

Sanctuary Squats

The Political Contestations of Piazza
Indipendenza Refugee Occupiers

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We were on the move, running and caught somewhere between the water cannons and the police on foot, their batons raised and ready. We were trying to help those who had fallen, trying to salvage the pieces of luggage soaking and dirty, hoping that documents delicately placed between layers of baby clothes would stay dry. We were trying to figure out what the next step would be. The occupiers were being evicted from the formerly abandoned eight-story office building in Piazza Indipendenza they had called home for roughly four years. This prominent five-hundred-person “squat” was occupied by individuals and families from the Horn of Africa, primarily Eritreans, who had obtained some form of internationally recognized refugee status and right of residency in Italy.

In the wee hours of the morning on August 24, 2017, the call went out to friends, activists, and journalists. “They’re evicting us, there are water cannons [*idranti*], hurry, come quick.” As dawn broke, I got off the tram at Rome’s main train station, Termini, and heard chanting in the near distance. As I got closer I could hear Habtom’s outcries reverberate. He was visibly shivering, his flannel shirt soaking wet, but his voice carried. Water cannons towered above, advancing and retreating, as the group of Eritrean, Ethiopian, and Somali occupiers, the majority of whom had some kind of refugee status, did the same. Their shouts seemed unable to penetrate the monstrous water cannons, easily mistakable for tanks, that were made to

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shove them further and further back and out. Habtom told me that they woke up to torrents of water in their faces some forty minutes earlier.

The water cannons would punctuate the day, coming back to hose down women and disabled occupiers who were intentionally holding the front lines in order to leverage vulnerability as a form of protection. They hoped that public outcry would come to their aid. All the while, photojournalists frantically photographed the scene, negotiating delusions of Pulitzer Prize grandeur with the preservation instinct to keep their equipment dry and intact. The police had their own camera crew. They were quick to circulate footage of a refugee occupier throwing a gas canister (hitting no one in particular) in the scuffle that ensued after the water cannons were deployed. For days to come, news outlets would cycle through these images and debate whether the eviction was warranted or excessively violent.

As night fell, we reconvened around big pots of spiced meat called *zignyi* that people in the Habesha, or Horn of Africa, community had made in their restaurants or houses.¹ They brought the pots out to the street to feed those who had spent the day confronting the police, in hopes of providing some nourishment and reprieve for those dragged away from their homes. We sat on the sidewalk eating in this impromptu enclave, an improvised sanctuary of sorts, as police cars drove by assessing the situation, making their presence known.

The crowd swelled after the meeting with housing and immigration NGOs and community organizations in the nearby municipal building ended. Those participating decided that women and children could go to a bare-bones temporary homeless shelter called the Sala Operativa Sociale (SOS) run by the municipality, while everyone else would stay with Baobab Experience, a volunteer organization that provides legal and medical assistance to transit migrants (those who have yet to start asylum applications or are having trouble with the process) living in the streets of Rome. Those evicted would discover that staying with Baobab would mean sleeping on the concrete outside the Tiburtina station. They would join transit and clandestine migrants trying to get around fingerprint surveillance in order to leave Italy and apply for asylum or find work in another country of the European Union (EU).² “There isn’t even cardboard,” those returning from Baobab said. Many of those evicted were not in transit; they had been living in Rome for over a decade.

After a long day full of state violence, community care, and confusion, it was unclear who was left to appeal to. One woman began to laugh. “What a nice shower we all got today.” Others were more imploring: “Why would they say that they can host us when they cannot?” “It would be better not to pretend that there is a place for us.” Being sent to Baobab reminded some of those evicted that the border management system was why they lived in occupations: “They won’t delete our fingerprints and they force us to stay here but what is here for us?” That night, the city was dead set on getting these refugee occupiers out of Rome’s city center, and so those evicted turned back to their community and temporarily found sanctuary in other squats.

Political Contestations of Refugee Occupiers

This article details the political contestations of refugee occupiers after they were violently evicted from their home, colloquially called Piazza Indipendenza. Participant observation as an activist and friend of Eritrean refugees during the time of their eviction by the municipal state brought to light the way refugee occupiers both demand rights to subsidized housing and care for each other. This article details how refugees confront the discriminatory distribution of integration resources in Italy by establishing autonomous structures, like housing occupations of abandoned buildings, to both approximate their entitlement to subsidized housing and assert their rights. I argue that, for Eritrean refugee occupiers, it is the Habesha community itself that provides the most reliable form of care, shelter, and protection, such that migrant-occupied squats act as sites of sanctuary.³

Occupying housing is not simply an act of necessity; it is a political act to advocate for housing rights. Activists involved in the housing occupation movement generally operate in reference to an *autonomismo* politics of engaged withdrawal.⁴ Autonomists are critical of state structures and work to build alternative social arrangements to provide for the needs of the community. Autonomist squatters come from a political tradition willing to undermine the legitimacy of the state when providing care for marginalized people is considered illegal. The Piazza Indipendenza occupation is unique within the context of housing activism in Rome because the occupiers were refugees or individuals with some form of recognized international protection, all from the Horn of Africa. Being both refugees and from a former Italian colonial region, these Eritrean refugees occupy two persecuted subject positions. As refugees, they sought asylum in defiance of legal regimes that persecute or criminalize unjustly. In Italy, these Eritrean refugees turn to housing occupations as they face forms of discrimination oriented around marginalizing poor and foreign others.

Legally contestable practices that provide shelter to persecuted persons have historically been recognized as institutions of sanctuary (for instance, the sanctuary practices in Europe during the high Middle Ages, and the New Sanctuary Movement that burgeoned in the United States). A definitive feature of sanctuary is that it invokes a higher power (whether international law in the case of political asylum, or divine justice in the case of religious/Christian sanctuary) to protect someone from suffering the consequences of a crime that should no longer be considered as such. I thus turn to the practice and literature of sanctuary in order to attend to the interplay between protection, persecution, and criminality at work when refugees, from a place that was formerly colonized, occupy housing in Rome. I argue that while refugee occupiers do not use the ethico-political language of sanctuary to define the care practices of sheltering members of their community, the concept of sanctuary helps interpret the kinds of political and legal contestations undergirding forms of shelter and care in the Habesha refugee community in Rome. Since squats

are not recognized religious spaces they are arguably more vulnerable to state intervention than sanctuaries, particularly through evictions. Despite the fact that these spaces are not immune to state violence, these sanctuary squats act as shelters for the persecuted from which to contest repressive governmental policies.

The Ethical Imperative of Sanctuary

Sanctuaries are places where creatures can seek shelter from persecution. While the institution of sanctuary morphs in relation to the sociohistorical context in which it is practiced, it is defined as a holy place in which one can seek refuge or safety. Across numerous sanctuary practices, the most robust codification of the institution of sanctuary for which records exist is found in the ecclesiastic laws of the high Middle Ages. In these sanctuaries, Jews and avowed criminals (fugitive slaves, debtors, thieves, and murderers) could seek protection from corporal and capital punishment as arrangements were made for their exile. However, refuge here was contingent on either conversion to Catholicism, penance, and/or penalty. With the rise of centralized power territorialized in the secular nation-state, the practice of sanctuary became reinterpreted as a means of fostering impunity for criminals and an infringement on sovereign jurisdiction. It was effectively abolished by the eighteenth century.⁵

Practices of providing shelter or legal support to protect persecuted people are being revived in the New Sanctuary Movement, a revival of the US sanctuary movement of the 1980s that opposed deportations of Salvadoran and Guatemalan migrants. Members of the sanctuary movement invoked not only divine justice but also contemporary refugee law to recast deportees as refugees and implicate the US government in contributing to the political conflict these asylum seekers were fleeing (by providing the Salvadoran and Guatemalan governments with funds, training, and arms, for example).⁶ The churches and secular institutions that were part of the sanctuary movement contested the legitimacy of immigration law and US foreign policy by sheltering migrants with deportation orders. In the 2000s, the New Sanctuary Movement (NSM) revived this practice of shelter, which is currently being resuscitated in response to the increased deportations ordered by recent US presidential administrations. The NSM, at its most political, shelters undocumented migrants with deportation orders in defiance of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials. By emphasizing that people in sanctuary have a right to an asylum hearing and detailing the dangers they may face once deported, the NSM works to undermine ICE's claims that migrants in sanctuary are criminals who violated US laws and must be deported. Choosing holy sites, mainly churches, as sanctuaries sends the message that disregard for the political sovereignty of the US government in these spaces is not an evasive act to foster impunity for criminal actions but an ethical act to care for the stranger.⁷

Sanctuary movements tend to seek sacred spaces as forms of shelter. Here shelter is provided in the name of divine justice, which is understood to entail ethical and moral commitments that exceed the terrestrial laws of a political entity like the nation-state. While housing occupations are not conceived of as sacred spaces, they pose a similar concern for state jurisdiction and sovereignty. Occupiers defy laws against illegal squatting in order to enable a neglected community to care for itself.

In Rome, housing activists respond to the lack of affordable housing through an autonomist politics of engaged withdrawal. Engaged withdrawal is organized around creating autonomous spaces to both provide for the needs of the community and practice horizontal forms of self-governance.⁸ These movements often oppose the hierarchical way the state both distributes resources and selectively represents certain, often privileged, segments of its constituency. Engaged withdrawal refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of a state when it marginalizes certain factions of society. This refusal is accomplished by building alternative forms of governance and withdrawing into autonomous enclaves, such as housing occupations, where horizontal forms of representation are put into practice. These occupations are like sanctuaries in that they understand themselves to be apart from the purview of the state. Occupations differ from sanctuaries in that they are not considered to be holy. But in the same way that sanctuaries became conceived of as infringing on state sovereignty, the state considers providing shelter in these spaces to be illegal. In these occupied sites, as in sanctuaries, the sovereign legitimacy of a state to deem forms of care and shelter illegal is contested as unjust.

Engaged Withdrawal

Housing occupations are places of solidarity building to mobilize collective forms of engagement with the state and advocate for a more equitable distribution of state resources and representation. For decades, activists in Rome have organized housing occupations in order to increase access to the right to housing, a right enshrined in the Italian constitution.⁹ Housing occupations are also established to address the lack of affordable housing in Rome, a result of mismanagement of public housing and real estate speculation. Most housing occupations are oriented around advocating for the state to recognize occupiers' rights to public housing; in so doing, occupiers intentionally seek abandoned, government-owned or requisitioned buildings to occupy.¹⁰

The occupied building in Piazza Indipendenza, for example, was once the headquarters of Federconsorzi, a state-run agency that provided financial services to Italy's farmers. The company was cooperatively owned until corruption scandals led to its liquidation in 1991, when the headquarters was sequestered by the state.¹¹ While ownership of the building passed through the hands of real estate speculators, it lay abandoned until 2013, when the housing rights organization Blocchi Precari

Metropolitani (BPM) organized its occupation in conjunction with a number of refugees and immigrants from the Horn of Africa.¹² Once the initial threat of eviction subsided and the occupation was established, BPM left the governance of the building to the Habesha community who lived there. A committee was formed of elected representatives from the varying groups, often determined by ethnic or religious affiliation, to manage the building. This committee was tasked with organizing guard duty and collecting dues for maintenance (cleaning supplies, locks, and interfaces through which to siphon electricity, television, and water), as well as mediating disputes (since, as one occupier put it, “you obviously can’t call the police to come”).

Occupied housing committees also work toward transforming these buildings considered the property of the state in a way that makes them not only inhabitable but compliant with housing code. Doing so enables these spaces to gain recognition as legal residences by the government, effectively doing the work of the state to provision public housing resources for themselves. Recognition of occupations as legal residences not only secures occupiers permanence in their self-made yet state-owned homes, but it also affords occupants access to health care services as well as the ability to renew legal documents that require proof of a valid address. For refugees and immigrants with permanent residency status, a formal address is the most important element for integration, because in order to qualify for naturalization as an Italian citizen you need a state-recognized residence to demonstrate that you have lived for ten consecutive years on the territory.

The committees of housing occupations also organize occupiers to participate in protests and solidarity building oriented around advocating for housing reform. Residents in certain occupations are obligated to take turns protesting in order to be in good standing as a housing occupier. The political work of occupation engages with the state to advocate for a more equitable distribution of resources. It also withdraws from the state into autonomous forms of self-governance that undermine the legitimacy of state sovereignty when state actors and institutions neglect and marginalize vulnerable members of the community. This contestation of state sovereignty thus mirrors defining aspects of sanctuary as seen in the NSM and the asylum system, where sheltering deportees is not only about withdrawing into sanctuaries. The New Sanctuary Movement is also oriented around engaging with the state to reconsider the right of residency for those in sanctuary. Like many practitioners of the New Sanctuary Movement, who actively took part in state-sanctioned legal hearings on behalf of individuals in sanctuary, housing occupiers are similarly oriented toward engaging with the state to advocate on behalf of those marginalized for their reintegration into society. While housing activists often advocate on behalf of refugees, occupied housing movements are predominantly oriented around horizontal forms of governance to enable refugee occupiers to advocate for themselves. This emphasis on promoting occupier-led initiatives through activist-organized and migrant-run movements perhaps marks a divergence from

certain sanctuary movements that tend to rely on the integrity of religious figures or congregations to vouch for those in sanctuary.

From Immigrant Back to Asylum Seeker

Occupying creates space in a situation of severe resource scarcity, especially for underserved and marginalized sectors of society. The majority of individuals in housing occupations in Rome are immigrants, which is indicative of the inadequate, corrupt, and racist ways the state distributes resources.¹³ Violent evictions reveal forms of marginalization that usually appear, if at all, as mere negligence. Evictions force negotiation between occupiers and state officials when public outcry over the spectacle of neglect can be leveraged in order to advocate for housing integration. Indeed, the state considered the demands of the displaced refugee occupiers in the aftermath of the Piazza Indipendenza eviction. While evictions are critical political moments, neglecting to provide refugee occupiers with alternatives after an eviction merely leads occupiers to cycle through other housing occupations—vulnerable to repeated evictions as they turn to more precarious forms of squatting.¹⁴

Many of the Piazza Indipendenza residents had bounced between occupations and were cautiously optimistic that they might be relocated when the police first came to evict them. Many were once part of the Ponte Mammolo occupation, a tented squat that had established itself on a large, grassy triangular area on the outskirts of Rome in the Trieste neighborhood, whose street names “Ethiopia,” “Libya,” and “Asmara” pay homage to past colonial exploits. When Ponte Mammolo was evicted, two years earlier in the summer of 2015, occupiers slept outside for months, protesting with Italian housing activists. These protests led to roundtables with elected officials, which resulted in negotiations with municipal officers and access to public housing vouchers. These vouchers are part of a neoliberal-style program in which the municipality pays private homeowners the rent of the few voucher holders selected from the ever-increasing pool of people eligible for public housing. Despite having vouchers, it was difficult for many of these Eritrean refugees to find a homeowner willing to rent to them, since Rome lacks adequate anti-discrimination laws, and homeowners can freely specify if they do not want to rent to “blacks” or “foreigners.” Many of the occupiers of the Ponte Mammolo squat who were given vouchers retreated to other community occupations, including Piazza Indipendenza, while they tried to find an indiscriminating landlord with a rental that met the stringent facility standards imposed by the city.

Only two years had passed between the two evictions and yet, in this small span of time, the municipal government’s willingness to negotiate and offer alternatives to occupiers drastically changed. After the Piazza Indipendenza eviction there were no vouchers and no recognition of the squat as a residency. Representatives from the municipal government were willing to offer only 107 beds for women with children in asylum reception centers (SPRAR) located on the outskirts of

Rome in Torre Maura e Boccea. The nearly five hundred residents evicted from Piazza Indipendenza elected representatives among themselves to explain why these were not viable options for them, but most of what they said in their brief encounters with municipal officials fell on deaf ears.

Many occupiers were concerned that they were not offered the kinds of government-subsidized housing options that other squatters had been offered in the past, but merely space in temporary asylum reception centers for those deemed vulnerable instead. These were the only structures that were available, or so the municipal representatives claimed. Temporary asylum reception centers in Rome are provisioned through another neoliberal program in which private real estate owners contract with the municipality to turn buildings into spaces for refugee reception.¹⁵ This setup is arguably more lucrative for real estate owners than public housing for a number of reasons, primarily because a portion of the funds come from the EU and because an owner can host more people in smaller spaces.¹⁶ However, from the perspective of the refugee occupiers, it was almost as if the expansion of a more robust infrastructure of asylum reception had the effect of pulling recognized refugees away from the housing rights Italian citizens are entitled to and treating them instead as newly arrived asylum seekers despite their permanent residency status.

The dormitories that the municipal officials made available to those deemed vulnerable were used for political asylum applicants who did not have legal recognition as refugees and who had just arrived on the territory. Treating the occupiers of Piazza Indipendenza on a par with asylum seekers and not as permanent residents meant that the state could significantly diminish the kinds of resources that those evicted would otherwise have access to—creating more barriers to their integration. This move included refugees in a way that insisted on their difference, not as potential/future citizens entitled to rights but as foreigners to be contained in reception centers and evicted from places within the community. What the eviction of Piazza Indipendenza made clear is that Rome's municipal government is shifting away from informal tolerance of occupations as makeshift solutions to the systemic problem of public housing in the city, and toward increased evictions. If this continues, many immigrant occupiers will lose their homes before getting the chance to be recognized as citizens of the country where they have lived, albeit on the margins, for over a decade. Whereas recognizing occupations as legal residencies or relocating occupiers to public housing would enable refugee integration as citizens after ten years, evicting refugee occupiers exacerbates the exclusion of refugees from becoming enfranchised and entitled to greater rights.

Evicted from Eternity

In the days following the eviction, thousands of people came out to protest, with the refugee occupiers from Piazza Indipendenza leading on the front lines. Signs and

rallying cries against xenophobia and for the right to housing and refugee integration filled the air and carried across to the ears, and perhaps chagrin, of the tourists and police officers lining the street that led from the Colosseum to Piazza Venezia. People filled the street of the Imperial Forums, the same street where nearly one hundred years earlier 5,500 homes were demolished by the Fascist regime to make their violent claim to authority and power spectacularly manifest in time for the October 1922 March on Rome.¹⁷

It seemed fitting to protest the marginalization of these refugee occupiers from Piazza Indipendenza upon the now invisible ruination of homes that were demolished to better display the Roman Forums on the way to the Colosseum. It was through these kinds of forced evictions that Rome was transformed from a city with multiple foci into one with a single city center, oriented around the office of Mussolini, the Fascist leader, with Piazza Venezia at its fulcrum. The forcible relocation of the city's poor inhabitants to the periphery made spatially legible the hierarchy of class and power during the Fascist era. This Fascist remodeling and marginalization, or "glorious cleansing," of the urban poor from the city center to the periphery, enabled the unearthing and magnificent reconstruction of the ruins of the Roman Forums. Showcasing the relics of ancient Rome was an integral part of visibly manipulating history in a way that portrayed the Fascist state model as the inevitable outcome of Italy's history, a direct revival of the glory of the Roman Empire.¹⁸ Our march down Via dei Fori Imperiali was a staged interruption on this street where nowadays tourists and Italians alike promenade in bucolic revelry of ancient Rome. It aimed to draw attention to forms of marginalization that continue to persist in the city.¹⁹ We protested against evictions and reasserted that immigrants and the urban poor have as much, if not more, right to the eternal city of Rome as anyone else.

As the sun began to set on the Palatine Hill, Italians who came out in solidarity with the occupiers retreated to their homes, while those evicted refused to leave. They demanded an audience with the mayor, Virginia Raggi, whose office in Palazzo Senatorio was situated at the heart of the city, thanks in part to Mussolini's urban reconstruction projects. In front of Trajan's Column, in arguably the most visible part of the city center, the evicted Eritreans made their encampment and waited for the mayor's response. From here, an occupier and good friend, Simon, pointed to the municipal building kitty-corner to where we were. I followed his finger to the balcony; that is where Mussolini declared Eritrea an Italian colony, he tells me.²⁰ "Look at us now, you know when the Italians were in Eritrea they wouldn't let Eritreans live in Asmara? Our fathers were not allowed to walk on the main Harnet Avenue but forced to walk in the streets with the horse shit. Here, they won't even let us live on the sidewalk."²¹ Simon laughed as I looked down at the pile of horse shit that the police on horseback, assigned to monitor the protest, had left at our feet. I looked up and saw occupiers hanging a banner between two trees: "VIA



Figure 1. WE ARE REFUGEES (NOT) TERRORISTS!!! banner in Piazza Venezia.

CURTATONE 3/PIAZZA INDIPENDENZA, SIAMO RIFUGIATI(NON)TERRORISTI!!!” (3 CURTATONE STREET/INDEPENDENCE SQUARE, WE ARE REFUGEES (NOT) TERRORISTS) (fig. 1). The night hung heavy with the specter of how the Fascist Italian state experimented with forms of discrimination through spatial exclusion in the colonies before implementing these same techniques back home in Italy.²²

Despite being able to secure an audience with municipal officials, the refugee occupiers of Piazza Indipendenza were not provided with any housing alternatives—they no longer qualified for public housing because they had illegally squatted. For decades, housing occupations were tolerated in Rome, even by right-wing governments responsible for liberalizing the real estate market and dismantling the Fair Rent Act (Law no. 392/1978). These governments selectively choose whether or not to enforce laws. For example, Law no. 80, passed on May 23, 2014, makes it illegal for squatters to qualify for public housing; if they are caught, they’re removed from the waiting list. Although this wasn’t enforced in 2015 during the Ponte Mammolo eviction, when occupiers received housing vouchers, it was being invoked now.

The characterization of refugee occupiers as criminal squatters ricocheted in the media through rhetorical slights of hand that made a point to mention migrants alongside terrorist activity, particularly in right-wing media outlets. This was what slogans like “we are refugees not terrorists” were responding to. After the eviction, right-wing media published article after article accusing the squat of harboring transit migrants, or dangerously riotous individuals who would throw gas canisters and Molotov cocktails at the police, or economic exploiters who made a profit on rent. Three occupiers were arrested on charges of resisting arrest, and footage from police surveillance on the scene replayed images of one or two refugee occupiers throwing gas canisters (otherwise used for cooking) in the scuffle with police.²³ These legal and rhetorical forms of criminalization divest the act of occupation of its political intent. Representing refugee occupiers and their attempts to shelter and care for themselves as parasitic and criminal consequently frees the municipality from its obligation to provide refugees with adequate access to the social welfare services they would otherwise be entitled to. Occupying housing through *autogestione* or



Figure 2. Women and disabled refugee occupiers holding down the front lines against police water cannons during the Piazza Indipendenza eviction in Rome, Italy, on August 24, 2017. Angelo Carconi/AP.

self-organization is increasingly understood by state officials as being at odds with state attempts to combat security threats with increased surveillance.

On the other side of the political spectrum were scenes of police officers caught on camera saying, “Make them disappear, if any of them run break their arms.” Scenes replayed in the news and on social media of water cannons knocking Habesha women off their feet while a disabled man on crutches struggles to stand against torrents of water that left broken noses and full body bruises in its wake. These scenes portrayed the refugee occupiers not only as vulnerable but also as victims of excessive force used by the police.²⁴ Placing those seen as vulnerable, like women with children and the disabled, on the front lines is a tactic often used by occupiers to protect the group as a whole. This tactic creates a spectacle aimed at inciting a public outcry, making visible what social neglect and marginalization would rather push to the periphery. The photograph above (fig. 2) is one of the few from that day that capture women and the disabled defiant in front of water cannons before being knocked to the ground.

Refugees are familiar with being portrayed as victims of persecution because it is part of how political asylum claims are adjudicated. This is mirrored in liberal sanctuary movements that often portray those in sanctuary as upstanding migrants whose only crime is crossing a border, a crime that shouldn’t be conceived of as such, especially when their right to an asylum hearing is unjustly ignored. The righteousness of the person in sanctuary is invoked to legitimize the nebulous legal line of sanctuary’s noncompliance with state security officials. Contemporary sanctuary practices diverge from their medieval counterparts in that they refuse to harbor avowed criminals. They have instead taken on the logic of the political asylum system that harbors those who are victims of persecution—not because of a criminal action they have done but of who they are. Refugees are understood internationally to be victims of repressive regimes in their country of origin that unjustly categorized them as criminals. The ingenuity of the sanctuary movement however, is that it also implicated asylum-granting countries (namely, the United States) in contributing to the conflict that persecuted refugees from San Salvador and Guatemala. While refugee occupiers in Italy cannot be said to experience a form of persecution

akin to enforced lifelong military conscription or torture, denouncing asylum-granting countries for lack of integration resources to adequately shelter refugees has been used as a legally valid argument to justify refugees seeking asylum in other EU countries further north.

Fortress Europe

The porous borders of the European Union were initially created to facilitate the steel and coal trades, but soon the Schengen laws allowed European citizens to freely cross national borders as if they were moving through domestic territory. The movement of non-European citizens, however, is heavily regulated by comparison. These regulations are codified in the Dublin Protocols, whereby asylum seekers are required to apply for asylum in the first country of their arrival in the EU. These regulations were established to discourage country choosing and to keep the practice of asylum a practice of seeking protection not opportunity. However, the regulation of internal borders, coupled with the fact that migrants have few (if any) legal means to arrive to asylum-granting countries, means that Europe's frontier countries (Italy included) receive the majority of asylum claims. As a result, frontier countries like Italy and Greece are under greater strain to adequately provide resources for asylum and refugee reception. Asylum seekers traveling through Italy and Greece have invoked this inadequacy to successfully lodge asylum claims in other European countries further north.

In the landmark case of *M.S.S. v. Belgium and Greece* from 2011, for example, demonstrating the inadequacies of the asylum reception system in Greece justified asylum seeking in Belgium instead.²⁵ The logic of this case posits that Greece can no longer be considered a country of asylum if it provides insufficient resources there for asylum adjudication and refugee integration. The EU has attempted to offer more financial support for the reception of asylum seekers in countries of first arrival, as well as to institutionalize responsibility sharing of refugee integration across the EU through relocation programs like that of European Asylum Support Office (EASO). It has thus become harder for defense attorneys to argue, on behalf of their intrepid clients under threat of deportation back to Italy, that access to Italian integration resources were inadequate.

During the protests, after the evictions, and in the deliberations about what issues to bring up in municipal negotiations, refugee occupiers repeatedly demanded that their fingerprints be deleted. If the municipal government was going to renege on its recognition of them as refugees and treat them like asylum seekers instead, then they should have the right to seek asylum elsewhere, or so the logic went. They called for the deletion of fingerprints because it is through fingerprint surveillance that European officials track the movement of asylum seekers, registering their country of first arrival and deporting them back to those countries when they try to claim asylum or are found without a right of residency in other

parts of the EU. When refugee occupiers call for the cancelation of their fingerprints, they accuse the Italian government of failing to be an asylum-granting country able to ensure that refugees receive their right to adequate integration resources. Refugees protesting against fingerprint surveillance also express frustration with the inequities of the Dublin laws that force them to stay in frontier countries of first arrival, while EU citizens are allowed freer movement in the Eurozone. It is not uncommon for border patrol agents to enforce this inequality through racial or class profiling, by only asking Black passengers, or passengers with shabby-looking luggage, or none at all, for their documents on Europe's transnational trains.

Many of those living in the Piazza Indipendenza occupation professed some pride in having chosen to stay in Italy. Others do not choose to stay in Italy but are constrained to, despite having family members, often wives and children, living in other EU countries. These, often fathers, can only visit their families for a maximum of three months at a time. Often, they only stay for the couple of days they can take off work—perpetually stuck in the predicament of having to sacrifice being present for their family in order to provide them with financial support. Those overstaying this allotment of time run the risk of being deported back to Italy, where they would subsequently face a five-year embargo on their travel out of the country. Housing occupations are attractive options for those who only need housing for a few interspersed months of the year or for those looking to cut corners in order to send more money to those they care for. Deleting their fingerprints would allow these refugees to seek asylum in other EU countries, where many already have family ties and potential work opportunities.

Suffice it to say that refugee occupier demands to have more expansive rights to free movement through the EU also fell on deaf ears. The eviction quickly destroyed much of the work that those living in Piazza Indipendenza had done to build a life in the diaspora. Many not only lost their homes but their jobs as well. Many employers fired them because they couldn't understand why their wages weren't enough to live in a legally sanctioned home and so suspected them of criminal proclivities. After the eviction, the majority of these refugee occupiers sought solace in other, often more precarious, housing occupations with dubious structural integrity, farther out on the outskirts of town.

Sanctuary Squats

Evictions do a funny thing to one's sense of time. In an hour, you can lose your home. In a few days, life on the streets starts to get to you. In a week, you can find yourself in another housing occupation, further marginalized, on the outskirts of the city, feeling like you lost a decade of your life. In a month, you can give up trying to fight back. And yet, the threat of eviction is always on the horizon, ever present, ever possible.

In the end, Piazza Indipendenza occupiers sought solace within their own community, in the remaining occupations that are increasingly under threat of eviction. Evictions are moments when the spectacle of state violence provides a forum through which migrants can draw attention to the obscured forms of state neglect that led them to occupy the building in the first place. This publicity thus positions them to be better able to advocate for recognition of their right to affordable housing and international protection. But what happens when the public is no longer sympathetic? As rising populist movements in Italy gain votes by scapegoating refugees and migrants, the public offers little sympathy and little outcry over migrant evictions.

Drawing parallels between sanctuary practices and housing occupations encourages us to reconsider the illegality of housing occupations and the criminalization of refugee occupiers. Housing occupations are interventions that attempt to build alternative forms of community in a context of resource scarcity. If criminalizing these practices functions not to integrate refugees into society but marginalize them further, then perhaps squatting is a crime that should no longer be considered as such.

In DIY refugee-occupied places, people can become proprietary about the resources they've invested to make their space inhabitable. But often, these are places where people share what little they have with those who are in need of that little, making a life for themselves as they are made to wait and work for change. These squats are not sacred spaces, but they are sanctuaries where the illegality of sheltering and caring for those perennially marginalized is cause for contestation.

Carla Hung is a postdoctoral researcher at Arizona State University. Her dissertation, "The Politics of Asylum among Eritrean Refugees in Italy," investigates how hospitality among Eritreans is criminalized by Europe's border security system. Her ethnographic work focuses on the intersections between migration studies, humanitarianism, and postcolonial studies.

Notes

1. "Habesha" is a term for the highland-living ethnic groups that span both Eritrea and Ethiopia whose language derives from Ge'ez (Tesfagiorgis, *Eritrea*, 210). The major part of the diasporic community in Rome with whom I conducted ethnographic research defined themselves as part of the Habesha community, even though there were always exceptions with people who were Afar or Bilen, etc. Reference to the term "Habesha" serves as a sometimes clumsy shorthand to highlight the community of Ethiopian, Eritrean, and even Somali individuals from different ethnic groups that live together in these contested diasporic spaces.
2. The transit migrants who tend to be part of the Baobab crowd have generally been found to be in violation of the Schengen laws that regulate movement within the European Union. Often, these transit migrants have been sent back to Italy because their fingerprints were originally registered there as the first asylum granting country of arrival, and the Dublin Regulations necessitate that they must therefore apply for asylum in Italy. Upon return, many have trouble inserting themselves into overcrowded

- reception centers and thus find themselves living on the street while they wait for a decision to be made on their asylum request or while they try to organize a way to leave the country again. Others still are asylum seekers who have received a negative decision on their asylum application and are effectively undocumented or clandestine.
3. In Italy, reference is made to the term “occupation” when speaking about an illegally occupied space used for housing; whereas the colloquial English term “squat” is rarely used. Use of the term “occupation” in Rome complicates the illegality of occupying abandoned state-owned structures by contextualizing these acts within a political history of struggle for housing rights, as well as in a social history of establishing “social centers” to encourage autonomous or alternative ways of life to flourish apart from those established by mainstream capitalism. Throughout the text, I have elected to strategically use both terms, “occupation” and “squat,” in order to underscore differing perspectives. Mudu, “Ogni Sfratto Sarà una Barricata.”
 4. Virno, “Virtuosity and Revolution.”
 5. Shoemaker, *Sanctuary and Crime in the Middle Ages*; Rosenwein, *Negotiating Space*; Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights*.
 6. Coutin, *The Culture of Protest*.
 7. Coutin and Perla, “Legacies and Origins of the 1980s US–Central American Sanctuary Movement”; Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, “The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles”; Wiltfang and Cochran, “The Sanctuary Movement and the Smuggling of Undocumented Central Americans into the United States”; Crittenden, *Sanctuary*; Michels and Blaikie, “I Took Up the Case of the Stranger”; Hondagneu-Sotelo, *God’s Heart Has No Borders*; and Terry and Jiménez, “The New Sanctuary Movement.”
 8. Virno, “Virtuosity and Revolution,” 196–97; Berardi, *After the Future*; Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, 60; and Procupez, “The Need for Patience.”
 9. See Articles 2, 3, and 47, subsection 2 of the Italian Constitution enacted in 1947. Senato della Repubblica, 1947, *Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana*.
 10. Squatting Europe Collective, *The Squatters’ Movement in Europe*; Marinaro and Thomassen, *Global Rome*; Mudu, “Patterns of Segregation in Contemporary Rome”; Armati, *La Scintilla*; and Belloni, “Learning How to Squat.”
 11. “Le speculazioni immobiliari.”
 12. “Lo sgombero e il destino del palazzo di via Curtatone.”
 13. Arjona, *La città meticcica*; Vereni, “Liminal Cosmopolitanisms.”
 14. López, “The Squatters’ Movement in Europe”; Manjikian, *Securitization of Property Squatting in Europe*; Neuwirth, *Cities*; Vasudevan, “The Autonomous City.”
 15. “Rapporto sulla protezione internazionale in Italia 2017.”
 16. “Ecco quanto spende l’Italia per i migranti.”
 17. Cervelli, “Rome as a Global City.”
 18. Cervelli, “Rome as a Global City,” 49; Gentile, *Fascismo di pietra*; Baxa, *Roads and Ruins*; Arthurs, *Excavating Modernity*; Agnew, “The Impossible Capital”; Painter, *Mussolini’s Rome*; and Herzfeld, *Evicted from Eternity*.
 19. Cannata, Carloni, and Castronovi, *Le periferie nella città metropolitana*; Daolio, *Le lotte per la casa in Italia*; Insolera, *Roma moderna*; and Tozzetti, *La casa e non solo*.
 20. In Piazza Venezia on May 9, 1936, Mussolini took to the balcony and declared that Italy finally had its empire now that Ethiopia was under Italian sovereignty.

21. Harnet Avenue was once called Viale Mussolini, “Harnet” meaning “independence” in Tigrinya, the official state language of Eritrea.
22. Makki, “Imperial Fantasies, Colonial Realities”; Pankhurst, “Italian Settlement Policy in Eritrea”; Taddia, “Constructing Colonial Power”; Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, *Italian Colonialism*; Palumbo, *A Place in the Sun*; and Mesghenna, *Italian Colonialism*.
23. Progetto Melting Pot Europa, “Pena sospesa per i rifugiati condannati in seguito agli sgomberi di Piazza Indipendenza.”
24. “Sgombero dei rifugiati a Roma”; and “Italy: Police Beat Refugees.”
25. Clayton, “Asylum Seekers in Europe”; Mallia, “Case of *M.S.S. v. Belgium and Greece*”; Moreno-Lax, “Dismantling the Dublin System”; *M.S.S. v. Belgium and Greece*; and “Case of *M.S.S. v. Belgium and Greece* European Court of Human Rights.”

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