

## Squatting through Violence\*

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<sup>1</sup> There are variations in how this sentence has been translated. In the translation I'm using for this text, for example, it reads: "You can distinguish squatting mankind from sitting mankind." See Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body" in Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter, eds., *Incorporations* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 454-477. Witold Rybczynski, in his book *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (New York: Viking, 1986) wrote: "Regarding posture there are two camps: the sitter-up (the so-called Western world) and the squatters (everyone else)" (78). He does not cite Mauss as a source, perhaps illustrating just how often-quoted and dispersed such a statement is. He does, however, add a footnote to the sentence: "This bipartite division has been remarkably consistent; there is only one example of a civilization in which both sitting and squatting coexisted: ancient China." I have, on another occasion, also made use of the different inflections sitting and squatting have accrued in a Chinese context. See my "Marine Lovers, another Sit(t)ing," *BE* (Berlin: Künstlerhaus Bethanien, October 1994), 100-107.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Mauss, 458.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Many years ago, my younger brother told me in passing an anecdote which I remember to this day. He was probably twelve or thirteen, waiting for the bus in San Jose, California, the suburban city where we grew up, with a few other people whom he took to be Vietnamese immigrants. What struck him about this otherwise innocuous moment, and perhaps what located the foreignness of these strangers for him, was the position of their bodies while they were waiting—they were squatting. Although they were not squatting to call attention to themselves, that was exactly the effect as they rested their un(der)assimilated Asian bodies in a habitual position of waiting, incongruous with the sun-bathed sidewalks of a California suburb. What rendered this a particularly unusual scene to my young brother's eyes, so much so that he told me about it, was the fact that the bus stop provided seats, which remained empty while these strangers squatted, waiting.

In "Les techniques du corps," an essay dated from 1934, Marcel Mauss made the often-quoted ethnographic assertion that "humanity can be divided into those who squat and those who sit."<sup>1</sup> What sort of statement is this? Is it a replay of the Enlightenment morphology, which schematically represents Western humanity as upright and historical while others are base and subservient, living in timeless savagery? Given ethnography's obsession with racial classification, including precisely the difference between European sitters and dark-skinned squatters, Mauss' statement seems on the surface to harbor the desire to locate essence through the body. But the opposite is the case. "Les techniques du corps" is an affirmation of the power of artifice in all attitudes of the body—a study of the technological education of bodies, which refuses to define technology merely as the instrument of science, speed, and war.

"Les techniques du corps" describes the ways in which bodies are themselves instruments used in an acculturated, mechanical process, constrained by social tradition and utility. To emphasize the role of the social in these unconscious, repetitive actions of the body, Mauss returns to the Latin word *habitus*, one he contrasts with the French *habitude* (habit or custom), which signifies an individual's "acquired ability" or "faculty."<sup>2</sup> In contradistinction, *habitus*, where the techniques of bodies are located, connotes a structural process which "[does] not vary just with individuals and their imitations; they vary especially between societies, educations, proprieties and fashions, types of prestige. In them, we should see the techniques and work of collective and individual practical reason rather than, in the ordinary way, merely the soul and its repetitive faculties."<sup>3</sup> For Mauss, the habits of the

body which constitute “techniques” are precisely the effects of “inhabiting” a social enactment of space. Like his famous articulation of the three-way trajectory in the economy of the gift (to give, to receive, to reciprocate), the acquisition of a particular technique of the body necessitates the indissoluble mix of three factors: social, psychological, and biological.

*The child, the adult, imitates actions that have succeeded which he has seen successfully performed by people in whom he has confidence and who have authority over him....It is precisely this notion of the prestige of the person who performs the ordered, authorized, tested action vis-a-vis the imitating individual, that contains all the social element. The imitative action that follows contains the psychological element and the biological element.*<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 459.

“Humanity can be divided into those who squat and those who sit” was not proclaimed in the name of hierarchical differences across the divide of “civilized” and “primitive” bodies; rather, it was an appreciation of the preservation of the gift of the squat, which to Mauss was neither abjected nor necessarily the mark of his racial/ethnic other:

*The child normally squats. We no longer know how to. I believe that this is an absurdity and an inferiority of our races, civilizations, societies. An example: I lived at the front with Australian (whites). They had one considerable advantage over me. When we made a stop in mud or water, they could sit down on their heels to rest, and the “flotte,” as it was called, stayed below their heels. I was forced to stay standing up in my boots with my whole foot in the water. The squatting position is, in my opinion, an interesting one that could be preserved in a child. It is a very stupid mistake to take it away from him. All mankind, excepting only our societies, has so preserved it.*<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 463.

This drama of the purging and preserving of squatting highlights the point that the body techniques we inhabit (which are continually being forgotten and relearned, written and erased) are analogous to other mediating forms, such as writing or speech in that they function both as agency and sign. While the two are inextricably bound together, these squatting fragments you hold in your hands are an attempt at a sustained movement from a reading of the latter to a proposal of the former. This is not a manifesto for squatting (although I for one would welcome one), nor is it a study of its repression per se (in which case, innumerable bodies would have to be summoned to testify on its behalf, not the least of which would be women’s bodies in labor—in all senses of the word). Rather, these notes are limited to performing the role of a temporary interpreter, attending to the split-second

when the habitual sitter encounters (and is divided from) his double in the habitual squatter.

They were squatting, waiting for a bus....In the late 1970s and early 80s, San Jose was one of the American cities where recent Vietnamese refugees, many of them "boat people," were relocated after gaining asylum in the U.S. Just as their eyes, over-saturated with the devastation of war, needed to adjust to the panorama of American culture, their displaced bodies needed to negotiate the corrosive space between the alien and the assimilated in learning acceptable ways of presenting themselves on suburban American streets. What made an anecdote which implied the alien abjection of squatting Asian bodies poignant for me, and perhaps what made the grounded squatting bodies uncanny for my brother, was the fact that we also inhabit Asian bodies—that previous to our own immigration to the U.S. with our family just a few years before, we lived in a hemisphere where squatting bodies in public places, though not exempt from class connotations, would have remained unremarkable. An assimilated immigrant child's observation of the squatting everyday shifted into something remarkable in the violent process of dis-identification with newly-foreign bodies, which to other's (i.e. American) eyes probably resembled his own. Assimilation is a continual grasping of fragmented information, displacing of old habits—an ecology of the Self in which differences are enacted against the terms of the self. A displaced body that squatted where seats were available bespoke the difference between material availability and technological access: perhaps the squatters had not availed themselves of seats out of habit, perhaps my brother had lost access to a body that can squat. In a sense, they were anachronisms to one another. This belatedness is crucial, for the habitual squatter carries through the city a body's time-frame that is measured against the schedule of the city's own identity.

The violence that my brother (didn't quite know he) saw in the figures of squatters has been re-choreographed in the ensuing fifteen or so years. In the Vietnamese community of San Jose today, which is now the largest in America, habitual public squatting has probably been unlearned by many, re-routed to exclusively private spheres by some, and retained by a few. At the same time, this mode of squatting has also been accessed by others, most ubiquitously itinerant migrant laborers, who as a denotable collective has always made use of it. In almost all cities in California, the brown bodies of Latin American migrant (mostly illegal) day-laborers wait on designated street corners from daybreak on for employers who drive by with offers of a day's or a few hour's work. Often these are squatting bodies resting on their haunches, for such bodies, even at rest between long stretches of waiting, must connote the willingness to get up at any point to work. The squatting position, poised between standing and sitting, allows for no intermediary moment between obsequious patience and ready servitude: the squatter is already on his feet, ready for hire, at your service. The fact that these bodies (among others) are the target of the passed, but suspended, Proposition 187,<sup>6</sup> only underscores the

<sup>6</sup> Proposition 187 was an initiative passed in California in November 1994, denying illegal immigrants the right to medical care, education, and other services provided by government agencies.

<sup>7</sup> John Darnton, "UN Swamped by a World Awash with Refugees," originally published in *The New York Times*, also in *International Herald Tribune*, August 9, 1994, A1. According to the United Nations, there are 49 million refugees and "internally displaced people" in the world today. A 1993 UN report stated that "displacement of people is not the by-product of war but one of its primary purposes." Thus not only is displacement and famine used as a weapon, but the images generated by such atrocities also circulate through the media-tion system as mechanisms of war.

<sup>8</sup> Echoing Derrida's observation that "what a photograph really shows is the Law"—that is, what can be shown under the rule of the Law—Avital Ronell has analyzed the operation of televisual obscenity (literally "off-scene," off-stage, that which cannot be shown) during the time of the Gulf War when its violence was displaced onto the simultaneous moment of the Rodney King beating. See Avital Ronell, *Finitude's Score* (Lincoln, Nebraska and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Inscriptions: Of Truth to Size," *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 211.

obscenity of the power relations involved in such a transaction. For such bodies, willing to uproot themselves following capital's demands, while having had always submitted to systematic denials in full participation in society, are in effect forced to be ever more willing to squat under the gaze of the rich nation across the border from the poor nations of their birth.

Squatting places the power differential between bodies through the terms of sovereignty—"He who is sovereign," says Maurice Blanchot, "is the one who does not have to wait." The bodies of obsequious squatters on the other hand, have always figured the abjection of those who must wait: the migrant worker; the coolie; and in a larger context, the squatters seen purely as such in the media—the refugees from famine and war—who are hostages to such images, since the financing of international efforts for their relief are based precisely on sympathy generated by the same images of the same squatting bodies, tucked under faces forever looking up at the cameras of the donor nations, awaiting their uncertain fate. Like the squatting migrant workers who must compete for work on the street corners of California, these squatting bodies must also be submitted to a competition with other abject bodies in their own pathetic depiction, for only "extensive coverage of a catastrophe by the international media [can] exert pressure upon governments to contribute."<sup>7</sup> The technological media(tion) that facilitates this spectacle not only overwhelms the reading of refugee bodies as images for consumption, but simultaneously announces its own ethical insufficiency—for there is no possibility of communication, of reciprocation, in such a gesture—and its ideological interests in "what can be shown."<sup>8</sup>

Whether rendered (re)markable as the jarring habit of the alien set against local habits, or unremarkable as the banal matter of course in the imaging of the pathetic other, squatting conjugates the body in a field of violence. Where can there be an outside to this field from our perspective when the First and Third Worlds collapse onto the geography of a squatting body? The "Geo," as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reminds us, "has already been grafted,"<sup>9</sup> and in turn so have the bodies which cross its lines. The squatters in the metropolitan West, like their counterparts who have been strategically displaced by the violence of warfare or the violence of the policies of the World Bank (here one thinks of farmers in sub-Saharan Africa who have been made refugees when centuries-old food production and distribution systems are destroyed through new agricultural technologies and global economic policies), are continually embattled, embroiled in border disputes. The lines of containment created by such positions in demarcating the transient refugee/migrant bodies are rewriting always and again those bodies as sub-sovereign—that is, non-subjects of the state, literally abject to the sovereign nation. Squatting, as a form of inscription, cannot in and of itself figure the abjection of its occupants. Yet, when it functions as a signifier which inversely reflects one's own servitude to (a sitter's, or a citizen's) identity, such signification secures the citation of sovereignty in the sitter while exiling squatters from the realm of identity. Seen as a trace of the primi-

tive, the servile, the alien, the homeless, the fecal, a squatting body does not cite an authority that is recognized, neither from the highly centralized and differentiated flows of capitalism's media technology (where the representation of authoritative bodies, including the body of the state, are rigorously regulated); nor is it individuated (one does not squat, but sit for one's portraits, after all), invested with the connotations of the modern body that "belongs" to the sovereign subject of the West, the transcendental being from which we all cite, albeit in reduced dosages, in diffused forms.

This winter, answering a call from the Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst (NGBK) in Berlin for an exhibition of which the subject was "the business of violence," I disseminated on the walls of buildings and bus stops throughout the city's streets the image of a slightly less-than-life-size squatter (with his back to the viewer, his face in eclipse just enough for it to be discerned as Asian) multiplied on a thousand wheat-pasted posters.

I had re-imaged the squatters at the bus stop from my brother's anecdote because it is in the recess of such a moment that there lies another framing of violence, one which figures the belated relationship violence has to its "situation." Through this belated situational frame, one finds once again squatting as the historical grounding of the recurrent residual trauma of the Vietnam War, this time in Berlin: in 1992, 50,000 of the 60,000 Vietnamese "guest workers" who came to work in East German cities since the 1980s—due to their homeland's ravaged poverty that was kept destitute by a U.S.-led economic embargo—were forcibly repatriated back to Vietnam. My project of a thousand squatters was thus just a modest attempt to put back onto the streets of Berlin some of the Asian bodies which have been expelled. While the "new" Germany shrouds itself in the rhetoric of "openings," it has also taken the opportunity to exercise its "sovereign right" in redrawing the threshold for non-German immigration—in 1993, the German Parliament revised the asylum laws to make it more difficult for would-be immigrants and refugees to enter.

It is perhaps today's Berlin without the wall, called once again to its former identity, which allows this thinking of the violence of identity in its place. For violence, even simply in the practical sense of thinking it, is not just an entity of actions, such as the recent attacks on foreigners; but a breach with the space of the other, which is unlocatable "as such" for the simple reason that the true ethical space, the non-violent space one occupies with the other, is a project in the imaginary and cannot, as its *raison d'être*, be completed in the past or the present. Thus the other to violence (not merely "non-violence" in the common sense, since passivity and indifference can also be great violence, indeed) is a call to responsibility which involves a process of becoming in order that we may develop its possibility. An adequate response to violence necessitates the negotiation of a contract with the future. Squatting has taught me to wait.

What is certain is that the scarred disjunction that is Berlin, divided and reuni-



fied, wealth and rubble, thrown for decades into the anxiety in waiting, already houses the symbolic body of the squatter as a subject of violence, for such a city is already familiar with a certain metaphysics of the Squat.<sup>10</sup> The bound symbol of Germany's hopes and wounds, Berlin is still waiting. It is, as they say, "a question mark."<sup>11</sup>

Literally centered by the "emptiness" which remained after Allied bombing and the erection/demolition of the Berlin wall, the city has dove into a massive physical reconstruction in seeking to rehabilitate its identity through architecture. This new found center of gravity has also involved a gleeful real-estate development and systematic de-squatting of Berlin, which was common in both the East and the West before unification. In this light, the alien habit of a squatting position, almost never seen; need only be grafted upon the familiar practice of squatting as habitat, now diminishing.

The impropriety, the obstinate lowliness of squatting in polite society no doubt gave rise in part to the term's denotation as a crime against the owner of property. Squatting, in the colloquial sense as we understand it in English—illegal habitation of property without permission, right, or title—underscores this "improper" gesture in the presence of the Law only more literally than the image of a squatting body. Just as the squatter squats a building, the squatting alien is seen to squat a country. Sometimes they occupy the same space; certainly, they occupy the same abject relationship to the respective "real estates" they squat against.

Through this parallax view, I read, with the technology of squatting, a sentence in NGBK's invitation letter for the exhibition: "In Germany, violence in the street and violence against the other, against foreigners and the foreign, have received serious public attention only in the last few years." What we are confronted with in witnessing propaganda and literal acts of this stinging resentment against "the other" is the reminder that the ethos of national identity and sovereignty, epitomized in this case by unification—materialized also "only in the last few years"—is a structural process of naming certain others, "foreigners," against the violent fiction of its own unadulterated integrity. Squatters, literal or metaphorical, are resubjected to the terms of its rule: squatted property is reclaimed by the entitled; guest workers contracted before unification are expelled; laws are changed to deter further immigration, based at least in part on a "reconsideration" of the "role of aliens" in the new Germany. In this age of capitalism's triumph, can one really be surprised that the purging of the alien work force in Western Europe—that is, a purging of the squat from the body politic—coincides with the new outlets for cheap labor opened up by the "new world order?" Previously invited or at least tolerated "guests" are now made to appear, through the rhetorical manipulation of images of the very violence against them, more and more unassimilatable. Just as this "post-modern racism" (Sloavoj Zizek's term) or "meta-racism" (Etienne Balibar's) is a shock-effect of the aftermath of the Cold War,<sup>12</sup> racism in another manifestation—physical violence "against foreigners and the foreign"—only reminds us of the continual

<sup>10</sup> It seems the metaphysics of squatting continues to occupy the infrastructure of Berlin. The return of its status as capital has been pushed back repeatedly. The latest projection is that the year 2000 will officially mark the occasion after Christo's wrapping of the Reichstag, Germany's once and future House of Parliament. He's said to have waited decades for the project to be approved.

<sup>11</sup> See Paul Goldberger, "Reimaging Berlin," *The New York Times Magazine* (February 5, 1995): 45-53.

<sup>12</sup> See Slavoj Zizek, "The Violence of Liberal Democracy," *Assemblage*, no. 20, (April 1993): 92-93, among other essays.

<sup>13</sup> For a reading of the realignment of capital and the experience of aporia sited in Europe after 1989, see Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992). It was originally published in French as *L'autre cap* in 1991 when the news of the day was the Gulf War, not Bosnia. Yet that other heading—that headline news—soon returned to “the day” which haunts Derrida's *Reflections on Today's Europe*.

<sup>14</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volumes II & III*, (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 228-229.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 233-234.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

embattledness which houses the bodies of the veterans we call immigrants, foreigners, refugees. The ethical breach with the other has grave historical resonance in Germany; yet, as California, the former-Yugoslavia, and other places have shown, the desecration of the alien is waged as warfare on a global dimension. At stake once again are borders: who will (again) be the one who squats in the re-alignment of capital? Berlin as Capital. Germany as Capital. Europe as Capital.<sup>13</sup>

In the volume under the heading of “Sovereignty” in his collection of writings, *The Accursed Share*, Georges Bataille calls for a trans-valuation of values in the understanding of the very word, sovereignty. An anti-rationalist project, Bataille in this critique/manifesto posits the edifice of “traditional sovereignty” as resting on formally “crude” foundations, since it actually “assert[s] itself in the sphere of knowledge,”<sup>14</sup> in collapsed and collapsing cosmologies in which Bataille has little faith and cannot imagine a return. To submit squatting to this thorough exegesis of sovereignty would be another project. What I would like to extract for our purpose here (in the same manner that I've snagged and sniped the image of the squatter), is the tenuousness Bataille ascribes to the “sovereign moment.” “We should calmly ask ourselves,” he writes, “if the world we have conceived in accordance with reason is itself a viable and complete world. It is a world of the operation subordinated to the anticipated result, a world of sequential duration; it is not a world of the moment.”<sup>15</sup> Bataille aimed to salvage the sovereign moment from the modern ghetto of the unconscious, to pose it head on against the servitude to utility that permeates the timescape of the modern world.

For Bataille, past institutions of sovereignty, sited in objective recognition of their unification of sovereign moments (e.g. the figure of the king) can only exist for the individual in representation and cannot be experienced from within.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the sovereign moment is experienced subjectively, but at the same time, we have an objective knowledge of it.

*We speak of laughter, of tears, of love, beyond the experience we have of them, as objectively conditioned impulses....If we go instead from an isolated consideration of those moments to the notion of their unity, we are referred back, provided we attain it, to deep subjectivity.*<sup>17</sup>

What deep subjectivity ultimately experiences is “nothing.” It is a “subjective experience of an objectlessness,” a negative collection of disappearances.

*This disappearance corresponds to the object of those effusions that acquaints us with sovereign moments: they are always objects that dissolve into NOTHING, that provoke the moment of effusion when the anticipation that posited them as objects is disappointed.*<sup>18</sup>

In moments, objects dissolve into nothing, but it is exactly through this vanishing



point of the “nothing” that we can perceive a unity, a “global experience whose composite object is made of the fusion, into a single object, of the different objects of the different effusions at the moment of the dissolution.”<sup>19</sup> The multifaceted dimensions of a single object, its “erotic, laughable, terrifying, repugnant or tragic value” are all in essence present as the indivisible collection of its moments objectively given to the imagination. In the same vein I ask: What is a moment of squatting? What awaits squatting? What “nothing” disappears into the recess of its moment? Squatting is also “nothing.”

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 235.

It is through such an understanding of the fragility of the moment that I re-pose squatting as a counter-technology of resistance—a resistance to the technology of wars declared in the name of sovereignty, yes; but also a resistance to the very terms of sovereignty imposed onto the abjected squatter. To resist is to not let go of what one holds dear. On certain bodies, squatting is the resistant position which reflects the history and events, the space between the arrivals and departures in the life of its occupant. On the streets of a city of sitters like Berlin, what I intended to bring forth (to bear as a gift) from that trace into the public realm was a poetics of squatting, the promise of a gesture sent into the future which depends on another body, not mine.<sup>20</sup> In doing so, I am merely reciprocating the gift of squatting strangers had given to me, mediated by my brother's words. To paraphrase Hannah Arendt, “We are strangers who stand (squat) in need of being welcomed.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Here I am morphing Avital Ronell's reading of Heidegger's analysis of the formal and spiritual congruence between the greeting and the poem. See Avital Ronell, “The Sacred Alien: Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin's *Andenken*,” lecture given at Deutsches Haus New York University, February 23, 1995.

The bus stop provided seats, which remained empty while these strangers squatted....In attenuating the distance between the many years since my brother's passing anecdote and today's regimes of violent resentment against otherness, in honoring the fragility of the other's gift, I, echoing Mauss and others, reaffirm the squat in its potentiality. The proposal for a scattered proliferation of squatters in the eroded space of the public cannot function as an organized “counter-position” *per sé*; but rather, as a way of retaining violence in a form in which one can re-inhabit it humbly, with a minimal amount of violence, while slowly transforming the erosion of this public sphere into an internal frame which imagines its other, squatting is a form of counter-architecture. On five hundred of the thousand posters an additional text surrounded the figure of the squatter:

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. From Arendt's reading of Kant, quoted by Ronell.

#### Proposal

1. Imagine a city of squatters, an entire city in which everyone created their own chairs with their own bodies.
2. When you are tired, or when you need to wait, participate in this position.
3. Observe the city again from this squatting position.