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Feelings of Community and the Combat of Poverty

Though the theme of Skrabut's article is familiar (self-help housing in Lima), her approach on documentation and multi-dimensional notions of residency is original. Processes of land invasions by the poor and house-building in Lima and beyond are widely analyzed and discussed (Degregori, Blondet and Lynch 1986; Golte and Adams 1990; Matos Mar 1984, 2004; Moser 2009; Turner 1967). Most invasions of the 1960s–1980s were the result of organized action that required a profound preparation and subsequently the establishment of neighborhood organizations. The invasions in themselves already created a sense of community, which was strengthened by the defense of the territory against the legal owners (state, large landholder) and the enormous task of building the houses and the neighborhood. The origin of the neighborhood of Pachacútec, where Skrabut has done her ethnographic fieldwork, shows a different pattern.

As Lima's urban history shows, on a few occasions, the national government has given its support to the poor—and appropriated their grassroots energy, I add with some irony—by designating land for their self-help housing. Pachacútec is in part the result of such a state initiative and a relocation of an earlier invasion. The dwellers of Pachacútec did not have the overwhelming and uniting experience that an organized invasion may produce. They have either bought the land for a nominal fee or come from another area due to the mentioned relocation. This relocation received much media attention, which enthused many others to settle in Pachacútec or to claim a plot of land for future use. Meanwhile, different versions of land titles were distributed by various politicians and community leaders. In this context, residency has received specific, multidimensional meanings, which are being debated and struggled over constantly.

Residency is connected to doing and performing, especially regarding living and being active in the neighborhood. It is a practice that can be executed in different ways, such as participating in collective activities to obtain access to infrastructural necessities, even if the resident is not present in the neighbor-

hood full time. Owning titles to the plot and its construction is not always enough to be considered as a full resident, as it is subordinate to the moral rights people may have who actually live on a plot. For this reason, titleholders are not supposed to kick someone out who has invaded the plot. Being present is important, and that is why on the days that one of the many surveyors, who are often politically engaged, pass by to check if the house is occupied, people feel an urge to be at home. Residents do everything to obtain documents that show that they live in the house they claim to live in. Also, some inhabitants have more moral rights to live in Pachacútec than others. The deserving inhabitants are those who do not only show their material need for a house, but who additionally give proof of their community commitment and documentary acquisition. Those who cannot show their “doing living” nor documents become labeled as the undeserving poor or *turistas* who fail to perform residency in a convincing way. Skrabut sketches the sad story of a poor single mother who is very occupied in the communal kitchen. This voluntary work guarantees her food for her children and herself, but takes her away from her home for long hours during the day. For this reason, in the eyes of the community leaders, she is not performing residency enough. They are convinced she has a house elsewhere and are threatening to evict her.

Comparing Skrabut's study with my own work (see, e.g., de Waardt and Ypeij 2017), it comes to mind that this complex and at times contradictory set of notions of residency in Pachacútec is related to its specific origin and history. The neighborhood still suffers from a weak social fabric and should be considered as a community in the making. As my own research in Año Nuevo (located in Comas, Lima-North, and only a few miles away, as the crow flies, from Pachacútec) shows, a strongly knitted social fabric adds to feelings of security and community and—under certain circumstances—enables its residents to overcome poverty. Año Nuevo is the result of a huge, meticulously organized invasion in 1970, which took years of preparation. Nowadays, the neighborhood is consolidated with full infrastructure. Residency of the original invaders and their offspring has never been questioned. Many of the original neighborhood organizations are still active, such as the women's communal kitchens. The inhabitants almost all managed to obtain titles to the plots and their houses. Titles are important in the struggle against poverty, because they turn the plot and its construction upon it into a financial resource that can be sold or, partly, rented out (Moser 2009). The feelings of connectedness to the neighborhood become especially noticeable in the fact that the children and grandchildren of the original invaders live either in Año Nuevo or in an adjacent neighborhood. The invasion, the years-long grassroots work of building houses and infrastructure, has both produced a feeling of community and is securing the need for housing for already three generations. I am not promoting a romantic perspective here. In the daily practice of the neighborhood organizations and committees, power struggles over leadership positions and resources, hatred, and envy are as much part of the picture as solidarity, reciprocity, and feelings of

community. Nevertheless, the organized character of the invasion facilitated feelings of shared positionings and goals.

Several houses have two to three stories. Some are divided into separate apartments, with outside staircases, front doors, and occasionally separate electricity meters. To be sure, not all families have experienced this level of resource accumulation, but a noticeable number did. Since Peru's economic spurt of the last decade, these families can be considered to belong to the so-called new urban middle classes. Compared with *Skrabut's* study, the conclusion is tempting that—because of its specific origin—Pachacútec's social fabric is much more fragile and loose. This raises the question of whether its poor inhabitants will be able to combat poverty in the near future and reach a form of social mobility in the long run.