

## Strangers in a Strange House: Spanish Youth, Urban Dystopia, and Care Santos's *Okupada*

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The image of youth has come to epitomize the image of Spain (Graham and Labanyi 312). Young Spaniards embody the nation's exuberance and freedoms in their renowned and at times infamous nightlife, and they are a highly educated and diverse workforce that represents the nation's future as an integrated European democracy with a market-driven economy. And while Spain does have the youngest population in Europe at the close of the 1990s (Allinson 265), the image of youth as a representative culture for contemporary Spain belies the demoralizing social and economic problems that Spanish youth face following the 1992 recession. Despite years invested in university educations and advanced degrees, young Spaniards face a frustratingly high unemployment rate, which at times reaches 30% (Rodríguez 21), and a dispiritingly impenetrable labor market without the "enchufe" of nepotism. Spain has one of the highest unemployment rates in Europe among university graduates (Sánchez Juárez 33) and only 40% of those graduates hold jobs that reflect their level of studies and training, a disparity that for many young people that devalues higher education (Jiménez Barca). Those young people that do find employment lament the lack of equitable salaries as they face a de facto earnings glass ceiling of 1,000 Euros per month. This generation of "mileuristas" express uncertainty about their future, a weariness of living day to day on limited incomes, and a disillusion with government to produce meaningful change. Moreover skyrocketing urban housing prices and the burden of a mortgage on limited incomes curb youth's emancipation from the family household until well into their thirties. Despite youth's continued cohabitation with their parents, ties to family are straining. Once glorified as a prototypical national institution under Franco, the contemporary Spanish family is fractured by divorce, parents' increasing time commitments to career responsibilities, and youth's desires for increased autonomy (Jones 388-90). The economic and labor realities that prevent young people from establishing independent lives for themselves bode poorly for the future of the family and indeed for the population in general considering Spain's steadily declining birth rates. The duality of the image of Spanish youth—as a vibrant national symbol and as a stagnating underclass—sets the stage for its problematic representation in literature.

Spain's youth narrative of the 1990s, commonly referred to as "la generación X,"<sup>1</sup> provides an equally disillusioning image of youth and a grim outlook for Spain's future. Novels such as José Ángel Mañas's *Historias del Kronen* (1994) and José Machado's *A dos ruedas* (1996) portray a disaffected and apathetic youth that engage in a hedonistic lifestyle of sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll to numb the pain of failed relationships and interpersonal disconnect. Etxebarria laments the pervasive cynicism, an "estado de ánimo de una juventud que no conoce otro estado de ánimo que la desesperanza" (*Eva futura* 131). Estranged from friends and family, in this literature home is merely a waystation between "marchas" for Spain's youth (as Miguel mentions to Carlos in *Historias del Kronen*, "Cada vez que llamo a tu casa, o estás durmiendo o no estás" [181]). Drained of optimism for career success or meaningful relationships, youth drop out, rejecting the world of corruption and unemployment that they inherited from their parents. In Mañas's *Ciudad rayada* (1998), Kaiser bemoans, "ki si la corrupción, ki si tenemos una sociedad enferma, kon un kuartenta y cinco por ciento de paro juvenil y una educación de mierda kon la ke kerían

konbertirnos a todos en mano de obra barata” (143-144 [sic]), which he explains while unsurprisingly high on drugs, and hence his freestyle orthography. Spain’s Generation X novel ultimately underscores the consequences of its protagonists’ hedonism, since their continual escapism into drug and alcohol induced stupors produces radically unstable identities.<sup>2</sup> Reacting to the pervading pessimism and disillusion, youth retreat inward, recoil from family and friends, and sever interpersonal communication. In contrast to the “ensimismamiento” in other Generation X novels—as seen particularly in Lucía Etxebarria’s *Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas* (1997) and *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* (1998)—Care Santos’s *Okupada* (1997) approaches the youth problem by examining the role of collective identity among this amalgamation of fiercely independent and alienated young people. *Okupada* surveys Spanish youth culture by following a group of 17 to 22 year-old social outcasts as they stage an “okupación.” These youth band together in an appropriated house to construct a utopian microcosm of tolerance and acceptance. The novel’s representation of youth exemplifies the theory of strangers who, as society’s undecidables, resist social hierarchies and thus, being “strange,” their very presence causes disquietude and disorder. Vis-à-vis the perpetual uncertainty of youth as strangers, *Okupada* asks if identity can transcend the individual’s immediate whims to encompass the dynamics of a group. Might alienated youth<sup>3</sup> find sanctuary in community? In the face of disintegrating families and fleeting interpersonal relationships, is a sense of belonging, unity, or community possible?

The identification with youth has come to define, and to an extent confine, Santos’s early novels. Alba Editoriales markets both *Okupada* and her first novel, *La muerte de Kurt Cobain* (1997), under the category “literatura juvenil.” Both novels, like other Spanish Generation X narratives, emphasize the correlation between readers and protagonists; young people reading these novels seemingly identify with its twenty-something characters, recognizing their own disillusion and alienation in those of the protagonists.<sup>4</sup> Yet the challenges that the protagonists face in *Okupada*—abandonment, homelessness, self-preservation (they must scrounge for their own shelter and food), drug addiction, threats of violence, death—demonstrate a fight for basic human needs, which points up the paradox of the “literatura juvenil” label attached to Santos’s novel: the protagonists are youths in age only. In contrast to the “pijos” of *Historias del Kronen* and *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* in search of escapism, *Okupada* reframes youth as a struggle for survival. A nurturing, emotionally well-adjusted home and upbringing are laughably anachronistic notions for Santos’s protagonists. Forgoing the teenage rites of passage of *La muerte de Kurt Cobain*, *Okupada* portrays young people who no longer have the opportunity to be young.

The novel’s namesake derives from “la okupación,” or squatting, in which marginalized young people take over an abandoned building or apartment. While an okupación addresses the basic need for shelter, its implications typically transcend the physicality of the four walls of a building to articulate a political cause. In particular, a “casa okupada” tends to be a neosocialist, pseudoanarchistic living experiment modeled after the commune lifestyle.<sup>5</sup> These terms—neo-socialist, pseudo-anarchistic—are inherently vague since in *Okupada* there is no rigid ideological framework that defines this okupación. Rather, the okupas’ philosophy incorporates a hodgepodge of socially progressive slogans (“Somos los herederos directos del anarquismo...para defender valores como la ecología, el antimilitarismo, la insumisión” [36-37]) and a borderline stereotypical youthful idealism (“No somos adultos ni tenemos ganas de serlo.

Somos ciudadanos libertarios, antiautoritarios, revolucionarios, pacifistas, contrarios al sistema y casi mayores de edad, aunque esto último no nos preocupa demasiado, como casi nada que dependa de las leyes que dicta el poder establecido” [13]). The okupación combines an atmosphere of tolerance for social outcasts with a tacit agreement that its members pool resources (money, food, skills, education) for collective benefit. In order to serve their community they host a series of “talleres” in which, for example, Beatriz teaches music, Begoña teaches painting, Oswi-Wan teaches poetry, Alma conducts aerobics classes, and the flamboyant Óskar gives lessons in “el dragqueenismo,” the delicate art of being a transvestite. Their duality of purpose distinguishes the okupas from the low socioeconomic threshold of only being homeless, and while an okupación typically entails poverty, unemployment, and social marginalization, it establishes political positions as well, as in the case of family politics (the runaway), local politics (the anarchist), and national/global politics (the immigrant). Thus while an individual joins an okupación partly out of necessity—s/he does not have a place to live, is economically disenfranchised, or is thrown out of a home—s/he also does so as an act of social defiance. The okupas in Santos’s novel further seek a space in which to belong and feel wanted. In essence, theirs is a community building project; the decision to leave a place no longer considered home emerges from their distinct backgrounds: two teenage runaways, a drug addict, a Cuban exile, a bohemian artist, an Iraqi Kurd seeking political asylum, a homosexual shunned by his parents, and an anarchist university dropout. As members of socially ostracized groups the okupas in effect challenge their marginalization, establishing an alternative space in which to address physical (survival) and emotional (belonging) needs.

The choice to “okupar,” however, does not occur everywhere under the same legal conditions. Northern and central Europe provide a figurative open door to squatters. In Amsterdam a dwelling left uninhabited for 18 months is legally available for habitation by squatters. While the legal precedents for squatting in urban Great Britain establish that it is a violation of civil law, squatting enjoys a de facto legal and social tolerance (Prichard 166). The city government in Geneva even directs the phenomenon, known in French as “le squat,” through the establishment of officially designated squat houses. While such a sanctioned counterculture is perhaps an oxymoron, le squat’s overt organization contrasts with the lawlessness and disorder of the okupación in Spain.<sup>6</sup> Article 245 of the Spanish Código Penal prohibits squatting and leaves no ambiguity that okupas are lawbreakers. In fact, the concept of an organized or government sanctioned okupación according to the Swiss model would be antithetical to the Spanish okupa. Their rallying cry is antiauthoritarianism, to wage a “batalla al odioso poder establecido” (*Okupada* 59), whose social establishment—government, police, capitalists, and particularly property owners—is anathema to their itinerant lifestyle. The okupas base their fragile community on the property owner not discovering their presence: “Para entrar a okupar, es imprescindible que no te vea nadie, que la pasma no te pille *in fraganti* cuando estás entrando... Por eso lo mejor es okupar de madrugada, cuando los vecinos duermen y, si se puede, hasta cortar el tráfico para que no te pillen en plena faena” (38). The illegality of the okupación forces its inhabitants to live a nocturnal existence; to take possession of their new abode the okupas in Santos’s novel sneak through a garden door, always entering and leaving by the same clandestine route under cover of the night. Their relationship with darkness produces a duality of existence, both practical and symbolic, in that the night serves to hide them (a form of protection) while it simultaneously keeps them hidden (a form of isolation) from the rest of Barcelona.<sup>7</sup> This living in darkness pushes them underground—out of sight of property owners

and law enforcement—but also further marginalizes these outcasts from society at large. They assume the role of the trespasser who, according to Begoña, straddles the fine line between a “ciudadana correcta” who has a home and a “delincuente común,” the homeless okupa (142). As trespassers, they are unwanted and unwelcome wherever they stay, and regardless of the space they inhabit, such that their occupation continually works to ostracize them. Although the okupación provides them shelter, the okupas occupy a gray area between being in an appropriate space and belonging to a makeshift community.

Transience and instability mark the social and physical spaces that the okupas inhabit, and indeed a sense of certainty is anachronistic in the postmodern era. Home, family, community, career, marriage, and friendship, once trusted as long-term sources of stability have now been transformed into relationships of convenience. Each is disposable, stripped of the guarantee of stability, and according to Zygmunt Bauman, are couched in until-further-notice clauses (*Postmodernity* 24). As the individual’s experience and skills run the risk of being outdated at a moment’s notice, continual renewal is paradoxically the only constant in life. Long term planning, pursuing goals, or leading a principled existence, once the foundation upon which to base personal growth, is now considered superfluous baggage for the postmodern citizen. A totalizing life project is incongruent with the world that now surrounds the individual, as reflected in the uncertainty of Spain’s volatile job and housing markets and the youth defeatism portrayed in Generation X literature. For Spain’s youth the concept of home itself lacks stability and permanence. In the face of uncertainty and the impossibility of depending on any person or institution for the long term, the individual must remain independent, flexible, and keep his/her options open. Subsequently the perception of reality—rather than a trajectory of an interconnected past, present, and future—now contracts to a series of vignettes and short-term opportunities. Currie refers to this contraction as “a flight from the present...to hurry everything into the past even while it is still happening” (97). Time has become fragmented and disjunctive such that one must live day to day, even hour to hour, and thus life lurches forward as an ever-evolving contingency plan. Identity itself is not immune to this pervasive instability. Douglas Kellner affirms that “postmodern identity is an extension of the freely chosen and multiple identities of the modern self that accepts and affirms an unstable and rapidly mutating condition, which was a problem for the modern self, producing anxiety and identity crisis” (158). Postmodern identity is chameleon-like; it morphs to exploit the moment, like a reflex or a survival mechanism, in which external stimuli dictate one’s actions and belief systems. It is no longer a question of having the vision and fortitude to weather adversity while sticking to one’s morals and beliefs. Reliance on institutions (family, career, community) and hence a fixed notion of identity is potentially detrimental, since as the individual becomes fixated, stuck in any one concept of the self, s/he cedes the ability to spontaneously bend and change, and hence loses his/her survival mechanism.

The inherent instability of postmodern identity reduces the life journey to that of a tourist itinerary. One feels pushed to see, to quickly assimilate the experience, and then move on, never staying in any place nor fixating on any act for too long. In essence, the postmodern era sends the message that the individual must pass through life as a vacationer; what one experiences in the here and now must remain in the here and now, as in the tourist cliché, “it’s a nice place to visit, but I would not want to live here.” Bauman suggests that “like everything else, the self-image splits into a collection of snapshots, each having to conjure up, carry and express its own

meaning, more often than not without reference to other snapshots” (*Postmodernity* 24). The postmodern identity is essentially a series of superficial images, constructed piecemeal, even randomly, and the order of these identity snapshots is of little importance as long as they do not impede an individual’s flexibility. Yet as one lacks the metanarrative to string together identity, the fragmentation breeds further uncertainty.

Wandering through this fog of uncertainty is the stranger. As society’s undecidables, strangers resist categorization into social orders. The other, in contrast, is based on dichotomies and hierarchies, such as man/woman, citizen/immigrant, insider/outsider, and good/evil, where the former exercises control over the latter. The stranger, however, falls into ambiguity, as s/he is neither wholly inside nor outside, neither dominant nor submissive, neither friend nor foe. Consequently, their identities are unstable and unclear, their stranger status coming from “their tendency to be fog and eclipse boundary lines which ought to be clearly seen” (Bauman *Postmodernity* 25). And while strangers inhabit an ambiguous space, they must necessarily be located somewhere, and thus they muddy the divisions between belonging and being cast out. Similarly, the Spanish okupa lacks the foundations of identity construction (home, family, community) and the legal grounds to occupy a private space. In *Okupada*, for instance, Óskar is ostracized from his family who is intolerant of his homosexuality, Mustafá flees his home in Iraq to escape political persecution, and Kike, a professional okupa, experiences the perpetual transience of the okupación movement, stating, “De hoy a mañana te han echado de tu casa. Te sientes como una basura” (37). Since they live with a sense of permanent uncertainty, their concept of home is an estranged place. Madan Sarup explains that “unlike an alien or foreigner, the stranger is not simply a newcomer, a person temporarily out of place. S/he is an eternal wanderer, homeless always and everywhere” (11), and like the stranger, the okupa manifests the absence of home and roots, unable to fit in anywhere. Oswi-Wan and Mustafá would face political persecution if they were to return to Cuba and Iraq, respectively, yet as illegal immigrants they are strangers in Spain as well. Inge, a junkie, pusher, and drug trafficker, cannot feel safe at any point along her drug route (from Morocco, through Spain and France, to her native Germany) because the narcotics that define her identity pushes her to the social and legal peripheries wherever she may be. Thus strangers are home-less, both without domicile and without the building blocks of identity that a home implies. Even the other, while marginalized, can in fact go home; s/he has a place to call home, a space of security and protection. The stranger, on the other hand, suffers the uncertainty and instability of lacking any place of refuge.

In addition to being out of place, the stranger produces ripple effects throughout society. Strangers are contaminants. Since they cannot be easily classified—neither inside nor outside—they disarrange neatly constructed social hierarchies of everyone remaining in their right place. As appropriators of others’ property and space, squatters like Kike, Kifo, Begoña, and Óskar inherently violate the social contract of allegiance to private property and as such, Santos’s strangers must move about at night. Strangers’ lack of a clearly defined place throws a monkey wrench into society’s order-making machinery, and therefore their presence is a threat. An orderly society, as Mary Douglas argues, is one free of dirt, which “offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment... In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying, we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea” (2). To reestablish an ordered, hygienic environment society must cleanse its impurities and put people in their

places, or as Julia Kristeva explains, “it is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). Consequently, the stranger’s violation of order fosters a dream of purity, producing the reactionary rhetoric of “if we could only get rid of (a certain undesirable), our problems would be solved.” This dirt elimination project implicitly establishes hegemonies—pitting insider against outsider, the clean against the dirty—and proposes a utopian project in which the hegemonic power seeks a space that is either uncontaminated and stranger-free, or in which the stranger turns into the other and fits neatly into the social order. As portrayed in Generation X literature, Spain frames its own youth as strangers, whose ambiguities—between carefree adolescence and responsible adulthood, between economic dependence and gainful employment, between social blight and the future of the nation—strain social order.

*Okupada* posits an alternate perspective to the stranger problem and the subsequent dream of purity in what one could call the stranger’s revenge by contemplating the dynamics of a space if it consisted of nothing but strangers. The okupas construct a space of belonging, their own private alternative utopia. Off the streets and in their own house, the home-less are now, literally, inside and are no longer strangers, rather they constitute the majority. With the structure of the house serving as a partition from the rest of Barcelona, they are empowered to define the inside from the outside, the insider from the outsider, and who belongs and who does not. In the teeming, consumeristic landscape of the Barcelona portrayed in Santos’s novel, the okupas declare their house a free space (19, 52) and work to transform their dwelling into a utopian micro-society, an urban “locus amoenus” of freedom, tolerance, equality, and mutual respect. In fact the okupas even recreate the dream of purity by constructing their own space of cleanliness, a purification that is quite literal in the novel. The eight strangers converge on a house in a state of decay, abandoned for twenty years to an accumulation of grime, and Alma narrates the clean up effort: “Todo estaba asqueroso. De cualquier rincón salían sopresas desagradables: preservativos usados, jeringuillas, mierdas como catedrales y hasta un carburador y una batería de moto... llenamos bolsas y bolsas con escombros que habían caído por todas partes, pedazos de puertas y muebles podridos” (28, 29). Upon their arrival, their house lacks a reliable structure, with rats infesting the basement and “una buhardilla que, literalmente, se caía a pedazos... y podía pasar que el suelo cediera o que el techo se desplomara sobre nuestras cabezas” (26). Through a physical cleaning and reconstruction, they transform the dwelling from a space in disrepair into a utopic space. Kike pirates electricity from powerlines in the street and throughout the house’s floors they designate spaces in which to construct a bar, a concert hall, and bedrooms. The project transcends the act of construction and represents a movement larger than their own self-interests, an act of community that forges a collective identity, and the house serves as a metaphorical framework upon which to build this identity. No longer the strangers, within its protective shelter they are free to express and develop their personal identities. Through their workshops (music, painting, poetry, aerobics, and of course “el dragqueenismo”) their particular signs of identity may flourish. Alma, for example, seeks “un ecosistema original y divertido en el que me apetecía mucho quedarme a echar raíces” (28). As is common in Spain’s youth narrative, like *Historias del Kronen*, *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes*, and Loriga’s *Lo peor de todo* (1999), parents and family are largely absent from *Okupada*, and Alma observes of her parents that “ninguno de los dos está nunca en casa porque sus múltiples obligaciones les mantienen entretenidos” (89). An okupa like Alma looks to the collective identity of the okupación as a surrogate family, since Alma’s family unit disintegrates when her parents divorce

while she is participating in the *okupación*. Mirroring Alma's desire to "echar raíces," her fellow *okupas* seek a sense of belonging and the stability of a space in which to found an identity. Finally, in distancing themselves from their parents and an adult world they consider hypocritical and irrelevant, the *okupas* reveal what Manuel Vázquez Montalbán would call "el peterpanismo" (385). Their utopia is a "culto de juventud" as they declare, "no somos adultos ni tenemos ganas de serlo" (13) in a desire to stave off the inevitable: adulthood and presumably maturity.

For that reason, their utopian vision is short-lived, even doomed from the beginning. While the itinerant strangers of *Okupada* find shelter in an abandoned house, they do not find a home. By taking up residence in the house they unwittingly replicate the power structures—the outsiders become insiders—against which they are ostensibly rebelling. The group christens their run-down dwelling "Bákinjam" after the British royal palace of the same name. Adopting the name of the house of Windsor, center of a monarchical and formerly colonizing world power, is an ironic choice for a supposedly collective, neo-socialist living experiment. Yet it also signals the hypocrisies into which they fall and the disintegration of their utopian microcosm at the hands of abused authority. The *okupas* replicate the same dream of purity that drove them from their previous spaces (the streets, broken homes, intolerant families, Cuba, Iraq) to occupy Bákinjam in the first place. By creating a utopia for Barcelona's strangers, they reproduce the project that necessitates the drawing of boundaries, the establishment of order, a "clean" space free from the stranger. Their rigorous cleaning evolves into a crusade to rid their microcosm of its unwanted, the disorderers among the strangers themselves. Namely the presence of Inge, the German drug pusher, represents a faultline along which the *okupas* divide themselves. Despite their declared tolerance and ostensible acceptance of outsiders, Begoña condemns Inge's drug addiction as immoral (117) and Oswi-Wan attempts to exclude Inge from their house, alleging that "Inge no era de los nuestros" (131). Their utopia reproduces the need to purge the unclean, singling out the stranger among strangers. As their confrontations multiply, the *okupas* abandon their utopian idealism and fall into the same trappings of power they had fiercely criticized in the Barcelona outside the *okupación*. For example, once they claimed unwavering loyalty to their ideals: "las ideas no las desalojarán jamás. Esa es nuestra fuerza... Nuestra lucha es social y libertaria y no vamos a renunciar a ella ni dentro de cuarenta años" (40-41). On two occasions Kike affirms that, "somos pacíficos y detestamos cualquier acto violento" (46) and this pacifism, "no debemos olvidarlo bajo ningún concepto, pase lo que pase" (131). Yet their interpersonal conflicts escalate into violence among the love triangle of Alma, Kifo, and Inge who fight each other at knife-point (110-111). Furthermore, Kifo defends the *okupación* with growing violence, fending off the invading police force with molotov cocktails. As mentioned above, a principled existence is futile when faced with the vicissitudes of the postmodern world, and similarly, hypocrisy infiltrates the core values of the *okupación* and rips at the fabric of their pacifist movement. The romanticized community splits apart and the spirit of equality and tolerance splinters into petty individualism as the *okupas* become ever more self-involved. Begoña, for example, the longest serving *okupa*, expresses disillusionment with their movement, claiming, "la *okupación* es un modo de vida alternativo sólo apto para falsos idealistas" (157) and abandons the *okupación* for a lucrative job. Inge and Kifo withdraw from the collective and retreat into drug-induced escapism. Their microcosm reproduces the "us versus the stranger" dichotomy that the movement sought to upend, and thus the *okupas'* utopia crumbles.

Marin notes that a utopia (from the Greek “ou topos,” or “no place”) degenerates due to the contrast it implicitly draws between utopian and non-utopian spaces (286). The euphoria of utopia turns into disillusionment when one goes “back to reality.” In *Okupada*, the difference between the utopian (the okupación) and non-utopian (Barcelona) spaces is similarly unsustainable; the okupas’ ideals of unity and equality cede to the grim reality of capitalist greed and xenophobia when they leave the protection of the okupación. Attempting an anarchist public relations campaign (Kifo says, “Yo propongo movilizar a la opinión pública...hacer algo que llame la atención de la gente para que nos conozcan y estén a nuestro favor” [93]), the okupas scale the Ayuntamiento and, in a move reminiscent of a band of pirates, pull down the Spanish flag and in its place hoist the black flag of the okupación (105). Yet their symbolic act—the flag serves as a mark of identity and as a rallying point—lasts an underwhelming three and a half minutes (106). Rather than rally public support for their cause, the flag-raising incident provokes a police invasion of Bákinjam to force out the okupas. Like the ideological emptiness of raising their flag, their socially compromised identity—the okupación—is hollow; the okupas show that they can easily discard their dreams and goals as circumstances fluctuate. As the okupas’ act of social resistance turns against each other, the metanarrative of the okupación is overturned and the promise of utopia degenerates into dystopia.

The collapse of the okupas’ house parallels the breakdown of their collective identity. As the identity of the stranger is uncertain and unstable, *Okupada* reproduces this instability as identity shifts from solidarity to solitude. Beatriz conveys the sense of hopelessness and detachment in her view of interpersonal relationships: “Estaba convencida de que nunca viviría en pareja una larga temporada. ¿Para qué? ¿Para herir y que me hieran?” (102). Her cynicism reflects the ephemeral nature of postmodern identity, as it is located in the imminent present, rejecting the modernist notion of an interrelated past, present, and future. Indeed the attempt to give identity a structure—relationships, family, home, career—is detrimental in postmodern life. Structure, like the foundation of a house, is useless when facing the tectonic shifts of a world of radical uncertainty. Thus identity cannot be evaluated for the long term, rather like the drugs that Inge injects, it is a quick fix. As the community in Bákinjam implodes, the okupas shift and change out of a stagnating, collective identity and reaffirm their autonomy. To construct and trust in a metanarrative such as “collective identity” or “group unity,” indeed any commitment beyond the self, handicaps the individual, and as such s/he burrows ever deeper into self-involvement and seclusion. Sarup comments that “amid the universal homelessness [of the stranger], individuals turn to their private lives as the only location where they may hope to build a home. In a hostile world, what can one do?” (11). Santos’s okupas are caught in a tension between belonging and exclusion and as such, their identity is unstable: “Instead of constructing one’s identity, gradually and patiently, as one builds a house—through the slow accretion of ceilings, floors, rooms, connecting passages—a series of ‘new beginnings,’ experimenting with instantly assembled yet easily dismantled shapes, painted over the other; a palimpsest identity” (Bauman *Postmodernity* 24-25). In *Okupada*, Bákinjam’s lack of architectural integrity and stability reflects their shaky community. Indeed the collapse of collective identity accompanies the physical collapse of the house: in the climactic confrontation with police, amidst escalating violence, the structure fails, floorboards crumble, and Kifo falls to his death.

The okupas attempt to extend their collective identity through the narrative structure of the novel itself, writing the text as a testament of their short-lived community. Each protagonist adds one

chapter to the story of the okupación, democratically contributing to a collective identity, telling their own story in their own words. They also declare a metatextual rebellion against the hegemony of a singular narrative voice: “No estamos de acuerdo con esos narradores cretinos que a menudo aparecen en las novelas, que son uno solo y que fingen saberlo todo de todo el mundo, narradores oligárquicos, manipuladores y fascistoides” (14). The okupas’ rejection of authority appears as an orthographic rebellion in the purposely misspelled words scattered throughout the novel (i.e., introdukzi3n klarifikadora, ke, okupas, Óskar). But like the drug-induced orthography in Mañas’s *Ciudad rayada*, the changes are a superficial transgression, an artifice that purposely draws attention to itself, breaks the pact of verisimilitude, and lacks the profundity to inspire substantive change. The narrative structure of *Okupada*, like the structure of their house, is also unstable, as captured in the textual chaos of Mustafá’s unintentionally comical chapter. Truly an inhabitant of a tower of Babel, his inadequate language skills necessitate a hybridized usage of Spanish, French, Italian, English and at times Arabic:

Yo le digo que to travel es molto facile para kurdos, porque sonno pueblo n3mada, de artesanos, ganaderos y agricultores (Alma me ayuda con las palabrotas) y es exacto lo que soy moi: vivo de entallar power-rangers y otras cosas, I travel como mis antepasados (los del arca, por ejemplo), plantuve tomatos y n3scaros na mi window y si no teno cabras es because en Barcelona no hay. (79)

The multiple narrators create a textual schizophrenia by narrating from subjective, contradictory, and ultimately self-serving points of view. Who is to blame for the okupación’s failure depends on who is narrating. Under the guise of a collective project, the structure of the novel itself undermines the okupas’ attempt to construct the okupación as a metanarrative. To paraphrase Baudrillard, the medium becomes the message as the okupas condemn themselves for a superficial adherence to their principles. Dorca affirms that Spain’s youth narrative reflects a crisis of values (320), and indeed *Okupada* intimates that unity is a liability, permanence is detrimental, and commitment is meaningless.

The identity problem for the okupa is that the construction of home is impossible. In a resounding pessimism, both sides lose. On the one hand *Okupada* criticizes the materialistic society and the stranger-segregation project of the metropolis outside Bákinjam, and demonizes the police for using excessive force. And on the other hand the novel critiques the alternative lifestyle of the okupación as the okupas’ hypocrisies strip their project of ideological renewal and humanistic transcendence. They lose their battle against the police and authorities, and the okupas’ quest for a more enlightened existence results in failure. In effect their struggle produces no substantive change. Later a politician, Avel•lí Pi Sureda, appropriates Bákinjam’s collapse to pose in front of television news cameras to further his political clout. And adding insult to injury, it is a “humanitarian” organization called “Techos para todos” (directed by Alma’s own father, no less) that enlists police force to evict the offending okupas so that the house can be made available for the homeless, while of course, the okupas are themselves home-less.

Care Santos’s *Okupada* shows the disintegration of youth communities and the failure of collective identity, questioning if unity is at all possible among contemporary Spanish youth. In a novel directed Spain’s youth, *Okupada* lambastes this same youth culture’s superficiality, egotism, and self-involvement, and chides youth for playing at being revolutionaries, a game that

they abandon when they are no longer having fun. Despite its apparent antiauthoritarianism, the novel is a cautionary tale for contemporary Spanish youth who betray their own search for identity. For them, home is an ephemeral place, and as society's unclassifiables, these strangers in a strange house can only find shelter in a space of uncertainty.

## Notes

(1) This generation of young novelists ranges from the canonical José Ángel Mañas, Lucía Etxebarria, Ray Loriga, and Pedro Maestre, to the largely overlooked Caimán Montalbán, Daniel Múgica, Gabriela Bustelo, Violeta Hernando, José Machado, and Care Santos. Studies by Carmen de Urioste, Germán Gullón, and Toni Dorca debate the terminology, define the characteristics, and explore the meanings of this narrative. While Gullón celebrates this literature as an act of freedom and autonomy (x-xi), these three critics do coincide in that it unmasks a disturbing portrayal of reality for contemporary youth. As Urioste points out, despite being surrounded by the population of a major European capital—Madrid—protagonists cannot tolerate being with others and they consistently retreat from meaningful interpersonal relationships (470-471). This antisocialism manifests itself in Santos's *Okupada*, as well, in the lack of cohesion and communication among urban youth.

(2) The modern identity was often related to the other, and associated with empowerment or vindication on the part of the marginalized (Kellner 141). The modern identity constituted an interactive process in which one's interpersonal relationships were forged alongside one's relationship to him/herself. Identity is no less a concern in the contemporary Spanish youth novel than it was under modernism, but the uses of identity have shifted such that now postmodern identity is interiorized and subject to change according to the whims of the individual, without consideration of the effects on interpersonal connections. Whereas principles, morality, and dogma were once to remain constant in the face of life's adversities, now the allure of instant gratification takes precedence, as seen in the drug abuse in Mañas's *Sonko 95: Autorretrato con negro de fondo* (1999) and Caimán Montalbán's *Bar* (1995).

(3) Youth, according to Hebdige, is a series of struggles in the lives of young people that impact identity formation (68-80). Similarly Epstein views youth culture as essentially a space of identity formation in which young people experience a tension between childhood and adulthood that produces alienation (4-21). Through its estrangement Spain's contemporary youth culture becomes apathetic to its present and future, which further defines the youth experience as downward mobility. This conceptualization of youth culture ties closely with the definition of youth subcultures, in which the individual feels isolated due to a pervading sense of meaninglessness (Hebdige 72). Thus the young person is drawn to subcultures as a space in which to construct meaning. However, a key to subcultures is that subcultural resistance to hegemonic culture affects only those engaged in the subculture and has little if any effect on society at large (Epstein 11), a parallel that *Okupada* draws in its denouement.

(4) Specifically Santos addresses a post-adolescent audience in *La muerte de Kurt Cobain*. The 15 year-old protagonist Sandra is unusually independent, has curiously adult sensibilities, and confronts an adult world that is distanced and uncaring of her intense emotional plight. Sandra rejects traditional notions of family and adulthood—"Nosotros creemos que eso de casarse es una mierda y que lo que hay que hacer es vivir la vida" (30)—and as in many of Spain's youth novels, Sandra's parents are absent from her life, vacationing in idyllic Czechoslovakia, a nation whose internal collapse mirrors the unraveling family structure in Spain's youth novels. In *La muerte de Kurt Cobain* pop music and film serve as reference points for reality; songs by Nirvana—"Come as You Are," "On a Plain"—provide a soundtrack for the novel's plot points and the narrator alludes to hip filmmakers—"Aquel discurso era intenso como una peli de Tarantino" (44)—to provide exposition. In addition to its pop culture references, the novel identifies with its youth readership by portraying teenage disenchantment and the value of

solidarity among teenage girls. While in retrospect Santos expresses misgivings about publishing this early novel (“Entrevistas”), the way the novel presents this coming of age story underlines its connection with young people by speaking youth’s own vernacular.

(5) The okupación has an electronic corollary in “la ciberokupación.” As identity on the internet is linked to user names, domains, and URLs, one can appropriate virtual spaces by being first to stake a claim to an internet name and then profit from reselling it. For example, Tunisian student Anis Darragi purchased the domain name “www.repsol-ypf.com” and, like other “pícaros virtuales,” attempted to exploit Repsol for millions of pesetas upon news of its proposed merger with YPF (Iglesias). Yet despite similar terminology and a common link to the question of identity, there is a fundamental difference between the ciberokupación and the street okupación. Like the landgrabbers or Sooners of western American lore of the 1850s, profit and economic advantage drive the ciberokupa, whereas the okupas in Santos’s novel (as well as nonfiction okupas throughout Europe) would reject such a capitalist enterprise. Their okupación originates from a quasi-socialist philosophy in which profit is neither a goal nor even a consideration and any resources are shared equally with the group. Yet despite the rejection of materialism and the slogans of unity, Santos’s novel reveals the okupas’ allegiance to these ideals is half-hearted at best, thus offering a cynical vision of Spain’s urban youth.

(6) In *Okupada*, Óskar further specifies the difference between Spain’s scrappy, downtrodden okupas and the rest of Europe’s squatters, who he dismisses as “okupas con pedigrí” (59).

(7) In contrast to the Madrid-centric narratives of Generation X, Santos sets *Okupada*, as well as the aforementioned *La muerte de Kurt Cobain*, in Barcelona. Whereas the novels that take place in Madrid by Mañas, Etxebarria, and Loriga downplay urban Spain’s increasing ethnic diversity and burgeoning immigrant populations, *Okupada* mirrors Barcelona’s pluralistic image. The diversity of protagonists’ nationalities and ethnicities—Inge the German drug trafficker, Mustafá the Kurdish refugee, and Oswi-Wan the Cuban exile—reflects Barcelona’s reputation as an international crossroads and as a destination for immigrants, yet simultaneously emphasizes the paradox of their marginalization. Like their young Spanish counterparts that struggle to find affordable housing (Galindo and Mars 38), immigrants are also pushed to the legal periphery to have a place to live.

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