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**Islands of the
Good Life**
Ecotopian Experiments
in Rural Romania

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Introduction

This thesis is about ecotopian practitioners in rural Romania. It is concerned with the whys and hows of its subject, which one inevitably adopts as a choice and a goal. Therefore, these questions have to do with motivations, ethics, and practices that inform an idea of what "living well" means today in a relatively marginal corner of Europe. The fieldwork at its foundation will take these questions away from the abstract and into the concrete, specific, and personal. In this introduction, my goal is to present to the main research questions tackled here, to articulate my own position as a researcher *vis à vis* the subject, and to introduce the reader to two of the central concepts I explore in this thesis, namely ecotopia and permaculture.

The roots of this research lie in multiple places in both my personal and academic history that seem to have gathered around this topic at this time, growing from seemingly disparate points to a place of convergence. If I address the more personal aspects of this research in the introduction, it is, on the one hand, to get them out of the way so that the bulk of the thesis can more sharply focus on my far more interesting interlocutors and, on the other, because my own position in relation to them must be clarified and articulated. However, I think my most immediate impetus for researching ecotopian practice is one many readers can empathize with and therefore this research will be of particular interest to them.

Most young people today experience some form of negative psychological effects around the issues of climate change and the future (Hickman et al. 2021). Whether manifesting as anxiety, grief, helplessness, or anger, these feelings attest to the fact that the large-scale complex phenomena we call climate change or climate crisis also affect people's individual material and psychological well-being on a small scale, inflecting our experience of everyday life. Psychoanalyst Sally Weintrobe goes more in-depth on a whole range of psychological states specifically engendered by the climate crisis, from eco-anxiety, -grief, -futility, -shame, and -rage to solastalgia (a term she borrows from environmental scholar Glenn Albrecht), climate trauma, and

moral injury caused by our everyday lives unfolding within a system we find unconscionable (Weintrobe 2021: 235–243). According to Weintrobe, all these forms of distress are appropriate reactions to "emerg[ing] from the climate bubble" (2021: 231). This is a "bubble-like psychic retreat from reality" (2021: 23) which, in the case of climate change, has been fostered and upheld by neoliberal culture at least since the 1980s, and is a phenomenon she posits as characteristic of the present moment in the Global North (2021: 3).

An important aspect to these problems, both in their overall scope and in terms of people's lived experience, is scale. Feelings like anxiety, grief, shame, and futility are bound up with the idea that one's personal decisions and actions are of no consequence in the scheme of things or that one doesn't really have a choice at all. Myself and my interlocutors are not exempt from this form of distress. However, as ecotopian practitioners, my interlocutors have made radical changes in an effort to live more sustainable and ethical lives. This is not to say that it is up to individuals to halt or reverse the climate crisis (a perspective that would only follow the same individualizing neoliberal logic), but that it is possible to seek a good life outside of the usual formulas and that grassroots experimentation, whether one, ten, or fifty people are involved, is worth exploring on its own terms.

To begin with, I think it's important to note why this is not an effort in self-ethnography, despite the fact that myself and my interlocutors have a lot in common by the usual metrics. Two of them are Romanian, like me, and the third has been living in Romania for many years; we are separated by, at most, 19 years in age; we speak the same language; we are all white Europeans from backgrounds that span but do not exceed the middle class; we have similar concerns about the climate crisis and are similarly dissatisfied with the promises of an urban life under European capitalism, centered around wage labor, consumption, and convenience. That being said, I want to stress that these similarities only emerged as we got to know each other during the fieldwork period and that initially this fieldwork took place in a space quite foreign to me.

It's common for people in Romania, even among native urbanites like me, to have a "*la țară*" ("at the countryside"), usually where older family members live. This designation is almost archetypal: "at the countryside" is an adequate and sufficient answer to questions like "Where are you going this summer?" or "Where did you spend the holidays?", only to be disambiguated with the optional follow-up "Where is *your* countryside?". I, for one, was born in Bucharest, the country's capital and largest city, and do not really have a countryside at all. Like many others at the time, all of my grandparents were, by either choice or circumstance, transplanted into cities in childhood through the centralization efforts of the communist regime under which they lived. Growing up, I would sometimes hear my friends wax poetic about spending summers in the countryside or being raised there by their grandparents, stories that always seemed to contain some sort of primeval event like "slaughtering the pig" or "fetching water from the well" or "the harvest." As far as I was concerned, these were as good as fairytales. In blunt terms, I'm a city kid for whom the rural was *terra incognita*.

It was only in my adult life that I began to explore the countryside (significantly, not *my* countryside) more actively. One formative experience in this regard, the one that first gave me an inkling of the idiosyncrasy, variety, and possibility that lie in the rural was a WWOOF¹ trip to the village of Vișa, in Arad county. That is where I met Iarina,² my host, who I would end up seeing as a sort of personal Ovid. When I met her, Iarina was in her 50s and a very active member of the village community, despite the fact that she also grew up as a city kid in Ploiești, not far from Bucharest. She had spent most of her professional life traveling the world as a casino manager on cruise ships, picking up a smattering of languages at sea, and ultimately settling in Sweden for a short while; until, that is, she decided to

¹ Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) is a platform that facilitates volunteering and work on organic farms.

² This and all other personal names in this thesis have been changed. Village names have also been changed, but more general geographical indications such as county, region, or nearby landmarks have not.

return to Romania, buy a house in a village she had never been to or heard of, and start growing her own food, collecting her own rainwater, and making soaps and creams out of the plants in her garden. The summer I met her, seven years after moving to Vișa, Larina was running for mayor.

It wasn't just that Larina was (and is) a charismatic and fascinating person. The photos of her posing in satin croupier vests alongside dancers in feather costumes are hardly forgettable. What made my stay with her so compelling was the fact that she had taken the time to *learn* how to live in a small village. And so she could teach me. Apart from gardening instructions, Larina offered all manner of advice: "Don't work on Sundays, and if you do, don't let the neighbors see you"; "Don't tell anyone you're vegetarian, just say you're fasting"; "Don't play with the dogs, people here think that's only for children." It had taken a long time for her to learn all this and she had made an active effort to do so. The people you will read about here are also going through a similar adaptation process in different ways. If Larina is not among them, it's because she has since returned to the city in order to assure better access to education for her son.

In fact, Larina's story contains many elements that reoccur in the lives of the people I will write about here. One of them also used to work at sea. Another also returned to the city, only to come back to the countryside with greater resolve. Another also makes great efforts to engage the village community. A child's education will also come into play as a push away from the rural. All of these are more or less relevant aspects of their personal histories and current challenges, but they are not what makes them "ecotopians."

The term "ecotopia" is not widely used, but has accumulated quite the history since the latter half of the last century. The word was popularized by Ernest Callenbach in his 1975 utopian fiction novel *Ecotopia*, but an earlier and more relevant provenance for the purposes of this thesis is its use within anthropology by E.N. Anderson, since 1969 by his own account (Anderson 2013: xi). The term is difficult to provide an exact definition for, despite or perhaps precisely because of its

resonance. Anderson's own description of what it means for anthropology invokes the term's Greek etymology: "eco- from *oikos*, household; -topia from *topos*, place, with implication of 'eutopia'—'good place'" (1969: 275). It is interesting to note the fact that Anderson only recognizes the more obvious connection to utopia in a later work on the subject (Anderson 2010: 4), but initially prefers to focus on *eutopia*, opening up further connections with *eudaimonia*, one of several important concepts surrounding the idea of happiness or "the good life" which we will return to in later chapters.

In the article where he introduces the term, Anderson goes on to position ecotopia as a *telos* for anthropology. Seeing as "[t]he myth of 'value-free' social science is now thoroughly dead" (1969: 266) he argues that ecotopia is, in fact, already accepted as the goal of applied anthropology, but that anthropology often falls short due to an inadequate level or form of commitment. Anthropologists, he claims, are often not radical enough to tackle the systemic underpinnings that stand in the way of ecotopia and end up merely recommending adaptations or coping strategies (1969: 275). He suggests that anthropologists would do better to position themselves as "planning for the world" (1969: 276), to expand the scope of their interest in global production-consumption relations in ways that benefit local control and long-term goals, and should actively participate in shaping a new global culture of ecotopia in collaboration with scholars and researchers from other fields, not just "out there" but also "at home," in the university (1969: 279–281).

Regardless of whether one finds Anderson's injunctions adequate for today, the problems he was reacting to—human and nonhuman exploitation facilitated by a global power imbalance and economic structure that favors the already rich and powerful and allows them to offset the costs onto the powerless, incentivizing short-term gain rather than anything resembling sustainability—only seem to have grown more dire in the intervening six-or-so decades. They have since sparked a veritable explosion of literature offering diagnoses, analyses, and solutions, as well

as developing a vocabulary to talk about these issues from the largest to the smallest scale.

Today, talk of unsustainability often takes on a catastrophic or even apocalyptic tone, inciting feelings of distress and hopelessness in the face of a seemingly unsolvable problem. In contrast, the concept of ecotopia seeks to suggest a positive vision rather than limiting itself to diagnosing or resisting problems. In that regard, it is not by any means singular. It invokes a dialogue with the centuries-long tradition of utopian thinking, as well as the more recent line of transition visions proposed since the twentieth century by ecologically-minded thinkers like Thomas Berry, Ivan Illich, Vandana Shiva, and Rob Hopkins (for an extended summary of transition thinking, see Escobar 2018: 137–158).

Significantly, however, ecotopia positions itself as more of an umbrella-term than a specific vision. In his later book, *The Pursuit of Ecotopia*, Anderson stresses that it is "local traditions, local cultures, and local small-scale communities [that] must be the real place of action in saving the world environment" (2010: xii). Within this, he includes any and all cultures, practices, and ways of life, regardless of their ideological foundation, that could further the ecotopian project in their specific context. Therefore, this umbrella welcomes a multiplicity of manifestations, as long as they move in the same direction and share the necessary and sufficient values of long-term sustainability. It can thus accommodate multiple transition or utopian visions, having no claim to universality and no need for an all-encompassing framework.

More recently, environmental anthropologists Joshua Lockyer and James R. Veteto follow up on Anderson's idea of ecotopia and identify three interrelated ecotopian social movements that have asserted themselves (mostly, but not exclusively) in the Global North: bioregionalism, permaculture, and ecovillages (2013: 6–7). In their overview, Lockyer and Veteto position bioregionalism as the worldview and politics that undergird ecotopian practice, permaculture as its ethical and methodological toolkit, and ecovillages as its resulting socio-natural form of

organization. While the simplicity of this description is useful in understanding what each of these strands of ecotopian thinking and practice excels in, it proves overly reductive in practice.

The people you will read about in the following chapters are certainly ecotopians. They hold strong commitments to the belief that humans can and should maintain mutually beneficial relations with the natural world and these beliefs have an overwhelming impact on their everyday life, goals, and work. They actively try to spread their knowledge, experience, and techniques in the hopes of creating an ecotopian culture, at least on a small scale. However, none of them are engaged with bioregionalist thinking to any significant degree, nor do they live or wish to live in an ecovillage. Instead, their living arrangements are closer to a homestead model and permaculture is by far the ecotopian strand that most informs their values and practices. Therefore, of the three, permaculture will also feature most prominently in this thesis. All of which is not to say that the conceptual connections drawn by Lockyer and Veteto are invalid, but simply that ecotopian practice is more diverse than their overview might suggest, and that preserving and taking a serious look at this particularity will be core to this thesis.

It would therefore be useful to also briefly define permaculture on its own terms, which also happen to be those in which my interlocutors came into contact with it. The concept was coined by Australian environmental researchers Bill Mollison and David Holmgren and first presented in their 1978 book *Permaculture One*. The two also actively promoted and developed permaculture throughout their lives, not only in print, but also through public talks, teaching, activism, and establishing demonstration sites for permaculture techniques.

Essentially, permaculture is a type of eco-social design. Initially, Mollison and Holmgren defined its aim as establishing an "evolving system of perennial or self-perpetuating plant and animal species useful to man [...] a complete agricultural ecosystem" (1990: 1). It was a multifaceted and interdisciplinary project from the very beginning, including elements of both plant and animal agriculture, craft, ecology,

and indigenous practices, and has only expanded since. The permaculture movement has articulated beyond practicing communities into a smattering of local and international organizations, most prominently the Permaculture Principles website,³ inspired by David Holmgren's later work *Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability* (2011, first published in 2002) and run by his collaborators, and the Permaculture Institute founded in 1997 by Bill Mollison and Scott Pittman, which continues to offer permaculture design courses.⁴ On most permaculture platforms and publications, one is now as likely to find discussions of agriculture, natural architecture, and agroforestry as self-help, spirituality, Indigenous histories, and politics.

I will elaborate on both ecotopia and permaculture in much more detail in subsequent chapters, exploring them further in theory and in practice. What I hope I've made clear at this point is that both terms point to a holistic, ethically grounded way of life for individuals and communities that, broadly speaking, centers sustainability as a minimal guiding goal and principle. If this seems overly broad, it is precisely because ecotopia and permaculture are concepts that inevitably remain open-ended in order to accommodate the integration of insights from many disciplines (as per their holistic ambition), as well as encouraging endless place-based permutations informed by local traditions, disciplines, needs, etc.

For this reason, the following chapters will be grounded first and foremost in the specific experiences of my ecotopian interlocutors who practice permaculture in their own ways, taking inspiration from this literature according to their own goals and preferences. They therefore developed a personalized toolkit of concepts and methods which may or may not correspond to the "canon" of ecotopian or permaculture literature one might reference in an academic discussion on these topics.

³ <https://permacultureprinciples.com/>, accessed December 2025.

⁴ <https://www.permaculture.org/>, accessed December 2025.

In more literary terms, the stories of the people you will read about here all share certain plot points, which correspond to the core research questions that structure this thesis. Of course, if life is not stranger, it is certainly more complex than fiction and the processes, decisions, and events at stake here are not straightforward: people backtrack, change their minds, fail, their thinking and practices evolve according to their situation and resources, changes and decisions may unfold over years. But the commonalities stand as the focus of this research, taking stock of their complications as the bread and butter of analysis rather than a hindrance.

Firstly, environmental awareness and significant concern for environmental issues are not a given for anyone, least of all in Romania, where these subjects are relatively absent from public discourse compared to other European countries. The first question I will attempt to answer is how each of my interlocutors came into contact with these topics and, more importantly, how they came to take them seriously to a degree where they significantly influence their decisions. In the first chapter I will discuss the factors that contributed to their dissatisfaction with city life, and the influences, circumstances, and motivations that led to their adoption of certain values and how they conceive them.

Secondly, my interlocutors have also put these values into practice. They have all decided, at one point or another, to move from urban to rural spaces in pursuit of a more sustainable life. Therefore, my second question will be how they came to envision a good sustainable life as a rural one and how they experienced this transition. All of my interlocutors are quite experienced in what they do. They have been living in their respective village homesteads, practiced permaculture for several years now, satisfying most of their daily needs in this way, and have started making active efforts to popularize their practices, to teach others, to foster community, and to work toward a wider ecotopian culture. In the second chapter, I will tackle what the rural promised as a space for an alternative way of life and detail

the process of adapting to rural life and community, as well as the challenges they faced in establishing their permaculture practice.

My third question will follow up on the first two with a more theoretical bent, asking how an overall vision of sustainable life informed by permaculture as an ecotopian practice relates to the pursuit of the good in one's life as well as society at large. In the third chapter, I will discuss how ecotopia and permaculture relate to utopian thinking, what kind of imaginary for a good life they outline, and how they can be mobilized in favor of sustainable, ethical, and happy futures.

What I hope to achieve by following these threads is a picture of what ecotopian practice can look like in concrete terms in rural Romania today (and, perhaps, in similar places across Europe) that will allow the formulation of a model or at least some guidelines for a good life and an assessment of both the shortcomings and potentialities of such a life. As Lockyer and Veteto (2013: 3–6) point out, if we are to take ecotopian practices seriously as "living laboratories" for a more sustainable and just world, anthropologists can contribute by assessing the successes and shortcomings of these experiments and can, in turn, find answers for some of the core questions of environmental anthropology.

Lastly, a short note on the structure of this thesis. The reader will have noticed that certain sections are titled in italics. These mark short vignettes from my fieldwork and are interspersed between the more conventional sections of academic writing. They do not form a linear narrative, nor are they meant as direct illustrations of the aspects discussed in the respective chapters, but rather engage in thematic dialogue with them. The primary function of these pieces of narration is to provide a sketch of the experiential dimension of being and living in the places and with the people described. Therefore, while their order and placement is purposeful, I would encourage the reader to reference these sections in whichever order they prefer.

Arrival

Fresh off a 10-hour night train from Bucharest to Cluj-Napoca, I crossed the bridge over the railway lines and jumped on a 45-minute bus to the village of Savalin, where Adi lives, one of my ecotopian interlocutors who agreed to host me as a volunteer on his homestead. I had never heard of the village, nor was I particularly familiar with that area of Romania. Luckily, I'd told the bus driver where I was going—without his say-so, I wouldn't have known where to get off: an unmarked station by the side of the road; across from it, a small sign marking the entrance to the village, which was obscured by a row of trees. I knew roughly where Adi's house was from Google Maps, but little idea of how to get there. So, after texting Adi and waiting for the length of a drawn-out cigarette sitting on my overstuffed duffel bag for him to reply, I decided to try to find my way. I walked up the road, past fallow fields, toward the hills. Past well-kept houses with fruit trees in the yard and flowers up front. Past a smiling young woman nursing her baby on the bench in front of her gate. Past the pillars of a newly built suspended highway. Past a kindergarten with children in the yard and old women who looked at me suspiciously.

The village of Savalin sits along a forest road, tucked between rolling hills on either side, in Cluj county, some 40 minutes away by car from Cluj-Napoca, the largest city in the area. According to the 2021 census, it has a population of under 500 people. As you turn off the main road that leads North to Ukraine and go along the road that crosses the village, Savalin looks like a series of quaint houses lined up on either side. Small as it is, it appeared more lived-in than other villages in those parts of Romania, many of which have been left half-empty by migration to urban centers. Instead, Savalin seemed to be holding up well. The single-story houses with wood-framed windows and shingled roofs with carved wooden detailing along the rake were well maintained, sometimes clearly having been recently repaired and restored. The gardens were tended to and chickens and dogs could be seen and heard behind most fences. The villagers I saw, young and old, bustled around their

usual business on that particular Wednesday, which left me with an impression of vitality I didn't expect in a village that small.

But Adi's homestead was not among those houses. Next thing I knew, I'd gone past the village entirely. After a hump of the hill and a turn in the road, I found myself between a large donkey pen up the hill to the right (mostly empty but for the donkeys themselves, some chickens, and a large tin cover protecting a few round hay bales) and a couple tin warehouses up the hill to the left, loudly protected by five enormous chained dogs. In front lay the road with what seemed like nothing but green hills on either side. Once again, I sat down on my overstuffed bag and waited.

I must have gone through quite a few drawn-out cigarettes before a beaten-up SUV passed by, then turned back. "Miss, where are you going?" "To Adi's, do you know him?" "Sure I know him. I thought that must be where you're headed. I'll show you the way." The old man in the SUV was the local forester. He drove me halfway up the hill on a dirt road so full of shrubs that I hadn't even noticed it before. Then he pointed further up and said "That's where his house is. You'll find a path between those trees there, just follow it." I thanked him and got to looking for the path, with no success. To be honest, I hadn't gotten a good idea of where the house was either. I was on a small pasture on the side of the hill and all I saw looking up were trees. However, before I could properly sit down in the lovely thick grass for a drawn-out cigarette to chew over whether it would be acceptable in terms of fieldwork ethics to just show up at a participant's door—albeit, with due announcement and previous agreement of my coming, to be clear—, another more urgent issue claimed all of my attention. Three (to my mind) enormous, stout, muscle-bound, flaxen chestnut horses had unceremoniously approached my trusty duffel bag and were attempting to open it. Even more alarmingly, one began to piss dangerously close to it. What started as a rather icy standoff soon turned into a sort of cuddle pile, with the three horses crowding me and competing for scratches and pets. It was between those three animals—any of which could have knocked me over and trampled me with no great effort—that I finally managed to make contact with Adi.

He met me down by the road with his mother. We first drove her back to where I'd started, at the other end of the village, so she could take the bus home. As it turns out, reception isn't very good up where Adi lives. The phone and internet only really work inside the house and Adi had been out working in the garden all morning, not noticing my messages. We then stopped at a house for Adi to refill his gas tank from a villager, Mrs. Miruna. "But I've forgotten my tank and my wallet, is that ok?" he asked from outside the gate while Mrs. Miruna walked over. Not only was it ok, Mrs. Miruna wouldn't let him go without some pears from her tree to take home on top of a full gas tank. When I told him about the forester, he said "What a joker. He should have taken you this way." The forester had indeed pointed me in the right direction in terms of where the house was, but we took a different fork up the dirt road.

Near the top of the hill, surrounded by a row of fruit trees and shrubbery below and forest above, was Adi's homestead: a dense and winding collection of gardens, earthen structures, footpaths, patches of forest, and an assortment of animals. Adi had followed the natural curves of the hillside when designing the space and it was indeed so winding and so dense that it took me a while to let go of the idea that I might get lost. Later that day, I asked Ivana, Adi's partner, what her favorite spot was. She took me to the top of the chicken coop, which doubled as a platform-terrace with a truly Arcadian view: I could see the hill across the road, but the warehouses looked small and the dogs just moving spots; I could see the horses' pasture down below us and Ivana told me they look the same because they're a family—parents and their son; to the right, I could see the next hill and a large flock of sheep being herded back for the evening, their bells ringing out across the valley.

Chapter I

I was wondering what's happening. I'd watch documentaries all the time about what's going on in the world, about climate change, about war, about government control, about the weaknesses of our societies. We've got a lot of weak points where we could easily fail. [...] That's what I was watching. That's what I was feeding on. And then I'd look around: people only cared about their salary, home, holidays, and I thought "That's not for me." I mean, maybe there's something more than that. (Adi, ecotopian practitioner)⁵

Is that all there is?

Is that all there is?

If that's all there is, my friends, then let's keep dancing

Let's break out the booze and have a ball

If that's all there is...

(*Is That All There Is?*, written by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, notably performed by Peggy Lee)

This chapter sits across one more and one less typical focus of anthropology, hoping to create a bridge that will allow the latter to be further explored more in depth. In broad strokes, the questions I want to answer have to do with the good life: what it means to live well and ethically, what it means to live in a way that looks toward a better world, that looks toward the (personal, local, global) future with hope. But since this particular pursuit and outlook constitutes a significant discontinuity with my interlocutors' previous lives in their respective milieus, I will start from the point of dissatisfaction that led them to seek a different and more articulated vision of a good life to begin with.

In anthropology more broadly, this focus shift is described by anthropologist Joel Robbins as an emerging move away from "the suffering subject" and toward "an anthropology of the good" (Robbins 2013: 448–450). In his article, Robbins proposes

⁵ This and other quotes from Adi are taken from transcripts of our interview, translated from Romanian.

a genealogy of the conceptual "slot" of the subject within anthropology, which, starting in the 1980s and until the present day, has been filled by the suffering subject (*ibid.*). This, according to Robbins, was a result of the inadequacy of anthropology's previous subject, characterized by otherness (be it racialized, colonized, or otherwise marginalized). This inadequacy was precipitated both by the prolific critiques aimed at practices and discourses of othering, as well as by the actual weakening of the boundaries that enacted the mutually constitutive oppositions between Western and non-Western societies, "civilization" and "savagery," "developed" and "primitive" (2013: 449).

It was in this space of reconfiguration in anthropology that suffering emerged as a possible common ground beyond cultural difference and the suffering subject crystallized as "the figure of humanity united in its shared vulnerability" (Robbins 2013: 450). This new focus allowed anthropology to give up its analytic distance and engage in empathetic witnessing of its subject, finding application in the negative goal of mitigating suffering and dismantling structures of violence and exploitation. However, Robbins points out that the suffering subject, with its pretension of universality, only touches on the "cross-cultural point" of anthropology, its mission to show how cultures differ (in this case, in their production of suffering), but not on its "cultural point," a term by which he describes the claim that cultural difference also informs human subjectivity on deep and intimate levels (2013: 456). This is where an anthropology of the good would come in as a complement to suffering slot anthropology, by looking at the different ways in which the good is conceptualized and in which people "organize their personal and collective lives in order to foster what they think of as good" (2013: 457).

The concept of an anthropology of the good, which Robbins proposed as a description of trends that were already emerging, has only expanded since. Sherry Ortner picks up on the developments in this area of study, which she contrasts with the "dark anthropology" that has been dominant since the 1980s (2016: 49–50). Ortner goes more in depth on both the theoretical underpinnings of the darkness of

anthropology as well as on the perspectives and potential forms an anthropology of the good might take. She suggests that while the two are complementary, as Robbins had indicated, they do not have to and indeed should not be oppositional, but integrated (2016: 60).

In this chapter, I have exactly that in mind. As I've already described, ecotopia is very much characterized by an active and explicit effort to think about and practice more or less clearly defined positive ideas of the good: sustainability, fairness, care, etc. But it often sits in contrast, if not in direct opposition, to established ways of thinking and living that, in this case, were also the ways in which my interlocutors previously thought and lived and that still surround them today. Therefore, I think it would be valuable to begin, in a way, before the beginning, before my interlocutors became ecotopians, to look at the substrate of experience where ecotopian ideas and ideals grew and allow the contrast to reveal itself along the way.

It should be said that, naturally, this is a retrospective view on those experiences, retrospective not only in terms of time, but also in terms of a subjective periodization of one's life. All of my interlocutors perceive a radical break between their life before and their life now, which may not be clearly definable, but has certainly crystalized as such in the intervening years. Hindsight may influence the way they described their experiences to me, but the goal here is not to assemble an exact biography, as much as to obtain both a factual and subjective idea of what challenges they faced, what their lives were like, and what shaped the dissatisfaction that led them to seek a change for the better.

This must be the place

If one was to pick out a theme in Adi's account of his life before coming to Savalin, it would be the struggle to find his place, as he put it. Both in casual conversation on the subject and in the sit-down interview I conducted with him, this expression was a constant refrain. What that might mean is a little harder to pin down, but what's certain is that Adi tried looking for it in many different places and

contexts. He's been an entrepreneur in a village near his hometown, a migrant worker in England and Italy, and a worker and student in Cluj-Napoca, but none of it really ended up working for him.

I didn't find my place. Anywhere. Not in Cluj, not in England, not... In Italy it was good but not for long. And then I realized I had some money and I looked at the money and thought 'Is this what I'm working for?' I had no purpose, no meaning, no... For these pieces of paper? And I realized I don't like it, that's not what I want. That's why I went to college, to do something different.

Adi initially wanted to study to become an auto mechanic. He's always been, as he likes to say, "technologized"—he likes working with hardware and software; he likes fixing things and tinkering; the small business he started in his youth was an internet café and computer parts shop and he enjoyed it while it lasted. But Adi was working abroad during the university sign-up periods and couldn't make it to Romania to take the entrance exam for the mechanics programme he wanted. Instead, his then-partner suggested he sign up to the University of Agricultural Sciences, which had a specialization for tractor mechanics that was easier to get into. However, after one semester, "[Adi] realized [he] was at a plants university" so he switched his major to horticulture.

The next part of this story is not Adi finding his place studying nature, but rather a period of crisis. While he was a student, he discovered permaculture and natural building (entirely separately from the university which, according to him, was rather hostile to this approach and entirely focused on commercial agriculture) and took the first steps toward the homestead he has now. But he also broke up with his partner and lost his father. So Adi decided to give work abroad another chance. He went to England, hoping to make enough money to return to Savalin and get on his feet.

I started thinking 'What am I doing here?' because I didn't have anyone, I didn't have any money, I was struggling. [...] I thought I'd go there to make some money, save up, and come back here and reinvest, but it didn't last long. Because I realized I couldn't, I didn't find a well paid job. Well paid... I mean enough to put some money away. There was no point in staying there just to survive. I was better off coming here. And that's what I did. [...] Rather than working in London from morning to night just to pay rent and food and transport and end up with shit on a stick in the end, better to stay here and continue my work and, slowly, I'll build something.

Overall, the way Adi describes his life and state of mind before his final move to Savalin (after this last period of working in England) is rather dark. It was characterized by loss and economic struggle, but also by intense climate anxiety, isolation and addiction. "When I drank, there was like a valve here [he points to his throat, by his jugular] that would open and I would drink anything—anything!," he told me. But by the time I met him, he had been what I would call straight-edge and what he would call sober for years. He had not only stopped drinking alcohol, but also quit smoking and was very careful about any potentially addictive habits at all. He'd have one cup of coffee in the morning and would even refuse tea after lunch.

In turn, his climate anxiety was fueled by the fact that he only saw dystopian and catastrophic descriptions of the future at the time, as he describes in the fragment quoted at the beginning of this chapter. This would later change and Adi would find a more hopeful outlook in solarpunk, but only after he had settled in Savalin and, in fact, resonated with it because it was close to what he was already doing.

In regards to loneliness and isolation, I first asked Adi about it in the context of Savalin. While the village is relatively populated, he is not particularly close with the villagers and the social life available to him seemed rather transitory, consisting of volunteers and visitors who would come and go. But Adi described his time in London, before moving to Savalin for good, as far more lonely. Once again, he came back to the idea that he could not find meaning there, that it was not his place. It

seems, then, that Adi did not end up finding his place at all as much as *making* a place for himself in Savalin.

Becoming landlocked

Aaron, another ecotopian interlocutor, began his permaculture project in the village of Prigov, Alba county, as even more of a stranger. Aaron is from Germany and immediately stands out among the locals: he speaks Romanian well, but slowly, measuring his words; he wears dreadlocks on the top of his head and shaves the sides; he has large tattoos; there is an openness and enthusiasm to his demeanor that doesn't match the villagers' more reserved and circumspect social style.

The idea of finding one's place, or, as Aaron put it, "connection" also plays a part in Aaron's life before moving to Prigov. For him, this search was backgrounded by a period when he did feel this connection, the five years he spent in Tanzania as a child. Aaron describes the time when his family lived there for his father's work as a Lutheran pastor in very rose-tinted terms, perhaps an understandable idealization of a happy phase of childhood. He describes his life in their small coastal town as being characterized by a lot of freedom to play outdoors and by a strong connection with nature and other children. All of which stood out even more strongly after his family moved back to Germany and he found himself constricted in his access to nature and struck by the comparative competitiveness and rigidity of German schools.

I was in a small town so it wasn't too bad. I guess in a big city it would have been tougher. And I found my friends, made some music, I found my ways to cope with it. But I never found the connection I had back in Tanzania. And so I decided—when it was time to choose what to study—I decided I want to study nautical sciences because I was looking for this connection and I thought maybe the sea could give it to me. [...] I wasn't really conscious about ecological topics or anything. So I was also looking just for earning money and finding a way to get happy by earning wealth, traveling, having lots of free time, and being at sea.⁶

⁶ This and the following quotes from Aaron are taken from the transcript of our interview, which was conducted in English.

For Aaron, making music seemed like a kind of litmus test of wellbeing. When I asked if he still did it, he told me that he doesn't, with no indication of regret at all. He said that music, for him, came out of unhappiness and was a way to cope with it: "It was a way to deal with my negative feelings when I was upset. Now I don't feel like doing it and I have enough to do anyway." The fact that he doesn't need it anymore stands, according to him, as an indicator that now his life is more content and happy.

Before coming to Prigov, however, Aaron's idea was to become a ship captain one day and enjoy what seemed like a charmed life. Earning well at sea in blocks of several months, this kind of life would leave him with far more leisure time overall than a more conventional job. But once he started working on ships, he began to see significant cracks in this vision. For one, despite the fact that he chose smaller vessels hoping for a more permissive schedule, his experience on those voyages was less than promising.

What I noticed is that the people on the ship were not the happiest people. So the goal of my studies was at some point to become a ship captain, which pays very well, so they were all pretty wealthy people, but they were unhappy, unhealthy, most of them obese, drinking a lot, divorced... Unhappy people. [...] And also the environment was a lot different than what I had expected. Basically it feels like... I don't know, a mixture of a prison and a factory. So you have very weird working schedules, sometimes you work at night, sometimes you work the morning shift, sometimes the day shift, and it's always rotating so you never find a real rhythm. So all the time you're kind of tired, smoking a lot, drinking a lot of coffee, in the evenings drinking so you can sleep, so super unhealthy.

However, the event that most changed his perspective and prompted him to rethink the way he organized his life was the birth of his daughter, Diana, who was born when Aaron was still in nautical school and had to spend some months at sea every year. At first, Aaron tried to find more balance in his chosen profession. He took jobs on a rescue ship in the Mediterranean, something he believed in strongly

but which proved too emotionally taxing; then on a sailing ship transporting cargo across the Atlantic emissions-free. But he was still unhappy being away from his daughter and partner for months at a time.

Apart from his personal misgivings, having a child made Aaron question things more broadly as well. As he describes it, he and his social circle had a "mainstream lifestyle" focused on building wealth and enjoying their lives in consumerist and individualist terms. On the one hand, Diana's birth made him think about the world more generally and more long-term; on the other hand, it was on the emissions-free sailing vessel that he first got to know "not really mainstream people" who exposed him to ideas around environmentalism and veganism.

It was when Diana was born, that's when it started. And more and more I started thinking what do I actually do? What do I want? And what do I want for my daughter at some point, when she's older? And also bigger questions, not only for me, like I want a nice small house in the mountains and I'm quiet and the rest of the world, it can do what it wants. But also in what kind of society do I want to be? What opportunities do I want her to have? What do I wish for the whole world to look like?

This is how Aaron and his partner, Simina, began to think of the house they were building in Prigov, which they'd initially planned as a holiday home, as a permanent residence. And, more than that, as a site where they might pursue a more sustainable and self-reliant life, independent of usual patterns of consumption and labor.

Struggle in paradise

I think an obvious (and reasonable) line of questioning at this point would sound something like this: What's so bad about all that? We all experience struggles at various points in our lives. Adi and Aaron are far from the first or last to have a tough time finding a stable or satisfying job, to have to compromise between time

spent with loved ones and time spent at work, to feel a bit lost in life and try to look for their own place and meaning in the world. And most of us don't move to quiet rural communities and start growing our own food because of it. Why would someone going through a hard time therefore conclude that their life needs a radical change rather than working to improve their situation by more usual means? Why would they conclude that a "mainstream lifestyle" isn't for them? What's so bad about living life concerned about one's salary, home, work, and vacations?

On an individual level, an answer that both Adi and Aaron would certainly agree with is that there's nothing wrong with it at all. While both of them work to teach others permaculture and natural building and try to foster community in support of people who want to go down that same path, they both readily admit that it's not for everyone. They may be ecotopians, but they are not proselytizers. And it is certainly true that, beyond any intervening personal difficulties, their lives as white European cis-het men is one of great privilege in the scheme of things.

But as soon as we begin to investigate this question more deeply, problems begin to appear. Chief among them, that this life of privilege doesn't actually work particularly well when it comes to making us happy. In his article, "Hope, Fairness, and the Search for the Good Life," anthropologist Thomas Eriksen takes his time describing all the ways in which the "global middle and upper classes," which presumably encompass the readers of his article and of this thesis, as well as a good portion of the population of the Global North, enjoy a degree of luxury in their (i.e. our) everyday lives that was previously unimaginable and which cannot be reduced to personal income or wealth. From physical security and access to healthcare, to readily available entertainment and affordable travel, Eriksen posits that the material conditions of the lives many of us take for granted amount to a sort of earthly paradise (2016: 241–243).

But while material comforts and happiness or satisfaction,⁷ as subjectively experienced, are correlated to some degree (ranging from the point past poverty up to the richest 25%), they are certainly by themselves insufficient conditions for happiness (Eriksen 2016: 243–244). Indeed, in his own overview of the cross-cultural components of wellbeing, anthropologist Edward Fischer counts adequate material conditions as one of at least six elements of a good life (2014: 5), placing them as a necessary but insufficient condition among others (2014: 8). Instead, two of the elements he identifies seem to resonate far more with the accounts of my interlocutors, namely the ethical dimension (the concern with values and a purpose greater than one's self-interest) and a horizon that leads into the future (Fischer 2014: 12). And these areas are precisely the ones that Eriksen paints as lacking in the lives of the inhabitants of paradise.

The affluent societies we live in are self-undermining in both ethical and material terms. They boast humanist values and ambitions of wellbeing and sustainability, yet continue to operate in exclusionary ways and are still governed by economic interest and calculation (Eriksen 2016: 244). On the one hand, these contradictions reveal an ongoing ethical inconsistency between the values many people espouse and the way our societies are governed. On the other hand, they remind us of the fact that this paradise will, sooner or later, collapse under the pressure of its own need for consumption. As Eriksen puts it, "through our spectacularly successful and comfortable way of life, we are simultaneously undermining the conditions for our own existence" (*ibid.*). Therefore, it is no wonder that our values may ring hollow and that the future seems foreclosed.

Eriksen ties up these two elements under the concept of hope (or, in this instance, hopelessness) and coins a diagnosis of the problem as the "Syndrome of

⁷ In this section, I use the terms happiness, satisfaction, wellbeing, etc. loosely and interchangeably. For the purposes of the present discussion, which does not seek to positively define happiness or "the good life," but rather focuses on creating a contrast between what does and does not contribute to a good life, this ambiguity can remain, to be discussed in more detail later.

the big, bad wolf" (2016: 244–245). In short, this expression refers to the loss of the wolf's predatory *raison d'être*. Having hunted and eaten all three of the little pigs, the big, bad wolf would lose his horizon of hope and purpose. He would be afflicted with an existential malaise and fall into hopelessness until such time as he finds another pig to hunt. Eriksen casts us, the inhabitants of paradise, as the stuffed wolf with nothing left to look forward to but little private dreams that always turn out to be "too puny and too realistic." We may wish for a raise in our salary, for a new holiday destination, for a new car, or new furniture. We may well get our wish and remain dissatisfied, with a bitter taste in our mouths, and a vague impression that "[t]he good life, and the good society is, somehow, something else" (Eriksen 2016: 246).

I would suggest that therefore there is reason for the question "What's so bad about all that?" to be followed up with something akin to Peggy Lee's famous refrain, "Is that all there is?" When looking to cite this song, which came to mind as an anthem of disillusionment with the pleasures of life as conventionally prescribed, I was surprised to find that it has an infamous admirer in Donald Trump. According to his 2015 biography, the former and current US president identifies with the narrator of the song to some degree, stating "It's a great song because I've had these tremendous successes and then I'm off to the next one because it's, like, 'Huh, is that all there is?'" However, he only "keeps [this observation] in reserve for a moment when he's supposed to demonstrate self-awareness" (D'Antonio 2015). I admit, I did not expect to name this most overbearing figure of the last decade in my thesis, but one could hardly name a bigger, badder wolf to illustrate the point.

Insofar as we are aware of the internal ethical and material inconsistency of our societies—and, at this point, most of us are, to the extent that pointing out rampant unsustainability and injustice in our social, political, and economic systems feels like a platitude—we may become subject to moral injury, a condition of "feeling caught up in a vast machine that prevents one from acting with care and conscience; the collapse of one's inner ideals; [...] guilt of one's actions within this framework" (Weintrobe 2021: 241). Psychoanalyst Sally Weintrobe argues that moral injury is

actually a healthy reaction to the predicament of finding oneself complicit in undermining one's own values (2020: 352), but the emotional distress it causes can lead people to disavowal rather than a reckoning with their responsibility. The latter is particularly difficult because as of yet there is no conventional framework through which to gauge personal responsibility in a proportionate manner, which accounts for swings between disavowal or denial (making oneself feel "too little") and overwhelming guilt, anger, or helplessness (making oneself feel "too much") (Weintrobe 2020: 353).

There is certainly a problem of scale at play here between one's individual agency and the larger systems in which it is embedded. As I also noted in the introduction, placing the responsibility for these problems and the capacity to solve them on individuals is both naïve and counterproductive, in the sense that it would betray an insufficient understanding of the neoliberal individualizing logic that facilitates unsustainability and short-term thinking in the first place. If we acknowledge that we are personally complicit in the reproduction of these systems, we must also acknowledge that, in the spirit of proportionality, responsibility is not equally distributed to all people and neither is the power to engender large-scale change. Finding oneself "hopelessly rich," as Eriksen puts it (2013: 245), does not translate to economic or political power, and is therefore perfectly compatible with disempowerment, if not compounding it, as Weintrobe describes. It is precisely for this reason that hope, and a politics of hope, is essential in order to face responsibility, acknowledge limitations, and still proceed in an effort to formulate and pursue a better idea of a good life.

Views from the summer kitchen

The summer kitchen is a staple of countryside life in Romania. Many houses, old and new, have such an area—attached to the side of the house or somewhere in the garden—that need not consist of more than a structure to protect from the sun, a table, and something to cook food on like a propane burner or an electric stove. Pretty much wherever you are in Romania, plane, hill, or mountain, summer days get sweltering and people tend to congregate in the summer kitchen around midday, waiting for the sun to let up.

The village of Prigov is no different, tucked as it is in the Apuseni mountains, near the Arieș river. The mountain air gets cold at night, but on summer days the sun burns hot and makes work uncomfortable and drudging. Because of this, Simina and Aaron's usual schedule included a break after lunch during which they would go up to their house and rest or do some indoor work: emails and administrative tasks, drying and packaging herbs, or spending time with their daughter.

Aaron and Simina's property is a two-hectare strip of land that cuts vertically up a steep slope, from the main street of the village to the hilltop. The lower, flatter section of it is where they receive guests. It is also where they hosted me while I was with them. There is a little patch of grass for tents, two wooden caravans, an outdoor shower. Between one of the caravans and a vegetable garden, there was also a small summer kitchen: a few tree trunks stuck into the ground to support a wood roof for shade; their knobs and branch stubs serving as hooks for hanging dishcloths and mugs; a wooden camp table with benches on either side; a hose and tin bucket for a sink where earwigs would congregate at night; a decades-old electric stove, a small refrigerator, and storage boxes for pots and dishes.

That summer kitchen is where I spent many an after-lunch break, looking out to a mountain with an exposed rock face, which Simina and Aaron could also see from the porch of the house above. I grew to know that view quite well and, upon rereading my fieldnotes, I seem to have taken notice of it throughout my stay. The mountain sloped gently, at an angle that made it seem strangely accessible. Perhaps

because of my inexperience as a mountaineer, landscapes like that make distances impossible to gauge for me. I could not tell if it would take a few hours, an afternoon, or a day to walk there. Up to the cliff and above it, the mountain looked verdant and welcoming, with the grey rock standing out against the green and rounded circumvolutions below. It was to the East of us—the sun would come up from behind, casting the cliff in shadow and lighting the forest that seemed to spill out below like draped fabric. At noon, it would fade into the background behind a grey gauze, which turned milky white later in the afternoon. In the evening, with the late summer sunset casting light on it, the rock would take on a rosy, holographic quality.

Looking at the mountain from the summer kitchen was similar to looking at a landscape painting. Regardless of actual geography, it felt remote and removed—more like a view than a place. But perspective in that kind of terrain is also shifting and unpredictable.

On one of my last days in Prigov, at Simina's recommendation, instead of spending my usual break in the summer kitchen, I took a side path to go above the property, right up to the top of the hill. It was a cow path dug into the ground, with walls of earth on either side that rose higher than I am tall, with thick roots poking out of them and the trees creating a sort of tunnel above. The limit of Simina and Aaron's land was marked by a fence of planks and woven sticks. From there, as I followed a footpath further up, three old men passed me by one at a time with curt greetings.

What surrounded me looked like an alpine pasture. The ground was covered in small grasses and flowers, dotted by bushes and moss-covered stones that pierced up through the earth. Trees were small, grouped in patches here and there, and among them, the cause of the old men's presence—a small herd of brown and white dappled cows. Aaron later told me that the men only went up to milk the cows, who spent all summer season on that elevated pasture.

But on that high ground, what arrested my attention were not the cows, but the cliff I had spent so long looking at. It looked enormous and extremely close. With the light of a clear summer day shining on it, the rock was grey, solid, imposing and

present. It was anything but a flat landscape. From that angle, I could see the shadow play of the rocks' dimensions, of stray white clouds casting passing shadows on their surface. I could see one end of the village below, peeking out between the trees, but now it was the village that looked remote. If I didn't know better, I would have thought there was nothing between me and that cliff face—not the village, not the road, not the sloping forest.

Future trouble

So far, I have sketched out in abstract terms how the elements of ethics and of being part of something greater than oneself can connect under the concept of hope, opening up a future horizon of possibility to pursue a good life. The vagueness in these terms is important, insofar as their content can vary greatly on a personal, local, and cultural level. Therefore they remain to be fleshed out in terms of what projects greater than oneself people engage in, what kind of futures are at stake, how they can be envisioned and enacted, and what a good life can actually look like. In this section, I will tackle the former questions by looking more closely at how the future is culturally constructed and how hope can be articulated into politics and practice.

Firstly, however, it is important to keep in mind that, as Arjun Appadurai reminds us in his essay about the future as a cultural fact, "the future is not just a technical or neutral space, but is shot through with affect and sensation" (2013: 486–487). These experiential qualities should not be simply laid to one side as idiosyncrasies, but are part and parcel of our relationship with the future and can help us to better understand it. Indeed, it is certainly the case for my interlocutors that their preoccupation with the future and, implicitly, with sustainability are rooted in deeply emotional experiences that make the future a matter of personal concern.

For Aaron, it was the birth of Diana. This event expanded the scope of his thinking about the future, both in breadth and duration. He could no longer think only about his own circumstances, since his child would inhabit the world in her own way, shaping and being shaped by it. He could no longer only look to the short-term of his immediate concerns or even of his lifespan, since his child would have her own life to live and, possibly, her own children to worry about in turn. The world became larger, the future became longer, and both became personal.

For Adi, the future was a source of distress, anxiety, and uncertainty. It seemed to him that what he had to look forward to was the "salary, home, holidays" life and that, even if he did attain it, this dream would be a fragile one. He worried

"[what] if I walk into a shop, however much money I may have, I could have a bag full of money, and I could go into a shop and I can't find a single apple? What would I do?" As he put it, he was "feeding" on catastrophic visions of the future and saw himself embedded in and carried by them. These anxieties were not fully quelled by becoming more self-reliant after starting his permaculture project either.

I kept thinking about what would happen in the future. While I was here [in Savalin], you know? What's humanity's future? I wasn't necessarily thinking locally. I operate locally with my stuff here, sure, but it's not just up to me. I mean, if the world falls to ruin, I can't go 'Hahaha, look how well *I'm* doing.' No. I'll fall too. Maybe it'd take longer, but still... That's not the goal. I kept thinking 'What's going to happen in 50 years? In 100 years?'

These examples show us that feelings about the future are not of strictly personal concern. In this respect, to paraphrase the old feminist adage, the personal is very much political. While individual preferences and tendencies apply, these feelings are expressions of people's interaction with larger structures of meaning and social organization that shape the way they imagine the future and the kinds of futures they *can* imagine. As far as the issue of unsustainability is concerned, writer Amitav Ghosh famously spelled out that "the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (Ghosh 2016: 12). If the creatives and artists who most straightforwardly take on imaginative work in our societies have a hard time imagining futures that are less than catastrophic, the rest of us don't seem to have great chances.

But if our relationship with the future is fraught, imagination is not the only culprit. Arjun Appadurai identifies three dimensions of future-making that operate at both individual and cultural scales, imagination among them, along with aspiration and anticipation (2013: 286). The former's contribution is perhaps the more obvious and, Appadurai argues, must be placed at the center of our understanding of cultural activity at the most quotidian level. It would be easy to only focus on the grander expressions of imagined futures in "liminal" moments (such as in visions or

prophecies) (*ibid.*), or in the form of literary or speculative texts. But Appadurai warns against overlooking the role of imagination in "the production of the everyday" of both present and future, shaping functions we might otherwise be tempted to understand simply in terms of social reproduction (2013: 288).

Indeed, too narrow a view of culture would have us miss its orientation toward the future entirely. If what we think of when we think of culture is a collection of artifacts, customs, knowledges, and traditions we inherit from the past and that primarily serve to ensure the reproduction, durability, and resilience of our ways of life, then its relation to the future would simply be one of absorbing new elements and challenges into already established structures (Appadurai 2013: 285). Instead, Appadurai suggests that cultures *are* actually future-oriented, but in a more oblique way, that they "smuggle it in indirectly when they speak of norms, beliefs, and values," in other words, in the form of "designs for social life" (2004: 61).

Designing futures

We can see once again the connection between ethics and the future, the two elements of wellbeing reunited under the concept of hope. By undermining its ethics, a society also undermines its own principles of future-making, giving new dimension to the concept of unsustainability. Yet another, more fundamental corollary of the idea that our imaginative constructions of the future (even of our own futures) is socially and culturally determined is that societies and cultures are designed, insofar as each of us participate in performing, reproducing, altering, and imagining their present and future horizons on an everyday basis.

Appadurai can once again provide some primary analytical scaffolding in this respect. Despite the fact that most people experience their social worlds as given rather than planned or designed, this is a result of the modern circumscription of design as a specialist activity rather than a universal human capacity (Appadurai 2013: 253–254). Instead, Appadurai sees design manifesting in all aspects of life,

insofar as they involve deliberate choices about how one manages relationships, effort, time, energy, resources, etc. with certain goals or results in mind (2013: 254). The idea that design is a specialist domain deployed, on the one hand, to produce commodities and, on the other hand, to aid large-scale institutional planning is a narrowing that came along with the articulation of design as we know it today, responding to the demands of industrial capitalism (2013: 256).

Indeed, critical design scholars and practitioners have also been moving toward such broader conceptions of design. In his overview of this phenomenon, Arturo Escobar cites descriptions of design that very much resonate with Appadurai's, as a category of actions and practices meant to achieve a desired result or state of things (2018: 33). By his account, design *did* always play a significant part in shaping social worlds, but its exclusivity as an expert domain served to reserve this power for institutional actors, thus divorcing social norms from "life-worlds" and making them heteronomous impositions by an expert group (2018: 32). By contrast, new critical trends are emerging in design thinking that reconfigure design as more democratic, human-centered, and socially-oriented and aim to weaken the boundaries between professional designer and user, to divorce design from its orientation toward commodity production, and to recenter design's role in the production of human experience and social configurations (Escobar 2018: 48).

To this end, Escobar also points out several areas of convergence between design and anthropology. Anthropology can bring to design the tools and insights necessary to tie materiality, meaning, and practice together and to understand them as historically and culturally constructed, thereby politicizing design and revealing it as a matter of social practice. In turn, anthropology can incorporate design insights in understanding the world as designed, enabling anthropologists to better focus on world-making practices (Escobar 2018: 53–59).

In relation to ecotopia and my interlocutors' practice, two aspects are essential here. Firstly, as I've described in the introduction to this thesis, permaculture, which also happens to be my interlocutors' primary toolkit, takes the form of a type of

design from the very beginning, later being distilled into twelve design principles by David Holmgren. The application of these principles to many different areas of life, from arranging a garden to managing one's social life, seems a lot less obscure once socio-natural systems are generally understood to be designed, whether consciously or not. Secondly, understanding design practice as encompassing everyday purposeful human activity disabuses us of the notion that to design (one's life, a society, a future) necessarily involves the formulation of an all-encompassing vision that must then be applied as if building a piece of furniture following step-by-step instructions. Instead, design can be an open-ended, continuous, participative, adaptive process shaped by everyday needs and circumstances and manifesting in the most mundane activities.

In the following chapter, I will describe how my interlocutors started their ecotopian activity as an effort to design different (i.e. better) lives for themselves. If until now the focus has been on the dissatisfaction and challenges they experienced while pursuing more conventional ways of living, the next chapter will follow their shift away from these formulas, toward an active construction of new forms of sustenance, labour, organization, and future-making.

Ode to tomatoes

When I stayed with Adi and his partner, Ivana, it was September—harvest season for a lot of crops. Ivana was pregnant and often had a hard time moving around or doing physical work, so I was happy to take on as many of those duties as I could. One of the tasks that proved more demanding than I expected was harvesting everything there was to harvest. We ended up picking only a fraction of the fruit and vegetables that seemed to demand our attention from every direction. Small and dense as it was, the garden was bursting with produce: the trees were heavy with apples, peaches, pears, and apricots; the yellow beans bulged in their pods; the tomatoes' skin was cracking open, exposing the juicy pulp below.

We prioritized the tomatoes and beans. The fruit we would pick as we walked by them, stuff a handful in our pockets, and eat as we worked. The ones that fell on the ground we would leave for the geese to find or, if they were still firm enough, throw out like a ball for the dogs to chase. I would walk up and down the hill, from the house to the vegetable garden and back, with heavy basketfuls of beans and tomatoes, and marvel at simply *how much* there was. As I picked, I saw how many more tomatoes would soon be ripe, how much squash would be ready within a week's time, how big the pumpkins were growing for next month. The tomatoes were first priority because they would go bad the quickest. If I were to estimate, I think the day I harvested the most amounted to around 15 kilos of tomatoes, only from a two-by-four or so meter greenhouse. Cherry tomatoes, Roma, plum, bull's heart, yellow, red, orange—all there. The kitchen had a hard time containing all of them.

That weekend, Ivana and Adi had visitors. Cristi, a designer who organized environmental education courses and talks came to discuss a possible collaboration; Polina, a travel vlogger, came to film with a friend of hers, Cici. Adi showed them around the gardens while Ivana and me started preserving the tomatoes and beans. We blanched, peeled, chopped, cubed, boiled, and jarred all day. By the afternoon, when their tours were over, we had filled twelve large jars of beans and tomato juice

and we still had a couple basketfuls of tomatoes left to process. The others joined in. I was minding an enormous pot of tomato juice boiling in the kitchen while they were at the table outside. Tomatoes, tomato juice, tomato skins, tomato seeds everywhere. Ivana would chop the tomatoes, Cristi would pass them through a grinder several times over, Adi would collect the skins and set them aside for composting and bird feed. I came outside, waiting for the next bucket of tomato juice to fill up so I could bring it in to boil. I smoked a cigarette with fingers pruned from handling tomatoes all day. We chattered and joked incessantly, like a flock of sparrows in the morning.

As the sun began to set behind the hill across the road, its light became so intense we could barely keep our eyes open. It fell right on our table in bright reds and oranges, on the shiny surface of the tomatoes and the frothy surface of their juice. We fell silent for a moment and Ivana said something about it being a poetic moment. I began to search for poems about tomatoes and found Pablo Neruda's ode to the fruit; I read it out loud for everyone, whose hands were too wet with juice to hold the phone. We agreed it was an excellent description of the plenty we were elbow-deep in, a well suited celebration of

the tomato, / star of the earth, / recurrent / and fertile / star, / [that] displays / its
circumvolutions, / its canals, / its remarkable amplitude / and abundance.⁸

⁸ As translated by Margaret Sayers Peden in Neruda 1990: 139–143.

Chapter II

I came here, saw the land from the other hill, he showed it to me and said 'Look, that's it.' And I asked 'With the forest?' 'Yes.' 'With the hill?' 'Yes.' 'I'll take it!' [...] I always believed you can produce something with a piece of land—I don't know what, but you can produce *something*. I don't know, you can sell sand, you can sell earthworms, you can sell grubs, you can live... I don't know, anything! Anything! Flowers, peonies, wood, walnuts, apples, pears, plums, there's no point listing them all, there's too many! (Adi)

The first years I wasn't even aware of it. I don't know when it started. A few years ago I started noticing that although it's all very pretty, very nice, everything is well designed, or like direct physical needs are all fulfilled, there's still something missing. And of course it's community, people, you need a connection with people as well. (Aaron)

If a good part of my interlocutors' dissatisfaction with city life and with what a more typical way of life had to offer can be placed under the configuration of hopelessness brought about by ineffectual ethical values and the lack of a more long-term horizon worth building toward, permaculture came as a tool to design a different livelihood and a different future for themselves. This represented a radical change in their lives, including moving from urban to rural localities, moving from one country to another in one instance, changing the way they approached their social lives, finding or building new forms of community, and essentially transforming their daily lives completely.

This change unfolded at different paces for my interlocutors, which also shaped their experience of it. Permaculture itself, by its holistic scope, accommodates very diverse forms of practice which, in the case of my interlocutors, articulated according to their particular preferences, needs, resources, and values, as well as the rural context they found themselves in and their relationship to it. In this chapter, I will detail what this change looked like for each of them in their respective villages and how their particular interpretations of permaculture practice were formulated in interaction with their social and material predicament.

From the ground up

When Adi decided to start his permaculture project, the first thing he needed was a place. At the time, he was living in Cluj-Napoca and had no specific idea of where he wanted to go, only that he wanted two hectares of empty land. So he made a habit of going to see different villages and pieces of land every weekend, scouring newspaper ads and online groups for sellers. It took a long time, and he ended up going out to the neighboring Alba and Mureș counties looking for a suitable place. It wasn't that people were not selling—they very much were and are. Rather, he found that people were eager to sell large pieces of land for cheap that were far too big for what he needed. But he would inquire anyway, on the off chance that someone would be willing to sell him a smaller plot.

The ad that led him to his current piece of land was advertising 70 hectares in a different village. The woman who had placed the ad refused to partition it, but told Adi that her brother wanted to sell his 1.6 hectares in Savalin. Then the brother told him of cousins who also had adjoining 1.6 hectares to sell. And so, from one person to the next, Adi ended up with seven hectares from three different sources. This turned out to be a difficult arrangement. Getting the land registered in his name took three years for some pieces, six for others, and involved a litigation over the price, which one of the previous owners wanted to raise after their initial agreement. "But I got through it. I got through it and got the land, which is what I wanted," Adi told me.

I was living here already, but the land wasn't mine. It was tough. I often ask myself why I put myself through this. But I couldn't have done it any other way, I really couldn't. If I had to start over, I think I would do the same thing. There weren't any other options.

When Adi moved to his plot in Savalin, there was nothing constructed on it at all. It contained a patch of forest toward the top of the hill (which Adi has kept as it was) and the slope underneath, down to the road. Since his land was not used for pasture, the slope was full of shrubbery and tall grasses, which still occupy the area

Adi hasn't cultivated. In fact, even now, nine years since, Adi is far from having worked his whole land. The most striking thing about his homestead is its overwhelming density—all his gardens, plants, animals, trees, and constructions cover a small surface area which, from the inside, seems endlessly varied. But when he started, selling his apartment in Cluj-Napoca to make the initial investment, Adi only had a piece of grassy and forested land.

That's where he lived for the first and hardest period. Some of the difficulties were foreseeable, others less so. For one, Adi built the house and the gardens from scratch. He had learned about natural building from books and attended a workshop about it, conducted by Ileana Mavrodin, an architect who was one of the first to promote cob building in Romania in the 2000s. Cob is a mixture of clay, sand, and hay that can be used for building or plastering structures. It is cheap—especially if one already has both sandy and clay soil on their land, as Adi does—, malleable, and relatively easy to use and forms breathable walls that regulate indoor humidity and temperature. For his house, Adi used cob for isolation over a structure of earthbag walls. He built the house gradually, area by area, starting with the cellar, which took around three months to construct to the point that Adi could move in it from the tent he had been sleeping in.

The initial "establishment" phase of a permaculture is also known to be the most labour- and resource-intensive, especially when speed is a priority (Holmgren & Mollison 1990: 9–10), as was the case for Adi. Permacultures generally start with a period of observation, wherein one gets to know the land and the organisms that are already on it, following the first principle of permaculture, "observe and interact" (Holmgren: 13, 16). This is not to say that the observation process ever really ends, but that permaculture design should emerge from and respond to the specificities of the site. In their analysis of permaculture imaginaries, Roux-Rosier *et al.* see this particular element as part of the practical register of permaculture, defining it as a developing "hermeneutic" of land, a way to "'read' the territory and to understand its

'patterns'—that is, the specific and hyper-localized identity of the territory, the species already implanted, their habits, the topography and micro-climate" (2018: 559).

Adi's sudden transition from city to countryside and permaculture also made it more challenging. Since permaculture is meant to take shape as an integrated system, time is an essential component in its formation. Not only is the beginning the most intensive part of the process, but the "maturation" of a permaculture—that is, when the system can be said to have stabilized in ecological terms—can take decades depending on the types of plants it involves. For example, Adi intended to turn part of the forested area on his property into a food forest which he only expected to be consistently productive in ten years or so.

This does not mean that a permaculture will produce no yield until then, but that the system will be relatively less productive and stable before that point (Holmgren & Mollison 1990: 9). Therefore, permacultures are often designed in phases that mimic ecological succession, the process by which an ecosystem changes as barren land becomes colonized or following a disturbance such as fire or flooding. This fosters productivity over time (with vegetables or herbs producing from the first year and other plants and animals yielding or being introduced later) without compromising the continuous development of the system (see Holmgren & Mollison: 33–34 for examples).

Corrective and balancing measures also tend to be slow in permaculture practice, as suggested in the fourth principle, "apply self-regulation" (Holmgren 2011: 71), and in the ninth principle, "use small and slow solutions" (Holmgren 2011: 181). This is because the goal is to ultimately create a self-regulating system, therefore functional, systemic solutions are favored over symptomatic ones. For example, in order to keep the soil moist during increasingly dry and hot summers, permaculturists might (as Adi and Aaron do) keep certain fast-growing plants specifically for mulching, create terraces and trenches to keep runoff water from flowing away, and design multi-layered gardens where trees and bushes can provide shade for smaller plants. Therefore, permaculture design unfolds as a continuous

process, alternating between observation and intervention, establishment and maintenance.

In Adi's case, the economic aspect of his project evolved slowly, but positively. He used his savings and the money he got from selling his apartment for building materials which, by his estimation, did not exceed €5000 (not including tools). For the first three years of living in Savalin, he also worked remotely as a video and audio editor to earn additional income. As he puts it, he got quite lucky in this regard. One of his more stable and long-running jobs was editing a podcast from the United States "about gardening, aquaponic systems, solar energy systems, that kind of thing." Adi also began to share his progress online, on YouTube and Instagram, quite early on. This turned out to be an important step in dealing with another challenging aspect in rooting himself in Savalin.

The eyes of others

A challenge Adi did not expect was that, in the beginning, he did not receive much support from the village community, nor from his social circle in Cluj-Napoca. When he started, Adi thought that everyone would want to do what he was doing, or at least be interested in the project. This did not turn out to be the case.

Everyone I invited here—I'd say 'Hey, come and see what I'm doing'—they would come, but it wasn't their thing. They would come and look and go 'Oh my, Alex...' Like that, with pity. Once, twice, three times, ten times, the same thing. So I didn't invite anyone anymore.

In turn, villagers tended to be suspicious of him in the beginning. Adi believed there were many reasons for this: some thought he was a hippie young man who would cause trouble in the area or that he had moved there to grow psychoactive plants; others thought permaculture was a strange and crazy idea they'd never heard of before. One significant interaction I've heard Adi recount multiple times took place shortly after he'd started his permaculture. At the time, he was more enthusiastic

about trying to tell locals about what he was doing, to show them what permaculture was and how it worked. But he found that people were resistant to it and was told by an old man to "do it in his own place." Adi took that to heart. Tensions between him and other villagers neutralized with time and familiarity, as people saw for themselves that he minded his own work, managed to run a productive garden, and brought volunteers and tourists to Savalin. However, Adi is still not particularly close with the community or involved in village matters, therefore Adi's regular interactions with villagers are mainly functional, such as trading produce or other goods like methane or raw wool, which he uses for mulching. That initial rejection made Adi seek community elsewhere and, as he put it, "That wound is still there and I have to heal it."

What is striking, however, is that many aspects of permaculture do resonate with traditional subsistence agriculture and village life, which are still practiced and preserved, especially by older generations. This was noted by anthropologist Katy Fox who contrasted her experience with Romanian subsistence farmers (who would refer to themselves as peasants) and permaculturists in the UK. Beyond working closely with and in nature with an approach centered on making do with available resources, she also found that both groups were highly aware of the importance of interconnectedness and reciprocity within their community, as well as between their community and others (2013: 166). However, Romanian peasants tended to see these aspects as a matter of necessity and begrudging compliance with their given situation (2013: 175), rather than seeing them in a positive light. Fox attributes this difference to the way each group conceives of progress and the good life, determined by "the differing extent to which they want to imagine and live in ways other than the dominant models of progress" (2013: 165). Despite being marginalized and devalued in the normative discourse of "modernization" and "Westernization" that followed the transition from a socialist economy to a capitalist one, peasants reacted with disappointment and "defeatist" acceptance, seeing

themselves being left behind while still holding on to those same ideas of modernity and progress (2013: 170).

An offshoot of this which also provides more context for Adi's experience is that, as a result of the instability exacerbated by economic transition, the sharp inequalities it produced, and the intensely hierarchical thinking that followed, which placed them toward the bottom of the emerging social order, peasants tended to be highly suspicious of others, drawing strong boundaries between those they saw as trustworthy and untrustworthy (Fox 2013: 172). This is very much in line with my own observations and seems to me like a more general trait of Romanian social life that extends beyond the rural, inflecting people's interactions more widely, including in urban settings.

The concept of modernity plays an important role here. While, in Fox's account, Romanian peasants were perfectly aware that modernization did not include or serve them, they saw it as an inevitability and continued to value it (2013: 175). This may also influence the way peasants perceive permaculture more generally. In her article on Latvian traditional farmers' views on permaculture, environmental anthropologist Guntra Aistara recounts several instances of rejection on the part of the farmers when faced with certain permaculture techniques. She argues that farmers are accustomed to following a binary distinction between traditional and modern agriculture: they are used to the juxtaposition of their own traditional farms with monoculture fields where industrial agriculture is practiced, and show interest in permaculture practices insofar as they can fit into either category. However, permaculture as a whole is not only a combination of the two, bringing together insights from agro-ecology, forestry, etc. as well as from Indigenous and traditional forms of farming, but sometimes "fall[s] into a 'gap,' neither traditional nor modern" (2013: 124). As a result, the traditional farmers found it unacceptable and outside the bounds of what they would consider "serious farming" (2013: 125).

By contrast, permaculturists particularly value the variety and hybridity of practices from different epistemic bases. Indeed, the concept of permaculture first

emerged in an academic context through the collaboration of Bill Mollison and David Holmgren at the University of Tasmania in the 1970s, but also integrated from the very beginning practices and models of agriculture and land management of Indigenous peoples in Tasmania, examples of which pepper *Permaculture One* throughout.

Aistara frames this as a rejection of the modern process of onto-epistemic purification (in Bruno Latour's terms, see Latour 1993), with permaculture design being explicitly aimed at creating hybrid naturecultures (Aistara 2013: 115–116). One prominent example of this is the "edge effect," a phenomenon by which the interface between two ecosystems is significantly more diverse than either individually. In turn, complexity and diversity are highly valued in permaculture as factors that improve the stability and longevity of the overall system, even at the cost of short-term productivity (Holmgren & Mollison 1990: 7). Therefore, it is standard permaculture practice to increase the edges and interfaces between different areas as much as possible (Holmgren & Mollison 1990: 29), as suggested in the tenth and eleventh permaculture principles, "use and value diversity" (Holmgren 2011: 203) and "use edges and value the marginal" (Holmgren 1990: 223).

Sustain-ability and permaculture

These principles also manifest in the way permaculture practitioners organize their life and social relations. Marginality is conceived as a liberating space (Fox 2013: 168) that opens up the possibility of reconfiguring oneself and one's life away from dominant norms. This not only means that permaculturists tend to favor egalitarian, relational, and collective ways of thinking, but also that they understand this relationality to include the nonhuman world in a way that must change their own subjectivity, in a "co-arising and coevolution of person and environment" (Fox 2013: 174). Recalling the discussion in the previous chapter about culture as designed and how, by undermining their own ethical and material foundations, highly developed

societies foreclose their own futures, it is now more clear how modernist ideals of progress and the nature/culture divide inflect daily life, experience, and social organization even on a small scale, in relatively marginal areas of "the West." Here, a contrast becomes evident not only between permaculturists and traditional farmers in Eastern Europe, who have commonly internalized modern ideas of "development," but also between permaculture and more conventional forms of environmentalism.

In most forms of "orthodox environmentalism," the focus tends to remain on conservation, which upholds the material segregation and conceptual binary between the natural and the anthropic, between nature and culture, thus also removing personal stakes from the equation and the critical edge of holistic thinking, by framing environmentalism as a series of discreet "causes" rather than as a systemic, epistemic, social, political, cultural issue (Fox 2013: 177). The resulting idea of sustainability is therefore also constructed on uncritical grounds, undercutting its future-making potential.

Design theorist Tony Fry coined the term "defuturing" for the condition of "defutured" worlds, meaning worlds that function in negation of their future, and thereby in self-negation (2020: 238). He also put forward a cutting critique of conventional conceptions of environmentalism and sustainability, contrasting them with his preferred term, "sustain-ability" (2020: 7). He argues that, by upholding the separation between the human and the natural, the biocentric perspective of conventional environmentalisms results in a reductive and inadequate approach focused on producing solutions to symptomatic problems without addressing the underlying causes (2020: 240). Through its "deflection to 'the natural'," this perspective conceals "the multi-ontological relational complexities and flux of the biophysical, socio-cultural and cognitive-symbolic qualities of all that requires to be sustained" (2020: 239–240) and thus cannot serve as a basis for genuine sustain-ability, in the end inevitably sustaining the unsustainable (2020: 7–8).

Fry describes the defutured as rushing toward a series of short-term futures that compromise long-term sustain-ability. He refers to this contradictory condition of

long-term futures being negated by short-term ones as a colonization of the future by the past and present (2020: 10). By contrast, true sustain-ability is not a fixed state to be arrived at, but instead unfolds in a sequence of finite "sustainments" that preserve or increase available means of future-making. Therefore, since this process is dynamic and lacks a clear end-goal, it is rooted in the continuous exercise of judgment to determine "what is an appropriate and responsible action in ever-changing relational circumstances" (Fry 2020: 8).

This framework resonates with the design approach of permaculture, whose fluid cycles of observation and intervention meant to preserve and foster diversity and spontaneously emerging relationships between organisms as bolsters of resilience can be understood as a series of such sustainments. Perhaps more fundamentally, however, it reveals the radical potential of the holistic ambitions of permaculture. Returning to Fox's observations working with permaculture practitioners, she recounts their explicit acknowledgement of the fact that current ways of life are essentially unsustainable, therefore sustainability involves their change rather than their preservation as simply "greener" forms of consumption and exploitation (2013: 164). In addition, their conscious effort to formulate new ways of living comes with a rejection of fixed ideals (like modernity or development) and is instead seen as taking shape through practice (Fox 2013: 171).

Digital paths

It seems, then, that the surface-level similarities between permaculture and traditional village life and subsistence farming do not necessarily belie a deeper resonance or compatibility, at least in the region discussed here. It is therefore less surprising that, in his first years after moving to the countryside and starting his permaculture project, Adi did not find support or community in his immediate context in Savalin, nor among his urban circle. This resulted in Adi seeking it elsewhere, namely online. He began by documenting his project on Instagram and creating an

Airbnb profile to receive guests in his caravan as soon as he could, before he had even started work on his gardens.

I mentioned previously that permaculture is not well known in Romania and environmental issues are generally relatively absent in public discourse. Therefore, it was not surprising for me to learn that the vast majority of Adi's online audience is international, with only around 10% in Romania. Early on, his online presence was central to him gaining the confidence to continue his project. Adi's first Airbnb guest came shortly after he returned to Savalin from London and paid 35 RON (aprox. €7) per day to stay in a caravan and enjoy the landscape.

I calculated how many eggs I eat, how much I spend on bread, and I thought 'I'll survive!' [...] That's what gave me confidence that I can do something here. And that I can draw people here somehow. So that's what I did and that's what I'm still doing. [...] And people started coming. That year, I started the Airbnb in April, and in August this vlogger from London came and she was a huge help. She paid for the nights she spent here, for the experience, and she gave me a camera too, the camera I still use to film everything around here. She gifted it to me. And she gave me confidence.

Eight years later, Adi still uses that same camera to film YouTube videos, which he posts on several channels. He stresses that, on the one hand, his online presence makes people feel safe to visit his homestead and, on the other hand, social media algorithms help to expose him to people who already have an interest in permaculture or natural building. Indeed, this seems to mark a significant change in his approach. Adi continues to be very active and engaged in spreading and teaching permaculture and natural building (not only through social media, but also through workshops and hosting volunteers), but he only aims his activity at people who are already interested. Not only because he acknowledges that this way of life is not for everybody, but also because he is more purposeful about building (an albeit geographically scattered) community around these practices.

I surrounded myself with people who want to do this. And running every day into optimistic people who dream of a good life, of moving to the countryside, of having a garden, because they know that's the answer... I fed off their dreams and realized that what's happening around me is good, not bad.

Adi uses workshops, Airbnb, and social media not only as a source of income, but as a constellation of paths aimed at enabling people to engage with these practices themselves. It is important to note that he doesn't see his paid workshops as an economic exchange between himself and attendees, but as an opening for a longer-term relationship between them. In fact, having students who start their own permaculture or natural building projects and continue to contact Adi for advice and consultation is the goal. Volunteering functions similarly, as an accessible way for people to learn by working in Adi's homestead and, if they wish to get more involved, Adi is more than happy to oblige. When I stayed in Savalin, Adi had a volunteer, Andrei, who had found him online and ended up staying with him long-term to work on a building project. By the time I got there, Andrei had been living with Adi for over a year.

However, people need not begin by making as drastic a change as Adi did and he seems to have been successful in creating a community around his practice, engaging people with different angles of interest and levels of involvement. One such example is Adi's friend from university, nicknamed "Mr. Bee" by Ivana.⁹ Mr. Bee is a passionate beekeeper who lives in Cluj-Napoca, but keeps several hives on Adi's property and comes by a couple times a week to tend to them. By his estimation, Adi hosts more than fifty people each year and at least ten or so come by his homestead

⁹ Ivana was an important presence in my fieldwork and an integral participant in the daily life of the homestead. However, the reader will notice that the account provided here only mentions her in passing. This is because at the time Ivana and Adi's relationship was relatively new and she had only been living on the homestead for about four months. Thus, the processes and practices that are in focus here were mostly driven by Adi long before her arrival, when he lived alone in Savalin.

on an almost weekly basis to work, learn, or socialize, mostly from Cluj-Napoca and neighboring villages.

Seeing and doing

It would perhaps be easy to dismiss Adi's case as that of an eccentric who faced natural resistance and, in time, managed to gather similarly eccentric people around himself. He certainly has been perceived as such by people in his vicinity. Even in the context of this thesis, Adi could be said to represent an isolated or exceptional case, such that seriously analyzing his practice and experience would not produce relevant conclusions. I believe this kind of perspective to be not only short-sighted, but also falling into a tendency to individualize ethical ideals and aspirations, which stands in direct opposition to the project of taking ethnographic research seriously when it comes to ideas of a good life, which inevitably have a deeply personal component. In this section, I am once again taking my cue from Arjun Appadurai's discussion of aspiration as a cultural capacity, wherein he flags the often overlooked fact that these ideas, as idiosyncratic as they may appear, "are always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life" (2004: 67). Moreover, I believe Appadurai's essay can better illuminate the processes and stakes at play here.

More specifically, the effort to form community around shared ethical concerns and practices can be understood as part of a renegotiation of the terms of recognition. Appadurai describes them as the conditions under which people "negotiate with the very norms that frame their social lives" (2004: 66). It is important to note that the people Appadurai was writing about live in conditions of deprivation and marginalization very different from those experienced by my interlocutors, namely poor urban populations in Mumbai. The fact that the contexts I describe here are marginal relative to what Eriksen named "hopelessly rich" societies should

remain front of mind. That being said, I believe the framework remains relevant and applicable.

Appadurai argues that the concept of recognition (and the terms and politics thereof) can help to better understand the ambivalent relationship poor people have with the dominant norms of their society: by recognizing these norms, they are also recognizing a social structure that places them on its bottom rung, and that reaffirms the conditions of inequality and exploitation under which they live, and are in turn only recognized as a problematic category, in terms that "ensure minimum change in the terms of redistribution" (2004: 65–66). The ambivalence stems from this double bind that often sees poor people fluctuating between cynicism and compliance to the norms that impoverish them and strip them of dignity (2004: 65). This contradictory condition clearly recalls the case of Romanian peasants discussed previously, in that their begrudging compliance to ideals of modernization simultaneously devalues their practices and prevents them from accepting alternative perspectives.

I would argue that Adi's effort to build community around his ecotopian practice can be conceived as a strategy of renegotiating the terms of recognition he was presented with. His shift to an unconventional way of life that eschews comfort, consumption, and the pursuit of wealth positioned him as an object of pity on the part of his former urban peers and as an object of suspicion on the part of Savalin locals. Online spaces allowed him to change the social frame of reference he could obtain recognition from and, by successfully leveraging his online presence into an in-person community of friends, learners, volunteers, and visitors, he managed to obtain, if not approval, at least respect in his local social environment. Adi expressed his emotional impetus in this direction in terms of "being seen":

I was alone, it was hard, but then I realized, I thought 'If I really appreciated the people I saw who did these things—in books or online, in the stuff I was looking at—why keep it all for myself? I should show it online. If my acquaintances, my family, my neighbors don't care and look at me with pity, maybe others will see things differently.' That's why I started filming. [...] I think I have that need, I want to be seen... Seen, yes, that's all. I think we all want that. And

maybe I shouldn't pretend that I don't have that need or that I don't want that. Maybe it's really important.

Invisible lines

In a strange twist that makes one go "it really is a small world, isn't it?," one evening me and Simina realized we have a friend in common. I knew him in Bucharest, where he was working as a performance artist and writer, and organizing a yearly performative arts festival. Simina had met him long before, in their hometown of Constanța. Months later, when I met up with this common friend—who is, for that matter, an inveterate gossip—he was quick to ask "So you met Simina. What did you think of her?"

Simina is, if nothing else, a big personality. From the moment I first stepped into her yard, she took it upon herself to show me around and regale me with all manner of stories, explanations, and observations. Frankly, I could not believe my luck to have run into such a communicative interlocutor. She was hospitable, forceful, verbose, funny, and very knowledgeable about Prigov and its surrounding area. On walks or car rides, she would constantly lay out what each thing was as we passed by it: houses, shops, wooden signs, gardens inside the village; blocks, monuments, factories, parts of the landscape, markets, fortresses outside of it. It felt like a combination between a historical walking tour and someone showing me around their neighborhood. Simina's input was especially important in understanding what was happening in Prigov, which seemed inscrutable without her explanations.

Prigov is smaller than Savalin—not necessarily in size, but in population. According to the 2021 census, it has less than 350 residents and gives off the impression of a half-abandoned place. Every time I walked through the village, I saw more dogs than people roaming the main street. It was also hard to tell which houses were inhabited and which were not. Many looked quite derelict, with wood-set windows that had gone opaque with dust and time and overgrown verdant yards that, although beautiful, didn't suggest care. Most striking, though, was that Prigov was not just quiet, but largely silent, skirting the boundary between peaceful and eerie. There is not much in Prigov for people. There is a functional old church with a

wooden bell tower—beautiful and solitary on a hillside ledge—, a school with only eight children (Diana among them), two general stores, and the village hall. Savalin doesn't even have a bar which, needless to say, is usually also a staple of Romanian village life; the closest thing is a single table with plastic garden chairs around it in front of the smaller of the two stores, almost perpetually occupied by the local drunkards.

Simina, however, seemed to know most people in the village, as well as all the hidden or absent figures that inhabited it and the invisible lines that crossed it. She would point to a yard and tell me who lived there, if they had emigrated and where, if they would come back for part of the year, that the yard was actually split into two properties, that there had been an inheritance dispute about it, that the house is in a bad state because of that dispute. She would point to another and tell me that the person who lived there moved in some years ago, that she'd hoped to start a restaurant before discovering that it was almost impossible to get the mayor to sign off on a building permit, that she has a sister who also stays there from time to time. She pointed out the mayor and the former mayor's houses to me. Those I could have guessed: they stood out as the biggest, best-kept houses, both flanking the village hall. Approaching the other end of the village, where the houses got more sparse, Simina told me there was no point continuing down the road because further up was where the "forest people" lived. At first I thought she meant foresters or shepherds traveling with flocks, but no, Simina said, these were people living on a whole other level of off-grid: no electricity, no water, no garden, just a hut and a pig, a goat, or a cow. And, of course, a gun. I hope the reader will understand that, while my curiosity was piqued, so was my instinct for self-preservation, therefore I looked no further into this mysterious wild folk.

Simina's stories of administrative problems were not immediately visible, but it soon became clear that they strongly impacted life in the village. The Zonal Urban Plan (PUZ) had not been updated since 2003 and still largely followed the land partitioning laid out in the 1890s, since the area was one of the few that had not

been collectivized and systematized under the communist regime. This was the reason for seemingly arbitrary boundaries between plots and properties, which seem absurd at this point, often cutting across yards, houses, and gardens. The sequence of inheritances only further divided plots, creating an overwhelming patchwork of rights of ownership and making many properties nigh unusable. Houses cannot be sold or restored because they often have multiple owners who would all have to give their approval. Businesses cannot operate in the village because they would require updating the PUZ and obtaining special permits, made all the more expensive and difficult by the corrupt mayor. Simina's suspicion was that the situation continues because the ultimate goal is for the village to disappear altogether—caught between the interests of the stone quarry in a valley nearby and the National Forest Fund that manages surrounding protected areas, she believes the village is a nuisance to both local and national actors.

Simina spoke about all this passionately and angrily, in a way that betrayed intense affection for and attachment to the place. It was, after all, the home village of her grandparents and great-grandparents, a place she spent several years as a child, and the place she feels most connected to. The land she and Aaron now live on belonged to her grandparents and is suffering from some of the same ills as the rest of the village. The middle section, between the campsite below and Aaron and Simina's house above, is the old family home and yard that is by far the most neglected area of the property. The house isn't particularly large—it's a pretty standard family house with a handful of rooms—, but different sections of it are owned by various members of Simina's family. Simina's mother, Miriam, spends summers there, some family members come during holidays, yet others never come and are completely uninterested in restoring it. However, Simina remembers it fondly and vividly as it was while her grandparents were alive. She showed me where a summer kitchen used to be, the mound of wood that used to be a pigsty, the old outdoor toilet nobody uses anymore except her and Miriam because they are afraid of the snakes that tend to gather on the path that leads up to it.

While her grandparents and a great deal of what the village was like back then is gone, Simina still seems to keep a sort of living record of Prigov in her memory. Significantly, it appears to be a living record rather than a nostalgic snapshot: she is attentive to the current events in the village and to its inhabitants, both human and nonhuman. Sometimes, I would go up to Aaron and Simina's house in the evening and, sitting on the porch, she would point things out to me just as readily. The two irises, one of which had grown far bigger than the other, though they were planted at the same time, only a meter apart. The hummingbird moths' favorite honeysuckle. The stag beetle who circles around in the evenings, which she recognizes by the sound of its clumsy flight, as it knocks against the roof. Simina was particularly fond of the beetle, often waiting to hear it around eight in the evening. When it did come, Simina would walk out into the yard, keeping an eye out for the jay she'd seen hunting it before. At a certain point in the evening, when the late summer sunsets seemed to prolong the day indefinitely, she would tell me "It's going to be dark in 10 minutes. You'd better get going if you want to get down to the campsite before dark." And she was always right.

Different place, different pace

If the change Adi made in his life was as quick as it was drastic, things went very differently for Aaron and Simina. As I touched upon earlier, their move to Prigov evolved more slowly: from building a vacation home, to deciding to move to the village year-round, to developing a permaculture and a community around it. They already had a connection with the village through Simina's family and their move there was both precipitated and paced by Diana's presence. It was also clear that a sort of division of labor took place between Aaron and Simina. Aaron stumbled across permaculture and pursued it through a more conventional path (at least as "conventional" as permaculture gets), taking a Permaculture Design Course with a former student of Bill Mollison's and currently pursuing certification from a permaculture institute in Germany. He deals with the better part of the design and maintenance of their garden and teaches the permaculture workshops they organize. Simina, on the other hand, works a lot more closely with locals in Prigov and neighboring villages, and takes on a lot of the administrative tasks that come with applying for and obtaining funding for their projects. She sees this as a balanced way to play on each of their strengths.

I don't have a good grasp on the permaculture part. Aaron does. I only know a little, I'm at the beginning of that road, while he's done it and studied it, and he's very good at it. I'm very good at other things. [...] So this project and this way of life is only possible because there's both of us. And I think each of us does our part and we complement each other well and it works.¹⁰

As a result of this more deliberate process and organization, Aaron and Simina did not face the kind of initial challenges that Adi did, which is not to say that they did not run into difficulties—indeed, they very much still do, especially given that their move and the beginning of their permaculture was more recent than Adi's. However, in this section I would like to more specifically focus on their community

¹⁰ This and other quotes from Simina are taken from transcripts of our interview, translated from Romanian.

work, where their particular approach can offer an interesting counterpoint to Adi's and can bring other dimensions to the fore.

The first significant difference is that Simina and Aaron did not start from a place of social isolation, as Adi did. The fact that Simina already had connections there made them an atypical, but acceptable presence for the locals, and moving to Prigov as a family lessened their need for outside social support and connection. They had access to a local social circle from the very beginning: Diana went to school in the village with all the other kids, therefore Simina and Aaron were brought together with other parents and with the school principal and teacher; they already knew neighbors and friends of Simina's family; they were (and are) often perceived as strange and meet resistance from Prigov locals, especially from the older generations, but were never truly outsiders or complete newcomers to the village. Therefore, in their case, building community had more of a political function than a social or emotional one. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why they chose a more structured approach, often intersecting with larger organizations and institutions. Aaron and Simina are present on social media, but less so. They did not try to build a platform centered around themselves, but mostly use social media to promote their projects.

In the first years after their move, the two hosted more campers and volunteers in an unstructured way, but this has happened less and less in the intervening years, as Aaron and Simina decided they prefer for people to come for structured workshops or programmes such as student exchanges, mobilities, or specific projects. They also noticed that they would receive far more interest from abroad than from within Romania: by the time I stayed with them, five or six years after their move to Prigov, they said I was only their third Romanian volunteer. Instead, their activities and sources of funding are often within EU structures or have a European scope. Firstly, these programmes allow them to teach permaculture and share their experience in a way that is both economically viable for them and accessible for the participants. They focus on programmes that would provide the

funding necessary to at least cover participants' expenses, such as Erasmus+, the European Solidarity Corps, or Forum Synergies scholarships. Secondly, they are very much concerned with how effective their activities are in actually pushing participants to practice permaculture in their own lives. They found that people who would come to camp or volunteer in a more informal manner were often interested in permaculture, but were not necessarily also considering it as an option for themselves. For this reason, they shifted focus to more involved participants, especially young people and students.

Among other factors, this is certainly a function of the relative isolation of Prigov. Taking Savalin as a term of comparison, Prigov is not only less populated, but also far less connected to any population centers or cities. Savalin is within a 40 minute drive from Cluj-Napoca, one of the largest and fastest-growing cities in Romania, and surrounded by many other well populated villages, suburbs, and small towns. As a result, it enjoys reliable transport connections, such as the bus I took to get there. Prigov, on the other hand, is located in a more remote and more mountainous area. The only way to get there is by car, up serpentine mountain roads, and there is no large city within an hour's drive. The landscape also plays an important part in the lower density of villages in the vicinity, given that Prigov is surrounded by multiple protected areas. All of this means that it is more difficult for Aaron and Simina to assure people's access to their homestead. While Adi would regularly receive casual visits from people just passing by, coming and going to Cluj-Napoca, there is little chance of anyone just happening upon Prigov, therefore bringing people there requires purposeful planning and organization.

Aaron and Simina use international structures to allow themselves to be found and to avoid letting geography isolate them from larger permaculture and rural movements. They are part of the European Permaculture Network, work with the European Network for Community-Led Initiatives on Climate Change and Sustainability (ECOLISE), and participate in the European Rural Parliament. Aaron

sees their activity, on both large and small scales, both internationally and locally, as part and parcel of permaculture practice:

Most people who want to make a living off permaculture, they go into design. Garden design, landscape design... And I'm not very passionate about that to be honest. I think it's an important part and for many people it's the main part, but for me, I see myself more in the social part. And I don't think one part is more important than the other one, but I think the social permaculture part doesn't get enough attention and it needs to get more attention. [...] So I see myself in teaching, definitely. Teaching and connecting... Maybe... Not politics, that sounds stupid, but trying to influence also on a bigger scale.

Negotiating the rural

It is not the case, however, that the smaller, local scale is more approachable than the larger. Prigov locals have their own reservations about permaculture, similar to those described in Savalin earlier in this chapter, but they have also found some support, for instance from the school principal, who helps to organize small community gatherings and participates in some of their activities with international exchange students focused on local traditions, despite the fact that she has no particular interest in permaculture. Aaron and Simina see this variation in people's openness as an expression of generational difference. In Simina's estimation

Our generations are fractured, the dialogue between them is fractured, because there's a huge difference between the generations. For example, my parents lived under communism, so they're never going to have the same views, the same mentality about many things as I do or my child does. [...] In Romania there are over 3500 or so communities similar to ours and they have the same problem. I look around at others to see what they can do. For example, the next community over as you go is Carm. What are they doing? Despite being a much more developed village, their young people also leave. For high school, for the city, for other countries, out. [...] Some stay, maybe some return, but the degree to which young people return is too small to matter. Not to mention, they come and do what? Because if you haven't learned to do certain things since you were young, you don't even know how to work.

In this context, Simina and Aaron see permaculture as a possible path to make rural life viable outside of industrial agriculture and mass tourism, which otherwise seem to be the only options for supporting oneself in that rural setting. Their efforts in this regard can be seen as an attempt to shift the narratives and trends that define the rural in Romania specifically and in Europe more widely, which become increasingly fraught as rural areas continue to depopulate and to be underserved by public services, and to reframe the rural as a space of possibility.

Depopulation and marginality are certainly realities of village life in Romania, despite the fact that almost 50% of the country's population lives in rural areas and over 93% of Romanian territory can be described as rural space, one of the biggest proportions in Europe (Băneş *et al.* 2018: 22–23). Indeed, their perceived marginality has less to do with the material, economic, or cultural importance of these areas than with the value framework being employed. The dominant ideal of modernization, as described by Fox (2013: 168–171), creates a dichotomy between the urban as the dynamic locus of said modernity and the rural as a devalued space of the past and tradition. In their account of prominent narratives of and approaches to the rural, Mark Shucksmith and David L. Brown critique this binary separation as reductive of the many complexities that come with describing and defining the rural, but acknowledge that rural spaces are still usually framed in either pastoralist or modernist terms—as either romanticized repositories of tradition or backward areas to be developed or enveloped by the urban (2016: 2). This binary once again expresses a double bind for rural residents, presenting them with options that seem limited to preserving their way of life as a relic of the past or allowing it to disappear by falling in line with a vision of modernity that would inevitably lead to its disappearance.

This is, of course, a false dichotomy. As Shucksmith and Brown point out, "[c]hange not stability is the normal situation for rural communities and regions" (2016: 4) which are in no way the static, fossilized places a modernist view of them would have one think, nor are they edenic bubbles of primitive wisdom. Instead, the

situation in Prigov and villages like it is better understood in terms of tensions between several competing meta-narratives of rural change (*ibid.*). Perhaps the most prominent currently would be what Shucksmith and Brown call the "places left behind narrative," characterized by abandonment and the departure of young people, that sees "some (vulnerable) people remain trapped by their lack of opportunity and their lack of human capital" (2016: 6). In other words, those who can leave will do so, and those who can't must live with what's left. Indeed, this would be an understandable view of the changes that have taken place in rural Romania since the 1990s. Despite the fact that, following the fall of the communist government and its centralization efforts, rural out-migration saw a sharp decrease and even a slight reversal (Hăgăuș & Földes 2020: 290), urban-to-rural migration "mostly include[s] those who take summer or holiday accommodation in rural areas, older people and pensioners, who prefer to retire in rural areas, where they have a more affordable living" (Băneș *et al.* 2018: 26), and the overall rural populations only increased slightly in villages within the functional orbit of urban areas (Hăgăuș & Földes 2020: 295).

In such villages, like Savalin, where access to important urban areas is relatively robust, a narrative focused on urban–rural access (Shucksmith & Brown 2016: 5) might also be at play; in yet others, like the more touristic Carm that Simina mentioned, an "amenity-based economy narrative" (*ibid.*) might be more prominent. The situation will inevitably vary from place to place, depending on each village's geography, population, demographic, governance, and social organization. Two things in particular should be noted here. Firstly, that the "places left behind" narrative is almost always present, especially for the less privileged and older inhabitants of Romanian villages and, secondly, that the alternative narrative being constructed by permaculture practitioners does not neatly fit into any of the dominant categories outlined by Shucksmith and Brown, though it intersects several of them. The most significant crossover is with narratives of "society–nature interrelationships" (Shucksmith & Brown 2016: 7–8), which centers the ways in which rural societies shape and are shaped by their natural environments. This is a

preoccupation shared by the idea that permaculture aims to design integrated naturecultures that would be mutually beneficial to humans and nonhumans under the ideal of sustainability. However, the meta-narrative described by Shucksmith and Brown can just as easily accommodate discourses of sustainable development where the emphasis falls on development (i.e. discourses still focused on modernization that endorse continued growth and consumption, but with certain mitigations of environmental impact) or discourses that openly perpetuate the kind of hierarchical top-down prescriptions that are incompatible with permaculture ethics and principles.

This is no surprise, nor is it a fault of the overview provided by the two scholars. Their aim was to identify prominent meta-narratives of rural change (Shucksmith & Brown 2016: 4), whereas permaculture operates on a far smaller grassroots level and has yet to become a widely known practice in Romania—of bring it to that point is precisely my interlocutors' goal. Their continued work with both locals and international visitors is aimed at establishing permaculture as a viable way of life in rural spaces that stands apart from dominant discourse of development and modernization, and that is accessible and particularly well suited for those who do not have ready access to the kind of capital involved in industrial farming or mass tourism, but also have little hope or desire to attain a good life by moving to a city and pursuing a more conventional path like the ones they previously took and abandoned themselves.

Chapter III

I think there must be millions of young people in the world who can't find their place, can't find their meaning, can't think what to do with little money. I'm just talking about our work. To give my work to something that gives me purpose in life, that gives me courage, that gives me freedom. That's what I want this to be, beyond what I do here. (Adi)

I think it makes sense to most people. [But] they don't really think they can do something. They know it's better not to buy shitty food, and it's not good to go on huge vacations, and it's not good to be wasteful with all kinds of things. But they feel caught up in a system, they think it doesn't make a change if they change, they don't know how to change the big structures around them, and so they just do what everyone does and just continue. So maybe what I'm hoping to do actually is to rip them out of their everyday life and show them that it's possible. (Aaron)

In this final chapter I will attempt to bring together the various elements of my interlocutors' stories and practice in light of their ecotopian quality and potential. In other words, I will look more closely at how moving to the countryside, practicing permaculture, and building community in the way they do serve to paint a picture of a good life, society, and future. I would like to begin by noting that this discussion takes place at the inflection point of an ambiguity intrinsic to the concept of the good also expressed in the English expression of "good life": in common parlance, the definite and indefinite articulation of these words are usually understood to have slightly different meanings—*the* good life invokes images of a life of pleasure and plenty, a desirable and happy life; a good life is more likely to refer to a virtuous life, a life led by ethical principles.

This ambiguity is rather fortuitous, as anthropologist Daniel Miller points out, because it preserves a fundamental connection between the good as excellence and desirability and the good as ethically virtuous which appears at the Greek roots of the European philosophical tradition. Indeed, the two meanings were also conceptually bound together. In Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, *eudaimonia*

(happiness) is understood as a manifestation of *aretē* (virtue, excellence), therefore the good life and a good life meld as the practice of being good at living well (Miller 2024: 1). Throughout this chapter, it is precisely the interconnection of both these meanings that is in focus, therefore I will be using the two articulations somewhat interchangeably unless otherwise specified.

Unlike Miller's book, however, this thesis is not an effort in philosophical anthropology. Indeed, as a former student of philosophy who shifted toward social sciences only later in my academic history, I am very wary of the fact that interpreting ethnographic material using philosophical tools, especially ones derived from a canon very much divorced from current historical, social, and material conditions, opens up significant pitfalls on both sides. This is not to say that scholars in this field are unaware of such complications, but that my own approach will only employ philosophical elements in a limited capacity. Specifically, they are relevant for this chapter insofar as it touches on the utopian, a term that itself originated in the work of English philosopher Thomas More and is closely connected with both ethics and social philosophy.

Miller neatly sums up the fundamental difference between the anthropological and philosophical frameworks regarding the good life by noting that anthropology operates in relative and lateral terms, by exploring the good in one society versus another, rather than philosophy's absolute terms, which contrast a given society with an ideal one (2024: 3). The necessity of these conceptual clarifications stems precisely from the fact that analyzing ecotopian practice does not quite fit into either category. Here, one is dealing with ideals that emerge from and are shaped by their specific cultural contexts and are directed toward some degree of actualization, but, at the same time, envision a world that does not (yet) exist and that is fundamentally different. Ecotopia is, therefore, not quite utopia, but certainly related to it.

Enacting utopia

At first glance, a real utopia sounds like an oxymoron. We are used to thinking of utopias primarily as fictions that critique the real world by contrast, but do not actually claim to lay out feasible plans for change or an achievable form of organization. This is, however, only one aspect of a utopian tradition that encompasses not only fictional and theoretical literature, but also practical experimentation. Anthropologist H.L. Moore draws attention to the latter in her analysis of nineteenth century socialist utopian communities, which can provide important theoretical groundwork for the present discussion.

Moore sees the belief in the possibility of "*willed* social change" as an essential particularity of socialist utopian practice (1990: 14, original emphasis), based on the core assumption that humans have a capacity to learn and then to use that knowledge to effect desirable social change in line with a utopian vision (1990: 17). Already, an important difference arises between the dynamics of utopia and ecotopia. In most of the utopian communities described by Moore, meaning and organization were first prescribed and envisioned, then enacted—a reversal of the usual process of cultural sedimentation unfolding over longer periods of time (1990: 15–16). The most straightforward instances of this were the socialist utopian communities that followed the writing of thinkers like Charles Fourier and Robert Owen, who provided very detailed descriptions of what socialist societies should look like and how they should function (Moore 1990: 17–18), but they were also short-lived and "[g]enerally began in hope and ended in bitterness and disillusionment" (Moore 1990: 23–24).

Other utopian projects operated quite differently. Moore distinguishes between the text, followed by practice, followed by culture and society succession pursued by socialist utopias on the one hand, the approach of feminist utopian reformers on the other, who worked on the premise that changes in material living conditions (especially in domestic spaces) would reconfigure gender relations and ultimately society at large, and the efforts of utopian science fiction writers to shift the

imaginative space of possibility for the future by producing plausible alternative visions of it (Moore 1990: 28–29). Ecotopianism shares certain traits with these historical utopian movements, but stands apart from them in substantial ways.

Firstly, the most glaring difference is that ecotopia is not laid out as a detailed societal model and is better understood as an ideal and ethical basis for building solidarity between localized and diverse forms of organization rather than as a prescriptive set of goals and means. It shares utopian feminists' preoccupation with ushering change by shifting material conditions and practices on the most everyday level, but the precise nature of these shifts is left open as a matter of experimentation and variation. To use E.N. Anderson's terms, "[e]cotopia, like sustainability, is a process goal" (Anderson 2010: 207), meaning that it cannot exist as a stable state of things, but must be approached pragmatically in a myriad of partial expressions (Anderson 2010: 195), and the diversity of means and agents enacting it must be not only tolerated, but positively valued as such (Anderson 2010: 197–198).

Secondly, I would argue that utopia and ecotopia have differing relationships to time. Utopias "sit uncomfortably into historical time" because, while they address the present, they are usually rooted in imaginings of a golden age (be it past or future), and posit the achievement of their vision as temporally remote (Moore 1990: 16). I have shown in the previous chapter how permaculture eschews dominant ideas of modernity as well as tradition, a common characteristic of ecotopian practices, but their relationship to historical time is only tense to the extent that any project of radical social change meets resistance and inertia in its effort to shift the direction of cultural development. Ecotopia does not posit an ideal future, nor an ideal past. It values traditional knowledge insofar as its endurance attests to some degree of sustainability, but nevertheless approaches it with a critical eye (Anderson 2010: 37–38). It understands its enactment as a continuous historical process that will inevitably also change the forms ecotopian ideals take and the means suited to applying them.

Therefore, ecotopia seems closer to a transition vision than a utopian one, conceptualized as a fundamental transformation of cultures and values variously described as postgrowth, postcapitalist, postmaterialist in the context of the Global North (Escobar 2018: 140). Transition visions and their companion, transition design, acknowledge that ultimately "transitions are not designed, but emergent," therefore their form and direction cannot be predicted (Escobar 2018: 152). Thus, the work of transition design is to direct social transformation in a desirable direction beginning from the local scale, creating "tiny islands where unsustainability and defuturing are held at bay" and which, in time, have the potential to "give rise to new continents where life might again flourish" (*ibid.*). Ecotopia is much more compatible with this kind of thinking and has significant crossover with transition imaginaries, both often employing elements of degrowth, relocalization, decentralization, grassroots organizing, bioregionalism, ecological justice, and bio-cultural diversity (Escobar 2018: 142–144).

Permaculture as ecotopian practice

Let us return to permaculture as the strand of ecotopian thought and technique most relevant to the cases discussed here and analyze how it can operate as a form of ecotopian practice. As previously described, permaculture itself encompasses an eclectic collection of skills, knowledges, approaches, and forms of organization tied together by the guiding principle of sustainability, further articulated into the twelve design principles. Permaculture fosters a holistic application of these principles in aspects of daily life ranging from agriculture, food provision, and land management to social, economic, and community relations. It is important, then, to note that permaculture practitioners focus on different aspects of permaculture and experiment with its application in different ways, therefore creating a wide spectrum of what permaculture can look like. Here, I will focus primarily on permaculture as

understood and practiced by my interlocutors, therefore it seems fitting to start by placing them within this variegated landscape.

In broad strokes, permaculture can be said to accommodate several imaginaries or conceptions which are in no way mutually exclusive, but also not necessarily mutually compatible. In their article on the subject, Anahid Roux-Rosier and colleagues identify three such overarching permaculture imaginaries: permaculture as a set of practices, as a holistic life philosophy, and as an intersectional social movement, with the first focusing on the agro-ecological application of permaculture in order to obtain increased autonomy, the second focusing on its spiritual and ethical dimensions, and the third on the eco-political view of sustainability as a matter of intersectional struggle (Roux-Rosier *et al.* 2018: 557–558).

The first is the most prominently shared across my two fieldsites. As I have described in the previous chapter detailing my interlocutors' practice, the promise of greater autonomy and freedom from dominant structures of dwelling, production, and reproduction was an important factor in what attracted them to permaculture in the first place and they continue to maintain and expand the degree to which they can be materially self-sustaining (though total self-sufficiency is not their goal). Another trait of the agro-ecological approach their practice shares is exemplarity (Roux-Rosier *et al.* 2018: 558): my interlocutors' homesteads function as demonstration and learning sites for those who come as volunteers or workshop participants, serving to show how a more sustainable way of life can be achieved through permaculture and to encourage visitors to pursue it for themselves. The approach to permaculture per this imaginary is essentially pragmatic (Roux-Rosier *et al.* 2018: 559–560) and geared toward the accumulation of practical ecological knowledge that supports the establishment of sustainable forms of socio-natural organization. Therefore, in this case, it can be said that ethical and political goals are facilitated and expressed through the practice of permaculture design within one's own way of life.

That being said, my interlocutors' approaches also differed in some important respects. An eloquent illustration of this difference might lie in their preferences for different permaculture authors. Both Adi and Aaron were well acquainted with the "canonical" books of Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, as well as other influential figures like Masanobu Fukuoka, an important proponent of natural farming. However, when I inquired specifically about the literature that most informs their current practice, they seemed to point in diverging directions. Adi cited Austrian permaculturist Sepp Holzer as a major influence. Holzer's approach is strongly focused on the agricultural side of permaculture design, including landscaping, agro-forestry, animal rearing, and close observation of the ecology of one's land (see Holzer 2011). Aaron, on the other hand, was much more interested in the social dimension of permaculture, citing Looby Macnamara's *People and Permaculture* (2012), one of the first books to specifically focus on the personal and social implications of permaculture,¹¹ as one of his favorites. This inclination is also clearly manifest in the public-facing activities each of my interlocutors organizes, with Adi focusing on hands-on practical workshops on gardening and natural building, and Aaron and Simina focusing more on collaborations with international networks as well as local community work.

Permapolitics

With the benefit of more than two decades' hindsight since the publication of *Permaculture One*, David Holmgren reflects on the spread, developments, and public perceptions of permaculture, particularly in Australia, where the concept is more well known. He identifies two popular conceptions of permaculture that have crystallized in the intervening years, which roughly correspond to the two imaginaries mentioned above: permaculture as gardening, and permaculture as counterculture (2011: xxi–xxii). Holmgren does not come down on either side; he simply points out

¹¹ <https://loobymacnamara.com/people-and-permaculture/>, last accessed January 2026.

that each enables the engagement of people with different interests and needs, and that the flexibility of permaculture has allowed it to avoid some of the common "obstacles and opposition that revolutionary ideas encounter" precisely because the more maximalist expressions of radical cultural change may alienate people and therefore inhibit that very change from taking place (2011: xxi).

This is a fair point. Militant rhetoric can certainly be polarizing and result in poor relations with the wider local community, a common occurrence among the utopian communes previously discussed (Moore 1990: 23). However, this approach also opens up "softer" iterations of permaculture to another of the risks faced by any radical movement, namely that "alternative imaginaries may be recruited by dominant actors to reproduce, rather than challenge, hegemony" (Roux-Rosier *et al.* 2018: 552). It is easy to see this happening in the permaculture as gardening framework.

For instance, I mentioned previously that during my stay with Adi he received a visit from Cristi, a designer working in environmental education. Cristi's projects are very much in line with the conventional discourse focused on "sustainable development" and techno-fixes, broaching topics like reducing food waste, using less water, buying more durable clothing, all squarely focused on altering individual consumer behavior. His audience mostly consists of corporate employees and children, with Cristi organizing talks and workshops for companies and schools. His proposal for Adi was, as presented at the time, to adapt these projects into a retreat format with Adi's homestead as the venue. It is still unclear whether this collaboration will end up taking place, but Adi's enthusiasm for the idea was, in my view, the expression of a largely depoliticized conception of permaculture naïvely opening itself up to co-option by a fundamentally incompatible form of environmentalist discourse.

Indeed, the ideological positioning of permaculture in general is rather ambiguous and is usually placed somewhere in the vicinity of eco-anarchism (Roux-Rosier *et al.* 2018: 560), but lacks a substantial engagement with theoretical

tools that could result in a more robust and coherent political project, especially on larger scales (Lockyer & Veteto 2013: 14–15). This is an important area of possible collaboration between permaculturists and anthropologists: as Lockyer and Veteto stress, permaculture could benefit greatly from integrating insights from various academic fields, political ecology chief among them, to "create a powerful dialectic between anthropological theory and practice on the one hand and cultural critique in action for sustainability on the other" (2013: 104). This must be, of course, a two-sided effort and, in my experience, permaculture practitioners do show the requisite openness to allow interest and influence from social scientists, whereas it is less clear that their openness is met with an equivalent interest on the part of researchers.

Stepping stones for imagination

Permaculture's embrace of contributions from a diverse range of fields leaves practitioners with many possible ways to envision what they are working toward, specifically in terms of a more encompassing and articulated vision of ecotopia. Perhaps because of the intense climate anxiety he experienced, this is something Adi felt a pressing need for. I have quoted him previously as saying that he did not feel the self-reliance he achieved through permaculture would exempt him from suffering the repercussions of global crises, a concern that was not and could not be assuaged by thinking within the confines of his homestead, nor even of Savalin, of Romania, or Europe. What Adi was looking for was an alternative to pervasive dystopian images of the global future, and he found just that in the form of solarpunk.

Solarpunk is, in broad terms, an emerging genre in speculative fiction and visual art defined by its staunch embrace of optimistic and positive imaginings of possible futures, in direct opposition to its more established and better known cousins, cyberpunk and steampunk.¹² While solarpunk emerged as a term only since

¹² <https://re-des.org/a-solarpunk-manifesto/>, last accessed February 2026.

the mid-2010s, it has since claimed Ernest Callenbach's novel *Ecotopia* as one of its earliest precursors (Johnson 2020), and can indeed be seen as an aesthetic expression of ecotopian ideas. The "solar-" expresses the injunction to imagine a post-fossil fuel world, often replete with solar energy infrastructure and technologies, among other tools of ecological harmony (Williams 2019: 6–7); the "-punk" roots this vision in a critique of the status quo and a position of rebellion and resistance toward it (Gilliam 2023). It is important to stress that solarpunk is not necessarily utopian. It does not reject apocalyptic narratives as an impossibility, but as counterproductive, therefore its orientation toward positive future possibilities places focus on what is achievable and on "the struggles en route to a better world," not just on what those ultimate destinations might look like.¹³

Adi certainly related to solarpunk very differently from most people who encounter it. While an ordinary reader or viewer of solarpunk works is likely to perceive them as aspirational, ideal, or pedagogical illustrations of a desirable future (Johnson 2020), Adi resonated with solarpunk precisely because he saw it as something he was already working toward. It attested to the fact that many people around the world could and would see a way of life like his own as aspirational and allowed him to imagine himself not as an isolated case, but as part of a change that may spread on a far larger scale.

I thought 'Hey, that's what I'm doing too!' So then I realized that's a future we could be moving toward. If everywhere I looked there were investments into solar energy, renewable energy, sustainability, gardens, good food, eco, what if you take all that stuff together and ask 'What if that happened everywhere in the world?' We'd be doing very well. I mean, there's a good chance that we'll be ok in the future. And in the present.

To this day, Adi identifies himself as much with solarpunk as with permaculture. While permaculture defines the practical toolkit and the ethical basis

¹³ *Ibid.*

that guided him to a form of rural, sustainable, and more self-reliant way of life, solarpunk came as a complementary repository of aesthetic forms (with the visual being the more important for Adi) that allowed him to see his practice as part of a larger future-making project, to envision possible futures where permaculture practice *does* become more widespread, and where societies, not just small communities, are guided by the same principles.

Maps to the future

Here, I would like to return to Arjun Appadurai's threefold framework for future-making. In a previous chapter, I discussed the first element, imagination, as one that needed to be re-centered in our understanding of the everyday construction of the social, and to come unstuck from apocalyptic imaginings of the future in order to envision different paths. While dystopian predictions about the future still abound, it seems that alternatives, whether utopian or simply optimistic, are also coming into view. If solarpunk, ecotopia, or some other positive transition narrative can provide this kind of imaginative horizon, let us turn to how the futures they describe can come to pass.

This second element of future-making is aspiration, defined by Appadurai as a cultural capacity (2013: 289–290). Specifically, it is a "navigational capacity" that allows people to map how they can get from their current predicament to their desired one, or at least how to begin the journey from point A to point B (Appadurai 2004: 68–69). Based on his work with impoverished populations in Mumbai, Appadurai argues that this capacity is not evenly distributed, pointing out that, due to less opportunity for trial and error and experimentation, poor and subaltern populations have a less detailed map at their disposal than the more privileged members of society (*ibid.*). My interlocutors and, I would argue, ecotopians in

general have a challenging path to navigate not necessarily because of their social and economic status (though these difficulties would only compound), but because the predicament they are headed to does not exist. It is one thing to use a map to move toward a place one has never been to, another to use it in an attempt to alter the terrain itself.

This is where the pragmatic side of permaculture plays a decisive role. The fragments from my interviews with Adi and Aaron quoted at the beginning of this chapter speak to the virtue of permaculture practice that it can be adapted to and start from what is at hand. It can start in the countryside on a piece of land or in a planter on the windowsill of an apartment. It can start with growing food or building a house. It can start on rich soil or poor soil—it will regenerate and/or improve either. It can start from a small or large commitment (of time, resources, labor). If one has few material resources to work with, one can scavenge and repurpose—all the better. Accessibility and adaptability also account for the form permaculture education usually takes. Permaculture books tend to be geared toward an unspecialized audience and the practical workshop is by far the most common setting in which people learn permaculture practices, where participants can see what permaculture can look like in action locally, presumably in a climate and ecosystem similar to the one they would also work in. The more advanced Permaculture Design Courses can then offer more technical and broad knowledge, but they are generally undertaken by practitioners who want to become professional permaculture designers or to practice permaculture on a larger scale.

Of course, this is not to say that permaculture is practicable by anyone in any situation at all. There are a number of possible limitations, ranging from different levels of physical ability to one's current living conditions that make permaculture more or less feasible. But as a toolkit it is remarkably adaptable. My interlocutors

have taken their practice to a level where it informs their lives and livelihoods to a very large degree, but that does not need to be the case for any or indeed for most permaculture practitioners. For example, permaculture can also be practiced even to an advanced level in a small allotment in a communal urban garden or in one's yard.

This is an essential part of why many permaculture practitioners find it empowering. This feeling stems from the ways in which permaculture allows them to detach from dominant conceptions of progress and conventional ways of life, to "tak[e] control of their own lives" and not follow well-trodden paths "like lemmings off cliffs" (Fox 2013: 171). Indeed, to the extent that one of the priorities of permaculture in its agro-ecological application is to provide for the needs of the practitioner in a sustainable, low-energy, and low-resource way, it can offer real possibilities to decouple from the systems most people depend on for their subsistence and livelihood. It can allow people, as is the case for Aaron and Simina, to substantially reduce the amount of wage labor they have to engage in, or even eliminate the need for it completely, as is the case for Adi. It can constitute an actionable response to the moral injury caused by acknowledging one's complicity in an unsustainable society. It can create virtuous cycles that realign human and ecological wellbeing. In short, it can be used to trace a navigable course between one's current predicament and a desirable long-term future.

This is where the third of the elements of future-making proposed by Appadurai comes into play—anticipation (2013: 293). As much as permaculture can contribute to an individual or local community practice of sustainability, it will always exist in close relation to the environment at large and in interdependence with other socio-natural structures, be they other permaculture communities, villages, cities, states, etc. The holistic and continuous process that is permaculture design and

practice looks toward a horizon of autonomy understood as preserving and cultivating as much as possible the capacity to act from one's own resources (Escobar 2018: 167) rather than any mirage of self-sufficiency. Therefore, permaculturists cannot extricate themselves from the broader struggle for an ecotopian culture, for the end of global unsustainability and exploitation.

The challenge still seems unmanageable and overwhelming. What are the chances that those "tiny islands" of sustainability will come together into a continent (Escobar 2018: 152)? This is not only an impossible question to answer, but also, according to Appadurai's framework, a self-defeating one. He posits that reclaiming the capacity of future-making requires cutting through the tension between two "ethical styles," the ethics of possibility and probability (2013: 293–295). The latter is favored by the current dominant culture and operates according to a logic of accounting, measuring, and quantifying risk (Appadurai 2013: 295), essentially inhibiting future-making capacities by dispensing with imagination and upholding the uneven distribution of the capacity to aspire. Instead, the former is described as "those ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that increase the horizons of hope, that expand the field of imagination, that produce greater equity in [...] the capacity to aspire" (*ibid.*), therefore it is the only one compatible with a future that envisions significant cultural change. If ethics and possible futures are indeed to realign under the aegis of hope, everyday pragmatism must be guided not by what is likely, but by what is possible.

Conclusion

Talk of sustainability and unsustainability, radical social and personal change, cultural transitions, utopia and dystopia can often produce a sense of vertigo. These topics, as contradictory, complex, and multifaceted as they are, involve consideration of multiple scales in terms of both space and time—from the individual to the global, from the everyday to the far future—, of multiple aspects of life and society—economic and social structures, family and community relations, aspiration, imagination, emotion, sustenance, ethics—, of multiple dimensions of the world we know to be interconnected, but often choose to separate to spare ourselves inevitable overwhelm—the biosphere, the climate, structures of governance, of production, consumption, extraction, and exploitation, human and environmental histories—, and somehow one must keep them all in mind at the same time without suppressing the endless variety found within each of them. This is, of course, impossible, but is a good goal to direct one’s efforts in producing a nuanced understanding of the issues at hand.

That being said, I wish to produce no further nausea in the reader, nor, for that matter, in myself. Here, I want to root much of what has been discussed in the preceding chapters in an account of what it means for the everyday realities we live in, returning to the core question of this thesis: What can all of this tell us about what the good life might entail today, in Romania and Europe?

To begin with, we can surmise that robust conceptions of *the* good life and a good life should be two sides of the same coin. While it would be a stretch to suggest that aesthetics, pleasure, and comfort on the one hand, and ethics on the other coincide, a predicament in which the two are at odds will ultimately undermine both. This is the case in the “hopelessly rich” (Eriksen 2013: 245) societies of present-day Europe, where previously unimaginable levels of security and affluence produce

dissatisfaction, malaise, and distress in conscientious beneficiaries, rather than wellbeing. Therefore, between the ethical good and the desirable good, one cannot be pursued at the expense of the other and are better construed as complementary rather than oppositional. This requires the reclamation of people's capacity to imaginatively shape their everyday lives in order to realign their material and ethical priorities. By virtue of its holistic scope, ethical foundation, and adaptability to many different contexts and circumstances, permaculture can serve as a toolkit for achieving and maintaining this realignment long-term for individuals and small groups.

Secondly, the future must be seen as a matter of personal concern. Isolating it as something remote or as a technicality subject to predictive calculation misses the reality that, on the one hand, conceptions of the future are a core element of wellbeing in the present and, on the other hand, that the future is constructed and enacted in the everyday, within the limited, but significant agency of people, whether they are aware of it or not. Oversight of this fact results in a vicious cycle by which the future is colonized by the present (Fry 2020: 10) and its possibilities are further foreclosed as a result. Sustainability adequately conceived for the long-term requires more than an accounting of resource use, as it also involves acting in a way that increases the means and possibilities of future-making (Fry 2020: 8) under an ethic of possibility (Appadurai 2013: 293–295). In this regard, the concept of ecotopia can serve as a basis for imaginative horizons, approachable through permaculture as a set of principles and methods that enable and facilitate navigation in that direction.

Thirdly, the pragmatic, the social, and the futural are closely bound together. If people commonly feel trapped in larger systems that they otherwise find pernicious, the practicalities of creating alternative forms of sustenance is an essential first step toward the empowerment required to proceed in envisioning and building more sustainable ways of life, social organization, and futures. While permaculture and ecotopian ideas spread and manifest on small scales, at the level of individuals, families, or small communities, and therefore offer no straightforward way to enact

large-scale change, they can provide paths to disentangle oneself from the dominant economic systems one is usually dependent on, even or especially in places otherwise considered marginal (Fox 2013: 168, Holmgren 1990: 223). By taking root in neglected or devalued spaces, both the agricultural and social aspects of permaculture can grow to create viable alternatives for communities and more autonomous ways of life.

I do not mean to overinflate the importance or power of these ideas and practices. It bears repeating that, as of now, they are largely unpopular and unknown in Romania, and have a long way to go before they can be said to have a significant presence in and contribution to the country's rural environment. However, I want to stress that my interlocutors did find significantly more happiness and satisfaction through permaculture than they had in their more conventional lives, and that only seems to continue in time. When I asked if they missed anything about city life and if they would ever consider returning to a more typical urban way of life, their answers ranged from "I can't imagine that" to "I just wouldn't." I believe it would be unreasonable to dismiss the fact that, be they representative cases or not, permaculture clearly works for them emotionally, materially, and socially. Therefore, with a view to the possible and hopeful rather than the probable and calculable, I can only take seriously the possibilities opened up by ecotopia and permaculture to lead into futures where people live in a more equitable, sustainable, and free world and are all the happier for it.

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