SEWERS VS. CENTERS: Politics of Choice and Localized Public Health in the Underground Community at the Gara de Nord-Bucharest

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SEWERS VS. CENTERS:
Politics of Choice and Localized Public Health
in the Underground Community at the Gara de Nord- Bucharest

Aran Valente

May 2020

A THESIS

Submitted to the faculty of Clark University, Worcester,
Massachusetts, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
The degree of Master of Health Science in the department of International Development,
Community, and Environment

And accepted on the recommendation of

Marianne H. Sarkis

Dr. Marianne Sarkis, Chief Instructor
ABSTRACT

SEWERS VS. CENTERS:

Politics of Choice and Localized Public Health

in the Underground Community at the Gara de Nord- Bucharest

Aran Valente

This thesis is based on ethnographic research conducted on a community of people living in the sewers below the Gara de Nord (Northern Train Station) in Romania’s capital city, Bucharest, between 2011 and 2014. The history of former Romanian president, Nicolae Ceaușescu’s policies on population growth and treatment of orphans provide an important background to my research. Before 1989, Ceaușescu’s pro-natalist policies produced thousands of children who were abandoned by their families and had to be housed by the state. They were forced into state orphanages where they faced abuse so horrendous that some fled into sewers. Their sewer community’s “underground law” supported former and current abandoned youth, spurring them to creative ways of reducing health risks. This thesis makes the case that autonomy, or, at least, an individual’s greater control over their person, health, and daily life, determine their decision to live in sewers instead of state centers.

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This thesis is dedicated to Cătălina
and the Gara de Nord Canal Community
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my professor, Dr. Marianne Sarkis, for her continued support and encouragement regarding the structuring and formatting of my thesis. This thesis would not have been possible were it not for her constant examples of community health ideas in relation to my thesis research. Her exemplary leadership in the Community and Global Health Department of Clark University’s International Development, Community, and Environment program has inspired many students, including myself, towards true community collaboration during health crises. I also wish to thank Dr. Jude Fernando for his support, critiques, and guidance on my thesis process. I would like to thank his family for opening their home to the graduate students in my program. Finally, I wish to thank Dr. Thomas Kuehne for his careful reading of my thesis and his very detailed and inspiring critique of my work which helped me expand my understanding of my research and the community which I was examining.
Please be advised that this thesis contains several graphic images of drug use and violence.
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Thesis Committee
Dr. Marianne Sarkis
Dr. Jude Fernando
Dr. Thomas Kuehne

SEWERS VS. CENTERS
Politics of Choice in the Underground Community
at the Gara de Nord – Bucharest

I ran into President Angell this morning on my way to our library. I asked him what his thoughts were on our school’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic?

“Sometimes,” he said, “the best thing to do is to leave your office and listen to what students have to say.” A wise response, in my view. Some of what I have written in my thesis involves listening closely to what people living in trying circumstances think, feel, and do when confronting a disease.

In the library, while reading through Dr. Sarkis’s edits, I took a moment to look out the side window of Clark University’s Goddard Library onto a nearly empty quad. I saw parents carrying duffle bags, rolling suitcases, and disassembling bureaus on the lawns of the undergraduate dormitories. They crammed a semester’s worth of supplies into their minivans, Purell sanitizer in hand, face masks at the ready. It is strange to write a thesis about a community of people attempting to prevent an epidemic a half-decade ago in the middle of a global epidemic happening now. At first, one might not expect the subject of my ethnographic research – homeless drug users living under a train station – as having much in common with families congregating at an institution like Clark. But during a health crisis, both American families and Romanian tunnel dwellers wince when they hear a sudden cough or sneeze. Both obsess over the best strategy to keep their home more sanitary and their children safe. This thesis is about tunnel dwellers who struggle to improve their health as they live through pandemics and epidemics in a country on the other side of the world, but it’s also a story about us as human beings and the lengths we’ll go to, whether for better or for ill, to preserve our happiness, our loved ones, and our lives.

I am grateful for the opportunity Clark has given me to see the connection between the classroom and real life in a crisis situation.

Sincerely,

Aran Valente
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Why would an eighteen-year-old girl “prefer” to die in a sewer? On 28 May 2014, eighteen-year-old Lenuța, who had been living in the sewers below Bucharest since she was fifteen, tragically died from what was officially diagnosed as cardiopulmonary arrest (Valente 2014; see also O’Brien 2014; Dukehart 2015). Sewers below Gara de Nord, the busy Northern Train Station in Romania’s capital, Bucharest, are home to a close-knit community of otherwise homeless people, where Lenuța once lived. Two days before she passed away, social workers attempted to get Lenuța to the hospital. According to Paraic O’Brien, a reporter for Channel 4, a British public-service broadcasting station, Lenuța told the social workers she “preferred to die in the sewers” (O’Brien 2014). O’Brien’s news segment ends with a shot of a pothole in the street, the entrance to Lenuța’s home and the question, “Why did a girl, just turned eighteen, just give up?” (O’Brien 2014)?

O’Brien asks the wrong question. Instead of asking why she “gave up,” his question should have been why she chose to live in the sewers and refused to go to the hospital. Had he asked, one of her answers might have been that living in a state-run orphanage was lonely, isolating, and terrifying. Before her death, I interviewed Lenuța who condemned the Romanian orphanage system as worse than the sewers. She demanded to know why it was considered “fine” to live in state institutions, rather than in the sewers or streets, when she knew that in all three she faced “tough conditions” (personal interview, Lenuța 2013). Further, she wondered why the orphanage was compared only to life in the sewers and not to a desirable situation—a human living situation (personal interview, Lenuța 2013). In the sewers, she found community who worked together to better their health and had a social structure that was enforced by their leader, “Bruce Lee” (so-called because of his admiration of the movie character).

Lenuța was not naïve to the hardships suffered under state control. Rather than dwell on where she chose to die below ground, O’Brien should have asked about policies that inhibited her acceptance by society aboveground. Lenuța’s story should force us to
consider what policies and what socio-economic and environmental factors could, as some implied, trap a young girl in a sewer for years before she even reached adulthood?

Figure III. Lenuța in the Gara de Nord Canal in 2013

Lenuța’s story is what led me to conduct this research on the Gara de Nord sewer community. From June 2011 to September 2014, I visited and conducted in-depth interviews with the community of people who lived in the *subteran* – underground – sewer at the Gara de Nord in Bucharest. In this thesis, the term “sewer” will be used interchangeably with the term “canal.” Sewer community members used the term “canal” to describe their living space although most news stations referred to the tunnels as “sewers” (personal interview, Andrei 2014; personal interview, Bruce Lee 2013; personal interview, Florica, Lavinia, and Vlad 2014; personal interview, Daniel 2014; personal
In this paper, the terms “canal” and “sewers” will be used interchangeably. There were several other canal communities in Bucharest, but I chose to focus on the community at Gara de Nord because it was, at that time, the most researched and structured community. Also, canal members were insistent about its principles of autonomy. Gara de Nord Canal Community\textsuperscript{1} members were not afraid to announce to myself and other news crews that they were working hard to build their community, that they were a family, and that they tried to share as much as possible (personal interview, Andrei 2014; personal interview, Mălina 2014; personal interview, Bruce Lee 2014). In the wake of Lenuța’s death, researchers and media presented the lives of Bucharest’s sewer community either as romanticized narratives of survival or as stories of hopeless suffering. When related in their own words, however, the lives of the people living in the sewers do not match either of those representations.

This group describes the nuance surrounding their own health status as both a product of state policy and an antithesis to what was provided within the state’s current structure. There are some ways in which the Gara de Nord sewer community also functioned within the economy of menial and illicit activities. The sewer community, despite facing seemingly insurmountable adversity, learned how to make their circumstances manageable, to some degree, and their lives meaningful. From their perspective, there was a purpose to their existence, and this was grounded in their own sense of community and shared history. This thesis is an attempt to explain the pragmatic, health, and political reasons behind why Lenuța, Bruce Lee, and others chose to live in sewers instead of the centers provided by the government.

Chapter 2 will describe the social hierarchies, rules, and relationships within the Gara de Nord Canal Community. The chapter will also describe their relationship with some other canal communities and groups living around the Gara de Nord in Bucharest. The chapter outlines the physical environment of the sewers. From there, social hierarchies of the canal’s drug and sex trades in the context of position, gender, and race

\textsuperscript{1} The Gara de Nord Canal Community members also humorously referred to themselves as “Sector 7”. There are officially 6 sectors in Bucharest, so they joke is they are the unofficial underground “7\textsuperscript{th} Sector.”
will be shown. The chapter will also show nuance within the rules, practices, and struggles of the Gara de Nord Canal Community. This section will analyze ways in which exploitative relationships in the Gara de Nord Canal Community overlapped with relationships of advocacy, protecting vulnerable groups from further exploitation aboveground. This chapter describes the social hierarchy within the canal community as a reference point for their relationships with groups outside their Gara de Nord community.

Chapter 3 will describe the methodology that was used in the course of conducting ethnographic research on the community in the Gara de Nord Canal. The first part of the methodology will describe how the author initially learned of orphans living around a train stop through documentaries, a secondary project at a family center for Peace Corps Romania, and finally meeting a connection to the canal in Bucharest. The next section will describe how the author built a rapport with people around the Gara de Nord through informal conversation before entering the subterran – underground – tunnels of the canal. The author then discusses taking field notes, photographs, and eventually video interviews of people living in the Gara de Nord Canal, choosing to conduct ethnographic field research through participant observation. After that, a section describes different stages of participant observation that the author experienced as well as an example of semi-structured interview questions. Then, the section describes the furthering of the author’s relationship with the community. The author explains some of the challenges that they faced during the interviews such as interviewees not responding to all questions because of pressure from the community’s leadership. Finally, the last section discusses the author working with the Institutional Review Board at Clark University to come up with a format for how the thesis would be written as well as having a group of people sign consent forms and give tacit consent in the Gara de Nord Canal.

Chapter 4 reviews media and literature, introducing the subterranean underworld as a violent metaphor for fear of the unexplained, stigmatization of the “other”, and intimate aspects of our lives that we do not want others to see. The idea of sewer tunnels as “othering” is first introduced through films about the European holocaust before broadening to films about underground healthcare during modern warfare and homelessness in the United States and Romania. Though locations vary around the world,
tunnel dwelling is often not initially a matter of choice but a reaction to systemic violence, often in the name of “development,” happening aboveground. In Mongolia, Ethiopia, USA, Latina America, and Eastern Europe, children living in tunnels under the streets face police brutality and other perils from the world above while attempting to create their own families and raise children in their world below. Despite many of these underground tunnel dwelling communities having complex social structures, news channels, academic articles, documentaries, and other media outlets often polarize their struggle as romanticized narratives or hopeless victims.

Chapter 5 will describe how the policies of Nicolae Ceaușescu, the authoritarian Romanian president who governed from 1965 to 1989, affected the patterns of homelessness in Bucharest. Against this background, it will describe some of the pragmatic and political reasons why abandoned youth affected the patterns of homelessness in Bucharest. Abandoned youth will be defined as children that were either deserted or neglected by their guardians while at home (Stativă, et al. 2005, 8). The term “abandoned youth” will also include children who voluntarily left their family and attended state institutions on their own volition. During those years, a generation of “abandoned youth” took to the street, many of whom still live and make a living in them, including at Gara de Nord.

This analysis will examine what choices sewer community members made, and in what context, to exercise agency and a measure of personal autonomy. There will be three main arguments of this thesis surrounding three ideas involving autonomy, security, and access: First, people in the Gara de Nord Canal Community do have certain choices but severely controlling leadership by Ceaușescu, state center abuse, suppression by police, lapses in grant funding, and other types of subjugation prevented them from pursuing a free and democratic existence. Second, abandoned youth used the collective independence they had gained in the canal community to make healthier choices than state control permitted. Third, the Gara de Nord Canal Community’s rules created a system people used to find creative solutions to reduce health risks and to improve their health system in some unusual ways, providing a case study that could prove useful to future public health
research. The chapter explains why some abandoned youth prefer sewers over state centers, both during Romania’s Communist-era and currently.

Chapter 6 begins with a story about a revolution over Romanian state healthcare scandals stemming from hazardous sanitary conditions at the same hospitals that Gara de Nord Canal members attended. From there, the chapter outlines how physical abuse, neglect, and malnourishment affected the height, weight, and other physical health traits of orphans, forcing them to flee to the sewers. Though structural reforms to the child welfare system reduced some of the more extreme forms of neglect and health conditions, some abuses continued to occur. Other aspects of healthcare, such as stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS and the release of sensitive medical documents about anti-retro viral (ARV) medication recipients affected health in the canal. Some Gara de Nord Canal members attempted to mitigate health risks by continuing to cook nutritional meals, practice hygiene, drink clean water, maintain sanitary conditions, and dispose of syringes. The effects that Ceaușescu’s orphanages had on the mental health and sense of autonomy furthered their drive to form a community of interdependence under the streets of Bucharest.

Chapter 7 talks about some international organizations’ attempts to alleviate the spread of the burden of disease in the Gara de Nord community’s drug users. However, these interventions often bring problems of their own due to lapses in the distribution of supplies. In Romania, the lapse in syringe exchange actually exacerbated a health crisis. The Gara de Nord drug users’ health issues in relation to international syringe exchange funding is also reflected in local communities across the world. The chapter will then focus on how the policies of the World Bank and The Global Fund coincided with state-based policies that deemed new psychoactive drugs (NPDs) illegal. Specifically, The Global Fund’s criteria for withdrawal of funds for syringe exchange without a clear plan of transition for incorporating syringe exchange into government programs will be analyzed concerning an epidemic of HIV/AIDS among people who inject drugs (PWIDs) after funding ended. Romania’s becoming “developed” will be discussed with the World Bank’s policies that likewise ended international syringe exchange. Gaps in funding for syringes increased the desperation of PWIDs who became more aggressive at the same
moment that legislative changes further criminalized their community. In response, some Gara de Nord Canal members preferred syringes on the black market to free syringes from international organizations. Efforts to reduce health risks such as sweeping up syringes had little effect on police raids and efforts towards health, such as providing light underground for safe injections, were also criminalized by police.

Chapter 8 will describe events that led up to the dissolution of the Gara de Nord Canal Community. The community dissolved for several reasons. Chief among them was the arrest of Bruce Lee and several other community members by police. Fear of going to hospitals, unsanitary state healthcare conditions, the withdrawal of international syringe exchange and subsequent use of the black market for needles, social workers distancing from clients, state center abuse, and the overall stigmas associated with the Gara de Nord Canal members left them socio-economically isolated. When the clean needle program funding ended, the community became increasingly desperate. Nevertheless, they held fast to principles of cooperation, hard work to provide for their “family,” and an autonomous existence where they pursued strategies to lead healthier lives. Though their leader often enforced his rules through abusive methods, the community still had some control over how they managed that abuse. However, after the arrest of Bruce Lee on drug-trafficking charges, people competed for his position by terrorizing the Gara de Nord Canal members through rape, violence, and robbery. This caused the community to disband, its members scattering aboveground to the streets of Bucharest where they faced more hazards and dangers than before.

The thesis concludes with a reflection on how the idea of the “outlaw” in society was socially constructed within the legal shortcomings of society. The sophisticated social structure of the Gara de Nord Canal Community gave it space below ground to pursue alternate forms of governance even within an oppressive system. Autonomy to explore and take ownership of relationships, livelihoods, and health practices was a consideration made by abandoned youth when choosing canals over state centers. The desire for autonomy is discussed as a core value that former Gara de Nord Canal members living under global capitalism, unfortunately, can no longer pursue.
Throughout the rest of this thesis, several narratives articulated by canal community members focus on their interests in autonomy from the state are contextualized and discussed. These often-addressed issues were noticed by social service workers and myself. Furthermore, the claims were supported by empirical evidence. For instance, canal community members would report that they had attempted to obstruct a police raid with a physical barrier, social workers would confirm that some of their clients had reported on this practice, and television news stations would show the obstruction in the course of filming the police raid. Based on this evidence, the paper argues state interference was defended against on principle and, in extreme circumstances, by physical barriers. Not all narratives were always completely accurate. For instance, the Gara de Nord Canal Community emphasized their camaraderie as a reason to be in the canals, although for those members who inject drugs (PWIDs), the closeness was arguably more a function of having a chemical addiction in common than a real relationship. Nevertheless, even if not all the relationships were as genial as they claimed, the community’s drive to organize is impressive. I wanted to show not only what the Gara de Nord Canal Community had already accomplished, but its motivation for organizing against state-based decisions and their vision for a better future.

The decision of a young girl, Lenuța, to prefer death in a sewer community over life in a state center was presented by reporter Paraic O’Brien as proof of her status as a victim, ignoring why she made the decision in the first place. Some community members were concerned about their drug boss and Lenuța’s former romantic partner, Bruce Lee, facing possible imprisonment. These sympathies will be contextualized as part of a larger political and health history. The author will argue that the community’s pursuit of semi-autonomy and adequate health conditions led to the creation of their own community, one that brought meaning to their existence. Subsequent chapters examine the Gara de Nord sewer community’s internal relationship among its own members and through its relationship with state and non-state actors. The community’s principle of building a way of life that was not aligned with state institutions grounded their own sense of social order both within and outside the confines of their own periphery.
Governmental policies that were enforced by police further criminalized the Gara de Nord, Lenuța, and other sewer community members. The day after she died, some members of the Gara de Nord Sewer Community were circulating a rumor amongst community members that Lenuța’s death was the result of an injection of synthetic drugs\(^2\) which, combined with physical weakness from AIDS, resulted in a cardio-pulmonary arrest. Some sewer community members were worried that if this story were verified it would mean their leader and Lenuța’s ex-boyfriend, “Bruce Lee\(^3\),” might go to prison. Their concern for the leader of the sewer community at the Gara de Nord, a drug dealer, cannot be understood unless the politics of sewer communities are explained. The author’s in-person ethnographic research with the Gara de Nord Sewer Community provides some explanation as to why the community depended on Bruce’s form of leadership.

\(^2\) Synthetic injectable drugs originally arrived in Romania as ethnobotanical drugs, made from dried and flavored plants: Salvia divinorum, Mitragina speciosa, Amanita muscaria, etc. They were sold to Romania from China, England, and Germany starting in 2008 (Maftei 2012, pp. 200-201).

\(^3\) “Bruce Lee” was the alias of the sewer community’s leader, Florin Cora, who chose the name because of Martial Arts films, illegally imported from the West during Romania’s communist era.

“I don’t want you to see only the ugly things we have here. We are like a family here. Like a society. Yes, we live under the earth, but we have our conditions that we make on our own money. Everything is from our work, from what we realize.”

— Bruce Lee introducing the canals in an interview, 2013

“I forgot to tell you that he have the syndrome of the savior.”

— Alin describing Bruce Lee, 2012

“When a man's his own enemy, it's only because he's too much his own friend.”

— The character, Fagin, from Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*, 1839

*Figure IV. A look through the pothole at the Gara de Nord Canal Community*
“...there is nothing else like this,” Dragoș, a Gara de Nord Canal Community member remarked about his home beneath the streets of Bucharest (personal interview, Dragoș 2014). Indeed, the Gara de Nord Canal Community was unique because its location and social structure had developed in some unusual ways. After listening to my recounting of the Gara de Nord canal’s social structure, Will Hunt, author of the 2019 book, *Underground: A Human History of the World Beneath Our Feet*, remarked that in some ways, it sounded more complex than the Freedom Tunnel homeless community in New York City that was featured in Marc Singer’s 2000 documentary, *Dark Days* (personal interview, Hunt 2018). Unfortunately, popular media over-simplifies the complexities of the Gara de Nord Canal Community’s social structure.

The polarized narrative of sewer community members can be shown through televised news depictions: In his initial report, British Broadcasting Station Channel 4’s reporter Paraic O’Brien records the suffering of sewer community members and a sewer community volunteer as reluctantly accepting Bruce Lee’s role as a protector of children (O’Brien 20 May 2014). In their segment, *Children in the Bucharest Sewers*, the public-service broadcasting organization of Belgium, *RTBF*, portrays Bruce Lee as a protector and the sewer community members as hopeless victims (RTBF 11 November 2014). After canal members explained that canals are their home and the community a “family,” American Broadcasting Company (ABC) News’s Nightline Edition’s reporter Bob Woodruff concludes that sewer children have “no prospects and no home (Woodruff 29 November 2014).”

There are multiple ways to view social hierarchy in any society, and the Gara de Nord Canal is no exception. This section will focus on three ways that social hierarchy within the Gara de Nord canal Community was constructed: by position, by gender, and by race. This section will begin with a brief description of the Gara de Nord Canal Community itself:

**Gara de Nord Canal Community description, conditions, and numbers**

Canal tunnels extended from one entrance through a pothole in the center of a busy traffic intersection of – *Piața Gării de Nord* – North Railway Station Square- boulevard next to the *Gara de Nord* – Northern Train Station – in Romania’s capital, Bucharest. The
tunnel continued in one direction toward an Elm Tree and statue of Gheorghe Duca, a **Căile Ferate Române** (CFR) – Romanian Railways – railway staff member, next to the **Policlinica CFR Gara de Nord** – CFR Northern Train Station Clinic – on an island in the middle of the boulevard where it turned 45 degrees to the right. On its opposite end, under the four-lane boulevard, the tunnel also turned 45 degrees to the left to form a Z-shape. The Z-shape would eventually become an L-shape when, in the aftermath of a police raid, the state had tractors and bulldozers crush part of the tunnels in 2013. This government project destroyed the wing of the sewers where the people slept on beds in darkness. After the demolition was completed people had to crowd into the remaining wing of the Canal and sleep under fluorescent lights which affected their sleep schedule and sense of time.

![Figure V. Map of the Gara de Nord Community. Data source: https://www.google.com/maps/@44.4197345,26.0897148,12891m/data=!3m1!1e3](image)

Back in 2012, a wooden ladder could be used to access the sewer tunnels through the pothole. The police removed the wooden ladder and installed a more accessible metal ladder. After climbing down the ladder through the darkness of a pothole, one of the first
signs of human presence was that the air smelled of body odor, urine, paint thinner, and occasionally animal feces (personal observation, Aran Valente 2012; Paraic O’Brien 2014). But there were other aromas in the Gara de Nord Canal as well: the scent of coffee and eggs in the evening, of French fries for dinner, of roast chicken, vegetable stew, and chocolate bars at Christmas time. Living in a canal could have negative effects on one’s mental health and canal community members worked to make their new home as comfortable to live in as possible. The canal tunnel’s ceiling was almost six feet high in some sections and four feet high or less in other sections with a width of approximately five or six feet. On either side of the canal tunnel were two hot water pipes, each about two feet in diameter, a narrow corridor with a dirt floor running through its middle. The inside of the canals was hot and steamy, like a sauna, enough to fog a camera lens. The corridor between the two hot water pipes was wide enough for only one person to walk through at a time. People had to squeeze past each other or hop up on the pipes to give each other room when moving through the corridor. In such close quarters, canal community members had to remain calm, patient, and cooperative. In the springtime, the corridor’s dirt floor would flood, and people would place stones, wooden blocks, and bricks to hop across because they could no longer see uncapped syringes that had sunk under the mud.

The concrete walls of the Gara de Nord Canal tunnels were adorned with a menagerie of items found in the trash bins around the Gara de Nord: a framed painting of a couple riding a horse-drawn sleigh through a wintry countryside, flashing Christmas lights as snow flurries howled through the pothole from outside, porcelain figurines of children and puppies next to the canal community leader’s Arsenal of guns, knives, and explosive gas canisters. The leaders’ reasons for having these weapons in the canals will be explained in later sections of this thesis. Sometimes the items varied depending on the time of year such as a toothy, smiling, glowing pumpkin face in mid-autumn accompanied by an American flag, perhaps to flatter this researcher, or show which country had Jack-o-lanterns in late October. This “art” was viewed by the many people who frequented the canals. Canal community members gave multiple estimates of the number of people living in their community. 24-year-old canal community member, Mădălina Viorica Ștefania,
approximated “30-something people” living in the canals (personal interview, Mădălina Viorica Ștefania 2014). Dragoș, one of the members living in the canals, said there were “fifty” people living in the tunnels (personal interview, Dragoș 2014). However, of this population, only a fraction permanently lived in the canal.

A canal community member estimated that there were “twelve” or “thirty or forty” people who were living in the canals permanently with a “maximum [of] fifty” people (personal interview, anonymous source 2014). There was a wide range of estimates because different numbers of people stayed in the canals at different times during the day. Generally, after work ended aboveground at 5:00 p.m., dealers would receive the most
customers with numbers dwindling by 11:00 p.m. The population of people living in the canals was at its peak in the winter and sparse during the summer. Many of its residents would leave for the Romanian Black Sea Coastline of Constanța, a four-hour-drive from Bucharest, to conduct income-generating activities during tourist season. Some women preferred to stay around the Gara de Nord even in the summer. They felt safer in Bucharest where they knew their community. Women were estimated by the canal community members as only a handful of individuals.

Canal community members had a hard time recalling the period they and others spent in the canals, partly because it was hard to keep track of the time underground where there was no sunlight during the day or darkness at night unless Bruce Lee shut off the lights in the bedroom area, usually after midnight (personal interview, Ioan 2014). Some members also had a hard time recalling how much time they spent in the canals if they did not sleep there every night. Mădălina Viorica Ștefania, for example, said she had a hard time recalling how many people were in the sewers because she lived infrequently in the Gara de Nord Canal, “We used to stay together in the underground for a few weeks and after that, I used to leave. I was coming back for a few days and after that, I was leaving again. That’s why I don’t know since [when] and why they are here (personal interview, Mădălina Viorica Ștefania 2014).” The numbers of women and people in general, as well as time spent in the sewers, were also affected by the relationships sewer community members held in their social hierarchy. This idea will be elaborated upon and the social hierarchy of the sewers further described in the next section. The section will be introduced with an origin story told from a social worker who began his life in the sewers with Bruce Lee.

David’s Story:
In January of 2013, as snow howled through the canal’s pothole entrance, a social worker who grew up in the Gara de Nord Canal, David, said in the past the elders had what the younger generation now do not have. When I ask what that is, he yelled, “Balls!”

He went on to explain that in the times of Ceaușescu there were no lights in the underground tunnels, but it was better. He was born in this same underground sewer drain
and said his life, love, and dreams are aboveground, but his memories are of the subteran. He solemnly held a bottle of whiskey to his chest as he said this, nursing his drink, as another Gara de Nord Canal member, Cristian, counted some of the cash from a long evening of drug dealing.

There were six of them down there originally, David continued: David, Bruce Lee (Stefan Horia), and four others. He said he became in the middle-income bracket along with Cristian, working for an NGO, two of the men are now in Parliament, and the last two are thieves who steal from the rich and give to the poor. And then there’s Bruce, of course. He said he is nostalgic about that time because they were people living underground and there were no lights, but they were all still expected to go to school and get educated.

The origin story changed depending on who told it. In one version, two hundred police attacked and massacred the Gara de Nord Canal, until only six remained. No matter the context, however, two joined the state, two became international jewel thieves who robbed the aboveground for those beneath it, one became a healer (or social worker), and one became Bruce Lee. One metaphor that could be drawn from this is that the six people had different approaches to defeating state brutality. Two joined the state, hoping to defeat its corruption from within, two robbed the aboveground, hoping to defeat the people of the state from without, one hoped to change the sewers through healing, and one hope to change them through his style of rule. This next section describes Bruce’s style of rule concerning hierarchies.

Social Hierarchy

Gara de Nord Canal members made choices that changed their physical environment and social structure, including social hierarchy. Therefore, it’s important to note that this social hierarchy was not fixed (DeAngelis 2015). On the contrary, it was dynamic and ever-fluctuating depending on how relationships in the sewers developed. This section will first list the social hierarchies as they existed in the Gara de Nord sewer community between 2011 and 2014. The end of the section will also describe relationships the Gara de Nord Canal Community had with the larger Gara de Nord criminalized community and other canal communities in the larger Bucharest area. The analysis will largely focus on
the psychoactive drug trade and the sex trade. Examples will also be given of instances when these social hierarchies were challenged and questioned by sewer community members from both the bottom-up as well as the top-down.

Figure VII. The boss, “Bruce Lee,” shows the size of the Gara de Nord Canal.

“I represent the law and order and protection,” a former Gara de Nord community member translated Bruce Lee — bossul — the boss, as he described the importance of his position in the sewer community. In addition to ruling over Gara de Canal community members, the underground boss believed he communicated with a higher power. The boss felt he was called to his role through divine intervention and answered to someone above him. A former Gara de Nord Canal member translated Bruce’s thoughts on his piety, “I do everything in the name of God. Nothing in my name . . . Jesus Christ, he give his life for us, the poor. For us to live through him. Everything I have, life, money, it belong to Jesus (personal translation interview, Bruce Lee 2012).” As an example of his piety, Bruce had a
picture of The Last Supper hanging outside a corridor of the sewers that led to his private bedroom. Twenty-four-year-old Gara de Nord Canal Community member, Mădălina Viorica Ștefania, remarked of Bruce Lee, “... he is our father (personal interview, Mădălina Viorica Ștefania 2014).”

“I don’t believe in law or [the] president,” Bruce Lee once remarked, but there were strict rules in the Gara de Nord Canal: “don’t fight one another, don’t steal, try to be as a family,” and “nobody can sexually abuse a girl” (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2012). The other sewer community members likewise followed these rules to strive for familial unity so that they too could better endure the hardships of state neglect, police abuse, and drug addiction (Lancione 2019, 13). In addition, Bruce Lee demonstrated that agreeing to operate within a system of dealing criminalized drugs in exchange for items found in the trash (Lancione 2019, 10) i.e. “clean money” to afford options explained above, made people become “like brothers (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2012, 2013).” However, Bruce Lee often ended the familial sentiments with harsh authoritarian violence. Nevertheless, organized drug dealing, in this case, reduced street crime as the desire for “sanctuary” by Bruce’s followers meant they had to follow the rules of trash-collecting rather than petty theft, which could easily become violent (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2013). The sewer community decision to unite around a common struggle of remaining independent from abusive state institutions was more important than quick economic gains through illicit means.

While some of Bruce’s rules may sound ordinary, it’s important to remember that some of the people navigating these systems suffered from addiction, were trauma survivors, and experienced institutionalized neglect and abuse at a very early age. While this certainly does not excuse illicit activities, their ability to adapt, cooperate, and work long hours in pursuit of a shared vision for more independence, health, and security is nothing short of impressive.

Mădălina Viorica Ștefania said that after Bruce Lee left prison, she joined him in the Gara de Nord Canal Community because, “He raised me since I was little, he was taking care of me, and we were living in an abandoned school building (personal interview, Mădălina Viorica Ștefania 2014).” Bruce Lee maintained his position as a boss because of
relationships he had developed with followers even before he came to rule over the sewer community. However, his relationships alone did not afford him the power he had acquired. Bruce Lee oversaw business transactions, illicit or otherwise. He also controlled who entered and exited the sewers. For example, before sewer community members allowed reporters, anthropologists, social activists, or other people who were not members of their community, to enter the sewers they first had to notify Bruce. In this way, Bruce Lee acted as gatekeeper to the aboveground for the canal community. In addition to new visitors entering the sewers, Bruce was notified about how much copper and bronze were stripped for the recycling services, the types of trash that were collected, and the relationships that people held with each other. But how had Bruce Lee garnered so much power in the first place? The answer to this question lies within how the social hierarchy of the sewers was organized and will first be explained by focusing on the NPD trade.

Guests, whether customers, journalists, or researchers, were treated with respect and offered what food and drink the Gara de Nord Canal Community could afford. Bruce was cautious about strangers coming into his canal community. Another rule was that if a stranger asked a Gara de Nord Canal Community member for entrance into the sewers, they first had to run it by Bruce. Bruce made himself available to newcomers out of politeness and also to gauge their personality to see if they posed a threat to him or their community. However, Bruce’s evaluation of newcomers could be contested by the arguments of other members. For example, after initially entering the sewers, some members argued that my research on their community should end. Their community was a criminalized drug den and the presence of someone from aboveground taking notes in the middle of a drug transaction posed a legal threat to their business. A Gara de Nord Canal Community member, Talaitha, later explained that she advocated on my behalf to Bruce, who eventually conceded and allowed me to continue researching their group in the canal. One advantage of autonomy was that homeless people could contest the rules of the establishment. In an orphanage or state center, someone who was deemed a threat to the institution could not be advocated for by homeless people. In February of 2012, spokesman for the Local Police of Bucharest Razvan Popa said authorities forcibly removed 300 homeless people from the streets of Bucharest and drove them to social
centers. However, he explained that the Gara de Nord Canal Community members “categorically and insistently” refused to be taken to the shelters even in -20 degrees Celsius weather (Badea 2012). The Gara de Nord canal Community members’ decision to engage in at least some aspects of the decision-making process shows that parts of democratic rule-making practices were developing in the canal that could not have existed in state centers.

**Social hierarchies of the drug trade**

A wing of the Gara de Nord Canal was a drug den where NPDs were exchanged for cash. Bruce Lee played an important role in the NPD trade, which forms an important facet of this research. The psychoactive drugs are classified as “new” for legal clarification. Some Gara de Nord Canal members and social service workers explained that in the past, there had been other psychoactive drugs that had arrived in Romania and were criminalized by Romanian governmental legislation (Ministry of Administration and Interior, et al. 2013, 7-13; Botescu 2012, 15; UNODC 2016, 7). However, the law was too narrow in describing the drugs’ chemical compounds that marked them as illicit. Suppliers changed the chemical compounds of the drug, effectively making them legal once again. The legislation took a couple of years to criminalize the “new” legal drugs, postponing an end to the NPD trade (Ministry of Administration and Interior, et al. 2013, 7-13; Botescu 2012, 15; UNODC 2016, 7).

NPDs were not the only drugs that were used in the sewers. There was also *aurolac* — paint thinner — that was huffed from bags. However, *aurolac* had already saturated the market and was not very profitable in comparison to the psychoactive drugs.
According to police, in addition to new psychoactive substances and *aurolac*, the sewer community trafficked heroin. Sizable amounts of heroin were never observed by the researcher to have been exchanged and some social service outreach syringe-exchange program coordinators and workers questioned the validity of the police claims. This idea will be elaborated upon later in this thesis. The hierarchy of the psychoactive drug trade is important to explain because of its changing legal status when it was documented heavily by national and international news teams during the time of this ethnographic research. New laws in Romania changed the status of NPDs from legal to illicit commodities (Ministry of Administration and Interior, et al. 2013, 7-13). The role of the funding gaps in the international syringe exchange programs in exacerbating the spread of disease among sewer community drug addicts will be highlighted later in this thesis.
Sewer community members felt there was a legal tradeoff in Bruce’s role as boss of the NPD trade. His position meant that he claimed sole ownership of the drugs. A Gara de Nord Canal member said that there was a law that whoever owned drugs would be the only one to serve a full prison sentence in the event of an arrest by authorities (personal correspondence, anonymous 2013). In this way, Bruce’s role was perceived as both a position of power and a position of self-sacrifice for the larger community. These two ideas as well as his association with God and being referred to as “The Father” of the community only furthered his status as a martyr during prison arrests. Bruce took advantage of all of this, speaking on behalf of his community to national and international news teams, making himself the face of the community’s struggle against a corrupt criminal justice system (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2012-2014). At one point, a
translator, remarked about Bruce, “I forgot to tell you that he have the syndrome of the savior (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2012).” The legal details of this law will be described later in chapter 6. Beyond the legal trade-off, religious symbolism, and self-aggrandizement, Bruce’s position of power was buttressed by the social hierarchy of the drug trade. The group of individuals within the community most powerful below Bruce also protected his position.

This group was comprised of young men in their twenties and thirties. They were dealers who exchanged drugs for cash. In pop-culture films about organized crime, a group such as this is often referred to as the “main men.” Given the gendered status of their role, this description would be fitting. However, I would hesitate to use this term, as it tends to be associated with a socio-economic class of criminals that the Gara de Nord sewer community did not have access to. For the sake of this thesis, this group of young men will be referred to as “top-dealers.”

Bruce’s top-dealers administered the psychoactive drug called “Pure Magic" through several procedures (personal observation, Aran Valente 2011-2014). They counted the money that customers would bring to them, measured the psychoactive drugs for injecting, and tapped the correct amount of Pure Magic drug powder onto folded cards or paper. They also controlled who crossed an area called “the counter.” The counter was a four foot by one-foot slab of wood set across the hot water pipes. It functioned as a way of organizing the administration of the drugs, similar to a pharmacy. On one side of the counter, Bruce Lee and his top dealers ripped open small “Pure Magic” packets of white psychoactive powder for their users and on the other side customers handed them Romanian Lei in exchange for the drugs. The counter also prevented anyone from stealing money, drugs, and other items of value that were hidden in Bruce’s room.

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4 The most common forms of New Psychoactive Drugs were “Diesel, Pure, Katana, and Magic.” Though “Pure Magic” itself was an off brand by comparison, it was still widely distributed in the immediate Gara de Nord and larger Bucharest community (Botescu 2012)
The boss’s room was located behind the counter through a narrow crawlspace that was several meters long. The rules about who could cross the counter were strictly enforced by Bruce. His method was simple and effective. Main men administered the drugs to customers at the counter and, in exchange, received a cut of the day’s profits. However, if that person failed to enforce their authority or forgot to inform Bruce before allowing someone to cross the counter, Bruce would tell them they were no longer in charge of the counter and they would not continue to make a profit that day.

There was another reason for the counter and the hierarchy which was that it provided a non-violent method of defense. Sewer community members described servicing over two hundred customers every week. Many of the customers who engaged in injecting drug
use were living on the streets and desperate to avoid going into withdrawal. If Bruce’s system of administration did not function for the customers, he would lose power and the loyalty of his employees. His immediate defense was comprised of a small group of the above-mentioned top-dealers and a handful of other community members whose roles will be described later, numbering less than a dozen individuals in total. In other words, if a gang war or coup d’état was attempted it would not take much to overthrow Bruce. This tension between Bruce’s drug dealings and the threat of a rebellion by customers was not spoken of explicitly but alluded to in some of Bruce’s interviews. In one instance, Bruce described an attack by a rival gang, “They just come suddenly,” he exclaimed, “Last week they just put fire underground. They come, put fire, they beat everybody here. I just fight with them for these children. They broke the electricity; they broke the lights . . . (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2013).” The Gara de Nord community learned the attackers were former sewer community members themselves (personal observation, Aran Valente 2013). Despite this attempted mutiny, Bruce continued to rule over the sewer community. A former Gara de Nord member translated Bruce Lee’s description of his victory over the attackers, “It’s like I just make justice in my own way (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2013).” Bruce may have fought off the attackers physically in this instance but on a day-to-day basis, it was the loyalty of customers, top-dealers, and other sewer community members that kept him in his position. The demand for psychoactive drugs was first and foremost to make a profit but also functioned as a form of market justice to control drug addicts.

The top-dealers occasionally would run into relationships within the hierarchy that conflicted with their tasks. For example, at one point, Bruce’s former girlfriend, Lenuța, who performed sex work for one of Bruce’s top-dealers, Dante, wanted to cross the counter. The main men were unsure of how to handle the situation. Lenuța pressured the top dealer into letting her pass the counter before Bruce was notified. Bruce was angry that, in his view, the top-dealer and Lenuța had both violated his rule. One could theorize that the drug dealer’s confusion stemmed from Lenuța having been afforded special privileges (such as cutting past the counter to meet Bruce) because of her former intimate relationship with Bruce (Valente personal observation 2012-2014). From the perspective
of the top dealer, it was difficult to follow a rule when he did not know how close Bruce and Lenuța still were. Bruce gave the top-dealer a warning that if his ex-girlfriend crossed the counter again the top-dealer who allowed such a transgression to take place would be suspended from his duties behind the counter.

In addition to confusing relationships, sewer community members in the canal were unsure of how to manage people undergoing psychosis from the drugs, especially in Bruce’s absence. In one instance, several sewer community members filling in for Bruce when he was in prison beat up one of the addicts when he was undergoing psychosis (personal journal entry, Aran Valente 2013). The physical beating of someone in psychosis also showed a social hierarchy between dealers and addicts. Though there were beatings under Bruce as well, people tended to receive more warnings before Bruce’s followers became physical. Addicts were undergoing various stages of withdrawal on the lawn next to the canal entrance. In 2012, the interpreter, Alin, showed an addict whose skin “felt like ice” and was trembling even though the temperature was in the mid- ‘80’s and she was lying under five blankets (personal field notes, Valente 2012). No women were observed as holding the same status as the top dealers. Women tended to hold the role of lower-level NPD dealers and aurolac dealers or sex workers. This next section will describe how gender dynamics fit within the social hierarchy of the sewer community.

![Image](image_url)

*Figure XI. One of the Gara de Nord top-dealers, Dante, sleeps next to a dog under Bruce Lee’s picture of The Last Supper.*
The gendered social structure of sex work in the sewers

Due to a lack of laws after the fall of communism, Romania became a haven for sex tourists who travelled there to abuse minors (Popescu 2014). Evidence of this pattern has been shown over a decade after the revolution. For example, in 2001, a French pedophile described choosing Bucharest over Bangkok, because there was a legal advantage due to extraterritoriality in Europe (National Assembly of France 2001). Some pedophiles used political connections over the weak legal system. In 2002, former American Fulbright Scholar, Romanian cultural historian, and anti-Semite, Kurt Treptow, was initially defended by the American Ambassador and Romanian President’s advisor after authorities arrested him on charges of pedophilia in Romania’s cultural capital, Iași (JTA 1996). Treptow was imprisoned after his conviction, released two years early after publishing a history book about Romania and, upon returning to the United States, became treasurer of the Libertarian Party of Nevada (Benea 2016, Bollag 2002; Hogea 2002). In the early 2000s, some youth lived in the canal (Bârcuțean 2001, 122). High profile cases such as this provide a glimpse of the power dynamics that might exist between pedophiles and their victims at a location like the Gara de Nord.

Some of Bucharest’s drug dens were former brothels. When illicit drugs, such as heroin, arrived in the 1990s, pești – pimps – in Bucharest decided that rather than risk losing territory to accommodate new drug lords, they would expand their business to include drug dealing as well (personal interview, Nicoleta 2014). Devolving state responsibilities during Romania’s transition to democracy exacerbated the sex trade. Initially, during the 1990s, after orphanage closures, over a thousand children lived in cardboard boxes near heating vents in the Gara de Nord. They became easy prey for pedophiles before police purged the area in 1998, at which point older children began using younger children to conduct sex work, passing on the pedophiles’ abuse.
Figure XII: Lenuța, 15 years old, sits in the baracă — the shed — in 2012

The child sex workers moved into the sewers, servicing sex tourists and middle-class Romanian men at Hotel Ibis and other nearby buildings (Skinner 2008, 127; National Assembly of France 2001). Even before the arrival of NPDs at the Gara de Nord Canal Community, some transactions involved sex work and illicit drugs like aurolac. For instance, a few years before my study began, an undercover reporter noted that older children in the Gara de Nord railway station sewers served as pești and rewarded “younger children with candy and glue (Skinner 2008, 127; Korgen and Gallagher 2013, 68).” It is not hard to imagine how this model could be developed to more thoroughly encompass both a brothel and a drug den with the arrival of in-demand commercial drugs like “Pure Magic”. In the Gara de Nord Canal Community, some of Bruce’s top-dealers, such as Dante, also worked as pești who managed sex workers. Condoms were kept in the same storage room where Bruce stored the iron, copper, and bronze that were collected for the
recycling center (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2013). Bruce provided a shower curtain so that female sex workers and women, in general, could have privacy (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2012). From a community health angle, Bruce Lee was taking at least some precautions to help sex workers manage both their sexual and emotional health.

After the pești, were the madams, who also played a part in controlling and managing sex workers. Bruce recounted that there was a madam who lived in the sewers and collaborated with him to oversee the sex work. I observed that when there was a conflict between the male pești and the female sex workers, Marilena, who Bruce described as the madam would intervene and negotiate business terms, sometimes as an advocate for sex workers. For instance, at one point the Marilena advocated for one of Bruce’s ex-girlfriends, Lenuța, who would later engage in sex work as well (personal observation, madam, Lenuța, Bruce Lee 2013). Marilena’s advocacy sometimes served as empowerment for female sex workers in a male-dominated industry. Also, the sewer community served as a safer place for sex workers to sleep at night rather than in the park where some of them had been raped by customers (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2013; personal side note during translations, Aran Valente 2014).

At the bottom of the hierarchy were the sex workers, who had very little control over the labor they were involved in. This was especially true of sex workers who had a disability. For example, one of the female IDUs, Talaitha, had become blind from the drugs and became a sex worker for a pește – pimp – (personal correspondence, Constantin 2015) because she was excluded from other income-generating activities after becoming disabled.

**Additional positions in the hierarchy of the sewer community’s social system**

In addition to the sex workers, some members smuggled drugs, black market syringes, and other items into the sewer community. These roles are harder to describe as part of the social hierarchy because their status tended to fluctuate depending on the circumstance, but they were always lower than the top-dealers, pești, and madams. Some of the children were involved in organized begging.
How racism affected the community’s hierarchy

“You are worse than a boschetar [homeless person] . . . we are all looking at you. I was thinking you were cleaner, you stupid tigani,” Bruce Lee once remarked to a Gara de Nord Canal member who was a member of the ethnic group, Roma (personal footage, Bruce Lee 2014). The term, tigani, derived from the Greek term, tsinganos, means “untouchable,” and has negative connotations connected to the historical enslavement of Roma people in Romania (Marushiakova, Vesselin 2018). Another stereotype Bruce Lee mentioned is the idea of Roma people lacking cleanliness or being “dirty”. Referring to Roma people as “social dirt” was used by Romania in the 1930s to push for eugenic sterilization when the idea of healthcare became increasingly racialized (Făcăoaru, G. 1941, p. 17).” Author E. Benjamin Skinner described Roma people he met involved in sex trafficking in Bucharest as having “rotting teeth”, an “underbite”, and being “wild-eyed and aggressive (Skinner 2008, 128).” Ironically, in the course of trying to vilify a group that he perceived as selling sex slaves, Skinner used racialized terms that would have been used to justify the enslavement of their ancestors by white people, some of whom would have used Roma slaves for sex. The idea of attaching racist undertones to hygiene further oppressed Roma people who lived in the sewers. Their views reflected larger societal prejudices describing the Roma as giving a “bad name” to Romania (Pulay 2017, 2). However, not everyone else in the Gara de Nord Canal Community harbored Bruce’s racist views.

The sewer community had people from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds who interacted and worked alongside each other. There were Roma, ethnic Romanians, ethnic Hungarians, as well as a few people of other backgrounds and from other European countries living together in the sewers. While it could be argued that their friendship was more the shared experience of poverty and, in some cases, chemical addiction, some members of the Gara de Nord Canal Community were explicit in their acceptance of diversity. Diversity, in this context, also represented a business advantage as it meant they could appeal to a wider range of customers for various income-generating activities. There were cross-racial examples of organizing, interracial relationships, and examples of anti-racist labor relations in the sewer community as well as Roma and non-Roma working
together to bring trash from the boulevard to the recycling companies. At least one of Bruce’s top-dealers, Dante, was Roma. The community did weigh in their opinions on decisions Bruce made promoting a more diverse community, and some of their attempts at inclusion had results. However, this next section will focus on and problematize ways in which some aspects of racism and ethnocentrism further entrenched social hierarchies within the sewer community itself.

Some sewer community members commented that Bruce only ever had Roma girlfriends. After a relationship had ended, sometimes Bruce’s ex-girlfriends — Lenuța for example — became sex workers. Within the sewer community, some members privately remarked that most of the sex workers were Roma. Employment discrimination forced some Roma women to seek alternate forms of income-generation, such as sex work, to make a living. For those who were addicts, fast cash meant they did not have to worry so much about finding ways to afford drugs. Though international and local media reported that some individuals in the sewer community, including Lenuța, were Roma, they did not make any larger observations about the group in general. Part of this may have been that the media was not sure that describing the social implications of group relationships in the sewers would allow them to have continued access to the sewers. The media also has a history of privileging stories about white people who are sex trafficked over people of color who are sex trafficked (Presley 2020).

Some criminals took advantage of the invisibility and vulnerability of Roma people, particularly children involved in the commercial sex trade. In 2011, according to a Gara de Nord Canal Community member, a man who was alleged to be a pedophile from England surrounded himself with only children who were Roma (personal interview, anonymous 2011). The pedophile’s choice was likely calculated. There was an assumption in Romanian society that the blame for Roma children who were exploited fell on the bad parenting practices of Roma families rather than institutionalized neglect and discrimination (Euronews 2015). Moreover, there was a belief that some Roma families were actively selling their children in the sex trade (Justice Network 2016). What was more common was that traffickers would pay parents in Roma communities 100-200 Euros to have children work for them performing “chores” for a year, using this as an excuse to
separate children from their families and pull them into the trafficking networks (OSCE 2006). One of the former sewer community members described an instance where a man who claimed to be an English photojournalist working for an NGO told the sewer community that he was doing a project that would show poverty in Romania, presumably to raise money for international aid. According to the canal member, he took some children from the sewer community up to an apartment he had rented for the night with cash, took off their clothes, took pictures of them, and left the country before authorities had a chance to intervene (personal interview, Alin 2012). A disproportionate amount of the children who were in the sewers were Roma so the man’s choice to target their community was indeed calculated. Public discourse sometimes made sweeping generalizations that the sewers were filled with “gypsies⁵” and often used the term synonymously with sex-traffickers (personal observation, Aran Valente 2011-2014). Prejudiced views such as reduced public pressure for law enforcement to investigate white traffickers using Roma youth in the commercial sex trade.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, the advent of the internet, the 2008 financial crisis, and Romania’s 2007 EU membership, which simplified border crossing, all contributed to Romania becoming the largest hub of sex trafficking to Western Europe, with a third of the victims being children. (United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime 2015; Hickman 2014; Hughes 2014, 33-50, 35). The discrimination that Roma girls, particularly those like Lenuța, face because of their gender and ethnicity make them a target group for traffickers (Gamble 2009). Romanian police have been known to sexually abuse Roma street children and protect prostitution rings in exchange for a cut in their profits (Gamble 2009). The idea Bruce Lee mentioned that Roma people were “dirty” also played out in the public’s perception that Roma street children were too unhygienic to be vulnerable to traffickers. In 2013, Korgen and Gallagher wrote, “Eastern Europe has become a center for sex tourism and the trafficking of women and girls into Western

⁵ In the past, Roma people were described by white Europeans as “Egyptian” under the assumption that they were of North African origin. Britain’s Egyptians Act of 1530 criminalized Roma people, forcing them to either leave England or face imprisonment (Act concerning ‘Egyptians’ 1530). The term “Egyptian” was later shortened to the pejorative term “gypsy” which later came to hold a similar racial connotation to the n-word (Paulson 2018; Matache 2019).
Europe and the United States for sex slavery. Why? Because poor white women and girls live there (Korgen and Gallagher 2013, 68).” This phrasing whitewashes the stories of victims in Eastern European countries like Romania, pushing the idea of trafficking brown-skinned Roma youth out of the equation. Romania’s status as a country comprised of a predominantly white population does not mean that people of color, such as the Roma, are less likely to be trafficked.

Racism also affected members of the Gara de Nord Canal Community who were managing health issues. When a sewer community member, Andrei, described having been neglected by his family on account of stigma surrounding being HIV/AIDS positive, he said, “But I forgot to tell you that I come from a Roma family. She doesn’t know how to handle or take this sickness (personal interview, Andrei 2014).” His belief that ethnicity played a role in the degree of the stigma he received from his family members may have been a function of internalizing the oppression. However, it may have also been part of a larger observation that Roma people were often discriminated against in health care and, due to disproportionately less access to health information when compared with their white Romanian counterparts, might be more likely to believe local myths surrounding how the infection was transmitted. Informal segregation of healthcare and other sectors continues to negatively impact the health and treatment of Roma communities during pandemics. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, doctors have expressed concerns of Roma communities being more vulnerable to infection due to residential segregation. European states, including Romania, have enacted militarized approaches that target Roma towns and neighborhoods in the name of quarantining the areas from infection (Matache & Bhabha 2020; COE 2020; Rorke 2020; Kakissis 2020; Amnesty International 2020; New York Times 2020). In these instances, state and economic practices have negatively impacted the autonomy, health, and human rights of Roma communities.

Roma people were often implicated in thefts from tourists. Pickpockets told tourists there were Roma “thieves” in the train station, using the racialized threat as a distraction while they stole purses, wallets, and other accessories. This ploy, of course, was at the expense of Roma people. Implicit in this con was the tourist’s belief that Roma people were all “thieves” and white or light-skinned Romanians were upstanding citizens.
Though some Gara de Nord Canal members did not go beyond using the idea of Roma “thieves” to trick tourists, other groups, including the Gara de Nord Canal Community, actively self-victimized to justify their conflict with Roma groups over territory.

In one instance, a white man told Bruce Lee, “I have come with a problem to you. There are two guys, Moldovan, and they were threatened by some other men. I wanted to tell you because they are staying with you in the same house (personal interview, Florin and Bruce Lee 2014).” The translator said that the “Moldovans” and the “other men” were a single group of Roma people from the region of Moldova that were being harassed (personal side-note by translator, Larisa 2014). Some members of Bruce’s group were looking to pick a fight with them over a threat, real or perceived. This would be an instance where racism also affected gang conflicts and group mentalities. The group of Roma people was not part of the sewer community, rather they represented an external threat.

Roma people were targeted with evictions in Bucharest. For example, on September 15, 2014, armed riot police flanked by reporters stormed Vulturilor Street No. 50 to evict residents in a predominantly Roma neighborhood. Twenty tenant families protested the state by sitting on carpets and in tents in front of their homes, refusing to leave for a year with signs resisting police action (Nedea 2014; Reclaiming Spaces 2014). Eventually, the state succeeded in carrying out the evictions, and the Roma families joined other vagrants, some of whom would wander to the Gara de Nord Canal looking for a place to sleep (Ciobanu 2017).

The Gara de Nord Canal Community’s relationship to other groups in Bucharest

This next section will detail the Gara de Nord sewer community’s relationship with other groups that were also involved in similar illicit activities in both the Gara de Nord area and, in the Bucharest area at large. First, their relationship with the Gara de Nord’s sex workers will be described and second, their relationship with other canal communities involved in the psychoactive drug trade will be explained. The degree to which the two illicit activities of sex work and the drug trade enforced boundaries was affected by the amount of time those activities had been established in Bucharest. Their relationship with the Gara de Nord sex workers existed more closely in the Gara de Nord area because
brothels had been established in Bucharest for a long time, so territories were more structured (personal interview, Nicoleta 2014). The psychoactive drug trade’s hierarchy, by comparison, was more fluid and administration happened at a city-wide level because it was more recent and changing legal measures made it a less stable market. A small canal community had gained a monopoly on the drug trade distribution and controlled the dealers’ relationship with the suppliers as middle persons. This next part will describe the relationship pești and madams outside the sewer community held with Bruce Lee and his top-dealers in the Gara de Nord Canal Community.

The Gara de Nord Canal Community’s relationship to the Gara community

In addition to Bruce’s top-dealers who prostituted women, some pești lived outside of the canal but controlled sex workers living inside the Gara de Nord Canal. In June 2012, there was a pește, Laurențiu, who conversed with four or five sex workers on one corner of the Gara de Nord, near a traffic intersection, and also paid close attention to who arrived and left the canal community (personal field notes, Valente 2012). Bruce allowed the sex workers to sleep in his canal for protection from assault in the city park and around the Northern Train Station at night. However, Bruce looked the other way when pești and madams came into the sewers to verbally and physically assault sex workers who worked for them. More than one pește beat a sex worker near where Bruce and his top dealers sat on the hot water pipes and they did not stop the abuse (Valente, Aran, personal observation 2013, 2014).

If sex workers fought over interpersonal struggles in the sewers Bruce would work to mediate the interaction and advocate for cooperation in his system (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2012). Even though his attempts at intervention did not always prove successful, the vision he had of a calm place where people could work out their differences through words was admirable. From an economic-based perspective, Bruce allowing pești to beat sex workers in his canal had business potential. If a sex worker did not like the pește they worked for outside the canal system, they could switch to a pește in Bruce’s Gara de Nord Canal Community with the hope of a more manageable relationship.

Bruce’s rule may not have applied to all Gara de Nord Canal members, but it did apply to those who participated in his income-generating activities. There were other
social hierarchies outside the sewers that fell across lines of race and sexual orientation. While some of the male pești managed female sex workers of multiple backgrounds, there was a white female madam at the train station who managed mostly trans Roma women. The sex workers would wait for customers in front of the train station, next to the taxi park, across the street from Bruce Lee’s sewer community. If someone approached one of the sex workers and was not soliciting them for sex the pește or madam would approach and ask them what they wanted or for what reasons they had approached their sex workers. At one point, after arriving at the Gara de Nord to meet with members of the sewer community my friend and I were followed by a pește into the Gara de Nord to keep track of us because he had never seen us in their community before and wanted to know what we were doing (personal observation, Aran Valente 2011). On the one hand, this was a method of control. On the other hand, sex workers, especially those who were trans Roma women, were sometimes harassed by the public or belligerent customers who were transphobic, racist, sexist, or harbored prejudices against sex workers. In these instances, protection from a pește or madam was beneficial. The pești and madams usually kept their distance from the sex workers unless there were extenuating circumstances, that is until nightfall when they would stand beside them for support and showcase the protection. The sex workers’ choice to stand at the front of the train station at a major transit center, meaning that any actions out of the ordinary from customers would be noticed by taxi drivers, bus drivers, and the lock-shop staff who saw them every day. So while the location drew the most customers, it also ensured public witnesses in an instance of harassment. Some pești and madams would arrive in the Gara de Nord Canal Community and talk to Bruce about business transactions to better coordinate their operations or mend any tensions that arose between their groups (personal observation, Aran Valente 2011-2014). In a sense, they were an extension of the Gara de Nord canal Community, separated by a pothole entrance, yet connected by a common illicit activity that was outside of the state and legal market’s domain. This next section will detail a case study of a former pickpocket’s relationship to the Gara de Nord Canal.
Alin: A case study

The rule for pești, madams, and sex workers’ relationship to the Gara de Nord Canal also applied to pickpockets. Alin recounted that in 1998 he began his life on the streets after leaving “orphanage number two in either Barlad or Vaslui” and decided to travel to Bucharest because it was a big city and he knew there would be “stuff” there. Alin went to the Gara de Nord with a gang of pickpockets who were also 17 to 18 years old and began to steal from people who had traveled from afar and were sleeping in the station. They would sneak up on the traveler and cut through their luggage with sharp objects. If the tourist awoke, they would beat them and flee the scene. Alin went on to say,

“I was alcohol addicted. The civil police arrested me. They made a file for me and I was arrested for 24 hours. I continued for a few months and then when to the City of Hope at the Day Center. A Social Assistant observed me, like the way I was drawing, we talked, and they gave me an apartment to get me off the street because they didn’t want me to destroy my life. I studied the bible in the church, got baptized, and decided to do military service. When I got to my original district in Vaslui for Juridic, Medicala, Psychologic [legal, medical, and psychological evaluation documents] for the military, they arrested me on account of the former charges. I spent three years and two months in Vaslui prison. I went out on the 23rd of July 2003, having fulfilled my sentence, and met up with the City of Hope and best painter I met in prison. I worked under his apprenticeship and he taught me how to paint. Every month I had visitors from the City of Hope. When I got out of prison I was employed by the City of Hope working for two weeks of the month with street kids and the other two with this organization doing social work, oil painting, exhibitions, donations, and working with abandoned babies.”

“I got into alcohol addiction again, began to drink a lot, quit with the City of Hope, and joined on with Teen Challenge. After Teen Challenge I decided to live with my sister, Adriana, in a flat that we rented with our pay from work and were normal citizens of society for a few years until this year in March when I lost my job as a postal carrier and I was in a financial blocking and I don’t know what to do. I spent a few weeks more on the street and then I met Costin on the street and I went to Concordia.” Alin concluded with this,

“I have one principle and it is that life is about choice. I realize that life is in my hands and I wake up. I have a sister and she motivates me because I have to fight for her as well.”

His last comment about choice is a theme worth highlighting as it represents not only Alin’s views but the views of many who joined the Gara de Nord Canal Community. Alin’s prior experience as a pickpocket at the Gara de Nord in 1998 may have helped him survive on the streets later in life and his proximity to the Canal meant he and his sister had
a safer place to sleep than on the streets. But what of the other canal communities? How did they relate to the Gara de Nord Canal members? The Gara de Nord Canal Community may have been the most public, but its profits were hewn from a larger tunnel-dwelling shadow network that extended across the rest of the capital. This next section will outline the relationships these underground tunnel communities held with each other.

The Gara de Nord Canal Community’s relationship to other canal communities

“I usually go to other undergrounds in the city,” 24-year-old sewer community member Mădălina Viorica Ștefania explained in an interview, “In Diham (the name of the other sewer community’s location) there is another larger underground . . . They also have T.V. and lights, food, cleaning, I have felt very well there also. How it is with Bruce Lee it’s the same there,” she explained, referring to physical conditions and amenities of Diham’s sewer community. However, her relationship with the Gara de Nord community was better than at Diham, “. . . the thing that was bad [about Diham’s sewer community] is that I was fighting with the people in there every night because of my boyfriend (personal interview, Mădălina Viorica Ștefania 2014).” While in Mădălina Viorica Ștefania’s case, the differences between the Gara de Nord and Diham were personal, Gara de Nord Canal members also said that as far as living conditions were concerned, Bruce’s system at the Gara de Nord was more organized. Some social service workers went so far as to say that by comparison to Bruce Lee’s system, the other sewer communities that directly dealt NPDs looked like disaster zones. In addition to Diham and Gara de Nord, there were four or five other sewer communities in locations scattered across the capital (Constantin personal correspondence 01/07/2020), some of which played a specific role in the illicit drug trade. For example, a different sewer community in another section of Bucharest was the “brains” behind the illicit psychoactive drug trade in 2014 (personal interview, Constantin 2014). A glimpse through the pothole’s entrance revealed a canal tunnel that looked like a college dormitory lounge with well-dressed young adults sitting on bean bags typing on laptop computers in a room with carpeted flooring and good lighting (personal observation, Aran Valente 2014). Romanian Association Against AIDS (ARAS) outreach coordinator, Constantin, explained that the people on the laptops were looking online for the best business deals for psychoactive drugs to be imported from abroad (Constantin
personal experience 2014). Once ordered, the drugs would be administered to sewer community drug dealers who would distribute them to customers at Gara de Nord Canal and other locations.

In addition to Diham and the Gara de Nord, there were 4 to 5 other canal communities throughout the city that have been documented (personal correspondence, Constantin January 7, 2020; Tse 2013). The relationship that the Gara de Nord sewer community held with other sewer communities is an example of the complex web of connections present underground in Bucharest. While some of these connections may have initially been linked by no more than common interests in illicit activities, they had developed towards an idea of kinship and community that could not be easily broken by a rival gang, a coup d’état, or a police raid.

The media’s polarized narrative of the Gara de Nord Sewer members did not capture nuances within the community’s social structure. This structure was a product, in part, of the group’s autonomy; the canal’s hard-to-reach location provided the physical space necessary for this autonomy to play out. The “underground law and order” imposed by their leader created a system of rules to cooperate sufficiently in an environment in which they attempted to meet their basic needs. However, this same system also gave the group agency to participate in self-destructive behavior, such as investing in drug and sex trades, which negatively impacted the health of some of their most vulnerable members and left them subject to illnesses such as HIV/AIDS. From the perspective of the community’s drug dealers, police corruption and changing community dynamics made it difficult to maintain a less chaotic hierarchical system within the canal. Some canal members used their agency to participate in the sex trade and struggled with exploitative customers and procurers. From the perspective of the canal’s procurers, intimidation of both customers and competition was a way to protect sex workers, who might otherwise experience worse abuse. This rationale was a way of maintaining control of sex workers and justifying their behavior. Racist discrimination against the Roma aboveground was replicated by Bruce Lee in the canals below to maintain his system of power, which further limited autonomy for members who held minority status in the canal. In these instances, agency for some could lead to oppression and less autonomy for others. The canal
community’s relationships with other groups that invested in illicit activities at the Gara de Nord further complicated their own sense of autonomy. Despite these counter-indications, canal members continued to pursue certain freedoms that accompanied autonomy from state control such as economic independence, mitigation of health risks, and management of relationships.

Figure XIII. Bruce poses with his butterfly earring, keeping a close eye on his community
CHAPTER 3: MEDIA AND LITERATURE REVIEW

“It’s easier to die when you’re in love.”
– Teresa Berezowska’s character, Halinka, in Andrzej Wajda’s 1956 film, Kanal

“We want our babies born free like they meant to be.”
– Cynthia Enivo’s character, Minty, in Kasi Lemmon’s 2018 film, Harriet

“These people are laughing at their lives, he thought with amazement. They were shouting and yelling at the animated shadows of themselves.”
– the character, Fred Daniels, in Richard Wright’s 1971 story, The Man Who Lived Underground

Figure XIV. A metal ladder leads down to the floor of the canal beneath the boulevard.

The devil, Hades, demons, ghosts, faeries, and monsters of all sorts are often portrayed as coming from a subterranean underworld (Revelation 20:10, Matthew 25:41,
In the 13th Century, according to urban legend, bandits hid in Parisian catacombs under Chateau de Vauvert, now the Luxembourg Gardens, and sorcerers conducted black mass in the underground tunnels during the 1348 plague (NBC 2004). Either of these examples could provide fodder for theatrical performances. An underground realm of the stigmatized “other” who, once un-masked, brings brutality to those above them is common in entertainment: Stigmatized by society for health conditions beyond his control, Andrew Lloyd Webber’s masked Phantom of the Opera commits acts of violence before abducting a woman he covets and descending through a tunnel into his underground lair, hiding his true self from view (Nightinggale 1988). David Moreau and Xavier Palud’s 2006 horror film, Ils- Them- depicts Romanian children emerging from tunnels to murder a vacationing French couple. This portrayal dehumanized abandoned Romanian youth, rendering them as violent without explaining the context (Olson 2018, 251; Moreau, Palud 2006). Movies in 2019 such as Bong Joon-Ho’s film, Parasite, Andy Muschietti’s film, It Chapter II, based on a novel by Stephen King, and Jordan Peele’s film, Us, depict underground beings revealed to those above them through bloodshed whether along lines of class, good vs. evil, or a government’s failed project (Ho 2019; Muschietti and King 2019; Peele 2019; Powers 2019). More specifically, these three movies describe the intimacies of class warfare, social stigmas that manifest as fears, and oppressed worlds that parallel our own. In this way, that which lies beneath also represents parts of our society and parts of ourselves that we would rather keep concealed from others.

Underground as a site of the oppressed “other” in film and media

The discovery of the “other” who is trying to remain invisible from those who wish to harm them by hiding in underground sewer tunnels has been used in films about the holocaust. Andrzej Wajda’s 1956 film, Kanal – Sewer –, shows Polish resistance fighters becoming lost in a labyrinth of sewers beneath Nazi-occupied Warsaw before emerging only to be re-captured by the fascists (Wajda 1956). Steven Spielberg’s 1993 film,
*Schindler’s List,* and Agnieszka Holland’s 2011 film, *In Darkness,* both depict Jewish people hiding in underground sewer tunnels to escape Nazi persecution happening above them. In addition to the holocaust, othered groups hiding in underground tunnels on their journey to freedom has been used to describe the narratives of escaped slaves in America. In Kasi Lemmons’s 2019 film, *Harriet,* the protagonist conducts the underground railroad, hiding escaped slaves in tunnels underneath pro-slavery search parties sent to re-capture them. In all four films, the racialized “other” seeks refuge in a sanctuary literally beneath the heels of the oppressor. As with the above-mentioned films, some Gara de Nord canal members of the Roma ethnic minority, a group that was historically enslaved and targeted during the holocaust, who hoped to find refuge in the canal from structural racism aboveground.

Elsewhere, the underground is used as a metaphor for racism itself. Similarly, in Ralph Ellison’s 1947 book, *Invisible Man,* and Richard Wright’s 1945 book, *The Man Who Lived Underground,* the subterranean becomes a metaphor for the black experience and racism in America. This idea is more recently expressed in Jordan Peele’s 2017 film, *Get Out,* through the metaphor of “the sunken place,” a site beneath the gaze of the oppressor where the matriarch of a white family sends the black protagonist before enslaving him. In Ellison’s and Wright’s books and Peele’s film, the spatial dimension of the subterranean becomes symbolic of racial hierarchies imposed on the oppressed.

Some documentaries show people hiding in tunnels who are “othered” by their political affiliation. Feras Fayyad’s 2019 documentary, *Cave,* shows a pediatrician, Dr. Amani Ballour, protecting patients from war and persecution by hiding them in underground tunnels that she converted into a hospital in Ghouta, Syria (Fayyad 2019; Abouzeid 2019; O’Dowd 2019). Some Gara de Nord Canal member were supporters of Romania’s former communist party who would have been mocked or shunned for sharing their political affiliation’s beliefs aboveground. Marc Singer’s 2000 documentary, *Dark Days,* shows the lives of homeless people living permanently in The Freedom Tunnel in New York City, some of whom arrived in the underground to avoid societal stigma above them (Singer 2000). Filmed one year later, Edet Belzberg’s 2001 documentary, *Children Underground,* documents the lives of former orphans who are oppressed by society and
living in an underground metro station, Piața Victoriei, one subway stop away from the Gara de Nord Canal Community.

**Articles about people living in tunnels**

*Figure XV: A young Gara de Nord Canal member poses in the entrance to their home.*

In 2017, two teenagers were saved by search teams and rescue dogs after being lost in Parisian skeleton-lined catacombs, which are known as an illegal location for partying school children (The Guardian 2017; Pike 2005, 1, 30, 304, 327, 340). Author Will Hunt’s acclaimed 2019 book, *Underground: A Human History of the World Beneath Our Feet*, documents his experiences in underground tunnels, in some of which he encounters tunnel dwellers (Hunt 2019). Most of the time, tunnel dwellers remain a peaceful yet misunderstood group. However, the fear of the other emerging from underground to wreak havoc on those above, which has inspired some cinematic topical themes, is occasionally reflected in real-life events. In 2014, a man emerged from a New York City subterranean tunnel to lob a smoke bomb at fancy restaurant customers, including actress Rose McGowan, who would later become known for winning in a trial against serial rapist and movie producer, Harvey Weinstein (Mohney 2014; Los Angeles Times 2020). In general, however, tunnel dwellers tend to stay out of the public’s view as a result of
stigma, an issue which is occasionally politicized by public figures. In 2019, Democratic Presidential Candidate Julián Castro toured a homeless village living in storm tunnels in Las Vegas, commenting at an event the day after, “It wasn’t lost on me or anyone else there that underneath hotels that are worth hundreds of millions of dollars, in one of the places that is known around the world as a playground for people around this country and around the world, that you have people who are living in deep poverty, sleeping not even in the street, but in a drainage tunnel (Stracqualursi 2019).” Castro’s choice to draw the public’s attention to the massive wealth disparity is laudable, but he fails to add that tunnel dwellers also have agency and their underground has been a site of protest and resistance in the United States and around the world.

During World War II, some polish resistance fighters launched part of the Warsaw Uprising from the sewers beneath their capital city (McGuire 2014). A 1990 New York Times article documented 'mole people' living in tunnels beneath New York City fighting to save their home, partly owned by Donald Trump, from eviction in the name of development (Tierney 1990). Jennifer Toth’s 1995 book, The Mole People, documents the same community beneath New York City gathering two dozen homeless people to surround a rival gang’s leader who raped a man’s wife while someone persuaded the police to intervene (Toth 2001, 100). A 2012 National Geographic article described a “Rafah underground” tunnel economy of 15,000 Gazans who had been smuggling weapons, medicine, and clothes since 1982, some remarking that the irony of having to travel beneath their land was not lost on them. National Geographic was not the only organization paying attention to the literal underground Palestinian resistance. During Gaza’s conflict, “Israel also extensively bombed smuggling tunnels in Rafah (Verini 2012).” A 2019 New York Post article described a hundred pro-democracy student protesters escaping persecution by police through Hong Kong Polytechnic University’s sewage tunnels to refuge at the China-Hong Kong Border (Lapin 2019). In the Israel-Palestine and China-Hong Kong examples, tunnels are used because they link political boundaries that are contested through violence. In 2019, a group of homeless people living in a subway tunnel near London’s parliament protested the chaplain to the Speaker of the
House of Commons, Rose Hudson-Wilkin’s decision to evict them from their home (Taylor 2019).

**Articles about children in tunnels around the globe**

situations (Panter-Brick 2010, 83-94). Nevertheless, there is some literature that plans to change this pattern. For instance, Phillip Dybicz’s 2005 article, Interventions for street children: An analysis of current best practices, the author suggests organizations coordinating their practices, collaboration between government and NGOs, and vocational training as possibilities (Dybicz 2012, 164). While the author’s points are valid, they should also consider how these services also affect the sense of autonomy street children might feel in government and organizational structures as opposed to their own community. Though scholars such as Leontina Dragu present a linear decline to live in the sewers (Dragu 2019, 278), some people who stayed in the Gara de Nord Canal did so on a temporary basis, oscillating between living in houses, living on the streets, and living in canals depending on their circumstances. Journalists and academics limited the discourse on canal communities to monolithic representations instead of embracing their complexities.

Journalism and Academic Articles about Canal Community in Bucharest

Discourses on street children present social deprivation as the norm and assign stigma to poor families, depicting them as having fallen out of mainstream society because of socially unacceptable attributes (Moura 2002). Since Bruce Lee advertised how his community was organized to the press, the media’s portrayal was slightly more varied. As mentioned previously, canal members were largely polarized as leading lives that were
either romanticized or consigned to victimhood status. Canadian digital media and broadcasting company Vice Media describes sewer community residents in Bucharest as addicts, beggars who lack hygiene and abused children (Paduano 22 March 2012; Tse 21 October 2013). At one point, the Romanian public became curious about Bruce’s beginnings, spurring media coverage of the community. Romanian News Stations, *Access Direct* and *Antena 1* went so far as to introduce Bruce Lee to his sister, Elena, and invited them both to their studio to talk about their relationship and family’s past (Access Direct, *Antena 1*, 24 October 2014). In this instance, Bruce Lee was portrayed as a misled gangster and the lives of his community members, largely absent from the show, as survivors under his care.

Reporting on Bucharest’s sewer community members by popular media sources has been sporadic. Writer Akash Kapur notes in his description of Bucharest sewer residents ten years after the overthrow of Ceaușescu, “Since their fifteen minutes of fame- when the media seized upon their story as an emblem of the evils of communism . . . there has been little interest in these children (Kapur 1999, 43).” In popular print media news outlets, the story is the same: According to a National Geographic article, during Coburn Dukehart’s interview with an anthropologist Massimo Branca, it is clear Branca wants people to connect with sewer community members through photography. Branca wants viewers to see sewer community members with compassion and empathy rather than “pity, judgment, or fear (Dukehart 17 June 2015).” Branca also exoticizes Gara de Nord Canal Community member, Lenuța, as “mysterious” due to her “large, black eyes” (Dukehart, 17 June 2015). Romanian Roma Rights Activist and Director of the Roma Program at Harvard Francois-Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights, Magda Matache, discussed a history of photographers exoticizing and exploiting Roma women as a byproduct of colonialism at the Global Roma Diaspora conference (personal attendance, Matache 2019; FXB Center for Health and Human Rights of Harvard University 2019; ERRC 2007). The German weekly news magazine, *Stern*, also covered Branca’s story, posing questions about whether homeless people have to survive if they want to die (Geiger 7 February 2017). 2015 CNN documentary photographer and social activist Yasmin Balai called
attention to the photographer’s responsibility to pay attention to how people in the Gara de Nord Canal are portrayed to the public (Cohan 2015).

More recently, the documentary, *Bruce Lee and the Outlaw*, shows a child of the sewer community, Niku, as a three-dimensional figure whose character develops over time with Bruce Lee holding the role of a more mysterious figure (Vandebrug 8 June 2018). Though media producers such as Massimo Branca and Joost Vandebrug offer a more in-depth portrayal of sewer community members, they tend to focus on young individuals, obscuring the larger community’s collective actions.

Some media outlets described the sewer community residents as organized gangs that protected children (Opnminded, 20 July 2016). When described in this way, one sewer member retorted, “They call us a mafia? What kind of mafia is homeless and living in a sewer?” In other instances, even the total number of people in the community was changed.

Korgen and Gallagher’s 2013 book, *The True Cost of Low Prices: The Violence of Globalization*, grossly exaggerated the findings of a reporter, E. Benjamin Skinner, describing sex slavery at, “the Gara de Nord railway station in Bucharest, where a thousand orphans, deinstitutionalized after communism, live in the sewers but emerge to service sex tourists and local men (Korgen and Gallagher 2013, 68).” By observation, there were less than fifty permanent residents of the sewers, only a handful of which were children. Exaggerations such as this are harmful; in the course of trying to sell their morality story through shock value, they disqualify research findings for social issues like sex slavery that stand to greatly benefit from an understanding of the facts.

In academic sources, though the stories may be less sensationalized, the polarized narrative of victims or survivors for sewer communities remains: The scholar, Judith Gray, has missionaries, social assistants, health workers, and volunteers narrate the lives of sewer communities rather than the sewer members themselves. Orphans on the streets and in the sewers are described as physically abusive toward people, animalistic, and incapable of showing “love and affection” (Gray 13 June 2001, 8). Gray argues that conditions on the streets make children more at-risk than in the orphanages. In writing on her memories of International Development in Romania in 1990, USAID worker Randal Thompson
describes collaborating with UNICEF and the Romanian government on the Convention of the Rights of the Child. This convention was designed to formulate new policies for street children who, “. . . lived in the sewers of Bucharest” and “resisted help because they were addicted [to glue] and became used to their communal lifestyles.” Interestingly, USAID and the EU’s solution to child welfare issues such as those in the sewer communities involved pushing for Romanian communities “to take charge of their social problems instead of relying on State intervention.” Some scholars offer alternate timelines for children entering the sewers. According to the Journal of Christian Nursing writer, Michael Farruggia, sewer children beg by day, are abused, become addicted and, to survive, “turn to prostitution, theft, and other crimes (Farruggia 2003, 32).”

Whether through devils, villains, or vengeful Romanian orphans, the other that comes from a world beneath our feet is represented in holy scripture, theater, and cinema as a part of our community and our inner person that we shield from public view. The Gara de Nord Canal Community was typified by many aboveground as a dangerous place that was often sensationalized, perhaps in part due to media portrayals of what lies beneath. While some activities in the canal were criminalized, members’ initial motivations for entering the canal were not solely based on the pursuit of criminalized activities. While a modest amount of the activities pursued in the canal were criminalized, the majority of income-generating activities involved collecting recyclables, washing the vehicles on the boulevard, and cleaning the streets at night for the police so that they would be safer for pedestrians in the morning. This thesis focuses on various aspects of the criminalized activities, as some of them led to the demise of the community, but not because it was the community’s sole aspiration. As has been seen in films about the underground as a site of refuge for the oppressed “other,” the canal was home to groups that would have been targeted during the Holocaust and continue to be excluded from society for being Roma, gay, or homeless. These groups in the Gara de Nord Canal were united by their decision to live in underground tunnels in pursuit of autonomy from the state. Underground tunnels have become a space shown on screen for groups that live at the margins of society, whether because of genocide, political persecution or poverty. While canal members would agree that they are marginalized, from their
perspective they were heroes who had created an autonomous community in the face of such adversity. As with the literature on tunnel dwellers over the centuries, the Gara de Nord Canal Community had its own unique history. Though public figures have defended underground sewer communities, they overlook the history tunnel communities have had as a site of militant resistance to illegitimate authority, state-based abuse, and societal exclusion whether in the context of the Holocaust, rape, war, police repression, or classism. From Colombia to Mongolia, from Ethiopia to Mexico, from the United States to Romania, communities of children have been documented as living in tunnels beneath the streets of major cities. The Gara de Nord sewer community has been represented as either a romantic fairy tale or a disaster zone of sufferers. The former abandoned youth who comprised this community made media appearances only as props to provide an example of the evils of communism rather than a community with their own unique dynamics, politics, and aspirations. These narratives will be challenged with a more nuanced narrative of the complexities of the Gara de Nord Canal Community. To fully appreciate the amount of adversity sewer community members overcame as well as to better understand their circumstances, Chapter 5 describes the events that led up to the rise of sewer communities in Romania’s capital.
CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

“Do you still have those pictures with me?”
— Gara de Nord Canal member, 2014

Throughout this thesis, I examine the social structures of the community at Gara de Nord. The analysis of this social structure contributes to the scholarship of understanding various forms of abuse, stigma, and resistance to institutional power. During the period of my study, there was a large community of people who organized to live in the canals, some of whom fled state institutions under Romania’s former President, Nicolae Ceaușescu, as well as those who were evicted during urban development. This thesis presents the conflict of a canal community stigmatized by the larger public as well as by state structures with a focus on social assistance programs that challenge that autonomy. The ethnographic research project I conducted from June of 2012 to September of 2014, and again in June of 2017, employed notetaking, photography, and video footage used for this thesis.

History of why and how I first met members of the Gara de Nord Canal Community

I first heard about Romanian orphans who became street children and lived in tunnels near or under subway stops in 2010 while watching Edet Belzberg’s 2001 documentary, *Children Underground*. This was just before I began a tour of service with Peace Corps Romania in April 2010. I loved serving in Peace Corps Romania, but I wanted to push myself by getting in contact with a group that was challenging to work with. My goal was to gain real-life experience with vulnerable groups to draw from when making decisions in what I hoped would be a career that involved principles of social justice. At that time, I felt the ideal career would be engaging in social work abroad in the sector of international development. I told the Romanian Peace Corps staff that I wanted to start a second project working with a group that was challenging from a social perspective. In October of 2010, while serving in Peace Corps Romania, a Peace Corps staff member suggested that for my secondary project I teach English as a foreign language at a branch of the Austrian-based international non-profit humanitarian NGO, *Concordia*, that was based in my Peace Corps site in the city of Ploiești in Prahova County, Romania. I began teaching English at two
Concordia facilities, Casa Austria and Casa Eva – Austria House and Eva House – that both provided family-type housing to orphans and single mothers.

One day, while visiting Concordia country-wide headquarters in, Bucharest, I happened to see a poster advertising social work with street children near a subway stop, which reminded me of the Belzberg’s documentary, Children Underground.

I decided to correspond with Concordia’s administrative manager, asking if I could work with the street worker to learn and develop relationships with the children on the streets in Bucharest. She initially thought it was a bad idea and felt I should first prove my commitment by continuing to teach English at the facilities for orphans. We corresponded every week from October until June of 2012, when she left her position and was replaced by a second administrative manager whom I convinced to connect me with the social worker in Bucharest.

I took the Romanian CFR train from my Peace Corps site in Ploiești to Bucharest’s Gara de Nord and waited to meet the social worker so that I could receive training to work with the street children. However, the social worker failed to show up and the new administrative manager felt bad since I had spent money on two train tickets so she decided to connect me with someone named Alin who had lived in Concordia’s family-type housing and said he knew people on the streets. I met up with Alin and his sister, who said that if I paid him 20 RON (USD 4.70) he would take a Peace Corps Volunteer Leader, Katrina, and myself, to meet a community of street children and adults living in an abandoned restaurant behind a policlinic6 across the street from the Gara de Nord Canal. Katrina, Alin and I went to the place Gara de Nord Canal members call the baracă – the shed – where we met canal members. We were followed by one of the pește of the Gara de Nord, Laurențiu, who wore a Hello Kitty hat and was curious why we were there. In the baracă, I took pictures with my camera of Gara de Nord Canal members, including Lenuța, and took down notes as Alin explained and introduced us to who everyone was and explained their positions in the Gara de Nord social structure.

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6 Provides treatment for outpatients in the dispensary or department of a hospital (Merriam Webster 2020).
Alin talked about how one of the men sitting in the middle of a group of children, George, was a pedophile. Alin showed us a woman, Narcisa, who was shivering in the hot summer weather while wrapped in blankets because she was undergoing withdrawals from drug addiction. As I turned away from Narcisa, I met the drug boss, Bruce Lee, who conversed with Alin, Katrina, and me briefly. After crossing the street to the *Parcul Gării de Nord* – The Northern Train Station Park – we were introduced to three single mothers and an ex-madame who had gone to prison for prostituting under-age girls.

**How I built a rapport with the Gara de Nord Canal Community Members**

On an evening in June 2012, the *pește*, Laurențiu, conversed with 4 to 5 sex workers who were waiting for customers at one corner of the Gara de Nord. Alin claimed the sex workers tested positive for HIV and would sleep with customers without telling them. Eventually, the *pește* and sex workers crossed the boulevard and joined us in the park. I sat down on a bench in a small park to one side of the train station with Laurențiu and several sex workers and had a conversation with them. While this might not seem like much, it set the tone of my research. I was there not only to study the canal, but to see how the larger system worked, and to gain the trust of the canal I would need their support and trust in return. I explained to them that unlike other journalists who had come to learn the drama of their lives, I was here for academic purposes. I was more interested in accuracy than emotional resonance. Alin explained the major events that had happened at the Gara de Nord in the last couple of years such as police raids, the spread of drug addiction and people who had died in the canals. By learning about various people, events, and the history of the Gara de Nord Canal Community, I was able to learn how to situate myself within it as an informed observer.

I was told it would help build rapport if I learned Rromani, the language spoken by people of Roma ethnicity within their families. A disproportionate amount of people in the Gara de Nord Canal Community were Roma families who were evicted from houses by police due to structural racism in Bucharest. On May 13, 2012, I was invited to start learning Rromani from a government official who worked in the Rromani Affairs office in Ploiești’s city hall, Ion Micuța, and we were constructing a Rromani-English dictionary together. Although everyone in the Gara de Nord Canal also spoke Romanian, my
knowledge of the Rromani language was a conversation starter and helped communicate ideas and feelings that were not found in the Romanian language.

On the next trip to Gara de Nord on the of September 18, 2012, Alin explained that Bruce Lee had been taken to prison for selling drugs and the corruption of minors. Alin suspected Bruce had delivered children to John, a British man who took children to a flat. When Alin asked if he took pictures of the children with their clothes on, the man did not reply. Alin said Laurențiu, the pește whom Katrina and I had met last time, had left the train station, but George, a local pedophile was still in the area. Alin, in addition to discussing the history of the community, also critiqued the various social service systems, explaining that he had been asked to leave Concordia because he defended clients who were treated poorly by staff members. He provided examples such as a pregnant Roma woman, Florina, who was forced to work a full workday at a farm, and a child who was physically abused by staff at another orphanage. Learning stories such as these inspired the sub-narrative within my thesis that people preferred to live in the Gara de Nord Canal as a result of the abuses in state centers.

On October 18, 2012, after Bruce Lee left prison, I asked Alin if it would be possible to gain entry into his underground canal system. There was a large man, also named Alin, who guarded the canals with a club. Alin spoke with Bruce Lee who said it was acceptable and allowed us entry to the Gara de Nord Canal. Alin and I entered the tunnels and I began writing field notes with a notebook and pen. The material I collected was part of my independent research project about the lives of people living in the canals below the Gara de Nord. My project had no institutional affiliation but happened with the cooperation of community leaders. My ethnographic research, which I would eventually use for my thesis, was focused on residents of the canal community and visitors, including social workers and some medical personnel who relate to the community between the years 2011 to 2014.

Throughout the fall of 2013 and spring of 2014, I was also volunteering with several NGOs, including Carusel, ARAS (Romanian Association Against AIDS), and Samusocial, all of which worked with homeless people in the Bucharest area. I decided that one way to better my approach to working with the Gara de Nord Canal Community
was to learn the approaches that Romanian social outreach workers had developed to reduce health risks associated with drug use, sex work, and homelessness. At Carusel, I helped facilitate activities for children to make crafts to sell to tourists so that they could remain economically independent as a way of preventing trafficking and interviewed its director, Dr. Ioan. I also attended a master’s class at the University of Bucharest’s School of Sociology and Social Assistance taught by Dr. Marian Ursan, who is an expert at the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and has developed programs for people involved in commercial sex and injecting drug use (personal experience, Ursan 2014). In addition, I spent time with the outreach workers at Carusel at exhibitions and concerts that aimed to raise awareness about marginalized groups, poverty, and social justice in the war on drugs in Bucharest (personal experience, Carusel 2014). These experiences taught me how art could be used to campaign for social justice initiatives at the street level. Towards the end of my time in Romania, I tabled social justice events that were in solidarity with a group of residents from a predominantly Roma neighborhood who were demonstrating against their evictions by state police. Moments of activism and solidarity such as this inspired my thoughts on how to write about marginalized communities. I think it is the responsibility of scholars to highlight points of social justice when communities mobilize against illegitimate authority. I also spent time riding in an ambulance to the Gara de Nord and other sections of Bucharest with social outreach workers at Samusocial and ARAS to observe health checkups (personal experience, Samusocial and ARAS 2014). I interviewed two of ARAS’s social outreach workers, Nicoleta and Constantin, who passed out syringes and knew clients at the Gara de Nord Canal. Learning the social work approaches of people like Dr. Ioan, Nicoleta, and Constantin informed my ability to conduct conversations with the Gara de Nord Canal Community and built a rapport that reflected the model of outreach being put in place by my peers.
Stages of participant observation ethnographic research

I used the participant observation method for my ethnographic research. Participant observation, “entails spending a considerable amount of time with research participants in their natural settings as they perform day-to-day activities, observing these behaviors and listening to the comments and conversations of participants, and recording this information as field notes for later analysis” (Schensul and LeCompte 2013, 281). My participant observation employed targeted sampling, documenting time and locations (largely the Gara de Nord Canal) that abandoned youth and former abandoned youth congregated in for various activities (Clatts, Davis, Atillasoy 1995, 122-23). There were several stages that I went through in documenting the group living in the canal. The first stage involved gaining the community’s trust that my field notes would not be used to aid the police. The second stage involved moving from field notes to video footage of interviews with canal members. I hoped that this stage of moving between materials would create synergy between vision and methodology, which has been shown to increase the reliability of field research on street children (Lucchini 1996, 167-170). The final stage involved publishing a piece about the passing of a canal member, letting canal members use my recording equipment, and letting them know in advance that I was leaving to say our final goodbyes.

After my initial contact in 2011, I was euphoric about the possibility of learning about how the underground canal’s society was structured and discovering more about its history. Before I could learn details of the community, I continued to build rapport by
having conversations with people, learning about their lives, and sharing some of my own life experiences with them as well. In October of 2012, Bruce Lee invited Alin and me to use my Canon Powershot SX40 Camera to film in their Gara de Nord canal community, most community members giving tacit consent as well. I turned my camera off if a Gara de Nord Canal Community resident said they did not want to be filmed.

I returned several times to the Gara de Nord Canal in the late fall of 2012 and spring of 2013. However, I began documenting the community on a routine basis in the fall of 2013, entering the canal at least once a week on average. I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews, the majority of which happened from January through March of 2014 with some additional interviews taking place from April until August of 2014 and late June of 2017. My questions from the semi-structured interviews are listed below:

Intrebari/ Interview Questions

1. Cum te cheama?
   What is your name?

2. Cati ani ai?
   How old are you?

3. Ce îți place să faci în timpul liber?
   What do you like to do in your free time?

4. Ce faci de obicei într-o zi obișnuită?
   What do you usually do on an ordinary day?

5. Care este anotimpul tău preferat? De ce?
   What is your favourite season? Why?

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7 The ‘u’ is included in ‘favourite’ and ‘colour’ because in Romania they would have used the British system of English-speaking. I wanted the interview questions to have familiar ways of spelling words in English so as not to distract them from their thoughts during our conversations about the personal parts of their lives and community.
6. Ce îți place aici, în canal?
What do you like here, in the underground?

7. Care este culoarea ta preferată?
What is your favourite colour?

8. Ce îți place cel mai mult să mănânci?
What do you like most to eat?

9. Îți plac jucăriile? Ce jucărie ți-ar plăcea să ai?
Do you like toys? What toy would you like to have?

10. Te uiti la televizor? Ce programe urmărești mai des?
Do you watch TV? What programs do you watch more often?

11. Ai fost vreodată la școală? Cât timp ai fost la școală? Când ai fost ultima dată?
Have you ever been to school? For how long have you been to school? When was the last time?

12. Știi să scrii? Știi să citești?
Can you write? Can you read?

13. Asculți muzică? Ce muzică îți place?
Do you listen to music? What kind of music do you like?

14. Câte persoane sunt în total aici?
How many people are here in total?

15. Câte femei sunt aici? Dar câți copii sunt aici?
How many women are here? But how many children are here?

16. Sunt femei aici care au copii? Câte femei stau cu copiii lor aici?
Are there women who have children? How many women stay with their children here?

17. De unde au venit copiii de aici? Cum au ajuns să stea aici în canal? De cât timp sunt copiii aici în canal?
From where did the children come here? How come they are staying here in the underground? For how long are the children here in the underground?

18. Cam de cât timp stau persoanele de aici în canalul acesta?
For how long the people here are staying in this underground?

19. Unde muncesc ei? Ce loc de muncă au?
Where are they working? What job do they have?

20. Cum de staţi în canalul acesta de la Gara de Nord şi nu în alt canal din oraş?
How come you are staying in this underground in Gara Nord and not in another underground in the city?

Of course, the questions are age-specific, so I would leave out questions like “Do you like toys,” if I was addressing an adult. Geography Professor and interpreter Larisa and I decided including questions such as “what is your favorite color” would be fun for people to answer and help build their confidence to answer some of the more technical questions that came up later in the interview. I collected my field notes when I was not filming interviews or the canals in general, and people were aware I was going to leave their Gara de Nord Canal Community months in advance (Taylor 1991, 243). Starting in the fall of 2013, I would often bring a half dozen oranges, several packages of tissues, and a 5-liter jug of water with me as I entered the canal tunnel. People in the subteran canals
often offered me coffee, chocolate, and bread, so I would offer them some oranges in exchange as a way of promoting healthy eating. Some of the Gara de Nord Canal members were sick with sinus infections in the winter so I brought packets of tissues so that they could blow their nose. I had initially offered people notebook paper as well, but when I saw some of them using it to snort NPDs, I decided to stop to prevent contributing to their drug use in any way. However, the paper material of tissues is too soft and the powder sticks to the paper, so no one used it to ingest NPDs. Finally, the 5-liter jug of water was because people wanted clean water and would beg for 5-gallon jugs of freshwater from local restaurants for over an hour at times.

As I gained the trust of Gara de Nord Canal Canal Members, they also gained mine. Eventually, I began handing over my Canon camera to some Gara de Nord Canal members and they would film each other and conduct interviews, every so often interviewing me. I remember following behind Bruce Lee as he ran around the Canal with my camera, asking everyone for their input. I was worried because if he dropped the camera it would be expensive to repair but I was also excited that Bruce and other community members were as enthusiastic as I was to film. Eventually, the community purchased a camera of their own, and while the majority of its footage was used to keep track of customers purchasing illicit drugs, they would occasionally film each other as well and enjoyed pointing out that they were now filming me.

After the passing of a Gara de Nord Canal member, Lenuța, I wrote an article entitled, Lenuța’s Fight: Seeing Beyond Victims in the Sewers of Bucharest, which was published on the website for Redevenim, an NGO that worked with homeless people in Bucharest. In July, I took a few copies of the article to the Gara de Nord baracă- the shack- and left them for people to read. I returned a few days later to ask if anyone had any critique of the article or did not want me to publish it. Gara de Nord Canal members said they liked the article and hoped I would share the story with others. The article inspired a twenty-five-page academic journal paper that I wrote in the evenings during my second Peace Corps tour in Uganda. That article inspired this thesis. My last night at the Gara de Nord Canal, in September of 2014, I spent showing everyone photos that I had taken of them. I asked if anyone would be interested in writing their names on the backs of
the photos so that I could keep them as a way of remembering the Gara de Nord Canal Community hopefully to return someday. Canal members were eager to put their names on the back of the photos, which I kept during my time in Uganda and still have today.

**Challenges during interviews**

I did incur some challenges during my interviews and filming, as I will discuss in this section. I interviewed Gara de Nord Canal members, reading the interview questions if they were illiterate from behind my Canon SX40 camera, usually propped up on a brick, someone’s jacket or my arm so that it sat at the person’s height. The interviews generally took about ten to forty-five minutes depending on how much people were willing to divulge about their personal lives. In the interviews, people spoke about their daily routine, the history of their community, and demographics within the Gara de Nord Canal. Some challenges faced during my interviews had to do with people deciding not to answer or feeling concerned about answering certain questions. This section will explain the details of these challenges and how they were managed.

In any social system, there are power dynamics, and I found that in the case of the Gara de Nord Canal Community, those dynamics were heightened by the desperation of poverty and limited resources. I situated myself as a non-judgmental observer who was open to hearing what people chose to share. However, there were limits. For example, I had to make sure that Bruce Lee felt that my interviews and conversations with other community members were not challenging his system of rule. I accomplished this by showing that I made efforts to meet with him first and have a conversation, share a cup of coffee, or at least acknowledge his presence as a sign of respect before taking out my camera to film. I also always asked if it was possible to film. I learned that for the participants themselves, the system of rule in the subteran was restrictive in some specific ways. In response, I tried to accommodate their wishes and functioned within this system when taking field notes, photographing, filming, or conducting video interviews.

I turned off the camera when research participants requested it. I turned off the camera if participants wanted time to deliberate whether to have the camera recording the interview. If the subject decided the interview should end, I turned off my camera. If the subject wanted to have an interview conducted with them but did not want their face on the
screen, I left the lens cap on my camera. I found that in some instances, research participants refused to answer my questions altogether. If the subject refused to answer a single question but indicated they wanted to finish answering the rest, I would skip whichever question they requested to decline. Some of the instances of the aforementioned refusals are elaborated on below, and the participants’ responses are contextualized to demonstrate nuance.

Perceived power relations sometimes affected whether people answered my interview questions. One of the Gara de Nord Canal women, Iolanda, answered with an abstract explanation about the number of people in the canals, not explaining how long people had lived in the canal, and deciding to praise their boss, Bruce Lee, saying, “He offers us help. He offers what others don’t give. He offers us many things that we never had” (personal interview, Iolanda 2014). In my view, these excessive moments of praise were often a product of the anxiety people felt about pushing against an understanding that they were to keep the details of the community’s history private (personal interview, Iolanda 2014).

Iolanda asked someone off screen if she would be heard over the camera’s video recorder (there was loud music playing in the background of a lot of the interviews) and indicated that she did not want me asking a member of the canal community any more questions (personal interview, Iolanda 2014). Any information that was revealed increased the chances of their community receiving additional state surveillance at a time when legislative changes determined some of their activities to be illegal, which I will further detail in Chapter 6.

I think these forms of censorship can be better explained with a description of the larger social order that their boss, Bruce Lee, had maintained, which will be the subject of Chapter 3 of this thesis.

I learned that some Gara de Nord Canal members reminded each other to remain secretive about this aspect of their lives. At one point, a man chastised Alexandra for dealing drugs during a video recording, remarking, “you are doing this only where someone else is here [meaning the interviewer] you are talking only in inappropriate situations (personal interview, Horațiu 2014).” However, it seemed these informal rules
were not necessarily followed. Alexandra went on to remark later in the interview, “I drink and I used drugs and I smashed the windows of the night shelter,” that she slept in, before arriving at the Gara de Nord to meet her fellow members in the canals (personal interview, Alexandra 2014). At the beginning of my filming, I spoke with many of the drug dealers who told me they were uncomfortable with the filming of their illicit drug dealing activities in the canals. If they said they were uncomfortable, I would turn off the camera. One of the Gara de Nord Canal dealers, Dante, was not comfortable with video recordings until well after a year had passed.

I noticed that my privileged status as a wealthy American may have influenced some Gara de Nord Canal members expecting a reward in return for their interview or giving answers they hope would catch the attention of an international audience. For example, in one interview, a woman, Denisa, commented that if people responded that, “maybe you’ll come back with stuff to help us. You send these photos outside the country (personal interview, Denisa 2014).” I responded that I would need consent to release the photos and that I was not sure that sending photos outside the country would garner any results. Another canal community member asked at the end of an interview. If I would give him something after he answered my questions. I reminded him that as was described at the beginning of the interview I was not allowed to give anyone anything in exchange for the interview because doing so would exert undue pressure, throwing off the value of the social research. I did bring oranges, Kleenex, and water down for the group in general, but I did not give anyone special items for their interviews. In the middle of an interview, a member, Dragoș, asked for money to buy a juice box and corn (personal interview, Dragoș2014). I answered his question with the same response as I did for Horațiu.

**Ethical Considerations**

The field notes, photographs, and footage used for this thesis were collected through ethnographic field research that was conducted before enrollment at Clark University from 2011 to 2014 and again in 2017. Clark University International Development, Community, and Environment’s Masters of Health Science Professor, Dr.

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8 When Dante finally changed his mind, however, he insisted that the researcher show commitment to filming the canal community.
Ellen Foley permitted me to use the research for a thesis on May 29, 2019 provided that it: “does not include minors, identify individuals involved in illegal activities, or include data that places a subject at risk.” This email is in response to previous information from Clark University’s Institutional Review Board explaining:

“The IRB has determined that some of the data collected for the documentary can be used, but there are these three restrictions:

1) Any data using minors
2) Anything addressing illegal activities conducted by an individual who is identifiable in the data
3) Anything that would place a subject at more than minimal risk.

Because you have what the OSPR designates in its New Rule as “broad consent,” the consent forms that you have already collected—despite the fact that they were not collected under the auspices of an IRB—would be satisfactory, as long as none of the above criteria are violated.”

Consent forms

Ten participants consented to be filmed. The names of people who signed consent forms will have their names changed in the thesis. Ten people consented to have their names and information included. I received consent to produce the thesis when I received consent to initiate data and filming collection.

I received consent from Hora Florin (Bruce Lee) in 2014 when I was interviewing him. I have his consent form and I have video footage of him signing the form and giving his consent. As was discussed above in the methodology, I first met Bruce Lee outside of the canal in June of 2012. One of my first interviews was with Ramona Botezatu who I had met outside of the canal and who discussed stigmas surrounding HIV/AIDS with Alin and me. I had met Darius, whose underground name was “Munte” — mountain — when I was in the Gara de Nord Canal and spoke with him about his experiences in the canal (personal interview, Darius 2013). Bianca made a brief appearance, although she was preoccupied with organizing a bag she was carrying at the time. I met Mihaela in the canal, and she spoke with me about how she had a long relationship with Bruce Lee and respected him as a leader. I filmed the rest of the people who signed consent forms in the
canal and let them speak about whatever they wanted to, even if it did not necessarily relate to the interview question. All names have been changed to protect the identity of participants except for Bruce Lee who is a public figure. All faces and any identifying markings have been blurred.

**Conclusion**

The approach of participant observation was used in the course of writing this thesis. I found there were challenges to the filming such as participants indicating they could not share certain information or wanted the camera turned off altogether. I turned off my camera and I skipped questions when requested. Some participants consented to having their names and information included. While their information has been included, I have changed names by the request of interviewees unless they were a popular and known figure such as Bruce Lee.
CHAPTER 5: THE RISE OF SEWER COMMUNITIES IN BUCHAREST

“The fetus is the property of the entire society.”
— Nicolae Ceaușescu, 1966, President of Romania

“I don’t believe in law or [the] President.”
— Bruce Lee, 2012

“I have one principle and it is that life is about choice.”
— Alin, former Gara de Nord Canal member and addict, 2012

There are communities across the globe that live under the streets of major capital cities in drainage pipes, sewers, and central heating tunnels. Some of these communities in African, Asian, European, and North and South American urban centers will be described in greater detail in Chapter 7. What makes the Gara de Nord sewer community of Romania unique from any other is that many of its leading occupants who are thirty and older trace their history back to a set of direct state-based policies and politics that affected their mental and physical health in very specific ways. These state-based policies of anti-abortion, orphanage, and HIV/AIDS censorship made the health status of sewer community leadership inseparable from state policy. Sewer community members, social outreach workers, and academics noted that after Romania’s revolution the same governmental heads whose policies had paved the way for the creation of sewer communities continued to rule Romania. This chapter will first focus on one of the most well-known stories about how an extreme form of state interference on the reproductive rights of women paved the way for a proliferation of abuse and neglect in state orphanages, the state-based administration of a viral pandemic, and, eventually, the rise of sewer communities in Bucharest.

Nicolae Ceaușescu came into power in Romania in 1965, implementing a particular form of Marxism-Leninism heavily influenced by Stalinism and by Chinese and Korean
communism of the 1970s (Danta 1993, 174; Holman 2005; Steavenson 2014). The ideology and policies adopted by Ceaușescu, based on systematization, totalitarianism, and his interpretation of communism will be referred to as “Ceaușescuism” (Danta 1993, 172; Holman 2005). Bruce Lee, who was in his forties at the time of the research, claims that it was after the overthrow of Ceaușescu in 1989 that he discovered the sewers at Gara de Nord (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2014). However, a social worker, who grew up in the Gara de Nord Canal, contradicted Bruce’s version and said that he spent part of his childhood in the sewers even during Ceaușescu’s presidency. If this is the case, why did Bruce Lee and other people choose sewers under Ceaușescu’s administration over state orphanages? The answer to this question lies with an understanding of the politics of Romania’s last communist president.

One important policy of the Ceaușescu period in particular, the anti-abortion law, affected the Gara de Nord Canal’s formation. Ceaușescu’s interpretation of Stalin’s belief that population growth would fuel economic growth led to his government issuing the harsh pronatalist Decree 770 in 1966. It criminalized abortion for women under 40 with fewer than four children, proclaiming that the fetus was societal property. Its purpose was to increase Romania’s population from 20 to 30 million by the year 2000 (Andronache 1989; Breslau, 1990; Steavenson, 2014; Nachescu 2014, 59). The state’s interference stripped women of autonomy both over their bodies and reproductive rights. The anti-abortion law forced many women to give birth to more children than their families could provide for, and some sent their children away to state institutions, including orphanages (Gillie 2019; Walker, 2010, 2011).

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9 “Ceaușescuism” refers here to the politics and policies specific to the Ceaușescu regime and makes no generalizations about all communisms.
State institutions for children were built in Romania after the Second World War (Steavenson 2014). State institutions will be defined as buildings devoted to public, educational, or charitable programs (Webster 1999, 683), supported wholly or in part by the state. This chapter focuses specifically on orphanages, which will be defined as residential institutions for the care and education of orphans (Oxford 2019). Ceaușescu’s anti-abortion law increased the number of children entering these state institutions – an estimated 100,000 children were housed in 700 orphanages in 1989 (Andronache 1989; Toma 2012; Steavenson 2014).

Abuses suffered in these state institutions for children, in the context of Ceaușescu’s economic policies, explain why many children moved from centers to sewer communities. After 1982, Ceaușescu redirected the budget towards paying off foreign debt. He sent money to institutions such as the World Bank, making Romania a “model ‘debtor’, at least from the creditors’ point of view” (Kapur, Lewis, Webb 1997, 1061). This debt-repayment effort, however, caused the economy to plummet, and conditions in the orphanages to worsen (Andronache 1989; Steavenson 2014). In the orphanages, infrastructure deteriorated, food was stolen, children were neglected, medical care was lacking, and some caretakers had become abusive (Kim 2010, 96). Not surprisingly, some children ran away to, among other places, the sewers beneath Bucharest’s Gara de Nord (Andronache 1989; Steavenson, 2014; Odobescu 2015). After the overthrow and
execution of the Ceauşescus in 1989, the atrocities committed against Romanian children became public knowledge via coverage by the foreign press: “Disabled children with bone-stick limbs tied to their beds, cross-eyed toddlers who couldn’t walk, malnourished babies left unattended in cribs with metal bars, little corpses stacked in basements” made international news (Steavenson, 2014; Andronache 1989). Cristina Fierbinteanu, an outreach worker for the Romanian Association Against AIDS (ARAS) and coordinator of the Opiate Substitution Treatment Center (which conducts outreach medical and psychological work with people in the Gara de Nord Canal), explained that, amidst these revelations, “In 1990, some orphanages closed, people who were around 18 at that time ended up on the streets. And right now, they have children, and their children have children,” resulting in generational poverty (personal interview, Fierbinteanu 2014; see also Andronache 1989; Ciorniciuc 2014). These closures forced children of the state to make autonomous decisions for themselves and, eventually, their families.

Figure XIX. Orphans at a state institution in Gradinari, Romania in 1989, the year Ceauşescu was overthrown (Ellsen 1989).
Some abandoned youth living on the streets had HIV/AIDS because in the mid-1980s Ceaușescu’s Ministry of Health and other authorities refused to recognize the possibility of the infection and barred doctors from discussion or diagnosis of the illness, which was referred to as a “capitalist disease” (Gillie 1990; Bohlen 1990; Dente and Hess 2006; Matic 2006, 136). Syringe injections of blood were, at that time, purported to “boost immunity (Williams 1990).” Doctors, professionals, and nurses would end up giving children the iatrogenic HIV/AIDS virus in orphanages around the Gara de Nord, among other places, by using unsterilized hypodermic needles (Bencomo 2006; Steavenson, 2014;). At that time, there were orphanages located near the Gara de Nord that gave blood transfusions to the children living there, reusing unsterilized hypodermic medical needles to save on cost (Gillie 1990). Therefore, many children who fled the orphanages were HIV/AIDS positive and some moved into sewers, huffing Aurolac as a form of relief (Andronache 1989; Bohlen 1990; Bencomo 2006).

Figure XX. Orphans in 1990 line up for food in one of Romania’s orphanages (Charlton 2015).

10 Aurolac or “bronze,” a brand of synthetic silver paint used for huffing, is either bought in bottled form at five lei (1.22 USD) or a small amount is measured into a plastic bag for one leu (.24 USD). People living in Gara de Nord community huffed Aurolac out of plastic bags and drank alcohol, not switching to injectable drugs until 2008, with the coming of synthetic drugs, as they could not afford heroin (personal interviews, Bruce Lee, Codruț 2013, 2014).
In 1997, the European Union (EU) said that Romania could become a member state as long as it reformed, among other things, its policies for abandoned youth, turning state-sponsored childcare into a political issue (Andronache 1989; Steavenson 2014). The number of Romanian children separated from their parents significantly declined from roughly 100,000 in 1990, the year after Ceaușescu fell from power to 60,000 in 2014 (Steavenson, 2014). The government plans to close all placement centers, approximately 170 in total, by 2020 (Steavenson, 2014).

Many people entered state institutions because they were abandoned by their families, abused within families (personal interview, Constantin 2014), because of “fights with their parents”, or because “their parents have died” (personal interview, Mihaela 2013). After joining the EU in 2007, Romania was hit in 2010 by the global economic crisis, and the number of children entering the state system increased for the first time in 15 years. At the same time, caretakers’ salaries decreased for the first time in five years (Steavenson 2014). This decrease in state employee salaries has perpetuated, and perhaps even increased, abuses against children. But escaping from institutions to live in the sewers did not remove children from abuses. Still, understanding how the abuse differed in the two places can help explain the preference for life in the sewers.

Children were abused physically, emotionally, and sexually in Ceaușescu’s orphanages, as well as neglected (Gloviczki 2001). Sexual abuse is believed to have furthered the transmission of HIV/AIDS in orphanages. The staff in Ceaușescu’s orphanages traumatized youth with various forms of emotional abuse. Staff refused to talk to children, threatened them with blackmail, mocked them, made them wear inappropriate clothing, and did “not provid[e] opportunities for children to make their own choices and decisions” (Rus, Stativa, Pennings, Cross, Ekas, Purvis, Parris, 2013). Children could make choices and decisions in the sewers that were not available in state centers. Physical abuse in these orphanages ranged from light (spanking, kicking, and hair-pulling) to severe physical beatings, such as with a plank or wet rope (Rus, Stativa, Pennings, Cross, Ekas, Purvis, Parris, 2013). This resulted in children with high rates of developmental

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11 Names will be changed for members of the Gara de Nord community rather than to protect their anonymity.
disabilities and mortality (Morrison 2004). Gad (2015) has theorized that protections, such as increased security existed in the Gara de Nord Canal that could not be found in Ceaușescu’s orphanages. Relationships that included emotional warmth were often easier to find in the sewers than in state institutions (Steavenson 2014).

Sometimes the decision to enter the criminalized sewer system is not a free choice but is forced by discrimination in the legal system. For example, homeless people are required to have temporary identification that is issued by the Department of Social Protection through its Population Evidence Bureau. People cannot enter public housing or access other services without IDs, but the Bureau uses quotas limiting the number of IDs it will issue each month. The quota appears to be arbitrary and leave many people with no other recourse but to find shelter in the sewers (personal interview, Larisa 2014). This irony is not lost on the Gara de Nord Canal. One resident, Alexandra, declared that the police were keeping their “eye on” petty criminals, beating them while “not beating the thieves who have a home and food” (personal interview, Alexandra 2014). Since many activities in which the sewer community engages have been declared illegal, the state in effect is forcing people into criminal activity.

Why abuse in the sewers is preferred to abuse in legal centers

“Two hundred police,” recounted a social worker who was raised in the Gara de Nord Canal, used to invade the sewers every night under Ceaușescu to make sure people never became organized (personal written interview, anonymous 2013). From 1952 to 1989, Securitate, the secret communist police, would inspect Bucharest’s sewers, among other places, for any signs of political opposition, during government parades (Deletant 1999, 144). In the past, those who were victims of and opposed to the state congregated in Bucharest’s sewers, which served as a socio-political sanctuary. There were forced removals of nearly 40,000 people in Bucharest alone and more in Romania at large, all in the name of “systematization,” to redesign the capital to be modernized, progressive, and economical (Manolescu 2015). People chose to move into sewers, among other places, during and after forced removals. The state did not want people organizing into a movement of political opposition against its abuses in a place where they could not be monitored. Forced removals within Bucharest increased homelessness which, despite
police repression, in part led to the development of underground communities such as the Gara de Nord Canal. In certain circumstances, alternatives to centers are not chosen out of desperation, but because some of them can fit the desired land needs of the homeless more than homeless shelters.

Because of the way they were constructed, sewers were less accessible to police and also safer than orphanages. Safety, then, meant people had better opportunity to manage abusive relationships in a place where they had the option of leaving and were less likely to be brutalized by police. Hot water pipes also provided better heat. Food, some of it left by train passengers, was often more nutritious and shared more fairly (personal interview, Larisa 2014). In the orphanages, food was often pilfered by underpaid staff (Steavenson 2014). Most importantly, children in the sewers felt, even amid abuse, that they were presented with choices, however limited, and could sometimes find a protector.

In his sewer community, Bruce Lee once physically beat Lenuța after she implicated him in raping her. Bruce Lee also beat other people, employed mob justice, abused children, and did not seem too concerned about the presence of pedophiles. Pești and madams would physically abuse their sex workers; drug dealers would inject children with synthetic drugs to addict them at an early age. Given these dangers, the preference for sewers shows how traumatizing life in the state institutions must have been. Though the sewers may still have been risky, people elected to live their own lives, join communities with leaders who may allow for more possibilities, manage abuse somewhat better, and have options that are often absent from state institutional control.

Bruce related how he spent his childhood in an orphanage in Râmnicu Vâlcea, one of the most notorious during the Ceaușescu years, while going to school in Băbeni village (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2013, 2014; see also Gad 2015). Bruce explained that his teachers thought he was a “fighting man,” a “bad person,’ and a truant (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2014). However, the school administration may have chosen to look the other way at the actions of students like Bruce, presumably owing to the loyalty they displayed to Ceaușescu, which had its own benefits. For example, students who demonstrated their allegiance to communism could be admitted to school based on party loyalty rather than test scores, received better deals on tuition, and free textbooks (Phillips 2010, 8).
Educational opportunities such as these would have been especially enticing to orphans who did not have families to cover their finances.

The Ceaușescus were executed in 1989, and Romania’s communist-era ended (Graham-Harrison 2014). After their execution, pressure mounted to reform public education. Government Decision 461/1991 attempted to change the legal framework of education. However, reformers were influenced by political beliefs and subjective opinions when restructuring the legal frameworks of education, including high school education (Birzea 1996). A Romanian neo-communist author argued against this transition, believing in involution reform, or the idea that post-communist transition reforms “caused social insecurity, violence and falling standards of living” (Birzea 1996, 105). Inequities increased in Romania under the transitionary economy, for teachers and those loyal to their former leader lost their power in the schooling system. Teachers’ positions and work performance shifted from following Ceaușescu’s state-based, unchallenged political party guidelines to holding a relatively more ambiguous parent-teacher relationship (Popa, Acedo 2006, 105). Though corporal punishment in schools had been outlawed in Romania since 1948, as is confirmed in the Education Law (Art. 157), this law was not enforced (Corporal Punishment of children in Romania 2018). Parents, who had more power under the new political system, organized to stop teachers from administering corporal punishment to their students. As this was happening, themes surrounding various forms of child abuse came to the fore in the nation’s political dialogue. This included abuses from classmates like Bruce, who would have relied on violence in Băbeni, Târgu Jiu, and Bistrita’s orphanages under Ceaușescu’s administration to survive (Ciorniciuc 2018; Odobescu 2015). At that time, orphanage supervisors were notorious for cultivating violence and abusing children under their care.

Parental pressure on the school administration to end child abuse and bullying combined with Bruce’s loss of status as a follower of Ceaușescu may have influenced his headmaster’s decision. “After Ceaușescu died, the director threw me out of school,” Bruce commented. Bruce drawing connections between his behavior in school, Ceaușescu’s death, and the director’s decision to expel him fit with circumstances surrounding Romania’s transition from Ceaușescuism to capitalism. After his expulsion, Bruce traveled
Romania as a “vagabond” (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2014). Eventually, Bruce arrived in Bucharest, lived in “piața Unirii, [piața] Romana,” and other train stations and locations for many years, making connections with the local homeless populations, before securing his position as leader of the sewer community\textsuperscript{12} (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2013; Alexandrescu 2002, 53).

**Why criminalized sewers are preferred to legal centers after 1989**

Romanian Police abuse in response to the state criminalization of acts of survival within the sewer community continued with the help of discriminatory legislation. Local Police Law no. 155/2010, grants Romanian Police the authority to “identify beggars and homeless persons and place them in the care of social assistance public service so that they can be helped (Housing Rights Watch 2012).” To give the criminalizing abuse context, during a police raid, authorities used this law to forcefully remove people whom the officers defined as “beggars” and “homeless,” bringing them to social assistance elsewhere in the city. This gave the police an excuse for forced removals, during which they often “confiscated” valuable items from the sewer community. Since these occurrences happened frequently, the freedoms canal members worked to attain were often short-lived. From the Securitate inspecting the sewers in 1952 to police abuse in 2014, there is a history of the state criminalizing people who chose the sewers over state institutions. The police are treated as an abuser whose decisions were resisted and managed by the sewer community.

The criminalized system in the Gara de Nord Canal is preferred over some legal systems which perpetuate or even increase state abuse. One must use continuities to explain why homeless people chose to adapt the sewers for their survival, how it was criminalized by the state, and how long state abuse towards sewer communities, especially those at Gara de Nord, has occurred. This will support the main argument for why sewers

\textsuperscript{12} Gabriela Alexandrescu’s 2002 International Labour Organization document, *Working Street Children in Bucharest: A Rapid Assessment*, describes “Op. - Did a lot of kids make money for Bruce Lee? (Bruce Lee is one of the leaders of the street children’s groups in Bucharest).”

“C.S. - Yes, while I was living in Dristor several children made money for him (George, Faianta, the Moldavians, etc.) (Alexandrescu 2002, 53).”
are preferred by some over centers. Criminalization of unpaid electricity hookups will first
be described to build context for why sewers continue to be criminalized.

Since Ceauşescu’s downfall, some people in the sewers have become addicted to
injectable drugs and as a consequence of discrimination, no longer were taken in by
homeless shelters (personal correspondence, Roşca 2016). For addicts who use injectable
drugs, constant light is important, since people need to see their veins for an injection. At
the end of the 19th Century, Bucharest had two train stations, the first kerosene street light
system in the world, and sewer systems (Danta 1993, 170; Oil 2007). From at least 2012,
the sewers at Gara de Nord were kept well-lit, this time with electricity rather than
kerosene, for the homeless population living there (personal interview 2013; see also
Ciorniciuc 2014).

In 2012, the possibility of electricity all day and night were options injectable drug
users did not have in care centers. Members of the Gara de Nord Canal informed me they
were “stealing electricity” at night to have for “24 hours,” hiding wires taken from a
telephone pole and extended into sewers with “a rock, so others can’t see” because they
“were poor (personal interview, Mircea 2014).” “We are stealing from the state,” a
member of the Gara de Nord Canal once told me as they illegally connected to Bucharest’s
electricity, hooking up to the electric grid (personal interview, Petre 2014). Richard
Pithouse writes of people organizing around and creating some autonomy by stealing electricity. He writes of impoverished urban shack settlements using illegal electricity hookups in South Africa which are often criminalized and forcefully disconnected by police (Pithouse 2008). Like South African shack settlements, Romanian sewer communities may form around the autonomy stolen electricity creates but are often criminalized by police. Once in the criminalized sewers Bruce and the community adapted in various ways which were criminal.

Some academics, such as Eric Hobsbawm (1959; 1969; 1973), theorize that global capitalism would make cities more unequal and impoverished people would defy state oppression by legalized means. Hobsbawm (1959; 1969; 1973) argues that the transition to a capitalist economy would transform social banditry, or the taking of material capital from the wealthy to the poor, into “more progressive” (legal) forms of defiance, under the assumption that with capitalism came a more lawful state. However, even when the criminalized Gara de Nord Canal Community attempted to abide by the law, no such change occurred. For example, in 2013, the sewer’s residents stopped stealing electricity from the telephone pole, because electricity would be cut, making life difficult for drug addicts who did not want to rupture their veins in the dark. The Gara de Nord Canal bought a generator for this reason but also to show, as Bruce Lee remarked “We have [won] our [. . .] electricity, we don’t buy it [from the city], [and] we don’t steal it from the state (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2014).” While it was not communicated how the funds for the generator were collected, the sentiment of a desire for collective independence was conveyed.

Soon, however, the authorities began to question the legality of the generator, interrogating, as Bruce Lee lamented, “if we have papers for [. . .] the generator. Everyone would want to take something from us, from what we’re doing, and it’s not fair!” (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2014). Police used the sewer community’s lack of papers for the generator as an excuse to invade the premises. From 2011 to 2014, Bruce Lee and others reported that whenever they “organized the underground” “masked police” would “break in”, “beat everyone”, and “steal” “TV’s, devices” “because they don’t have to give [an]
account to anybody so that’s why they steal everything,” as there was “no law for them [underground] to be protected” (personal interviews, Bruce Lee 2012; 2013; 2014).

Bruce kept weapons such as knives, guns and explosive gas canisters and would electrify water to ward off invasions of his treasures. These treasures included, some stolen “oil paintings13” he intended to use for buying “a house or a bloc” for street people one day. He did not use them against police, however, since the brutality of the police towards even petty criminals was a very real threat (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2013; see also Digital Antenna Group April 2013, Ciorniciuc 2014). For example, on 4 March 2014, police officer George Stefan Isopescu murdered 26-year-old Daniel Gabriel Dumitrache, a Roma man who was in custody after being escorted to the police station for allegedly running a one-man racketeering operation from a parking lot a couple subway stops from Gara de Nord Canal (Dorobanțu 2014). Romanian Police have a history of homicide against people engaged in petty crime, especially those who are ethnic minorities

13 Police at one point raided the sewers using tear gas, water hoses, and fire extinguishers to destroy a “barricade” made by the sewer community, handcuffing residents, with the exception of Bruce Lee, who went into hiding. The raid was done to take back stolen paintings to a French citizen (Digital Antenna Group April 2013, Antena 1 November 2013; Kanal D 2013). It was theorized by an outreach worker that wealthier criminals had stolen the paintings and put them in the underground for storage, where they had been seen on a T.V. show about public health of the homeless.
and homeless (Dorobanțu 2014). In 2018, political activist and Harvard scholars Magda Matache and Cornel West co-wrote an article, which described that Roma in Romania and African Americans in the United States share a common history of being disproportionately killed by police as a legacy of slavery and colonialism (Matache and West 2018).

The state as an abuser through police is crucial to this argument. Police invasions in the canal were often hampered by uncapped syringes, bent rebar, barricades made from trash (Digital Antenna Group April 2013), and other obstructions created by homeless abandoned youth to prevent a fast invasion. When there is an abuser in a center that is locked after hours, there is nowhere to physically escape. A state center could not be adapted to waylay the advance of an abuser.

Why sewers are preferred over state centers today

Romania’s National Salvation Front Democratic Party assumed power in the election of May 1990 (BBC 1989; Pop-Eleches 2008, 466-468; Nelson, 2014). Several years later, law 108/1998 replaced law 3/1970, abolishing Ceaușescu’s childcare system by decentralizing child protection authority’s administration (Greenwell 2006). Though national politics and policy have changed since Ceaușescu’s fall, today’s abandoned youth still find reasons to join the sewer communities rather than the state’s institutions for

Figure XXIV: Bruce shows guns and, in the bottom right photo, an explosive gas cannister for defending against police. These images depict weapons that could be used potentially during conflict between some members of the autonomous canal community and the state’s law enforcement.

Twenty-four-year-old Rodica explained that she chose the Gara de Nord Canal because the boss, Bruce Lee (called “father” by canal members), “takes care of me as a protector” (personal interview, Rodica 2013, 2014). Constantin, an outreach worker, and psychologist at ARAS, expanded on this point, describing that the same dangers that occur on the street are found in foster care centers (personal interview, Constantin 2014). After the often under-staffed centers’ employees go home at five o’clock, sometimes an abuser, who is stronger and more manipulative, takes advantage of weaker residents. They may rape their victims as well as abuse them physically, mentally, and emotionally. These abusers cause many to flee to the canals. One orphan said she “came from the orphanage” to the Gara de Nord Canal in the night. Constantin explained, “What’s the difference between what happens in the streets and happens there? In the streets you choose your boss. I’m doing all the things: hand job sex, blow jobs, begging for him . . . but it’s my
choice. I chose him as leader or as a protector; in the orphanage I don’t have that choice. He is the strongest there. I don’t have any other options to choose from” (personal interview, Constantin 2014).  

In 2008, to take control of Gara de Nord’s canal shelter, Bruce used the violence he had practiced in the orphanage, at school, and on the streets to defeat former canal leader, “Van Damme,” intimidated police, and clashed with others besides VanDamme to claim ownership of the subteran community he had known as a child (Pro TV 2013; Ciorniciuc 2014).

Besides offering protection by strongmen like Bruce, as well as warmth and food, Gara de Nord was desirable because access to the train station provides good opportunities for begging and for informal jobs, such as parking cars or car washing on the boulevard (personal interview, Andrei, Bruce Lee 2013, 2014). Residents also can engage in scavenging copper or brass found in trash bins around the city and become part of the synthetic drug trade, which had been introduced to Romania after the collapse of Ceaușescuism (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2013; personal field notes, Valente 2012). Food bought with money from these income-generating activities in the subteran was often “eat[en] together” (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2014). Bruce Lee would make sure that everyone worked and was fed in the evening, especially during Crăciun – Christmas. He wanted to ensure that the next generation would not have to endure the same nutritional hardships as the adults who lived in Ceaușescu’s state institutions for children. Andrei, a member of the Gara de Nord Canal, commented that children entered their community from centers to “eat something warm” as in the canals they were able to choose food that tasted better than the food they ate in centers (personal interview, Andrei 2014). Perhaps more important than physical comforts was the emotional support that residents were able to find in the canals. When asked what kind of emotional support abandoned youth can find in the canals today, Horațiu, one of the residents, replied with one word, “Entourage” (personal interview, Horațiu 2014). He meant that in the canals he can manage relationships, some of which even resemble friendship, whereas in a state system he must deal with whomever the institution chooses to let in. A woman in the canal community, Mălina, added to this, “Here we fall in love” (personal interview 2014).

14 It is of note that the boss being described by a psychologist as “him” is gendered and shows some of the politics of patriarchy within Romanian society.
Figure XXV. Bruce Lee and the madam prepare a meal at Christmas time.
CHAPTER 6: “BUT WHERE IS THE PROMISE?” THE GARA DE NORD SEWER COMMUNITY’S RELATIONSHIP WITH STATE HEALTH SERVICES

“In the hospital the doctor will make a promise, “I swear to help people,” . . . they say, “I promise to help people and save life.” The state of Romania, they make a promise. But where is the promise . . .? You go home, after two days, you die. Because doctor can’t make nothing. Because if you don’t pay.”

— Gara de Nord Canal member, Bogdan’s interview, 2014

An entire population
as yet unborn
but condemned to birth
lined up in rows, before birth
fetus beside fetus
An entire population
which doesn’t see, doesn’t hear, doesn’t understand
but develops
through the convulsed bodies of women
through the blood of mothers
Unasked.

— From the poem, “Children’s Crusade,” by Ana Blandiana, 1984

“We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories.”

— Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid’s Tale, 1985

“He died after three weeks in hospital,” Eugen Iancu, founder of Asociația Colectiv GTG 3010 (GTG 3010 Association), was trying to hold back tears as he explained that his
23-year-old son, Alexandru, who died of infections caused by non-multi-resistant nosocomial bacteria while being treated in one of Romania’s state hospitals for burns covering 28% of his body sustained from Colectiv Nightclub’s fire (personal interview, Eugen Iancu and Ana June 2017). A little over a year after Lenuța’s passing in 2014, the Romanian government was overthrown in the wake of a healthcare scandal connected to Alexandru’s preventable death. In June of 2015, 35,000 people protested in front of Bucharest’s national government headquarters, leading the former Prime Minister, Victor Ponta, and his office to resign after outrage over the deaths of 64 young adults victims of the same nightclub fire, 37 of whom, including Alexandru, died from infections picked up in hospital (personal interview, Eugen Iancu and Ana June 2017; Ilie 2016; Gillet 2015).

Despite reforms brought about in the wake of the Romanian Prime Ministerial office resignation, the national healthcare system’s structural problems persist. A year later, a businessman, Dan Codrea, of the company Hexi Pharma, drove his car at 60 miles-per-hour into a tree with no sign of having used brakes. This occurred after he was revealed to have diluted his cleaning product, Thor’s Disinfectant, that he had supplied to Romanian hospitals where of the nightclub fire victims had been treated the year prior. Romania’s Health Minister, who initially tried to downplay the seriousness of Codrea having diluted his disinfectant, resigned from his position amid protests shortly thereafter (The Economist 2016; Ziare 2017). Alexander Nanau’s 2019 documentary, Colectiv, shows the Health Minister’s replacement, former patients’ rights activist Vlad Voiculescu, fighting against the administration’s corruption while facing political backlash from Bucharest’s Social Democrat mayor, Gabriela Firea (Nanau 2019). Stories like those of Alexandru and the other 37 burn victims show political links between healthcare conditions in state hospitals and government administrative decisions for public health. These connections also affected the health choices of people living in the subteran tunnels of the Gara de Nord.

Before Alexandru, there were many people, including Gara de Nord Canal members, who stayed in Romania’s state hospitals at the height of their illness. For example, in 2014, one of Bruce Lee’s top dealers and Lenuța’s new boyfriend, Dante, had checked into Institutul Național de Boli Infecțioase ”Prof. Dr. Matei Balș” (Matei Balș
National Institute for Infectious Diseases) hospital when he was in the final stages of HIV/AIDS (personal visit, Dante 2014). The Directorate of Public Health had put in purchase orders for the same diluted Thor’s Disinfectant from 2014 to 2016. The Public Health Directorate bought this disinfectant even though they knew that the nosocomial bacteria *Clostridium* had produced twenty-two times the infections in 2012 as it had in 2010 (Năstase 2016). For someone like Dante at the height of an auto-immune deficiency from HIV/AIDS, common infections like *Clostridium* can be fatal. The *Matei Balș* institute hospital directorate’s purchase order, as well as those of other hospital heads, had been made at double the average market price, which some believe could imply money laundering (Năstase 2016; The Economist 2016). Stories such as this might also explain the hesitance of Lenuța, Dante, and other Gara de Nord Canal members to check into a hospital at the height of their HIV/AIDS infections. Similar stories of healthcare malpractice and corruption have continued.

As recently as 30 December 2019, the story of a 66-year-old pancreatic cancer patient accidentally set on fire during surgery in one of Bucharest’s top hospitals, *Floreasca Spitalul 15*, Floreasca Hospital-, made headlines (Bloomberge 2020; BBC 2019). The flames were put out with a bucket of water, and with two-fifths of her body covered in burns, she died weeks later. Twenty-five Floreasca hospital doctors threatened to go on strike when management dismissed their head of surgery after the medical blunder, and Romanian Prime Minister, Ludovic Orban, warned their hospital manager that the dismissal does not abscond him of responsibility (Romania-Insider 2020). The lack of training for state hospital medical procedures also carries over into its treatment for people with HIV/AIDS, which includes Gara de Nord Canal Community members. State healthcare problems have negatively impacted health outcomes during other pandemics as well. During the most recent pandemic, as of May 5, 2020, a lack of protective medical equipment in hospitals such as facemasks has resulted in a high transmission rate of COVID-19 for hospital staff (Johns Hopkins 2020; WHO 2020; IHME 2020; University of Virginia 2020; Ministry of Interior 2020; Moldovan 2020; Romania Journal 2020; Gillet 2020; Ro Insider 2020;). One month earlier, when the country’s health workers comprised 12 – 16% of those infected due to poor hospital management, Romanians autonomously
produced protective equipment for workers in hospitals, clinics, and ICUs to protect them from contracting COVID-19 (Moldovan 2020; Ro Insider 2020). These events are part of a larger problem in Romania’s healthcare system and its ensuing corruption, both of which rank as worst in the EU (The Economist 2019; The Economist 2016).

The doubling of wages in five years has not prevented corruption, underinvestment, and brain drain from staff who leave in search of better pay (The Economist 2019). Romania spends the least on healthcare, both per person and by share of GDP, has the highest treatable disease mortality rate out of the European Union’s member states, has one of the Eastern European bloc’s lowest life expectancies, and has built one hospital in thirty years (Bloomberg 2020; The Economist 2019). Cristi Puiu’s 2006 dark comedy, The Death of Mr. Lazarescu, dramatizes the failures of Romania’s healthcare system, showing the protagonist moved from hospital to hospital by indifferent doctors after an ambulatory service that does not answer the first emergency phone call, eventually carts him away from his bloc apartment (Holden 2006). But what happens if a sick person does not live in an apartment? How do they access health services if they do not even live aboveground?

As in Cristi Puiu’s film, Gara de Nord Canal members’ emergency ambulatory services did not answer their first phone call, or their second phone call, or any phone calls. Gara de Nord Canal members felt that ambulance services generally avoided their underground home because of stigma so they had to send people to the hospital in the train station’s tourist-priced taxi services. By comparison, Puiu’s protagonist, Mr. Lazarescu, was considerably more fortunate.

This chapter will discuss the relationship the Gara de Nord sewer community holds to health services in Bucharest. The first segment will show how the health of abandoned youth was affected by Ceaușescu’s policies. The next part will show how orphanage and state institutions’ abuses continued to affect the health of children after the overthrow of Ceaușescu. These first two sections will aid in contextualizing the Gara de Nord Canal’s relationship to state-based health services. This first section will theorize about how the physical dimensions of orphanage rooms would have made a sewer appealing for abandoned youth fleeing state institutions.
Why physical health conditions are preferred in sewers over centers before 1989

The 236/1930 law of Health and Protection laid the legal blueprint for Romania’s orphanages, ironically, as state structures for, “. . . children whose physical, intellectual, and moral development cannot be assured within the framework of the family,” whose care would be determined by state authorities and, “in collaboration with medical experts (Council of Europe 2001, 99; Alexiu 1999).” This relationship between the state and medical sectors was in the context of the rise of eugenics in Romania, where state interference had to be legitimized by the political establishment and scientific community to justify additional medical practices, such as forced sterilization (Turda 2009). This 1930 Health and Protection law was later amended by law 246/1958 to regulate medical assistance. Some of these medical experts leant health-related credibility to a changing political landscape that contained a burgeoning number of children whose births were dictated by state policy.

It is worth noting that before the Gara de Nord Canal, and even before the orphanages, the original resistance came from women who aborted in defiance of the state’s decree. According to a 1988 Secret de Serviciu — classified information — health ministry internal document, with the exception of 1966 and the years when more draconian anti-abortion policies were introduced, abortions continued to increase (Kligman 1995, 238-239, 244). For instance, in 1984, on International Women’s Day, Ceaușescu unveiled another stage in his Orwellian reproductive politics that inspired Margaret Atwood’s novel, The Handmaid’s Tale, by saluting their national importance to bear four or more children for population goals (Kligman 1995, 239). In response to this new measure, women avoided pregnancy through illegal abortions, abstinence, and coitus interruptus (Kligman 1995, 238). After Ceaușescu’s pro-natalist decree in 1966, the ratio of beds to live births decreased (Ciobanete 1988). More children were entering state institutions than could be accommodated by social service regulations. In December 1989, twenty-three years after Decree 770 was declared, women who aborted illegally and those forced to give birth, and abandoned youth of the 1960s and 1970s united in their revolution to overthrow Ceaușescu’s government (Solomon 2007).
A description of the physical interior and the child-to-caretaker ratio of Ceaușescu’s orphanages is necessary to more clearly grasp how the conditions in these over-populated state institutions affected the health of abandoned youth. Orphanage accommodation varied depending on the age of abandoned children. The immediate enclosures for infants were split into multiple small rooms, each of which housed up to 12 babies, with one caregiver tasked to 15 infants (Silver 2014). In other institutions, 10 to 50 children spent most of their time in bed in huge rooms (Zamfir 1998). Staff kept children in cribs and failed to provide nutrition and keep them physically, socially, auditorily, or visually stimulated (Le Mare 2006; Human Rights Watch 1999). Some children were naked in cages, tethered by their limbs (Simms 2013; Zeanah et. al 2003). These enclosed spaces have a connection to the appeal of canal communities.

Before 1989, there was a less significant number of street children in Bucharest and they were more removed from public consciousness (Bârcuțean 2001, 122). After 1990, that many people began entering the canal and forming their own communities (Alexandrescu 2002, 57). Orphans fled to the canal with the coming of winter, but some went into the sewers during other seasons as well (Bârcuțean 2001, 122). The sewers may

*Figure XXVI. A tunnel entrance in the winter next to the canal community's Christmas tree.*
have appealed to abandoned youth because they resembled a familiar enclosed environment but offered more autonomy over physical health conditions than state-sanctioned orphanage protocol. Gara de Nord Canal members who were raised in Ceaușescu’s state orphanages went aboveground for income-generating activities such as collecting copper and brass from the trash to sell at the recycling center, becoming more physically fit than they ever would have been in their former state institutions (personal footage, Gara de Nord Canal 2011-2014, 2017; O’Brien 2014). The canals represented a spatial middle ground between physical aspects of the crowded social enclosure abandoned youth had become accustomed to in state orphanages while still having the option of going aboveground, and moving around, gaining physical strength in the process.

Staff in Ceaușescu’s orphanages physically abused children in ways that also affected their physical health (Anisman 2015, p. 103). Physical abuse (Silver 2014) in these orphanages ranged from light abuse, such as spanking, kicking, and hair pulling, to physical beatings, such as with a plank or wet rope (Rus, Stativa, Pennings, Cross, Ekas, Purvis, Parris, 2013; Rus 2012; Stativa 2002). In some orphanages, children who wet their beds were caned on the soles of their feet, ate food in an assembly line while sitting on potties, and were beaten until they could not move (RFI 2019; France24 2019).

Ceaușescu’s decision to gut the social welfare system in the 1980s to pay off foreign debt ran Romania’s health system, including its orphanages, in the ground (Hundley 1995). The immediate effects of orphanages are shown in the physical health of the orphans who would have been in orphanages under Ceaușescu. In Ceaușescu’s orphanages the combination of malnourishment, lack of physical interaction and engagement, and abuse delayed the growth of the children. In one study, only 15% of Romanian adoptees were developmentally normal and physically healthy (Johnson, et al. 1992). The physical proportions of these adoptees were affected in specific ways by orphanage conditions.

Romanian orphan adoptees were disproportionately below the fifth percentile for weight and height, and some had developed psychosocial dwarfism (Le Mare 2006; Johnson, Miller, Iverson, Thomas, Franchino, Dole, Kiernan, Georgieff, Hostetter 1992). Psychosocial dwarfism, a growth disorder observed between the ages of 2 and 15, is caused by emotional stress and neglect and can occur in both infants and children.
(Bowden, Hopwood 1982). 31% of children who had spent eight months or more in an orphanage remained below the 10th percentile for height (Le Mare 2006). This means they were in the bottom 10% of the mean for height, well below the average. These studies show how the conditions of Romanian orphanages affected basic health outcomes for children, such as height. In addition to affecting the health of abandoned youth, the ratios of large numbers of vulnerable children assigned to an individual staff member in enclosed quarters created power dynamics conducive to abuse.

Though there was physical abuse in the Gara de Nord Canal, community members could better manage these abuses than in Ceaușescu’s state institutions. As ARAS outreach field coordinator and psychologist, Constantin, explained in Chapter 2, people chose their leaders in the Gara de Nord Canal Community, a right they were not afforded a state center (personal interview, Constantin 2014). Having even the slightest control over an abusive situation was enough for homeless people to choose the Gara de Nord Canal over state centers. These forms of physical abuse and neglect in enclosed quarters diminished the physical health outcomes of children, making them vulnerable to some infectious diseases that existed in the dimly lit unhygienic orphanage rooms.

For instance, 18% of Romanian child adoptees who had lived in Ceaușescu’s orphanages were soiled when their families met them (McMullan, Fisher 1992, 33:504). The failure of Ceaușescu’s state orphanages to maintain hygiene meant that a large percentage of orphans had contracted infectious diseases. In one study, over half of Romanian orphan adoptees had evidence of past or present hepatitis B infection, a third had intestinal parasites, and 45% had two or more pathogens (Johnson, D.E., et al. 1992). These diseases would have been in the abandoned youth who fled to the sewers. Orphans adopted from Romania between 1990 and 1994, many of whom would have weathered orphanage conditions before 1989, showed cumulative health risks associated with their physical health (Groza, et al. 2017).

In addition, as was described in Chapter 2, the state gave iatrogenic micro-transfusions of the HIV virus to abandoned youth in orphanages between 1986 and December of 1989 (Kozinetz 2005; Glover 1996, 145). These former children, now adults, questioned the credibility of state institutions in providing medical care. The state-based
administering of a deadly virus can not solely be addressed by offering health services via state institutions, however well-intentioned. To win back the trust of former orphans in state institutions, it must also be analyzed and acted upon by the state as a political issue of health justice. After Romania’s revolution, some aspects of the structure of orphanages in Romania under Ceaușescu continued, creating similar health outcomes in the children who lived in them. These outcomes are a continuity of a legacy of abuses occurring at the hands of the state in orphanages. The Romanian government has not made a meaningful effort to bring justice to the lives of former and current abandoned youth whose lives were destroyed by iatrogenic microtransfusions of HIV under their state’s care. As a result, some former abandoned youth who had received HIV via iatrogenic microtransfusions felt that autonomy from state control to mitigate health risks also helped reduce the chance of state-based medical blunders. From their perspective, autonomy was also a way to demonstrate against the Romania state, which had not accepted full responsibility for their medical mistake. Since the state had not brought justice to the lives they had destroyed, those former abandoned youth who had contracted HIV in orphanages and subsequent generation existed in defiance of the state. Their maintaining autonomy in the canal was a testament to their conviction.

After the 1989 revolution, the Romanian government made efforts to reduce abuses in institutions. For instance, the government set up programs to lower the number of children living in state institutions in the hopes that fewer children in state centers would lower the chances of abuse occurring. In 1997, the country began dismantling its large orphanages — a process that increased in the early 2000s — with three options for institutionalized children: reintegration with their birth family, foster family adoption, or living in a small group home in extreme circumstances (American Public Media 2018). The number of children in state centers decreased from 32,000 in 2004 to 9,000 in 2012 (The Economist 2013). However, despite these efforts, abuses continued (Rus, Stativa, Pennings, Cross, Ekas, Purvis, Parris 2013). In 2012, a former Gara de Nord Canal member, Alin, described having been kicked out of a social service program, Concordia, for an altercation after he had defended clients against poor treatment from staff (personal field notes, Valente 2012). Alin also described a pregnant Rromani woman, Andreea, who
was forced to work a full work shift on a farm to retain her place in a shelter. He also described a shelter director picked up a girl, Valentina, and shook her for not paying him rent before throwing her back on the streets (personal field notes, Valente 2012).

A 2006 study in Iași County revealed that 68% of males and 63% of female children had been victims of threats in their institutions (Gavrilovici and Groza 2007). Alin explained that staff at a center like Concordia describe their treatment of clients with drug addictions differently in front of sponsors than the reality of the situation, and the people “bow down their heads” (personal field notes, Valente 2012).

**Abuses and physical health after 1989**

![Image](image.png)

*Figure XXVII. A community member prepares makeup in the Gara de Nord Canal.*

The notion of family is central to Romanian national values. The idea of youth estranged from their family and placed in institutions can carry its stigmas. Even in some of the more progressive institutions in Romania, such as residential care, segregation of
abandoned youth continued. In 1997, a national cross-sectional survey on Child Abuse in Residential Care Institutions in Romania (SCARCIR) showed that staff tended to punish children who did not have siblings with them in the institutions (Rus, et al. 2013). This phenomenon makes the sewer community’s emphasis on calling Bruce “father” and the madame “mother” even more significant. The idea of having a family in the sewers would have made them more appealing than institutions (Leontina 2019, 278). Reports from social workers and the media claimed that Lenuța had preferred to die in the sewers among this “family” rather than check into a hospital.

**Why some canal members felt the state had denied Lenuța her medication**

In the wake of her passing, some sewer community members argued that, contrary to this mainstream opinion, Lenuța had not refused to take her medication. Instead, the Romanian state had denied her the medication. “But Lenuța they don’t pay,” Gara de Nord Canal member, Bogdan, felt Lenuța had not been given the treatment she deserved by the Romanian state for HIV/AIDS (personal interview, Bogdan 2014). While the circumstances surrounding Lenuța’s passing were debated between social services and her underground tunnel community, a strong opinion expressed by some members of the Gara de Nord Canal was that serious problems existed with the HIV/AIDS treatment program in Romania. Bogdan further described how the Romanian healthcare system affected not only Lenuța’s life, but the rest of their lives as well. He expressed that the discrimination within the state’s health care system would mean the death of the entire Gara de Nord community,

> “Because one by one they die. One by one . . . in the Gara de Nord . . . The state of Romania say, ‘these persons standing in the tunnel, in the park, okay . . . the people, they take drugs,’ . . . the state of Romania want, she want exterminate them. Yeah . . . like dogs . . . A person gone. And another person come say, where is she? She was just here! And say, oh, I’m so sorry, she die. That what happen in the Gara de Nord. Where is it, Nicu, where is it? Bruce Lee, where is it? Sima, where is it? Another, another, another. Where is Romeo? Where is Dante? Where is Van Damm? Oh, sorry, he die. Why? Because the state of Romania don’t make nothing for them (Bogdan 2014).”
Bogdan’s arguments may have sounded inaccurate or at least exaggerated to people outside the state’s medical service system in Romania. From the perspective of the U.N. and global health circles, at face value, Romania’s HIV/AIDS program was a state-of-the-art model for the rest of the Eastern European region (UNAIDS 2014; Dente 2006; BIPAI 2020; Matic 2006, 121). After Europeans experienced an increase in HIV cases, particularly among IDUs between 1999 and 2001, patients and AIDS activists pressured governments and international organizations to begin equal access programs throughout the region, including in Romania (Matic 2006, 130). The country’s program provided nationwide access to treatment for all people.

In 2001, Romania had created the first universal AIDS treatment and care in the region, servicing top quality highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) treatment to 3,500 patients. By 2014, 9,571 patients were on this treatment with an additional 442 people on post-exposure prophylaxis (UNAIDS Romania 2014). Five years later, medical salaries increased from 88% to 122% of the national average, presumably incentivizing health care professionals to provide top treatment services for their patients (The Economist 2019). In Europe, Romania was the first country to utilize the Accelerating Access Initiative, a collaboration between UNAIDS, WHO, and five multinationals, that agreed to reduce ARV prices by 20% to 40%. The Romanian Ministry of Health invested 15% of its per capita expenses to procure the remaining ARV treatment cost (Matic 2006, 121). In addition to antiretroviral treatment, people with HIV/AIDS qualified for more services under disability law. Law 584/2002 and 448/2006 categorize HIV/AIDS as a disability. People who contract the infection are entitled to a nutritional allowance as well.
as a disability certificate that allows them to have economic subsidies (UNAIDS report 2015). Unfortunately, HIV/AIDS infection documents are not always kept confidential.

The certificates of disability that would have qualified Lenuța are often leaked to the public, and Romania’s Criminal Code encouraged government officials, doctors, and other individuals to “monitor” children with HIV/AIDS who are believed to have had unprotected sex (Human Rights Watch 2006). This form of persecution disproportionately affects women and girls (Human Rights Watch 2006). Checking into a state institution could lead to other complications for people who were HIV/AIDS positive. For instance, medical personnel, social workers, municipal staff and other people who service people at state institutions are common sources of leaked information about HIV/AIDS positive people living in their care (Human Rights Watch 2006). Leaked documents could also further stigmatize Lenuța in her community (Krug 2015, 9). A 2013 survey showed over half of adults would not accept someone with HIV/AIDS as a relative (52%) or friend (50%) (National Council for Fight against Discrimination 2013). In addition to leaked information, Bogdan and other sewer community members’ claims that medication had been denied were also confirmed.

15,000 to 20,000 Romanian doctors have left for better pay in other parts of Europe since the country became an EU member in 2007, leaving over a third of hospital posts in Romania vacant (The Economist 2019). A limited number of qualified professionals creates a demand and a power imbalance that can be taken advantage of. Lapses in access to antiretrovirals have occurred, standards of in-patient care in psychiatric facilities are often so low that they pose a risk to child health, and medical staff has refused to administer HIV/AIDS treatment to youth (Human Rights Watch 2006). Gara de Nord Canal member, Bogdan, described the hypocrisy of doctors denying treatment to patients who do not offer bribes, “In the hospital the doctor will make a promise, “I swear to help people,” . . . they say, “I promise to help people and save life.” The state of Romania, they make a promise. But where is the promise . . .? You go home, after two days, you die,” from the doctor’s failure to provide quality treatment because they did not receive a payment (personal interview, Bogdan 2014).” All of these factors may have affected Lenuța’s decision to avoid hospitalization as well, preferring to die in a place where she
felt she was more cared for below ground than above. This example illustrates some obstacles Lenuța and other sewer community members could have faced in accessing HIV/AIDS treatment in Romania’s healthcare system.

Gara de Nord Canal member, Dante, stayed in Institutul Național de Boli Infecțioase "Prof. Dr. Matei Balș” in Bucharest as he entered into the final stages of HIV/AIDS. During a phone call to the hospital from the canal, Dante asked for cigarettes at the hospital, which the medical staff complied with. Over a smoke on the back lawn of the hospital, Dante described how he was placed in a different hospital room from other gang members who also attended the hospital. It was nice that they were concerned about his anxiety around rival gangsters but what about the healthcare itself? Dante let out a slow puff of smoke from the side of his mouth, looking into the distance. Should he trust the nurse and stay in the hospital for health support? Should he trust the social worker and check into a state center for social services that could better his condition? Or should he just return to the canal and make the best of the time he had left? Dante, like his girlfriend, Lenuța, chose the last option, spending two more years with his underground family, taking HIV/AIDS medication in tunnels beneath the streets, before his passing in 2016. Dante chose the last place most aboveground would think to go in the last stages of a deadly disease.

There were severe health risks associated with life in the sewers. The tunnels’ narrow enclosure increased the chance of contracting Tuberculosis; drug-induced psychosis caused sewer members to make erratic movements, sometimes with syringes in hand; getting pricked by an uncapped syringe could increase the spread of HIV/AIDS; the spread of hepatitis-A combined with HIV/AIDS could cause serious health risks (personal observation, Aran Valente 2012-2014; Lugoboni 2012; Sullivan 2005, 150-158; Beggs 2003; Gray 2016, 267-281). There is limited data on policies for HIV PWIDs receiving healthcare in Romanian hospitals. For example, as of 2015, there was no information on age restrictions regarding HIV testing for PWIDs in Romania (Krug et al. 2015, 5). A failure to provide data about age restrictions was a structural barrier limited the ability of PWIDs in the Gara de Nord Canal to find what state healthcare services were accessible (Krug et al. 2015).
How the sewer community mitigated physical health risks

The Gara de Nord Canal Community used several different methods to mitigate health risks in the sewers. Though not all their attempts at improving their health were successful, they nevertheless show a vested interest in the improvement of their community’s public health. For instance, there was a belief that tuberculosis was spread through cigarette-butt stains and other expulsions from the lungs that would get embedded on the walls of the sewers. Since many of the sewer community members had their immunity systems lowered by HIV/AIDS, the accumulation of TB and other germs could pose serious health risks. The sewer community believed that painting over the walls with thick paint could reduce the transmission of germs from one individual to the next. Therefore, sewer community members recounted that they organized to re-coat the walls of the sewers with thick layers of paint which would, supposedly, reduce the number of germs that accumulated on the sewer walls. The Center for Disease Control does not confirm that re-coating walls with paint necessarily reduces health risks associated with infection (personal interview Center for Disease Control, July 2019). If this is the case, why did the sewer community invest in this method of harm reduction in the first place? One might theorize that HIV/AIDS positive sewer community members frequented hospitals when their immune systems were compromised by disease. Hospitals clean their walls often with chemicals which makes the paint more porous. For this reason, hospital walls are frequently re-painted. Someone from the sewers may have observed the walls being re-painted and misunderstood why that was happening. Nevertheless, the sewer community’s decision to paint the walls of their enclosure shows how motivated they were to reduce health hazards that afflicted their community. Though wall painting may not have produced the desired results, it worked in tandem with other strict rules of hygiene and cleanliness that had a significant impact on the Gara de Nord Canal’s community health.

Canal community members followed rules that prevented the spread of disease. Food that was suspected of being past its expiration date would be disassembled; meat would often be re-cooked over a flame to kill off any bacteria before being prepared as a meal. Sewer community members prepared food in ways they could not have controlled in
orphanages or state institutions. As was described in chapter 3, HIV/AIDS infected blood had been given as a nutritional supplement to orphans, so having control over what substances entered their bodies as adults was important (Rogers 2009). The intake of healthy nutritional food was especially important for HIV/AIDS positive canal members (WHO 2001, 10-16). Sewer community members would wash food during meal preparation, used dish soaps to clean plates and utensils after finishing their meal, and dirt would be swept from the floor. As Bruce described, in the winter there were places to shower and bathe in the sewers (personal interview, Gara de Nord Canal documentary 2012-2014; Mullan 2009, 757-761; Kho 2008, 26-28; Nizame 2008, 288-297; Van der Geest 2013, 179-190; Larson 2001, 225-230).

During winter nights, canal members begged routinely for clean water from local produce, dairy, and health food shops. Members walked door-to-door with several empty five-gallon plastic jugs, asking if store owners would fill them with clean water. Many shop owners refused to give out water, worrying that the begging would turn into a pattern and they would lose customers as a result. On one occasion, members had to beg for clean water at over a dozen businesses before one of the owners finally agreed to fill up their

Figure XXIX. Bruce shows water to bathe (top 2 photos), and electricity (bottom 2 photos).
jugs with spring water. There was water in the train station bathrooms, but the sewer community was concerned that the tap water, especially from dirty bathrooms, might make them more susceptible to disease. 1.5 liters of clean water per day is essential to maintain the health of key populations infected with HIV/AIDS (Wegelin-Schuringa 2006; Mis 2014; WASH Advocates 2020; Petersen 2005, 642; Yallew 2012, 1471-2458). While some of these routines may seem mundane, for a group struggling with homelessness, stigma, addiction, and health conditions, developing their creative approaches to reduce health risks was impressive. Autonomy in the sewers meant people who had been diagnosed as HIV/AIDS positive had some control over their liquid and nutrition intake that centers failed to provide.

Routines to reduce health risks were fueled by “a sense of belonging, reciprocal trust and care (Lancione 2019, 1).” The community’s emphasis on health and hygiene ran contrary to agoraphobic societal assumptions that poor people were not clean and smelled bad. The emphasis on the physical health of people in the sewers may also have been born from not wanting to relive the conditions they faced as children in Ceaușescu’s orphanages. Though state institutions in Romania have improved since the times of Ceaușescu, the people who reside in them must clean according to state and orphanage protocol. Having the option to clean as frequently and thoroughly as one wished was another reason why people chose the sewers over state institutions.

Figure XXX. Canal members used shampoo, lotions, and conditioners for hygiene.

One particularly important aspect of hygiene involved sweeping up used syringes. Bruce rotated responsibility for dealers who cleaned syringes. Bruce strictly controlled
when used syringes were disposed of. The sweeping of syringes was intended to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS and other infections among canal community members. However, sometimes the degree to which Bruce enforced the disposal of used syringes was fueled by politics. For instance, the day after Lenuța’s passing, Bruce ordered every member to exit the sewers in the middle of the night, offering to buy food for everyone at the corner store down the street in exchange for their cooperation. However, for the few who chose to remain in the canal against Bruce’s wishes, Dante, one of the top dealers, “comes with electroshocks to throw us all outside. And I have panicked for good (personal interview, anonymous 2014).”

Bruce employed an extreme measure such as electroshock due to the enormous stress he was under. In the wake of Lenuța’s funeral, the rumor of a misplaced syringe increasing the acuteness of Lenuța’s passing implicated Bruce as potentially responsible as was described in the introduction. Bruce’s beating of Lenuța after she implicated him in rape only further exacerbated questions of whether he had played a role in her passing. A Channel 4 news reporter, Sean, remarked privately to a leader of CARUSEL, Dr. Ioan, that he cursed himself when he learned of Lenuța’s death because he had chosen to portray Bruce Lee as a protector rather than a criminal in his broadcast (personal correspondence, Dr. Ioan 2014).

Behind closed doors, O’Brien, as well as other media figures, had been conflicted. They knew that access to the sewer community was contingent on Bruce’s permission. A criminalized drug den that is open to press coverage is rare. Bruce had already lived in and ruled the sewer community for over two decades, and some social outreach workers anticipated his leadership would continue for at least another twenty years. Presenting Bruce in a negative light, as a drug dealer, would sever the press’s connection and mean a vulnerable group would remain invisible to the public (personal correspondence, anonymous 2015). Some reporters and journalists had gone so far as to suggest that increased awareness would put pressure on stakeholders to craft public health policies to reduce the burden of disease for the sewer community (personal conversation, Aran Valente 2014). Bruce’s implication in the death of Lenuța changed the portrayal of Bruce as a hero in the press.
A week after Lenuța’s passing, Paraic O’Brien, who up until then had portrayed Bruce as an informal guardian of children and society’s most vulnerable, attended Lenuța’s funeral and scrutinized Bruce on his decision to deal drugs to children (O’Brien 2014). A police car was routinely parked outside the entrance to the sewers, and police would regularly monitor the whereabouts of Gara de Nord sewer members aboveground. The canal leadership felt negative coverage could embolden the police to evict them permanently from their home, ending their struggle against state oppression. Bruce wanted syringe disposal in the canal so that his public image would not be further tainted by the circumstances surrounding Lenuța’s death. In this instance, while the canals were chosen over state institutions to better manage abuse, maintaining autonomy was also a way for Bruce to control and contribute to the oppression of canal community members. In addition to Bruce’s abuse, a canal community member, Alin, recounted other risks of living in tunnels underneath Bucharest. Recently, a man died tragically in a tunnel under the MOL gas station because there was a gas leak and when he went to light a cigarette the canal system exploded. In another instance, the state was performing demolition and buried people who were living in part of the Gara de Nord tunnel in Bucharest (Badea 2012). Luckily, they were able to call family members who contacted the authorities to help them escape. Gara de Nord Canal members took these environmental risks into consideration when making decisions for their community in the subterran as well.

![Figure XXXI](image.jpg), Two syringes next to "treasures" found around Bucharest.
Why Mental Health Trauma from before 1989 affected canal members

Ceaușescu’s orphanages affected the mental health of children in various ways. The orphanage staff’s failure to educate and socialize with children under two led some orphans to have a significantly lower IQ than other adoptees in this age bracket and changed how certain regions of their brains functioned (Sullivan 2019; The Economist 2013; Chugani 2001, 1290-1301; Eliot 2014, 752-754; Morison 2000 717-737). Some UN and NGO leaders argue that for every three months a child stays in an institution, they lose one month of development (The Economist 2013). While arguing that living in a tunnel underground as a way to stimulate mental development is a hard sell, it is worth considering that “street smarts” do require social intelligence that had been denied in orphanage conditions.

In Ceaușescu’s orphanages, children were subjected to emotional abuse. Staff refused to talk to children, threatened them with blackmail, mocked them, made them wear inappropriate clothing, and were found to be “not providing opportunities for children to make their own choices and decisions (Rus, Stativa, Pennings, Cross, Ekas, Purvis, Parris, 2013).” Some staff went so far as to refer to orphans as “animals (Kerrigan 1999).” Children who expressed their sadness at this treatment were placed in straight jackets and drugged (Silver 2014). Blackmail, name-calling, and other forms of abuse could happen in the sewers as well, but at least in the sewers, people had some control over whether the community would vote to allow such treatment to continue.

There is a correlation between orphans who developed Disinhibited Social Engagement and those who lived in orphanages during that era (Humphreys, Nelson, Fox, Zeanah 2017; Giltaij, Sterkenburg, Schuengel 2017). Disinhibited Social Engagement (DSE) can occur in individuals who have experienced neglect from institutions (Zeanah, Chesher, ONeil 2016). People who have DSE are overly trusting of strangers, fail to observe verbal boundaries, and can come across as hostile, exhausting to spend time with, and easily exploitable (DSM-5 2013; Kennedy, et al. 2017). Adoptees who lived in Ceaușescu’s orphanages for more than six months showed a six-fold increase in Disinhibited Social Engagement (DSE) as opposed to adoptees raised in UK orphanages (Kennedy, et al. 2017). However, some studies counter this argument. A study of 350
Romanian pre-schoolers found a point prevalence of only 2% for DSED (Gleason, et al. 2011). DSE symptoms could continue to affect the development of children long after they have left orphanages but can be reduced when individuals exhibiting symptoms are in a familial environment (Humphreys, Nelson, Fox, Zeanah 2017). The canal community may not have been a place most scholars would associate with family, but the Gara de Nord community’s emotional bonding allowed people with disorders like DSE to manage their social interactions in ways that were more comfortable than in a detached institution.

Romanian adoptees who were raised in Ceauşescu’s orphanages had higher cortisol levels throughout the day than those raised by their birth families, resulting in toxic stress (Gunnar, Morrison, Chisholm, Schuder 2001). Toxic stress occurs when prolonged forms of adversity such as neglect, or abuse affect the brain’s architecture and chemistry (Harvard 2020). Toxic stress, if left untreated, can lead to mental risk factors such as substance abuse and mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and suicide. In response to this history, the Gara de Nord Canal members tried to reduce stress in their tunnel home as much as possible. The sewer community would put warm and welcoming decorations on the wall, laid bedding over the hot water pipes, and generally worked to make their lives in the sewers more relaxing than they would have been in Ceauşescu’s orphanages, reducing toxic stress in turn. Canal members remained calm despite their cramped quarters with heat radiating from hot water pipes and people underground experiencing psychosis, which was a challenge. Nevertheless, canal members tried to keep the atmosphere relaxed. Canal members’ persistence to remain calm may have had to do with the prolonged periods of stress they experienced in orphanages before 1989.

The mental health of sewer community members was tended to not only through individualized self-care but through collective community decisions. The community worked together to confront each other’s prejudices. At one point, a sewer community member negotiated with Bruce to resolve a conflict he had with Lenuța and try to understand the perspective of women living in the canal, some of whom were Roma. This is not to say that canal members did not still harbor prejudices, but that it was easier to manage each other’s prejudices through internal mediation than within the structural oppression of bureaucratic state institutions.
In addition to managing relationships among themselves, canal community members had to manage abuses among customers and, on occasion, the presence of police. For example, after Lenuța’s passing, two officers were assigned to monitor sewer community members at a restaurant Bruce had renovated called baracă or “The shack”. The baracă, opposite the policlinica, was the metal-beamed skeleton of a restaurant where Gara de Nord members congregated in the summer. They once created a barricade at the baracă to prevent local police from entering through a hole in the chain-link fence that separated their summer home from the gas station parking lot. Sewer community members would, at first, get chased down by the police for anything that was perceived to be suspicious. As time continued, sewer community members began talking to the police, explaining that logic behind much of their decision-making was not to hide crime but, for example, to inject drugs out of the view of the public, manage their withdrawals, or engage in income-generating activities. By establishing relationships with the authorities, sewer community members felt they were afforded more autonomy in their daily routines. This was often a challenge, as the Bucharest police force would rotate new officers to watch over the community, sometimes choosing two men or two women. Sewer members would have to start the process all over again in establishing trust between themselves and a new set of authority figures.

Police had shown animosity towards the Gara de Nord Sewer Community members. For example, in 2012 spokesman for the Local Police of Bucharest told B1TV that sewer people had “fleas and lice” and made a sweeping generalization that all canal members were “drug and ethnobotanical [synthetic drug]” users (Badea 2012). The trauma and Adverse Child Experience (ACE) of having been arrested by police often added to negative mental health problems (Nurius, Paula et al. 2016; Felitti, Vincent et al. 1998, 774-786). Sometimes, as a way of expressing their frustration for having been criminalized and protesting policing, sewer community members would self-inflict pain that would negatively affect their physical health (personal field notes, Valente 2012). For example, a Gara de Nord Canal member and addict, Codruț, stole luggage from a man named Moses and was removed from the Gara de Nord by the Jandameria. After his police arrest, Mihai, who had mental and developmental health problems, became so upset
that he poured glue from a bottle onto himself in the back of the police car and lit himself on fire (personal field notes, gara de nord canal members and social outreach workers 2012). Social service workers at the time believed Mihai, who was later covered in bandages, would not survive the winter from the burns left from his act of self-immolation. The canal was a place where Mihai could remain warm as his wounds healed during the winter. Canals were also a place where differently abled people, such as Codruț, could better manage abuses than in Romanian mental institutions under communism or state institutions under capitalism today. Acts of self-harm after an arrest were not limited to Mihai. Some sewer community members arrested by the police would pull razors they had been hiding in their mouths and mutilate themselves on the way to prison (personal field notes, Aran Valente 2012).

![Figure XXXII. Mihai (left) and Sara(right) relax next to the Gara de Nord entrance.](image)

Growing up in Romanian state institutions has been “associated with higher levels of psychiatric morbidity, internalizing psychopathology, externalizing psychopathology,
and ADHD among early adolescents” than children who were in foster care (Humphreys, Gleason, Drury, Miron, Nelson, Fox, Zeanah 2015). While people in the sewers were not in foster care, they tried to transform the sewers into a familial environment, as was described earlier in this chapter. As he described porcelain dogs, rubber bath-time fish, plastic Disney lamps from Aladdin, and other toys for children he had chosen to decorate the canal walls, Bruce once joked that he had the “mind of a child (personal interview, Bruce Lee Documentary 2011-2014).” Bruce was not adorning the sewer walls with toys because he had a child-like mind but because he was trying to re-live a childhood that he never had in state institutions. Journal articles often referenced Bruce’s having been through one of the most notorious orphanages under Ceaușescu. Some social outreach workers talked about his growing up on the streets as a source of childhood trauma (personal conversation, anonymous 2014; Gad 2015; Clavarino 2015). A social outreach coordinator who will remain anonymous said he had heard that Bruce’s family had sold him into slavery as a very young child to shepherds who repeatedly raped him, using him as a child sex slave, before he was brought to the orphanage (personal correspondence, anonymous 2014). These three stories highlight sources of childhood trauma Bruce may have endured from state institutions, street life, and familial exploitation.

At a psychological level, Bruce’s sympathizing with people cast aside by society and interest in turning them into a family was a coping mechanism to manage his own mental and psychological health. Had he been a 40-year-old man in a state institution or on the streets and decorating his surroundings with toys he would have been mocked and probably taken advantage of. Bruce and others felt the canal was safer to explore their emotional journeys through decorative art that represented their desires.

Bruce’s comment and how the Gara de Nord Canal Community chose to decorate the walls of their home demonstrates the overlap between the theories of the precarity of geography and precarious psychological states. Precarity is defined as a “structure of feeling” that extends beyond the traditional definition of labor economies and expands into spatial relationships of the urban landscapes that are both seen and unseen (Harris 2016). However, scholar Gergő Pulay describes homeless PWIDs in Bucharest engaging in scrap metal collection as a counterpoint to the notion of precarity. Pulay argues that in this
instance, homeless PWIDs don’t only invest in income-generating practices because there are no alternatives. Instead, they decide to re-integrate into the economy for stability (Pulay 2017, 199). Similarly, a decision to live in a canal near the city center to better perform the aforementioned tasks of scrap-metal collection as well as accessible social and health services, involved some homeless PWIDs carefully strategizing about their future. The lives of people living in the sewers have been described as precarious, but a location that was off the streets and still had access to the rest of the city did lend some sense of stability. In addition to stability, the community was organizing around disciplined activities. Professor and expert on the opioid epidemic in the United States, Dr. Edward Bilsky, described how occupational therapy can help people avoid unhealthy decisions that they might otherwise make for the dopamine rush, such as furthering drug use, because they have found a meaningful way to occupy their time (Bilsky 2019). In much the same way, people in the Gara de Nord felt as though they were building their lives in a meaningful way towards a shared goal. This is not to say that a drug den in a sewer increased positive psychological states. Rather, people had a place where they felt as though they were more than a charity cause from a failed state experiment who could not keep up with urban development. Out of this sense of community could emerge a feeling as though they had some modicum of control over their own destiny; a place where their lives mattered.

Another way in which sewer community residents tried to ease their mental health trauma was by adopting animals for emotional support. Stray dogs, puppies, cats, and, on one occasion, pigeons, were taken in by canal community residents who attempted to domesticate them. Addicts who were going through withdrawal, children who were trying to get a night of rest, and drug dealers who had conducted hectic business transactions, would hold the animals close for comfort. Bruce Lee went so far as to name his favorite dog after himself.

15 However, precarity and other ideas about poverty and marginalized groups trace back to anthropologist, Oscar Lewis’s ethnographic reports, which included negative views of impoverished families in Mexico and Puerto Rico. Lewis’s research falls within a specific cultural reference point and bias surrounding poverty that does not necessarily equate on the other side of the Atlantic (Pulay 2017, 194).
In the 1980s, Ceaușescu’s decision to destroy entire neighborhoods of houses and replace them with block apartments forced dog-owners to abandon their pets, increasing the stray dog population substantially (Marinas and Cristel 2014; Clej 2013; Russell 2011). The idea of stray dogs for trauma survivors has been used in other regions and contexts. For example, NGOs train stray dogs as therapy animals for former child soldiers of the civil war in Northern Uganda (BBC News, August 2019; Okot February 2018). In the United States, service dogs are used for soldiers who have PTSD and, more recently, for sexual-assault survivors (Jacobson 2014; Marinas 2014). In Bucharest, a psychologist notes that NGO-trained therapy dogs help orphans who have been victims of abuse in state-based institutions improve their mental health (Tedeschi, Jenkins 2019, p. 432). People preferred the sewers over the centers because in the sewers they could have similar therapy animal relationships without having to deal with abuses they could not control in the state-based institutions.

What makes the Gara de Nord community’s instance remarkable is that the trauma survivors themselves organized to domesticate the dogs for therapeutic purposes without the help of an NGO or other outside interference. This form of autonomy did run the risk of people abusing animals or animals becoming aggressive towards humans without any enforceable legal procedures. While there were cases where dogs were hit or thrown, some members of the community would reprimand the abuser and teach them to be careful with how they treated the animals. Dogs that became aggressive were kept away from the canals and left on the streets with other packs. It was a striking parallel that the state’s pro-natalist policies resulted in the abandonment of youth, some of whom chose to live in the canal, and the state’s re-structured housing forced families to abandon their pets, some of which were ironically adopted by formerly abandoned children in the canal.
While the animals were mostly useful for improving the mental health of Gara de Nord’s sewer community, they also posed a risk to the physical health of sewer community members. Dogs would frequently defecate in the sewers, sometimes on clothing, and brought in contaminants, bacteria, and other diseases from the streets. The spread of disease reduced the health of sewer community members, the majority of whom were AIDS-positive and therefore more at risk of death from infection. At one point, the anthropologist, Matteo, brought all the dogs to the vet for a checkup to reduce the risk of disease transmission. His decision only temporarily eased the burden of disease. Dogs, cats, and other animals that were kept as pets by the canal community continued to eat garbage, run through contaminated streets and spread diseases to people in the canal. The presence of animals was one instance where the canal community members’ desire to compensate for mental health problems, such as trauma, had negative effects on their physical health.

Figure XXXIII. Gara de Nord Canal members loved their canine companions.
Why abandoned youth prefer mental health in sewers after 1989

Some of Romania’s homeless shelters, such as NGO Casa de Prietenii – House of Friends –, will not accept homeless people who are severely mentally disabled, unemployed, delinquent, and chemically dependent because they have neither the money nor the capacity to support these cases (O’Neill 2010, 265). Only those who were already reasonably well integrated into society were allowed in shelters (O’Neill 2010, 265). Those that remained were visible to the public view at, among other places, the Gara de Nord (O’Neill 2010, 267). Sewers were preferred by the Gara de Nord community because of such limitations imposed by state institutions on groups that would be the most vulnerable to abuses and hardships of living on the streets.

The visibility of homeless people going in and out of potholes at the Gara de Nord meant that homelessness entered the public dialogue. The removal of homeless people
from Bucharest’s city center and into state institutions on the periphery kept the homeless hidden from view and prevented the public from discussing the structural problems that produced homelessness in the first place (Pulay 2017, 25; O’Neill 2010, 267). Though homeless people slept in the sewers at night, they were active during the day at the train station. Canals afforded protection to homeless people who otherwise would be left vulnerable on the streets. Visibility and protection were two options that not only benefitted the sewer community but allowed society to function more democratically as homelessness became part of a larger public conversation in Romania.

Children who were interviewed described abusive relationships with staff that made it difficult to manage relationships and pursue autonomy beyond their institutions (Bratianu and Roșca 2005). Autonomy could not be pursued at an individual level on the streets or in the sewers of Bucharest. Despite the adversity that abusive relationships in Gara de Nord Canal presented, people who fled to the sewers, whether under Ceaușescu’s orphanage system or more recently, persisted in the pursuit of autonomy even if it did not come easily to them as a result of past trauma. Canal members’ management of relationships was central to building community in the sewers. The community had to first manage relationships among themselves, which meant finding diplomatic ways of holding each other accountable. If a sewer community member was becoming too loud for people to rest, children such as Rodica would first explain to them that they were interrupting someone else’s sleep, then ask them why they were angry, and finally find ways to console them (personal footage, Aran Valente documentary, Rodica 2012-2014). In other instances, if an IDU went into psychosis and became destructive, the community would first discuss how to manage the situation, elect someone to check on them and talk them into a more constructive mood, and if that did not work, finally elect to kick them out (personal footage, Aran Valente documentary 2012-2014). Bruce, for his part, attempted to manage relationships with people who questioned his authority (personal footage, Aran Valente documentary 2012-2014).

Lenuța, Dante, Bruce, and some other members of the Gara de Nord Canal Community did occasionally go for health checkups at state hospitals, but the visits were few and far between. The same could be said for the canal community’s interest in
attending state centers for the homeless. Whether hospitals or orphanages, state institutions had a history of deplorable health conditions that would make even patients in desperate need of medical attention pause before checking in. What the Gara de Nord Canal Community showed, however, is that even in challenging circumstances, such as living below ground, communities still possess the ability to organize towards a healthier lifestyle.

The overthrow of the Romanian government’s administration through popular protest in the wake of a healthcare scandal points to agency Romanians invested in the health of their community. As with the canal community, the Romanian public wanted control over the quality of their healthcare. Various canal members attended the same unsanitary state hospitals as their aboveground counterparts, sometimes when they were in the final stages of AIDS. Some former abandoned youth in the canal had experienced structural healthcare problems since infancy in Ceaușescu’s infamous state orphanages. In these state institutions, former abandoned youth received state-based iatrogenic administration of HIV/AIDS through microtransfusions, abuse, neglect, and unsanitary health conditions, which stunted their physical and developmental growth as children. In this instance, state control had devastating health outcomes for former abandoned youth, whose wariness of state healthcare carried over to subsequent generations. The fear of former abandoned youth, present-day abysmal state healthcare conditions and corruption may have been part of the reason canal members, such as Lenuța, rejected hospitalization in the final stages of HIV/AIDS. Lenuța and other Gara de Nord Canal members refused state health services in favor of their agency to mitigate health risks underground. Canal members used their autonomy to reduce health risks by exercising their agency in tending to hygiene, preparing cooked meals, forming manageable relationships, and adopting animals. The adopted animals improved mental health at the expense of sanitary health conditions. Bruce enforced the disposal of syringes after he was implicated as having played a role in Lenuța’s passing. Bruce’s questionable motives for syringe disposal, health risks associated with animal adoption, and investments in the drug and sex trade did not deter members from living in the canal. Despite these health risks, members felt that
having autonomy over their underground health system was more manageable than the health systems of state institutions or hospitals.
CHAPTER 7: “WE WANT SYRINGES, WE WANT METHADONE!”
THE GLOBAL FUND, THE WORLD BANK, NGO NEEDLE EXCHANGE
PROGRAMS, AND ROMANIAN GOVERNMENTAL ASSISTANCE
PROGRAMS

“The idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that is wrong with the world.”
– Co-founder of Partners in Health, Dr. Paul Farmer in author Tracy Kidder’s book,
Mountains Beyond Mountains, 2003

“...I couldn't help sitting there reflecting on how sometimes when you're in the middle of
a crisis, like we are now with the coronavirus, it really does have– ultimately, shine a very
bright light on some of the real weaknesses and foibles in our society...”
– Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Anthony Fauci,
April 2020

“The life goes out... like a candle...”
– Alin translating Liana’s explanation of what it feels like to have AIDS, 2012

“In these dangerous times, where it seems that the world is ripping apart at the seams, we
all can learn how to survive from those who stare death squarely in the face every day and
[we] should reach out to each other and bond as a community, rather than hide from the
terrors of life at the end of the millennium.” – Jonathan Larson’s 1994 musical, Rent

“Bring a bag of syringes.”
– Anișoara exiting the Gara de Nord Canal, 2014

“If you don’t take the man outside the hospital, I will shoot you,” ex-heroin addict
Mukisa recounted what the Ugandan state hospital’s security guard said to him at gun-
point in 2016, forcing him to abandon his friend, 35-year-old Kenyan
immigrant, Wamwarav. Hours later, Wamwarav died alone in hospital from a heroin use-
related sickness (field notes, Mukisa 2016). Like in Bucharest’s Gara de Nord Canal
Community, drug users in Uganda’s capital, Kampala, were discriminated against by the
state’s health system. As a result of this discrimination, some were compelled to advocate
for their community members’ access to healthcare. But why did an ex-heroin addict
choose the role of social advocate for his friend’s drug problem when social workers were
supposed to be available? Mukisa Bull said Ugandan social workers, who typically fill the
advocacy role, were distancing themselves from servicing their clients because of the
international syringe exchange organization, The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria.

In the instance of the Global Fund’s international syringe exchange program in Uganda, policy protocols harmed social worker—client relationships. Mukisa Bull explained that social workers hired by the Global Fund spend less time than they did before with their clients because of bureaucratic demands. As he said this, we watched a social worker put a band-aid on the forehead of a child who had suffered a police beating. The officer had stumbled over the homeless sleeping child’s body in a field while on patrol (field notes, Mukisa 2016). While there was a social worker available this time, most of the time social workers are not available even to treat children who are victimized by police brutality. Generally speaking, social workers spend the majority of their time filling out the Global Fund’s office paperwork and lessening their availability to provide medical and mental health support to children and vulnerable groups who were victims of the Ugandan state’s abuse in turn.

Figure XXXV. An elder in Mukisa’s neighborhood in Kampala, Uganda, teaches children to make crafts to sell so that they can make enough money to stay out of the illicit drug trade.
The Global Fund was created in 2002 to invest money to stop AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (The Global Fund 2020). The organization has a history of employing financial strategies that contradict its vision of a healthier world, including its decision in 2018 to partner with the beer company Heineken in Africa. This partnership was criticized by public health groups, as it downplayed the health risks associated with alcohol and exposed female beer promoters to sexual exploitation (Marten and Hawkins 2018; The Lancet Gastroenterology & Hepatology 2018; Global Fund 2018; Kessler 2018; Beaubien 2018).

Figure XXXVI. Mukisa poses in his neighborhood in Muzana of Kampala, Uganda.

The Global Fund syringe exchange services, begun in 2016 in Uganda, privileged its policies over local client needs. Like their Ugandan counterparts, Romanian social workers also observed that after they became Global Fund grant recipients in 2003, they were pulled away from clients’ needs by the organization’s demand for bureaucratic activities such as paperwork and online communication (personal conversation, Constantin 2014). Counter to client observations of their relationships with social workers dwindling under the Global Fund’s needle exchange protocol, the Ugandan Harm Reduction Network’s syringe exchange program has been portrayed as positive (UHRN 2017; HRI 2018). This may have been due in part to the Ugandan Government’s increased openness to internationally financed syringe exchange programs in key regions of Uganda (Twaibu 2017; Tharoor 2017; Avert 2019). As someone familiar with the Global Fund’s history in
Romania, I met this news with some trepidation, not only because of the change in social worker-client relationships but because of policy changes that can affect syringe exchange grant eligibility. In other instances, such as Romania in 2011 and Mexico in 2016, a policy change affected the country’s Global Fund grant eligibility.

In 2011, the same year Lenuța joined the Gara de Nord Canal, on the globe’s most unequal border, the Global Fund intervened to offer syringe-exchange support in Mexico. This support happened when sex and drug tourists crossed from San Diego, California to Tijuana, Mexico’s red-light district, leaving an epidemic of HIV and hepatitis C in their wake (Cepeda, et al. 2019, Strathdee, et al. 2012). Two years later, in 2013, the Global Fund withdrew its syringe exchange program from Mexico when there was not a sufficient transitionary plan in place for the government to develop syringe exchange programs to a scale necessary for all PWIDs to receive needles in places like Tijuana. In Tijuana, PWIDs began re-using syringes in the wake of the grant funding withdrawal, which further exacerbated the epidemic of HIV/AIDS (Cepeda, et al. 2019; Borgquez, et al. 2019).

Similar to Tijuana, Romanian drug users suffered a resurgence of HIV/AIDS cases after the Global Fund withdrew its syringe exchange grant. Just as in Mexico, this grant was withdrawn without establishing a transitionary plan for the Romanian government to develop its own state-based syringe-exchange program (EHRN 2016).

The Global Fund used the same criteria to withdraw from Romania in 2010 and from Mexico in 2015 as it did during 2015 from Vietnam, 2016 from Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro, and 2018 from Jamaica (Open Society Foundations 2017; Avert 2019; van Rooijen, et al. 2016). There was a resurgence of HIV/AIDS transmission in Serbia when the Global Fund first withdrew in 2014, after which it ironically became eligible again in 2017-2019 after most of its health service infrastructure had already ended (van Rooijen, et al. 2016). Some of these funding circumstances would almost sound comical if they were not real. All these countries that experienced the Global Fund grant withdrawal were linked by one common factor: they all became classified as middle-income countries.

This chapter discusses two different transitions that affected the relationships various institutions held with the Romanian sewer community: First, the World Bank and Global Fund changing syringe exchange funding policies. Second, the re-classification of
NPDs from legal to illicit as a factor of the transition in the relationship sewer communities held with the local police. The second part of this chapter will also describe the sewer community’s perspective on local laws that further criminalized the NPD trade.

**Why the Global Fund withdrew syringe-exchange grants**

In 2011, Global Fund board members decided there should be new eligibility criteria that declared countries classified as upper-middle-income and which had a ‘moderate’ HIV disease burden ineligible to apply for any more Global Fund HIV grants, including the syringe exchange program (The Global Fund 2011, 2012; EHRN 2011). The board member changed the Global Fund’s eligibility requirement for the New Funding Model they had created. The New Funding Model’s eligibility requirement was based on the Development Assistance Committee’s (DAC) 2005 new criteria for Official Development Assistance (ODA) (The Global Fund 2011, 10). These guidelines declared ODA assistance would not be continued for countries that were, “(i) above the high income threshold defined by the World Bank; (ii) a member of the G8; or (iii) a member of the European Union, or have a firm date set for EU admission. In accordance with these guidelines, the following five UMICs are not eligible for ODA: Bulgaria, Lithuania, Macedonia, Romania, and Russia (The Global Fund 2011, 10).” These policies affected the lives of young people in this region of the world. Across Eastern Europe and Central Asia, a quarter of PWIDs are younger than twenty, including members of the Gara de Nord Canal such as Lenuța (Merkinaite 2010, 112-114).

**Why the additional policies further limited chances for syringe-exchange**

The Global Fund decided that in addition to a low burden of HIV, there were ‘no political barriers’ that would prevent the implementation of harm reduction services in

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16 The Global Fund’s classification in 2020 show Romania is still not eligible for HIV Funding (The Global Fund Eligibility List 2020, 7).
18 Paragraph 9b of the Eligibility Policy says that the countries must demonstrate barriers to providing funding for interventions of key populations to qualify on the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) list of official development assistance (ODA) recipients As of 2020, the Secretariat determined Romania does not meet this requirement and is therefore still not eligible for HIV funding allocation (The Global Fund Eligibility List 2020).
Romania (The Global Fund Eligibility List 2020). However, the Romanian government has not demonstrated a commitment for an intervention of syringe-exchange programs that is to scale with the demand (Cook, Bridge, MacLean 2014; Bridge, et al. 2016). For instance, there are not enough government-run opioid substitution clinic (OST) locations (5 sites) or NGO-run OST locations (4 sites) to prevent further transmission of HIV or reverse its prevalence and incidence in the future (Shaw, Simionov, Varentsov 2016; The Global Fund Eligibility List 2020, 11; Aidspan 2014, 54).

Due to the government’s failure to develop its syringe-exchange programs, NGOs applied to fund grants from other international sources. After the initial international funding closure, the European Commission gave ARAS structural funds in 2012 and 2013 (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction 2015). Now Norway gives “regional funds” to ARAS’s social and medical services (Alexandrescu 2013). The Global Fund’s withdrawal changed the relationship that the Global Fund held with its NGO service providers and the relationship the government had with the Gara de Nord Canal Community.

Why the sewer community’s choices were limited by the World Bank policy

“Legal highs” – synthetic injectable drugs – were deemed illegal without a permit according to law 194/2011. “Smart shops” or “spice shops” which had sold synthetic injectable drugs shut down after this new law criminalized their products (Botescu 2012, 10, 28; Simionov 2012) and the synthetic drug trade transferred to sewer communities, adding the possibility of yet another criminal charge against them. Addicts became customers of sewer communities such as the Gara de Nord Canal, where synthetic injectable drugs were sold under the brand name “Pure Magic” (personal interview, Dante, Bruce Lee 2012, 2013, 2014; Botescu 2012, 47). Bruce Lee would tell addicts to give him syringes from ARAS and stockpile them, selling “free” syringes back to injecting drug users (personal interview, Constantin 2014). Some NGO workers cite this as an example of Bruce Lee using the corruption of the system to control injecting drug users. However, international organizations closing ARAS’s syringe program funding also damage sewer communities. The change in a sponsor’s choice of donations increases the chance of criminalization for addicts.
After its accession to the European Union, for instance, the World Bank reclassified Romania as “developed” (The World Bank 2019). The World Bank, like the Global Fund, said Romania was ineligible for international grants such as HIV program funding. In this case, the World Bank argued that since it was developed, Romania did not qualify as a syringe exchange recipient. The World Bank added one more element by which Romania was not included in the syringe exchange program. ARAS and other NGOs had relied almost exclusively on international donors for their syringe exchanges (Adams 2010). In 2011, after funding ended, the average injecting drug user had access to a needle every four days, though some people with serious addictions need a syringe three times a day (Alexandrescu 2013). In this particular case, the World Bank’s decision to dictate that accession to the European Union meant a country was “developed” made the lives of Romanian injecting drug users harder. Some canal members, including Bruce Lee, contemplated theories that the Romanian state was part of a larger global system that functioned at the expense of their community’s vulnerability. They were trying to express sentiments of dismay and paranoia at learning they had been taken advantage of by the aboveground yet again, this time by powerful systems that existed beyond the Romanian state. These global decisions strengthened the conviction of canal members that only their community could mitigate their health risks. They felt they could mitigate these risks by developing a more thorough principle of autonomy.

**Why World Bank and Global Fund’s decisions affected PWIDs**

The Global Fund had also not installed the necessary transitional plan to shift the burden of a syringe exchange program from their services to the Romanian government’s. According to the Global Fund, Romania’s classification as “developed” by the World Bank and its accession to the European Union disqualified it from HIV grant eligibility, which led the number of harm reduction NGOs in Romania to drop from six to two (Shaw 2016, 10; Botescu, et al. 2016). This further crippled the chances injecting drug users had of accessing syringe exchange programs. Across the globe, the distance to syringe programs is a structural barrier that affects access of PWIDs to access syringe programs as well as

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19 In 2011, 895,160 syringes were distributed to 9,000 beneficiaries (Alexandrescu 2013).
other services such as opioid substitution therapy (OST), HIV testing, viral hepatitis testing, and anti-retroviral therapy (Krug 2015, 9). PWIDs who reported using safe injecting equipment fell from 85% in 2009 to 16% in 2012 (UNAIDS Global Report 2013, 149). The effects of this program closure were devastating. According to a report, this funding closure coincided with HIV/AIDS rates for PWIDs in Bucharest rising from 1.1% in 2009 to 6.9% in 2012, finally reaching an apex at 53% in 2013 (Shaw, Simionov, Varentsov 2016, 4; Jürgens, Csete, Lim, Timberlake, Smith 2017). Reports such as these were a distressing way for canal members to learn the consequences of trusting in a global market of health services that was unaccountable to their community. Also, in 2011, PWIDs had the highest rate of viral hepatitis C (HCV), 79% prevalence, in Europe (Shaw 2016). For PWIDs in the canal, international funding negligence of this magnitude highlighted the significance of autonomy from the global political economy of NGO healthcare. As one PWID put it, “I also keep track of needle dealers on the black market (personal interview, anonymous 2014).” This criminalized black market was found to be more reliable than NGO syringe programs because of the politics surrounding donor funding as described above.

The impact of this HIV/AIDS resurgence can be shown more clearly through the creation of an exponential regression chart table. This exponential regression chart was created with data from a table showing the rate of HIV transmission from 2007 to 2012.

<table>
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<tr>
<td>HIV among IDUs</td>
<td>4 (.21)</td>
<td>3 (.16)</td>
<td>7 (.37)</td>
<td>14 (.74)</td>
<td>129 (6.78)</td>
<td>102 (5.35)</td>
</tr>
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By running an exponential regression test in excel one can arrive at these results:

The second chart below shows slightly different numbers from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and the WHO:

As one can see in the above charts, the R-squared is very close to 1. The R-squared should be taken with a grain of salt. Nonetheless, it is a very reasonable fit. This means the rate of change is proportional to the number of PWIDs with HIV which is a serious problem. The exponential increase in HIV transmission among IDUs qualifies this resurgence as an epidemic. The number of new HIV infection in PWIDs differ slightly depending on the source of the information (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction or the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and World Health Organization), but in both cases, they chart an exponential increase between 2010, when the Global Fund withdrew funding, and 2013. Even as the rate of the epidemic began to taper off in 2013, according to WHO findings, the R-squared remained very close to one. In the view of canal members, reports such as these showed the dangers of investing their trust in aboveground health service support of any kind.

**Figure XL.** Annual new HIV diagnoses for people infected through injecting drug use in Romania as reported to the EU and WHO. Data source: HIV/AIDS in Europe. European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, WHO Regional Office of Europe, 2015, p. 41, http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/324370/HIV-AIDS-surveillance-Europe-2015.pdf.
While in 2014 the number of new HIV diagnoses in IDUs decreased significantly to 162 and in 2015 the number showed fewer diagnoses at 142, they were still considerably higher than in 2010. These numbers, however, have done little to sway the Global Fund’s decision to cut funding to Romania. If anything, the Global Fund has re-enforced its decision with additional policies that further limit the chances of Romania ever receiving HIV funding for syringe exchange programs again. In the eyes of canal community members, this underlined the importance of maintaining autonomy from outside sources of social support, including those that were international.

**Why PWIDs, NGO workers, and activists protested the Romanian government**

Since neither the Romanian Ministry of Health nor the Ministry of Labor finances social services ARAS has “to depend on external funds still” for their syringe exchange program (personal communication, Anonymous 10 July 2016). Consequences of syringe dispersal lapses were dire for injecting drug users. In response to international funding closure in 2013, some Romanians protested.

Drug users, outreach workers, and civilians mobilized at Bucharest’s Revolutionary Square in 2013, where two decades before the mass movement which overthrew Ceaușescu took place. Protesters shouted with megaphones and picket signs “We want syringes! We want methadone!” They petitioned the Romanian government so that addicts, some of whom were abandoned youth, as mentioned before, who had fled Ceaușescu’s orphanages and current youth who fled state centers, could have access to substitution treatment (Alexandrescu 2013).

Some Romanian government officials refused to develop syringe services or mobile syringe distribution, perhaps hoping that more international funds would be found.

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\[20\] In 2013, The National Institute of Infectious Diseases, reported 231 (53% of the sample group) new HIV cases in 2012 among injectable drug users, 74% of which were in connection with Hepatitis C (Alexandrescu 2013; Kazatchkine 2014).
When ARAS did receive shooting equipment from the drugs agency of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, they said it “caused users more medical complications – broken veins and abscesses- than benefits (Alexandrescu 2013).” NGOs like ARAS take the pressure off the government by depending on foreign donors. This can result in low-quality government syringes. What was not addressed by NGOs like ARAS was that international organizations, such as the World Bank\textsuperscript{21}, European Union, or Norway, are not accountable to their aid recipients. However, some local government officials did attempt to support the Gara de Nord’s Canal’s health through methods other than mobile syringe exchange programs.

\textsuperscript{21}The Global Fund, more recently, decided that, in addition to a low burden of HIV, there were ‘no political barriers’ that would prevent the implementation of harm reduction services in Romania, even though the Romanian government has not demonstrated a large commitment for such an intervention, especially for syringe-exchange programs. In addition, there are not enough government-run opioid substitution clinic (OST) locations (5 sites) or NGO-run OST locations (4 sites) to prevent further transmission of HIV or reverse its prevalence and incidence in the future (Shaw 2016).
Before his arrest in 2015 for heroin importation, as international funding was being cut to NGO syringe programs in 2013, Bruce Lee said a government official had given him cement to use as flooring. This donation may not have protected addicts from infections passed through used syringes but did protect them from germs that could spread a common cold which, in a population dying of AIDS, can also save lives. Also, some PWIDs said syringes that sank into the mud of the canal’s dirt floor would re-emerge in the spring as the ground thawed. Application of cement to the floor prevented the needles from rising. The Romanian government was aware of the failings of state institutions, which led to chaos in the streets and were willing to co-operate with the Gara de Nord Canal, at least temporarily. The World Bank, Global Fund, and European Union’s policies, in this specific instance, brought members of local government closer to a criminalized leader of

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22 Sewer community member used some of the cement to cover the floor. However, they used the rest to build a jacuzzi. There was no filtration system for the jacuzzi water, however, and it quickly also became a health hazard. The walls of the jacuzzi left only a small space for people to wriggle through to get to the other side. The Gara de Nord Canal Community realized the jacuzzi could be used as yet another obstruction to prevent a police raid from accessing Bruce’s private quarters before he could hide his possessions.
the very people they had evicted and declared as criminals. This was a way of compensating for the shortcomings of international donors.

As the donation of the EU’s NGO needles began to run out in the fall of 2014, addicts began sharing them, further spreading infection. Even after the EU structural funds, Norway, and various private foundations and NGOs funded syringe-exchange programs, the rate of HIV/AIDS transmission among people who inject drugs (PWIDs) only decreased to 21.4%. PWIDs who were around the age of many Gara de Nord Canal members had the highest rate of HIV/AIDS at 28% for 25-29 years and 27% for 30-34 years in 2015 (Shaw 2016). At one point, people were so desperate that Bruce Lee himself went to ARAS, begging for the next shipment of needles. The added cost of black-market syringes resulted in Gara de Nord canal members running out of money for substance use more frequently. Out of desperation to stop their chemical withdrawal symptoms, underground residents became more aggressive with their income-generating activities. Organized begging, for example, began to resemble organized harassment. In response, the police enforced the criminalization of begging around the Gara de Nord Canal and residents could be penalized with a fine of Lei 200 to Lei 1000 (49 to 245 USD) (Housing Rights Watch 2012). This added debt to people already in economic distress, further increasing desperation. Put another way, members of the subteran were forced to commit crimes that produced dire legal consequences23, as a means to self-fund their syringes. Desperate addicts were now criminalized with greater frequency, among them the abandoned children who had escaped government centers. This aggression lent pseudo-credibility to institutionalized discrimination from state housing centers against drug users.

Again viewed only as victims, both former and current abandoned children of the Gara de Nord canal were seen as incapable of constructing their solutions and inventing their futures. Institutionalized discrimination against abandoned youth continued (Ionescu

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23 Members could be criminalized for begging in trains and railway stations according to The Railway Transportation Act no. 7/2005 with the penalty of a fine; penalized for one month to three years for begging according to The Criminal Code no. 65 of 16 April 1997; given sanctions on the spot for begging by police, mayors, and other authorities according to The Contraventions Act no. 2/2001; and receiving a fine of 100 to 500 Lei (24 to 122 USD) for begging according to the Law on Public Order 61/1991 (Housing Rights Watch 2012).
2016), as activism for real political dialogue was undermined by temporary global intervention for international health rights as mentioned before. Sewer community members elected to push for their autonomy from international aid for syringe exchange in the sewers. They demonstrated that even in the face of their drug dependency, Gara de Nord canal members were capable of assisting each other through reciprocal care to inject safely (Lancione 2019, 7, 9,10). Canal member could develop cooperative behaviors such as these in canals more than under control from the state.

**Why the sewer community decided to adapt syringe disposal practices**

Bruce was strict about making sure syringes were cleaned off the floor of the Gara de Nord Canal. For example, in one exchange he and another man argued about how clean the floor should be. Bruce exclaimed, “... Only you are allowed to go in the Canal and clean it up. There, it’s dirty all the time.” The man replied, “Dirt? I am always cleaning my place. My family shall die. Why are you saying this? I have always been cleaning up. My brothers shall die.” In this context, ‘my family shall die’ and ‘my brothers shall die’ is a shortened version of, ‘If I’m not speaking the truth, my family shall die/brothers shall die.’ An equivalent colloquialism in American English is, ‘I swear on my mother’s grave.’ The man continued,

“Everybody comes here and throws the syringes everywhere.”

“When I’m not there, there’s a lot of dirt,” Bruce said.

“I swear on my girl that I’m always cleaning up. But there are all the people coming and throwing syringes,” the man replied.

“Take that garbage bag and put it in the garbage bin,” Bruce stated, referring to the used needles placed in a garbage bag for disposal.

“If there are people entering 50 times there and throwing their syringes it starts to get dirty,” the man explained (personal interview, Valeriu, Bruce Lee 2014).

This exchange shows Bruce cared about making sure used syringes were cleaned and disposed of in his community. However, as the other man observed, customers did not safely dispose of their syringes in any containers after use. Drug dealers had to cater to the customers’ comforts or risk losing business. From the perspective of some Gara de Nord Canal Community members like the man mentioned above, cleaning up syringes took
time, partly because the space between the two hot water pipes, where most of the syringes fell, was so narrow. Spring rains flooded the narrow corridor and syringes sank into the mud. This made syringe disposal particularly tedious. If there was a line of customers, someone who moved around to pick up syringes blocked traffic. Also, cleaning up syringes was futile if customers were going to toss more needles into the muddy central corridor. From their perspective, Gara de Nord Canal members could either maximize profits in the drug trade and run the risk of transmitting disease through infected syringes left by customers or clean up syringes more methodically. The real problem was not the cleaners, dealers, or even the addicts. The question was a tradeoff between wealth and health. Was the wealth that was accumulated by the demand for drug use worth the risk in potential health lost to an infected syringe? How would one manage economic demand and addiction while at the same time making sure the sewers remained sanitary? Also, the gain in finances meant members could afford more nutritious food and other choices for a healthier living situation. This tradeoff between physical health risks and mental health risks was a delicate balance, especially for drug addicts. However, in the canals they had the option to make this choice and control their health more than in state centers.

As winter turned to spring, Bruce Lee decided it would be easier to have everyone leave the sewers at night for a thorough cleaning and disposal of customers’ syringes. He and the rest of the sewer community would leave the Gara de Nord Canal to wait for one of their members to clean the sewers. The addicts still needed to inject, however, and one woman, Anișoara, commented that the group should remember to “bring a bag of syringes” from the sewers to the surface (personal interview, Anișoara 2014). This meant that more uncapped syringes were tossed to the pavement which became a hazard to the general public in the morning unless the street sweepers were thorough. Though some members had their contradictions of mitigating health risks, the community’s autonomy allowed them control over their health outcomes more than in institutions provided by the state.
Why the sewer community decided to adapt syringe disposal to avoid prosecution

Figure XLIII. Canal members try to sleep amid the bustle of drug transactions.

“Take the drugs! Take aurolac! Make inject! Why [is] it being [in] my family?” canal community member, Bogdan, shared what he felt was the perspective of some of Lenuța’s family members. In his view, some of Lenuța’s family had stigmatized her for using NPDs in the Gara de Nord canal. This, combined with the stress of navigating a social hierarchy and conducting an intimate relationship with a much older, more powerful man like Bruce Lee, could certainly overwhelm someone as young as Lenuța. Bogdan had comforted Lenuța when she was struggling to survive in the canal and, in return, she would give him gifts to show her appreciation. “Hey, keep it,” Lenuța used to tell Bogdan, leaving him a “. . . syringe in the wall . . .” to use (personal interview Bogdan 2014). However, these gifted syringes, or syringes of any kind, became scarce in the summer of 2014 as the Global Fund’s donor program needles Gara de Nord Canal drug users had grown accustomed to were exhausted. Before discussing how the community decided to compensate for the syringe exchange program’s closure, this next section will describe policies that affected the lives of drug users in the Gara de Nord Canal.

Since the side effects of consuming the drugs were detrimental to one’s health, the Romanian government passed legislation to strip the product of its legal status. In 2011, two initiatives to change new psychoactive drugs’ legal status were created. First, a Joint
Ministerial Order reinforced old consumer safety and tax laws that ensured health protection. Second, a new law penalized any unauthorized supplies of drugs with psychoactive effects. Violations of the latter could result in as much as 5 years of imprisonment (EMCDDA Country Drug Report 2019). Since the drugs were re-defined as illicit, the Gara de Nord Canal Community was subjected to additional laws. Article 27.1’s law 143/2000, later amended by article 4.0’s law 522/2004, declared that while consumption of illicit drugs is not penalized by law, its possession, sale, trafficking, and delivery is illegal with a penalty of multiple years in prison (EMCDDA Country legal profiles 2012). As was discussed before in Chapter 2, this law is important because its inception led many to view Bruce’s position of sole ownership as one of self-sacrifice.

Users and dealers alike were aware that the criminalization of NPDs put them in a precarious position with the police. GD 461/2011 re-instated the National Anti-drug Agency to maintain safety and order. The agency worked collaboratively with authorities for the raiding of psychoactive drug shops (Botescu 2012). From the perspective of some Gara de Nord Canal Community members, whether it was by keeping their illicit drug activities secret, or eliminating evidence of drug use, their plan to keep evidence of their activities out of the public’s view reduced their chance of a police raid occurring. After all, if drug using customers were reporting that the sewers were relatively clean, there was less probability of a police raid. The idea of winning over the police on public health precautions in a drug den may seem naïve but since the drugs had only recently become illegal, some Gara de Nord Canal members felt rules of engagement between police and dealers remained open to interpretation. As some Gara de Nord Canal members and social outreach workers pointed out, initial legislation failed to end the psychoactive drug trade. As was explained in Chapter 3, Laws had focused too narrowly on defining the chemical compound of the drug. When suppliers learned of these legal changes, they changed the chemical compound of their psychoactive substances to fall outside the bounds of the law, essentially rendering it legal again (Administration and Interior, et al. 2013, 7-13; Botescu 2012, 15; UNODC 2016, 7). Some Gara de Nord Canal members thought that if suppliers had found ways to avoid the state’s laws in the past, why would they not find a way around them in the future? Various other canal members felt that autonomy in the sewers allowed
them to negotiate with state authority on *their* terms, to maintain their community’s sense of security. The canals provided access to income-generating activities for members to have enough financial leverage to support their pursuit of autonomy, control over their health, and freedom from the state. Once they understood the repercussions of their dependency on the Global Fund’s syringe exchange services, some canal members felt this same logic of autonomy, security, and access also applied to international NGOs.

Some Gara de Nord Canal members felt the new psychoactive drugs’ popularity with drug users complicated the relationship between the police and the sewer community drug dealers. Even if the police arrested the Gara de Nord Sewer dealers, the demand for more drugs would still exist. Potentially, this created an opportunity for new drug dealers to prove their dominance in the market and meet the demand for synthetic drugs through violence. This violence would create additional work for the police. This by no means meant the Gara de Nord Canal Community drug dealers were immune to arrest. In response to potential police enforcement of these legal changes, the Gara de Nord Canal Community attempted to organize for more thorough syringe disposal. Community members hoped that if they showed they had reduced health risks, or at least minimized the visibility of those risks, the police would be less likely to raid their home. In this way, their mitigation of health risks doubled as a method of security by not providing an excuse for potentially abusive authorities to intervene. Even with the growing threat of police intervention, some canal members chose to live in the canal because they had an environment to inject and dispose of syringe that was unavailable in state centers.
In the underground canal, one of Bruce’s top-dealers, Dante, was using force to get people to leave the sewers so he could more easily dispose of used syringes. Sara, a woman living in the Gara de Nord Canal commented, “He comes with the electroshocks to throw us all outside. And I have panicked for good” (personal archive, Sara 2014). The use of the “electro-shock” – a small taser – shows that the sewer community took the idea of public health, at least to appease the authorities, very seriously. The sewer community worked hard to organize for healthier options so that they could minimize health risks, live longer, and hopefully avoid police intervention.

Despite knowing that at any moment their home could be raided by police, the Gara de Nord Canal Community still worked to make their living situation healthier. People chose to live in the sewers because they could control their health risks more than in state institutions. Of course, some canal members had health risks specifically related to being
drug users and they would continue to use drugs, too.

Figure XLV. Sweeping up syringes in the canal's nightly party is a challenge.

Canal members felt that the Gara de Nord Canal provided an environment where they could better mitigate health risks than through services provided by the global political economy of healthcare. As with Bucharest’s canal community, drug users in Kampala, Uganda, were forced, in their view, to choose autonomy to mitigate health risks over services provided by international organizations such as the Global Fund. In addition to restricting social worker-client relationships, the Global Fund ended syringe exchange grants in countries that had achieved middle-income status. However, they did not create a transitionary plan to shift the burden of syringe exchange from international to state services. As a result, there were no other sources of syringe services that were to scale with the community’s demand, and addicts in the canal began sharing the last of the Global Fund’s needles.

The end of the Global Fund’s syringe exchange grant coincided with an HIV epidemic among injecting drug users in Romania. As a result, some canal members chose to re-invest in syringes on the black market. They now understood that, in addition to state
institutions, they had to sever their dependency on international NGOs if they wanted to survive. Therefore, canal members maintained their community’s autonomy to avoid the deplorable effects of international NGO policies. From the perspective of canal members, the Global Fund’s syringe exchange grant closure demonstrated the importance of their canal community’s autonomy in mitigating health risks. In reaction to the Global Fund’s negligence, some members of the state implemented non-syringe exchange prevention strategies to reduce health risks in the sewers, re-establishing connections with Bruce Lee. However, the state also used the community’s desperation to afford syringes on the black market as an indication of guilt by association and an excuse to further criminalize the sewer community, reducing their autonomy. This combination of both support and criminalization sent a confusing message to sewer members. In reaction, Bruce further enforced syringe disposal in an attempt to demonstrate health risk reduction and regain the trust of law enforcement. In this case, international NGO policies brought the state closer to a drug boss while also justifying their criminalization of his community. Due to these reasons, some canal community members felt that autonomy from the political economy of global health services, security from state abuse, and access to their own strategies to mitigate health risks, supported their conviction to live in canals instead of state centers. The sewer community’s strong will to organize better health options, such as more thorough syringe disposal, initially engendered hope in the Gara de Nord Canal members for their relationship with the police. The Global Fund and World Bank’s decision that Romania’s change in income status and accession to the European Union should end its HIV/AIDS grant, led to a closure of its free needle exchange funding. This funding closure does coincide with an epidemic of HIV/AIDS transmission among PWIDs. Many Gara de Nord Canal injecting drug users died tragically in the wake of the HIV/AIDS epidemic from 2011 to 2013 as the Global Fund withdrew its free needle exchange grant and social workers scrambled to find new funding sources. However, while many canal community members died, the community itself survived the brunt of the epidemic, only to have their plans and their entire canal dismantled by law enforcement. This final demise of the Gara de Nord Canal Community at the hands of the state will be discussed in Chapter 8.
CHAPTER 8: “THEY BEAT US AND STEAL OUR MONEY”: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE KING PIN IS REMOVED?

“All the pieces matter.”
— The Wire, 2002

In Chapter 2, Bruce described strict rules such as non-violence, not stealing, and acting in a familial manner with each other. He also advocated for an organized system of drug dealing and trash collecting to manage the canal community and help prevent conflict from arising. Bruce also controlled who entered and exited the canal, aware of the groups that hoped to take advantage of his Gara de Nord Canal Community, furthering abuse towards its members. Though his abuses of power often contradicted his ideals, the community continued to struggle towards a shared vision of autonomy from the state. If these are the principles of the subteran, what happens when the leader, the enforcer of those rules, is removed?

Figure XLVI. Gara de Nord Canal member poses in front of The Last Supper.
In Chapter 7, the switch from international aid agencies to the EU because of World Bank policies and EU accession, meant that in addition to the fall of 2014, NGO syringes were lacking from January 2015 to January 2016, making the Gara de Nord Canal that much more desperate and therefore susceptible to criminal justice intervention (Gad 2015). Also, after Lenuța’s funeral, Channel 4 went from portraying Bruce Lee as a hero and protector of children, to questioning the Gara de Nord Canal’s leadership ethics (O’Brien 2014). The possibility of a criminal justice intervention and the negative media portrayals of their leadership meant less protection from certain kinds of abuse. The sewer community endured abuse from Bruce and others. Nevertheless, the abusers did not threaten the economic autonomy of the sewers and the abuse tended to target individuals rather than the entire group. This did not mean the abuse was any less painful for the victims. However, the victims still had the emotional support of other Gara de Nord Canal members to rely on.

In 2013, when Bruce Lee was incarcerated for two months (Ciorniciuc 2013), a child explained that abusers came to “beat us and they steal our money (personal interview, anonymous 2013).” Bruce Lee added that in his absence, there was sexual abuse of children, girls were raped, and there was forced child prostitution in the Gara de Nord Canal, driving children to go back to centers (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2013; see also Ciorniciuc 2014; Gad 2015). Though Bruce Lee’s governance was abusive, the victims still had enough support from certain community members to reduce negative effects on their mental health.

Figure XLVII. After Lenuța's death, police surveillance increases around the canal.
These forms of emotional comfort were not available, however, if the entire community was abused. Emotional support, despite the abuse, was enough for homeless people to prefer the sewers over abuses at centers where the abuse was more difficult to manage and support was not necessarily available.

On 21 July 2015, Bruce Lee and several dealers were arrested by Romanian Police (Lancione 2019, 13) on what authorities claimed were drug trafficking charges for dealing “heroin”\textsuperscript{24}, methadone, and various other drugs” in the Gara de Nord area\textsuperscript{25} (O’Brien 2015; Meredith 2015; Clavarino 2015). Bruce Lee became neither a hero nor villain, just another incarcerated criminal who may have less time in prison given the latest changes to the Criminal Code on 1 February 2014, reducing several penalty ranges for supply offenses (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction 2016).

After turning reporting into a witch hunt to remove Bruce Lee from the sewers and emancipate the Gara de Nord Canal’s most vulnerable, the foreign press severely lessened their reporting on the sewer community at Gara de Nord. Perhaps it was not just disinterest, but a lack of knowledge regarding who had replaced Bruce Lee, the ruler of the Bucharest underground at various locations for over a quarter of a century, by cooperating somewhat with the state’s authorities, NGO social and medical services, and various vulnerable groups.

\textsuperscript{24} Heroin, like the oil paintings, did not make sense socio-economically to be in a sewer drain of impoverished drug addicts. An outreach worker theorized it was probably stored there by a wealthier criminal. The shakedown itself was suspected to be the result of an undercover cop- not one of the members of the underground community.

\textsuperscript{25} Some members of the Gara de Nord Canal Community had speculated about the possibility of one of its members being an undercover policeman. Bruce Lee had become paranoid that some of the adults were informants to the police and accused them of selling out the community. Some of the social outreach workers had wondered if Bruce himself had a deal with the police since they never seemed to catch him during a police raid, there are only so many exits in the underground tunnels, and if the police were really concerned they could probably find a blueprint of the central heating unit tunnels at the city government. On the second to last day I was in Romania, I witnessed what looked like a man in an expensive sports car hit one of the underground canal children on the boulevard next to the entrance of the canal. The man stepped out and what looked an exchange of a few seconds took place between the man and the child, who looked as though he had been wounded in the collision and was clutching his leg. Then, the man hopped back in the car and revved the engine to drive away. Angered by what I though had taken place, I ran over and demanded the man to stop his vehicle and call the police or I would take down his license plate number and report him to the local police. The man responded quietly, “I’m an undercover officer,” and flashed me his badge. I took down his license plate number because I thought perhaps the badge was fake. In hindsight, I think he may have in fact been an undercover officer and the child was his informant.

Foreign news networks would have found that pressure to have Bruce Lee incarcerated brought more chaos than emancipation. ARAS social services reported that two men fought for leadership in the power vacuum following Bruce’s incarceration by terrorizing the Gara de Nord Canal’s residents, many of whom were ethnic minorities. They raped the girls, many of whom were Roma, and stole from everyone (Gad 2015). One of the men raping impoverished Roma women had a swastika tattooed on his back (Gad 2015). Though there had been individual instances of racism and sexual abuse in the Gara de Nord Canal under Bruce Lee’s leadership before, recent neo-nazi rule and multiple rapes only happened during Bruce’s incarceration.
During the Channel 4 documentary, Paraic O’Brien touched upon Lenuța being Roma (O’Brien 2014; Valente 2014). The Roma, a people historically enslaved in Romania, have struggled against the oppressive forces of ethnic bigotry and exclusion that persist in Romanian society today. Lenuța faced the double adversity of being both Roma and a woman in a society dominated by white men. Speaking to people who live aboveground, I have heard allegations of the sewers being filled with “Gypsies,” homosexuals, thieves, and AIDS victims. Oftentimes, the terms were used synonymously (Valente 2014).

Raluca, a volunteer social worker who helps people living at the sewer at Gara de Nord, said that she had been urging Lenuța to go to the hospital to get AIDS anti-retroviral medication for two years (personal interview, Pahomi 2014; Valente 2014). Lenuța kept refusing, claiming that she was humiliated by the stigma of AIDS. One could say that it was not the infection that killed her, but the social stigma associated with it. She was dying because of what she was afraid others would think of her which, in her mind, superseded her health. Perhaps, if such pathological perceptions, such as speaking of the Roma as being synonymous with AIDS, did not occur in society aboveground, Lenuța would still be alive today.
Only a third of Gara de Nord Canal’s residents remain, the rest having scattered across Bucharest’s dangerous streets to find shelter. According to the 2879/2009 Bucharest Local Council Decision by-law, sleeping on park benches near the locally policed Gara de Nord is off-limits. This vulnerability on the streets makes former residents easy prey for child pornographers, traffickers, and organ harvesters (Housing Rights Watch 2012; Gad 2015). There was already sexual abuse in the subteran, though it may not have been to the same degree as the streets. The incarceration of a leader, which destabilizes a system, resulting in more crime, danger, and abuses, shows the importance of thinking beyond criminal justice. The Ugandan political scientist Dr. Mahmood Mamdani posits that criminal justice intervention in the midst of a political conflict does not solve the “crime,” but can feed into the cycle of violence created by a political system. Instead, social and political justice should be employed in an attempt to rebuild (Mamdani 2013). Bruce’s arrest did more to satisfy the moral conscience of wealthy people who lived aboveground than it did to end the abuses for the homeless abandoned youth who lived below. Despite Bruce Lee’s authoritarian rule, abusive centers, local police repression, international funding closures, and other forms of oppression, people in the subteran do have certain choices, but it is neither a democratic nor a free existence.
CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION: SPEAKING IN THEIR OWN WAY

The lyricism of marginality may find inspiration in the image of the “outlaw,” the great social nomad, who prowls on the confines of a docile, frightened order.

— Michel Foucault

“Sunt haiduc” – I am an outlaw (personal notes, anonymous 2013, 2014) – former and current abandoned children in the sewers of Gara de Nord would affectionately say, remembering outlaws from folk songs such as “Andrii Popa,” which was based on a true story (Roman 1990, 71). In academia and news reporting, there are debates over whether groups designated as “criminal” can be social movements. Hobsbawm (1959, 1969, and 1973) argues banditry is not a social movement, though it can be a substitute for it. However, he focuses only on the leadership, presents the peasantry as desperate, and deprives them of agency to find their own solutions, as history shows that bandits do not always steal from the poor (Murindwa-Rutanga 2011, 28-29). Mainstream journalists, likewise, focus on the drug-dealing leadership of Gara de Nord Canal, presenting them as either oddities or devils (O’Brien 2014, 2015; Meredith 2015; Clavarino 2015), missing both that crime is socially constructed and that members participate in movements, not just the leaders (Murindwa-Rutanga 2011, 28-29). Arguments based on examples such as this, in certain circumstances, at certain points in time, for particular clusters of people, can show why some criminal groups with a particular history, such as the Gara de Nord Canal, might also be seen as social movements to understand their reasons for choosing sewers over centers (Bar-On 2001, 185-200).

Dr. Ioan, Professor and Director of the NGO, Carusel, who works with vulnerable groups in Bucharest, explained Bruce Lee was only “a piece of a big puzzle” (personal interview, Ioan 2014). After sensationalized news reporting, residents were, in 2014, the “most stigmatized in the whole country . . . because it became public. People saw what . . . [was] going on [in the] underground [and] linked all the other issues like drug use, sex work, ethnicity, diseases, HIV, TB, with that group” (personal interview, Dr. Ioan 2014).
Figure L. Gara de Nord Canal member “Dante” receives a haircut underground.

An accurate study of social movements must not parallel the role of a drug lord to Robin Hood, rather it should contextualize the roles that various individuals and groups play in a social movement’s concrete situation politically and historically (Slatta 2004, 22; Murindwa-Rutanga 2011, 28-29). This kind of analysis would show the Gara de Nord Canal is a community caught up in a criminalized system, that traces its origins back to state politics and policies. This community is nevertheless willing to take those risks, in the pursuit of freedoms and protection the current state system cannot provide for them.

In respect to the strongman, Bruce Lee’s, important contributions of emotional security, a member of Gara de Nord Canal, Roxana, explained, “He offers what others don’t give (personal interview, Roxana 2014).” Specifically, enough security to have more freedom of choice than one would be afforded in state institutions. Ceaușescu’s pro-natalist policy produced a generation of abandoned children who became homeless under the former Romanian president’s leadership before 1989. These abandoned youth
combined with subsequent generation of children and adults who struggled with homelessness due to orphanage closures in the early 1990’s, as well as more recent discrimination from population census bureau reports, abuse from state centers, and neglect from NGO syringe exchange programs. These two groups composed the larger social group that resided in the Gara de Nord Canal.

The structure of non-violent, non-abusive drug transactions may have been enforced physically by Bruce who, “represent[ed] the law and order (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2013)”, but it was also discussed, debated, and invented by members of the sewer community whose “options” Bruce “respected” (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2012, 2013). Trash can be sold or bartered for economic growth but does not have to be bought within any state-based market. Communal bartering and eating outside of the state’s domain had begun to develop into communal living.

The question, then, is not whether or not there were rules, but what was the people-based system guiding the community towards? Bruce Lee talked of constructing “an organization underground” “with our own power” [and] “principle[d]” (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2013) co-existence ungovernable by repressive structures. It was not just quick money that the abandoned youth in the sewer community coveted. What they were gaining was collective independence and defense from “nations or [a] system stronger than [us]” (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2012). Their criminalized, nascent grassroots social movement formed the barest of independent “underground law” and order returning to the lives of people plagued and cast aside by a globalizing society (personal interview, Bruce Lee 2013).

Despite abuses from Bruce Lee, NGOs, and the state, the sewers have continued to be chosen over formalized state locations as a commons (Linebaugh 2010) for people to construct autonomy from more oppressive centers. The idea of exploring the barest forms of political autonomy is a consideration abandoned youth may have while determining whether or not to endure abuse when contained in a state center. There are only two options for Romanian abandoned youth who lived under Ceaușescuism and are now living under global capitalism: state institutions or scattered in the streets. When confronted with an organized community, the state reacted by developing legislative tenets and police
repression to criminalize sewer communities, denying them their legal existence. This system of discriminatory urban logic continues to destabilize autonomous communities like Gara de Nord Canal, created by former children of the state who had been forced to choose an alternative to state centers. Choice, in this instance, was less a statement of fair options and more a question of what abandoned youth could endure.

Lenuta’s passing is a major loss for her family and her community. One can only hope that her passing will be cause for Romanian society to take the plight of people at Gara de Nord—suffering the heat, the cold, and the inhumanity of oppression—far more seriously. We should not ask, “Why do they give up?” Rather we should ask what policy changes are needed to empower these people underground. The world can find many people living on the streets and under them who share the plight of exclusion from human dignity.

I would like to counter Channel 4’s suggestion that Lenuta just “gave up (O’Brien 2014)” with the words of Vito Russo, an activist from the United States, who argued against stigmas during the AIDS crisis. I believe, if Lenuta were alive today, she would appreciate his sentiments:

“...If I’m dying from anything, I’m dying from homophobia. If I’m dying from anything, I’m dying from racism. If I’m dying from anything, it’s from indifference and red tape, because these are the things that are preventing an end to this crisis...if I’m dying of anything, I’m dying from the sensationalism of newspapers and magazines and television shows, which are interested in me, as a human-interest story, only as long as I’m willing to be a helpless victim, but not if I’m fighting for my life (Russo 1988; Zinn, Arnove 2004, 534).”
Figure LI. Lenuța in spring of 2014.
APPENDICES
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ARAS</td>
<td>Romanian Association Against AIDS</td>
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<tr>
<td>DAC</td>
<td>Development Assistance Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
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<td>NPD</td>
<td>New psychoactive drugs</td>
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<td>NSP</td>
<td>Needle and Syringe Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OST</td>
<td>Opioid Substitution Therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWID</td>
<td>Person who injects drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>UNODC</td>
<td>United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime</td>
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APPENDIX B: GLOSSARY

Cases

Asociația Colectiv GTG 3010: An association created by victims of the Colectiv Nightclub fire on October 30, 2015. The plan to create a regional center for the treatment of large burns, support the reintegration of current burn victims, and monitor the ongoing investigation into the Colectiv Nightclub fire. They have built a monument to commemorate lives lost in the fire (Asociatia Colectiv GTG 3010 2020).

Aurolac dealers: people who administer aurolac to customers, typically in bags, see aurolac.

Aurolac: (also referred to as "bronze") a brand of synthetic paint with golden bronze and varnish for painting frames and ornaments that has hallucinogenic effects. In the Gara de Nord Canal, the product was used for huffing and is either bought in bottled form at five lei (1.22 USD) or a small amount is measured into a plastic bag for one leu (.24 USD). Some people living in the Gara de Nord Canal Community huffed Aurolac out of plastic bags and drank alcohol, not switching to injectable drugs until 2008, with the coming of synthetic drugs, as they could not afford heroin (personal interviews 2013, 2014).

baracă: "shed," an abandoned restaurant behind the Gara de Nord clinic where canal members congregated in the summer when the canal became too hot.

boschetar: 1. someone living through sewers, existing in poverty, homeless, evading social order. 2. Pejorative term for a man who is drunk and not moral (Roman 2018, p. 126).

Bruce Lee: the alias of the sewer community’s leader, Florin Cora, who chose the name because of martial arts films, illegally imported from the west during Romanian’s communist era. He also chose the name because of his admiration of the movie character.

Bucharest: Romania’s capital city. see Romania.

canal members: 1. Members of the Gara de Nord Canal Community. 2. Members of the 4-5 canal communities in Bucharest. see Gara de Nord Canal Community, see canal.

canal: a term used by Gara de Nord Community Canal members to describe their home, an underground network of tunnels that were built decades ago to supply central heating to Romania’s capital, Bucharest (Cohan 2015).

Carusel: An NGO association that aims to improve the quality of life for PWIDs, sex workers, people living on the streets, and other groups living on the margins of society. Co-founded by Dr. Marian Ursan. see Ursan, Marian.

medical policies that paved the way for the creation of sewer communities. see

Ceaușescuism: The ideology and policies adopted by former Romanian president, Nicolae Ceaușescu, based on systematization, totalitarianism, and his interpretation of communism. Ceaușescu's political ideologies were heavily influenced by Stalinism and by Chinese and Korean communism of the 1970s.

Channel 4: A British public service broadcasting station located in London, U.K.

Colectiv: A nightclub that caught fire in 2015, leading to the deaths of over 64 young adults, 37 of whom died from infections picked up in hospital (personal interview, Eugen Iancu and Ana, June 2017).

counter: a four foot by one fut slab of wood set across hot water pipes in the Gara de Nord Canal drug den. It separated customers from dealers so as to better organize the administration of drugs, similar to a pharmacy counter.

Dogs of the underground: Stray dogs were taken in by canal community members who attempted to domesticate them. In Bucharest, a psychologist notes that NGO-trained therapy dogs help orphans who have been victims of abuse in state-based institutions improve their mental health (Tedeschi, Jenkins 2019, p. 432). People preferred the sewers over the centers because in the sewers they could have similar therapy animal relationships without having to deal with abuses they could not control in the state-based institutions. What makes the Gara de Nord community’s instance remarkable is that the trauma survivors themselves organized to domesticate the dogs for therapeutic purposes without the help of an NGO or other outside interference. It was a striking parallel that the state’s pro-natalist policies resulted in the abandonment of youth, some of whom chose to live in the canal, and the state’s re-structured housing forced families to abandon their pets, some of which were ironically adopted by formerly abandoned children in the canal.

drug smuggler: a person who engages in the transport of illicit drugs (Kloppenburg 2013, p. 167). At the Gara de Nord, this position was often performed by those at the bottom of the drug trade's hierarchy, often performed by children.

Dumitrache, Daniel Gabriel: A 26-year-old man of Roma ethnicity who was murdered by police officer, George Stefan Isopescu, on 4 March 2014 while in custody after allegedly running a one man racketeering operation from a parking lot a couple subway stops from the Gara de Nord Canal. see Roma, see Local Police of Bucharest.

Fierbinteanu, Cristina: A Psychologist at ARAS (Romanian Association Against AIDS) who has worked in social outreach to people from the Gara de Nord area of Bucharest in the past.

Gara de Nord Canal Community: A community of people living in underground tunnels at the Gara de Nord in Romania's capital, Bucharest. The Gara de Nord Canal Community members also humorously referred to themselves as "Sector 7". There are officially 6 sectors in Bucharest, so the joke is they are the unofficial 7th sector. see Gara de Nord, see Canal.
**Gara de Nord Sewer Community**: see *Gara de Nord Canal Community*, see *Canal*, see *Gara de Nord* ................................................................. 9

**Gara de Nord**: (North Train Station) The busy Northern Train Station in Romania’s Capital, Bucharest. see *Bucharest*,........................................................................................................................................ 1

**heroin trafficking allegations and conspiracy theory**: On 21 July 2105, Bruce Lee and several dealers were arrested by Romanian Police on what authorities claimed involved a conspiracy to traffic heroin and other drugs in the Gara de Nord area. Heroin, like the oil paintings, didn’t make sense socio-economically to be in a sewer drain of impoverished drug addicts. An outreach worker theorized it was probably stored there by a wealthier criminal. The shakedown itself was suspected to be the result of an undercover cop- not one of the members of the underground community. see *Gara de Nord Canal Community* ........................................................................................................ 1

**iatrogenic**: illness induced inadvertently from a medical examination or treatment............ 71

**informant children**: Some members of the Gara de Nord Canal Community had speculated about the possibility of one of its members being an undercover policeman. Bruce Lee had become paranoid that some of the adults were informants to the police and accused them of selling out the community. Some of the social outreach workers had wondered if Bruce himself had a deal with the police since they never seemed to catch him during a police raid, there are only so many exits in the underground tunnels, and if the police were really concerned they could probably find a blueprint of the central heating unit tunnels at the city government. On the second to last day I was in Romania, I witnessed what looked like a man in an expensive sports car hit one of the underground canal children on the boulevard next to the entrance of the canal. The man stepped out and what looked an exchange of a few seconds took place between the man and the child, who looked as though he had been wounded in the collision and was clutching his leg. Then, the man hopped back in the car and revved the engine to drive away. Angered by what I thought had taken place, I ran over and demanded the man to stop his vehicle and call the police or I would take down his license plate number and report him to the local police. The man responded quietly, “I’m an undercover officer,” and flashed me his badge. I took down his license plate number because I thought perhaps the badge was fake. In hindsight, I think he may have in fact been an undercover officer and the child was his informant................................................................. 140

**Isopescu, George Stefan**: see *Dumitrache, Daniel Gabriel* ......................................................... 79

**jacuzzi underground**: A member of the Ministry of Public Health gave Bruce Lee cement to cover the floor of the canal as a public health precaution as the Global Fund withdrew its grant for syringe exchange. Sewer community member used some of the cement to cover the floor. However, they used the rest to build a jacuzzi. There was no filtration system for the jacuzzi water, however, and it quickly also became a health hazard. The walls of the jacuzzi left only a small space for people to wriggle through to get to the other side. The Gara de Nord canal community realized the jacuzzi could be used as yet
another obstruction to prevent a police raid from accessing Bruce’s private quarters before he could hide his possessions.

**Jandameria**: A military body that polices for the protection of the civilian population. The members of this body are called *gendarmes*.

**Legal highs**: a term used to describe synthetic injectable drugs that were legal when they were initially imported to Romania beginning in 2008, see *synthetic drugs*.

**lei**: Romania's financial currency. Singular is *leu*. Alternately referred to as RON.

**Lenuța**: A Gara de Nord Canal Community member who had been living in the canal below Bucharest since she was fifteen.

**madam**: Referring to brothel-keeper or -manager. An English-slang, gendered term for a position that a man in the same line of work would not hold. (Bernstein 2017, pg. 226).

**Matache, Magda**: Romanian Roma Rights Activist and Director of the Roma Program at Harvard Francois-Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights who discussed a history of photographers exoticizing and exploiting Roma women as a byproduct of colonialism at the Neglected Voices: Global Roma Diaspora conference at the Harvard-Kennedy Center in 2019. She is also the former director of the NGO, Rromani CRISS in Romania that addressed the issue of disproportionate numbers of police homicides and brutality targeting Roma people in Romania and Europe. Magda Matache and political activist and public intellectual Dr. Cornel West co-wrote an article that detailed the common history of struggle Roma and African-American people shared against the history of criminalization as connected to the legacy of slavery in Europe and America (Matache and West 2018).

**micro-transfusions**: transfusions of blood that were administered by Romanian health workers to orphans under the belief that they would boost child immunity and fortify against anemia and malnutrition. Unfortunately, the Romanian Ministry of Health failed to recognize the possibility of HIV infection. The Romanian government used unscreened blood banks and recycled syringes which exacerbated the spread of HIV/AIDS in Romania, especially among orphans, between 1986 and 1989. When abandoned children fled the orphanages and entered the canals they brought the virus with them. 90% of the Gara de Nord Canal Community members had HIV/AIDS in 2014 (Kozinetz 2005; Glover 1996, 145).

**My brothers shall die**: see *My family shall die*. Another variation on this phrase is, "If I'm not speaking the truth, my brothers shall die." An equivalent colloquialism in American English is, "I swear on my mother's grave."

**My family shall die**: A shortened version of the full phrase, "If I'm not speaking the truth, my family shall die." Another variation on this phrase is, "If I'm not speaking the truth, my brothers shall die." An equivalent colloquialism in American English is, "I swear on my mother's grave."

**new psychoactive drugs**: a term used to describe drugs whose chemical chemical compounds had been changed since 2008 to avoid being defined as illegal according to new legislation passed by the Romanian government to criminalize their use. The most common forms of New Psychoactive Drugs were.
**NPDs**: new psychoactive drugs, see *new psychoactive drugs*................................. 38

**O’Brien, Paraic**: A correspondent for the British public service broadcasting station, Channel 4 News ........................................................................................................ 1

**official development assistance (ODA) recipients**: recipients of governmental aid that promotes economic development as defined by the DAC. see *Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC)*, see *Global Fund* ........................................................................................................ 119

**oil paintings**: Displayed on the walls of the sewer community by members. Police at one point raided the sewers using tear gas, water hoses, and fire extinguishers to destroy a "barricad" made by the sewer community, handcuffing residents, with the exception of Bruce Lee, who went into hiding. The raid was done to take back stolen paintings to a French citizen (Digital Antenna Group April 2013, Antena 1 November 2013, Kanal D 2013). It was theorized by an outreach worker that wealthier criminals had stolen the paintings and put them in the underground for storage, where they had been seen on a T.V. show about public health of the homeless......................................................... 79

**Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC)**: The OECD is an inter-governmental economic to stimulate world trade and economic progress. The DAC was incorporated into the OECD in 1961. The committee functions as a forum where the World Bank, UN, and donor country government attempt to help developing countries meet Millennium Development Goals and reduce poverty (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark 2020). ................................................................................................................................. 119

**pigeons**: In 2013, some Gara de Nord Canal members decided to trap pigeons, put chains around their legs, and kept them near the entrance to the canal. Some canal members had hoped to train the birds to become carrier pigeons, delivering messages from their canal community to other locations to remain undetected by police. I pointed out that there was a food chain to consider, but members said all the animals loved each other and dogs and cats would not harm pigeons in the canal. One week later, I returned to find a some members looking somber. All that was left of the pigeons were a couple feathers and some specks of blood on the wall. Nevertheless, their plan to communicate with other groups in the capital through unconventional methods is worth noting............. 108

**Popescu, Dan**: Social Outreach Coordinator and Psychologist at ARAS (Romanian Association Against AIDS) who has supervised social outreach groups that work in the Gara de Nord area of Bucharest................................................................. 126

**psychoactive drugs**: a drug that affects the brain's workings and causes changes in mood, awareness, thoughts, feelings, or behavior (NCI 2011), see *synthetic drugs*. ................... 23

**Pure Magic**: The brand name of synthetic injectable drugs that dealer sold to customers in the Gara de Nord Canal Community's drug den (personal interview, Santo, Bruce Lee 2012, 2013, 2014; Botescu 2012, 47). ..................................................................................................................... 120

**PWIDs**: (also referred to as IDUs) people who inject drugs........................................... 6
Romania: A country located in southeastern Central Europe, bordering the Black Sea to the east, Hungary to the west, Ukraine to the north, and Bulgaria to the south.

Romanian Association Against AIDS (ARAS): The first anti-AIDS association in Romania since 1989. Formerly received funding from the Global Fund to conduct social outreach and administer syringes to drug users in front of the Gara de Nord Canal in Bucharest, Romania.

Secret de Serviciu: (classified information) a term for a health ministry internal document that is not to be shared with the public. In the example described in this thesis, a Secret de Serviciu document read that with the exception of 1966 and the years when more draconian anti-abortion policies were introduced, abortions continued to increase.

Sector 7: A term Gara de Nord Canal Community members used humorously to refer to themselves. There were 6 official sectors in Bucharest at that time so that joke was that the canal was the underground 7th sector.

sewer community: 1. a shortened form of Gara de Nord Sewer Community. 2. a reference to the larger sewer/canal communities throughout Bucharest, used in this thesis largely to reference the NPD trade's larger network. see NPD, see Gara de Nord Sewer Community, see Gara de Nord Canal Community, see Canal.

sewer member: 1. a member of the Gara de Nord Sewer Community. 2. a member of the 4-5 sewer communities in Bucharest. see Gara de Nord Sewer Community, see Gara de Nord Canal Community.

sex workers: people whose work involves sexually explicit behavior. In the Gara de Nord Canal Community sex workers tended to be women, although this was not always the case.

subteran: the correct translation of the term "underground". Referring to the tunnels under the Gara de Nord that the canal community lived in. see Gara de Nord Canal Community, see subsol.

synthetic drugs: (also referred to as)

Thor’s Disinfectant: A disinfectant sold by businessman, Dan Codrea, through the company, Hexi Pharma, that had been illegally diluted in Romania in 2016. The diluted disinfectant was responsible for the spread of nosocomial bacteria that led to the deaths of young adults who were admitted to hospital after suffering burns in a fire in a nightclub, Colectiv. see Colectiv.

țigani: A pejorative term used for members of the Roma ethnic group, which holds minority status in Romania. The term, țigani, derived from the Greek term, tsingános, means.

top-dealers: the author's term used to describe the dealers who were second in command to Bruce Lee in the Gara de Nord Canal Community drug den. The author uses this term because some members of the canal did not want to be thought of as "main men," a term usually associated with the mafia.

Ursan, Marian: a former expert at the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC). He had developed programs for people involved in commercial sex work.
and injecting drug use. Professor at Bucharest’s school of Sociology and Social Assistance. Co-founder of the NGO, Carusel.

West, Cornel: A political activist, public intellectual, and professor at Harvard University who co-wrote an article with Dr. Matache about how Roma in Romania and African Americans in the United States share a common history of being disproportionately killed by police as a legacy of slavery and colonialism.
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Figure LII. Codruț and the author in the Gara de Nord Canal, 2014
Figure XLV: The author at Clark University, September 2018.