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Thesis Portfolio

(Pre)Occupied Ethnography, Abject Resistance

I. Introduction

A cool breeze on wet skin makes me shiver. I throw another bucket of water on my head, trying to wash all the soap off. Through wet hair I can see the red double-decker bus swinging by the house again, a reminder that I'm standing near a busy road in wet underwear. Still dripping, I smile to the tourists whose cameras inevitably turn towards us, me and the house where I'm staying. A spray-painted curiosity, the three-story squat (or *okupa*[1]*)* is wedged between one of Barcelona's largest parks and an otherwise quiet, upper middle-class neighborhood. I wave with my whole hand at the *bus turístic,* though many residents (of both the house and the city) would deem just a middle finger sufficient. As a fellow outsider, I feel hypocritical condemning them. The building, a former warehouse, invites attention. It is equal parts public spectacle and shuttered enigma. The barrage of neon graffiti that covers the walls contrasts against reinforced metal doors - reminders of the ever-looming threat of eviction. The *guiris,* the tourists, almost always took pictures of the house and this busload caught a bonus surprise: an anthropologist, mid-bath, stuck between their gaze and a reluctant subject - the actual squatters themselves.

A year later, in a different part of town, some friends of mine are in the process of trying to rehabilitate an abandoned house. The plumbing isn't done yet, so the shower at that time consists of a garden hose held up by bamboo poles. It's also situated in the middle of a yard that slopes down towards the city. Sweaty and dirty from working, we form a line for the shower. As my turn comes up, one of my friends points at my shorts and teases me, "You're not embarrassed are you? We're all friends." I look around the yard, to the people chatting casually around me, some clothed, others in towels or less. I look up to the house, where people in the kitchen are getting dinner ready and talking through the window to those working in the garden. I am completely embarrassed, of course, but like the others I take off my shorts and step under the hose.

When I had arrived in Barcelona to do fieldwork I was worried, like any researcher, about not being allowed in. I was inspired by the activism of the city's *okupas*, occupied houses and social centers that had persisted despite years of increasing repression. Among them they've managed to create an almost parallel world of self-managed meeting spaces, concert venues, public kitchens and community gardens. I had a personal desire to increase awareness of this form of lived resistance, but beyond that I had hoped to find some way to do ethnographic research that the participants in these spaces could find useful in their struggle, against real estate speculation and the criminalization of dissent. But I was also concerned about not being welcome as a researcher and an outsider. And my concerns proved warranted, at least partially. Though I made close friendships and found people with whom I shared strong, political affinities, those same people - the ones whom I protested, occupied, ate, bathed and lived alongside - refused to be the subjects of my research.

During my initial six-month stay in the field, and again over the following summer, requests I made to record interviews with experienced activists were roundly denied. Reactions to my attempts ranged from the evasive to the confrontational. The people I had become closest with told me they "didn't want to be studied." Some deflected my questions indefinitely, with promises of "next week." Others were outright hostile, equating anthropologists with journalists and even cops. Squatting in Spain is illegal, and the risks okupas live with are high. A violent eviction and arrest could happen with little notice – and yet the fear of infiltration itself didn't seem to account for this refusal. My physical presence as an outsider, and my participation within occupied

[1] An abbreviated version of the Spanish word for occupation: ocupación, spelled with a "k" to distinguish it as

spaces became acceptable over time. What never became acceptable was the tape recorder.

In response to my requests for information about okupas, I was handed self-published "fanzines" with accounts of okupa history, theory and analysis. Most were written anonymously or under the name of a collective. I was given manuals and encouraged to take part in occupations, to learn by doing. Experienced squatters were willing to give advice, but only to groups with serious plans to occupy, not to researchers interested in knowledge for knowledge's sake. In my fieldwork I abandoned my plans to do formal interviews, to relay squatters' voices. I tried to get involved in immediate ways by participating in projects to open and defend occupied spaces, and by helping to collect and cook food for community dinners. Rather than writing *about* okupas, I've tried to write to and alongside them, engaging the issues they also write about, like the discourse of crisis, or the securitization of the city, from the point of view of a partisan, albeit one embedded in a university several thousand miles away.

Rather than a dead end, this collection of papers takes the refusal of okupas to be the subjects of study as a starting point for interrogating the contingencies that shape ethnographic engagement. As Visweswaran (1994) has shown in the context of feminist ethnography, a moment of ethnographic failure can reveal the historical conjectures that make some forms of subject-hood desirable. My repeated failures to recruit okupas to give a representation of their work pushed me to reflect on how the ethnographic research I had hoped to do was fundamentally at odds with some of the central, ethical commitments and political strategies by which okupas operate. What began as a methodological issue turned into an epistemological crisis; one that has provoked me to think about how anthropology might be able to trouble the ways in which collective action and social change are understood. As I argue this case illustrates that traditional modes of research we possess may be ill equipped to serve as tools for those emancipatory projects that reject representation to begin with.

II. Anthropology *con el culo al aire*

Nancy Scheper-Hughes' (1995) proposal of a militant anthropology was a call for a morally engaged and politically committed anthropology. It was a provocation for anthropologists to abandon the façade of false neutrality, to take ethical stances and in doing so, to make their research relevant to the people with whom they work and useful for the world. Scheper-Hughes describes this vision of "anthropology-with-its-feet-on-the-ground" as a "barefoot" anthropology, one that refuses the role of distanced observer. Jeffrey Juris' call for militant ethnography (2007) affirms this approach, and argues that through active collaboration and participation in dialogue and debate, we can get an even deeper understanding of the ways in which communities organize.

Inspired by these and other calls for engagement, in my own research I've made no pretense of neutrality. I entered the field as an aspiring partisan. However my willingness to take on the role of the militant ethnographer, of the morally engaged anthropologist, did not make finding that role in any way easy. No one asked me to "give them voice," to be their witness. The okupas I spent time with made no demands for recognition from the media or the state. They refused to recognize these channels of authority and sought ways to get by beyond their reach. Without a desire for increased representation, for advocacy, what could I offer as an outside researcher? Within the numerous social centers there was no shortage of debate and self-analysis. What insight could I bring to their work that they couldn't? And considering the dangers of police surveillance, why risk having an anthropologist around in the first place? The okupas had made a good point. But this also left me clueless about what to do.

For one to be left "con el culo al aire" means to be left "with one's ass in the air." The phrase describes a situation in which one is caught with their pants down, left high

and dry, left exposed. To be left in such a state can lead to embarrassment, like when a bus drives by while you're bathing. But it can also be an intervention, a moment of forced self-awareness and reassessment when your own expectations have left you in a compromised position. To feel helpless can push one to rely on others. And if it leads to humility, to the recognition of shared vulnerability, feeling exposed can also lead to greater closeness.

An anthropology *con el culo al aire* - a "bare-assed" anthropology - complicates the image of the fellow-suffering, militant ethnographer. It acknowledges the uncertainty to which engaged anthropologists expose themselves as a result of their determination to take a stand in what are always epistemologically fraught encounters. We may be able to assert our ethical commitments, and defend them theoretically, but the course of action always remains to be negotiated. And what if there isn't a role for the ethnographer? What does it look like for an ethnographer "to be on their side" if the community where one works rejects representation? What kind of engagement is then possible? Anthropology *con el culo al aire* is a militantly naïve anthropology. It embraces embarrassment and the crisis of not knowing what to do next. It is a situated anxiety. It acknowledges failures and uses moments of uncertainty to drive critical inquiry, to better understand both the context of the field, as well as the limits of what it is we can offer as anthropologists who recognize our collaborators as fellow knowledge-producers.

Finally, an anthropology *con el culo al aire* is a vulgar anthropology. It attends to the crude and the common. It is anthropology for those left out. But it isn't one that seeks to bring them in as much as trouble the terms of their exclusion. It offers a rebuttal to the demands for seriousness that are used to negate the claims of some actors – often the poor, the young, the racialized, the marginal – those unable or unwilling to take on the language of "serious politics." It draws from the kind of oppositional attitude okupas take towards authority. It wants to give up its own authority to undermine all authority.

III. A Politics Against Politics

A study of *the study* of struggles can prompt us to interrogate the ways in which we represent them and the investment we have in those representations. One of the interventions this collection of essays proposes is to challenge the use of the category of "movement," as it has been used to describe okupas in Spain. The term "movement" is useful for situating different projects within a recognizable form of collective action, and one with an established body of literature. However the project of defining okupas as such, I would argue, has the effect of obscuring more than it clarifies. Beyond that, the very impulse to categorize, to fix a definition, works directly against the kind of politics okupas enact. Rather than seeking to isolate okupas as a movement, I use an analysis that considers occupation as a practice used by diverse actors, for diverse ends.

Some of the qualities that the scholarship on okupas identifies as shared across different cities and time periods is an anarchist, or anti-authoritarian stance against all forms of domination, one that includes a rejection of internal hierarchy and representation. This stance informs a practice that relies on an egalitarian, do-it-yourself mode of organizing in which individuals speak for themselves. Collectives are self-run, usually through small assemblies, and membership is based on voluntary association. Members decide whether or not they want to work together based on their affinity to each other and to the project at hand. Many collectives also aspire towards autonomy from structures that perpetuate inequality, namely the market and the state. But beyond these similarities, there are as many differences between okupa collectivities, regarding their interests (be it ecological activism, anarchism, feminism,

Catalan or Basque independence, anti-militarism, queer activism etc.), as well as their activities, and with whom they collaborate.

Previous studies have acknowledged this diversity as well as the reluctance of okupas to see themselves as forming a cohesive, singular "movement" (Dominguez et al. 2010). To be fair, these studies also complicate it as a "movement of movements" (a term used also to describe the alter/anti-globalization movement), acknowledging the diversity of tactics, approaches and politics that have animated okupas. Yet to do so, these studies still insist on framing the limits of an okupa movement proper, distinguishing one category of activist squatters as the "real okupas" and separating them from those who occupy houses out of necessity, or young people who squat to have free space but make no other demands (see especially Pruijt 2004, Vilaseca 2013).

But what if we resist the desire to define them as a movement? What else could we learn if we suspended the tendency to fit okupas (and other actors) into established political schema and considered, in broader terms, the practices of squatting and their history in Barcelona? What even the most sympathetic studies fail to address is the relationship between academic research and this mode of collective action. The desire of scholars to *legitimate* squatting as an effective political action can actually contradict the logics of the actors themselves (who seek no such legitimation). Certain commitments okupas have that make research difficult also reveal some of the limitations we have of what we understand as politics, or more specifically, how collective action can produce political change precisely by refusing to be categorized.

IV. Alternative, Autonomous, Abject…

The second intervention that these essays make is to turn away from the framing of okupas as forming an "alternative" or an "autonomous" community, and to re-conceptualize squatting as an "abject practice." Where alternative implies a choice, some of those who squat are unable to do otherwise, including many of the city's undocumented migrants, Roma, and poor who have been excluded from formal housing options as well as aforementioned categories of "political squatting." Yet these people contend with the same forces as explicitly activist okupas. And while many okupas aspire to a situation of autonomy, by occupying houses produced by and for the market, they remain reluctantly entangled in the dominant property regime.

By contrast, I argue that using the notion of the abject - the excess, that which is rejected (repulsed, expelled), but can never be entirely removed banished because it also helps define the subject - can help us to think of squatting as a simultaneously a condemned practice, but one made possible and even necessary, by cycles of surplus housing and aggressive speculation (Kristeva 1982, McClintock 1995, Tyler 2013). If we consider squatting as an abject housing practice: one that provokes legal repression and moral reprimand, and yet one that has "haunted" formal, acceptable housing practices in Barcelona, not just since the emergence of okupas (in the 1980s), but throughout earlier periods of industrialization, and extending into moments of high migration into the city, as well as recent crisis-related re-housing practices, then we can better understand how occupations fit into a broader landscape of direct action and how these are inter-related.

V. The Portfolio

The four papers included in this portfolio take on the two themes of "movement vs. practice" and "abject resistance" in four different empirical situations. The first, "Notes on a Common Insurrection," describes a debate over the idea of violence as it became associated with a category of "antisistema" protester, which was then used to justify extensive new surveillance and policing initiatives. Pushing back against attempts to marginalize protest, two groups considered safely outside the category of

"antisistema" - lawyers and pensioners – used their positionality to disrupt the states' attempt to render protesters as unworthy of consideration, and in doing so, amplified the condemnation that economic austerity policies constituted a more egregious form of violence than the protests against them. In a similar manner, "Unsettling Injustice" depicts two specific protests that seek to make claims on public space by politicizing the marginalization of deviant groups (including sex workers, female laborers, and squatters), and by situating those struggles within a larger history of opposition within the city.

"Expired Europe" takes as its focus the policing of another abject practice, the recycling of discarded food, as a means to examine the mechanisms used to discipline the provisioning practices of residents of the city. These include both a municipal ordinance defining the proper use of public space as well as a media discourse of crisis that decries the growing number of "average" citizens engaging in "savage" practices, reinforcing the stigmatization of practices outside the market. Finally, "Manual Transmission" is unique among the four in that it puts research on activist practices in Spain, specifically within the 15M/Indignado protests, into a comparative analysis with those in the United States' Occupy Wall Street mobilization. But even this study retains a focus on practices that disrupt the social movement model of collective action and envision social change as a molecular process wherein the focus is not on building counter-hegemonic formations of power, but cultivating other kinds of subjectivities that relate in more equitable ways.

While these essays end up in different places, and work towards various ends, each one begins with an occupied space and moves outward. These tenuous locations are not only places where other kinds of politics can be imagined. They are also privileged vantage points for analyzing how attempts to live and think otherwise are foreclosed. There was a wall with graffiti in one of the houses I lived in that had a kind of okupa proverb that said: *"kien okupa preokupa"* or "who occupies worries." At first I read it to mean that who occupies is worried (probably about eviction). But those who occupy also worry others. To live in a state of resistance is to trouble not only the police or the property owners, but also the categories of how we understand the political. When everyday acts - a meal, a bath, a story - become a form of contestation, by virtue of their taking place *within* an occupation, their political stakes in all contexts becomes more apparent, and suddenly there's no shortage of ways to occupy ourselves.

VI. Contents

1. Notes on a Common Insurrection: Violence and Transversal Solidarity in Occupied Barcelona

2. Unsettling Injustice: Re-Articulating Social Conflicts in Barcelona's Past and Present

3. Expired Europe: Consumption, Waste and Crisis in Spain

4. Manual Transmission: The Do-It-Yourself Theory of Occupy Wall Streets and Spain's 15M

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