

# Revitalising the uncanny: Challenging inertia in the struggle against forced evictions

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## Abstract

Following the case of 100 Roma people evicted from their home in the centre of Bucharest in September 2014, the article looks at evictions and practices of resistance from the ground-up, without assuming a-priori what a politics of resistance may look like in Bucharest or elsewhere. The aim is to understand eviction and resistance as part of the same continuum of home unmaking-remaking, and to fully take into account the role of non-humans and urban atmospheres in the process. In this sense, the article analyses the case of Bucharest through two, interconnected, affective atmospheric: that of uncanniness, which allowed for the resistant Roma body to articulate its demands; and that of inertia, which emerged from the imbrication of home-less people's street life and gradually rendered resistance more difficult to assemble. Paying attention to these post-human entanglements, the article critically contributes to academic and non-academic debates on occupation, displacement and urban activism, with the aim to strengthen our capacity to imagine alternative strategies of resistance.

## Keywords

Activism, affective atmosphere, eviction, inertia, Romania, uncanny

In September 2014, when I arrived for the first time at 50 Vulturilor Street, located not far from the centre of Bucharest, I had the vivid impression of being catapulted into the middle of a post-calamitous event. *Stuff* was everywhere. Bags, tables, chairs, furniture and pieces of furniture, boxes and scrap materials, old TVs and stereo sets, a toothbrush poking out from a white toiletry bag resting on a broken suitcase, which was lying on a sofa alongside a number of other bags, covers, shoes, umbrellas and, of course, people. Human bodies were standing, moving, chatting around all that mess, right in the middle of two sidewalks delimiting the course of the street. What I had encountered that day was the aftermath of a massive eviction in which 20 families (around 100 individuals) had been thrown out onto the street after having lived for many years – for some up to 20 – in the house they were now

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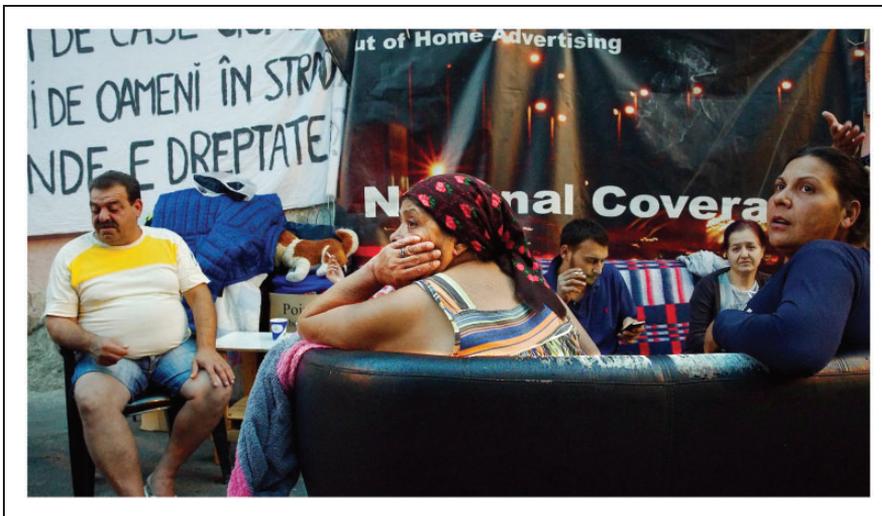
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only able to see from the pavement. That day on September 2014, things and people were all soaked in the densely potent atmosphere of having become, all of a sudden, home-less (Figure 1).

As a consequence of wider processes of gentrification, neoliberal urban agendas and precarious dwelling conditions, evictions like that of Vulturilor are all but an exception in Europe and in many other parts of the world too (Desmond, 2012; Hartman and Robinson, 2003; Porteous and Smith, 2001). Although there are specificities to the Romanian context – such as the fact that many of these evictions relate to Roma people and originate within a particular history of housing policy (Amnesty International, 2011, 2013; Chelcea, 2012; Lancione, 2015, 2017; Zamfirescu, 2015) – at a more general level, they can be understood as part of a so-called ‘planetary process of gentrification’ (Lees et al., 2016). In short, with all due specificities, from Dhaka to Boston, passing through Shanghai and Sao Paolo, a vast array of people lose their homes in the name of making the 1% incrementally richer and more powerful. Bucharest is no different. In recent years, the city has been the setting of a play already performed in other cities as well: purification and commercialisation of the old city centre under the keywords of ‘culture’ and ‘entertainment’; international investments in real estate and speculation; ‘scandals’ of corruption related to public building permissions; contested forms of citizenships; and more (Chelcea and Pulay, 2015; Marcinczak et al., 2014; Nae and Turnock, 2011; Stoiculescu, 2012).

Framing Bucharest, and the Vulturilor’s eviction, as yet another case of neoliberal ‘urban restructuring’ (Brenner and Theodore, 2005) is possible – but this generalist reading does not tell us much about how accumulation, dispossession and other urban phenomena are lived and embodied by the ones experiencing them. Attention to such details does not lead, as some scholars seem to contend, to an a-critical, ‘anecdotal and notably indiscriminate approach to urban investigation’ (Storper and Scott, 2016: 16). As this article aims to



**Figure 1.** People in the aftermath of eviction.

Source: The author.

show, it is perhaps only within that ‘how’ – *within* the everyday makings of accumulation, dispossession, eviction, expulsion, bordering, marginalisation and more – that something potentially new can be learnt to critically (re)imagine urban political praxis and theory (Amin, 2014; McFarlane, 2011; Simone, 2010).

Since the day of the eviction until July 2016, when the camp was forcibly dismantled and the families divided and placed into homeless shelters, the community lived on the street, in tents and improvised shacks, claiming their right to social housing. This makes Vulturilor one of the longest and most visible protests for housing rights in the history of contemporary Romania. It is important to note that the Vulturilor people were unjustly evicted – after their house was sold by its owner to a foreign investor – and the State did not intervene to provide them with social housing, to which they are entitled by law (Zamfirescu, 2015). On the basis of my engagement with the community – which included months of grassroots activism, a one-year continuous visual ethnography,<sup>1</sup> and more than two years (and counting) of entanglements with the stories of evicted people in Bucharest – in this article, I aim to address questions related to the struggle for housing in the contemporary urban. How do people organise resistance and decide to occupy? What drives them and how do they articulate their claims? How, most importantly, does life on the street impact practices of resistance? What is it that makes the initial impetus of resistance gradually fade away, leaving space for despair, resentment and sense of loss?

Following these questions, the central concern of this article are the processes that made and unmade resistance in Vulturilor both possible and impossible. The article argues that in order to understand these processes, it is necessary to look at evictions and resistance from a vitalist and grounded point of view, taking the urban mechanosphere as a full actant of these processes. The aim is to show how small urban devices, machines and atmospheres matter in defining everyday experiences and, largely, in assembling alternative modes of life, togetherness and resistance (Amin, 2015). Paying attention to these post-human entanglements, the article contributes to a critical reading of evictions and their unfolding, calling attention to two affective atmospheres that are key in their makings: that of *uncanniness* and that of *inertia*. It is within those situated assemblages and atmospheres, and not in grand-theory, that a differential understanding of right to the city, and of the struggle for that right, may be articulated (Duff, 2016; Lancione and McFarlane, 2016; Simone, 2015b).

## Critical geographies of eviction

Evictions entail trauma, displacement and loss. From New York (Newman and Wyly, 2006) to Cairo (Selim, 2015), passing through Dhaka (Paul, 2006), Phnom Penh (Brickell, 2014), Puerto Rico (Fernandez Arrigoitia, 2014) and London (Powell and Marrero-Guillamon, 2012), they have become ‘a frequent occurrence for people living at the bottom of the urban class structure in cities throughout the world, to the point of it being epidemic in some societies’ (Slater, 2013: 384). It is not surprising then that scholars have been looking at this pressing phenomenon for a while now. At the risk of oversimplification, contributions can be mainly divided into four groups, according to their theorico-empirical focus.

The first group comprises works that look at macro-economic dynamics and structural forces shaping the right to the city (Mitchell and Harvey, 2003), neoliberal modalities of urban governance (Brenner and Theodore, 2005), and wider processes of urban gentrification (Lees, 2012). Most of this scholarship is based on the classic works of David Harvey and Neil Smith around, respectively, capital’s needs of continuous

new (urban) spatial fix (Harvey, 1985, 2004) and the rise of revanchist urbanism in the US and beyond (Smith, 1996), which are read as triggers of urban displacement. Coherently with the structuralist premises of this scholarship, the focus of a political-economy approach to evictions is not 'eviction' per se, but rather the broader processes of capital accumulation by dispossession that are conceived to be the 'causes' of evictions (which are understood as effects). The consequence of this approach is the proliferation of macro-narratives of urban processes and taxonomies of gentrification, which even if helpful in providing frameworks of reference to the debate, largely overlook the micro-politics at play in urban displacement.

A second group of works looks within the effects of displacement, namely at the everyday experiences of people evicted from their homes or about to be evicted. At large, this is a scholarship of anthropological nature, attentive to fine details, embodiments and grounded processes. Examples of these works are, among others, Herzfeld's (2009) thick description of the gentrification of Rome's Monti district, a recent study of the felt temporalities of eviction in Ho Chi Minh City (Harms, 2013), and, last but not least, Desmond's poignant and acclaimed work on Milwaukee (Desmond, 2016). The latter is of particular interest because it shows the potential of ethnography to critically connect large politico-economic trends (such as Milwaukee's anti-welfare crusade and segregationist legacy) with the lives of a disabled veteran, a lonely mother and a disenfranchised family without reducing the latter's struggles to the former trends (see also Desmond, 2012).

Similarly, attention to the processual nature of evictions is also found in an emerging geographical scholarship built around a critical consideration of 'home' and homing practices (Blunt and Varley, 2004). Baxter and Brickell have in this sense proposed the concept of 'home *unmaking*' as a way of focusing on 'the precarious process by which material and/or imaginary components of home are unintentionally or deliberately, temporarily or permanently, divested, damaged or even destroyed' (2014: 134). According to Nowicki (2014), home *unmaking* allows for a fluid understanding of home and of evictions as well: the two are part of a continuum that is variously assembled and experienced on the basis of the material arrangements at hand, of one's own gender and social status, and of everyday affordances (for a similar take, although not explicitly about *unmaking*, see also Datta, 2012).

A third group includes a few works that have looked at the assemblage of eviction from a wider relational point of view. Scholarship in this sense is still scarce and limited to this or that aspect of the assemblage. Contributions include once again Desmond's layered and relational ethnographic narratives (Desmond, 2014), Delaney's rich account of displacement as something both material and discursive (Delaney, 2004: 851; also Ramakrishnan, 2014) and possibly the only more-than-human approach, in the contribution of Fernandez Arrigoitia (2014) around the agencies at play in the eviction of the Las Gladiolas' block in Puerto Rico. Although these works still align and belong to the ethnographic and processual take presented before, it is important to notice their stress on the wider agentic powers and atmospheres that *unmake* contested geographies of home. In other words, the 'emotional and embodied dimensions of the breakdown of homes' (Fernandez Arrigoitia, 2014: 189) is constituted by human and non-human bodies alike.

Last but not least, scholars have also paid attention to the practices of resistance that are put in place during the aftermath of evictions. From seeking alternative accommodation at friends or relatives' houses, to the organisation of widespread and articulated social movements (such as Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH) in Spain), people around the world combat forced displacement and fight for the right to housing and to the city. In recent years, particular attention has been paid to the analysis of practices of

squatting, which, as Mudu recalls in the case of the *Movimenti per il diritto all'abitare* in Italy, are for the most part related 'not only [to] the struggle for housing but also [to] the struggle for alternative living conditions' (Mudu, 2014: 157). Scholars have therefore theorised around grassroots movements and the fight for decent housing, autonomist movements, resistance against urban 'renewal' and displacements and around the spatialities of 'occupatio' (Corsín Jimenez and Estalella, 2013; Mayer, 2009; SqEK, 2013; van der Steen et al., 2014; Vasudevan, 2015a). In a recent set of contributions, Vasudevan has proposed (re)understanding occupations and the city together, where the latter is not seen just as the platform for organised action but it is more profoundly re-approached as 'an enduring site of political contestation' (Vasudevan, 2015b: 317). The city in this sense is not only a space where occupations take place, but it is understood as a laboratory where multiple stances and spaces are re-articulated in order to build 'the necessary conditions for social justice and new autonomous forms of collective life' (Vasudevan, 2015b: 318).

This article is based upon and expands the last three sets of literature in the following ways. First, in taking a grounded perspective on evictions, it aims at enriching the notion of home *unmaking* to include the variegated practices of resistance that are brought to the fore by people in the process of *remaking* their home. In this sense, *unmaking* and *remaking* are seen as part of the same continuum where 'homely' stabilisations and destabilisations constantly take place and (re)produce the fluidity and variegated natures of what is considered to be 'home' (Simone, 2016). In this regard, the article also speaks to a performative reading of homelessness (Cloke et al., 2010; Desjarlais, 1997; Lancione, 2013), which is arguably part of a fluid understanding of home *unmaking* and *remaking*. Second, the article traces *unmaking-remaking* from a vitalist point of view – namely via bringing non-human agencies and atmospheres fully into the calculus of the assemblage of 'home'. Related to this, and third, the article aims to contribute to a renewed understanding of practices of resistance by bringing to the fore the affective capacities that mould these practices and their outcomes. The continuum of home *unmaking-remaking* is theorised and empirically traced as a post-human, collective assemblage that exceeds the will of its participants.

The focus of this article is therefore, and above all, political: following its vitalist premise, 'resistance' is here rethought beyond the 'ideals of social movements' (SqEK, 2014) to fully incorporate the more-than-human *affects* in its making. As life becomes increasingly subsumed in the biopolitics of late capitalism (Rossi, 2013), what can an affective and assemblage-driven understanding of that life bring to the fore (Anderson, 2016)? What is, as Duff puts it, the affective capacity of the urban (2016)? How does it intervene in the production of home *unmaking* and *remaking*? How, more specifically, can an affective politics of resistance inform and sustain urban housing struggles? I am proposing that the (partial) answer to these questions is to be found in the capacity of anything, human and non-human, to affect and to be affected. That is the point where we can start to appreciate the complexities of home *unmaking* and *remaking* as well as their potential for alternative politics.

## **Towards an affective understanding of eviction and resistance**

People are not merely resilient, they do not simply get evicted and then cope, shout, organise, attend, fight back; but they are, by and large, part of a wider socio-technical machine populated by agencies and affective capacities that co-governs them and 'their' actions. Such a claim is in-line with the conspicuous literature on urban assemblages (Block and Farias, 2016; McFarlane and Anderson, 2011), socio-technical infrastructure (Amin, 2014;

Larkin, 2013; Simone, 2015a), and vitalist ontologies (Bennett, 2010; Braidotti, 2013), which blur the boundaries between the self and the ‘outer’ world. As Amin and Thrift contend, humans are only ‘dividuals’ ‘who for most of the time are simply part of a combination of bodies or parts of bodies, resonating around a particular matter of concern’ (Amin and Thrift, 2013: 50). The key for a vitalist understanding of home *unmaking* and *remaking* is then to de-centre mainstream readings of the human component of the assemblage and to widen the scope of analysis including broader ecologies of bodies and affects.

A key element in this scholarship is the idea that, in the mist and makings of life, *anybody* has the capacity to affect and to be affected by anything else. In other words, *anybody* – human and non-human alike – is distinguished through a set of relational capacities to affect and to be affected but is not extinguished by those capacities. The scope of a critical – and not simply enumerative – approach to assemblage thinking is (a) to trace these capacities; (b) to retrieve their effects on the body of concern and (c) to connect these insights back to the broader micro-politics of the social field (Anderson, 2014; see also Deleuze, 1988, on abstract machines and the power-affect articulation; Guattari, 2010, for the politics of the molar-molecular relationship; Bignall, 2010, on passive and active affections).

Literature on affects has loomed large in recent years but this is not the place to recall its lineage (Anderson, 2006; Buchanan and Lambert, 2005; Duff, 2010; Pile, 2010; Stewart, 2007; Thrift, 2004). Two points seem particularly relevant for the kind of post-human social geography I am trying to articulate.<sup>2</sup>

First, affects work through imbrications – which means that they are not something ‘out there’, as a social fact, but something emerging from the interpolation of bodily capacities or, to say it differently, from the imbrication ‘with multiple forms of mediations’ (Anderson, 2014: 102). Affects are in this sense a collective endeavour, emerging from the makings of any assemblage (Guattari, 1995) or, to say it differently, from the ‘composites of place’ (Amin, 2015: 243). If the *capacity* to affect and be affected belongs to each individual element, the instantiation of that capacity (which we call *affect*) can be understood and grasped only in its unfolding, namely, in the interaction between bodies, in their frictions, attunement, dispersal and perturbations (Ash, 2013).

It is through this process of assemblage that an affective life comes into play, which produces in turn new affections and resonances for the assemblages themselves.<sup>3</sup> Affects in this sense work at two levels: one is that of the assemblage, of the imbrication between elements; the other is that which emerges from that imbrication, creating collective forms of affective capacities that ‘exceed the ensembles from which they emanate’ (Anderson, 2014: 160). This is what Anderson calls ‘affective atmospheres’ (Anderson, 2009). As will become clearer in the following section, atmospheres are key to understanding the powerful intensities of home *unmaking* and *remaking*, because it is also through them – through their coming ‘to envelop specific bodies; sites, objects, people’ (Anderson, 2014: 160) – that the makings of home are actually felt and done.

The second point to be made is that affects are politically relevant. If their significance ‘lies in the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible’ (Stewart, 2007: 2), it means that in understanding their doings one may be able to prefigure alternative articulations and doings (i.e. to grasp a glimpse of their potential becoming). The scope of such an endeavour would be to either strengthen or weaken the ‘intensities’ that these affects can build for the sake of specific, situated and subjective<sup>4</sup> political goals (Haraway, 1988). In what follows, I analyse two of these intensities to see if and how they can be instrumentalised to strengthen practices of urban resistance in Bucharest, and possibly elsewhere. The title of the article refers to the idea of ‘revitalisation’ because such ‘intensities’ are, in a vitalist sense, *alive*: they are all part, producer and product of a shared affective life (Deleuze, 2001).

‘Revitalise’ is, then, both about (a) understanding what makes the struggle for the city ‘alive’ and tracing how this works, and (b) to fuel that same struggle with new capacities in order to allow for its collective expression to endure (Guattari, 1995).

### Uncanny resistance and home-less inertia in Vulturilor street

For the sake of analytical clarity, I have sketched some of the above theoretical reflections together with the specificities of the analysed case (which I am about to illustrate) in Table 1. Table 1 summarises the process of assemblage that brought the ‘evicted Roma people’ of Vulturilor to first become ‘occupiers’ and then ‘home-less’ again, highlighting the related affective capacities and atmospheres. In the remaining part of this section, I illustrate the basic tenets of this process, introducing the two atmospheres that are investigated here: ‘uncanniness’ and ‘inertia’.

#### Of uncanny atmospheres

The analysis starts with a peculiar ‘body’, which is the ‘evicted Roma body’ (point A in the table). This is a familiar body in the Romanian context, for at least three reasons. First, the disenfranchisement of Roma is familiar, since in Romania, they were held in slavery for roughly 500 years (from the 15th century until 1865), and their marginalised life continued during Ceauşescu’s time and beyond (Liegeois and Gheorghe, 1995). Second, as Zamfirescu reminds us, housing deprivation is familiar in the Romanian context: ‘As of 2011, there is an average of 6% of Europeans who suffer from severe housing deprivation. Romania has the highest percentage – 28.6%’ (2015: 5). Third, for historical and contextual reasons, Roma are ‘disproportionately affected’ when it comes to forced evictions (Amnesty International, 2011: 2).

In the case of Vulturilor, however, this familiar body decided to react (point B): it started to camp on the street, to organise public demonstrations, to write a community blog<sup>5</sup> and to build a settlement made of self-constructed shacks on the sidewalk. A new body emerged: that of the ‘occupying Roma’.<sup>6</sup> The assemblage of this new body – which I illustrate in the

**Table 1.** Eviction and resistance: Bodies, assemblage, affective atmosphere.

Affective atmosphere <i>Uncanniness</i>			
<b>A</b>	<b>Body</b> Evicted Roma body  <i>Familiar</i>	<b>Assemblage</b> Collectivity, placards, tents, food, common fire, buzz of coming and going, solidarity, energetic bodies...	<b>B</b>
		<b>New body</b> Occupying Roma body  <i>Strangely familiar</i>	<b>C</b>
			<b>Affection</b> On the State <i>Puzzling, frightening</i> On the evicted and activists <i>Invigorating, inspiring</i>
→			
Affective atmosphere <i>Inertia</i>			
	<b>Body</b> Occupying Roma body  <i>Strangely familiar</i>	<b>Assemblage</b> Rain, second hand clothes, no sanitation, cold pavement, humid shacks, harassment, bureaucracy, tired bodies...	<b>D</b>
		<b>New body</b> Home-less Roma body  <i>Familiar</i>	<b>E</b>
			<b>Affection</b> On the State <i>Invigorating, reassuring</i> On the evicted and activists <i>Weakening, slowing</i>

following section – gave rise to a specific affective atmosphere, which I here named ‘uncanniness’. I use the notion of the ‘uncanny’ inspired by Kaika’s reading of Freud, where, in her critique of normative conception of home, she highlights how something familiar (the ‘heimlich’) can become utterly unfamiliar and surprising (the ‘unheimlich’ or ‘uncanny’) (Kaika, 2004). Uncanny refers to that ‘surprise’ and can be understood as a ‘class of fear that leads back to something old and long familiar’ (Wilton, 2003: 374) or as the affective response to ‘the familiar rendered strange: the strangely familiar’ (Pile, 2011: 196).

The assemblage of the ‘occupying Roma body’ leads to the production of an uncanny affective atmosphere because nobody – neither the State nor the activists and NGOs who eventually helped the evicted people – was expecting that kind of assemblage from the people of Vulturilor. The expectation was that people would have protested for a few days and then, as happened on many other occasions, they would have found shelter among their friends and relatives. Moreover, the ‘familiar’ Roma body in Romania does not protest in that way: it does not occupy, it does not articulate its demands, it does not fight the institution so explicitly. It does not, in a word, become an autonomous political subject but it does, at best, rely on NGOs to perform its cry (which is usually pre-codified under the diagram of the ‘poor Roma’). The uncanny emerges because in contemporary Romania (and elsewhere in Europe as well), there is a *repression* (cultural, symbolic and historical) about who the Roma can be. Their political subjectivity is straightened, bracketed and codified: [the Roma]. Once that repression is contested, and the familiar body of the [evicted Roma] transforms into the political body of the *occupying Roma*, the uncanny effect (or affect) is produced. To a certain extent that body is still an evicted Roma (familiar); but to another, it is also organised and politically charged (strange): the overall effect is the uncanny. It is thanks to the challenge that is brought to the original repression that the uncanny emerges: ‘unheimlich is what was once heimisch, homelike, familiar; the prefix “un” is the token of repression’ (Freud, 2003 [1919]: 136).<sup>7</sup>

Freud’s definition of the uncanny is, however, limited to the negative response that a third party has of the uncanny event: the uncanny is the fear one has of the ‘strangely familiar’. But what of the response that ‘strangely familiar’ has of itself? Is it always reducible to ‘fear’, or can it be something different? If we move away from an understanding of the uncanny as ‘emotion’ – namely as a cognitive response by an individual to an event – and we raise it to the level of the affective – understanding it as ‘a quality of life that is beyond cognition and always interpersonal’ (Pile, 2010: 8) – then the uncanny can be understood as an affective atmosphere affecting different constituencies in different ways (point C, Table 1). In the case of Vulturilor, the affection procured by the uncanny was twofold. For the authorities, it was coherent with Freud’s analysis: they were frightened by the strangely familiar body of the occupying Roma, and they did not know how to deal with it. They hoped that it would have quickly turned into something familiar that they could have managed, but they were negatively surprised by its stubbornness. For the people of Vulturilor however, as well as for many grassroots activists and NGOs in Bucharest, that same uncanny atmosphere was one of hope and inspiration. That body – the occupying Roma body – was strangely familiar for them too, but this time in a positive way. Affection in this case was not about fear, but about reassurance, positivity and strength.

### *Of inertial atmospheres*

However, uncanniness gradually dissolved. The State’s stoic denial to grant people social housing and the specific affective capacities of life on the street (which people endured for

almost two years) contributed to the formation of a new affective atmosphere – which I name ‘inertia’ – and a new assemblage: the ‘home-less Roma body’ (point D in Table 1). The atmosphere of inertia emerged from the entanglements of everyday life on the street and negatively affected the makings and sustenance of the uncanniness enveloping the occupying Roma body. During the months I spent with NGOs, activists and the evicted community, I observed a deterioration in the way people were relating to each other and in how they were perceiving the protest. Comments on the line of ‘*We don’t know what to do anymore; we just wait for something to happen*’ became the norm after the first couple of months of life on the street. This deterioration affected all parties involved in the protest: on the one hand, the NGO workers were suffering from fatigue by providing constant material and moral help to the community, while the grassroots activists struggled with igniting new passion in the protest. On the other hand, the evicted people saw their emotional resources and strength chipped away by a life made of patch-worked tents, self-built shacks, rain, cold meals, cold clothes, endless bureaucratic entanglements and vague or absent responses from the authorities.

It is within and through this enmeshment that a sense of non-progression and non-direction began to emerge. This was not a sudden change, something neatly perceivable as it happened, but a process of slow, overlapping and non-linear more-than-human affections. As I will try to describe in what follows, such affective intensity of inertia is deeply related to the mechanics of becoming home-less, namely the process through which a subject is re-assembled into someone less-than-normal, because they are deprived of the canons of ‘home’ (Lancione, 2013). The everyday bodily traumas associated with that deprivation, and the continuous displacements arising from it, deeply affects the way in which home-less people perceive themselves, their surroundings and goals. The affective atmosphere of home-less inertia is about those traumas and is characterised by harsh assemblages, stressful encounters and laborious movements. I use inertia, in this sense, also to signal one’s own struggle to keep balance and to stay still in the mist of the affections brought forward by life on the street (Gowan, 2010; Robinson, 2011).

Thinking of inertia as a shared ambience allows for tracing the affective relationships that, through daily makeshifts, have an impact on the life of the home-less Roma body. Looking within these daily affections allows for moving away from usual depictions of homeless people as ‘lazy’ or, as some academics would have it, as ‘bored’ (O’Neill, 2014). Boredom may at best be understood as one superficial emotional response triggered by inertia – such as it was with ‘fear’ in the case of the uncanny – but it tells us little of the processes underpinning its makings. These are multiple and offer different affections according to different affected bodies. If inertia slowed down and factually altered the protest of the people of Vulturilor and their associates, the State, invigorated by the new inertial ambience, factually won its discriminatory battle, re-evicting the Vulturilor people, this time from the street, in July 2016 (point E). Families were divided and sent to homeless shelters: the ‘occupying Roma body’ was thus returned to a manageable status of familiarity, that of the non-autonomous home-less.

I will now turn to the illustration of how these atmospheric intensities came to the fore in the case of Vulturilor.

## **The occupying Roma body**

During the first week of the occupation, I asked A., one of the evictees, what her goal was and how long she was planning to stay on the street. She replied: ‘Aici o să rămânem: ori murim, ori trăim! Asta este decizia mea. [. . .] Cât o să rezistăm, atâta rezistăm!’ (We will stay



**Figure 2.** One of the evicted women.

Source: The author.

here: either to die or to live! This is my decision. How long we will resist, that's all we can resist!). Such fierce response was also reflected in her eyes: she, like all her peers during those early weeks of occupation, was infused with a sense of strength and hope (Figure 2). According to a Roma actress and activist involved in the case, what is really peculiar about Vulturilor is the fact that the community stood cohesive and tight in the face of adversity:

Vulturilor was a particular case because it concerned so many people who had decided to remain on the street and then this was something new and I really appreciate the courage of these people. [...] In the case of one of my friends [a woman who was evicted from the Rahova-Uranus area of Bucharest], she stood 4 months in the street but afterwards she lost confidence because she lacked support. What is a bit different about Vulturilor is that people support each other, so you don't feel alone in this fight.

The strength and unity of the community could be felt vividly, simply by walking along Vulturilor street, passing through the two occupied sidewalks. It was in those first few days that a shared ambiance of uncanniness emerged among *anybody* in Vulturilor. A political artist and activist prominent in setting up a dialogue with the community clearly specified the uncanniness of Vulturilor as political matter:

The potential of what's happening on Vulturilor 50 is [...] to create an immediate and powerful solidarity between different people who are affected by housing injustice and which by number, and perhaps *an unusual relationship* in the State's eyes, in the authorities' eyes, in the eyes of the real estate market, could create a real resistance. (Emphasis added)

From an analytical point of view, we could say that the making of that atmosphere took place through the imbrications of discursive stances, bodily arrangements and material predispositions assembled in-between the community and a number of external parties.

First, although the evicted families did not necessarily share particular sympathy toward each other, the people of Vulturilor immediately started to talk about themselves as *one*. Their aim was to obtain housing for the whole community, and not for the single

individuals: a motto among them was on the lines of ‘*We are not going anywhere until everybody gets a house*’. Second, the evictees who decided to occupy the sidewalk understood the meaning and the strength of being together in such a fight, and they knew that only by staying on the street – making their bodies and their presence visible to the many (Butler, 2011) – they would have a chance of having their plea listened to. Above all, they found themselves united by the ultimate goal of their protest, which was to accept no form of help from the state other than the restoration of their housing rights.

Third, the will of these people assembled itself with a number of material devices that allowed them to effectively occupy and maintain Vulturilor’s sidewalks (on the specificities of the camp as a form of protest, see Frenzel et al., 2014). Tents were built, placards with slogans were placed in strategic and visible positions, a community fireplace was organised, waste was correctly displaced, rain water was collected, food cooked in volunteer’s homes and distributed with the help of a local NGO, and documents of all sorts – mainly regarding applications for social housing – were circulated and discussed. Although these practices were infused with tensions typical of any collective process of decision making driven by an autonomous ethos (Halvorsen, 2015), they were at the same time *generators* of an atmospheric attunement bringing people together and orienting them toward the same goal. As the chairman of the NGO involved with the distribution of food and clothes remembers:

It’s true that people don’t depend on that food, it’s not their basic daily support, but it becomes a clear instrument of solidarity. There are people that I don’t know who call and say that they know from somebody of this situation and that they have a blanket, a sleeping bag, a tent they would like to donate. There are people who say: ‘Okay! I can cook at my place; I could use some supplies’, and others say: ‘Okay! We can get those supplies!’ so food can be cooked and we can come during the evening with warm meals.

The food, its preparation and the act of sharing it produced an invigorating sense of commonness and scope that exceeded *any* specific body assembling the occupation of Vulturilor’s street sidewalks. The same affection was produced by seemingly insignificant assemblages like the exchange of cigarettes around the fire; by borrowing the wi-fi from neighbours; by buying coffee from an automatic machine in a nearby shop for one leu (£0.20); by printing and circulating the pictures I was taking; by helping the kids do their homework and assisting the adults in filling the ‘dosarului pentru locuinta sociale’ (the request for social housing); and more. Co-operation between different people and matter was possible because in those entanglements a surplus of ‘mass and energy that exceeds the self, that cannot be appropriated, that constantly returns, that has emergent properties and that defines the situation’ was generated (Amin, 2008: 9). Such surplus is the uncanny atmosphere: a ‘connection forged through political activity’ (Featherstone, 2010: 88) and post-human mingling, forming a shared, fragile ambience that is, arguably, impossible to design.

However, the uncanny atmosphere is hard to maintain: its softness moulds, shifts and it creeps. The first visible instance of this process took place on the weekend of the 24th October 2014, roughly a month and a half since the eviction, and it was prompted by the first heavy snow of the season. The snow was a major distress for all the actors involved in the occupation: the tents collapsed, forcing Vulturilor’s people out. Some people found refuge in friends and relative, while others were relocated where possible (including a church, activists’ homes and my own flat) (Figure 3). When people returned to the street a few days later, the discontent until then only superficially expressed became tangible. Although they organised themselves in order to build shacks to replace the now



**Figure 3.** Collapsed tents after the first snow. The slogan reads: ‘The street is not home’.  
Source: The author.

inadequate tents, people also started to become increasingly tired, distressed and intolerant. The ‘porosity’ of uncanniness slowly crept in on life on the street, a process characterised by its own affections, to which I will now turn.

### **Everyday home-less inertia**

In living for a prolonged time on the street – under precarious sanitary, dwelling and legal conditions – one’s own personal perspectives, life trajectories and everyday habits undertake profound changes (Desjarlais, 1997; Robinson, 2011; Snow and Anderson, 1993). Being home-less – as I have argued in my works – is neither a matter of fitting within a particular social category, nor limited to lacking access to adequate dwelling, but it is a matter of processual entanglement with peculiar urban materialities, powerful normative stances and pre-determinate stigmatising discourses that deeply re-shape one’s own subjectivity (Lancione, 2013). It is the city – with its carnality of pavements and rusty platforms, of cold benches and shadowy galleries, of mechanistic speed set against the tempo of a human body, of crowded shelters and social services; with its atmospheres of indifference and hate, of solidarity and joyfulness, of discrimination and playfulness – which entangles with the bodies, souls and dreams of the people that navigate its terrains. Exposed and assembled with and through the everyday life of spaces such as sidewalks, train stations, shelters, which have not been designed to dwell-in but only to pass-by, the individual becomes someone else, in an unfinished yet poignant process of subject-formation that we call ‘homelessness’.

Reading homelessness as a process rather than a status allows us to unpack its nuances and powerful micro-dynamics (Cloke et al., 2010). In the case of Vulturilor, solidarity and cohesiveness worsened with time. Tangible signposts of this process included the increased complaints about the kind and quantity of help received as well as the number of verbal fights among people, which eventually led to producing durable fractures in the relations between the community’s families. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, people started

to lose faith in the protest and to feel tired and anxious about their living conditions. For instance, my research diary of the 9th of January 2015 reads:

People are very sad and tired. Outside is terribly cold, but the stoves in the shacks work fine. I have asked A. how she feels and she did not want to talk much. She looked very tired. When I asked what she wanted to do she said: 'What should we do? We wait; and we hope in God'.

The change in A., from the fierce 'We will stay here: either die or to live!', to the submissive 'We wait; and we hope in God', is just the surface of a layered assemblage that led to the weakening of the uncanny. The list of interconnected elements is long and cannot pretend to be exhaustive, or even evocative, of its complexity. It included the lack of proper sanitation facilities; reduced mobility; lack of washing and cooking facilities; lack of electricity and running water; the provisionality of dwelling in shacks; the harshness of Bucharest's winter; the necessity to work and maintain oneself; the lack of any institutional response to their plea; and more (Figure 4). The interplay of these and many other things gradually but consistently affected these people's self-esteem, hope, projectuality and capacity to sustain the protest (see Lombard, 2013, for a discussion of hope/hopelessness and time at the urban margins). I., one of the most resilient men in the community, was particularly exhausted by the continuous request for new documents required by the municipality's social housing department:

I'm wasted. I'm, I'm... I'm having a nervous breakdown. So many papers, so many actions, I can't imagine what it is that they intend to do. We can't figure this out. For so long, we've spent the entire winter outside in the cold, being sick, with sick children. We are all a nervous wreck. Psychically we are... not this way, we can't hold on anymore. We are finished.

In a similar vein, his wife could no longer bear the stress associated with not having a 'proper' home. As she pointed out, not having a 'home' affected the whole spectrum of her family's social life:

We don't know. We couldn't get any sleep out of despair. We live in uncertainty with the children. The children haven't attended school today. It's terrible! For us. And we can't go to work because... we are afraid that they'll take away our things again.



**Figure 4.** The assemblage of the shack.

Source: The author.

The entanglement of one's own life with and through the street is a process of becoming other – the marginal other – that gives rise to a peculiar kind of inertial atmosphere. At the most basic level, there is the resistance created by the material and affective culture of living as *home-less*. Things become hard and solid, bulky and difficult to align, slippery and highly provisional. To combat the rigidity of the weather and in order to feel just 'all right', people had to wear multiple layers of clothes and sleep in turn to maintain and operate the stove; water needed to be carried for kilometres in provisional buckets; wood had to be chopped in the middle of the street, with little more than an improvised axe or using bare hands; cooking was done in the same place where one slept, eat and stood. One's own wish for normality was pushed back by the impeding consistency of the urban form which stroked back, held on, and scratched.

Under the cast of that inertial atmosphere, people became more reluctant to protest, to organise public marches, to write for the on-line blog, and they were tired of engaging with the Kafkian bureaucracy required to apply for state dwellings. Moreover, they became sadder, more stressed, disfranchised, detached from each other – in other words, just '*waiting for something to happen*'. Finally, many of them abandoned the camp, the numbers of which decreased from the original 100 people to a consistent group of 70 who lasted through the winter, and were eventually down to no more than 30 people at the time of my last visit (June 2016).

The NGO, volunteers and activists portrayed in the previous sections were also affected by *home-less* inertia. Following an escalation in arguments related to the provision of help, the major NGO involved in the resistance decided to back out in order to dedicate their resources to other situations. Despite the rationale behind this choice, many of the NGO social workers told me that they felt increasingly 'weighted down' by the lack of progress in the fight and by the immobility of things in the camp. The more time they spent in the camp providing assistance and keeping the morale up, the more they became consumed by a stagnating atmosphere that was not moving forward. Dozens of other volunteers arguably felt the same, their numbers dropping from the fifth month onwards. The grassroots activists were more continuous in their effort, persisting in promoting new activities and forms of protest for the community, and also helping them with the complex legal requirements for social housing. Yet, even their engagement decreased with time, possibly reflecting their overall inconspicuous numbers and the lack of any positive news coming from the institutions. Before the eviction of the camp, which took place in July 2016, only few activists were still actively involved with the community.

## Revitalising the uncanny

Affective atmospheres can be traced, judged and intervened upon. The kind of judgement one exerts upon the affections that they bring to the fore is based on two premises. First, it is always situated – namely it derives from the explicit orientation one takes and refuses immediate generalisations (Katz, 1996). Second, and related to the first, affective judgment is not about a-priori determinations and meta-ethics, but is a matter of contextual assessments based around an understanding of ethics that involves more-than-humans in its makings (Braidotti, 2013; Grosz, 1993). It is, in other words, about focusing on how the capacities of *anybody* are affected in the encounter. As Duff puts it:

'[g]ood' encounters involve the transfer of power from the affecting body to the affected body and so invest that body with joy and an increase in its power of acting, while 'bad' encounters involve a decrease in the power of the affected body and so invest that body with sadness. (Duff, 2010: 885)

To use Ranciere's terminology, through their determination, Vulturilor's people disrupted the 'police order' – which in Bucharest wants for the poor Roma to be destitute, disorganised – and made politics possible (Purcell, 2013). What I asked in this article is *how* that happened, through what form of assembling, via which shared ambience? Identifying the atmosphere of uncanniness has allowed me to depict the politics of Vulturilor as a broader, mostly pre-conscious collective endeavour, whose fragility stems from it being ephemeral and entangled within all sorts of agencies. Yet, that uncanniness was there and allowed people to enrol and to step up for their rights. Similar processes, although not investigated in this way, do take place all over the world when common grounds against evictions are assembled. Paying attention to their affective dynamics does not serve the purpose of establishing another fancy academic etiquette – the uncanny atmosphere – but to focus on the fragility of these endeavours: inertia can creep in at any moment, as it did in the case of Vulturilor.

Uncanny atmospheres matter. On the one hand, they provoke disorientation, puzzlement and even fear on the bodies that would like to maintain the status quo and re-establish the 'familiar' (like the State in the case of Vulturilor). On the other hand, however, they invigorate the now strangely familiar body with new energies and a sense of possibility that the status quo, and familiarity, did not offer. Finding 'joy' in the makeshifts of home *unmaking* and *remaking* – namely, for the perspective adopted here, succeeding at resistance and becoming autonomous (Geronimo, 2014; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006) – is thus also a matter of how uncanny atmospheres are generated and, most of all, sustained. A positive affective politics of home *unmaking* and *remaking* is, in this sense, also a politics of attentiveness to the matters building up and slowing down uncanny atmospheres. As the case of Vulturilor shows, the real danger for such politics is for the uncanny to be normalised. When this happens, the space for action is reduced; the resisting body is slowed down; and a new docile body is assembled.

According to Freud, the uncanny – since it originated in repression – has always the force to return. This is a force that lingers 'despite rational protests to the contrary' (Pile, 2011: 298). Revitalising the uncanny is then a matter of finding new creative ways to sustain that lingering, bearing in mind the more-than-human lives of which the uncanny is made of. I will offer three concluding suggestions in this sense, first, with an activist-scholarly task. As this article has tried to do, imagining and enacting a radical politics of uncanniness is about the intellectual exercise of tracing and unifying the (only seemingly) separated parts that make up the makings of homing, eviction, displacement, *homelessness* and resistance. Specialist and sectorial scholarships in this regard do not help and serve the scope of division rather than that of a common struggle (Amin and Thrift, 2016). The notions of home *unmaking* (and possibly the continuum *unmaking-remaking*) and a vitalist take on the performativity of evictions can, if combined, move our theoretical understanding of these phenomena forward and, in turn, inform alternative practices (of action and imagination).

Second, the uncanny needs to be continuously re-enacted and re-invented. One could understand this as a matter of continuously de-territorialising a body before it actually fully re-territorialises (Deleuze, 1988). The task is to keep atmospheres of uncanniness alive in such a way to re-generate their 'uncanny effect'. For Freud, this is done 'by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, such as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality' (Freud, 2003 [1919]: 136). This is, above all, a task for the creative, the performer and the one able to perceive the line of flight. It is in fact about seeing and actualising the potential of a body: what can it be? What can the 'occupying Roma body' be next, to preserve its uncanniness and thus buy more time and space for autonomous action? The balance between the familiar, the un-familiar and the strangely familiar is, however,

blurred and difficult to play with.<sup>8</sup> A mild transformation will harken to familiarity, while a too extravagant assemblage will harken to strangeness: uncanniness sits in the middle of the two and is not easily attainable.

Last, attention to the affective atmosphere that life on the street brings to the fore is key to revitalising the uncanny. Inertia is real, felt and embodied. In Vulturilor, it affected both the community and the people revolving around it: week after week everyone, including myself, was less motivated, less prone to keep on with the occupation, and even less able to imagine possible paths of action. That is not simply because time passed, but it is because specific conditions, material and affective, do have certain impacts on the way resistance is lived and performed. Scholars and activists need to imagine forms of practices able to retrieve when and how inertial atmospheres emerge and are at play, in order to re-work the articulation of their protest to cope with (and fight against) those negative affections. This involves dedicated attention to the processes tempering the home-*less* body: the intersection of certain human predispositions with the harshness of street's capacities give rise to an inertia that is dangerous for the making and sustenance of any practice of resistance. Paying attention to how such affection comes to the fore and acting upon it – contrasting its emergence through creative practices that needs to be thought of – is a political endeavour as much as rallying, writing placards and occupy the street is. Guattari is very clear about this:

Affect is not, then, a state that is passively submitted to, as its ordinary representation amongst the 'psy' disciplines would have it. It is a complex subjective territoriality of proto-enunciation, *the locus of labor, of a potential praxis*. (Guattari, 2013: 210, emphasis added)

The present study has only provided an orientation toward that praxis, but it has hopefully set the agenda for other explorations of how eviction and resistance are assembled through the affective nuances of the micro-political.

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## Notes

1. From which I have produced an ethnographic documentary about evictions in Bucharest called *A Început Ploaia* (Lancione, 2017). For more info, please visit [www.ainceputploaia.com](http://www.ainceputploaia.com)
2. I re-articulate these two points from Anderson's recent excellent compendium on affects (2014).
3. By affection, I mean the affective response that the affective atmosphere provokes on a body.
4. In the sense of 'collective subjects' (Braidotti, 2013; Guattari, 2010).
5. [www.jurnaldinvturilor50.org](http://www.jurnaldinvturilor50.org)
6. See Maestri (2016) for the analysis of a partially similar transition in the case of Italy.
7. According to Freud, the familiarity of the uncanny is related to either 'repressed infantile complexes' or 'primitive beliefs' (Wilton, 2003: 374). None of these enter into my analysis and, to say the truth, also Freud himself seemed to argue that more was at play, in the production of the uncanny, than those two aspects: 'It is evident that we must be prepared to admit that there are other elements besides those set down here determining the production of uncanny feelings' (Freud, 2003 [1919]: 138).
8. Interestingly enough, similar debates take place in robotics, where the traditional uncanny effect prefigured by Freud (fear) is to be controlled in the design of human-like robots (a short, but key text in this sense is Mori, 1970).

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