

**Title:** Unsettling Injustice: Re-Articulating Social Conflicts in Barcelona's Past and Present

### Scene 1

June 2013, Barcelona. As we arrive at the community center for the premier of the documentary: *4F, Ni Oblit, Ni Perdó* (Neither forgotten nor forgiven) the space is already several hundred people over capacity. The documentary we're there to see is the product of several years' investigation into a court case that resulted in the imprisonment of four young people. On February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2006 a police officer was struck in the head by a potted plant while trying to shut down a party being held at a squatted social center nearby. The injured police officer was hospitalized and went into a coma. Four young people outside of the party were arrested, charged with assaulting a police officer, and sentenced to several years in prison. One of the four who was charged - Patricia Heras, later took her own life. Over the intervening years, support for the defendants of the 4F case grew<sup>1</sup>. A number of protests called for a review of the case; condemned the physical and psychological abuse by the police involved; and later, made claims of corruption after evidence contradicting the official police report was revealed. Supporters of those who were accused argued that this case was representative of much larger problems of abuse and corruption, as well as an effort by the city to clean undesirable elements like squatters, out of the touristic center,

Yelling over the crowd, one of the organizers explains that they have found a new location to host the screening and that we are going to walk over

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<sup>1</sup> For more information and to view the documentary:  
<http://www.desmontaje4f.org/en/>

together. As we walk to the new location, I chat with friends who've come from all over the city to see the completed film and show their support for the cause. Our group converges with a crowd of people who are already standing in front of a shuttered building on *Via Laeitana*, one of the major thoroughfare that cuts through the center of Barcelona. We stop, and at this point it is unclear where we are going. Within moments, a ladder is extended by two hooded figures who begin pasting a sign over the entryway of the building behind us. *Cinema Patricia Heras*. The crowd cheers as the flapping, paper sign is unfurled and glue is smoothed across it. Heavy tools begin clanking from behind a fabric sheet and the applause grows louder yet as suddenly the sheet drops and behind it, the doors to the building open. As the same organizer explains via megaphone, after 12 years of disuse, the former Palace of Cinema is being commissioned for this special premier. For only 24 hours "we" will be taking over the theater and using it to denounce police violence, as well as the property speculation that drives and which leaves such buildings empty. In other words: This is not just a screening. This is an occupation.

While some people enter immediately, others remain in front of the building, debating whether or not to take part in this surprise protest. Responding to this hesitation, an older man in a neon-green vest takes the megaphone. He introduces himself as a 'iaioflauta' –one of a group of retirees who had first come out into the streets during the 15M or indignado protests in 2011. They had taken the lead as one of the most prolific new activist organizations, staging anti-austerity protests at banks and government offices across Spain. Their name, Iaioflautas, requires some explanation. Early news reports on the 15M Movement had referred to the demonstrators camped out in

Madrid and Barcelona as *perroflautas*, a stereotypical figure of a young person who, not wanting to work, plays music on the street to make money (hence flauta, or flute), often accompanied by mangy dogs (hence, perro). Reacting to the media's dismissal of the 15M demonstrators as a group of *perroflautas*, this collection of seniors began calling themselves *iaio* (meaning grandpa and grandma)-*flautas*<sup>2</sup>.

This particular Iaioflauta, after announcing his group's support for the cause, then declares that he and a dozen other Iaioflautas will stand guard outside the cinema and deal with the police should they arrive. Laughter follows this comment as many in the audience, mostly young activists and squatters, well accustomed to facing off with police during protests. They seem to find the idea of people their grandparent's age fighting cops to be quite a funny image indeed. But as a friend of mine, who'd been present at a previous occupation attempt of that same building notes, it really is the most effective defense. When dealing with so-called *perroflautas*, the police don't feel the need to hold back, but with older folks they still show some restraint. And it works. The documentary is screened in its entirety. Family members, members of the 15M Audiovisual Assembly, and even one of the four that had been imprisoned and served a five year sentence introduce the film and speak about the effort it took to put it together, as well as their hope that it would pressure a re-opening of the case and a prosecution of the police, judges and politicians implicated in the 4F *muntatge* – or set up.

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<sup>2</sup> Grace Reynolds at the University of Virginia is currently doing fieldwork with the Iaioflautas in Barcelona

**Scene 2:** Later that month, I attended another event, also near the center of Barcelona, a walking tour organized by an anarco-feminist collective. It was the second iteration of a "*Ruta Herstorica*" – "A Her-storical Tour" of the Raval neighborhood in which members of the collective took turns narrating a route that stopped at various historic sites of women's resistance. The collective had also produced a newspaper, with information on each stop of the tour. It opens with this introduction:

"The roots, the old cobblestones of the city center, the wounds that still sprout blood... To recover the memory of our comrades, of the fighters, of the imprisoned, of the prostitutes, of the migrants, of the deviants... it is essential to recuperate our HERstorical memory, silenced and hidden in the books of HIStory." Most of the sites the route brings attention to – a former women's prison, a self-organized, secular, women's school, a brothel, a textile factory, and a street that had been barricaded during an uprising in 1909, and again during the Civil War in 1936 – are long demolished and have since been replaced by other buildings. And so one component of the trip was to make this history visible by putting up posters and signs, and in some cases performing acts of street theater.

As the tour wound through the narrow streets of the neighborhood, the number of tour-goers, starting around fifty, drew in residents, tourists, and passersby who came over to see what was going on. One action staged in front of a historical cathedral, decrying historic and present-day lack of access to abortion, brought out a number of curious churchgoers. At another point, the tour came across three police officers attempting to question a resident of the barrio and likely doing what has become a routine check of their papers. The

officers' calls for us to "move along" were ignored and the sudden presence of this large and stubborn audience was enough for them to leave in visible agitation.

In this way, the tour, a very common sight in Barcelona, became a kind of intervention, a disruption - a protest, leaving a changed landscape in its wake. In the presentation of each site, the members of the organizing collective sought to connect historical events to contemporary issues, labor exploitation, the criminalization of sex work, and impositions by the state and the church on women's bodies. Recovering and uniting these histories, they emphasized the multiple modes of exclusion and forgetting taking place: through redevelopment schemes that displace vulnerable, neighborhood residents; through official histories that neglect these experiences; as well as those erasures that occur within activist discourses, marginalizing the struggles of women. While maybe 100 people followed the entire route, many more pedestrians, residents, tourists stopped to see what was going on and a number of posters and signs remained up for weeks after.

### **Discussion**

So why consider these two events? What can they help us understand about this larger moment? When facing profound uncertainty about the future, with so many pressing issues to address, why would activists spend so much time and energy looking backwards? Connecting to the theme of this conference - resurrections - one of the interesting qualities these actions share, and which I think is worth considering is the recruitment of the past into contemporary projects of world making.

Through the project of the “herstorical” tour, Spanish and Catalan anarcho-feminists describe *their* activism as anchored to that of women past. Through the re-inscription of the contemporary landscape, the tour organizers assert the legacy of women’s struggles in the neighborhood, struggles that include the modes of resistance deployed by contemporary migrants and sex-workers who must constantly avoid the police, prison or possible deportation. The move to integrate these disparate conflicts works towards disrupting the kinds of “social abjection” described by Imogen Tyler in her study of the London riots in 2011. Tyler describes how even progressives did not take lower-class youth and their complaints seriously. Poor, young people, like sex workers, street vendors, or *perroflautas*, were not considered legitimate political actors, they were too violent, not serious, bereft of moral capital. Part of the work the tour sets out to do then is to integrate these different struggles into a common one, based not on ethnicity, or even a shared political orientation, but on women’s ongoing experience of persecution, self-organization and opposition.

In the occupation of the theater, the recruitment of the dead takes top billing. The figure of Patricia Heras unites those in attendance, who relate to her as a friend, a colleague, “one of our kids” as the *iaioflautas* claim, or as one of many victims of systematic abuse and corruption. Patricia is one of us, and thus, what Patricia suffered was not only an injustice that demands redress, it was also an attack against us. But what kind of an “Us?” Only years ago, it would have been hard to imagine this collection of squatters, seniors, and young professionals working together. But ongoing crisis and the popular protests, and especially the occupations of public squares that began in May of 2011 have brought disparate groups into conversation, into a shared sense of “we” who are

facing disaster. Home evictions and cuts to healthcare have been especially devastating for seniors. Squatters are facing increased repression as attempts to contain protest have led to crackdowns on squatted houses and social centers. And a highly educated class of young people is now stagnating, enduring unemployment levels that have remained above 50% for years. In Ernesto Laclau's work on populism he describes how an antagonistic frontier emerges between "the people," and "those against the people," produced through the linking of what might begin as highly heterogeneous demands, into what he has called a "chain of equivalence" (Laclau 2005). These demands become unified in their opposition, and in this case aided by the symbol of Patricia Heras. Whichever way you relate to her, as friend, colleague, fellow victim, fallen comrade, Patricia is imagined as one of ours, and the enemy remains at large.

While the media lament the ongoing crisis facing Spain's lost generation,<sup>3</sup> and groups like the Juventud Sin Futuro (or "Youth Without Future") ironically embrace this destiny (or lack of) – some activists have turned their attention towards the past, trying to re-build their communities in ways that political and class divisions had previously discouraged, but which the current disruption of social order have made possible. While crisis may have set the conditions for these links to be made, lasting change, the creation of a more just world, has in these instances led to the production of new histories, obscured histories brought to the light.

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<sup>3</sup> Homs, Daniel Bosque. 2013. "Spain's 'Lost Generation:' Youth Unemployment Hits 57 Percent" Huffington Post (May 28, 2013)  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/28/spain-lost-generation\\_n\\_3344183.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/28/spain-lost-generation_n_3344183.html)

How activists have gone about this task breaks from the images of protest that dominate our understanding of resistance, moving towards what critical geographers Pink and Lewis (2014) describe as a project of “making resilience.”

In their study of the global Slow Cities movement, Pink and Lewis propose a distinction between resistance - understood in binary terms of oppression or opposition - and *resilience*, which they suggest better captures the ways in which Slow City activists try to maintain and build the communities they desire, despite outside pressures of homogenization. Resilience, they argue, is built through an “interweaving of the already existing elements of the local,” things which make cities special, in which they excel, and all of this is done *in relation* to global retail flows and regional governance structures, not solely *in opposition* (Pink and Lewis 2014: 12). While the actions I’ve described in this paper are more antagonistic in their approach, they are nevertheless, intended also as ways of weaving together already existing elements, as a means of articulating localized identities within, and against, existing structures and flows. The ways they do this, by re-orienting participants to the social landscape of the city that strengthen tenuous bonds forged in crisis, create the possibility for a new normal to emerge. Rancière argues that, “Politics, before all else, is an intervention in the visible and the sayable” (Ranciere 2012: 37). Even through their very modes of action, by turning leisure activities into oppositional practices, these forms of activism challenge our understanding of where the political takes place, who it includes, and how we choose to understand this moment of rupture and increased visibility of contestation, as one of perpetual crisis or radical possibility. Tempering the proclivity within social movement



studies to look for novelty, we should follow the lead of these activists and attune ourselves to see the ways in which the past is brought into the present.

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