

GospodinA: Performing protocols of State Motherhood and Domestic Hope from the 1980s Socialist Romania

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Introduction: A Soup That Cannot Be Reheated

In September 2025, I spent half a month searching Brussels for caraway seeds (*Carum carvi* in latin, *chimen* in Romanian). I moved through supermarkets, specialty grocers, and “world food” aisles, repeatedly encountering confusion with *cumin*, an entirely different spice. A shopkeeper eventually offered to order caraway for me - the shop logic of contemporary abundance: if something is missing, the market can procure it on demand. « Just come back in two days ». The gesture signals for me a sharp contrast between the food crises of my childhood and my present, Brussels life.

Caraway is the key ingredient in “*supă de chimen*”, a clear caraway soup my mother cooked throughout my childhood in 1980s Cluj-Napoca. The soup was nutritionally modest yet emotionally dense: it appeared when little else was available, when wage factory work and exhaustion left no time for my mom’s elaborate cooking, and when a thin, hot liquid would still stand in for maternal care. Very often I remember my mom making this soup when she left for afternoon factory shifts. As if to say: « I leave you in the care of this soup ».

Today, the difficulty of sourcing caraway in Brussels does not register as a crisis; instead, it reveals a temporal rift between the austerity of Romanian socialism and the relative abundance of Western European capitalism (Verdery 1996). That rift becomes the productive impossibility at the heart of my reenactment practice. Something that is so endemic in Romanian cuisine is

seen as an exotic spice in Belgium, even though Romania and Belgium have similar flora and climate.

This paper examines *GospodinA*, a practice-based performance project that investigates domestic survival strategies as both crisis management and sources of hope in 1980s socialist Romania (Dobre 2018). Through the reenactment of my mother's alimentary gestures—in the case of the caraway soup: toasting caraway, cutting bread croutons, leaving soup on the stove before night or afternoon shifts—I explore how everyday food works absorbed and negotiated state policies around reproduction and alimentation, and how such embodied techniques might become relevant again under future ecological and political crises (Kligman 1998; Verdery 1996). In doing so, I read the preparation and cooking gestures as “restored behaviour” in Schechner's sense—behaviour that can be repeated, rehearsed, and re-enacted across different contexts while carrying traces of its original performance—and align the project with debates on food, memory, and crisis in performance and food studies (Schechner 1985; Taylor 2003). In Schechner's terms, performance is “twice-behaved behaviour,” never entirely original but always drawing on prior iterations (Schechner 2013).

Historical Context: Abusive State Motherhood and Cover-ups for the Alimentary Crisis

The final decade of Nicolae Ceaușescu's rule -1980-1990 -was marked by a politics of scarcity, sometimes camouflaged as... intentional and due to scientific thinking and analysis. The regime pursued aggressive debt repayment by exporting agricultural products and fuel, leaving domestic shops chronically under-supplied (“1980s Austerity Policy in Romania” 2026; Verdery 1996). This was coupled with the catastrophic effects of centralised planning policies, that, mostly based on fake production reports, gave rise to fake offers responding to very real and urgent demand. Rationing, long queues, and blackouts became part of the fabric of daily life, particularly in urban centers (“Bread Rations in '80s Romania” 2020). Official propaganda celebrated images of abundance and rational nutrition, sometimes associated with even absurd slogans, but for most citizens, especially women running households, food was a terrain of continual crisis and improvisation (Dobre 2018).

Two policies are central for understanding food and motherhood in this period. First, Decree 770 (1966) instituted one of the harshest abortion bans in Europe, casting reproduction as patriotic duty and subjecting women to mandatory gynecological checks and intrusive surveillance (Kligman 1998; Panfilo 2024). The Romania new wave cinema follows quite a lot this topic of monstrous forced motherhood, with Cristian Mungiu's « 4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days » winning the Palme d'Or at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival. The state sought demographic growth while providing few structural supports for child-rearing beyond ideologically heavy childcare and schooling. Second, the 1982 "National Program for Scientific Alimentation" claimed to rationalise citizens' diets by fixing caloric norms and restricting access to sugar, meat, and fats ("Comunismul și alimentația românilor" 2023). In practice, this policy legitimised drastic cuts in food supply, producing malnutrition and widespread anxiety around feeding families ("Bread Rations in '80s Romania" 2020).

During the discussions leading to the adoption of the "National Program for Scientific Alimentation" it seems that the Ceausescu presidential couple was worried that the general population was eating too much and the state had to intervene to cut back on the overeating epidemic (Anton 2015, 345–356). An anecdote of the era says that during the debates Elena Ceausescu, in agreement with her husband saying that this was a kilocaloric alignment with the World Health Organisations standard, famously added: "That's it! We publish it, if they want to eat more, let them eat, the risk is theirs." (Odobescu 2012)

Together, these measures produced what I call "abusive state motherhood": women were compelled to bear children while simultaneously being denied consistent access to food, heating, and basic household infrastructure (Kligman 1998; Dobre 2018). Breeding bodies were counted, monitored, and disciplined - abortions were grounds for prison sentences for doctors, patients, midwives etc, but daily survival was outsourced to the domestic sphere and to kitchens where largely female labour stretched inadequate resources. The domestic kitchen became a site where macro-political crises materialised in micro-gestures: watering down soups, substituting one ingredient for another, negotiating access to meat through informal networks, and calculating calories not as a health fad but as a matter of endurance (Counihan and Van Esterik 2013).

My mother and my family were a direct victim of these two policies merging in the birth of my younger brother in 1986. This for our household meant an almost imposed state of poverty. I personally think that my brother to this day lives with the incautious feeling of being the « accident child ». My own memories of this period involve foraging trips for medicinal plants

with my father, visits to rural relatives to procure milk or eggs unavailable in the city, my mom making trips in the south of the country to engage in food contraband - proper food contraband with tightly packed good to hide the smells that would escape the suitcase - , rituals of pig slaughter, often shared with another family to extend the meat supply across seasons. These practices unfolded under the shadow of the Securitate, the secret police, whose informant networks penetrated workplaces, queues, and even family life (Țăranu 2012). The situation was difficult and any kind of criticism was met with harsh corrective measures from losing one's job to losing freedom or worse. To adapt Elena Ceaușescu's 1982 comment "That's it! if they want to criticise, let them criticise, the risk is theirs.". Yet within this atmosphere of poverty and fear, women developed intricate repertoires of food skills—preserving, substituting, stretching, outsourcing, exchanging, bartering—that transformed systemic crises into localised, fragile forms of hope (Dobre 2018).

To situate this historic era I would also like to share a personal memory. In first grade, looking for attention, the little performer in me came up with the following line: "Yesterday, when I took the bus from school it was as usual ssuuuuuupeeeeeer full. And then, at one of the bus stops, Elena Ceaușescu got on the bus. And because it was sooo full I offered her my seat." I don't remember how that went down with my classmates. For me it is an important child lie because it is a truth-revealing lie: a child does not understand the reality of the oppressive system in which he lives. This was mainly due to my mother's education — she was very careful that we were not involved in any political chit-chat, that we did not witness jokes or hear adult commentary that, repeated by us, could create trouble at school. My mother's silence about politics was itself a form of domestic motherhood — protective, strategic, and in its own way a survival technique. This was in the end a kind of bittersweet anaesthetic, because until the Revolution I never fully understood that we were poor, or that anything was lacking.

My first ten years of life unfolded between these two registers of motherhood. On one side, the conscripted state motherhood: decrees, caloric norms, rationing. On the other hand, the domestic motherhood of my mother Caliopea — endless making-do, adaptive cooking, care maintained against the criminal ineptitude of state policy.

Research Motivation: Beyond Criminalisation and Nostalgia

In post-1989 Romania, public discourse has often oscillated between two polarised attitudes toward the socialist past: moral condemnation focused on political repression and a nostalgic consumerism that fetishises old brands, slogans, or aesthetics (Verdery 1996; Dobre 2018). Not

wanting to visit the past except from the point of view of criminalisation is a research blindspot. Both approaches risk obscuring the everyday labour through which people navigate crises. On the one hand, an exclusive emphasis on the crimes of the regime can render survival strategies politically suspect or trivial. On the other, kitsch nostalgia can depoliticise those strategies, turning them into quirky retro curiosities.

GospodinA responds to what I perceive to be a “blind spot” in collective memory: embodied, domestic techniques through which people endured shortages and maintained social bonds. Without denying the violence of the regime, I argue that attending to such techniques is crucial for understanding how the crisis was lived and how hope was produced at the scale of the household. This is not a recovery of “good old days” but an inquiry into how people coped and cared within a structurally hostile system.

Diana Taylor’s distinction between archive and repertoire is especially helpful here (Taylor 2003). The archive preserves documents, laws, and images—Decree 770, rationing cards, Party speeches, alimentary industry slogans—but the repertoire consists of embodied practices that transmit knowledge through gesture and performance, learning directly from women who lived these challenging decades. The way my mother toasted caraway, portioned stale bread, or timed cooking between factory shifts belongs to the repertoire rather than the archive. Such techniques were rarely written down; they were learned by watching, doing, and adjusting under pressure.

In a present marked by climate crisis, democratic erosion, and new forms of austerity, these embodied repertoires may become relevant again. We live in a time of cover ups, propaganda and state or corporate surveillance. Food systems face disruptions from drought, war, and supply chain shocks, while growing economic inequality threatens access to nutritious food for many (Counihan and Van Esterik 2013). The past has not really passed. Remembering how families once navigated systemic scarcity is not simply an academic exercise but a potential form of preparation—a way of cultivating awareness of techniques that might be reactivated or reinvented (Verdery 1996). I used GospodinA as an artistic and pedagogical device.

Methodology: Restored Behaviour and Practice-Based Research

GospodinA is anchored in performance studies and practice-based research. Rather than reconstructing a historically accurate kitchen or staging a museum-like, historically accurate

and correct “period meal”. I work with Schechner's notion of restored behaviour: behaviour that can be “repeated, rehearsed, and re-enacted,” disentangled from its original context yet carrying traces of it (Schechner 1985). Restored behaviour is never raw or spontaneous; it is always already shaped by prior performances, prior bodies, prior contexts that leave their mark on the present enactment even when that mark is invisible or partially forgotten. It is, in this sense, behaviour with a memory — behaviour that knows more than the performer knows, that carries within it sediments of history, repetition, and transmission that exceed any individual act of will or intention. For Schechner, this is not a limitation but the very condition of performance: there is no first time, no originary gesture, no behaviour that is not in some sense a citation of something that came before.

In Schechner's terms, performance is “twice-behaved behaviour,” never entirely original but always drawing on prior iterations (Schechner 2013). The performer is never simply herself; she is always also the accumulation of every prior performance of the same sequence of actions — every rehearsal, every previous enactment, every body that has moved in this way before. This is what makes performance simultaneously personal and transpersonal: it passes through the individual body but is not owned by it. When I reenact my mother's gesture of toasting caraway seeds, I am not inventing a movement; I am receiving one, however imperfectly, however partially, however transformed by the distance between her kitchen and mine. The gesture arrives in my hands already inhabited.

Schechner distinguishes between pathways for restoration. In his model, “1” denotes the original source or event; “2” is the performer in the present; “3” represents documented evidence (scripts, recordings, archives); “4” is the restored performance itself; “5a” is the imagined or partially reconstructed past; and “5b” is a new performance generated through that imagination. The 1 → 3 → 4 model aims at reproducing a verified past event—say, a canonical staging of a play—based on documentary evidence. By contrast, the 1 → 5a → 5b pathway reconstructs a past that is partly imagined and created in the act of performance. My work clearly follows the latter path. I have incomplete recipe files, grocery lists or note diaries from my mother's 1980s cooking. I also rely on sensory memories, oral accounts, and scattered archival materials about food policy and everyday life (Dobre 2018; “Comunismul și alimentația românilor” 2023).

I map the model as follows:

- 1: Myself in 2026 Brussels, a researcher, foster parent, and night-shift baker.

- 5a: The imagined/remembered kitchen of 1980s Cluj-Napoca, constructed from interviews with my mother, brother and sister, childhood recollections, and historical research.
- 5b: The reenacted performance of cooking and serving dishes, such as the caraway soup, in contemporary homes, involving new participants and generating new affective and cognitive responses.

The methodological emphasis lies on what I call “accumulation” rather than rehearsal. Each attempt to source ingredients, cook under time pressure, and host a GospodinA dinner becomes a data-gathering event. I keep field notes, photographs of table settings, and audio recordings of conversations, but the primary research instrument is my own body with a particular focus on my hands learning gestures. This aligns with practice-based approaches that treat artistic making not as illustration of theory but as a mode of knowledge production in its own right (Charmaz 2006; Taylor 2003).

At the same time, the project embraces the impossibility of literal reenactment. There is no rationing system in Brussels, no looming fear of a knock on the door by secret police, no child-health clinic measuring our foster son’s weight against Party norms. The loss of these conditions is not a limitation to be overcome but a generative gap. Schneider’s concept of “temporal drag” captures this: the pull of the past on the present that cannot be closed but only staged, exposing what refuses to be restored (Schneider 2011). Hunger and the texture of 1980s bread remain out of reach; what can be reactivated are the logics of care, improvisation, and calculation that structured domestic cooking. While fear and sourcing hope are as relevant today as they were 40+ years ago.

GospodinA: A Shop of Personas

GospodinA is structured as a shop that does dinner reenactment into private homes. Instead of ordering a dish, the customer orders a persona. Each persona is a composite figure distilled from interviews, archival materials, and my own memories. Together they investigate four axes of state motherhood: giving birth, feeding, education/indoctrination, and surveillance.

The menu currently lists nine personas/dishes, each with a name, a short description, and a tablecloth motif. The customer/host chooses one persona and thus selects a narrative that will be installed or produced using a particular woman’s life trajectory, a historically plausible dinner, and a bundle of correspondence. We agree in advance on the number of guests and whether they will read the letters aloud themselves or listen to « the radio ».

On the day of the performance, I arrive with:

- ingredients for a dinner linked to the persona's story;
- a tablecloth designed for that persona;
- a packet of texts: adapted letters, excerpts from laws and magazines, and reworked Securitate reports (Securitate Archives extracts and Romanian Secret Police Operation notes)

The dinner becomes a performance structured in phases: laying the tablecloth, preparing food while reading texts and serving the food. I try to reenact gesture, taste, and text to create an immersive experience of crisis and care.

Here I briefly outline 3 personas and how they relate to food, crisis, and hope.

The Decorated Mother (Mama eroină)

This persona echoes the official "Heroine Mother" title awarded to women with many children (Kligman 1998). Her menu is a festive meal cooked from almost nothing: thin soup, tiny portions, bread leftovers gathered over several weeks. Correspondence includes letters about repeated pregnancies, hospital experiences, and official ceremonies, juxtaposed with excerpts from decrees and pronatalist speeches (Panfilo 2024). The crisis here is demographic and nutritional; hope appears in small acts of celebration that shine bright in scarcity. Official calls to "rational consumption" and reports on "discontent expressed in queues" frame these scenes as potential threats to order. Adaptive cooking in the spirit of "How to Cook a Wolf" (M.F.K. Fisher, 1942—a guide to cooking under wartime rationing). The tablecloth is made from factory work overalls.

The Passer (Trecătoarea)

A woman who works in or around the food distribution system: factory worker, shop assistant's sister, relative in a "better supplied" region. She travels by train with tightly wrapped parcels—sausages, cheese, sugar, coffee—layered in plastic, cloth, and newspaper so their smell is contained. At home, her children smell the hidden food as she unpacks and repacks, knowing it is destined for sale at the factory, not for them. She is an equal parts economist, and caregiver. The dinner is made up of a tasting menu of the finest that the regime has to offer: cheese, salami, bread, chocolate, coffee. The smells are intense. The readings are interviews I took, in 2014-2016 with people who worked in the system of food production in the 1980s and

engaged in different forms of stealing or contraband trying to mitigate the systemic crisis - including stealing food for grain banks. The tablecloth is a 30 metres long « stash-tablecloth » that unfolds over the table between two suitcases, like an animated conveyor belt offering a small taster menu of the finest the 1980s had to offer.

The Jar Mediator (Mediatoarea de Borcane)

Here the focus is on jars and preserves: pickles, preserves, compotes travelling between time stretches. The menu centers on opened jars paired with simple staples like potatoes and bread, foregrounding preservation techniques as technologies of temporal extension (Counihan and Van Esterik 2013). Letters travel with the jars, carrying recipes, news, and affection. Securitate interest in parcels and foreign contacts reminds us that even jars were monitored. Crisis is seasonal and infrastructural; hope lies in the durable glass containers that make future meals possible: we harvest when possible, making time an ingredient. The act of preserving is itself a form of hope—an anticipation of scarcity, a wager that abundance in one season can be stretched across the lean months to come, and that the labour of summer will still nourish someone in winter.

Techniques and Technicalities: Food as Domestic Techne

The work needed to enact and research GospodinA requires foregrounding not only the symbolic but also the technical dimensions of food domestic practices. Each persona's menu involves precise techniques: toasting spices, cutting bread, timing fermentation, managing heat with unreliable stoves, calculating portions etc. These are not abstract metaphors but concrete micro-technologies developed under pressure. Consider the caraway soup. Its "recipe" is minimal: toast caraway seeds in sunflower oil, add water and salt, thicken lightly with flour, and serve with bread croutons. Yet each step embeds decisions shaped by crisis: when to cook, how much oil to expend, how to reuse stale bread, how to season in the absence of stock or meat ("Scarce Food: A Guide to Survive Communism" 2025). These decisions constitute a repertoire of technicalities—small, repeatable operations that translate structural crisis into edible, if modest, sustenance. They are also techniques of hope: they perform the belief that a pot of soup can carry a family through another day, that improvisation can temporarily patch systemic failure.

In reenacting these operations, I treat my body as an instrument for rediscovering tacit knowledge. Michael Polanyi describes tacit knowledge as the fact that we “know more than we can tell” (Polanyi 1966). My mother’s and other women’s cooking confirms this. When I ask for recipes, she lists ingredients and approximate quantities; when I watch her cook, I see micro-adjustments and gestures she never verbalises. The “obvious” steps—shaking the pan at a particular moment, tasting for acidity—are precisely what must be relearned in reenactment. Currently I am working also on a cinematographic 2D animation movie that centres around the gestures of preparing, serving and eating these products.

By staging, and later on projecting, these techniques in contemporary kitchens, *GospodinA* exposes their continued relevance. In a future marked by energy rationing or supply disruptions, such micro-skills may again become essential (Verdery 1996). The project thus positions domestic food techne not as a quaint tradition but as a potential toolkit for navigating crises to come.

Crisis, Hope, and the Ethics of Reenactment

A central question of the project is: what am I actually reenacting? I can recreate certain gestures and recipes, but not the total environment of 1980s Romania. In my Brussels kitchen, there is no imposed hunger; if my family dislikes the soup, they can open the fridge and choose something else. There is no Securitate listening at the door. This absence is both ethical and epistemological.

Ethically, I refuse to simulate hunger or fear for aesthetic effect. The suffering of those who experienced real deprivation and surveillance should not be turned into an immersive “experience” for a well-fed audience. Instead, I highlight the contrast between then and now, allowing discomfort to arise from that disjunction. Epistemologically, the gap forces a focus on what can be transmitted: the logic of substitution, the rhythms of shift-based cooking, the tension between state prescriptions and lived practice (Dobre 2018; Kligman 1998).

The “caraway problem” exemplifies this tension. In 1980s Romania, caraway was ubiquitous; in Brussels today, it is obscure, replaced by a global palette of spices. I can special-order it, but doing so foregrounds the privilege of choice rather than the constraint of scarcity. If I substitute another spice, I betray the sensory specificity of my mother’s soup. Either way, the

performance exposes the impossibility of perfect restoration. Schneider's temporal drag returns: the soup pulls me toward my mother's kitchen, but the path is broken (Schneider 2011).

Yet within this impossibility lies a different kind of hope. By acknowledging what cannot be restored—actual hunger, the exact taste of Romanian bread, the psychic toll of surveillance—I hope to avoid romanticising crisis (Verdery 1996). At the same time, by reviving small techniques of survival, I insist on the ingenuity and care that flourished despite systemic violence (Dobre 2018). The project does not promise redemption; it offers attentiveness to fragile, embodied knowledge that might otherwise disappear.

I recently made the carvi soup that I perform under the persona of the "Shift Worker", for a friend who is depressed. His depression is not new but him living now alone worries me. The soup is supposed to be made and left as a care food gesture. I left the soup on the stove after spending an entire afternoon and evening at his place. "I leave you in the care of this soup" gesture had travelled from 1980s socialist Romania into a contemporary Brussels apartment, from material scarcity and time poverty into the different but equally real poverty of depression and solitude. The crisis had changed and the gesture had adapted to new conditions. This is what I think restored behaviour looks like. It demonstrates the 1 → 5a → 5b pathway in real time while updating the crisis register, without simulating large scale hunger conditions. Here the soup was made in response to real suffering, real need — something closer to the original function than acting out making a soup. This performance opens up to a very important possibility, that of me also being affected by what I do/re-perform for others. This is the true motivation for my artistic and research work: work resulting in feeling and knowing more than I did before.

Conclusion: Repertoires for Future Crises

GospodinA stages meals and dishes as sites where crisis and hope intertwine. Through reenacted gestures of cooking and feeding, the project foregrounds how domestic labour absorbed the shocks of state policies around reproduction and alimentation in 1980s Romania.

By translating these practices into contemporary Brussels, the work does not aim to recreate the past but to generate new understandings of how food functions in times of crisis. The personas and menus reveal different configurations of constraint and agency: demographic pressure, surveillance of reproductive bodies, queues, rural labour, informal networks, and

alternative lifestyles. Across these variations, food appears as both a tool of control and a medium of resistance, a terrain where micro-techniques of hope took shape (Counihan and Van Esterik 2013).

As the 2026 Dublin Gastronomy Symposium invites reflection on Food and Crisis/Hope, GospodinA proposes that domestic food techne — recipes, gestures, timing, preservation — constitutes a repertoire of survival skills that may become vital in the face of climate disruption, economic austerity, and political instability. The project sits at the intersection of gastronomy, performance, and memory studies, suggesting that to prepare for future crises, we might need not only policy and technology but also continuous, humble practices like toasting seeds, cutting bread, and leaving a pot of soup on the stove for someone else. And perhaps also less morally straightforward but equally pragmatic practices: hiding food, stretching rations, stealing grain.

Yet beyond the exhaustion and the tedium and the anxiety of cooking under impoverished conditions, there is something else at work. When we cook as an adaptive and hopeful practice — against the grain of totalitarian regimes, ecological collapse, economic violence — we enter a long line of people who, before us, also made do. They also ruminated, substituted, preserved, improvised and so on. They also fed on what little remained. They survived, and in surviving, fed the survival of others. To cook under crisis is not only a practical act; it is a way of standing in that line — of recognising that the gesture of the hand reaching for a spice, adjusting the heat, portioning what is scarce, has been made before, countless times, by people who did not know if it would be enough, if and when it would get better, and did it anyway.

The soup I make is not my mother's soup. I cannot be her, nor can I rebuild 1985. But the act of making it—under time pressure, with substituted ingredients, for people I care for—creates a bridge between past and future crises. In that bridge, alimentary gestures become more than a domestic routine: they become a practice of remembering that hunger is possible, that improvisation is survival, and that care, however constrained, can still generate hope.

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