

On “The Familial Occult.” An Interview¹ with Alexandra Coțofană

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ABSTRACT

The interview offers a short insight into the soon to be published book at Berghahn, coordinated by Alexandra Coțofană, “The Familial Occult; Encounters at the Margins of Critical Autoethnography”.

KEYWORDS

Occult; familial occult; magic; critical autoethnography; interview; Berghahn.

Anamaria Iuga (AI): I know, Alexandra, that you are working on a book about the occult. What is the title, and who will be publishing it?

Alexandra Coțofană (AC): “The Familial Occult; Encounters at the Margins of Critical Autoethnography,” and it will be published by Berghahn² as part of a series produced in collaboration with the European Association of Social Anthropologists. Berghahn is a well-known but small publishing house, a family concern headed by Marion Berghahn, who gives every manuscript her personal attention and without whose agreement no book can be accepted for publication. That was the process in the case of the book I am coordinating. This will be the second volume I have published with Berghahn as editor. The other volume³ is open access, but the contract between EASA and the publishing house means that the series in which this new book is being published will not be open access. I would be very happy if some of the chapters in the book, or at least the

introduction and conclusions, could become open access. Perhaps I will succeed in getting the publishing house’s permission for this.

AI: Yes, Berghahn’s has an open access policy, though not for everything it publishes. The discussion in the introductory text about people initiated into magical practices, who at the same time belong to the researcher’s family, is of great interest, and it would be useful for it to be available free of cost.

AC: It’s a subject that has effectively not been touched on up until now, and so, it would be wonderful if open access was an option. I want to say from the start that the book uses a method in the social sciences called critical autoethnography, in this case, to explore the experiences of social scientists and scholars in the humanities who grew up with occult practices (what we would call “magic” and “witchcraft”) in their families, hence the title, “The Familial Occult.” As we did a survey of the literature in our respective fields, we noticed

that there is a lack of this particular sort of subjectivity. What I mean is we couldn't find cases of the author growing up in the occult, rather than traveling abroad, to find the occult in the cultures of other people.

We noticed that the way these practices are addressed has allowed scholars to further exoticise the others since the beginning of our disciplines, and to treat the occult as a practice that does not pertain to the civilized world. Further, it allowed our various disciplines to speak about others, to others, rather than to make room for them to speak themselves, as Gayatri Spivak (literary theorist, feminist critic, and postcolonial theorist) has called for, decades ago.

We liked the method of critical auto-ethnography because it suggests the objective researcher from elsewhere is not the only pertinent actor in research. The researcher can and should also accept their subjectivity and involvement in a practice or set of beliefs, and that should not be seen as something that chips away at the integrity of their lens.

AI Are you the only coordinator of the book?

AC: The idea for this book came after a conversation I had with James Nyce, Professor Emeritus at Ball State University (U.S.A.), and also an Associate Professor at Lund University in Sweden. We had been discussing this subject for several years, but the opportunity to have something published arose two years ago. And that was also when we started thinking seriously about launching a call for papers to people who might be interested in the subject. The project was initially going to involve joint editorship, but Professor Nyce, given that he was already a Professor Emeritus, thought that it was more important for my career, which is in its early days, that I should bring it out as sole coordinator. This was a generous offer for which I owe him a debt of gratitude. I accepted. It isn't easy, it has been a complex multi-stage task and I am currently just embarking upon a new round of corrections, but I'm glad it's happening.

AI: How did the idea for the book come up?

AC: I believe it was in Zalău,⁴ in 2010, that I

first met James Nyce. We started speaking about our families and we realised that both of us had had the experience of having a grandparent... in his case his paternal grandfather, in mine my paternal grandmother... who was known in their community as a "magical figure," a person who was involved among other things in occult practices, if I want to avoid using the word "witchcraft" and describe this occupation in politically correct terminology. He was the first person with whom I had ever discussed this part of my family history, so for me it was a kind of "letting the family skeleton out of the cupboard." When I began writing my doctoral thesis, I was planning to study witchcraft, magic, and conspiracy theories in a Romanian context. I thought I was going to write a lot about my grandmother, but gradually I realised that I hadn't said anything about her at all. I had mentioned her in one sentence in the Introduction, but effectively I had not written about her and what she used to do. For me this was an indication that I was not yet ready to write about it. The idea for this book took shape in 2020, the year my father died, because after my grandmother's death in 2011 he began training to become a magical figure himself. Despite my protests – because my grandmother had after all been raised in a particular tradition – my father, since she had refused to pass on her knowledge to him, exerted himself to study the subject on his own. And that was how he learned it, in a very neoliberal way, from the 1990s onwards, when one of the fruits of democracy in Romania was that books of every kind could be published freely. It was then that my father started to read everything he could lay his hands on! I attempted to explain to him that this was not right, and, well, I can tell you that we had some arguments about it. But after he died, I felt that I could finally write about occult practices as part of the private life of my family. All this is in my chapter. I also wrote about the fact that one can never in fact shake off this label in one's local community. This is a kind of theme that every chapter in the book comes back to.

AI: You are talking about a stigma.

AC: Yes.



AI: What was your personal relationship with magical practices in the different stages of your life? Can this be picked up from the book you are coordinating?

AC: No. My grandmother used to keep me very close to her when she was doing magic, but for various reasons, including the stigma that was there in my life right from when I was very small, I chose to keep a distance between myself and anything that involved making use of these practices. And anyone who reads the whole book can see that the social sciences researchers who have contributed to it, with only two exceptions, are not practitioners of the occult. Which shows that the stigma to which we were subjected is a major one that can cause an emotional blockage that we, those concerned, have experienced it in an extremely powerful way.

AI: What cultural spaces do the writers in this book come from? You are Romanian, but what about the others?

AC: I am Romanian. Then there is James Nyce, an American with German Mennonite forbears; we have two Swedes, a couple from the Caucasus (he is Russian, and she is from Abkhazia; they live together in Georgia), and a woman from Siberia. So, we have both ends of the former Russian empire. There is also an author from the Philippines, and an author whose father emigrated to the US from China, though he himself was born and raised in the US. And an author from Morocco.

AI: From all corners of the world.

AC: That was the intention.

AI: What fields do all these researchers who, as you have said, also have this inside view of the phenomenon concerned work in?

AC: The authors come from fields such as religious studies, comparative literature, anthropology, ethnology and folklore. And what the book is trying to say, is that this practising of the occult (I will keep to this term, because if we call it witchcraft or magic it's a bit reductionist and we know that these terms have negative connotations), all the occult practices, when we see them in literature, we find them in authors who have sought and wished to "serve an apprenticeship." We usually see a power

relation between author and practitioner. The author brings with him the background of an urban person, someone from the first world, who in every case travels into the third world, or the rural space, so, there is this difference too between him and the person he asks to be trained by. He requests an apprenticeship in occult practices, he gets it, but he can easily give up this identity when he returns home. However, we do not see, and have not seen, those of us who read research into religion, anthropology, or comparative literature – I am thinking of some of the fields the authors of the book work in – we have not seen texts written by authors who have actually lived in a family in which occult practices exist as part of the daily routine. This would help us to also see what happens when you do not exoticise these practices but live in them, what it looks like when you live in them. And it doesn't look very good, it's a bit painful.

AI: What were the challenges that you, or the authors, had to face up to when you began writing? What stages did you go through, so to speak?

AC: The first challenge and perhaps the most difficult was at the outset, when there were almost twice the number of writers we actually have in the book. All these people had expressed an interest and wanted to write, but a very large number of them subsequently pulled out. Either they felt that they could not yet talk about these things, or they themselves were ready to, but when they talked to their families the family didn't want them to talk about it, since the stigma was still very powerful. And as we know, work of this kind, above all the work of an anthropologist, can be confused with journalism by a public that doesn't understand the discipline. I think it was for this reason that some families didn't quite understand what the purpose of this article was or who its target public was; they somehow believed that the whole village was going to find out about them. But it would be a global village. And this was a problem. As a consequence, we lost many writers, very promising writers, in the early stages of putting the book together. A propos of the fact that – if we take account of the origins of

Handwritten signature: Alexandra Coțofană



those who have written for it – the book covers almost all corners of the world, we had a writer from Peru, and this for me meant that the book would have included South America as well; I was absolutely delighted that we had him, but he kept being unable to write. I actually delayed the entire volume for six months for him, but he kept being unable to write. In fact, what he did produce, his first draft, was extremely well written, but it didn't get to the heart of the issue. And something of the kind happened to all of us. Some contributors who had written a great deal, who in some cases had been writing for decades, had a deep emotional blockage when it came to writing about this subject. It is very personal. By doing so you bare your soul before the whole world and it's... I think that for many of us it was hard to take a step of this kind. Some people chose not to take it, or were not allowed by their families and communities to take it.

AI: Perhaps the right time had not come.

AC: Or perhaps it never will, and so in a way these stories will die when they do, still inside them, and this too is understandable.

AI: Have you also had feedback from writers who in the end did publish articles in the book as to whether they encountered these kinds of problems during the writing process?

AC: Yes, and I want to say that my impression is that somewhere along the way some very deep friendships were formed between us. I don't know if this was also the case between the different authors, or perhaps only between me and them, because they confided in me about the difficulties they experienced when they had to write. The father of one of them died while he was writing; my own father had died as I was preparing to write. This led to the formation of some extremely close relationships, some intimacies that I don't know that we share with anyone else, during this painful process of writing. The biggest problem was once more, for the majority, that of being able to put a name to the practice, being able to speak, being able to write, being able to acknowledge that yes, their family were involved in this kind of practice. In one case, that of the Swedish authors, there was also a moral problem for one of the authors,

because they are Swedes, Europeans, living in the Saami space. And that means there's also the issue of colonisation, but happily the author concerned (the woman) is conscious of this and verbalised it in our workshop, after which she took it on board in an intelligent manner in the way she wrote. These were the sorts of problems.

AI: At one point in the Introduction you mention the fact that several authors experienced the writing of their articles as a therapeutic procedure. Can you give more details?

AC: Yes. Once again, for those of us who had lost a family member who had been directly involved in occult practices, it was a kind of weeping and wailing, carrying out the business of mourning. We wept and wailed at the keyboards of our laptops. And we wept and wailed together, and we wept and wailed productively, because something came out of it. And yes, it was a form of therapy. To speak only of my own chapter, I wrote it when I was actually on the way back from my father's burial, and I have never written a piece so swiftly or so clearly. It needed the least correcting of absolutely anything I have ever written or, probably, will ever write. Because it came to me all at once, I sensed immediately how I could structure it. I should mention that I had also been to a workshop on the subject of critical autoethnography, which is a method that originated at the University of Melbourne,⁵ in Australia, but is now much used all over the world in a whole range of fields. It is a method which, in my opinion, ought to be used in a systematic way, because we still – unfortunately – have the tendency in a variety of disciplines to believe that the author can be objective, that they can observe from a distance and understand the depths of a subject, but that the moment they become affectively involved they begin to make errors in what they write about it. Our discipline is affected by a pseudo-scientific principle that says it is impossible for us to write well when we are involved. But what the originators of this methodology say is that we are, in fact, subjective all the time, and that it is better for us to work at having a healthy

relationship with this self, better to see how we can include it in the text, than to skirt round it, because we are always going to keep bumping into it, it is always there, there's no way you can write in the third person for ever.

AI: Autoethnography as therapy. Why do you think it is so important – as you say in the Introduction – to pay tribute to Anne Parsons? Why are you so impressed with her work and writings?

AC: As you know from the Introduction and as readers will find out at a certain point, Anne Parsons was the daughter of Talcott Parsons,⁶ of whom we all know, and she too was an anthropologist. She worked somewhere at the interface between psychiatry and anthropology, a very interesting space. A tortured life, which – in a final twist of fate – ironically ended in a psychiatric hospital, and much too early, in suicide. I didn't know about her; I think she is a much neglected figure in anthropology. Even I, who was always reading about anthropology and the occult and mental states, hadn't heard of her until a year ago, when Jim Nyce told me of her work, which amazes me. And she is impressive because she did something remarkable for the period in which she was writing. She was a Protestant woman living in the United States in the 1950s and she made a very clear distinction between occult practices and psychiatric problems, that is, mental health problems. Her writings include some extremely interesting case histories that were recovered for publication by colleagues after her death and edited to form a book. Her notes are very important. She understood, for example, that schizophrenia and paranoia are phenomena that have a specific anatomy. They present in a certain way and show themselves in a certain way. By contrast, occult practices manifest themselves entirely differently. She makes clear the distinction between these two human "conditions" and takes both of them very seriously. There's a place where she describes some cases which she sees with great clarity. A woman who was in fact schizophrenic accuses some female neighbours of witchcraft but doesn't pursue the witchcraft theme to its

logical conclusion; instead, at a certain moment she makes a sudden turn towards entirely different social imaginaries and doesn't pursue the cultural logic of witchcraft in southern Italy. And Anne Parsons, as a good anthropologist, understands and can translate what witchcraft means for the communities of southern Italy; being at the same time a very skilled psychiatrist, she understands the logic of schizophrenia. This is something which strikes me as remarkable for someone writing at that time. And, in practical terms, the reason she came to such a swift and tragic end is that no doors were open to her; her research was highly interdisciplinary and came at a point at which interdisciplinarity was not valued. These days, whatever university you go to and whatever you are trying to do, they want you to be interdisciplinary! Well, back then it wasn't like that. That is why she wasn't able to find a home, a place of her own in which she could continue her studies and her research as she would have wished. She had gone to that psychiatric hospital to carry out a research project. And the doctors there ended up by confining her there and not letting her leave. That was how she died. Utterly tragic. The doctors there didn't take her anthropology seriously, while in the world outside the anthropologists didn't take her psychiatry seriously. There are other examples of researchers who found themselves in comparable situations; Foucault would be another very good example. I even tell my students that people like Foucault and Anne Parsons were brilliant intellectuals who were born at the wrong time and in the wrong place. It just happened like that. If Parsons were born now, her research would be hugely appreciated. As it was, she was born at an unfavourable time and her work ended up sitting on the back shelves of a few libraries. To this point, when I wanted to buy the book her colleagues had published, I had the greatest difficulty finding a copy.

AI: What were your feelings, or those of other writers, as you approached the subject of your book and even your own text?

AC: The first... The most visible one, so to speak, because there is a real "sandwich" of



feelings, except that the layers are not one on top of the other but go from front to back. First, there is shame, caused in fact by the stigma. A shame that seems to be not just a Romanian shame, my shame, but a global shame, because I have seen it in all the authors, wherever they came from. The second feeling is the anger that some of the authors feel towards a member of their family or community. Others of the writers feel this anger towards the discipline. An anger at the privileged status of the logic of the discipline, which until recently treated occult practices as something exotic and something that ought not to be taken seriously. It was seen as something that happened somewhere else and for that reason was worth researching, but not taken seriously. If scholars become involved, they do so, as apprentices, as if they were making a collection of souvenirs and fridge magnets. They didn't acknowledge the privilege of having a position in which you can step out of the role of someone who practises the occult in order to enter into a different role. Returning to feelings, I think that towards the end I also found a feeling of relief, of liberation, when the chapters were finally finished, when I saw them with their bibliographies and their biographies and their literature and everything else they needed. It was finished, something had come of it.

AI: A kind of exorcising.

AC: Yes. Like a period of weeping and wailing, once again, I think that's what it is. It's a weeping and wailing for a part of one's life that was lived with a specific pain.

AI: Were these feelings shared by the other authors as well? Have you received feedback about them?

AC: Yes, yes, that's what I was saying, all these emotional states were discussed in a workshop and after that in emails exchanged between the authors, or more accurately between myself and the authors, because I don't know whether they wrote to one another. Yes, so I'm not talking only about myself but about the majority of the authors. Some of them, for example, no longer communicate with other members of their families. The author from the Philippines

is a very interesting case. His mother had a heterodox spiritual group within the Catholic church in the Philippines. She was the leader of the group. After she died, her three or four children divided up the community between them, because they had split. The author writes from his perspective, because he both continues to have recourse to magical practices and is also an ethnomusicologist. I believe he was also for a while the Dean of the university where he teaches. But he isn't on speaking terms with two of his sisters. On the one hand there is the release of having written this article, but at the same time, life keeps happening. That's why I say that people who live within this reality have nowhere to escape from it.

AI: You were saying that he also practises. Are there other authors too who practise the occult?

AC: Yes. The author whose parents came from China, he and his father taught each other occult practices. He is currently Associate Professor of religious studies at a university in the States, and he taught his father some practices and his father taught him other practices. Yes, a happy situation compared with the relationship between me and my father, where this kind of symbiosis and communication didn't exist. But they practise together. So, the book presents situations in which the family continues to exist and to support itself – more fortunate cases – but it also explores cases in which we find a divided family: some members have died, others perhaps have not, but in any case there is a lack of communication between them.

AI: You were speaking earlier of the university professor who practises the occult. It would be interesting to see how he changes hats, so to speak. Today he puts on his professor's hat until twelve o'clock, after which he puts on his magical figure's hat.

AC: Religious studies as a discipline is more forgiving towards its researchers than anthropology, or than anthropology used to be, historically speaking. In a religious studies environment you can actually be a practitioner of magic and you won't be seen as all that strange. When I was working on my PhD, although I



never used to say anything at all about my family, whenever I explained to people I was speaking with that I was doing research into magical practices in the Romanian context, their first question was always: "But do you believe in it? Is it real?" But when I studied for a year in the religious studies department, I was not asked these questions. That's what makes me say that my impression is that their discipline is a slightly more tolerant environment.

AI: Gentler.

AC: Gentler, yes, that's the word, Ana. They are gentler, sometimes it's better to be gentle. We shouldn't criticise everything, and not everything has to be black or white; sometimes things aren't black or white.

AI: What do you think is the general level of interest among researchers in the subject of the occult?

AC: From our literature review I have observed that the occult is perceived by the majority of researchers as something that belongs to the other. No matter whether the person is an atheist, or perceives themselves as belonging to a religious orthodoxy – I don't mean Orthodox Christianity but orthodoxy in the sense of the practising of religion "as it should be practised" – occult practices are usually perceived as belonging to the other. Consequently, they need to be studied in order to understand the other. This other, once again, either lives in a rural area, or is part of a minority, or is in a different country that you have to fly to. This was the traditional relationship between researcher and subject. What amazed us in the workshop we held in 2020 and the subsequent discussions was that although the occult is one of the topics that the social sciences have concerned themselves with for the longest time – yes, if we look at anthropology, some of the first texts were written about magic, witchcraft, but once again as something belonging to the other – this relationship hasn't been revised to any great extent. It hasn't been thought through again, even though the sub-discipline of critical thinking is extremely important in anthropology. The reasons for this have been varied and mainly cultural, because we are still

products of the contexts in which we live, and I believe this has been the biggest problem. This is the narrative thread that we have attempted to combat, or at least to suggest that the relationship that lies at the centre of this narrative construct could be reconsidered. This is what I have tried to do above all in this book.

AI: Do you think the publication of the book will change anything about the way researchers approach the theme of the occult?

AC: We aren't necessarily expecting it to be understood as we have written it straight away, but I believe it's important that it should be read. Like any book, or like any published research work, it first needs to be read. And to be taken seriously. Our hope is that it will be read by undergraduates, master's students, and we hope also by PhD students in religious studies, comparative literature, anthropology, sociology. And that they too will give their opinion. My hope is that it will make people ask questions. Maybe it will make people question their viewpoint as the only real truth, maybe we can succeed in thinking differently as well and being more gentle towards one another. We are under no illusions that the book will escape immediate criticism, but we think we will also find a bit of gentleness along the way and yes, we hope it will raise some questions.

AI: What makes you think that occult practices can be regarded today, in the twenty-first century, as a matter of current interest?

AC: The simple answer is because they are still happening, because people still believe in them and still practise them. They are still a black sheep that we blame when something happens, even when we have no evidence and, I might say, especially when we have no evidence. Because even though they seem to be something practised by the other, if we stop and look for a moment, they are not not at all far away from us. And, as this book shows us, they are kind of everywhere; they aren't an issue that belongs to the East, or to Eastern Europe, or to the Muslim world, they are something that exists in the ontologies of a very large number of cultures. That being the case, they need to be



taken as seriously as the way we think about money, or the way we think about clothes, or absolutely anything else that is part of daily life. I believe that the shame and anger I told you we felt when we were discussing this subject and the way it affects our lives reflects to some extent the relationship our societies have with the subject of occult practices generally. I believe there is still a shame around the fact that we still believe, that we still practise, we still seek for answers from that source. And again, that very appropriate word that you used earlier, gentleness, could I believe be a very good tool with which to rethink our relationship with the occult. Instead of feeling bad that it still exists in our universe, we could ask ourselves why it exists, what roles it plays and what problems it solves, or perhaps fails to resolve, and what kind of resolution we are looking to it to provide.

AI: Do you want to continue researching this subject?

AC: I think that for me, the text and the Introduction that I wrote for this book were a way of gently saying goodbye to this bit of my life. There are a number of reasons for this, but I believe I have somehow made peace with my family through this book. For all the authors published in the book it was a way of making peace with their families, their childhoods and the contexts from which they came. So, I do not expect there to be a volume two, a volume three and a volume four. Maybe, as with Anne Parsons, in years to come people will need to root around in more than one library to find the book. But this is only my thought now, I may not be right. For many of us it meant embracing the pain we had been through. And no, I think it is not a subject we will be continuing with.

AI: Thank you. What are the themes you want to address in your future anthropological research?

AC: I currently have a project that I term atmospheric epistemologies. I am making a comparison between meteorological researchers and people who follow conspiracy theories, how these two groups of people create bodies of knowledge about cloud seeding.⁷ I focus on this practice of cloud seeding and how

meteorologists understand it, and how people who believe in conspiracy theories learn what cloud seeding is. I am working with people from both groups, I've been working on it for over two years and I think I have at least two more years' work to do on it. This year I will be in Colorado for the whole summer on a sabbatical fellowship to work on political polarisation in relation to climate change. This is my current project.

AI: Very interesting! Particularly as I have seen that you have already published books on environmental issues, such as contested landscapes.⁸

AC: Yes, I have been moving slowly, slowly towards the environment.

AI: Environmental anthropology.

AC: Yes, the environment and nationalism, the extreme right. The occult has left me with an interest in conspiracy theories and with this subject I have moved further towards the environment.

AI: Thank you for taking the time to give this interview. I can hardly wait for your next book.



NOTES

1. The interview took place online on 9th March 2023.
2. The Berghahn website gives November 2023 as the month of publication: <https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/CotofanaFamilial>.
3. Alexandra Coțofană, and Hikmet Kuran. 2023. *Sentient Ecologies. Xenophobic Imaginaries of Landscape*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 266 p.
4. Zalău is a city in the northern part of Transylvania, Romania.
5. See: Stacy Homan Jones. 2016. "Living Bodies of Thought: the 'Critical' in Critical Autoethnography." *Qualitative Inquiry* 22 (4): 228-37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800415622509>. See also Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis. 2015. *Autoethnography*. Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press.
6. Talcott Parsons (1902-1979), American sociologist (Harvard University), known for his social action theory and structural functionalism.
7. Cloud seeding implies the use of weather modifying techniques, which involve the creation of clouds (of rain or snow).
8. See note 3.