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Neighbourliness, conviviality and the sacred in Athens' refugee squats.

ABSTRACT

To better understand the range of possibilities and opportunities for (co)existence available to displacement-affected people, attention must be given to the thick webs of sociality shaping interactions in situations of mass-displacement. This article makes the case that refugee squats in Athens are distinct spaces wherein different understandings of (co)existence converge; spaces whose production is contingent on support from neighbourly relations and networks that are mediated in moments through conceptions of conviviality informed by religion. Based on ethnographic work carried out in 2016 and a spatial analysis of refugee squats in Athens, this article emphasises neighbourliness and conviviality as they relate to sacred understandings of coexistence. This helps highlight the limits built in to thinking about the movement of refugees from the global South through Euro-centric ontologies of the social. More than this, following postcolonial debates on the decentering of knowledge production the research makes manifest how Islamic socio-cultural memories of *jīwār* or a right of neighbourliness complicate geographies of humanitarianism that make stark binary assumptions between religious and secular space. In turn, the evidence from Athens indicates that refugee perspectives on neighbourliness are imperfectly translated by migrant rights activists as solidarity, obscuring the different ways Muslim structures of feeling contribute to the production of refugee squats.

Keywords: neighbourliness, conviviality, religion, postcolonial, squats, refugees.

INTRODUCTION

The sites for neighbourliness or “cartograph[ies] of togetherness” (Rolnik cited in Nowicka & Vertovec, 2014:347) under discussion in this article are etched upon other existing mappings and trajectories. Mappings which have in some cases been erased and in others re-inscribed to draw attention to power dynamics and hierarchies that have shaped past and ongoing movements. These cartographies recognise the variegated character of movements from elsewhere to somewhere particular.

Residual traces on such palimpsests merit further attention; drawing our gaze away from the prominent thick-lines of (b)ordering that delineate the taken-for-granted naturalness and arrangements of the nation state. They ask us to focus instead on blurrings and fadings; the lived experiences and histories of recent arrivals and those already resident. In such neighbourhoods alternative understandings, ways of knowing, being and doing are uncovered, discovered, and stubbornly retained despite the context generative power of the nation-state in producing practices and understandings of locality (Appadurai 1996). This attunes us to the presence of what Tariq Jazeel (2018: 56) calls a “sacred modernity [or] structures of feeling in everyday life and in modernity wherein [religious traditions] and historical resonances are made palpably and affectively present for and by the subject.”

In spite of their uncertain legal statuses, various categories of people on the move draw attention to their being resident neighbours through a privileging of socio-cultural relations ahead of legal relations favoured by state actors. Their insistence on being recognised as neighbours emphasises the salience of relationality in refugee agency and decision-making. Of particular interest is how socio-cultural traditions of neighbourliness as understood by refugees and asylum seekers from West Asia are recognised and reconfigured in exile: how are ways of

being neighbourly and doing neighbourliness retained or transformed through displacement?

What value is there in acknowledging Islamic discourses and practices of neighbourliness in situations of displacement and exile? And to what extent do such ideas and practices extend or otherwise reproduce understandings of refugee protection and assistance?

This article explores the distinct colourings and markings of a cartography of togetherness in the neighbourhood of Exarcheia, Athens. I begin with a brief discussion on the geographies of squatting and their emergence as a conjunctural response to displacement; coinciding with a national economic crisis wrought through policies of austerity. Here, the reader is introduced to an ethnographic account of how relations between residents of squats and the locality of Exarcheia plays out. The prevalence of squats in Exarcheia complicates conventional readings of the geography of humanitarianism by highlighting how practices of conviviality can transform relations between residents and new refugee arrivals as they negotiate a geography of exile.

The second half of this paper extends the analysis further by thinking through decolonial possibilities of 'religion' as a concept; recognising the everyday and lived relational practices promoted by Islamic tradition rather than focusing on stark binary assumptions between religious and secular space. To do so, I highlight how neighbourliness tied to expectations of entitlement to protection and assistance in times of displacement or *jiwār* is an example of relationality in the Islamic tradition. Working on the geography of religion, Lily Kong (2010: 755) points to the "emergence of variegated and complex religious landscapes" in global cities with an emphasis on places of worship that migrants establish. This paper pushes the direction of this research towards the situated, embodied and relational understandings of Islam that begin with migrants themselves. I consider how the framing of an Islamic epistemology on

neighbourliness decolonises understandings of what is commonly understood as 'religion' and responses to mass-displacement. Here, I draw on Talal Asad's (1986) work on Islam as a discursive tradition and a turn towards ethical geographies anchored in relational understandings of space. This turn towards everyday lived understandings of Islam can be contrasted against scholarship's preoccupation with hypervisible forms of official 'Muslimness' and its spaces (Dessing et al. 2016; Werbner 2018).

This article is based on five months of ethnographic work undertaken in Athens during the summer and autumn of 2016. In that time I worked alongside residents, volunteers and activists in helping secure and distribute resources for the daily running of refugee squats. Much of my work involved mediating between residents as they organised the day-to-day management of the squats, relaying their needs to ad-hoc humanitarian groups (Sandri, 2017; Rozakou, 2017), and accompanying residents to clinics, hospitals, mortuaries and the courts. The intensity of a situation where squats were under continued threat of dismantlement by the state or attack by fascist groups, combined with the pressing day-to-day material needs of surviving in the city, dictated that ethnographic observation was an appropriate research method.

In what follows, I reflect on how the spatial dynamics of squats produce convivial relations between residents and activists engaged in acts of solidarity and humanitarian practices. I put forward the view that relations of solidarity can be interpreted through a decolonial lens - an Arab-Islamic epistemology that moves beyond ethno-patriarchal formulations of 'religion' and the sacred/profane binary at its heart. Instead, religious traditions can be understood as contributing to alternative formations of what constitutes the 'We' - framed by a set of

intersubjective relations, developing virtues and realizations of an ethical self in changing contexts.

EXARCHEIA: A CONTEXT FOR AN UNFOLDING CONVIVIALITY

Let us begin by thinking about the city of Athens as being both a site of conflict and segregation, and a site for encounter and interaction. Almost exclusively, the refugee squats are concentrated on either side of the Patisision thoroughfare that carves its way through the heart of Athens; either in the Exarcheia neighbourhood or in the vicinity of Acharnon street. A third welcoming space is the Prosfygika site housing eight apartment blocks in the Ampelokipoi neighbourhood (see map below). Accommodation for spontaneously self-settled refugees is limited to a very few neighbourhoods of one from 59 municipalities of the city and greater metropolitan area. For migrants looking to reach Northern and Western Europe these neighbourhoods, along with Omonia and Viktoria Square, have become important staging posts where community organisations, NGOs and solidarity initiatives signposting and providing material support to recent arrivals can be found.

Squats and collectives in Athens

- 1 Hotel Oniro squat
- 2 Acharnon school squat
- 3 Women's squat Acharnon
- 4 5th school squat
- 5 Spirou Trikoupi 17 squat
- 6 Single men's squat
- 7 City Plaza Hotel squat
- 8 Notara 26 squat
- 9 Gare squat
- 10 Derventio 56 Social Centre
- 11 Steki Social Centre
- 12 Prosfygika site

Figure 1. Map of prominent refugee squats and solidarity initiatives supporting refugees in Athens in 2016.

This cluster of neighbourhoods, conveniently located in the city centre, borders onto other neighbourhoods densely populated by migrants from East Europe, Africa and South Asia. The movement of spontaneously self-settled refugees to the city gravitates towards these handful of neighbourhoods where long-settled migrants have established businesses; helping new arrivals negotiate entry to Europe on more familiar terms. Nigerian, Pakistani and Afghan traders can be found manning ubiquitous mobile phone shops. Egyptian run cafes, grocery stores and competitively priced eateries do a brisk trade boosted by the presence of new arrivals.

Less visible, although equally numerous, are the Muslim prayer spaces or *masājid* of Athens. The number of *masājid* in Athens is estimated to be in excess of 100 and are often restricted to nondescript shop front conversions or can be found in the basement of apartment buildings (Triandafyllidou and Gropas, 2009; Hatziprokopiou and Evergeti, 2014). The *masājid* are largely financed through donations and managed by migrants from single ethnicity groups. This “fragmentation [...] along ethnic lines” (Hatziprokopiou and Evergeti, 2014:612) challenges the notion of a Muslim supra-identity: transnational in character and able to transcend national, ethnic and linguistic cleavages. For the most part, the priority of such spaces is limited to providing a regular site for the five daily prayers in congregation and as a hub for migrants with similar migration histories and trajectories to assemble. The more expansive function of gathering the *ummah*, or community of believers, with the aim of further establishing a unified

and common religious, political and socio-cultural community, the role of a formal *jāmi'* mosque, has remained elusive until now.¹

An attempt at establishing a squat in Nea Chalkidona 5km north of the city-centre failed in part due to the lack of connectivity it had with this particular migrant geography. These familiar spaces, made available through a migrant geography of Athens, are themselves indicative of a pattern of ongoing migration that has seen cities of Greece transform from sites of emigration to that of immigration (Fakiolas and King, 1996). As such, we must acknowledge the multiplicity of ethnicities, languages, class fractions and migration histories that in aggregate constitute resident 'host' populations. For new arrivals, these groupings can be found in and around Exarcheia.

With the crisis of austerity in Greece, Exarcheia became a testing ground for a dense cluster of social enterprises, squats, assembly points, food and time banks for people that the state and market had long neglected and marginalised. This infrastructure or ecology of the commons was slowly extended to people on the move - refugees and migrants. It is in this particular constellation of social relations that migrants and refugees have been afforded space to insert themselves. Here, they attract another set of networks and relations which append themselves to the existing infrastructure. Most notable among these relations are those with actors in informal humanitarian spaces wherein can be found "geosocial practices of safe space [...]"

¹ The first official mosque supported by the Greek state is set to be opened by September 2019 in the Votanikos neighbourhood of Athens close to the Eleonas refugee camp. See: 'Greece: Athens mosque likely to open by September, official says'. Aljazeera. 07 June 2019. Available online: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/06/greece-athens-mosque-open-september-official-190607175717162.html> [accessed]: 12 July 2019.

distinguished by their mix of transnational, but also personal and embodied modes of social justice-inspired protection” (Mitchell and Sparke, 2018:8).

This quality of “throwntogetherness” (Massey, 2005) characterises Exarcheia. Human bodies and attendant social relations arrive from elsewhere at different times on journeys that may not yet be complete. Exarcheia can thus be thought of as “the contemporaneous existence of a plurality of trajectories; a simultaneity of stories-so-far” (ibid: 12), and stories yet to be imagined and narrated. The different courses and life histories of the people inhabiting, shaping, and producing the refugee squats of Exarcheia demand acknowledgement. Refugees and migrants bring with them an understanding of neighbourliness tied to claims to protection and assistance; eroded through the process of displacement and now being reconfigured in emplacement. Here, the open-ended possibility of everyday mundane social interactions generates an ethos inviting the stranger. This ethos lends itself to the production of spaces that “demonstrate a practical concern with making migration safer in situated, embodied, and relational ways” (Mitchell and Sparke, 2018:2).

The sight of refugees sleeping under the open skies at Pedio Areos Park bordering Exarcheia prompted local anarchist and leftist initiatives into action in the summer of 2015.² Following the closure of the informal camp at Piraeus port in July 2016 there was a spike in the number of arrivals in Athens. The juxtaposition of thousands of refugees and migrants homeless in the streets of Athens with an increasing number of abandoned hotels and derelict office blocks in the heart of the city spurred civil society activists to undertake solidarity with the thousands of

² Solidarity with Refugees in Greece Statement, 29 July 2015. Available [online]: <https://www.facebook.com/pediontouareos/posts/829630847085462?fref=nf&pnref=story> [accessed 02 July 2019].

people on the move. Through struggle and popular mobilisations against the ravages of neoliberal economic policies, spaces have been re-worked, and re-encountered for purposes other than for what they were originally designed - producing squats.

Squatting has been open to a number of interpretations in the literature on urban informality. It has been argued that there is “no strict homogenous theory of squatting” (Vasudevan, 2015:342). Squats, and urban slum dwelling more generally, have been described as the detritus of a “brutal tectonics of neoliberal globalization” (Davis, 2006:174). Such depictions of abjection arguably overemphasise structural conditions. In so doing, agentic behaviour of residents, who undertake an everyday improvisation and re-assembling of materialities for the purposes of place-making, is obfuscated and made peripheral (Neuwirth, 2004; MacFarlane, 2011; Vasudevan, 2015). Urban squatting can be defined as “living in – or using otherwise – a dwelling [for a prolonged period] without the consent of the owner” (Pruijt, 2013:19).

Explanatory factors for the prevalence of urban squatting has ranged from being a collective response to the scarcity of housing (Wates, 1980; Neuwirth, 2004; Davis, 2006) to a spatial arrangement for a prefigurative politics that seeks to redistribute resources (Lowe, 1986; Corr, 1999; Kallenberg, 2001).

Pruijt (2013:23) provides a useful typology to think about the various configurations of squatting movements. A distinction is made between the motivations of squatters, their demands; and their context - how they are culturally and politically embedded. Under this schema, refugee squats in Exarcheia can be understood as having characteristics of both ‘deprivation based squatting’, wherein people have no other recourse of action aside from being street homeless, and a ‘political squatting’ that understands the reclamation of property

through squatting as an “anti-systemic politics [identifying] with revolutionary or ‘autonomous’ ideas” (ibid.:36). In both configurations, Pruijt’s work highlights a tension concerning hierarchical power dynamics privileging the agency and understandings of activists over and above so-called beneficiaries. I am interested in questioning this supposed passivity and look to explore the agency of refugees through their relationality as they negotiate their arrival in Athens. As such, this paper understands squatting not only as an informal set of spatial practices or a makeshift approach to shelter, but also a precarious form of residing *with* others in the city (Vasudevan, 2015:340).

This is a view of squatted spaces as both a social and mental construct; one perceived, conceived and lived *by bodies* (Lefebvre 1991). Lefebvre’s idea of lived space or spaces of representation - spaces directly experienced by those inhabiting it - allows us to consider the possibility that refugee squats in Athens may also be spaces for religious traditions to be reinvigorated through the collective agency of residents and their relations to one another. If we understand social space is produced and begins with a diversity of bodies in relation to one another, then it follows that spaces of religion are “overlapping, co-existent, in parallel with other spaces [...] internally in tension, being made up of multiple, contested, real, and imagined sites and relations” (Knott, 2005:23). As we follow the movement and moorings of human bodies to better comprehend religious practice, we are provided with a means to complicate the secular/religious binary and move beyond institutional readings of the sacred that squarely place the numen in designated spaces of churches, mosques or temples. These nascent geographies are thus perhaps best interpreted as continuous processes of contingent clusterings being made and unmade at sites of encounter (Levitt, 2012).

THE UNTRANSLATABILITY OF REFUGEE ENCOUNTERS IN EXARCHEIA

The research sites under consideration here were drawn from squats affiliated to the Syrian Solidarity House Initiative (henceforth SSH) which numbered seven in total; including a squat solely for single men and a squat solely for households with pregnant women or children under the age of one. Two further squats were formerly public buildings - primary schools that had been closed due to austerity measures imposed by the Greek state. A fifth squat was a privately owned one-star hotel that having fallen on difficult times lay derelict. A sixth building was formerly a health clinic and a seventh - a converted store. Aside from the Hotel Oniro squat, none of the buildings were designed for residential or habitation purposes. A conservative estimate of the number of residents at SSH squats stood at around 1200 people.

Although labelled here as SSH, the name was not used by residents but by Greek activists who had initially helped the refugees to occupy abandoned and derelict buildings. For Arabic speaking residents of the refugee squats in Exarcheia, the word squat was clumsily translated to and referred to by some activists as *iḥtilalat* or occupations - an irony not entirely lost on Palestinian and Iraqi residents who, having lived with the consequences of military occupations, preferred to use the English-made-Arabic plural *skwotāt*. This untranslatability of the word squat is apposite in that it draws attention to the challenge of recognising, *on their own terms*, the informal circuits of association comprising urban lives relocated from the global South to the global North. Here, we find ways of being and doing from outside of Western perspectives and experiences come up against the European city. Untranslatability, along with mistranslation is recognised as central to opening up discussion on “ethical, cosmological and theological dimensions of worldliness” (Apter, 2013:4); providing a “theoretical fulcrum” (ibid.: 3) through

which to challenge Anglophone hegemony over knowledge production in the Social Sciences.

The notion of untranslatability alerts us to and emphasises postcolonial difference and how experiences and lived understandings of migrants are often flattened out to make sense for and from European perspectives.

This article sets out how residents of Athens' refugee squats express an understanding of *jiwār* or a neighbourliness *tied to expectations of entitlement to protection and assistance*. The Islamic resonance of *jiwār* was never fully grasped and recognised by activists supporting the squats who translated it simply as an expression of solidarity. As one British volunteer at the Acharnon school squat remarked to me: "you won't find religion here." What then, to make of *jiwār* as an everyday lived Islamic tradition? How can we account for both its centrality in the response to mass displacement by refugees and migrants and the fragmentary reading afforded to it by European activists and volunteers? Activists' partial translation of *jiwār* as solidarity is indicative of a failure to read between the lines and to be attentive to that not explicitly articulated - (re)producing and privileging Western ways of knowing (in this case, a habitus in accordance with anarchist and autonomist practices of solidarity in Exarcheia). This then is the postcolonial gauntlet thrown down to understandings that reduce Islam to the category of 'religion'. It asks us to be cognizant of structures of feeling carried by migrants located in a spatial present characterised by a modernity privileging a religious/secular binary view of the world. To work with the notion of untranslatability challenges this hegemonic understanding and makes space for different ways of thinking, seeing and doing - moving "beyond the coordinates of the concept 'religion'" (Jazeel, 2018:58).

REFUGEE SQUATS - A CONVIVIAL SANCTUARY?

Residents themselves parochially referred to squats by their given name or the street they were located on. It is also a mis-characterisation to refer to the squats as Syrian. During the summer and autumn of 2016, residents were indeed predominantly Arabic speaking with many Syrians (Arab and Kurdish), but also included Palestinians from Syria and Lebanon, Iraqi (Arab and Kurdish) and to a lesser degree Afghan refugees. Less present were African refugees and migrants.³

The SSH squats were appended to and partially absorbed into a broader amorphous movement for a reclamation of the commons as a response to the neoliberal remedy of austerity (Mitchell and Sparke, 2018; Cabot, 2016; Rozakou, 2016; Rakopoulos, 2016). Surplus donations were, however sparingly, distributed to other less well-resourced squats. There had been attempts to better coordinate the distribution of resources between SSH squats but these sporadic efforts proceeded slowly. Facilities available at one squat, for instance a Doctor's surgery, were open to residents of other squats within the SSH initiative. Following the firebombing of the Notara 26 squat on the 24th of August in 2016, suspected to have been perpetrated by fascists, the residents of the nearby Hotel Oniro squat were quickly on the scene to help extinguish the blaze. In the days that followed, residents from the squats combined efforts to help repair the fire damaged storeroom. Long term residents of squats also helped locate and establish new squats to welcome new arrivals to the city.

³ A later short visit to the squats in April 2017 indicated that the early characterisation of the squats as Syrian could partly be attributed to the specific patterns of movements of refugees and migrants from the Greek islands in the Aegean to Athens.

Living quarters at the Hotel Oniro squat were cramped - with up to 140 people living in 30 rooms. The kitchen area, however, was far too small to allow any communal cooking with residents preferring to keep a small camp stove in their rooms. The reception area of the hotel was similarly small - approximately 200 square feet. Varnished wooden benches lined the walls of the reception area. Occasionally, residents wandered down from their rooms to gather in a corner to access the weak and intermittent Wifi connection borrowed from a neighbouring cafe. The more compartmentalised structure of the building compared to the ad-hoc arrangement of the primary school squats meant there was a greater degree of privacy available to residents. Correspondingly, there was equally a lack of an adequate communal space. This ultimately resulted in limited possibilities for residents to encounter volunteers and act as 'hosts'.

The relationship between architectural design and convivial practices is not insignificant. Wise and Noble (2016:427) alert us to an understanding of the spatio-temporality of convivial relations that "rest as much on material environs as they do on interpersonal and social relations." It is this dynamic interaction between people and built environment wherein space is organised and reorganised, that determines "the logic of connection or discrimination" (ibid.). The Hotel Oniro carried with it a residual conformity to capitalist modes of hospitality. While there were no fee paying guests at this 'hotel', the space did not encourage the mingling of guests. The lobby where the reception counter originally stood was designed for the simple transactional act of registering guests. Residents of the Hotel Oniro repurposed a storage space as a distribution and information point for residents and volunteers. A drab basement room was transformed into a colourful classroom for younger children; the intermittent classes

organised by European volunteers an attempt to bring structure to the daily lives of children while granting parents some respite from childcare duties. Assorted household goods and staple foods were distributed from a small 100 square foot room, behind which a utility space for laundry had been fitted out with three washing machines donated to the squat. Incidental encounter in the parochial spaces of the refugee squats was punctuated by the sporadic arrival and departure of volunteers, activists and neighbours who came to discuss the needs of the squat and to make residents aware of nearby initiatives. However, the lack of a large welcoming space stymied the ebb and flow of visitors and their accompanying resources.

To remedy this resource dilemma, residents of the Hotel Oniro embarked on a charm offensive to raise the profile of the squat. Recognising the lack of a convivial space to encounter neighbours and others from Exarcheia, they decided to make use of the nearby public square where different rhythms and temporalities converge. Summer evenings in the square were used by some, mostly young male, residents to share cigarettes, talk and drink. The prevalence of alcohol and marijuana smoking, particularly in the evening, meant that some (not all) residents of the Hotel Oniro felt it to be an inappropriate space - preferring to use the space during the day. This is particularly true on a Sunday when a market appears on the square with vendors selling locally grown and produced food products. The streets adjoining the square and running off perpendicular to the square were also heavily frequented by Athenians enjoying evening meals in the many restaurants and eateries.

Residents of the Hotel Oniro raised money from a group of Spanish volunteers to prepare *knafeh*, a popular Levantine dessert, which they distributed to passers-by at Exarcheia Square along with a handwritten card detailing the location of the squat. They also set up a sound

system and introduced the local neighbourhood to the joys of *dabkeh*. Such practices of sharing food and celebrating together have been described by theorists as “convivial tools” (Illich, 1973; Borremans, 1978) that serve to reassemble long term residents, newly arrived refugees, and curious passers-by to produce new formations of ‘We’. My suggestion to pass a donation box among the assembled crowd was flatly rejected by residents of the squat - preferring instead to engage in conversation with those present. Talal, a lead organiser of the Hotel Oniro squat, explained “we are not here to beg from these people.” Talal and other residents of the Hotel Oniro were looking to effectively create a space for a shared sociability. Their insistence on wanting to share food with neighbours was an opportunity to reciprocate the hospitality that had been afforded them. In so doing, they sought to move beyond the imposed role of guest consigned to them through a humanitarian lens. Instead, they designated themselves as neighbours; present, visible, and resident.

NEIGHBOURS - NEAR, FAR, PRESENT AND ABSENT

The framing of relationships between the residents of Hotel Oniro and other local residents as one of neighbourliness was echoed by ‘Urwa and his friends who had arrived from Lagadikia camp and were staying at the 5th School. ‘Urwa was part of a group of self-organised Syrian and Palestinian refugees who explicitly rejected programmed interventions from humanitarian organisations. They understood themselves as being more capable and effective in responding to the needs of fellow refugees than actors from the formal humanitarian system. ‘Urwa told me:

“We don’t need volunteers coming from Europe to come and hug our children - we can do that ourselves. We can make the children happy. We can show Europe another face of what it means to be a refugee - one which isn’t asking and in need but one that is *giving and sharing with their new neighbours*. This is what we did in Lagadikia - we grew vegetables and made *knafeh* which we shared with the people from the local villages. We want to do the same here in Athens to show that we can give something back”
[emphasis added].

Again, the sharing of food here carries great symbolic significance. The common perception of the figure of the refugee in the public imagination is of someone desperately in need of food and resources. In “sharing with their new neighbours” food products, widely understood as that which is most needed, ‘Urwa and his friends disrupt the narrative of humanitarian work. Acts such as these have an explicitly decolonial political orientation in that they seek to transform understandings of what it means to be a refugee away from the eurocentricity underpinning international law and humanitarian action.

While Talal, ‘Urwa and his friends did not speak about an explicit religious duty, belief, or motivation underpinning their resolve to helping other refugees, they did speak about it as “something ethical” and a “responsibility to others”. This was an idea that resonated with Marwan. A former resident of a SSH squat, Marwan had applied for asylum in Greece and was living in shared accommodation provided by UNHCR through PRAKSIS a local NGO. Once a week, Marwan could be found helping prepare food and serving homeless Greeks and migrants at a weekly soup kitchen held by the Athinas street vegetable market near Monastiraki square. Marwan described his volunteering at the soup kitchen as “making use of myself” and as an

opportunity to meet more Greeks. “Their situation here is as bad as ours - they need help too”, he told me in reference to the crisis of austerity. Here, Marwan acknowledges and acts on the rights entitled to the other articulated through understandings of neighbourliness. While benefiting from housing provided to him through the official humanitarian system, he rejects the idea that he is simply a passive recipient of aid. Instead, he understands his obligations, not only to those labelled refugees, but also to those who have been similarly dispossessed. The “situated multiplicity” (Amin, 2008:19) of the ‘pop-up’ soup kitchen produces a conviviality affording Marwan a space to fulfil his obligations the best he can. Despite only having a rudimentary grasp of English and Greek, Marwan was successful in communicating through expansive gestures and welcoming smiles to volunteers and diners alike. This broad everyday lived understanding of a right to neighbourliness should not be understood in the abstract - as an ethic of inalienable natural rights. Instead, this relationally grounded ethics provides us with a grammar of interaction for seeking protection, care and assistance from one another outside of a hegemonic Western humanitarian discourse and practice.

This was evident on the occasion of the *mawlid al-nabwi* (the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday) when residents of the Hotel Oniro organised a celebratory event. Sweets made by residents were distributed to those present. Choosing to spend the meagre resources available to residents of the squat on preparation for the celebration is significant. It was a further opportunity for residents of the Hotel Oniro and other displaced people, who had taken residence in other squats and in private accommodation in the city, to come together. Cognizant of the violence wrought on their everyday experiences through hierarchical roles and statuses imposed on them by secular migration governance and humanitarian regimes,

residents of the Hotel Oniro were nonetheless able to uncover religious meanings to their season of migration.

From this vantage point we begin to see elements of a diasporic approach to the sacred characterised by locative, trans-locative and supra-locative understandings of religion (Tweed 1997). The lobby area of the Hotel Oniro was transformed into a reflective space for a prayer circle. Prayers and recitation of the Qur'an were said in remembrance of the Prophet. Parallels were drawn between the suffering wrought by the exile of the early community of Muslims from Makkah and the tribulations faced by those who had found their way to Athens. As the day passed, the celebration oscillated back and forth between threnody and hymn. Prayers were sent on the souls of those lost to the conflict in Syria; supplications made to God for a speedy reunion with husbands, daughters, sons, and parents who had preceded them on their journey to Northern Europe; and thanks was given to new friends and neighbours encountered on their sojourn in Athens. Those present moved across time and space, finding in the biography of the Prophet echoes of their own plight and transformation. The space of home was mediated between memory and aspiration - located somewhere between Syria, Athens, and Northern Europe.

APPROACHING RELIGION RELATIONALLY

Moving beyond the usual spaces of mosques, churches and temples, scholars have found ample fertile ground in locating religious practice at alternative sites such as museums (Kong, 2005; Buggein, 2012; McCormack, 2017), schools (Kong, 2005; Bobrowicz, 2018; Vince, 2019), development and humanitarian NGOs (Beaumont, 2008; Clarke and Jennings, 2008; Ngo, 2018);

roadside shrines (Preston, 2002; Solso, 2015; Osterberg, 2018), media spaces (Vásquez and Marquardt, 2000; Kong, 2006; De Wildt et al., 2018), streetscapes (Ismail, 2006; Jones, 2006), sites of financial practice (Pollard and Samers, 2007, 2013; Bassens et al., 2013) and home spaces (Kong, 2002; Tweed, 2006). A further site of difference recognised by geographers of religion has been embodied experiences of the sacred - drawing attention to emotion and affect. Here the body is understood by scholars as being the site from where religious values are inscribed (Secor, 2002; Gökarıksel, 2010; McGinty, 2014) and how it is affected in sacred settings (Connell, 2005).

Scholarship has also become sensitive to how embodied practices and religious traditions are structured by societal concerns and in so doing contribute to the cultivation of an ethical self (Asad, 1993; Mahmood, 2005; Zaman 2016). What has largely been absent from discussions on religion and society is the idea of the ethical self as a relational subject - one that Constance Furey (2012:9) describes as being imbricated and “enacted through sustained affiliations and intense encounters.” I would go further. Relationality does not restrict itself along lines of propinquity; be that temporally in terms of sustained affiliation or in terms of intensity. Rather, there is a relationality present at moments of fleeting interaction that punctuate everyday movements across urban environments. I am thinking here of the prosaic, quotidian and even halting character of encounters between residents, volunteers, and activists in securing material needs for the running of the squats that takes them to marketplaces, neighbouring squats and community spaces, or on transit systems that serve to connect the city. Furthermore, activists and volunteers would come and go precluding for the most part any ‘sustained affiliation’.

Such sites of encounter invite us to critically engage with relational thinking wherein people on the move are configured as key actors in the production of a neighbourliness that is simultaneously being deterritorialized, made mobile and re-territorialized. In the context of neoliberal austerity that has precipitated the immiseration of Athens' middle class, refugees and migrants are frequently exposed to ethical connections and codes with residents who recognise the struggle to traverse borders as being linked to the struggle against precarity for Athenians (Mitchell and Sparke, 2018). Outside of the security provided by spaces of solidarity such as in Exarcheia, refugees and migrants may equally encounter ethical connections and codes built on ideas of racial exclusion and prejudice that shut them out (Karamanidou, 2016; Mantanika, 2015).

In an encompassing review and critique, Martin Jones (2009) insists geographers advocating a relational approach often overstate an open-ended characterisation of a cosmopolitanism that celebrates external connectivity. This openness, he observes, "often belies the lived-experience of many. Contextual forces within advanced capitalism (such as class, race, gender and location) are considered important for framing and allowing certain possibilities and opportunities to exist" (ibid:493). How then is the existence and emergence of an ethical self produced in a relational context that is specific and constrained? In other words, what relational possibilities and opportunities to realise an ethical self are available to displaced people on the move as they land on "toxic soils" of racism? (Macharia, 2015). These questions have taken on greater significance following the coming to power of the right-wing New Democracy Party . Since July 2019, there has been a concerted effort on the part of the Greek state against self-organising initiatives in Exarcheia. Beginning with the repeal of the 1982 law protecting university

campuses against incursions by police and military actors, New Democracy also announced eviction orders for all 23 anarchist and refugee squats in Exarcheia in August 2019. In conflating refugee squats with a law and order problem and the proliferation of illegal drugs in the neighbourhood, New Democracy have readily cast refugees in the role of “folk devils” and incubated a “moral panic” around self-organised communities that sit outside of state structures (Cohen, 2002 [1972]).⁴

Thinking through how refugee squats open up space for the possibility of everyday neighbourly interactions invites us to question what neighbourliness means from the perspective of people on the move. Understanding how traditions serve to develop virtues in changing contexts allows religions to be considered as a vernacular and grammar for encountering, contesting - and perhaps even overcoming - difference. What I am concerned with here is not the contestation of sites sacralised through habitual ritualisation, but of everyday sites and encounters where the binary of sacred/profane fails to capture the necessarily embodied, affective and relational character of religious traditions.

Attention to the idea of a relational ethical self can be found in the codified Islamic position on the concept of *jiwār*. We see it develop from its inchoate use in providing protection and assistance to early Muslim exiles (Shoukry, 2011) to becoming a code of conduct governing social patterns of cohabitation tied to expectations of entitlement to protection and assistance - what I refer to here as rights of neighbourliness. These are less rights residing in individuals, but

⁴ See ‘Inside Exarcheia: the self-governing community Athens Police wants rid of’, The Guardian, 26 August, 2019. Available [online]: https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/aug/26/athens-police-poised-to-evict-refugees-from-squatted-housing-projects?fbclid=IwAR1kjYoOleUbc_8yDyqOJ_PtN6YBAPnGoE1EYvbmA8GUuniE6GShcmg-k6Q [accessed 21 September 2019].

rather ethical prompts that mediate and fill the space between people. Al-Ghazālī notes there are four kinds of neighbour each with a corresponding set of rights: the non-Muslim neighbour who has the claim of neighbourliness rights over you; the Muslim neighbour who has the additional claim of Islamic brotherhood; the non-Muslim relative, who is also a neighbour, has both the right of neighbourliness and the right dues from kinship; and finally, the Muslim neighbour who is also kin enjoys all three claims of rights (cited in Sherif, 1975:100).

The blurring of kinship rights and obligations with neighbourly ones is commonplace. In her work on gender and neighbourhood space in Istanbul, Mills (2007) describes how frequent neighbourly visits punctuate the rhythm of the day; stretching, linking and blurring boundaries between the insides of homes to the streets on which those homes are located. Practices of reciprocating visits between neighbours she tells us “makes the residential street of the neighborhood an extension of private family space” (ibid.:341). Everyday encounters are littered with reference to real or imagined kin relationships. Fictive kin relationships continue to be a prominent feature of propriety and support networks in the Arab and wider Muslim world. Suad Joseph (1996:200) observes that through the idiom of fictive relationships expectations of a set of moral or ethical practices is recalled in dealings with the stranger to produce a “learned grammar of sociability” (Buonfino and Mulgan 2009:16).

Refugee residents of squats in Athens readily mobilised the idiom of fictive kin relationships and the village to describe interpersonal relations in the squats. One resident of the Acharnon School squat told me, “the squat is great, we live like a real community here. My family is here, my friends are here. It’s like a small village.” However, when pressed further on whether there was much interaction with neighbours other than activists he replied, “there’s nothing to do,

we don't really know anyone out there. We spend most of our time smoking argileh in here."

Limited encounters of this kind prompt us to consider and reflect on the ambivalence and ambiguity of squats, and of the kind of connectivity made possible through them. At the same time, they are convivial spaces wherein people on the move negotiate their transit through Athens, but are also made "abject spaces" where the state renders inhabitants "inaudible and invisible" (Isin and Rygiel, 2007) through filtering out the resident of the squats from care and protection regimes afforded by the state, NGOs and humanitarian agencies.

The perspective offered through *jiwār* moves us away from an atomistic reading of the self as autonomous. It challenges the understanding of a society of individuals wherein "each person shuts himself up in his own subjectivity" (Fanon, 1967:36). Instead, it opens avenues for understanding how the self emerges as inherently vulnerable, fragile, and dependent on others in situations of constraint. Here, I agree with recent developments in social theory that propose our understanding of agency should be more expansive (Mahmood, 2005; Burke, 2012; Pham, 2013; Burkitt, 2015). We need to consider how agency "produces an effect on the world and on others" and thus always relational, rather than in the narrow sense of reflexive choice better characterised as "one element or moment of agency" (Burkitt, 2015:332).

In her discussion of the communal agency of women in the Middle East, Quỳnh Pham (2013) questions Eurocentric readings of autonomy as freedom, directing us instead to contexts where women are recognised as having to endure while being embedded in both relations of power and thick webs of sociality from which they meaningfully negotiate the common terms of their day-to-day lives. Pham argues for a relational ontology of agency that is necessarily dialogical; as she incisively observes: "one's action is rarely one's own and rarely for one's own sake only,

for it is pulled, pushed, harmonized, agitated, coaxed, pleaded ... by multiple bonds. In this sense, one could say it is always already coauthored” (ibid: 37). As such, purposive and reflexive actions must be understood as being constituted within relationships - including relationships oriented towards the sacred - that traverse space and time. The same could be said for residents of the SSH squats in and around Exarcheia who endure while being cajoled, pushed, pulled and asked to adapt by other residents and volunteers undertaking humanitarian roles in relation to them.

In paying attention to one’s relationships, virtues are disciplined and care of the self is practised – a point long understood by tenth and eleventh century Muslim ethicists such as Ahmad ibn Muhammad Miskawayh and Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī. In his most celebrated work – *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* – al-Ghazālī commends as a general rule that: “sociability is the fruit of a wholesome character; and isolation, the fruit of a bad character.” (cited in Goodman, 1999: 136). Similarly, for his predecessor, Miskawayh man’s imperfection can only be resolved through cooperation with others. In *The Refinement of Character* Miskawayh (2003) observes virtues are revealed and “manifested when one participates and lives with other people, and has dealings and various kinds of association with them.” The erosion of social and material capabilities through the loss of relationships centred around the home is captured in a popular Damascene proverb warning of the fate that lies in store for one forced to leave his home: *yalli byiḡla’ min dāru ‘all miqdāru* - the one who leaves his home, lessens his worth.

For Talal Asad (1986:14), Islamic tradition cannot be disentangled from the living practices of historically and socially located communities and their institutions – it is a “discursive tradition”. Properly understood, this is “a set of aspirations, sensibilities, commitments, and relationships

of subjects who live and move in the different times of a common world” (Asad cited in Iqbal, 2017:200-201). Here, I take ‘a common world’ to mean a world characterised by experiences of dispossession, dislocation and exile.

The right of neighbourliness is one imbued in the Arab-Islamic imaginary; permeating literature, poetry, understandings of the sacred and taken-for-granted interactions between people. Arab literary tradition, including the Qur’an and the books of *aḥadīth* that record the life of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, is replete with references to the blurred boundaries between strangers, neighbours and kin in the context of dispossession and displacement (Shoukry, 2011; Zaman, 2016). Islamic traditions celebrating the rights of neighbourliness or *jīwār* echo the oft-cited proverbial lines of the pre-Islamic poet Imru’ al-Qays: ‘Our neighbour, we are both strangers here, and every stranger to another stranger is kin’. They also resonate in the work of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish and Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury where encountering and negotiating difference in exile is a prominent and recurring theme. It is a reminder that religion cannot always be abstracted from the cultures it is embedded in (Smith, 1982; Sommerville, 1992).⁵

This view on the concept of religion collapses the secular/religious binary. It reminds us that we need to critically interrogate our postcolonial present “to understand the processes through which the categories of the modern [...] have been inscribed into the texture of our lives” (Scott, 1999:56). Residents of the squats on occasion may have translated their actions as explicitly ‘religious’ and at other times ‘ethical’, but those meanings are only made available in

⁵ To set Islamic tradition apart from the context in which Islam emerged would be a mis-characterisation. As the Prophet’s wife ‘Ā’isha is reported to have said: ‘Islam came when there were sixty-odd good qualities among the Arabs, all of which Islam intensified; among these are hospitality, good-neighbourliness and faithfulness to one’s engagements’ (cited in Sherif, 1975:98).

the first instance through a set of social relations that acknowledge and recognise bodily practices and performances as authoritative (Asad, 1993). The practices and relations of neighbourliness pursued by residents of the SSH squats reminds us that the storied narratives of lived religion are themselves disciplined by authorising structures but nonetheless contain within them (re)tellings of tradition both future and past.

For displaced people aspiring to freedom of movement and demanding commitment and empathy from those already resident to facilitate their right to move and right to stay, religious traditions take on urgent significance. Elsewhere, in conversation with David Scott, Asad tells us that traditions are often pushed onto new terrains:

“where parts or all of the tradition ceases to make sense and so needs a new beginning.

And looked at another way: with each new beginning, there is the possibility of a new (or “revived”) tradition. A new story about the past and future, new virtues to be developed, new projects to be addressed.” (Asad cited in Scott, 2006: 289-90)

Thinking about how traditions are susceptible to a re-encountering, re-calibration and re-assembling rather than simply a continuity of well-rehearsed beliefs and practices, holds open the distinctly dynamic possibility of traditions to transform and move in new and perhaps unexpected directions. The embodied cultural capital of displaced people on the move, or ways of ‘knowing how to go on’ (Bauman, 1993:164), learns to adapt as it “land[s] on pockmarked geographies” that are already “deeply rutted” (Levitt, 2012:165). Islamic traditions of neighbourliness are recalibrated to help address new projects of solidarity and resistance to

(b)ordering in the sanctuaries of Exarcheia's squats. Old stories of dispossession and dislocation are recounted anew in the perilous journeys undertaken by residents.

CONCLUSION

The untranslatability of terms such as squats can be found to apply equally to the ubiquitous use of the term solidarity. In Arabic the word translates to *tḍāmon*; iterating a notion of responsibilities reciprocated but more commonly used in the context of political discourse and international relations. Rather than use *tḍāmon* to describe squats they had helped produce, refugee residents articulated their rapidly changing and dynamic matrix of relationships with volunteers, self-labelled solidarity activists, and other refugees and migrants through idioms of fictive kin relationships and neighbourliness. In practice, this is a situated, embodied and relational sociality.

In the absence of support from the formal humanitarian architecture and the state, refugee residents of squats in Athens draw on collective and personal memories of both the village and the *hāra* - the urban neighbourhood street wherein understandings of conviviality, mutual aid, and neighbourliness are integral to longstanding socio-cultural traditions and everyday lived practices of Islam. This vernacular of solidarity, deeply penetrated in the everyday lives of people now displaced, found resonance and was made partially intelligible to local Greek activists. Echoing Antigone, migrant rights activists in Athens began to raise the ethics of kinship (imagined or otherwise) above the political demands of the state. In response to the crisis of austerity imposed by the Greek state and the European Union, they have extrapolated practices

of mutual aid found in the village - underscoring a “recontextualisation of village-hood” to locate new horizons of solidarity in the city (Rakopoulos, 2016:143).

This paper has sought to consider the sacred beyond institutionally sanctioned spaces of religion. It shows how practices and understandings of neighbourliness are important aspects of living a life in accordance with Islamic ethical precepts; a point oft-neglected and overlooked in analyses of the intersections of religion and migration where the emphasis has been on either Muslim as a category of identification or on institutional responses to displacement. A focus on neighbourliness interrogates binary assumptions between religious and secular space. Instead, we are directed to the relational character of the ethical self and the concomitant structures of feeling produced. Refugees and migrants bring with them an understanding of neighbourliness tied to claims to protection and assistance that has been eroded through the process of displacement and is now being reconfigured in emplacement. The self-care spaces of refugee squats in and around Exarcheia provide a particular perspective on what it means to be neighbourly.

This paper confirms neighbourly relations are not only social and interpersonal but are also shaped significantly by the built environment. The repurposing of public buildings and derelict hotels to provide accommodation for displaced people transiting through Athens afforded an opportunity to reconfigure the displaced outside of the discourse and symbolic markers of the formal humanitarian system. Rather than signified as simply refugees in need, the spaces and spatial practices produced by displaced people in Athens marks them as neighbours; present, visible, and resident. Recent moves by the Greek state to dismantle the infrastructure of the

commons underlines the fragility of neighbourliness; constraining possibilities and opportunities to realise an ethical relational self for displaced people in Athens.

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