6 Human capital and digital citizenship

Postsocialism's urban dispossessions

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"Today, we adopted a law that addressed Romania's need to attract both human capital and financial resources and to better promote Romania in the eyes of foreigners," accorded the Romanian MP for the USR-Plus party, Diana-Anda Buzoianu, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic (Romania Journal, 2021). It was December of 2021, and she was introducing draft legislation in support of the country's first digital nomad visa programme. Like digital nomad visa programmes elsewhere (there are over 50 globally), Law 22/2022 aims to appeal to Western digital nomads, or those who engage in remote tech labour and enjoy the freedom of leisurely travel while being financially bolstered by predominantly Western tech corporations, startups, and entrepreneurial capital flows (Müller, 2016; Reichenberger, 2018; Svobodová, 2022). Romania's programme specifically aims to increase the presence of wealthy tech workers based beyond the European Union (since EU citizens are already able to live and work in Romania). While digital nomads have been flocking to Romanian cities such as Cluj, Bucharest, and Timișoara for well over a decade – in part due to the country's exceptionally fast internet, relatively low cost of living, high safety index, high English language proficiency, a plethora of coworking hubs, and recoded Orientalist myths that bleed wanderlust fantasies of "the East" (Digital Nomads Romania, 2021) – Romania's digital nomad programme codifies digital nomadic lure into law.

According to Buzoianu, the programme aims to attract 2,000 workers annually to help Romania build the country's "brand" (Turp-Balazs, 2021). These surrogates for "human capital" will putatively transit innovation into the country, their arrival allowing Romania to fulfil post-Enlightenment fantasies of Western recognition and avowal – desires augmented in postsocialist techno-urban contexts. Unsurprisingly, nothing was mentioned in legislation discussions about the gentrifying impacts that digital nomadic entry produces, in which poor, Roma, and other racialised residents are dispossessed to make way for the capital that digital nomads and Siliconisation transports. As with other forms of touristification and lifestyle migration (Gant, 2016; Hayes & Zaban, 2020; Opillard, 2016), human capital here becomes fodder for real estate developers, bourgeois services, and Airbnb and Uber usage. It also promotes an array of co-working spaces that have been popping up across the country over the last decade.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003451785-8

The rise of digital nomadism in Romania reflects ongoing dreams of Westernisation and specifically post-1989 aspirations of Siliconisation, in which countries become brands and technological innovation serves as a barometer for capitalist transformation (McElroy, 2024; Popovici, 2022; Zamfir, 2022). While the digital nomad programme helps materialise this, so do an array of other digital citizenship initiatives geared not towards wealthy foreigners but rather local residents. Smart and creative city ventures such as the European Capital of Culture, a title that the city of Timişoara won in 2016 and which materialised in 2023, also telescopes technocapital and dreams of Western recognition into the urban core. As has been well critiqued, such programmes stoke local contexts of gentrification and racial dispossession (De Cesari & Dimova, 2019; Florea & Popovici, 2021; Lähdesmäki, 2014; Zamfir, 2016), not to mention deep-seated desires of Europeanisation (Turşie, 2015; Pajvančić-Cizelj, 2020). In Eastern Europe, cultural and human capital programmes alike galvanise anticommunist understandings of progress, in which citizenship into the Western and European body infers cleansing Romania of its putatively dark socialist past by opening up new pathways of becoming Western.

In this chapter, I asses the urban dispossessive fabrics woven into human and cultural capital initiatives such as the digital nomad visa programme and the European Capital of Culture. By situating these contemporary projects within a longer historical arc, I map digital citizenship dreams upon longstanding aspirations of Western becoming. Building upon ethnographic research conducted in Cluj and Bucharest between 2016 and 2019 (McElroy, 2024), as well as close readings of recent policy initiatives and media, I converse with the fields of urban geography, digital geography, critical race and ethnic studies, and postsocialist studies. This interdisciplinary approach to studying capitalist state initiatives allows me to trace the emergence of the digital citizen: a figure whose cyborgian expertise, or promises of it, proffer exceptional residency status, whether permanently or temporarily. I also focus on the aspirational politics that render promises of technocitizenship for Romanian residents. As I question, who gets to be a technocitizen, and whose dispossession is requisite for Western arrival? In asking this, I draw connections between recursive circuits of global technocapital that foster conditions for Western digital nomadic arrival, and local aspirational contexts to become technologically and culturally recognisable to particular notions of modernity.

In what follows, first I further explore how digital nomadism itself has transited from a fringe Silicon Valley identity into government programmes transnationally. I then situate digital nomadic fantasies within a longer context of anti-Roma racism going back to Orientalist literature, while also contextualising digital nomadism's contemporary role in racialised gentrification and capitalist technoculture. Next, I draw connections to cultural capital aspirations of Western becoming and postsocialist contexts of anticommunism. This is well evidenced in Romania's European Capital of Culture competition, which I also elaborate upon. I conclude by looking to a government-led artificial intelligence programme which telescopes dispossessory digital visions into new citizenship frontiers.

Digital nomadism

By offering digital nomads an exceptional residency status, Romania's digital nomad visa programme reifies Western and particularly US imperialism, tendering wealthy non-EU highly paid tech workers a special privilege. After all, one of the requirements attached to the visa – which was passed with support from the Ministry of Research, Innovation, and Digitalisation, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by amending the country's Emergency Ordinance 194/2002 regulating foreigners (Guvernul Romaniei, 2022) – is that applicants must maintain gross monthly salaries of at least three times that of an average Romanian worker, meaning at least 3,700 euros. This is a significantly higher salary requirement than nearby postsocialist countries which also offer digital nomad visa programmes, such as Croatia, Hungary, Georgia, and Estonia (Johnson, 2023). Estonia was the first country to offer an e-Residency programme as far back as 2014 (Krivý, 2021), though its formalised digital nomad initiative also emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Many digital nomad programmes were launched during the pandemic to capitalise upon Silicon Valley tech firms and startups migrating to remote work, instantiating a proliferation of digital nomads (Thompson, 2021). According to the Remote Life Survey and Pew Research, roughly 55 per cent of Americans engaged in remote work by October 2020 due to the pandemic, while only 7 per cent worked remotely pre-Covid (Brynjolfsson et al., 2023). And as of March 2023, roughly 35 per cent of workers whose jobs can be done remotely still work from home (Parker, 2023). Statistics such as this have been interpolated opportunistically by countries seeking to attract highly paid remote workers and new genres of cognitive capital. According to the digital nomad membership site Nomad List, which offers tens of thousands of paid members opportunities to connect with other digital nomads, and which also ranks different cities based on their relative perks and shortcomings, digital nomadism flourished during the pandemic and in its so-called aftermaths. According to the site, Timișoara averaged roughly 100 digital nomads per month arriving pre-Covid, 50 per month during the height of the pandemic marked by travel restrictions, and as of 2023, 350 per month (Nomad List, 2023). Similarly, Cluj, still more admired for its "Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe" status, reached 200 per month in 2020 and is up to 600 per month as of 2023. Bucharest, as the capital city, maintained 600 per month pre-Covid and 1,600 per month during 2023. While these statistics in part reflect the website's own growth, digital nomadism also appears to be flourishing.

Not only do digital nomad programmes summon Silicon Valley white-collar wealth (which was already reliant upon the outsourcing of labour pre-pandemic), but also Orientalist fantasies of Eastern European difference. This follows a postsocialist trajectory of Western technocapital more broadly exploiting the East, when state socialist computer and engineering infrastructure became fodder for Western companies such as IBM, Hewlett-Packard, Microsoft, and more to exploit (McElroy, 2024; Miszczyński, 2020; Vincze, 2017). Given that Romania had excelled in hardware development during socialism both above and below ground (Fiscutean,

2017), and given the havoc that post-1989 disaster capitalism wrought (Florea & Popovici, 2021; Verdery, 2003), Romania quickly became a prime location for technological predation and incursion. Much of this relied upon post-Enlightenment desires of Westernisation, mimicry, and becoming familiar amidst imperial aftermaths (Bhabha, 1997; Petrovszky & Țichindeleanu, 2011; Popovici, 2022). According to the US International Trade Administration, Romania today leads Europe in its number of certified information technology specialists and ranks sixth globally, topping both the US and Russia (International Trade Administration, 2022). It is also home to US tech outsourcing firms such as Amazon, HP, IBM, Microsoft, Oracle, and more. While much of the country's tech work is related to outsourcing, there are plenty of local software, cybersecurity, and digital companies creating new products. Nevertheless, the government aims to attract Western, and primarily US, digital nomads to grow human capital opportunities.

As a phenomenon, digital nomadism is often attributed to Tsugio Makimoto and David Manners and their 1997 book *Digital Nomad*, which presaged a future run by wealthy tech professionals equipped with "digital toolkits" who could live a life of "location independence." Then, in the early 2000s and 2010s, the concept began to flourish, correlating with Silicon Valley's so-called Tech Boom 2.0 marked by venture capital investments in software, startups, the sharing economy, and the monopolisation of computing power by large companies such as Amazon, Facebook, and Google (Opillard, 2016; Walker, 2018). Some digital nomads even began to describe themselves as "digital Gypsies" (Taylor, 2011), adopting Orientalist fetishization for the figure of the "Gypsy" – a trope racial common in hippie culture but also racially appropriative tech culture (McElroy, 2019). Disregarded in such framing are the lived experiences of dispossession that Roma people have long experienced, not to mention how digital nomadic arrival is tethered to processes of gentrification, which in Romania sees Roma residents disproportionately dispossessed and evicted to make way for Western arrival.

It was long before the late 1990s that nomadic fantasies began indexing geographies of possession and dispossession. During the mid-19th century – a zenith of numerous Western European colonial projects – that the Orientalist literary movement emerged, rife with Gypsy novellas, poems, and theatre alongside work fetishizing and racialising people from the Middle East (Said, 1978; Lemon, 2000; Trumpener, 1995). What I find interesting here is how the romanticised literary figure of the Gypsy became the workhorse of national movements across the continent. Stories narrated a widespread anti-Roma racism made more visceral as Roma people began migrating westward after emancipation from slavery in countries such as Romania (Achim, 2004), as well as Western imperial dreams to nomadically expand and transgress nation-state borders and enclosures. In Orientalist literature, Gypsy novellas often featured Western male protagonists whose countries were, at the time, engaged in colonial projects. After falling in love with sexualised, racialised Roma women, protagonists attempt to "become" Gypsies – deracinating Roma personhood from that of an ethnic or racial identity into something one can become simply by living nomadically. Frequently, narrators end up murdering their muses, fating Roma people to the domain of extinction while mapping

Western imperial superiority as inevitable. Deracination in this sense speaks to the uprooting and attempted dispossession of a racialised people materially and allegorically.

As a movable racial figuration then, the deracinated Gypsy maps the sexual, racial logics of imperial reproduction. Yet from the figure's recurrent textual death, different ghosts materialise – including that of the digital nomad. However, there are immense differences between this nomad and that of the 19th century. Today's figure is not something that imperialists lust after; it is an identity that many Western tech workers believe that they have already obtained, albeit through a more complete process of deracination. While most 19th-century Orientalists were writing from the hubs of Western imperial cities, today's tweet, blog, and post from cities such as Bucharest and Cluj, all the while anchored to Silicon Valley. This, I suggest, indexes Silicon Valley's newfound imperial status – one that was in fact emboldened by the pandemic's unleashing of remote work.

For instance, the website Nomad Capitalist, "the world's most sought-after expert on legal offshore tax strategies, investment immigration, and global citizenship" which works "exclusively with seven- and eight-figure entrepreneurs and investors who want to 'go where they're treated best,'" offers digital nomad coaching to over 1,500 clients living in over 100 countries. In his *Nomad capitalist: Reclaim your freedom with offshore companies, dual citizenship, foreign banks, and overseas investments* (2021), the company's cofounder Andrew Henderson details experiences of obtaining passports and opening bank accounts in an array of countries, including Romania. Chapters in the book bear overly imperial titles such as "Introduction: Shuttles Are for Slaves," "The Location Independent Lifestyle: Come to Cuenca Where Flowers Bloom from Your Toilet Water!," "Second Passports: I Welcome You as the Newest Citizen of . . .," "Investing Overseas: A Home on Every Continent . . . And a Cattle Ranch Too," and "The Final Frontier: If It's Not Risky, It's Too Late."

In a video published in November 2022, Henderson described the now infamous American-British internet personality Andrew Tate as the ultimate digital nomad due to his possession of 7 passports, 15 driver's licences from an array of countries, residencies in 30 countries, and bank accounts globally (Nomad Capitalist, 2022). Tate had first risen to fame years earlier through reality television appearances and a brazen misogyny that earned him a cult-like following among a particular cohort of receptive young men. Then in December of 2022, Tate, who had been elusively living in Bucharest and Dubai, was caught by Romanian authorities on account of running an exploitative webcamming criminal ring made visible through his own social media. Despite his arrest (which went viral on social media), Tate still maintains a large following amongst young men and digital nomads alike, the two groups often synonymous. His membership platform maintains over 2,000 subscribers who pay for edification from millionaire "professors" who offer lessons on digital nomad strategies (The Real World Andrew Tate, 2023). While Tate can be understood as an extreme example of digital nomadic violence, the fact that sites like Nomad Capitalist continue to uplift him for his diversification of passports, drivers' licences, and residency permits reveals a significant angle of nomadic

fantasy and the political economy undergirding it. These are only emboldened by digital nomad visa programmes – as long as one's digital activity isn't as spectacularly violent as Tate's.

Yet less viral forms of digital nomadism do impart violence as well, particularly via racial dispossession in contexts of urban gentrification, as I continue to explore. On one hand, then, digital nomads and self-proclaimed "digital Gypsies" deracinate lived Romani experiences of racial banishment, updating a 19th-century Orientalist wanderlust fantasy. On the other hand, the arrival of digital nomads stokes local contexts of dispossession. In countries such as Romania, this often infers the racialised eviction of Roma residents, as I continue to describe.

Not yet human

Through digital nomadism but also other tech initiative programmes, cultural, civic, and capitalist values get propagated, often resulting in the racial banishment and disavowal of those rendered unassimilable to Western understandings of the human. Some of this invokes the work of the creative class, an idea celebrated by Richard Florida (2019) and chastised by a cohort of critics who find urban markers of creative innovation synonymous with gentrification and racial dispossession (Atkinson & Easthope, 2009; Mirabal, 2009; Peck, 2005). In Cluj, according to Oana Mateescu, "one can speak of laboratories – pockets of urban space dedicated to experiment, collaborative discovery and creativity, but in the (etymological) end, also places defined by their capacity to shelter and stimulate labor" (2022, pp. 243–244). Put another way, although Cluj is rendered a magnet city for creative knowledge workers within and beyond Romania, having been branded the Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe for over a decade now, Romanian tech workers are often reduced to human cognitive capital utilised for powering Western outsourcing firms. This gets at the power of middle-class technocapitalist aspirations which persevere despite the exploitations that outsourcing inheres.

The mimetic desires to become Western have long been noted by those studying colonisation (Bhabha, 1997; Chakrabarty, 2000). Drawing upon Sylvia Wynter, Katherine McKittrick writes that by anchoring to a Western European bourgeois model of being, one projects upon and absorbs

> all those who belong to the now globally economically Westernised middle classes; their working classes; and their criminalized and jobless underclasses. This then reifies an ostensibly humanly normative social category: *homo oeconomicus* (the virtuous breadwinner, the stable job holder, the taxpayer, the savvy investor, the master of natural scarcity).
>
> (2015, p. 19)

Yet, as she notes, this figure requires "the symbolic death of the denizens of the 'planet of slums' just as it uncovers the teleological underpinnings of the story-lie of ostensibly human development" (McKittrick, 2015, p. 19). Put in another way, just as the imaginary of *homo oeconomicus* reproduces a mimetic quest through

promises of emancipatory cognitive capital, it also inheres a perpetual disavowal of and disregard for those rendered racially unassimilable.

As highlighted by scholars of Western coloniality in Eastern Europe (Bakić-Hayden, 1995; Gagyi, 2016; Koobak et al., 2021; Parvulescu & Boatcă, 2022), the region has long been read as only semi-civilised and eternally tasked with an unfulfillable task of becoming Western and therefore human. Veda Popovici articulates that in Eastern Europe,

> coloniality has a specific profile based on centuries of Western domination exercised partly by actual colonial rule, partly by complex financial and cultural dependencies. This history has produced Central and Eastern Europe as a semi-periphery, a financial, political and cultural process that has been long in the making and dates back centuries.
>
> (Popovici, 2022, para. 4)

This has long been doubly the case for Roma residents (Costache, 2021; Rexhepi, 2022). Indeed, Romanian nation-state formation and national identity are shaped in opposition to an imagined Roma incivility and racially maligned homogeneity (Beck, 1989). Western imperialism in the East thereby functions to create ongoing and unfulfillable desires of becoming Western for the middle class, while disavowing possibilities of assimilation for those who have already been relegated as unassimilable by instantiations of racial capitalism over the course of many centuries.

It is no surprise that as cities such as Cluj gentrify and become "smart," it is Roma residents who are wastelanded to spaces like the peripheral dump of Pata Rât, a garbage dump located 18 kilometres beyond the city centre where over 1,500 racially dispossessed residents reside (see also Zamfirescu, this volume). One of the largest instances of banishment took place in 2010 just as the city was beginning to gain its Silicon status, when Western companies such as Nokia began moving outsourcing tech operations to the city promising jobs and opportunities for a post-recession economy (Miszczyński, 2020). Siliconised dispossessions have only continued to augment since then, whereby those who can't land cognitive and creative capitalist jobs get banished to the Silicon wastelands. Yet problems of housing precarity pervade, with Cluj's rents now higher than Bucharest's. At the same time, collectives such as Căși Sociale ACUM! (Social Housing NOW!) have powerfully organised against racialised evictions and for housing justice.

Racial dispossession is not only a result of Siliconisation and contemporary gentrification; it also has everything to do with practices of property restitution, whereby anticommunist postsocialist legislation authorises the re-privatisation of housing nationalised and made public during socialism. Many Roma residents lacked stable housing prior to state socialism due to centuries of propertied violence, for instance, contexts of slavery in which landlords and the Orthodox Church gained power by rendering Roma people human capital to gain spatial and political power (Achim, 2004). Communists led the process of housing nationalisation in state socialism's early years, creating contexts of stable housing for many for the first time in national history. Yet postsocialist processes of lustration

(national policies of repairing harm executed by prior regimes) use the language of transitional justice to restitute nationalised property to the descendants and heirs of pre-socialist owners, often leading to the evictions of Roma families who have been living in those buildings for generations (Chelcea, 2012; Popovici, 2020; Verdery, 2003; Vincze, 2017). This postsocialist property mutation was used as fodder for EU integration in 2007, with economic systems conflated with state socialism rendered an aberration to be evicted and lustrated against. Lustration is in fact a practice that originated in ancient Rome (*lustrum sacrificium*), in which census takers held public animal sacrifices every five years to atone for the empire's transgressions. Wlad Godzich writes, "Psychohistorians may speculate for a long time as to what led Central and Eastern European nations, and eventually Balkan ones as well, to revive the practice of 'lustration,' as it became commonly known" (2014, p. 6). While lustration involved removing those with Communist Party ties from power and accounting for particular violences associated with the regime, it also meant atoning for the undoing of private property. Atonement here only works through anticommunist religiosity, which has become an unquestioned logic with which to justify the institutionalisation of private property and the racialised dispossession it requires.

Histories of racialised violence thus are reproduced through the restitution of private property. At the same time, as Irina Zamfirescu writes in this volume, many Roma evictees, by lacking formal rental contracts, de facto also lose access to possibilities of obtaining state identification cards. This is in part due to Law 105/1996, which regulates population records and identity cards, and which requires applicants to provide proof of residency such as a property title or rental agreement to get an identity card. Generally, both permanent and temporary identity cards are available to Romanian citizens beginning at fourteen years of age, and then are required in housing applications. If one is without an official address, access to state identification cards and therefore the benefits of citizenship (for instance, access to state resources or the ability to vote), become increasingly impossible. At times property owners allocate tenants the status of what Jasmine Arpagian and Stuart Aitken write as being officially homeless and therefore without space, or *fără spaţiu* (2018, p. 447). Indeed, temporary cards may list "spaceless" addresses, which are commonly accorded to tenants in homes that landlords are hoping to evict through property restitution schemas. Should tenants receive permanent cards, it would be more difficult to execute an eviction. Yet temporary spaceless cards also communicate the precarity of one's status, which may reproduce housing discrimination from future landlords, employers, or teachers. Per Arpagian and Aitken, "For occupants living in this state, uncertainty becomes ordinary until the prolonged slow violence of dispossession is interrupted by the trauma of displacement. These actions push legal liminality, spatial instability, and improper(tied) subjectivity" (Arpagian & Aitken, 2018, p. 448). To be without space and to be in contexts of (im)propertied liminality is not to be digitally nomadic; rather digital nomads celebrate the ability to obtain residency benefits regardless of space.

Lightness

Not only are the dispossessed denied full citizenship privileges in official documentation processes and thereby refused social services, but they are also in many ways interpolated as the antithesis of the digital citizen. This contradiction illustrates how racialised technocapitalism works, whereby those with access to Silicon Valley white-collar jobs are afforded a status that those historically subjected to racial capitalist exclusions and expulsions are forced to endure – and often enough, organise against. Middle class–aspirational Romanians meanwhile valorize technocitizenship, a dream situated on the horizon of becoming through human and cultural capital programmes.

Assimilation into technocitizenship requires a strange and homogenising presentism, as well as a disavowal of the socialist past during which Romanian cities such as Cluj, Bucharest, and Timișoara were technological hubs of innovation and computer development in their own right – both above and below ground (Fiscutean, 2017; McElroy, 2024). It was also then that up to 30 per cent of urban property was nationalised and made public and in which there were higher rates of employment, healthcare, education, and more (Vincze & Zamfir, 2019). In other words, programmes auguring in Western recognition and capital today seek to disavow what gets reconfigured as a "dark" socialist past despite the era's housing, social, political, and technological innovations. On one hand, these socialist pasts get recast as retrograde precursors to the figment of dangerous Eastern European hackers threatening to infiltrate Western democracy – a common postsocialist trope (Gutfrański, 2019). Postsocialist Westernising initiatives, on the other hand, seek to celebrate technocapitalist incursion while at the same time disinterring Romania's own apparently elapsed Western past. Human capital initiatives seek to attract and recover pre-socialist Enlightenment promises of becoming Western.

While techno programmes invite Western techno and human capital directly into Romania, they also seek to transform Romanian citizenry into one marked by Western values. For instance, the Light Revolution of 2017 and 2018 saw over a million demonstrators mobilise "light" technology to display repugnance towards the corrupt and "not-Western-enough" government. These protests were marked by smart phones, laser displays, and anticommunist propaganda, and were supported by big banks, tech companies, and even McDonald's (Atanasoski & McElroy, 2018; Deoancă, 2017). They were also laboratories for new digital civic initiatives. For instance, there was Educație Civica (Civic Education), a platform of "Funky Citizens" funded by the Romanian-American Foundation intended to train Light Revolutionaries into becoming "civically fit." I came across a stack of their flyers in a Bucharest metro station in the winter of 2018 after having returned from observing Light Revolution protests. Though no one was there handing the flyers out at the time, they were clearly catered towards protestors, with a link to their website front and centre on the printed pages. According to the site (Romanian-American Foundation, 2022), Educație Civica endeavours to mobilise smart technology, visualisations, infographics to propel Romanians into the technology and innovation

sectors, and to foster entrepreneurial skills and competition. Fluency with these tools, it is inferred, is crucial in winning the new revolution for Western becoming.

Theorizing "entrepreneurial citizenship" in postcolonial India, Lilly Irani writes of investments in innovators as a means of "national belonging for those who subsume their hopes, ideals, particular knowledge, and relationships into experiments in projects that promise value" (2012, p. 2). "Entrepreneurial citizenship rearticulates old distinctions between those who can govern others and those who must be governed, cared for, and drawn into modernity," she suggests (Irani, 2019, p. 13). Similarly, Sylvia Lindtner (2020) writes of "prototype citizens" in post-Mao China, or Chinese innovators who garner government support and who gather in makerspaces and model "the good life" through technological experimentation for other Chinese, ultimately gaining recognition as creative makers by the government and the West. In postsocialist Eastern Europe, Maroš Krivý meanwhile has mapped out citizenship promises through the *e-Estonia* government-led programme first rolled out in the mid-1990s, which aimed to connect the government, entrepreneurs, investors, and citizens through digital platforms, databases, portals, and other smart city platforms (2021). This has also included Estonia's 2014 *e-Residency* platform aimed to attract digital nomads and establish Estonia as a virtual tax base. Such initiatives interpolate digital and "smart city" innovations as vehicles for gaining Western recognition, with the Estonian president remarking as far back as 1997 that going forward, "every Estonian's thoughts and words will matter exactly as much as . . . the thoughts and words of Americans [and] Russians" (cited in Krivý, 2021, p. 239). Today, government initiatives such as *Startup Estonia* have protracted this vision, naturalising technological entrepreneurship into the heart of public policy and planning. It is not random that the Estonian city of Tallinn often sits high up on lists of the best locations for digital nomads, alongside Bucharest, Budapest, Cluj, Zagreb, and other Eastern European cities that have adopted similar programmes (Nomad List, 2023; Pickering, 2022; Whitley, 2023).

Similarly, in Romania, digital citizenship is understood as a channel for transforming Romanian citizens into proper Westerners. Writing of how Western coloniality has historically shaped political subjects in Eastern Europe, Dace Dzenovska argues that

> the postsocialist objects of Europeanisation . . . not only take up the discourses of free markets, human rights, and democracy as proof of Europe's civilisational superiority, but also strive to embrace the colonial underside of European modernity, thus undermining attempts at keeping the two separate. (2013, p. 398)

Transposing this analysis into technocapitalist aspirations of Western becoming in postsocialist Romania, it becomes clear how citizens are recruited into the ongoing project of affirming the West's techno-moral superiority by performing anticommunist disavowal. When digital nomads land in postsocialist geographies, then, they taunt the assimilatory possibility of Western becoming for some through their very movements – movements far different than those dispossessed and banished from urban cores upon digital nomadic arrival.

Cultural citizenship

Western, civic, and light technological aspirations have bled into ongoing bids amongst Romanian cities (and cities across the region) to gain the annual status of European Capital of Culture (ECoC). In 2016, the city of Timișoara won the 2021 bid, which was then postponed to 2023 due to the pandemic. On one hand, the city's victory is not particularly exceptional, especially given that in 2023 it shared the title with two other cities, Elefsina in Greece and Veszprém in Hungary. The Romanian city of Sibiu also held the title in 2007, the same year that Romania and Bulgaria joined the European Union and thus became eligible for ECoC possibilities.

Given that the ECoC programme began in 1985 during the Cold War, incorporation of Eastern European countries signals the ability for the postsocialist East to Westernise through capitalist and "creative" processes of Europeanisation. Prior, ECoC participation inferred instrumentalising highbrow culture for aesthetic and symbolic gains, but with the inclusion of poorer Eastern countries, bids began to emphasise "a clear focus and a systematic approach to social regeneration" (Tommarchi et al., 2018, p. 158). They also took a "more citizen-centred" approach to cultural inclusion (Turşie, 2021, p. 198). Ioana Florea and Veda Popovici suggest that in such contexts, Eastern European cities have emerged as "dreamscapes and playgrounds" that artists and cultural managers spend years prepping them for in hopes "that it will boost their well-being" (2021, p. 141). While promises rarely materialise, racialised dispossessions and other forms of gentrification do take place to wipe urban space "clean" for such possibility (De Cesari & Dimova, 2019; Campbell, 2011; Lähdesmäki, 2014; Šebová et al., 2014; Zamfir, 2016).

In addition to instigating gentrification, ECoC aspirations also flatten a cornucopia of cultural and racial differences across the continent into a singular narrative of Europeanisation. As the European Commission stated in 2014 as part of its quest to incite a new continental Renaissance, "Europe is an identity, an idea, an ideal" (2014, p. 1). Postsocialist nations, it was inferred, should remould their histories in ways that align with this Renaissance imaginary. As Corina Turşie critiques, Eastern European "inferiority complexes" related to poverty and anticommunist imaginaries were promised "healing" through EU cultural initiatives which allowed them to reinvent and re-narrate "their past in a European context, to which they belong" (2015, p. 125). Such historical revisionism, like processes of lustration, manifests contradiction. In this case, Eastern European difference is exoticised as culture to be capitalised upon as long as it is defanged from socialism and insofar as its citizens uphold ongoing dreams of Westernisation (Pajvančić-Cizelj, 2020). ECoC initiatives thus dose out exoticised differences as cultural attractions while also encouraging self-colonisation – a familiar Orientalist trope.

Timișoara's bid technically began in 2011 with the founding of the Association Timisoara European Capital of Culture. In 2014, it launched a ten-year participatory "Cultural Strategy." After a series of debates and consultations with professionals from Eastern and Western Europe, its final bid, one in competition with the other shortlisted cities of Baia Mare, Bucharest, and Cluj, was booked in 2016. All

four cities bear rampant histories and contemporary practices of racialised eviction practices, none of which were adequately addressed in any of the bids. Instead, numerous artists participated in the bid creation, hoping to access small and limited pools of funding that would become available should their city be selected. As Florea and Popovici articulate, many art collectives were co-opted into proposing small projects that involved racialised people in poor neighbourhoods who were then transformed into unpaid art objects. In their words: "Art, education, and community participation were used as magic concepts that would solve everything in the candidate cities, thus rendering harsh social problems of inequality and dispossession insignificant. Urban redevelopment projects (proposed by local authorities together with real estate companies) legitimised by cultural projects/buildings were not challenged or opposed, despite their clear gentrifying character. The ECoC urban fantasies, together with the precarity of the artists, proved to be very effective anesthetics" (2021, p. 142). Yet not all artists and collectives bought into this paradigm. For instance, the *Gazeta de Artă Politică* (*The Political Art Gazette*), a leftist art periodical that both Florea and Popovici have organised and written for, has long been an accomplice of anti-eviction struggles. In fact, it dedicated a special issue in 2016 to critics of the ECoC (Gazeta de Artă Politică, 2016).

The ECoC selection panel, administered by Romania's Ministry of Culture, ended up proffering the award to Timișoara in part due to its "clear and strong process of community participation" (European Capital of Culture, 2016, p. 15). They also appreciated that the bid emerged from an "intercultural, multi-confessional and entrepreneurial community," and from "a city of small sparks that ignited transcontinental transformations" (European Capital of Culture, 2016, p. 15). Points were additionally accorded for the Timișoara team's inclusion of positive "European themes," such as LGBT connections and linguistic differences, as well as for recognising ongoing troubles such as the legacy of the Holocaust, youth unemployment, and also, interestingly, hostility to migrants and newcomers. Meanwhile the digital nomad ranking and membership site Nomad List – replete with data on tens of thousands of members including nomads residing in cities across the globe, including Timișoara, Cluj, and Bucharest – shows that while digital nomads favour Romanian cities for factors including fast internet, affordability, lack of crime, walkability, abundance of co-working spaces, and English fluency (though less so in Bucharest), members tend to give poor scores to Romanian cities for blatant racism and homophobia (Nomad List, 2023). In this sense, while digital nomads in general are welcomed by the entrepreneurial culture celebrated by the state, both they and the state acknowledge that not all migrants or differences are treated the same way. Yet funding continues to be allocated towards widening this technocapitalist wedge of (in)hospitality, in which digital nomads are offered possibilities of bypassing border restrictions while anti-immigrant hostility is offered cultural capital at best.

Despite noted hostility towards migrants, Roma, people of colour, and queers, digital nomadism has flourished in Romanian cities during and after the pandemic. At the same time, Timișoara's ECoC bid included programmes such as "Temporary Citizen," "Live with a Local," and "Take a Stranger Out" (European Capital of

Culture, 2016, p. 15) – all various touristic programmes that aim to bring people together but that also elide that prior to the ECoC programming, cultural citizenship has long been denied to those whose difference gets rendered unassimilable to universalist tropes of belonging. In many ways, the proposed programming mimics Airbnb campaigns against strangers also made in the name of universal hospitality. It was in 2013 that Airbnb CEO Brian Chesky launched a million-dollar #OneLessStranger initiative to "bring the world together," as he proclaimed via YouTube video (Airbnb, 2014). Yet, as he laments, "There's one obstacle in our way. And that, is strangers. . . . We'd love to rid the world of strangers." Before the video draws to a close, he asks viewers: "How far will you go to make one less stranger?" Yet while Airbnb has long been a primary accommodation for temporarily residing digital nomads and wealthy tourists, it has also long been agential in instigating local contexts of gentrification which materialise unbelonging, estrangement, and dispossession for the racialised poor (Gant, 2016; McElroy, 2019; Spangler, 2020). That ECoC branding from a so-called entrepreneurial community engages in similar marketing against strangers highlights the gentrifying impacts of the programme, alongside its preferences for one genre of newcomers at the expense of others long denied cultural citizenship.

For instance, Cluj, the runner-up in the Romanian ECoC competition, applied under the banner of "East of West" along with "Re-signifying Europe" and "Servus" (Servant). One of its main goals was to include the formerly evicted Roma communities now living in Pata Rât. The four proposed mechanisms of Roma inclusion, entitled JIVIPEN in the application, include 1) an annual week-long intercultural camp; 2) an ethnographic exhibition focused on Roma cultural heritage, as well as performative events that will take place after a month-long research project; 3) an annual three-day-long conference with corporations, NGOs, public institutions, and universities; and 4) an annual march against structural racism. These plans, George Zamfir notes, fall short of materially addressing housing and racial justice demands from the Roma residents wastelanded at Pata Rât (Zamfir, 2016). Similarly, for many Roma evictees who had been organising to return to their homes in the city centre for decades with little to no support from the mayor and elected officials, found municipal support for Cluj's proposal tongue-in-cheek. In fact, as far back as 2011, posters appeared across the city depicting the mayor with the words "Kluj Kapitală Kulturală," a Ku Klux Klan reference to the ECoC and a warning against the city applying given its racist history. Ultimately, the ECoC panel, while impressed with Cluj's goals to become a hub for "cultrepreneurs," found its ambitions of bringing segregated communities into one "ClujUnion" too difficult a task to overcome (European Capital of Culture, 2016, p. 15).

At the end of the day, it was Timișoara that won the ECoC bid. Its proposed motto, "Shine your light! Light up your city," and its desire to become a city "where cultural excellence prevails," speak to the simultaneous goals of valorizing a pre-socialist past and upholding a Western techno futurity. As the programme's website elucidates, by welcoming in light and ushering out darkness (an alibi for socialism), the region can reunite with its pre-socialist enlightened past (Pavel & Jucu, 2020). It was before state socialism that Timișoara was considered the "Little

Vienna of the East," a golden era that anticommunist techno-urban fantasies seek to recover. The website reminds viewers that it was in Timișoara that the first German-language newspaper was printed, and that the first public library was created in all of Central and South-Eastern Europe. Further, "Between 1880 and 1914, Timișoara was the most important industrial, commercial, financial and cultural city in the region, admired for its artistic excellence in music, literature, painting, sculpture and architecture, as well as its technical and scientific innovations" (Timișoara ECOC, 2023). It was in 1884 that Europe's first electric street lighting was created. And almost 100 years later, it was in the city that the Romanian Revolution was sparked, finally putting an end to state socialism. Per the site, the cultural capital goal is "to remove the darkness . . . through a culturally fuelled civic process . . . to set civic energy in motion, 'exporting' the values of other European cities that we believe in, to stimulate an open, visionary attitude among citizens" (Timișoara ECOC, 2023).

To make such enlightened visions work, a particular politics of memory is required, one aimed at restituting the pre-socialist past and subtending it into the postsocialist present. Perhaps, then, the auguring in of digital nomads and ECoC tourists seeks to connect a Western circuit board into motion, transiting technocitizenry dreams into the future while fuelling the economy with human capital. This process melds well upon that of property restitution and the dispossessions it inheres. Together, these human capital programmes are coded to push certain people offscreen and beyond the reach of technocitizenship, banishments to spaceless geographies which in turn create new space for tech development.

Agora

As human and cultural capital initiatives illuminate, aspirations for Western becoming are tied up in techno-urban racial fantasies. On one hand, these bear historic precedence, recoding Western desires of incursion into the East, not to mention post-Enlightenment national visions of Western assimilation. On the other hand, the dispossessions and disavowals that such projects incite update a long trajectory of anti-Roma racism. Rather than heeding the calls of those continuing to fight against their own expulsion, government programmes fanned by the flames of global capital continue to champion posthuman notions of a digital citizenship. In this sense, and following critiques of posthumanism offering an ascendency only available to some (Jackson, 2020; Weheliye, 2014), human and cultural capital initiatives recode imperial maps of enlightenment through promises of digital citizenship.

While the institutionalisation of digital nomadism and capital of culture programmes are two urban examples of techno-exclusion, there are always new programmes being spun. In March 2023, only months after the digital nomad visa programme was institutionalised and amidst Timișoara's ECoC programming efforts, Romania's then prime minister, Nicolae Ciucă, unveiled his new digital political advisor, Ion – a computer programme emboldened by algorithmic computing power paraded as artificial intelligence (AI). Embodying a full-length mirror on

the programme's website, Ion was designed to data mine social media and gather user input to inform the Romanian government of citizens' real-time desires (Ion.gov.ro, 2023). The Romanian company Humans.ai, which created the tool in consultation with the government and AI researchers, describes it as leveraging

> AI algorithms, and unsupervised learning methods, as well as deep neural networks, which automatically identify topics of interest to the public administration, prioritising discussion on social media based on their impact on the public sector, and providing decision-makers and lawmakers with a bird's eye view on the expectations of citizens at the local and national level.

Ion, they write, "will represent the modern version of the ancient *Agora*, a link between citizens and decision-makers, where everyone's voice matters" (Humans.ai., 2023). While there have been many glitches with its launch (Ardelean & Vulcan, 2023), Ion nevertheless successfully landed Romania on the map for the world's first AI government counsellor who "will always be apolitical and never belong to an administration or a political party" (Humans.ai, 2023).

Although AI and large language models are far from intelligent (Bender & Koller, 2020; Whittaker & Suchman, 2021), they also embolden large tech companies at the expense of humans whose labour and data are in turn reduced to capital (Marx, 2023; Sadowski, 2019). Yet here what I find most interesting is that a public-private hybrid was created in reference to *agora*, the ancient Greek marketplace for free-born citizens to gather and hear rulings of kings and councils. Fittingly, at the time, agora reified the power of the market and government information, but only for those already citizens. Today, Humans.ai concretises this stipulation in what they describe as a great social equaliser. This slippage strategically feigns a universally flat playing field, ignoring how for the dispossessed and undocumented, the promises of agora are void.

For Humans.ai, agora is a nod to democracy, a tool that gives voice to "the people." Yet like the digital nomad visa programme and ECoC competitions, not all people can traverse to the public square to participate in democracy; rather, it is only those who are already interpolated by the market as worthy who can advance to the next (now digitally mediated) level of technocitizen. Its politic is one that Jacques Derrida (2000) critiques as hospitality of invitation, whereby openness exists but only for those who are already invited into spaces deemed worthy. Hospitality of visitation, on the other hand, embraces a Jewish messianic concept of difference deferred, one in which through a commitment to justice, the door remains open to foreigners and strangers regardless of how different or unassimilable they may be. Reflecting upon such a politic in the realm of property, Ananya Roy suggests that "Derrida's refusal of the proprietary prerogatives of property is a radical expansion of the concept of sanctuary. It also bears resemblance to abolitionist critique and its analysis of possession" (2019, p. 771). In other words, by actually opening up space for difference and for visitation by strangers (beyond the capitalist reduction of strangers vis-à-vis Airbnb, digital nomad visas, and ECoC marketing), the very concept of private property (upon which capitalism has always been reliant)

is put into question. In this sense, initiatives such as AI counsellors, digital nomad visas, and cultural capital programmes feign openness and hospitality but inevitably uphold the borders and barriers that state-sanctioned private property reproduces. Those who have long struggled for recognition into the post-Enlightenment space of human, or for housing in the space of the city, continue to be banished and disavowed.

Yet human and cultural capital programmes are not the only entities carving out spaces of belonging and unbelonging. On the contrary, housing and racial justice collectives throughout Romania and the region have been hard at work organising against the dispossessory logics that uphold structures of banishment at the expense of digital citizenship. In Bucharest, Cluj, and Timișoara, groups such as the Frontul Comun pentru Dreptul la Locuire (Common Front for Housing Rights) Căși Sociale ACUM! (Social Housing NOW!), and Dreptul la Oraș (Right to the City), as well as autonomous social centres such as A-casă and Filaret, offer mutual aid to support those facing expulsion from city centres making room for new genres of belonging.

At times, organising efforts are explicitly directed against the Siliconisation of "smart cities," for instance, Căși Sociale ACUM!'s 2021 action called "To Whom Does the Smart City Belong?" During the event, which sought to commemorate the 2010 eviction that landed 350 people to Pata Rât amidst the early days of Cluj's Siliconisation, activists gathered downtown and online with posters reading questions such as: "To whom does the smart city belong to, if the rent for two rooms is higher than the minimum wage?" (Căși Sociale ACUM!, 2021). The words on another sign asked, "To whom does the city belong, if in 2010 the city hall evicted 350 Roma people to the landfills?" Questions such as these, alongside ongoing housing justice struggles, point to the contradictions of technocitizenship. These contradictions highlight the dispossessions that acts of gaining Western recognition necessitate and reproduce. At the same time, articulations of technocapitalist refusal point to a materially coordinated effort to fight displacement and create spatial futures of belonging beyond agora's boundaries – futures that transcend the partiality of hospitality that technocitizenship invites.

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