

# A DIGITAL OIKOS

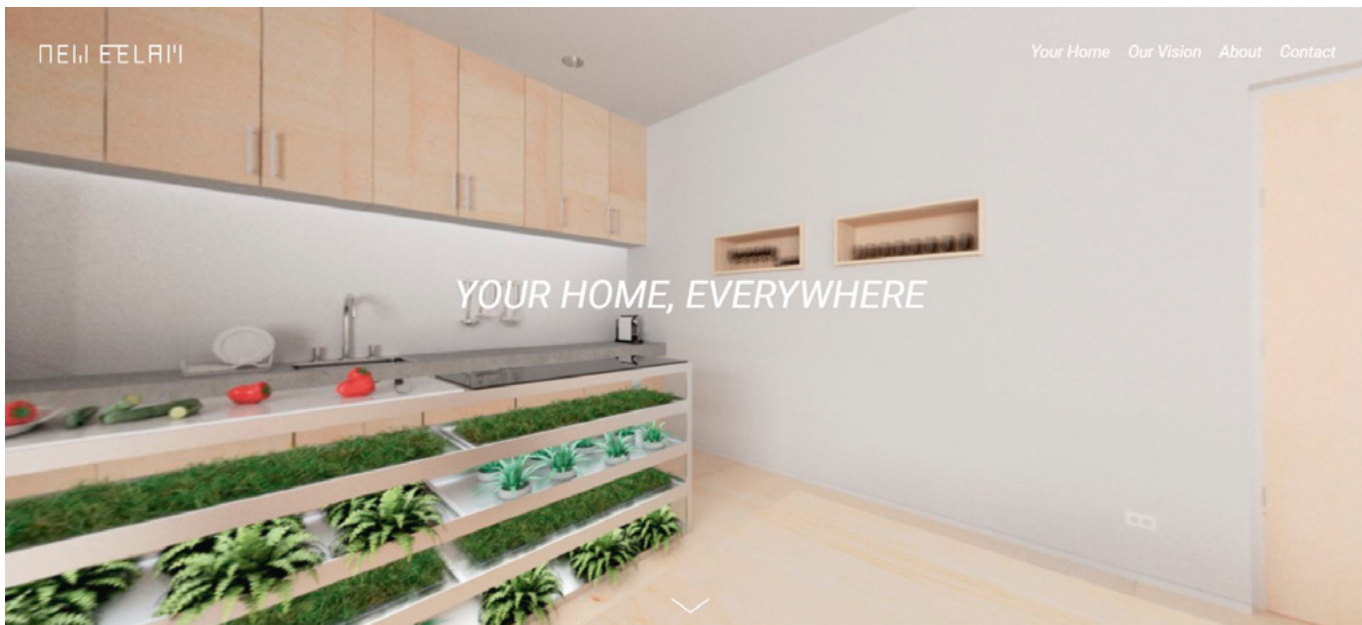


Fig 1  
Screenshot of the *New Eelam* website  
splash page, accessed July 2019.

‘Having no body and no name is a small price to pay for being wild, for being free to move across (some) countries, (some) political boundaries, (some) historical ideologies, and (some) economies. I am the supercommunity, and you are only starting to recognise me. I grew out of something that used to be humanity. Some have compared me to angry crowds in public squares; others compare me to wind and atmosphere, or to software.’<sup>1</sup>

What is the price of being wild; of being free? Is it the price of precarity, or the cost of security? Does freedom mean freedom from all collective bonds, or freedom to restructure how we live and work together? Is it possible to produce a new subjectivity of the unencumbered, the detached, without losing the structures of solidarity, co-operation and sharing that are required for material and psychological security? As an alternative to ownership and the particular freedoms and violences that private property offers, new platforms – social, spatial and digital – for collective life can potentially support the increasingly prevalent conditions of the transient subject. This essay examines the changing relationship between private property and the household through emerging digital technologies that offer a reconstitution of inhabitation, association and ownership. Through an analysis of contemporary sharing economies and their attendant social, financial and aesthetic parameters, we argue that these platforms possess a latent capacity to untether habitation from ownership and its dominant forms of settlement, and thus support increasingly transient forms of life and constituencies. Exploring such possibilities within the context of the digital economy, we argue that cloud-based infrastructures for home-sharing constitute a digital *oikos* that could redefine the political and social frameworks of domestic space and, more profoundly, private property itself.

The *oikos*, or household, is classically defined as the basic unit of private life; a constituent part of the Greek city-state that served as the counterpart to public life and civic praxis. Consisting of the family, the home and its propertied domain, the *oikos* explicitly encompassed the practice of managing the relationships between all members of the household as a foundational political act.<sup>2</sup> As opposed to the limited scope of this private sphere, emerging digital publics potentially remap these intimate ties of human association and expand the social sphere beyond familial ties to define new kinship structures and political associations. Furthermore, while the private space of the *oikos* in the Greek *polis* was fundamentally separate from public life, ownership of the household was the precondition for citizenship and participation in civic life (albeit only for the free, land-holding male). In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt writes that ‘without owning a house a man could not participate in

the affairs of the world because he had no location in it which was properly his own.’<sup>3</sup> In addition to expanding this social diagram, digital sharing economies introduce a new civic domain, characterised by the dissolution of private property into collective forms of ownership, use and governance.

Digital sharing technologies might create a rupture within traditional conceptions of private property, since they can operate at a granular scale to aggregate complex forms of participation, distribute financial resources and transform material constructs into informational commodities. While companies like WeWork and Uber have capitalised on the increasing flexibility of life and labour – commodifying the ethos and aesthetics of communal live-work models through the corporate rebranding of the sharing economy – their technological platforms have fundamentally remapped the

relationship between space, ownership and use. However, rather than serving a corporate agenda, these same platforms could instead be recaptured as a collective project to resurrect the early promises of a digital commons and institute a techno-ethic of sharing, redistribution and governance that would redefine the material and social practices of everyday life. Digital sharing economies could determine conditions for collective management that work towards the mutual good of the group and avoid the pitfalls outlined in Garrett Hardin’s ‘Tragedy of the Commons’, in which individual actors (in the case of Uber and Airbnb, read ‘corporations’) use up common resources for maximum profit.<sup>4</sup>

An example of this redefined *oikos* can be found in artist Christopher Kulendran Thomas and curator Annika Kuhlmann’s ongoing project *New Eelam*, first shown at the ninth Berlin Biennial in 2016 and most recently displayed in Bristol last year. The project exists as both a physical exhibition – an installation of a staged domestic interior – and an online service platform for home sharing. Equal parts venture capital pitch and sci-fi future, *New Eelam*’s promotional videos, web interfaces and furniture showroom propose an imagined future for housing. Positioning itself as a solution to current phenomena of statelessness and migration caused by global conflict, environmental change and financial crisis, the project proposes a digital platform for a ‘home-streaming’ service. At its most basic level, it gives subscribers access to a global network of collectively owned housing units and aims to provide a ‘flat-rate subscription to a housing cloud [that] could allow continual access to homes around the world’<sup>5</sup> through an online app. Unlike Airbnb, a system by which privately owned properties are mediated by a profit-driven corporate rental infrastructure, *New Eelam* functions as a digital commons: property is de-privatised, decentralised and collectively governed. This shift from private property ownership to digitally and co-operatively managed housing recalibrates the spectrum of permanence in relation to habitation and redefines how we relate to property, and even citizenship, through dwelling.

Within this conceptual framework, how can you ‘stream’ a home? In the case of Netflix and many other media platforms, subscribers pay on monthly basis to use the streaming service, but have

no agency in determining its content or operation. However, *New Eelam* users are both subscribers and co-owners, and are responsible for the governance of the housing pool. In contrast to conventional housing co-operatives, in which members own shares that are directly tied to a specific dwelling unit, subscribers to the platform have access to the entirety of the ‘home-stream’, just as users of a media streaming service have access to all of the content available. By decoupling specific units of housing from the ownership shares, private property is restructured into an aggregation of collective interests and assets. Incorporating concepts from emerging Decentralised Autonomous Organisations (DAOs), *New Eelam* proposes the use of blockchain and cryptocurrency technologies to enable the governance of vast resources through a combination of autonomous computational regulation and shareholder voting.<sup>6</sup> Governed by DAO decision-making logics in lieu of centralised corporate hierarchies, user-subscribers have access to any available asset in the collectively-owned and globally-distributed housing pool.

Such an infrastructure could permit new models of collectivity to be mobilised as true peer-to-peer (P2P) networks – distributed platforms that allow for the exchange of information and services between equally privileged actors – that reframe the home not as a sequestered interior, but as an active agent in a broader system of shared resources. Beyond technologies that merely enable the self-management of the home (such as Google Home and Nest), sharing platforms like *New Eelam* instead expand and reorient the *oikos* towards a digitally-managed collective life. In P2P networks – such as file sharing software like BitTorrent and open-source crypto-currencies such as Bitcoin – users can operate collectively to accomplish mutually-beneficial tasks that cannot be addressed by individuals operating alone, thus replacing the motives and actions of any singular corporate entity. As Adam Greenfield argues in *Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday Life*:

‘Some see in these tools the advent of a ‘digital consensus space’ in which startling new forms of coordination and governance might emerge, in which the activity of leaderless horizontal organisations might be supported at a global scale. Others see a reinvention of government itself, as the state masters powerful new tools for the verification of identity, the certification of compliance and the distribution of benefits. At the outside, glimmering faintly like a distant constellation, some even glimpse the makings of a fully posthuman economy.’<sup>7</sup>

Although the sharing economy’s initial emancipatory promises of access and equity have made steps towards this end, these promises have been largely denatured and depoliticised by corporate interests. Currently, corporate co-living and home sharing models have circumvented (or denied) the digital ethics of P2P networks and open source commons – in which technology, knowledge and social

exchange are shared and open – opting instead for centralised structures of organisation that dovetail into contemporary forms of platform capitalism.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, models like WeLive and Airbnb conflate spatial austerity with high-cost housing, masking above-market pricing (studio apartments in New York are often rented for more than \$3,500 a month<sup>9</sup>) with the corporate rhetoric of ‘agility’ and ‘flexibility’. Targeting an often-privileged class of tech-savvy digital contractors, this sharing economy accelerates and aestheticises the precarity of nomadic lifestyles, rather than relieving the pressures of the gig-economy.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps *New Eelam*, a ready-made platform for the transient subject, could instead leverage the potential of the collective in order to support involuntary forms of transience: the precarious worker, the migrant or even the refugee.

A digital *oikos* of collectively managed domestic space owned and governed by peers, in tandem with the ethos of the P2P market, could offer a privileged yet shrewd way for a new housing model to emerge from within contemporary forms of capitalism. According to media theorist Trebor Scholz, the key to this transformation is in ‘cloning the technological heart of Uber, Task Rabbit, Airbnb, or WeWork [...] to crack the broken system of the sharing economy/on-demand economy that only benefits the few’.<sup>11</sup> This argument for what he terms ‘Platform Co-operativism’ calls for an alternative to sharing economy corporations like Uber and WeWork, whereby companies are collectively owned and democratically governed by workers instead of executives and investors. While it empowers workers through shared ownership, could this notion not be expanded to remediate the relationship between private property and housing, and in turn revolutionise access to housing in a way that will benefit transient people? Through the tactics of Platform Co-operativism, *New Eelam* places power, through a new form of participatory governance, into the hands of its user-subscribers.

The promotional film for it claims that ‘by reorganising housing to function more like informational commodities, the cost of each citizen’s subscription could be progressively reduced over time, until it could even become a trivial cost’, thus transforming domestic space from an asset of acquisition into one of ‘collective access’.<sup>12</sup> Economies of scale can be found in that the more housing there is in the pool, the more affordable the subscription. This model also implies a restructuring of the traditional relationship between owner and user by implementing a flat-rate subscription for which fees are not based on the classic value metrics of unit size, lease type or ‘location, location, location’ and a system by which privately owned properties would be acquired through the collectively managed resources of the subscriber co-operative. Treating the home as a service, rather than an asset entangled in economies of acquisition and exchange, therefore leverages the benefits of a jointly owned pool of housing units and enables them to become increasingly affordable, more accessible and less scarce as the platform expands. Critically, unlike

1 Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood and Anton Vidokle (eds), *Supercommunity: Diabolical Togetherness Beyond Contemporary Art* (New York: Verso, 2017), p 9.

2 Aristotle, *Politics*, Book I, translated by H. Rackham

(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), pp 3–13.

3 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp 29–30.

4 Garrett Hardin, ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’, in *Science* 162, no 3859 (1968), p 1244.

5 *New Eelam* promotional film (2016), produced by Christopher Kulendran Thomas in collaboration with Klein and West, Mark Reynolds, Annika Kuhlmann

and Jelena Goldbach, with music by Ella and Florian Zwietnig.

6 Christopher Kulendran Thomas, ‘Stream Housing Love Sharing’, exhibition text for *New Eelam: Tensta*, Tensta konsthall (11 October 2017–14 January 2018).



Fig 2-3  
Christopher Kulendran Thomas in  
collaboration with Annika Kuhlmann,  
*New Eelam*, in 'Moving is in Every  
Direction. Environments – Installations –  
Narrative Spaces', Hamburger Bahnhof,  
Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin, 2017.  
(Photo: Joseph Kadow)





corporate structures of platform capitalism motivated by shareholder profit, every subscriber benefits from the *use* value, rather than the exchange value of this shared set of resources.

In addition to this projective tech start-up, *New Eelam* also exists as a series of exhibited installations. These 'showrooms' contain a series of domestic tableaux and home interfaces that feature aluminium modular shelving, beds and sofas on backlit raised floor systems, as well as video screens showing promotional material, glossy light boxes displaying generic images of cities and interiors, and an integrated hydroponic planting system. Part sci-fi showroom and part oxygen bar, the installations present a cool, clean vision for the future of 'your home, everywhere'.<sup>13</sup> The flexible and modular design of the structures implies an operative and playful field condition in an abstract 'everywhere', but would benefit from a more explicit spatial model that reveals the inherent frictions caused by the lifestyle it proposes. Absorbing the aesthetic tendencies of corporate branding – luminous, technical and sterile – these concept spaces appropriate the visual instruments and interfaces of the start-up in selling a lifestyle that is too clean and too easy. Though it implies a complex and potentially messy infrastructure for collective decision-making, *New Eelam* employs a visual language that reifies the user as an autonomous individual, rather than making visible the social and political dramas of a new digital *oikos*.

With future plans to roll out the platform in two cities, Thomas is now seeking external sources of funding for the project by wearing the mask of the venture capitalist entrepreneur and CEO of *New Eelam*. Armed with a cadre of consultants and specialists from the fields of 'technology, real estate, art, architecture, finance, law, data science and design',<sup>14</sup> he presents the platform through a corporate realist framework that allows it to function as a Trojan horse for the artist to operate within the territory of corporate transdisciplinarity. Through actively seeking out venture capital and creating a web platform to gauge interest in the home sharing service, Thomas exposes it to economic and political realities outside of the speculative interior of the biennial exhibition. By simultaneously performing both satire and techno-solutionism, however, the project produces an ambivalence that risks undermining its political and spatial potential. While *New Eelam* performs aesthetically as a venture capitalist start-up, it could alternatively produce a new set of visual tendencies and values that are aligned more explicitly with a 'venture communist' platform, as described by Dmytri Kleiner in *The Telekommunist Manifesto*.<sup>15</sup> But beyond the project's status as an instrument of real estate technology, what are the consequences of overlaying the tech entrepreneur with the venture communist? By adopting this combination of corporate aesthetic branding and collective financial structure, the model risks denying the unique voices of the precarious populations that it seeks to support.

As the tone of the project vacillates between speculative futures and corporate mission statements, what are the spatial, representational and structural conditions it embeds that could withstand its eventual co-option? By deploying architecture exclusively as a branded visual field, *New Eelam* stops short of fundamentally reconfiguring new forms of life that will inevitably emerge from radical social, political and environmental shifts. In backgrounding space as a passive asset in a digitally managed network of collective ownership, it may be doomed to forever remain a representation of a life beyond property; an image rather than a frame. More dangerously, the platform's claims of collectivity could obscure more insidious

forms of soft power and incentivise precarity without offering a stable network of support. Ultimately, the project's attitude towards architectural form is too neutral. Rather than existing purely as a branded home-streaming service and furniture system, it could more explicitly re-design domestic space to dismantle its embedded biases towards private property and individual ownership. Beyond image and interface, this reorganisation of the home – its forms, atmospheres and habits – is necessary to support an expanded digital *oikos*.

The digital interface must also include formal and spatial tools to facilitate the shared occupation of the domestic interior and enable user-subscribers to collectively author and broker design interventions; a renegotiation of space that would inevitably produce micro-economies and collective ecologies, mobilise resources and resynchronise bodies. In considering possible spatial scenarios for the *New Eelam* model, what internal acts of sorting or post-occupancy reconfigurations could reflect these new structures of habitation? For instance, the profit models of Airbnb have led to a range of new occupation types, from the temporary inhabitation of a domestic space as an immersive touristic experience to the internal subdivision of existing dwellings into smaller units for the maximisation of profit. Alternatively, WeLive is tied to a more specific typology that is characterised by minimal private bedrooms offset from shared 'amenities' such as living rooms, kitchens, offices and even gyms. While both of these housing models are designed to extract the surplus of branded lifestyles, a different motive could produce new spatial types and domestic structures that are affordable and accessible, and actually improve the user's quality of life.

*New Eelam* would present user-subscribers with an array of available unit types, their locations, the possible durations of stay, their associated fees and the maintenance protocols tied to each. For instance, inhabiting an apartment in a co-operative housing block would demand a specific set of responsibilities and spatial practices that differ profoundly from those of a single bunkbed or a detached single-family home. Critically, a restructuring of housing would need to resist the incentivisation of contemporary trends of technomadism and instead allow the housing pool to accommodate a more flexible spectrum of lifestyles. The service would therefore need to include varied housing stock and manage the social structures that are embedded within each typology, from typical family units to new forms of communalism or private nomadic space. While the proposed modular storage system hints at the need for rentable furniture systems and the importance of security for personal belongings in collective dwelling models, such forms of habitation will have to begin to integrate more permanent, long-term options. If one of the luxuries (and requirements) of living a nomadic lifestyle is the possibility of leaving at any moment, these new storage systems present a profoundly architectural problem and opportunity.

Instead of defaulting to the *existenzminimum* that so often characterises precarious housing situations, this new form of communal luxury could offer more generous spaces for daily life. Rather than relying on tools like the Airbnb cleaning fee, care for these domestic environments – from changing the light bulbs to watering the plants to complete renovations – becomes a critical component of the governance structures and negotiation procedures of the platform. Instead of landlords holding tenants hostage with potential rent increases in response to the demands of the market, aggregated subscription fees could be re-invested in new domestic equipment and upgrades, allowing units to stay up-to-date with material finishes

and new domestic equipment. Counter to the austerity of subsistence dwelling dictated by profit maximisation and cost minimisation, such collective investments in new infrastructures could also relieve domestic labour and household maintenance work. These changes in space and governance would highlight the possible benefits of semi-permanence and provide for a community of dwellers, instead of exploiting individual precarity.

While all of these changes are possible, and perhaps necessary to restructure future forms of life, this model also allows for property to remain exactly the same, but be activated by digital protocols of management and distribution, rather than spatial adjustments. A process of collective decision-making would help to determine the balance of investment in new units, and robust software would assist user-subscribers in making informed decisions at both a local and a global scale. Risking a descent into the banal, an understanding of the micro-politics of collective life are essential if we want to accommodate increasingly heterogeneous and transient constituencies. Beyond the redistribution of housing ownership, such platforms could articulate a set of governing conditions that address Mierle Laderman Ukeles' pressing question: 'after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?'<sup>16</sup> The digital *oikos* thus requires a renewed attention to be given to household maintenance as a foundational act of solidarity. *New Eelam's* ethos of uprootedness must be reconciled with the call to bolster solidarity among local constituencies in a communal system, in order to provide new platforms for delegation and shared labour that ease the burdens of communalist praxis.<sup>17</sup>

To this end, *New Eelam* situates itself historically as a critique of the suppression and ethnic cleansing of the Tamil people following the end of the Sri Lankan Civil War in 2009. Its name refers to their pre-colonial homeland of Eelam (the ancient Tamil word for Sri Lanka), which has now been adopted as the name of the aspirational independent state for the group. As Jeppe Ugelvig argues in his essay 'New Eelam and the Dispersion of Critique', 'the story of Eelam is also a story of the subjugation of socialist communities to destructive global capitalist market forces and their colonial genealogies'.<sup>18</sup> Targeting the colonial structures of the nation-state, the project proposes a new system of digital citizenship that restructures the relationship between subject and homeland. While *New Eelam* does not fully address how it would overcome the problem of increasingly tight national borders in attempting to create a planetary-scale housing cloud, the ambition of the project is useful in its challenge to the precondition of private property for political status.

The mobilised household that the project proposes, redefined through the digital *oikos*, would need to tie transient life to a new and broader civic landscape. In the context of the growing refugee crisis and the critical shortage of affordable housing, the utopian aspirations of *New Eelam* seek to decouple citizenship from permanence and ensure that domestic life is 'optimized for mobility rather than accumulation'.<sup>19</sup> As worldwide socio-political shifts accelerate inequalities in housing and political status, it therefore proposes a way forward for the 'at-large' global citizen. As Ugelvig states, the project offers 'a potentially emancipatory trajectory for technology in the global economy: specifically, the liquidation of citizenship through the dissolution of individual property ownership'.<sup>20</sup> As transience increasingly becomes a familiar status, it is crucial that such digital platforms ensure continued political agency for a nomadic population through inclusive access and affordability.

A nomadic *oikos* means 'creating a new Eelam for all, where citizenship [is] a choice, not a hereditary privilege'.<sup>21</sup> Is it therefore necessary, inevitable or even *desirable* to be encumbered by possessions, property and political status? Learning from property models practiced by indigenous communities in the Americas, for whom 'owning the land, selling the land, seemed ideas as foreign as owning and selling the clouds or the wind',<sup>22</sup> belonging was defined through communal ties, rather than through territorial possession. Similarly, applying communitarian practices developed by Charles Fourier, according to which 'members of the *Phalanstère* were to rotate their homes and jobs so as to remain unattached to a single place',<sup>23</sup> new forms of collective habitation rely on the continuous restructuring of life and labour in order to sever any attachment to traditional forms of family, home and property. Through the mobilisation of a varied social, spatial and temporal spectrum of cohabitation models, *New Eelam* creates a new cache of freedoms and instruments for the unattached, the nomadic and the unencumbered. It allows us to reframe our political subjectivity and begins to lay down the foundations for a new form of civic transience. Transforming the citizen-subject<sup>24</sup> into the user-subscriber, the emancipatory potential of the project lies in the disavowal of property as the primary vessel of socio-political status: a detethering that must operate as a critical frame for a new and more varied sensorial, subjective and spatial condition. Freshly armed with the techno-juridical instruments of the digital *oikos*, perhaps we are finally equipped to produce new forms of sharing and belonging beyond private property.

7 For a discussion on blockchain technologies see 'Blockchain Beyond Bitcoin: A Trellis for Posthuman Institutions', in Adam Greenfield, *Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday Life* (London: Verso, 2017), p 147.

8 See Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

9 Benjy Hansen-Bundy, 'A Week Inside WeLive, the Utopian Apartment Complex That Wants to Disrupt City Living', in *GQ Magazine*, 27 February 2018.

10 Katherine Rosman, 'We Work. We Live. We Work Out. Eventually We Die.', in *New York Times*, 12 October 2017.

11 Trebor Scholz, *Platform Cooperativism: Challenging the Corporate Sharing Economy*, (New York: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2016), p 14.

12 *New Eelam* promotional film, op cit.

13 Quoted from the *New Eelam* website splash page, accessed July 2019.

14 Ibid.

15 Dmytri Kleiner, *The Telekommunist Manifesto* (Amsterdam: Institute for Network Cultures, 2010).

16 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, 'Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!', written in Philadelphia, October 1969.

17 Trebor Scholz, op cit, p 14.

18 Jeppe Ugelvig, 'New Eelam and the Dispersion of Critique', *DIS Magazine*, 2016.

19 *New Eelam* promotional film, op cit.

20 Jeppe Ugelvig, op cit.

21 Christopher Kulendran Thomas, op cit.

22 Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 314.

23 Peter Serenyi, 'Le Corbusier, Fourier, and the Monastery of Ema', in *The Art Bulletin* 49, no 4 (1967), p 283.

24 Etienne Balibar, 'Citizen Subject', in *e-flux Journal* 77, November 2016.