

Chapter 10

Seized by the Spirit. The Mystical Foundation of Squatting among Pentecostals in Caracas (Venezuela) Today

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Democracy is always a matter of temporizing. It cannot be conceived of without this continual obligation to take the time—to develop proposals, to discuss the possible outcomes, to persuade, to implement decisions. Democratic power is always exercised more slowly than individual authoritarian power. Thus democracy must remain patient. even at those times when it encounters, more or less fortunately, the media's haste.

—Sylviane Agacinski, *Time Passing: Modernity and Nostalgia*

“Our God is a Living God,” or “we do not believe *in* God, we believe God.” The Pentecostal squatters in Venezuela’s capital city, Caracas, among whom I have recently done fieldwork, voice these and other related statements often to distinguish their own brand of spirituality from that of other religious communities across Venezuela. Although I originally found what the squatters said somewhat puzzling, their statements soon began to resonate powerfully with what I had first observed during the initial moments of fieldwork, namely, the strange (at least to me), unexpected spectacle of these squatters illegally occupying—in the name, and on the behalf, of the Holy Ghost—an empty 12-story building located in what

was once a relatively posh, bohemian part of the city now teeming with informal commerce and all sorts of criminality.

A few initial encounters with the squatters sufficed for me to grasp the connection between the squatters' phenomenal spatial avarice and the notion of a "living God" instantaneously conveying His dictates to His squatter-people. This is a God, moreover, that one does not so much believe *in*, as if He was forever installed in some distant, invisible realm mediated by some visible image or authority. Rather, one believes *Him* as much as one believes or ought to believe a figure of authority that in the here and now tells you what to expect and what to do. If the Pentecostal squatters assert that you must "believe God" this is, indeed, simply because He, as a living, present deity, addresses you right now as a believer who, as such, is part of the community of the chosen, you better not merely believe *in* Him but *believe Him*, paying close attention to all that he tells you in the very moment that he speaks and you hear him. In what follows I hope to make clear that, at least in Venezuela, much of Pentecostal spirituality is precisely about obliterating the gap between God and his own creation so that, presumably, representation may give way to forms of religious presencing pregnant with all sorts of far-reaching, devastatingly efficacious worldly social and cultural effects.¹ Before, however, I simply will note that, given the connection between the squatters' spirituality and their spatial orientations, it is not all that surprising if the image of a hungry Holy Ghost gobbling vast stretches of the cityscape by means of the squatters' docile agency eventually seized my imagination. Such a ghostly apparition presides over much of what I write here.

Spirit Seizures

I credit the rapidity with which I gained some preliminary insight into the squatters' behavior to the very insistence with which they accounted for their actions in terms of the Holy Spirit's agency. A few examples will suffice to give an idea of the extent to which it is the Pentecostal squatters themselves who reflexively assume the link between the Holy Ghost's innermost designs and their own spatial agency.

One inheres in the insistence with which the squatters legitimate their illegal operations through appeal to transcendental grounds, claiming that whatever they seize is theirs "because God has given it to us." I cannot think of any more effective means to circumvent worldly property rights than the claim, drawn from the Bible, that "God is the owner of the entire world's silver and gold." Voiced constantly by the squatters, with syllogistic

necessity such a claim neatly assigns divine origins to all worldly property while rendering the squatters' rights to whatever they seize ever more unasailable. After all, if it is the Divine owner himself who hands something to *me*, a member of the community of the chosen, is then not such a thing *mine*—at least in trust? What could be a more compelling property right than one that originates in such a direct heavenly transmission from God to his People and away from the undeserving?² Given such premises, it is no wonder that the Pentecostal squatters inhabit a thoroughly miraculous economy, a sort of parallel universe where all sorts of portentous signs—from dreams, to uncanny voices and visions—impinge on believers as so many divine injunctions continuously tell them what to do.³

That it is a matter of doing, of a supremely action-oriented deity seizing across history His very own spatiotemporal creation through the agency of His third person Trinity filling like electricity the bodies of the faithful—the squatters speak of themselves as “vessels” to be filled by Spirit—should be clear from my second, final example. One day as I was driving Hermana Juana,⁴ the squatters' irresistibly charismatic leader, through the streets of Caracas, suddenly she turned away from the empty buildings she had been gazing at through her window and, briefly catching my eye, said: “You know, if we do not occupy spaces we do not receive blessings from the Holy Spirit.” What better indication of a divinely inspired logic of spatial occupation spiraling out of all possible control in a limitless series of seizures, acts of more or less violent appropriation, to which there is no foreseeable limit? Does not this statement insinuate a religiously imbued, unbridled logic of consumption that posits the space of the city, the nation, and even the world as fair game, an ever-expanding field for this logic's limitless self-extension? Lest anyone find fault with mentioning the Holy Ghost and such logic of spatial occupation in the same breath, so to speak, let me say that none other than Hegel himself once spoke of the relation between the three persons of the Trinity as the mode whereby God dialectically seizes or spatiotemporally takes hold of his own creation across history. Thesis, antithesis, and synthesis: according to Hegel it is through these persons' interactions that God self-relates by constantly bringing back to Himself, the originating source of all things, His own creation that had become detached from Him throughout history.⁵

If the Holy Ghosts' ongoing, active reclamation, for and on behalf of God, of the spaces of His own creation may be characterized as limitless, then this is due to the limitlessness of the spatiotemporal flight whereby, since the Fall and on account of their sinfulness, men and women detach the world away from the Father. Ultimately extending to the whole of creation, it is due to such a postlapsarian metonymic flight from one object and space to the next that the third person Trinity has His task cut out for

Himself. Faced with such a predicament, Spirit, in other words, cannot but intervene *in* the world or, what comes to the same, in the spatiotemporal manifold so as to constantly reclaim and return it to its originating source and foundation.

When Hermana Juana told me that in order to “receive blessings” from the Holy Spirit she and the other Pentecostal squatters must “occupy spaces,” she was simply voicing the extent to which her own and the other Pentecostal squatters’ agencies overlap with that of the Holy Ghost to the point, indeed, of both being one and the same. It is precisely such an overlap that the squatters have in mind when, in line with all other Pentecostals, they insist on their self-proclaimed status as mere “vessels” or conduits of the Holy Spirit, with no independent will or agency of their own. Given such a folk theory of the person as a sheer empty medium available to the designs of the deity,⁶ it is little wonder that such expressions as “I was used by the Holy Spirit” or “the Father used me” are uttered so often among the squatters. They use such phrases to signal God’s exclusive hand in some singularly momentous or delicate matter over which they claim no special responsibility, for example, a miraculous healing or, as happens to be the case, the occupation of the Yaracuy building followed in short succession by the seizure from its Portuguese owner of a relatively large shoe factory in the building’s basement or garage. Such expressions unambiguously convey how much the squatters view their illegal activities not as “theirs” but the Father’s. In other words, in the squatters’ understanding, they are merely the docile instruments that the Holy Spirit “uses” to occupy and repossess those spaces away from the undeserving.

But the peculiarly aggressive spatiotemporal tendency of the squatters’ religious practices as forms of seizure and occupation of spaces hitherto held by others is not only present in these *invasiones* or *tomas*, as they are called in Venezuela, although these disclose such a tendency in a singularly dramatic fashion. It is, for example, evident in the processions that Hermana Juana orchestrated on several occasions with the aim of reclaiming, in all its filth, messiness, and chaos, the Boulevard of Sabana Grande for Christ. I remember catching my breath while trying to keep up with her, single-mindedly walking straight ahead of me on one of the long avenues parallel to the boulevard with a small group of Pentecostal sisters lagging a few steps behind. With their long, colorful skirts adding a somewhat anachronistic touch to the surrounding cityscape of street vendors, dilapidated storefronts, occasional manic honking, and slightly amused passersby, Hermana Juana and the other sisters made a remarkable sight.⁷ Seemingly oblivious to anything going on around her, she accompanied her walking with the staccato recitation of a series of barely inaudible formulas. These amounted to so many invocations of the Father to “take out”

the Evil One from one object or place to the next so that He could repossess them all. Every once in a while *Hermana Juana* would rapidly extend either her left or right hand to touch one or another object, briefly pausing while slightly inclining her whole body forward as if to use her weight to push her powerful words right into the wall, phone booth, or lamp post she was passing.

In line with the belligerent overtones of Pentecostalism everywhere, for which the Manichaean battle between God and the Devil is a structuring force immanent in the most diverse religious practices, what *Hermana Juana* and the sisters sought to accomplish with this kind of procession was straightforward enough: namely, chasing the Devil from the boulevard while turning it into “Christian territory” freed from all the un-Christian practices and commodities so prevalent in the area.

“Blessed, Prosperous, and Victorious”

The sheer excitement and energy that filled the air each time the possibility of a new seizure arose give an idea of the consuming desires that render the squatters as subjects of a certain lack—one that can be filled only momentarily by adding yet another space to a list that keeps serially expanding. Discernible in the many frantic comings and goings, and in the mischievous smiles, quick glances, knowing looks, and hushed words the squatters hastily traded among themselves, such outbursts of enthusiasm were clearly in excess of any utilitarian calculation of needs. Indeed, they betrayed a subjective disposition for which ceaselessly seizing or occupying space after space is clearly an end in itself.

The places the squatters considered seizing ranged from the small businesses located on the ground floor of the *Yaracuy* building, including a relatively large restaurant, a pub, and an electric appliance shop, to a series of unoccupied buildings, private homes, and, even an abandoned hospital on the coast far away from Caracas filled with bats and hundreds of rusting metal beds. As for those other spaces that *Hermana Juana* and her daughter *Nivea* had already seized with the help of the other squatters before I arrived among them, the list includes part of the ground floor of what at some point was a bank in another part of the city away from *Sabana Grande*, the *Yaracuy* building itself, and a shoe factory located in what used to be this building’s garage. The latter the squatters occupied with the purpose of turning it into a storage place where, for a price, the informal merchants of *Sabana Grande* could store their goods at night.

Highlighting how much a capitalist logic of increase is, from the start, intrinsic to the economic relations between the Three Divine Persons there is a strictly Hegelian way of talking about the quintessential Christian mystery of the Trinity that throws light on how the squatters' religiosity possibly relates to their ceaselessly seizing proclivities. Thus, according to Mark Taylor, Hegel's speculative system—for whom the Incarnation prefigures “the self-reflexive structure of the Absolute Idea”—“prepares the way” for later accounts of capitalism, such as Marx's, where the structural parallels between God and money are distinctly brought out. This is so because, already in Hegel and very much in line with the “economic” structure of his system, Spirit behaves as a universal currency or equivalent that, much like money for Marx, mediates between thoroughly heterogeneous dimensions. Thus, while Spirit mediates between the Son and the Father or the “particular” and the “individual” throughout history, continuously bringing a fallen creation back to its originating source, so too, as their universal equivalent, does money for Marx mediate among heterogeneous commodities. Furthermore, it does so within an economic circuit that, much as in the case of religion or speculative philosophy, amounts to a circle always closing or returning to itself. In line with such an understanding, if God, as both “interior” to and “outside” every system of exchange and hence “omnipresent,” is “money in more than a trivial sense,” then money, and, by extension, capitalism are quite metaphysical entities. It is precisely on account of such a momentous convergence between religious and economic structures that, as much in capitalism as in Christianity, “immaterial structures are constitutive of ostensibly material realities” (Taylor 1999, 157–158).

It is important to realize here that whether in the case of God, the Absolute, or Money, the universal equivalent embodies excess. To stay with the economy for a moment, it is clear that money can only behave as the universal equivalent of a welter of heterogeneous commodities on the basis of a “surplus” that, beyond the production of use values or the mere satisfaction of immediate needs, calls for the realization of exchange (*ibid.*, 158). In turn, when money evolves historically into its “most developed form” of capital, with exchange value taking off from use value, “growing wealth” becomes “an end in itself.” In other words, as “the self-reflexivity of the exchange process becomes clear,” “exchange value posits itself” as such “only by realizing itself [that is], increasing its value” in a process that is, in principle, limitless (160). It is at this point that the Spirit of Christianity and that of capitalism fuse into a single, spectral agency poised to take over the world.

One night in the summer of 2006, *Hermana Juana* asked me if I could drive her and two sisters from the building to inspect some abandoned

dwellings in an upper middle-class residential area of the city. With her and the two other sisters intently gazing through the windows at one relatively lightless house after another, trying to identify whether or not they were actually abandoned, I remember slowly cruising in my jeep through the dark, quiet streets and avenues of the upper middle-class neighborhood thinking to myself that a taboo was being broken in my presence. It was as if, seized by the (neoliberal) spirit of a certain capitalism, I was about to witness the sisters moving into a brave new world that, thus far, had eluded the grasp of the Prosperity Gospel to which, in all of its incremental possibilities, they are so religiously devoted—a Gospel, I might add, for which endlessly consuming commodities, accumulating wealth, or seizing territory are nothing less than “ends in itself.”⁸

A Haunted Landscape

At this point one may wonder about the kind of circumstances under which these events can be possibly happening. Because even if it is true that Spirit has a tendency to wander, unimpeded by any material obstacles, when it is no longer a matter of simply moving about with supine disregard for all worldly partitions but of actually seizing vast chunks of space the material and the spiritual can no longer be separate. They must, that is, once again enter into a mutually contaminating commerce where neither can be said to emerge unscathed. Here this means mostly two things. One, it means that, eager to carry out its designs while obviating all “religious” mediations, under such circumstances Spirit passes directly into matter, availing itself of a wide panoply of bodies and other material implements—guns, crowbars, or hammers—capable of bringing down whatever obstacles crosses its path. It also means that when this occurs, the material world itself fills with Spirit swelling with the powerful, aggressive winds that swiftly course through it, blowing right from above.

As Michel de Certeau has argued for Reformation and Counterreformation Europe, for Spirit to be able to so thoroughly do away with all religious and political institutional mediations these must have already been considerably weakened by debilitating circumstances. Only then, in all of its power, can Spirit blow right through the living, directly imprinting itself on the body of the believers (de Certeau 1995). If in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was the melting away of the world’s institutions and partitions that paved the way for the Spirit’s coming, something similar happened recently in Venezuela. Briefly, it all has to do with the establishment of the Chávez regime in 1999 following

an acute economic crisis made more critical by the implementation, 10 years earlier, of a program of neoliberal structural adjustment imposed by the International Monetary Fund that issued in the delegitimation of most forms of cultural and political representation. Finally, bereft of all credibility, under the impact of President Chávez's polarizing rhetoric as well as the policies of his administration, which were bent on replacing what is left of the country's liberal institutions with a direct democracy focused on the President, such representational forms have in recent years almost thoroughly washed away. In retrospect such an outcome was something of a foregone conclusion considering the extent to which Venezuelan representative institutions relied upon the paternalistic ability of political parties and other institutional instances to clientelistically channel resources to the poor in exchange for loyalty and various forms of support. Given such cultural and institutional premises, it is not surprising that, precipitated if not necessarily caused by the imposition of the International Monetary Fund program, the nation's dire predicament eventually resulted in the thorough delegitimation and virtual collapse of Venezuela's representative democracy.

Avatars of the One

These were auspicious circumstances for the emergence of both a political outsider like Chávez and the kind of Pentecostal spirituality that concerns me here. Armed with a new constitution and informed by a virulently totalizing Bolivarian political theology, since it came into power in 1998 in the wake of general elections that President Chávez unexpectedly won by a devastating margin, his regime seeks to make *tabula rasa* of every existing circumstance while founding anew all aspects of the nation, from the national assembly to workers' unions, neighborhood organizations, and the universities. Permeated by a fundamentalist nationalist ideology, Chávez's secret organization, the MBR200, sought to regenerate the nation's decay by returning the nation to the teachings of its founding fathers, especially those of Simón Bolívar, father of the fatherland. So much so, indeed, that collapsing time and space while obviating all representative instances, Chávez often parades as the medium through which, in "real time," the Spirit of Bolívar instantaneously reaches, so to speak, "live" Venezuelans from the past.

With its born-again emphasis, Pentecostal spirituality aims for no less radical beginnings: a primeval condition in which, with all mediating, representative religious instances gone, Spirit may once again directly seize

the body of the believers and, through them, the larger world that has temporarily become detached from the deity. Through aggressive processes of recentralization, in both intimately related cases it is all a matter of bringing a stranded world back to the One as its single originating source and foundation, regardless of whether such a One is called the Holy Ghost or Bolívar with Chávez parading as mouthpiece.

A History of Violence

As for the world that such a morphing One so jealously and, ultimately, I believe, hopelessly reclaims, constantly “negating itself... either... by limitlessly multiplying itself, or... by turning itself into nothing” (Nancy 2004, 110),⁹ let me return to the beginning to give a sense of just how ravaged it is—that is, to the double set of doors of the Yaracuy building, which I repeatedly ran up against during the first few days of fieldwork before being allowed inside. Passing through these doors into the building is not in any way akin to entering some reclusive “inside”; rather than any hidden depths, what one meets “inside” is the most unflinching “outside.” Indeed, whatever lies “inside,” from broken elevator in the lobby to the stairs leading through the mezzanine and a series of floors all the way up to the “penthouse,” bears the unmistakable traces of the “outside” reality that one presumably leaves behind, in the streets, when entering the building.

Simply climbing the main stairs of the building all the way up to the “penthouse” suffices to confirm what I say. Everywhere the heavily locked doors of the apartments, often secured with thick chains or reinforced with heavy metal planks, bear testimony to how fragile the boundaries between “inside” and “outside” are within the building. The same can be said of the groups of apartments barricaded behind some impromptu common gate that blocks the corridor and that one must necessarily trespass before reaching any one of them. All of this mutely yet eloquently speaks to a recent history of violence, of forced entries, sieges, and seizures, and to the corresponding countermeasures undertaken to set the balance straight.

Indeed, as I eventually found out, during the months immediately preceding my arrival, a true reign of terror had taken hold of the building, leading to several violent deaths and the temporary forceful eviction of the squatters by the police. It all had to do with warfare between rival squatter bands, one of which forced itself into the building armed with guns, machine guns, and other deadly weapons only minutes after *Hermana Juana* and her largely evangelical following had seized the place.¹⁰ Such

rivalries are not unprecedented in a city and nation that in recent decades have experienced a dramatic informalization not just of the economy, with over more than half of the available jobs going to the informal commercial sector, but also of all forms of social intercourse, which increasingly overflow the normative channels and forms of authority that, in the past, had more or less precariously contained them. If to all this one adds a housing crisis of terrifying proportions, made worse by the geologic instability of the lands around Caracas, then the scene is set for the kind of confrontation I have been describing.

To see why it suffices to focus briefly on Sabana Grande, where the Yaracuy building stands, an urban area where informal commerce and all sorts of criminality coexist. Picture this area as a long boulevard fed by parallel streets covered by an unimaginable profusion of precariously erected stalls packed against each other with only the barest space for pedestrians to fight their way through a labyrinth of paths, and where day in and day out, rain or shine, myriad street vendors peddle a bewildering variety of services and goods amidst the enveloping soundscape—a deafening roar where evangelical sermons and songs, rap and salsa music are synchronously blasted from loudspeakers everywhere—and you will have an idea of the place. To say that such a sea of informality is largely beyond the reach of most representative institutions or institutionalized forms of authority is to immediately conjure a shady world where an array of criminal or semicriminal elements and networks fill the void partially left vacant by older forms of ordering. Bribing their way with different officials, it is these criminal elements that, especially in the boulevard's most profitable areas, discharge some of the functions hitherto incumbent on the state; among these, maintaining a modicum of peace among the different vendors or, through intimidation and beatings, keeping a tight control over large numbers of stalls, charging the individual vendors for their daily use while adjudicating over who at any time does or does not have the right to occupy a given spot on the boulevard.

Anyone's ability to wrest an ever meager subsistence from these deteriorating circumstances, marked by a relentless even if not always overt struggle over territory, is continuously lessened by the increasing competition provoked by the growing numbers of those swelling the economy's informal sector. But beyond economic considerations, I do not think that one even begins to take stock of the lives of this people other than through some kind of empathetic understanding that allows one to somehow sense or imagine what it is to go on fending off dispossession without ever letting go of the need to watch over one's place of work, which at any time may be gone, occupied by another, or, in what amounts to a constant search for an ever-elusive dwelling, without worrying sick about keeping a roof over

one's head at night. A true crossing of the desert, as witnessed by the many stories, signs, uncanny voices, or visions that proliferate among the Pentecostal squatters around this traumatic absence of home, such a quest raises the whole issue of the dwelling from physical to metaphysical proportions.

It is from such a world and otherworldly visions that *Hermana Juana* rose as some Moses-like figure ready to lead her squatter-people into the Promised Land of the building. The comparison with Moses is entirely hers, not mine, as well as the insistence on assimilating the building to a Promised Land overflowing with rivers of milk and honey. Her life before seizing the *Yaracuy* as the quasi-millenarian leader of a relatively large following of mostly Pentecostal squatters is not unlike that of many living in Caracas' poor neighborhoods: a continuous struggle to merely stay afloat where charm, cunning, hard work, or, in the case of *Hermana Juana*, an obvious native intelligence along with considerable entrepreneurial skills barely suffice to keep the head above water.¹¹

When *Hermana Juana* seized the *Yaracuy*, she did so as the hub of a concentric network of alliances among individuals and families formed over time, mostly around the many Pentecostal churches that increasingly dot the poorer neighborhoods of Caracas. Such groupings are what spontaneously forms in a sociality like Venezuela's that, in the wake of a failing institutional network, increasingly looks like a landscape of new tribes. It is not, therefore, surprising if minutes after *Hermana Juana* and her Pentecostal following seized the building, a rival band of heavily armed squatters showed up at the gates, threatening to shoot everyone in sight unless immediately allowed into the building. From the squatters' many retellings of this incident and its aftermath, a disturbing scenario emerges of two rival "peoples" crashing head on, each more or less fleetingly summoned into being by rival forms of sovereignty or alternative politico-theological regimes—a phenomenon that is highly symptomatic of the fates of sovereignty in Caracas today as well as of the mutations that a construct like "the people" is presently undergoing there.

What followed the two consecutive seizures by the rival bands of squatters were months of intense fear and uncertainty, of clandestine meetings in the Pentecostals' apartments with members of this camp secretly fabricating weapons, including rudimentary hand guns, in order to fight their oppressors, something that they eventually did, as well as plotting in hushed voices about what to do next; and armed patrols coursing the corridors throughout the night, often banging in deafening succession on their doors, awakening them with the occasional gun to the head, all to summon such a godly bunch at godless hours to perform the most menial of tasks, for example, washing the building's main stairway clean as rivers

of water released by the armed thugs from the penthouse flowed downward through the Yaracuy's stairs. And all of this punctuated by rumors, shouting, or the string of ominous threats, say, of point blank execution or rape confronted by the occasional "hallelujah" or "Christ loves you" from the Pentecostal camp that, occasionally, some of them cannily shouted at their oppressors in the theatrical attempt to, momentarily, turn the tables around until some more conclusive means were mustered to permanently redress the situation in their favor.

The leadership of the building never directly incriminated themselves with regard to the killings, yet widespread talk of "Christian warriors" brought by the Pentecostals themselves into the building from far away *barrios* during the worst moments of the conflict between the rival camps intimate God's hand in the matter, as well as the extent to which, in all of what happened, the Pentecostal squatters were not so much believing *in* Him as heeding His commands. In case there were any doubts about the killings' Christianity, the frequency and conviction with which Hermana Juana and the rest appealed to the Bible, either invoking the text's canonical beheadings or, if not, reveling in those passages where, trumpets in hand, Joshua and his followers bring the walls of Jericho down, surely served to dispel them. In yet another indication of the Bible's prodigious encoding capacities, not the least due to its condition as a vast repository of many gory deeds, Hermana Juana and the other Pentecostals seamlessly linked the building's bloody killings to God's overall design to repossess His creation. Or, as they often put it while significantly drawing a finger across their throats, "you know what happens when anyone messes with a Pentecostal."

Nor is it as if in and of themselves the killings were devoid of all Christian pathos or significance. One of the stories that the squatters like to tell is of one of the *sicarios*—as hired killers are called in Venezuela—refusing to die while being shot at one, two, three, many times from above. All along, according to the squatters, this *sicario* simply stayed seated in the pool of his blood while twitchingly taking the bullets that, one after the other, someone fired at him in succession. The bloody mess did not, however, get in the way of Hermana Juana's daughter trying to discharge her Christian duties. In one more manifestation of the logic of increase inherent in the Prosperity Gospel practiced by the squatters, all throughout the event she greedily urged the dying man to surrender to Christ, thus adding yet one more soul to His Harvest. As one would expect, with all the twitching involved, to do so was farthest from the man's mind, or that, in any case, is what not without some perverse humor several of the squatters told me, clearly attuned to the slapstick comedy possibilities of the incident.

Mystical Foundations

This, then, is the kind of reality to which in recent years both the Holy Ghost and Chávez have arrived; ever since these two related arrivals occurred, it has definitely been show time in Venezuela. Leaving aside for the moment both the media and Chávez, what I wish to underscore here is that it is from the very depths of the squatters' dispossession that the most extreme form of possession, that is, by God Almighty himself, is insistently called forth. As the Pentecostal squatters put it while not always convincingly insisting in their total fearlessness amidst their utter vulnerability, it is all a matter of "standing firm on the rock of Christ" allowing Him amidst all of the world's sinfulness and fears to do battle for oneself. Such a dramatic turnaround brings to mind Racine's play *Athalie*, where the character Abner exchanges the dangers and fears of this world for "fear of God" as that "supplemental fear" that is "more frightening than all earthly fear." According to Slavoj Žižek, in Lacan's understanding such an exchange retroactively renders these "fears into a perfect courage" while turning Abner from an "unreliable zealot" into "a firm, faithful adherent sure of himself and of divine power" (1991, 16–17).

What Lacan says about Abner may also be said about the Pentecostal squatters who, by standing firm on Christ's unmovable rock, land on the very "mystical foundation of authority." As analyzed by Derrida, it is on such grounding that every higher authority rests as an originary "violence," a "mystical foundation" that cannot be legitimized. This is just to say that lawlessness lies at the very source of the law as a violent, ineffable origin that, while inaugurating the law, nevertheless exceeds both the law and the logos itself. (Derrida 2002, 228–298). Silently trapped inside the law, it is such an unaccountable, embarrassing excess that nonetheless enables the law to be the law or legislate the world's manifold, hybrid realities, the myriad disappropriations of the proper, as so many seemingly self-possessed, self-identical entities, an outcome to which violence, of one or another sort and of a greater or lesser degree, is by no means irrelevant.¹² Given the depth of the Pentecostal squatters' disappropriation, it is not surprising if it is not just violence but its highest form, Divine Violence, which they enlist in their attempt to repossess the world in the name and on behalf of the Holy Ghost.

Even if their circumstances may seem dramatically different, the squatters nevertheless live in the same fallen world as we do. Much as in any other, in such a world "the religious" names the ineradicable trace of ideality and transcendence that, always in excess of the world, must nevertheless intervene *in* the world if some enduring experiences and entities are,

through repetition, to be temporarily wrested away from this world's many losses and disappearances. While the violence of such a religious force may be more or less, amounting as it does to the sovereignty of the Holy Ghost seizing or repossessing through them the fallen world that has become stranded from the Godhead, the religious force that takes hold of the squatters' minds and bodies could not be more excessive and violent. In its excessiveness, such a force is minimally equal to the squatter's equally excessive, radical disappropriation.

It is not just, then, that as a result of such a possession the squatters are seized by the Spirit; through them, such a Spirit literally seizes everything on which these squatters have either put their hands or fantasize so doing, from buildings and shoe factories to beer pubs, restaurants, abandoned hotels, shops for electric and electronic appliances, and so on, in a list that is potentially infinite. Even if I might have suggested otherwise it is not, however, as if a recalcitrant world no longer posed any limits to the Holy Spirit's repossessing designs so that, availed of this Ghost's founding power and authority, the squatters were free to possess whatever they wished without any worldly obstacles ever crossing their path. If that were so, the Pentecostal squatters would be some kind of superpower irrepressibly swallowing all of reality, which clearly they are not. In their repossessing spatial practices the squatters constantly brush against the law. This is just to say, first, that no matter how weakened, the Venezuelan state still has some coercive powers of its own, and, second, that regardless of their ambitions, as God's chosen people the squatters have yet to step out of the desert like some self-sufficient, sovereign power; far from such a Leviathan-like condition, as exposed and vulnerable as ever, they rather insist on their harsh circumstances, ignorant for the most part of what such a Promised Land would be like.

Ghostly Possessions

If there were any doubts about the squatters' vulnerability, these were dispelled in the wake of the murders when, sweeping through all the apartments, police forces temporarily evicted them from the building while stealing all of their possessions, from TVs, radios, and VCRs to refrigerators, beds, and other household appliances. When a few days later the squatters were officially authorized to reenter their apartments, they returned to empty floors and walls, stripped bare of what was there before an experience that, dramatically so, made once again explicit the very dis-possession that, in their inability to hold to anything for too long, is

endemic to their existence. Albeit in a more extreme police register, such an experience simply replayed the myriad humiliations, dispossessions, and losses, the sense of constantly having to start anew from scratch, which forms the fabric of their every day.¹³

This, I suppose, is one of the reasons why the squatters repeat so often that “even if we are in this world, we’re not of this world.” Because, including the seizure of the Yacucy, which, given its illegality, at any time may be undone by the state, the sovereign acts that the Holy Ghost perpetrates through the mediation of the squatters unfold in a kind of parallel universe. A phantasmatic double of the “real” world as it is defined by normative expectations, symbolic affiliations, and existing power relations, from movies to rap songs, ideally, at least, in such a religiously inflected realm everything that is of this world must have its “spiritual” counterpart in the other, hence the profusion of “Christian” CDs and DVDs that one can find serially displayed in the stalls of informal traders or *buhoneros* specializing in this kind of commodities. Trying to attract a clientele these *buhoneros* often blast the music of their religious CDs through loudspeakers or, if not, show their Christian DVDs to an absorbed audience of onlookers on the TV sets that they often keep in their stalls. I submit that doubleness is an attribute not just of the “Christian” commodities that the squatters endlessly acquire; it marks everything that they do or seize on behalf of the Holy Ghost or, better yet, that such a Ghost seizes through them, imbuing with spectrality, as not quite of this world, every worldly thing, good, place, or space on which they put their hands.

Showtime

Given how promiscuous the exchanges between “religion” and the “electronic media” are in our times, it is not surprising that whenever the Holy Ghost arrives through the squatters to such a radically dispossessed world, He does so in fully televisual terms (see also de Abreu in this volume). Arriving to the bodies of the Pentecostal squatters, so to speak, in “real time,” such a televisual possession goes a long way to account for these squatters’ sense that, as opposed, for example, to the Catholics’ “dead” deity, theirs is a “living God” instantaneously conveying His messages and dictates to His squatter-people.¹⁴ Indeed, swiftly seizing the bodies of the believers as “vessels” through which to reconnect with the living, whether in tongues or the vernacular, the Holy Ghost’s messages and dictates directly erupt in broad daylight to more or less sensationalist effects, and often in the television studio-like stage of the various Pentecostal churches

that the squatters attend every Sunday. To give a sense of the televisually inflected character of the public sphere that is so sensationally brought about through the intimations of Spirit, it suffices to cast a brief glance at any of these Sunday services in downtown Caracas' Monarchical Church. Attended by crowds of believers, these services are part of the "Prosperity Gospel" that, more and more throughout Venezuela, places spirituality and material gain in a strict means-end relationship, so much so that, among the squatters, the question "how are you?" is often answered with a resounding "blessed, prosperous, and victorious," a set phrase that poignantly conveys the acquisitive and belligerent overtones of their brand of Christianity.

Something noticeable about the services is how little they respect the separation between audience and stage that authors like Lyotard and others regard as requisite to the constitution of representation or the representative relation.¹⁵ In the Monarchical Church, no one really represents anything; there is seemingly no gap or temporal delay separating the representative from the represented, safely kept at a distance in their place, patiently waiting for the proceedings to end. Instead, in this televisual context everyone is bent on directly presenting live the power of Spirit bursting among those present through their talking, singing, laughing, trembling, jumping, or uncontrollable sobbing. It begins with the audience on their feet, their arms raised high like a forest of swaying, vibrating antennas, thus ready to receive the gift of the Holy Ghost descending among them right from the stage where, clad in black, the pastor thunderously preaches. From that moment on, all precarious distinctions start to break down. As a large part of the "audience" moves onto the stage, a ritual battle unfolds there in which, from demons to deity, everything that once was either distant or hidden is instantaneously revealed. In principle invisible, such hitherto unavailable dimensions break into the open through forms of disclosure or revelation that unceremoniously break down any separations between "private" and "public" domains or the "represented" and the "representative" that formerly were more or less precariously in place.

"Everything that is hidden must be revealed;" this is how Hermana Juana responded this past June to my horrified reaction to the Venezuelan attorney general's words on national television concerning a prominent priest found killed in his hotel room in Caracas. Insisting that the priest had "participated in his own death," the government official publicly disclosed the state of the priest's most intimate viscera, revealing to a national audience that his "rectum had been mistreated" and that a "condom was found stuck in his anus." These horrific homophobic words are part of the Chávez regime's attempt to discredit one of its most staunch

internal enemies, the Catholic Church. But beyond this contingent political motivation, such a public explosion of viscerality is, I believe, closely related to similar instances where President Chávez and members of his government have introduced into public discourse references and expressions that hitherto had been rigorously confined to the realm of the private. Such “intimate publicities,” as I call them elsewhere, have become routine in Venezuela (Sánchez 2006, 401–426). One could cite a number of these nefarious, homophobic, or misogynous instances, rich with exposed viscerality, such as statements by President Chávez on national television joking about sodomizing his enemies in the upcoming general elections. One, however, stands out: the words by one government official on a television program who, asked to comment on a female politician who at the time Chávez had just named his vice president, answered by jokingly cautioning his audience about never trusting “an animal that bleeds monthly and does not die” (*El Nacional*, 11 October 2000).

One does not begin to grasp these instances in their significance as public explosions of viscerality, bodiliness, and, generally, the hidden and the intimate unless one takes stock of the breakdown of representation and the representative relation as it, for example, takes place in the Pentecostal service that I have alluded to before. As I argue elsewhere in reference to Venezuela, a sealed bourgeois sphere of political representation gathered around specularity and the eye and protected by protocol and secrecy was erected in both Europe and North, Central, and South America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as an inherently violent means to defuse the violence and terror of the revolutionary wars then raging on both sides of the Atlantic (Sánchez 2004).

Fuelled by universal skepticism and subjected to the kind of “media’s haste” of which Sylviane Agacinski speaks in the epigraph to this chapter, the current withdrawal of such a separate, relatively self-contained sphere of political representation, no longer protected by secrecy, signals the blurring of the demarcation between “private” and “public” domains, a return of bodiliness, viscerality, and the senses to center stage and, along with these, the generalization of violence that now colors all of sociality. Drawn into a globalized avalanche of digitally and electronically reproduced images and texts, with their penchant for obliterating any temporal gap or delay between events and their “live” presentation to the public, such a bourgeois sphere begins to give in, no longer is allowed the “temporizing” that, again according to Agacinski, is needed in order “to develop proposals, to discuss the possible outcomes, to persuade, to implement decisions” within a domain that is somewhat protected from the urgent demands, pressures, and instigations of the public (Agacinski 2003, 139).

Under such a relentless exposition and exposure, politicians must put their bodies—now increasingly rendered in all of their idiosyncrasies and quirks as sites of government in their own right—on the line and govern through constant polling, focus groups, plebiscites, and other such means that make them directly answerable to the whims and desires of the public. As celebrities and politicians are increasingly exchangeable, so too, the distinctions between “present” and “past,” “here” and “there,” or “private” and “public” domains become increasingly blurred in a media-saturated environment that renders the body into the tremulous site where, in all of its passionate immediacy, the intimations of a ghostly elsewhere are immediately registered and sensed. No longer protected by a series of representative instances that are either gone or currently undergoing a severe crisis, such a sentient, haunted body is, in other words, returned to the center of sociality and, much like that of the Pentecostals in the service that I briefly evoked a few pages ago, is increasingly delivered to a battle against demons. No wonder, then, if more and more around the globe, social life increasingly dissolves into mortal bodily combat, with a series of antagonistic interests and aspirations directly expressed and registered through the medium of the human body.

As witnessed by President Clinton’s cigar, the Abu Ghraib photographs, the Mark Foley scandal, or, even more recently and ominously, the digitally reproduced execution of Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, which bespeak the catastrophic intrusion of the “private” into the very heart of quintessential “public” institutions, recently all over the world such a protected bourgeois sphere has been emitting signs of a severe malaise. Occasioned by globalization and the proliferation of media of all kinds, from small to mass, one may detect in such a malaise signs of a universal withdrawal of the politico-theological, hounded by a bunch of dirty little secrets digitally reproduced and nearly uncontrollably disseminated by the media, a situation that, as with the Pentecostal squatters, does not come without both the wholesale spectralization of sociality and widespread violence¹⁶—this, along with the viscerality and bodiliness inherent in a collective life increasingly reduced to a sweaty hand-to-hand combat with politics dissolving into a series of discreet issues, all viscerally fought out on behalf of one or another “mystical” instance or authority. Dangerously bereft of those representational protective instances that in the past introduced a postponement or delay between the immediate expression of a series of conflicting passions and interests, focalized in the body, and their properly *political* negotiation in a sphere away from such a turbulent setting, such a collective life, in other words, increasingly looks like a series of disjointed battlefields where bodies meet and clash with one another.

One can learn something about how, and with what effects, such an uncanny mix of viscerality and religious violence happens by briefly focusing on what goes on during possession among the Pentecostal squatters. Much as in television with which such a spectral being is so conspicuously entangled, when the Holy Ghost seizes the body of one or another squatter, He arrives “live,” something that is evident from the profuse tears, singing, frothing, praising, shaking, and dancing that his invisible yet overwhelming presence *sensuously* draws from the believers. Coursing through what remains of the institutional assemblage, now hardly capable of representing or mediating the numinous, in His crusade to repossess the world such a living God places the body and bodiliness at the crossroads of a thunderous clash of forces on a mobile terrain where all territorial and social boundaries constantly shift. Bereft of all mediating institutional protections, in all of its vulnerability such a tremulous body is, in other words, increasingly delivered to a battle against demons. This, by the way, is one possible meaning of the return of bodiliness, not only to our academic attention but to the center of sociality, as well.

As the character of electoral campaigns all over the world increasingly shows, with most markers of distinction between the “public” and the “private” blurred, much of collective life increasingly looks like such a bodily spiritual battle. One good example is the poisonous campaign ads and right-wing blogs in the United States with their unmediated appeal to and exposure of a series of “lowly” bodily passions; another is the latest elections in Venezuela, troped by Chávez as a battle of the people against an opposition cast as the devil: posters figuring a wholesome people’s representative overwhelming a squeamish, stereotypically homosexual devil starkly made the point that, more and more, with the theologico-political retreating, politics is all a matter of filling one’s mouth with ugly, filthy words so as to momentarily recollect one’s dispersed forces to, yet again, go and demolish the enemy. The extreme polarization and extraordinarily close results of many elections around the world are, I believe, sure symptoms of such a widespread reduction of sociality to mortal bodily combat. Whether from the left or from the right, if something good is ever to come out from such an unsettling state of affairs, so redolent with viscerality, I simply do not know.

Notes

This is a reduced version of an essay published in *Public Culture* 20, no. 2 (2008). The research on which this chapter is based was carried out while I was a postdoctoral fellow in the research program on which this volume is based. Earlier versions

were presented at a conference at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, at the Anthropology Department of New York University, as a BOAS Lecture at Columbia University, at the Graduate Workshop of Anthropology of Latin America and the Caribbean (WALAC) at the University of Chicago, at the Anthropology Department of The Johns Hopkins University and at the Center for Contemporary Theory at the University of Chicago. I would like to thank the members of these audiences for their comments and questions. Adam Becker, Deborah Kapcham, Webb Keane, John Kelly Brian Larkin, Claudio Lomnitz, Birgit Meyer, Rosalind Morris, Nancy Munn, Emilio Spadola, Rupert Stash, and Paula Vásquez have generously read and commented on the paper at different stages of its development, for which I am most grateful. I also wish to thank here my wonderful research assistant Isabela Luján. Much of the paper was developed at New York University's Center for Religion and Media, where I was a Fellow in 2006, and completed while I was a Faculty Fellow at NYU's Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies. I would like to thank the directors of these two centers, Faye Ginsburg and Angela Zito, and Thomas Abercrombie, respectively, for their generosity and intellectual stimulation. As always, Patricia Spyer has provided invaluable intellectual and personal companionship. Finally, I owe an immense debt to the Pentecostal sisters, their families and followers with whom I work in Caracas.

1. Needless to say, what I have here in mind is not any "real" presence but the effect of such presence brought about by a wide range of digital and electronic technologies, especially television, that seemingly obliterate the difference between so-called real presence and its representation. See Samuel Weber 1996, 121, 161.
2. In line with the squatter's understanding, by "the undeserving," I mean all those *mundanos* or worldly, mundane beings that have not been baptized or "born again" in the Holy Spirit; that is, virtually everyone who is not a Pentecostal.
3. The literature on Pentecostalism grows at a pace that is hard to keep up with. I have found especially useful Corten and Marshall, 2001; Robbins 2004; Meyer 2004b; Stoll 1990; De Witte 2005b; Oosterbaan 2005. In general, for Venezuela the essays on Pentecostalism by David Smilde are especially insightful. For the bearings it has on some of the arguments in this chapter see especially Smilde 1998.
4. In order to protect the confidentiality of the Pentecostal squatters among whom I have done fieldwork during the past two years, all proper names have been changed.
5. For Hegel's treatment of the Christian Trinity see Hodgson 1988, 111–198, 417–432.
6. If that is what it is, given the squatters' borrowing in order to formulate their self-understanding of both person and agency from a globalized repertoire largely shared by Pentecostals everywhere.
7. For an illuminating study on this connection see Meyer 1999.

8. For a fascinating account of the connections between, on the one hand, Christian Fundamentalism generally, and, on the other, neoliberal globalization see Comaroff 2006. For a stimulating consideration of these issues see also Meyer 2005b.
9. Indeed, I believe that the intensity with which such a morphing One nowadays recurrently dissipates along a metonymic chain where images and things constantly slide from one to the next, without easily lending themselves to be comprehended by any totalizing instance, is key to understanding why it increasingly exhibits such extreme hyperbolic tendencies. In other words, the tendency with which, as a greedy "Holy Ghost," as "Bolívar" or, for that matter, as Bush's "Crusading Mission" such a One becomes monstrous, turned into an oversized spook agonically striving to swallow all of reality is, in my view, directly proportional to its helplessness vis-à-vis a globalized world that is ever more resilient to any and all such totalizing ambitions. In this respect, it is highly significant that the quintessential demonic, pagan "other" of Pentecostal Christianity in Venezuela is the Maria Lionza possession cult. Elsewhere I have written about this cult as a site where, possessed by television, the mediums irrepressibly slide along metonymic chains where, in any one session, they may become possessed by literally dozens of globalized spirits from "Vikings" and "Barbarians" to "Egyptian Pharaohs," "wild Indians," dead movie stars, and heroes from the Venezuelan Wars of Independence. See Sánchez 2001.
10. When Hermana Juana seized the Yaracuy building, sometime in 2003, she did so as the head of some 65 families, of which roughly half were Pentecostals. Calculating an average of 4 or 5 members per family, this would amount to somewhere between 100 and 150 Pentecostals in the building.
11. The image is not only metaphorical. Both the zone where Sister Juana used to live before seizing the Yaracuy building and the nearby Vargas state suffered in 1999 massive landslides, resulting in 1,000 officially confirmed dead, thousands disappeared, and 150,000 people displaced. For a fascinating account of the emergency generated by the 1999 mudslides and its management by the military, see Fassin and Vasquez 2005. See also Vásquez 2005, 2006.
12. For an insightful discussion of Derrida's "economy of violence" and its implications for the understanding of both political processes and the reformulation of cultural and political identities see Beardsworth 2000, 1–46.
13. This has been made quite evident in recent months when, at least for the time being, the Boulevard of Sabana Grande has been retaken by the state, clearing the whole area from informal merchants. Given how crucial the support from this informal sector is to the Chávez administration the long-term repercussions from such a state intervention still remain to be seen.
14. On televisual possession see Sánchez 2001.
15. For an insightful consideration of Lyotard's understanding of the notion of representation see Bennington 1988.
16. On the withdrawal of the Theologico-Political see Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1997, 122–142. In line with Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's arguments,

the chapter here should not be read as a nostalgic plea for the return of a theologico-political formation that nowadays seems irrevocably compromised. In the hope of aiding the search for democratic solutions to the current crisis of political representation, it merely aims to call attention to some of the more traumatic aspects and consequences of such a global crisis.