

LAMERCÉ 2017

OPENING SPEECH

Marina Garcés

Saló de Cent, September 22nd 2017
Council of Barcelona



OPENING SPEECH OF LA MERCÈ FESTIVAL 2017

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The City Regained

An us without a name, made up of all our names

Friends, our guests from Iceland, residents of Barcelona and people passing through, new arrivals, migrants with official papers and without, the young and not-so-young of Barcelona who have left; public employees who keep this city hall going, whether you are councillors, staff, interns or temps; loved ones, relatives, friends and acquaintances and, above all, all those of you who do not know me or know why I am giving the speech to open La Mercè, I wish you a **happy festival**.

It really is remarkable for me to be here, in the Chamber of the One Hundred, giving a speech and addressing my city. If I remember rightly, the last time – the only time – I was here was many years ago for a wedding. It wasn't me but some friends who were getting married, and I sat on the benches where some of you are now, admiring the surroundings. I won't be able to look around me much today if I am not to lose my thread. Here I am in the same place, then, in order to celebrate once again the moment that our lives come together, the desire to be together. On this occasion, it's not the intimate desire of two people who love each other but the desire of all the residents of this city to meet up around music and fire, dancing and the word, popular traditions, the arts and all those celebrations still to be invented.

This is not an easy time to be giving an address. Firstly, when I agreed to give the festival opening speech, I feared that I would be showered with insults. They do not frighten me but they do make me sad, and they impoverish our collective life. What we have now is that the public expression of speech is banned, suppressed and criminalised. We live in a state of institutional and political emergency precisely because of this prohibition against expressing ourselves freely in a referendum. If I said yes to this discomfiting challenge of giving this opening speech, it is precisely because, even at a time like this, I trust in free speech. Free speech does not mean saying anything, but being able to address ourselves and to share our words while resisting any kind of control or coercion. To my mind, free speech is the heart of philosophy, that which gives it meaning inside and outside of classrooms. However, free speech is also the fundamental condition of every aspect of collective life: culture, ethics, politics and celebrations, as well. While I was writing and rewriting this speech in recent days, I received expressions of support, as if I was going off to war. Speaking can be a struggle, but it is not going to war. Free speech is always a celebration, even if you have had to fight to achieve it. And today, in spite of everything, we are celebrating.

In small towns and in neighbourhoods, the annual festivities are a highpoint on the cyclical calendar of public gatherings. Whereas Christmas is the time of the private get-together, of 'going back home', as the advert said, annual festivities in our culture are a time for going out onto the streets and squares to renew our lives and to find out what has become of each of us. I experienced this in La Selva de Mar, the village of my childhood and early youth. When the annual festivities start, in early August, those who left come back to the village, the absence of the dead is felt more sharply, babies' first steps are celebrated when they can already dance in the front row on stage, old lovers meet again, the youngsters going out to dance and date are envied, and we feel the sadness of the elderly and sick when they miss their first dance because they no longer have the strength for it. It is also the time when divorces and changes in partner become evident, as do personal squabbles and political disputes, displeasure, loneliness and broken worlds. We always know that there is someone who, for whatever reason, will not come back. But even the absences matter. This year, for us in Barcelona, it is a year of particularly painful absences.

In major cities, the annual festivities have become large-scale festivals, mass events in which it is increasingly difficult to find one another. You arrange to meet up with friends but it's not long before you've already lost them in the crowd. Cultural consumption and leisure dominate the celebration and the notion of getting together with others is watered down. This year, however, I feel that the Mercè Festival will be different in character: it will have a bitter-sweet flavour that we have not tasted for many years, decades perhaps, during which this city had succeeded in forgetting terrorism and war. This year, we remembered with grief the 30th anniversary of the Hipercor attack as if it were in the distant past. But global violence has broken out in Barcelona in recent days. During this Mercè Festival, we all of us carry within us an equally painful absence: that of the people who will never come back to Barcelona or to its festivities, not because they don't want to but because on 17 August they lost their lives on the Rambla, on Diagonal and on that street in Cambrils. And along with them, some young people from Ripoll who won't be there either and about whom we will always have doubts as to whether they really wanted to die while killing others, which is what they did. For all of them and for all those who have been wounded forever by their deaths, and also for all those who die due to violence every day beyond our accursed borders, we make this Mercè a re-encounter with the city, with its streets and squares, and also a gathering between us. Looking at each other in the eye, not only to fill ourselves with emotion for a moment but also to break the indifference that normally separates us and the hostility that increasingly faces us.

II

With every life cut short, with every concrete pile, with every police check, the city is less city. Because what, exactly, is a city made of? Of the free coming and going of people. When we say 'city', we think of its urban fabric, of its buildings and monuments, of its amenities, of its skyline, of its brand... But these things are nothing without people coming and going, arriving and leaving, who take root and fly off in an anonymous and constantly new way. What is a city? A place where you can come and start your life again amongst people who don't know you. A city is not, therefore, a commodity or a space of consumption, nor is it a company or a brand. That is precisely what Barcelona has been turned into: a product, a commodity and a brand.

Some are even proud of that and have grown rich as a result of it. But let's be clear from the start. Those of us in numerous groups around the city who have organised ourselves and resisted the Barcelona brand have criticised this for many years. The brand expropriates and makes a profit from the physical and symbolic, urban and affective spaces we live in. The brand turns the city into a space for the circulation of goods, capital and people in which it is becoming ever more difficult and expensive to arrive, put down roots and build a life.

If I am here today, sharing my speech with everyone I live alongside, it is because my forebears were able to make their way to Barcelona along different paths, looking for a liveable life. From Sigüenza, from Tremp, from Alt Empordà, from Portugal and from Badalona, the paths of people who weren't looking for each other and who knew nothing about each other crossed in Barcelona.

If I am here, with you, it is because my grandparents were not only able to get here but because at a particular time they wanted to return from their respective exiles after the war to continue, with the fear of the defeated, to defend their ideas, their ways of life and their language. My grandmother on my mother's side is 98 years old and is here with us today. She forgets the present as quickly as it comes, but she will never stop remembering the last train that left Paris when the Germans arrived and on which she returned from exile, pregnant with her first child.

If I am here, and am moved to be speaking now within these walls, it also because my mother, like my father, both made their professions a commitment to Barcelona. They taught me that there is an honest way to make a city. If there is one thing I have learned from my parents, it's honesty. Honesty and independent thinking, which are inseparable. My mother, who died 15 years ago, worked here in City Hall, providing a link between Barcelona and the rebellious Latin America she loved so much. She made municipalism a personal pledge and did not belong to any political party. With her I learned that municipalism is not about winning elections and running a city council but of weaving relationships face to face, city to city, horizontally and based on commitment. My father, who is also here today, has taught me that there is a way of doing architecture that does not deceive or play at artifice, that does not impose its emblematic and mercantilist whim; an architecture, be it popular or high-brow, old or new, that knows how to listen to the best that the city has gradually acquired over the course of the years and as people

have passed through. From both of them, I have learned, then, that a city is not the plaything or the project of its politicians or its businesspeople, of its administrators or its visionaries. Rather, it is the delicate fabric woven by many hands, many lives and many people who do not need to be in the limelight or to engage in the battle for power. This is the city that I feel loyal to and which I have been returning to every week for many years now.

Because if I am here, ultimately it is because every week I come back from Zaragoza, the city where I work and teach. For 14 years, with the occasional interruption to bring up my children, I have lectured at the University of Zaragoza. Consequently, I live but I don't work in Barcelona. I live but I don't work in Catalonia. I am a Barcelonan who earns a living in Aragon, going in the opposite direction, upriver, to so many Aragonese. Generational bottlenecks, cuts and changes in the university system prompted me to look for a better employment option far from here. But I have never wanted to move, to have a house or home of my own far from here. I come and go, initially on the coach, now on the high-speed train, and I spend the night in hotels. My home is here and I often ponder on the question of why that is, especially when it's late when I get back and the night weighs heavy on me.

Why do I return? Why do I keep coming back? I have never been in love with Barcelona, the way they tried to sell it to us Barcelonans some years back. I have never believed in that self-satisfaction of citizens in love with their city and hence with themselves, a feeling that in Barcelona has turned into marketing, design and ideology. What, then, keeps me so strongly tied to this city? That is what I want to talk to you about. Perhaps because I'm not clear about it in my own mind and drafting this speech has helped me to ponder on the subject. And I believe that sharing it will help us, perhaps, to think about what we are each of us doing here, what is it that connects us and keeps us committed to each other.

III

There are many Barcelonas, but the Barcelona I like to come back to is firstly a city that does not like power. Not the display of power, not the abuse of power, not proximity to power. A city that knows that the best sovereignty is to be a long way from those who issue orders: monarchs, emperors, potentates, financiers, masters, bosses... The further away, the

better. “Let them all go home”, as they said in Argentina during the 2001 crisis. The Barcelona I like is a princess that has no desire for a kingdom or a husband. A free woman, just like the free women – the anarchist women of the 1930s – wanted to be.

In Barcelona, by and large, we don't like to be ordered about, either by outsiders or insiders. It is a very Catalan virtue that we have never lost, regardless of what has happened. Because we don't like being given orders, we have a tendency to respond in a forthright manner to abuses of power, as we have seen this week. On a global scale, we must remember the importance in Barcelona of the anti-war movement, the anti-globalisation movement or the recent protests of *Volem Acollir* (We Want to Take In) against the closure of borders to refugees. At a local level, the long struggle against property speculation and financial precarity has been putting up resistance for decades and has been opening up spaces for life in the city.

In the same antiauthoritarian spirit, Barcelona has also made its streets the place where the whole of Catalonia can come together, pro-independence and anti-independence supporters alike, to rebel and mobilise against the ban on allowing Catalans to exercise their right to self-determination. I am allergic to any form of nationalism, our own or that of others. I work in a Spanish city and the people of this peninsula (and elsewhere) will never be my enemies. I have always believed that the map of states – all states – with their colours and straight lines, deceives us. Its nice colours are the result of a geography of war. There is no state without a border and an army. I prefer geographical maps, which show the true shape of valleys, mountains and rivers, that don't stop at a border. As I am saying today, I believe in a shared world built by the free comings and goings of people. But in the face of a state that has turned a legitimate question into an illegal action, all there is now is a space for a forthright response that will transform this state from the ground up and without complexes. I wish to take this opportunity to make special mention of the detained and the accused, the students, the port workers and the people who are still demonstrating on the streets. It is not just about being able to vote. It is about being able to tell ourselves everything in order to be able to question in depth the terms and conditions of our cohabitation, not just national but also political and social. The Barcelona I like is the one that is unafraid of sweeping changes and for that very reason also refuses to accept the plans already written to achieve them.

The Barcelona I like to come back to is, in second place, a city where there is a sense of living as a community. In Barcelona, we do business in everything; we are shopkeepers and traders. But I am convinced that there is still a limit to the privatisation of life in Barcelona. There is resistance to it. We are now seeing this in neighbourhoods' resistance to the effects of mass tourism. This is not 'tourism-phobia', as has been said. It is resistance to rampant capitalism and its devastating consequences. And I have to say, contrary to every attempt to cast blame and to criminalise those involved, I am proud of this resistance. When the recession began and young people across Spain began to leave, I recall that a letter from a girl from Madrid began to do the rounds. It said: "I want to live here". In the face of the seemingly unavoidable expulsion of so many people who can no longer afford to live in Barcelona, we have to keep saying we want to live here. And the only way to do that is by fighting together. "Together we can", as the huge banner that hung from the Banc Okupat (Occupied Bank) in Plaça Catalunya said.

Living together does not mean living on the defensive or just with each other, as if we were Asterix's people. Europe as a whole is now barricaded in and on the defensive, and Barcelona must not fall into this trap. Not now, despite the argument of security and safety against terrorism. As I said earlier, a city is built from the free comings and goings of people. In fact, the Barcelonan us is a fiction fabricated using all the peoples, accents and landscapes that those of us who live here carry within us. There are cities with just one landscape and a single language. In contrast, Barcelona has the sea and the mountains, it has nearby beaches and pools, it is dry and it is wet, it is urban and a village, cosmopolitan and provincial. Barcelona speaks Catalan and Spanish in all their possible accents, and increasing numbers of other languages that we are gradually having to learn to receive and hear. I have seen my children learning to speak and to breathe in this phonetic diversity of tones and expressions. I assure you it is the richest thing we have.

I said that there are many Barcelonas, but the Barcelona I like to come back to is ultimately a city where there is political life outside of political parties. In Barcelona, there has traditionally been a culture and forms of collective mobilisation that do not involve the party system, nor are they dependent on it. The people who invited me to give this opening speech are well aware that I do not like political parties. I believe in the public system but not in the party system. I believe in politics but not in strategising or

politicking. There is still a lot for us to do and imagine if what we want is to transform politics. In case any journalist reporting today is in any doubt about the matter and is doing research in order to have an exclusive tomorrow, I am not in any political party, not organically nor under its shadow. If I wanted to be, I would do it openly. I know people – people I trust – who are in the new political groups and in the CUP (Popular Unity Candidacy) because we have shared struggles in social movements for many years. Taking the most important expression of the 15M movement further, we could say “they don’t represent me or my friends”.

My us, the us that I believe has a special political force in Barcelona, is an us without a name made up of all our names, self-run, that acts in many ambits of social life (neighbourhoods, schools, social bodies, athenaeums, groups that share the same interests, assemblies, co-operatives, etc.) and that only emerges into the public light from time to time for major mobilisations. It seems not to be there yet it always is. It is real but anonymous. This is not spontaneous romanticism on my part. I am speaking about what is most real: the daily commitment of many people, without whom there would be no civil society and no democracy, the two fetish terms that the powers-that-be like to invoke so as not to be left overly isolated or exposed. From this point of view, Barcelona, as well as the rest of Catalonia, is a simmering pot of people acting on the fringes of power or traversing it. What I am saying may sound naive, but I assure you it is not in the least bit ingenuous. Without this politicising of daily life, there is no city or country.

Many people of my generation discovered this Barcelona, the city of us without a name made up of our all names, 21 years ago on 28 October 1996 during the eviction of the Princesa Cinema. For many of us that day, the Olympic city, its stories of success and the silences, business dealings and torture on which it had been founded, cracked and other presences and other ways of making a city emerged. Many of us had never set foot inside a squatted building, some of us had. But the cry that went up that evening on Via Laietana acted as a catalyst for worlds that came together and were activated, as they still are today. This is the Barcelona I like to come back to; this is the calendar I want to recall today.

IV

This city that does not like authority, that has a sense of living as a community and which knows how to organise itself politically without being dependent on parties is the city I like to come back to, that I am tied to and committed to. The city where I find an us that broadens my horizons and a life that is not just a private life. When I come back, I arrive in a home that is not just my home or the home of my immediate circle.

I would like to be able to say that this city that I come back to is a city where culture is the true environment, the living ecosystem where collective life is pursued and pushed forwards, but I can't say that because I don't feel it is the case. In Barcelona, as in so many other cities around the world, what we call culture has been turned into a festivalised product linked to consumption and tourism. But culture is something else: it is the possibility of meaningfully connecting knowledge and life, what we know and what we want. There is no need for us to be a Mediterranean Manhattan or to bring all the cultures of the world together in a theme park, as the Universal Forum of Cultures hoped to do in 2004. If we want to be a city of culture, it is far more important for education to work and to open up paths, not only for joining the labour market but for learning as a community how to live. Culture is precisely that: learning together how to live.

I would like to be able to say that this city that I come back to is a city in which equality is the basis of freedom, but I can't say that either because it is increasingly evident every day that that is not the case. Inequality is growing at a frightening speed, and exclusion and violence are establishing themselves and becoming normal in our neighbourhoods. Many things have changed. The people suffering today have many faces, very different stories, and skin in lots of different colours. Some are escaping from war, be it armed, gender, political or environmental warfare. Some are discovering or rediscovering poverty after a generation of living well. Our new impoverishment coexists with global poverty. Poverty and misery know no boundaries, however much Europe and its migration policies might think they do. Cities are unable to solve everything, but big or small, they are the place where every problem becomes visible and combines with others. These problems are not an obstacle or the collateral damage of our global success. They are our shared reality and hence we have to take responsibility for them.

I would like to be able to say, too, that Barcelona is a city that knows what it wants to be, that it has an idea of itself, however crazy it might be, but I think that too is not the case. In just a few years, we have gone from being a semi-abandoned, post-industrial city to a global showcase of touristic consumption. We know we don't want to end up like Venice, but what do we want to be? At a particular moment in time, we were due to be the epicentre of a metropolitan, Mediterranean and southern European region that crosses and spills beyond states. Now we face the challenge of being the capital of a Catalan republic that has not as yet come into being and, at the present time, we do not know what form it will take or what partnerships it will enter into. I envisage it as a republic together with the other Iberian republics, free of any state.

The changes that Barcelona has undergone in a short time are immense. If we look back, it's like watching a time-lapse film full of wise choices and bad decisions, successes and failures. But if we look ahead, what do we see? I'm asking each of you. I'm not asking what will happen in relation to the headline news dictating the current circumstances right now; we cannot know that. I'm asking how you imagine you will live, how we will live individually and with others in the not too distant future. Do you see yourselves doing the same thing that you used to? Will you be able to pay the rent on the flat where you're living? Will you be driving the same car, or will we, at last, have given up private car ownership? Will you love in the same way? If you have children, how will you bring them up? Will you carry on living here? I hope to keep coming back, but I have to say I find it hard to imagine the life that we can live together. The present is tense and difficult. Everywhere. The future of the world is dark these days. But life becomes brighter each day if we learn to imagine. To imagine is not to give your fantasy free rein. Instead, it is generating ideas and sensations that open the map of what is possible. How can we, today, relearn how to imagine the city together and hence the world that we want?

As I said earlier, I have learned from my parents, and also from many friends and colleagues who have come later, not to trust visionaries or planners, not to trust in the tactics of the party system or those selling ideas of limited scope. And from philosophy (which I have said little about in this speech because it's what I talk about all the time), I have learned to trust in a possibility open to all of us: the possibility of thinking radically about how we want to live. Of being able to think about it, really, at least once. All we have to do is ask ourselves a question: of all the things we

have, experience and desire, what is it that really matters to us? It's a question that makes us look for the essential. Not essences but what is truly important. It's a therapeutic and revolutionary question that at a stroke does away with many headaches, many pitfalls, lots of excuses and lots of private and collective complications. It is the first step towards a truly free imagination. The good solutions, as craftsmen and women know, are always the simplest. Ask yourself this question right now, for a moment, or tomorrow, once again. Ask yourself this question during the festivities, while you're dancing and arranging to meet up with your friends and losing sight of them amid the crowd. Ask yourself this question as well during the difficult days ahead. Of everything that I'm living through, what is it that really matters to me? Ask yourself the question and you will not only find yourselves, but you will also find the city once more because you will find others again. The city where you want to live, the world where we want to be together and celebrate, year after year, the fact that we are able to meet up once again. The present may be hazy, but as someone from Menorca recently taught me to say: full sails for the high sea!

Today is the first day of autumn. Today the Mercè Festival begins. Today they say there are fewer cars in the city. And every day our lives start again while there is nothing to prevent it. With those who are here and those who are not, with those who have come back this year, with those who want to do so and with those who will never be able to do so again. I wish you all a good Mercè!

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Ajuntament de
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