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Response

I would like to begin by thanking George Tudorie and the editors of the *Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations* for organizing this symposium. As an anthropologist, it is a true pleasure to see the book being read by a panel of scholars representing a diverse set of disciplines, from Anthropology (Luminița Mandache) to Philosophy (George Tudorie) and Communication Studies (Alexandru Cârlan), as well as to have the opportunity to engage with some of the comments and criticisms that their different readings brought forward. I will respond to each in turn.

George Tudorie engages the book generously, summarizing the argument and evidence considered in each chapter but also gives close attention to the theoretical underpinnings of the book. Over the course of his reading, particularly around the chapter “Bored to Death,” Tudorie raises the question whether the homeless men and women described in this book might not really be bored, as they had claimed, but perhaps something else, such as depressed, ennui, angsty, melancholic (or some other closely related possibility). Tudorie raises the question about what might happen to the analysis if, after a turn on the psychiatrist’s sofa, the diagnosis of some or all of these homeless persons were to change. Tudorie’s question, also raised by Alexandru Cârlan, gets to the matter of research method as much as the book’s analysis.

Underlying Tudorie’s question, I believe, is the lingering suspicion that language does not always mean exactly what it says. Given that this must be the case at least some of the time, Tudorie’s question invites a kind of excavation to be performed – an effort to get beneath the surface of, in this instance, this boredom talk and to dig down to the very bottom of things where some more essential interpretation is supposed to be found. My issue with this inclination mirrors that of Michel Foucault’s (1967: 275), namely that as one digs deeper beneath the surface, one finds that there is “nothing absolutely primary to interpret.” Instead one descends into a hall of mirrors. Such an exercise might provide insight into the diagnostic logics of psychotherapy, but these were not the questions that I set out to pursue in this research.

The most basic observation out of which the book evolved was this: day in and day out, homeless men and women were observably and self-consciously bored. They described themselves to me and to each other as bored, and they described the marginal places in the city where the homeless congregated as boring places to be. The homeless also organized significant portions of their day wrestling with, and trying to move themselves out of, their boredom by pursuing consumer stimulation. How and to what effect, I found myself wondering, had the

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experience and management of homelessness become entangled with advanced capitalism's fetish for market activity – the drive to produce and to consume ever harder and faster?

When my informants looked and spoke of being bored, I have no doubt that the language and embodiment associated with their boredom pertained to a certain emotional space (as opposed to an exact point). I was also struck that the boredom that the homeless described inhabiting looked and sounded very different than my own experience with boredom. What I found significant and in need of explaining, though, is that boredom is how these men and women consistently talked about and managed the affective dimensions of homelessness at the level of their everyday life. The homeless did not call themselves depressed, for example. They did not visit a therapist to improve their inner world, nor did they seek out formal or informal markets for cheap pharmaceuticals to alter their moods and emotions as has been documented in other contexts (see Han 2012). Instead these homeless men and women headed to the mall, the corner store, or the food court. They pumped up the volume on their radios, and for those shelter residents with access to a television, they flipped channels while guzzling instant coffee and sugary snacks. Boredom defined the problem of deprivation, inactivity, and exclusion in a neoliberal moment of supposed rising prosperity, and the struggle to stimulate oneself out of boredom was pursued as the solution. This inclination is all the more striking of an observation given that deprivation and inactivity were neither new nor novel for these homeless men and women. Their experience of late communism was also framed by similar conditions, but these homeless men and women remember and spoke about communist-era austerity and idleness in completely different terms.

Rather than trying to unmask this boredom to propose some other diagnosis, my method was to account for the forces, strategies, and rules that gave this space of boredom its shape (see Foucault 1971). To that end, I approached boredom and human interiority ethnologically, which is to say in relation to one's environment and the historical and cultural forces that constitute one's sense of the reality of it (see Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007). This tack opened, I believe, a remarkable window into what it means to be displaced from a brutally competitive moment of advanced capitalism, one that is organized around a heightened drive to produce and to consume, both in Romania but also well beyond Romania.

As an aside, I have always wondered why audiences regularly focus this line of inquiry upon boredom rather than the book's other key term: homelessness. Following this spirit: given that Bucharest's shelters charge rent, screen out the most vulnerable, and are populated by large portions of pensioners, is it not possible that some of these men and women are in fact not homeless? And that these institutions are not shelters but rather low-cost, government subsidized housing?

Coming from Communications, Alexandru Cârlan engages the book primarily at the level of photography, taking issue with the selection and number of images. Cârlan also presses for clarification about how these images relate to the text and concludes with an interesting question about religion.

I read in Cârlan's remarks a certain disappointment with what could be interpreted as a conservative selection of images. As Cârlan rightly notes, the majority of images are either depopulated or are solitary portraits. When groups of homeless persons are featured, the images are obscured. They are either shot from behind the group of people, taken at a distance, or are heavily back lit, for example. This is not without good reason. I approached the photography for this book with a great care and caution that reflects anthropology's own ambivalence about incorporating images of any kind into ethnographic texts, particularly ones focused

upon the homeless. Robert Desjarlais, in his own study of homelessness in Boston, pointed to the danger that photography posed to studying the urban poor. If photographs speak a thousand words, Desjarlais' worried, they may ultimately affirm the ghostly and dehumanized representations of the homeless that ethnographers strive so ardently to upend (Desjarlais 1997: 1-5). Concerns over representation have prompted the majority of ethnographers studying vulnerable populations to leave the camera at home and to focus on prose.

Joao Biehl's, *Vita* (2005), and Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg's *Righteous Dopefind* (2009), however, made moving cases for incorporating photography into ethnographic writings about homelessness. Both books evocatively demonstrated the potential of the image to document the brutal and dehumanizing impress of structural violence upon the poor and marginalized. These authors did so carefully, ever aware of the photograph's potential for unintended consequences, and these authors attempted to mitigate that potential by insisting that the incorporated images should not be interpreted separate from the accompanying text. As Bourgois and Schnoberg put it (2009: 14): "The multitude of meanings in a photograph makes it risky, arguably even irresponsible, to trust raw images of marginalization, suffering, and addiction to an often judgmental public."

Beyond the complicated politics of representation, others have been troubled by the unpredictable life photograph's take post publication. In her book on addiction, Angela Garcia writes of an incident where one of her published images of an addicted couple was obtained by the Associated Press and reprinted in other venues with neither the permission of the author or of the persons depicted (Garcia 2010: 34). Separated from the original text meant to contextualize the image's content, and superimposed onto other stories, the circulation of the image created intimate and institutional consequences for the originally depicted couple.

With this in mind, I approached the selection of photographs for, *The Space of Boredom*, (as with the writing of the text) with great care to mitigate the images' unintended, injurious potential. I also worked under the assumption that most readers of the book will be unfamiliar with Romania, and I wrote the text with accessible pros in the hopes that the book might find audiences beyond the graduate seminar and in undergraduate classrooms and beyond the university setting. Given these commitments, I found photography useful for documenting the material conditions of certain places, to illustrate certain embodiments and postures, and to convey mood. I favored portraits over more dynamic shots of homeless shelters and day centers to respect the privacy of those who were willing to speak at length with me but who did not want to be photographed. I also avoided pictures that captured homeless persons engaged in illegal or taboo activity, particularly around the topic of male prostitution (see "Bored Stiff"). I then placed selected photographs strategically within the book to complement and extend the immediate text. I resisted captions to discourage efforts at interpreting images without reading the surrounding text. Given the added production cost of incorporating images into the book, I am grateful to Duke University Press for their unwavering support in allowing me to include each and every one of the book's thirty-three photographs.

Given the care and consideration that went into crafting a humanizingly honest portrait of homelessness in Bucharest, I find tremendous relief (and a sense of pride in a job well done) that Cărlan's issue with representation in the book centers upon my efforts to represent my own embodied loss for words rather than having anything to do with the homeless men and women that animate the book (See: O'Neill 2017: 21). Admittedly, I did find this to be one of the more puzzling points Cărlan attempts to make – is it really so implausible that one is familiar with their own embodied expressions?

Otherwise, Cârlan seeks clarification about my development of the “ethnographic negative” as a methodological tool for understanding boredom and inactivity, which I detail in the book and have explained at greater length in a subsequent publication (See: O’Neill 2017a). As I have explained in these other venues, the practice of ethnography is predisposed to see a world in motion – people cannot help but be described as doing something. Even sitting in a shelter and staring at blank walls constitute activities (namely sitting and staring). Cârlan’s concern that one of the book’s photographs, which depicts shelter residents passing time by playing a game of tossing coins, undermines the argument of the book because it shows activity makes no sense. Each and every image in the book that shows a living person, from an ethnographic perspective, captures activity (however banal it may seem to the observer or the observed). As I explain in the book, boredom is not inactivity in some ontological sense but the absence of *meaningful* activity. The point of what I call the ethnographic negative, as I have developed it, is to find ways of identifying and describing how and to what effect certain moments register as active and others as inactive.

Cârlan ends by wishing more had been written in the book on the topic of religion. I would note that religion is not absent from the book. Ample mention is made of the way religious organizations, both from within Romania and from abroad, organize the provision of meals, clothing, and other goods for homeless persons. What I did not find over the course of fieldwork was a turn towards religion or spirituality to manage the social and affective dimensions of exclusion, to find belonging, or to animate dulled inner worlds. The homeless men and women I got to know did not spend their downtime attending religious services or in prayer (either by themselves or with others). Neither did religious figures pass through the shelters, day center, squatter camps, and transit stations where the homeless congregated with any regularity. Indeed, the priest photographed walking through the re-developed city center, as Cârlan notes, has his attention turned to his cell phone rather than the figure of the poor very much situated around him. When my informants did pass through religious organizations, they did so in search of material needs, and once out of earshot of the minister or the volunteer, bristled at the spiritual dimensions of their messaging. Importantly, much of the resentment that the homeless articulated to me in those moments had less to do with any perceived failings surrounding the religious organizations themselves and more to do with the present limitations of charity (religious or otherwise) versus past experiences of state guarantees.

Fellow anthropologist, Luminița Mandache, offers a generous summary of the book and its argument. Mandache, ultimately, presses for a greater discussion of labor (particularly its absence) in structuring the social and affective lives of the downwardly mobile men and women that the book follows. Indeed, the discussion about boredom that I wish to have is framed by two poles, or sets of expectations: on the one hand, the socialist-era labor fetish under which my informants came of age; and on the other, the heightened consumerism ushered in by globalization. I agree completely with Mandache that work creates a sense of meaning and importance well beyond generating a paycheck to spend, and my hope is that the sense of lost positive identity as a worker comes through in the book’s vignettes and analysis.

Mandache also raises the concern that the book’s focus on consumption and belonging somehow de-politicizes the analysis by framing the homeless as under consumers rather than as rights bearing citizens. I would argue here that this shift from a citizen endowed with rights to work, food, and shelter to a consumer that exercises freedom through market choice is not an analytical decision that I imposed but the historical shift whose social and affective consequences this book aims to understand. Time and again, homeless men of a certain age lo-

cated the idea of a right to housing, work, and food rations to a Communist past rather than the market-oriented present. The homeless, by contrast, derided the sense of freedom of market choice on offer in the present, wryly quipping, for example, that they ‘have never been more free to sleep under the stars, even in the dead of winter.’ Feeling cast aside by a state that no longer cared to ensure their basic needs for food and shelter, I became interested in how these men and women turned to the market as consumers in search of relief but also in search of a sense of belonging to the city, the EU, and as Mandache rightly points out, a global order. I was also interested in the limitations of these consumer-based strategies for any kind of transformative politics. I think it is worth noting that the fieldwork for this book took place before the great political awakening that followed the tragedy at *Colectiv*, after which public demonstrations featuring tens of thousands of (typically young and educated) protesters started taking to the streets with inspiring regularity. During the time of the fieldwork, I too was struck by the notable absence of rights-talk in shelters and day centers. Resignation over political corruption was the more common theme.

Finally, and relatedly, Mandache wishes that the book had ended on a note of resistance, one in which active citizens made rights-based claims in the public domain. This sort of liberal activism did not emerge during the course of the fieldwork, but that is not to say that there is not a story of resistance to be found within this book. *The Space of Boredom* details the tremendous physical, financial, and interpersonal effort undertaken by the homeless to overcome their exclusion and marginalization from urban life. It just doesn’t look the way one might have hoped. Rather than rights claims articulated in main squares, this effort took the form of aggressive self-care to erase the marks of homelessness so that the homeless could not look homeless and fold into public spaces such as parks and public transit, malls and mega stores, and bars and restaurants rather than being publicly and humiliatingly ejected from them. There is a politics of resistance to be found in these efforts. Whether that politics is inspiring (or even satisfying) is another question entirely. I hold out hope for a more fully transformative politics of resistance unfolding in the future. I also leave open the possibility that such a politics will not take the form of 20th century activism but will draw instead upon experimentation with new techniques in alternative domains.

I would like to conclude by extending one last time my gratitude to each of the three panelists for their time and their thoughtful readings and vigorous engagements. I look forward to carrying the conversation on.

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