"We Are Not Marginals"

The Cultural Politics of Lead Poisoning
in Montevideo, Uruguay

by
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The expanding squatter settlements of Latin America's cities are emblematic of the new forms of spatial inequality and social suffering wrought by the neoliberal order. In the context of the return of the "dangerous classes" across the Americas, the dominant classes have mobilized the culture-of-poverty and marginality myths of the 1960s as a means of governance by placing responsibility for the "pathologies" of poverty on a criminalized urban underclass. Analysis of the debates regarding the meanings of Uruguay's new urban poor in relation to a lead-poisoning epidemic in Montevideo links the growth of economic and housing informality to social exclusion and marginality, and reveals the efforts of those in power to shift responsibility for lead poisoning onto its victims. It also identifies various responses of squatters to hegemonic forms of culturalism and othering, including the displacing of culturalist discourses onto similar "others," "strategic othering" emphasizing their structural vulnerability to urban environmental hazards, and the use of their status as lead victims to assert their humanity and rights.

La expansión de asentamientos ocupados en las ciudades de América Latina es emblemático de las nuevas formas de desigualdad espacial y sufrimiento social labrado por el orden neoliberal. En el contexto del retorno de "las clases peligrosas" a través de las Américas, las clases dominantes han movilizado los mitos de la cultura de pobreza y marginalidad de los 1960 como medio de gobernación, colocando la responsabilidad de las "patologías" de la pobreza en una subclase de criminalidad urbana. Un análisis de los debates en torno al significado de los nuevos pobres urbanos de Uruguay, relacionado con un caso de una epidemia de contaminación de plomo en Montevideo, vincula el crecimiento de economía y vivienda informal con la exclusión social y marginalidad y revela los esfuerzos de los que están en el poder de desplazar la responsabilidad del envenenamiento con plomo a sus victimas. Así mismo, identifica varias respuestas de los ocupantes a las formas hegemónicas de culturalismo y el hacer de "otro," incluyendo el desplazamiento del discurso culturalista encima de similares "otros" hacer de "otro estratégicamente," poniéndole énfasis a su vulnerabilidad estructural a los peligros del medio ambiente urbano, y el uso de su estatus como victimas del plomo para acertar su humanidad y sus derechos.

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The expanding squatter settlements that ring or dot Latin America's cities have become perhaps the most emblematic of the new forms of spatial inequality and social suffering wrought by the neoliberal order. Increased fear

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of crime, widespread residential gating, death squads, and popular vigilantism mark the return of the "dangerous classes" across the Americas (Caldeira, 2000; Goldstein, 2004; Low, 2004). In this context, the dominant classes have mobilized the culture-of-poverty and marginality myths first popularized in the 1960s as a means of governance by placing responsibility for the "pathologies" of poverty on a criminalized urban underclass. Squatters have taken on renewed significance politically and in the Latin American social imaginary and are central to the ideological and political debates over the character of the urban poor, represented alternately as apathetic, "permanently redundant" (Harvey, 2000), and disease-ridden communities or as the potential incubators and agents of radical politics and change (Auyero and Swistun, 2009; Davis, 2006; Kaztman et al., 2003; Olesker, 2001; Roberts and Portes, 2006).

This article analyzes the debates and contested discourses regarding the cultural and political meanings of Uruguay's new urban poor in relation to a lead-poisoning epidemic first publicly identified in Montevideo's western working-class neighborhood La Teja and numerous squatter settlements (*asentamientos*) in 2001. Sources of lead contamination were multiple and cumulative and included automotive emissions from leaded gasoline (phased out in 2004); water pipe connections; leaded paints and consumer products; industrial emissions, including metals foundries, wool dyers, and battery factories; landfill of toxic waste under homes and public schools; illegal burning of domestic, industrial, and electronic waste; and cottage industries such as car battery "recycling" and metals recovery from stolen telephone and electrical cables. Lead became Uruguay's most extensive case of environmental contamination and inspired a powerful environmental justice movement in the Comisión Vivir sin Plomo (Live without Lead Commission—CVSP). The CVSP drew together squatters, working-class families of lead-poisoned children, long-time neighborhood activists of La Teja, militant journalists, students, pediatricians, and other sympathetic professionals. The state responded to the lead discoveries by funding limited environmental and public health studies and forming a national commission to direct intervention efforts. It opened a national lead-poisoning clinic, relocated entire settlements to government housing, and provided nutritionally fortified "food baskets" to poor families to mitigate the impacts of toxic exposure.

Lead contamination became a publicly recognized issue in a context of deepening economic crisis and the dismantling of a welfare state once considered central to Uruguay's myths of exceptionalism (Perelli and Rial, 1986). The radical transformations associated with neoliberalism brought about new forms of polarization and social exclusion and introduced new forms of consumption and industrial processes that together laid the foundation for intensified risks and impacts of lead contamination exposure (Renfrew, 2009). Social actors, particularly the working class and the poor, understood lead as a problem due to these structural processes but also recognized the symbolic dimensions that provoked moral reflection about lead's patterns of victimization and the social conditions that made the epidemic possible. The state, for its part, consistently framed the problem in "cultural" terms, attributing exposure pathways and risks to the behaviors and practices of the urban poor.

Drawing from qualitative ethnographic fieldwork, my analysis of lead poisoning in Uruguay has three goals. First, it relates the growth of economic and

housing informality among the "new poor" to social exclusion and marginality, analyzing the connections between urban informality, ecological degradation, and political mobilization. Second, it reveals the strategies those in power used to minimize the significance and risks of lead poisoning and to shift responsibility and blame onto its victims, primarily by framing the origins and dynamics of lead poisoning in "cultural" terms. Third, it analyzes the "cultural politics" of lead poisoning through various grassroots actors' responses to hegemonic forms of culturalism and othering. These responses included (1) the internalizing and displacing (or "refracting") of culturalist discourses by some squatters onto "other," similar residents; (2) the employment of a form of "strategic othering" on the part of CVSP and working-class activists, who negotiated the anxiety of potential downward mobility by emphasizing the structural vulnerability of squatters to urban environmental hazards; and (3) the rejection of othering strategies by some squatters, who rejected the status of "marginals" while drawing on their symbolic, embodied, and bureaucratic status as lead victims to claim and assert their humanity and rights. By way of conclusion, I suggest that analysis of the Uruguayan lead-poisoning case contributes to broader understandings of the ecological dimensions of inequality in neoliberal times and the ways in which "marginality" and "culture" continue to serve as key strategies of governance, as well as enduring political terrains of contestation.

ECOLOGICAL MARGINALIZATION AND CULTURES OF POVERTY: HISTORY, CONTEXT, DEBATES

Though Oscar Lewis (1966) attributed both negative characteristics (social disintegration, dependence, authoritarianism, anomie) and positive attributes (spontaneity, a functional coping strategy) to his "culture of poverty," its pejorative connotations gained the widest currency in academic and policy circles, including those in Latin America (e.g., Germani, 1980). Squatters in the 1960s and 1970s were widely portrayed as lazy, dependent, hypersexual, and potentially criminal members of a "seething, frustrated mass." Their housing was characterized as a parasitic "social cancer" taking the form of "filthy and disease-ridden shantytowns" (Perlman, 1976: 1–2). Squatters were thought of as exhibiting a "present-time orientation" and as incapable of "deferring gratification," planning for the future, or generally thinking beyond their immediate social worlds and time (Lewis, 1966). Many of these ideas echo the stigmatization long associated with the "pathologies" of the urban poor in the industrial cities of the Victorian era (Engels, 1887).

Other theorists critiqued the dominant culture-of-poverty discourse. Manuel Castells, Janice Perlman (1976), and Latin American theorists such as José Nun (1969), Alejandro Portes (1972), and Aníbal Quijano (1977) formulated theories of marginality in the 1960s and 1970s largely derived from neo-Marxism and dependency theory. They argued that with the development of an increasingly complex and technologically advanced international division of capital, the system became unable to absorb the surplus labor it created. Populations became part of a "marginal mass" and a "permanent structural" and unabsorbed feature of the economy (Auyero, 1997: 509; Quijano, 1977: 21). Perlman

(1976) and others questioned the functionalist "myths of marginality" that posited squatter settlements as homogeneous and bounded units of analysis (dys)functionally integrated into a broader social order. Critics recognized the marginality myths as instruments of social control of the poor, a means of simultaneously blaming the poor for their condition and exonerating the dominant classes from social responsibility and a more equitable distribution of resources and wealth (AlSayyad, 2004; Perlman, 1976). According to these critics, the poor of the shantytowns were not "marginal" or excluded from the rest of society but were in fact fully integrated on economically exploited terms.

Restructuring associated with neoliberal globalization since the 1990s reorganized production and urban spatial forms in Latin American cities as in other parts of the world. Intensified socioeconomic inequalities pushed greater numbers of people into poverty and into the informal economy and irregular housing settlements. Slums and squatter settlements in the region now include a greater number of the downwardly mobile urban middle and working classes and are no longer the predominant domain of rural migrants (Bayat, 2004: 80). The economic shift from national industrialization models such as import-substitution industrialization to export-oriented production resulted in widespread urban deindustrialization. Coupled with the scaling back of welfare policies, these processes resulted in the growing vulnerability of both rural and urban populations, leading to new forms of marginalization and social exclusion.

In Uruguay, squatter settlements grew from the late 1990s on at an annual rate of 10 percent and by 2004 included almost 15 percent of Montevideo's population (Avila, Baraibar, and Errandonea, 2003; Olesker, 2004). Whereas Uruguay once prided itself on being Latin America's exceptional "model Republic," the deep economic recession at the turn of the millennium punctuated decades of socioeconomic decline. Unemployment rates hovered around 20 percent, and labor insecurity reached two-thirds of the country's labor force (Laborde, 2004). Poverty doubled from 1998 to 2003, affecting roughly one-third of the total population (Laborde, 2004). At least 85,000 Uruguayans emigrated in only a three-year period, and of those who remained almost as many became indigent, while the national debt ballooned to a suffocating US$13 billion (Kirichenko, 2004; Papa, 2004).

The explosive growth of the squatter settlements in recent years reflects a process of urban spatial restructuring rather than demographic growth per se (Olesker, 2004). With sharp rises in the cost of living and a 30 percent loss of income for workers in only five years, families were no longer able to afford rents or property and were gradually expelled from the city center into periurban squatter settlements (Corboz, 2004; Papa, 2004). This process of socio-spatial restructuring reflects a "push" dynamic rather than the "pull" of industrialization or the promise of a better urban life for rural migrants that characterized the growth of Latin American squatter settlements for most of the twentieth century (Perlman, 1976).

The expanding asentamientos differ in character from the long-standing urban slums of Montevideo, known locally as *cantegriles*, which Avila, Baraibar, and Errandonea (2003) characterize as "pockets of marginality" in the city center that corresponded to the structural limits of the import-substitution-industrialization model dominating state economic policies from the 1930s to the mid-1980s. The term "cantegril" originated in the 1950s as an ironic reference to the Cantegril Country Club in the exclusive resort city of Punta del Este

on the Atlantic coast. The cantegriles, in turn, should be differentiated from previous forms of slum and shantytown development. These include, notably, the rural *pueblos de ratas* (rat villages) of the displaced gauchos of the nineteenth century after the fencing of the countryside and the introduction of industrial cattle farming and the *conventillos* (tenement slums) that served as popular housing in Montevideo for the waves of European immigrant laborers in the early twentieth century. The cantegriles grew rapidly in the 1950s and 1960s, as the import-substitution-industrialization model slowly unraveled, and housed predominantly landless rural migrants to Montevideo (Avila, Baraibar, and Errandonea, 2003; Corboz, 2004). The asentamientos of the capital, in contrast, grew in the 1980s and 1990s in the city's peripheral and marginal spaces, with 70 percent of their population drawn from Montevideo itself. As Avila et al. argue (2003), the asentamientos reflected new local forms of social exclusion corresponding to the socio-spatial transformations of the global neoliberal economic order.

Many asentamientos are entirely new or recent settlements, and their residents consist mostly of formerly unionized and now unemployed construction and other skilled workers (Kaztman et al., 2003). Other settlements, however, represent a mix of long-term and recent squatters, and housing type and makeup, occupational type and status, and point of origin are heterogeneous (Corboz, n.d.). Neighbors, the settlers themselves, the media, and other commentators often alternate between the terms "cantegril" and "asentamiento," reflecting differences in signification.[1]

To live in a cantegril, according to hegemonic discourse, is thoroughly "cultural" and implies sharing a specific set of values and attributes that approximate Lewis's culture-of-poverty concept (Corboz, n.d.; Lewis, 1966). Politicians, the mainstream media and academics commonly portray life in the cantegriles as self-entrenched, resigned, and pathological, in contrast to life in the asentamientos whose residents have been temporarily and recently displaced from the mainstream of society. Residents of the asentamientos have agency, according to this view, while those of the cantegriles passively experience their fate in life. Following this framework, the future of asentamiento dwellers still holds the possibility of transcending their conditions of squalor. The danger, of course, is that they will eventually become cantegrileros themselves.

CULTURALISM AND BLAME: HOW OFFICIALS EXPLAIN LEAD POISONING

The spatial location of squatters on polluted riverbanks, abandoned industrial brown fields, and once-empty lots of toxic landfill facilitated their framing as diseased and dangerous bodies. They became "matter out of place" (Douglas, 1966), blurring the boundaries between the natural (urban ecology) and the cultural (the cityscape). Public health officials and medical practitioners presented environmental disease as the result of the conflation of endemic poverty and ecological degradation or, as several of them put it, the coming together of the "two p's" of *plomo* (lead) and *pobreza* (poverty).

Debates over the reach of environmental health risk were most prominently exemplified by the state's official protocol establishing a medical intervention threshold at blood lead levels of 20 µg/dL (micrograms of lead per deciliter of

blood), doubling the CDC and World Health Organization's "action threshold" of 10 µg/dL, which Uruguayan activists unsuccessfully pushed the Public Health Ministry to recognize. By doubling the intervention threshold, the state ensured that the scope of the disease would in fact largely be confined to the asentamiento poor, whose participation in or close proximity to contaminating cottage industries augmented the baseline blood lead levels of the general urban population. The official protocol largely overlooked lead water pipe connections and lead-based paints, two proven yet thoroughly understudied sources of lead contamination in Uruguay (Mañay et al., 2008). It did so on the grounds, as more than one official told me, that squatters typically do not have running water and "do not paint their shacks." The equation of the "two p's," lead and poverty, thus became a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby the now-criminalized victims of lead poisoning (those who participated in illegal and contaminating activities in their own backyards) could be blamed for their fate.

Culture-of-poverty-influenced etiologies of disease expressed by the media and much of the political establishment actively undermined the potential to construe lead poisoning as a universal threat and as a violation of children's rights and childhood innocence, as the social movement and the sympathetic media portrayed it. Official discourse explained lead poisoning in cultural and individualist terms, shifting the burden of responsibility from the polluting industry to the irresponsible parent and from the legal actions of the state and private industry to the illicit activities of the informal economy. This discursive strategy employed what Didier Fassin and Anne-Jeane Naudé (2004: 1859) refer to as "practical culturalism," a "common sense theory that essentializes culture and overemphasizes the understanding of social reality by its cultural aspects."

Uruguayan officials, for instance, emphasized the role of education in shaping the vulnerability of poor families. Factors associated with "culture" and "habitat," including endemic improper hygiene and poor parenting, hindered prevention and remediation measures in the asentamientos. Those employing culturalist discourses often emphasized the practice of pica, the abnormal ingestion of inedible substances, as one of the primary causes of children's lead poisoning. As a company lawyer for the state oil refinery explained, children of poor families who "sleep alongside horses" also "nourish themselves with dirt."[2] Squatters were portrayed as intimately associated with dirt, both literally and symbolically. Dirt surrounded their houses, their children (supposedly) ate dirt, and therefore they were unclean, polluted, and defiled. The backward and premodern "cultural" practices of using horses for work (as part of the informal recycling trade) and their embodied proximity to pollution placed squatters closer to tradition and nature, according to this view, and distanced them from the cleansed, modern and civilized urban core (Corboz, n.d.; Douglas, 1966; Hoffman, 2002). "Dirt-eating" children, as well as those who participated actively in the informal economy, were denied the status of passive and innocent victims and became active agents of their misfortune, with the complicity of "backward" parents socialized within an intractable culture of poverty. Some of these ideas were drawn directly from now-discredited scientific articles circulating in Uruguay of lead poisoning in North America, where pica was considered a behavioral abnormality disproportionately affecting the poor or even a cultural "survival trait" from Africa that would differentially poison poor children of color (Warren, 2000).

Officials and everyday citizens questioned the motives of antilead activists. A director of Montevideo's Environmental Hygiene Laboratory charged that "people jump on the bandwagon" of lead contamination to pursue "other interests." Activists of slum settlements only want "free" housing or food, according to this argument, and are ultimately unconcerned about their children. When families are relocated, some charge, other poor families come in immediately to occupy the vacated terrains, sometimes with the complicity of the moving families. Others illegally sell the new houses to which they are relocated. In a conversation one day at the lead-poisoning clinic about a rumor that some families had sold their government-issued houses, the driver hired to transport families to the clinic retorted angrily, "They're born bums and they'll die bums. You have to just bury them all in a sewer." He went on to complain of the poor's lack of moral standards, arguing, "They sell everything: their houses, food baskets, even the medicine that's given to them." As a further example of the ways hostile discourses were reproduced across society and of the stigmatization of lead victims in everyday life, in the early days following the initial lead discoveries children repeatedly suffered discrimination in schools from teachers and fellow students who feared contagion from the "lead disease" (Amorín, 2001).

THE URBAN POOR RESPOND: NEGOTIATING CATEGORIES OF THE OTHER

REFRACTED OTHERING

The poor of squatter settlements often described their neighbors as driven by "envy" and self-interest or as "constantly complaining" and demanding that things be "given" to them by the state. The most frequent negative characterization I heard was of other squatters as unhygienic and "dirty." Stories, gossip, and anecdotes, often supported with graphic evidence, reinforced perceptions of the "other" amongst the poor. Residents often interwove their stories with culturalist discourse regarding the values inherent to cantegril life. In this way, I argue, individuals internalized hegemonic culturalist discourse and at the same time disassociated themselves from it by displacing or "refracting" it onto other, similar subjects.

Lucía and Víctor lived with their children in the highly contaminated Rodolfo Rincón settlement for almost two decades. Víctor became one of the leaders of the antilead movement, and both were important referents for the community before it was razed and collectively relocated to government housing a few kilometers away. Víctor and Lucía discussed the common problems faced by residents of Rodolfo Rincón through diseases spread from improper sanitation, intestinal worms in children and adults, hepatitis, and rat infestations. Many of these problems were due to a lack of municipal and state services and to the life conditions forced on families who lived on US$40 a month. But, Lucía argued, "The people are at fault as well." Lucía took the problem of sanitation as a case in point. She said she has lived in the cantegril for 19 years but has always made sure to have her bathroom and shower. Some other families "have a 20-inch color TV" but still "use a little bucket for their necessities." Lucía told me about another family whose older kids had all served time in the

Comcar prison.[3] She described the little ones as "full of flies" and "always rustling and climbing through the garbage bins." She argued that part of the marginality lived by these families was taught to the children as well as being forced upon them by circumstances. "People need to look forward," she said. Otherwise, "parents marginalize their children" and foment a cycle difficult to break.

One day I visited Lucía and her family after they relocated to their new government home. Lucía's daughters Fanny and Talía came in from playing with some neighborhood girlfriends. Six-year-old Talía was acting aggressively, speaking to Lucía disrespectfully and bothering Lucía's sleeping granddaughter Yoana. Talía had recently been in trouble for forcibly grasping and squeezing a younger girl's head at school, and this had followed an earlier incident when she stabbed a classmate in the face with a fork. After one of her frequent misbehaviors while I was in their home, Lucía admonished her: "You're acting like someone from the cante[gril]!" To which the teenaged Fanny responded ironically: "What do you want? She was born in one!"

A young teenage mother of the 25 de Agosto squatter settlement I met named Ema, whose severely poisoned son was hospitalized with a blood lead level of 64 µg/dl, expressed her bewilderment and frustration that other children of her asentamiento "eat dirt" but "do not have lead." She kept strict hygiene in the home but had been unable to avoid her child's being poisoned. Ema's position was not uncommon, and it responds to the dominant biomedical discourse reducing lead exposure rates and prevention to individuals' and families' abilities to maintain "proper" hygiene. No matter how clean people kept or attempted to keep their homes, the fact that the interior and exterior grounds were often made of dirt or located directly adjacent to contaminated soils, in addition to the endemic lack of running water and sanitation, made the biomedical prescription of hygiene and cleanliness practically impossible to achieve. Furthermore, while it is impossible to verify whether other children in fact "ate dirt," this was precisely the claim repeated by health officials in attributing individual responsibility for contamination. Most likely, then, Ema's and others' indignation reproduced aspects of hegemonic culturalist discourse and arose in part from the morally perplexing challenge of making sense of their suffering.[4] Through refracted othering, they channeled and displaced circulating discourses of poverty and blame onto other, neighboring families of the asentamiento or onto residents of other cantegriles: it is "they" who are dirty, lazy, or ignorant, not "us."[5]

STRATEGIC OTHERING

Working- and middle-class activists of the antilead movement struggled to come to terms with the extreme forms of poverty in their midst. They referred to lead poisoning in the asentamientos as resulting in a series of "unnatural" and "perverse" logics, exemplified by stories of mothers of children just under the 20 µg/dl intervention threshold who encouraged their children to eat contaminated food or even dirt in order to qualify for state assistance. Clara Méndez, a social worker from La Teja, referred to the "perverse situation" in which some people would avoid caring for themselves and their children in order to maintain "sufficient" levels of lead poisoning to access government

benefits. José Camarda, a former housing minister turned CVSP leader, explained the consequences: "This creates an entire life strategy. That is, if I'm able to get my child lead-poisoned, I'll accomplish something. Those stories are diabolical. And you could say, 'Wow, what a bad mother.' No, no, that's the reality. What is the reward for that child to be cured?" Most of the CVSP activists had stories they related in terms of perversion and moral perplexity. The CVSP leader Carlos Pilo often graphically rendered the desperation suffered by the poor. He told of children's endemic hunger and lack of proper clothing and, in perhaps the most horrifying of tales, of the seven-year old boy who attempted suicide. Another CVSP leader reflected in a social movement meeting on his thoughts as he spoke to a breastfeeding mother: "I knew that through this act she was almost certainly killing her child."[6]

Though it is difficult to judge the veracity of these claims, their prevalence is socially significant. Movement leaders used these perceived perversions to highlight the forms of structural violence that force individuals and families into morally questionable acts or, as I often heard, make people "live like animals." In making this point, they emphasized highly symbolic and emotive domains of life such as the violation of the mother-child bond or the corruption of childhood innocence. This tactic of "strategic othering" still "others" the poor but places emphasis on the structural and systemic origins of poverty rather than on the "cultural" origins employed by hegemonic forms of othering. In other words, the prevalence of individual pathologies and social perversions is an indictment of an immoral economic system and the failure of the state to protect its citizens rather than a reflection of the moral character of its victims.

On the surface, activists appeared to simply reproduce culturalist discourses. By contrast, I argue, the goal of strategic othering was not to negate the humanity and agency of the poor but rather to present the poor as victims of a system that had forced them into a situation of dehumanization. Structural violence denied these individuals the basic principles and rights of modernity: entering into the labor-capital relation, living in a dignified dwelling, being able to procure adequate food, or avoiding preventable disease. They had been rendered "subhuman" by an unjust socioeconomic order.

Through culturalist discourses, those in power would "other" the poor in order to naturalize their misfortune, turning it into a permanent state rather than a temporary setback. By placing the burden of blame for poverty and disease on the shoulders of the victims, the powerful absolved themselves of responsibility. Through strategic othering, in contrast, the "subhumanization" process was one that occurred historically through the subjugation and exploitation of workers by capitalists. Presumably, this misfortune could be reversed. There was a space left open for agency and change, in contrast to culturalist frameworks that rendered the poor passively and permanently surrendered to their fate.

The state oil company union leader Julio López employed strategic othering in describing to me the "unnatural" conditions that led to extreme levels of lead contamination in La Teja. He described the proliferation of informal metals recycling: "There wasn't a neighborhood where someone wasn't messing things up. The lack of jobs, the crisis that we're suffering, makes people look for means of survival that are not normal." A union-led investigation discovered

dozens of clandestine recycling centers across La Teja, many of which smelted metals on their own property, releasing lead oxide into the air and the soil.

López positioned the poor in opposition to union workers and formal laborers, presenting the conditions under which poor people live and work as "unnatural" and thus literally engendering a different human "nature." This discursive construct reflects a binary matrix of "worker" and "nonworker" in which the worker represents full humanity, dignity, rationality, solidarity, and historical agency and the nonworker represents their inversion.[7] Within this framework, the "worker" (or "the people," the "common man," or "the neighbors") exhibits solidarity and strong family and community ties, is hardworking and self-sacrificing, and bears boundless creativity and resourcefulness. The worker epically confronts a restraining or repressive force that may alternate between representatives of "the state," the "capitalist class," "the elite," "politicians," "the rich," or "the powerful." The "constellation of values" associated with the ideal type of the former category shapes the mirror opposite of the latter (Alvarez Pedrosian, 2002).

In early-to-mid-twentieth-century Uruguay, as in the advanced capitalist nations, work was relatively plentiful, and the principal internal conflict of the worker's self-identification could be characterized as mediating the double image of work as the "principal source of valorization" of existence and as a vehicle of exploitation and therefore the cause of hardships and evils (Alvarez Pedrosian, 2002: 49). In a crisis-ridden Uruguay, however, where labor itself became a privilege, a formidable lumpenproletariat symbolically threatened from below and from outside the traditional worker-capitalist equation to become the possible future path of degradation of the modern worker. Work in a precarious and decadent Uruguay became "a lucky destiny, a prize of fate, or a divine blessing" (Alvarez Pedrosian, 2002: 70).

The worker/nonworker matrix expressed a tension within the antilead movement between working-class actors and the poor of the asentamientos. Even while expressing solidarity and concern for the plight of the extreme poor, workers evinced an uncomfortable aversion to what was considered the depths of desperation that poverty could engender. In order to maintain separation between the working class and the destitute, complex gatekeeping and boundary work became necessary (Corboz, n.d.). The "refracted othering" of individuals like Ema represented one form of boundary work. Strategic othering represented another, holding up the dehumanized "other" living in extreme poverty as the worker's dreaded potential fate.

While the category "worker" draws on universalist, essentialist, and abstract constructions of an ideal type, antilead activists of the CVSP grounded this construction in a specific and meaningful place, the barrio La Teja. They drew together the barrio's strong working-class and radical political identity, dense social and community networks, and local histories of militant resistance to the dictatorship. These place narratives provided a history and normative model for workers and neighbors to share.

Strong place identity allowed local residents to present lead contamination as an "invasion" of the neighborhood by a harmful force from outside. They defined the invasive agents variously as irresponsible industry, the state, and, to a lesser extent, local residents engaged in cottage industries. In this latter case, local residents were partially absolved of blame by their status as victims

(or ex-workers) forced into this position by the structural conditions of unemployment and socioeconomic crisis. In a way, these ex-workers had themselves become "outsiders," because they no longer fit the ideal type of the worker.

For long-term local residents, La Teja's core identity is a place where workers live with dignity and no dignified worker with a decent job and housing would consciously poison his/her environment and community. The responsibility for lead contamination, suffered collectively, shifted to the external actors associated with the dominant power structure: the government, capitalist interests, or corrupt politicians. Through their actions, they took away the very creative essence of workers, along with their dignity and, worst of all, as Carlos Pilo would frequently warn, their hope.

DENIAL OF OTHERNESS

In 2004 I attended a street protest organized by squatters of the Inlasa settlement in La Teja. The former metals foundry Inlasa operated for decades, at its height employing 400 workers. By 1990 the workforce had been cut by half, and the factory promptly shut down. Squatters soon settled on the abandoned property. The protesters that day blocked the road and bridge passing the old smelter grounds demanding long-promised housing relocation and a reprieve from conditions of squalor. They lived in Inlasa without sanitation, with massive levels of lead contamination, and with a constant risk of crumbling walls. Over 60 families were squatting at the time in this old smelter, surrounded by layers of lead, dirt, and concrete. Protesters hung a large banner across the street at car-level that read in bold letters: "S.O.S. MINISTER SAUL IRURETA, 61 FAMILIES OF INLASA FEAR STAYING STUCK (UNDER RUBBLE). PROMISES OF RELOCATION THAT WERE NEVER HONORED: 61 FAMILIES CONDEMNED TO MARGINALIZATION: DESIRE FOR A BETTER LIFE (WE FIGHT FOR DECENT HOUSING)."[8]

Inlasa was reminiscent of a bombed-out building in a war zone. Its most defining feature was a large chimney that towered over the two-story building and was viewable from a distance. The front doors of the factory were removed long ago, leaving the opening as a glimpse into the lives of the inhabitants inside. Most of the rows of windows in the old factory were without panes and covered with plywood, bricks, or sheets of tin. The edges of the concrete wall were in a process of advanced decay.

Rubert, who had been living in Inlasa with his family for 11 years, invited me into his home.

He unhinged a thick chain lock on a door at ground level, shrugging and lamenting, "You have to lock things up around here." We took a flight of stairs to the second floor. Rubert's family was comparatively lucky, as it occupied the former managerial office space of the Inlasa factory. It consisted of a long room converted into living and dining room and a bedroom that the entire family shared.

Rubert said that as a baker with a steady job he made enough money to provide food and some material comfort to his family. What they hadn't been able to afford was decent housing. A soup kitchen (*comedor*) served food to the settlement's children from Monday through Friday, sometimes their only meal of the day, according to Rubert. While acknowledging the need and destitution of

the families in the complex, he also had some unforgiving things to say about some of them. He said that some took advantage of the state-delivered food baskets, turning around and selling the goods rather than giving them to their children. "These aren't bums, they're sons of bitches," he declared.

Rubert's discussion of living conditions in Inlasa alternated between the refracted othering reproducing tropes of the poor as criminal, lazy, and morally negligent and a plea to be recognized as fundamentally human and as workers who have simply fallen on hard times. The latter discourse constitutes a rejection of the category of otherness. Like strategic othering, it recognizes the structural violence to which people have been forced to adapt. In contrast to strategic othering, however, it rejects that this violence has forced them into a state of absolute marginality or hindered their agency. The banner stretched across the street suggested the same. Families were "condemned to marginalization," but they "desire[d] a better life" and would fight to see it realized.

Carmen Techera, the principal spokesperson for the Inlasa protesters that day, employed a similar strategy. As we conversed, Techera explained to me the harsh conditions endured by the settlers. She said that you used to lift up a little bit of dirt and lead scrap was revealed everywhere. All of the settlement's children were poisoned, she told me, and one was found with a blood lead level of 69 μg/dl. Residents also suffered a host of other diseases and infections due to the lack of proper sanitation.

Carmen and her family had lived in Inlasa for 14 years. "We are not marginals," she said, but "they marginalize us." The term "marginados" carries a double sense of being "marginalized" by the rest of society and "marginal" as an ontological state. The latter sense of "marginal" often carries a criminalized undertone. This essentialized category carries the meanings associated with culture-of-poverty discourse, and it is what settlers such as Carmen emphatically deny. "We are not marginals" is an assertion and a plea, in short, for recognition of their fundamental dignity and humanity. The undeniable, sometimes brutal and even "perverse" hardships they were forced to endure were signs of their marginalization and othering by a dominant power structure. Again, their assertion is similar in many ways to the strategic othering employed by working-class activists. The difference, however, is in the denial of the principle of otherness that accompanies these hardships. They are humans forced into inhumane conditions, but they are still humans, never "animals."

Víctor of Rodolfo Rincón argued a similar point in discussing the fine line between marginalization and "being marginal." He brought up an example of a man who becomes too old or tired to push his garbage recycling cart on foot for so many blocks each day. "It's sometimes easier to break open a door and steal what you can from a house," he said. In this case, "society forces you to learn things you shouldn't learn" and "to do things that maybe you don't want to do." Víctor tried to teach his children "not to be marginals." He did not want them to go through their lives treated like second-class citizens or to end up years from now living in the cante with their own families. He insisted that there was nothing to be ashamed of, that it was "not a dishonor" to live in the cante, but his hopes were that they would have better options. There were many people, he reminded me, who "never thought they'd live in one."

CONCLUSION: FROM MARGINALITY TO BELONGING

Montevideo's lead-poisoned squatters resisted the "techniques of erasure" (Briggs, 2004) by which they were symbolically rendered "invisible" by the dominant classes. Often deploying overlapping narratives of refracted othering, strategic othering, and the denial of othering, squatters struggled to assert agency against the denigrating and marginalizing discourses of the state and ultimately to cope with and make sense of their lives of toxic suffering. Those I spoke with often invoked the notion of a threatened "dignity" in arguing, quixotically, for their very status as humans and citizens. Paradoxically perhaps, for most of the squatters in question lead poisoning for the first time put a public face on their suffering. Newspaper accounts documented the plight of mothers concerned about the health of their children, names and identities were published in print, and television cameras broadcast a newfound "fame" for people who were all too forgotten. In spite of the harsh and long-term suffering implicated by the disease, lead poisoning also served as a "nobilizing" tool, a respite from the demonization and stigma associated with the new urban poor, and a means by which the public image of squatters could be de-linked from the crime, violence, and ignorance that accompanied hegemonic discourses of marginality. Lead-poisoning status, furthermore, provided access to social welfare in the form of food baskets, medical care, and even housing relocation, relative luxuries for the urban poor in the context of economic crisis and a disintegrating welfare state. Drawing from the affliction of embodied suffering and structural violence, squatters attempted to assert personhood and rights. They declared that they were full persons, not "others," and part of society.

In a sense, what was at stake in this cultural politics of lead poisoning was the place of the new urban poor in the Uruguayan social imaginary, with very real consequences for the state's adoption or rejection of intervention policies. The irruption of extreme poverty shattered the long-standing myths of exceptionalism of Uruguay's "model Republic." Society was forced to come to terms with its new danger zones, while the socially excluded challenged the very basis of their supposed marginality.

If the new poor of squatter settlements have become key actors and sites of collective mobilization in the free-market city, the case of lead poisoning in Uruguay suggests the importance of incorporating an analysis of the often neglected environmental dimensions of urban poverty, both in terms of its structuring effects on health and as a new arena of political struggle. The coming together of class, place, environment, and suffering bodies in La Teja, however, points to the difficulties in identifying the boundaries and limits of community and the inter- and intraclass conflicts and tensions inherent in most place-based social movements (Auyero and Swistun, 2009; Harvey, 1996). The development and unfolding of these struggles, nevertheless, suggest the emergence of new forms of collective mobilization and the contestation of processes of urban and environmental marginalization across the region.

NOTES

1. In this article I alternate between usages of "asentamiento" and "cantegril." I generally follow the common social science, media, and government preference for "asentamiento" but use "cantegril" when settlement residents themselves refer to it in this way.

2. The charge of "sleeping with horses" refers to the informal garbage recyclers of Montevideo, who often work with horse-drawn carts. An advantage to living in informal housing settlements for these workers is that it allows them a place to keep their horses. Nevertheless, these individuals and families usually do not sleep in the same quarters as their horses, and the majority of asentamiento families do not have horses.

3. The Comcar prison is located in the community of Santa Lucía, on the northwestern periphery of Montevideo. It is a notorious, overcrowded prison that has become part of the popular lexicon in Montevideo. To "go to Comcar" and similar phrases are widely recognized and draw deep meanings across classes but in obviously different ways.

4. A further complicating issue is that environmental disease manifests itself differently from individual to individual, according to physiological factors that would be impossible for a lay observer to identify.

5. In her analysis of the tensions between older and newer residents of Montevideo squatter settlements, Corboz (n.d.) describes the newer (self-identified "asentamiento") residents as distinguishing themselves from the older "cantegril" residents through strategic forms of moral distancing and "boundary maintenance."

6. Lead may be transferred through breast milk.

7. My discussion of the worker/nonworker matrix is inspired by Don Kulick's (1998) formulation of the man/non-man matrix among transgendered prostitutes in Northeast Brazil.

8. Saúl Irureta was the minister of housing during the December 2004 protest.

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