

COMMUNAL LIVING PROJECTS AND THE SUBVERSION OF CAPITALIST CONDITIONS

Right to Housing and Recognition and Redistribution of Care Work



Poster “For you, for me and for all my companions. Hurrah for the feminist strike”. Inner courtyard of the housing cooperative La Borda.

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Abstract

This thesis addresses the topic of the residential struggles, focusing on projects of communal living that aim to build forms of resistance and subversion of capitalist conditions.

The first part is dedicated to exposing how neoliberal logics deny the fundamental right to adequate housing, prevailing the logic of the market over the logic of use in the terrain of living spaces. Through an autoethnographic method, it constitutes an insight into my subjective experience of the so-called housing crisis in the Netherlands. In this context, I narrate my discovery of a specific case of intentional community in the city of Nijmegen, which serves as a conceptual bridge to the second part of the project.

The second part is thought as a possible step to take in this situation to fight the injustice derived from the current housing system. I explore a specific case study: the housing cooperative of La Borda, an ongoing initiative of communal living. Methodologically, this part draws on the elaboration of interviews to three of the current inhabitants of the living project. My research question concerns the potential of the communal living project of La Borda to challenge and replace -within the project- the conditions of capitalism. To delimitate this question, I reflect on it by considering two main factors: (1) to what extent the typology of this housing model challenges the commodification of the right to housing, and (2) to what extent care work is recognised as a primordial issue and distributed fairly.

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“The problem of precarious survival helps us see what is wrong.
Precarity is a state of acknowledgement of our vulnerability to others.

In order to survive, we need help,
and help is always the service of another, with or without intent.”

The Mushroom at the End of the World, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing

1. Introduction: motivation, concept, and plot behind this thesis

I write this MA thesis from the conviction that the knowledge that is produced within academia needs to be closely linked by -and even about- the quotidian struggles and forms of living that people engage with in their daily realities. In this sense, I always have in mind the famous claim “the personal is political,” popularized after the publication of an essay by Carol Hanisch with that title in 1969. In this line, feminist scholars have reclaimed the collective significance of the personal spheres of people's lives.

This thesis constitutes in itself a story built around the topic of housing, specifically about first-person struggles to find a living space and collective forms of resistance that are taking place in the present time in urban settings. The problematics around housing are present in a global level (Madden and Marcuse 2016) and are leading to precarious situations that make many lives unliveable while giving economic profits to housing companies, banks or individuals who own these living spaces.

As an MA student of gender studies, the story I want to tell gives another perspective to this social problematic: the topic of housing is placed on the centre to enlarge imaginaries about how can decent housing collectively be vindicated as a right and in what ways can a house become an activist and feminist sphere, subverting the privatisation and the gender dimension of care work. In order to approach these topics, I will acknowledge real initiatives that exist in this framework. But I asked myself: how to bring this type of knowledge to the level of theory?

I found inspiration in the view of Sara Ahmed (2010) who, influenced by black feminists and feminists of colour, vindicates another understanding of theory, emphasizing its political and quotidian dimensions. In this sense, speaking in the first person about her personal experience as a scholar, she affirms that:

I began to appreciate that theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin. I decided then: theoretical work that is in touch with a world is the kind of theoretical work I wanted to do. [...] The personal is theoretical. Theory itself is often assumed to be abstract: something is more theoretical the more abstract it is, the more it is abstracted from everyday life. To abstract is to drag away, detach, pull away, or divert. We might then have to drag theory back, to bring theory back to life (Ahmed 2017, 10).

Following Ahmed's conception about theory, the way theory is presented in this thesis is inspired by the works of some scholars in this line, such as *The Cancer Journals*, by Audre Lorde, *Depression as a Public Feeling*, by Ann Cvetkovich, or “When Death Cuts Apart: On Affective Difference, Compassionate Companionship and Lesbian Widowhood,” by Nina Lykke. Among many others, these contributions are

part of a feminist academic genealogy that radically breaks normative assumptions about theory, using their own lived experiences as the foundation for academic projects.

1.2. Research question and theoretical framework

This thesis deals with the current problematics surrounding housing. The first part is dedicated to exposing how the neoliberal logics deny this fundamental right, with the logic of the market prevailing over the logic of use in the field of living spaces. In other words, houses become sources of profit-making instead of being understood as a fundamental and basic human need. This frame produces “residential injustice” (Madden and Marcuse 2016) and reflects the structural “capital-life conflict” [own translation] (Pérez Orozco 2011, 33) that manifests ordinarily in concrete lives; the denial of the right to housing constitutes a clear instance of this violent tension.

The second part is thought as a possible step to take in this situation in order to fight the injustice derived from the current housing system. The exploration and analysis of the different struggles to claim the housing right would be too vast and beyond the purposes of this thesis. Based on my experience, I aim to zoom in on only one concrete path, exploring a current initiative of communal living that puts into practice another understanding of housing, not only as a place to live but also as a matter of activism.

It is essential to highlight that there is a wide range of initiatives that might fall under the notion of living in community (Jarvin 2011). I will focus on the present time in order to understand the contemporary social relevance of this phenomenon. Exploring this same dimension and highlighting the increasing emergence of types of communal life, Eliezer Ben-Rafael, Yaacov Oved, and Menachem Topel, editors of *The Communal Idea in the 21st Century*, ask: “Does the communal idea still have some message to convey to society? The issues underlying this question become acute in a world where alternative options to capitalism seem outdated” (Ben-Rafael et al. 2013, 1).

In an attempt to delimitate and give coherence to my project, I decided to focus exclusively on a case which takes place in the city in Barcelona and is motivated by the principles of social justice. It is the case of an entity called La Borda, which, as I shall explain further down, is a housing cooperative that practices an emerging housing model in the Spanish context. Traditionally, housing cooperatives in Spain were created with the strategic goal of reducing costs for their members. After the construction, the cooperatives were dissolved, and the flats were sold to members of the cooperative, who became their owners (Etzebarrea, Cano and Merino 2018, 62). Instead, the housing cooperative La Borda is not a transitional entity, but a permanent one, and this is for ideological reasons: it aims to practice a

common form of living that stands as an alternative to capitalist hegemonic values and dynamics. The fact that the community is built based on such political reasons is in itself a relevant aspect for my research: it is the engine that moves my curiosity to know more in depth about the different approaches to this reality. My main research question is the following: To what extent does this initiative function in an alternative way to the current capitalist conditions? To delimitate this question, I reflect on it by considering two main factors: (1) to what extent the typology of this housing model challenges the commodification of the right to housing, and (2) to what extent care work is recognised as a primordial issue and distributed fairly.

My case-study can fall within the meaning of the terms “intentional community” and “cohousing.” But how do I specifically define the meaning of these two concepts? As the political scientist Lyman Tower Sargent (2013) explains, the different attempts to theoretically determine what an intentional community constitutes are contradictory and they cannot be generally applied because intentional communities are a worldwide phenomenon that is hugely diverse and the projects identified within this term can present significant differences. Moreover, the collective nature of the initiatives adds another layer of complexity because communities “are inhabited by living, breathing human beings, each one with a different understanding of their own community” (Sargent 2013, 54). That is why establishing closed definitions of these denominations is not exempt from controversy.

Although he stresses these obstacles and, at the same time, believes that definitions must always be porous and open, Sargent finds relevant to explore possible definitions as a way of studying the phenomenon. He adopts an approach which I find particularly interesting for my project because, placing the subjectivities of the members of the communities at the centre—as I myself do in this thesis—, Sargent prioritises the vision of the people that are part of a community to determine whether they form or not an intentional community. In other words, what people think of themselves matters and, to be able to speak of communal living, it is essential that the people have the intent to live together and that, in this common inhabiting, some kind of communal functioning or activity takes place. In addition, Sargent also emphasises that the choice of living together is usually determined by some shared vision that motivates the creation of an intentional community. In this aspect, Sargent draws a connection between intentional communities and utopianism, clarifying that this form of social organization can be commonly thought of as a utopian space in which the members put into practice their shared ideas concerning an improvement of everyday life. In his own words:

Utopianism is concerned with the transformation of the everyday life but also directly confronts the fact that lives are wholes, that children, families, marriage, education, economics, politics, death, etc. are all connected. And intentional communities are particularly radical in that their members are willing to experiment with the transformation of their own lives. (Sargent 2013, 70).

Sharing Sargent's view, my interest lies in discovering how this utopian praxis takes places and transforms the experiences of the people that choose to live in this way.

Besides "intentional community", there is another term that is useful to get us closer to the reality that I am investigating, namely: "cohousing", which is a specific type of intentional community (Bamford 2001, 2) characterised by the combination of private households with extensive space and shared facilities. In this way, it is a model that pays close attention to the favouring of socialisation processes, while respecting the need for a private sphere. In their definition of cohousing, other scholars put the emphasis on the fact that these dwelling projects are collectively created and/or managed by the residents (Ruiu 2016; Tummers and MacGregor 2019).

The delimitation of my topic of study was not only motivated by the typology of the intentional community but also by the geographical location and context of my case. In this aspect, I chose to focus on a case that is set in Barcelona, the city where I grew and where the so-called "housing crisis"¹ has become an urgent issue.

1.3. Current state of academic literature in relation to the topic

The social geographer Helen Jarvis states that: "the lived experience of collective housing has been neglected and remains undertheorized" (Jarvis 2011, 562). This lack of attention is taking a reverse turn since a considerable number of scholars have recently dedicated their academic works to examine the implications of this form of social organisation (Sargisson 2012; Chatterton 2016; Daly 2017). Predominantly, these academic contributions underline the potentialities of these communal living initiatives, especially in terms of sustainability and social cohesion. Moreover, the topic of intentional communities has also attracted the attention of feminist thinkers (Hayden 1979; Vega-Solís and Martínez-Buján 2017) for its transformative promises with regard to achieving a fair redistribution of care work² beyond the traditional gender roles and its consideration as a private or individual issue that needs to be assumed by people socialised as women.

¹ For a discussion of the topic and clarification of the term "housing crisis", see: 3.1. Emancipatory desires and commodification of a right

² For a discussion of the topic and clarification of the term, see: 4.4. Caring "neighbours" or "the tribe"

The right to housing³ is a requirement to fulfil a broader human right to an “adequate standard of living” (Paglione 2006, 124). As the lawyer and philosopher Giulia Paglione (2006) highlights, this implies that the right is not fulfilled by the mere concession of physical space. Instead, the place must meet some requirements in order to be adequate: “If adequate housing is that which guarantees to its occupants a life of security, peace, and dignity, it can be inferred that every housing situation that does not provide for such conditions is not in line with the legal interpretation of the right to housing and therefore constitutes a breach of the right to housing itself” (Paglione 2006, 126). Paglione offers a critical analysis of the international legal framework to prove that the adequacy standards are established from a “biased and male-oriented interpretation of the right to housing” (Paglione 2006, 127) that does not contemplate the conditions inside the home: the relations between the people that share the living space. Incorporating the experience of people socialised as women suffering from violence in the domestic sphere, Paglione reinterprets the right to adequate housing, suggesting that gender-based domestic violence can be framed as a breach of this fundamental right.

In line with this perspective, the present thesis is not only centred on the question of material access to housing—this aspect is, of course, important, and it also occupies part of the discussion that I present here. Otherwise, inspired by Paglione's approach, the argument takes a broader dimension on analysing what kind of relationships take place in the domestic sphere. I consider that, from a feminist perspective, it is relevant to ask the following questions regarding adequate housing: Is care work distributed among the inhabitants? Who—and who does not—undertakes these fundamental tasks for life? In spite of all the transformative promises that are usually attributed to intentional communities in this sphere, professors Lydewij Tummers, architect, and Sherilyn MacGregor, expert in environmental politics (2019), alert that, in the available literature about cohousing, there is a “troubling silence” (Tummers and MacGregor 2019, 64) about the real distribution of care labour in these living contexts, beyond their promises. Intending to break this silence, I aim to provide a critical reflection on this issue.

³ I will use the terms “right to housing,” “right to adequate/decent/affordable housing,” and “housing rights” interchangeably; the term, as codified in international law, appears as “right to adequate housing”. (Paglione 2006)

2. Methodological politics and choices

2.1. Situated knowledge: acknowledging my positionality

I understand the research I conducted in the framework of this thesis from a “postpositivist” approach (De Vault and Gross 2007, 176), which means that my findings are shaped by the process of research itself and are the result of my subjectivity and the methodological choices that have defined step by step the direction of this investigation. In the words of the feminist sociologists Marjorie L. De Vault and Glenda Gross (2007), this approach means a rejection of the idea “that social realities are simply ‘there’ for researchers to find. Instead, we understand [...] the research process itself as an integral aspect of the construction of knowledge about society” (De Vault and Gross 2007, 176). That is the reason why I dedicate this chapter to explicitly reflect on my methodological approach applying Sandra Harding’s understanding of methodology as “theorizing about research practices and their implications for people and communities” (quoted by De Vault and Gross 2007, 174). In this vein, I will reflect on the following questions: What is my position in relation to the topic of my research? Which cases am I studying and what has been my criteria for establishing this selection? Which research practices will I apply and why?

My interest and choices as a subject that researches from a very specific location shape the knowledge that I produce. As a person who has been living in a community and who is active in anticapitalist struggles, specifically in feminist anarchist circles, I feel personally -and politically- involved with the topic. However, I do not consider this positionality as conflicting or incompatible with writing a valuable thesis on the topic of communal living.

Following the feminist Adrienne Rich in “recognizing [my] location, having to name the ground I[’m] coming from” (Rich 1984, 219), I escaped from the traditional positivist conception of the researcher (objective, value-neutral). Instead, I, as a subject, expose myself as a radical strategy to highlight that in conducting research -no matter the degree of neutrality that it is claimed- the researcher’s view is omnipresent and echoes in the process of investigation and its findings.

As a feminist, I want to be transparent and honest about the fact that my goal is not to achieve neutrality on my research but to practice Donna Haraway’s claim for situated knowledge. As she theorizes, objectivity has played a key role in the legitimation of the processes of scientific knowledge production. However, in general, this “objectivity” was the result of a particular location and gaze: the one of the White Man- and I add: Abled, High-Middle class- which was assumed, with all the violence that this implies, to be universal, without marking its specificity and the particularities derived from

this view. In need of producing feminist knowledge in a more ethical, responsible, and accountable manner, Haraway defends a feminist conception of objectivity which departs from particular and specific embodiments. In her words:

I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity. (Haraway 1988, 589)

My lived experience has fostered my thoughts on this form of organization and, at the same time, has nurtured my motivation to learn from the ways that people narrate in first person this living practice.

2.2. Narratives: telling, hearing, and connecting stories

Following an epistemological tradition that conceptualises knowledge production as a “kind of story-telling practice” (Haraway 1989, 4), I attempt to give space to people to share with me their stories, as well as provide an insight into my personal story. My purpose with this focus is to pay attention to what these stories narrate, to how these stories are told and, in a broader context, in what ways these stories are socially relevant. In line with this specific research frame on narratives, I decided to apply different qualitative research methods that allow me to tell, hear, and connect these personal stories: the practice of autoethnography and the method of interviewing.

Autoethnography constitutes a research method that allows me to self-reflect and to write my own lived experience concerning, first, the difficulty in finding decent housing and, second, the discovery of living otherwise in an intentional community in Nijmegen. I find this method as an appropriate strategy to transparently include my own lived experience in this terrain, telling this personal story in dialogue with its bigger social context: “through the self and back to the social in a constant state of re/turn” (Mackinlay 2019, 189). A way of theorising that departs from what I have experienced and works on the social relevance of this story, which will also be present and explicitly dialogue with the stories of other people experiencing this living together.

Wondering about how to define critical autoethnography and, at the same time, practicing it, the professor of education Elizabeth Mackinlay writes that this practice “opens up the possibility of theory as story, that theory tells a story of the everyday and story tells theory through and with the everyday” (Mackinlay 2019, 192).

The narration of my personal experience will start last year in Barcelona, and it will include my present time. The fact of being simultaneously engaged in this form of living and in my MA studies (including the writing of this thesis) has prompted daily reflections that I now bring together in this academic context, disrupting conventional boundaries between academic and creative writing. This destabilization of a clear separation between writing genres, which can include “the use of ‘literary techniques’ in the writing of scholarly texts” (Lykke 2010, 173) is a common phenomenon in the feminist studies field and, as the gender studies scholar Nina Lykke explains, it is linked with the feminist critiques to objectivity, and with the reflection about the researcher’s positionality.

After the autoethnographic section, the second part of this thesis presents a fundamental methodological shift in coherence with my position regarding this project. As an outsider, I give voice to three different people who are inhabitants of the housing cooperative of La Borda. This second part departs from the insights that these people shared with me in our conversations -I remain, of course, aware in my role in shaping these dialogs. My voice remains still omnipresent: I am the one choosing the conversational fragments and highlights that I want to include and how I want to include them. In this sense, I present a personal reflection on this cohousing project. My ideas have been fostered by the interviewees’ interventions, my observations, and academic literature.

In the process of conducting interviews, I have attempted to avoid the instrumentalization of my informants’ perspective, using the material of the interviews merely to confirm my preconceived hypothesis on the topic that I research. Instead, understanding that each personal narrative can give me a different insight and open up new reflections, my purpose has been to engage in the dialogue with a real curiosity and to train active listening to be able to learn from their stories and from the conversations that we generate together. The emphasis of this element of togetherness is not due to a naïve approach to the interviewing method, but to a horizon that I want to keep in mind. I am aware that an interview carries unequal power relations between the researcher and the informants, and I consider it ethically essential to be conscious of my position as an interviewer. However, with the idea of generating knowledge in a collaborative way, I envision the interview as a “collaborative moment of making knowledge” (as Marianne Paget argues, quoted in De Valt and Gross 2007, 181). During the process of conducting the interviews, I considered it ethically indispensable that people knew and agreed on the conditions and purpose of our conversation. For this reason, we explicitly talked about and mutually signed an agreement.

Intending to adapt the interviews to the specificities and particular flow of each story and, at the same time, including some topics that could serve as a common ground between all the conversations, I considered the format of the semi-structured interviews (Reinharz 1992) as the most appropriate

option for the nature of my research. Its flexibility, for example, contemplating the possibility of going more in-depth into one answer or including a question in relation to a topic that I might not have previously thought, is in harmony with my conception of the interview as a relevant moment in terms of learning and discovering aspects which can be relevant for my research.

The interviews were conducted in person using Catalan as the language of communication. This decision was determined to prioritise the fact that the speakers, including me, could express their ideas in their native language to achieve more precision, complexity, and fluidity in the articulation of their discourses. Since the thesis is written in English, this means a need to translate the interviewee's words to include their voices in the body of this work in which the literal excerpts of the interviews appear directly in English. This translation of the interview's material is done with an effort to keep the original nuances and tones of the discourses. However, I am conscious that the action of translating words from a language to another always implies losing some aspects because languages are manifestations of different ways of understanding the world and, therefore, there are not always exact equivalations but only approximations.

In addition to autoethnography and interviewing, I also want to highlight the writing as a distinct research method which constitutes a key piece in the production of knowledge. Writing is not just a practice to put into words my theoretical argumentation on the topic of this thesis. Instead, in the path of writing -with actions such as choosing words, elaborating sentence, and relocating paragraph- I give shape and consistency to my ideas. In this sense, I follow the sociologist Laurel Richardson who theorises about writing as an inquiry and creative process. As Richardson explains:

In standard social scientific, methods for acquiring data are distinct from the writing of a research report, the latter presumed to be an unproblematic activity, a transparent report about the world studied. When we view writing as a *method*, however, we experience "language-in-use," how we "word the world" into existence (Rose, 1992). And then we "reword" the world, erase the computer screen, check the thesaurus, move a paragraph, again and again. (Richardson 2000, 923).

This "wording the world" is a complex and significant process, an embodied experience that implies self-reflexivity and that it is in itself a method that produces knowledge. That is why I find it indispensable to stress its relevance in this methodological chapter. In the elaboration of this thesis, I have experienced the method of writings in different ways. Sometimes, it has been a struggle to find the appropriate, and precise words in a language that is not my native language, and the frustration has emerged. Other times, I have felt more confident with the voice that I was finding in constructing the text. But always I have had in mind that writing is a long process that takes time, care, and patience.

Changing the text and finding the words "again and again" can be exhausting and lead to moments of despair. It is a labour that, as a feminist, I consider it important to bring to light. An image that Sara

Ahmed uses and that is suggestive to this purpose comes from the association between the work of conceptualising and the action of sweating. Ahmed talks about “sweaty concepts” to denominate the theoretical work that comes from the embodiment of a difficult position in this world, a particular situation that implies an everyday struggle with the system of oppression. She uses the example of Audre Lorde, as a woman who makes theory from her lived experience of inhabiting a black body and the violence that this carries in a system in which whiteness constitutes the norm and the privilege:

A “sweaty concept” might be one that comes out of a bodily experience that is difficult, one that is “trying,” and where the aim is to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty, which means also aiming not to eliminate the effort or labour from the writing (I suspect not eliminating the effort or labour becomes an academic aim because we have been taught to tidy our texts, not to reveal the struggle we have in getting somewhere). (Ahmed 2014)

Together with Richardson concept of writing as a method, I find in this image of sweating a way to vindicate the “labour” of writing, the effort and the struggle that this practice entails, which I also experience as a challenging possibility of transforming the text and engaging with it in a very personal way that allows producing knowledge in harmony with feminist ethics and reflections.

3. Autoethnography

3.1. Emancipatory desires and commodification of a right

Living in Barcelona, I am surrounded by people from my age, from average in the range of 20-25, who struggle to move from their parents'⁴ house to be able to have their own living spaces. It has been some years since the topic started to become a common conversation within my social environment. Most of my friends have studied a university degree, but they currently live below the minimum wage in Spain, which, in 2019, was fixed in 900€ per month. The numbers on our bank account are not promising. The desire to move clashes with the impossibility to do it, and then it becomes clear: housing is not a right, as it is established in the legal framework⁵. Instead, it is a privilege, which is not within everyone's reach. Like me, most of my friends come from well-off backgrounds, and they can count with their family support. This is a pillar that radically differentiates our situation from other social realities. In other words, not everyone can count on a home to resort to if necessary.

Barcelona is a city where the distance between, on the one hand, the salaries and, on the other hand, the rental and acquisition prices of housing is unbridgeable. After the financial crisis, rental prices decreased. However, the last years prices have dramatically increased. For instance, the increase between 2014 and 2018 was of 35,2% (see graphics below). In 2018, 8.877 families were evicted for non-payment of the rent in Catalonia. These numbers do not include the so-called "silent" evictions, those that are produced by non-renewal of contracts or by unbearable increases for tenants.⁶

⁴ I use the concept of parents beyond the normative heterosexual model and including a wide range of conviviality models and situations.

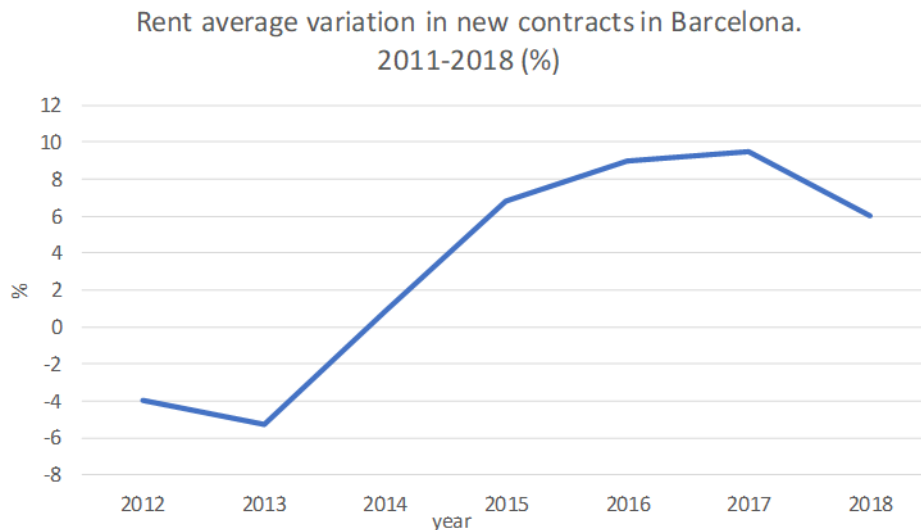
⁵ The Spanish constitution establishes this right. Article 47 states that: "All Spaniards have the right to enjoy decent and adequate housing. The public authorities will promote the necessary conditions and will establish the pertinent norms to make this right effective, regulating the use of the land in accordance with the general interest in order to prevent speculation. The community will participate in the capital gains generated by the urban action of public entities." [own translation].

<http://www.congreso.es/consti/constitucion/indice/titulos/articulos.jsp?ini=47&tipo=2>

⁶ See report by *La Directa*, "Manifestació massiva a Barcelona contra els lloguers abusius": <https://directa.cat/la-manifestacio-habitatge-en-colors/>. 8 April 2019.



Source: Own elaboration with data from Barcelona city Council



Source: Own elaboration with data from Barcelona city Council

In the frame of an agreement with Barcelona City Council, several organizations from the social rights and the public health sectors collaborated to publish a series of reports under the title *In-depth analysis of the situation of the right to housing, energy poverty and its impact on health in Barcelona* [own translation]. They alert that it exists and “emergency situation” (2018) in which basic needs are neglected and that the severity of the situation is aggravated by insufficient and inaccessible data from public administrations. Facing this lack, these series of reports are an attempt to make visible the structural dimensions of the issue and, in doing this task, they aim to generate public debate and put pressure on the institutions to implement political measures.

In a book entitled *In Defense of Housing: The Politics of Crisis*, the sociologist David Madden and the urbanist Peter Marcuse (2016) offer a political analysis of the residential struggles, as a global phenomenon present in most urban and suburban neighbourhoods. Versioning Hanisch’s political

statement, they claim that “the residential is political” arguing that the so-called “housing crisis” must be understood not as a temporary or abnormal phenomenon but as a “political-economical problem” which is a consistent outcome of the capitalist system: “[the] housing crisis is not a result of the system breaking down but of the system working as it is intended ” (Madden and Marcuse 2016). As they argue, the qualification of the crisis represents the change in the experiences of the middle-class homeowners and investors, who, after the financial implosion of 2008, faced a residential instability, which was a change in respect of their previous situations. However, for working-class and poor communities, the obstacles in finding an adequate and affordable living space are not an exception but the norm.

Keeping in mind this systemic character, Madden and Marcuse use the term “crisis” to stress the unsustainability and the daily violence that many people suffer in their dwelling conditions. We live in a time when the commodification of housing, a process by which the economic value of dwelling spaces dominate over its other uses, is extremely virulent and this process happens in a context of growing inequality. In this context, the ability to achieve a living space depends on the economic means, which is contradictory with the universality of this need.

Along with the basic and universal right to inhabit a home, Madden and Marcuse explain that in the current housing system people experience their home as a precarious sphere where they feel alienated and insecure, at risk of being evicted or disposed. This residential alienation produces daily personal and psychological problems, which can manifest in an embodied form and include, for instance, suffering from stress, fear, anxiety, or disempowerment.

Departing from what I have detected in my surrounding, I paint my subjective image that is a piece of a bigger social puzzle. There is a commonality that crosses and affects people from different positionalities: a sense of struggle to find and keep a decent house, which is not an individual problem but a systemic one. In other words, my social circles, which I am aware only represent a particular segment of the population, suffer the difficulty of emancipation which is one of the manifestations of this multi-faceted and pandemic issue: the capitalist commodification of a fundamental right.

3.2. Immersed in the problem

Being able to count on financial support from my parents, I choose to move abroad to study. In my case, I saw enrolling in the MA in Gender Studies as a fruitful opportunity to immerse myself in a subject I am passionate about while developing my career and increasing my chances to find a job once I come back.

Before moving to Utrecht, I suffered from anxiety, in part derived from the fear of not finding a living space. All the sources -ranging from the University to personal fonts- alerted me from the difficulty to find a roof in Utrecht. In this sense, I found myself collapsed by this unencouraging panorama and unable to deal with the situation from Barcelona. As a way to face the problem, I decided to book flights and a hostel to spend the August invested in the search. By chance, a friend that was in that moment studying in Utrecht offered me the possibility to rent his space while he was on holidays for the summer. This gave me a bit more space to breath.

In Amsterdam, a good friend that I met during my Bachelor studies, who, like me, decided to move to enhance her career, was stuck in a very similar situation. But it seemed we were not the only ones. The social media groups, together with all the online platforms to find a house, offered a conglomerate of desperate messages from students who were putting their efforts to find a living space in the Netherlands. There were also offers, of course, but the imbalance was obvious: every advertisement caused a rapid proliferation of replies. Many of our responses never got an answer. They got lost in a sea of voices that, like continuous waves, asked the same as us. Moreover, the fact of being international discarded us directly from many of the offers.

The time was passing, and feelings of guilt were assaulting us: Are we not doing enough, or are we doing something wrong? Should we be more creative with our messages? I also tried asking for protection from the University, the institution that admitted me to its academic program. But I was on an infinite list of students also struggling with the situation.

The number of people affected by the lack of accommodation contrasts with the hegemonic individualistic approach to the problem. In this framework, the individual is charged with all the responsibility and broader key questions for understanding the dynamics that enter into play to find a living space are left aside. The way Utrecht University deals with the issue, which affects a significant part of their students, manifests this individual approach. A video entitled "How can I find a place to live in Utrecht? Tips and Tricks!", which is available on the official website of the institution, constitutes a clear example.



Source: Utrecht University



Source: Utrecht University



Source: Utrecht University

As these screenshots show, the student is put as the unique actor who must take action to solve and sort out their/her/his accommodation. What struck me most about this video is the fact that the voice that narrates the video is addressed directly to the student who turns to the university's website to find help regarding their accommodation. The message constitutes a prediction of a future that could result in a dramatic way: "you could end up with no place to stay." Moreover, no form of solidarity is built among the different students who are in the same vulnerable position. Instead, finding a living space becomes a competition. In the process of sharing my situation as much as I could -also as a way to extend the voice and increase my possibilities of success- I realised that many people were affected by the same problem. It was not a result of personal failure but a structural problem. I had an uncomfortable feeling of competing with other people for a place in the house, and, at the same time, the experience of a connection derived from the fact that we all found ourselves in similar precarious conditions.

Moments of hope combined with times when I thought it might be an option to just give up on the master and come back to Barcelona, where the housing market was not better, but I could always count on the roof of my parents. After being in several of these meting situations, some doubts also came to my mind: do I really want to live in this place and enter the competition? Are there alternatives that scape this individualistic approach?

3.3. Finding my place

In the process of trying to make myself at peace -without results- with what seemed to be a real jungle, I sublet a home for three months which gave me a bit of stability to continue with the finding for a more permanent option. I came across the concept of “living groups” (*woongroep*, in Dutch), and I started to investigate a platform which serves as a way to connect people that wanted to live in an intentional community. The idea called my attention, and I began to research in this direction. During this time, a post in the Facebook group AskAnnabel2.0, a social platform created by the Utrecht's Gender Studies Collective, called my attention (see Annex I). Willing to know more about a place that sounded interesting to me in political terms, I got in touch with them. I checked the distance between Nijmegen and Utrecht and, in my mind, I gave up on the idea of settling in Nijmegen because I considered that the distance and the transportation expenses were too high to assume them in a daily basis. In parallel with this flow of thoughts, I received a reply from the living group, inviting me for dinner in mid-September. Impelled by my curiosity, I decided to join for the dinner.

The day arrived. Almost one month had passed since I landed in the Netherlands. After being invested in searching for a living place, having moved to a temporary house, and started my master programme, with all the emotions that these processes aroused, I felt nervous and tired, at the same time. The travel until Nijmegen cost me a lot of money and more time than expected: I got completely lost on my way to the station. My mental map of Utrecht was fragmented and distorted by the newness of the city and my recent experience of changing places.

Once there, I understood that the evening in this house was going to be radically different from my previous experiences in house viewings. I was the only person invited, and the six people that I met proved, with their actions, their desire to generate a space where we could meet each other and establish a conversation. In this sense, the format was not following the structure of what I had encountered before: a meeting with multiple people where everyone performed a quick presentation, explaining a few things about themselves. This time they offered me dinner, and it was framed as an informal space to share expectations and get to know each other to be able to envision ourselves as potential members of the same living group. It was not only the format but also the topics discussed took different directions. They explained to me the political ideology and activity of the place and also the commitment that they expected from a person living in this place. Concerning this last level, I realised that the organisation of the care work was collective and that forming part of the group meant also taking responsibility for an amount of housework. I felt excited to know about this way of living, but at the same time a pressing question was on the table: Will I be able to be part of this living group in a responsible way?

3.4. Solidarity in praxis

Since I got a positive reply from them and I made the decision of living in this place, more than half a year has passed. This is a time that I see now as a time of learnings with fluctuant emotions and motivation. Combining my studies at Utrecht – with a full-time internship- with activist and care work at Nijmegen has led to joy but also has not been exempt from feelings of pressure and symptoms of burn out. This living together has meant for me to radically challenge notions of individuality: caring, in my daily basis, for other six people and thinking about them while looking for vegan recipes or cleaning the toilet, for example. The collective sense is not reduced to assuming domestic work but is also put in practice in other spheres, like the political activity or the financial organisation. In this last aspect, we share the food, contribute to a house pot to buy the communal supplies, and pay the rent based on what we called “solidarity system.”

The rent of the building is paid to a housing company which owns its property after the legalisation process that changed the squat condition of the place. We currently encounter serious difficulties to assume the cost of the space monthly, and that also relates to the obstacles that I faced in Barcelona. We have an internal system, which involves my living group and the other living group of the building, a total of fourteen people, to collectively deal with the increasing rent. With this system, we calculate the amount of rent that everyone must pay at the end of the month according to their income. It is a decision that was taken by the inhabitants in the past. However, we periodically meet and talk about this agreement, keeping open the possibility of adjustments or changes in the functioning of this system. To ensure the sustainability of the system, we established a minimum rent, that tenants must assume regardless of their income, and a maximum rent that sets a ceiling. In the middle, we agreed on the fact that the amount that people assume cannot surpass the 42% of their income. For us, it becomes a manner to self-regulate the conditions of access to the place and, at the same time, to practice a fairer system.

For me, this solidarity form of dealing with daily issues is a crystallisation of an application of a utopia. It does not mean that the functioning is perfect. The people forming part of the living group also struggle with precariousness, and the tension arouses when trying to live in solidarity in a capitalist system in which ideas of productivity and processes of discrimination are the rule. In this context, it is challenging to find a way to find a balance between respecting the fact that everyone needs to contribute to the place (in a material and non-material way), but also that each of us have different situations, for example, in terms of mental health, social skills, or finances. However, it constitutes an attempt to radically practice a way of living based on the idea of interdependence.

4. Case Study: La Borda

4.1. Presentation of the characters and the setting of this story

La Borda is a housing alternative in Barcelona. As I will explain further below, it is a housing cooperative that adopts an emergent kind of tenancy in the context of Spain: the right of use or assignment of use. It constitutes a specific type of intergenerational cohousing (Etzebarrea, Cano and Merino 2018, 62).⁷ In Annex II, I provide information regarding the current human and spatial composition of La Borda.

Throughout the case study, I will incorporate the voices of three current inhabitants of the housing cooperative in a recurrent manner to prioritize their perspectives. At the same time, their subjective reflections will allow me to develop an analysis that feeds on genealogies of feminist thought. The selection of the participants was defined by their willingness to collaborate with this project. This element of unpredictability translated into a lack of control about the number and the profiles of the interviewees. Favours the richness of the sample, the three participants presented some differences regarding age, gender identification, and the form of conviviality in which they inhabit their private spaces in the cooperative. Another variable that must be taken into account is that their willingness to participate in this research project might indicate a certain degree of satisfaction about the housing cooperative. Respecting the anonymity of the collaborators, we agreed that their names would not appear in the text. Instead, each of them is replaced by a fictional name. The names of the characters will be Anna, Joan, and Esther. In Annex III, I provide, under these fictional names, a brief profile of the three people I interviewed. These descriptions aim to socially situate the characters of this story, providing information relating to their age, gender identification, origin, and professional background.

4.2. A “commoning” practice

The action of “commoning” offers us an interesting framework to study the case of La Borda. Lydewij Tummers and Sherilyn MacGregor define the term as follows: “The commoning is understood as an ongoing process of people coming together to create the environments they want to inhabit when the state and the market fail to deliver” (Tummers and MacGregor 2019, 63). The word “commoning”, together with this specific conceptualisation, underlines an active position taken from a collective of people that join forces to generate alternative living conditions that go beyond the possibilities offered by the state and the market.

⁷ For an overview of cohousing experiences in Spain, see: Etzezarreta, Cano and Merino (2018).

La Borda emerged in the frame of a neighbourhood movement in the context of an old industrial site called “Can Batlló”, situated in La Bordeta neighbourhood, Barcelona. After the cessation of its industrial activity, the industrial site was supposed to be renovated by the City Council. However, it remained abandoned and underutilized. In June of 2011, a neighbourhood platform called “Recuperem Can Batlló” [“We regain Can Batlló”, own translation] took the initiative and occupied the place to develop self-managed activities (Cabré and Andrés 2018).

The idea of creating and implementing a housing cooperative emerged in this movement “in the framework of a bottom-up urban process that responded to the inability of public and private institutions to disentangle Can Batlló’s future” (Cabré and Andrés 2018, 421). As their website states,⁸ the community of fifty people that currently live at La Borda is a group of people who are related to Can Batlló project. In fact, the housing cooperative is defined as part of this project.

The fact that La Borda emerged within this self-managed project explains the active involvement of its inhabitants, who were generally active in social movements and have a trajectory of participating in collective forms of autonomous organisation. In this sense, the members have performed a main role in the decision-making processes during all the stages of the project, including the initial idea, because the collective engagement of the people was the flame that made possible the existence of this housing cooperative. Capturing this involvement, Lacol, the architecture cooperative in charge of the project, defines participation as “the most important and differential variable of the project”.⁹

In the unfolding of the subjective narratives, I will examine this cohousing initiative in relation to the strand of commons thinking that focus on “how commoning practices might challenge and replace the destructive, unsustainable conditions of capitalism” (Tummers and MacGregor 2019, 65). This approach is pertinent in the context of La Borda, as the project’s motivation is synthesised as follows: “We want to be and live in community under the values of feminist and solidarity economy”.¹⁰ This claim summarises “their utopian vision” (Sargent 2013, 69), which is based on values of feminist and solidarity economy, both critical and propositional approaches about the hegemonic capitalist system. The term “feminist economy” encompasses a rich genealogy of authors that have explored -and still do- the fruitful intersection between economy and feminism, examining the functioning of capitalism from a feminist perspective and highlighting its dependence to the patriarchal order (Hartmann 1979; Federici 2012); “solidarity economy” denominates associative experiences that emerge “with the intention to promote socio-economic alternatives to the capitalist modality” (Osorio-Cabrera 2013, 38). In order to reflect on the project’s potentialities to challenge in the living conditions of the hetero-

⁸ La Borda (website): <http://www.laborda.coop/en/>

⁹ Lacol (website): <http://www.lacol.coop/>

¹⁰ La Borda (website): <http://www.laborda.coop/en/>

patriarchal-capitalist order, I will deal with the following aspects of this housing cooperative: 1) the right of use model, 2) the redistribution of care work.

4.3. The right of use model

La Borda Housing SLL is a housing cooperative which relies on a model of legally denominated “assignment of use”, which is based on the idea of “non-speculative holding”.¹¹ In the context of Spain, this typology of dwelling has hardly been implemented until recently, except for specific experiences, such as the one of La Borda (Etzebarrea, Cano and Merino 2018, 69).

The model of La Borda finds inspiration in previous experiences in other countries -such as Andel in Denmark and Fucvam, in Uruguay-, where this model of cooperative housing is widespread. It stands as an alternative to the two dominant ways of achieving a living space, that are rent or property options. In contrast to these paradigms, the inhabitants are not owners but, as members of the cooperative, hold the right of using the space. As Anna states:

The property resides in the cooperative. The keywords here are neither mine nor yours; ours. It is collective. And you will say "oh, it's not yours!" but, of course, I'm part of the assembly, I'm from La Borda, I participate in everything and whenever there are financial decisions I'm there, and you always come to consensus: you come to find a way that everyone is more or less happy. It's ours; We feel it's ours: we've built it ourselves; we've decided a lot of things ourselves.

Anna’s intervention stresses the collective model of property that La Borda puts into practice, underlying the intense feeling of involvement and belonging that the cooperative generated for the inhabitants who have the power to make crucial decisions about the project, which is managed collaboratively by the residents. At the same time, using the exclamation “oh, it’s not yours!”, Anna introduces a common negative critique that she faces when explaining the logic behind the project. This critique is tied to the prevailing idea of property, which is imagined as a safety condition regarding housing. In the same line, Esther pointed to this fact:

The culture of possession, of owning a house, is still very present because people think that they are in a bad situation if they do not own a flat. Of course, television, the media, the whole of society tell you that to be renting is to throw money away.

In the Spanish context, the strong link between property and housing has historical roots that can be traced in the politics of housing that were implemented in the times of the Franco dictatorship (1939-1975). In 1957, Franco created the “Ministry of Housing” [Ministerio de Vivienda] which motto was:

¹¹ *Íbidem*

“We do not want a Spain of proletarian but a Spain of owners”¹² (França 2017, 19). One of the main goals of this conversion was the social control and the avoidance of revolts, that were highly likely in the situation of not having a home. The journalist João França (2017), who is expert in social movements, situates at that time the foundations for the establishment of the owning model in the housing terrain, which has had devastating effects for a large part of the population. Facing an increasingly expensive market and a shortage of social housing, many decided to indebt to become owners of a living space. The situation was a result of a specific economic context of deregulation of mortgage lending in which the financial entities gave uncontrolled access to credits to a population that started buying properties. It is what is known with the name of the “Spanish housing bubble” (França 2017, 23), that grew with the lack of State intervention.

The impossibility of paying the mortgage debt lead to a generalised problematic where, during the economic crisis, a lot of people lost their propriety, that happen to be in the possession of the creditor (the bank).¹³ Many people were left “without homes and indebted for life” (Weerdt and García 2016, 471): their debt was not fully paid with the creditor’s appropriation of the property because its value had decreased with the crisis. Analysing the Spanish housing situation from a Foucauldian perspective, the geographers Melissa García-Lamarca and María Kaika argue that mortgages “operated as a biopolitical technology” (García-Lamarca and Kaika 2016, 324) by which the quotidian lives of a significant part of the population were controlled, regularised, and shaped by the power of financial institutions.

During the interviews, this particular trajectory and the problems associated with the housing market were present. Anna defines the model of La Borda as an “anti-speculative fight” in the sense that the inhabitants have fixed an entrance of financial contribution that they paid to enter and that inhabitants fully recover if they want to move out of the place. The loss of this contribution will be replaced for the new inhabitant/s moving who will pay an economic contribution of the same amount. Anna emphasizes that this congelation of the prices counteracts the current speculative dynamics, and it erases the possibility for the tenants of losing the living space.

¹² The world game proletarios-propietarios [proletarian-owners] gets lost in the English translation.

¹³ This generalised problematic situation was the seed for the creation of social platforms, such as the “Platform for Mortgage Affected People” [Plataforma d’Afectats per la Hipoteca]. This grassroots organisation was created in 2009 with the aim of facing collectively the housing situations, with direct actions, such as the stop of evictions, and pressure the institutions to implement measures in order to control the unfair housing system. One of its founders and spokesperson, Ada Colau, was elected in 2015 as the Mayor of Barcelona and she has recently reoccupied the position after the last municipal elections. This social platform is one significant experience within the social movements in the housing sphere, which scope is too vast for the length requirements of this thesis.

This is the same price now than it is in the year 2030 and 2050 because it is always the same: it stops the increase of the prices of rent. Apart from the danger that you do not get your rent contract renewed, which is what happens a lot nowadays.

Residents have the status of cooperative partners, and they hold the indefinite right to inhabit the place and make use of both the private and the shared spaces, avoiding the possibility of selling or renting their flat. In this sense, this non-profit alternative puts in the centre the right of use, preventing the prevalence of the exchange value, that consequently commodifies the fundamental right of housing.

The narratives of the three inhabitants I talked to present the belief in housing as a universal human right, and they clearly express that the value of use should prevail. During our conversations, I inquired about their experiences with encountering obstacles to find decent and affordable housing. Both stories of Esther and Joan share echo with the emergency and unsustainable situation in regards to housing. It is remarkable that the telling of these experiences did not start spontaneously in any of the cases without my explicit interrogation. They did not give a straight answer affirming that they had difficulties in the past in finding a living space. However, their answers clearly show that they have had problems in this sense. Esther says:

Not directly. Well, we spent a few years that in the flat where we lived we experienced mobbing, because we lived in a building [...] and the owner died and the heirs wanted to sell the property and the easiest way was for the tenants to leave [...] because we had an old rent [...] now people are paying 750 for a cave [...] with our daughters [we did have experienced problems] because the salaries are 1000 euros and the flats 700.

Esther expresses a first experience of “mobbing”, a label used in the housing sphere to refer actions of harassment by the owner of the space to force the tenants to leave the dwelling and, in this way, be able to rent or sell the dwelling again to increase the economic profit. The practice is common and it is a clear example of how the idea of profitmaking dominates over the liveability of people in a way that the owner feels authorized to expel the inhabitants. In Catalonia, there were social platforms and workshops specifically created to share strategies to confront situations of real state violence (González Garcia 2015, 95).

In his turn, Joan says that, since he moved to Barcelona to study, he had always shared a flat with a lot of other people. Due to a lack of economic sources, he ended up some time sharing a room, a situation he explained was not ideal because he did not have a private space: “Twenty-five years-old, we were then, and we were a year and a half sharing the room because that was the only way we could pay”.

I interpret their lack of stressing these past unliveable situations as a contextual sign: they do not highlight their case because they understand that they are not remarkable or exceptional, but they are

ordinary situations resulting from the ordinary and, at the same time, violent, functioning of the system. In this line, Joan says:

I suppose everyone has experienced it: being young, looking for work, fucked-up times [...] the fucked-up thing is that housing must be a right, but the thing is that we're in a system that earning money is also conceived as a right, here's the hard part, and what's ahead? because there are political parties that when they talk about freedom it's freedom to speculate.

All three interviewees emphasise the political dimension of the impulsion of La Borda, highlighting it puts into practice a new model of housing in the Spanish context in which the market logics deny this universal right. Keeping in mind its political significance, it appears pertinent to ask about the economic conditions that condition processes of inclusion or exclusion regarding who has access -and who has not- to living in this alternative model. Joan recognises that some people that were involved in the process of gestation finally dropped the cooperative because they had a more inclusive idea of the project in economic terms. He says:

The access fee was 18000 euros, and I wish we could have gone down, but the numbers did not come out. And, in addition to the 18000, there is the monthly fee, that is cheap, but, of course, 18000 euros already represented a barrier, we must be honest.

His intervention underscores the existence of an economic obstacle to be part of the project due to make possible the feasibility of the project, that is, to have the sufficient financial sources to ask for a credit and generate confidence on the project, which was really innovative and also generated some fear in the entities investing on it. In this sense, it reflects an unsolvable tension between the ideological motivations - "I wish we could have gone down"- and the demands of the capitalist system which the project cannot escape.

In contrast with Joan, Esther's approach does not depart her ideals in terms of universal housing but from a good assessment of the project, in comparison with the current unliveable market conditions. She acknowledges that the access fee was a considerable amount of money but that renting a place in Barcelona also implies a significant initial investment of money. Putting in a balance the stability that La Borda offers- the contract cannot change, you hold the right to live in the cooperative with total stability- and the current condition of renting, she considers this outcome positive. However, like Joan, she also recognizes that this initial investment, required to push the project forward, generated some exclusions, which explains the similar profile of people living at La Borda:

So yes, that is why we are all white, we have more or fewer jobs, more or fewer precarious. We would like the project to be more diverse, but what we could not assume was cost zero, of course. It was already an effort for most people, many of the people who live here are young people with precarious jobs; I mean, undoubtedly, their families have helped them.

The tension between ideological wishes and the capitalist condition becomes present again: “we would like [...] but [...]”). Although recognizing the existence of shared privileges among the inhabitants, she also points to the inner differences in terms of their economic situation. There were multiple conviviality units¹⁴ that could not afford the access fee, but, in the end, there was only one who did not manage to collect the required money. The ability of almost all the members of the project to find ways to support themselves financially is a sign of a certain degree of financial sources or possibilities, in the sense that they could mobilize people to help them. The exclusions derived by the lack of affordability are a common problem in cohousing realities that results in a generally similar privileged situation among socioeconomic class, race, and education (Garciano 2011, 175).

During our conversation, Joan also reflects on the political significance of self-reflecting about how processes of inclusion or exclusion take place in cohousing realities because there is the danger that the project ends reproducing class privilege and leave to the margins de less privileged ones. In order to relativize the impact of this economic barrier, Joan explains that since the amount of 18000 started to be considered as a real option for the initial capital, conviviality unit had a period of four years to save the money. Moreover, they implemented measures of mutual support to avoid the exclusion of the conviviality unit that could not face the economic charge, the members of the cooperative thought about a collective solution. Some units were able to invest more money initially, compensating the lower contributions of others who had a less privileged economic situation.

This solidarity action is not an exemption. Instead, there is a long-term mechanism which is already activated to help cohabitants experiencing future difficult times or situations collectively. This mechanism is sustained by monthly equal economic contributions by each member: every adult- not every conviviality unit (which ensures that every person contributes with the same amount)- pays five euros every month, which is saved as a communal saving. This source has not yet been used, but it is thought to be activated in moments when inhabitants cannot pay their monthly quote or some kind of expenses such as “the glasses for some kid,” as Joan puts as an example. The creation of this communal saving indicates a shared willingness to create an economic support network to face economic difficulties collectively.

The exclusions derived from the access fee are the consequence of external requirements to which the members of the cooperative adjust to make the project possible. The interviewees show awareness about this barrier. Esther also suggests that the fact that the project was a pioneer in the Spanish

¹⁴ The members of La Borda use the term “conviviality unit” to refer to the variety of forms in which people inhabit the private spaces. The use of this particular terminology escapes the traditional denomination and connotations of the word “family” enabling a more inclusive and open concept. See “Annex II” to know more about the human and spatial composition of La Borda.

context was translated into some difficulties to break the established functioning framework, especially in regards to their constitution as a collective cooperative. In this sense, she states that:

Well with all the history of the cooperative, we have been like an icebreaker with everything [...] it will be slow like everything [extend the model] but there are many interested people, many groups... the most serious problem they have and will have is the land to Barcelona because there is little and it is very expensive... it is also very difficult for banks to give you a credit with collective ownership, because what they want is private property and with guarantees and we believe that this must be broken.

Esther contrasts, on the one hand, the growing popular demand for housing alternatives and, on the other hand, the main challenges that this kind of initiatives need to overcome in the Spanish Context. These obstacles include economic difficulties and the need to achieve “a change of mentality” [own translation] (Etzebarrea, Cano and Merino 2018, 83) which hampers the success of this new model of housing. In the same line, using a metaphor to illustrate the innovation that this model entails, Anna expresses: “what happens is that we are only a drop. Well, now, we are more than a drop, with this model. People don't understand it.”

Talking about the possible future expansion of the model, Joan hopes that the experience of La Borda creates a precedent of “confidence” and that, in the future, “cheaper promotions could be possible”. In this sense, he points to the possibility of “helping to fund similar projects from mutual savings of La Borda”.

According to the narrations of the three inhabitants, the case of La Borda presents some tensions in its challenging/negotiating the conditions of the capitalist system. Its challenging potentialities can be synthesized in the idea that it practices an alternative model of housing based on the prevalence of use and collective property. Moreover, it builds strategic supportive economic network to face financial difficulties, which escapes the traditional individualistic framework dominant in capitalist economy. The aspect of the negotiation becomes evident in the concessions the members of the cooperative must to undertake to make feasible the project, with an economical initial contribution that excluded some people. As Marcuse and Madden express: “The housing question may not be resolvable under capitalism. But the shape of the housing system can be acted upon, modified, and changed” (Marcuse and Madden 2016). La Borda is a singular project which cannot solve the problematic “housing question” and, although trying to function based on solidarity and feminist economy, still is embedded in the capitalist system. However, the experience is relevant because it can be interpreted as a way to collectively and proactively “act upon, modify, and change” this unfair system and the model has prospects of expanding in the Spanish context.

4.4. Caring “neighbours” or “the tribe”

As Esther highlights, La Borda encompasses fifty people “with different needs and ages. That was what we wanted; therefore, the realities are diverse”. Her intervention stresses the diversity closely linking the specific needs of the inhabitants with their age. What is interesting is that there is a recognition of the quotidian needs for the maintenance and sustainability of all human lives, regardless of factors such as age. This universality points to the interdependence between human beings, questioning the same idea of independence. In other words: humans are socially dependent beings that need care, in different degrees, measures, and forms. The dependency is not a static and exceptional condition. Instead, our (inter)dependency is a dynamic condition that changes during all the vital moments and stages of life.

One of the main purposes of this cohousing cooperative is “to promote intergenerational relationships and community integration. In short, we look forward to a fair sharing of reproductive, domestic, and care work”.¹⁵ Reproductive, domestic, and care work or labour are some of the main terms produced and vindicated to make visible and give recognition to the fundamental work for maintaining and sustaining all human lives. There exists a rich terminology to designate the range of activities that this work includes. I will predominantly opt for the term “care work” to refer to this type of labour. I base my definition on the work of the feminist economist and independent researcher Amaia Pérez Orozco (2006). She explains that this work includes a two-folded dimension: a tangible, material dimension - in regards to the physiological needs- and an immaterial dimension based on relational and affective aspects -in regards to the emotional wellbeing. Orozco stresses that the need for care does not constitute an anomaly but is universal:

Generally care is used in a narrow sense, linked to the material dimensions and centred on the condition of dependency, as an individualized situation, based on an assumption of normality that marks deviation, determining those who do not enjoy a normal health or body, without taking into account that any criterion of normality is a social construction.” [own translation] (Pérez Orozco 2006, 12)

Pérez Orozco mobilizes the concept of care to refer to a universal need, destabilizing static labels of categories such as “the normal health” or “the normal body”.¹⁶ In the same line, the geographer Bengi Akbulut affirms that care work “is the most fundamental basis of social reproduction [...] to which we

¹⁵ La Borda (website): <http://www.laborda.coop/en/>

¹⁶ These reflections about care lead to examine the category of ability and disability critically: How does the distinction dis/abled function? Which complexities are faced in the attempt to define these terms? These political questions are some of the concerns of the Critical Disability Studies (CDS). In this field, the division of people into dis/abled is problematized and, the dichotomy appears to be unstable, porous, and temporary (Shildrick 2009).

all owe our existence” (Akbulut 2017). It is also important to stress that the universality of care does not imply a denial of the differences that people- in various situations- present in their changing needs of care.

But how is this work socially distributed and valued? Feminist economists have recurrently denounced that it was understood to be a natural responsibility of people socialized as women and not valued as work. The feminist economist Silvia Federici exposed the problematic social unrecognition and invisibility of the work performed in the domestic sphere by people socialized as women:

Capital has been very successful in hiding our work [...] this peculiar combination of physical, emotional and sexual services that are involved in the role women must perform for capital that creates the specific character of that servant which is the housewife, that makes her work so burdensome and at the same time so invisible (Federici 2012, 17).

The gendered dimension of the labour relies on the norm of the nuclear heterosexual family, establishing a division of roles which is delimited by the space (public/private), and the social and economic recognition (paid/unpaid job). However, to avoid a false universalization, it is crucial to recognise that the restriction of women to the role of the housewife functions as a normative ideal that is not representative of the diversity of experiences that the social category of woman encompasses but also illustrates a particular segment of class-privileged realities (Pérez Orozco 2006, 11). Sara Ahmed also highlights this relation between the social construction of womanhood, the figure of the housewife and the heteronormative framework: “The history of woman is impossible to disentangle from the history of wife: the female human not only as in relation to man but as for man (woman as there for, and therefore, being for)” (Ahmed 2017, 224).

In this way, the construction of what it means to “become a woman”-in Simone de Beauvoir’s terms- strongly relies on the assumption of the social role of being for, or, in other words, caring for. I am not suggesting the need for women to stop taking responsibility in this fundamental sphere, but I am highlighting that the patriarchal-capitalist system leads to a social undervaluation and an unfair distribution of this labour. As the sociologist Sara R. Farris explains, the current situation in the Global North, with the increasing incorporation of women in the labour market, has led to a “caring crisis” [own translation] (Pérez Orozco 2011, 40) that has predominantly been solved through a commodification of this labour, paying workers to assume it (Farris 2012, 192). The fact that these workers are predominantly migrant women is significant to understand that this model reproduces, under another scheme, the same basic attributes of this work: its gender dimension and its social undervaluation. The result is a reinforcement of the gender and racial power inequalities:

It follows the rules of gender and the “sexual contract” within the household, which establishes that women are still in charge of reproduction and care. Further, it follows the rules of the

“racial contract,” according to which ethnic minorities and people of colour perform the least desirable and valued tasks in a society (Farris 2012, 194).

In this apparently “new” form of externalising this work, the underlying dynamics in terms of individualisation, privatisation, and feminisation remain intact: “Care is widely believed to be an issue for individual families to figure out, rather than a social good to be supported by wider communities and society at large.” (Chopra and Sweetman 2014, 411) or “a question to be resolved privately and by women” [own translation] (Pérez Orozco 2006, 9).

The question of care has been commonly studied in relation to the family, the Market, and the State, dismissing the dimension of the community. Underlying the limitations of these dominant approaches, the sociologists Cristina Vega-Solís, Raquel Martínez-Buján and Myriam Paredes explore realities in which care depends on a plurality of people: “What happens when what we call care is provided in more collective settings? What happens when care is common and is practiced in common? What dilemmas and difficulties face those who share it? [own translation] (Vega, Martínez-Buján and Paredes 2018, 13)”

The project of La Borda offers potentialities to practice care in a more collective setting, mainly because the issue is perceived as a common responsibility and, as I have highlighted, there is an explicit willingness to achieve a “fair and shared”¹⁷ distribution of this labour. The social relations in La Borda are understood by Anna and Esther as relations between neighbours. Specifically, Anna narrates:

Relationships here would be of good neighbours. I like the word neighbours a lot [to define others] because it encompasses many kinds of relationships: with some people, I have a longstanding friendship, and, with others, we are creating relationships here. But, for me, the word neighbour is meaningful. My parents always said: “it's better to have good neighbours at the door than relatives in Mallorca” [...] If you need something, you find it next door immediately.

Anna’s intervention also emphasizes physical proximity as a key factor to make possible this kind of immediate interaction. In relation to the phenomenon of cohousing, the social geographer Helen Jarvis explains that this element of shared location (“colocation”) gives cohesion to social networks because it opens potentialities to collaborate in a daily basis (Jarvis 2012, 562). The dimension of mutual help for covering the needs appears as central in her understanding of the social relationships in La Borda.

Anna’s remark of “good” neighbours resounds with the thought of Donna Haraway who conceptualises the action of making kin beyond the biological family, paying particular attention to the idea of being kind between one to another:

¹⁷ La Borda (website): <http://www.laborda.coop/en/>

My purpose is to make “kin” mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy [...] I was moved in college by Shakespeare’s punning between kin and kind—the kindest were not necessarily kin as family; making kin and making kind (as category, care, relatives without ties by birth, lateral relatives, lots of other echoes) stretch the imagination and can change the story (Haraway 2015, 161).

Giving her view about the social relationships between the co-housers, Esther also points to this aspect of mutual help, what can also be denominated as taking care of each other:

The idea is that we're not inventing anything. It used to be normal, but we have lost these dynamics nowadays. I remember when I was a kid that the neighbour used to bring food to our home and if a kid was sick and her mother worked, the neighbour had the keys and went to take care of him. In a way, this has been lost. We are not inventing anything but recovering the solidarity between people.¹⁸

Her memories play a significant role in building her current conceptions of the kind of solidarity relationships she conceives as fostered in La Borda. In this sense, she argues that this type of relationships used to happen in the past and have been progressively abandoned. The use of the verb “recovering” captures this idea. This loss of the collective dimension, which a progressive individualisation, of the care work is in line with the analysis of Silvia Federici that clarifies that the limitation of care work in the domestic sphere is the consequence of a process that was imposed in the context of the system of capitalism. This phenomenon has been accentuated and it needs to be reversed due to its harmful consequences. To revert this process, she suggests a socialisation and collectivization of housework through what she denominates “the reconstruction of the commons” (Federici 2012, 136), which means the action of regenerating collective forms of living to make possible a fairer distribution of the intensive labour that social reproduction requires.

In the course of the interview, Joan also used the term “neighbour” to describe the other inhabitants, but when I asked how he defined the others, he used the terms “tribe” and “activists”, putting a specific accent in the cohesion generated during the gestation of the project and also on the ideological affinity and political involvement of the members, without forgetting the aspect of the mutual care:

You don't know whether to say friendship with everyone, whatever, but there is that point of strong affinity, for everything we've been through, for everything we've lived together, there's a desire to help and collaborate, therefore, fits quite well in this term of the tribe. And the other term, that I have it very clear, is activists, that is everyone who has put themselves here

¹⁸ It is also remarkable to notice that Esther’s intervention also hints a gender dimension of care work because, in the examples she uses, the person cooking or taking care of somebody is always a woman. This detail illustrates the traditional gendered dimension of this work.

[...] the process of work has led us to be in this line a very politicized group that also makes it easier to understand each other.

The reference to the concept of the “tribe” must be situated in the specific Spanish context in which some years ago some authors and collectives started to use and popularize an African proverb that says “it takes a tribe to raise a child”.¹⁹

During the three conversations, I realised that the responsibility for childcare remained with the family units and that it did not strongly rely on the community. This centralisation presents different conditions due to the variety of typologies of these units, which also include a more extended model. I did not talk directly with the units which are in charge of childcare and the reflections I present are based on the views that the three participants expressed during the interview. They all point out to the fact that the people who are currently raising children in La Borda have particular needs who are sometimes difficult to combine with the participation in the decision-making assemblies and other activities. In this sense, Joan explains that:

Here [in prioritizing the different needs] we have failed [...] all the formalization of the project has required the participation in many assemblies -all organized on the weekends-. All the conviviality units had to participate, and we set a minimum of involvement. At least one member of each unit had to go. If you can't go, then nothing happens, but we think it is important that every unit of coexistence stay tuned. But what is the reality? There are those who don't have any kind of burden, there are some who are alone, therefore, they must always represent their unity, and there are those who go with children or that must take care of elderly people [...] Obviously, we have been flexible in this: you participate in something if you can and everyone shares their situation a little with the others [...] We organized spaces during the assemblies to collectively look after the child, but, in the end, these spaces were a bit disappointing because the same parents were at the children's space [...] and now that we are at La Borda [...] we've done as more practical issues and we have forgotten a little bit about the care issue, I say it as a failure because I think it's the pending issue.

This intervention manifests a contrast between the homogeneous participation requirements and the diversity in the personal living conditions among the individuals. In this last aspect, the emphasis is put again on the child raising, an accent that reflects the current growing presence of kids in the cooperative. The narration also points to the building of strategies to collectively share the childcare,

¹⁹ The proverb took special attention when Anna Gabriel, a parliamentarian, member of CUP -a political anticapitalist party - used it in an interview when asked if she would like to have children. Obviously, the question is an evidence of the pressure that compulsory maternity signifies for women. However, her answer highlighted the cultural construction of the nuclear family, questioning this western hegemonic norm and, at the same time, it opened a debate about other possible ways of social organization that include the idea of raising children in common by groups of people who understand that they are all parents of the children, and responsible of them. This association can go beyond biological parenthood and the adults are not necessarily tied by loving or sexual bonds. See report by *El País* “Anna Gabriel: “Me satisfaría tener hijos en grupo, en colectivo””: https://elpais.com/ccaa/2016/05/11/catalunya/1462966185_313983.html. 12 May 2019.

such as children's spaces. Joan values the outcome as a "failure" which shows a sharp critique about the collective ability to manage "the care issue".

In a view which presents similarities with this, Esther affirms that they are in the process of "fitting" the care work. Meaningfully, this way of framing the situation puts the responsibility on the collective and not on the individual. She also points to the childcare and explains that the fact that the children were not familiarised with everyone represented- and still does- an obstacle in sharing childcare work. However, Esther says that this difficulty will become minor, and she explains to me a recent example of what she considers care between neighbours: "Yesterday I was just talking to P. [adult neighbour] and R. [his son] because the grandparents are ill [...] and I was saying "if you need me, just tell me [...] but this has to be built".

This scene presents a situation of co-houser offering help to another. It can be characterised as an informal help because it arises spontaneously: "cohousing projects are 'supportive' communities where many types of formal and informal care arise." (Ruiu 2016, 406). The configuration of the space plays a pivotal role already in facilitating spontaneous interaction. The three inhabitants agreed on highlighting the ideological aspect and the daily consequences that the option of giving priority and centrality to common areas dedicated to activities of care and socialisation implies. After the conversations, I saw that the inner courtyard of the house was full of kids, who after school played together in the communal space. In the meanwhile, the adults were talking, some of them doing the laundry. The interaction happened continuously, and it flowed in an informal, natural way.

In overall, there is a friction between the shared utopia which places at the centre the desire of caring in common and the current reality which has left in a second plane this labour, that remains an individual burden. In this sense, I identify a perpetuation of capitalist conditions. However, it is important to take into account that the inhabitants have lived together for a relatively short time and the social relationships to facilitate the sharing of care work have still to be cultivated. What is remarkable and seems to point into this direction is that the care work is identified as an essential sphere and there is a strong determination of finding a way of functioning differently. Moreover, the colocation and the prioritization of communal spaces foster the cooperation between inhabitants.

5. Conclusions and suggestions for future research

The main methodologies used in this thesis—the practices of autoethnography and interviewing, with a strong emphasis on lived experience—reflect those feminist research ethics that aim to place subjectivities in the centre in order to escape from a problematic universal neutrality and achieve,

instead, “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1988). The autoethnography gives a personal insight into the so-called housing crisis caused by the capitalist commodification of the right to housing. I capture my feelings of guilt and anxiety derived from the impossibility of finding adequate housing. My subjective experience of this situation is also a direct consequence of the hegemonic approach to the issue which places the responsibility on the individual without acknowledging that the problem of housing is the result of systemic conditions. Beyond this individualistic approach, I narrate my own discovery of a specific case of intentional community in the city of Nijmegen. In this environment, I experienced forms of solidarity to (1) facilitate the right to housing through collective redistribution of the rent and to (2) distribute care work in everyday life in a shared and responsible manner. My learning, my reflections, and the questions raised by the intentional community in Nijmegen serve as a conceptual bridge to the second part of this thesis, which focuses on the analysis of La Borda, an intentional community in the context of Spain. Both the case of the intentional community I came to live in and the case of La Borda constitute two instances of applications of “utopian visions” (Sargent 2013, 69) that open the possibility of functioning in an alternative way in the context of the current capitalist system.

My research question concerned the potential of the communal living project of La Borda to challenge and replace the conditions of capitalism. Specifically, I reflected on this question by considering the inhabitants’ shared vision and their praxis in relation to (1) counteract the current violations of the right to housing and to (2) overcome the invisibilisation, privatisation, and gendered dimension of care work. My findings offer a considerable degree of ambivalence because the project presents certain subversive aspects in these two dimensions and, at the same time, some limitations. This ambivalence reflects the complexity that the building of alternatives entails in the context of capitalism. In this sense, there is a tension between, on one hand, the desire to replace capitalist dynamics—fighting for the universal right to housing or aiming for a recognition and a fair distribution of care work—and, on the other hand, the need to operate within the capitalist system, which leads to a certain perpetuation of the current dynamics, such as the exclusion of the right of housing for economic reasons or the individualisation of care work. The fact that the project presents some restraints does not detract from its value but reflects some shades and difficulties in the social transformation that the inhabitants intent to implement in their daily lives. The limitations have been highlighted by the three inhabitants of La Borda that I have interviewed, who have offered a critical perspective on the project. This capacity of self-critique is remarkable because it shows that they are conscious of the aspects that are not working in harmony with their anti-capitalist and feminist ideals and this awareness makes them want to go on thinking and transforming the current dynamics collectively. The project is not static but keeps evolving.

Another aspect that I would like to highlight is that the findings of La Borda project are shaped by its incipient state and its current reality. At the moment of elaboration of the interviews, the housing cooperative had been functioning as a home for only five months, and its human composition made it urgent to address the issue of child-raising. For further research, I would suggest investigating the concrete evolution of the project of La Borda because, as it is an intergenerational experience, La Borda will substantially change in terms of age composition. In this sense, I would find it extremely stimulating to research the future strategies and decisions that the community will take to adapt to a more elderly community in coherence with their feminist and solidarity values. Moreover, I would also encourage the monitoring of the implementation of this model in Spain, because the experience of La Borda has prompted the birth of other similar experiences and it seems a fertile terrain to study from a feminist perspective. The emergence of this kind of cohousing initiatives offers a fruitful opportunity to enlarge imaginaries, acknowledging that there are alternative ways of living—beyond the traditional individual or nuclear forms that dominate in the Global North—that can be relevant in order to put into practice feminist and solidarity values, proving that the domestic sphere is a relevant context to achieve a social transformation.

Pursuing this project—and also experiencing problems in finding accommodation and living in a communal way—, I have become aware that the global problem surrounding housing—especially present in urban settings—responds to a structural dimension: we are currently living in a system that denies this fundamental right, prioritizing capital over life, which creates unliveable conditions for the people that cannot afford a decent living space. Moreover, I have understood that the public space is not the only space for politics: the dichotomy private-personal/public-political is just a binary simplistic assumption. Instead, homes can also be powerful environments in which revolutionary forms of solidarity and care can take place.

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Annex

Annex I: Living group post

DE GROTE BROEK

The Voorkant living group is looking for new housemates throughout spring and summer 2018. We are a vegan living group of 8 people in the Grote Broek, a legalised squat in the city centre of Nijmegen. The Grote Broek hosts two living groups, a bar (the Onderbroek), a political café (the Klinker), and many other social and political projects.

Our ideal housemate would be:

- involved in activism and non-parliamentary politics
- actively participating in the living group
- (willing to be) active in the Grote Broek
- communicative
- clean
- not allergic to dogs

If you're interested, shoot us an email, tell us why you would like to live here, and something about yourself at:

hetvoorkantje@gmail.com

DO YOU WANT TO LIVE IN THE GROTE BROEK?



Annex II: Current human and spatial composition of La Borda

La Borda presents a combination between private space (28 housing units - which include dwellings of three different sizes - 40, 55, and 70 square meters- and community spaces to "enhance community and neighbourhood life".²⁰ These community spaces include kitchen-dining room, shared workspace, laundry space, multipurpose space, guest room, health and care space, storage for plants, outdoor and semi-outdoor areas, such as the courtyard and the roof. Following a popular Spanish typology of dwelling named "corrala", all of the spaces are articulated around a central inner courtyard, an ample relationship space.

The members of La Borda use the term "conviviality unit" to refer to the variety of forms in which people inhabit the private spaces. The use of this particular terminology escapes the traditional denomination and connotations of the word "family" enabling a more inclusive and open concept which refers in a more neutral way to the fact that there are units-can be individuals or groups- who live together. This lack of specificity aims to respect and include the diversity of the realities of the different units in La Borda. Following the terminology used in La Borda, the total of the 28 private spaces are distributed between 27 conviviality units (1 of them occupies two spaces). According to their realities, these units can be classified into: 10 unipersonal, 6 couples, 7 couples with children, 2 one-parent with children, 1 group of adult conviviality, and 1 group of adult conviviality with children (García 2015, 28).

The numbers show that the dominant typologies of conviviality (unipersonal (10) and couples (13)) still reproduce the current hegemonic nuclear forms of social organisation. However, for reasons related to the privacy of the residents, I couldn't have access to more information regarding specific information about social variables -such as age, gender identification, sexual orientation, functional diversity²¹ or income- of the people composing the different units. That is why it becomes impossible to provide a more detailed vision of the human composition of La Borda. What also remains a question is the existence of companion species- using the terminology of Haraway (2003)- inhabiting the space.

²⁰ Lacol (website): <http://www.lacol.coop/>

²¹ In substitution of the term "disability," I opt, here, for using the term "functional diversity". In the Spanish context, this term is vindicated by some activist that experience ableism. Antonio Centeno explains that this renaming is "not with the aim to be politically correct, but to be political [...] It is not about changing the world, but the way of thinking, because, while the model of disability is centred on personal tragedy, we say that this is a matter of human diversity" (Centeno 2017, no page). He points to the political ideology behind the construction of the category "disability". However, I am aware that some activist practice re-appropriation strategies and use the term "disabled" or the term "crip". Being aware of my position, I prefer using "functional diversity" because I understand that the context (who, where, and why) matter in the act of wording.

During my visits in the cooperative, I saw no sign of it and neither the topic was addressed during our conversations.

Annex III: Profile of the Interviewees

Anna is a person who identifies with the gender category of woman, she is sixty-four years old, and was born in Barcelona. She is currently retired, and she used to work as a primary school teacher and she also worked as a second-hand bookseller. Anna lives in La Borda in a private space on her own.

Joan is a person who identifies with the gender category of man, he is thirty-two years old and grew in Sant Feliu de Guixols, a Catalan village. He moved to Barcelona to start a university degree in Architecture, and he currently works in LaCol, the cooperative that was in charge of the construction process of La Borda. Joan lives in LaBorda in a private space shared with his partner.

Esther is a person who identifies with the gender category of woman, she is sixty-six years old and she was born and grew in Barcelona. She is currently retired and she used to work as a kindergarten teacher. Esther lives in La Borda in a private space shared with her partner.