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# Weird exoskeletons: Propositional politics and the making of home in underground Bucharest

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**Abstract**
The paper explores the politics of life underground in Bucharest, Romania. It focuses on a tunnel passing under Bucharest's central train station, where a community of drug users and so-called 'homeless' made a long-standing home, using a space that many others considered uninhabitable. Relying on extensive ethnographic observations and interviews undertaken within the tunnels, the paper traces and illustrates the socio-material entanglements characterizing life underground. It frames this assemblage of bodies, veins, syringes, substances, and various relationships of power and affect, as a 'propositional politics' of home and life at the margins. Such a politics speaks of drug addiction and extreme marginalization, but also of a sense of belonging, reciprocal trust, and care. In tracing such a politics, the paper does not aim to romanticize the status of home in the underground, nor to treat it as the marginal antithesis of normative homeliness, but to reveal the ways in which an affirmative, self-grounding politics of home emerges from the immanence of tunnel life within the fabric of the city. As such, the paper contributes to debates around homing practices in conditions of uninhabitability and proposes a radical approach to the politics of life at the margins in the contemporary urban.

*Keywords*: Home, Underground, Uninhabitable, Propositional Politics, Assemblage, Bucharest

# Weird exoskeletons: Propositional politics and the making of home in underground Bucharest

Sometime in the fall of 2014, I was undertaking fieldwork in Bucharest. I found myself at the Gara de Nord (the main train station), taking to some homeless people, and to a photographer who was doing a project with them. On the opposite sidewalk to that on which we were standing, I saw people coming and going through the manhole at the centre of one of the busiest intersections in Bucharest. They acted as if they were in an open-air living room, chatting and smoking, moving and standing still, descending and ascending, bringing and leaving stuff, hanging around in the middle of the street with plastic bags filled with Aurolac[1], and carrying big bags of copper wire to be loaded into taxis and sold in the circuit of scrap metal recycling. The photographer, Massimo Branca[2] wanted to take me inside the tunnel under the street. He was telling me that one of the pictures I had taken back in 2003, inside another tunnel near the Grozăvești metro station, had captured Radu, a person who was now living in the tunnels under the Gara de Nord, right in front of us.

While he was talking, I started remembering the place that Radu, speaking a decade earlier, had defined as his 'home': an underground chamber crossed by a huge pipe carrying hot water, which made the place warm enough to inhabit during Bucharest's harsh winter. At first sight, the tunnels are a place that seems to declare the impossibility of a homely life for their inhabitants, an inhospitable and cramped world under the streets. Yet when I decided to enter the manhole of Gara de Nord once again, I found that Radu was still there, as Massimo suggested. He was still living in the tunnels, 11 years later, with dozens of supposedly homeless others. How was this possible? How could home*less*, drug user, hustlers – as they were usually defined in the local press – survive for so long into the uninhabitable of the underground? Most importantly: what kind of wider story was emerging from that urban assemblage, and what has it to say to the whole of Bucharest and beyond?

[1] A synthetic paint still colloquially known by its brand name during the communist era. It is placed into a bag and the fumes inhaled as a drug.

[2] The project of Massimo Branca and his colleague Ivan Marchesan is one of the few meaningful and empowering visual accounts of life underground. Their book can be ordered at http://insideoutsideunderbucharest.com

Image 1. Bruce Lee (as the community leader liked to be called) entering the tunnel at Gara de Nord, 2014. Photo by the author.

In July 2015, following a number of sensational press reports about the 'junkies' populating the 'underworld of Bucharest'[3], local authorities sealed the entrance to the tunnels, evicted their 30-40 inhabitants (arresting some of them and their leader), and declared the era of the 'lumea din subteranul Gării de Nord' to be over[4]. Stretching back far before this eviction, however, many members of the underground community had already experienced continuous forms of displacement throughout their life, like other disenfranchised urbanized dwellers in Bucharest and worldwide (Desmond, 2016; Madden and Marcuse, 2016; Brickell *et al.*, 2017). For many of them, this consisted in an initial dislocation from the family in the shape of a State orphanage; followed by a passage from the orphanage to the street; then from the street to drugs, to violence, and to homelessness; then from homelessness to the tunnels (Desjarlais, 1997; Gowan, 2010; Robinson, 2011). Life underground, however, gave many of them a momentary sense of normality in the midst of their "abnormality". In the tunnels, they had friends, a 'tata' or father (the name for the tunnel community's leader, Bruce Lee), some provisional forms of income, material possessions, and both physical and emotional warmth. The tunnels, as they put it, were 'casa' (home).

In this paper I am interested in understanding what was lost in the 2015 eviction of this community. When the tunnels were closed *what kind of urban life was shut down?* The answers I provide rely on my initial encounter with Radu in 2003, subsequent visits in 2008, and on dozens of hours of participant observation and audio-recorded semi-structured interviews that I undertook with the Gara de Nord's tunnel community in 2014 and 2015. I interpret this ethnographic material in a way that brings together literature on

[3] Including an 'award winning' report from the UK-based Channel 4, available online, which led to a number of sensationalistic pieces from the likes of the USA's ABC, Al-Jazeera, Deutsche Welle and more.
[4] 'The underground world of Gara de Nord', the routine media phrase for the tunnels. Note that for almost two decades, the authorities had tolerated the presence of people living in tunnels like those of the Gara de Nord in Bucharest. The major attention paid by the international mass media to the story of Bruce Lee in 2014 was undoubtedly a major factor in provoking the harsh response of the authorities toward his particular community. This will be explored in full in another publication.

home and home (un)making (Miller, 2001; Kusenbach and Paulsen, 2013; Baxter and Brickell, 2014), the notion of the uninhabitable (Simone, 2016, 2018), and readings that have drawn attention to the liveliness and provisionality of infrastructures (Larkin, 2013; Amin, 2014). What emerges is a critical intervention that contributes to a number of discussions relating to processes of home-making at the urban margins, but that also taps into a new scholarship of urbanity that focuses on the city's spaces of alterity (Roy, 2011) and interstices (Simone and Pieterse, 2017), and on its social geometries, from unusual heights (Graham, 2018) and densities (McFarlane, 2016) to underground depths.

But there is more. Using this case, I aim to make a point about the *propositional politics* of life at the margins. By 'propositional' I mean a politics that stands on its own: it functions as a statement of truth, provided that one is ready to understand its conditions. This type of proposition is not logical in the sense of being underpinned by (or, in a sense, pointing to) a universal theory of truth. Rather, by 'propositional' I intend something that is *true* because of its immanent existence (Deleuze, 2001); because of the bodily politics of its performative assemblage (Butler, 1993). I am using the notion of 'propositional' in order to move away from readings that tend to see the politics of the margins as one of 'alternatives' or 'visibility'. These readings are problematic since they are defined by their opposition: conceptually, they require the opposite side to be there. A 'propositional' politics, instead, has its own truth – its own standing – which emerges from its assemblage[5]. The truth to which it points is not the 'deep truth' of logic, but rather a self-grounding immanence emanating from its own being and relational becoming. Within that becoming, the politics of the margins can speak its concerns, it 'appears' (Butler, 2011), articulating a life that does not need to be 'alternative' to anything else: it simply *is*, it simply *becomes*, and therefore it can only be appreciated from within that becoming, according to its own proposition.

To grasp the 'proposition' of life at the margins, the 'margins' itself need to be decoupled from binary understandings. Relying on my previous works (Lancione, 2016), by 'margins' I don't mean a defined space occupied by people characterized by determined socio-economic conditions, but a *tension*, a struggle (hooks, 1990), emerging from historically unbalanced power relations. That tension cuts through people and spaces, (co)construting them as part of bordering processes through which the margins become actualised (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). So the margins explored in this paper are not the tunnels per se, or the homeless people themselves, but the historical, social and cultural processes through which these things came to the fore and are able to articulate their own politics of life. These are margins stretching throughout history and throughout the socio-material-affective assemblage of contemporary urban Bucharest. In this sense, recognizing the propositional politics of life at the margins is about decolonising sociological and

[5] It is important to stress that its 'standing' is not contained in itself, but within the relationalities composing its assemblage, which are by definition of an external kind (Anderson, Kearnes, McFarlane, & Swanton, 2012)

spatial understandings of marginality (Ferguson, Gever, Minh-ha, & West, 1990; hooks, 1990), in order to investigate its makings and un-makings; its make+shifts (Caldeira, 2009; Hall, 2012; Vasudevan, 2015; Simone and Pieterse, 2017). The ultimate goal is to grasp, as far as is subjectively possible (Haraway, 1988), traces of the 'political' within those making and un-making of precarious lives, identifying that which is of 'concern' both for the parties involved and for the larger mechanosphere around them (Stengers, 2005).

In this sense, the politics of 'home' and 'life' in underground contemporary Bucharest *is* a 'propositional politics' because what it shows in its historic, material, affective, performative assemblage – its statement of truth – *is* of concern for the city. In other words, life underground in contemporary Bucharest shows, in its unfolding, *the possibility of homing the city, even within conditions that seem to announce its impossibility*. This means that life underground becomes the concrete representation of that which is necessary to sustain its reproduction: it does not need alterity to be defined, and it does not need an external intervention to save it, because it is already saved. Instead, it requires allowances and spaces to grow, forms of care and harm reduction that are crafted around its politics rather than around detached normativities. This paper therefore represents a radical attempt at rethinking what life at the margins is on its own terms, according to its own practices, affirming the possibility of its autonomous existence in the face of wide-ranging powers of urban normalization.

**Into the uninhabitable**

Life in the underground of Bucharest emerges at the intersection of complex social and economic processes, spanning over more than 40 years. These will be explored in more depth in another publication, but briefly, three processes are particularly salient to understanding these underground forms of dwelling. First, there is the earlier regime of socialist planning: the tunnels described in this paper consist of small underground rooms that were built in order to repair and maintain the labyrinthine district heating system of the city, by which underground hot water pipes bring warmth to the city's offices and homes. Second, there was the intersection of Ceausescus' natalist policy and the economic fallout of the '70s and '80s, a combination of factors that sharply increased the number of institutionalized children, since families were encouraged to reproduce in spite of the fact that resources did not allow them to sustain more children. According to Kligman, in 1989 there were 156,000 children in State's orphanotrophies (1998). Third, Romania opted to privatise its public housing assets in the '90s and in the '00s (Chelcea, 2012; Marcinczak *et al.*, 2014).[6] This, coupled with the closure of many state orphanotrophies and the impact of general economic decline on lower-class workers, led to a rise in the number of homeless people in the country during the early 90s (O'Neill, 2010; Florea and Dumitriu, 2017). It is at this point that many people found refuge in abandoned buildings, dilapidated houses, and warm underground tunnels. The recent closure of the latter fits within the current

[6] Today the country as less than 1% of social housing – one of the lowest in Europe.

cultural climate in contemporary Romania: one dominated by a civilizing middle class, which cannot bear the sight and smell of the poor, especially when the latter are made visible by international news channels (Chelcea and Druţă, 2016; Vincze, 2017).

Yet, a number of people like Radu and Bruce Lee lived underground for almost two decades from the late '90s to the mid-2010s. In the tunnels, amidst the impossibility of urban life, they lived *their* life 'acasa' – 'at home'. If the home has become "a complex exoskeleton for the human body with its provision of water, warmth, light, and other essential needs" (Gandy, 2005, p. 28), one of the goal of this paper is to show how the home*less* of Gara de Nord were able to assemble their own *weird exoskeleton* through and with the tunnels and broader arrangements. The notion of the 'weird exoskeleton' is used here to signal the mediated and patchwork nature of life in underground Bucharest: an assemblage of out-of-the-norm but functional infrastructural arrangements in the midst of substance addiction, deprivation, and institutional harassment, which was referred to as 'homely' by the community composing it. This home was based around practices of belonging, infrastructural makeshifts, and a network of human relations aimed at claiming independence and self-sustenance in the face of historical destitution, everyday marginalization, and continuous displacement.

There are several scholars who have been working with similar concerns in recent years, and this paper expands on a number of lines within contemporary scholarship. A first strand has been developed by urban thinkers interested in understanding the 'urban political' as something more than bare policy making (McFarlane, 2011a; Amin and Thrift, 2016; Block and Farías, 2016). In their work, the politics of the city becomes the politics of everyday urban life: an everyday made out of makeshift practices where the present and the future of the city are contested, assembled, and disassembled to claim new ground for action (Vasudevan, 2015; Maharawal and McElroy, 2017; McFarlane and Silver, 2017; Roy, 2017), to construct subjects and spaces (Millar, 2014; Nielsen, 2014; Lancione, 2017) or simply to make ends meet (Simone & Pieterse, 2017; Thieme, 2017). These approaches do not dismiss the role of larger processes and power relations in framing the actions of everyday life but are interested in showing how one informs the other, without subsuming one into the other (Elwood *et al.*, 2016; Lancione and McFarlane, 2016). A similar point is made in some careful ethnographies of marginal lives in the midst of addiction, eviction, and homelessness (Desjarlais, 1997; Bourgois and Schonberg, 2009; Knight, 2015; Desmond, 2016). Life in the tunnels is more, in this sense, than an effect of the neoliberal restructuring of Bucharest: it is affected by it and emerges from it (and other pasts) but is also a making that informs the present and the urban future; a form of dwelling that is also an appropriation, and a constitution, of a radical right to the city (Lefebvre, 2009; McFarlane, 2011b; Purcell, 2013).

Secondly, there is an emergent strand of work around the matters of homelessness, displacement, and evictions which looks at how these processes are lived and performed in their unfolding (Gowan, 2010; Robinson, 2011; Fernandez Arrigoitia, 2014; Vasudevan,

2015; Brickell *et al.*, 2017; Lancione, 2017). This is a scholarship exploring the makeshifts of life at the margins in both cities of the global north and south, which does not reject political economic readings of marginality but enhances them through grounded narratives, post-colonial sensibilities and an orientation towards the unexpressed, or under-acknowledged, potential of marginal lives. When it comes to matters of 'home', a similar approach is taken within an emergent critical literature focusing on the processes through which 'home' is made and (un)made: home in this sense is a never finished project, but continuously (re)made out of matters, affects, and politics (Miller, 2001; Brickell, 2012). The added value of this understanding of 'home' is to see home-making processes not as something that is detached from home-unmaking processes (Baxter and Brickell, 2014), but as part of the same non-directional continuum, an entanglement that is productive of experiences, subjectivities, and urban politics. To fully appreciate *what was evicted and tamed* by the revanchist policing of Bucharest's local authorities, the eviction of those living under the Gara de Nord needs to be understood in terms of the rich makings of life within the tunnels.

Finally, home (un)making in Bucharest's underground is mediated - and initially rendered possible by - the vast teleheating infrastructure previously mentioned. That infrastructure is 'alive' (Amin, 2014) in the sense that it makes something possible for the inhabitants of the tunnels; it is constantly negotiated and turned into something new, but it also disables other possibilities, and even become threatening (for example, in the summer months, when the heat made the tunnels unbearable). Emergent literature in recent years has started to conceptualise infrastructure as a full agent in co-producing the post-human experience of everyday life in the city as something that is incrementally adjusted (McFarlane, 2008; Silver, 2014), provisionally arranged (Graham, 2010; Pieterse and Hyman, 2014; Chelcea and Pulay, 2015), vulnerable (De Boeck, 2012), and part of the bare sociality of urban life (Simone, 2014). These contributions point to an epistemology of the everyday urban that is not dissimilar to the two other strands presented above (the machinic city and home (un)making). In this sense, the 'infra' of infrastructures refers "not to what which lies 'below'", an underlying socio-cultural-economic 'structure' governing urban things, "but to what which becomes visible once the contingencies are aligned in material and human terms" (Chattopadhyay, 2012, p. 248). By looking at how life underground is mediated by, and assembled through, the pipes and the tunnels of infrastructure, one can reveal *how* the relational 'structures' sustaining that life work, and their multiple meanings.

This work expands understandings of life at the margins and urban infrastructures challenging mainstream readings in two substantial ways. Firstly, the community of Bucharest's underground is often interpreted as something formed of adaptive human beings, the 'resourceful' and 'resilient' poor who mould the city to their own demands. But if there is truthfulness in this reading, it is only superficial: narratives of 'resilience' tend to be told by the dominant of the minority, as a way for the former to delimit and control the latter (as occurs in other contexts, see Amin, 2013). The weird assemblage of

underground Bucharest does not fit within the status quo, but exceeds it to propose – in its actualisation – an alternative proposition of 'home' and 'marginality'. Secondly, and connected to this first point, the infrastructure of the tunnels would be understood by more traditional interpreters as a simple means, a survival strategy for inhabitants. However, these tunnels were defined as 'home' by the home*less* of Bucharest's underground, not simply as a 'shelter' or a 'refuge' made possible by some hot pipes. The tunnels were a 'casa', a shared commons, the crafting of which brought into being a new collective subject. Life 'at home' underground still has its unbalanced power relationships and tensions, but is also charged with an atmospheric sense of belonging and ownership'.

This is also why the tunnels' subjects are more than bored homeless people waiting for something to happen amidst neoliberalising Bucharest (O'Neill, 2014). Instead, they are dwellers in their own homes, which they have constructed, maintained, and proposed to the rest of the city and beyond. Where such an underground politics of life really goes, nobody knows, but it is there and its productive forces - its desire for life (Guattari, 2013) - call for recognition. Such is the "operational space of the uninhabitable", which I will now trace in its discursive, material, and affective makings. It is a space where the underground does something more than simply refusing habitation or gesturing towards its impossibility: instead, it points "[t]o an implicit affective solidarity that can morph into a political demand; but it is a crystallization that is never exhausted by the nature of the demand or how it is addressed." (Simone, 2018, p. 7).

**Nobody listens to the King (discursive makings)**

The uninhabitable of the tunnels was constructed out of material and affective practices, which are illustrated in the following sections, but also out of discursive repertoires built around and coming from the tunnels. There are two of the latter: the first produced by local and international media; the second brought to the fore directly by the underground community themselves. A brief presentation of this second can ground an understanding of what the 'home' of the tunnels meant for its own people. At the centre of this auto-representation undoubtedly sits the undisputed leader of Bucharest underground: the 40ish year old Bruce Lee, so-called "Regele Canalelor" ("King of the Sewers") (Image 2).

Image 2: "Regele Canalelor in his 'office' in the tunnels at Gara de Nord". Photograph by the author.

Bruce Lee had a lot to do with the media exposure that the tunnels have had in recent years. He welcomed journalists and reporters because he wanted eyes from the "outside" to see the kind of alternative life that they, the "boschetari" (homeless, hustlers), had managed to put together. He and a few others were responsible for rendering the tunnels habitable, emptying the space of its rubbish; covering the pipes with bitumen (to lower the internal temperature), and putting in place the other practices of homing – or 'niching' (Blister *et al.*, 2016) - described in this paper. Despite the fact that he was raised in an orphanage, did not receive any formal education, and spent most of his life on (and below) the streets of Bucharest, Bruce Lee knew that what he had managed to achieve in the tunnels was unique. There, a community of drug users, despised by history and by mainstream society, managed to carve out a space of autonomy. They had electricity, food, clothes, entertainment, and drugs without having to depend upon external aid (which sometimes came, in the form of hot food and clean syringes distributed by local NGOs, but was never fundamental to maintaining these lives).

Bruce Lee presented himself, and was presented by other people living in the tunnels as the "tata" (father) of the community. And he wanted to be remembered as such:[7]

> *I like saying that I'm one of God's men. Not necessarily that meaning, but I like doing things as God would do them. Or, better said, I like doing good things while I'm living. I've read the Bible and God's word since I was young and ever since I read the Bible and started to really believe God's word, my life has completely changed. I stopped being that man, that child who was pulling tricks on people, and stealing. I have really changed. I'm trying to do only good. To leave something behind, a history for others to remember… to talk about my life, my legacy. I don't*

[7] All direct quotes come from tape recorded interviews transcribed and translated by Dr Alina Huzui-Stoiculescu.

*want to leave only dust behind me and people to forget about me. I want them to remember my work here for abandoned children, for poor people, for miserable people that are being neglected.*

In this speech, the "King of the Sewers" was trying to position himself as a man of God, a leader who cares about his people and their destiny. What is important here is not to understand whether Bruce Lee was, or was not, a "man of God", or even if his tale was factually correct. Instead, what is relevant is that through this depiction, and his own self-characterization as a saviour figure, Bruce Lee's main aim was to demonstrate the alternative way of living that he and his people embodied to a society that had despised them from the start. Hence also his tone of self-reliance when talking about the benefit to the community of trading in scrap metals:

*I've told you, we are independent. We don't need to answer to no one. We have our own house, we have a job, and we are by ourselves. I want to, so I'm doing this because I want them to acknowledge that they can earn money through work. It doesn't matter what. They can clean, wash, or they can help me do this [sorting metal and selling it]. They are paid. So they will try to continue working. Moreover everyone saw that it is easy money to make and they don't have to go to prison for it. They don't have to steal, to get into trouble. This is what I'm trying to teach them, that work is man's virtue.*

Bruce Lee's rhetoric is both about his personal glorification, but also about the constant reminder to the others—the journalist, the reporter, the visitor, the urban ethnographer—that what he and his people were doing was neither about becoming rich nor about turning to an organized form of crime (in contradistinction to some media portrayals of the community). Rather, it was above all about making "condițiile de viață mai ușoare", or improving the life that history gave to them:

*I'm trying everything not to break the law, you see? I admit using drugs because this is our life, our misery. In this hole where we've been rejected. I've tried to improve living conditions. To live like people, because I'm not interested in building a house anymore or having all the facilities [in the sense of having a house for himself]. […] But I'm interested for everyone, not for me. Because God has given me everything, believe me.*

Perhaps it was his ingenuity and egocentrism that led Bruce Lee to trust that reporters were going to write about tunnel life in its complexity, rather than focusing solely on drug-inflected deviance from the norm. As I grasped from many conversations with him, he knew that depicting life in the tunnels as a matter of 'abnormality' was harmful to his community. When I first asked him whether I could record our conversations, he replied: "*I've told you that it doesn't bother me, as long as it's in our own interest. I know*

*that you don't intend to harm us.*" However, the dominant media discourse that emerged from the "spectacle of the tunnels" is one that readily dismissed the effort, strategies, nuances, and labour put in place by Bruce Lee and his peers to ameliorate the conditions of life underground. A closer look, however, reveals that the possibility for an alternative representation is already contained in the question of *how* the uninhabitable of the underground was made and unmade in everyday life, beyond the stigma and marginalization (Caldeira, 2009; Hall, 2012; Thieme *et al.*, 2017).

## Make-shifts of life underground (material-affective makings)

The material and the affective are sides of the same thing, since the making of life is about encounters between human and non-human matters. The combination of the two is able, in its overall articulation, to produce atmospheres that stick to a place and affect *any*body in it (Anderson, 2014). This non-linear circularity was productive of the exoskeleton making 'home' possible in the tunnels, which was fueled by reciprocal care, a sense of belonging, and fulfilment of the essential requirements for material wellbeing, despite the fact that life in the tunnels was also a weird composition of drugs, illicit trade, and provisional infrastructures and arrangements.

### *The economy of injecting*

Tunnel life was immersed in drugs. They were circulating all around, in liquid form, powder, vapours. Drugs enmeshed the atmosphere of the place by way of their pinching smell, and their passage from hand to hand, flipped through fingers, stored under jumpers, up sleeves, in socks. They appeared in a series of rhythms: inhalation and exhalation, pumping Aurolac from small silver plastic bags, the holding of breath, staying still, and poking the skin to make it tender, pushing 'legale' (legal highs) from the barrel to the needle, right into one own's body (Image 3). Injecting was particularly prominent. One could not stand in the tunnels for more than a couple of minutes without seeing someone trying to poke a needle through skin, or passing stuff around, or shouting at someone else to get water, a syringe, some help. Syringes were used as darts, thrown against the carpets covering the hot pipes, or just discarded on the floor. Bodies were lying on the pipes, being lifted above the city and beyond.

Injecting was the everyday (re)actualization of a binding past, a moment when hard drugs had been made available to these users for free trial on the street, or the point at which a user tried 'legal highs' with the hope of weakening heroin's grip, thereby falling into an even stronger trap. Dependency is the attachment of two bodies, human and non-human, thus creating a whole new assemblage that turns life upside down for the sake of its own flow (Duff, 2011). This was *not* a joyful endeavor. Most people in the tunnels did not 'enjoy' drugs. They did drugs because they had to: to stop the pain; to relinquish the rush; to calm down without going mad. And in such a state of urgency, the conditions under

which injections were performed were very provisional and poor. Infections stemming from unsafe injection were common. Open blisters could be found all over bodies; recrudescent wounds treated only with water or simple bandages; feet more swollen than one might think humanly possible. Debilitation, demotivation, infectious diseases were the norm. As was death.

Given their previous history of institutionalisation and homelessness, as well as current punitive approaches toward them, the users of the tunnels decided to sustain their dependency-entangled lives autonomously, using the fragile means at their disposal underground (Bourgois and Schonberg, 2009). This required the alignment of the fragility of matter and a relational, reciprocal form of care (Lawson, 2007; Mol, 2008) that knows nothing of the hegemonic types of charity and institutional care (Desjarlais, 1997; Lyon-Callo, 2004; Lancione, 2014), but instead enacts a different set of provisions and a divergent form of attentiveness to the other.

The performance of injection provides a clear example in this sense. The act of pushing a needle below one's own skin is just part of a broader and more complex nexus. Firstly, there is the labour necessary to obtain the substance to be injected. For the people of the tunnels, this comprised a wide range of activities, most of which were coordinated by Bruce Lee himself. It consisted in the collection of scrap materials from garbage bins, which were then brought underground to be separated and organized according to their value - copper on one side, iron on another; functioning electronic items on this pile, jewellery on another – before being sold outside the tunnels through various means. People were paid by Bruce Lee for the job they did, or for the items they brought him. On the other hand, Bruce Lee was using the money both to buy drugs (which were then sold back to people) and to care for the broader needs of the community (such as medicines, food, hospitalization and more). Money was part of the flow of commodities in the tunnels but accumulation was not seen as central by anyone, including the King, who lived a simple life with minor economic benefits to himself.[8]

Secondly, the individual needed to obtain some water, some syringes, some space, and some good veins to inject. Despite the lack of current water; despite the scarcity of good and clean syringes; and despite the tunnel being a small and extremely crowded space populated by heavy users with few, sometimes no, good veins still available, the people of Gara de Nord were always able to align their provisional contingencies and perform the task. A lot of collective labor had to be put in place to do so. After procuring the right materials and accessories, individuals had to inject standing in a small corridor (no larger that a foot wide), while other people were constantly passing by, and objects moving around them. More often than not, injecting required the work of two parties: the one receiving the injection and a second trying to help, probing the skin of the first in search of

[8] Other activities included working as an informal parking assistant in the train station area, street begging, and buying and selling small quantities of drugs. Despite media descriptions, stealing was a very last resort and was never a primary strategy of the group or Bruce Lee.

hidden veins, good spots, and points of access. More than once I have witnessed the elongation of a body pinched by someone's else syringe-bearing hand, while both tried to keep still in the jostling, bustling corridor, pushed by other bodies, casting shadows and calling one another, shouting instructions, in the humid hot-stiff atmosphere of the underground. The searching, touching, adjusting, and trying to inject – often more than a dozen times before final success due to frail veins and inadequate syringes – signals an economy of care that is often unspoken yet explicit in its actions.

The inhabitants of the tunnels, despite their shouting one to the other, their raw modes of interaction, and their apparent lack of care, did understand one another's condition, and were always ready to procure water for a peer; to share clean syringes; to make some room if someone needed it; and to help one another with injecting. If resources, bodily, relational, and material, needed to be aligned to perform a shot, that alignment was not entirely dependent on just the will of the parties involved. Fundamentally, these relations held together by virtue of a habitual form of being together: by sharing the same space without having to fight for it; by feeling secure in the midst of dozen of bodies cramped into a tiny underground corridor; by looking for the same substances and sharing the same needs; by being physically within the same common 'home', crafted around hot underground pipes and a shared wish to live independently, yet united.

Again, such home-making togetherness should not be reduced to the act of helping alone, but should be traced in its making and unmaking in place, i.e. should be situated in the whole urban exoskeleton of the tunnel (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Gandy, 2005). Its (unmaking) thus can been seen in a division of jobs; in a movement of commodities in and out of the manhole; in its slow times; in its lights, music, improvised sleeping rooms; in being held together by a recognizable leader, Bruce Lee; in community relationships with people outside of the tunnels (trading, chatting) by whom the tunnel dwellers were largely left alone; and as a part of the life those in Bucharest would expect to encounter in and around the station of Gara de Nord.[9] Highlighting these forms of home (un)making is about tracing the complexities of the uninhabitable: a way to show that the 'crawling bodies' and the 'living death' of the Gara had their own way of going about life; their own weird home-made of warm pipes, clothing, syringes, and even domestic cats (Figure 3), which exceeded everything the city had to offer - and had ever offered – these people.

[9] There is no space in this paper to illustrate these important relationships, which are going to be tackled in another publication.

Image 3: “Injecting in the tunnel of Gara de Nord”. Photograph by the author

***And there was light***

The tunnels were ‘homely’ far beyond the reciprocal attentions brought forward by the domestic care of injecting. Like any home, part of the exoskeleton was assembled and sustained through the comfort of technical provisioning, which included the heat produced by the pipes, as well as the atmospheric warmth of electricity and light. As Images 2 and 3 clearly show, large areas of the underground tunnels were illuminated. Bulbs made the space very bright; ventilators were positioned at different points to obtain a bit of ventilation; a plasma TV was continuously running and playing music, amplified by a couple of speakers; and electric plugs were available for people to recharge their mobile phones.

Electricity, perhaps more than anything else, played a vital role in allowing the tunnels’ homemaking to emerge and endure. Through it, an otherwise bleak infrastructure was transformed: light was cast in the belly of the city, where formerly there was only dark, making the ‘exoskeleton’ seem vibrant and alive. But how did the ‘boschetari’ of the Gara get access to electricity, and how did they ensure its constant presence, given that they had no official access to a private commercial provider?

Ioan, a young but close friend of Bruce Lee, once brought me to the ‘dormitory’ area in the tunnels (which consisted of a room accessible also through a second open passage from above ground). There he showed me an electric switch panel:

> Ioan: *Here’s the electric panel that I’ve talked to you about. It crosses the entire sector, the entire tunnel. One end is outside, in the barrack. So the electric power is divided: one end at the barracks, the other outside* [on the public lamp]*, and we turn all the power off from there* [the main electric switch]. *The second panel is similar to this one, it’s on the middle. On this side* [he indicates with his hand the other side of the tunnel].*The current comes from here and we have electric power everywhere.*
> Michele: *Everywhere*.

Ioan: *Everywhere. This panel was made by dad [Bruce Lee]. He employed an electrician but he spent a lot of money in vain, he bought the panel but it wasn't useful. Because the wires went on fire. They burnt. He made these wires from the old ones*.

Electricity came from a cable attached to a public lamp outside the tunnel, which ran to the makeshift electric panel that Ioan showed me. Local authorities knew about this arrangement and never created a real problem about it, perhaps thanks to the low-level bribes through which local police were kept complicit. In case electricity was not available from the public lamp, the tunnel dwellers had bought an electric generator which ran on petrol. The generator was positioned right at the bottom of the tunnel entrance and attached to the second electric switch by a complex system of cables running through the tunnel. Its noise and smell were another of the peculiar feature of the tunnel-as-home. This makeshift infrastructure was made possible thanks to the constant work of repair and maintenance put in place by Bruce Lee and his peers (Graham & Thrift, 2007).

The abundant light provided by the tunnel's electric system was needed to inject, but that was not its only purpose. Enmeshed in their harsh life, in the lack of necessary resources, and in the constant precarity of their existence, individuals in the tunnels found comfort in the music emanating from the TV (which they referred to as 'their' plasma TV, not Bruce Lee's); in the few facilities they had at hand (such the plugs for phones); and in the fact that somehow that place resembled the material culture that can be found in a 'normal' home (including a series of pictures attached to the walls of the tunnel; Miller, 2001). Togetherness was made possible by that warm atmosphere, which contrasted sharply with that which people found outside, on the cold streets where they were exposed to violence and harassment.

Beyond electricity, food was another vital component of the underground infrastructure of home. People ate together, at different times of the day and night, sharing bread, cheese, soup, and whatever else they brought into the tunnels from the outside. Moreover, once a day a hot meal was cooked by Bruce Lee with a little gas heater positioned in his 'office'. Everyone I spoke to referred to this 'warm food' in one way or another, as a pivotal experience that defined life underground as 'homely'. While food, in general, was not a problem since it could be obtained outside the tunnels, 'warm food', cooked by oneself or by someone else made community members part of 'the family', providing an unparalleled emotional warmth. As Ilena, one of the tunnel's inhabitants (Image 4), puts it:

*It's a very good life here, we have food and warmth, and we have everything we need. […] He [Bruce Lee] wants to provide a proper future, a warm bed, a warm meal. Each day, from morning to evening. Each morning we have a hot tea, we have tea, and eggs, whatever God offers us. So we eat whatever we have to put on*

*the table. No one is left behind to watch the others eating. We eat together; we are like a family.*

Image 4. "Ilena washing the dishes underground". Photograph by the author

**A propositional politics**

One of the projects of the people of Gara de Nord was to construct a 'summer home' outside of the tunnels, using the derelict shell of an old restaurant situated just above the front of the train station. I was brought to that space many times, by different inhabitants of the tunnels, who showed me around, indicating how the space would be organized; enumerating the different interventions that were already complete (including the installation of numerous bulk beds, the repairing and painting of walls, the fixing of windows); and highlighting how Bruce Lee was investing all the money he had (namely, all the profits from buying and selling drugs and scrap materials) to fix the 'baracă' (shack).

When police intervened to arrest Bruce Lee and to seal the entrance of the tunnel in July 2015, local media reports described the shack as the 'villa' of Bruce Lee, implicitly accusing him and his peers of living a luxurious life on the basis of of their illicit activities. The tone, the words, and the discursive repertoires used in describing the 'villa' were all assembling the same representation: that it was impossible that homeless people and junkies were building a *home*. How could such a thing be happening? Surely, most comments implied, they had to steal, to do something illegal and out of the ordinary, to *afford* a home. After all, the people of the tunnels were just Bruce Lee's 'boschetari', 'aurolaci', home*less* drug-users without a place or a future in the civilizing, individualizing, and profit-driven city of Bucharest.

It is against this narrow gaze, which refuses to allow the many to see beyond the stereotypical portrayal of the margins and their supposed uninhabitability, that this paper takes its fundamental stance. Due to space constraints, I have only been able to hint at the complexity of life underground, a subject on which I will expand elsewhere. These hints,

however, hopefully suffice to show how the new 'casa de vară' (summer home) of Bruce Lee and his people was already inscribed in the old home, the tunnels: it was an extension of this, possible only because of the construction of home going on underneath, in the belly of the city. It is in a space created in-between the warmth generated by the pipes; the electricity introduced via the switch and the cables; the light illuminating the whole place; the food cooked and shared each day; the care dispensed to others injecting; the recognition of Bruce Lee as a father figure or implicit leader - and many other provisional alignments - that the people of Gara de Nord were able to construct their own 'casa' in the underground of the city. This was a 'home' carved out of an adversarial history and a neglectful present: the only self-constructed exoskeleton available to them to make their lives possible.

The consumption of substances such as heroin and "legale" was not an aim for the people of the tunnels, but a historical form of enslavement territorialized on their bodies. The goal, for the *ciudați* of the underground, was never a death induced by the syringe, but endurance: to keep going, to stay alive in the face of all adversity and addiction. Their broken veins were a clear sign of the politics of hope emerging from the tunnels. If on the one hand they clearly signal a traumatic history of neglect engraved *in* the body by desperate attempts to inject, on the other hand, they also stand as a sign of the will *to live*: they connect to a socio-material infrastructure and an economy of care assembled with what is at hand, not simply to survive but to be at home, in the city. This is the tunnels' lively proposition. It is a statement, an affirmation of the possibility of life in the face of conditions that supposedly deny that possibility.

Crucially, life underground in contemporary Bucharest constitutes a propositional politics of a *weird* kind because it is made out of 'weird' stuff. It is assembled by self-describing 'ciudați' (strange people) (Foucault, 2016): *drogaţii* (junkies), *oameni ai străzii* (homeless), *aurolaci* (consumers of Aurolac), *curve* (prostitutes), *boschetari* (hustlers). It is made of intersections between these bodies and stolen copper wire, veins, synthetic drugs and opioids, rotting flesh, and holy pictures hanging on the walls of an underground tunnel constructed to maximize efficient energy production and consumption by the Socialist Republic of Romania. The 'weirdness' of these assemblages needs to be maintained to avoid a sanitised and romanticised reading of the underground as home: it is because of its strangeness – as an assemblage of stuff outside of the canon of moral and cultural acceptability - that its inhabitants were targeted for eviction. Crucially, it is on the basis of this strangeness that these same inhabitants were able to use such materials to create a 'home' at the margins of Bucharest.

As critical scholars have shown, homes are simultaneously spaces of inclusion and exclusion: they are produced to bond a definite set of people and things against the outer world, thus excluding the latter from the calculus of everyday homely life (Kusenbach and Paulsen, 2013; Atkinson and Jacobs, 2016). But they can also become spaces of harassment, fear, unequal power relationships, and violence (Blunt and Varley, 2004), their physical and emotional arrangements vulnerable to destruction by violent events in the

form of forced evictions, natural disasters, and revanchist policing (Porteous and Smith, 2001; Brickell *et al.*, 2017). The tunnels were no different. A 'home' is, after all, what someone defines as such (Veness, 1993; Miller, 2001). It is a space of belonging, made of material cultures and contested affections: a coming together of human and non-humans which is not defined in advance by its form and is not restricted to specific places or artefacts. In tracing the politics of Bucharest underground, the goal is not to romanticize the status of home in the tunnels, but to reveal its implicitly and explicitly urban proposition.

Such a propositional politics, as I argued in the introduction to this paper, is an affirmation of the tunnel as a form of urban life. It is 'propositional', because it is a statement about something immanent: it is articulated in the here and the now, present, tangible, embodied, performed, grounded, and therefore, true. It is political because, by being in the world so loudly, so visibly and tangibly, it is also an implicit invitation to being attentive to its presence, ready for its movements, open to the possibility of its encounter (Butler, 2011). In other word, it is a matter of concern, both because of what it shows and because of its potentiality. The task of the critical urban ethnographer is to appreciate the propositional politics of life underground from the assemblage of its weird exoskeletons, a situatedness that is the only possible starting point for an attempt at grasping its politics.

Any genuine politics of care for this alternative form of home-making will need to take its proposition seriously. Harm reduction interventions aimed at sustaining it, grounded in its own demands, can work for the better. On the contrary, any orientation coming from a world that does not recognize its form of everyday life can only produce forms of control and regimentation, not just in the Rancerian sense of policing the tunnels, but in the more quintessential sense of annihilating this alternative form of life by default. If the socio-economic-material answer to homelessness is the homeless shelter, than there is no room for any alternative proposition, any alternative life form than the institutionalized home*less* body. The 'boschetari' of Gara de Nord are not home*less* bodies, and *they did not want to be governed as such*. So they assembled their alternative desires, their right to be alive in the city, through the mechanosphere of the tunnels: it was a conatus that brought joy to its community, in the midst of death and addiction. The tunnels were a festive creation through which a right to life was expressed, albeit in a number of solitary chambers filled with needles and wires. It was about being at home, within the belly of a frenetic, very civilized and violently normalised Bucharest.

The propositional politics of life underground emerged at the intersection of these tensions, of these marginalities within which patterns of beings in the world are (re)produced in non-linear ways. Refusing to romanticise the urban poor, this paper represents an analytical attempt to recognize the possibility of 'a' life – of *l'autre* – within a domain classified by some as uninhabitable (Lefebvre, 2009; Simone, 2018). I have sought to avoid transforming the politics of that life into an individualizing narrative of 'resilience', to show instead how the underground worked as a collective form of

contestation from below. As such, it can be seen as a minor articulation (Katz, 2017) that carved out a right to the city (in a truly Lefebvrian sense, a right to autonomy and reappropriation), pointing towards wider and more profound concerns. Its weird exoskeleton, and its propositional politics, therefore require substantive cultural reframing to be recognized, to which this paper makes a small initial contribution.

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