Against the Airport and Its World
ZAD Metropolis Commune
‘That it might take a generation to build a victorious revolutionary movement in all its breadth does not cause us to waver. We envisage this with serenity.’

Just before boarding the ferry, you check the internet and see that the police have pulled out of two main crossroads in the ZAD. The Interior Ministry can no longer maintain its militarized presence without hindering its ability to protect Paris. In this period of weakness, the Zone to Defend will grow. You close the internet, walk out of the cafe, and into the streets of Calais, filled with immigrants trying to reach their families on the isle. It is the spring of 2013.

Where are the words, where is the house, where are my ancestors, where are my loves and where are my friends? There are none, my child. Everything has to be built. You must build the language that you will live in, You must build the house where you’ll no longer be alone. You must find the ancestors who will make you more free, and you must invent the new sentimental education through which once again, you will love.
ruins the old world has left within us and which remain to be demolished.”

When you are dropped off on the motorway, you see ZAD PARTOUT tagged on a billboard. You walk the rest of the way to Calais, thinking of everything you have just seen of the past months. You have finally experienced it and now that the memories are within your imagination you will know what you are fighting for. Just as the edge of the port city comes into your view, you remember more words, written in 2003:

For those who have been through occupations and land defense projects, this text might seem familiar. Through our fleeting experiences of revolt and communal living, we briefly glimpsed what is possible. This potential relies on exactly what we lack in the United States: a strong connection to place, affective bonds with other rebels and people outside of the structures of work and family, and territory free from police and other forces of control. So it was no surprise how quickly Occupy fell apart after losing its source of power: the spaces, or territories, where we determined how to run our lives, and from which we could organize offensive movement against this miserable world. Some might call this living-and-struggling.

What does all this have to do with a land occupation in France? We see these struggles as very intertwined — as forces of capital and colonization flow through this hyper-globalized world, so do resistant narratives, ideas, and people. Without fetishizing or idealizing struggles abroad, we can draw lessons and inspiration from them. At the risk of being Eurocentric, it is also useful to learn from struggles in other highly developed, affluent countries. The ZAD, as well as other anti-development struggles in France and Italy such as the anti-TAV (a high speed train) movement are impressive in their militance as well as fostering connection between anarchists/anti-capitalists and locals defending their land and well-being. In both these struggles there has been a complementary mix of sabotage, street conflict, more traditional protest, communication projects, and in the case of the ZAD, occupation and communal living.

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a few preliminary notes...

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In the US, especially the Western states, we have a strong history of ecological resistance. From the beginnings of Earth First! to the Northwestern green anarchist scene of the 90’s to the still-imprisoned comrades of the Green Scare, the practice of militant land defense is part of our insurrectionary history.
There are still inspiring actions against development and ecological devastation all over the continent: indigenous rebels, students, and anarchists of Quebec fighting the Plan Nord, the Mi’kmaq anti-fracking occupation in Rexton, New Brunswick, the anti-tar sands activity across the US, the Dineh elders resisting eviction from their native territory at Black Mesa in Arizona.

What seems to be lacking is a strong connection between these different nodes of resistance. We need to rethink the connection between urban and land-based struggles, as there is a tendency for these to become isolated from each other, but linking of the two could strengthen both. The occupations showed us a potential way forward, they were a gesture towards creating a territory outside of immediate police control, an experiment in communist living and anarchic revolt. It would serve us to continue wildly experimenting, creating our own zone to defend, seeking what we truly desire in this world instead of reaffirming our static identities such as anarchist, worker, queer. Forms of collective living can’t exist outside of capitalism unless they are truly antagonistic and combative to it, there is no way to truly determine our own lives in this world without collectively and individually resisting it.

Our situation is obviously different than Europe, our social fabric is torn to shreds and we don’t have solid ground from which to fight this world of domination. We are almost all displaced people, with little connection to place or the generations of militants that came before us. We face the gloomy isolation of a technocratic prison society, with capitalism and racialized and gendered domination embedded deeply in our society. This country is founded on slavery and genocide, and as such all we can affirm is our struggle against this beast.

Back on the motor way, you hitch a ride back up north towards the UK. On the radio some analyst is talking about the recent situation in Cyprus and the selling off of the countries natural gas rights. The driver of the car informs you he works for a gas company and his job is to locate gas reserves. He says it is only a matter of time before they are drilling in Spain. The experts say this will increase jobs and put more money in the economy. This is the crisis, engineered to extract more resources from the earth. As the car hurtles down the motorway, you watch the TGV train speed past a nuclear power plant. Thirty kilometers further on, there is another nuclear power plant, and you know that before you reach Calais you will see several more. You think of the struggle against the train in the Susa Valley and when you look up in the sky and see the planes you think of the ZAD, brought into being in order to stop an airport. And then you remember words you read years ago, words you had almost forgotten:

'So lucky are the orphans – the chaos of the world belongs to them. You cry over all that you’ve lost; indeed, we have lost everything. But look around us: we have gained brothers and sisters, so many brothers and sisters. Now, only nostalgia separates us from the unknown. You go, you are lost. The measure of your value is nowhere to be found. You go, and you don’t know who you are. But this ignorance is a blessing, and you are without value, like the first man. Wander the roads. If you weren’t so lost, you wouldn’t be so destined for encounters. Let’s go away. It’s high time. But please, let’s go together. Look at our gestures, the rising grace within our gestures; look at our abandon, how beautiful it is that nothing catches us; look at our bodies, how fluidly they mix. How long it has been since such free gestures descended on the world. But you know, there are still walls against our communism. There are walls within and between us that continue to divide us. We are still not done with this world. There is still jealousy, stupidity, the desire to be someone, to be recognized, the desire to be worth something. And worse, the need for authority. These are the
A few weeks later, sitting in a bar, you find out the situation at the ZAD is same as it was before you arrived. Everything continues as it did, the zone persists, and there are more manifestations planned in the future. You look up at the television screen above the bar man and see conservatives fighting police in Paris over the equal marriage law, the unemployment rate jumping to 27 percent in Spain, and a bombing in the US. You find another seat, away from the television, and read these words about life in a free zone.

“At the camp we got to see our usually grouchy, unsatisfied child in a new light. Already after two days she moved up and down the steep hills on her own, queued for the peoples kitchen by herself, asked other grownups for help, and did not only cry for us parents...In the evening she helped stack the firewood and fell asleep, without any discussion, around the fire with a hundred noisy people around. Food that she would not eat normally she ate with a ravenous appetite, also because of the lack of any alternatives. She met passing cows and goats without timidness. During the day she did not search the contact with us parents so much, but was where there were other children or activities or people she found interesting.”

Back in the metropolis, you see the Roma camps nestled along the side of the motor way and watch the smoke flow out their precarious chimneys. Hundreds of cars speed by, exuding exhaust and garbage. Down by the river, under a bridge, a few young men tag the words ZAD PARTOUT. In the super markets, unseen thieves walk out the doors with hundreds of euros worth of groceries. Refugees from Syria, Kurdistan, and Libya sit at the bars, watching the world go by. The metropolis keeps running. You are reminded that the crisis has yet to hit France as it has Greece and Spain.
retreat into the back room. When your friend in the metropolis picks up the phone they ask where you are and you tell them about your experience with the river and how you thought it was the freeway. They laugh and ask when they will see you again and you say you don’t know. After hanging up the phone you find a glass of beer with Picon liquer waiting for you. You pick up the glass and salute the comrade who gave it you after your long walk.

proached. One of the cops was severely beaten, another set on fire. In response a large group of riot police started an offensive against the new barricades and soon you are on your way there along with many others. The fight is in progress when you arrive, attack, counter attack. As the chaos unfolds, you remember the people on crutches, the people missing eyes, people you have met on your travels who have suffered serious injuries at the ZAD, and yet dozens of people surge forth, throwing rocks and bottles at the police, screaming at the tops of their lungs and raving like mad people. And then you see three canisters arching in the sky, heading directly towards you. You get out of the way, one of the canisters lands in the soil beside you, and rather than exude tear gas, the canister explodes, leaving a large crater in the ground. It is then you understand this is real, this is the nightmare, trying to break into the zone.

The battle goes back and forth until the police mass their forces and then push forward, overwhelming the barricade. They are met with molotovs during the final counter-attack. As you and the others retreat, someone sets the bar beside the barricade on fire, making good their promise to never let the police have it. You have time to catch one last glimpse behind you and see dozens of riot police in gas masks running through smoke and tear gas towards you, the bar burning behind them, the nightmare having reclaimed the space you all liberated two days ago. The police line comes to a halt beneath the tree house. This is the new border between freedom and order.
crowd quiets itself. A woman begins talking about protecting the earth, the rites of spring, and for clear reason she ends her prose poem with the words, MAYBE GOD IS BLACK.

It all comes back. In the commune, in the forest, in the bar, in the house, everyone talks about the Black Panthers. It has been going on for months. It is the common thread running through this web. As the English words on the radio fade away and are replaced with techno music, you think of the autonomy, the self-suficiency, and the self-defence of the Black Panthers. You think of the threat they posed to the order of the US and how the questions they posed still have not been answered. But as the techno music blares, you realize you have been seeing the answer this whole time, struggling to take shape. When someone hands you a spliff, you realize you are not high.

In the morning, over 1000 people arrive carrying shovels, picks, plants, chickens, seeds, and supplies. They go to different pieces of land and begin planting, tilling, building new structures. In the afternoon you go to the new barricades. There, people are tearing up the concrete road and digging into the soil. In the rear, at the cross roads, people are eating food, drinking wine, lounging in the sun. By the early evening, there are five new barricades where before there was only a skull and crossbones spraypainted on the concrete, signifying police occupation. Before you arrived at the ZAD, the map you studied showed this location as a place to be avoided. Now it is a center of life, filled with happiness and celebration. At night you go to a party at an occupied farm on the other side of the zone where a new house has been constructed. There you eat sandwiches and crepes and drink wine and watch people dance inside a large tent. And then you go to sleep, content to with the knowledge that the zone has grown wider and denser.

And so it is only natural that you see the nightmare. In the morning you awake to the news that the police have returned. A group of people hiding in the forest ambushed them as they approached. But then there is something else you had not forseen. For so many years you have caught glimpses of freedom, sometimes in a riot where your comrades controlled a few city blocks for a few intoxicating hours, sometimes in a squat during a period of rebellion, sometimes just in your imagination. And then you enter the ZAD, the Zone To Defend.

It occurs to you, as your boots sink deep into the wet earth, that mud is opposite of the metropolis. Concrete covers the metropolis, hiding the soil below. Mud is polymorphous, the metropolis is angular and static. The metropolis is hard, mud is soft. And it is everywhere in the ZAD, surrounding every structure, forming along every path, the constant companion of the free people in the fields. As you enter the outskirt of the ZAD, avoiding the police checkpoints, you remember the Latin word humus, signifying the ground, the earth, the soil. From this root comes the English word humbleness and humility, the perfect descriptors for the structures that constelate the fields and forests of the zone.

Your days pass as if in a dream. One day, you walk down a road and come to a tree house. You ask to come up and a voice from somewhere says “Yeah.” When you enter the two level tree house there is no one there. Having no explanation as to where the voice came from, you return to the road and soon come across a bar near a barricade. An old punk is dozing off inside and you don’t want to wake him. You look back the way you came and see no one. Up ahead, over the barricade, the road is also empty. And then you decide to go wander the woods. After stumbling around for a while, you come to a two story house built with tree trunks and tin. After knocking on the door and getting no answer, you climb a ladder to the second floor and find an empty bed. As soon as you lay down, you are asleep. This is the dream.
But it does not end, this dream, and you find yourself at La Chat Teigne, the center of the ZAD, a conglomeration of structures connected by walkways made of branches. There is a communal kitchen, a meeting hall, a tavern, a workshop, a shower, and several communal houses. You open the door to one of these houses and find over twenty people resting, sleeping, reading, kissing. Later, when night falls and a crescent moon hangs in the sky, you sit outside the communal kitchen, listening to crickets. Suddenly, a barefoot woman carries an accordion out from the kitchen. She walks out in the mud field in front you, stands under the moon, and begins to play. One by one, people emerge from shadows to listen, and when she begins to sing, so do they. Although you do not know the words, you find it all quite beautiful.

But before that happens, you are in the ZAD one evening, sitting with a group at Le Chat Teigne, when you hear word that only a handful of police are guarding the cross roads beyond the barricades. Tomorrow is the Seme Ta ZAD, a manifestation meant to reclaim land and plant crops in the zone. Perhaps the police are trying to lower their profile, expecting the arrival of the media, old people and children to arrive in the morning. Regardless of the reason, dozens of people begin heading to the cross roads, you with them. When you arrive you see the first new barricades springing up, but you follow a large group heading towards the police. By the time you arrive, the attack has already begun. 50 people rush the three police vans. Several tear gas grenades go off, but the wind pushes it towards the police. Just as the gas exhausts itself, the attack resumes, and the three vans flee in terror, met with the sound of hundreds of people cheering. You return to the cross roads to help bring barricade materials to the front. Someone has brought a sound system, tuned in to Radio Klaxon, the pirate radio of the ZAD. Inexplicably, an English voice comes on and the large
behind you. When the meal is finished and dozens of empty wine bottles clutter the table, someone begins projecting images on the wall. They detail the construction of a two story house made with wood processed at the communal mill. It was built in pieces and then smuggled into the ZAD. The last images show the finished house standing amidst the mud and trees, a gift to the free people of the zone.

A few days later, you are in a small hamlet, staring at a flock of male sheep. When you ask your comrade if their wool will be taken, she says no, the sheep will be eaten, just like the goats, the rabbits, the pigs, and the ducks. In the afternoon you and her take the goats up into the hills. It is the first time you have seen the herd instinct in play, the way the goats follow you as they would another goat. It makes you sad to see their trust, and when you ask her if it will be difficult to kill one of these animals she says yes, she has grown quite attached to them. In the evening, with the goats back in their stone barn, your comrade cooks you pasta with beef. As you eat, she tells you she has only killed one animal, and she only did it because of all the purchased meat she has consumed throughout the course of her life. In the cupboard are dozens of jars of duck confit, preserved in their own fat, made in the commune, ready to be eaten. To be autonomous, to defeat alienation, is difficult.

In your world, communal living usually means paying equal rent, sharing a bathroom, having a chore list and bulletin board to write nasty messages to each other on. The very Protestant and very Western union of egos is what reigns in your world: collectives that resemble gold miners more than rebels, banding together out of self interest, a desire for cheaper rent, greater social capital, and sometimes laziness. Every so often there have been collectives born out of struggle, collectives with a common purpose, a rebellious intention, but these flames have been quickly extinguished by the hip nihilism that is more a product of capitalism than a desire for rebellion. You have grown accustomed to defeat, and the most defeated and hopeless of your peers remind you there is nothing else. This virus of despair, of capitalist nihilism, infecting Germany, the UK, and the US (the most affluent places), is a poison passed off as the highest insurrectionary analysis, the purest form of understanding, when in fact it is nothing but a death cult, a counter-revolutionary excuse for enjoying a decadent and empty existence.

But hundreds of kilometers away from the ZAD, in the nasty suburban sprawl of the metropolis, you find a collective, a commune, inhabiting the disaster and filling it with life. You sit in a living room, drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, and you watch as the entire commune walks in and out of the collective house all day long. Everything is sharded freely, tobacco, food, beds, drinks, money, vehicles. Downstairs, people fix the engine of one of the communal cars, getting it ready for the big trip to the ZAD. You are told not to ask for things so many times you begin to feel like a baby.

A group comes back from the forest. They have been discussing love and cybernetics. When you ask what they have found, they tell you two things. 1: cybernetics wants to know everything. 2:
love is what cannot be known. Over twenty people in the commune were involved in coming to this conclusion. But before you can ask them any more questions, you are off to their social center for a gathering of the metropolitan comrades. Everyone sits around a long table as the food is prepared. A few children play in a corner. Two women are pregnant. You cannot tell who the parents of the children are. Everyone treats them the same. In the midst of laughter, joking, and coughing, the entire group makes collective decisions about who can use the cars and what day works best for fixing the new house.

It is decided the next day would be best, and you go with them to help, swinging a sledge hammer, tearing down brick walls, carrying wheel-barrows full of soil, and ripping out wooden beams. This is going to be a massive space, part social center, part house, part gym, part studio. When it is finished it will be in the center of an immigrant suburb and will be a hub of life for those living in the neighborhood. After working for the day you drop one of the comrades off at their apartment. It is in one of the twelve story apartment blocks, the banlieue, and as you watch them walk off towards the concrete towers, you realize the commune is possible here, in the metropolis, and that it is possible to overcome defeat. On the way back to the house, the comrade driving the collective car tells you that you will go with them to the ZAD in one week. You begin to think you are dreaming.

You watch the chain saw cut through the trunk of the tree. This is first time you have seen this take place in reality. There is snap, a scream, and soon the tree has fallen, rolling back and forth before becoming still, lying on the ground. And then you are in the communal lumber mill, feeding boards through a machine, turning them into geometrically perfect planks for the floors of a house.

In your world, you know anti-civilization anarchists who inhabit wooden houses built by other people. When they are not on their computers or texting on their smart phones, these anarchists are constantly refining their ideological purity, attacking those who do not repeat the same rote lines, and basking in their own powerlessness. They take for granted the material world they live off and within, never questioning where it came from and the thousand unseen and forgotten sacrifices that brought it into being. They would condemn you for being here as they would never condemn themselves.

In your world, you also know Marxists who constantly talk about an abstract concept called the means of production. But it is never their own means, it is the means of the enemy, waiting to be seized at the correct moment. The slavery and exploitation that brought these means into being are forgotten, as is the alienation inherent in such means. You have never seen these Marxists create their own means of production, built with joy, intention, purpose.

The planks come out of the machine and are stacked in rows, waiting to be assembled into a house. Later that day you look over the blue prints for the homes that are to be built for the commune with their own hands. In the evening, inside a stone house next to the mill, you sit at a long table with dozens of others, eating a collective meal while a fire rages in the hearth.