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Radical Methodological Openness and Method as Politics: Reflections on Militant Research with Squatters in Catalonia

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Abstract: In 2017, it was estimated that over 87,000 families—around 270,000 people—lived in squatted properties in Spain. Such figures, often used by the media to stigmatise residential occupations and generate moral panic, give an ill-defined yet powerful indication of the prevalence of squatting within and outside organised housing movements. From these came the question: How to elevate the "minor knowledges" of precariously housed people in an ethical, engaged, and situated way, in dialogue with a coordinated activist push to reframe squatting as a political strategy? Based on the experience of the first "strategic positivist" survey about squatting in Catalonia, we offer a situated reflection on the tensions and contradictions of militant research in a shifting political terrain. The urgency and ethics that guided our process made it necessary to operate through methodological openness and to consider method as politics, advancing a broader agenda of movement-relevant research supporting non-speculative forms of inhabitation.

Resumen: En 2017, fue estimado que más de 87.000 familias—alrededor de 270.000 personas—vivían en inmuebles okupados en el estado español. Estas cifras opacas, a menudo utilizadas por los medios de comunicación para estigmatizar las ocupaciones residenciales y generar pánico moral, dan una indicación, mal definida, aunque poderosa, de la prevalencia de la okupación dentro y fuera de los movimientos por la vivienda. De ahí surgió nuestra pregunta: ¿Cómo compartir los "conocimientos menores" de las personas que ocupan en precario de una forma ética, comprometida y situada, en diálogo con un impulso activista coordinado para replantear la okupación como estrategia política? Basándonos en la experiencia de la primera encuesta "positivista estratégica" sobre la okupación en Cataluña, en este artículo ofrecemos una reflexión situada sobre las tensiones y contradicciones de la investigación militante en un terreno político movedizo. La urgencia y la ética que guiaron nuestro proceso colectivo hicieron necesario tener una metodología abierta y considerar el método como

política, avanzando así una agenda más amplia de investigación relevante para los movimientos y que apoye formas no especulativas de vivir y habitar.

Keywords: militant research, methodological openness, squatting, strategic positivism, Catalonia
Palabras clave: investigación militante, metodología abierta, okupación, positivismo estratégico, Cataluña

Introduction

In parallel to an unprecedented rise in home dispossession, eviction, and precarisation (Brickell et al. 2017; Rolnik 2018), calls have been made for understanding and sharing methodological openness in housing justice research. Recent collective publications such as the "Methodologies for Housing Justice Research Guide" (Roy et al. 2020), "(Dis)Placement: The Fight for Housing and Community After Echo Park Lake" (After Echo Park Lake Research Collective 2022), and the journals *Trespass* (launched in 2017) and *Radical Housing Journal* (launched in 2019), among others, are pushing the boundaries of methodological debates on activist research and the geographies of housing struggles. Such endeavours depart from the political reflection that the knowledge generated from and with housing movements is key to moving beyond the current housing impasse towards a broader agenda of social transformation that supports non-speculative and radical forms of inhabitation.

Meanwhile, deepening housing precarity is driving the re-emergence and expansion of residential squatting across the globe. In the so-called Global North, the return of the phenomenon has been analysed as a response to mass housing dispossession due to financialisation, debt, and the entrenchment of intersecting socio-economic inequalities (Dadusc et al. 2019; Grazioli 2017; Herbert 2018). In Southern European countries in particular, practices of squatting have re-emerged both within and outside the framework of social movements (Esposito and Chiodelli 2021; Pavón and Janoschka 2016; Raimondi 2019; Saaristo 2022). In Spain —and especially in Catalonia—the hard-hitting 2008 financial real estate crisis triggered hundreds of thousands of foreclosures and evictions, and the state-backed rescue of the financial system facilitated speculative institutional investment in a vast stock of empty housing that proved an effective and publicly supported target for social movements squatting for the right to home (Ferreri 2021; García-Lamarca 2022; Martínez 2013, 2017). With the spread of residential occupations as a strategy to access housing in increasingly precarious times, there is need for situated and movement-relevant radical geographical research, which raises urgent political and methodological questions about positionality, processes, and approaches.

Research on residential occupations is intrinsically difficult due to the subject matter, the unlawfulness of the practice, and the great risk run by occupiers. A growing body of scholarship in geography and cognate disciplines has examined different rationales and politics of squatting, ranging from activist-driven urban

occupations (Holm and Kuhn 2011; Martínez 2018; Mudu 2014; Vasudevan 2014), the intersection of migrants' struggles for autonomous inhabitation (Dadusc 2019; Dadusc and Mudu 2022), to more informal practices that self-organise a right to shelter and to claiming home (Esposito and Chiodelli 2021; Herbert 2018), at times as part of coordinated efforts (Squatting Everywhere Kollective 2018). Scholarship on residential squatting in European cities has largely drawn on ethnographic accounts and qualitative interviews (Cattaneo and Martínez 2014; Esposito and Chiodelli 2021; Gonick 2016; Grazioli 2022; Polanska 2017; Saaristo 2022). Social movement scholars have consistently noted the lack of official and unofficial "hard" evidence on the phenomenon; in fact, it is often the case that "the slippery nature of squatting requires broad estimates and interpretations" (Martínez 2018:4). Few quantitative studies have been published on how and why people squat (for exceptions, see Davoli 2018; Kingham 1977), and fewer still as part of a collective militant research process with a goal to generate emancipatory knowledge for transformative political action (PDTG Tejiendo Saberes n.d.).

In this paper, we engage with these issues by offering a situated reflection on the methodological and political learnings from a mixed-method militant research project about residential squatting in Catalonia. As we outline epistemological and ethical concerns behind the quantitative survey and the qualitative interviews undertaken, we ask: How can the "minor knowledges" (Malo 2004) of precariously housed people be given visibility in an ethical, engaged, and situated way, in dialogue with a coordinated activist push to reframe squatting as a political strategy? In what follows, we reflect on a framework that deployed methods as politics and radical methodological openness (Wolch 2003), "strategic positivism" (Wyly 2009), and a critique of the patriarchal and colonial legacies of positivism (Lugones 2008). Through this, we contribute to wider debates about doing research "with" and "from within" direct action housing movements towards a positioned, feminist militant analysis that runs counter to taken-for-granted disciplinary and political distinctions.

Our paper is structured narratively to explain the research process and its political implications, offering snapshots of the results throughout to give insights into the depth and breadth of the study. In the first section, we outline the political *situation* from which this militant research originated and the parameters for a radically open methodology *for* movement-relevant knowledge production in housing justice research. In the second section, we elaborate our approach to method as politics and strategic positivism, and how that involved a careful reflection on the deployment of categories and classifications. The third section details three key political and methodological tensions in our strategic positivist approach: (i) the negotiations of anonymity and access to a criminalised group; (ii) the need to both deconstruct and reconstruct established categories in research design; and finally (iii) the way in which the investigation led to an attempt to reframe the "political" in squatting. The fourth section discusses how the movement-driven research process made visible the dimensions of the phenomenon, challenging stereotypes and producing impact across and beyond the "squatting" scene. In the penultimate section we reflect on ourselves as authors and on questions of positionality and mutual learning in our collective inquiry.

We conclude by reflecting on issues related to radical forms of knowledge production in struggles for housing justice.

Starting from the Situation: A Radically Open Methodology for Movement-Relevant Knowledge

In November 2016, a weekend state-level meeting of the Platform for Mortgage-Affected People (PAH) was held in Barcelona, bringing together dozens of PAH nodes from across the Spanish state. The authors of this paper—who had been activists or activist-researchers, many for several years prior, in PAH Barcelona and specifically the PAH's Obra Social commission that coordinates squatting strategies and actions—took part in discussions about political discourse, the squatting process, care, and conflict resolution. The work of the Obra Social commission had been on the rise across the Spanish state—including our work in PAH Barcelona as of 2015 to reinitiate and strengthen the campaign—due to the unprecedented amount of empty bank-owned housing targeted for squatting with and for PAH members with no other housing options, under the political demand of transforming them into public housing.

During the final state-level Obra Social assembly, whose aim was a collective reflection on various campaigns and possible future state-level coordination, *compañeras* (comrades) from Madrid shared a militant research initiative they were completing and publishing as a book titled *La vivienda no es delito* ("Housing is not a crime"; see Coordinadora de Vivienda de Madrid 2017), emerging from long term neighbourhood-based organising and around 30 in-depth interviews (Youngman and Barrio 2021). The discussion about this report and campaign inspired several of us in PAH Barcelona to propose an investigation to demonstrate the realities of housing movement-led squatting in Catalonia at the Obra Social Catalana assembly—a regular collective assembly with squatting commissions from over a dozen PAHs across Catalonia—in December 2016. The proposal was approved, and we began to organise[1] with the purpose of generating data and making visible the experience of people living in flats and buildings squatted by housing movement members across the region. Published as an open access 60-page report (Obra Social Barcelona 2018) based on a quantitative survey and in-depth interviews,[2] the research was developed as one piece of a wider campaign to decriminalise "organised" squatting as both a response and a tool for struggle in the face of evictions, increasing housing precarity, and little to no institutional solutions.

The research process was thus rooted in epistemologies and ethics of activist research and militant investigation, which combine critical scholarship and denunciation with work with—rather than on—communities of struggle. We understand this effort alongside scholarship concerned with negotiating the fraught boundaries between co-production and appropriation (Dadusc 2014) and engaging with modes of knowledge production that actively work towards "movement-relevant research" (Kostka and Czarnota 2017:370). Drawing from feminist frameworks, movement relevance and working with communities of struggle are understood as intrinsic to the rationale and research design, rather than something to be sought *a posteriori* (Askins 2018; Pain 2004).

A commitment to the knowledges people have about their own lives and experiences requires methodologies that are both mobile and slippery, "yet critically holding onto *feminist politics of/for social and spatial justice*" (Askins 2018:1284, emphasis added). This approach echoes propositions of radical openness as *method* (Wolch 2003) and is reinforced by Latin American literature about militant investigation. In the latter tradition, an openness to the *situation* that drives the research is understood not simply in terms of a political conjuncture but also of intense individual and collective commitment to both militancy and research (Colectivo Situaciones 2003). In our case, the *situation* emerged from a reckoning with the shifting conditions of housing dispossession four years after the peak mortgage crisis in Spain, when squatting empty bank-owned housing became a marker of housing struggles (Pavón and Janoschka 2016). Within this, the PAH and its Obra Social commission combined three different objectives: to recuperate the social function of housing by withdrawing it from circuits of financialisation and capitalist accumulation; to pressure financial institutions to agree to debt-free foreclosures (the eradication of debt in exchange for the house, known as *dación en pago* in Spanish); and to force the public administration to institute policies to guarantee the right to decent housing (*derecho a una vivienda digna*) (Di Feliciantonio 2016; Pavón and Janoschka 2016).

If the *situation* was the mainstreaming of squatting, the political rationale for the research was an attempt to counter negative stereotypes in mainstream political and media campaigns. The way this filters down to squatters' everyday experience was expressed by many comrades, for example this 36–45-year-old *compañera* told us: "At the beginning I also imagined squatting as a very ugly thing, that the police would come … that is the image they give you. For society in general, we are criminals". In this *situation*, story-telling the much more plural lived experiences and politics of squatters within and at the margins of neighbourhood-based housing movements became a matter of urgency. This aligned fully with militant research's privileging of "experiences of knowledge production over/against mechanisms of domination, that combine criticism of the 'expert-led' system with the strengthening of minor knowledges (*saberes menores*)" (Malo 2004:36–37). At the same time, there was a political need to attempt something radically new: to collect a large-scale sample of quantitative data, as "evidence" that could be used to legitimise squatting as a practice and social reality. It was not just stigmatisation that was being countered: it was also agnotology—the wilful production of ignorance (Slater 2019)—about living as/ through occupation, as a powerful tool of further dispossession.

We were committed to decentre and disrupt the predominant understanding of theory, and of methodology, challenging the "gaze from the core" that often arises as "part of the colonial, imperialist, or otherwise dominant way of understanding, giving meaning to, and conquering the periphery" (Maloutas 2018:252). In doing so, we sided with those who do not look at squatting as "other" but as a valid way of accessing housing in the face of extreme precarity and otherwise homelessness. We aligned our research with the stance that all squatting is political (Milligan 2016; Polanska 2017), and similarly rejected the dominant binary that separates needs-driven and political squatting (also discussed as "deprivation-based" squatting; see

Pruijt 2013). During the research, however, as discussed later, we realised that this dominant binary was not just a theoretical distinction, but instead structured self-identification, political organising, and discrimination, feeding into societal processes of stigmatisation and delegitimisation.

As we—the research collective—began to work, we discussed *how* to give visibility to the "minor knowledges" (Malo 2004) of precariously housed people in an ethical, engaged, and situated way, through a militant investigation that both borrows and challenges the tools of quantitative social science research. We now turn to discuss our approach.

Method as Politics and Strategic Positivism

"Drugs, squatters [*okupas*] and delinquency"; "Mafias take control of the squatting movement [*movimiento okupa*]"; "Housing kidnappers".[3] Such headlines, labelling all squatters as *okupas*, flooded daily newspapers across the Spanish state in the mid-2010s, distorting, through "myths" and criminalisation, a much more complex and variegated political and social landscape. Quantitative data, often of dubious reliability, was deployed to decry the exponential growth of squatting, and was weaponised by populist political parties, government departments, consultancies, and private security companies, such as the Spanish branch of the global Vacant Property Specialists Group (VPS 2021). Many drew on inaccessible local administration and police data. A widely reported study, for example, by the independent Institut Cerdà in 2017, based on these opaque datasets, sounded the alarm about an estimated 87,000 families squatting across the country and depicted occupation as "a problem to be solved" (Institut Cerdà 2017).

Behind these scaremongering headlines, the reality was that squatting was on the increase due to ever-more dire levels of precarity, marginalisation, and exclusion from the housing system rooted in "safe" (indebted) owner-occupation or unprotected tenancy, as well as due to the lack of public housing. As a 25–35-year-old squatter *compañera* with two minors explained: "Social workers told us, 'No matter how many times you come here, no, we don't have [public] housing'". Other solutions were simply not adequate due to caring situations within households. As a 36–45-year-old *compañera* told us: "Even when I had managed to rent something, lately I only managed to sublet rooms. And with a child it's very complicated". Similarly, an 18–25-year-old man, reflecting on the alternative of street homelessness, declared: "I saw myself sleeping under a bridge. But I said it loud and clear: I will not sleep under a bridge with my father". These quotations offer glimpses into the complexities of the often-intergenerational housing precarities that underly many squatting practices.

To debunk mainstream myths and commonly held perceptions, we needed to produce evidence which met "the standards of proof established by the state, corporations, or general public discourse" (Wyly 2009:318). In other words, we needed numbers and "hard data" to counter the "data" used by the media, populist political parties, government departments, consultancies, and private security companies, while also acknowledging the plurality of experiences that remained hidden under the pejorative *okupas*. As we designed the research framework, we

experimented with an approach that Wyly (2009) and others have called "strategic positivism". This approach emerged in part in disruption of the so-called "paradigm wars" (Oakley 1999), referring to the conflicting ontological and epistemological positions underlying quantitative and qualitative approaches to research. Traditionally, quantitative methodologies take positivist approaches to understand social phenomena, with concern for objectivity, replicability, and causality, among others, while qualitative methodologies are constructivist and interpretivist, committed to seeing the world from the perspective of the people in question (Bryman 2008). Since the late 1990s, the neat dualism between positivist and post-positivist scholarship has been challenged by the rise of critical/strategic positivism as well as by a push from progressive movements to reclaim the value of "evidence" and the tools of quantitative methodologies, "negotiated in a spirit of partnership, equality, and trust" (Wyly 2009:312–313). Borrowing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988, 1999) concept of "strategic essentialism", this positivism is strategic because it constructs "objectively defined" categories politically, while also recognising the dangers of decontextualised epistemological truth claims. In our collective and grounded engagement with squatter *compañeras*, we strived to develop open survey categories and disrupt established classifications, trying to embody in the very way of doing research an ethos of method as politics.[4]

The Survey and Interviews: Incorporating "Non-Modern" Knowledges

Through combining online and hard copy anonymous questionnaires and in-depth semi-structured interviews, we sought to reclaim quantitative tools "to count those who would not otherwise count" (Wyly 2009:316) and generate what Hannah (2001:516) has called "statistical citizenship" of squatters as political subjects. This involved first questioning and then carefully considering *how* and *by whom* such counting and questioning is done. Upon subsequent reflection, we found inspiration for how to best articulate this in the work of feminist decolonial scholar María Lugones. In her framing, "non-modern knowledges, relations and values" are those "at odds with a dichotomous, hierarchical, 'categorial' logic" (Lugones 2010:743) that defines modern capitalist colonial modernity and its understandings of race and gender (see also Lugones 2008). In the Spanish housing context, we understood "non-modern" as people that are not part of the accepted ("modern") dichotomous housing regime of mortgaged homeownership or tenancy, as well as other dichotomous categories based on official legal status—for instance around definitions of work and of migration status—imposed onto life-supporting activities and movements. Working with and from this position thus aimed to disrupt the hierarchical, categorical, and dichotomous logic underlying positivist knowledge-generation approaches that originate from patriarchal and colonial relations, as we detail in subsequent sections of the paper.

As we dissected and reconstructed categories, we approached the survey with the spirit of a political method, drawing on a long history of militant inquiry (Conti 2004). The survey comprised 28 questions about the personal and housing

situations of people currently squatting or who had squatted during the previous two years (Obra Social Barcelona 2018:56–57).[5] We collected both individual and household data on: age; gender; passport held; last housing tenure before squatting; household composition, household income and work; ownership of the property; legal status of the occupation; access to essential utilities; relationship with welfare institutions; relationship with neighbours; type of occupation (individual flat or larger collective building occupations); and health impacts. Over a six-month period, the survey was distributed via social media, email lists, and in-person presentations at housing assemblies, reaching 79 Catalan PAHs and over 150 additional housing groups and neighbourhood assemblies. The origin of the study's rationale in the PAH's Obra Social Catalana gave it strong legitimacy. Individual participation in the survey, however, was entirely voluntary, and as such the sample is characterised by a degree of self-selection.

We received 626 valid responses, which equated to roughly 1,800 individuals, based on respondents' average occupancy of three persons in each home, the largest sample of any study on squatting in Catalonia and in Spain. While it is impossible to ascertain its representativeness, for lack of reliable baseline dataset on the phenomenon, an overview of key results offers some indications of a plurality of positions, alongside structural issues of poverty, work precarity, and lack of affordable alternatives, as illustrated in Table 1.

The partial geographic data gathered corresponded to 70 cities, towns, and villages across Catalonia, albeit a high proportion (91%) lived in the province of Barcelona. The overrepresentation of the province can be partly explained by demographic patterns (it is where 74% of the Catalan population lives) and partly by the higher density of mobilised and networked groups in the political orbit of the PAH and direct-action movements.

The 156 respondents who agreed to a follow-up, in-person interview—a quarter of our sample—are evidence of trust in the research process as well as a desire to share lived experiences. The vast majority of interviewees we contacted accepted, often inviting interviewers to their homes, where we followed an interview guide regarding *compañeras*' housing trajectory, legal proceedings, access to utilities, health, income, relations with the state, and neighbours (among others), and the political in squatting (Obra Social Barcelona 2018:58–59).[6] Our purposive sampling selection of 39 interviewees from 15 Catalan municipalities was based on geographical location and a diversity of responses among six qualitative criteria (Table 2).

Applying Strategic Positivism and Method as Politics: Three Key Tensions

In designing and undertaking the research, we combined a form of strategic positivism that upset categories and hierarchies with grounded ethnographic approaches necessary to decolonise terminologies and generate the "evidence" relevant to our movement. These unfolded in three core tensions in our research process that illustrate methods as politics and the need for radical methodological openness, which we explore below in dialogue with relevant literature.

Table 1: Overview of key survey results (n = 626). Source: adapted from Obra Social Barcelona (2018:57).

Profiles of respondents and their households

87% of respondents were over 26 years old.

34% were between 36 and 45 years old.

7 out of 10 lived with their families; in more than half of the cases, with minors.

56% were women, 36% men, 8% gender undisclosed.

14% were young people leaving their family home (emancipation).

Reasons for squatting

In 75% of responses, household income was insufficient to pay rent.

In 93% of responses, households were below the poverty risk threshold in Catalonia; 37% had an income of less than 400€ per month or had no income at all.

Only 39% of people were in paid work; for women the percentage is 29%. Among those who had paid work, 78% were in temporary jobs or worked in the informal economy.

Of the 61% without paid work, half did not receive any assistance or benefits.

80% had looked for housing alternatives before deciding to squat.

Relationship with institutions and property owners

59% had applied for public housing before occupying.

65% are officially registered themselves in their squatted home (i.e. are not hiding from local governments).

67% had tried to negotiate a rental contract with the property owner.

51% had an open judicial process and 17% did not know their judicial situation.

41% of those no longer squatting had obtained a social rental contract, but only 12% were in public housing.

Forms of organisation

52% squatted thanks to networks of support, including political collectives, housing assemblies, friends, acquaintances, and neighbours.

87% of occupations were carried out without financial exchange; only 13% had to pay someone to occupy, usually in situations of emergency and isolation.

Day-to-day life and consequences of squatting

81% lived with the constant worry of losing access to basic utilities (electricity, water, gas); 11% had managed to regularise them and 8% had no access to utilities.

7 out of 10 people had a positive or very positive relationship with their neighbours.

Anonymity and Negotiating Access

One of the key tensions concerned how to negotiate anonymity while giving visibility to marginalised and invisibilised personal and collective experiences. Digital anonymity through surveys was relatively easy to achieve, and we decided to mask IP data on the online survey platform to ensure the confidentiality of squatters' geographical locations. Yet in militant and participatory research, the taken-for-granted value of anonymity needs to be reconsidered and renegotiated. Ethics in non-participatory research is always couched in the language of "protecting" vulnerable subjects, which runs counter to a negotiated ethics of care (Askins 2018) and raises the necessity to reframe the anonymity question. If research is truly participatory in content, arguments have been made precisely against the rule of confidentiality in favour of naming the participants and communities involved, and their inestimable contribution. Drawing on the work of Evans (2004), Cahill et al. (2007:310) have argued that "participants have the

Table 2: Characteristics of interviewees according to six qualitative criteria.
Source: adapted from Obra Social Barcelona (2018:9).

Age of interviewees	
<18 years old (with parents present)	2
18–25 years old	6
26–35 years old	9
36–45 years old	11
46–65 years old	11
Gender	
Women	28
Men	10
No gender disclosed	1
Migration status	
Spanish passport holder	28
Residency or work permit	7
Sin papeles	3
EU (outside of Spain)	1
Last tenure before squatting	
Private rental contract (flat)	17
Staying with family or friends	8
Mortgage	7
Single room rental	2
Hostel	1
Household composition	
With family members	27
Alone	7
Young people housesharing	3
With acquaintances	2
Monthly household income	
Between 400 and 705 €	15
< 400 €	9
705-1,000 €	6
No income	6
> 1,000 €	2
Prefer not to answer	1

moral right to be recognised as sources of information as well as to accrue any benefits for their communities coming out of research". While we protected confidentiality of individual respondents, all the 18 participating PAH and non-PAH housing assemblies were named and thanked in the foreword of the report—a requested and expected action. Furthermore, at the end of the anonymous interview many interviewees expressed interest in participating in the campaign to decriminalise and legitimise squatting, for example by explaining their lived realities in short videos to be disseminated through social media networks.

Beyond the guarantee of anonymity, we were mindful of how to reach participants in highly vulnerable personal situations and precarious living conditions. The link to the online survey was distributed over a six-month period via the individual PAHs own Telegram and WhatsApp groups and social media platforms like

Twitter widely used by members of the movement. The familiarity of PAH activists and sympathisers with online tools for communication made this a highly successful strategy. When the decision was taken to expand the reach of the survey to other housing assemblies and groups on the territory, however, we often found that access required an in-person presentation during an assembly and careful negotiations. Many squatters were hesitant to disclose any information about their living situation digitally, doubting the promise of anonymity or simply preferring analogical methods, such as hard copies to be filled out by hand.

An example of this was when we approached Barcelona's Ciutat Meridiana neighbourhood association (AA.VV.), active in an area known for its heightened social and health inequalities and high eviction rates (Palomera 2014). As part of its weekly anti-eviction organising, the assembly collectively advises people who live in occupied homes, who in their vast majority are undocumented Latina and African individuals and families. Aside from experiencing systemic racism and poverty, many had also suffered from violence and abuse. Most squatters here did not have data plans for their mobile phones, nor did they feel comfortable with the online nature of the data request. Anticipating both situations, we presented ourselves and the research initiative during a regular assembly and encouraged members to complete hard copies of the survey. After a month we collected 120 completed surveys, with over half of the respondents volunteering for in-person interviews. From the survey data we produced a short report focused on Ciutat Meridiana, which we presented at an assembly with the intention of the AA.VV. using it as a political tool to engage with the district administration and show the lived realities and extreme precarity of living as occupiers through "hard data". Such data illustrated, for example, that 80% of households responding to the survey earn less than 700 euros per month and 20% have no income; 72% have minors; and of the 94% who have energy and water supplies, 93% have at least one of them illegally connected. By reaching out and engaging on their own terms with this and other similar housing assemblies—central to local resistance but often neglected by the mapping of activism in Barcelona and Catalonia—we attempted to decolonise narratives and geographies of housing resistance itself.

Deconstructing Categories in Research Design

A second tension in our research design was how to attend to the specificities of singular experiences without reinforcing existing stereotypes. Aware of feminist concerns about incorporating the voices of others without colonising them (England 1994), we were careful about how to frame respondents' status and position in ways that were sensitive to how multiple layers of oppressions are generated (Lugones 2008, 2010).

With the idea of making explicit the power of words, we took a series of unusual terminological decisions in the report. For example, when designing the survey, we debated whether to use the term households, families, or units of cohabitation (*unidades de convivencia*), deciding upon the latter because of the implicitly patriarchal and normative nature of household or family. Another much debated linguistic choice concerned the use of plurals in Spanish. Part of a wider

wave of feminisation of politics, in many assemblies and collectives in Catalonia it is now common to use the feminine plural (as opposed to the customary masculine, as in many Romance languages). Given that the majority of respondents to the questionnaire and in the interviews were self-identified women, it was decided, whenever possible, to use terms with "feminine" or "neutral" plurals, such as persons (*personas*), or substitute the vowel with an "x" in plural nouns and adjectives that referred to individuals. Such practices thus sought to blur binaries and challenge dominant understandings of households and gender roles and relations (Domosh 2003; Parker 2016).

Another important concern was to bring a decolonial sensitivity to the intersections of squatting with migration, bordering, and social and economic vulnerability (Dadusc et al. 2019). This is particularly important in the Spanish geographies of housing precarisation and dispossession, with approximately one million migrants from the Global South being granted mortgages at the most intense phase of the property boom in the 2000s (Martínez 2017; Palomera 2014). For example, we did not request discriminatory information such as country of origin or nationality; instead, respondents were asked about their passport and legal-administrative situation, to denaturalise the issue and shift it to questions of bureaucracy. This decision, however, made it harder to later interpret the figure of 73% of the sample holding a Spanish passport, which included foreign-born passport holders, especially from Latin America.

Moreover, attentive to the ways in which migrants self-represented in urban social movements (Gonick 2016), we debated how better to name migrants in irregular judicial-administrative situations through using migrants (*migradas*) or undocumented people (*sin papeles*), finally settling on the latter thanks also to linguistic assistance from a migrant-focused squatting assembly in Barcelona. The multiple layers of precarity that, for example, being a female migrant *and* undocumented bear on people's lives became clear in interviews, for example:

> Undocumented migrants don't even have the possibility to access social benefits. And there is also the danger that [welfare agencies] will use your precariousness to take your children away from you. This has happened to a *compañera* of mine. They took her child away from her on the pretext that she wasn't taking care of him properly. Far from helping us, they criminalise us and our children. (36–45-year-old *compañera*)

In multiple presentations of the survey results, we foregrounded the question of the underrepresentation not only of *migradas* and *sin papeles*, but also of those squatting experiences that remain below the radar of organised housing assemblies (Aguilera 2013). The invisibility of non-organised squatters was an acknowledged limitation of the study and was publicly discussed both in relation to the data set but also as a political question beyond the research, in terms of the constituencies of many housing collectives and support networks across Catalonia.

Thus, from research design to execution and writing up, we sought to be aware of the "modern", colonial legacies of the tools of counting, and the risk of reproducing assumptions of "objectivity, neutrality, and a flattened view from nowhere" (Graziani and Shi 2020:408). In doing so, we situate our critical approach within "radical, recombinant positivism" as an attempt to offer

"situated and partial contributions to the negotiated, contested processes of defining and achieving social justice" (Wyly 2011:906).

Reframing the Political in Squatting: A Dilemma of Classification

A third and final key concern was how to address stigma and stereotyping without reproducing them in the language we used around squatting/occupation. This was fundamentally about how to bridge the divide between cultural and political constructions of different "types" of squatters and visions of housing self-management. These tensions were made complex by the linguistic difference between *okupa* and *ocupa*, which has even been officially recognised by the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE). The external fault line concerns the use of pejorative terminology (*okupa*) as a tool of stigmatisation; squatting scholars have long underlined the uses of language to criminalise and create moral panics (Dadusc and Dee 2016), as part of a widespread common media and political moral rhetoric around unlawful occupations (Debelle et al. 2018; Nowicki 2017). To distance themselves from such representations, squatters and direct-action housing activists have sometimes deployed tactics of positive self-representation (*ocupa*). This points to a deeply interiorised process of portraying oneself as "good" and thus worthy of a home (Nowicki 2017). Drawing on Teresa Caldeira's work in São Paulo, this as a "dilemma of classification", "whereby those that are socially demonised replicate the same language and rhetoric when referring to one another" (Nowicki 2017:132). Associating squatting with deviance or normalcy, a tactical communicative choice towards the exterior, becomes a fold within the movements themselves, as squatting becomes a term of internal identification and distinction.

The distinction between *okupa* and *ocupa* inhabits a fraught and contested terrain. The housing movement that emerged in the mid-2000s from the Spanish movement for dignified housing known as *V de Vivienda* ("H for Housing"), a direct precursor of the PAH, endorsed the term *ocupa* instead of *okupa*, which "projected another identity for squatters" (Debelle et al. 2018:68). Since the 15M movement, both discursively and practically, in large urban centres like Madrid and Barcelona convergences occurred between the "movement of occupation" and the "movement of okupation", favoured by the structural homology between the occupation of squares and of buildings, the configuration of these groups as a political subject, and the visibility of repression (Martínez and García 2015). The beginning of the anti-eviction campaign "Stop Desahucios", at the heart of PAH's everyday practices, strengthened the gathering of political experiences and collectives around housing issues, and increased the legitimacy of squatting as a political tool. The PAH's discourse as a movement has adopted the terms "recuperation" and "ocupa" to refer to squatting (Gonick 2016), this discursive "line" was not always adhered to in Catalonia. Some PAHs, Obra Social PAH commissions, or individuals within PAH branches were comfortable with either designation, or even with the more politicised "k" spelling precisely because founding members had historically formed part of leftist, anti-capitalist squatting collectives

in their cities. As underlined by a former spokesperson of Obra Social Catalana, these PAHs approached squatting as a key strategy operating in parallel with more reformist, institutional solutions, thus legitimising squatting as a struggle for decent housing and ideally generating a new-order squatting movement that responds to current realities. If using the term "ocupa" aimed at disassociating residential occupations from established stereotypes, using "okupation" emerged from a self-identification with a history of struggle for place, with reclaiming and revindication, and an openly anti-capitalist affinity.

An uneasy negotiation of the distinction between *okupación* and *ocupación* thus ran throughout our research. This tension, and the moralising discourse underneath it, often emerged within interviews, for example with a 36–45-year-old *compañera* who explained:

> There are all kinds of *ocupas*, but they [society] generalise it. The *okupa* is the lazy one, the one who only lives on benefits, the one who does nothing. But it's not like that. I for example have never had any help, nor have I spent all day asking for help; I've always managed to make ends meet, nor have I gone to a flat with four rooms ... I'm in a flat with one room and there are four of us.

Given that at the heart of the distinction is an issue of self-identification, following a participatory, feminist, and decolonial ethics we decided to maintain openness to a plurality of positions. Throughout the interviews and the research process more broadly we negotiated, through ethics of collaboration and care, multiple truth claims and positions of housing justice collectives and individuals. Categorical distinction between different "types" of squatters were carefully questioned in an attempt to denaturalise them, since "to reassert the political quality of deprivation squatters calls for reconsideration of how deprivation squatters engage with politics, and what, indeed, the politics of deprivation are" (Milligan 2016:26). In reporting extracts of individual interviewees, for example, we maintained their self-representation as either *ocupas* or *okupas*. This plurality was maintained in the provocative title of the report; in the text of the report we opted for using *ocupación*, which we felt was more inclusive as well as easier to read.

Back to the *Situation*: Collective Interpretations and Shifting the Discourse

These political and terminological reflections did not simply take place within the collective but were central to a desire for collective openness throughout the process of data analysis and writing. Beyond a question of "consent", our commitment to a collaborative ethics of care included a long process of opening the work of data interpretation and its representation (Cahill et al. 2007) as a significant component of the *political work* of making the report. Although the official launch took place in summer 2018, the labour of partial and final data analysis and discussion started the previous summer. We engaged in over 30 in-person presentations before and after the launch, in local housing assemblies, public squares, radical neighbourhood centres (such as *3Voltes Rebel*, in Barcelona's Nou Barris neighbourhood), squatted social centres (such as the historic *CSA Can Vies*

in Barcelona's Sants neighbourhood), street protests and occupations, to more formal debates in institutional research and cultural spaces such as at the prestigious *Ateneu Barcelonès* and the annual Social and Solidarity Economy Fair (FESC).[7]

Debates and public presentations were key to our aim as militant investigators: to engage with a collectivisation of knowledge production, but also use the research process as a method for building counterpower (Conti 2004) through a reflection on the languages deployed to represent and self-represent. Interestingly, assemblies where members were characterised by extreme levels of precarity and multiple levels of oppression welcomed the research and its purpose to generate "hard evidence" and visibilise their experiences. More "political" squatting networks, identifying with the *okupa* term, tended to find the investigation problematic as it implicitly legitimised positivist research tools and aims that they identified with the state and the police.

The qualitative and quantitative data had different effects on and meanings for different audiences; however, in many cases they challenged preconceived ideas. In the second section of the report, "Who Squats? Debunking Myths", gender distribution and the average age of respondents were significant and, to some, surprising. The result that 56% of respondents were women reflected issues of gender in housing struggles globally (Helene 2019; Williams 2004). Also important were the results that in 55% of households there were minors, and that 56% of respondents were in the 36–65 age bracket, far from imaginaries of young, carefree individuals trying out a "radical" lifestyle. Interviews show the extent to which squatters reflected on these stereotypes, often contrasting their lived experienced with previous imaginaries:

> I used to be ashamed to say I was a squatter. I felt that I was doing something ugly, something horrible, you think people will look at you like … some dudes who like to smoke, with their dogs … But the truth is that this was what I saw on TV, I had never seen it in real life. (26–35-year-old *compañera*)

> You find yourself in a situation where you have spent 27–28 years self-employed and with a mortgage, and the crisis turns everything upside down … There are people who don't understand squatting, but it's a matter of coming into contact with it. Maybe I wouldn't understand it either if I hadn't come across it. (46–65-year-old *compañero*)

For traditional, established neighbourhood-based housing assemblies and housing networks, the report presented a view on a phenomenon anecdotally on the rise, but which they struggled to incorporate in their formal housing demand and campaigns (e.g. *Barcelona no està en venda* / "Barcelona is not for sale"). Importantly, the report challenged the perceived marginality of squatting and explicitly drew the line between occupations and the increasing insecurity and unaffordability of available housing tenures. A key example was the statistic in the report's third section, "Why Do We Squat? Housing Unaffordability", that prior to squatting, 50% of respondents had lived in privately rented accommodation. The impact of a more deregulated and expensive private rented sector after 2013 was

to become a significant campaigning issue for the tenants union established in 2017.[8]

PAH Obra Social Catalana's aim to use the study to generate a dataset to counter mainstream narratives and stereotypes was only partially achieved by its publication, as the wider campaign to decriminalise squatting did not ultimately materialise, partly due to burnout, partly precisely because of the dilemma of classification discussed earlier. Yet the report had significant local political impact, on which we can offer some figures. The Spanish language version of the report, printed in 1,000 hard copies—paid for by solidarity donations of collectives and allied housing assemblies—was sold out within a couple of months at a nominal price from six independent bookshops in Barcelona as well as from key participating collectives across Catalonia. The online free PDF was downloaded over 2,400 times in the two years after the report launch. Its 2019 Catalan translation was downloaded over 400 times by summer 2020. The report received significant media coverage, with journalists from the regional Catalan television channel TV3 covering its launch in 2018, while local and national digital and print newspapers (e.g. Aullé 2018; García 2018) have used its data to support informed debates of the different waves of squatting. Anecdotally, we also know that local movements have used statistical data from the report to back up their campaigning and negotiating efforts, strengthening their knowledge based on organising and lived experiences.

Positionalities and Mutual Learning in Collective Inquiry

Before we conclude, it is crucial to reflect on the positionalities and practices of mutual learning. The two named research-activists authoring this text were not the main researchers but rather two who wrote this paper. They formed part of a horizontal, heterogeneous group of activist-researchers, almost all women—some with university degrees, others without formal studies. Most of us—but not all—were of white-Southern-European origin. We were differently housed: some of us squatting under constant threat of eviction, the remainder renting in Barcelona's precarious and overpriced private sector. Time for data collection and analysis was not only negotiated from work, in many cases precarious and low-paid in sectors such as catering and care, but also from the demands of housing activism, which for many was an issue of survival. Those of us studying or holding temporary research positions did not formalise our work time institutionally, although we did benefit from the relative freedom and flexibility our positions provided. We also benefited from training on design and statistical and spatial analysis software, which are key in developing rigorous research datasets and dissemination materials in projects that straddle academia and activism (Graziani and Shi 2020).

Formal research training and specialist skills brought up questions of power, knowledge, and privilege. Within the collective, we addressed these disparities and facilitated mutual learning by organising regular collective workdays—often in our *compañeras*' squatted homes or related squatted spaces—to devise data collection strategies, to pore over the data, and to decide on textual and visual

representations of the quantitative and qualitative materials. To conduct in-person interviews we teamed up in pairs, with one person who had done them before paired with another who had not. This strategy, for example, brought up important reflections around negotiating the boundaries between following the interview topic guide and offering practical advice and support, with interviews becoming extensions of the co-counselling mechanisms of housing assemblies (García-Lamarca 2017). In a few cases, interviewees invited neighbours and friends, turning interviews into facilitated collective conversations and co-counselling.[9]

In many ways, academic distinctions between research-activists, activist-scholarship, and militant research did not capture the often fluid, embodied, passionate, and thoughtful positionalities of each member of the collective: for most, it was just militancy in a different form. Yet, as is true of any social process, there were tensions. In the ideal framework of militant investigation, researchers are part of social movement struggle while researching. Negotiating positionality and participation in the everyday, however, is often riddled with contradictions and entangled power relations (Chatterjee et al. 2019; Colectivo Situaciones 2003). In our case, the time and energy taken by the research process generated debates about the value of the research. Some collective members, while supporting the efforts in principle, withdrew from research activities. As succinctly put by the Pantera Rosa militant investigative collective, "while you are doing the research, you are not participating in other types of activism, and there are still a lot of people who don't share the idea that activist research is a political practice, which in some cases creates further pressure" (Pantera Rosa 2004:197). In recognition of this, more privileged members of the collective focused their efforts on the more time-consuming activities of data inputting, coordinating, archiving, and analysing, providing a stable scaffolding for the unpredictable messiness of both militancy and research.

Throughout the research process, we also regularly held debriefing sessions in pairs or smaller groups to address and discuss the affective dimension of engaging with particularly harrowing and intimate personal stories. The narratives that many research participants told—of fear, ill health, discrimination, violence, suicides—were hard to bear. Despite practices of care, both within the collective and towards participants, those encounters were not easy to sustain outside the relatively more comfortable setting of a housing assembly, where collective response could be actioned. As a consequence, the relatively small number of interviews we conducted (n = 39) was in part also a result of the political and affective impact of these intimate encounters, which for many of us took place on top of daily anti-eviction activities, weekly neighbourhood housing assemblies, and self-governance in squatted buildings. The slow research pace—18 months from inception to the publication of the report in 2018—thus existed in the interstices of hectic temporalities of permanent housing crisis and mobilisation, and the temporalities of caring for others and ourselves. This was not "slow scholarship" (Mountz et al. 2015); rather, it was a committed scholarship that was fundamentally "interdependent with others' oppressed spatio-temporal situations" (Meyerhoff and Noterman 2019:218).

Conclusions

In the wider context of housing dispossession and dwelling precarisation (RHJ Editorial Collective 2020), criminalisation and stigmatisation are powerful tools that act to silence lived housing conditions and inhabitation practices that do not conform to dominant economic, social, or cultural norms. In the current scenario of mass and capillary dispossession, and the rise of policing and property securitisation, life is increasingly supported through everyday dwelling practices whose stigmatisation is part and parcel of the normative production of a prolonged crisis and the reproduction of housing as a site of intersecting oppressions. Contributing to the wider knowledge generated from and with housing movements as key to moving beyond the current housing impasse, we have proposed and discussed the possibilities of radically open methodology *for* movement-relevant knowledge production in housing justice research, and how it led to understanding method as politics and the deployment of a strategic positivist approach.

The political project of countering stigma, and the decriminalisation of life on the margins through militant research, however, is often complicated by issues of self-identification, and the language of reclaiming and revindication. The debates around mass squatting in contemporary Spain discussed here are a particular example of this, but certainly not unique. Exploring the epistemological questioning that accompanied our militant investigation, in this article we have reflected on attempts at decolonising knowledge production about and with people who live in squatted homes through collective reflexivity and a commitment to situated research encounters. We offer these methodological reflections with and from within direct action housing movements to highlight methods and processes for facilitating the decolonisation of terminologies and for challenging both sites of knowledge production and their frameworks and purposes. The longer history of housing mobilisation and the existence of powerful, committed networks of individuals and collectives were a necessary condition for embarking on this process, which would limit its replicability in other contexts.

At the same time, situating these reflections in a diverse range of housing assemblies, political spaces, and discursive frames led to unstable and contested reformulations of categories of meaning and legitimating discourses. Situated and decolonised epistemologies against invisibility and stigma demanded opening up research aims, processes, and languages, leading to outcomes that challenge taken-for-granted disciplinary distinctions, neat terminologies of political slogans or strategic positioning. In our openness to the militant research encounter, we negotiated but also found it necessary to contrast the terminologies of some of the organisations and groups we worked with, through lived and reflexive accounts. Politically, the report and the process put forward the stance that the difference between "types" of squatters is largely counterproductive to the movement. We took as a stance that all squatting is political in different ways—placing solidarity and building counter-power at the centre. Neither "recuperation" nor "okupation", our attempt to denaturalise long-established categories towards a reclaiming of the *political* dimension of spatial re-appropriation, remained ultimately an unstable political terrain of convergence.

The powers of dispossession and displacement, together with the long inertia of pejorative and imposed classifications, continue to enact their politics of division and de-legitimation of squatters as political subjects, alongside other precariously housed individuals and groups. To counter this, we propose that a wider agenda of recognising, supporting, and amplifying forms of urban inhabitation that disrupt speculative dynamics and offer a direct response to housing injustice requires radical methodological openness and careful attention to the politics of minor knowledges generated with and from lived experiences of housing resistance.

Acknowledgements

Data Availability Statement

The data that supports the findings of this study are available in the supplementary material of this article.

Endnotes

[1] This originally included activists from the housing justice movement in Barcelona and the wider region.

[2] The report—"¡La vivienda para quien la habita! Informe sobre Okupación de Vivienda vacía en Catalunya" (Obra Social Barcelona 2018)—is available as a supplement to this article on Wiley Online Library (see Supporting Information).

[3] "Drogas, okupas y delincuencia"; "Las mafias toman las riendas dentro del movimiento 'okupa'"; "Secuestradores de casas". Headlines from Spain's nationwide daily newspapers El Confidencial (2017), El Economista (2017), and El País (2016), respectively.

[4] Method as politics, as opposed to the politics of method, is central to an understanding of social science methods and concepts as performatively part of the making of different social worlds. See, for example, the notion of "ontological politics" in the sociology of Law and Urry (2004).

[5] The report is available as a supplement to this article on Wiley Online Library (see Supporting Information).

[6] The report is available as a supplement to this article on Wiley Online Library (see Supporting Information).

[7] See #videsocupes on Twitter.

[8] See https://sindicatdellogateres.org/ (last accessed 28 September 2023).

[9] This was felt as particularly important for interviewees who lived relatively far from the activist "core" of the city of Barcelona, or in places where local PAH assembly dynamics

created stigmatising hierarchies between the legitimacy of those who squatted after a mortgage repossession, and those who had never been homeowners.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

Data S1 Supporting Information.