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Inhabiting Dispossession in the Post-Socialist City: Race, Class, and the Plan, in Bucharest, Romania

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Abstract: The paper explores the racialised geography of a series of socialist blocs located in the southern periphery of Bucharest, labelled as a contemporary Romanian "ghetto". Through extensive ethnographic and archival work, it expands on contemporary Western race-aware urban scholarship, advancing an expansive reading of the "plan" as a key element to account for the endurance of foundational dispossession in the context of Bucharest. The goal is to trace how the social segmentations of "class" and "race" have been diagrammed through discontinuous city-making in the last hundred years, refuting a reading of these complex processes as a matter of evolutionary stages between economic regimes, which ends up reproducing a stereotypical representation of the Eastern "other". The paper contributes to a situated approach to racial urbanism, offering the basis for a trans-Atlantic dialogue around the makings and unmakings of urban dispossession.

Keywords: dispossession, racialisation, Roma people, assemblage, planning, Eastern Europe

Raluca and the Bloc

This paper is situated within an *aleea* called Livezilor, in Bucharest. At one end of that street was a shipping container which had been converted into a harm-reduction centre for intravenous drug users. It was called "Caracuda". On the other lay a number of *nefamiliști* blocks, socialist units that were designed as temporary accommodation for single workers who migrated to the city to work in nearby factories in the mid-1960s and 1970s. Over the subsequent decades, they had turned into what was in the media referred to as a "ghetto" of poor Roma people and outdoor drug consumption. Raluca was living in and out of these blocs.

When I first met her, she was working the streets of Ferentari, the neighbourhood where Aleea Livezilor can be found. That day, Bogdan, a friend and peer-educator in Caracuda, approached her and asked if she was OK, if she had condoms, if the street was calm. Short, pointed questions, to which she replied with short, pointed answers. When we were out of earshot, he then told me about how women like Raluca suffer a three-fold burden: they are addicted to heroin and *legale* (mephedrone);[1] they are sex workers; and they are Roma.

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The only other time I met her again was two weeks after this episode. It was a cold morning and she was waiting near the Caracuda centre. I approached her. "Ce faci aici?" She slowly raised her head and softly said: "Sunt rău." "Feeling bad." Then she showed me a swollen, pus-seeping index finger. She was clearly in pain, barely able to talk or stand. When Bodgdan and the doctor came, she was medicated and cared for, and they urged her to visit a hospital immediately.

Raluca never went to the hospital. A few days later, one of Caracuda's clients told us that she had been found dead under the main staircase of the *nefamiliști* unit where she used to sleep from time to time (Figure 1).[2] But Raluca couldn't have gone to the hospital even if she had wanted to. She had no medical insurance and, very likely, no ID either. On the fringes of history and of a city that did not have a place for her, Raluca's life was marred by intersecting forms of dispossession: the racialisation of the Roma poor; the structural pitfalls of the Romanian welfare regime; the lack of any real public housing policy; the instantiation of a neoliberal ideology that blames systemic social problems on individual shortcomings; and a revanchist and violent approach towards drug users.[3] These matters are not typical of "Romania" per se. Yet, their unfolding and structuration is always a situated affair, which I aim to investigate in this paper by staying close to Bucharest and its discontinuous contemporary history.

Introduction

In this paper, I aim to expand on contemporary Western race-aware urban scholarship, providing a situated ethnographic and archival reading of dispossession in the Romanian post-socialist context—one that has the potential to enhance trans-Atlantic critical race grammars. At the core of this work is the question of how

Figure 1: Lifelines in Aleea Livezilor, 2015 (source: the author)

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the tensioned politics deriving from the social segmentations of "class" and "race" have been tackled through city-making in Bucharest, with particular reference to its Roma population. The paper confronts this question by refusing a staged reading of these processes as transitions between economic regimes—which ends up reproducing a stereotypical representation of the Eastern "other"—to advance, instead, a transversal approach to *dispossession* as seen from the standpoint of the city's contemporary "urban plans".

Methodologically speaking, this work is part of a long-term engagement with Bucharest initiated in 2003. I purposely phrase my work on Bucharest as a long-term affair, and not as "fieldwork", because this is how I have gradually learned to come to peace with the disjuncture between the timing of academic production, the needs and urge of grassroots organising, the depth of my emotional capacities, and the time-span required to "grasp" historic and spatial processes. The methodology underpinning this research is that of engagement,[4] a longitudinal exposition that is required to follow the storylines—to use Simone and Pieterse's (2017) term—of Raluca and her community without silencing their violent histories of liminal dwelling and becoming (Lancione and Simone 2021).

Tracing the assemblage rendering Roma people both expendable and a terrain of extraction in the history of contemporary urban Romania, means to go beyond the surface of violent displacement, forced removal, and incarceration, and to refute what McElroy and Werth (2019) have called a "deracinated" understanding of these processes. The question to ask is around what it means to *inhabit dispossession* in Bucharest. Borrowing from Ananya Roy, it is about querying around the property that is dispossessed, but also to centre and interrogate "foundational dispossession": "what about the personhood that was once itself property?" (2017:A3). In the case of Raluca and Aleea Livezilor, what about the making of a collective—and yet very much embodied—racialised subject, if one considers the lineage of feudal enslavement, fascist assassination, communist re-subjectification, and, ultimately, neoliberal expulsion, through which its coming into the world has been framed?

In approaching Aleea Livezilor, I take the notion of the "plan" as a key element to account for the formation—and endurance—of foundational dispossession in the urban context of Bucharest. Roy (2019) herself accounts for this, in her theorising of "racial banishment" in US cities, and many have done the same in recent years, across geographies (Amin 2012; Bhan 2016; Caldeira 2012; Gibbons 2018; Hunter and Robinson 2017; McKittrick 2006; Perry 2013; Picker 2018; Shabazz 2015; Simone 2018; Yiftachel 2006). But a "post-socialist" city like Bucharest poses peculiar challenges. In theorising from Ferentari, where does the "plan" end, and how can foundational dispossession endure, in time and space, in a context where very different administrative, ideological, and economic arrangements come to the fore with great power and urgency, and are then radically scrapped away in the relative short time of less than one generation? How to be attentive to the power of racial capitalism and its banishment, when for a part of its recent history the state has the intention not to banish, but to include the "Roma other" in its economic plans?

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Relying and expanding on scholarship from Romania, I aim to account for the continuity of racial becomings through that nexus of ontologies one can call "București" (Cotoi 2021). To this end, the "plan", here, is more than the act of planning, its topographies, governances, and bureaucratic results, but also what the "plan" is able to mobilise and bring with itself throughout time. It is the assemblage of affective and political economies that, aligned in a certain way, diagrammed in a certain manner, allow for a particular affirmation of life and inhabitation to persist and to be reproduced through time and space. This means to understand the "plan" by its sense of direction—not its declaration. Following Tadiar (2013:42), planning becomes a partially formed and only partially formalised arrangement through which "contemporary contradictions between state and capital, nation and state, [and, following Simone (2016), the habitable and the uninhabitable] are 'resolved', put to use and toward ends that only exacerbate the inequalities of our times".

And so to trace the makings of Bucharest's and Livezilor's racialised Roma assemblage, I identify the emerging conditions—the results of the class/race tensioned politics—as "baselines", to convey, in a simple and analytical way, the capacity of their *planned resolutions* to allow for further racialist assemblages to be carried forward. A "baseline", here, works as a diagram that is both situated in history but also able to abstract from it, pointing onwards by ensuring the assemblage of racialised bodies (Weheliye 2014) and by instructing the tempo of their inhabitation (Hartman 2018; Simone 2018). This is how the "plan" is able to have its say on futurity (Deleuze 1988): by violently extending beyond itself, percolating through diffuse forms of power—legislative, cultural, economic—across discontinuous times and spaces, which cyclically (re)emplace racialised bodies (Roy 2017).

In what follows, I first clarify the paper's conceptual contribution, by discussing the notion of "dispossession" in relation to the post-socialist context, and then I present the three baselines of racialisation I am working on in Ferentari, which expand cognate investigations I am conducting in other areas of the city (Lancione 2017, 2018, 2019). The conclusion confronts the question of what kind of liberation might be possible when one embraces a disillusioned view on the capacity of state agencies to deal with systemic racism.

Foundational Dispossession and the Post-Socialist Context

Central to understandings of racialised dispossession in contemporary urban debates are notions of racial capitalism and of the logic of proprietorship at the core of the latter. With the former, thanks to the foundational work of Cedric Robinson (2000:14), it has become clear how capitalism works within and through racialised logics, to (re)produce a "world system … dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide". Crucially, these logics are founded on specific ideologies of what it means to "possess". Within racial capitalism there is no possession outside of proprietorship, which is to say, no possibility of claiming one's own economic (broadly understood) place in the world unless that space of

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relations is individualised, inscribed in the singular (Nichols 2020), and therefore grounded in the subtraction—or bordering (Anzaldúa 2015)—from, and of, the non-white other (McKittrick 2006).

The debate is without doubt more nuanced and I have no space to account for its energy, variety, and scope in this paper (Derickson 2017; Hawthorne 2019; Hunter and Robinson 2017). However, it is important for me to refer to these notions because, in bringing them into conversation with the so-called post-socialist context, some tensions come to the fore. There are at least two questions framing the encounter between the contemporary race-aware urban scholarship coming mainly from the US and the Romanian, and post-socialist, context at large.

The first is: *can one speak of racial capitalism in a context where, for a significant part of its recent history, "socialism" was the main game in town?* The answer is affirmative, but it requires specification. In working with *dispossession* beyond the US context, it is important to frame it not only as a concept to situate racial violence in its historic formations, but as an analytic to consider the ontological foundations of racialisation. The latter requires a careful engagement with the contextual genealogies of dispossessive power. As Byrd et al. (2018:3) have put it, "dispossession … is an ontological proposition" structured around and structuring some "primary conditions of possibility", which include "[c]olonization, Indigeneity, racialization, and chattel slavery and its afterlives, along with the heteropatriarchal household economy". In this view, dispossession is the de-facto *diagram of life* in conditions in which "propriety" becomes the core function of individual and collective relations (Butler and Athanasiou 2013; Hardt and Negri 2019). When such a "conception and practice of the proper" becomes the structuring form of collective life, "[t]he logic of appropriation instantiated through dis/possession works in tandem with the production of colonial, racial, gender, and sexual categories that change over time" (Byrd et al. 2018:3).

Although the stress on "proprietorship" might at first not fit well within the "socialist" context, an ontological reading of dispossession invites a venturing beyond the mode of production defying the frameworks through which *appropriation* unfolds. If proprietorship is there—perhaps as an expression of a state's will subsuming in itself the only possibility of individualisation—dispossession, and its racialised baselines, are there too.[5] Crucially, this is not to say that dispossession is unavoidably everywhere and therefore nowhere. One's ability to trace how racialised dispossession endures is dependent on grounding the practice of proprietorship itself: on taking an inescapable, not universally detached, view on ontological formations (Haraway 2016).

And so, following this reasoning, the second and main question framing this paper is: *what does foundational dispossession in Bucharest look like*, or, more modestly, how did it manifest for the Roma of Aleea Livezilor?[6] I want to highlight, among others, the contribution of critical urban Romanian scholars that helps with this. There are three aspects to address here—albeit briefly—which point to three markers of difference vis-a-vis the implementation of the dispossession grammar in the US context.

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The first is related to the broader societal, cultural, and geopolitical context in which Romania/Bucharest/Ferentari are located (if we take Robinson's world system framework seriously, this matters) and, specifically, to the role of the Roma question within this context. In Europe, contrary to what happens with critical readings of the racial histories of African Americans in the US context, attention to the "Roma" is still reduced to matters of ethnicity, largely failing to capture how structural inequalities and violence not only relate to, but structure, today's forms of urban development and governance (for exceptions, see Creţan and Powell 2018; Picker 2018; Powell and Lever 2017). The problem is not simply a lack of engagement or conceptual repertoires; it is also connected to the double-colonisation of Eastern Europe from its neighbouring West (Böröcz 2009; Gagyi 2016; Popovici and Pop 2016). This is a colonisation of an economic kind, which has effects on poor racialised urban dwellers, in terms of housing possibilities and patterns of migration and contemporary trans-national slave labour. But it is also a colonisation of the Roma "other" in itself, as a double-typoid of difference to be appropriated by new techno-infused neoliberal urban developments (in the case of Romania, brilliantly discussed by McElroy 2020)[7] in order to construct mainstream whiter European, and Romanian, middle-class identities (Deoancă 2017; Gheorghe 2010).

The second situated marker of difference relates to local capitalist dynamics, and in particular, for the sake of this paper, to post-1989 urban neoliberal formations. In the context of Bucharest, Liviu Chelcea (2006) has convincingly showed how the traditional causal dynamic between capital and space in the urban context—where the former gets reproduced and accumulated through the latter (Harvey 1985)—was de facto reversed in the first years of the post-socialist realm. According to him, "the control of space leads to capital accumulation in post-socialist cities" (Chelcea 2006:128), that is, it is thanks to the availability of urban land and housing stock in the hands of the state that, in the aftermath of 1989, a new capitalist social class, and a related urban circulation of accumulation and extraction of value from land, could be planned for and take place. In Chelcea's (2006) own words, "the appropriation of valuable urban space, rather than representing an expression of capital differences, precedes and is a constitutive part of the process of primitive accumulation. Gentrification, in this case, is intimately linked with the processes of making a capitalist class in Eastern Europe, in this specific case, through the state allocation of property rights" (see also Chelcea 2003; Chelcea and Pulay 2015; Vincze 2017; Zamfirescu 2019).

Appreciating this dynamic is important to understand the formation of spaces of housing marginalisation, precarity, and resistance across the urban post-1989 East (Tsenkova and Polanska 2014; Vilenica 2017), and to grasp how the same processes have played out in Romania, too (Berescu 2011; Florea and Dumitriu 2017; Rughinis 2004; Zamfirescu 2015). Eniko Vincze (2013:224)—a key scholar of reference who has investigated the intersection of racialised oppression, housing injustice, and neoliberal urban formation in the country—is adamant:

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> Throughout the process starting from the promise of "no oppression" and ending at the reality of "no protection" (on the domain of housing), the post-socialist state became an ally of the "free" residential market (and the property rights of its major actors, such as real estate entrepreneurs and banks) against the socioeconomic needs and rights of its citizens.

It is important to read Chelcea's and Vincze's scholarship bearing in mind the geopolitical and cultural context these processes are now operating within. If there are forms of resistance to these long-term racialised processes (Berescu et al. 2021; Florea et al. 2018; Lancione 2017; Popovici 2020; Vișan and FCDL 2019), the dispossessive assemblage is now well-oiled and protected by a dominant cultural doxa grounded around three core dogmas: the refusal of anything having to do with the "socialist past" (Chelcea and Druță 2016); a desire for affirmation aligned with ideas of modernisation and civilization, linked with the European colonial project (Popovici and Pop 2016); and a strong anti-Roma and anti-poor sentiment, also fuelled and reverberated by official authorities (Vincze and Zamfir 2019). As Veda Popovici (2020), another key thinker of these processes in the country, recently recalled, the current neoliberal plan for and of the city is therefore a diffused assemblage of racist, whitened and classist affections, structured around a number of practices of proprietorship cutting through the constitution of state bureaucracies (and therefore of the distribution of rights and resources).

Finally, a third marker of difference to situate this case within the current race-aware critical urban thinking is related to the history of Roma people in Romania. Research is lacking to provide any meaningful comparison between the slave trade/plantation/urban segregation/incarceration industry against black African Americans in the US, and the dynamics involving enslavement, marginalisation, and social control of the Roma in Europe and in Romania (Picker 2018). At the same time, and at a bare minimum, it is important to assert the specificity of the Romanian case when it comes to Roma people like Raluca. For space constraints, in what follows I will touch upon only three "baselines" structuring this history, but these instantiate on at least three previous ones: the enslavement of the Roma from 1500 to 1865 under the (mostly Ottoman) feudal rule of the country; the emergence of the "nation of Romania", when the Roma where largely discriminated, without formal rights, and still attached to forms of exploitation rooted in the feudalism logic; and the Fascist regime of Antonescu (1940 – 1944), when they were persecuted, systematically deported, enclosed in concentration camps, and killed at will. When the socialist regime came into power—as Beck (1989:59), a US anthropologist working in Romania in the 1980s, recalls—the idea that Roma were less than human was deeply rooted in the social imaginary:

> Prisoners of war were Gypsies. Gypsies were slaves. Slaves were degenerate or flawed. Once the notion that Gypsies were less than human was accepted, the possibility that they were anything else, most certainly not contributing members of their society, was not possible.

I will return to the specific contribution that "theorising dispossession from the post-socialist city" can bring to translocal debates in the conclusion. In what

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follows, starting from an ontological reading of dispossession and expanding on Romanian scholarship, I present three baselines, or "resolutions", of the couplet race/class in Ferentari. These can be understood as abstractions of that couplet at specific points in time, to resolve its emergent tension. The first baseline has to do with the socialist project of housing newly poor (of which many were Roma) working-class Bucureștean in Ferentari in the late-1960s. The second is connected with the "transition to capitalism", and the strategic absence of planning that opened up new spaces of liquid circulations in the neighbourhood in the 1990s. And the third involves today's full-blown racial capitalism, which includes racial banishment of the Roma poor from the city.

First Baseline: Ședința Comitetului Executiv al Comitetul Central al P.C.R. of 23 July 1968[8]

My starting point are the blocs where Raluca grew up and ended up dying. These blocs are inscribed in the particular urban form that Ferentari took since its inception, as an agricultural-cum-industrial empty land in the late 19th century. Up to the end of the Second World War, the neighbourhood was a mix of empty plots, various industries, and low-rise buildings constructed—as Dominic Teodorescu (2018) recalls—in the *mahala* countryside style. In some regards, it was the least urbanised area of Bucharest, and it remained this way up to the end of WWII. From that moment on, Bucharest's population increased steadily, essentially due to people moving from the impoverished countryside, looking for work and a better life in the city, but also related to the wider efforts on the part of the Ceaușescu's regime to "systematise" the country, through processes of forced urbanisation and industrialisation (Zahariade 2011). When the folks I am going to introduce had the meeting that I am going to report below, they were faced with a problem to be solved: Bucharest's population grew from around a million in 1944, to 1.4 million in 1966, and to 1.8 million in 1977.

To appreciate how the socialist plan for the city served as a baseline to reproduce racialised dispossession, one needs to look back into the archives where decisions have been stored and recorded. Among the many I have encountered, the meeting of the Comitetului Executiv al Comitetului Central al Partidul Comunist Român[9] that took place on 23 July 1968 particularly stands out. The meeting started at 5pm, chaired by Nicolae Ceaușescu.[10] First "ordinea de zi", the most important agenda item of the day, was "privire la noile tipuri de locuinţe construite în mediul urban din fondurile de stat centralizate", which means "to discuss the new urban dwellings to be constructed by the state", in order to accommodate the new workforce coming from the countryside (mentioned previously).

Up to that point, houses constructed by the state were organised into three main kinds of design, according to different levels of comfort: from I, the most comfortable, to III. The comfort was not only related to the space, but to the level of the finishes and provided services. In this meeting, Ceaușescu and his comrades are discussing a project advanced by the Comitetul de Stat Pentru Construţii, Arhitectură și Sistematizare,[11] which essentially was devised by Ceaușescu himself to find a way to construct more houses without altering the allocated

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budget. The solution found by the architects (one of which, Tovarășul Bădescu, is also part of the Comitetului Executiv) is to construct flats of a lower comfort, introducing de facto two new lower levels of comfort: level IV and the "garsoniere", or studio-flats, without kitchen and with a shared bathroom in the hallway (Figure 2).

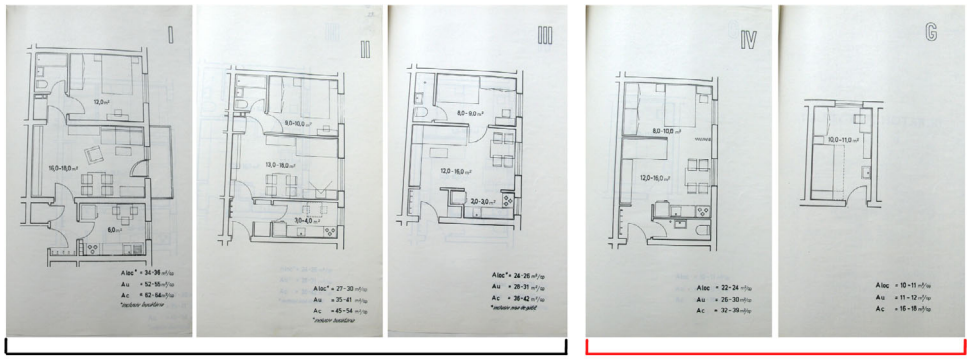

Figure 2: Level of comfort; collage of scanned documents attached to the minutes of the 23 July 1968 meeting (source: Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale—ANIC, Bucharest)

There are a number of important things in this meeting, some very amusing (for instance when Ceaușescu, to justify the changes in the level of comfort, says that there are hotels for people that can pay $2, some for people who can pay $10, and some for people who can pay $20, and the same should be applied to houses), but the most important things for the sake of this paper are as follows.

A) Ceaușescu explicitly says that these new flats need to be constructed in peripheral areas:

Nicolae Ceaușescu: În centru să facem locuințe de gradul 1 și 2, iar acestea pe care vrem să le grupăm în anumite cartiere să le facem în zonele mai periferice. [In the centre, we should build first and second grade housing, and those we want to group together in certain neighbourhoods should be built in more peripheral areas.]

Emil Bodnăraș: De gradul 3 și 4 vor fi în zone mărginașe. [Grade 3 and 4 will be in marginal areas.]

B) The group agrees that these new flats can be constructed in derogation to the usual planning scheme—more specifically, they can be without canalisation and with fewer connections to bigger streets:

Ceaușescu: ... Sîntem în iulie și avem timp ca din acest an să începem cu toate mijloacele locale aceste construcții, ca anul viitor să dăm un număr mai mare de apartamente în folosință. [... It is July and we have time from this year to start these constructions with all local means, so that next year we can allocate a larger number of apartments.]

Emil Bodnăraș: În cadrul planurilor de sistematizare existente. [Within the framework of the existing plans of systematisation.]

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> Nicolae Ceusescu: Să-și caute cartiere libere. Sistemul propus aici este cu străzi înguste, și numai strada care vine in cartier, restul să fie 4-5 metri, cu sens unic. [Let them look for free neighbourhoods. The system proposed here is with narrow streets, and with only one street that comes into the neighbourhood; the rest should be 4–5 metres, one-way.]
>
> C) Ceaușescu is adamant that the Party needs to stop building comfort I houses, which won't be allocated but sold to people who can afford them, usually in the city centre. The focus of state provisioning should switch to the lower-end of the spectrum:
>
> Ceaușescu: Nici pentru 1969 și 1970 nu vă mai dăm din categoria I. [For 1969 and 1970 we no longer give you category I.]
>
> Popa Dumitru: Trebuie pentru centru, pentru cei care cumpără. [We must (leave those) for the centre, for those who buy.]

This discussion will then become law, and for a few years in Bucharest, and other major Romanian cities, the state will purposely build houses for the new working class moving from the countryside, which is composed either of small poor family units (for which they build comfort IV flats) or the so-called *neifamislisti*, workers without families (which the *garsoniere* are for). A substantive part of the total housing output of that period is these kinds of blocs.

What these blocs did at the time was to provide much needed housing to the newly urbanised working class. But in doing so, the buildings played a role in structuring the "working class" itself, according to the overall economic structures of the time. As Chelcea (2012) recalls, "new class formation was given priority over social welfare considerations", not only by explicitly discriminating non-state employees in the allocation of flats, or in the level of rents to be paid, but also in segmenting state workers through the planning and distribution of flats. Those with higher expertise and status were receiving better comfort flats vis-a-vis those filling the ranks of unskilled jobs, many of which were in the relatively low-tech industries of the time (Vais 2020). Given that flats were directly assigned by factories, I have found documents in which the relationship between the kind of work tasks one performs and the kind of flat (comfort) one is entitled to is clear (a process common throughout the Eastern Bloc at that time; Gentile and Sjoberg 2013).

Crucially, this segmentation of the "working class" through the plan intersected with other forms of long-term discrimination, including those based on race. The newly urbanised Roma, often illiterate and poorly trained to work in the mechanised factories of the time, ended up for the most part in the lower-quality dwellings—especially in the cases in which these dwellings were the main things on offer (such as in Ferentari). Indeed, it was right on the edge of Ferentari (in Rahova) that one of these dwellings was first piloted and constructed, bending the planning rules of the time (Figure 3). At that point in time, the Socialist Republic of Romania was faced with the task of "resolving", to use Tadiar's words, the intersection of a newly booming industrial sector, of its population, and of the urbanisation needs of the latter. But at that juncture, the comfort IV flats and

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the *garsoniere* built throughout Ferentari in the late-1960s and early-1970s were planned without consideration for the long-term racialised lives of the Roma living in those spaces, a racialisation which was strategically ignored and subsumed into the class question.

The problem was of course bigger than Ferentari itself. As I have illustrated in another paper (Lancione 2018), the communist state did not have a clear policy on "gypsies" for many years (Merfea 1994). The approach taken by the authorities was to consider Roma "workers" like any others, including them in the working classes, even though they mostly undertook lower-skilled jobs. While this might initially appear inclusive, it actually both stemmed from and contributed to the inability and unwillingness of the authorities to tackle the "ethnic" question, which remained high during those years (Gábor et al. 2009). While the state improved living conditions for many Roma, the perception of them as an inferior social group remained unchallenged, having become ingrained thanks to the long history of violence, tracing back to their enslavement in the country. In this context, as Veda Popovici recalls, in Romania the "failure of socialism to address racialization laid the ground for capitalism's blunt exploitation of racialized histories" (in Florea et al. 2020:152).

Figure 3: The first "nefamiliști" bloc, piloted in Rahova, near Ferentari (from the Comitetului Municipal București al PCR periodical, *Informația Bucureștiului*, 13 September 1968; source: Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale—ANIC, Bucharest)

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Second Baseline: Sosireape Heroinei[12]

In order to be laid, the ground Popovici refers to required a series of passages having to do with property regimes, institutional governance, and geopolitical positioning. On top of these, in Ferentari, the transition from the socialist way of "resolving" race and class to contemporary racial capitalism passed through another major abstraction: a diffused plan, crafted at the intersection of a strategic institutional vacuum and of international organised crime, which allowed for the formation of the "destitution", "poverty", "illegality", and "addiction to drugs" that today's plans aim to "fix" (see the third baseline).

Aleea Livezilor was populated by the blocs we have just described: mostly *garsoniere* and comfort IV flats. Post-1989, some of these were vacated by their occupants, and some occupied by the incoming population of (mostly Roma) people leaving the impoverished countryside around the city. At that point in time, the country's borders became more porous too—it was a time of movements not only within the country, but also within the whole Eastern Bloc and throughout it too. International cartels trafficking opioids from Afghanistan and Pakistan in particular saw an immediate opportunity in these openings (UNODC 2014). Frontiers where poorly managed by low-paid civil servants of states including Bulgaria, Romania, and the whole of ex-Yugoslavia, whose status was no longer clear, sometimes even administratively so (the cases of Moldova and Transistria are exemplary in this sense, still to date).

The Balkan opioid route was hence opened, becoming a major international heroin trafficking route towards Europe (Maftei 2012; UNODC 2015). Once borders were opened, traffickers moved the goods by bribing officials and finding fertile ground in peripheral and transitional spaces such as Ferentari for new drug markets to flourish. Such locations were functional both to move drugs *and* to test new cuts along the way (as many of my informants, who saw the opening of these routes with their own eyes and veins, told me).

The opening of the Balkan route was met by the complete lack of expertise on behalf of the authorities and, later on, by open and blatant racism against people who served as a testbed and gateway for the "route" to work—the *săraci*, which means poor, but connotes racialised tones (in the case of Ferentari, Roma and their wretched lifestyle, as it is often referred to in the media, in the ghetto). The channelling of these substances through racialised bodies needs to be taken seriously. The "opening" of a route is the opening of relations, economic interests, and state border control, but also conditions of inhabitation, substances, and flows. Such a cartography is not "planned" in the conventional sense of the word. There is no meeting of the Partidului Comunist Roman here, and still, a cartography is designed, unrevealed in its assemblage, and brought to life. This is a cartography where bodies are allured, aligned, pinched, and hooked; bodies that after a while do not have any pleasure in injecting heroin, but pain, vomit, and withdrawal. It is a plan each one of these bodies tries to keep together through small tricks, dealings, and half-baked jobs, with no entitlement to the *garsoniera* it occupies, being constantly targeted as "other", and controlled, violently, when it passes the minimum allowed threshold of movement (Hartman 2018).

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It is through these stories, without a declared sense of direction but which allow for a circulation to happen, that a "route" is opened and an urban futurity, at first implicitly and then explicitly, is planned for. This is a plan where the flow is constantly interrupted—by withdrawal, lack of support, jail, precarity, and also collective shame and media denunciation of the "ghettos" of Bucharest in 21st century Europe—and yet, through those interruptions, its foundational dispossession is allowed to continue.

Figure 4: One of the blocs of Livezilor seen from Adrian's room (source: the author)

Figure 4 reports a shot taken in the house of Adrian, a 26-year-old Roma man, father of one, drug user, hustler… We are speaking in one of the *garsoniere*, the flats with lowest level of comfort, in Aleea Livezilor.[13]

Michele: Is this your room?

Adrian: Yeah, I rent here. The owner … I don't know him because he only comes to collect money and then he leaves.

M: How is life here? What are the conditions?

A: The conditions, you can imagine how bad they are, because we don't have basic utilities, and especially since I have a four-year-old child, these aren't favourable.

M: Do you have light and running water?

A: Yeah, we do but it's cold.

M: What do you take?

A: Heroin. Since I was 12 years old. But you see … [My problem] is not about money because since I'm a drug user you can imagine that I don't care that much about

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money in life. You can't think of anything else when you get into this situation, you don't care about anything. You don't care about not being a normal person.

M: Why?

A: Because you're sick, you feel bad. You're shivering and vomiting. It's an ugly life. It's a nightmare you can't wake up from.

M: And where do you shoot up, here?

A: Yeah. This is the problem, it would be better to have specialised spaces, for instance a centre, to pay more attention to what we're doing. I would no longer be forced to shoot up in front of my child, and this affects me a lot.

I have friends who visit me, sometimes I trick them, sometimes I visit mum and steal from her, anything that crosses my mind. You'd do anything when you're sick.

[…]

M: And so what do you think institutions should do for you?

A: Well, they should create a centre where we would be treated right, to have our own doctor to examine us so we won't get sick so often, to prevent us from getting sick. You've seen it already, there are all sort of diseases, AIDS, hepatitis, you don't even know. I have lots of friends who died. Since legal highs [mephedrone] appeared, I think that on my alley 15–20 people have died in the last two years.

M: 15–20.

A: I'm only talking about those from my alley.

M: How do you feel right now?

A: In my heart. How can I feel? You can imagine that I'm not feeling good because I have this boy and I don't have the luxury of keeping out of his sight to prevent him from seeing what I do, because at some point he sees those things and you know children these days are more curious, they are simply smart, and I don't want him to walk the same path as I did. That's it. If we had a centre where we could go, and not to be forced to do it at home, to prevent him from seeing those things, that would be okay.

The opening of the Balkan route, of the *piața de droguri* in Ferentari, are not forms of state-driven racial banishment; yet, through its absence and the de facto enabling of drug flows, in the early 1990s the state provided the affective, cultural, and material infrastructure connecting—like a hinge—a previous baseline to the next. In plain terms, the *piața de droguri* in Ferentari is racialised because it territorialises itself on racialised bodies, reproducing the proprietorship of the state on those bodies through dispossession by doing nothing to re-design what has come before, instead enforcing it further through fierce control of "deviance". But there is more. Beyond incarceration, as it is clear from Adrian's words, the state plan here is to let things be and let them flow, because it is convenient and easier to control "a" ghetto filled with poor, Roma, addicted bodies rather than having them roaming around the city. On a deeper level—on a level that

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transversally connects historic and spatial baselines—the apparent lack of plans in the 1990s is a plan in itself, a way of governing, of reproducing and accelerating the resolution of race and class through the "bloc". The consequence is felt and lived trauma for many, but not only: it is the re-affirmation of a dispossessive logic through time and space.

Forged on the baselines I have showed thus far, the same old story has continued in the last two or three decades too (O'Neill 2010). Bucharest has worked hard to clean itself up, being ready for "civilization", "modernity", "Europe"—common keywords in the local media—and now international investments and urban rebranding. In terms of the everyday racialised life, this has included the forced removal, by orders of the local mayor, of the only helpline for poor Roma drug users in Ferentari (Figure 5): the Caracuda centre that offered help to Raluca, and that was actively trying to become the first consumption room in Bucharest, as per Adrian's wishes. A place which clearly does not fit within the new resolution—the new plan for proprietorship—crafted by the local authorities and the city, to which I will now turn.

Third Baseline: Civilizație și Modernitate[14]

In 2019, the mayor of Sector 5 (where Ferentari is located) presented his plans for "the best investment opportunity in Romania"—the "Bucharest Centenary Project"—at the MIPIM (an international property event hosted in Cannes). In his view, this would be the "largest urban project developed in the last 30 years": 1.6 million m^2 built area, 10,000 dwellings, and 300,000 m^2 office space to be developed not very far from where Raluca used to live. This project (devised together with the World Bank) sits within a broader envisioning of the southern spaces of the city, which also includes an "Urban Regeneration Project" (RUF) for Ferentari, launched in 2017 with the French Embassy in Bucharest. For the most part, the latter is about what to do with the Roma poor and, especially, with "ghettos" like Livezilor. Those, the plan says, are what is currently impeding the full development of the neighbourhood and the city.

The key area of intervention, according to the Ferentari plan, has to do with viability and with the fact that most of the streets within the blocs are enclosed, and not connected with other axes of traffic (as seen, an effect of the socialist plan for these "marginal" areas). The recommendation is to "expropriate", demolish, and better connect those "underdeveloped" pockets with the rest of the city. Which blocs need to be demolished is left untold, but all the arrows point to the *garsoniere* built in the late-1960s by the Ceaușescu regime. These are arrows pointing not just in a figurative sense, but also topographically, as found in the illustrations presenting the plan to the media (Figure 6). On the map, green areas indicate major works on the socialist blocs, including "*expropiere*", expropriation. Blue arrows indicate the direction of traffic to be "rationalised". On the left, where the blue arrows meet the green areas, is where "expropriation" should meet "rationalisation": Aleea Livezilor, the "*ghetou*" where Raluca used to live.

The planned dispossession at the core of the RUF is one interested in resolving race and class in a particular way, to produce a baseline where contemporary

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Figure 5: Dispossession of Caracuda—the only harm reduction centre in Ferentari (source: Marian Ursan, head of Carusel, the NGO running Caracuda, March 2017; reproduced here with permission)

neoliberal urban formations can accrue and extend their reach in the underdeveloped and racialised periphery of Bucharest. As Dominic Teodorescu (2019:728) also reported while analysing the current plans for Ferentari, "the racialisation of Romanian Roma makes the realisation of neoliberal principles easier for local administrations, which use racial prejudice to justify the passivity of the local state towards an extremely pauperised population". A closer look at the RUF makes the

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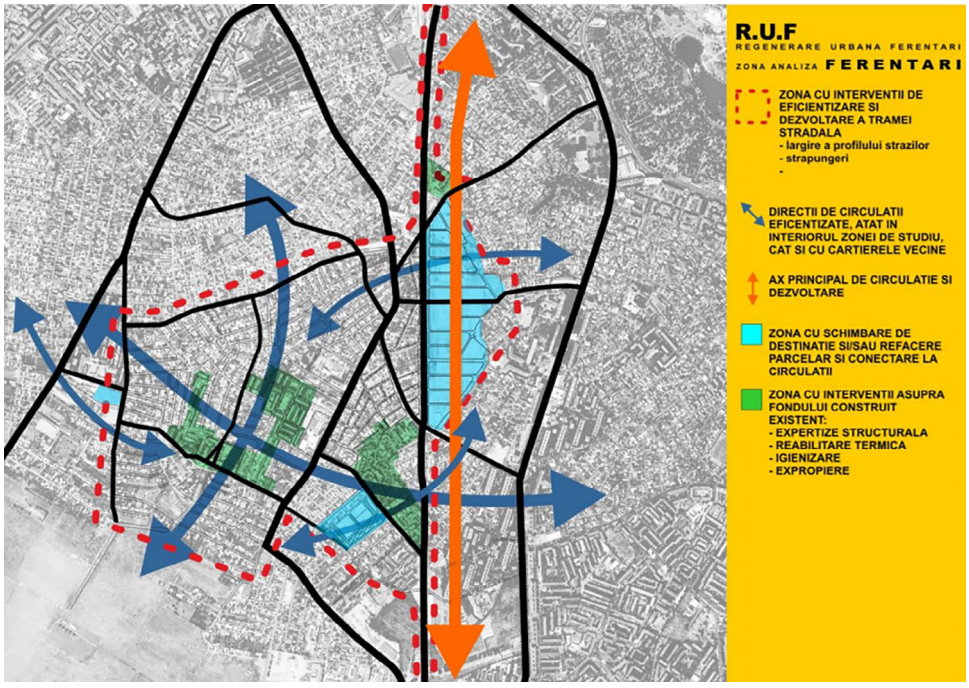

Figure 6: "Regenerare Urbana Ferentari", the Urban Regeneration Project for Ferentari (source: Primăria Sectorului 5 al Municipiului București 2017)

diagrams at play, and their connections with previous baselines of dispossession, clearer.

The plan asserts that reducing the poverty of Roma people is key for Romania to meet the European goals of poverty risk for its citizens.[15] After this opening statement, without mention of the long-term racialised logics at play in Ferentari, the RUF turns to listing how it has identified the "*zone cu disfuncționalități*", dysfunctional areas, where it plans to intervene. Parameters include a high concentration of people with a low level of human capital; with a low level of employment in formal economic sectors; with precarious housing conditions, which are real "hotbeds of infection"; lacking ID documents; illegality; and more. On the basis of this categorisation of deviance, the plan claims that its goals are to "1. Compensate for the uneven level of economic and urban development and 2. Capitalise on existing economic resources in heritage or on the territory of Sector 5". To this end:

> the present administration will promote the development of a *Science Park and Technological Park* that will capitalise on the fixed resources offered by the old industrial platforms on the territory of the Sector, a project that will represent an opportunity for the regeneration of the old industrial platforms and their surroundings … (Primăria Sectorului 5 al Municipiului București 2017)

The realisation of this plan will be carried out through the implementation of strategies grouped in three domains—social, economic, and ecological—through

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which matters of class and race are resolved and made manageable throughout. On the societal level, the plan states that the public spaces of the "*zonele ghetoizate*" will be transformed into "*zone de promenadă*", promenade areas, and that this and other adjustments will be achieved through the "demolition of the ghettoised blocs and of the unauthorised buildings". On an economic level, the plan focuses on reading the everyday economies of the Roma in Ferentari from a highly ethnicised point of view, promoting "arts and crafts" and the constitution of a "multicultural centre" where traditional Roma activities can be performed and showed. On the ecological level, green areas are promised, "sustainable transportation" is argued for, and "raising awareness and educating the population" on waste management is presented as a need, clearly echoing diffused, stigmatising understandings, of the "dirtiness" and "insalubrious" lifestyle of the urban poor in Bucharest.

At this point, the plan also says authorities will initiate "*construirea de noi locuințe sociale*", meaning, they will build new social housing. However, if one inserts this assertion into the longer histories of post-1989 housing privatisation in Romania (Rughinis 2004; Vincze 2017), the chances of its factual implementation appear slim. Not only: one also has to ask what interests the French Embassy, the World Bank, and the local administration have in building social housing when the other strategies devised in the plan clearly point in the direction of "whitening-up" and "classing-up" the neighbourhood: first, by framing "illegality" and other forms of social deviance as problems that can be fixed through technocratic solutions, such as with the proposal of a high-tech scientific park (surely not to host Roma scientists, given the Roma's access to tertiary education in the country); second, by insisting on the need to systematise and make public spaces green, in order to clean streets of drug users (hence the eviction of Caracuda), rather than advancing serious long-term harm reduction intervention; third, by demolishing the socialist blocs without providing *a clear plan of relocation* for the affected population that, given the lack of documents, given the high level of stigmatisation described in this paper, and given the lack of institutional/political trust, will likely be left to its own devices.

The Roma currently living in places like Aleea Livezilor, but also in the surrounding areas of Zăbrăuți and Iacob Andrei, will be displaced. This is not a matter of if, but when (indeed, consistent displacement in the area has already taken place). At that point, international agencies will advocate for the respect of European values. But the displacement of those poor Roma families does not sit outside those "values": it will just be the further instantiation of an ongoing set of racialised plans, unfolding through the long-term baselines of dispossession founding contemporary Bucharest.

Conclusions

This paper had two main objectives: first expanding, in a situated way, on the critical race-aware urban scholarship that has been produced, mostly in the US, in recent years; second, contributing, in conversation with key Romanian scholars, to a critical history and geography of dispossession affecting Roma people in

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Bucharest. In both, I have been moved by a decolonial sensibility toward urban research, which invites for careful dealings with frameworks developed in the centres of academic discourse and power, even when these are genuinely radical. The main ambition has been to work with concepts such as *planning*, *class segmentation*, and *racialisation* attentively but, at the same time, in non-dogmatic ways, bending them in order to maintain the critical edge of the *dispossession* grammar in its global translation.

In relation to the first contribution, one thing the post-socialist contexts can teach to current race-aware urban scholarship is a healthy scepticism of linear genealogies and metanarratives. This is something that the best race-aware urban theory embraces already, but the risk, in its global translation, is of losing the analytical capacity to account for situated histories and processes (reproducing erasure common in the history of urban studies; Oswin 2020). In the context of post-socialist cities, racialised dispossession works through continuity and major discontinuities. A critical approach to it requires, therefore, an expansive take on the state's power, class structuration, and racialisation. In Bucharest, dispossession is about racial capitalism, but not only and not always. It is about banishment, but not only and not always. It intersects industries of incarceration, housing markets, and global trafficking, but not only and not always. What the relationship between the available critical urban-race grammar and the post-socialist context brings to the fore is the need for expansive, transversal, and relational readings of how racial space and subjects are (re)produced. Indeed, as local scholarship has already shown, it is only questioning prevailing definitions of matter such as capitalist "spatial fix" or the Roma-ethnic "question" that Romanian thinkers can speak truth to local and global power (Chelcea 2006; Vincze 2017).

In this context, I have therefore proposed to look at *baselines of dispossession*, tracing how they relate one to another, instead of narrating a linear story across time and space. To do so, I have grounded my analysis within spatial planning, however reading it beyond its declarations, by looking at its capacity to activate wider—affective and material—cartographies of dispossession. The methodological question has been to trace how plans intersect, throughout history and forms of urbanity, to (re)produce the racialised other of today's Bucharest (or, more modestly, of today's Livezilor). Without a shadow of doubt, there are essential and excruciating differences between a plan designed to house people and a plan explicitly designed to demolish, displace, and construct not for people, but for profit. At the same time, however, there is also continuity across these very different spaces and times, which reside in the kind of *resolution* (through abstraction) of class and race that these plans bring to the fore in their unfolding. Enabling such continuity is not a secondary or unwanted effect. It is a nuanced enabling, yet of such a magnitude that neither the architects working with Ceaușescu on the new urban plans of their time, nor the agencies that disregarded the trafficking of substances and then repressed the users, nor today's acolytes extracting value from land-grabbing in Bucharest, could call themselves unaware of.

If the introduction of a transversal and pragmatically situated reading of dispossession can contribute, I hope, to trans-Atlantic reasoning, my second objective with this work sits squarely with Bucharest and its grassroots politics. The question is: who is

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now going to care—in a radical sense (Hobart and Kneese 2020)—for racialised dispossession in the city? Can this role be played by that same state that, through various iterations, has been instrumental in the maintenance of recursive practices of proprietorship across time and space, never resolving the transversality of systemic racism? If there is a futurity for the "otherness" through which the current whitened city is constituted, can that be within current state and EU diagrams? In the entanglement of the dispossessive racialised cartographies outlined in the paper, which intersect with many other forms of structural violence too, "[h]ow are we to struggle for the desire to exist and to be free, when this desire is not exactly 'ours'; in fact it can never be exclusively 'ours'?" (Butler and Athanasiou 2013:198).

If "our" desire is mediated by the collective plans we are unavoidably part of, the way forward is around the constitution of another way of planning, another way of homing, from the interstices of current makings (Lancione and Simone 2021; Purcell 2013; Roy et al. 2020). As Ananya Roy (2017) puts it, looking at the case of Chicago in the US, there is scope for the emergence of forms of dispossessed collectivism that fight the diagram of dispossession at its (individualising) core. In Bucharest, there is important work done in this sense by a number of groups, fighting for housing, for a radical take on Roma rights, and for a different way of understanding—and therefore planning for—inhabitation in the city. The work of collectives like e-Romnja (fighting from the grassroots to empower Roma women across systemic racism and patriarchy), or the Romania-wide housing anti-racist activist network "Bloc", are exemplary. Ultimately, theirs is a fight for a liberatory kind of home beyond dispossession. At times, this takes the form of collective action-protest and Roma self-organising. In other cases, as it is in Ferentari, resistance maintains an edge of becoming via a strategic mundane *oeuvre* of endurance, such as the words of Adrian evoked (see, for other mundane accounts of resistance in Ferentari, Pulay 2014). Carusel has adopted this option too: first accepting the closure of Caracuda, but then working incessantly for years in order to open another, bigger hub where intensive case-management can be brought to the fore, always in Ferentari.[16]

In all cases, these interstitial becomings can offer radical alternatives only insofar as they fight the wider ontologies dispossession is grounded in. In Bucharest, this means, as Popovici (2020:108) recalls, to interrupt "the aspirational paradigm of becoming a white middle-class West. Such struggles break with historical property regimes based on continuous racialized dispossession, setting a new threshold for political anti-racist struggles that go beyond the cultural". The task is enormous, because the foundations of racialised dispossession are engrained in modes of imagining and planning the city, across space, time, and embodied life. A situated liberatory effort will have to reckon with past continuities and break away from how those seem to have already diagrammed the future.

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research in the socialist archives; and the transcription and translation of interviews. My work in Bucharest would not have been possible without their friendship and help, as well as their own knowledge production.

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Endnotes

[1] One of the most common categories of "*etnobotanice*" drugs – being compounds derived from plants – found in Ferentari.

[2] Through my fieldwork, I was able to discover that the type of infection that probably killed her is common amongst users in Bucharest and is related to the poor-quality syringes offered by the national drug agency at the time. They are unsuitable for the type of injection that heroin use involves, and tend to break under the skin.

[3] At the time, Caracuda was the only harm-reduction centre in Ferentari. It was subsequently closed down at the direction of the local mayor.

[4] Concretely speaking, such an engagement has involved long periods spent in the Romanian capital (the longest of which included 18 months between 2014 and 2016, thanks to the support of the Urban Studies Foundation), when some of the observations, interviews, and the archival research underpinning this specific paper where undertaken; but also numerous subsequent visits (up to February 2020), extensive desk-bound research, and, most importantly, constant exchange and political work with some of my colleagues in the FCDL (a grassroots group fighting for housing justice in the city). Specifically, the work reported in this paper involved daily visits to Ferentari, extensive volunteering in Caracuda, working with the NGO running it (Carusel), 80+ hours of transcribed audio recorded interviews with people gravitating in and around Ferentari, and walk-alongs with the centre's clients, social providers, and city officials, as well as a number of other similar activities in spaces that are not directly reported here, but have informed my understanding of the city.

[5] See Verdery (2003) for a rich discussion of property regimes across pre- and post-socialist times in Transylvania, touching on some of these points.

[6] The broader question is the focus of a monograph in the (long-term) making.

[7] The colonisation and silencing are also related to scholarship. Mainstream "Romani scholarship" de facto de-politicises the everyday life and grassroots politics of groups of Roma that affirm their community identities through individual and collective fights such as the one for housing not immediately legible from, or reducible to, questions of ethnicity.

[8] "The Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Romanian Communist Party of 23 July 1968".

[9] "Executive Committee of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party".

[10] All the documents are taken from the Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale (ANIC), Bucharest (retrieved in 2015/16 in collaboration with Dr. Stoiculescu), from the collection of Fondul CC al PCR [the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party] Secția Cancelarie [the Chancellery Section].

[11] "State Committee for Construction, Architecture, and Systematisation". The latter is particularly important in the history of socialist Romania, since it was directly related to the will of the Party to "systematise", hence urbanise, the country.

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[12] "The Arrival of Heroin".
[13] Adrian is one of the dozens of individuals, self-defining as drug user, with whom I have undertaken observation and semi-structured interviews within the blocs of Ferentari in between 2014 and 2017. His words are representative of the concerns expressed by virtually all my informants.
[14] "Civilisation and Modernisation".
[15] The plan fully adheres to the European-modernisation-civilisation neocolonial grammar of many similar documents in the country. Moreover, similar plans can be found in a number of CEE cities, too.
[16] The Centrul Comunitar ILO-Ferentari, opened in May 2021 (https://carusel.org/2021/05/12/centrul-comunitar-ilo-ferentari/).

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