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# One with Others

Care, Stigma and the Creative Everyday of Urban Social  
Space in Soacha, Colombia

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## Abstract

This thesis examines ways in which residents of one informal neighbourhood in Soacha, Colombia, are engaged in everyday struggles to navigate inequality, marginalisation and displacement. Similar to other informal settlements that have been established around the periphery of Soacha and its larger neighbour, Bogotá, the neighbourhood's population is a mix of rural migrants, the urban poor, and those displaced by conflict. These residents suffer from high levels of poverty and institutional neglect, while crime, drugs and violence affect their lives both literally, through the presence of criminal groups, and symbolically, through stigmatising narratives attached to people and place. This territorial stigma, meanwhile, connects to historical currents of the stigma and marginalisation of rural populations in Colombia.

Previous understandings of informal settlements as slums, qualified only by poverty and lack, have been interrogated by recent research, which has presented a more nuanced picture through studying the development of homes, public space and everyday life within them. In Colombia, research has also engaged with the ways in which the urban poor and the displaced – often living within these informal settlements – engage in struggles to assert their rights. Drawing on this literature, this study provides a textured and lyrical engagement with the research neighbourhood, exploring its social space and questioning how meaning accumulates around the people, places and acts that occur there. I also examine the conditions of everyday life for neighbourhood inhabitants, particularly through the work of a care organisation run by two local women. This foundation, a *comedor* [canteen] providing food to local children, is the only social organisation present in the neighbourhood and so I engage with its key role in supporting local families and the possible significance of this for the development of the neighbourhood. Finally, I ask how the fear generated by crime and violence is present within the neighbourhood through its inherence to specific locations, and how these places are understood by local inhabitants.

I address these questions by drawing on ethnographic fieldwork – specifically participant observation conducted working within the foundation – interviews with neighbourhood inhabitants, and photographs and maps created by local children. I find that in the absence of support from external actors, hardships are often navigated on an interpersonal level

through kindness amongst residents and the care present in the work of the foundation. These two responses are able to mitigate but not resolve larger structural inequalities, whilst also forming bonds of solidarity and sociability amongst residents. The foundation is especially important in this regard through changing the use of neighbourhood space and opening up new opportunities for residents to engage with each other. I also find that, for the displaced, contrasts between their rural and urban lives highlight painful contradictions which serve as a marker of injustice and reminder of loss, but also a testament to progress made in living through displacement as they establish new homes. Finally, I found that while particular places were emblematic of crime, violence and fear these understandings of place are contested through the everyday engagements of local children in play, and their connection with family, friends and animals.

Overall, I argue that the everyday acts and practices of residents are generative of moments that allow the neighbourhood to matter, in significant moral ways, to those living there. These acts and practices are understood as struggles occurring against the injustices and inequalities that residents face daily, and which by necessity form their everyday. This makes the political and moral shaping of the neighbourhood a quiet one, motivated not by one unifying goal but dispersed throughout routines, interactions and individual moments. I argue that this is of central importance for understanding how urban space is formed through a moral community based on respect and recognition of the other, and how this is a process that occurs unevenly due to the presence of stark injustices. This reveals the ways in which local everyday lives engage dialectically with structural inequalities and narratives of stigmatisation, providing insights to the formation of social marginality and the contestation of this by those forced to live it.

## Lay Summary

Colombia has undergone a rapid change over the last century from a largely rural population to an urban one, a trend seen across the whole of Latin America. In Colombia, this has been driven by economic changes and the effects of conflict, which have in turn caused rural-urban migration and internal displacement to the major towns and cities. The movement of millions of people has resulted in the establishment and expansion of self-built (informal) settlements around the periphery of these urban centres. Informal settlements, broadly speaking, are characterised as containing high levels of poverty, poor infrastructure and a weak level of support from the state. This has led to the stigmatisation of these areas and their inhabitants – particularly around crime, violence and education – reflecting historical forms of social marginalisation in Colombia linked to rural populations.

This thesis studies how the inhabitants of one informal settlement of Soacha, Colombia, have developed their neighbourhood and community, focusing on the work of a care organisation run by local women. In the absence of any social support organisations from local authorities or the state, this foundation is important through the work that it does supporting local families and their children. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted within this foundation, this research offers a close portrait of how local people manage problems caused by the absence of state or municipal support, stigmatisation and the presence of violence and fear in their neighbourhood.

I find that residents face continual hardships, primarily poverty, lack of work and poor housing. As these are experiences inhabitants share, I contend that it has fostered a delicate solidarity which can be seen through acts of kindness and the care work of the foundation where research was based. These acts suggest that residents and the foundation offer support which takes account of a shared understanding of hardship and life within the neighbourhood. However, while these small acts of care can be life-changing due to the poverty that residents face, they are unable to alter the underlying conditions which cause this poverty initially. My research also finds that the hardships are disproportionately felt by the displaced, who have to adjust to a forced change in their everyday lives and environment through the loss of their rural homes and ways of living. For these women, their home serves as both a reminder of and struggle against these losses.

Finally, this thesis examines how residents perceive their neighbourhood and the tension between stigmatising narratives, resistance to these and alternatives suggested through everyday actions. I argue that the foundation is part of changing how residents think about and interact with each other and the space around them, creating opportunities for sociability and dialogue that would not otherwise exist. I also contend that while certain places are characterised as dangerous and fear is deeply present for inhabitants, there are other ways of understanding the neighbourhood through examining how children engage with the same locations, but in very different ways that highlight their connections with friends, family and animals.

Overall, I argue that it is through the shared understanding residents have of conditions of life within the neighbourhood that they are able to take small steps toward making and sustaining urban community. The absence of support from the local authorities and the state prompts residents to act against material hardships, social exclusion and stigma through their relations with each other, primarily acts of kindness and the care provided by the foundation. These are understood as struggles against the inequalities and injustices experienced, struggles that are contained within the day-to-day routines of residents. They create meaning for residents that is rooted in events from their own lives which has importance for them, and although unevenly experienced and unable to solve the inequalities that are causing hardship, these struggles are argued to be generative of urban place and community through allowing moments for the neighbourhood to matter in different ways to those living there.

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“In the daily, lived conflict between what is and what might have been if people had not lived the lives they were forced to live or chose to live, there is a double vision of two lives (caught and free, *used to* and *anymore*, the city and home) differentiated by a lived experience of loss and the dream of redemption.” (Stewart 1996: 50)

## Beginnings

The beginnings of the neighbourhood are proclaimed almost as in a fable. A man called Camilo arrives to be a caretaker of some land on the edge of the capital city, Bogotá, and is followed shortly afterwards by three more men. These men want to divide the land into plots for sale. To avoid disputes they reach an agreement. Each one will throw a stone, and wherever this stone lands will be the patch of land for which they are responsible. The stones are cast and the men begin dividing the land, working around the few houses that already dot the expanse of grass.

—

This patch of greenery lies next to a large area of wetland. On the far side, in Soacha, like a mirror-image people are also building amidst the grass and mud. Over the following years the two neighbourhoods will encroach further and further into the wetlands. Eventually, legislation is adopted designating the wetlands as a protected area due to ‘anthropic’ damage caused by surrounding settlements. Taking advantage of some recent house demolitions, the municipal authorities build a fence and road to surround the wetland area, laying out its boundaries to prevent further encroachment from the nearby neighbourhoods.

—

Far to the west of the capital city, nestled between steep ranges of hills and surrounded by thick vegetation, is a small town. From this town, a man sets out toward the capital. Years later, he is the president of a community association in a developing neighbourhood on the fringe of that vast city. The neighbourhood at the time bears the name of the incumbent city mayor. After the mayor is revealed to be corrupt, the community holds a vote to change the name of their home. They choose the name of the small town to the west, connecting one place to the other, the city to the country.

—

The sparsely inhabited pasture fills quickly. Lots are divided, then divided again, some as many as ten times. There are no public services in the area and the only planning of streets is done by the families building their own houses. There is no sewerage, so each house is constructed with its own septic pit.

–

In the hot tropical lowlands a young woman runs from her family farm in the middle of the night, after guerrillas arrive to massacre her soldier brothers. Leaving behind wandering waterways, animals and the coca crop and tools she used to build a life there, she arrives in Bogotá. Years later, she is the partner of a demobilised guerrilla, moving from apartment to apartment. Remembering her home in the lowlands, hoping and waiting for a home of her own in the city.

–

Three families come from the countryside in search of work and economic opportunities. They have little money and few possessions but remembering their skills from the country they establish a business for themselves, gathering scrap wood and material from around the neighbourhood to make charcoal. The place around where they establish themselves comes to be known as *los carboneros* (the charcoal burners).

–

A woman moves to Bogotá, still young, with her children in tow. She struggles to find work, forcing her to live in shared tenement housing where the landlords steal the food that she leaves out for her children. She moves to Soacha searching for a place to live and begins working as a *recicladora* [recycler]. Almost thirty years later, one of her daughters will be murdered over a debt owed to drug dealers. The body is left in what remains of wetlands surrounding where she lives. On the opposite side of these wetlands lie the houses and blocks that have risen from where three men first cast stones.

–

In the upper part of the neighbourhood sewage is directed into a large pit dug in one of the lots, referred to as ‘the lagoon,’ which is located close to the entrance to the neighbourhood. But with nowhere for the sewage to go, once the pit is full it simply overflows.

–

A short distance over the line dividing Bogotá from Soacha a woman arrives from the countryside with her youngest children, leaving her ailing mother-in-law at home but drawn

by the promises of her sister-in-law: work, a place to live, money for the family. Only a few weeks later her sister asks her to leave and find her own home. With no money and no work, she is despairing of how she will survive. But a shopkeeper gives her food on credit and a man gives her son work. Soon, she is building her own home amongst the grass, mud and pools of the wetlands. Over the years she cares for generations of children growing up in the area, and decades later she boasts of her status as the grandmother of the neighbourhood.

–

A bridge is built connecting one corner of the neighbourhood to an adjoining one, spanning a canal that had divided the two. This is the first hint of road to the area, and a truck can now enter to collect rubbish, so residents no longer have to dump their waste in a vacant lot.

–

A young girl, only 15, catches the eye of guerrillas in her hometown far to the south. Fearful, she flees to Bogotá. Years later, after working and saving to restore what she lost in the countryside, she returns home. But now the conflict is not just with the guerrillas but paramilitaries as well. She and her brother barely escape with their lives and she returns to the city once more, this time settling there permanently.

–

A new president of the neighbourhood is elected by the inhabitants. He proves to be proactive and efficient, raising funds for improvement works and beginning the process of paving the streets. Soon after, electricity is connected to part of the neighbourhood for the first time. It takes some five years before residents are legally connected to the electricity network.

–

Three public telephones are installed in the neighbourhood. When someone receives a call, any passing resident will answer, then fetch the intended recipient from their home. Later, the community pools money to fund the purchase and installation of telephone equipment that will allow each household to have a line connected to their household.

–

Some inhabitants begin to siphon drinking water from the main aqueduct connection in the adjacent neighbourhood. There are disputes amongst inhabitants, before the police are involved. Some of those accused of stealing water are imprisoned.

–

There is still no sewerage, so the community pool their money together to have pipes installed that can carry away waste water and relieve some of the problems with sewage. The main pipe is laid in the streets outside houses and with their own resources and labour each household makes their individual connection. But the sewer is built below the level of the wetlands nearby, so water returns to the houses. In the rainy season, this floods to the height of one's knees.

–

The drains from each house end up running out into the middle of the street, where the children play. Accidents occur, and there are infestations of insects and rodents throughout the neighbourhood.

–

The neighbourhood in Bogotá is legalised, solving some problems with making improvements to infrastructure as the necessary permissions can now be gained from the authorities. But attempts to get the streets paved are halted when the municipality discovers there are no – official – water mains or sewerage pipes. Without these being installed, the residents are told, the streets would simply need to be dug up again. Shortly afterward, a government body<sup>1</sup> helps residents of the neighbourhood install a water main. Almost 20 years later some streets remain unpaved.

–

For some time, sewage runs directly into the lagoon adjacent to the neighbourhood. Residents of the lower part of the neighbourhood build barriers to prevent being flooded with sewage, connecting a pump with a generator to drain the water. Conflict arises when

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<sup>1</sup> The Social Solidarity Network (*Red de Solidaridad Social - RSS*) was a special program of the Colombian government working with impoverished communities. The RSS no longer exists, being merged in 2012 with other government bodies attached to funding from Plan Colombia. For more information see <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3f7d4d78a.html>

residents from the upper areas, whose sewage flows into the waters, refuse to contribute to the costs of maintaining and running the pump.

–

A gas connection is established to the neighbourhood. For the first time, residents are able to cook with gas, rather than the gasoline, electric or wood stoves that they have been using until this point.

–

A woman and her children arrive in the neighbourhood, fleeing conflict and danger. She knows nothing about the neighbourhood, and nobody living there. She sleeps on the streets, before a local woman sees her and takes her in. She spends the next two decades building a home, establishing a foundation to feed local children, and petitioning the state on behalf of other displaced people in her neighbourhood. But when she speaks of what she saw that night – the reason she fled, the cause of her displacement – it is like no time has passed at all, she says; “It is like living it again.”



1 – Mercedes' daughter carries a brick during construction of their home, circa 2005. Photograph by Mercedes.



2 – View of Bogotá. Photograph by the author.



3 – View of Soacha. Photograph by the author.

## Introduction:

### Displacement, Migration and Making a Home in the City

The preceding piece of writing is adapted from the history of the Bogotá neighbourhood that adjoins the one where this fieldwork took place, in the city of Soacha, Colombia. It both documents and partially dramatizes how this small piece of city came into being, combining the history of a place with some of the personal stories that inhabitants told me during fieldwork. These are people who were displaced by conflict or were forced into economic migration, or who simply took a chance on making a better life in the city. They frequently left behind or lost family, friends and homes; and in most cases discovered these again in the city. In this they followed the footsteps of millions of others throughout Latin America, a movement of not just material bodies but society, culture, memory and history, entire lives travelling from the country to the city.

But the unique contours of Colombia have given their experiences a form that helps to understand the drivers which led these people to the city, and the outcomes they have experienced living within it. In the materiality of the Colombian landscape, where mountains, valleys, rivers and lowlands have become associated with regional differences in people and politics. In the stigmatisation and persecution of rural populations, and the bewildering conflagration of conflict and violence visited upon them. In the changing concepts of rights, citizenship and struggle that have accompanied an increasing liberalisation of Colombia, socially and economically. These are phrases which try to make vast things intelligible, supported with research from many disciplines, data from reports, statistics in percentages and numbers: the millions displaced, the hundreds of thousands of dead, the missing. But these are ciphers for moments that occur and are lived with immediacy, in all intensity and fused to a lasting experience. For people living within the neighbourhood that forms the focus of this thesis, the stories they offered were ones which still bore emotional weight and resonated. These stories capture the moment when people first walked and built the streets of the city that they live in. These were stories of people living lives with the all gradated textures that involves. These moments and stories are where this research looks to uncover some of the contours of social marginalisation in Colombia, and especially the ways in which people resist this.

Trying to see the cities of Bogotá and Soacha now, it seems a far cry from the small town established almost 500 years ago by Spanish colonists. Today, there is a vastness to the joint urban area of Bogotá and Soacha that is hard to capture. From the top of Monserrate, a mountain that borders Bogotá, it can seem as though the whole highland savanna has been urbanised, with streets and buildings stretching off into the distance, lost in the haze of traffic fumes. The distinction between the two cities, moreover, is faint and indistinct. Yet, Soacha is a city in its own right, albeit much smaller than its neighbour. It lies to the south-west of the capital and is marked more by the rising slopes of hills than any notable change in urbanisation. Viewed from a hilltop in Soacha itself the buildings and neighbourhoods are jumbled together, sawn into by steep gullies and ravines on the south-eastern edges, dotted with scrubby green spaces, rivers and parks.

The cities have enveloped not only the landscape but the people and culture who inhabited it. The Muisca, like many other indigenous peoples in South America, were decimated by disease, starvation and dispersion. The remainder have largely been absorbed, swelling colonial workforces, dispossessed of territory, becoming *mestizo* [of mixed indigenous and Spanish heritage] (Safford and Palacios 2002: 25-26). Muisca communities still live here, in the Bogotá localities of Bosa and Suba, in nearby Chía and Cota, balancing and reconfiguring their indigenous identities against that of the Colombian state and urban communities which they live within (López Rodríguez 2005). Traces of their culture can be seen in the significance of sacred sites such as Lake Guatavita, source of the colonial Spanish myth of El Dorado, and other local place names. The suburb of Chía to the north of Bogotá, is named after the temple dedicated to the Muisca goddess of the same name (López Rodríguez 2005: 23) and the word 'Soacha' itself is an adaptation from the Muisca for sun [*sua*] and man [*cha*]. Now, other sacred spaces dot the landscape; each Easter, during *Semana Santa* [Holy Week], trails of Catholic pilgrims ascend Monserrate to the monastery there. In Soacha, three large crosses adorn a hilltop overlooking the city, sharing the slope with Muisca rock paintings of the "man of the sun."

Attempting to gain height by climbing these hills, to gain some birds-eye view of the city, is to pretend that it is somehow knowable in a snapshot. But these urban spaces are not legible through a panorama, but in traversing the roads and streets. Here, the distinction between the cities can become more pronounced, as the paved roads on the Bogotá side give

way to hard-packed earth in Soacha's poorest neighbourhoods, such as where this fieldwork was conducted. To someone unfamiliar with the city, as it was to me when I arrived, it can seem a repetitive jumble of similar buildings. But as with all cities there can be an intimacy of knowledge there as well, after a time. This is not something I experienced, but for the residents I spoke to it was; the gradual realisation that the city has gone from a place where everything looks the same to one where the whole world knows you; where "if you ask around here for me – "so-and-so from over there" – and me, almost everyone around here will know who I am" (Maria). That there is a transition to a certain place, their neighbourhood, which is couched within the larger city.

Although familiar, it is still a bounded and centred world that is marked through certain streets and buildings, delineated by a road or an expanse of grass. Home is here, in different meanings of the word. For one family, the inadequacy of the house is a reminder of the poverty that they suffer; the leaking roof, the lack of doors, the holes in the walls. That the rainy weather makes their children sick, or that they can't legalise their ownership because it's deemed too dangerous a place to live, perched on the edge of a canal. For another, it is a reminder of how far they have come and what they have achieved, even as it mirrors the loss of another home. That while it can't compare to how they lived before they have made something from the brink of having nothing. That last year they finally tiled the floor, and this year they will paint. That now they have a home, a family, friends and all the meaning of a life invested here. Or the house may be an entire life, showing the distance between the neighbourhood now and that of decades ago, when this was just a plot of land or an expanse of grass, dotted with deep pools of water.

The neighbourhood where this research took place is located on the edge of Soacha and shares a border with its larger neighbour, Bogotá. There, I was based within a social care organisation located in the neighbourhood, a *comedor* [canteen] providing free or discounted meals to local children and referred to simply as the foundation throughout. This organisation is central to this project. In addition to interviews with residents, research was primarily conducted through participant observation within the foundation and so the rhythms of a day spent there came to characterise fieldwork. Sweeping floors and tables, preparing food in the kitchen while I talked with Mercedes and Alisson, the women who ran the foundation. The preparation and cooking in the kitchen with one of the changing cast of cooks that were

employed there during my fieldwork. Managing the chaos of serving dozens of children every day, rationing the food so there will be enough for the last body through the door. Keeping the space in some semblance of order, tidying and cleaning afterwards, followed by a quiet lunch shared with Mercedes and Alisson in a room to the rear of the building, the three of us crouched over child-sized furniture. Then other activities: fundraising sales, homework support, photography workshops and dance classes.

Amongst all of this it could sometimes seem a huge leap to connect back with the larger issues and sociological concepts that this research is motivated and supported by. Social marginalisation, exclusion, and displacement, to name a few relevant ones, could get lost in the moment I was washing dishes in a kitchen, or awkwardly trying to learn *cumbia* as children laughed. The people that spoke to me didn't rail against the state and neo-liberalisation at every opportunity, but their lives have been profoundly impacted by forces like these in the societal changes that push and pull them from one place to the next and that continue to shape their lives and city. They are present as Mercedes and Alisson calculate their food bills or rake through bags of old donations to find something that might sell for a few *pesos*. They are present when the rain turns the street into a river, or when the police clad in fluorescent jackets ride through on motorcycles. So, understanding why families came to the city, or why residents' lack of education was blamed for high crime levels and an opposition to peace, is fundamental to why what happened in that kitchen mattered and why the children found a dance lesson important.

The sociological analysis undertaken here is about connecting local lives to things that happen at larger scales, but also about moving from past to present, or more accurately, grasping how these exist in a dialectical tension with each other. That things which have happened in the past are not confined to it, especially in a country like Colombia where a history peppered with conflict and violence reverberates throughout the present (Roldán 2003: 4-5). These are moments which were not expended in the instant that they occurred, and that resist a simple reduction to a past event. They are something which "preserves and concentrates its strength" (Benjamin 1969: 90) as it extends into a story capable of spanning time and place. History is never truly finished. In Benjamin's (1969: 263) words, it is not aligned one event after the other like the "beads of a rosary," but enters into a "constellation" with the present, where meaning is imparted through the relations between things. In being

called up through memories and narratives and placed into a relation with the present, these events are imparted with a new meaning and significance themselves.

In the broadest sense, this thesis is concerned with the ways in which things become in the present, in how the city, social marginalisation, something that might be called a community, find their roots in both contemporary actions and historical narratives. It is concerned with how trajectories of movement – in displacement or migration – became part of lives that are lived now. I had intended to focus exclusively on how people who have been displaced make a home in the city, how they integrate with existing communities. But this is a neighbourhood where displaced families live in the same poverty as rural migrants and the urban poor. I spoke to people who had been forcibly displaced and those who had simply gravitated to the city for jobs, family or other opportunities. I also spoke to those who had been living in the city almost all their lives. Often, residents had arrived many years ago, sometimes decades. As far as there is any process of integration, it is one that encapsulates the physical construction and social development of the neighbourhood, from natural landscape to built environment. Among the people I spoke to, displacement and migration are now memories, for the most part, something of the past but not necessarily contained there, frequently soaking through into the present. More specifically, then, this thesis is concerned with the repercussions of displacement, migration and social marginalisation and their ongoing articulation in the lives of those affected; in the difficulties that they have overcome and the ones that they continue to struggle against. How do struggles and losses feed into the meaning of a home? But also how do things which can be more difficult to locate, such as stigmatisation and fear, form part of the everyday for residents? How do individuals, groups and communities navigate the structural inequalities and histories that temper the conditions of their lives, as well as the places where these lives unfold?

This thesis therefore engages with marginality and stigmatisation in order to unpick how social inequalities take on meaning and significance, and how structural forces penetrate into the everyday of urban inhabitants (cf. Lefebvre 2014). At the theoretical level, this is a study of the production of space, especially social space (Lefebvre 1991) defined through the relations that we have with those around us, and how these dialogical relations matter for our selves (Taylor 1989; 1991) and the moral geographies of respect in the city (Cresswell 2005; Sennett 1989; 2004). In the way the chapters that follow have been written I attempt

to undertake Andrew Abbott's (2007) call for a more lyrical, deeply felt sociology; one that uses our emotional response to what we research to help communicate what is experienced in a moment, but without dropping the rigour and awareness of the social world that surrounds the people who speak to us. In this sense it is indebted to, among others, Samuel S. Johnson's (1934) beautifully observed study of the legacy of plantation slavery, and the ruinous entrapment of poor farming communities within the structures and mechanisms of an unfamiliar capitalism; that, for some, it feels like they might never break even no matter how hard they work. Stylistically and intellectually Kathleen Stewart (1996; 2007) is present throughout in her unique voice and form of lyrical anthropology, especially her perceptive and immersive study of Appalachian communities where stories carve out their own space of meanings and significance between imaginaries and realities of culture. Stewart's (2007) innovative engagement with the texture of lives, and how these are lived through moments that can even tangentially speak to a relation with social and cultural currents less easily located, has parallels in my own treatment of ethnographic excerpts which are scattered throughout this thesis. Likewise, Michael Taussig's (1987) almost – and sometimes literally – hallucinatory exploration of the interlocking realms of terror and symbolism in Colombia's Putumayo was an impactful introduction to the complexities of Colombian culture and the chaotic relationship between indigeneity, the *campesino*, colonialism and spreading tendrils of modernity. Finally, of course, Walter Benjamin (1997; 1999) shadows everything with his careful sensitivity in excavating the archaeologies of modernity, from the arcades of Paris, the stairways of Naples, or the streetcars of Moscow. Benjamin's ability to feel currents of social and cultural change through the apparently banal or ordinary first suggested how even small things can speak – if not clearly, then at least meaningfully – to the larger ones.

### Research Problem

This is research that grew organically out of my engagement with the foundation, the women who run it, their work within the neighbourhood, and the children who attended it. It is a response to what they were saying during my time there, and also an attempt to work with the sensations and emotions of being an unfamiliar body in an unfamiliar space. In recognising that being a *gringo* and being *here*, in this particular space, needs more than reflexivity. That the best way to register some of the truths that people live in the neighbourhood is to do so emotionally and try to feel and communicate the moments of emotional engagement that

arose. That the way Alisson dances a few steps with a boy, or how Mercedes insists on showing me photograph after photograph of her life before and after displacement, have a resonance that escape theoretical reasoning, to some extent. These ethnographic moments are interspersed throughout this text to keep this emotional register, working with literature and theory to address three central research questions:

Firstly, how do people turn a piece of land, an anonymous city, into a home? How does a patch of landscape make the transition to part of the urban fabric which people inhabit; to becoming something known and meaningful? How is the social space of the neighbourhood formed, as an informal and developing urban area? This is at the core of this research project, an underlying thread that runs throughout the following chapters and connects the experiences of displacement, migration and poverty alike. I argue that residents are engaged in a quiet political and moral shaping of the neighbourhood which occurs through the everyday and the informal practices of care and acts of kindness that sustain residents through hardship and poverty. These acts are limited, however, in that they can mitigate but not solve larger structural inequalities; in this respect the state and local authorities are also part of the relationship, although more frequently as an absence. Despite this they remain key in binding residents together through forming social relations defined by respect and recognition. For the displaced, memories of rural homes and livelihoods evoke painful comparisons with the present that are simultaneously a testimony to suffering and injustice as they are also evidence of progress made in fashioning a new life for themselves.

Secondly, I investigate what role the foundation plays in the neighbourhood. Specifically, how does the foundation function within the neighbourhood in the absence of a strong state infrastructure and against some of the constraints present within the neighbourhood, such as violence and fear? I find that the work of Mercedes and Alisson is bound through routine, small acts to the moral shaping described above. I argue that, influenced by Mercedes' experience of displacement and both women's lives within the local area, the foundation represents a conscious moral project which responds to stigmatising opinions of the neighbourhood and its inhabitants. Through their familiarity with the lives of residents Mercedes and Alisson have an emplaced understanding of the social and material experience of living there, evidenced through an embodied relationality and daily practices of care. The foundation is also capable of opening alternative spaces within the neighbourhood for

sociability and interaction, opportunities that are otherwise lacking for residents due to insecurity.

Finally, and linked to the above, I ask how violence and fear are bound into the space and places of the neighbourhood? Particular places emerge as central to this process, namely a nearby nature reserve, the *humedal*, and an especially stigmatised area of the neighbourhood, the *olla*. I find that ways of knowing the neighbourhood are contested through different narratives woven from engagement with these places, where violence and fear are two prominent strands. However, I also argue that the presence of children's everyday routines of play and significances within the same spaces shows the ways in which the neighbourhood is a more complex intertwining of competing symbolisms.

Overall, I argue that the everyday acts and practices of residents are generative of moments that allow the neighbourhood to matter, in significant moral ways, to those living there. These acts and practices are understood as struggles occurring against the injustices and inequalities that residents face daily, and which – in a context of daily hardships to simply survive – by necessity form their everyday. This makes the political and moral shaping of the neighbourhood a quiet one, motivated not by one uniting goal but dispersed throughout routines, interactions and individual moments that happen through the social. I contend that it is through dialogical relations between self and other that residents come to understand their neighbourhood and engage in the creative work of shaping this urban fabric. This is a space where ideas of criminality and disorder are both rejected and assimilated. Violence and fear are very real experiences for residents, ones that also influence how they think about themselves and their neighbourhood; they provide the moral fuel for the motivation to start the foundation, and in part define its goals to improve behaviour and change outside perceptions. But it is in the present absence of the state that inhabitants feel most strongly the injustice and inequality that they struggle against. Material hardships and the physicality of living in poor housing, with frequent floods and dust, provide embodied experiences of these inequalities. For the displaced, this is an inescapable reminder of what they have lost through the contrast between rural homes and the city, where the landscape is different, livelihoods have been lost, and opportunities are in short supply.

This thesis presents an image of how social inequalities and stigma become manifest as tangible experiences for the urban poor, not only in the conditions of their lives but in the

dialectical interplay of the imagined and the real, the past and present, memory and hope. Residents move between these to constantly create, re-work and re-create the social space of their neighbourhood.

### Thesis Structure

Chapter One provides an overview of Colombia's recent past and contemporary changes, focusing on how inequalities and stigma that were rooted in rurality have shifted to the urban poor with the urbanisation of the Colombian population and the widespread displacement caused by conflict. This is connected to concepts of citizenship and rights that have motivated recent struggles from subaltern groups in Colombia, both rural and urban. Chapter Two moves on to outline the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis, beginning with Henri Lefebvre's work on space, cities and the everyday. Lefebvre is allied with a discussion of Charles Taylor's dialogical relations, Richard Sennett's concept of respect and a broader discussion of stigma, place and moral geographies. This chapter establishes the theoretical groundwork that supports the argument which follows, locating the creative potential of everyday moments for the formation of social space as a co-created context. Chapter Three presents a brief overview of participants, methods and the methodologies guiding this work, highlighting the importance of Les Back's (2007) call for sociological listening and Andrew Abbott's (2016) writing on lyrical sociology.

Chapters Four, Five and Six are where I analyse data and present my substantive findings. Chapter Four focuses on arrivals, drawing on interviews and focus groups to analyse the ways in which rural migrants and the displaced experienced the shift to urban living. This chapter teases out the importance of informal support and kindnesses for residents in navigating initial circumstances of often considerable poverty, and how displacement is a continuing experience rather than something confined to the past. Chapter Five moves on to look at the work of the foundation, drawing on the extensive participant observation undertaken there. I explore the foundation's roots in the moral ambitions of Mercedes and Alisson and discuss the potential that its activities have for shaping the social space of the neighbourhood. Finally, Chapter Six examines the different ways that violence and fear were talked about, experienced and understood in the neighbourhood, before discussing how these are both embodied and contested through the everyday of children, drawing on maps and photographs created during workshops held at the foundation. Chapter Seven presents some

concluding thoughts and relates these to events that have occurred in the neighbourhood since fieldwork was completed.

## Chapter One: Shells

“All societies live by fictions taken as real.” (Taussig 1987: 121)

This chapter offers an overview of the dynamics that have contributed to the production of new forms of marginality in Colombia, establishing the ground within which the lives of people living within the neighbourhood are set. Firmly placed within larger sweeps of politics, conflict, and socio-economic change are the lives of the rural poor, those people who, in their transition to towns and cities, have become the urban poor. It is crucial here to understand how links between geography, rurality and the conflict have been forged over time, and the consequences of the concentration of violence and persecution within rural areas. These are particularly ruinous for those communities and people whose ways of being are closely linked to the land upon which they live; the indigenous, Afro-Colombians and *campesinos*.

Although translating to rural peasant or small-scale farmer, the connotations of *campesino* are deeper than this literal translation implies. *Campesino* can also be described as “a social identity category of someone whose customs, beliefs, lifestyle and social, economic, political, and cultural practices are linked to rural land and economy” (López 2019: 25). Pushing a little further, however, and connecting back to the central theoretical concerns with the self, identity and space discussed throughout this thesis, *campesino* is understood here as someone whose sense of self is intimately linked with the land they live upon, their territory and the ways of being that relate to this (cf. Escobar 2016; Lederach 2017; Salamanca 2018: 32). The repercussions of violence, displacement and economic liberalisation are therefore, on the one hand, increasing migration and displacement to urban areas, but on the other they also represent the degradation and undermining of fundamental ways of being for *campesino*, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities.

While most of the neighbourhood residents involved in this research project were formerly *campesinos*, the tumultuous changes endured by all groups also serve to highlight the vast imbalances of power that exist in Colombian society. The chapter begins by outlining how displacement and urban poverty find their roots in the actions of powerful groups in the reshaping of rural Colombia, socially, politically and economically. It sketches out how these actions have contributed to devastating losses for rural communities, leading to continuing hardships for rural migrants and the displaced. These connect with stigmatising narratives of

rurality and indigeneity which feed into the lives of the new urban poor, exacerbated by the persecution of those engaged in social and political struggles. These currents of persecution, loss and stigmatisation are fundamental for understanding the everyday struggles of neighbourhood residents that are explored in later chapters and are especially meaningful for understanding the moral frameworks which guide the work of Mercedes and Alisson in the foundation and how displacement resonates through peoples' lives. Inured to the false promises of guerrillas, terrorised by paramilitaries who offer to protect them, suspicious of local authorities and a state often complicit in these abuses, the rural and urban poor have remarkably limited avenues of support. This points to the organic emergence of local support and care amongst residents of the neighbourhood to mitigate this absence of support, a connecting thread throughout the chapters that follow.

### Geography

The landscape of Colombia is hugely varied, from low-lying jungle in the south to cool highland pastures in the centre, and vast grass plains in the east bordering Venezuela, all crossed with rivers, valleys and mountains. It is the mountains that have been held to exert a particular influence over the social, economic and political development of modern Colombia, in their disruption of travel and trade and the distinct social enclaves that arose as a result (Bushnell 1993; Safford and Palacios 2002). Three primary ranges of the Andes run almost parallel across the western half of the country. The Cordillera Occidental lies to the west and stretches from the southern border to near the Caribbean coast in the north. Next to this lies the Cordillera Central, the highest of the three ranges, which runs centrally from south to north, with Colombia's second-largest city of Medellín located at the northern tip. Finally, there is the Cordillera Oriental, the most easterly range that runs from the same southern root up toward the north-east of the country and beyond into Venezuela. To picture these ranges on a map is to imagine they lie like backbones across a flat plane. To see them in person is to see the land rippled and folding back on itself in waves, steep flanks covered in heavy vegetation and scored with gullies. Even at the fringes of the lowest ranges the landscape is difficult to travel.



4 – Hills near Armenia, Quindío department. Photograph by the author.



5 – The opposite side of the mountain chain that skirts Bogotá. Photograph by the author.

This is a landscape that has been attributed a direct role in the form and development of Colombian politics, and consequently society. A landscape where travel by boat was quicker than by land and precipitous mountain trails slowed traffic to and from the highland capital – Bogotá – to a crawl, making political power a fragmented and localised phenomenon (Bushnell 1993: 37, 74). Throughout the colonial and independent periods political divisions group along topographical distinctions and it may be that the concentration of colonial wealth, prestige and power within the cities was opposed by a more reformist agenda amongst the country's peripheral areas; the *llanos*, hot lowland grasslands that stretched out to the Venezuelan border from the cordillera oriental, and the Caribbean coast (Safford 1972: 358-363; Safford and Palacios 2002: 97). Yet, geography alone is not powerful enough to account for the consolidated political landscape that emerged in Colombia (Safford 1972: 367). The political divisions are embedded into the intermittent and numerous wars that take place throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the formation of what were to become the two primary political parties for more than 100 years – the Conservatives and Liberals – characterised by remarkably distinct geographical pockets of political support (Bushnell 1993: 92, 117-118). In a territory so divided by mountains, rivers and jungle, where not only topography but climate can hand one side or another an advantage, guerrilla warfare develops as a result of the inability to effectively control regions (Bushnell 1993: 46-47, 66, 149-151, 205; Safford and Palacios 2002: 94-95, 101). Yet, the frequent political conflicts rarely result in anything beyond a perpetuation of violence and engrained hostilities (Bushnell 1993: 118). The legacy of consolidated political support, weak central state presence and historical patterns of guerrilla warfare instead carries over into a widespread and long-lasting period of conflict known as *la Violencia* [the violence].

### *La Violencia* and Rural Conflict

A populist and a gifted speaker gains increasing notoriety, claiming to speak for the underprivileged of Colombian society; Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. In 1946 he runs, unsuccessfully, for president and following the election a wave of violence washes through the Colombian countryside. Attacks, reprisals, the settling of old grudges carried over from previous conflicts, justified under the umbrella of partisan politics (Bushnell 1993: 182, 202). In 1948, Gaitán is speaking at a political rally in Bogotá when he is shot and killed. The assassination sparks widespread rioting and opportunistic looting throughout the capital – known as the *Bogotazo*

– and political fallout inflames the ongoing rural violence further. While the intensity of violence seen in the capital rapidly fades away, in the country it continues for almost a decade, where it is characterised by a brutality visited upon the rural civilian population by militias and ‘self-defence’ forces (Derks-Normandin 2014: 1-3). The starkness of the time is summarised in the name it acquires: *la Violencia* – simply, the violence.

One of the peculiarities of *la Violencia* is the way in which a supposedly partisan political conflict generates such terrible acts; why it results in massacres, atrocities and abuses more commonly seen in ideological or racial wars (Roldán 2003: 12, 23). Or how and why it perpetuates in different forms over the decades that follow, through the 1950s and onwards, each period a shell containing the form of the conflict to follow (Safford and Palacios 2002: 345-347). Grudges, allegiances, tactics and consequences feeding one into the other. To stem the continuing rural violence, still nominally occurring along political lines, the Conservative and Liberal parties negotiate a power-sharing agreement in 1957, the National Front (Safford and Palacios 2002: 322-324). Under this agreement, the presidency alternates between the two and all government positions, including at the local level, are shared equally between Liberal and Conservative. The violence is, at first, dampened by this agreement, even as it contains within it the seeds for another future conflict through the formal exclusion of any other political parties; in particular, communist groups who begin to see armed revolt as the only means of achieving political change (Bushnell 1993: 223-226), in a situation where vast inequalities in land ownership serve to provide fuel for future conflicts (Karl 2017; LeGrand 2003; LeGrand et al. 2017).

As violence continues, regional centres of power and their elites attempt to exert control over peripheral areas, their resources and the inhabitants – *campesinos* who hold little to no political power (Roldán 2003; Rueda-García 2003). In the 1960s and 1970s reforms aimed at a redistribution of land – from large private interests to *campesinos* with insufficient or no land – are blocked, a conglomerate of agriculturists, landowners and cattle ranchers allying against it while successive governments implement only piecemeal or half-hearted changes (Bushnell 1993: 232). Devoid of political clout themselves, disillusioned rural populations try to find alternative routes to protect livelihoods and communities (LeGrand 2003: 176; Safford and Palacios 2002: 309-310, 327-328) and amongst the Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos (ANUC), a nation-wide association of *campesinos*, there is an increasing leftward

turn (Bushnell 1993: 233). But the limited political conditions that exist under the National Front governments excludes rural groups from achieving power themselves<sup>2</sup>, even locally, leading to the formation of leftist guerrilla groups, most notably the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - FARC).

### FARC, Paramilitaries and the Land

In the Magdalena valley, rural communities and former Liberal guerrillas, drifting to the political left, constitute the beginnings of the communist self-defence forces that will eventually become the FARC (Bushnell 1993: 173, 243-244). Aligned with *campesinos*, land squatters and frontier colonists, FARC's early years are tied to struggles for land and the right to independent colonisation<sup>3</sup> in areas where the state is only dimly felt (Safford and Palacios 2002: 355-357). But as FARC gain moderate successes the nature of the movement changes; throughout the 1980s and 1990s ideology gives way to paid militarism, and wholesale political change to a localised control of the drug trade, providing a cash crop for *campesinos* and guerrilla alike (Safford and Palacios 2002: 364). The ethical and social legitimacy that FARC had found in their early years weakens further as they adopt kidnapping and extortion as a means of funding their war against the state, unwittingly drawing drug cartels into the conflict and giving rise to powerful paramilitary groups (LeGrand 2003: 179).

These paramilitary groups find their roots in the criminal organisations of Colombia, but rapidly expand through funding and support from other sources; narco-traffickers, politicians, business leaders, agricultural and multi-national corporations all cooperate against the kidnapping and extortion levelled by guerrilla groups. As the paramilitaries grow in strength through the 1980s and 1990s, they find more allies in the police and armed forces, formally consolidating under the umbrella of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia – AUC) (IDMC 2011: 37–38; Koth 2005: 14–16). They engage in direct conflict with the guerrillas, sometimes, but more often they attack anyone perceived as supporting or belonging to the guerrilla groups; threats, assassinations, displacements, massacres and abuses all perpetrated against civilians – overwhelmingly rural – community

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<sup>2</sup> There were other guerrilla groups who had urban roots, such as the M-19 (*Movimiento 19 de Abril* – April 19<sup>th</sup> Movement) (Safford and Palacios 2002: 359-360).

<sup>3</sup> Frontier colonists clear and settle outlying regions of uncultivated land for agricultural purposes; for more information see Elhawary's (2008) article and Safford and Palacios (2002: 311-312).

leaders and rights activists (LeGrand 2003: 182-184). The violence reaches such disturbing levels that some scholars predict the imminent collapse of the Colombian state (Pizarro 2002). Not only Colombians, but external actors, namely the United States, come to see curbing paramilitary power and influence as a necessary step to resolving the conflict. Negotiations begin in the early 2000s and result in the disarmament and demobilization of over 30,000 AUC fighters (Derks-Normandin 2014; IDMC 2011; Isacson 2014). The paramilitaries are, by this point, responsible for the majority of deaths, injuries, abuses and displacement events in Colombia (Romero 2018). Yet, as in other periods of conflict, their disarmament simply marks a new phase as many of the supposedly demobilised paramilitaries morph into 'criminal gangs,' tightening their control of the drug trade and continuing to forge links with agribusiness and landowners (Ballvé 2012; Derks-Normandin 2014).

Yet again, the conflict and land are tied together as the pursuit of profit drives expanding paramilitary activity in the remote and resource-rich zones of Colombia, revealing links with coca farming, cattle ranching, palm and banana plantations, mining for gold or emeralds, and oil (LeGrand 2003: 188-189; LeGrand et al. 2017: 260). Civilians are driven from one region to the other. Fleeing violence and threats, watching their land become absorbed into that of larger private interests, *campesinos* turn to frontier colonisation across almost a quarter of Colombia's land, clearing and settling millions of hectares for agricultural use. These are regions with only a weak state presence, however, and so it seems as if the conflict simply follows these colonists as armed groups try to assert control of the newly available land and resources (Elhawary 2008: 89). Once again, settlers find themselves caught between guerrillas, narco-traffickers, paramilitaries, police and the army. Once again, with little formal protection either physically or institutionally, in the law and courts, many are displaced from their land or forced to resettle (Safford and Palacios 2002: 311-312). Meanwhile, the lucrative profits of the drug trade have to be turned into something less illicit, fuelling narco-traffickers' purchases of large tracts of land and investment into ranches and farms and transforming them into some of the largest landowners in the country, concentrating land ownership amongst a tiny minority of property-owners (Safford and Palacios 2002: 315-316; Segrelles Serrano 2018: 413). This is combined with impunity for the powerful, allowing widespread acts of injustice to be committed against the poor, particularly the rural poor, who continue to suffer displacement, dispossession and discrimination; inequality and injustice become

defining characteristics for rural life in Colombia (Berry 2017). The young, those with families, and landowners are the most affected (Carrillo 2009; IDMC 2011: 37; Mundt and Ferris 2008; Núñez and Hurtado 2014). The consequences are not just a material loss of possessions and land but a more brutal attack on the *campesino* way of life that renders it unviable and dangerous, severing rural communities' meaningful ties and relationships with place (Lederach 2017). Undermined by inequality, vulnerable through the weakness or downright complicity of state institutions, rural civilians – not just *campesinos*, but indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities – have fled to urban areas, resulting in one of the largest internally displaced populations in the world (IDMC 2020: 2).

### Many Injustices (Mercedes)

“When I was displaced I came alone with my children, I had to leave at two in the morning.”

“How?”

“Through the field by the mountain to the main street, to the street. When I arrived there, there was a truck coming with building supplies; sand, earth. I asked the driver if he could please take me to Bogotá.”

“And I came here with my children, I didn't want to stay.”

“Because there, where I was displaced from, the guerrillas were operating. The guerrillas were there, and they took the children, that were only nine years old, to their meetings. We had to take our children to the meetings, right?”

“And they talked and talked - bla-bla-bla-bla-bla.”

“To the kids. Even the children were saying to us that we had to do this, that they [the guerrillas] were fighting for the people, and some other things.”

“Later the paramilitaries came. They were called the AUC. OK?”

“And these two started fighting for control of the village, then [the guerrillas] came to take the children. How can they say that to you like that? Well, they took them from us, and they took them to the guerrillas – those who were supposedly fighting so that they wouldn't take our children!”

“By then, it was...it was already a struggle between them [the guerrillas and the paramilitaries], to stay in the village. They committed many murders, many, many, they killed a lot of people there. A lot, a lot. I saw when the guerrillas killed Don G---; I worked as an employee in his house and they killed him.”

“Don G---. They killed him...”

*“And after...”*

“Yeah, so, me? “I’m going.”

“And this, David, is hard, because, look; when we arrived here, [the government said they would] give help to the displaced – a lie. And the guerrillas arrive and they asked for help, and the government gave them help. I saw it there, in the Red Cross, where they operate.”

“And this is silenced.”

“This...it’s because of this that I don’t believe in the peace [accord], you understand? For this, no...I don’t believe. Is it possible? Who knows?”

“But it’s because of this that I rebel. No lies, no, no.”

“I think...I think that the peace could be good, but there are many things which are hidden, many things that they don’t tell the truth about...the truth is never told, and they commit many injustices, David. Many, many.”

*“It’s difficult to see, with the peace, is it for...”*

“Exactly. So, this is hard...there are good things, right? They would fix a lot of things that can be solved, but when the damage is already done, no.”

“Forget it, the wounds heal, but the scars remain and this, no...it’s hard, hard, hard.” [crying]

*“Do you want to continue?”*

“Yes, yes, yes.”

### Displacement

FARC and the Colombian government finally agree a peace accord in August 2016. Despite being rejected by the Colombian public in a referendum on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2016, a revised

agreement is negotiated and then approved by the Colombian congress in November 2016, bringing an end to a conflict that has lasted more than half a century (Brodzinsky 2016). Surveying the wreckage that has been left in the wake of the conflict, throughout changes in the factions, motivations and methods it is apparent that the overwhelming suffering of the civilian population has been one of the few constants. A litany of numbers gives only a vague indication. Of the almost 260,000 people killed, more than 215,000 have been civilians (Romero 2018), and although there are disparities between assessments – and a general acceptance that statistics are subject to a large margin of error – the cumulative number of persons displaced by the conflict is somewhere between six and eight million (Núñez and Hurtado 2014; UNHCR 2019). Currently, it is estimated that there are 5,576,000 internally displaced persons, plus an additional 2,164,000 who are identified as having achieved a partial solution to their displacement, defined as “having returned, resettled or locally integrated” to some extent, but with significant challenges remaining in their living conditions (IDMC 2020: 110). Alarming, despite the peace deal with FARC, demobilisation of guerrillas and paramilitaries, and a reduction in the number of large-scale clashes between armed actors, displacement has continued largely unabated with 174,000 new displacements over 2019, the majority of which were conflict related (IDMC 2020; Núñez and Hurtado 2014).

The conflict remains regionally fractured, no longer in terms of a distinct geographical division of Liberal or Conservative – those two parties themselves now being splintered and much reduced – but in the regionally distinct drivers of conflict as opposed to one overarching struggle. Fighting continues amongst the state, paramilitaries, narco-traffickers, FARC dissidents, and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN – National Liberation Army), the remaining guerrilla group (IDMC 2020: 56), yet displacement and its inversion, confinement, are driven as much by threats and fear as they are by actual armed confrontations (IDMC 2011: 11, 20). Today, the violence remains stubbornly rural, and disproportionately affects Afro-Colombian and indigenous peoples whose lands lie on resources of interest to agricultural and mining corporations, cattle ranchers, or in the path of drug trafficking corridors and growing zones (Derks Normandin 2014; IDMC 2011: 27; UNHCR 2019). Once again, we circle back around to inequalities and imbalances in power. These are powerful actors, leveraging the relative lack of land rights for these communities to dispossess them through legal channels, or employing armed groups to extort, threaten, displace and kill local

leaders and those who resist (Escobar 2003; Grajales 2011; Hylton 2006; Mundt and Ferris 2008; Osorio and Culma 2018: 234; Ossa et al. 2007). Not only has the signing of a peace accord failed to halt these attacks on community leaders and rights activists, but there is evidence that they are increasing in number with an estimated 300-800 murdered since 2017 (HRW 2020; Indepaz 2020; Parkin Daniels 2020).

More numbers give scale to a dispossession felt deeply and personally: 6,000,000 hectares lost, or 60,000km<sup>2</sup> – almost 5-6% of Colombia's total land mass (HRW 2013). In 2011 and 2013 there are attempts to facilitate the return of land through the Ley de Víctimas y Restitución de Tierras [Victims and Land Restitution Law, or 'Victims' Law'], and again through the peace accord with the FARC in 2016. Inequalities and vulnerabilities are addressed, with promises of land reform and the guaranteeing of property rights for those with no title, and the improvement of rural infrastructures (LeGrand et al. 2017: 260-261). Yet, significant obstacles remain; after decades of violence and displacement, how can the displaced be identified, and is their return feasible? If fear does not prevent them from returning, who will guarantee their safety? How can they return when homes are occupied or destroyed? Even where land restitution after displacement is possible, people may come home to find a landscape changed beyond recognition. Beyond the man-made disaster that is the conflict, these communities find themselves suffering the consequences of rural economic development policies as water is siphoned away for agriculture and resource extraction, or the toxic aftershocks of these contaminate their land and crops (Osorio and Culma 2018). In the interests of agri-business and the state the land is being reshaped through monoculture plantations and roads, easing access, increasing productivity and tying displacement and dispossession tightly to a spatial process of state formation and control (Ballvé 2012). The eradication of coca crops through aerial spraying delivers more contamination and toxicity from the sky, causing indiscriminate damage to land vital for livelihoods as it simultaneously removes the coca farmers' means of subsistence before alternatives are available (Felbab-Brown 2020; Rincón-Ruiz and Kallis 2013). In the face of such a cacophony of threats and barriers there is a risk for many that displacement will simply become permanent and rural homes lost forever (Ferris 2014; Mundt and Ferris 2008).

This, then, is the reality for up to eight million people who have been displaced in Colombia. Rural areas, rich in resources and of strategic interest to the state, paramilitaries

and guerrillas, have been the focal point of violence since at least the time of *la Violencia*. Rural populations – the indigenous, *campesinos* and Afro-Colombians – have suffered the repercussions through the violence visited on them and massive displacement, made possible as a result of entrenched inequalities in power and the capacity of the state, paramilitaries and guerrillas to take by force what cannot be taken legally, or to leverage the one in service of the other. With displacement continuing in recent years, and return only a remote possibility for many people, the result is that the situation and experience of displacement has become commonplace within Colombian society (Núñez and Hurtado 2014). The following section examines the bureaucracies of support for displacement that exist in Colombia in order to highlight the limitations of these for people who have largely become lost amongst an overall trend of rural to urban migration. The situation of the urban poor and informal settlements is then examined and connected to historical and continuing stigmatisations within Colombian society, plus emergent forms of citizenship and struggle that contest these.

### Displacement Bureaucracies in Colombia

The Colombian state is marked by a heterogenous relationship with displacement, one that threads through the causes, outcomes and legacies of the phenomenon. Even as its own armed forces and police are implicated in historical and current abuses, or through their alliances with paramilitaries, there is a concomitant effort to develop a legal framework of support and recognition for the displaced. In 1997<sup>4</sup>, Law 387 is introduced to provide concrete and legally binding protection for the displaced. The law is ground-breaking in scope and comprehensiveness, outlining several key rights: the right to access international aid, guarantees of basic civil rights, the right to live without discrimination due to displaced status, the right to family reunification, freedom of movement, the right to return. The law defines objectives for the Colombian state to provide assistance and support for the displaced,

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<sup>4</sup> The Colombian state, in Law 387 of 1997 works from the following definition of a displaced person: “A displaced person is any person who has been forced to migrate within the national territory, abandoning his place of residence or customary economic activities, because his life, physical integrity, personal freedom or safety have been violated or are directly threatened as a result of any of the following situations: internal armed conflict, civil tension and disturbances, general violence, massive Human Rights violations, infringement of International Humanitarian Law, or other circumstances arising from the foregoing situations that drastically disturb or could drastically disturb the public order.” See <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5a255b374.pdf>

especially women, children, Afro-Colombians and indigenous peoples. The provision of a means of self-subsistence – a livelihood. Yet, the dual relationship between state and displacement continues, and in 2004 the Colombian Constitutional Court rules against the state, declaring it to be failing to meet these obligations and promises (Ferris 2014: 17-18). New coordinating bodies are created to govern the state's response to displacement events and manage the provision of services for displaced populations. Multiple additional laws strengthen points of protection and response around justice, reparations and protection, together with amendments recognising the amorphous, shifting nature of the conflict and the reasons for displacement (Carrillo 2009; Fagen 2011).

The introduction of the 'Victims Law' in 2011 entails a further reshuffling of bureaucracies and entities, creating the Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral de Víctimas (UARIV). The law not only addresses issues of land restitution for those displaced but also offers legal recognition of their status as victims of the conflict, hailed as an important step in managing imagined future transitions to peace and issues of justice and reparations. The victims' register is created in the Registro Unico de Víctimas (Central Registry of Victims or 'Victims' Unit') to collate the details of all those affected by the conflict (Ferris 2014: 21). Registering as a victim then entitles a displaced person to emergency aid: food, hygiene items, assistance with rent, and psychosocial care. Victims are offered programmes of education, health, training and livelihoods. The aim: to make registered displaced persons self-sufficient within 3-6 months. But for those unable, unwilling or ineligible to register there is only basic state welfare available, or the possibility of attempting to access the support offered by one of the many international NGOs present in the country<sup>5</sup> (Carrillo 2009: 534-537). And yet, despite the organisations, laws and policies that are present within Colombian society there is no sense of a resolution to protracted displacement. Familiar problems emerge, of contesting the power of armed groups in isolated areas of the country where the state has only weak influence or its very institutions are compromised through links to paramilitary groups, clientelism and corruption (Ballvé 2012; Elhawary 2008; Safford and Palacios 2002: 311-312). Under these circumstances, providing even basic aid is problematic, and the restitution of

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<sup>5</sup> Including, amongst others, Mercy Corps, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Save the Children (STC), International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and UNHCR (ACNUR in Colombia) either supporting the Colombian government in various capacities toward the implementation of state programs and assistance, or undertaking projects of their own (Ferris 2014: 28-29).

land a distant hope. Dangers are foreseen, too, from the signing of the 2016 peace accord, that the displaced may sink into a generalised category of victims (Ferris 2014: 37-41), losing sight of the specificities of displacement in the need to re-establish homes and livelihoods (Fagen 2011: 42-45).

Inevitably, the losses of displacement are felt beyond the material. Loss of land and property is one aspect, but for *campesinos* this connects to a deeper sense of self through the importance of a familiar territory and practices (cf. Lederach 2017) or the place that home occupies as something more intimate than a simple shelter (cf. Brun 2015). It is the unseating of a previous way of being in the world, along with the nested connections that run through the human and non-human in work, movement, the landscape and food to name a few. This experience characterises arrival to the city for the women that I spoke with in the neighbourhood. It is summarised in the satisfaction expressed by one woman, Maria, her drawn out “*mhhmm*” as she recalls the size of her lost house in the country and recounts the tools, crops, animals and ways of travel that were central to her life there. Contrast this with the disgust she feels at their loss and the change to an unfamiliar urban environment. These profound changes make displacement a deeply disorienting experience, compounded through the difficulties that can arise in accessing support through state bureaucracies and aid agencies – especially when combined with a distrust or fear of the authorities. Despite this, access to emergency support is crucial and drives the majority of displaced persons, like Maria, to the towns and cities where this is perceived to be more readily available.

### Displacement to Urban Areas

Almost all displaced persons in Colombia settle in or around urban areas (IDMC 2011: 32). For many, the pattern of movement is first to overwhelmed local towns in the vicinity of large displacement events. Here, overstretched and inadequate infrastructures combine with a desire for greater anonymity to drive movement on to larger towns, cities and the regional capitals such as Cali, Medellín, Barranquilla, and Bogotá (Carrillo 2009: 530-533). People go in search of vital first support packages from aid agencies and the government, for work, healthcare, education and housing, or to disappear (Fagen 2011; Mundt and Ferris 2008; Núñez and Hurtado 2014). But in the confusion of arrival, faced with huge queues and unfamiliar processes, many end up unregistered and unable to access support, compounding the effects of losing the support of friends and family whilst facing an urban setting where

jobs demand a very different skill set to their rural homes (Albuja and Ceballos 2010; Aysa-Lastra 2011). Colombia has no camps for housing the displaced, so as they are lost amongst rural migrants and the urban poor in cities, there is confusion amongst aid agencies and the government over the scale and nature of displacement; who, exactly, is displaced, and what are their needs or vulnerabilities (Campbell 2006; Crisp et al. 2012; de Geoffroy 2009; Kellenberger 2009; Pantuliano et al. 2012; Vidal et al. 2013). In this uncertainty, the concepts and tools developed to work with refugees and the displaced in other, rural contexts are a poor fit for the diffuseness and diversity of the urban environment. The urban displaced are exposed at the juncture of responsibilities between aid organisations, international NGOs and the state as responsibilities become unclear, broad definitions of protection creating a lack of clarity (Ferris and Ferro-Ribeiro 2012: 47-59). Yet, displacement, although indelibly linked to the status of victim in Colombia, is not a transition to a *being* of passive victimhood. At the very least, living in the city allows the displaced to be 'at the door' of government and the authorities, affording opportunities to articulate needs and demands for basic rights through protests and occupations (Berents 2018). In the absence of aid or state support people are able to search out opportunities – both formal and informal – which allow them to find some measure of self-sufficiency and livelihoods (Banki 2006; Jacobsen 2006; Zaman 2012). In Colombia, where female-headed households form a disproportionate number of displaced families (Meertens 2012: 6), women value the potential opportunities that cities can offer for work and gender equality (Mundt and Ferris 2008).

But again, the positive is tempered with other facts. It takes time to turn an opportunity, or the idea of an opportunity, into a reality. Insecurity follows women to the city in the risk of physical or sexual abuse and exploitation by unscrupulous employers (IDMC 2011: 48; Meertens 2012: 9-10). Poverty is the overwhelming norm for displaced families through fundamental material losses (Ibáñez and Vélez 2008), yet for those female-headed households extreme poverty is more likely (IDMC 2011: 34). Subsistence support available in rural homes has vanished and new pressures from the urban environment emerge to deepen and complexify poverty in the shape of expenditures for rent, utilities, transport, food; more than half of families report not having enough to eat (Carrillo 2009: 537-539; IDMC 2011: 40-41). Housing is in short supply, and that which is available can be outside the means of many displaced people as they struggle to find any income, meaning that many live in self-built

housing within informal settlements (Fagen 2011: 55-56; Rueda-García 2003). The transition to urban living is therefore by no means an easy one, and difficulties are exacerbated through new risks contained in the city. In the poverty that afflicts the peripheral neighbourhoods where displaced people overwhelmingly settle, indifference or hostility to new arrivals is not unknown (Carrillo 2009: 538, 546). Criminal gangs exert influence here, and new territorial boundaries have to be learnt and permissions obtained, while receiving aid can serve only to make someone a target for crime (Carrillo 2009: 537; Ferris 2014: 16). With the increasing presence of narco-trafficking gangs in cities intra-urban displacement is on the rise too, although distinguishing voluntary from forced movement in the city is more complex (IDMC 2014: 41-42; Núñez and Hurtado 2014: 3-4).

Displacement, then, is a short term that contains worlds of experience. In Colombia, through the rural roots of the conflict, it overwhelmingly impacts upon populations who are faced with devastating losses. With little option to remain in the conflict zones, the overwhelming trend is for rural-urban patterns of movement. For all the displaced, but especially *campesinos* and indigenous peoples (Carillo 2009: 542-543), the change in circumstances is seismic, constituting profound changes to rural ways of life and their social and cultural practices. The urban environment also throws up new challenges and risks to accompany the slim opportunities for access to aid and employment. With the continuing and shifting currents of conflict through the Colombian countryside return is only a distant possibility, meaning that displacement has become protracted or permanent as it extends over decades. As a result, displacement, in tandem with social and economic changes, has driven an increasing urbanisation of the Colombian population; in particular, the growth of peripheral neighbourhoods in large towns and cities such as Bogotá and Soacha.

### An Informal Expansion

In 1538, on a cool highland savanna, Spanish colonists establish the city of Bogotá. For hundreds of years it serves as a capital, first to colonial New Granada, then to independent Gran Colombia before present-day Colombia. The city remains more of a town for much of this time, its industry limited to largely artisanal output and the population small, numbering only 40,000 inhabitants in 1843, some three hundred years later (Bushnell 1993: 81-82). In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, there is a rapid increase in the rate of urbanisation. Replicating a trend seen across Latin America, people living in rural areas flock

to cities and the population of urban areas skyrockets (Rueda-García 2003: 1; UN-Habitat 2017: 9) Cities now drive economic growth, and the industrialisation of urban areas feeds job growth in towns and cities while changes occur in the rural economy; large-scale agricultural practices swallow smallholders, while liberalising economic policy reduces the viability of traditional *campesino* lifestyles (Safford and Palacios 2002: Ch.13). The population of Bogotá swells to an estimated 4,000,000 people, before doubling again. Today, it is somewhere between 7,500,00 – 9,000,000 people (DANE 2018b; UN-Habitat 2017: 13). In Soacha, just next door, the population follows a similarly precipitous rise to 600,000 (DANE 2018b). Even then, there is a lack of certainty, with the city's mayor claiming the actual figure to be almost double, at 1,000,000, citing the expansion of informal settlements and the influx of refugees from Venezuela (El Tiempo 2019).

In a period of chaotic growth, with inadequate housing stock available, rural migrants and the displaced simply begin to build homes and infrastructure themselves (Doebele 1977). The provincial air of old Bogotá is truly gone, as peripheral settlements grow independently from the centre into self-contained urban locales in their own right. Over time, informal settlements emerge as the cheapest and most accessible form of housing for the poor, leading to poverty concentrating around the south and west of the capital (Rueda-García 2003: 13-17), which itself results in the overspill of population to bordering metropolitan areas, such as Soacha (Camargo Sierra 2015: 137). These settlements are frequently classified as illegal; in the conditions of their initial creation, through 'invasions,' or by the unsanctioned subdivision of housing plots, known as pirate urbanisation [*urbanización pirata*] (Zeiderman 2016: 123). Yet, despite this, there is an implicit acceptance of the need for these settlements to accommodate the migrants and displaced that continue to arrive. In 1970 it is estimated that almost half of Bogotá's inhabitants obtained housing in this manner, making these 'illegal' settlements integral to the growth of the city (Rueda-García 2003: 8, 14). Some of the largest neighbourhoods in Bogotá today – Ciudad Bolívar, Kennedy and Bosa – have their roots in these processes. So, too, does Soacha. Now, the border between the two cities is coterminous, one abutting the other, and what may technically be informal neighbourhoods display many formal characteristics; street names, lighting, services and shops, transport connections. As the municipal border blurs, so does the distinction between the formal and informal city.



6 – Rooftop view of the neighbourhood. Photograph by Anibal.

### Informal Settlements and the Suggestion of Marginality

Like displacement, ‘informality’ is a term that needs some exploration. It can be used broadly, yet the places that it refers to vary in their emplaced and specific characteristics, across neighbourhood, city, and national scales (Hernández and Kellett 2010; Roy 2009; Varley 2013). These informal settlements, these invasions and pirate divisions, are imagined spaces as much as real ones. In official discourses of the authorities and planning they are positioned against formal ones; a jumble of self-made shacks, sheets of tin, wood and plastic bordering a muddy street juxtaposed against pavement, brick and glass, a space of neat divisions and well-tended lawns. Order and disorder, in other words, the centre and the periphery, a familiar and misleading dichotomy. But the space of informal settlements is in a constant process of change as residents construct, alter, and expand, destabilising frozen oppositions and placing them somewhere on a continuum between these two visions of urbanity. They can be more than this, as well; viewed as an alternative to the formal city, rather than an opposition to it (Hernández-García 2013a: 9, 16-19). *Producing urban space* (Lefebvre 1991) in a different way, one that dialectically engages with ‘formal’ processes of urban planning

and liberalising economies; finding niches for employment, for housing, for living within urban space (AlSayyad 2004). And so, they undermine the models and epistemologies of urban theory from the global north, suggesting variegated alternatives to these in the abundance of different forms they can take, and their specificity in responding to local conditions (Roy 2009: 826).

There is a need to be cautious, however, of the creativity and independence that can be ascribed to urban informality. To describe these settlements as heroic, culturally distinct, communitarian, ecologically friendly, as resistant to the impositions of capitalism and imperialism, is to risk effacing the realities of life defined by poverty and stark structural inequalities (Varley 2013). A comparison between normative ideas of good living ties these places and their populations tightly to existing 'others,' a comparison that is all the more inevitable given the proximity of one form of urbanism to the other. These are spaces that are always, in part, defined through their relation with the state, their relation to mechanisms of law and urban governance that are able to categorise them as 'illegal' or 'informal' in the first instance. Informal settlements can transform the land, but they cannot make new ways of legitimising these transformations, meaning they remain vulnerable to the decisions and actions of those in power (Azuela 1987). Although established independently, they are still subject to the mechanisms of the state and its operations.

In Colombia, as housing supply fell well short of demand, or was priced beyond the means of the poor, an approach of increased regulation and intervention was adopted, mandating local government with the integration of informal settlements to the formal city. Authorities were tasked with the "establishment of norms for the informal city, around improvements in the quality of life, environmental control and community participation [...] the alleviation of social decomposition and on urban safety" (Betancur 2007: n.p.). But when involvement occurs only after the event of settlement – when these are already *spaces* and *places* for people – the public sector is limited to reactive measures; recovery of squatted land, negotiations with the community, legalisation and the improvement of infrastructure (Hernández-García 2013: 31). Until this point, settlements "exist partially outside the gaze of state authorities and city plans" (Yiftachel 2009: 89), generating neither overt interest nor persecution. Transgression of normative values, however, reveals the social position of these neighbourhoods and the relative powerlessness of their inhabitants. Negative reputations,

crime and disorder, can prompt local authorities to act, usually punitively through demolition and eviction (Yiftachel 2009: 92).

Within Bogotá, where around 25% of the total urbanised space is estimated to have been created informally and with little available space for further building within existing boundaries, the continued expansion and establishment of informal neighbourhoods leads to conflicts with the authorities, which are exacerbated when land increases in value or is needed for development projects (Blanco 2012; El Tiempo 2020; Everett 2001). Considered in one light, then, living within informal settlements can be a tenuous affair and for the displaced and rural migrants in Colombia existing vulnerabilities are stacked upon new ones. Poverty, lack of employment, insecurity, a lack of social support, gendered risks and inequalities. Difficulties accessing healthcare, education and welfare support. These combine with lack of legal recognition for their ownership of land or housing, and the potential for conflict between new arrivals, especially, and other inhabitants and local authorities.

That there are urban populations who experience multiple vulnerabilities is not particular to Colombia or Latin America. Yet, as in the case of displacement and informality, there are specifics to the social inequalities experienced by these communities that both aligns with and is distinct from forms of urban marginality found elsewhere. While a spatial concentration of marginality has been argued for in the United States (Wacquant 2008b; Wilson 1987), particularly in the case of ghettos, the scale and spread of informal settlements suggests a very different dynamic<sup>6</sup> (Perlman 2004b: 191-192). So too, the presence of the informal economy – itself an integral part of the formal economy – suggests that concepts of deproletarianisation (Wacquant 2008b) have less traction than in the global north (Caldeira 2009: 849). Social, political, cultural and historical particularities are also argued to present distinct trajectories for the Latin American poor, one that has found articulation in recent years through diverse social and political struggles centred around democratisation and rights (Caldeira 2009: 851-852). But can the simple use of the term ‘marginality’ suggest a social and cultural distinctiveness to populations, an ‘otherness’ that fuels damaging policy approaches and public opinions – a production of the other that is capable of turning a myth of marginality

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<sup>6</sup> Contra Perlman, Javier Auyero (1997) argues that whilst it may be impossible to generalise from the empirical findings of Wacquant’s studies in the United States and France, his methodological approach and “epistemological warnings” can be usefully taken into research in the Latin American field.

into a reality (Perlman 1976; 2004a; 2006)? It is these suggestions of marginality that find purchase here, revealing not a fixed model of marginality but one that operates through a dialectical relationship with social weights of difference, worth and morality. One concept that does travel well, then, is that of stigmatisation, both of people and place. Within Colombia, territorial stigma – in the spatial fixing of a negative and denigrating reputation to place (Wacquant 2008b; Wacquant et al. 2014) – has resulted in policies of eviction and demolition. Often tied to claims of preserving or improving public health, this highlights the ways in which poor populations are subject to an enduring stigmatisation themselves, one threaded through historical discriminations within Colombian society.

### Nine Years Old

Yuli and I are at the foundation together, interviewing Mercedes and Alisson. They speak about their work in the foundation, their attempts to change a small piece of *something* in the neighbourhood for their vision of a better life. Later, the children arrive and I am overwhelmed by the seeming chaos of it all; the endless questions from children that I only half-understand, my uncertain place in that day and the work that is happening. It is almost with relief that we leave to catch the bus back, Yuli and I. We are accompanied by Mercedes and one of the boys from the foundation, William, who she brings along for the walk. I ask why and am told simply that he wants to come with her.

William is small, nine years old, dirty face and clothes. As we walk through the dust, past the trash, across the desolate park in burning sun, I am told that he wants to be a lawyer. He wants to help people. He wants to be a lawyer to help those members of his family who are in jail. I have already seen him helping earlier in the day, in the organisation, arranging items in the activity room and tidying the plates after children have finished eating. He holds Mercedes' hand as we walk and glances up as we talk. He looks happy to be holding her hand. He is nine years old. When we arrive at the bus stop, our bus is just pulling away. He runs after it, and bangs on the side. Other people on the street whistle for the driver to stop for us, but it is too late. The bus drives off, and we wait in the crowd a few minutes longer. While we wait, he stands close to Mercedes, and she drapes both arms around his shoulders in a loose embrace.

His face is dirty, his clothes are dirty, but he is happy. Maybe just to have the feeling of an embrace, to be with Mercedes and to be held by her? I was told by friends to expect a lot of things when I went to the foundation, when I entered the space of the neighbourhood; poverty, misery, danger, tough and difficult children. But nobody had mentioned happiness, even just for a moment. He smiles and lays one hand over hers. He is nine years old and he wants to be lawyer. For now, he lives on the other of the side of the park, next to a rubbish dump, on the wrong side of the city line, and the wrong side of the town. He is associated with violence, drugs, and poverty. We can't communicate without translation yet, but we can both look at the other and he watches me askance from between Mercedes' arms. Our bus arrives, and he shakes my hand and wishes me a good afternoon. As Yuli and I step onto the bus to return to Bogotá, William and Mercedes turn to go back across the park.

### Ollas, Stigma and the Poor in Colombia

Step back a little through the history of Bogotá, to 1948. The assassination of Gaitán and the Bogotazo. Rioting and looting engulf the centre, leaving widespread damage around Plaza Bolívar, which is bordered by the seats of Colombian government and justice. An adjacent neighbourhood, Santa Inés, is not spared, and its remaining middle and upper-class residents flee for the north of the city leaving the wreckage behind. Over the following years rural migrants, the displaced and the poor occupy the vacant buildings, while the construction of two large roads isolates the area. The neighbourhood becomes renowned for delinquency and disorder, the refuge of ex-combatants, migrants and other "strange people" (Tovar et al. 2017: 14). Informal economies in street markets and recycling emerge to support the burgeoning population, along with drugs and other vices. As the drug trade booms during the 1980s and 1990s violence and crime increase, with gangs controlling central areas that come to be known as El Cartucho. Horrified at the conditions and embarrassed by the proximity to the state's seats of power on Plaza Bolívar, in the early 2000s a 'renovation' plan is drawn up to demolish significant stretches of the buildings in the area. El Cartucho and Santa Inés are erased completely to be replaced with a public park, and thousands of inhabitants, including those living on the street, are displaced. Rather than conveniently vanish, however, many simply migrate a short distance away to an area that comes to be known as the Bronx (Till 2012: 3-4; Tovar et al. 2017: 14-21). The Bronx continues in much the same manner as El Cartucho, becoming synonymous with drug use and disorder amid claims that narcotics are

sold at open-air stalls while armed men enforce a loose order in the absence of police. Addiction, prostitution, violence and murder define the area in public imagination for more than 20 years until it is 'cleared' by the police and army through a forcible mass eviction in 2016 (Marcos 2016).

Since the clearance grains of truth have been turned into lurid and sensationalist stories of what occurred there, including people being fed to a resident crocodile, pits of dogs being used to dispose of bodies, satanic rituals and child prostitution; eclipsing the more ordinary stories of destitution that characterised the lives of thousands of inhabitants (Emblin 2016; Marcos 2016; 2017; Semana 2018). The sensationalism used to describe life within the Bronx is in stark contrast to the relative lack of discussion around violent police tactics used to evict inhabitants, and the subsequent persecution and public denigration of these people following eviction (see Ritterbusch 2018; Tovar et al. 2017). But the construction of a public imaginary around a space, the meaning of it as a place, and the subsequent impact of these reputations upon those living there, are central to understanding how stigma affects the urban poor in Colombia.

The interventions that led to the demolition of the Bronx and other areas in Bogota had little to do with addressing the underlying reasons for the crystallisation of poverty – and subsequently the informal economies of crime – that occurred in these neighbourhoods. Perceptions of disorder are powerful visual prompts for urban spaces, however, regardless of their relation to the actual conditions of social order (cf. Harcourt 1998; Sampson 2011: Ch.6). The confusion of visible instances of disorder with the sources of this leads to questionable policy responses to denigrated urban areas. Demolishing and rebuilding amounts to little more than a change to the aesthetics of place, with structural social inequalities proving more durable than the structures they come to mark (cf. Roy 2004; 2005: 150). Demolition is, however, a useful way for the state and capital to remove unwanted populations and appropriate high-value land from poor or vulnerable groups. In Bogotá, the eastern hills have seen repeated evictions and demolitions to secure land valuable for up-market housing developments and infrastructure (Everett 2001), in addition to spatial and aesthetic cleansing of the historic centre described above. The use of images of disorder, then, is a powerful tool for justifying particular forms of state action or inaction. More accurately, these may be described as urban imaginaries, combining not only visual cues of disorder but defining in the

public imagination what it means for a place to be an “*olla*”<sup>7</sup> [oy-ya; literally translates as pot/kettle]; the slums of Colombia, spaces of vice and disorder characterised by drugs and violence.

It is not just places but people that can acquire stigmatising labels, especially the urban poor. The terms deployed are further shells, ones that barely need to be disturbed in order to trace out their lineage. There are the instrumental echoes of social cleansing in the ‘disposable’ [*desechable*], or the reflection of engrained moral hierarchies in the ‘commoner’ [*populacho*]. Some take a racial turn, with ‘Indian’ [*indio*] connoting the ignorance, backwardness and crudeness attached to indigenous peoples (Rueda-García 2003: 12-13). These characterisations draw on long-standing social prejudices rooted in colonial constructions of the Indian and the “image of the wild man” (Taussig 1987: 467, 209-211). This time the jungles, mountains and lowlands all enter into conversation with the legacy of colonialism to produce moral geographies which are imposed on people and place alike. Associations with ignorance, barbarism, mysticism and sorcery permeated these visions of Colombia’s landscape, conditioning the treatment of indigenous peoples first by explorers, then rubber barons, the church, and the society that followed (Taussig 1987: *passim*, but especially Ch.4 and 18). The subsequent incorporation of the image of wildness and savagery into the social imaginaries of Colombian society created a juxtaposition between the order of civilised society in the towns and cities and that of the untamed backlands of the jungle and tropical zones (Taussig 1987: 75-78, 121, 133-134, 220, 227). These, too, leave an imprint in more recent imaginaries through the association of low-lying tropical zones – and their predominantly *mestizo*, Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations – with the disorderly or dissenting presence of coca cultivation, guerrillas and lawlessness (LeGrand et al. 2017: 261-262).

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<sup>7</sup> Other terms are also in use to refer to specific urban locales in Colombia, such as *barrios populares* to refer to lower-income neighbourhoods (Marzi 2018). Within the context of my own research, *olla* was specifically used around Bogotá and Soacha for neighbourhoods – or even sub-divisions of a neighbourhood – where crime is high. However, as Rueda-García (2003: 11-12) notes, there are multiple heterogeneous terms in use for poor neighbourhoods among state bureaucracy as well as in popular usage, which means that there are only vague distinctions between these terms, their technical import and colloquial meanings. Here, I refer to the neighbourhood as an informal settlement to highlight its origins and the continuing struggles residents experience associated with this. *Olla* is used to refer only to one loosely defined area of the neighbourhood, generally accepted as being physically located at the ‘lower’ end which bordered the wetlands, but with no distinct boundary regarding other residential streets.

These are not ethnically limited distinctions though, with spatial parallels elsewhere in the country. In the famously hard-working region of Antioquia, home of coffee farmers and entrepreneurial business, *la Violencia* was fuelled through a geographically racialised distinction between core cities and towns and peripheral, rural, zones. For civilised urbanites from the centre, the periphery existed as a realm of disorder populated by indolent peasants in need of control. Authorities and local elites came to associate these peripheral inhabitants with characteristics of promiscuity, communism, dissidence and religious deviation, branding them as criminal, other and a danger to the dominant social order (Roldán 2003: 36-39). As Mary Roldán (2003: 40-41) notes, the stigmatisation of peripheral inhabitants served as a justification for imposing a normative view of citizenship and identity on the region, where official discourse spoke of the Antioqueño 'race'; a fabricated image of whiteness in an overwhelmingly mixed-ethnicity population, deployed to circumscribe the acceptable and non-acceptable face of that society. More strategically, it was used to legitimate the violence visited on the peripheral regions, a violence directed at calculated goals of securing valuable land and resources.

Moral hierarchies were also marked through the significance of poverty and classification of citizenship (LeGrand 2013). In 1915-1930 the right to vote is tied to occupation, gender and education. A poor education or occupational level limits segments of the population to local elections, excluding them from the national level which is reserved for the elites only. Women, meanwhile, are excluded from voting altogether until 1954, technically; in reality, the first women's votes are not cast until 1957<sup>8</sup> (Restrepo-Sanín 2019). Citizen identity cards, meanwhile, provided detailed physical descriptions, not only of ethnic markers such as the colour and even texture of skin and hair, but also the manner of dress (respectable or ragged) and level of education (LeGrand 2013: 533). At the same time a moralising discourse connected to modern science – yet retaining religious roots – was gaining traction around issues of hygiene, education and youth, particularly delinquency (LeGrand 2013: 535-537). A focus on moral order led to the stigmatisation of those who were seen to disrupt this; at first drunks and vagrants, but over time including political opponents and social activists. LeGrand

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<sup>8</sup> Women's participation in Colombian politics is still relatively low, although change is evident in the election of Claudia López in October 2019, who is the first female mayor of Bogotá in the country's history. In addition, women voters are more active than their male counterparts, constituting a greater proportion of the electorate and exercising their right to vote in greater numbers (Restrepo-Sanín 2019: 108), even as their ability to do so is affected by violence against both female voters and politicians.

(2013: 542; see also van Isschot 2015) argues that this led to a confounding of social activism with criminality and the association of struggles for civil rights and liberties with communism and anarchic anti-state sentiment meant that the ruling classes viewed these as threatening. The repercussions of this can still be seen today in the targeting of demobilised guerrillas, leftists, environmental campaigners, and social activists.

The consequences are very real. Throughout fieldwork the inhabitants of Soacha were referred to as ‘uneducated,’ and suggested to be responsible for everything from petty crimes to the failure of the 2016 peace referendum. Armed actors – sometimes in concert with elements of the armed forces, state or local governance, and business owners – have undertaken ‘social cleansing,’ killing or disappearing unwanted persons from neighbourhoods – “petty thieves, prostitutes, homosexuals, and other undesirables<sup>9</sup>” (Bushnell 1993: 264; Safford and Palacios 2002: 361). Mercedes described to me social cleansing that took place in her own neighbourhood of Bogotá, where petty criminals and drug addicts were scoured out by organised gangs from another area. The bewildering contradiction contained in these actions is irrelevant – or perhaps those committing the murders are genuinely blind to it. The point is that those unlucky enough to be deemed outside the moral, social or political order are consequently viewed as the real criminals, intent on harming respectable others and destabilising society and, therefore, legitimate targets for violence. One outcome is that the association of criminality with poverty and the poor has led to their classification as “disposable waste” (LeGrand 2013: 544) demonstrated disturbingly through the false positives scandal.

#### *Recuerda los falsos positivos*

On a wall in Soacha is a simple line of graffiti that reads “*recuerda los falsos positivos*” [remember the false positives].

In 2008, photographs are displayed by the army of young guerrilla fighters recently killed in combat. In Soacha, a mother recognises her son, who disappeared while looking for work. Eventually, more than twenty young men from Soacha are discovered to be among the dead

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Other undesirables’ is used here by Bushnell, somewhat disingenuously, to encapsulate those perceived as political dissidents.

guerrillas, hundreds of miles away on the border with Venezuela (Semana 2010). The mothers organise and campaign for the truth, and piece by piece it emerges (Gordon 2017).

That the men were not guerrillas.

That they were recruited to work before being driven hundreds of miles across the country.

That they were murdered there, then dressed in guerrilla uniforms and presented as combat deaths.

That they were not the only ones, and that this is a systematic practice. That, over the years, anywhere between 3,000 – 10,000 murders have been committed by the armed forces and their paramilitary allies in this way (HRW 2015; Parkin Daniels 2018).

That this practice extends throughout almost the entire Colombian armed forces, and that they were murdered for nothing more than boosting a statistic, or so that someone could get an extra day's leave (HRW 2015).

That the men targeted were from populations considered marginal; the poor, the unemployed, the indigenous, the homeless, the disabled, drug addicts. The “deviant, undeserving, [and] undesirable” (Gordon 2017: 133).

Every day I travel to the foundation on the bus I pass by this line of graffiti, the black letters tacked starkly onto the red bricks. A directive to remember, not an appeal.

*“Recuerda los falsos positivos.”*

### A Reformed Citizen?

Cases such as the false positives are a significant indicator that the stigmatisation of the poor and marginal in Colombian society continues and is a phenomenon that stretches across rural and urban populations. As conflict and economic marginality drove *campesinos* into the cities and towns the new urban population found markers of inferiority followed them, becoming spatially attached to the neighbourhoods and settlements they called home. For some, socioeconomic and political exclusion remains a reality decades after arrival, and multiple displacement is threatened through possible eviction from the informal neighbourhoods in which they live. In the worst instances, these populations are subject to abuses from criminal groups and the authorities, exemplified through the false positives scandal. Yet, cases such as

this also drive political activism and civil campaigns through demands for justice and truth, even as those leading the campaign are subjected to further abuses such as threats and murder (Rocío 2013). Historical forms of violence and social and political persecution have driven the emergence of civic activism in Colombia, and disenfranchised *campesinos*, the displaced, and urban activists have been motivated by their experiences to establish, continue and expand struggles (van Isschot 2015). Within this, through successive national governments the state has occupied an ambiguous role, “simultaneously institutionalizing and undermining human rights” (van Isschot 2015: 204).

In 1991 the constitution of Colombia is amended, marking official gestures by the state toward an increased awareness and recognition of human rights, ethnic diversity and environmental protection, combined with strengthening judicial courts and a commitment to reconciliation and peace with the guerrillas (Safford and Palacios 2002: 337-338). Yet, even as this is being written the police and armed forces are collaborating with paramilitaries across the country to attack and degrade many of the same actors, concepts and processes (van Isschot 2015: 202-204). The language of human rights itself becomes contested amongst the government and local authorities, civil society, the armed forces, international NGOs, and even paramilitaries, as those inflicting abuses on others learn how to manipulate the terminology in use to change the significance of events; massacres become elongated into a series of homicides, bodies emerge only gradually, and displacement is inverted to become confinement (Tate 2007: 299-300). Despite best intentions, there is an appreciable difference “between the dreams of constitutionalism and real social practices” (Safford and Palacios 2002: 339).

The 1991 constitution also paves the way for increasing decentralisation of governance throughout Colombia. In rural areas, it is hoped that delinking local politics from centralised control will defuse conflict through the devolved election of officials and mayors, increasing local political representation (Ballvé 2012: 606-607). Within cities such as Bogotá and Medellín – at the time, witnessing skyrocketing insecurity and homicide rates – the state reduces the level of their involvement in local planning and policy, responsibility passing to mayoral administrations and private experts, who are tasked with improving areas relating to citizenship, public behaviour and public space (Berney 2010: 553). In Bogotá, this is evidenced

through the successive administrations of Antanas Mockus (1995-1997 and 2001-2003) and Enrique Peñalosa (1998-2000).

Again, there is a paternalistic, educational aspect to the interventions made, albeit a gentler one than that visited upon the rural poor. Both administrations focus on a right to the city through public space, aiming to reform citizen behaviour through appealing to collective sentiments of public belonging, pride and responsibility to the city, especially public spaces (Berney 2010: 541-555). This “pedagogical urbanism” (Berney 2011: 17) views the space of the city as one containing an educational potential for the citizenry, teaching them improved ways to live and act together in their city. It reshapes the landscape of the city to change the idea of it held by inhabitants; public transport is vastly improved – albeit not perfected – through the construction of the Transmilenio bus network, while central Bogotá is redeveloped with an emphasis on public space through boulevards and parks. Signs encourage residents to treat each other and these spaces with respect, and parks have wardens. Traffic behaviour is targeted as well through various projects, including, bizarrely, mimes at pedestrian crossing encouraging good road practices (Beckett and Godoy 2010: 287-288; Berney 2011: 20-24). But as these projects try to reshape the behaviour of citizens and foster a more inclusive and egalitarian city, the implementation of the ‘correct’ standards of behaviour and use for public space excludes some inhabitants (cf. Berney 2011; Galvis 2014; Galvis 2017).

Ultimately, the concept of fostering the correct kind of citizen behaviour entails the exclusion of those deemed not to meet that model, those “construed as threats to the city’s life – ill creatures to be extirpated from public spaces” (Galvis 2017: 92). The homeless are evicted from parks, while informal street vendors are banished from the streets and squares (Galvis 2014, 2017). The transformations in public space therefore do little to change the underlying socioeconomic and material conditions of life for the urban poor, particularly those in the most desperate circumstances<sup>10</sup>, and a policy focus on public space does little to guarantee equitable access to the city (Hellmer 2019: 84-93). Even attempts to include local citizens in the planning processes that will shape their neighbourhoods can be problematic, co-opting citizen groups into shaping public space after externally derived ideals of public

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<sup>10</sup> Subsequent left-leaning administrations attempt to address this but are hamstrung by political opposition and accusations of corruption and clientelism (see Gilbert 2015; Hellmer 2019: 87-93).

order, producing outcomes that can have little relevance or generate any sense of belonging for those involved (Hellmer 2019: 18). So, processes of decentralisation in urban governance have played a role in transforming the image of Colombian cities more than the material conditions of its citizens, and abstract appeals to model citizenship can be viewed as obscuring difference and disregarding the realities of life for many of the most vulnerable urban inhabitants (Galvis 2014).

Of course, there is no shortcut to realising the ideals of democratic citizenship and it is unsurprising that, even with the changes of the 1991 constitution, there continue to be significant obstacles to the social, economic and political conditions that would give citizenship a meaningful form for many of the most vulnerable groups within Colombian society (cf. Caldeira and Holston 1999). But the recognition afforded through the constitution has presented some groups with a framing within which to couch the terms of their struggles. Coca farmers – long persecuted throughout the conflict and caught between guerrilla, paramilitary and narco-traffickers – have recently campaigned for recognition of their unique social and cultural practices together with their status as victims of the conflict (Ramírez 2017: 352-356). The displaced and rural *campesinos*, also, have argued for their rights to a territory and spaces that recognise not only the struggles they are engaged in, but the socially distinct contours of their communities (Lederach 2017; López 2019), while the campaign for truth and justice by mothers in Soacha that followed the false positives scandal politicised gendered experiences and participation in public spaces (Rocío 2013). Austin Zeiderman (2013; 2016), meanwhile, argues that biopolitics have attained a central position in new understandings of citizenship for the poor of Bogotá through a focus on risk. Whereas historically the focus for government intervention within the lives of the poor was determined by class or need, recent formulations are based on assessments of environmental vulnerabilities and the designation of ‘lives at risk’. Interventions, such as resettlements and evictions, can consequently be conducted under the auspices of public health and safety through safeguarding lives from environmental risk, complicating the relationship between what can be construed as acts of state violence and the fulfilment of their obligations vis-à-vis citizens’ rights (Zeiderman 2016: 22, 80-82, 110-112).

The concept of rights and recognition put forward in the 1991 constitution has altered the language that surrounds multiple arenas in Colombian society, becoming enshrined not only

in the actions of the state but in the language of the poor and their social and political struggles. Yet, these struggles remain vulnerable to misalignments and appropriations that can obfuscate how and why inequalities come into being. As in the case of paramilitaries weaving a path through the technical definitions of atrocities, or the designation of risk and health to justify the movement of population, changing the terms does not necessarily change the substance. Similarly, attempts to implement the right to the city – understood as the right to public space – generated change that continued to exclude some populations precisely because it relied on limited normative understandings of good citizens and good behaviour.

This chapter has outlined how, in a nation where the landscape echoes through politics and society, the seeds of conflict were sown through the geographical distinctions and moral topographies that generated distinctions between highland and jungle, city and town, centre and periphery. The overwhelming impact of violence upon rural populations – indigenous, *campesino*, Afro-Colombian – has contributed to the urbanisation of Colombia's population through massive displacement, but also in the stigmas and moral prejudices that accompanied the dispossessed and the rural poor as they began new lives in the city. The informal settlements and slums that constitute their homes, however, are subject to the same inequalities in power as the rural peripheries they left behind, and both the urban and rural poor find themselves caught between the abuses justified through a moralised geography of the city and an evolving discourse of rights and citizenship. These are the shells of histories, significances and moralities that enfold the neighbourhood where this research was conducted, and the people who live there. They are the roots of the inequalities and obstacles that they face, and the source of their struggles for greater recognition and equality.

## Seeing, Sensing, Living

The roads are hard packed dirt, often with large rocks and pieces of masonry implanted into the surface. It is pitted, rutted and potholed, and on the one or two occasions someone is driving us in or out of the neighbourhood there is a noticeable difference as we leave the area, the car going from a slow, swaying crawl over the uneven surface to a speedy drive over smooth flat concrete. The road is a small difference, or not, but it makes for a marked and visible distinction between neighbourhoods. On foot, you see the smaller pieces also embedded there, the tops from beer bottles, broken glass and shards of plastic. If my shoes are thin, I can feel this unevenness on the soles of my feet as I walk. The many free-roaming dogs – some street dogs, others just pets left to their own devices for the day – defecate and urinate freely all over the streets, leaving frequent collections of excrement that get trailed down the street and dispersed through the earth; either by the tramping of feet or the wheels of the cars and *motos*. There is horse manure too, from the animals that are kept in the *olla* and used to haul the carts of *recicladores*. The occasional stretches of pavement seem to be built by the people living in the neighbourhood themselves. Today there was a group of men constructing a stretch outside of a building. This was a serious task, with string to measure levels, welded iron bars to form a stable base, and a wooden frame to hold the poured concrete. But it seems that all the pavement laid in this way, without the rest of the solid work to hold it together, ends up another part of the broken and jumbled mess that constitutes the streets in general.

The houses are, generally, all built of the same materials. The mainstay is red bricks, with grey cement between. Many seem unfinished, with half-built walls and additional floors stacking up round about the fairly limited living space. The windows are a decent size, large even, but frequently set under small overhangs which limits the light that can penetrate inside the edifice. The glass is frequently – almost always on the ground and first floors – covered with a metal security grille to prevent entry. Top floor walls or unfinished sections commonly have broken glass set into concrete to deter intruders. This ranges from the ubiquitous broken brown bottles of Poker beer (whose bottle tops, with the distinctive card symbols of diamond, club, heart and spade, are tramped into the earth streets), to shards of glass, to full-blown thickets of wicked looking slices of glass and mirror a good foot or more high. Doors are metal, with several locks including bolts, deadlocks and tumbler locks. If they have any glass, it is

again covered with a metal grille. Roofs tend to be corrugated metal, of random sheet size, weighted down with lumps of rock and bricks, or tied down.

The noise is constant; the rumble of trucks and buses outside, horns blaring, street vendors hawking their wares, dogs barking and music, always playing, all the time. It seems as if everyone is in competition with one another; radios, car stereos, sound systems in houses. Sometimes so loud that the ground reverberates to the bass.

When it is dry, the street is hard but gusts of wind blow clouds of dust down the street. We clean the dining room in the foundation in the morning, but this dust will coat everything within a day, driven up by passing traffic of delivery vans or buses heading down to the depot. It finds a way through the cracks in the uneven masonry of the houses, and the window fittings, and the gaps around the doors, covering surfaces in the same fine powder of dirt.

The rain today turns the street into a river. It begins with the dust rising in puffs as the drops fall, before it turns to mud, followed by water collecting in the potholes and indents in the uneven road surface. The small drains set into the pavement turn into whirlpools, until they begin to collect all the rubbish that comes floating down in the water, clogging the drains and causing the water to rise higher. People shelter under the building overhangs, joined by street dogs who gather in miserable huddles trying to escape the water. Doors open up and down the street as people begin trying to sweep the water out of homes. At the foundation, we form a constant team working at the door trying to clear the rubbish from the drain cover outside and keep it unblocked. The street is now completely covered in water, with no ground surface visible. Water creeps in under the door fitting, and the roof leaks freely, sending a stream of water down the central courtyard to the floor outside the kitchen. On the opposite side of the street an old woman – obviously well versed in this technique – uses a heavy metal pole to lever up a chunk of concrete in front of her door, allowing the water to flow into the gap. I wonder if it is a sewer. Later she goes to clear a drain with her hands, scooping the rubbish out. As she does this, she unwittingly puts her hand on a stone that is covered with faeces. The water is a filthy brown colour, full of plastic, cigarette butts, dog shit, condoms, beer bottle tops and whatever else has been gathering in the streets. Thunder cracks in explosions directly overhead, as people shutter up the shops and try to keep the water out. Unbelievably, in the middle of all this, a girl turns up at the foundation with money to pay for her meal that day.



7 – The street outside the foundation during a rainstorm. Photograph by the author.

## Chapter Two: Spatial Moralities and the Everyday

“Here everyday life is compared to fertile soil. A landscape without flowers or magnificent woods may be depressing for the passer-by; but flowers and trees should not make us forget the earth beneath, which has a secret life and a richness of its own.” (Lefebvre 2014: 109)

The points of connection between the space of the neighbourhood, its significance as a place, and the everyday lives of the residents could sometimes only be tangentially observed. In interviews and conversations, residents rarely stated that this or that place was important to them. There is far too much everyday living going on, too much happening immediately that demands attention. The daily exhaustions of poverty, displacement, stigma and fear. The ways these brush up against moments of everyday life that reaffirm what it is to be a human, relating to others: the love of family, seeing friends, going to work, a joke shared here or there. The shape of the neighbourhood and life within it can only be revealed through movement between these; in trying to understand how fear and attachment are tied into the same places, or how pride and shame can both be embedded within a home in displacement. It is also in trying to understand how the spaces that inhabitants use are bound into these relations. In the way that around 11.30am each weekday the door of the foundation, otherwise unremarkable, pulls in a steady stream of children and adults from the streets outside. The palpable change in the dining room as it fills with bustle, noise, smells, play. The adolescent love triangle that develops in that room, where Sebastián, losing out to his more dashing rival, simply states that it doesn't matter. He will still be here, later, and he can wait. The way that he can speak about this to Alisson here, and the way that she doesn't mock – or perhaps just a little – and he is fine with that. The friends that meet there, on their way to school. The adults that drop in for a chat, or to collect meals for home. The way that the space empties after lunch to be replaced with a more organised chaos later in the afternoon, of the shuffling rows of children in the dance classes and homework lessons which seem to consist of endless tugs on your sleeve and question after question. It is in the waiting and the disappointments of Mercedes for others to help; with the children, with their work, with everything outside of the foundation in the challenges of life after displacement. But the neighbourhood is also the arguments between neighbours, the emptying of the streets in the evenings and the bodies that sometimes appear in the *humedal*, or the stories of bodies

hidden in rubbish and houses of the *olla*. It is the children talking about these things over lunch, or a boy walking the streets for hours just to escape what happens at home. It is the stigma that adheres to residents and the streets they live in, and the material conditions of these. It is in standing on the paved smoothness of Plaza Bolívar in central Bogotá, surrounded by the instantiations of state and church power, and reflecting on what it is like to pick your way through an alley in the *olla*, through the mud and trash.

This chapter outlines the theoretical supports that can help to make sense of these observations, through focusing on the work of Henri Lefebvre (1991; 1996; 2014) on social space, the city and the everyday. The chapter begins by using Lefebvre's work to trace the ways in which the space of the neighbourhood can be understood as an outcome of the dialectical back-and-forth that the creation of informal urban space involves. This leads to a discussion of how the formation of meaning in social space can be conceptualised, relating Sennett's (1989) concept of moral communities to place-making and dialogical relations between the self and others (Taylor 1989; 1991). The negotiation of meaning in the city, however, has to be balanced through considering the operation of power and inequalities in the boundaries formed through moral geographies (Cresswell 2005) and territorial stigma (Wacquant et al. 2014). The chapter concludes by considering how these meanings and the moral topographies of the city can be contested through the struggles that occur through inhabitants' everyday lives (Lefebvre 2014).

### Prefacing Lefebvre

Lefebvre's work (1991; 1996; 2014) has found a foothold in urban studies and geography because of the fact that his thinking can help to reveal the manner in which society – its social, political, economic, historical and cultural fields – is intimately tied to everyday life in the production of space, particularly the urban<sup>11</sup>. While Lefebvre has been charged with an epistemological standpoint that is distinctly Eurocentric and colonialist, in his focus on the struggles of the everyday and the dissident to capitalism and state power he shares a concern with epistemologies of the south (Santos 2014; 2018) which argue for valuing other ways of being and knowing the social world. Similarly, Lefebvre's calls to break the dominance of the

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<sup>11</sup> This section has benefitted from the excellent analyses offered on Lefebvre by Rob Shields (1999) and Chris Butler's (2012) discussion of *The Production of Space* and the right to the city. Mark Purcell's (2003; 2014) detailed exploration and theorisation of the right to the city was also invaluable.

claims of discipline and science to 'true' knowledge and expertise find resonance with these calls for a de-colonisation of knowledge (Escobar 2016; Santos 2014; 2018), as does his belief in the body's experience and relations with the world as the root of this.

This is not to deny that Lefebvre's language and imagery can rely on relations of superiority and inferiority that suggest colonialist mindsets (Smith 2018: 47-48). Lefebvre's arguments are also rooted in, largely, European examples and history, making little reference to the global south and consistently drawing upon a fairly anonymous and non-specific everyman as the protagonist (gender is less ambiguous). But in his calls to resist simplistic dualisms and achieve understanding through a dialectical analysis of the lived experience of the social, of the everyday conditions and happenings of life, Lefebvre draws attention to other ways of knowing that are embodied through everyday struggles. Further, his description of the ways in which capitalism and modernisation have entered into everyday life – although Eurocentric – speaks to a shared concern with the colonisation and domination of other ways of being, even if that relies on a somewhat idealised rural past. So, although the foundations of his thinking may be located in European traditions and history and are far from perfect in the imagery and symbolisms used, his work is focused upon fundamental struggles that remain relevant for understanding how life is lived within the neighbourhood.

With an eclectic writing style and sometimes hard to follow argumentation, however, Lefebvre can be difficult to work with. Rather than a fixed theoretical framework to rely upon, drawing from his work requires "more a sensibility, rather than a closed system...due to the fluidity, dynamic and openness of his thought" (Kofman and Lebas 1996: 8). Lefebvre is less concerned with articulating set theories than he is with identifying different elements of the social and pursuing a dialectical analysis of these. Key to understanding his thought, therefore, is to foreground that it is the dialectical movement between elements which interests him, rather than the establishment of fixed categories, although this can lead to seemingly contradictory moments in his work (discussed later regarding social space). Lefebvre argues that while we may study and analyse the urban and life that occurs through it, because of its processual nature no analysis is ever closed or complete and as life continues, so can analysis: "there is always an opening" (Kofman and Lebas 1996: 53). In Lefebvre's view space, particularly urban space, is always changing.

## Social Space and the City

Part of the challenge in understanding the neighbourhood is in relating the different forms of this that are encountered or re-counted. When I arrived in Colombia it was described to me by friends as a challenging place, one of poverty and social needs. Some strangers, discovering I would be working in Soacha, described the entire city as a dangerous place, one of uneducated inhabitants responsible for their own problems. There is the confusion that arises from seeing it on a map, seeing it written into that representation of the city, but then being told by UN staff that it is not legal, not really. There is the continual back-and-forth of these claims to legality or illegality. There is the experience of being in the space itself, of sensing it as I walk down the street, of being in the foundation with its noise, smells and flavours. Most of all, there are the people I speak to: Mercedes, Alisson and the kids, their parents and families, all infinitely more complex than any other characterisation of the place and its people, yet sometimes overlapping these. Speaking about the neighbourhood is about encapsulating this overlap and capturing how where they live is an important part of who they are. It is about seeing this space as a social one, relational, built through the actions of residents over time yet still shaped by the opinions of others who have never been there; part lived reality, part urban imaginary.

It is these tensions between space as physical, social and lived that the work of Lefebvre can help to address. Lefebvre (1991: 404, emphasis original) argues that human society is inherently spatial, and that social relations “have no real existence save in and through space. *Their underpinning is spatial.*” For Lefebvre (1991: 70), society is maintained through the production of particular spaces which allow it to reproduce the relations needed to support that social order, and the inscription of social meaning into spaces. Social relations consequently become concrete through space, in the production of signs, symbols, and morphologies, whether that be a monument, building or something vast such as a city (Lefebvre 1991: 416-417). But as these inscriptions in space appear, as they become ‘real,’ they in turn influence the relations that occur and the production of subsequent spaces; social change is spatial, in other words, and constantly unfolding (Lefebvre 1991: 46-67).

Lefebvre therefore sees space as the outcome of relations between human thought and action (cf. Stanek 2008), the product of relations that exist between natural space and the strategies and actions of individuals and groups, knowledge and ideology, particularly

capitalism as the dominant form of political and economic organisation (Lefebvre 1991: 68-85). Drawing on Marx's argument that the relations of production are inherent – but concealed – within products, Lefebvre (1991: 32-33, 70-85) contends that social space functions in a similar way through encompassing all social relationships, relations of property, production and products; even our relationship with nature and the earth. But these elements are not all immediately apparent. We don't, generally, look at a street and see how all the constituent parts that make this (buildings, people, businesses, authority and power) came to settle in this configuration, nor how these are continually changing. A visitor to Bogotá, gazing on the blank emptiness of the large public park that replaced the Santa Inés neighbourhood in the centre of the city, will see little of the ways that declining property values, informal economies, the dispossession of rural landowners and violent evictions combined to create this space. Despite this it can seem 'readable.' Lefebvre (1991: 49-53) refers to this as abstract space, which appears as one thing but hides many more aspects. The purpose of analysing social space – using it as a “tool for the analysis of society” (Lefebvre 1991: 34) – is to make apparent the social relations that are contained and constituted in abstracted spaces. To help articulate this, Lefebvre (1991: 11-14) proposes a “unitary theory” to account for what he identifies as a tripartite field of spaces where each “involves, underpins and presupposes the other.” Three concepts are introduced to explain different “moments” (Lefebvre 1991: 33, 38-40) of social space.

1 - Perceived space, apprehended through spatial practice; the actions of movement, physicality etc. Space within the everyday routine, whether of individuals or groups, and experienced through the body and its senses.

2 - Conceived or conceptualised space, closely related to representations of space; plans, maps and drawings, the attempt to shape space according to one particular vision. This is most closely connected with specialised disciplines and areas of expertise, for example architecture or urban planning. This is often the space of violence – symbolic or actual – and signs.

3 - Lived space, which is representational space; where individual perceptions interact with physical and conceptual space to create symbols and symbolic meaning. This is more closely connected to the imagination through the re-appropriation of conceived space. Although identified with the private realm in opposition to the dominated public (i.e. the interior of a

domestic house against managed public space) it can also include inventive re-appropriation of public space by individuals or collectives and is therefore associated with creative production of space (Lefebvre 1991: 164-168).

The three moments of space above – perceived, conceived and lived – are the foundation of social space, which refers more holistically to the outcomes that appear as a result of the dialectical tensions that exist among them<sup>12</sup>. Social space is therefore a term that can be more useful to think through as a plural; that social spaces are inherently relational and processual<sup>13</sup>, always changing and influencing each other across the three aspects of perceived, conceived and lived. This also helps to maintain focus on a key element of Lefebvre’s thought in the importance of a dialectical approach to analysing spaces, their production and their outcomes; in David Harvey’s (2019b: 126, see also 130-146) words to “constantly think through the interplay” between different elements. Considering the tensions between differing interpretations of space has particular relevance when analysing how certain places within the neighbourhood – the *olla* and the *humedal* – attain powerful symbolic functions that come to influence relations between residents and external others, as well as internally among inhabitants. But the meeting of space with the user is of course not just through mental fields of imagination and symbolism. Space is first and foremost experienced by the body, and this embodied knowledge constantly comes up against these conceived spaces and also the state, which “promotes and imposes itself as the stable centre – definitively – of (national) societies and spaces” (Lefebvre 1991: 23, 40, 170-180).

Put simply, the city is where everyday life – its spaces and rhythms – encounters the political and economic projects of capital and the state. So, while the urban fabric can be

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<sup>12</sup> The use of this tripartite division is a potential pitfall through the temptation to divide social space and categorise it through examples of each of the three concepts. This has attraction for the focus it could bring to research; categorisation of space allows clarity, creating a more precise theoretical context. However, this would simultaneously reduce social space to the status of an object, to a “thing among other things” and Lefebvre (1991: 73, 25) explicitly states that his aim is *not* to develop a critical theory of space. To do so would continue to divide space and ignore that although there are indeed different elements to space, and different social spaces, none of these exist in isolation from the other (Lefebvre 1991: 40, 73-87).

<sup>13</sup> It is useful to draw on some insights regarding issues of translation of Lefebvre’s work from French to English, particularly in the meaning and significances of *l’espace* as used by Lefebvre. Rob Shields (1999: 154-155) notes that Lefebvre’s “metaphoric *l’espace* might be better understood as the *spatialisation* of social order” arguing that this more accurately denotes the “processual nature of *l’espace*” as “always undergoing change from within through the actions and innovations of social agents.” In other words, keeping the ongoing-ness of social space in mind helps to clarify that space is not something produced through action that then remains concretely the same; it instead continually changes.

planned in attempts at philanthropy, coherence or improvement by the state or for the accumulation of profit, this planning inevitably encounters the unpredictable and ungovernable in the use and appropriation of urban space by users (Lefebvre 1996: 82-85). Particularly within informal spaces such as the neighbourhood, where regulation by municipal authorities is low, there is an element of organic, unplanned growth that evades traditional ideas of a pre-conceived urban space. This is a place where people collaborate to build and develop, working with neighbours, friends and whoever else they can convince to join them. The unpredictability of urban space is not limited to the physical and is part of a greater gamut of social encounters that are possible within the urban environment. The help that residents of the neighbourhood offer each other, whether individual acts or longer practices of care such as that in the foundation are also organic, spontaneously emerging from everyday lives and practices. Lefebvre (1996: 131) describes these moments of social encounter and convergence as the “ensemble of differences.” These are encounters conducted primarily by those who live within and inhabit the space of the city, and which take place – for the most part – outside of the goals and strategies of commerce or profit (Lefebvre 1996: 147). This is characterised by Lefebvre (1996: 66-68) as the conflict between the urban as planned product and the creative work (or *oeuvre*) of those living there.

The production of space as an outcome, then, can be seen as the ways in which social relations are formed through the collision of different strategies and spatial practices among actors from the state to individual level, building from previous forms of space largely occurring through the city. It follows that attempting to understand space visually allows only a partial ‘reading’ as it relies primarily on the symbolic representations – signs, codes and other markings – that are often part of power struggles over space, obscuring social relations rather than revealing them (Lefebvre 1991: 141-142, see also 312-318, 389-391). An official map of the neighbourhood may detail a technocratic or administrative interpretation, but this will be very different from that of an inhabitant who not only lives there but may have been part of physically building the streets. It is also seen through how municipal boundaries are drawn between Soacha and Bogotá, creating an administrative split which is distinctly different from the interwoven relationships and livelihoods traversing this. Yet it can still have relevance, for example that a *recicladora* [recycler] from Soacha can be (officially) excluded from collecting in Bogotá because they live twenty metres too far south. In this way, maps,

plans and technical knowledges can be a means of or attempt at domination through privileging official discourses over the lived experiences and significances of residents. Lefebvre (1996: 143) notes:

“The city and the *urban* cannot be recomposed from the signs of the city, the *semantemes* of the *urban*, although the city is a signifying whole. The city is not only a language, but also a practice. Nobody therefore, and we have no fear to repeat it, is entitled to pronounce or announce this synthesis. No more is the sociologist or community workers than the architect, the economist, the demographer, the linguist or semiologist. Nobody has the power or the right.”

The signs and symbols of space are therefore one reading, but often a misleading one that is derived from relations of power and domination. Space is lived and qualified by the body above all and its processual nature becomes apparent in its genesis from the body, in the continual making, perception and remaking of this (Lefebvre 1991: 174). The attempt by the state or capital to impose rhythms and orders on space cannot govern this lived engagement with space, and so simply “makes permanent transgression inevitable” (Lefebvre 1991: 23). The city as an accumulation of power and decision making, in the control and ordering of space (Lefebvre 1996: 73), therefore collides with the urban; the social space of its inhabitants and the ways in which they use it.

As one plan is implemented and fulfilled, then, another will be subverted or appropriated by inhabitants in a different way, refashioned through their spatial practices and lived experiences; the representational spaces of creativity, the imagination and appropriation. In Bogotá, homeless people refashion the support struts of motorways into fireplaces, a bed, a toilet. Protestors block roads and occupy the Transmilenio stations, bringing transport to a halt. Families displaced to the city occupy tracts of peripheral land or half-constructed apartment complexes. There are also more mundane movements, in the opening of a fence to create a shortcut through the *humedal* or laying a makeshift bridge over a canal. The intended use of urban space is always confronted with unforeseen and imaginative ways of reimagining this by the people who inhabit it. This is the city as an *oeuvre*; as a work of art or creative product that is the outcome of a relational event between different actors and objects within society, ranging from the individual to the largest and most abstract institutions of power and ideology (Lefebvre 1996: 100-103). The *oeuvre* is the ways in which urban inhabitants appropriate and re-shape the urban via the everyday, with potentially profound effects through the innovation and creation of space (Lefebvre 1996: 117, 147-148, 171-173).

These are not aesthetic interventions which “prettify urban space with works of art” but “*praxis* and *poiesis* on a social scale: the art of living in the city as work of art” (Lefebvre 1996: 173). For good or bad, Lefebvre’s vision of the potential contained in the city as work of art is verging on utopian, where inhabitants can re-fashion urban space and enact change (cf. Nadal-Melsió 2008). But it also captures the ways in which knowledges about space, such as the stigmatised image of a slum, can obscure what it is like to simply live within it, even if it is marked by inequalities. It further suggests that the urban is a project of control which is never quite realised, and that the rhythmic actions of everyday living form a spatial practice capable of altering the city, even if only in small ways.

### The Right to the City as Struggle

Lefebvre (1996: 158, 173-179) argues that those living within the city should have the right and ability to manage and change urban space for their own needs, divorced from those of capital or the state; what he refers to as the right to the city<sup>14</sup>. This is about the right to transform the city and how urban inhabitants are governed, and by who. Mark Purcell (2003: 577) argues that this makes the right to the city fundamentally about appropriation and participation whereby the city is claimed and shaped by and for the daily usage of those living there. Purcell (2003: 578) interprets participation expansively as involvement at every level of urban reform, but also as increased interactions among urban inhabitants themselves as they assume a collective responsibility for managing the space of the city itself through a “living struggle” (Purcell 2014: 150). As David Harvey (2019a: xii-xiii) notes, the right to the city has entered into common usage and debate over urban planning and policy – especially with regards to issues of social justice and equality – but this often has little to do with the actual theoretical content of Lefebvre’s argument itself. It is instead reflective of how Lefebvre grasped that social and political struggles within the city would arise from the demands of inhabitants themselves. In some ways, the right to the city is simply an available

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<sup>14</sup> Lefebvre’s (1996) argument for the ‘right to the city’ has entered everyday usage in multiple fields such as academia, urban planning and policy and has also been enthusiastically adopted by social activists, campaigners, NGOs, architects, governments and the United Nations, sometimes with little or no reference to the content of Lefebvre’s work itself (see Butler 2012: 146-148; Earle 2017: 8-9; Mayer 2009; UN-Habitat 2017). The right to the city has also been instated in legislation, notably in Latin American countries where efforts have been underway for some years. In Brazil and Ecuador, it has been recognised through constitutional amendments, whilst in Mexico and Colombia it is used more specifically as an element of urban planning and policy to prioritise social land use and housing over private interests (UN-Habitat 2017: 68-71).

banner under which to gather a hugely diverse range of struggles that arise within specific yet generalisable conditions; specific in the parameters of each individual struggle, yet general in their relevance to urban inhabitants everywhere.

Harvey (2019a: xv) argues that tendencies to formulate the right to the city as another right among rights – such as that of housing or education – runs the risk of turning this into a struggle over who gets to define this right and “fill it with meaning.” Given that most rights within the city have a spatial focus, the danger is that those attempting to claim them will struggle to gain traction and significance if they cannot be articulated in space (Harvey 2019b: 147-148, see also Mitchell 2003). The limited resources of most urban inhabitants in comparison to the state or powerful corporate interests creates a tenuous guarantee that formulating the right to the city along these lines will be durable.

The thrust of Harvey’s (2019a: xiii-xviii) argument is that the city contains enough diversity to envision different ways of living, the task is simply to find a way of asserting these. It relies less on appealing to specific rights and entitlements through judicial channels than it does in spontaneous contestation and struggle, often in an unplanned manner through “what people do, feel, sense, and come to articulate as they seek meaning in their daily lives” (Harvey 2019a: xvii). These require a spatial grounding and the simplest way to achieve this is in the presence of bodies in the streets through protests and popular movements, an articulation that is very close to Lefebvre’s own, where the production of space proceeds first from the body. For Lefebvre (1991: 170-176), as we saw, the body serves as a fundamental reference point and measure through which we know the world around us. It navigates the physical and determines understandings of space through action, and through “gestures, traces, [and] marks” comes to qualify space itself (Lefebvre 1991: 174). In this way, the body represents the departure point for human activity, and is where we encounter our daily rhythms of navigating society; of undertaking a “spatial practice” (Lefebvre 1991: 38) whereby we interpret, react to, and shape the world, and where our thoughts and actions encounter those of others around us. Historically, these human actions ascribed spaces from nature with particular significance, transforming their meaning and purpose, whilst today the spaces of our society continue to be produced in the same manner (Lefebvre 1991: 48-53).

Lefebvre’s spatial practice implies a slightly different experience to urban space than the one mobilised by Harvey above. For, while there was political action and sentiment within the

neighbourhood, this rarely occurred through protests or organised events. The spatial practice of the residents I spoke to within Soacha and Bogotá is defined through their relations with neighbours or immediate others as much as it is with the state and capital. These are practices which occur through an everyday cadence rather than collective political events. It was in the shared walks at night for security and the watching of a neighbour's house while they were gone. Or in the generalised mayhem of a day in the foundation, with all the tactile sensations of touch and closeness. The political was a quieter occurrence in the repetitive actions of Mercedes and Alisson to *make* some kind of change; to produce it, in Lefebvre's terms. His theory illuminates the intersecting interests and visions that compete to define the meanings of space and reminds us of the importance in drawing out the dialectical relationships between different elements rather than an oppositional binary. He also points us towards the importance of grasping how the social is spatial, of understanding the city in terms of the inhabitants who live through this space, rather than as something that we can abstractly conceive as a whole; the idea of Bogotá or Soacha as somehow coherent and understandable through the language of mayors and urban planning. But the significance of the neighbourhood is something more grounded than the theory of Lefebvre alone will allow, for while his theory tells us about the ways in which space comes to be it is more opaque about how we can discern meaning and come to *know* space (Pierce and Martin 2015: 1285). The following sections will build on this observation to establish links between processes of place-making and the significances that come to inhere within places, and the place that moral understandings – of people and place – holds in establishing dialogical relations between self and other.

### La nona

"After I came here my life has been changed. For me it has been a blessing..."

"Ask whoever you want, everyone knows me around here. I've never even had a quarrel with a neighbour, that they would say "Uyy, this woman...we have a disagreement."

"Not at all. Not at all, not at all, not at all."

"I have been a good person with everyone and additionally in this time I started to look after kids, so that the mothers can work."

“This makes me like a mother hen with chicks.”

“Already today, the first ones that I brought up, they already have children, I’m already a great-grandmother. Yes, because to me...that’s how it was...”

“Rare is the person that can name my name, since to the whole world it’s *nona* [nanna]. Instead of calling me *abuelita* [granny], they call me *nona*. Where we lived [before, in the country] everyone called the grandmother *nona*.”

“And it stayed like that for me, everyone in the street, “What’s my *nona* doing? What’s my *nona* doing?”

“I give thanks to God and the blessed father that they gifted me this house.”

### Space, Place and Materiality

While one person can look at the informal settlements of Soacha and see slums, another living there can see their home, their memories, a history inscribed through space. For Carmen – *la nona* – it feels as if she is the grandmother of the whole street, matriarch of an extended family. Yet, while those living within a space may know this best, history and half-truths are equally influential in determining how others outside of a place know it. In the absence of embodied knowledge, a mediated understanding of space and place is found. Within the neighbourhood, specific places such as the *olla* and the *humedal* are blends of the stories that reside there and an everyday spatial practice, and as a researcher, it can be difficult to align these alternate meanings. Geographers Joseph Pierce and Deborah Martin (2015) have noted that whilst the theory of Lefebvre is invaluable for examining the nature of space and how it comes into being, it has shortcomings for apprehending this through fieldwork; where the practical task of researching social space is only made more difficult by Lefebvre’s insistence on treating the three moments of social space as simultaneously occurring within a unitary whole. Pierce and Martin instead propose that geographers’ work on relational places can overcome the gap between the ontology of Lefebvre and the task of epistemology within research. Relational places are theorised as “roughly congruent place bundles or components: necessary fragments that cohere into (temporary, always incomplete but also relatively stable) places” (Pierce and Martin: 1294). In practical terms this means that there are multiple threads to a place that are understood through diverse and distinct means. The means of

researching bedrock and soil formation are necessarily different from those of social relations, for instance:

“This hybrid ontological irreducibility has implications for the project of knowing places: they cannot be fully known through any one epistemological approach, and indeed [...] cannot be known completely at all, but always partially, always incompletely [...] They are simply different kinds of real thing(s).” (Pierce and Martin 2015: 1289)

Similarly, Tim Cresswell (2015: 53) argues that place is a “unique assemblage,” a “gathering of things, memories, stories, and practices.” Place is not just a way of thinking about named locations on a map, of establishing where these are in relation to each other, but in understanding the world that people inhabit and how this is “meaningful” (Cresswell 2015: 12) for those who live there. Yet, place is also interpreted in multiple ways, appearing not as one concrete reality but the different aspects that individuals have decided to focus on and consider important (Cresswell 2015: 18). Put simply, place means different things to different people. As Cresswell (2015: 64-69) argues, however, place is not static, a fixed something in these histories; it is created, re-inscribed and altered through the routines and actions of those living there (echoing Levebre’s concept of social space as not just historical but relational, actioned and imagined). Particularly with places such as informal settlements, where construction and alteration are ongoing processes, there is an aspect of place as something that is always becoming and changing<sup>15</sup> (Kellett 2002; Massey 2006). Even then, we cannot discount how the past can be materially present through the physicality of landscape (Massey 2006), and how this constitutes one of the most foundational ways in which people experience place.

Laura Ogden’s (2011) fascinating exploration of the Everglades region of Florida, *Swamplife*, documents how the non-human – in the flora and fauna of the glades – and the human interact to create a landscape of interwoven history, myth and cultural practices. Ogden’s (2011: 74-89) account draws attention to the importance of mobility and how this shapes the experience of space. Focusing particularly on the alligator hunting practices of gladesmen, she speaks eloquently of the ways in which the hunters and alligators altered the

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<sup>15</sup> For considerations of the limitations of place-making as a theoretical concept in Colombia – and Latin America more generally – see Beza and Hernández-García (2018). Fundamentally, as an Anglo-Western concept it is argued to have a limited applicability to a different social and cultural environment. However, for others who do work with place in Latin America see Kellett (2002) and Lombard (2014).

landscape through their mutually affective actions, while the glades themselves wrought slower, more creeping changes over time; the “countermove” of a “landscape that is in constant motion” (Ogden 2011: 89). Interspersed throughout are stories of the near-legendary local Ashley gang, who became synonymous with the glades landscape through their real and exaggerated exploits; exploits which were tightly bound to the shape and nature of space they occurred within. Waterways were escape routes, hidden islands hideouts. Rumours persist of buried treasure, lost in the mangroves. In ‘mapping’ the landscape of the glades like this, Ogden (2011: 28-31) argues that landscapes are “the products of collective desires” and “asymmetrical relations” that result in “assemblages constituted by humans and nonhumans, material and semiotic processes, histories both real and partially remembered.” The landscape of the glades – in swamps, mangrove thickets and mobile waterways – influences how humans and animals live, and these practices in turn influence how the glades are thought of and imagined. Meaning is derived from the almost mythologised actions of the Ashley gang as much as from the literal reshaping of waterways and vegetation.

There is a close overlap, then, between how we consider the roots of social space and how we position the meaning of place for inhabitants, and the linked co-constitutive relations described by Cresswell and Ogden are helpful for theorising this. Importantly, these co-constitutive relations are not confined to inhabitants alone but formed dialectically from dialogues established with others, both near and far, where the dubious reputation held by the neighbourhood situates it within a moral geography of the city. This reputation was deeply felt by the residents I spoke to as stigmatising and denigrating of not just their homes but their own characters. Similar to David Harvey’s arguments above, Richard Sennett (1989) argues that the meaning we attach to public space is rooted within the political, in the struggles, defeats and victories that inhabitants have gone through. It is that “something important” (Sennett 1989: 82) has happened which attaches a sense of belonging to space and subsequently cities are shaped by the lived experiences of those inhabiting them – a very Lefebvrian idea. Unlike Harvey, however, Sennett takes his argument a little closer to how people as individuals negotiate meaning amongst themselves, not just through collective struggles. That people know they are in the centre of a place does not depend on history-defining moments alone, but smaller ones as well; being able to interact with another in public, and the talk and negotiations that come with this. If meaning is imparted through the

political, however, the significance of a space will vary for individuals; one person's defeat will be another's victory. Sennett (1989: 83) therefore proposes that the city cannot be a space where "nothing painful ever happens" and must instead "confront the fact of difference" through achieving a sense of difference with equality. Confronting the fact of difference is, of course, easier said than done. Simply acknowledging that there are differences of meaning to urban space, never mind needs and resources, does little to establish equality. Sennett (2004) argues that respect must play a central role in overcoming inequalities within society through the recognition of difference with autonomy.

### Don Florencio

I step out of the kitchen one morning as I hear the first children arrive, chairs scraping and voices yelling, and am surprised to find an elderly gentleman sitting at one of the tables.

He is rake thin, face leathered and deeply scored with lines, wearing a plain blue denim shirt and baseball cap pulled down deep over his forehead.

He sits, still, as if trying to maintain a dignified separation from the squabbling children shifting and squirming around him. Both hands rest on a walking stick cradled between his legs.

He sees me come out of the kitchen and his eyes widen – a response to a *gringo* that I am gradually getting used to. Although I am on the other side of the room, he begins to talk to me and I move closer to hear better. I find it difficult to follow what he is saying, the noise in the foundation a first obstacle, his missing teeth another; where am I from, why am I here? As I answer the best I can, he fastens one cool, thin hand onto mine, until Alisson brings out a plate of food for him. He thanks her, and commences to eat, interspersing a few more questions. After a few minutes I go back to help in the kitchen, and when I come back out, he is preparing to leave, adjusting his hat and cane at the door. He bids a farewell to Alisson and myself, then steps carefully over the lip of the metal door frame and into the street.

I ask Alisson who he is and she tells me that he is Don Florencio, an elderly man who lives in the neighbourhood and has some struggles with money. I see him two or three times more at the foundation, always the same hat, the same cane, the same pose in his seat at the corner of the bench next to the door. Never more than a polite greeting or two extended

after that first conversation, to myself or anyone else in the foundation. Always still amongst the children. Always the same, patient wait for the plate of food.

### Dialogues of Respect in a Moral City

The work of Mercedes and Alisson within the foundation is predicated on a delicate understanding of the experience of life within the neighbourhood, and the hardships and struggles that residents face. For Don Florencio, his presence was quiet, unannounced, and irregular. There were no expectations of the need to ask for food nor to give thanks for receiving it. The success of the foundation depends on a careful control of relationships like this, offering support and care where Mercedes and Alisson can but without demanding too much in return. It is a respectful engagement with the people who need to use the support that the foundation can provide, one which ensures that they are “*seen* – as a full human being whose presence matters” (Sennett 2004: 3). This is respect as a mutual feeling – an equality – which contains an “expressive work” (Sennett 2004: 59) in that it must be “performed” through actions. It implies something deeper than identifying needs and implementing charity, which run the risk of distorting the recipient through characterising them as needy or dependent (Sennett 2004: 20; see also Caduff 2019; Tronto 1993). Inequalities undermine respect through relations where one party is exposed as dependent, particularly when they cannot control the manner and circumstances in which this need is exposed to others (Sennett 2004: 116-120).

In the quiet comings and goings of Don Florencio, there was a maintenance of his control over his time in the foundation, the manner of his engagement with the place and care that was offered. Sennett (2004: 118, 177) notes that the need for equality described above does not preclude the possibility of someone asking for help and admitting that they need it; “there’s nothing inherently shameful about it, so long as it can be *managed* by the person who makes it...[they need to be able] to control the condition under which they see and are seen.” The emphasis is on recognising that a person needs autonomy to feel respected – that sometimes they need to *not* be seen – and offering recognition that they can act and be on their own terms. For Sennett (2004: 262, 260-263) mutual respect is about negotiation, not imposition, where this is recognition and acceptance of differences in personal character and material circumstance, through “accepting in others what one does not understand about them.” It is something that is lived in the personal relationship between parties as well as

through the structural inequalities that influence this relationship; in other words, that getting to know someone is as important as knowing about them. This doesn't have to entail any huge leaps in understanding or efforts to change ways, Sennett (2004: 242-245) argues, but just a willingness to listen and to be seen to be listening to the important events that have shaped an individual's – or group's – life.

### You Give Account

“So, it's true, I'm not about being gentle or anything.”

“But, I manage this issue with [the community] very well, because in some moment they have maybe, like, conflicts and friction between themselves.”

“Then I try to like, not makes things worse, that things don't become worse.”

“Instead, I try to make things better and reconcile, reconcile the people. ‘No, look, this is like that, for everything there is a solution.’”

“So, I say that, because for big problems, well, big solutions, so I well, more or less manage these things with intelligence, I like to use emotional intelligence a lot.”

[laughing]

“It's very tiring, emotional intelligence!”

“You can't go clash with anyone, no, no because then you turn this into a war, a pitched battle.”

“So, I think that you have to know how to manage the community and always be equitable. That when there are mistakes, you have to say things, say them at the time, ‘I don't like this because of this, because of this.’”

“It seems like this to me.”

“You give account of your opinion to all the members of the *junta*...”

“I mean, if you like the social part you don't need to be educated, really, in these things, in these fields, because you learn a lot of things there.”

“You walk a neighbourhood, a community, you immediately focus on the necessities and it focuses you on what you want to do in a neighbourhood, in a community.”

Sandra, the leader of a community *junta* in an area of Bogotá bordering the neighbourhood, was not hesitant in outlining the fact that her blunt nature could sometimes cause problems with people from the local area. Yet, she believes that it is vital to have these small moments of conflict to ensure that communication can occur, that “you give account” of opinions and feelings. She later notes that she has to “take care with everyone,” using a form of emotional intelligence to consider outcomes and balance the decisions she makes to accommodate the viewpoints of others. This mutual exchange, the ability to listen and pay attention to others, forms a key part of the recognition and autonomy that underpin respect. Sennett (2004: Chapter Nine) refers to this as turning people outward, toward exchange and contact with others, connecting with the city as involving – or necessitating – that we confront the fact of difference with equality. For Sennett (1989: 84) the city comes to form a “moral community” for inhabitants through the ways in which it has meaning for them, through things that matter happening within certain places; that there needs to be a recognition and respect for the different meanings that can exist within a city in order for moral spaces to emerge. This in turn connects to broader issues of justice and ethics, how we develop a sense of what these words mean through learning to “talk with and learn from people who are unlike oneself” (Sennett 1989: 84) – what Charles Taylor would understand as our dialogical relations with others.

As Charles Taylor (1991: 31, 31-35) states, “reasoning in moral matters is always reasoning with somebody” and establishing meanings and importance in life, whether over personal actions, group ideals or even the importance of place, is a relational activity that occurs with others. Taylor (1989: 3-5; 1991: 48-52) argues that this has central importance as our identities are always formed dialogically: social relationships are not just the isolated product of interactions with others but are part of how individuals understand themselves through the recognition that they receive from others, feeding back into our sense of self. A crucial part of our identity therefore lies in understanding what has importance not only for ourselves but for those around us, in being “oriented in a moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary” (Taylor 1991: 28). These

relations with others are where we negotiate what matters to us, dialogues which establish the grounds where something comes to have human significance and, importantly, that do so against a 'horizon' of meaning (Taylor 1991: 36-37). This horizon is envisioned as a shared understanding of what is good; what matters within life and "a standard of what we ought to desire" (Taylor 1991: 16). Importantly, it relies on locating something outside of the self that has meaning and importance – and we are only able to judge what matters if there is some overarching ideal that allows us to locate the significance of other things in comparison with it (1989: 25-27; 1991: 37-41).

Speaking to Mercedes and Alisson about their work in the foundation it was abundantly clear that this is something important to them, as a symbol of how their neighbourhood could be something different and also as a vocational calling, something they enact personally day by day. Taylor (1989: 14, 16-19) holds that contemporary society – specifically, a liberal, democratic society with Christian foundations – places one source of moral significance<sup>16</sup> within our everyday lives, linking "productive activity and family life" to the respect given to us by others and accordingly our own sense of dignity. Taylor refers to this as the affirmation of ordinary life, and although Colombia may have specificities that set it apart from the European and North American sources of Taylor's argument, there are also similarities in the strong Catholic faith and a liberalising democratic state. The importance of the foundation for Mercedes and Alisson can be conceived of as an affirmation of ordinary life; that there are good things in the neighbourhood, if people would take the time to look, and that their own lives are connected to this struggle for recognition through their work. Central to this is a shared understanding for both women of the values that matter in this work and the changes they want to effect in the neighbourhood.

These shared understandings are vital to the dialogical relations that we establish with others. Taylor (1991: 32-35) proposes that as a person's sense of self is dependent on the relations that exist with others, how commonalities or differences in goals and values are understood has a key role to play in the recognition given to them within society. If people are unable to identify with the values held by others – whether actual or perceived – there will be repercussions in terms of the extent to which they are able to relate to and feel

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<sup>16</sup> Other aspects not discussed here are the importance of individual freedoms and self-control (Taylor 1989: Ch.1), and the search for an authentic way of being (Taylor 1991).

empathy for this other individual or group (Taylor 1991: 56-58). A shared understanding of what forms the good life, how we conduct and manage matters of family, work, the domestic, can therefore be one way in which to form bonds of social solidarity. Concomitantly, perceived differences in these areas can have the opposite effect. Taylor (1994: 25-26) argues that the recognition afforded to a person or group in society is subsequently meaningful both politically and through the impact this can have on a deeper sense of self, one held internally but dependent on external dialogues with others.

Taylor's argument regarding the self is closely connected to how people can affirm identities through a public, often civic, engagement. Taylor (1998: 143-147) argues that democratic states rely on a shared conception of what citizenship is – and the behaviours expected of good citizens – in order to function. When an individual or group is perceived as having “other ways of being” (Taylor 1998: 147) then there arises the possibility of their social exclusion through a failure to meet accepted social standards. A moral condemnation of the ways in which we live our lives is a denial by others of our everyday lives, our everyday self, as having worth. In Colombia, the moralising discourses surrounding rural areas and the urban poor demonstrate this most aptly. This is not a problem of there being irreconcilable differences between groups, but that a failure to engage in a dialogue – or a negotiation in Sennett's terms – has the effect of foreclosing the understanding of value that can be found in difference. Absent this, the results are a failure to see moral worth in the other through a limited conception of what is good and matters in life; in other words, of a “sense of mattering to each other” (Sennett 1989: 84). This is important because the process of identity formation is not a static one, either; it occurs continually both directly and indirectly (Taylor 1991: 33). If society projects a “demeaning or contemptible” (Taylor 1994: 25) picture back onto a person, it has the possibility to inflict not just shame, but a damaging sense of self.

In line with Sennett, then, a picture begins to emerge of the ways in which moral condemnation of an individual, group or even place can lead to a more profound social exclusion. If moral communities are dependent on the shared significance that comes from things that matter happening there, then the understanding of what constitutes an important *something* for inhabitants is vital. However, the argument so far has suggested that if equalities of difference – the respect for different ways of being – cannot be established then dialogues amongst residents will be affected. This becomes a knottier problem through the

interconnections of a sense of who we are with an understanding of what matters to us, and also what is important in life; our means of establishing horizons of importance with others. This lack of a shared framework can lead to people feeling “less and less bound to their fellow citizens in common projects and allegiances” (Taylor 1991: 112-113). For Taylor (1991: 107-119) this is important as he believes that a just society is only possible when there is a politically bound and active citizenry that can challenge the state and other powerful interests, often through judicial channels. If people are fragmented and divided from others, then there is little chance that they can collectively organise. Within this research project, residents of the neighbourhood often referred to one another as being separate in their struggles, as each carrying their problems individually. They felt isolated from other areas of the city and especially from the state, which was notable through its absence more than anything else. Meanwhile, stigma was partially internalised. These inscriptions of worth and difference are also capable of attaining a spatial fixity, such as in the “moral topography” (Taussig 1987: 287, Ch.18 passim) of the Colombian landscape. Within the city, the concepts of moral geographies and territorial stigma can help to understand the ways in which a moral differentiation becomes spatially fixed within the city, and the consequences of this for people living within denigrated areas.

#### “How Are You Living Here?” – Stigma and Moral Geographies

During a focus group one day Ana-Maria, a resident of the neighbourhood, mentions the stigma that residents of the neighbourhood face, and the reactions this generates in their interactions with the authorities. She describes the lack of interest from the authorities in collaborating with community projects, that “nobody comes here,” and that “the only way [the politicians] see people here” is as votes to be bought for political campaigns. She finishes by noting how the few times she has spoken with the police they were incredulous that she was asking for help:

“[The police] are just the ones that wash their hands and say: “Is that what, what they intend – to put an officer on every person [in the neighbourhood]? I mean, how are you living here?” So, like that they can give up and look to see how they can get out of there and – that’s it.” (Ana-Maria)

Throughout fieldwork residents repeatedly highlighted their awareness of the stigma that their neighbourhood faces, and the ways in which this shapes the expectations others hold of their behaviour and ways of living; that they are all criminals, and crime is all that can be expected from them. Erving Goffman (1990: 164) argued that stigma is not an unchanging constant in a person's life but is instead created in these moments of social interaction between persons "as a pervasive two-role social process." As a relational process, stigma exists through the capability of the parties involved to recognise certain norms of being, acquired from society, and when these have been transgressed. This in turn gives rise to what Goffman (1990: 45) terms a "moral career," consisting of transformative experiences where persons come to realise that they are perceived as possessing a particular stigma. This awareness of difference occurs when an individual measures themselves against what Goffman terms 'normals,' or those without stigma<sup>17</sup>. A stigmatised person may thereafter look back on their experiences of gaining awareness of their stigma as both revelatory, in revealing the nature of their difference, and transformative in that it leads to an alteration of the "beliefs and practices that he now has regarding his own kind and normal" (Goffman 1990: 52). Applying the concept of stigma – melded with aspects of Bourdieu – to urban neighbourhoods, Loïc Wacquant (2008b; Wacquant et al. 2014) argues that territorial stigmatisation is one of the defining characteristics for contemporary urban marginality, specifically locating the impact of structural factors as one source of this stigma.

Wacquant's (1993; 2007; 2008b) original formulation of territorial stigma was developed through a study of urban marginality within US ghettos and French *banlieues* (social housing estates), linking Goffman's stigma with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power to capture the ways in which social stigmatisation comes to be spatially fixed and enacted at both the local level and that of the state. As such it is intended to capture not just the interpersonal relations of stigma but also the power relations contained there, in how social structure and the actions of the state can be either injurious to or directly targeted against groups and segments of

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<sup>17</sup> In order for this to function the theory of stigma is founded on an assumption that "a necessary condition for social life is the sharing of a single set of normative expectations by all participants," (Goffman 1990: 152) within which persons and actions can be measured (or judged). As others have pointed out this is problematic in that it does little to explain "where norms come from, what they prescribe, what the effects of these prescriptions might be, or how they might be challenged or transformed" (Tyler 2018: 751). In short, there is little within Goffman's original formulation to account for power and the structures of power, and how social stigma can be intimately connected with these (Tyler and Slater 2018).

populations. Wacquant, Slater and Pereira (2014: 1273-1274) later developed the concept to argue that territorial stigma differs from previous forms of denigrated urban space – such as the historical slums and rookeries of 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain – in five distinct ways. Firstly, it is coming to be partially autonomous from what were previously typical markers of poverty, race, quality of housing. This is typically through the application of a distinctive label for areas affected; this may be ‘ghetto’ in the United States, for instance, or in Colombia ‘*olla*,’ as distinct from the widespread working class ‘*barrios populares*’ (although even this distinction may be blurred depending on who you talk to). Secondly, these areas become infamous within their countries and in some cases across borders. In Colombia, this has a distinct echo in the immediate comparison of any area designated an *olla* with the infamous Bronx or El Cartucho neighbourhoods of Bogotá. Thirdly, the association of stigmatised areas with social disintegration. Fourthly, their frequent racialisation, whether emphasised or invented, which is often associated with exaggerated claims of crime and violence. Finally, the negative reputations attached to these stigmatised areas provide ample material for a violent and frequently punitive reaction by the state. In Colombia, this is most immediately apparent in the forceful eviction and persecution of residents and physical demolition of areas of the city, justified as the need to root out crime and immorality with little regard to the consequences for those living there (see Ritterbusch 2018; Till 2012).

As discussed earlier, there are very real differences that limit the import of Wacquant’s formulation of marginality in Latin American contexts – not least differing racial, political and social dynamics (see Caldeira 2009; Perlman 2004b) – but there is value in considering how territorial stigmatisation can help to theorise urban social relations. Firstly, territorial stigma is influential in shaping the relationship between the urban poor and the state, something already explored by Wacquant and others in Latin America (Auyero 2000; Wacquant 2008a). Stigmatised inhabitants of poor neighbourhoods in Brazil, for example, are presented as the antithesis of respectable citizens, fulfilling the function of representing visible and punishable targets for the state in exercising control over law and order (Wacquant 2008a). When speaking to residents of the neighbourhood during this research, it was apparent that the relationship with the state was characterised more by feelings of abandonment than outright persecution. Despite this, in their lamentation of the lack of services and support from the state it is clear that residents feel this to be at least partly due to the negative reputation of

their neighbourhood. Mercedes and Alisson, too, feel that the authorities are too “afraid” to work in the neighbourhood – in what both women referred to as the “focus” of the problem, its centre [*el foco del problema*] – shying away from supporting their early work establishing the foundation. Reputation comes to govern relations with the authorities in their absence or retrenchment from areas affected, accentuating the impacts of poverty and displacement.

Secondly, regardless of the research context, the concept of stigma is still a powerful way to understand how social relations can come to have very real impacts within the daily lives of inhabitants in stigmatised neighbourhoods. It affects how residents think about themselves, as well as how they are thought of by those around them, with the media playing a powerful role in generating skewed images of stigmatised areas (Wacquant et al. 2014: 1275). Whilst this can be actively resisted in some circumstances (Queirós and Pereira 2018), in others, quiet acceptance and avoidance are more viable for those living in affected areas (Pereira and Queirós 2014). Within the research neighbourhood some residents are despairing of the stigma attached to the area, and the difficult conditions means that others hope to leave, while yet others are keen to resist, but with little means to do so. The foundation itself is seen by Mercedes and Alisson as an attempt to recuperate meaning for the inhabitants of the neighbourhood through establishing a different reputation for the area. Yet, there is no universal experience of stigma and it does not adhere to all inhabitants equally, being differentially experienced by residents of the same area and even spatially differentiated within a local area (Pinkster et al. 2020). For residents of the neighbourhood who do not live in the *olla*, for instance, it is often important to delineate themselves or where they live as distinct from ‘down below,’ leading to an internal stratification of the neighbourhood. This is not living with difference in equality but creating difference through the presence of inequalities, and territorial stigma therefore presents a significant obstacle to any vision of moral community in Sennett’s terms, and even more so Lefebvre’s notion of the right to the city. Rather than drawing urban inhabitants together, it creates boundaries and distinctions that conform to moral geographies created through the inscription of power and inequalities.

Tim Cresswell (2005: 128; see also Smith 2000: Ch.3 and 6) notes that the idea of a moral geography is simply “that certain people, things and practices belong in certain spaces, places and landscapes and not in others.” But behind this “deceptively simple definition” (Cresswell

2005: 128) there are nuances to how moral geographies come to be and how we interpret them. Fundamentally, the implicit or explicit sense of a moral order – determining what social action occurs where – often disguises the ways in which this moral order is a product of power relations that come to be spatially inscribed. Precisely because of this, the term ‘moral geography’ can be misleading, as rather than any meaningful engagement with the moral, what these are frequently referring to are, in fact, ideological geographies (Cresswell 2005: 128-130). This, then, is very different from Sennett’s conception of an urban geography where ‘moral’ signifies a shared understanding of meaning and importance; some concept of good and bad that can be established among inhabitants. Cresswell (2005: 132) is instead describing a place where “seemingly natural expectations about who and what belong where and when” are actually constructed through power relations and revealed only when the boundaries defining these are transgressed. In approaching the police for help Ana-Maria had unwittingly crossed one of these boundaries, reflected in the incredulity of the police that someone from *that* crime-ridden place expected them to be able to do anything.

Mary Douglas (2003: 2) notably examined social understandings of dirt and polluting behaviours, and how these are socially and culturally constructed; that dirt “exists in the eye of the beholder.” Douglas (2003: xvii, 4-5, 44-50) argued that dirt is defined less by what it is than where it is, and consequently the significance of polluting behaviour arises from the negotiation and definition of boundaries that govern where something does or does not belong. Through the classifying and rationalising inherent in the organisation of human society some things become residual, they become ‘dirt’; that which is rejected from the norm. Managing dirt is about making our environment “conform to an idea” (Douglas 2003: 3, 4; see also 2-5) closely bound to differing social and cultural interpretations of a moral code intended by humans to “force one another into good citizenship.” Douglas (2003: 4-5) herself recognised that her argument could make human society sound more systematic than it actually is. But her insights as to the social significance that boundaries and transgression can have are not contained in understanding what is dirty and what is pure or in identifying precisely how these categories come to be. They instead arise from the simple observation that dirt “is a relative idea” (Douglas 2003: 44) predicated on ideas of social order and disorder which define places for respective things, a key element of moral geographies.

If we consider that places are filled with normative ideas of behaviour which distinguish them from one another in what is permissible where, then it stands to reason that these boundaries – of normativity, of morality – require some form of ongoing maintenance in order to remain distinct (Curry 1999). As Michael Curry (1999: 104) notes, it is very hard to establish the ways in which people are engaging with a place due to the multitude of different meanings and interpretations that we can hold; thinking with Lefebvre, that one space can be many different places for different people. Added to this, our interpretations of what is good or bad can be fluid, as well as deeply personal, and “feeling as well as reason is involved in making moral judgements” (Smith 2000: 205, see also 38-42). So, moral geographies, in the sense of places demarcated by expected norms of action, are defined partially by a reasoning logic but also by more emotional responses to place and people. Douglas (2003: 172) argues that in order to understand the position that something has as dirty, or impure, we have to find where the boundaries between order and disorder become precarious. These are the places where boundaries become fragile and distinctions less clear, or where transgression of the boundary is possible, and where moral judgements can be fluid depending on the stakes involved.

Within the neighbourhood, its position next to an area of protected wetland, the *humedal*, creates tensions with the authorities and environmental groups. Human litter – from the activities of local businesses, or from the stacks of rubbish at the lower edge of the neighbourhood, or simply discarded by passers-by – finds its way into the grasses, reeds and waterways. Buildings are constructed on rare habitats. The neighbourhood and others like it have therefore become posited as a threat to these nature reserves’ continued existence (AGRB 2020). The boundaries protecting these natural spaces are made precarious, and polluting behaviour threatens their existence. But pollution is also social and stories of crime, immorality and violence feed into narratives of social disorder and the transgression of different boundaries. Pollution is consequently transferred to the residents as a social failing, foreclosing any (moral) questioning of structural disadvantages (cf. Douglas 2003: 161-163; Kallin and Slater 2014; Slater 2013). Unlike normative claims to ways of living, the enforcement of boundaries on polluting behaviour are unambiguous. As Douglas (2003: 162) notes, “pollution rules...are unequivocal. They do not depend on intention or a nice balancing of rights and duties.”

The consequence of this is that areas which are perceived as dirty or polluted are viewed as having the potential *to pollute*. There is an uncertainty about their moral status, and also about the stability of boundaries connected to them (cf. Campkin 2007). This is where the explicit connection contained within territorial stigma between forms of symbolic power and social stigma offers leverage. Stigma serves a purpose in attempting to wrench a place that exists transitionally – between order and disorder – fully into the realm of disorder, to justify the ordering processes that will need to be imposed upon it. Layering fact with half-truths and outright fictions, as in the case of the Bronx, creates a popular understanding of an area as socially abnormal. But once experienced the transitional state between order and disorder is sticky, it adheres; to pass outside of ordered society is a permanent mark that influences the reactions of others (Douglas 2003: 120-122).

In a similar way, the spatial grounding of territorial stigma has an adherence to places and the populations that inhabit them. Once marked, the ‘taint’ is durable. Sometimes strategies are employed which aim to bring neighbourhoods back toward acceptability through norms of good citizenship such as economic usefulness and entrepreneurship, redefining moral geographies. There have been attempts to re-make poor urban neighbourhoods as tourist attractions, as seen in tours of favelas in Rio and Medellín (Phillips 2013; Sarmiento et al. 2020) or proposals to develop city branding through capitalising on the cultural specificity of Latin American informal settlements and their idiosyncratic architecture (Hernández-García 2013b; Hernández-García and López 2011). Here danger, poverty and redemption are used to glamorise areas of the city, and they can suddenly be “pressed into the service of cultural consumption, of ‘culture itself’, and of the tourism and leisure industries with their almost limitless prospects” (Lefebvre 1991: 360). At other times the only solution seen by urban planners is to demolish, evict (or ‘re-home’) and rebuild; a literal wiping clean of the slate (which often fails to achieve the intended outcomes (see Kallin and Slater 2014; Till 2012)). In the more disturbing cases there are attempts at social cleansing and the disappearance of those outside the moral order (see LeGrand 2013; Roldán 2003), which Mercedes described as taking place in her neighbourhood a few years after she arrived, when armed groups from another area of the city came and “cleaned up” [*venían y limpieza*].

To summarise the argument so far, the production of space in the city is understood as something that occurs dialectically, in the contestation of meaning between different actors.

Here, it is the inhabitants of the neighbourhood themselves who are the most important, as it is their bodies that embed everyday practices within the urban fabric. These are in conversation with other elements, however, in the state, the past and the landscape, and the social imaginaries that flow from these. The meaning of place in the neighbourhood is conceived of as an oscillation between its moral significances for inhabitants, and the moral geographies created through stigmatising narratives. Whilst there may be competing visions for a space – Lefebvre’s conceived spaces – the struggles over which one comes to dominate social space is inherently tied to the operation of power. In this, residents as individuals are at a frequent disadvantage given the resources that can be levelled by institutions such as the state, commercial interests or even criminal gangs. Yet, space is not only formed by which plans are able to be implemented, but also in the significances that inhere within it. The meaning that makes somewhere a place, following Sennett, is linked to moral understandings of the city around us and the respect with which we approach the meanings held by others. Finding agreement in difference is not a straightforward task, however, as what may appear moral geographies are more commonly revealed to be ideological ideas of what belongs where. These normative ideas – of citizenship, of urban patterning, of land use – underpin the boundaries drawn in the city, creating concepts of territorial stigma which drive further structural impacts through an institutional vacuity and public denigration, one which can be partially adopted by inhabitants themselves.

Throughout the discussion above the residents of the neighbourhood are, at least, co-creators of their social and moral spaces, but are left largely silent and struggling to overcome inequalities which have an overbearing influence on their ability to materially and socially change circumstances. This formulation positions the neighbourhood as something other and outside to a vague centralised, normalised society and renders inhabitants inert. Although cognizant of their viewpoints and their centrality to the social space of the neighbourhood, it is largely dependent on inhabitants’ fixity as a marginal other. Similarly, when conceptualising Taylor’s arguments above, the simplest way to conceive of a dialogical other is to imagine them in a very straightforward manner as someone different. The affluent resident of North Bogotá, for instance, compared to the working-class inhabitant of Soacha; in theoretical terms, Douglas’s ordered society to the disordered, or Wacquant’s non-stigmatised to the stigmatised. But for those living in the neighbourhood, while the stigma and denigration

applied by others are real and influential, they are also intrusions to the everyday rather than the norm. For if we “find the sense of life through articulating it” (Taylor 1989: 18) in our dialogical relations with others, then it is crucial to note that for the most part the ‘other’ that residents engage with is simply other residents. This reconfigures relations with bodies such as the state, capital or other powerful actors; their influence is still key to life in the neighbourhood, but it has to be understood differently through the ways in which they are manifest to varying degrees within the everyday. To do this, I develop the argument from Lefebvre’s (2014) theory of the everyday and moments to contend that as the dialogical relations between self and others unfold within the everyday practices and routines of residents, it is here that we can find a quieter source of struggle against social inequalities and injustices.

### The Creative Everyday

“Everyday life is profoundly related to all activities, and encompasses them with all their differences and their conflicts; it is their meeting place, their bond, their common ground. And it is in everyday life that the sum total of relations which make the human—and every human being—a whole takes its shape and its form. In it are expressed and fulfilled those relations which bring into play the totality of the real, albeit in a certain manner which is always partial and incomplete: friendship, comradeship, love, the need to communicate, play, etc.” (Lefebvre 2014: 119)

Both Taylor and Lefebvre work with a concept of ordinary life or the everyday. Whereas Taylor (1989: 211) – fairly straightforwardly – describes this ordinary life as “what we need to do to continue and renew life,” Lefebvre takes a more complex view. Lefebvre (2014) argues that there are two distinct parts: ‘everyday life’ and the ‘everyday’. Everyday life is connected to all human activities and social relations, giving each “its shape and its form” (Lefebvre 2014: 119). It denotes the day-in-day-out rhythms of living and is further described as a product of the mode of production, the current form of society. Similar to his description of space as product discussed earlier, everyday life is posited as containing and yet concealing the relations that produce it, the “manifest forms and deep structures that are implicit in its operations” (Lefebvre 2014: 678, 688). The everyday is where these actions unfold, binding them together and acting as a mediating level between historical, cultural, and social forces and the individual; it is not an inconsequential aspect of life, but rather where all human activities have their root and find themselves authenticated (Lefebvre 2014: 338-339). The everyday is also closely linked to cyclical time, that of the body and nature, as opposed to the

linear historical time of capitalist societies (a thread explored more fully in *Rhythmanalysis* (Lefebvre 2013)). It is within the rituals and recurrences of the everyday that we can glimpse the remains of historical ways of human being – with a connection to nature and cosmic order, in festival and creativity – as some “residual aspect...of deeper meaning [that] is both a parody of lost plenitude and the last remaining vestige of that plenitude” (Trebitch 2014: 20). It is here that Lefebvre finds the project which anchors the critique of everyday life; the alienation of human beings within everyday life from their own sense of being, and the ways in which alienation means they are “torn from [their] self and changed into a thing, along with [their] freedom” (Lefebvre 2014: 500).

### Continuing – Mercedes

Energetic, smiling – happy, maybe. Definitely determined. An organiser, an instigator. One of my original field notes, written shortly after meeting Mercedes for the first time, states that she is like “the mother of all the children.” On reflection, this wasn’t right. Mercedes is closer to a companion, a co-conspirator, playfully joining in the games. But Mercedes is angry as well, angry at what happened, that there is no way to un-make what displacement did to her life. The murder that she saw, that meant she had to leave her home in the country. The natural things that she misses from there – the pure air, the pure water. The food. She hates the dirt of the city, the traffic and pollution, she hates shopping in the supermarket. She is a social person, but she is tired. She gets up at 05.00 and goes to bed around midnight because she collects her daughter from the bus every evening at 23.00, to walk her home. People play music in her neighbourhood early in the mornings and it wakes her up. She loves dogs, and when she shows me some of the photos of her life, from the past, there are always dogs. She is proud of her house in one sense, in what she has achieved, but when she tells me about it, when she invites me to see it, she seems also ashamed. Of the poverty, or maybe just of how she imagines it appears to me. She fights for things, she fights for her rights, even when these are vaguely defined. She knows that the law should help her, that she should be supported by it, but she does not feel the support coming and that makes her angry. She organises, not just in the foundation, but amongst others who have been displaced. She tries to motivate other people, she wants things to change. She’s a bit of a joker. Her brashness, her outgoing nature, the happiness she tries to

bring into things is laid over a deep hurt that emerges when she talks about the day of the murder, and when she came to the city.



8 – Mercedes. Photographer unknown.

When Mercedes speaks of the hardships that she has faced – that she continues to face – she does so with an awareness that there is something deeply wrong with these situations. She speaks of the lies of the government, which disguise the lack of support she has received. She remembers the endless talking of the guerrillas – “bla-bla-bla” – that claimed to serve people while taking from them; lives and possessions. In other words, she sees the truth of life for her and others like her, and it makes her angry. She has lived through a literal form of being torn from her self, of alienation, in the loss of a previous way of life and a home. Lefebvre (2014: 93-94, 99-100, 501-503) writes of alienation that among its many forms the most ruinous effect is on the social – on the relations that people have with each other – through the ways in which it turns people into things; in the “inability in all areas of life to grasp and think the *other*” (Trebitsch 2014: 12, emphasis in original). However, Lefebvre (2014: 94) argues that alienation can also contain a creative potential, where the estrangement of an individual from their self leads to a moment of clarity through the necessary confrontation with a “contradiction pushed to the point of antagonism”. These moments puncture through

and reveal to an individual a glimpse of the whole grounding through which their life unfolds. In Shields' (1999: 61) elegant comparison, like "sunshine through clouds" individuals are able to "discover something distant in what is near" (Lefebvre 2014: 509) in the grounding of social 'superstructures'<sup>18</sup> within everyday life. In this way, opportunities are present to apprehend the relations that are otherwise hidden in society and it is in the "defects and disquiet" (Lefebvre 2014: 343) that arise from these 'moments' that the potential for dis-alienation arises.

The injustice of what Mercedes has experienced is frustrating, confusing and hurtful, for her but it has also spurred her to do the things that she has in the neighbourhood; helping other displaced people with petitions, taking part in building occupations to demand support, and most of all in establishing the foundation with Alisson. These are moments which are prompted through the injustices she has experienced and continues to encounter day-to-day. Lefebvre (2014: 338) theorises moments as "seeds" contained within everyday life and from which "genuine creations are achieved, those creations which produce the human and which men produce as part of the process of becoming human: works of creativity." This is creativity as creation, the bringing into being of something new. Moments are brought into being through our confrontations with "obstacles, uncomfortable difficulties, disquiet, apparently insoluble problems" (Lefebvre 2014: 94). They are not necessarily conscious decisions, in plans for change, nor entirely unconscious and are instead defined through attempting to realise possibilities within everyday life. Lefebvre (2014: 642-652) argues that this is the root of their creativity in attempting to realise the impossible by pushing against the boundaries of what actually is, and that failure is a moment as much as success: the moment "is a festival, it is a marvel, but it is not a miracle" (Lefebvre 2014: 650) and that it happens does not mean the obstacle encountered is in some way solved by the moment. In their spontaneity, chaos and unpredictability they are impossible to categorise and systematise comprehensively, but they spring from the fundamental human activities that comprise the everyday.

Lefebvre (2014: 94) writes that there is a unity to society which "is the foundation of all society: a society is made up of individuals, and the individual is a social being, in and by the

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<sup>18</sup> For Lefebvre's critique of 'dogmatic' structuralism see *Critique of Everyday Life* (2014: 323-325). One fundamental point is that for Lefebvre (2014: 79) social structures can only exist and have meaning through their articulation and imposition within the everyday.

content of his life and the form of his consciousness.”<sup>19</sup> Everyday life is conceptualised as the root of this human sociality as it is integral to the essential human experiences of “friendship, comradeship, love, the need to communicate, play, etc” (Lefebvre 2014: 113, 119). A basic concern with human ‘being’ and the social therefore underpins much of Lefebvre’s theory, and the concern with an increasing objectification of the self and social relations is one that he shares<sup>20</sup> with Charles Taylor (1960; 1975; 1991), together with a belief in the need to find ways of re-establishing common bonds between humans in society. The path to overcoming the alienation of everyday life is through the everyday; the small, repetitive but shared motions each of us make. Specifically, it is through the creative potential of the everyday in the *oeuvre* and moments that movement between alienation and dis-alienation occurs, in the relations between self and other. Our dialogical relations with others are not just about the formation of a self internally or externally but are also linked to forms of the social and how these are created. If how we picture ourselves and what matters in life – our moral ideals – are rooted in practice, in our enactment of these within the everyday (Taylor 1989: 203-204), then the creative potential of these moments also lies in the possibility that interaction, dialogue, and recognition can help to reshape the ways we understand and make a moral space. Reflecting on the words and actions of Mercedes, I see both the moment of realisation – that she was, essentially, nothing more than a thing to others – and the moments of her reaction against this injustice. The following chapters explore many of the small actions that have resulted from this, most significantly in the work that she does with Alisson in the foundation. This is work that pushes against understandings of the neighbourhood and the people there to try and forge new ones. It is also work that is inseparable from the social space of the neighbourhood, and that is bound into the shaping of this through the relations it forges with others.

## Conclusion

Taken together, then, these theoretical pieces position the research and help us to understand the observations drawn from fieldwork in the following chapters, of the enmeshment of social changes, everyday lives and the lived social spaces of neighbourhood

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<sup>19</sup> Lefebvre (2014: 86-90, 95) posits the concept of ‘total man’ as one free from alienation, united with their self and others.

<sup>20</sup> Lefebvre (2014: 95) does, however, reject the place of God and religion in giving man common purpose and understanding, in contradiction with Taylor.

residents. In the ontological roots of space as product of social order, the neighbourhood is conceived of as a place linked to historical changes and significances in Colombia, ones that continue to bleed through into the present in normative ideas of citizenship and behaviour. Yet, the dialogical nature of social relations allows us to sketch out the connections between larger social change and the level of everyday life; to position experiences of poverty, marginalisation and stigma as both meaningful for individuals' lives and indicative for them of some wider social movements, through their loss of "control of their own expression" (Taylor 1975: 549). This helps to disentangle the multiple emotional responses that residents express toward their homes and local area; responses which are simultaneously resistant to and accepting of the stigma affecting the neighbourhood. This is not only a symbolic struggle, rooted in meaning, but also a practical one which is present in the everyday struggles of residents just to survive. These are interpreted as offering the potential for moments of realisation, illuminations which can reveal the inequalities faced by residents, and the injustices that flow from these. The role of the foundation, in particular, is best understood as an arduous form of work to alleviate structural injustices which combines with a moral claim-making to recover the spaces and lives of residents. This helps to conceive of how moments of change can occur through the everyday, in rote and rhythmic elements of life. Even if the change is not intentional, nor positive in genesis or outcome, these offer a window to understand how residents attempt to re-shape the moral geographies of the city and find their own meanings of space, place and people.

### Chapter Three:

#### “Like Living It Again” – The Ethics of Listening

“You have to have a sense of vocation, that you like it, that you like to manage the issue of, of community, that you have like this sense of...facing your fears, of making initiatives, to have an initiative, maybe for a project, to know how to speak to the people, with humanity. I mean, this is a vocation. Like I said, not everyone is for these things. This is why it caught my attention that you told me that [the interview] is for sociology, because this is a vocation, definitely. And this is not for everyone. And I don't know if it's that you are already born with this, or it's a spirit of being that you have, because the truth is that I never thought I would end up in this.” (Sandra)

We were sat around a table in Sandra's home drinking cups of *tinto* as she described her work as leader of a community association. She had just finished passionately outlining the struggles she had in managing the different temperaments of local residents, in making sure that as a leader she was able to listen, first and foremost, but also that she was able to judge her own reactions to different petitions; to “create a mirror” for herself. Sandra felt very strongly that this capacity to step back from her own emotional reactions – to the request, or to the person making it – was the most important quality she possessed in allowing her to do her job, even if she found this difficult at times. It facilitated her ability to judge requests not by her own personal preferences but by what was best for the community, and in doing so to avoid conflict amongst residents. “Yes, David,” she concluded, “this is some hard work.”

Sandra's description of the qualities and disposition necessary to her work echoes those that are often called for in scientific research, in the ability to be impartial or objective. But more than that, in her calls to recognise the uniqueness of this as a vocation, as a “spirit of being that you have,” it is positioning what she does as something that may not come naturally to others. It's not for everyone, she notes, because it involves listening and trying to understand concerns beyond your own, to shape understanding in response to what is heard rather than vice versa. It is not only about reflexivity and looking at herself, but in trying to truly understand others' concerns and why these matter to them.

This addresses a central concern of this chapter, in considering how it is that social research can best access and communicate some of what we hear during fieldwork. This chapter will contend that, in a similar way to Sandra and her community work, this is more than a reflexive positioning of myself as a researcher (although this is important). It is about admitting more

into the research project than just what we need for our research problematics, and doing so to give the people who speak to us – who form the vital substance of our research – “the courtesy of serious attention” (Back 2007: 1). Ethnography is a first step towards admitting these messier parts of life. The chapter begins with an overview of the methods used during fieldwork and a brief overview of participants. It then moves on to examine how participant observation allowed a close and at times very much embodied experience of work and sociality within the foundation. Despite this, there were obstacles both expected and unforeseen during fieldwork that related to both my presence as an outsider – the awkward and conspicuous *gringo* – and issues of insecurity and fear that were deeply engrained within the social space of the neighbourhood. Finally, the chapter moves on to consider how these issues connect methods to ethics, and how ethics in turn are an ongoing and relational aspect of the research process. I discuss how following Les Back’s (2007) call to make our sociological listening more artful can offer some ethical guidance for the research process, allowing us to articulate what we hear more clearly. I also adopt Andrew Abbott’s (2016) argument for a more lyrical sociology that connects with the emotional resonance of what we research, viewing it as a means to access a more truthful account of the social.

### The Project

This research is based on five months of ethnographic fieldwork, undertaken in two distinct tranches of approximately two and a half months each from August – mid-September 2016 and March – mid-May 2017. The roots of the project lie in my involvement with LIVED, a registered Scottish charity embedded within the University of Edinburgh, of which I am a trustee (see <http://www.livedprojects.org/>). Following a scoping trip to Colombia in 2015, LIVED were seeking to undertake a documentary project working with displaced youth in the neighbourhood of Altos de la Florida, Soacha, to be based within a school there. I offered to combine my PhD fieldwork with this project as my presence over an extended period of time would allow me to build the contacts and rapport with the local community which would be necessary for the LIVED project to be undertaken. However, on arrival for the first block of fieldwork in 2016 contacts at the school failed to respond to messages and phone calls. As it was not deemed safe to simply turn up at the school unannounced – Altos de la Florida being relatively inaccessible by foot and with no direct transport links – this required a rapid re-assessment in order to find an alternative location where both fieldwork and the LIVED

project could be undertaken. Friends in Bogotá suggested speaking with Yuli, a woman who volunteered at the foundation helping Mercedes and Alisson with the bureaucratic side of their work, following guidelines, submitting accounts, keeping paper trails and so on. Following an initial meeting with Yuli a further introductory meeting was held with Mercedes and Alisson at the foundation, where they agreed to host me for my fieldwork. Both women offered to assist me in recruiting interview participants from their own social networks in the community, including parents whose children were at the foundation. Mercedes and Alisson were also interested in having the LIVED project – discussed further below – hosted at the foundation, working with attendees.

Research was planned around ethnographic methods, predominantly participant observation, combined with semi-structured interviews. A total of nine interviews were held with local residents, including one jointly with both Mercedes and Alisson. One focus group was also held, again with local residents. As will be discussed later in this chapter, ‘local residents’ is not limited to only literal inhabitants of the neighbourhood (as defined through municipal boundaries), but also people living in adjacent areas, including Bogotá. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and for three of these interviews and the focus group a translator was present. When present, the translator was Yuli, who is a social science graduate and has experience of interviews, as well as being known to children who attended the foundation and their parents. In all interviews the residents involved were female. This introduces a bias to the data available but every effort has been made to acknowledge and address this through the analysis in the following chapters. Reasons for the skew in gender representation during interviews are likely twofold. Firstly, introductions were made by Mercedes and Alisson and as such were often through the foundation, or in Mercedes’ case wider networks of contacts with other displaced persons. The nature of the foundation’s work with children, combined with the preponderance for women to have childcare and domestic responsibilities in Colombia (see DANE 2018a; DANE/ONU 2019), partially explains why few contacts involved there were male. There is also evidence that amongst displaced families, there is a greater proportion of female-headed households who have no partner present (Meertens 2012). Secondly, the time of day that I was present in the neighbourhood, between 09.00 – 16.00, is also during working hours when many men were away from home. As explored in the following chapter, while women in the neighbourhood worked, they were also

more likely to be restricted to staying at home during the day because of care responsibilities.

Table 1 shows a list of all interview or focus group participants<sup>21</sup>.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Displaced Y/N</u>	<u>Interview/Focus Group</u>
Mercedes	Female	50	Y	Interview and focus group
Alisson	Female	36	N	Interview
Yuli	Female	33	N	n/a - translator
Alejandra	Female	40	Y	Focus group
Ana-Maria	Female	34	N	Focus group
Carmen	Female	65	N	Interview and focus group
Laura	Female	58	N	Interview
Luisa	Female	55	N	Interview
Maria	Female	47	Y	Interview
Sandra	Female	46	Y	Interview
Sonia	Female	49	N	Focus group
Vanessa	Female	27	N	Interview

Table 1: Interview and Focus Group Participants

In addition to interviews and focus groups I made detailed hand-written ethnographic notes at the end of each day – it being too busy and hectic to do this while at the foundation – equating to 40 type-written pages in sum. Transcription of interviews from the audio was done by a Colombian acquaintance, who also explained any idiomatic phrases or words in the language. I undertook translation myself once I had returned to Scotland. This translation provided a first opportunity to analyse the data gathered from interviews, reflect on emergent findings and establish some sense of the key themes. This analysis was done manually, organising interview and ethnographic data within separate tables grouped by

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<sup>21</sup> For focus group participants, there were additional women present who did not speak other than to confirm their name. They are not included in this list as no data featuring them is included. Ages are as of final block of fieldwork in 2017.

loose thematic clusters. Research questions were subsequently revisited and refined in response to these emergent findings and the writing process itself was led by the data, beginning with the ethnographic excerpts which act as anchors for Chapters Four to Six. This is part of an effort to marry the two strands of my data – ethnographic and interview – through an ethical, lyrical approach to writing which is discussed later in this chapter.

### Photography Workshops

The interviews and focus group were supplemented with visual methods through a photography project and mapping exercise conducted with children from the foundation. The photographs produced were subsequently used in an exhibition held at the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá, to which the children were brought for the opening. At the opening the children were given the opportunity to speak with some professional photographers (if they wanted to) and given a tour of the campus. The photography activities and exhibition were funded by and undertaken as part of the project by LIVED. Although initially planned as film-making workshops for the production of a documentary film, it proved too difficult to bring a filmmaker to the neighbourhood to facilitate these. In addition, giving the children expensive camera equipment was felt to be too risky as it could have made them a target for thieves who operated in the area.

The photography workshops were also offered as a partial incentive to the foundation and attending families for permitting research to take place there. Running the foundation already entails a huge amount of work for Mercedes and Alisson, and the assistance they provided me in finding interview participants – not to mention shepherding me around the neighbourhood – only added to their workload and disrupted routines. A reciprocation of time and energy through holding the photography workshops and exhibition was felt to be fair by Mercedes, Alisson and myself, in addition to the daily work undertaken as part of participant observation within the foundation. It also fostered a measure of goodwill amongst parents – and other residents – to know that I was contributing something for local children in addition to work at the foundation.

For this reason, the photography activities were not fully enfolded into the research design, instead being guided by a light-touch ethos to avoid them becoming overly extractive. While the photographs produced are used in this thesis, the activities themselves were

intended as something for the children. Therefore, although the delivery of the photography workshops and selection of images for the exhibition was close to photo-elicitation, there was no commitment to or insistence upon interpretation of the photographs (cf. Allen 2012; Pyyry 2015; Rose 2007: 240-243) or analysis of the images themselves (cf. Rudkin and Davis 2007). Initially, I had thought to hold interviews with the children discussing their maps, but one test interview felt distinctly uncomfortable and seemed to unsettle the children. Mercedes and Alisson agreed, so these were abandoned. There were no interviews with the children prior to the photography or as a follow-up, aside from asking participants to write a line or two explaining photographs' significance, if they wanted to, which could then be used during the exhibition.



9 – Children from the foundation at the exhibition. Photograph by the author.

The workshops themselves were divided into two groups, each composed of around ten children, all of whom attended the foundation and lived in the area. One group dwindled rapidly to only a single participant, whereas the other remained constant at ten. This resulted in a final total of eleven participants, six boys and five girls, aged between approximately eight and thirteen-years-old. The activities were held within the foundation either in the mornings

before school, or the afternoon following classes, depending on the schedules of the children involved. Two workshops consisted of map-making, where the children were asked to draw a map of their neighbourhood showing the places that were most important to them. A further four workshops consisted of photography activities. The first was an explanation of the activity, simply phrased as taking photographs of what was important to them in their neighbourhood. The children were asked to think about what mattered to them and use their maps for inspiration if needed. I then explained some basics of framing shots and taking photos. The following session involved distributing disposable cameras and explaining how they worked, using some test cameras in the foundation so the children could get a feel for handling them. The remaining two sessions were collecting the used cameras, and following development of the films, briefly discussing what they photographed and selecting photographs for the exhibition. The selection process was left entirely to the children, with the condition that they were limited to four photographs each. I felt it to be important that the children had ownership over their images and what was presented; the exhibition was intended to show the things that mattered to them, rather than anyone else<sup>22</sup>. Table 2 shows a list of people involved with the foundation who feature in this thesis, noting if they participated in the workshops or not<sup>23</sup>. If their engagement was limited to a particular period of time this has been noted.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Role in foundation</u>	<u>Workshop Y/N</u>
Mercedes	Female	50	Founder	n/a
Alisson	Female	36	Founder	n/a
Yuli	Female	33	Volunteer	n/a
Paola	Female	27	Cook (2017)	n/a
Juliana	Female	16	Cook (08/2016)	n/a

<sup>22</sup> This did result in a strangely high number of photos being chosen where the intended subject was partially obscured by the photographer's finger. Packard (2008) encountered a similar issue in their work with homeless people and suggests that this is indicative of unequal power dynamics and reduces the usefulness of visual methods. I would argue this only illustrates the need to step outside conventional aesthetic considerations of the image. That there is a finger in the corner of the frame certainly does not create any obstacle to the ability of the children's photographs to communicate (cf. Packard 2008).

<sup>23</sup> The children's names used here are pseudonyms; however, when attributing credit to photographs, real names are used unless there is an ethical reason to continue using the pseudonym (for example, the discussion of Gabriela's difficult circumstances at home that precedes Chapter Six). This is to allow as much ownership for the children as possible – within ethical considerations – for the work they created.

Marcela	Female	n/a	Cook (07/2016)	n/a
Diego	Male	n/a	Dance teacher (2016)	n/a
Claudia	Female	n/a	Dance teacher (2016)	n/a
Florencio	Male	n/a	Adult attendee	n/a
Santi	Male	10	Alisson's son	Y
Alejandro	Male	9	Attendee	Y
Andrés	Male	10	Attendee	Y
Diana	Female	11	Attendee	Y
Enrique	Male	11	Attendee	Y
Gabriela	Female	11	Attendee	Y
Jaime	Male	8	Attendee	Y
Laura	Female	12	Attendee	Y
Luis	Male	8	Attendee	Y
Natalia B	Female	12	Attendee	Y
Natalia S	Female	12	Attendee	Y
Sebastián	Male	11	Attendee	Y
Andrea	Female	7	Attendee	N
Carlos	Male	8	Attendee	N
Carolina	Female	9	Attendee	N
Eduardo	Male	12	Attendee (2016)	N
William	Male	9	Attendee	N

Table 2: Foundation Participants

### The Use of Images

The photographs used throughout this thesis fall broadly into two categories. Firstly, there are the pictures that I took myself during interviews, at the foundation and very rarely out and about in the neighbourhood. These were usually under the auspices of my role as a researcher, and so there are attempts to document aspects of life such as the physical spaces

of homes and the foundation. But the purpose is not only the “confirmation of presence” (Marcus 2001: 144) of the researcher, to attest to the fact that these things exist and were encountered. Other photographs were taken impulsively during fieldwork and are intended to be closer to the “punctuation” of Roland Barthes (2000). Images that hold my attention for one reason or another, or that just offer a pause; photographs of decorations and household objects, a cage of canaries, the material clutter of people living lives. They are used to try and communicate something not easily known; passing moments or encounters which somehow speak to or punctuate the data presented here (see also Rose 2007: Chapter 11).

Secondly, there are photographs taken by the children at the foundation. Chapter Five investigates some of these in greater detail, but they are also interspersed throughout the text. These are used illustratively in some cases, but also because they are a distinct resource from the photographs I produced myself. While visual methods and materials, when used uncritically, can be accused of trying to communicate an unthinking ‘truth’ through the representation of an existing object, an expected something (Maclure et al. 2010), they can also present an opportunity for a freedom of expression in removing the parameters often set by interviews and questionnaires (Rudkin and Davis 2007: 117-119). The photographs produced by the children have some of this free-form quality in that they are simply what they wished to photograph. Importantly, these are not used with the intention of explaining the quality of childhood in the neighbourhood, in providing revelations of some “closed space” (Marshall 2013: 57-59). While they do show spaces, interactions and moments that I would not have otherwise been witness to, they perhaps benefit from being a step removed from me, the researcher. As they often had no explanation from their author, the children’s photographs are more diffuse in meaning and content than the ones I took myself. Used in tandem with the rooted ethnographic data provided by interviews and participant observation, these images are closer to Les Back’s (2007) interpretation of photographs as something gifted, given and known only fleetingly. They are visual moments that attempt to evoke some sense of being in this particular place, or that attempt to recognise some of the poetic underpinnings of everyday interactions, places and things. They punctuate the text simply to interrupt the continual urge to explanation required when we write, and to recognise that words are limited.



10 – Smoke over the humedal. Photograph by Natalia S.

### Things Happen: Ethnography and Being in Place

Mercedes [smiling]: “Were you afraid? Did you feel afraid? Frightened? No? No.”

David: “For a moment, when I got off the bus and I didn’t see Mercedes.”

Allison [mockingly]: “He was frightened?”

Mercedes: “He had already arrived, but I wasn’t there yet.”

Allison: “He said: “They haven’t come for me!”

Mercedes: “Mercedes didn’t come!”

[Both laughing]

Not always being able to follow the rapid-fire conversation of Mercedes and Alisson probably saved me a lot of embarrassment during my time at the foundation. But there was a certain gleam that came to Mercedes’ eyes, or the play of a smile around Alisson’s lips, that let me know – irrespective of spoken understanding – when I was the butt of the joke. As all of my days in the foundation were with them, that became a regular occurrence. I was an oddity, photographed performing novelty tasks: sweeping the floors, wiping down surfaces, serving the juice, chopping vegetables, making *arepas* (a popular Colombian food made from corn flour), cleaning pots and pans. Some of these – the majority in fact – were regular household

tasks that I have performed many times. But Mercedes and Alisson were more than happy to re-make these into opportunities for some light comic relief in documenting my foray into their world:

“David’s making *arepas*! Haha!”

“Say *buñuelo*! Hahaha!”

Our days were spent together, as I tried to learn the habits and rituals of their work. As such my time there came to be bound by a set of rhythms laid down by the foundation and its role within the neighbourhood – its place within the ebb and flow of the days and weeks, how these were marked by inhabitants, and ruptures to these. Of course, my presence as a researcher – and more importantly a *gringo* outsider – introduced many interruptions to the cycles of sociality and work. Through assisting me in finding interviewees, being my guarantors within the neighbourhood, and accompanying me safely from place to place, Mercedes and Alisson had already introduced a major change to their working rhythm. But many of the fundamental actions of a day remained the same: buying the shopping, preparing the space and food, serving, cleaning and helping the children with their homework.

Jack Katz (2002: 71) has argued that ethnographic methods are essential for being able to investigate “life in action; behaviour changing; people in the process of becoming groups; groups in the process of formation and transformation.” As a study of not just people, but also place and social space, ethnography offered this research the best means of ascertaining the “place-bound action” (Herbert 2000: 550) that people engage in, and the relations between space, place, objects and individuals. The linkage between people and place is fundamental to understanding either, and studying this linkage is a task that ethnography is ideally placed to do through its embedded nature in the research site (Harper 2017). This is not about context, or setting the scene, but understanding that places “are often the center around which identities, social relations, meaning-making, and routinized interactions orbit” (Harper 2017: 103).

For studying how social space is constituted the importance of being ‘in place’ is even greater. If, following Lefebvre (1991: Chapter Three) the body is our most intimate vector of knowledge, then apprehending how people’s lives are interwoven with different understandings of the space that they move through would be impossible without *being*

there. Not simply observing, from a distance, or interviewing, but in engaging in the rhythms and movements of people's lives, trying in a small way to feel some of what they feel, even if it is only to be able to listen better to what it is that they are saying. Participant observation, specifically, was used for its ability to access "perpetual and embodied knowledge" (Fontein 2014: 73), permitting a better understanding of the daily rhythms that structured a day within the foundation and building relationships with the women who worked there and the children attending. Yet, the neighbourhood is a fluid environment, where things can change suddenly, and the rhythms of a day were susceptible to disruption. With heavy rain the hard earth roads outside turn to thick mud. If it continues, they flood, sometimes wall-to-wall water covering the surface. When protests erupt over increasing ticket prices on the Transmilenio, public transport links to the neighbourhood are cut, especially at the Portals which connect to the highways running up to the centre of Bogotá. The mood of a day, like smoke drifting over the grass of the *humedal*, can turn quickly. Children arrive with individual worries from home, school or the street. Things happen every day, of varying significances.

When things happen, residents have to live with and adapt to the changes these introduce into their day and so research methods need to have a similar flexibility. Strikes, the weather, violence, crime, illness, even people's moods – all these were related to planned research activities being disrupted during fieldwork. But through allowing a flexibility to respond to these moments as they unfold, ethnographic methods have a unique value in sensing the shape of things as they were encountered, their particularities and salience for residents (Becker 1958; Katz 2001). Participant observation allows things to be felt and experienced in an "engagement...of senses and emotions" for the researcher (Herbert 2000: 552), and some moments that were witnessed were deeply affecting. Even in those moments that the full import was hinted at, some meaning was retained through being with people and sharing their space. The fragility of the foundation's economy shown through the despair in Alisson's face as she opens a utilities bill, or the tangible presence of water and earth through floods and dust, could only be discovered through experiencing how they disrupt routines and rhythms, how they manifest and are felt in moments. Like stressing words in a conversation, emotions and bodily cues provide emphasis and change significance. Spontaneous laughter, embraces, tears of frustration, anger, or sadness are part of witnessing how deeply some things are felt within people's lives.

The act of observation and attempts to locate the significance of observed events within layers of meaning and interpretation involves a distancing which may go unacknowledged when the observations recorded are translated into research findings. Loïc Wacquant (1995: 491) argues that thick descriptions produced from observational methods “are, as a rule, disembodied reconstructions by the analyst that do not fully recognise themselves as such.” Attempting to place observations within broader frameworks of meaning and context necessitates the ability to step outwith the embodied experience itself. The issue this raises is one of positionality and the extent to which research is situated within issues and understandings that have relevance for the people and place under observation (Hammersley 2006). The risk is that qualitative research methods such as participant observation can either become too close to the research subject, producing descriptions which are so thick that external factors are lost to view (Back 2007: 16), or step too far away and force data into a “preconceived causal schema” (Wacquant 2002: 1523) that has little relevance for the reality found on the ground.

Social science research – anthropology especially, but any that involves an extended ethnographic investigation – also runs the risk of relying on an essential ‘other’ to be studied, unreflexively compared to the researcher’s own sense of self (Marcus 2001). Jack Katz’s (1997) observation that ethnographic studies draw justification from the unusual or the deviant points to the sometimes unconscious moral exceptionalism in the assumption that there *is something fundamentally different* about the research object. In the case of people, that they inhabit a qualitatively different moral universe from the intended audience, that requires the explanation of the ethnographer (Katz 1997: 392-393). Urban ethnography, especially, has to be cautious of the pitfalls that can arise from engaging with stereotypes of the urban poor, in particular the possibility that data may be smoothed over or contorted in the desire to assert the normality or goodness of participants (see Katz 1997: 397-400; Wacquant 2002).

#### “Now I Understand”

We are sitting in the living room of Laura’s house for my first interview outside of the foundation. Mercedes has made the introductions, and I have the recorder set up. Tripping over my Spanish, I ask the questions that I had prepared in advance. As we proceed, Laura seems to be clamming up and giving less and less information. At one point she refers to the

interview process as a “nuisance” [*esa vaina*]. It feels like the interview is breaking down and I’m fortunate to have Mercedes there, helping to keep things moving along. We begin to discuss how Laura obtains her services for the house, as it is located on the edge of the *olla* and has no legal connection to water, gas or electricity:

*David: “And how is this with the authorities here, it’s a problem or...?”*

Laura: “No, I never have had a problem with this, never, never; I never had problems with the authorities of any kind. None of my children, nor the family of my children, none of us had problems.”

Sensing that she is clamming up even further we move on to other topics. Her relations with neighbours? “I have never had inconvenience with nobody, never.”

Then, what about when she settled in the neighbourhood, was it easy, were there any problems? “I have never had one problem, one inconvenience or nothing.”

Her stony expression and studied indifference suggest otherwise and looking around at her house, perched precariously on the edge of a waste water canal, built from sheets of corrugated metal and plywood, it seems unlikely that she lives a trouble-free life.

Mercedes tries to dig a little deeper; but are there some restrictions, some things that are difficult about life in the neighbourhood? “No, I honestly do not want to start to answer that.”

I abandon the interview as a lost cause, filled with dread for the coming weeks and further interviews. We meander through the final questions, then later as we are saying our goodbyes, Laura apologises that she has spoken so little:

Mercedes: “No, it’s to hear the account, that’s what it is, he is a student, he is a student and nothing more, right? Like, he is studying, he has to present his thesis to graduate.”

Laura: “Now I understand. He presents his thesis to go and make his career.”

Mercedes: “That’s it, that’s it, don’t be afraid, don’t be afraid. It’s to present his thesis and so he needs to come here to the foundation and get to know the families that come here. To see how their daily life is.”

Laura: “How is the economic situation of some of...”

Mercedes: “Exactly. Exactly, so that they can know how it is that we live here.”

Laura: “I also have things that you don’t...but I know because you explained to me now what it is that he is doing...”

Mercedes: “Yes, *mamita*, this is why I said not to be afraid, you know that we are not going to want anyone to go cause harm or to look for a problem.”

The excerpt above was not my finest moment as a researcher. Forgetting a basic principle of ensuring that my interviewee knew exactly who I was, I had focused instead on obtaining consent. But the consent meant very little when those taking part did not have a full picture of how research was intended to be used. It transpired that, misinterpreting my intentions, Laura had thought I was from the municipal authorities – even with my patchy language skills – and that I was attempting to gather information for the eviction of residents. Following the revelation that I was, in fact, a student, she relaxed, and the interview was able to continue a little longer. Aside from offering an early and important lesson in interview basics, this encounter also revealed to me some of the challenges posed by working in the neighbourhood. Alongside general issues of language and verbal understanding, reflexivity was required as to my own position within the neighbourhood. Power relations were related not only to being male, being Western, being an adult, but also to how I could be mistaken for a local authority or government figure. Equally, some concerns held by residents transcended my own character, and were related to wider conditions of fear and insecurity that they lived with; fear of criminal groups, individuals, even family members or neighbours.

The most apparent problem faced before research even began was that of language. Spanish language lessons were undertaken prior to fieldwork commencing, but of course this in no way provides an adequate level of language competency – much of the learning was done during fieldwork itself (see also Watson 2004). Even then, language skills were imperfect and much depended on the willingness of those I was speaking to; to slow down, to repeat phrases I missed, or to avoid idiomatic language. The greatest frustration, and one echoed in Molly Andrews’ (1995: 79) observations, arose less with an ability to conduct the interview, which could largely be done with prepared questions, than with the ability to “make small talk” and follow up on responses. During early interviews in the absence of a translator, it seemed as if difficulties with language were preventing an important means of establishing

rapport with interviewees. But this was at least one thing that could be mitigated through a close working relationship with Alisson and Mercedes, who had the time (and patience) to speak with me day in and day out at the foundation. Vouching for me to local residents, or being present during interviews, they were able to relax most situations; even if, as with Laura, this took some time.

At times, studying transcripts during translation, it struck me that my questions had derailed what people wanted to say more than facilitated it. But while struggles with language presented the expected obstacles to the fieldwork process, they also functioned as a useful way to reverse – or at least mitigate – some power dynamics and encourage reflexivity on my own position as a researcher (Andrews 1995; Krzywoszynska 2015; Smith 1996). Rather than being presented as a knowledgeable expert, I could appear somewhat confused (often true), vulnerable (also true) and in need of a cup of hot *tinto* and a snack (perhaps true at the beginning but not the end). It could also cause problems of course; the children were sometimes frustrated if I couldn't follow all of their conversation, and one interviewee – Sandra – flatly expressed doubts that I was a capable researcher. This was more of a challenge than an observation. Displaced multiple times from the age of 15 onwards, Sandra has been living in the neighbourhood for close to 20 years. Similar to Mercedes in temperament, being driven and energetic, she is a capable leader in a local community association and possesses an intimate knowledge of social and political life in the area. She was interested to know, in this instance, that her time would be well spent. Ultimately, the interview came off well and Sandra and I continued our discussion long after the recorder had been turned off. Ironically, this was due in part to my having had only a loose grasp on the discussion; rather than my dictating the terms of the interview, Sandra and Mercedes often took my questions as only a starting point for their own smaller discussions.

Yet, communicating with, relating to, someone, is not a task for words alone. Sometimes we learn more from participation and doing than we do from simple explanations (cf. Krzywoszynska 2015), as I discovered in the case of the foundation's work. Forrest Stuart (2017) reminds us that while we may worry about how successfully we have integrated into our research field, sometimes focusing on the ways in which we transgress normality can be productive. If our presence as an outsider serves to highlight some hidden social rules, it can be helpful in understanding the dynamics of social interaction and behaviour. Similarly, my

presence in the neighbourhood, and especially the requirement for Mercedes and Alisson to teach me some of the rules of behaviour and limits of action, proved illuminating for understanding social life there. Doing something badly could be just as productive, if not more so, than doing it well and there was some value in “being made to feel a fool” (Back 2007: 18). My wasteful washing and tidying techniques in the foundation drew quick reprimands from Mercedes and Alisson, revealing the myriad tactics and tricks they had for making do with a limited budget. Being the awkward, robotic one in dance class or the one unversed in popular games encouraged the children to demonstrate for me, or to teach me, helping to relax the atmosphere during communal activities. Being humbled by a table of eight-year-olds could be practically useful in establishing relations of trust with children, through shifting my role from being a ‘powerful’ adult to someone who was somewhat dependent on their help and explanations.

These different moments in which I found myself to be something amusing or fallible helped me to get to know the children better. As useful and interesting as the maps and photographs produced through the workshops were, they are inherently an imposition of an adult world through my (shaky) control of the workshops and activities. My presence in the foundation and getting to feel more settled in the ebb and flow of life there would not have functioned if there had not also been ample unstructured, informal, “playful” (Aitken 2001: 176, Chapter One *passim*) getting to know each other. This is not a claim to have a unique insight into the world of the children in the foundation, or that all the barriers between the children and myself were removed. Part of the change in the relationship was simply getting to know each other and the children becoming more comfortable with my presence. But I was still patently an adult, and very obviously an outsider. I was a novelty, alien and different (at one point I was asked if people in Scotland slept in beds or caves). Not all the children were interested in speaking with me, and some would make jokes at my expense, leveraging language and familiarity. A very few were actively antagonistic and would try to insult or provoke me. In other words, the children varied in their assessment of who I was and how I would fit into their world and I was tested accordingly.

How I appeared to residents was not uniform, and particularly the trappings of research could be seen as threatening to residents; conducting interviews, taking notes and photographs. I was warned by Yuli before going to the neighbourhood to avoid dressing a

certain way so that I wasn't mistaken for a government or local authority official. Written consent was not possible as some residents were suspicious of signing documents, and levels of literacy meant that others would not have been able to read the consent forms. Fear extended not just to my intentions and affiliations, but also potential consequences of my actions. Mercedes and Alisson advised against taking photographs in the street, particularly near the *olla*, in case it was thought I was attempting document evidence of criminal behaviour. Plans to use digital cameras and make a short film with the children at the foundation had to be revised due to worries that the equipment was too visible and would make them targets for theft. These were problems for research that spoke to "systematic reasons" (Katz 2012: 268) as to why residents could exhibit distrust, suspicion and fear. They were part of understanding the neighbourhood as the people I spoke to inhabited it, marking precariousness. Life for some is lived at the mercy of the authorities' decision to evict or not, or the threat of violence for perceived transgressions.

#### "They Don't Allow It Just Like That"

Fear and insecurity were formative in dictating methods. Original plans to use walking methodologies as a means to investigate embodied experience of space (Myers 2011; O'Neill and Hubbard 2010) had to be abandoned after it became clear that it was not advisable for me to walk the neighbourhood unattended, and simply 'taking a stroll' was out of the question. Mercedes and/or Alisson insisted on accompanying me for any journeys, and I was warned that certain areas were off-limits unless special arrangements were put in place. Walking during fieldwork was therefore a practical and targeted activity aimed simply at getting from A to B, with little scope for distractions or conducting walking interviews (cf. O'Neill and Hubbard 2010). My unthinking assumption that I would be able to walk the streets was naïve, but it also revealed how restrictions on the use of space extended to residents, highlighting the contested nature of mobility within the neighbourhood (see also Pinder 2011).

While it could be argued that these concerns over my safety therefore reflect some portion of reality for residents, there were clear differences. Elevated concerns over my safety were no doubt because Mercedes and Alisson felt responsible for me as hosts. Locals do walk alone and, most importantly, I was ushered out of the neighbourhood before 16.00 every day and so had no experience of diurnal cycles of night and day that form an important part of the

rhythms of life for residents (cf. Kellett 2011). Furthermore, there were particular areas of the neighbourhood – the *olla* and *humedal* – which became akin to a kind of geographical ‘other,’ inevitably exoticised due to their inaccessibility to me. Discussing access to the *olla* for interviews, Mercedes outlined how this would need to be approached with residents of the area, and especially local criminals who controlled those streets:

“They look at it as opening a breach, let’s say, a space in which they are permitting us to enter their territory, as they say here. Right? They don’t do it with anyone and she [an interview participant] as the leader will go to speak there with them – in order to make the introduction, that is, so that they agree to the visit and that they permit [the visit]...they don’t allow it just like that.”

No interviews were conducted within the *olla* itself, and only a single walk was taken through its streets, accompanied by Mercedes and Alisson as always. In the end, one particular act of violence gave credence to the warnings I had been given and it was felt more sensible to avoid further direct visits to the *olla*. The *humedal* was similarly placed as off-limits, with the exception of one walk through the area close to the neighbourhood.

But for many of the children at the foundation the *olla* is where they live, and the *humedal* a place where they play. This is not to say that these were unremarkable places to residents and Chapter Six explores their local significance in greater depth. These were clear examples of contested social space, with dissonant strands of experience for those living there. Residents living in other areas of the neighbourhood mark a distinction between themselves and those who live “down below.” But it is important to mark the ways in which aspects of life in the neighbourhood were beyond ethnographic methods, for me, at least. I could speak to residents, visit (briefly) and try to connect their experiences with my own observations, but these were places within which my status as outsider was even more prominent. Ethnography is not a magic wand that grants unfettered access to local life, but by encountering barriers and implicit understandings of how space is configured in varying understandings of use, difference, ownership and safety, it is capable of tracing out some of the social and political contours of life within urban neighbourhoods. For this research project, it also provided a wealth of data in close observations of material conditions, emotional responses and non-verbal interactions, which can subsequently be used during writing. The final sections of this chapter will move on to consider the role of writing as an extension of method, and the interweaving ethical concerns of both.

### Vanessa's Home

The entrance to Vanessa's home has a blue metal door, the frame set in a wall that is composed of loose bricks piled on top of one another. The top third of the wall is a battered metal sheet. Alisson taps on the door, and it cracks open an inch while Vanessa assesses who is outside, before welcoming us in. Out of the sunlight, the temperature drops. Light from the street shines brightly through gaps in the wall, illuminating isolated places in the gloom of the interior.

"Ay, how cold [*¡qué frío!*]" exclaims Alisson, hugging herself and rubbing her bare arms.

Making our way past the washing, hanging from lines of old plastic twine inside the door, we pass a central area that is almost open to the sky, a few wooden planks crossing the space to provide fixtures for electrical cables. The floor is rough concrete, the walls bare brick, plywood or metal sheeting. Around us are the accumulated belongings of a family; assorted shoes propped up to dry, broken bicycles, children's clothes. On the fridge, a plastic jug holds a few fresh roses in water.

As we take our seats at the table the sounds of the neighbourhood percolate through from a large hole in the wall that a plastic tarp does little to disguise. Cockerels crow, dogs bark, music thumps. Overhead a plane produces a low rumble on its way to or from El Dorado airport in Bogotá. As I stumble through my introduction, explaining the research, where I am from, what I want to speak about, Vanessa nods then gets up to put on the radio. She turns up the volume.

I'm struggling to make out Vanessa's words over the clattering speech and music from the radio. She tells me that she has been in the neighbourhood for 13 years, buying the plot of land her house is on from an aunt. Her father built the house himself, paying for some local men to help with the work.

*"How long did it take to build?"*

"Well, it's not finished...the construction was bad."

"The truth is, [the construction] is all bad. All of it."

"When it rains my children get sick."

I ask Vanessa if I can take some photos, and she nods then takes me on a tour of the house. The rain has been heavy recently, flooding the foundation and turning the neighbourhood streets into a quagmire. Inside the house, evidence of water damage is everywhere. Sagging wooden panelling, greasy with water and mould, divides her bedroom off from the living space on the ground floor. The nearby bathroom is bare, rough concrete and brick, a small lip dividing the shower from the toilet. The walls are discoloured, a creeping black mould rising from the floor and descending from the ceiling. Buckets are stacked round about. Outside we pass the washing machine, next to a simple hand-fashioned sink of concrete, and nearby a plastic barrel is filled to the brim with rainwater. The smell of damp is palpable, the humidity cold and chilling. In the half-light of the interior, my photos are grainy and indistinct, but drops of water beading on the walls catch the light of the flash.

Heading to the upper level, we climb the unadorned concrete staircase and emerge again into the bright daylight. The exterior is a broad expanse of the same bare concrete as the staircase, and Vanessa shows me where the water is pooling into large puddles to soak through underneath. In the corner of this open area is the children's bedroom, formed from bricks, concrete, wood panelling and a sheet metal roof. Inside, the walls are covered in curling drawings, photographs, a paper love heart proclaiming "Darling" [*cariño*]. Vanessa points out gaps where the metal sheeting for the roof has been poorly laid into the concrete, explaining that when it rains the water comes in and soaks everything; the floor, the furniture, the bedsheets and her children's clothes. As we speak, I ask her if there is anything she would like to change.

"Well, I want to make more rooms here, at the top."

"But first it needs to be repaired. It's very damp, there is a lot of damp."

*"So, do you want to stay here, in the neighbourhood, in the future?"*

Vanessa does not have to think for long, shooting the answer back immediately.

"No."

There are too many things that need to change in the neighbourhood, she explains; that the government needs to come and repair the roads, so that when it rains there is not so much mud and flooding. That she is afraid of the lower part of the neighbourhood, the *olla*, and

does not like to go there. That “there are a lot of youths with a lot of vices here in the neighbourhood” who need help from the government, from somebody, to resolve problems of drug use. But ultimately, Vanessa sees the possibility of a future, if these things are addressed; “it could be good here, for the youths...”

As we emerge back out into the sunshine, in the opposite corner of the roof at the far edge is Sebastián, her son, who attends the foundation. He grins and waves over at us, in the middle of cleaning his bike while the family cat sunbathes next to him.

I call over to him, gesturing with the camera in my hand, “Ready [*listo*]?”

He nods and smiles.

### “Well, in Any Case, It’s Not So Much the Name as It Is...Right?”

More than three years have passed since gathering the verbal consent for the interview the excerpt above is taken from; consent for working with Sebastián and others at the foundation, for the interviews and conversations to be recorded and for photographs to be taken. Permissions seem much murkier today than they did previously, the significance of showing people’s faces and homes different when they are someone real to me and not an abstract research subject. Being granted permission to try and capture some slice of residents’ lives, to use their names, to display pictures of the intimate spaces in their homes and the objects within them, takes on a different cadence depending what and how they are written about, and where findings are disseminated. A reminder that “sociological ethics are staged through time” (Back 2007: 114) and are a grey zone of entangled relations that extend far beyond the initial point of permissions to concerns of representation through what we write, and truth for those involved.

Primary among these ethical concerns is the safety of participants, of being sensitive to what we show of their lives and how we choose to present this. Anonymisation is an obvious means of protecting participants, and while it is far from guaranteed that it will offer protection, or even that it is the most ethical choice available in all cases (Moore 2012), ultimately it has proved to be the most appropriate choice for this research. Some interview respondents had been displaced by the conflict and had fears that they could be traced by their names or what they said, while others were reluctant to speak of violence and criminal

activity within the neighbourhood, or to talk of problems with the authorities. All interviewees and any others quoted from informal conversations, including children, are therefore given randomly chosen pseudonyms. The exceptions are Mercedes, Alisson and Yuli, who wanted to keep their own names. In Mercedes' case, it is also a small gesture to bear witness to her own story of displacement and hardship, which she wanted to be communicated.

As subsequent chapters will explore, tensions and fear between different actors and areas, including lingering threats to displaced persons, are threads that trail throughout a variety of scales. Mindful of these concerns, in addition to anonymisation of participants the neighbourhood is left anonymous and is simply referred to throughout the text as 'the neighbourhood.' Similarly, using the name of the foundation itself would entail disclosing its location and consequently that of the neighbourhood; accordingly, it is referred to as simply 'the foundation' throughout. Although acknowledging that these decisions are somewhat clunky and stand in slight tension with theoretical commitments to space, place and materiality<sup>24</sup>, it is helpful in that it addresses any issues of disingenuity around *where* research was actually conducted. The neighbourhood as shown on maps bears little resemblance to the meandering and indistinct social networks enacted by residents on the ground, and which this research followed in tracing out 'the neighbourhood.' Even if in speech they frequently referred to the distinction between Soacha and Bogotá, families from multiple neighbourhoods on both sides of the municipal border attended the foundation. As a result, interviews were held with people living both within the neighbourhood and in the areas immediately adjacent to this. The lived space of the neighbourhood was something very different from the designated 'official' space of it, and residents from both sides described the same lack of opportunities and the same problems with the streets surrounding them, in an institutional absence of the authorities, lack of work and high crime.

I agree with Niamh Moore's (2012) assertion that in some cases anonymisation is as much a tool of erasure as it can be (sometimes misguided) protection, and that researchers should follow an ethics of care in their use of anonymisation. These ethics are a relational

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<sup>24</sup> For instance, with regards to place-making, naming and the significances of name are important in residents' understandings of where they live (Lombard 2014), while anonymising the neighbourhood also makes it difficult to fully engage with some aspects of Lefebvre's (1991) argument regarding conceived space and the influence of municipal authorities. It also sits slightly awkwardly with Les Back's (2007; 2012) call for live sociology, explored later in this chapter.

responsibility rather than a generalisable blueprint, occurring throughout the research process and situated specifically in accordance with individual and collective relationships (Banks et al. 2013; Hammersley 2015). Beyond issues of identification and anonymisation we also have to recognise that how we investigate and write about our subjects connects to ethics. The methods which we choose are never neutral themselves, and commitment to a particular methodology reflects the underpinning epistemological and ontological beliefs held by a researcher (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2011). Methods – perhaps more accurately methodology – are then inextricably linked to the ethical and political commitments of the researcher through their role in “which realities we choose to make more or less real” (Back 2012: 36). This means that as researchers we have to be cognizant of the ways in which the knowledge we produce is capable of influencing the world, in having real effects; to be political, be ethical in what we do, but to do so with care (Back and Puwar 2012b: 7-17, but see also individual chapters within the same volume). The best way to do this, I believe, is through listening carefully to what it is our research participants are saying.

I still have the photograph of Sebastián that I took that day on the upper storey of his house, smiling from behind his bike with the cat stretched out leisurely on the concrete beside him. In the lower corner some crumpled corrugated metal juts into the frame, part of improvised roofing that had been added to try and prevent further leaks into the rooms below. I chose not to use this photograph of Sebastián when describing his home, even though I had initially wanted to; I had wanted to show that there was some happiness there, something we can all recognise. But I came to realise that the photograph of Sebastián was what I wanted to show my audience, and not what Vanessa had wanted to tell me.

It is in what you choose to document, what you choose to show, that significance emerges. In this instance, the interview with Vanessa had not been, directly, about her son, or about trying to communicate some part of how they are just like everyone else. She had been reticent throughout, giving short or monosyllabic answers. When she did start to speak it was about her house, the living conditions, the things that need improved in the neighbourhood. In wanting to focus on the photograph of Sebastián I was not listening closely. The following section will explore how ethnographic fieldwork and the process of writing are linked elements of this responsibility to listen, and how both represent continuing ethical engagements with those who choose to speak to us for our research.



11 – The interior of Vanessa's house. Photograph by the author.



12 – Looking toward the bedroom of Vanessa’s children. Photograph by the author.

## Listening

When Jack Katz (1997) created a list of ethnographic warrants – justifications that give ethnography its power and relevance – first among these was the use of ethnography to undermine stereotypes. As Katz (1997: 394-397) observed with simple clarity, this is not only about disproving one lie, but being careful to avoid falling into another. The urge to write about the people who take part in our research as morally good, unimpeachable characters, is a strong one; more so when they are subject to powerful distortions, stigma and stereotyping. But the people who speak through our research have the right to be complicated, difficult, sometimes unknowable – even if this is awkward for what we want to say (Back 2007: 155-160, see also Wacquant 2002). To remove the pieces of a person’s character, or what they tell us, that do not fit the story we want to tell is to stray close to fiction. Rather than being an insight to a social reality they would be mere “projections of the researcher’s imagination” (Katz 1997: 392).

Similarly, Les Back (2007: 5, 7) has argued that sociology should be practiced as a “listener’s art” in order to pay attention to the “ordinary yet remarkable things found in everyday life.” Back (2007: 8) observes that as listeners we are inevitably “on the side of the story from the outset” in our attention to what we learn, but that this does not preclude the responsibility to think openly and critically. As academics we can possess a raft of knowledge surrounding what we research long before we even encounter it through fieldwork. To take the task of listening seriously we must be aware how this knowledge can encourage both “insights and blindness” and be prepared for “living with doubt in the service of understanding, of trying to grapple with moral complexity” (Back 2007: 12, 15). This means admitting that what we find during research, providing we listen carefully, may not be exactly what we want to say. It means siding with the people in our research, rather than the story we want to discover.

If sociology is a vocation, Back (2007: 165) argues, then it is so as a way of “holding the world and paying critical attention to it,” not as one for justifying our own arguments, theories and beliefs. We must recognise the ways in which we are, as listeners to a story, already “partisan” (Back 2007: 7-8) in the telling of this. Many sociologists are passionate about their topics and have deeply personal connections to the people and places involved in their research projects. Social research can at times feel – at least to me – like a mission

to correct misunderstandings. Back's argument is that sociology can be more than just a means to refute misrepresentations of the repressed or marginalised (who are anyway often the focus of social science research), although it does not exclude that; this study itself is at heart concerned with the ways in which social marginalisation is imposed upon and contested by residents of the neighbourhood. It is a proposition that "research practice can be more artful" (Back 2012: 33), both in the ways in which we undertake it and the ways in which we align our research to those we speak to. Artfulness is offered as a means to encapsulate a sociological practice conducted with rigour but also with care, where the researcher maintains an "attentiveness to what remains unsaid" (Back 2009: 209). Like Sandra, it is about trying to see past our own concerns and toward those of the person that we are listening to, the one who is speaking.

What Back (2007: 151) is arguing for is the importance of admitting texture and doubt into our understandings, to unsettle our preconceived categories of sociological knowledge and "cast doubt on the public understandings that prevail...and invite other voices to be heard and reckoned with." This is about contesting false representations of the social but doing so on the terms of those we are listening to, paying them "the courtesy of serious attention" (Back 2007: 1). It is about an awareness that the knowledge we produce is knowledge about living, breathing people, and so we have to be cautious of what we say, to do it honestly and to bring some of the life we encountered during research to our work. We have a responsibility as sociologists to speak carefully and truthfully. As Back (2007: 157-158) rightly notes, to do otherwise would be to make the portraits of those in our research incomplete, or to twist them into our ideas and in doing so make them "less than human."

#### Lyrical Sociology – or, Writing in Moments

Through writing, then, sociologists construct a form of authority over their subject matter, whether that is people, places or processes. The ways in which this is done consequently have implications for the forms of knowledge generated (Back 2012; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Law and Urry 2004). Words come to have a "force and productivity of their own" (Fraser 2012: 97), making communicating findings a relational act between author and audience, but also between author and subject. Andrew Abbott (2007: 70, but see also Abbott 2016, esp. Ch.4) has proposed that sociologists can adopt a lyrical stance that engages emotional imaginations in order to better communicate the "experience of social

discovery” felt by the researcher. Abbott (2007: 95) argues that this would allow the sociologist to get closer to an accurate communication of social reality in acknowledging some of the uncertainty of what we witness in the moment; that some of what sociology is studying is “human mutability and particularity in their most vivid form.”

This is similar in ambition to Back’s (2007: 166) call for social researchers to inhabit a state of “productive uncertainty” in admitting the fringes of experiences in addition to the central events. Both Back and Abbott are calling for us to step away from some of the security that is offered in our status as ‘experts’ of the social, and to challenge our reliance on traditional formats of both conducting and presenting our research and also the ways in which we write about this (see also Back and Puwar 2012a). For Abbott (2007: 68-75), this is most apparent in the reliance of social research on narrative structures and the impulse to place encounters from fieldwork within existing frameworks of knowledge.

Contra this, Abbott (2007: 68-75) asserts that some moments are experienced forcefully and emotionally and should not be shaped to fit a narrative arc which has a beginning, a middle and an end; a difference he compares to that of writing “about a thing” as opposed to writing about “ways of seeing” (Abbott 2007: 68) a thing. The former is rooted in the momentary and specific – specific times, specific places and specific objects – and attempts to apprehend the thing through the moment in which it is encountered. The latter attempts to create a narrative, to tell a story, that fits that object within existing sets of relations or a “teleological string of events” (Abbott 2007: 91). The “social discovery” that Abbott describes can be difficult to place within the latter method. Particularly when undertaking ethnographic work, there are many moments during research which are felt, emotionally, and align with a lyrical sensibility. Being lyrical, then, is not limited to the style of writing alone but also about recognising that sometimes “there is no real narrative at all. There is only the image of a situation” (Abbott 2007: 77, 86-87).

Abbott (2007: 91-92) suggests that when we locate something within a present – either temporally or spatially – we configure it as a subject of larger social entities, and therefore lose sight of the “dispositional quality” of the object itself. Essentially, that we colour our interpretation through placing it in relation to other structures, or by designating one thing as past, and another as present. In disrupting ideas of a narrative arc, lyrical sociology is fundamentally temporal. This echoes statements from residents during interviews –

particularly those who had suffered displacement – that specific events never lose their immediacy. Speaking of the moments that led to her own displacement, Mercedes stated that “when I have to talk about it, it’s like I am living it again,” and other women spoke of their displacement as a continuing or multiple experience. Similarly, when residents spoke in interviews of settling in the neighbourhood, or of significant events, there was a sense that these are continuing to affect their lives. There was no clear fixity that placed something as only being in the past. It is important to note that Abbott (2007: 69-70) is not arguing that all sociology should be lyrical, rather that writing lyrically, engaging an emotional imagination, is one option available to social scientists amongst others<sup>25</sup>. It is about writing that embraces some of the emotional responses we may have; that some moments we experience during fieldwork may have a significance which is hard to articulate, and that sometimes when people speak about the past they are living it again. Like Walter Benjamin’s rosary beads, these are events that often find a continuing significance through their relation to the present. When Mercedes tells me that she doesn’t want to speak about her displacement it suggests that this is because it still viscerally felt. It is difficult to speak about because it still matters. Lyrical sociology is about using poetics to try and communicate an “appreciation of the transitional” (Abbott 2016: 78), but also to access the ways in which some things imagined as transitional are still continuing.

Adopting a lyrical approach also speaks toward the local nature of the social process, to the fact that all the universals from sociology find particulars in their instantiation; that really, when I speak about a research participant, a resident, a child, what I am referring to is a “particular someone, somewhere, sometime” (Abbott 2016: 278). That sometimes we use words which disguise what we actually want to say; that inequality is an objectified stand in for injustice (Abbott 2016: 234-236). That marginalisation is a clean way to describe a morally

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<sup>25</sup> Abbot (2007: 88) does claim that a “belief in the determination of the present (both spatial and temporal) by “larger forces” is completely absent from lyrical sociology.” While admitting that this is partially “wilful,” Abbott (2007: 88-92) argues against attempting to understand moments as outcomes of historical processes as it relies on an acceptance of past/present/future temporality, to which lyricism is set in opposition. I instead follow Les Back’s (2007) argument that in looking closely at something sociologically – such as an individual or community – it is important to understand how other events flow around and through them. Whether through historical processes and relations of power, the researcher’s own cultural bias or how a globalised world filters into local communities, ethnographic studies must be aware of how the research subject – and the researcher’s positionality – is constituted by and part of a larger world beyond the research context (Back 2007; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus 1994). For a sustained theoretical critique of Abbott’s (2016) book, *Processual Sociology*, of which lyrical sociology is one part, see Wilterdink (2018).

bankrupt process of exclusion and discrimination which becomes etched into our physical landscapes in the denigrated communities of city, town and country. Or that sometimes, perhaps especially as students, we try to be objectively scientific and emotionally disengage from our research for no more meaningful purpose than that we think it is a necessary proxy to rigorous academic thought. But once we impart normative meaning to what we write there are new entanglements in that we then have to assess how differing normative claims can be equated (Abbott 2016: 242-244). Is one person's claim for justice more valid than another's? If their understandings of what justice looks like are different then how do we reconcile this? As a generalised question this is far too complex to be addressed here. But addressed to the specificities of this project, I argue that this is where holding the concept of dialogic relations, recognition and respect in mind can be helpful. These theoretical levers allow us to get underneath the significance of events in the neighbourhood and suggest ways of understanding distinct and sometimes competing struggles as the formation of a moral place in the city. They are one way of attempting to address the questions that are raised when we acknowledge that all our categories are just the product of "the endless conversation among humans about the particular nature of what has value, what should happen, and what is good" (Abbott 2016: 279).

Lyrical writing and listening to participants help to place them within the life worlds that surround them and have meaning for them (Abbott 2016: 246). Trying to connect with some of the social moments that Abbott describes is part of drawing more "vivid portraits" (Back 2007: 17) of not just the people, but the space and character of the neighbourhood itself, and hopefully to give a more honest account of what inhabitants told me. In weaving a lyrical sensibility through the art of listening the intention is to expand the means of communicating how I experienced social moments during fieldwork, and to recognise that the words of interviews alone are not enough to communicate life in the neighbourhood, particularly when those words are filtered and warped – however slightly – by translation. The following chapters are far from a certain pronouncement of truth in any way, and at times there has been a considerable amount of dwelling in "productive uncertainty." They do hope, however, to echo the aspirations of Les Back (2007: 1-3) when he talks of acknowledging the lives of those who might otherwise go unnoticed and of holding "the experience of others in your

arms while recognizing that what we touch is always moving, unpredictable, irreducible and mysteriously opaque.”



13 – Mercedes' daughter and dog in front of their home, circa 2008. Photograph by Mercedes.

## Hidden Places

During my criss-crossing walks in the neighbourhood with Mercedes and Alisson, on our way to an interview or some foundation business, the anonymous front of red brick walls and grill-fronted windows sometimes opens to permit another view. In one house we are guided inside to a garage where a woman sits, spotlighted in the glow of a lamp as she bends over a sewing machine. The wall behind her is hung with the tools of her trade; scissors, tapes, drawing tools, spools of thread and needles. Nearby stand racks of clothes. Against the far wall is a moped. If not for the lamp the room would be in darkness, and around the edges of the garage door white daylight cracks in.

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In the *olla* we knock on the door of a wooden shack and it cracks open an inch to reveal Juliana, from the foundation. The interior is dim, appearing to be in darkness from where we stand outside. In the gloom the small bodies of children can be seen moving slightly, gathering to peer through gaps in the wooden slats of the walls. We exchange polite greetings, enquiries as to whether the parents are home, but this door does not open any further.

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A roller door rattles open to reveal not a house at all, but a large garage filled with men sewing mattresses. Their large hook needles are sharpened on stones next to them before flying through the thick seams. Dust and fibre fill the air, and over their face masks only their eyes are visible, showing total concentration. A radio, turned up loud, delivers a stream of rapid Spanish, too quickly for me to understand. As I stand by, observing and taking notes, Mercedes and Alisson negotiate with the man in charge for the sale of a dozen old PCs they have acquired, the money to be used in the foundation. Transaction concluded, we leave, and the shutter rolls down again behind us.

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Alisson's mother welcomes me in to reveal a lounge with a well tiled floor, and walls that are freshly painted, with neat cornicing finishing the edges. The furniture is old but in good condition, matching sofa sets and chairs. On the far wall, a flat screen TV is mounted. To either

side, shelves hold small decorations and neatly framed photographs of children and grandchildren. We sit for *tinto*.



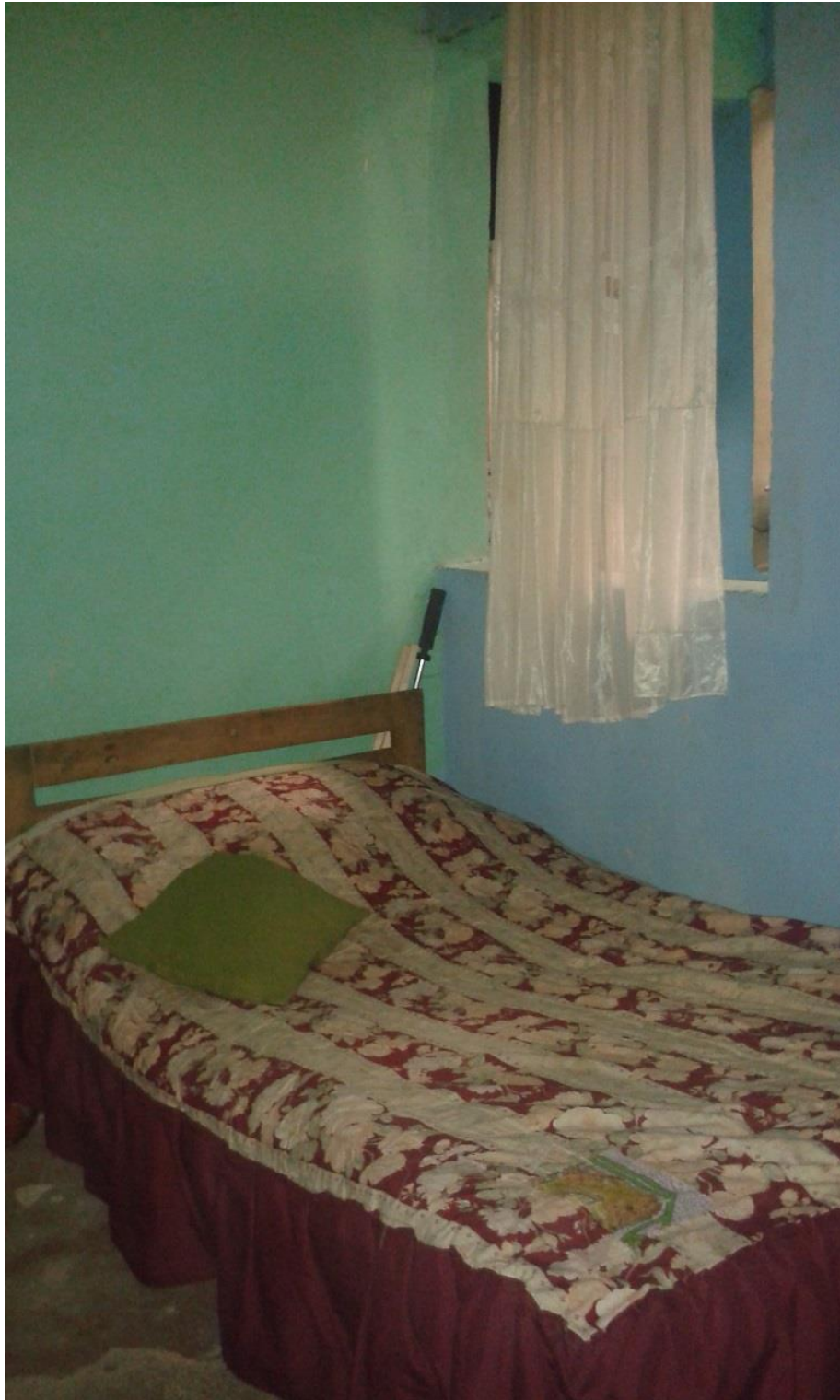
14 – Family photos at home. Photograph by Laura.



15 – Family photos at home. Photograph by Holman.



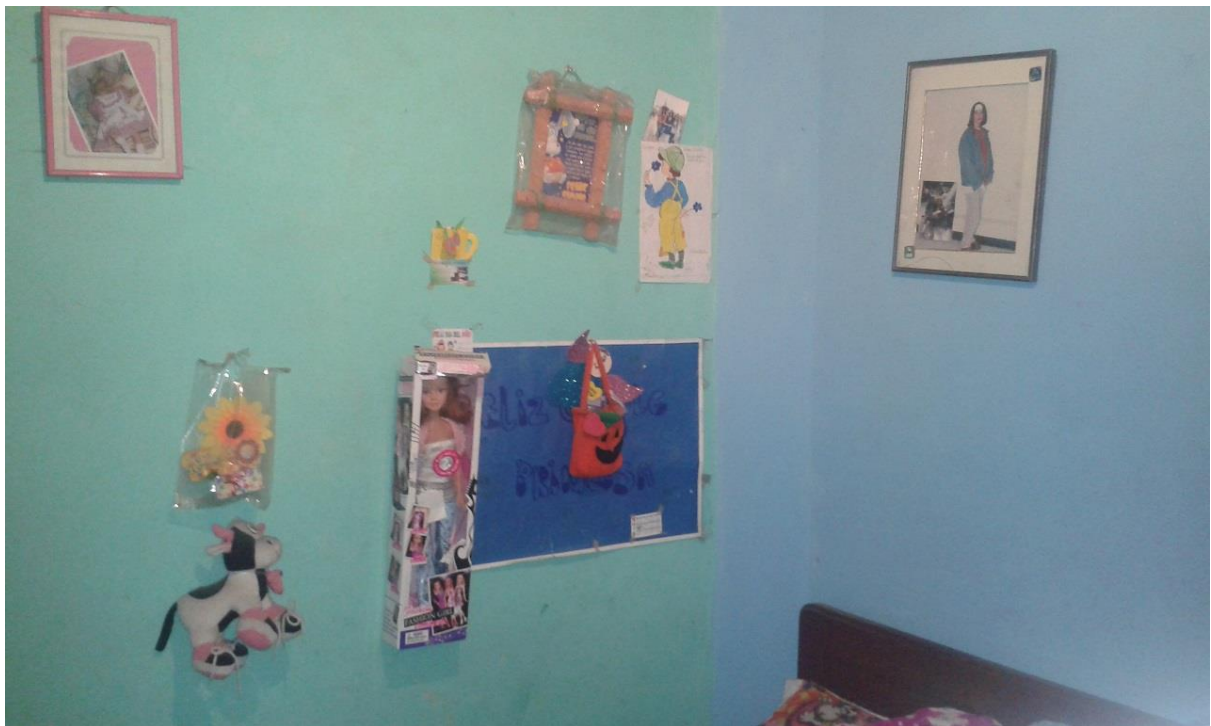
16 - Decorations, Maria's home. Photograph by the author.



17 - Bed, Carmen's home. Photograph by the author.



18 - Bed, Luisa's home. Photograph by the author.



19 - Decorations, Carmen's home. Photograph by the author.

Chapter Four:  
Moments, Struggle, Home

Carmen - Arrival

“I came from Boyacá...I came on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October, in '91, I came from the countryside.”

“I said to my mother-in-law, “Because we can't do a single thing, we are going to Bogotá until December and then we are coming, we're coming back.”

“And that was that, I left there.”

I am speaking to Carmen in the living room of her house, the walls painted a bright, baby blue, the floor bare concrete. The table we sit at is laid with a patterned cloth, and fabric covers are over the wooden dining chairs. At the windows, she has hung long, white lace curtains. Her small dog lies on the chair next to me, dressed in a cut t-shirt against the interior chill. Against the far wall two parakeets chirp and screech from their cage, which is half covered with a tattered black cardigan. Around us, pictures of children and grandchildren adorn the walls of Carmen's home; one clutching a certificate, another dressed for school, one just an infant. Above us, the electric bulb shines bright and naked from the cable strung across the corrugated metal roof.

Carmen continues her long story of arriving and settling in Soacha, detailing family betrayals, loss, struggles with poverty and desperation before finally finding a permanent home in the neighbourhood. For more than 20 years she has been in the same house, overseeing its growth from a single-roomed shack of wood and earth to the structure that surrounds us as we talk. Although older now, and “retired” from her informal job caring for neighbourhood children, she finds it hard to stay still, bustling around as she speaks, preparing endless pots of sweet, hot *tinto* that make my teeth ache.

“I came here, I came here it was earth, no floors, and nothing here. Just a roof.”

“No doors, even though I asked [the man who sold the lot] to put them when I came. At night I barred the entrance with a plank and you didn't know, I was ignorant of these things. But in those times you didn't have so many thieves as there are now, recently...”

“The plots, from this one here to the top you didn't have a single house.”

“I was the first that made the ranch here on this block. From here to the top there was nothing, this was the lagoon and grass.”

I picture how the landscape must have been before the neighbourhood grew, when the *humedal* was larger and the long grass, reeds and streams would have been traced over the landscape. Just a few metres from Carmen’s house, on the other side of the chain link fence, you can still see some of this wetland. The coarse, scrubby grass. A single tree. Tall reeds gathered around unseen pools of water. Carmen soon interrupts my romantic imaginings, continuing her story in what resembles a rattling monologue more than an interview.

“For example, say with this expanse of plots that you have one, [the seller] would stop there, this [the ground] would be moving so I didn’t like it, I said to him, “Do you not have one on the other side?”

“He said, “Well, I have another here.” And we came and you couldn’t pass for the mud; grass on each side. And I could already feel that it was like, firmer.”

Carmen gestures around us with her hands as she speaks, indicating different directions from where we are. Locating places that lie beyond the walls of her house.

“In this part, he had the [plot] here on the corner, this was his and this, and behind here he had another two [plots]. And I hadn’t liked the corner plots. Then I said to him, “This one yes, if we can negotiate, I’ll take this.”

“And I bought it at this time, and I went to the countryside and there I had things to sell, and I went, and I sold them, and I came back, and I brought the down payment. And he gave me one year to pay it.”

“If I had \$50.000 *pesos* I would take it and give it to him. And for 3 years I forgot about the plot.”

“I didn’t come back here, and when I came back it was just a rubbish dump and lagoon where they buried the dead horses and you couldn’t see [the house plots], only this.”

Romantic visions of an unspoilt wilderness vanish. Carmen reflects for a brief moment. The parakeets screech from their cage.

“There must have been deep pools.”



20 - Carmen's living room. Photograph by the author.

“The unending civil wars in Colombia...have added more than 400,000 [internally displaced persons] to Bogotá’s urban poverty belt, which includes the huge informal settlements of Sumapaz, Ciudad Bolívar, Usme and Soacha. “Most displaced,” explains an aid NGO, “are social outcasts, excluded from formal life and employment. Currently, 653,800 Bogotanos (2002) have no employment in the city and, even more shocking, half of them are under the age of 29.” Without urban skills and frequently without access to schools, these young peasants and their children are ideal recruits for street gangs and paramilitaries. Local businessmen vandalized by urchins, in turn, form *grupos de limpieza* with links to rightwing death squads, and the bodies of murdered children are dumped at the edge of town.” (Davis 2007: 49)

The bleak world of Mike Davis’s (2007) *Planet of Slums* contains no shades of grey but is painted in tones of stark black and white, shot through with streaks of a dangerous, bloody red. The “huge informal settlement” of Soacha<sup>26</sup> is populated not with people but death squads, paramilitaries, gangs, social outcasts, lost peasants and urchins. Similarly, a key UN-Habitat (2003: v, xxix) report on ‘slums’ describes them immediately as places characteristic of “the worst of urban poverty and inequality,” which are “squalid, overcrowded and wretched.” Ananya Roy<sup>27</sup> (2012: 693) writes that Davis’s ‘slums’ are “a space of violence,” drifting toward hyperbole as he describes an indistinct future war between the power of the state and the populations of informal settlements, with helicopter gunships strafing neighbourhoods while suicide bombers from the slums retaliate (Davis 2007: 206). The overall effect binds informal settlements to the language and imagination of slums and violence, tying the residents into discourses that work only – at best – through broad strokes. Amongst all the violence it is hard to see how one elderly lady like Carmen, her t-shirted dog, and two parakeets have not only survived, but established a home in the neighbourhood.

This is not to dispute that the events described by Davis do take place, nor that his intention is misplaced in trying to galvanise action to address serious issues; urban violence has been well documented in Colombia (Berents and Ten Have 2017; Doyle 2016; Moncada 2016; Moser and McIlwaine 2004; Rozema 2007), with Medellín during the 1980s and early

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<sup>26</sup> Presumably Davis intends this to read as informal settlements within Soacha, rather than that the entirety of Soacha is informal. Soacha is composed of almost 400 neighbourhoods; at the time of Davis’ writing – circa 2006 – only 50 of which (approximately 13%) were ‘illegal’ due to lack of land titling (ACNUR 2015). Davis also includes large swathes of Bogotá in his statement, ignoring the fact that these are largely formalised, working class neighbourhoods.

<sup>27</sup> This is not the only time that Davis has been noted for his overtly normative, sensationalist take on informal settlements; in addition to Roy (2005) see also Lombard (2013) and especially Fischer (2014a) for more on the inaccuracies of Davis’ work regarding Latin America, specifically Brazil.

90s the most infamous example of poor neighbourhoods crippled by violence from guerrillas, paramilitaries, vigilantes, drug cartels and the state (Martin and Martin 2015: 57-60). Similarly, inhabitants of informal settlements are no stranger to the structural violence of poverty and social exclusion that the UN-Habitat report outlines. Throughout Latin America, poverty has become increasingly embedded within conditions of declining opportunities for the urban poor, whether their part of the city is formal or informal, and a deepening retrenchment and decentralisation of the state (González de la Rocha et al. 2004). From providing the impetus to move to the neighbourhood, to its effects on methods of home construction, lifestyle, occupation and health, poverty is one linking thread through all of the subsequent discussion in this chapter. Residents live the embodied experience of this every day. Yet simultaneously residents made – are still making – the neighbourhood what it is today, and like inhabitants of other informal settlements throughout Latin America there is more to their home than just the misery of poverty and exploitation (Fischer 2014b).

One of the aims of this thesis is to understand how the social space of the neighbourhood is constituted; how does a patch of landscape make the transition to something known and meaningful for people, to becoming a place? What makes a home? How are people living through the hardships of poverty? Does displacement entail becoming the “social outcasts” of Davis’s slums? Looking beyond the “perpetual conceptual emergency” (Fischer 2014a: 50) that can be used to characterise poor urban locales, this chapter develops an understanding of the neighbourhood as a complex outcome of the practices, routines and narratives of residents. To do this, the chapter begins by connecting arrivals in the neighbourhood with spontaneous collective efforts to build and construct, a marshalling of the physical materiality of the landscape. I suggest that, in the felt absence of institutional support from local authorities or the state, acts of kindness (Brownlie and Anderson 2017) emerge as an important support for residents. Although uneven in occurrence, kindness has the potential to be life-changing for residents who have to negotiate slim margins of survival due to extreme poverty. I also understand these to offer an indication of the ways in which residents have solidarity and respect for the hardships faced by others in the neighbourhood, a first step toward the formation of moral spaces.

Yet, these hardships are as much a marker of place and meaning as sporadic kindness. The neighbourhood also emerges as a deeply gendered space, with women undertaking the

majority of work within the home and domestic caring responsibilities. The hardships of poverty are lived through the bodies of the women who are confined to their homes most days or struggle with chronic pain while doing manual labour. For women who have been displaced, the relation with the materiality of the neighbourhood is also profoundly felt through the imposed particularities of the urban environment, which are contrasted to rural ways of being. The loss of land and livelihood is embodied through changes in habits of movement, work and the contamination of urban space. But along with most residents, simply waiting for support from the authorities was not a viable strategy for surviving. Residents spoke of life within the neighbourhood as one of an everyday struggle to survive, only partially mitigated by acts of kindness. Finally, through looking at the ways in which home and place can be representative of struggles, I argue that we see another aspect of the topographical marking of important moments in the neighbourhood, where memories evoke and bear witness to past and continuing injustices and kindnesses.



21 - Parakeets, Carmen's home. Photograph by the author.

## Arrivals and Absences

Looking at the neighbourhood now, some 25 years after Carmen arrived in the mid-1990s, it is hard to see beyond the streets and blocks of houses. It is hard to picture the long grass and pools of water, littered with rubbish, dead horses; to imagine a younger Carmen toiling away in the mud and grass to build her house. To see her hemming in her plot, stopping the dumping of rubbish and dead animals. She takes her papers proving ownership to the head of the local *junta de acción comunal* [Local Community Action group, or literally ‘communal action council’], tells them where she is going to build, listens to their warnings – “OK, fine, it’s more difficult [to build] there!” – and then begins regardless.

Carmen describes the slow, rhythmic grind of daily construction. Her lot is more lagoon than house. So, she befriends a construction worker employed at a nearby site, and at the end of his working day he brings her loads of earth and rubble. As the water is so deep, she packs the earth and rubble into the pools of the lagoon “in the day and in the night,” then leaves it to drain. She repeats the process. Other would-be residents steal her materials in the night, lifting the rubble from the holes she has just filled. So, she starts again. Then, one day, the head of the *junta* – “he was crooked” – comes to inform her that she is exceeding the boundary of her plot:

“He told me that he would not let me build because I was spilling over the sides; and I had to return once again to demolish [the house]. To do it again...and it was like this until I finished my ranch, little by little...”

The story Carmen tells is of a process connecting her to the land, her neighbours, local politics and the emergence of an urban place. Looking at her home now you wouldn’t be able to appraise the years of struggle and toil that went into its creation, a hidden investment lost in one-dimensional assessments of monetary worth (Lombard 2013: 820). For residents such as Carmen the neighbourhood is not just another spot amongst the vast urban sprawl and it is certainly not a slum. It is something where she can see “worlds of meaning and experience” (Cresswell 2015: 18), a layering of history, landscape and sociality. Residents of the neighbourhood have watched the gradual retreat of the *humedal*, its containment and alteration, the springing up of streets, roads, shops and the growth of population. From a landscape of rubbish and dead horses, discarded into deep pools, they now see an accumulation of ordered places (cf. Kellett 2015); the grid layout of brick house in blocks,

roads, a park, the chain link fence designating protected land, and an expanding rubbish dump. In the distance, over a small grassy plain bisected by a road and waste-water canal, loom newly built tower blocks. But underneath it all, as resident Luisa notes, is still *la laguna*. As we are gathered around the small table, in the single rented room that constitutes her home, she asserts that, in truth, we are still above water: “We are standing on a lagoon. *Sí*.”

Residents describe the formative years of the area as one characterised by a gradual change in the landscape, where the beginnings of a neighbourhood were dragged out of the water and grasses of the *humedal*. Far from a gentle process, this has had a lasting environmental impact through the infilling of land and a gradual encroachment and intensification of human activity into the habitats of wildlife and plants. When people first began constructing in the area the lagoon itself was “huge...this was all pasture” (Mercedes), and there was nothing but “dirt, dust, stone, swamp, mud” (Sandra). To increase value, housing lots were subdivided and resold<sup>28</sup>, and the density of plots increased, but with no nearby facilities or shops, and no roads on which to travel, residents had to walk to other areas of Soacha to buy food. Children were taken to schools in nearby areas – “I had to take them over all this pasture” – even if “in these schools it rained more inside than out” until “the schools were turned into lagoons and you had to take the children home” (Luisa). The physicality of the landscape was manifest in what early residents described as constant floods [*inundaciones*] and damp, houses flooding when it “rained so much without stopping” (Mercedes). During this time spontaneous collaboration, where opportunities had to be seized as they became available, was vital in improving living conditions. Luisa, who has lived in the area for more than 30 years – “when there were no houses here, just fields” – described obtaining water and electricity through *tocaba cableado*, where residents connected illegally to the main supply simply by asking utility workers to do this when they were nearby. Roads were built with the help of workers from local construction sites, and as people continued to fill the “deep pools” of the *laguna* with rubble and earth the neighbourhood expanded. Shops appeared, then other small businesses. Over time the neighbourhood came to resemble much

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<sup>28</sup> Many of the informal settlements in Bogotá have been formed through this process of ‘pirate subdivisions,’ where the owner of the original land will illegally divide the land in order to maximise profits. Blanco (2012: 30-32; see also Doebele 1977) notes that this practice has largely replaced squatting on public land in Bogotá, tying informal settlements to a commercial process that involves both legal and illegal markets, further complicating the dichotomy of formal – informal urban space.

of the layout that it has maintained up to the present; even as the *olla* continues a slow growth of wooden houses and shacks into the edges of the wetlands.

Whilst the communal work that residents engaged in during the early years was largely unregulated, the *junta de acción comunal* that Carmen describes was a tentative link to municipal authorities. Established by the National Front unity government in 1958 following *la Violencia*, in their early years the *juntas* took the form of community self-help organisations, pooling resources for communal building and improvement projects (Flórez 1997). If they function well they provide a means of communication between local authorities and communities, increasing cooperation on local programmes and funnelling resources (Gilbert and Ward 1984) affording some degree of social coordination and organisation amongst not just residents within one neighbourhood, but also across wider areas within cities (see Pearce 1990: 151-154). As early as the 1970s, however, the *juntas* were already drastically under-funded and accused of wide-ranging failings: “inaction, excessive politicization, too much channelling of funds to political sympathizers, top-heavy paternalism, social control, poor accounting and auditing, and corruption among promoters” (Gilbert and Ward 1984: 775). Individual leaders became clients of political parties, leveraging their role as gatekeepers to resources and the authorities in order to gather votes (Pearce 1990: 187-188).

These failings compromised what was a promising tool for local engagement with and by authorities, and opinions within the neighbourhood continue to reflect a bitter disappointment with their ineffectiveness. Whereas elsewhere in the Bogotá region, at least, local *juntas* are effective partners of the community (see Beza and Hernández-García 2018: 201-204), during interviews most residents expressed either disinterest in or dissatisfaction with the *junta*. Speaking of the ones in both the neighbourhood and the bordering areas of Bogotá, Ana-Maria, who has lived in the area for 12 years, noted with some cynicism that “here we see that they come and they buy the kids with a toy car of a thousand pesos, a doll, when they are going to have elections.” But most complaints were focused on the seeming inefficiency of the *juntas* to achieve any perceptible outcomes:

Mercedes: They keep saying that there are so many problems [in the neighbourhood], but we are looking for a solution and they are not helping us with the solution.

Ana-Maria: But all the same, [the *juntas*] can't solve anything.

Mercedes: It's all leverage. It's like that they don't get involved, let's say, so much with the community like that because, as I told you, just now there was the rainy period here and it flooded everything in this part. We went ourselves to where [the president] is, and we suggested [with] his being the president of the *junta* for there, why didn't he pass on a request to clean the roads? No, he only said that "I've already called 123 and that." So, then you could see that, like, it was nothing important to him; "Yeah I did this already." Then it's not worth it. You're stuck there, like, damn - then what help can we have from people like him?

Carmen: Yes, the fact is that since [the *junta*] don't bother, nobody bothers.

Sonia: The president of the *junta* has been "they are going to clean", and no, no, nothing, they have not come. Not to clean, not for nothing. When they want to, they're invited.

In the one case where Mercedes was willing to approve of a *junta* it was attributed to the hard work and dedication of her friend, Sandra, who is president. The success is only "because of her" and other than that, in Mercedes' opinion, effective councils are "one in a thousand, none." Sandra herself believes that the authorities will not bring anything to their neighbourhoods, and in order to succeed "you have to search for opportunities yourself, to make a change" because "you can't find anything here." This lack of confidence is further reflected in opinions of the police and other services, who "wash their hands" (Ana-Maria) of the neighbourhood and refuse to enter; "from here to there the neighbourhood is completely forgotten" (Alisson). Absent support from the authorities, then, residents have had to – and continue to – find means of support amongst themselves through acts of kindness from friends, neighbours and also strangers.

#### "Sitting on Me Like a Sugarloaf"

I came from Boyacá and I came to where [my sister-in-law was], there in Soacha. It was her that got my hopes up to come, that she would help me, give me a hand.

Lies. Nowadays I don't trust her or those same hands...

So, yes, we came. I came myself before my husband and my children, I brought the smallest and the others stayed in the country. Then [my sister-in-law] gave me a little room.

I assembled the bed for them, for me and my children, the little ones that I took. That was Diana, Sofia...yes, they were the smallest. The ones that stayed there I said to them, "If I can find a place to live, I will call you so that you come."

It was me and nobody else carrying the weight.

15 days after being there my sister-in-law got my hopes up; that she gave me a room so that I could live there as I wanted. Well, after 15 days she said, "There are a lot of empty houses around here that they are renting."

And I said to myself, "Shit. This egg wants some salt."

And I started to think with my head. So, [my sister-in-law's family] had a store, they sold...well, a store, they had everything there. And a man came there who had, up there on the hill, up there, he had a lot house. The little house was nice, yeah - enclosed by planks but you didn't see the mountain at the sides - that he was renting. The moment that she threw us out of [the previous room] I went and saw it, and I had brought like some money when I came, I sold an animal I had, and I brought the money. I said, "Well, I will pay him the rent and call the others to come and we can gather ourselves there."

And I went to live there, and I brought my old lady, my mother-in-law.

She died. She died in December, in that December.

And that was here in Soacha.

And [my sister-in-law] had everything! And that was a time where we led a very hard life, we didn't have anything to eat or nothing.

She had a bakery, she had a store - she had a butcher's, I mean...and they didn't give us even a bone for soup...because we didn't eat, we couldn't give it to the mother because we didn't eat...

I went by foot to *20<sup>th</sup> July* [a neighbourhood in Bogotá with religious significance], there by that hill, and I arrived to *20<sup>th</sup> July* and I got myself into the church and I screamed to myself there, asking the divine child that...that something illuminate me, so that I didn't have to be begging for my bread. And my little girl cleaned me up and said to me, "What [food?] do you have, mamita?" and I said to her, "Nothing; happiness that I am here in front of the divine child."

Well...and I had myself a thousand pesos.

That was everything that I had taken in my bag. There was no way of buying a sweet because I had to pay the transport, of course, the bus that I took [from] there left me close to Soacha.

And I had a nephew, the son of my sister in law, that was well known there, everyone knew him, and there was a man there that had a store and he sold everything; vegetables, meat, rather...so I went back [home] and I left and I came, I came again up there but in another neighbourhood, where he lived. And I went to where they were playing football, they had a big field and they were playing there. And my nephew said, "Ay, Aunt, it's a miracle to see you here." As I wasn't going out.

He said "Aunt, come and have a beer?" And as I was bored, well, I accepted.

And I was drinking the beer and talking with him, so I said to him "I came to see if you can do me a favour [*vengo a ver si me hace un cruce*]?"

And I told him that this journey [to the city] had been a waste [*yo había perdido el viaje*]...

That if he could do me this favour and be my guarantor at the big store so they could give me some things, until Tuesday when my son came to bring some money.

He said, "Sure, Aunty."

Then like Francisco [the store owner] knew my sons already, then he said to me that...that, what happened to me? Then I told him – one goes for the truth when possible – I told him, and he said:

"Ah no, don't worry, don't worry about that, you have everything here."

Straight away he said that to me, just like that.

And he started to come down the counter and filled me a sack like that!

When this was 15 thousand pesos, this was a lot of money, that was in '92, to nowadays.

So, I stayed there. And he said: "Why didn't you bring one of your children to help carry the sack?" I said to him "No Francisco, it's better..." How was it? "...to burst than to stop. I'll load up the bag myself."

I took it myself when I had filled a sack, I was carrying it over the shoulder.

I arrived to where my sister-in-law was...I had already arrived and was sitting like on the edge of a fence like this and on this side, she lived here, and on this side lived a guy who worked in the brick factory, *El Salitre*.

And my other son that I had there, this guy had helped him to find work, so I went by there and the guy was in front of the door.

I said to him "Do me a favour, help me to get this sack down, that is sitting on me like a sugarloaf."

And I put the sack down there. We began to talk. I said to him "Thank God that I met you here on my way, I was going to ask a favour of you."

He said to me, "What is it?"

I said: "Is there not any work for my son?"

He said: "I need one [guy]. This morning coming send him here, at 5 in the morning he has to be here, and I'll take him. But make me lunch!"

So, there I was talking with him when [my son] appeared. Like from there you could see up the hill where I lived, and I saw him, and I signalled him, like this. He came and took the bag, we went but I didn't say anything to him. When we arrived [home], I said to my, to my other daughter I said: "Put the pot there, fill it with a lot of dry rice because tomorrow we have to make lunch for my son because tomorrow, he starts work."

He didn't believe it.

He said, "Ay, my mother."

And I, "Yes son, tomorrow."

And he set out his lunch pan and got up early the next day, and I made him breakfast, and packed him on his way and he went...*ay, Dios*.

And my son came home in the afternoon, he couldn't even make his hands like this, much less hold the spoon to eat, blistered, sure, from catching hot bricks and he didn't have gloves or anything.

He told me “Mama, it’s that I can’t even hold the spoon.” Then I put a little water to warm and added salt and I said: “Put your hands here and tomorrow you’ll be fine.”

And when he received his pay he came, and he gave it to me. He said “Mother, tomorrow we are going and paying what we owe, and we are doing another full shop.”

And we went the next day.

And he did not even say “I took this \$1000 for a soda.” No, he handed me all the money then I went, and I paid Francisco. I said to him “OK, Francisco, I’m paying this and I’m going to take another load.”

He said, “What do you want?”

That day was the first shop with meat, I threw a block of meat, like this, into the bag. And this happened every 8 days, I went, I paid, and I took another load.

That’s how it was, I kept going with Francisco. As I kept doing the shopping with him, we were already becoming good friends.

He said “Hey, my friend, I have some lots [for sale] there in that part, does it interest you?”

And, like, this was just a lagoon.

### “One with Others”

The ways in which people attempt to cope with poverty, absent support from the state or local municipal authorities, are varied and intricately contextual; whether known as self-help practices (Hernández and Kellett 2010), tactics and innovations (Mehrota 2010), or informal exchange networks (Lomnitz 1988), people across the world have found alternative means of surviving hardship in the city (UN-Habitat 2003; AlSayyad and Roy 2004; Lombard 2013; 2014). Family, friends and neighbours collaborate for the provision of services, construction of basic infrastructure and social support through childcare, clothing and food. These practices amongst residents can be considered one of the primary characteristics of informal settlements (Beza and Hernández-Garcia 2018). However, it is difficult if not misleading to try and present a single model of urban informality as characteristic of all informal settlements (AlSayyad and Roy 2004). Within the neighbourhood, whilst there are aspects of informal support networks in the descriptions of building local infrastructure and obtaining services

this seems patchy and infrequent at best. Tactics suggests a forward planning that fails to encapsulate the spontaneous and unexpected nature that help often takes. Self-help fails to adequately capture the interpersonal and dialogical nature of assistance, that this is something fundamentally performed with others. At the individual level, residents I spoke to had received support during their initial arrival to the city that was often life-changing in its consequences. The weight that Carmen is carrying, alone, is offset when Francisco offers her the food, and when the offer of work is made for her son that eventually allows the family to support themselves; the threat of starvation and failure that has been crouching over her transmuted into a literal weight of goods and provisions that sits on her “like a sugarloaf.” Mercedes is taken into a woman’s home – a stranger – after being found sleeping on the street with her children. Maria and Laura both are gifted clothes and shoes for their children by neighbours. Luisa describes how following her daughter’s murder neighbours gift clothes and food for her grandchildren, now in her care, as well as collaborating to find her some recycling work. The acts themselves are incapable of removing the binding reality of poverty, and many residents still struggle every day. The gesture of support, however, is remembered and seen as one of the few consistent opportunities to be found within the area: “because between everyone, the community, we help each other, one with others” (Mercedes).

But invoking the word community highlights its drifting semantics and forms. Residents could easily speak of individual acts of support exchanged between friends, or family, or neighbours. But in the face of larger communal issues, such as problems with roads, housing and crime, residents feel divided and perceive there to be a lack of collective will: “everyone shares the same ones, but equally nobody does anything; they don’t have, like, the reasons, like, the fortitude between themselves to do something” (Alejandra). In the city, where simple proximity to others makes chance encounters more likely, the support that residents offer each other may be better encapsulated by the sociological concept of kindness. Julie Brownlie and Simon Anderson (2017: 1223) propose that kindness, often overlooked in sociological analysis, forms a basis for many other interactions and relationships within the city; a kind of “a web or infrastructure of low-level, everyday kindness upon which much else depends.” Against visions of urban life as characterised by indifference to others, kindness is offered as a means to more nuanced thinking on the importance of small acts and gestures, committed voluntarily. As something that occurs at an interpersonal level, it can be an everyday act, but

one that inherently involves a reaching beyond the self to “extend recognition” (Brownlie and Anderson 2017: 1224, see also 1225-1227) to another. The kindness that occurs within the neighbourhood runs from small everyday acts to ones that are of fundamental importance for survival. They are achievable gestures, fitted to the means of the people offering them but often with a resonant, lasting significance (Brownlie and Anderson 2017: 1226-1228). In their everydayness they offer a recognition of the other that lies close to Sennett’s description of respect through autonomy. They ask nothing of the other in return, existing only as momentary interventions that can pass or that can extend, that can lengthen into something else.

Of course, the fit between kindness and the neighbourhood is not a perfect one and it would be disingenuous to try and describe the neighbourhood as a kind place, or to claim that all residents receive kindness equally. Carmen’s story also tells us that there are ample opportunities for kindness to fail to emerge, needs either unnoticed or ignored. Particularly cutting for Carmen, and echoed in similar stories by Luisa and Laura, was betrayal by a family member. However, Carmen’s sister-in-law did offer her shelter and a place to stay, even if only for a small period of time. But this support dissipated and in doing so it undermined Carmen’s trust. In situations of poverty many people may not find themselves in a position to offer lasting support to others, and circumstances may dictate the possibility of offering or receiving kindness, its “unevenness” (Brownlie and Anderson 2017: 1231-1233). Kindness, then, offers a different way to conceptualise how these opportunities for support work in the informal city through the sometimes transient nature of the connections they afford. People can be motivated to do good acts – pulling the thread a little, we could call them moral acts, a solidarity motivated by some sense of what *should* be done – but this does not have to last beyond that moment. But neither does it preclude the possibility that similar small acts can lead to something else, that an action can create bonds between people who are otherwise strangers; an action that “turns others into kin” (Brownlie and Anderson 2017: 1228). Lasting friendships were built on the acts of kindness that people who were otherwise strangers had extended; such as that between Carmen and Francisco, the shop owner, or Mercedes and another displaced woman, Maria.

These relationships should not be idealised. For the most part they are, or were, also extremely practical relationships. In the lack of an institutional presence from the state and

the failure of the only mechanism that is in place – the *junta* – the residents of the neighbourhood have had to find some measure of support through each other, even if this is uneven and sporadic. Even when lasting relationships have emerged from these, they are unable to solve the underlying struggles that residents must engage in and that continue throughout their everyday lives.

### “What You Live, What You Suffer”

When asked during interviews to identify opportunities in the area, many residents pointed only to the support that they receive from friends or neighbours, being known in the area, or the foundation run by Mercedes and Alisson. But acts of kindness, however important in the moments that they occur, are not enough to outweigh the many restrictions that residents perceive acting on them. Multiple residents state simply that “there are no opportunities here” and go on to list crime and criminals, lack of work and drugs – in their availability, effects and accompanying crime – as restrictions encountered on an almost daily basis. Public space, especially, is understood as compromised and dangerous due to gangs and drug use so that many residents feel restricted to their own homes, leaving few places for themselves or their children to socialise. For women, domestic duties were an additional bind. In conversation or interviews more than one (female) resident described being at home all day or “only” in the house, required to undertake the majority (or all) of domestic tasks, such as childcare, cooking, and cleaning. The neighbourhood was characterised by a deeply gendered division of space and labour<sup>29</sup>, one which mimics trends seen at the national level; where 64% of unpaid domestic work is done by women and which occupies more than seven hours every day<sup>30</sup> (DANE/ONU 2019). This is not to say that home was completely divorced from male presence and they were present in narratives of home construction or settling the neighbourhood. Against these limited examples of positive behaviour, however, were

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<sup>29</sup> For households involved in my research the split between those with both parents present (or a couple both living within the same household) and female-headed households was 6:8. I did not come across any instances of male-only households.

<sup>30</sup> In comparison with men, who average less than four hours of unpaid domestic work. Women also represent 94% of the paid domestic workforce (DANE/ONU 2019). Of female headed households where the head of household is employed, 63% also have to undertake the unpaid domestic work within the home; for female headed households where the head of household is unemployed, this rises to 87% (compared to 20% and 40% for men respectively) (DANE 2018a: 88-117, esp. 93-97).

numerous negative ones; the husband or partner as a drunk, as an addict, as a bully, a womaniser, an abuser. Or they were simply absences; dead, missing or unarticulated.

### Paola

Other than Mercedes and Alisson, the only other 'staff' at the foundation consists of the cook. When I first arrive this is Marcela, a quiet woman who smiles shyly but does not respond to my questions when we work together. After a few weeks, however, Marcela quits when her request for a raise is not met. For a time one of the older girls, Juliana, who is 16, takes on this position, before also leaving, in this case because she is pregnant. Mercedes and Alisson have to take on the cooking themselves, but when I return for my second block of fieldwork – and up until the final few days of my time there – the cook is a woman called Paola. She is the sister of Marcela, and several of her children, stepchildren and nephews and nieces attend the foundation. She could be an intimidating woman, and it was not uncommon to see her chasing one of these children around the dining room to mete out some – always avoided – punishment. Although not talkative at first, by the end of my fieldwork we converse easily in the kitchen.

Paola tells me one day that she left school aged nine and married at 13. Cooking in the foundation has been her first job – aged 27 – and her first time spending days out of the house. She is glad to get away from the house as she fights with her neighbours all the time, although she also finds it difficult to be away as she still has to care for her children and organise the house for her husband. She tells me of further difficulties that she has at home, as her husband has other women on the side that he is seeing. She says that she understands – “I am ugly” – but it is still hurtful to her. One day she reveals that one of the women her husband is seeing is her own sister, Marcela. She reveals that in return she has been cheating with her sister's husband. It all sounds a little incredible. Speaking with her further she explains to me that married life has been boring for her and describes her life as being a “sacrifice” – although she won't say for what. A few days before the end of my fieldwork, she tells Mercedes and Alisson that she will have to quit as she has found another job. They are angry, disappointed and worried about the extra work this will bring for them, and remonstrate with her while she works. Once they have left the kitchen, however, and we are speaking alone, Paola reveals to me that in fact she does not have another job but has been

pressured into leaving by her husband. She explains that he is angry at her being out of the house, feeling that she is not doing her work there, and wants her to stay at home again.

In Colombia, poor neighbourhoods are spaces where the majority of households are maintained by women (Moser and McIlwaine 2004: 100-109). When men are made redundant or struggle to find work during downturns or recessions, it is women who take the additional work that this creates. They also face the repercussions of violence and abuse that accompanies this loss of male face in a distinctly *machista* society<sup>31</sup>, intra-familial violence so widespread and 'normalised,' to the extent that it may not even be considered a problem (Moser and McIlwaine 2004: 99). Yet, this idea of a normalised violence is given the lie through looking at the most common reasons for family break-up, and consequently the prevalence of female-headed households: intra-familial violence and alcohol abuse (Moser and McIlwaine 2004: 112). Carmen was only too happy to expound on the feckless role men had played in her own household. She recalled her own husband – an unemployed alcoholic – demanding that *she* pay *him* for working on building their house. Eventually she “couldn't tolerate it, the drunkenness” and the husband returned (or was sent) to the country, while she remained in the city – living in the house she had built – with the children. Nowadays, “he doesn't come here, and I don't go there either.” Likewise, Carmen describes the relationships of her daughter as being “like dogs in mass” [*como a los perros en misa*] and runs through the litany of her daughter's partners: the first “they killed,” the second “another asshole, a good for nothing,” and the third “a real vagabond, a real womanizer” that “the earth swallowed” following the birth of his child.

In the absence of a partner to support them some women turn to informal work opportunities that can be undertaken from their homes. Carmen – ‘*la nona*’ – describes her home as her “office” and is so well-known for her childcare that it forms a significant part of how she herself is embedded socially within the neighbourhood. She has watched a generation of children pass through her door and send their own children in turn, paying her

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<sup>31</sup> Moser and McIlwaine (2004: 106-109) link this to Colombian males' inability to accept being seen as weaker than, or reliant on, a female partner due to an embedded (masculine) Colombian culture of *machismo*, where masculinity is performed through norms of male behaviour (including violence against women). Moser and McIlwaine found that loss of status within the household – for instance through unemployment – increased instances of violence within the family as men sought to re-assert dominance. Against this, Gutmann and Vigoya (2005) have argued that *machismo* is a blanket term – bordering on colonial stereotype – that is applied somewhat uncritically across Latin America by academics from outwith the region.

what they can or providing in kind, with food or help around the home. Simultaneously, her work and that of the foundation frees other local women to pursue their own employment; one mother, Alejandra, described how although the neighbourhood was “a very heavy [*pesado*] environment” it was advantageous to stay there, as “*la nona* takes care of my kids” and “the foundation has helped me a lot.” Others must find work outside of the home. Laura, a married 58-year-old resident of the neighbourhood, has to find enough income to support her family in addition to domestic work as her husband, now 75, is too infirm to work regularly. Despite suffering from chronic pain in her legs, Laura works as a *recicladora*. Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 18.00 to 23.00 – helped by her daughters – she heads out across the local area to gather materials for recycling, hauling them by foot in a handcart. Their routine starts again the following day at 05.15, Laura rousing the younger children and walking them over to their school in the bordering neighbourhood. Everything is focused on providing for her family, filtered through the experiences of her own body and the constant pain from her legs:

“I live from the recycling and nothing more, I am, like, the recycling...the recycling is my life. I recycle with my girls...and we live by this. I, for example, the studies that I give to my children, I give it myself, with my recycling; what they need, the same work that I find for myself. What you live, what you suffer...There are times that in cases like mine, that I suffer, needs arise for food for my daughters but in any case you have to overcome, that’s what you do, because you...and, like, I don’t have help anymore from the grandparents, I don’t have any of this, the only small help is my husband that sometimes I...”

“I have no strength.”

“My legs hurt me a lot; I [think] to myself, I’m going to have the operation and my nerves don’t let me. I’m too nervous, I say, “No” because I say that maybe something happens to me? I think all of this, and there are the legs, there are times they hurt me a lot, a lot.”

For Laura, her routine, her rhythm within the neighbourhood, is an embodied, painful experience as she has to “do everything by walking.” Her occupation, the physical toil of it, guiding her children to school, her location in the city. Even to attend a doctor’s appointment for her legs, the medical centre is a 30 to 40-minute walk from her home. Likewise, Alisson notes that “if there is an emergency, it is complicated” as medical centres are distant and “the roads are terrible.” Poor transport links to informal settlements in Soacha result in a common experience of limited or difficult movement, aggravated by the struggle for poorer residents

in managing the costs of what little public transport is available (see Hernandez and Titheridge 2015). Even walking itself was bound within restrictions of time and place, and heavily influenced by fear; certain streets were avoided by most residents and women especially tried to avoid walking alone at night or in the evening for fear of robbery and rape (see also Koonings and Kruit 2007; Winton 2005). The material experience of the neighbourhood here comes to be shaped by a lack of mobility, a certain “stillness” or “stuckness” (Cresswell 2012) where the neighbourhood’s marginality to the formal city is undeniable, palpable in its disconnection across transport and infrastructure.

While the experience of some things in the neighbourhood are apparently universal, such as the lack of opportunities and poor infrastructure, life remains complex and varied from resident to resident. Carmen, among the first to arrive, has ample space and a neat, well-constructed home, children and friends to care for her. During our interview she boasts of how she has done nothing that day as others cared for her; “I didn’t even fix the dinner today, I was here lying down.” Walk a block or two West from there, then turn down the street to the *olla*. You arrive at Laura’s home, a sagging shack of metal and wood sheeting hemmed in by an open sewer to the rear. Outside, her recycling cart leans ready for the evening’s work; a symbol of poverty in downtown Bogotá here represents an indication of occupation, livelihood. Laura faces a struggle every day to meet the needs of her family. While Carmen can claim no problems with anyone in the area, Laura clams up during our interview, afraid that someone will think she has been talking. Yet despite the disparities in each woman’s experience, they are marked by similar struggles and also kindnesses, smaller or larger, that help them keep going. Their experiences, while distinct, are to some extent emblematic of the shape of life for local residents. They also indicate the foundational place that the struggles and efforts of women have in the development of the neighbourhood. It is through their actions that the homes come into being, both literally and domestically. Their time and energy creates informal support for other women, in the care of children through *la nona* or the foundation. And most importantly it is through and on their bodies that life in the neighbourhood is marked. In the abuses of men, in the confinement to the home, in the physical pain and hardships of work. Speaking to women who have been displaced, however, the significance of similar struggles – with mobility, with work, with housing – take on a new aspect when considered in relation to the profound changes they experience through

displacement; not just in homes, but as lost livelihoods and a materially different connection to space.

### Maria's Home

Mercedes has arranged an interview for me with her friend, Maria, who was also displaced. When I arrive at the usual spot in the morning Mercedes is there to meet me off the bus. We walk briskly to the foundation, dropping off some shopping and saying a quick hello to Alisson, then set off. We cross the park back into Bogotá, following the cycleway around the edge of a neighbourhood. We pass a few pedestrians, but the path is largely empty, especially of bikes. Bordering it, the *humedal* stretches off toward the horizon. After a few minutes we peel off into a side street, anonymous for me amongst all the others. But for Mercedes, we are clearly heading into her home area. She points out buildings to me: her niece's house, another friend's, the building where she used to work. After another turn into a side street, she points out a battered metal door and tells me this is the entrance to her house. She promises to show me one day, but warns me, "My house, huh, it's ugly!"

Our destination is located diagonally across the street from Mercedes' front door. Standing in the hard-packed earth road, Mercedes knocks on the door, shading her eyes and peering into the window. From the other side of the metal grillwork and glass, the curtain twitches.

"It's us, open up!" calls Mercedes.

Maria gives a wave of acknowledgement and the door swings open, directly on to a bedroom decorated with plastic flowers and butterflies mounted on the walls. Maria's son, who is disabled, is lying in bed there watching television. She explains that she can't leave her son alone, so she has to stay home with him in the house all day. Inside the house itself is very dark with little natural light, and a faint scent of urine hangs in the air. Maria leads us through to her small patio at the back of the building and serves the *tinto* as she tells me of her displacement, fleeing her farm at 3am after FARC guerrillas came to massacre her family. Two brothers – targeted for working with the military – and her father, were killed. She travelled with her children to a nearby city, and with the help of the Red Cross, from there to Bogotá:

“We arrived in M—. In M— the Colombian Red Cross moved us by plane here to Bogotá. Here there was a network and they gave us help – well, at that time they gave us some groceries and some money for the rent so we could live here in Bogotá.”

“If not, I didn’t know Bogotá at all.”

“This is the reason we are here. I arrived in this neighbourhood without knowing anyone, without friends, nothing, nothing.”

“I met Mercedes by chance. She [Mercedes] had a girl in the hospital. So, the oldest, Lina, who is the smartest – she speaks! – so I passed by then I saw her alone and I said, “Where is your mother?” then she told me that her mother was staying in the hospital [with the other daughter].”

“So, I said, “And who is making the food?” She said “Nobody” then I told her “Can I come in?” then she said, “Yes.” So, I went in and I started to wash some dirty clothes, and tidy the house, and make the food and then I came back to my house.”

“[Mercedes] came at night to my house and said thank you. She started to cry because everything she had was falling apart.”

“So, I fixed the house.”

“And from that point we were two. Where she went so did I.”

“For everything, the two of us.”

“We became good friends, up to this point - by the grace of God, until God remembers us!”

Both women go on to recount how their early friendship was formed in the “huge” queues for aid, trying to obtain food for their children, “waiting and waiting...and we talked.” They tell me how they support each other now, more than a decade later; caring for each other’s children, watching their houses, one bringing food for the other when it is running short.

As we are speaking, we are sitting at the rear of Maria’s flat, in a small concrete patio. The patio is open to the air but surrounded on each side by high walls of red brick from the buildings round about. Inside, the TV’s volume is loud, giving a constant background noise. Over this, Maria’s son calls out for her from his bed every few minutes. Maria wearily shouts back a reassurance. Next to us is the kitchen – small, tiny even, and in poor shape. There is no

space, everything is piled around and it lies open to the outside. The back yard is partially covered with corrugated iron or tin, which is poorly fitted. Above us, the corrugated sheeting is propped up with rubber shoes, to provide a gap for air into the kitchen. The clothes dry out the back, hanging on lines. You can hear birdsong, and there is no traffic noise. But there is a pile of detritus in the corner, building materials, a broken bicycle, and while we are there Maria makes a small effort to tidy up. Shuffling into the kitchen she puts on another pot of *tinto*.

*“Did you buy this house?”*

“No, it’s rented.”

Mercedes interjects:

“It’s rented. House? The authorities, [gave] nothing. The guerrillas took everything [from her], cattle, everything.”

“And she only had the clothes on her back. Nothing more. The guerrillas took everything.

“And the authorities, nothing, they haven’t given her a house. 16 years of asking, nothing. Wait for the peace process.”

“And here we are.”

Maria nods in agreement.

“Now I have nothing.”

*“And how does this house compare with where you lived before? This house, or this neighbourhood?”*

“Where I lived...you’re asking me to compare the land where I lived, to here?”

“No. That is to say, that it’s not even close to the best illusion [*no es ni la mejor ilusión*].”

“Because where I lived before, I had everything. It was where I grew up, since I was a little girl.”

Maria grows animated, spitting the words out in a flat tone.

“I had everything!”

“I had cattle, animals, I didn’t want for anything, my house, I had everything!”

“And there you travelled by horse, or by canoe on the river. Those were the modes of transport where I lived.”

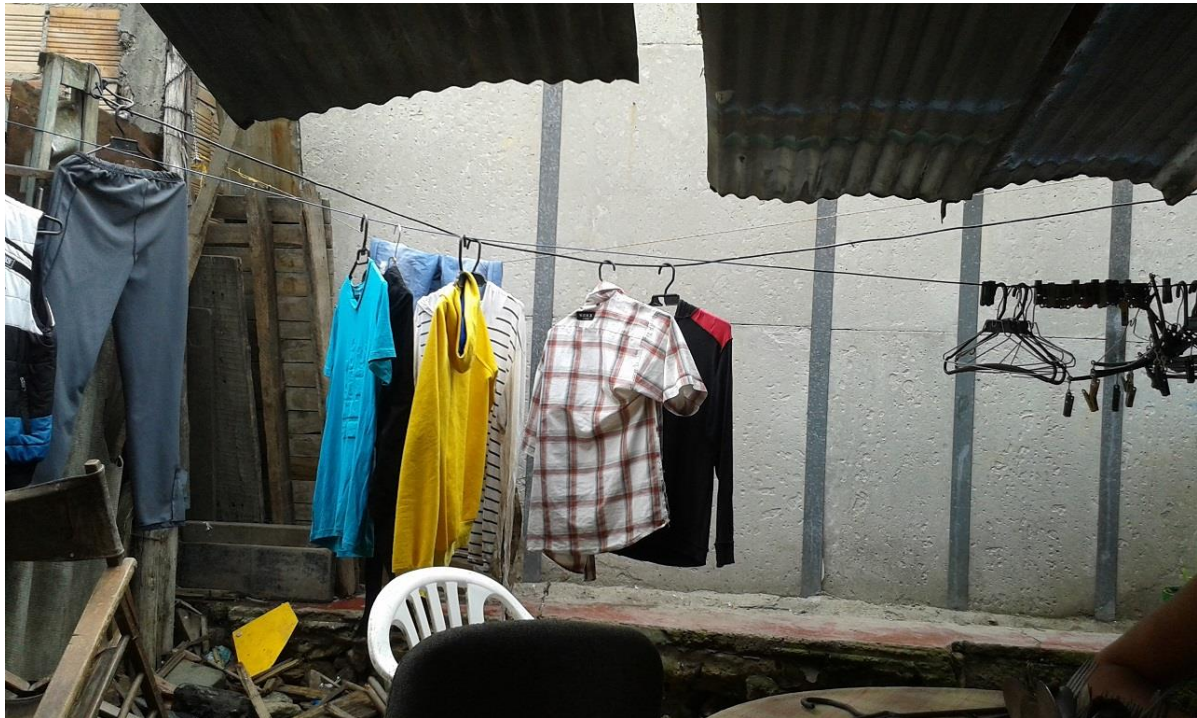
“And it’s the truth, that the economic situation there was better than here.”

“Here, talking like this, many times, I can’t say how many times I have gone to bed hungry, how many times recently I have gone to bed with only an *agua de panela* [palm sugar dissolved in hot water].”

“When you go to bed without anyone knowing you.”

“Of course, the situation there was much better!”

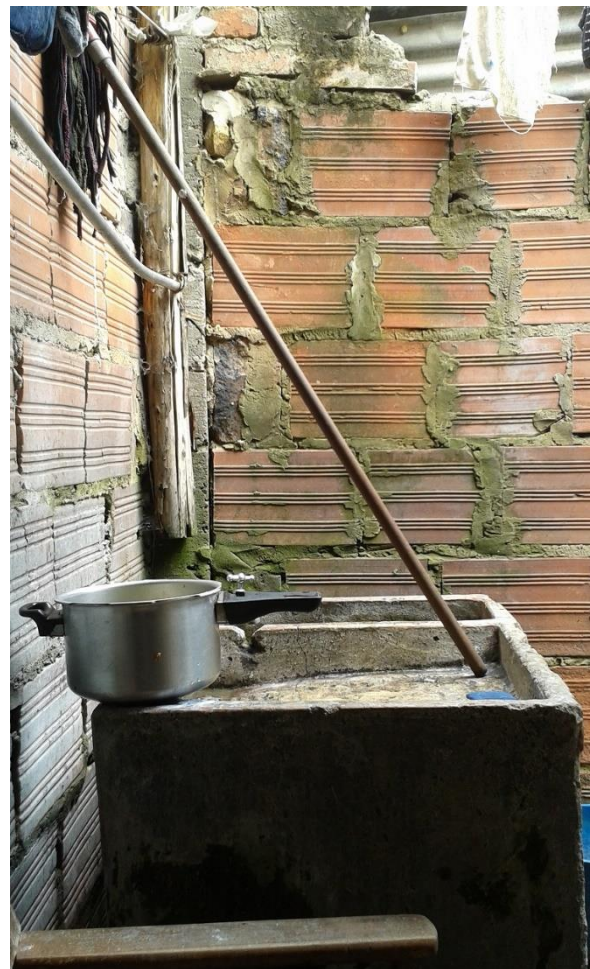
And then, with a look of disgust on her face, she slaps the brick wall next to her.



22 - Clothes drying, Maria's home. Photograph by the author.



23 - Kitchen, Maria's home. Photograph by the author.



24 - Patio Sink, Maria's home. Photograph by the author.



25 - Maria's patio. Photograph by the author.

## “It’s Not the Same as the Life You Have Lived”

For the women I spoke to in the neighbourhood who were willing to discuss their displacement<sup>32</sup> – Mercedes, Sandra and Maria – the move to the city is perceived to have brought about a shrinking of space, together with deeply felt changes in their habits of movement and everyday routines compared to their rural homes (cf. Lederach 2017). The women spoke of arriving in the city and feeling afraid because they didn’t know anyone, and because “all of the houses here are similar, so you’re afraid you will get lost straight away” (Maria). For Maria, the change in her circumstances is intimately connected with the nature of space. A simple question of how she came to be in Bogotá takes a circuitous route through descriptions of how she moved through her previous space, the contrasts between there and Bogotá. Any comparison between her life before and after displacement recalls her past sense of belonging to her previous home, even as these memories also cause pain in their disparity to the present (May 2017). But the memories are not instinctively nostalgic ones of deeply personal, intimate space (cf. Bachelard 1994). When I asked Maria to describe her previous home, I was expecting (almost hoping for) this nostalgia, the meaningful memories connected to a lost paradise of home and garden. Instead, her recollections were distinctly practical:

Maria: OK, where I lived was a house of six rooms, 12 x 12. Made of zinc and wooden planks. Because there I did not have this [gestures around the house]. On the farm I didn’t have this. It had 6 parts or rooms, kitchen, bathroom, it was *huge*. Because there the houses are huge. The house there was massive. Like that, *mhhmm*. I had everything I needed; I had a motorcycle, a chainsaw, scythes, a generator.

*David: And with a garden?*

Maria: No – with chainsaws, motorcycles, scythes. Crops of yucca, of plantain, of [sugar] cane, fields for...[trails off]

Maria: The crops and the cattle, because there the industry is dairy, the cattle. But there the easy money, what you would call the easy money, was the illicit crops [*los cultivos ilícitos*].

For Maria, the impact of her displacement is undoubtedly felt in the loss of her home<sup>33</sup>. This is, in one sense, a loss of livelihood, autonomy and the means of support that she had there.

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<sup>32</sup> Although only three women who had been displaced were willing to have interviews, I knew of a further six displaced families in the area. In 2014 it was estimated that close to 12% of the population of Soacha municipality were internally displaced persons (ACNUR 2015).

<sup>33</sup> There is, of course, also the loss of her family; her father and brothers who were killed when she was displaced. This is not discussed here as the death of family members and the trauma associated with this were not a direct

She was not interested in telling me of lost flowerbeds and trees, or homely rooms, things which had little relevance for a rural way of life. The inventory of items that Maria provided contained more practicality than nostalgia, a longing for a way of life more than a place or location. While Maria did not refer to herself as *campesino* listening to her talk evoked a similar significance for the rural life and environment she had left behind, a relationship that was severed when she was displaced. She feels her loss in the tools and crops, the animals, the functional parts of living on her farm. These were elements of a life that found meaning through ways of working on and with the land. Similarly, Mercedes and Sandra discussed the loss of land “to plant” and how “nothing compares to there, to how you live, to what you have there and the possibilities of growing, to have your land” (Mercedes). Sandra had been displaced twice. Following her first displacement she worked in the city, funnelling the money back to her family in the countryside to rebuild her farm:

“But after having worked so many years, again, as I told you, I returned to displacement once again, and everything that I had gained here [in Bogotá], with my work, there it was again that it was the paramilitaries, the guerrillas.”

“Once again, they took everything.”

“They displaced my mother, my other brothers. What I’d had and that had been invested there in animals, in things for the farm, they took everything again, they took from us there once again...our hands were tied.”

“So, can you say that it’s better now than before? No.”

There is little hope expressed by Sandra that through waiting she can return to her family home outside the city, even though she now believes it is safer there than in the city. Cumulatively, she feels as if she has lost everything, all that was “invested” in the animals and farm; representing for her the years of work and struggle following her first displacement. These years of effort were manifest in the land more than the buildings, in owning her own piece of land. For Sandra, her farm [*finca*] was “big, but not *that* big,” and she stated that she did “not have many things.” But “when those people take it from you, the land you own, your plot of land [*de su propia tierra, de su terruño*], you lose many things...yes...well, so much that for me it is to lose everything.”

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part of interviews, unless prompted by the interviewees themselves. This is in no way meant to imply that these losses were not still deeply felt and present, or that they were less important than the loss of home.

In comparison to their rural lives, where work and being were bound into the same action of maintaining crops and animals as the means to support themselves, these women found the experience of unemployment particularly jarring. Maria decried the loss of work as an aberration unique to the city, to Bogotá. She describes her sensation of arriving in Bogotá as feeling like “people looked at you like a freak because you were displaced.” Maria recalls hunting for work, stating that “everywhere in the world it is a thing” that you can ask for work and be given it; but if you ask for work in Bogotá “they look at you like a freak.” Maria is still unemployed, but with the mother of her partner’s children in jail, she is now responsible for six children, in addition to having a further four who are now adults. The majority of her time is occupied with looking after the children, and she spends most of her days within the flat caring for her disabled son; she is “almost never out” and “rarely goes to other places.” In contrast, when she speaks of her previous home she mentions the space, that her house was “huge” and the means of transport were on foot, horse or “by canoe on the river.” Likewise, Mercedes recalls walking “every day, [in] pure air. Here, the bus. Here the bus.” Worse, everything is “polluted” and “makes you sick”:

Sandra: Here [in the city] you eat a lot of genetically modified food. GM...here they inject a lot of...

Mercedes: Hormones and things...yes, I mean, they are natural, the food is natural there [outside the city], there are no chemicals there. Here, they inject chemicals. There, it’s natural.

Sandra: It’s madness.

Mercedes: The water.

Sandra: The water that you water the plants with there, the water is pure.

Mercedes: Pure.

Sandra: Pure. In contrast, here you have the filthy Bogotá river. [both laugh]

There is no doubt that the environs of the neighbourhood and local area are polluted, particularly close to the *olla*, where garbage from the rubbish dump leaks freely into the surroundings. The *humedal*, whilst ostensibly protected, also shows signs of pollution and contamination in the water and in the haphazard disposal of rubbish throughout the area. As Javier Auyero and Débora Swistun (2009a) have noted, environmental contamination is symptomatic of living in poverty in Latin America and is a problem endured by many residents of poor neighbourhoods. But it is through the comparison to their previous home, the

enforced nature of the change in environment, that these conditions were notable for those who had been displaced. The environmental differences were felt to be “immense” in the suffocating shock of transitioning from being “in nature, the natural environment” to the city where “you can’t breathe” (Sandra). Likewise, Maria explained that in coming from “your land” to the city you “suffer” and that “it’s not the same as the life you have lived.” For Sandra, with the cessation of hostilities between the state and FARC rebels, in addition to being polluted, Bogotá was now also more dangerous than her previous home where “it’s safe...it is much better [there] because, well, here the insecurity...you come and you go and you are already thinking that they are going to rob you.” The changes continue. In the city everything is “money, money, money” (Mercedes), or the lack of it; their food must be purchased, their homes are often rented. Water, gas, electricity, transport must all be paid for.

The displaced experienced their move to the city as a profoundly disorienting one. The foundations of their way of living and being were shaken and changed. In their neighbourhoods and homes the consequences of their displacement are felt most viscerally through material change. This could be read as a loss of self-sufficiency, but in the entanglements with the *things* of this life, the tools, crops and animals, there is an indication of a more complex relationship. Like Ogden’s (2011) gladesmen, the landscape and people of rural areas engage in a back and forth, a “mutually constitutive relationship” (Lederach 2017: 597) where one moves through the other. The everyday moments of rural life are now absent. The experience of the land as you travel *through* it, walking, or by river or horse. Breathing the pure air and drinking the pure water. The possibilities of growing. These are likely idealised visions of a past, thrown into a sharper focus by their comparison with a present where their everyday, their spatial practice within the city, does not “feel familiar” (Dudley 2011). The city introduced itself as something unknown, where life engages with these women in a very different way. The centrality of money and income is one, but it is also the physicality of place and their relationship with this; that the neighbourhood is dangerous and polluted, that the food is contaminated. There is little sense of material or sensory “continuity” (Dudley 2011: 746-747) with the way of life they had prior to displacement.

While it is important to acknowledge and be cognizant of warnings against essentialising discourses of displaced persons or refugees as being intrinsically out-of-place (Malkki 1995; Brun 2001), it is crucial to note that these women do not feel out-of-place in the sense that

they are adrift from any meaningful connections to place or people in the city. The initial experiences of disorientation, feeling lost, were temporary. Now, the women confidently state that “I can’t get lost in any part...everyone around here will know who I am” (Maria) or “a lot of the people round here know me, because I give a lot to the community and I participate” (Sandra). It was impossible to walk from the bus stop to the foundation without Mercedes meeting someone she knows well enough to stop and chat for a few minutes. Although it has taken years, they are no longer strangers to the neighbourhood (cf. Brun 2001: 18-19), and have well-established lives there, in some cases more so than people who have not been displaced. To the extent that they can be, with extremely limited resources, they are active in shaping their own trajectories. They search for work, find means of making ends meet and opportunities for informal employment, support – kindnesses from friends and neighbours – can be instrumental in improving conditions; Sandra has become so well-known that she is president of a *junta* in a Bogotá neighbourhood, Mercedes runs the foundation and works to help other displaced people in the area, and Maria engages in informal work minding the children and houses of her neighbours, or selling raffle tickets from her home. But as Sandra states, “I personally live here because I have to. The truth is it’s by necessity, because if not I wouldn’t live here.” The lack of choice in their situation, the slow morphing of it into a protracted and decades long experience, have also fed anger and resentment at what they view as abandonment by the state.

### The toma [invasion]

“And this is very important.”

“We all got together, everyone, all the families. Everyone, everyone, everyone...right?”

“We all joined together and we went to a residential complex. A complex that they had [in Bogotá], some houses that they were building.”

“They were making some houses.”

“And all of us, we invaded (took) these houses, all the families, we were all there. One in one room, one in another...everyone was there. And we brought the children. We stayed for 78 days. The police locked us up. Right?”

“Because it was an invasion [*esa era una toma*] and because we did it to make a claim to the government so they would give us housing; to give us a house because we didn’t have one, nobody was giving us work, right?”

“And because of the invasion that we did, they introduced the law, T025 of 2004<sup>34</sup>, organised with ACNUR. This, alright? For the displaced, the victims.”

“And through this law they gave me the house. If it wasn’t for this, I wouldn’t be here, in this lot.”

We are sitting at the table in Mercedes house. Another cup of *tinto* steams in front of me and Mercedes sits opposite, looking excited, almost a little nervous. She gestures around at the house as she speaks, animated, finger stabbing at the table for emphasis.

“But they wanted *us* to solve our problem, so they didn’t have to; it took two years of fighting for me to get this. Because this was a very hard process, we ticked the boxes for the paperwork for compensation; they wanted a lot of things that we didn’t have, we didn’t have the money, not for payment, nothing.”

“But we did everything to a T. For this law. This is important.”

“My children, they study at university because they pay for it. The state doesn’t help them with anything, and I continue with nothing and I [ask], “It’s for this that they violate our rights?” I mean, I suffered displacement, but I don’t want to keep crying, lamenting.”

“I can’t, no! I want to say, “we can!” And it’s for this reason that I do this, and I help all the people that I can.”

“To the displaced, I say, “Don’t stay thinking and stay here at a standstill, fight for your dreams!”

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<sup>34</sup> The law referred to here is T-025, passed in 2004 by the Colombian Constitutional Court. The law declared that conditions for many IDPs in the country were inhumane and amounted to a violation of their human rights. It called for urgent, widespread action and reform on the part of the Colombian state to address structural shortcomings in the bureaucracies responsible for administering aid and providing support to displaced persons. The law led to numerous follow up rulings and outside of directly attributable effects in terms of structural reform in state bureaucracies and resources, may have also served a symbolic purpose by foregrounding the plight of IDPs in Colombia and raising public awareness (Rodriguez-Garavito 2011). For an English-language copy of the law see [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Colombia\\_T-025\\_2004.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Colombia_T-025_2004.pdf) (accessed 30/10/2019).

She gestures at an old PC, yellowed with age, which sits in the corner of her front room.

“So, then I go, and I get in there!”

“Internet! Mercedes searches for law ta-ta-ta! Article ta-ta-ta! Right of petition!”

“So, then I position it, “Right of petition, the constitution, ta-ta-ta, article, law. Go and find it!”

“Fight, fight!” I tell them.”

### Waiting and Struggling for Home

Displacement can be experienced as a form of waiting, or temporal liminality, where even as individuals feel stuck in one sense, life continues to flow around and through them, transforming circumstances (Brun and Fabos 2015). Daily routines of eating, cooking, sleeping and working still occur every day, people age and families grow. For some, these everyday needs and the passing of time are tempered with hoping and waiting for things to change, for a new home or a return to an old one – “people simultaneously move on, feel stuck in the present and still actively relate to alternative and changing notions of the future” (Brun 2015: 20). Expanding the scope beyond displacement, waiting can also be seen as a characteristic of the subaltern experience (Jeffrey 2008), or a manifestation of unequal power relations through dependency on – or submission to – a higher authority and a belief in their ability to initiate change; a kind of “powerless waiting” (Auyero and Swistun 2009b; Auyero 2014). But to characterise the women that I spoke to as, if not powerless, then passive, would be doing them a disservice. Of the women that I spoke to, displaced or not, there is little evidence of being passive, of waiting for something to happen or for some assistance to be given. Sandra stated that “If you don’t work, you don’t eat. You have to get by through your own means, you have to be very hard to get your money here, because if not...that’s it.” There was little belief from any residents that opportunities to work and support yourself could be easily found in the neighbourhood. Instead, you have to “help yourself with the sweat from your own brow” (Laura). Carmen, who arguably seemed the most content of the residents I spoke to, cuttingly summarised her own experiences:

“It’s like that saying, “I’m going to Bogotá, to grab the sky with both hands” – lies. Here you have to eat shit every day to survive. You can make yourself a courtyard with the

lies that they tell, “It’s that in Bogotá...” – lies. You’re the king while you have what you brought with you, but for the rest? Forget it. You have to sweat for something.”

For displaced persons especially, the lack of opportunities was directly connected to the state and failed promises. The government “was not what it says it is” (Sandra) and in conversations and interviews the women described “interminable queues” for aid packages, of which they would receive only one a year – “I mean, who can eat for a year with only one aid package?” (Mercedes). Descriptions of the promised help, or the robust legal framework that Colombia has in place for assisting displaced persons, was often greeted as being “lies” and foreign aid money believed to be siphoned off to either the government or to support ex-combatants. Physically distant from the offices where they can obtain support, and with little state or local authority presence in their lives, discourses around support for displaced persons bear little resemblance to their own experiences. The experience of displacement for these women, of living in the neighbourhood, is characterised by feelings of abandonment and betrayal:

“And you come here, to Bogotá, because it is the capital, because they are all here, all of those [aid] entities, and you think that it is going to be easier, but the truth is that no, no.”

“In health? Nothing, nothing.”

“In education? Nothing.”

“Work? Nothing.”

“She [Sandra] works because she goes out and searches for it, and if not, the state does not take account of the displaced for this.”

“This is a lie, no.”

“They all speak on the television, saying “State, Government, they give the displaced everything.” Reality: this [gesturing at the surroundings], this, this is the truth!” (Mercedes)

Consistently, the lack of support and the anger felt by the women was connected to the place where they were, through the city, the neighbourhood or their own house. When Maria slapped the wall of her home after describing to me the hardship she lives, the physical structure of the house was connected to all these things. The materiality of her home was not just in the structure of it, as a physical thing, but also in the relationship it symbolises with Maria, their “mutually constitutive, experiential entwinement” (Dudley 2011: 747). For Maria, who has moved from house to house throughout the area – “because when one pays rent you keep like a pigeon, you fly over there, and you return back here” – there is little

investment in the process of construction and building. She has little control over the conditions of her life and her living conditions reflect her poverty, her displacement, the loss of her livelihood and the perpetual waiting for the government to grant her a plot of land (Dudley 2011: 749; Brun 2016: 432-433). For others in the area – displaced or not – their relationship with their homes is something different.

While not everyone in the neighbourhood was a home-owner – like Maria and Luisa, people were also renting rooms, flats or houses – those who had arrived in the early years of the neighbourhood often owned their plot of land. Subsequently, many of the years since their arrival had featured incremental stages of building; a door one year, tiling a floor the next, adding an additional room in another. This is the construction of a home dictated by conditions of extreme poverty, economic constraints limiting the pace of building and lengthening the process. It becomes a thing experienced temporally, fused with other fundamental changes in a person's life such as births and deaths, a child becoming an adult, marriage or separation; "The plot is not merely a demarcated piece of land, nor is the house only 'bricks and mortar': they are both full of memory and meaning." (Kellett 2002: 19).

Home is part of the social embeddedness of an individual within their neighbourhood; it contains social and economic activities, is a social front presented to neighbours and those living nearby, and represents the attainment, status and respectability of the individual living there (Kellett 2002). Within informal settlements, home is also often the site of economic activities (Kellett 2002: 25-26). During our walks across the neighbourhood to visit families on foundation business, or for my own interviews, we often encountered people engaged in informal employment within the home; tailoring, child-minding, cooking. These are homes where distinctions between the domestic and work are blurred, not only in the presence of informal livelihoods, but also in the acknowledgement that the domestic is often a form of work itself. In the neighbourhood, a space where women bear the overwhelming responsibility for domestic work, ideal visions of home as a positive and feminised place are limiting (cf. Rose 2013). If it is a site of the exploitation and oppression of women then there is "little reason to celebrate a sense of belonging to the home" and even less to look there in search of some "essence of place" (Rose 2013: 99, 101).

Home in the neighbourhood cannot be uncritically accepted as a place of safety and belonging, and can be far from the "material paradise" replete with "maternal features" that

Bachelard (1994: 7) describes in his ruminations on domestic space. For women and children – and some men – it can easily be a space of oppression and abuse. But a home, in its creation and maintenance as either an owned or rented property, does not have to be an imposed project nor a thankless and abject task. The actions of women in making a home are not only the outcomes of gendered and dominated spaces and arguing for home's value can be more than simple domesticity and "mother worship" (hooks 1990: 45). The construction of it – materially, socially and culturally – can contain a "radical political dimension" (hooks 1990: 42) through fostering spaces which allow resistance to domination and oppression. bell hooks (1990: 46-47) argues that the undermining of home, and erosion of the capability of African-American families to make and maintain a home, is one way in which racism degrades the foundations of a "meaningful community of resistance."

"Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world." (hooks 1990: 42)

Speaking of her own experiences growing up within a segregated black community in the US, physically, socially and culturally located on the margins, hooks (1990: 148-152) writes that for those inhabiting the margins – symbolic and literal – there can be value in understanding these as both "sites of oppression and sites of resistance." Being pushed to the margins, for hooks (1990: 150), does not mean accepting the place you call home is necessarily one of "despair" as to do so allows "a deep nihilism" into "the very ground of our being." hooks is, in effect, calling for those who find themselves there to claim the margin as their own, problematising the simple dichotomy which suggests "a margin is only defined by its relation to the centre" (Rose 2013: 265-266). Instead, the oppressed and dominated should use memories of their struggles to re-make and re-signify the margin into a place that is not defined by a dominant other. In doing so they can "create spaces where one is able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that transform present reality" (hooks 1990: 147).

For the displaced women the ongoing struggle to have a home of their own again is of vital importance. In Mercedes' case, her activism with other displaced families represents an act of defiance, and the invasion and occupation of housing by those who had none was a highly symbolic gesture. How influential the action was in the instigation of law T-025 is impossible

to say – documents mention the submission of numerous legal complaints [*tutelas*] as the official prompt – but it is clearly significant for Mercedes. It changed her from passive victimhood to active resistance, taking her out of being at a “standstill” and into articulating demands for justice and compensation following her displacement. The effect has been a lasting one, and although she told me that she has not accepted calls to become a “leader” for displaced persons locally, she is still instrumental in encouraging others to campaign for their own needs. What Mercedes felt to be the most significant result of the *toma* was being granted a plot of land for constructing her house, which needs little explanation; to be given land once again following her displacement was a hugely important moment for Mercedes. But this also invests her home with meaning, as it becomes a physical reminder of the pain, struggle and achievements linked to her displacement.

Following hooks, home can become one way to impart meaning to a place through connecting it to the struggles which someone lives through. As with Mercedes, it can be part of something important, and in doing so it can give a meaning to place, it can be part of forming a moral space. Within the neighbourhood, where poverty and displacement impose a particular experience of temporal liminality, home is tightly bound to the passage of time. For Mercedes her home – in its ongoing, piecemeal construction – represents her plans for the future, stitching moments from the past to the present and future.

*“I Remember – Past, Present, Future”*

We are sitting at the table in Mercedes house, speaking about when she was finally granted the lot for her house from the government.

*“Was it just the lot when you moved here, or was there a house?”*

*“No, there was a little bit [of house]. There was this room and the one at the back, ok? But ugly, ugly. This was...no, no, no, like I say...ugly, ugly, ugly.”*

Mercedes draws out a folder stuffed full of photographs, and begins leafing through them, pulling individual ones out for me to look at. We sit at her table, hunched over the pictures, as she lays out images of her life.

*“This is my house, I keep all of these photos, look. My little daughter.”*

*“And the others (in the photo)?”*

“Neighbours, you see?”

She points at the group of people, a mix of adults and children.

“Look, look – that is the heart.”

“It’s all the children, as far as I’m concerned...how would I put it...the children give a lot, they deserve a lot, right?”

“It’s the adults that don’t understand the children. Adults don’t understand the children and the children suffer, so...but, I like them. I like them, the kids.”

Another photograph, of Mercedes standing on a square bare earth.

“Look, here I am, this is my house. I don’t have walls. I don’t have walls, just the lot.”

“To get materials, they gave them to me, this is what they gave me. They left it for me in the street and everyone was bringing the materials inside here.

“That’s why, see; photo, photo, photo. Look, everyone is helping Mercedes carry. Friends, you see? Here, building walls, look.”

*“These photos are from here?”*

“Here. For each thing...” Mercedes mimes taking pictures “I remember – past, present, future.”

*“This is the street outside? It’s different, really different.”*

“Did you see how they are in front of the houses? Only earth. Only earth, see?”

“Look, look, do you see?”

“See, look, see!”

“My daughter. Yes, you see how they are helping me? This is nice, it’s beautiful, nice. You see? This is my house.”

*“Really?”*

“This is my house, everyone collecting, helping Mercedes.”

“Look how it was before, do you see? You see, right?”

“Only earth outside. A dog! I love dogs!”

“How long did it take you to build the house? One year? Less?”

“This? My house? Every year, I put something.”

“Little by little.”

“Yes.”

Mercedes points behind her, indicating a part of the house I haven't seen.

“This past year, the bathroom door. It didn't have a door.”

“2 years ago, I tiled the bathroom, the kitchen. Put nice floors in – the bathroom and the kitchen.”

“And so, this year, I want to paint, paint, paint, paint.”

“This year.”

Another photograph, this time of concrete pillars rising out of the earth next to her half-built house. Mercedes points at the photo, then at one of the same pillars embedded in a nearby wall.

“Some columns. Foundations. This is my house. Look, the columns. Worker, worker Maria!”

“Maria! Really?”

“Yes! You see? A wall!”

Pointing at herself, Mercedes gives an exaggerated imitation of her own reaction, “Mercedes: “Wow, wow, wow!” Look; my house before, look. You see? Ugly walls, this, this house.”

Mercedes pulls out another, showing the house with her and Maria standing out front, surrounded by a gaggle of children. She laughs, pointing.

“Mercedes! Mercedes, Maria, Lina, Adriana (her daughters). Friends of Adriana, you see? My house as it was outside, outside there. Only earth. When we had floors already, Mercedes, Lina, Adriana. My little children, Camilo (her son), Lina.”

“When I’d already fixed this, this, this –” more pointing around the house, “– just like that, Lina took photos.”

“This is me. These are beautiful memories. My son graduating. High school. Me working, look, I’m building this, look!”

Mercedes laughs again.

“My little daughter Lina. When she climbed here [the stairs in the house]...wow!”

*“Is it possible to see [upstairs]?”*

“Lina...now, now, I’ll take you now; but I want you to cover your eyes!”

Mercedes laughs again and pulls out a photo showing her as a young woman, standing next to a white house. The street stretches out behind her, small white houses. In the background, green hills rise up.

“My village; where we were.”

“Yes. You see? It’s beautiful.”

“Yes, it’s nice there...my daughter, cousins. This was years ago. Look, ’93. See, my son, Mercedes. Wow, [that’s] me! My house before. My dog!”

“There was no gate so they used to come in, the dogs. And I gave them food so they would watch the house, watch my children.”

Another photograph is drawn out, showing a younger Mercedes surrounded by children with makeshift instruments.

“This is the previous organisation I worked at - the musical orchestra of Mercedes! My daughter. How pretty!”

“Yes - I keep everything like this, I like it. Haha! Mercedes’ house before. Here we added a floor, and I was, “Wow, a floor!” My children, cousins, the [first] communion of my children.”

Mercedes points out her daughter at communion. She smiles as she looks at the photo.

“Grumpy, she’s grumpy. A dress...she (pointing at photo) “Mami, a pretty dress!” and me, “There is no money!”

“And this woman here, a woman from the neighbourhood, gifted me a dress, broken at the bottom.”

“And I fixed it up like this.”

“Pretty little girl! But happy! See, dresses. No...haha! My son’s grades...”

“These are all the memories that I have.”

“These are my memories, you see? Before and after...and after. Another year, I’ll show you [new] photos. Before, after – wow!”

Mercedes smiles and ushers me away from the table, towards the stairs that lead up to the roof of her house.

“Be careful, yeah? No? Alright, let’s go up and then we’ll go...”

As we step up onto the top level, through a small gate, her dog runs to greet us.



26 – Mercedes at home with her two daughters. Photographer unknown.

## Conclusion – Remembering and Making Place

“An entire past comes to dwell in a new house.” (Bachelard 1994: 5)

“The meaning of any past event may change as the larger, continuing story lengthens and grows in complexity.” (Antze and Lambek 1996: xix)

When Mercedes insisted on showing me her home, we spent very little time looking at the physical structure of it. My memories of the house itself are vague to the point where I cannot write anything more specific than I have done. Yet, the memory of sitting with Mercedes at her kitchen table as she pulls out her photographs is indelible. In the story of how she struggled to obtain her plot of land, Mercedes connects her house with the past and ongoing narratives of events that have shaped her life. The repeated and insistent calls that she made when we were looking at the photographs, to “look,” to “see,” indicate her desire to have these events witnessed. When Mercedes speaks of these as “all” of her memories, while not meaning this literally, she highlights the significance for her of recording these moments. The pictures become a kind of testimony; to change, to solidarity with neighbours and friends, to the things that matter to her: children, family, dogs. Surrounded by what is becoming a physical accumulation of these memories, the house can act as both remembrance and the becoming of future plans (Morton 2007: 170). Mercedes wants to paint one year, improve this or that part the next. Her home extends toward what can be imagined, even as it anchors the present and past.

The act of remembering and memories have been a connecting thread throughout this chapter, an inevitable consequence of asking people to recall how their place came to be. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (1996) note that memory serves as one way in which people weave narratives of their lives; through the stories that we tell about ourselves we shape who we are and we define what is important about us, a sentiment recalling Taylor’s (1989) understanding of the self. This in turn implies a dialectical dynamic between memory and the self whereby “people emerge from and as the products of their stories about themselves as much as their stories emerge from their lives” (Antze and Lambek 1996: xviii). In this formulation of memory as practice, remembering also becomes something that can be dialogical, engaged with between individuals or socially amongst a group as an ongoing act (Lambek 1996: 239). These memories are neither true or false, accurate or inaccurate, but “eyewitness accounts” (Lambek 1996: 248) given to others that testify to claims made

contextually, mindful of who, where, what they speak to and how. They ask for a recognition of the position of the teller but are mindful of the listener, too.

Narratives about place are often contentious, and one way in which struggles over the urban landscape are manifest is in the discourses that surround particular areas (Lombard 2013; Till 2012). Beyond stigma, an outcome of the narratives of the powerful, there are the stories told by those who live within these imposed imaginaries. Attempts to articulate a past hurt, or an ongoing struggle, indicate how injustices can become generative of new ways to imagine the future (Till 2012: 8). The invitation to see Mercedes' home was really an invitation to share in her memories, and more importantly to hear her testimony of suffering and kindnesses. Her home is, in the words of Iris Marion Young (2005: 138), "a meaningful and human project" that signifies and helps to make real, manifest physically, a long struggle to claim, make, maintain and grow her place in the city. In conjunction with her photographs, stretching back to before her displacement, it has become part of how Mercedes remembers, a marker of the events and relationships that matter to her (Young 2005: 140). As part of a wider process of placemaking within the neighbourhood, it also suggests how social space, in the contestations, improvisations and struggles of the residents, mixes with the built landscape; two "simultaneities of ongoing, unfinished, stories" (Massey 2006: 46).

Due to her displacement Mercedes' memories also serve as "acts of commemoration, of testimony, of confession, of accusation" (Lambek and Antze 1996: xxv), and we see some of this complexity reflected in her relationship with her home. Like others who have been displaced, she makes a distinction between the "beautiful" place where she lived before and the "ugly" house where she now lives. When she tells of the amazement that she or the children feel at seeing a new floor, walls, a staircase, she is aware that this is both a testimony to her achievements and also an indication of how much her struggle has reduced her resources and expectations. There is a self-aware irony in her repeated exclamations of "wow!" that is tempered by genuine pride. These different parts – the floor or walls – also recall the connections that she shares with neighbours and friends in the area, the kindness that was shown her. That small and large acts of kindness are remembered there – the gifted dress, building materials donated, help with construction – speaks to the deeper significance these may take on with the passage of time; a "sense that when they are noticed, at the time or retrospectively, they can be productive of more than the particular act" (Brownlie and

Anderson 2017: 1227). The house becomes a material accumulation of lived experiences, symbolic of both the good and bad that have followed her displacement, the moments that mark her time in the city. In her promise to show me photos of future years, Mercedes indicates the ways in which she sees change in her future, the possibility of something different; that things will not stay the same and she will not stay waiting for that change to come from elsewhere.

As Doreen Massey (2006: 42) notes, the past “can all too easily be reduced to human memory.” The narratives that residents told me about their lives constitute part of the placemaking that residents are engaged in, where their city, neighbourhood, streets and homes are marked by the important moments. But this is a process that is also characterised by the material relations they have with the urban space around them. Struggles to shape the landscape are as much collective as private, as are struggles simply to survive; the neighbourhood and the surrounding areas transformed by a necessity born of poverty. At the centre of this are people’s homes, housing not just their bodies and possessions – however poorly – but their routines and habits. In the absence of public space homes function as vehicles for domestic, social and economic practices. Kindness is one part of this, as a response to these struggles for survival. This is less a network of support than a proliferation of moments, unevenly distributed and experienced, where some recognition of the hardships individuals and families face is given. Residents cannot solve or overcome the hardships they face – and share, to differing degrees – but they can mitigate them, even be genuinely life-changing in the small margins created by poverty and displacement.

But lives unfold here scored by absences as much as these moments of kindness. An absence of work. Of a partner or husband, or simply of their respect. Of support from the state or authorities. These, too, are part of the making of a place, of how residents experience and live through their space. In the repetitive and consuming burden of domestic care and work, in the time spent confined to houses due to this. The insecurity of public places and the fear of crime. The disjuncture between rural and urban requires a reorientation and remaking of significances and relations to place, especially for the displaced. Ways of being – moving, breathing, working, drinking, eating – are fundamentally changed. Land to grow and plant is replaced with rents, utility bills, food bills and a contaminated environment. But as a space characterised by these diverse struggles to overcome I understand the neighbourhood to be

one marked by emergent moral communities. It is a space where a topographical marking of memory and narrative gives these absences and kindnesses a lasting importance. They are signifiers of the larger questions hanging over conditions of life in the neighbourhood, in the structural inequalities of life that the urban poor live. Rather than a simplified moral geography of purity and disorder, in the continuing projects of making home and place I see an interlinking between the materiality of place and the struggles which give this meaning, neither wholly positive – the intimate security of domesticity – nor negative. This is meaning formed through the dialectical movements between different glimpses of injustice, kindness and hardship, successes and failures; the complexity of lived experiences that make places matter to the people who live there.



27 - Street near Mercedes' home. Photograph by the author.

## The Foundation

Mercedes and I walk from the bus stop to the foundation, some 15 minutes through streets and alleys, before we cross the line between Bogotá and Soacha and slip from pavement to hard-packed mud. The park on the Bogotá side ends, concisely, along the city limits and stretching in front of us are blocks of low, red-brick housing. Passing into the neighbourhood, faded graffiti proclaims a Happy New Year, Happy Holidays, next to an image of striped candy cane. We turn the corner onto the street where the foundation is located, a simple dirt road with some rough concrete pavement running down each edge. Most days loud music blasts from the bar on the corner, or throbs through the ground from one of the houses further down. The door to the foundation itself is immediately off the street, a low entrance barely more than five feet high, set into a battered white metal framework which is festooned with locks and bolts. A raised concrete lip sits at ground level to keep dirt, detritus and water from getting inside. It is through this small door that all people enter the foundation – adults ducking their heads to avoid the frame, everyone being careful to avoid tripping on the lip at the bottom. Every day, as I pass inside, Mercedes or Alisson will warn me to watch my head.

The metal framework with the door comprises half of the wall abutting the street and the windows running across its length are covered with a protective grillwork. Next to this metal framework lies another, permanently locked, door with another large window adjacent, covered in the same security grill and with a net curtain hanging on the inside to block the view in or out. The dusty fabric filters the outside light to a dull grey within. Crossing the threshold, we step directly into the dining room itself, a large space formed of two adjoining areas; on the right, a medium sized table and wooden chairs, on the left a long wooden table and benches. In the centre is another small table, while an empty freezer sits against the rearmost wall, lids propped open, gathering dust and dead insects inside. The radio is playing and the smell of cooking fills the space, of simmering beans or lentils, or frying; plantain, onion or *arepas*.

As the first room that people enter coming in off the street this dining room is both the canteen and the public facing side of the foundation. It is where the children eat their meals, and where most activities occur – homework classes, dance lessons, and fund-raising events. The walls are concrete painted a plain white or tiled, with foam decorations attached –

animals, cartoon characters, letters, and numbers – and the name of the foundation is spelled out on the wall facing the entrance from the street. On the left-hand side is a large whiteboard, which serves as a menu for the day with each item written there – during my time at the foundation they also ask me to write the menu in English, and I do my best to translate. As the children arrive, they often stop and check the list, running through the soup, the main dish, the juice. The date and day of the week are also always written at the top and changed daily, marking the steady progression through the months. Occasionally, messages will be added to the board for the children to read - *Cuando perdonamos a las demás, nuestro corazón es libre* [When we forgive others, our heart is free], *Cuidar la naturaleza es cuidar de la vida* [To care for nature is to care for life]. Ranged around the room in various places there are also religious icons and symbols; a small statue of the Virgin Mary in a glass case, the word 'Jesus' attached to the wall, a wooden cross and candles. One table is laid with statues of angels, with pictures of Mary and Jesus, and a written copy of Psalm 23 - *El Señor es mi pastor* [The Lord is my Shepherd].



28 – The dining room at the foundation. Photograph by the author.



29 – Religious icons in the foundation. Photograph by the author.

Against a central pillar there is a small side table with a radio that blares constantly when the foundation is open, tuned in to a local station playing Latin and Colombian pop music. Paola, who works in the kitchen, likes to turn this up to deafening levels, to the annoyance of Alisson. The radio then becomes a regular battleground between the two, a to-ing and fro-ing of raising and lowering the volume with disputed claims of noise and acceptability. No compromise is ever reached during my time there, the process instead coming to resemble a habitual and almost ceremonial daily joust. Occasionally, Alisson will take one of the children and “dance a step” of salsa to the music while others look on, Paola included.

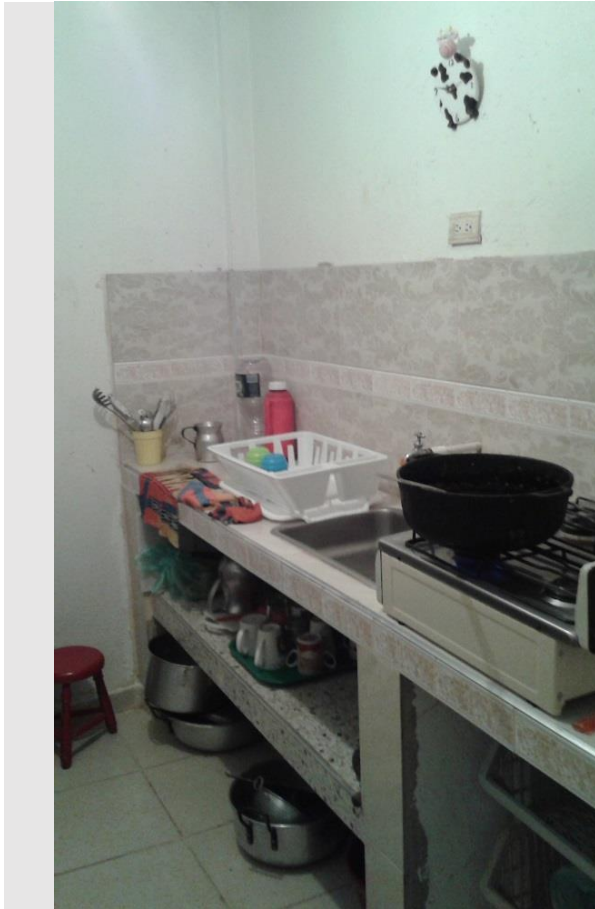
Beyond the dining room is the central stairwell, which connects the ground floor to the upper levels. To the right lies the entrance to the kitchen and further back an additional bathroom and then another room at the rear. The stairs to the first floor are on the left, simple concrete with no handrail. The stairwell itself is utilitarian, concrete and brick with a long-faded layer of white paint. The roof above the stairs is corrugated tin, with some clear plastic panels to admit light, there being no other source of natural light outside of the windows in the dining room. When it rains the roof reveals multiple leaks and the central area becomes flooded, with steady drips or streams of water flowing through gaps and tumbling down from two floors above to pool on the floor. During the rainy season the patter of falling drops is a constant here, accompanied with the sound of the mop slapping against the concrete as Mercedes or Alisson try to contain the water. After heavy floods or during warmer weather the drain set in the floor emits a strong rotting stink, or that of sewage. To the immediate left of the stairs, tucked under the flight to the first floor, is a heavy concrete sink with a stone scrubbing plane for cleaning cloths. The concrete steps themselves double as a knife-sharpener for Mercedes, who scrapes the old blades across the rough surface to restore an edge, and dishcloths and towels are spread here and there to dry.

The kitchen is the engine of the foundation, churning out enough food to feed more than 50 children a day. It is a long, cramped rectangle, easily the warmest room in the foundation – being heated by the gas stove – and the smell of cooking is a permanent feature until the burners are turned off at around 15.00. A worktop runs along the back wall with the sink and draining area for cleaning dishes in the centre, and a large industrial stove on the right, while underneath is a shelf holding the battered, industrial-sized pots and pans used for cooking. Flush against the left-hand wall there is a tall shelving unit, piled high with stacks of dried pulses, grains, rice, salt, oil and other cooking essentials. Next to it, on the front wall, is a rack with all the plastic cups, bowls and plates used by the children, which Alisson likes to keep grouped by colour. Next to this is a small table which has the cutlery and is used as another prep area, often for slicing plantain or salad. This all leaves only a narrow gap running down the centre of the room. With no windows to the outside and just one to the dim central hallway, the only light is from an electric bulb above. When the electrics fail – as they did occasionally for anything from a few hours to days at a time – it is close to pitch black inside,

and the cooking is done by candlelight. “*Qué romántico,*” Mercedes observes, with a hint of resignation.



30 – The central stairwell at the foundation. Photograph by the author.



31 and 32 – The kitchen at the foundation. Photographs by the author.



33 – Mercedes cooks by candlelight. Photograph by the author.

The bathroom – there are actually two, but one is located above and is supposedly off limits – is off the central stairwell. It is small, but towards the end of my fieldwork it is renovated slightly, with a new door installed instead of the plastic tarp that was hanging there previously. Inside there is a sink, shower and toilet – although it seems that the shower is never used. It is dark like the kitchen, having no natural light, and when the bulb is flicked on clouds of mosquitoes rise up and fill the air. In the confined space the mosquitos brush against your face, land on your arms and catch in my hair. Again, when the towel is used, more mosquitoes materialise; sometimes, it feels like I might breathe them in. Most of the time, the children are not encouraged to use the toilet, except for emergencies. Given the number of small children attending the foundation, however, these can be fairly common, with small hands plucking at Alisson’s sleeve for permission.

To the rear lie two rooms used for doing paperwork, activities and storing materials. One has a small, low table in it, and several child-sized seats. This is where Mercedes and Alisson tend to do their admin work, hunched over the table on tiny stools, and it is also where we eat lunch together at the end of the day, the three of us gathering together to talk and relax for a few moments. Around us on the back and side walls are shelving units that are full of textbooks, story books, encyclopaedias and so on, but I rarely see anyone use or look at these. Abutting these on the right-hand wall there are storage shelves filled with materials for different activities; board games, and a large amount of drawing and writing materials. There are also various items being stockpiled for future use; foam offcuts, cardboard shapes, a tin of loose buttons, a stack of old PCs. These are often items that have been donated by somebody and have no purpose in themselves, being only looked at speculatively on occasion by Mercedes and Alisson, in the hope of discerning a use for them. The room has no natural light, but a bright electric bulb, and the atmosphere of a chill cave buried away from the sunlight.



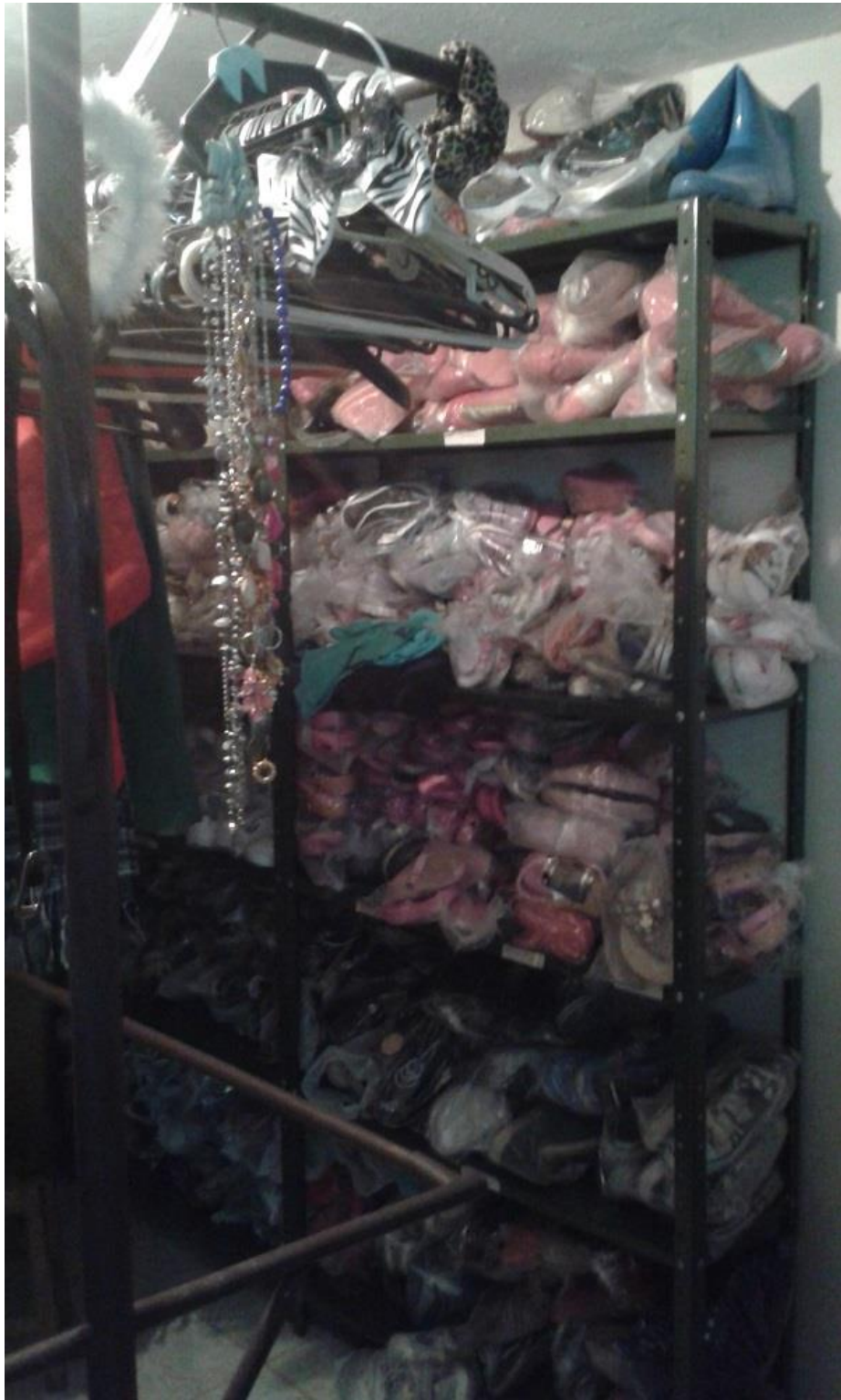
34 – The back room. Photograph by the author.

There is a semi-dividing wall on the left-hand side and on the other side of this there are more materials and games together with a large, old TV mounted on an old cable spool along with a DVD player donated by a local priest that is sometimes used to play films for the children. On the furthest left wall there is yet another collection of items that have been donated to the foundation which Mercedes and Alisson are waiting to sort through. Only the items that are of good or saleable quality are set aside for one of the fund-raising fairs that the foundation holds. Anything that is broken, exceptionally dirty or deemed useless will be thrown out or taken to one of the local recyclers that live in the neighbourhood. Various strange items surface during the searches for useful goods; a single plastic doll's arm, expired medicines. Once, as we sit raking through the bags, Alisson brings up an ancient-looking plastic device, all yellowed and cracked, with a hose and cup on one end. Mercedes puzzles over it, holding the cup attachment up to her mouth before we realise it's not an oxygen mask but a breast pump; much to Alisson's enjoyment (and mine).

The first floor is shared between the building owner's personal living space and storage for the foundation, plus a toilet; the second floor is entirely occupied by the owner, and is where they keep their dog, Natasha. During my first block of fieldwork Natasha is always penned inside behind a wooden gate, and her barking is a regular companion through the day. Part

of the daily routine after meals is to gather every last scrap of leftover food from the dirty plates for Natasha, down to a few remaining grains of rice. However, when I return the following year the dog has vanished. We are told that she has escaped, but one day Mercedes, Alisson and I see her in the park nearby. We speak to her and she is glad of the human attention, nuzzling our hands and walking alongside down the street. But when we try to tempt her back inside the house with food she runs away and refuses to cross the threshold. Despite her absence, we still gather the food for her.

The final room used by the foundation is also located on this level, a large space behind security grills which remain locked. The room is also used for storage, this time mainly of clothes and shoes that are for re-sale at one of the fund-raising fairs. Again, there is no natural light, and the room is dark as the clothes are stacked on eight feet high racks, almost blocking out the electric bulb. The clothes hang on rails or are neatly stacked, organised by gender and size, whilst the shoes fill an entire wall, floor to ceiling. The children are not permitted inside and compared with the bustle of the lower levels the space is quiet and still, the air smelling of dust and old clothes. Sometimes, during a very busy day, I sit here as I write my notes, slightly removed from the bustle below.



35 – The storage room. Photograph by the author.

Chapter Five:  
The Self and Others in Moral Spaces of Care

Eduardo

Salsa music squawks in a tinny shout from the small stereo balanced on a stool at the front of the room. In front of it, the dance teacher – hair bleached blonde, flamboyant and camp in his actions and speech – moves fluidly in time to the music. The children, gathered in something resembling rows, shuffle awkwardly, stand motionless or move with free abandon. I try a few steps, stiff and robotic compared to Alisson next to me, and at the side of the room Eduardo laughs and mocks me with his brothers. Alisson calls out to him to join and he waves her off with a scornful expression, his cap tilted back. Ignoring his protests Alisson dances across the room, pulls him down off the table, and dances a few steps with him. He is embarrassed, then laughing. Mercifully, for me, the song ends. Eduardo, smiling now, disengages himself and resumes his seat at the side of the room.

“You dance good,” says Sebastián, another of the boys. I look at him doubtfully and he laughs, then qualifies “For a *gringo*.”

The following week, the dance teacher is due again. At 14.00 some of the children start turning up for the lesson. Eduardo appears with his brothers, pausing near the door and looking in. He asks Mercedes where the dance teacher is, when will he come? Soon, Mercedes tells him, at 15.00.

“Do you want to dance this week?” asks Mercedes.

“Yes, *profe!*” replies Eduardo, before turning to head back toward his house in the *olla*. Half an hour later he is back, checking if the teacher has turned up.

By 15.00 the dining room in the foundation is cleared and ready for the lesson to begin. Tables and benches have been pushed to one side and the space is full of children, some of whom have gone home to change clothes especially. Eduardo appears again at the door to see if the dancing has started. Mercedes promises him that soon, soon the lesson will start, once the teacher has arrived. She checks her phone and tells me that the teacher has sent her a message on WhatsApp to say that he is delayed. As a stop-gap we play some games with the children, then Carolina, an eight-year old girl from the *olla*, sings a song that she has been

practising. Mercedes messages the dance teacher again. He is still delayed. Eduardo appears once more, looks around, then leaves again. It is 15.30. Mercedes phones the dance teacher, and he assures her that he is only five minutes away. We tell the children he will arrive soon and play some more games to pass the time waiting. Eduardo comes back for a final time, sees the teacher is not there, and with a gesture of exasperation leaves. At 16.00 we pack up and send the children, protesting, home. The dance teacher has messaged again to say that he is not coming. Mercedes is fuming with anger and tells me that for her, this is not good. She says that when the kids are here, they are not on the street, and being in the foundation is better in any capacity. But the children are hard enough to reach already without disappointments adding to the problem. As Mercedes puts it, how can they expect a child to engage with something when they have been let down, disappointed through a broken promise?

Eduardo is 12 years old and living in the *olla*.

Eduardo wears a baseball cap, a heavy, fake silver ring and a chain.

Eduardo's hands and face are dirty more often than they are clean.

Eduardo has two brothers, and together they often act out, wilfully disrupting activities, making life difficult for whoever is in charge. He incites other children to misbehave, organising collective disobedience.

Eduardo spends most of his time on the streets, I am told, with the older men who hang around the corners in the *olla*. He rarely attends school.

One day, he takes my pen so I can't make notes. Laughing – humiliatingly – he shows no intention of returning it and seems to enjoy my discomfort. Later, other children intervene and convince him to return it.

By the time I return for my second block of fieldwork six months later, Eduardo – together with his brothers – has dropped out of school altogether and no longer attends the foundation. I do not see him again.

As Helen Berents (2015: 92) notes, “dichotomies and stereotypes speak before young people themselves can offer alternatives.” By all accounts, Eduardo could fit the stereotype of being the archetypal urban youth troublemaker, destined only for the streets or gangs. It would be

easy to write him that way. Yet it was my own position in relation to Eduardo that created the relationship we – briefly – had; I was an outsider, one to be tested, it seemed. My own glimpses of Eduardo will never be anything more than partial; a surface reading, incapable of tracing out the emotional and intimate significances that inhere within his life in the neighbourhood, or his embodied experiences of this. But for other children at the foundation, or Alisson, or Mercedes, the relationship was something different; he conceded to a dance, he spoke of what he wanted, and entreaties had value to him. Although outcomes similar to Eduardo's are disheartening for Mercedes and Alisson, they form an inevitable part of the work that they do at the foundation; children dropping out of school, becoming pregnant, going to the street. But day by day Mercedes and Alisson keep working through the same routines, making do with limited resources and little outside support. In this there are echoes of Caduff's (2019: 790) observation that in relationships of care "things fall apart, collapse more often than not, get stitched together piece by piece, however provisionally, however precariously."

This chapter examines the place of the foundation within the social space of the neighbourhood through sketching out the history of the foundation, and its roots in the ambition and desire of Mercedes and Alisson to make meaningful social change, even if on a local level. This change may not be easy to bring about, or even to see, from the perspective of grassroots social organisations (cf. Maclure and Sotelo 2004; 2007), but this chapter does not aim to engage with measures of the foundation's success. Instead, the chapter begins by exploring how the foundation is a deeply personal project for both women that signifies their "moral ambitions" (Elisha 2011) to change the neighbourhood through their work with local children and families. Through their understanding of the neighbourhood partially as a complex of needs and vulnerabilities, but also as an area suffering very structural abandonment and violence, I explore how Mercedes and Alisson navigate between embodied knowledge of life in the neighbourhood and normative ideas of children and childhood when engaging in the practice of care (Tronto 1993). I argue that the foundation operates on a contextualised, grounded and sensitive – though by no means perfect – connection to local children that allows a shared understanding of the conditions of life within the neighbourhood and the struggles faced by local families. Although facing obstacles in their work through these difficult conditions, I understand Mercedes and Alisson to be opening up

a “site of opportunity” (Berents 2014) for the children and their families. The small steps taken through the foundation’s work with the children, where meals, education and other activities create social events, allow moments of potential change in residents’ relationships with each other and their social imaginaries of the neighbourhood. As a result, it has become an important part of local social space and indicates the ways in which care organisations may function within developing urban neighbourhoods. It also demonstrates how the small acts and changes undertaken through this care work can be part of a quieter political and moral activity contained in everyday routines.

### Moral Foundations

“In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going.” Charles Taylor (1989: 47)

What drives two women to strike out by themselves and establish a social foundation, with few resources, in a neighbourhood notorious for crime and poverty? What motivations convince them to undertake this project in the knowledge that there is little to nothing that can be gained financially? When they themselves are living on a fine margin between just enough and poverty, why do they risk the latter through pouring time and energy into unpaid work? How, more than a decade later, has this foundation settled into the rhythm of neighbourhood life? These questions did not motivate my research when I began fieldwork, but following months working and spending time with Mercedes and Alisson, it began to seem more and more remarkable – yet ordinary – that what they did was somehow succeeding. Against considerable obstacles they had decided to establish a *comedor* [canteen] for local children guided only by their own compulsion. Speaking with them about why they started the foundation, it became clear that it was linked to something they felt deeply as a vocation and personal calling that was a part of who they are, a thread connecting them to a vision of what their life should be. Their motivations, in other words, were deeply moral ones drawing on their experiences of life within the neighbourhood – both having lived in the area – and linking these with understandings of what the good in life should look like.

Familiar threads emerged in the history of the foundation that Mercedes and Alisson recounted to me, as we crouched around the tiny table in the rear of the foundation. Displacement, poverty, the impulse to help poor neighbourhoods *change* somehow. In 2000, following her displacement to Bogotá, Mercedes is lost and alone with her children in the city,

sleeping on the street. A local woman takes her in, and the church she is a member of provides the support that Mercedes struggles to receive from the government. In 2004, after finally securing a plot of land to build her house, Mercedes feels secure enough to begin working, and the church offers her a job within a social organisation they run in the same neighbourhood, working with local children. At the same time, Alisson is working with the Secretariat for Social Integration (*Secretaría Distrital de Integración Social*) in Bogotá, a part of the mayor's office responsible for implementing diverse social welfare programs. In her spare time, she volunteers at children's homework classes in the same organisation as Mercedes. Convergent interests in running extra-curricular activities meant that they were soon partnered on projects, whilst developing their own ideas together for new activities; stockpiling instruments for a youth band, or trying to set up a dance group. Alisson laments, however, that, "there were always limitations; the sister [in charge at the organisation] was always like, "This, no; this, no; this, no." Despite a lack of support, they persevere in working together and trying to get their ideas approved. Both, however, feel stifled through the lack of opportunities to implement their own ideas.

In 2005 a double loss hits Mercedes, with the deaths in quick succession of one of her sisters and a brother-in-law; it is "a difficult time, pretty heavy" that results in an extended leave of absence from her work. On her return Mercedes discovers that the programs she has been trying to develop herself have been claimed by other workers at the organisation, who are attempting to get them approved. Exasperated by the "chaos" and infighting she quits her position and for some months her and Alisson lose touch. Later encouraged by friends to pursue the projects they had envisioned whilst working together, Alisson searches for Mercedes:

"We were all searching for [Mercedes], we arranged to meet in the apartment and well, it was always something like, how to reclaim [the work] and look at what it was that was done badly...and then we had already started."

This is a relationship that has become close over time but finds its roots in a mutual respect and an ability to work well together. The women looked at each other and saw a shared desire to direct their complementary abilities to improving on the shortcomings of the previous organisation and its projects. They saw failings in the ways the work had focused on "people who did not really appreciate what we were doing there." Both women also expressed a belief that once the process of working together had started, in something as simple as a meeting

to discuss the idea in itself, it developed its own natural process; their role was simply to intuit where, how and what they would do. Their only guide was to make sure their work was “really going with the neediest” and where it was “really necessary, where it motivated us.” In conversation with both women one day, they chart out the small odyssey they took across different neighbourhoods of Soacha and Bogotá, searching for the right place to start their work:

Alisson: “We went out to search, we went until Cazucá – where else were we?”

Mercedes: “In Isla del Sol, there, at Lagos de Quintanares...”

Alisson: “Also close to Marco Fidel Suárez...”

Mercedes: “La Despensa...”

Alisson: “...but there was always something that said, ‘No, this is not it.’ We were looking, ‘OK, we’ll go to another site. No, here neither.’ It was like the sixth sense was saying, ‘Here? No, I don’t know if that can work.’”

As they talk, they recall how early attempts to collaborate with other individuals and organisations fell apart, condemning those they felt had not seen the work as “social labour,” but a way to further private agendas or make money. Consequently, each nascent partnership collapses before it even begins. Mercedes and Alisson enact strict control over their project, rejecting what they perceive as the hollow promises of possible collaborators and forsaking instrumental relationships in order to maintain a focus on their work as something “truly born of the heart.” They speak to me of their work as a “vocation” and “passion,” a deeply personal motivation reflected in their desire to find a place where, in their own words, they could be “pioneers” even if it meant “not one *peso* for us.”

### Mercedes and Alisson

Alisson bustles into the dining room to find out what all the noise has been about. She is wearing one of the nurse’s tops that she always has on at the foundation, which function as a uniform of kinds for her and Mercedes, and her long wavy hair is tied back tightly. Her green eyes look fiercely from one child to the next, who grin helplessly back at her. In the middle of the table is Mercedes, who has just been learning an overly energetic hand-clapping game from the children. She looks as guilty as they do and is smiling in the same way. Everyone’s hands are suspiciously clasped. Alisson’s gaze stops on Mercedes, and she angrily asks what all the noise has been about.

“Nothing, *mamita!*”

Mercedes is fighting to keep her face straight.

Alisson narrows her eyes, huffs loudly and turns to leave. As she does, she catches my eye, winks and smiles.

Behind her, Mercedes and the children descend into fits of not-so-silent laughter.

The reasons and motivations for charity work can be ambiguous, shifting and sometimes contradictory (cf. Elisha 2011; Payton 1996; Trundle 2014). Examining expat American women in Tuscany, Italy, Catherine Trundle (2014) argues that altruistic work can provide a means of establishing a sense of “moral personhood.” Interpreting the women’s volunteering as a means of understanding social boundaries and creating a feeling of belonging, Trundle (2014: 85) proposes that this allows reflexive consideration of who they feel themselves to be morally. Settling in a new location, with limited social connections and struggling to find employment, “self-worth was achieved through transplanting an ethic of work and achievement onto the sphere of volunteering” (Trundle 2014: 108). Through defining themselves in undertaking “ethical action” (Trundle 2014: 16) the women place themselves within boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in their new home and communities. Consequently, they were able to see themselves as distinct from tourists, meaningfully engaging as “necessary actors in, rather than spectators of, their vibrant cityscape” (Trundle 2014: 175). While there are obvious differences between affluent American migrants giving to (who they perceive as) the needy and the situations of Mercedes and Alisson, there are also parallels. In the act of charitable giving, the women Trundle describes are attempting to enact publicly values that they hold, using them to fashion a place for themselves within Tuscan society.

In a similar way, Mercedes and Alisson speak openly of their desire to work as growing from their own personal values, as a calling or vocation<sup>35</sup>. A vocational calling is, by definition, a work that someone feels compelled to undertake. It is an unavoidable part of who they are.

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<sup>35</sup> Throughout this chapter I will largely refer to Mercedes and Alisson in tandem, especially when relating to the aims and work of the foundation. This is not intended to ignore the fact that they are two distinct individuals, but simply to reflect the fact that together they are the foundation. Most of the data in this chapter was derived from interviews where both were present and affirming the expressions of the other; where appropriate, I make distinctions if particular data or observations are more clearly aligned to one individual.

Both Mercedes and Alisson hold this view of their work, including before the foundation, as something akin to an obligation or duty. As Mercedes noted, “you can’t make this, no, it’s that [this work] is imposed upon you.” Charles Taylor (1989) argues in *Sources of the Self* that our selfhood – our sense of who we are – is intrinsically bound up with our understanding of what is good or right within life. Taylor (1989: 3-4) connects this not only to concepts of justice and the well-being of others, but also to the things that provide us with a sense of dignity in our lives, what is meaningful, fulfilling and “makes life worth living.” It is essentially our sense of morality, or “moral thinking,” that provides our interpretations of these, and this comes to be defined along three separate axes: respect and obligations towards others, affirmation of what is a good life, and finally dignity – understood as self-dignity, and also allowing dignity for others, “thinking well of someone” (Taylor 1989: 15). In order to have a grasp of these concepts, each person must employ “discriminations” in order to discern what it is that truly matters to them, what is more important, or less. Especially with relation to the most instinctively felt moral reactions – our reactions to violence, in any form, against other human beings – we rely on an element of claim-making “implicit or explicit, about the nature and status of human beings” (Taylor 1989: 4-5). It is through drawing comparisons, making distinctions and marking difference that we determine our moral boundaries. As Taylor (1989: 8) elegantly puts it:

“If you want to discriminate more finely what it is about human beings that makes them worthy of respect, you have to call to mind what it is to feel the claim of human suffering, or what is repugnant about injustice, or the awe you feel at the fact of human life.”

Taylor (1989: 11-12) goes on to argue further that the respect for human life which was previously couched in terms of some overarching, objective good – a belief in God, or the divine principle of human life – has today come to be understood in terms of rights; natural, human or universal. Through this emphasis on rights, individuals are increasingly viewed as autonomous subjects, necessitating them to be “active co-operators in establishing and ensuring the respect which is due them” (Taylor 1989: 12, see also 25). In other words, being a moral person has come to be associated with a respect for others, often thought of in terms of rights – the right of each individual to live a life particular to them.

Taylor (1989: 13-14) argues that morality, whilst partially defined by a respect for others, is also deeply connected to the self, in the “affirmation of ordinary life.” Our understandings

of what is good in life are therefore also shaped by how we understand what it is to live a full life:

“[M]y sense of myself as a householder, father of a family, holding down a job, providing for my dependants; all this can be the basis of my sense of dignity. Just as its absence can be catastrophic, can shatter it by totally undermining my feeling of self-worth.” (Taylor 1989: 15-16)

These frameworks can only function when they are something personally significant, however, and we have to be moved by something in order for it to have a bearing on our conception of what is good or moral (Taylor 1989: 73-74). However, for Taylor (on frameworks 1989: 16-19; on horizons 1991: 33-52; also 1994) it is the loss of shared frameworks – or horizons – of significance that complicates attempts to find shared meaning, and therefore a basis for moral thinking and experience, within modern society. In lacking what was previously provided by an overarching, shared belief in something – such as God, or honour – meaning is now found in how people live their lives, their way of living. But as each individual interprets the best way to live their life separately from another, there can exist “conflict, even confusion, about what it means to affirm ordinary life” (Taylor 1989: 23-24). It is within our horizons of meaning, then, that people come to define their identity, who they are and what they stand for and how this relates to others. Through the dialogical nature of negotiating meaning with others we establish commonalities or differences of what is significant for each other (Taylor 1989: 25-30; 1991: 33-48; 1994: 34). For Taylor (1989: 28), an individual forms a sense of who they are, of their identity, through being “oriented in a moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary.”

Although a discussion of moral philosophy would seem a world away from the daily grind of work in the foundation, Taylor touches on important points for understanding how the foundation, as a moral project, has significance for Mercedes and Alisson and the wider neighbourhood. In his description of “orienting” the self in moral space we see echoes of how both women describe their project, and there are poignant connections to the ways in which Mercedes described her work as a means to re-establish some personal sense of values following her displacement. In positioning their work as intrinsically bound to their self, both Mercedes and Alisson can be seen to enact what Omri Elisha (2011: esp. 1-3, 18-24) has referred to as “moral ambitions”; an individual’s desire to achieve goals that are firmly linked

to their own personal outlook on what matters in life and why, and the hope that they can not only demonstrate these values themselves through their actions, but also encourage others to do so. Moral ambitions are fundamentally social in nature as they are inevitably oriented toward relations between self and others, and further shaped by the norms and expectations that govern social behaviour (Elisha 2011: 18-19). In this sense they are intimately connected to the cultural, social and institutional contexts within which they occur, and involve recognizing that there can be “gaps between one’s moral ambitions and the conditions of existence that reinforce and simultaneously threaten to undermine them at every turn” (Elisha 2011: 154). In other words, the context that surrounds an individual can be both a prompt for their desire to realise moral ambitions as well as a source of threat to the ideals at the heart of these. As a result, moral ambitions are never completely static, being re-shaped in response to events and circumstances.

We can see this movement between moral ambition and the world in the final steps of establishing the foundation, in the response of Mercedes and Alisson to pragmatics and happenstance. After some time searching, they come almost full circle to a neighbourhood in Soacha close to where their search first began. There, they rent a small room from Alisson’s aunt, with only enough space to provide small snacks and homework classes for children and, at first, the church affiliated with their previous organisation offers to support them, but the women soon find their interference to be stifling. The church gives “just the crusts of the bread” for food and tries to move the activities out of Soacha. So, with the small room too cramped – “this was chaos” – the women strike out alone again, hiring a nearby space that will come to be the foundation. Pragmatic decisions influence them at first; the space is cheap, and they are familiar with the area. Mercedes lives almost within visual distance of the neighbourhood, across the reeds and pools of the *humedal*. Alisson lived there as a child before moving away and her mother and aunt still do. But, Alisson states, she still “carries the neighbourhood in her heart” despite her memories of living there being tainted by recollections of the poverty and hardship that forced her family to move there when she was young. This familiarity allowed them attest to the needs of the people living there, and in knowing these needs they were able to dispel any doubts:

“We said, “OK, here’s the opportunity that you have been looking for, you’re going to recover values, you’re going to rescue these kids”... nobody believed in us, that is, I think that when we started this they said, “Those old women there, maximum one

month and you'll see them throwing in the towel." But no. It was this that we had been searching for ourselves, really searching [for] where had the need that motivates us, that makes us say, "We are going to start here." We were going to create this seed, we were going to see our fruit; it's not going to be short term, but if it is something short term, we thought to see what the process is going to achieve." (Mercedes)

From the beginning, Mercedes and Alisson envisioned their commitment to the foundation in terms of a long-term project that would not deliver immediate results but instead bear "fruit" through sustained engagement with the children and wider community (cf. Elisha 2011: Chapter Six). As a consequence, their work is bound up not only with their personal beliefs in what ethical social work looks like, but also a particular vision of the kind of community which they want to foster within the neighbourhood. In the language of Charles Taylor (1991:16-17) they feel called to realise their "moral ideals" in action and become part of re-shaping the social landscape through a long-term commitment.

So, the world can throw situations and events at an individual, it can leave a trail on their life that imposes these moral ambitions to create change, to make a difference. But the world can also undermine and defeat these ambitions, it can even strike at the ideals that reside at their heart. A woman can pick herself up after displacement, with some help, get back to work and feel like she is making a difference; but then petty squabbles cheapen the work and death pushes into her life again and she spins out for a time, disillusioned. But her friend seeks her out, recalling their shared passion that came from their ideals, and their ambition intensifies and takes on a life of its own, makes it truly *born* of the heart to the extent that her and her friend reject instrumentalism, reject even a *peso*, to pursue their own vision of what is needed and where. It leads them to find the right place and the right people simply because this is what they feel called to do. Planting the "seed" of the foundation was therefore nothing accidental for either woman, but required tenacity in the firmness of their beliefs; in the value of what they were planning to do, and in the value of the person that they were going to do this work with. Both in intent and execution the activities at the foundation are rooted in an awareness of conditions of life within the neighbourhood, taken as a shaping motivation to augment their "passion" for doing social work.

### Childhood Transgressed

Over coffee one morning Mercedes tells me that she considers the foundation as one way to reaffirm values which she felt had been threatened following her displacement: honesty,

responsibility, transparency and family values. She goes on to describe her reasons for engaging in social work as being something she has felt “since I was small,” what she terms as her own “suffering” when she sees “children in delinquency.” In their emotive use of language to describe wanting to “rescue” (*rescatar*) the children in the neighbourhood<sup>36</sup>, Mercedes and Alisson call to mind Lisa Malkki’s (2015: 13) observation that, for people supporting or undertaking humanitarian work, the child serves an imaginative purpose – “the child in need interpellates, hails them, as ‘persons who can help’.” The children in the neighbourhood are “sufferers,” what Malkki (2015: 84-88 specifically on sufferers, Ch.3 *passim*) describes as one of the central roles that young people occupy in humanitarian cultural practices. As an abstraction, the children attending the foundation could be innocent, or more precisely innocent sufferers, compromised against their will by the circumstances in which they live. They are “good to think” (Malkki 2015: 87) as sufferers, providing a moral impetus to the work of the foundation.

Speaking or writing about the children from the foundation it is necessary to speak of them as a collective; ‘the children,’ the group of young people who attended the foundation day in and day out. Mercedes and Alisson, and myself when I write about them, encapsulate them simply within that word, neatly delineating the difference between them and the adults who ran the organisation, their parents, neighbours, teachers, ourselves. But this is a category, like many others, which gains its meaning from the relations existing somewhere in the dialectical tension between the two terms – adult and child – inseparably linked, the one to the other, each losing significance without its opposite (cf. Alderson 2013; Jenks 2005a; Keddel 2018; Leifsen 2013; Malkki 2015; Tisdall and Punch 2012). Socially and culturally differentiated, childhood can be understood as a status that is constructed and bestowed according to boundaries that vary from society to society, boundaries which suggest specific yet generalised ways of being (Alderson 2013: Chapter One; Jenks 2005a: 6-7). It is a powerful social idea that points to a moment of emergence where a person is “becoming” their future

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<sup>36</sup> The language used by Mercedes and Alisson is strikingly similar to that used by others to describe their aims in setting up social programs within Colombia; for example, Hearn (1994: 343) also describes a desire to “help develop a new set of ethical and moral values among youths” in Medellin. These tie in to observations made by others of the moralising discourses that, historically, were levelled at the rural poor (LeGrand 2013; Roldán 2003).

self; a self which will, in turn, find itself embedded in understandings of adult conduct and behaviour, and so the idea of social order (Jenks 2005a: 8).

This positions children as particularly vulnerable or innocent in their transition as unfinished or incomplete persons on the path to adulthood – defined largely in terms of absences and what they are not; responsible, capable or knowledgeable (Alderson 2013: 74-76). This is the vulnerability that allows children to occupy the image of the sufferer, to borrow Malkki's (2015) term, often through their involvement with activities that are commonly understood as adult, especially vices; substance abuse, crime, sex. When children are threatened by or directly involved in these activities, it is a transgression of the boundaries between adulthood and childhood – like those of purity and pollution explored by Mary Douglas – representing a danger for those involved or a (future) threat to social order (Jenks 2005a; Jenks 2005b). For Mercedes and Alisson, the children from the neighbourhood are in danger precisely due to their proximity with adult vices that enact these transgressions, pinpointing involvement with crime, drugs, prostitution, teenage pregnancy, and dropping out of education as the challenges faced by youth from the neighbourhood.

The conditions of life within the neighbourhood are well known to both women. Alisson's time living in the neighbourhood was not something she discussed much other than to say that "thanks to God" she moved away in 2008. Mercedes, on the other hand, describes herself as living in two *ollas*; one, her neighbourhood in Bogotá and the other where the foundation is based:

Mercedes: Yes, it's very important for me, the foundation. Here [where I live in Bogotá], things are the same as in [Soacha]. I live in two *ollas*. Yes, here as well as back there...and since 2004 I've seen the kids; I was working and I saw the children– [makes a smoking motion]

David: *With drugs?*

Mercedes: With drugs. So, then I said, "No, we have to help them, we have to help each other." And they...I listen to them a lot because they are into this, into the drugs, and it motivates me to do something to rescue them, to take them out of this environment where they are.

By linking herself to the children she works with through the structural conditions of where they live, Mercedes makes an empathic connection between her own situation and that of the children. Rather than being images of suffering once removed from their own lives (cf.

Malkki 2015), the children Mercedes and Alisson were prompted to rescue were the ones seen every day, on the streets and in the houses around their own homes. The threats that these children face – very real ones, that the women not only see but experience – establish an understanding of what, if not the good, then a better life might be, for the children and the neighbourhood. When Mercedes and Alisson are doing the imaginative work of picturing how local children’s lives could be different, and the ways in which they need to be rescued, they are establishing a shared moral framework of what matters in life, imparting meaning to their work. It also speaks powerfully to their conception of what they do as a vocation. For Mercedes, there is no choice, “we have to help them,” while her observation that this equates to helping each other places her within the same category of needs. Their work has meaning not because it speaks only to a conception of how life can be better for others, but how it can be better for herself as well.

The close connection between her own neighbourhood and that of the foundation demonstrates the awareness that Mercedes has for the character of place. Particularly, the influence of the lower section of the neighbourhood, the *olla*, is seen as being very significant on the development of the children. It was not uncommon for Soacha to be generically described to me as a generalised zone of danger, where problems were caused by the “uneducated” residents. Prior to starting my research at the foundation, I was warned by acquaintances in Bogotá that the children there would be “difficult” to work with. As in other cities across Latin America, poor youth in Bogotá and Soacha – especially males – are seen as potential troublemakers or dangerous criminals.<sup>37</sup> This compromised notion of children who are – or are believed to be – engaging in adult activities means that they “circulate in and out of the ‘domain’ of childhood” (Leifsen 2013: 310). For children in the neighbourhood, and especially in the *olla* itself, growing up within such a stigmatised place attaches a moral geography (Cresswell 2005; Smith 2000) to their lives; even within the neighbourhood there is a distinction made for those residents from “down there” or “below” in the *olla*. Unlike ideal visions of suffering or innocence, the proximity of the neighbourhood’s children to

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example: on Brazil, Gough and Franch (2005); Leeds (2007); on Colombia (Soacha), Berents (2014); on Colombia and Guatemala, Moser and McIlwaine (2006); on Guatemala, Winton (2005).

'adult' vices is enough to shape their relations with people from other areas of the city<sup>38</sup>, or even further afield.

For the children living in the neighbourhood, then, the issue is less that they are denied a relationality with the adult world than that they are too closely enmeshed within it – in danger from, or already compromised by, their close association with a zone of perceived moral failure. But beyond perceived failings projected on to them by others, these children also have to negotiate the very real constraints that inhere within living a life in the neighbourhood. Through her own experiences of conflict, violence, displacement and state abandonment, Mercedes especially has a keen sense of political violence and what sociologists would understand as structural factors which are prevalent in the children's lives. In her assessment of life for children in the neighbourhood she is clear in attributing blame to lack of state investment in the neighbourhood, the effects of poverty on families and cynical politics<sup>39</sup>:

“Because it's terrible, they have no opportunities from the state to help them. A lot of talking [from the state] – communications, television, radio, but in truth...nothing. We have no parks. Fields? Parks? No. Activities? Sport? We don't have these things in the neighbourhood. And the guys look for gangs and delinquency. To steal, to kill.”  
(Mercedes)

In describing the location of the foundation, Mercedes and Alisson together phrased it as a being within a “border zone” or “frontier” between other neighbourhoods of Soacha and Bogotá. This was, on the one hand, a practical reference to the physical location of the neighbourhood along municipal boundary lines. But in another way the boundaries of the neighbourhood have a symbolic significance for locals. Residents spoke of difficulties not only with direct services, such as transport, food and healthcare, but also the ways in which living within the neighbourhood tainted their social interactions: residents' acquaintances react with alarm to hearing the neighbourhood's name, recyclers from the *olla* find it difficult to establish working relations with other areas, and planned relocations of residents to better quality housing fall through due to a lack of commitment from authorities. The notion of a

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<sup>38</sup> Following the demolition of the Bronx area in Bogotá, where many of the former residents had dispersed throughout the wider city, teenagers were viewed with increased suspicion by my acquaintances in Bogotá as potentially dangerous.

<sup>39</sup> This is not to say that there was an uncritical engagement with their own viewpoints. Mercedes and Alisson were aware that some young people in the neighbourhood were effectively beyond their help, and that familiarity with the area allowed a certain confidence in their interactions. In other areas of the city, using public transport, they were noticeably wary of groups of teenagers they did not know, or knew by reputation.

boundary around the neighbourhood comes to be a symbolic marker of social withdrawal. The frontier, a delineation of where services and connection end. A resident of the neighbourhood for almost 30 years, Carmen, could not think of any social initiatives outside of the foundation. Ruminating, she considered for a moment before mentioning a free food program for pensioners that briefly ran in the neighbouring area – but “here on this side, no, never had it. Not since I have been here, no.” In a very literal sense, Mercedes and Alisson have established themselves as “pioneers,” offering a program of social care where there had previously been none.

The process of establishing the foundation reflects the interplay between the deep moral ideals held by Mercedes and Alisson, their sense of self through their work as vocation and their response to the social context of Colombia and the cities of Soacha and Bogotá more specifically. Their description of what they do as something imposed upon them, that they *have to do*, can be partially explained through Taylor’s concepts of moral frameworks and the affirmation of ordinary life as a vital good. But this is a slightly different conceptualisation from that used in Taylor’s argument, as it is primarily motivated by a desire to change the circumstances that they see around them. Rather than using the existing ‘good life’ to reflect their self, Mercedes and Alisson find motivation in attempting to change the conditions where a good life can fail to emerge. That the experiences of children in the neighbourhood are closely linked to the moral geographies of Bogotá and Soacha, in the denigration of *ollas* and their inhabitants, is something that both women are familiar with through their experiences of living there. But while the motivations for their work can be partially explained through these factors, the impact of this work is found in the substance of the foundation’s daily rhythms of care and sociability.

### The Day

Based around the daily influx of bodies during the lunch period, the work within the foundation has a repetitive, soon-to-be-familiar beat in the preparation of the food and space for the children’s arrival. On most days the front door of the foundation remains locked until the children start arriving at around 12.00 – it then remains busy until the end of the lunch period, which can extend to 15.00 or even 16.00 if people turn up late. The cadence of the day itself changes depending on other, interconnected, cycles or interruptions of the week; which children have classes in the morning or afternoon, the weather, holidays, health. Even

in the periods leading up to or falling after the “lunchtime rush,” individual children may arrive, tapping at the glass, to pay money that is owed. A few permitted adults from the neighbourhood might arrive with containers to be filled with food. Parents drop by to ask about planned activities or sign their child up to the foundation’s register. As Paola observes in exasperation from the kitchen one day “There’s always people here.”

The work is physically tiring. When food basics are needed, they are bought from a large supermarket located around 15 minutes’ walk away, across the Bogotá line, and transported by hand back to the foundation. The majority consists of large, heavy packets of rice, pasta, potatoes and dry pulses, as well as oil, some vegetables and fruit for juice – although most fresh items and small amounts of meat are normally sourced from the tired-looking selection found in one of the small neighbourhood shops. All purchases are calculated down to the last *peso* and checked against the balance of what the foundation has. Sometimes, items are returned.



36 – Dried goods and buttons waiting to be sorted in the foundation. Photograph by the author.

The food preparation happens in the mornings, normally with everyone – Mercedes, Alisson, Paola (and, for a short while, myself) – pitching in to get it under way faster. Cleaning, chopping, boiling, and frying turn the kitchen into a steam filled sauna. With potentially up to fifty children arriving each day, quantities are large and the recipes simple. A usual meal is a bowl of soup – commonly *sopa de avena* made with oats, onion and carrot – followed by plain cooked beans, peas or lentils with rice and some fried plantain. Sometimes, pasta with a kind of Bolognese sauce is offered, although meat seems to be unpopular with the children – it is often picked out and left uneaten. The flavours are simple, with the focus on nutrition and affordability. Fruit is also prepared for making juice, then blended with water and poured into a large basin ready to be rationed out.

Before the children arrive the space has to be prepared, which involves sweeping the dust from the floor and wiping down all the tables and chairs. It does not matter if this has been done the previous afternoon before the foundation closes – by the morning, everything will once again be coated in a fine layer of dust from the hard-packed earth of the road outside. If it is raining, then it is a case of washing away the fresh and dried mud. If the rain is especially heavy then you will also be mopping up floods and making sure the drain outside the front door is kept clear of rubbish or other blockages, as water inches higher up the concrete lip. During very wet periods, the floors need cleaned at least twice a day, and Mercedes and Alisson may come at the weekends to make sure the ground floor is not too badly flooded.



37 – Keeping the drain outside the front door clear during a flood. Photograph by the author.

When the children arrive the atmosphere varies between busy and total chaos, depending on the number of children and who they are. The foundation has a large roster of children registered, fifty at the last count, ranging in age from 4-15 years old. Attendance is sporadic, however, and some children I see almost every day, others only once. Children arrive singly, with siblings, parents, extended family or in large groups; in particular, there are two groups of children from the *olla*, one comprised of three sisters and their two friends, the other of an interchangeable group of four to seven boys. These two groups dominate the dining room when they are there, shouting, playing, arguing, sometimes crying. All of the children run in and greet Mercedes and Alisson with a polite kiss on the cheek and '*Hola, profe.*' Some of the

younger ones hug them both. As an outsider – and a male – I generally get a handshake from everyone until later in my fieldwork.

After arriving the children begin to clamour for food, with soup up first, followed by juice and the main dish. Eating is a variable affair. Some children dawdle in the foundation for an hour or more, kicking their heels at the benches. Others run in, wolf down their food and run out again. Food is spread around the tables, chairs, floor and people. There is generally a spillage or two. Being there with the children is a tactile experience, as they clamber around you, grasping with food-sticky hands and kicking with muddy feet. Some try their luck getting second portions from whoever looks like a soft touch, petitioning with smiles or hang dog expressions for a second juice, another *arepa*, as they hang off your arm.

Toward the end of the day the portions either get more generous as we anticipate few children are still to come, or smaller as the prepared food is insufficient. With no set numbers for the day it is a gamble against being prudent in the use of food and avoiding waste or having to turn children away. Some adults also drop in to collecting food to take home, residents of the neighbourhood who have been allowed to attend by Mercedes and Alisson – an older man with no teeth, a young man with learning difficulties.

When the doorway begins to sit quiet and empty we start to clean and tidy. The dishes are washed on a rolling basis throughout the day so there are always enough clean plates, bowls and utensils, but inevitably there is a huge pile to be washed by the end. This is done in the sink in the kitchen. With the water being metered, every drop is valuable and when I first arrive, I'm quickly admonished for my free use of the tap and soap.

*"Ayy, no! Pare. Pare. Mire."*

I learn the correct technique. The basin is filled once with cold water from the tap. Every dish is then scraped clean, all the scraps – right down to the last grain of rice – being collected for the owner's dog on the first floor. The dishes are then washed with a little soap in the cold, greasy water until it is too filthy to continue. At that point, I'm allowed to re-fill the basin, rinse the dishes and then dry them. Following that, they are stacked – if Alisson is there, organised by colour – in the rack in the kitchen. Tablemats are then collected from the dining room and all the surfaces are wiped down, dropped food, mud and dirt swept up, and chairs stacked neatly. Finally, if there is food left over, we – Mercedes, Alisson and I – sit down to

eat in the rear room. Paola finishes her work in the kitchen and heads home with any leftovers for her evening meal. While we eat, hunched over on child-sized chairs at the low table, Mercedes and Alisson engage in the post-lunch ritual of repeated exclamations of tiredness and how cold it is in the back room, interspersed with observations about the children, their mood and presentation on that day, and any activities that are planned for the afternoon. Sometimes, they share a joke. Any bills received that day are opened and greeted with groans or looks of horror. The money that the children or parents brought for their food – usually less than 2000COP each in small notes and coins (around 0.60GBP at the time of fieldwork) – is totalled up, and often found short of what they need.

### Care

Joan Tronto (1993: 104) states that care “is not a cerebral concern, or a character trait, but the concern of living, active humans engaged in the process of everyday living.” Tronto (1993: 136-137) argues that care can only happen successfully where it is undertaken with a “deep and thoughtful knowledge of the situation, and of all of the actors’ situations, needs and competencies.” In other words, a familiarity with the context within which these processes and gestures of care occur. For Mercedes, her observation that she lives in two *ollas* suggests an empathic connection with the children from the neighbourhood, an awareness of how they live as comparable to her own life. In describing her daily routine, Mercedes outlines her efforts to keep her own daughter safe, attempting to secure higher education opportunities for her, walking her to and from the bus when she returns late from college. She struggled to provide the most fundamental needs of shelter and food for her children on arriving in Bogotá; the support and care of others then was vital and more than a decade later money and security remain paramount concerns. Mercedes lives within the same precarity as many of the children with whom she works. When she cares for them she is confronted with the care she both enacts and needs at home, and the latent possibilities that are mirrored within their lives. If the children are constrained – even compromised – by the social and material conditions within which they live and how these shape their possible actions, then a reliance on the care of others to mitigate this is an interdependency that Mercedes shares with them (cf. Aufseeser 2018).

Care is fundamentally about engagement, a way of relating to others, an expression of “an action or a disposition, a reaching out to something”<sup>40</sup> (Tronto 1993; 2013: x). It was – at least partially – the institutional and civil society absences within the neighbourhood that drew Mercedes and Alisson to the area. Their desire to establish the foundation where the “need” was greatest – linked to their moral ambitions – entailed a “reaching out” to what they saw happening around them, their awareness of and attention to the needs of the children that they were going to work with. As mentioned above, Mercedes was moved by her desire to help young people in the neighbourhood who she viewed as suffering, and both women had a clear list of issues that they believed local children faced. But these things all have to be rooted in an actual program of care, one that combines the everyday routines of feeding and teaching with more subtle goals to create the practice of care within the foundation. Asked what the principal challenge is that they face in working with the children, Alisson responded:

“Formation of values, I mean, more than anything, *reglas de urbanidad* [rules of etiquette /civility]. This is the biggest challenge with them. The objective, I mean, to be able to change a little like, not the mentality because that would be a little complex, but, yes, that they are conscientious, that they are planning to do something in the future. We want at least for the primary [age children], at least that they go on to high school, that there are no more children out of education, like there are right now.”

In practice, attempting to shape the children’s values takes the form of basic manners, primarily, along with other norms of social behaviour; encouraging them to say and please and thank you, be courteous in greeting others, tidy up after themselves, finish their meals. This reminds us that care is a way in which “normative sociality” (Caduff 2019: 799) can be enacted, where expected forms of behaviour and action are shaped. Although aware of the ‘bigger’ questions such as those relating to employment, poverty and crime, the focus of the work remained very much on what they can – or feel compelled to – do as individuals for the children<sup>41</sup>. Acknowledging that they face limitations to what they can effectively achieve

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<sup>40</sup> A more detailed definition is offered by Fisher and Tronto (1991: 40): “On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.” I would suggest, in line with Tronto’s (1993) further argument that care is essentially about human interdependency, that the act of caring undertaken in the foundation is fundamentally about finding a way of “living as well as possible”; both in the aspirations of Mercedes and Alisson, and their parallel goals to improve life for the children and the neighbourhood more generally.

<sup>41</sup> See also Scherz (2014, specifically pp.139-140), for more on charity work as a form of “pragmatic scepticism” relating to objectives, resources and positionality of organisations.

through the foundation<sup>42</sup>, these daily, repetitive interactions described above are the foundation on which deeper, and more subtle, acts of care are predicated.



38 – Alisson feeding one of the children in the foundation. Photograph by Holman.

The care extended to the children is outwardly physical, then, through the provision of meals. Through establishing the foundation as primarily a *comedor*, Mercedes and Alisson are able to guarantee that they can at least engage with the children on regular basis. As Alisson noted, the act of feeding the children is “something very tiny, but it’s so big,” that is “gratifying” to see in the physical changes where the children’s “countenance speaks for them.” But in accompaniment to the rhythmical repetitions of cooking, feeding and cleaning are countless small social interactions, prompted by observations of physical or behavioural change. Small moments which would be hard to pinpoint outside of a relationship between care-giver and care-receiver, where care is being enacted as an ongoing process (Tronto 1993: 104-108). In addition, they occasionally meet with the parents and adult relatives at their homes,

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<sup>42</sup> For a more detailed discussion on the ways in which cynicism operates as a related (yet distinct) response to effectiveness and limitations of charity work, see Trundle (2014: Ch.7).

ostensibly to secure the small payments which they ask for as contributions to meal costs or to sign the children up for extra activities. However, this also helps them to position their understanding of the children's home environments; specifically, any challenges or hardships that they may be facing there. Combined with the seemingly casual questions that are directed to the children when they come for meals, and informal chats with neighbourhood residents when they meet, Mercedes and Alisson have a wide-ranging knowledge of their attendees' lives:

"He's not studying, him and [his brother] have left [school]."

"The father beats the mother."

"We think he is being abused by his uncle."

"Her father is missing."

"The mother is displaced, with the children's father, who is a demobilised guerrilla."

"He has a wound on his head. His mother is a drunk, so he saves some money himself to buy medicine, to treat the wound."

"The mother, from where she lived, she has already moved to the second floor, and that is at least, [the daughter] already has her own room, and she doesn't have to share the room with her little brother, all of that."

At first this gathering of information, details about the children and their families' lives, can seem like gossip; keeping their finger on the pulse of what is happening in the neighbourhood. Yet, gossip can be powerful, a means of garnering information where there would otherwise be a lack, creating networks of (social) knowledge (Dunbar 2004; Scott 1993). Carlo Caduff (2019: 791) observes that relations of care are often painted to represent the carers in a heroic, ethical light, demonstrating their selfless commitment when they "dare to care for those in need." Yet, this serves to disguise the fact that relations of care are complex and intimate. Whilst those receiving care are often rendered "naked" (Caduff 2019: 791) under the gaze of their carer, the carer is in a similarly delicate position of observing vulnerability. Gathering details through conversation, observation, reaching out through acquaintances, means not just that Mercedes and Alisson know facts, but that they have an understanding of the vulnerabilities present in the children's lives.

“Hey – You Washed!”

Speaking with Mercedes, Alisson and Yuli today in the foundation they were describing the reaction of some of the children to the dance teacher – Diego – and his assistant – Claudia. Alisson explains that when the dance teachers arrived, some of the boys from the *olla* had just had haircuts:

“I remember that the Diego and Claudia came here, yesterday was eight, tomorrow it’s going to be eight days ago, and the kids came with their haircuts and [Claudia] was, “Hey, you came with your hair done and you washed!” She’s so extroverted.”

Around the room, they all make various expressions of embarrassment that she would bring this up so indiscreetly. Yuli turns to me and helps to translate, then finishes the story for me:

“So, the boys, they all just stood there and...”

She drops her face into a completely emotionless mask, framing a hard stare.

“You know, they were like, “What the...”

Mercedes and Alisson interpreted the success of the foundation partially through their ability to encourage socialisation amongst the children. They described to me how many of the children were “raising their face to be able to say hello,” in contrast to when they first attended and were “timid” with “self-esteem on the floor.” After some years working with the most regular attendees both women described an improvement in the children’s desire to interact with others, something they viewed as noteworthy because “it is very difficult to start a process here, and it gets lost at home.” Another success that they saw in the work of the foundation was the socialising it had encouraged between the *olla* and the rest of the neighbourhood. Yuli observed that at the very beginning children from the different areas would fight, and mothers from the “upper” area “didn’t want to have contact with the children from down there. But now they realise that they are all friends, and they can interact here [at the foundation].”

From Mercedes’ point of view, witnessing the vulnerabilities of the children at home is part of the substrate to understanding their relationship. It forms a “practical wisdom” (Niekerk 2008: 408) of what is happening in the lives of the children at home, and is an important tool for being able to do the work of the foundation:

“It’s maybe also that we like, won their trust, because it’s difficult, let’s say, a child with this problem that they have at the family level, and that they could be, how do you say, they are keeping to themselves and all of this and they are externalising this, belligerence, anger, that is, everything that they have received they are externalising in another way, with violence. In contrast, here, let’s say they see us as perhaps something of a maternal figure and maybe we have already won, like, this trust in them and you often see that they come and that [they are unhappy]. So, you call them over alone and you can start to ask them “What’s up? Why are you like this?” and they kind of loosen up a little and they’re already changing, they get a little bit of that out there, then you’re trying to understand: “Well he’s acting like this because he has this and this problem, so, let’s see how we can channel it into something, okay?” (Mercedes)

Care is not a circle of reciprocity. Those being cared for may not welcome the attempt, actively resent it or simply be ambivalent (Tronto 1993: 109). There is no guarantee for the carer that their actions will be recognised in the manner in which they would like (Caduff 2019: 795-799). For Mercedes and Alisson, their work within the neighbourhood has to be negotiated against a backdrop of suspicion and apathy that surround social work. Winning the trust of families in the neighbourhood is of paramount importance, particularly with regards to families living in the *olla*, where the majority of children attending the foundation live. Residents are distrustful of ‘officials,’ or strangers who may be from government agencies such as Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF) – the Colombian family welfare agency – who were feared for taking children away from families and into care. The events in the Bronx again haunted people in the neighbourhood, who had heard stories of how children living there were deemed to be in danger by the ICBF, then taken from their parents with little warning. Residents of the neighbourhood *olla* are aware that the reality of their living conditions, combined with the sullied reputation of the area, means they are vulnerable to similar interventions by authorities. Mercedes and Alisson were adamant, however, that in contrast to the authorities they are respected by *olla* residents because they “have the guts to go down there, where it is not permitted just like that.” Mercedes explained:

“If we have to take a risk and we ourselves have to go there and walk, even in some moments that have been, let’s say, for food or to take some benefactor or something. Let’s say, well, like it was in December with the pizza and all that<sup>43</sup>, we were without fear, none, nothing, taking our boxes and we went down, and we divided with them,

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<sup>43</sup> The previous Christmas – 2015 – the foundation had asked for donations from sponsors then used the money to buy pizzas, which they took down to the *olla* and shared with the families there.

we shared a piece with them. This was familiarity with them there so this maybe, like, influences and gains us respect.”

Familiarity, then, being known socially, lowered resistance from parents to them working with children, or even conducting home visits. Despite this, both women acknowledged that there were “limits” to where they can go in the *olla*, and especially outside of the neighbourhood. For instance, the adjacent neighbourhood in Soacha is deemed off-limits by Alisson as they do not know the group which control it, and beyond there she worries about paramilitaries. In the acts of care that Mercedes and Alisson enact through the foundation, in opening its doors to those who live in the neighbourhood, they do so with the knowledge that the relations established through this are fragile and risks exist. Although happy to describe to me in private the foundation’s emphasis on restoring values and improving “rules” of behaviour, they are sensitive to how *olla* residents understood the ways they were perceived by others; they couldn’t “go down there and make these comments...you already know that you can’t go and do it, right?” However, Mercedes and Alisson hope that through the foundation they can influence the behaviour of not just the children but their families as well:

“We are trying...trying to plant the idea that [residents] have to try to change the mentality that other people close to the neighbourhood have, [of] the sector, and that we are the ones who are going to lead this part of the change in this image; that we are going to show the beautiful things that we really have in the neighbourhood, in the sector, then like this little part is what we are trying to influence [...] and in the end, then, in itself we do not involve ourselves there with them and neither can we reproach [them] or any of that” (Mercedes)

The practice of care undertaken by Mercedes and Alisson is not reliant on stories of remarkable successes and a complete change of fortunes – on changing things that might be “a little complex” in Alisson’s words – but on more achievable goals; to plan for the future, to lift their face up and be able to look others in the eye. It is “a language of small steps, of concrete, limited victories” (Sennett 2004: 35). In Sennett’s terms, it offers respect through allowing some autonomy and difference, an acknowledgement that there are things which the work of the foundation will not address or change – or at least, not in the short term. The women are aware that they can’t approach the families living in the *olla* through moralising, nor could they base their interactions on the fact of where a child resides alone; “it’s not that we are putting it to them directly “is it there that you live, in the *olla*?” “this or that other thing?” No.” (Mercedes). Mercedes and Alisson are aware that just because families send

children to the foundation they cannot and should not try to tell these families how to change, but simply offer to support them in small yet consistent – the foundation has been in the neighbourhood for more than ten years now – and meaningful ways. As we have seen, this does not remove the moral dimension of their work in the sense of normative expectations of behaviour, or an aspiration to a kind of moral change. But because of Mercedes and Alisson’s own knowledges of how it can be to live within this space they are a step closer to Sennett’s understandings of a moral community; a moral geography that is not based on ideas of who or what belongs in which place, but that there are meanings which can be personally – and independently – held by residents. That families in the *olla* care about their children, that these children are aware of how others think of them and that they are not blind to seeing this in everyday interactions. But there are pressures that come from working in this space and struggling within such small margins of opportunity.

### The Phone

Today Mercedes’ phone was stolen from the foundation. Alisson had been using it to speak with Yuli, and she left it on the small table that sits just outside the kitchen while they went out to buy ingredients for the lunch. When they came back the phone was gone. The first person that Mercedes and Alisson blamed was Paola, the cook, as she was the only person there. They confronted her, but she said no, it wasn’t her – they could fire her if they wanted, but she didn’t do it. She did say that she had let somebody in to the foundation (the door is always closed and locked until it is time for the children to arrive), someone that Mercedes and Alisson know, so he could use the bathroom. Apparently, he is the older brother of Andrea and Carlos, who were at the foundation last year. The family is displaced and following their arrival in the neighbourhood a few years ago the older brother – who Paola let into the foundation – has become addicted to drugs and was thrown out of the house by his parents. He now lives on the streets, and still uses drugs. Mercedes and Alisson give him food sometimes, which is why Paola felt comfortable letting him inside to use the bathroom. They suspect that he grabbed the phone from the table when he was leaving, and Paola was busy working in the kitchen.

Somehow Mercedes’ daughter, Adriana, knows the accused and has a phone number for him. As we walk from the bus stop in Bogotá over to the foundation, Mercedes asks her to phone and confront him about the theft. They tell him that he has to come to the foundation

now, so they can speak with him. He replies that he has not taken the phone and is not able to come to the foundation. Repeated calls go unanswered. In a rage, or a panic, Mercedes talks of getting the gang from the *olla* – which I understand as just a loose group of men who sell and use drugs – to find the accused and beat him as a punishment for taking the phone. The police are not even mentioned. Yuli, who is also at the foundation today, remonstrates with Mercedes that this is not the correct course of action. As we continue walking, Mercedes marches off toward a group of men using drugs in a patch of grass between buildings. We all stop and there is an increase in tension. Yuli tells me that she thinks this is a very bad idea. We stay some distance away and watch as Mercedes speaks with the men, trying to establish the whereabouts of the thief. She repeats this at the next group of users we see. Yuli and Alisson are both visibly uncomfortable with Mercedes approaching these men, believing it to be risky and potentially dangerous to directly approach them, more so given the aggressive mood that Mercedes is in.

Eventually, we arrive back at the foundation. Paola, simmering over the initial accusation that she had stolen the phone, cooks silently in the kitchen without saying a word to anyone. Mercedes speaks with her son, as he was the one who had bought her the phone. He is very angry, stating that this is what she gets for trusting people and wanting to help, and he will not buy a replacement while she is still doing this work, especially as he had not even finished paying for this one. Mercedes is upset again by this, and once more her and Alisson discuss speaking with the men in the *olla*.

In their deliberate decision to place their work within a difficult environment – where support is minimal, trust is low, and resources scarce – Mercedes and Alisson can be seen to acknowledge some of the “difficulties of being in relation” (Caduff 2019: 803) with others. However, living in such a neighbourhood is something that is also felt in its articulation through the “social taint” (Wacquant 2008b: 173) of territorial stigma that attaches to the character of the inhabitants themselves. For any resident of Bogotá or Soacha, having your neighbourhood labelled as an *olla* is a terrible indictment. For Mercedes and Alisson, the stigma that was attached to living in the neighbourhood was perceived as unjust, while simultaneously becoming internalised as part of their motivations. Undoubtedly, the reputation of the neighbourhood is partly rooted in fact, and during interviews both residents as well as Mercedes and Alisson described restrictions in the area as connected to violence,

drug-related crime and fear. Being deeply embedded within the social space of the neighbourhood, Mercedes and Alisson subsequently experience many of the structural constraints and accompanying emotional distress that residents do. There are very real pressures and moments of rupture that can unbalance the delicate equilibrium within the foundation, the theft of Mercedes' phone being just a small example witnessed during fieldwork. As Joan Tronto (1993: 114) observes:

“Care is devalued and the people who do caring work are devalued. Not only are these positions poorly paid and not prestigious, but the association of people with bodies lowers their value. Those who are thought of as “others” in society are often thought of in bodily terms: they are described by their physical conditions, they are considered “dirty,” they are considered more “natural”...I think we come closer to the reality when we say: caring about, and taking care of, are the duties of the powerful. Care-giving and care-receiving are left to the less powerful.”

While the foundation is the only social program running in the area, the practice of caring is also undertaken elsewhere in the neighbourhood in private, domestic spaces, or as employment. Many of the children attending the foundation would turn up with younger siblings in tow, seven or eight-year-olds minding infants and toddlers. Carmen, mentioned earlier, is known as “*nona*” [nannie] throughout the neighbourhood due to her long history of employment minding children for working parents. During my interviews, grandmothers were caring for grandchildren, or mothers for stepchildren. Some women cared for children whose mothers were in jail. Even forms of employment are largely based on care – this time of objects and processes. The waste produced by richer areas of the city is transported by *recicladores* back to the neighbourhood for sorting, the landfill on the edge of the *olla* absorbing the unwanted. Second-hand goods filter into the foundation to find a second life with local families, and many businesses are engaged in handling, re-fashioning and restoring discarded materials from Bogotá. The social position of Soacha, and the neighbourhood within this, determined their place in the city's hierarchy of use and want, social relations marked by cycles of consumption, disposal and “making absent” (Hetherington 2004).

Through the presence-absence of the state, especially, the residents of the neighbourhood are left to find their own way through social relationships and connections. Through the lack of security the state's absence is felt in high crime and the accompanying fear. But in the event of serious crime the neighbourhood floods with the fluorescent jackets of police, picking through the undergrowth of the *humedal*, speeding past the foundation door on

motorbikes. One absence leads to another, often unwelcome, presence. Outside of murder the police are rarely seen in the neighbourhood<sup>44</sup>, and residents are largely left to navigate thefts, arguments, abuse and violence on their own terms. With the ambiguously shifting terrain of possible action afforded by a vacuum of governance, the presence of gangs or other armed actors in urban areas enter as a kind of “parallel power” (Leeds 1996). Against this, the foundation is attempting to establish a distinct and differentiated set of values for young people in the neighbourhood. Yet, as Mercedes demonstrated when her phone was stolen, the pressures and avenues of choice available to residents affect this space as well.

### Quién es?

Walking down the street with Alisson today, we passed a man who was getting into a car. As we walked by, he looked at me, then shouted over to another man hanging out of a window to ask who I was. The other man responded that I was working in the foundation with the children, at which point the first man nodded, then got into his car and drove away.

The absence of the local authorities and state within the neighbourhood is not always lamented by Mercedes and Alisson. In line with the opinion of most residents I spoke to, Mercedes views the abilities and motivations of the local authorities in offering support as both ineffective and cynical. When asked if they feel the foundation is supported by the local authorities, they described how early requests for assistance from the mayor of Soacha were turned down, only to be offered some years later with political strings attached:

“The fact is that [the authorities] have not been capable of saying, having all that they have, like, as they say, “having the power” they have not been capable of saying, “Let’s go and create a *comedor* and go and rescue these people, because we have the right people to execute a project like this.” And they never did anything because they were afraid to come here. And now that we are here, stuck in the focus [of the problem - *estamos ubicados en el foco*], that we have already done everything, then they would say, like, “OK, I can help them in this.” But then to put it in, like, the politics, “You will support us, you will give us the people [votes].” Then, this is the part that we could not have agreed to, so we said no.” (Mercedes)

As discussed in the preceding chapter, that the authorities only offer support on a conditional basis of securing votes is not surprising and neither is the scepticism with which Mercedes

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<sup>44</sup> The exception seeming to be a small post guarding a bus depot, the only part of the neighbourhood where there was a regular police presence. It was also removed from the public, being located on the very fringe of the neighbourhood.

views their offers of help. For her, the authorities are “afraid” of the neighbourhood, echoing the attempt by their initial religious partners to move the activities out of the neighbourhood and into Bogotá. Residents, as well as the foundation, frequently have to negotiate this territorial stigma in their interactions with the authorities, volunteers or potential outside collaborators. As Mercedes puts it:

“The reputation is rock bottom...they name [the neighbourhood and the adjacent one], then people immediately say, “Uyy, no – these are the biggest *ollas* of Soacha!” “That is the worst!” and I don’t know what...”

The difficulty in forging meaningful relationships with outside groups is something that has troubled the foundation from its inception. One of the few avenues of support has been the (Catholic) church, which is historically one of the pillars of charitable work in Colombia (Flórez 1997), and Latin America more broadly (Landim and Thompson 1997). The “symbiotic” (Landim and Thompson 1997: 339) relationship between church and state seen across many colonial Latin American societies was found in Colombia as well, and until the increasing separation of church and state that unfolded throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century the church undertook much of the charitable work in Colombia (Evans 2016: 20-27).

The echoes of this are seen in the engagement of religious groups with the urban poor, such as the church that Mercedes and Alisson worked for prior to the foundation. Despite initial support for the efforts of the foundation, however, Mercedes and Alisson felt this was lacking in substance and intention. In the church’s attempt to move the foundation back over the city line to Bogotá, Mercedes felt they were “placing limits, because this is Soacha...and it was more than we could justify.” Despite this, they maintain some links with the church and the priest in charge there visits the foundation on occasion and provides some materials. Both women also state that the church is one of the few positive influences in the local area because of the help they provide for children, particularly around values and guidance for behaviour. The name for the foundation itself was inspired by a prayer, and a religious connection is maintained in the proliferation of Catholic imagery and icons throughout the space of the foundation itself.

The links to the church, however, are scant compensation for the institutional vacuum that exists in the neighbourhood outside of the foundation. Connections with other groups are sometimes forged for particular projects – such as dance classes and health checks for the

children – but these are temporary in nature, and there remain no durable links to other civil society or governmental bodies. Even activities that are planned, like the dance classes described at the beginning of this chapter, are unreliable and inconsistent in their engagement with the foundation, the children and the neighbourhood.

### Exito! (Success)

Mercedes and Alisson have spent the last several weeks preparing for the team from Exito, a supermarket chain in Colombia. On the promise of educational activities for the children, featuring environmental awareness messages, videos and gifts, they have poured hours into signing up as many families from the neighbourhood as possible. In the afternoons, following the lunch, we sit hunched over the child-size tables laboriously copying out the details required from identity cards, birth certificates and school records: name, education level, address and ID number. The list grows and grows, until there are more than 50 children registered to take part. For many, the information is incomplete, and Alisson is usually the one in charge of trying to ascertain the missing details: “Who is the father? Are they not in school? Do you have any documents at all, even the birth certificate?” I’m tasked with entering the information on a spreadsheet using a borrowed laptop, while Mercedes and Alisson continue trying to drum up further interest through calling at households or speaking with parents in the foundation dining room. One weekend they hold a second-hand fair and use the opportunity of browsing parents to sign up further children. The next week, the day before the activities are due to take place, we lay out large banners on the tables and children set to painting welcome messages, the supermarket logo and the foundation name. We make badges for the participants by hand, so that they can be given to them once they arrive. An air of palpable excitement hangs over the children as they are informed that they also need to, if possible, wear matching outfits on the day of white t-shirts and jeans (for reasons that remain mysterious to me).

The following day – Saturday – I arrive early and help to set up the space. Mercedes and Alisson have managed to negotiate use of a 1<sup>st</sup>-floor room in a bar on the corner of the same street as the foundation. The room itself is filthy as it is used for *tejo* – a popular game which involves throwing heavy pucks at small packets of gunpowder buried in slabs of clay, until they go bang. It’s a messy game, in set-up and execution, and dry clay dust coats everything. The floor is littered with beer bottle tops and cigarette butts. Three of the walls are bare brick

and one is simply blue tarpaulin stretched between opposite ends, while the roof is roughly assembled tin sheeting. One wall has an improvised urinal, consisting of an empty, rancid-smelling plastic bottle connected to a hose buried in the side of the wall. We quickly attach the hand-painted banners to the walls, and a small table is set up near the entrance so the names of the children arriving can be checked off against the list we made. Children begin to arrive around 08.30am, matching outfits of white t-shirts and jeans filling the space. The sun beating on the tin roof begins to heat the air inside, as more children and their parents arrive. 30 minutes after the scheduled start time, the Exito team has not arrived. Dozens of excitable children are running riot in the enclosed space, the younger ones full of dizzying energy, the older teenagers separating into groups that moodily eye each other. Nearly all the parents line up against the rear wall, and I'm left in the middle of the room. I become entertainment, pulled around by sticky hands, questioned, squabbled over. My camera takes an unsupervised walk around the room and comes back fully loaded with pictures. White t-shirts are by now streaked with dusty brown from the clay dust.



39 – Waiting for Exito. Photographer unknown.

An hour and a half late, the Exito team arrive. They enter the room in a crowd of yellow-shirted smiles, around ten of them and aged mostly in their early twenties, all well-groomed. They hand out Exito-branded inflatable sticks – the kind you might see at a football match – and take smiling selfies with the children (which we will never see). One of them has a fireman’s helmet and jacket on, which is another mystery for me. After about five minutes the room is full of children bashing each other over the head with inflated Exito signs, and the noise is deafening amongst squeals and shouts. The young supermarket reps circulate a little more, gather everyone for a group photograph, attempt a song which trickles off to nothing, then head down the stairs indicating that the children should follow. We reach the street and from a minibus they unload bags of Exito-branded sweets, activity books and cheap toys, distributing these to the children and parents. The bus is flanked by police, who have evidently been employed as an escort. Once the bags are handed out the Exito team pile back on the bus and drive away, accompanied by their police escort. The entire interaction lasts less than 40 minutes. Mercedes is visibly disappointed, but also finds it (presumably tragically) funny, whilst Alisson looks quietly furious, before also cracking a smile. Around us, excited children and their parents dissipate into the streets, some kids still smacking each other over the head with their inflatables. Returning upstairs, the room is a deflated silence littered with branded flyers and burst sticks, which we set to tidying up.



40 – The Exito team distribute merchandise, with police escort in the background. Photograph by the author.

## Conclusion – Spaces of Opportunity

For Mercedes and Alisson, the amount of time and effort that they invested into the Exito activities could well be seen as a failure. There was little meaningful engagement with the children by the team from Exito, and the entire spectacle resembled an exercise in marketing more than the promised educational or environmental awareness activities, which were both completely absent<sup>45</sup>. There was also the hard-to-miss implication that the neighbourhood – and therefore the inhabitants – were viewed as dangerous, hence the police escort. And yet, in some ways this was as successful a failure as Mercedes and Alisson could have hoped for. In attempting to gather as many children as possible for the activities they were able to grow their contacts further throughout the neighbourhood, reaching new families. In using their own second-hand fair as a platform to publicise the event, where parents could attend to sign up their children, they also succeeded in raising funds and awareness of the foundation itself. They extended and deepened the reach of the foundation through penetrating new spaces in the neighbourhood, negotiating a deal with the local bar and re-appropriating, even briefly, a location from (predominately male) adult to family space. At the same time, they brought the children together in after-school activities in preparation for this, providing opportunities for more time together and strengthening the children's connections with the foundation. As a sociologist – or just an aware human – it was hard to view the children playing with Exito branded inflatables without a healthy dose of cynicism. But the truth is that this was the most excited, animated and relaxed I saw many of the children during fieldwork. As noted in the preceding chapter, for adults as well as children a lack of public space means that the majority of socialising is done in the home, in small groups. Opportunities for large scale gatherings such as this activity were rare. Whether intentionally or not, the activities succeeded in providing a space for adults as well as children that would not normally have existed. For a space of time it was possible for the families to interact and relate outside of the regular rhythm of their lives within the neighbourhood.

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<sup>45</sup> Excluding the possibility that the fireman's outfit was in some way an oblique reference to these.



41 – Carnage. Photograph by the author.

In her study of children living in Soacha, Helen Berents (2014; 2015) notes that while young people are constrained by fear and insecurity, they are also adept at finding opportunities to navigate around these. Spaces such as a local school or social foundation can offer islands of stability in neighbourhoods where daily routines are permeated with fear and violence, offering young people ‘sites of opportunity’ within which they can “make choices and undertake actions” (Berents 2014: 377). These sites do not solve problems in themselves – the “violence and insecurities of the community are not expunged but ameliorated” (Berents 2014: 378). But in offering some sense of stability and routine through programs of support, they offer an opportunity for children to imagine other ways of being and a different future for themselves and their neighbourhood (Berents 2014: 378-380).

Looking at the work of the foundation in retrospect, it is hard to present a dispassionate overview. It is one of the reasons this thesis is the way that it is, trying to communicate an emotional connection and reaction to something. The foundation run by Mercedes and Alisson represents an isolated opportunity for young people and their families to meet and

socialise in comparative safety. Crucially, it does this within their own neighbourhood, their own territory to borrow Escobar's (2016) term. Other spaces, of course, exist externally to the neighbourhood: schools, parks, restaurants and cafés, shopping malls. These are all found elsewhere in Soacha and the children and their families use these places. But these are all spatially distant to the homes of inhabitants, to their everyday spaces. Extending Berents' (2014; 2015) argument, I understand the foundation to be deeply woven through the social space of the neighbourhood in multiple and significant ways so that it influences life for local people.

The driving force behind the work of Mercedes and Alisson in the foundation comes from their strong moral convictions that something needs to change there; that there is some work to be done in "rescuing" the children and – more implicitly – the neighbourhood and even parts of their own selves. While I understand their frameworks to be established from normative ideas of childhood, their close positioning of their own selves and lives with those of the children suggest that there is a more fundamental relationship of respect and recognition underpinning their engagement with people and place. Yet, it seems prudent to indicate the limitations of reach and resources that the foundation faces. Constrained in their personal lives by many of the same issues that the children face, Mercedes and Alisson tenuously navigate poverty, crime and fear. The work that they do has to negotiate its presence with the parallel power of criminal groups that work in the area and take account of the institutional absences – of other organisations and especially the state – which are nevertheless very much felt; a present-absence, where a lack of something suggests and to some extent structures relationships between self and other.

Rather than pretending that they can overcome these obstacles, Mercedes and Alisson work within them. They work with families in the *olla* to negotiate their presence with the groups there, and indirectly my own for fieldwork. In the laying down of regular, repetitive interactions and relations for children and their families the foundation enters into the rhythm of neighbourhood life. Offering spaces for sociality and interaction allows opportunities for residents to form and maintain social connections outside of domestic space, valuable in an environment where public space is veined with insecurity and action restricted by the needs of caring. Despite their relatively limited resources, the contribution of the foundation to practices of care in the neighbourhood helps to create a close,

contextualised understanding for Mercedes and Alisson of the children's lives, one that suggests a relationship based on respect and recognition of shared struggles. One that takes account of the fact that things won't change all at once, and smaller steps are better than none at all. Against broad generalisations, stereotypes and stigma this offers a way of imagining the neighbourhood and its inhabitants differently. Even if these glimpses or moments are partial, if they fail to come to fruition when children drop out and in to something else, the foundation creates the opportunity for these moments to change the social space of their *barrio* through knitting sociability and breaking down some of the internal barriers in the neighbourhood, between the *olla* and others.

Writing the introduction to this chapter I intentionally omitted a small piece of my fieldnotes regarding Eduardo. Discussing his resistance to the activities that were being run I noted that, even when he is refusing to take part, he stays in the foundation and watches what is happening. Trying to run some basic English lessons one day at the foundation they collapse into disaster, more than 20 children overwhelming me with questions I barely understand. But as I split this down into a smaller group, and most of the children dissipate, Eduardo is one who still wants to participate. He comes, he takes part, he is keen to learn. This is the gap that organisations like the foundation exploit. That small space for another breath, another margin in the struggle to make something different from the stacked hand that people are dealt.



42 – Gabriela’s map.

## Gabriela

“There, I, well, my [grand]mother does not let me go out because she says we are not street children.”

*“In this part here, there is a lot of conflict?”*

“Yes.”

*“But in this part here, it’s OK? So, you—”*

“No, in this part as well there is a lot of conflict because the people show up here, because down there is an *olla*. They’re selling to addicts from there.”

Gabriela (11-years-old) was the only kid to turn up for the map-making activity session in the morning. She is tall for her age, light brown hair and big eyes that are very expressive, especially when she laughs or smiles, which happens often, if nervously. When Gabriela speaks she delivers a torrent of information, stories connected to stories, multiple subjects in one rattling monologue. As she speaks, she avoids eye contact, occupying herself with something in front of her; drawing, fidgeting, pushing food around on her plate. Sometimes she focuses on a point in space somewhere to the side of my head, staring at it while she recounts events to me. She tells me one day that she wants to be an actress, inspired by a travelling theatre group that came to her school. Another day she tells me that she wants to be a professional roller-skater.

She draws her map, a multi-coloured grid layout of the neighbourhood blocks, showing a green sweep representing the park curving off, as if seen through a fish-eye lens. Behind a line of trees at the cusp of this the *humedal* is just a blank void. Her grandmother’s home is shown at one edge and from there a sparse track of footsteps is traced along the streets, showing the route that Gabriela walks to school and back every day. The streets that she takes, the ones that she avoids. The foundation is marked with a table and chairs. The house of her friend with the dogs is shown with the simple note: “M— lives here.”

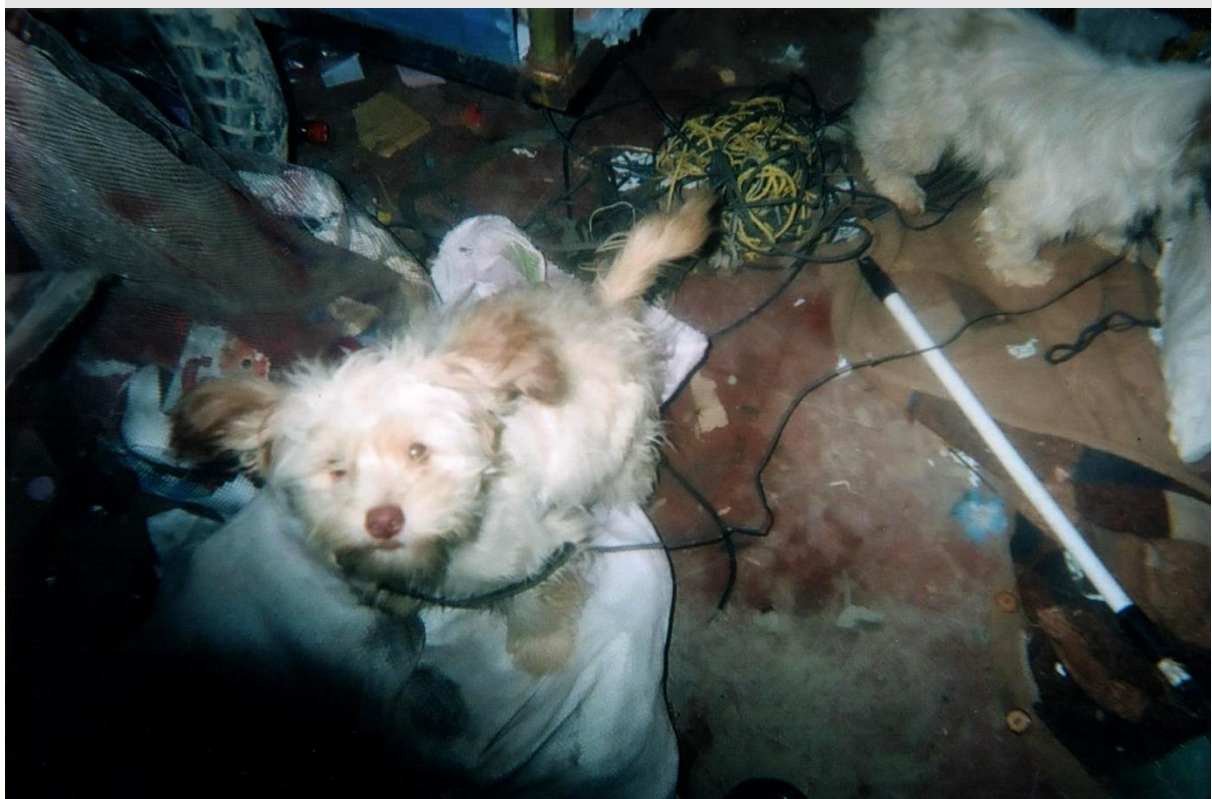
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She is trying out some phrases in English – “Hello,” “How are you?” etc. While I am explaining how to reply to “How are you?” with good, fine or bad, Gabriela says, “I am bad.”

I ask why and she explains that some things had happened with her friends at school; a falling out about shoes, or her having dirty shoes. She is speaking too rapidly for me to follow. She also mentions her “ex-best friend.”

—

She tells me of her love for dogs and likes to look at photos of my parents’ dogs that I have on my phone. She gives me a detailed account of the dogs in her grandparents’ home, where she lives, and also those of an older man she is friends with. He lives nearby and has five dogs that she goes to visit and play with.



43 – The dogs of Gabriela's friend. Photo by Gabriela.

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*Semana Santa*, an important religious holiday in Colombia, is a mixed experience for the children. Some of them do what you would expect children to do with a week off school; they play computer games the whole time or do “nothing.” Others visit Monserrate in central Bogotá on pilgrimage, climbing the steep stairs to the churches at the top of the mountain. Not just once though - they go three times, four times, and they revel in telling me how tired they were, how much energy they used.

Unlike most of the others, Gabriela is excited to go back to school. She explains that over the last week she did not undertake any pilgrimage but stayed at home while her cousins came to visit, which she was very happy about. She tells me that while they were there her uncle also came for a few days. When he left, he stole her bike (very nice, red), a small electronic game (new) and some other belongings from her grandparents' house. She doesn't seem angry about this, exactly, more exasperated. When I ask her why her uncle might have taken these things she doesn't know, but tells me that he is living on the street. As if this explains it.

—

Mercedes and Alisson tell me that Gabriela is from a “dysfunctional” family. Her mother is dead – connected to drugs, either from overdose or killed over a debt. Her uncle is homeless and uses drugs heavily. Her father, on the other hand, is simply missing. Nobody knows where he has gone and Gabriela never mentions him. One day, a body is found in the *humedal* and Alisson states with some certainty that this is the body of Gabriela's father. It isn't, but after that point his absence – for me – seems to haunt the *humedal*. On the days that the fluorescent jackets of police are seen moving around the edges of the grass and reeds, I wonder; does this also make Gabriela think of him?

—

Gabriela, who said that she likes to study without interruption, who was bright, who was curious, who wanted to travel, who has a dead mother, a missing father, and an uncle who is addicted to drugs. Who lives with her *abuelita*. Who likes nothing about the neighbourhood except her friends, until she loses them too. Who doesn't like the violence, the fighting. Who fidgets, who looks away, who wants to be a professional roller skater in a neighbourhood where they have no paved streets, and where she can't go outside at night because it's too dangerous.



44 – Plants in the humedal. Photograph by Fernando



45 – Holman's friends and family pose in the street. Photograph by Holman

## Chapter Six:

### Imaginarities of People and Place

#### “Do You Know the Word?”

I am in the foundation for the first time; bewildered, I was shepherded from bus to bus, then escorted through the streets to the neighbourhood. The bus journey and the walk both were disorientating for me, turning through unfamiliar streets until I have little sense of where I am. Arriving at the foundation I am given a quick tour before Mercedes, Alisson, Yuli and I move through to the back room for our first interview. It feels slightly ridiculous, four adults all hunched over on child-sized chairs, clustered at a child-sized table in the dim electric light, cups of hot *tinto* steaming around the recorder in front of us. Arrayed around us on small bookshelves are textbooks, activity books, books of fairy tales and myths, tubs of pens and pencils, rulers, glue sticks; all the paraphernalia needed to run activities with children. Cartoon pictures adorn the walls.

It will be some weeks before I am able to grasp enough of a conversation to direct an interview, so for the moment I just ask the prepared questions and Yuli translates. I let the voices wash over me for the most part, observing the interactions of the speakers. We move through the questions, covering the establishment of the foundation and its growth over the years. How did they meet? What were their motivations in starting the foundation, in doing their work here? Do they feel supported by the local authorities? That generates some looks of indignance and impassioned responses. Yuli translates that no, they do not, that they feel abandoned. That they feel the authorities are afraid to come here because of the neighbourhood’s reputation for crime. I ask if the police, specifically, come here? Yuli translates, before Alisson and Mercedes drop their voices, then huddle a little closer to her and begin to speak with a little more urgency. The conversation pings back and forth, and I’m following nothing. Yuli stops them, and turns to me: “Do you know the word *masacre*?”

“Picture a world, then, in which events are always mediated by story and in which the story of finding oneself on the side of the road is a conventional opening that posits, among other things, that things happen, that *places* mark the space of lingering impacts and unseen forces, that the world speaks to people who find themselves caught in it.” (Stewart 1996: 32)

Violence and danger were common themes during conversation in my first few weeks in Colombia. On discovering that I was a freshly arrived researcher who would be working in Soacha, some people – both Colombians and other expats – seemed to relish informing me of the dangers that would be encountered there. I was warned of places to avoid, how to take a taxi safely, where to keep my possessions when I was out, how to avoid making myself a target. People told me stories to illustrate the dangers and I was told not to offer opportunities to make myself a victim; “Don’t give any papaya!” [*No dar papaya!*]. Violence and its repercussions were raised in discussions about my research and became a recurring subject during conversations and interviews with residents in the neighbourhood as well. Residents spoke of the steady trickle of bodies found in the *humedal*, of the weekend fights in bars or on the street, of stray bullets and of keeping your problems to yourself. Violence was one of the first things that people told me, not just about the neighbourhood, but all of Colombia.

Writing in her ethnography of Appalachian communities and culture, Kathleen Stewart (1996: 37) notes that stories play a vital role in placing “the speaker in relation to others and the world.” As a fundamental cultural element of the communities she researched, the recounting of stories was grounded in the world around the teller, involving people and places that they are familiar with, or the teller themselves could be the protagonist. Stewart (1996: 34) observes that the ways in which locals articulated narratives leads the teller and the audience to hold “a doubled, haunting epistemology that comes of speaking from within the object spoken of,” a consequence of being “both subject and object of story, both inside and outside storied events.” Stories become integral to the cultural construction of social worlds. They are used to mark interruptions to the normal passage of things in their capacity to signal change, denoting the relations between those telling the story, others and the wider world around them (Stewart 1996: 37-38). Concomitantly, places become marked with the significance of what happens there, or has happened, and in being so they are re-made with new symbolisms and meaning.

Within the neighbourhood, the ways that residents speak about violence, crime and fear waver between story and narrative, rumour and fact. Precedent and history are important in establishing violence as a prominent occurrence, yet few interview respondents spoke of violence as something that had happened directly to themselves. Instead, the threat of violence hovers over their lives through past events they have witnessed, heard of through rumour, or been told in stories. This means that it is more often through fear that violence makes itself apparent, in the impact this has on residents' routines and behaviour. It seeps into perceptions of the neighbourhood and its residents, leading to stigmatisation through the perpetuation of these narratives by both inhabitants and those from outside, particularly the media. But while violence and fear are unavoidably present within the neighbourhood, it needs to be foregrounded from the outset that these are indivisible from the structural violence which is visited upon those who live there, in the inequalities and injustices that accumulate around their doors and in their streets (cf. Coates 2015; Kilanski and Auyero 2015: 2-3). This was something apparent to Mercedes when she spoke about the children in the neighbourhood, drawing a direct line between their lack of opportunities, the institutional vacuity within the area and young people's turns to drugs and crime.

The chapter begins by examining how violence and the fear that this generates are present in the narratives that residents tell about where they live. As meaningful events for many who lived there, violent occurrences or their aftermath were frequently articulated during interviews and conversation as characteristic of and integral to everyday life. In its many different forms it can be found to have impacted on the daily lives of inhabitants in diverse ways. As a result, fear emerges as a relational response to particular places, or more accurately fear of people and potentialities. Absences, too, emerged as a parallel yet distinct way in which residents' lives are marked by these events. Yet, there is significantly more to life in the neighbourhood than this, as we have already seen. Inhabitants of the neighbourhood and surrounding areas interact through acts of smaller or larger kindnesses, and the foundation itself represents a moral project for Mercedes and Alisson that is helping to re-shape the neighbourhood reputation and everyday rhythm for children and their families. In this regard – with the site of research (the foundation) as one explicitly positioned against violence, fear and stigma – the focus of fieldwork itself was never directly turned toward examining violence and fear.

Consequently, this chapter argues against viewing these as totalising experiences for residents, and instead aims to capture the ways in which residents are capable “navigators” (Berents and ten Have 2017) within their own part of the city, ways that are both defined by and in resistance to imposed conditions and experiences of violence and fear. The chapter concludes by drawing on material created by children in photography and map-making workshops held at the foundation. Following calls to take the observations and data produced by young participants seriously (Back 2007; Horton and Kraftl 2006a; 2006b; Rautio 2013), these photographs are considered as specific responses to the questions asked of the children during the exercises, and are used to explore how young people interact with some of the places most marked by violence and fear: the streets, the *olla*, and the *humedal*. I argue that these interactions – with each other, with family and with plants and animals – can be seen as evidence that these spaces are also bound into relations that matter deeply to the children. Consequently, this suggests that the moral topographies of the neighbourhood are overlapping and multiple, with the domination of violence and fear contested through everyday actions and interactions.

“I Want to Leave Here, to Leave This Neighbourhood”

Mercedes, Yuli and I arrive outside the house for the interview, the exterior of the building unremarkable to me from those around it, from other streets nearby. Mercedes raps on the ground floor window grill with her keys, shading her eyes to try and peer inside. She calls out in a semi-scolding voice, remonstrating with someone inside too quickly for me to understand. It seems we are not getting inside anytime soon and as we wait in the street Yuli explains that the children are cared for by their grandmother, but as she works as a *recicladora* the children are sometimes left home alone or in the care of their uncle. She goes on to explain that their mother was murdered last year, killed over a debt to drug dealers, with the body left in the *humedal*. The children are aware, apparently, of what happened and where the body was found. The father has simply never been around.

As this is recounted to me in the street, the grandmother arrives from work. She looks thin and worn out as she greets us, unlocking the door and showing us inside. The family live in a single room, sharing one bed and eating their meals at a small table which sits in front of the window. The uncle lives in a room upstairs. The room itself is basic and sparsely furnished; there is a wardrobe, a chest of drawers, a small wooden table with three chairs

and the bed. There is an old plastic barrel holding dirty clothes, and some cardboard boxes stacked up next to it. There is a mirror on the side of the wardrobe with some small stickers on it, and a few children's toys scattered around. There is a large picture of the Virgin Mary partially hidden behind the wardrobe. As we pull up some chairs around the table we begin by asking the grandmother about where she lived before this:

*"Before this house I lived more over there, like a block from here to there."*

*David: "But in the same neighbourhood?"*

*"In the same neighbourhood."*

*David: "And how does this compare to where you lived before?"*

*"Well, it's the same, practically the same. Before I felt like leaving..."*

*Yuli: "From here? Leaving from here?"*

*Mercedes: "Don't have those thoughts, no, no, señora."*

*[crying]*

*"I want to leave here, to leave this neighbourhood."*

*Mercedes: "Yes, rather, mama, but no, no, no, let's see. You are a very strong woman, mama, you have two children for whom to fight and everything, ok? Please, no? It's better to try..."*

### Violence in the Everyday

I had met the woman above on several occasions before we held this interview. On each she was polite but not talkative and came only to collect meals from the foundation rather than send the children there to eat. When she broke down during the interview it was as if a paper-thin division had been peeled away. The interview was not focused on violence and the questions were not intended to have her talk about the murder of her daughter. I had only learned a few minutes before we began that her daughter had been killed. Following the events above it wasn't mentioned again. But in that instant, I could see the feeling sweep through her as if it was a physical struggle to contain the emotion. The memory of her

daughter's murder – its continuing and felt repercussions – are now an unavoidable part of this family's everyday, bound into their lives and home.

To summarise violence we could turn to the concept of banality, arguing that in Colombia the sheer pervasiveness of violence across multiple arenas makes it almost unremarkable or expected, that it creates a 'banal' violence (Pécaut 1999). In its insinuation and interlocking throughout political, economic, social and cultural arenas, where various actors use it as "part of the rational pursuit of strategic goals" (Pécaut 1999: 158, 142-147). That when it is woven into the political institutions and social organisations of life it comes to seem a reasonable response or just another means of finding economic support and a career (Pécaut 1999: 148-151). That in the frequency of conflict and war violence has come to assume a naturalised position as an inevitability, seen again and again by the population (Pécaut 1999: 162). But this assumption of a banal violence assumes the perspective of the perpetrators, largely, explaining their actions through their recourse to an engrained course of action. It doesn't help to explain how violence and the fear associated with it gain a sort of stickiness (cf. Pinkster et al. 2020) to spaces, places and bodies.

We could try and capture violence with numbers, again, but this misses some of its diffuseness, its slipperiness and refusal to be contained in counts of homicides or crime rates, which miss its enlacement with the everyday (cf. Doyle 2019). It can bubble along, almost quiet, before sudden eruptions of killings and shootings that shock outside observers (Doyle 2016: 10). But to those living within the affected areas other signs can be apparent, in escalating altercations and tit-for-tat attacks, in threats and warnings. People become attuned to recognising diverse manifestations. More numbers, this time a little more enlightening. That residents of poor neighbourhoods in Colombia identify, on average, 25 different forms that violence can take; in one instance, 60 (Moser and McIlwaine 2004: 47). Unsurprisingly, these different forms of violence have different valences, they lean on people in different ways. Young women speak of sexual violence and heightened danger at night. Young men describe a pervasive risk of violence at all times (Moser and McIlwaine 2004: 49-51). Asked what they fear, people speak of violent physical encounters such as assaults, murders and rapes. But they also speak of the *threat* of violence, its possibility and attendant fear. The fear of addicts and drunks, of questionable bodies that contain potentials for violence (Moser and McIlwaine 2004: Chapter Three; Moser and McIlwaine 2006: 92-93).

These are the streets transformed into a series of “lethal puzzles and strange perils that seem to rise up from the asphalt itself,” which “transform every ordinary day into a series of trick questions” (Coates 2015: 21-22) waiting to catch the unwary in violence.

But to avoid the fear of the streets, of going into a space of potential violence, simply confines people to their homes and leads to feelings of being “stuck” (Berents and ten Have 2017: 112). Yet, violence is not limited to public spaces. There is the violence that only unfurls within the home, perpetrated against – or sometimes by – women and children, away from the view of others (Hume 2009; Wilding 2010). Violence can become a way to respond, part of a repertoire for handling situations (Auyero, de Lara and Berti 2014; Coates 2015: 23-24), and it can follow someone home, linking what happens there with what happens in the street, dissolving the boundary between what could be considered public and private forms of violence (Hume 2009: 4). And so, within the neighbourhood residents are not just victims but can also be perpetrators of violence. Sexual, physical, verbal and psychological abuse are all present. These are not disembodied statistics, but a litany of things happening *to* people, violence as a lived experience. Gabriela *being* robbed by her uncle, another boy *being* sexually abused by a family member, children *being* threatened and hit by their mother, a woman *being* beaten by her partner, Paola *being* verbally denigrated and bullied by her husband. These are just the glimpses of interpersonal and familial violence that were revealed during fieldwork, yet at the same time these were not openly discussed, reflecting that many of these events are known to others, but take place hidden from view as “public secrets” (Hume 2009: 20). There is, too, a sensitivity to how violence in the home was spoken about. Within the foundation, this is primarily a matter of care and the relationship of Mercedes and Alisson with the child or family affected. That violence happens is bound into everyday interactions, but this is not meant to imply that it becomes ordinary or accepted. There was an impotent disgust from both women, it seemed, when one day a man who beat his wife came to the foundation wreathed in smiles, handing out fruit and shaking hands. Paola did not blurt out the denigration she endures from her husband as something matter of course, just another part of life; it emerged only after weeks of talking in the kitchen, the conversation happening indirectly as we faced different directions, chopping vegetables and preparing the soup.

Within the neighbourhood, residents encounter incidents both small and large, incidents that cling to places and rhythms of life, intimately connected with their social space. Rather

than something distant – vaguely known acts and fearful places – violence and the fear of violence occur within residents’ familiar spaces and routines. Violence manifests and is encountered in everyday circumstances throughout neighbourhood spaces – disputes between neighbours, weekend brawls in the bars, fights at school – and more extraordinary ones, such as bodies in the lagoons or gunshots in the street. It happens at home. Residents have to live with the potentiality of violence – the fear of it – from day to day. But this does not make the violence banal, even if it is widespread. Many have witnessed events, seen bodies, or been victims of crime in one form or another and its prominence within the daily conversation of Mercedes and Alisson in the foundation and residents’ emotional reactions to this belie any claim of banality.

Luisa: “There Is the Story”

*“How has the neighbourhood changed over time?”*

*“The neighbourhood here? Well, there is the story.”*

*“Previously, when I arrived here in the neighbourhood, there wasn’t so much violence, no.”*

*“There wasn’t so much violence or anything like this.”*

*“There wasn’t so much violence, and I didn’t know that in this neighbourhood there were so many gang members or nothing, I didn’t see anything like that, but right now it’s really...”*

*[falls silent]*

*“It was very passable, calm.”*

*“Yes, but now with everything, with everything there is so much violence, they are fighting for anything.”*

-

Carmen: “If You Search for the Noise, You Find It”

*“Do you think that there are any difficulties in the neighbourhood? That people living in the neighbourhood have any problems?”*

*“Of course, it doesn’t stop, of course.”*

"It's like I say: "If one searches for problems, there they are." But if you don't give one [a problem] to anybody, then nobody gives one to you."

"Because problems...so, from here down to there, every time, they grab the machete and screw it up, from here to there."

"But if you don't search for the noise, if you don't search for the noise you don't have difficulties; like it happened with me when all these *ñeros* [youths, often viewed as delinquents or gang members] were gathering here on this block. To smoke [drugs]."

"And I was looking after children, this contaminated the house, so then I went out "OK my children, to the field, a little over there, I'm looking after kids." "Don't worry, we're going." Out on the corner, [my neighbour] was insulting them...it's true."

"And they treated her the worst, so if you search for the noise, you find it."

"And if you're not looking, you don't find it."

"And I asked them calmly, I always was since I went to open the door and they were there rolling their...their joint, they left – and like this you can keep living your life..."

-

Maria: "That's All We Have Here"

*"What do you think are the opportunities or restrictions in this neighbourhood?"*

Maria: "The drug addiction and the robberies, because that's all we have here"

Maria: "A lot of thieves. Addicts. Thieves. Rapists."

Mercedes: "Rapists. Children. They abuse the children...Is there anything else here?"

Maria: "No, not that I can think of, no...and the bars. There's also a lot of fighting here, in the bars. The Nacional with Millonarios [football teams in Bogotá]"

Mercedes: "Anything else?"

Maria: "Mmm, no, I don't think so..."

*"And do you have places here in the neighbourhood for social activities?"*

[Laughing]

Maria: “No.”

Mercedes: “Right now, the nature reserve.”

Maria: “For dumping what they’ve killed there.”

### Social Imaginaries of Violence

People seem to be in agreement – the violence is there. It can’t be ignored. But it can be managed. Others may want to “grab the machete and screw it up,” but Carmen will stay calm; you can make your own life. But when violence seeps into the facets of everyday life it comes to seem as if this is “all we have.” Luisa didn’t know when she moved to the neighbourhood that it would become so violent, and to her it seems to be a constant, one that was unexpected when she arrived some twenty years ago. Maria can’t see past it and speaks with a resignation and dark humour that is only heightened by the contrast with her memories of rural life before displacement. Asked about the opportunities or advantages of living within the neighbourhood she replies with her own puzzled question: “The opportunities?”

But perceptions of violence vary even while there is a general acknowledgement that it is present throughout the neighbourhood. While fear may in some cases prompt a coming together of community in response to external threats (Sparks, Girling and Loader 2001), experiencing crime and fear as a matter internal to everyday lives is something very different. One Medellín resident described the intimate ways in which she felt fear in her neighbourhood during confrontations between guerrillas and paramilitaries in the early 2000’s:

“Tension increased day by day. For us coming home had become like a survival trip every day. Silence had replaced the usual liveliness in the streets, while suddenly loud explosions could be heard nearby or further away in the hills. [...] We found the rhythm of the confrontations outside reflected in our breathing and in the beating of our heart.”

(El Tiempo 2003 (quoted in Rozema 2007: 61))

Violence becomes part of the rhythm of a place, either in its regularity or expected interruption, and also becomes something embodied, a threat to a person’s very existence through the potential destruction of their body (Coates 2015: 14-25). This fear is the proxy of

violence, a companion that becomes bound into the social space of a neighbourhood and influences the actions and decisions of residents (Gill 2016: 115-122; see also Sparks et al. 2001). It is in the thin, snaking trail of footprints that Gabriela sketched showing the exact route that she walks to school every day, or in the careful attentiveness of children as they ate at the foundation, keeping one eye on the door and the world around them. It was Mercedes meeting her daughter off the bus every night to walk the ten minutes home.

Because violence is multiple and can occur in many different ways, to different people, fear can be constant even when there is a lack of spectacular violence to attribute this to. A generalised sense of insecurity motivates Mercedes to meet her daughter, even as she described the current period as “calm” in comparison to the early 2000s after she had first arrived in the city:

“Oof, no, this time was hard, hard because there was a lot of [noise like shooting a gun], Friday, Saturday and Sunday, every day, deaths [*todos los días, muertos*]. Right now, it’s calm, I think it was much worse before. Much worse, because, let’s say, they came here from [the other sector] and cleaned up, to kill, they killed the people [*limpieza, matar, mataban a la gente*]. They came here from [the other sector] to kill the drug addicts.”

For inhabitants of affected areas, even the lack of overt, current violence does not remove the threat of further or future violence. Guerrillas, paramilitaries and gangs have all been known to use fear as a means of muting witnesses to crimes, which can lead to silence and a compartmentalisation of experiences (HRW 2013: 47-51; McIlwaine and Moser 2001: 971-974; Pécaut 1999: 154). When your neighbour could be working with the groups committing acts of violence, or where being overheard discussing it could lead to punishment or death, trust and social organisation atrophy (Moser and McIlwaine 2004: 53-54). Even in the foundation, sitting in the back room far away from eavesdroppers, Mercedes and Alisson spoke of violent events in hushed tones. Silence operates as one of the primary means to avoid conflict, and at the same time can be viewed as one of the most detrimental effects that violence can have on social relationships amongst residents (Moser and McIlwaine 2004: 108). Within the neighbourhood, people describe low levels of interaction with their neighbours, where “each person lives in their own house with their own cross to bear” (Alejandra). Others highlighted a reluctance to get involved with neighbours because of “like, the fear, the fear of getting in there” as it was up to each individual to “avoid getting involved

in problems” (Sonia). If residents saw “strange things such as, like threats or something, then you have to keep quiet” (Sonia).

In contrast to silence and division are the narratives that residents create around violence and fear, constituting a type of social imaginary that partially defines neighbourhoods<sup>46</sup> (Rodgers 2016: 91-92). It has already been made apparent that residents feel a general sense of institutional abandonment and social exclusion in the lack of local services, work, social support and access to public space. While residents were able to adapt to a certain extent – through informal support and kindnesses, meeting friends in the home, or even using the foundation as an opportunity for relatively risk-free socialising – the lack of safe public space is a more intractable issue. Specifically connected to violence and the fear of crime, the felt abandonment of the authorities in their inability to control public spaces – and their capacity to worsen outbreaks of violence when they do occur – means that many residents perceive few opportunities for using outdoor public space. Particular places become the focus of fear – the street corners, parks and sports grounds – and are viewed with suspicion (Moser and McIlwaine 2004: 57). Residents adopt strategies of avoidance and warn each other of what is happening, where.

#### A Hand on My Arm

Alisson explains the limits of their “safe” space within the neighbourhood – where her and Mercedes are able to safely go for work connected to the foundation. The area immediately around the foundation is OK, but just a few blocks to either side and that ends. To the south and east, they say that they can’t go because paramilitaries are in control there, and they hear rumours of violence, deaths. People just go missing. To visit the *olla* it’s often a good idea to check in advance, to get permission. They try to avoid the *humedal*, and always want me gone from the neighbourhood by 16.00 at the latest. They don’t want me on the street unsupervised, not even to the juice stall on the corner. I look down from the foundation doorway and see nothing remarkable; the road, rutted and dried from the sun, red brick walls. Only 20 metres or so away, the small juice cart stands alone, no customers, with the orange

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<sup>46</sup> As far back as 1980, Tuan (1980: 168-169) was noting that as an anonymous and threatening mass – to the upper classes – the urban poor have historically had little say as to their own experience of crime, violence and fear. Indeed, it is not difficult to find studies examining fear from the perspective of middle-class urban residents, often drawing on moral panics over perceived deviant behaviour (Shirlow and Pain 2003; see also Kilanski and Auyero 2015; Sparks et al. 2001).

umbrella reflecting the sun. Another day, they stop me from taking the bus back to the Transmilenio Portal. As I move to board they put a hand on my arm, pulling me back, then gesture wordlessly with a slight motion of their chin toward a group of youths climbing on. So, we wait a little longer.

Mercedes and Alisson are well known in the shops, and as we walk around the neighbourhood collecting odd items needed for the lunches, or for a particular task in the foundation, people greet them familiarly before I am introduced. Sometimes, as we are walking or taking a break in the foundation, they recount small stories of events that have taken place. Over there, a few blocks away, there was a gas explosion and a man was killed. Here, in this shop, the previous owner was killed for failing to pay his protection money to a local gang. Out there, in the *humedal*, there are homeless people living; I peer through the fence the next time we pass, but I can't see anything, just grass, reeds and a few sparsely scattered trees. On our side of the fence, an empty park, unused exercise machines, basketball courts and swings. A few stray dogs nose around the bins. As we pass through one of the streets bordering the park I ask Mercedes if I can stop to take a couple of photographs. She looks around quickly, then nods and consents – “but, quickly.”

### Fear as Stigma

The stories that people tell about crime, or the fear of it, are not just prompted by place but also help to constitute it (cf. Pain and Smith 2008; Sparks et al. 2001: 896). Once particular places have a dangerous or negative reputation, avoidance of these areas becomes a commonplace tactic in managing violence and fear in the city (Berents and ten Have 2017; Briceño-León 2007; Moser and McIlwaine 2004; Pansters and Berthier 2007; Restrepo and Moreno 2007; Winton 2005). Within Colombia, at least, this can be as specific as avoiding one street on a journey home (Rozema 2007), something I was often advised on as a recently arrived stranger to the city. Plotting a journey is not as simple as making it from point A to point B but must also involve a familiar knowledge of the city's topographies. These practices of avoidance and tactics to manage fear of place are nothing new. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1980) has argued that fear of place, however, is more accurately understood as a fear of the people within it. The urban poor and dispossessed, threatening the order of the upper classes, were the common scapegoats, but there were also racialised fears of ethnic or religious groups, of mobs, strangers and children that repeatedly occurred across Europe, China and

North America (Tuan 1980: 158-174). Although these fears subsequently become engrained within the fabric of a city, attaching themselves to specific places, Tuan (1980: 156) argues that “[fear] of the city as a physical environment cannot be neatly isolated from fear of the city’s human denizens.”

Fear of place, then, can be connected to fears over the actions of those inhabiting it. Within cities it latches on to places, seen in the territorial stigma that bleeds into perceptions of the residents themselves. In Colombia – and Latin American cities more broadly – it is peripheral, poor urban areas such as the neighbourhood that are commonly perceived to be more violent, and residents similarly stigmatised as violent and dangerous themselves (Koonings and Kruijt 2007; Moser and McIlwaine 2004: 56). The relationship between fear, stigma and insecurity is a complex one, as the structural violence visited upon these poor neighbourhoods, in part through their abandonment by authorities, is an important factor in the levels of violence experienced; violence encourages perceptions of lawlessness, leading to increased levels of violence through the impunity with which perpetrators are able to act and reinforcing stigmatising opinions of affected areas (Auyero, de Lara and Berti 2014; Moser and McIlwaine 2004; Winton 2004). In circumstances of acute stigmatisation residents of a denigrated neighbourhood can displace blame onto a specific problem area within their own locale (Auyero 1999: 59-63; Wacquant et al. 2014: 1271). These are the ways in which fear becomes practiced and embedded within the everyday. It becomes embedded within moral and material geographies through this attachment to bodies – whether their own fear or an imagined fear *of* them – and becomes part of the ways in which these places work (Pain and Smith 2008: 9-13).

What is important to consider for the neighbourhood is the intertwining of instances of violence, past and present, with the fear of this. This is attached to place within the neighbourhood, generally, through the action of territorial stigma and its embedment within the moral geographies of power in Soacha and Bogotá. More specifically, at the everyday level within the neighbourhood the *olla* was highlighted by residents as being responsible for much of the area’s poor reputation. The *humedal*, meanwhile, is infamous as a place for illicit activities, most notably the disposal of bodies. Both of these places figure prominently in the urban imaginaries that govern the social space of residents, Lefebvre’s (1991: 41-42) representational spaces that oscillate in meaning and significance.

*“They Say That There Is This Place”*

Alisson: “The area, this sector is known as like an *olla*, I mean, because obviously here there is micro-trafficking [of drugs] – but this is more like...[Mercedes and Alisson speaking at the same time] **macro**, so to speak. So, here [people from outside the neighbourhood] focus a lot on what we can’t be.”

Alisson: “And people say that here they live for robberies, that is to say, “Who have they not robbed?” Yes, obviously, but maybe it’s not people from here, the same sector, but other sectors doing it?”

Alisson: “And here there is that, the prostitution. There are youths and adolescents that are into drugs and they are prostituting, and all these types”

Alisson: “Yes, they are coming, for all that down there, that is, right now there is a police presence for all that happened, for so many murders, so many people that are found dead but in fact there is no...”

Yuli: *“They are not accidental deaths?”*

Mercedes: “No.”

Alisson: “No, it’s obviously from violence. There were massacres, because it’s that...”

Alisson: “In fact, a death that really hit us was that of J—. Let’s say, this was hard for us...”

Yuli: *“But, wait, I mean a massacre is a lot at the same, I mean...”*

Alisson: “Yes, they burned them...”

Yuli: *“But, to explain a little for [David] because “massacre” for him is like 30 people that were killed, or various during several days?”*

Alisson: “So, it’s that it was a problem for like 2 weeks where every day they were killing...and they were very violent deaths. Let’s say, to J— they tortured her, because...they tortured her. She appeared there in [the *humedal*] with bricks on her legs, then there were her other companions that were consuming drugs that night and they burned them.”

Mercedes: “To say something else, so in the part down there, there are some sites and all that, where according to that, the quantity of remains that they found there...”

Alisson: [lowers her voice] “There are “chop houses” [*casas de pique*]\* and so, I think yes, because yes...”

Mercedes: “Here is also like a little part the same as the Bronx. We have a part that is practically the same. They say that there is this place of these, of *pique*, of weapons, better to say, of everything, everything, there are a lot of things.”

*\*Houses used by criminal bands for torture, murder and the disposal of bodies.*

### Rumour and Reputation

How the neighbourhood is understood or imagined is as much about what residents don't know as what they do: the gaps, absences and uncertainties over the space and place within which they live. For Mercedes and Alisson, the stories connected to violence and fear in the neighbourhood hover somewhere between rumour and reality. Locations such as the *olla* and *humedal* became part of urban imaginaries formed through the stories and rumours that locals tell; stories connected to violence that unfurl throughout the social space of the neighbourhood. There are certain things, facts, that they can say for certain. An acquaintance of theirs, a mother to some of the children that attend the foundation, was murdered. The body was left in the *humedal*, barely hidden, along with others. These are facts. But mixed in with these facts are hearsay and rumour; that there are *casas de pique*, that too many human remains are found for the number of bodies that the police think they have, that weapons are stored somewhere. They say that bodies are brought from all over the city to be left in the *humedal*. On a Monday morning I am told by Alisson – who lives in Bogotá – that there were two murders in the neighbourhood during the weekend. Speaking to Paola later in the day, who lives just a few streets from the foundation, she claims to have no knowledge of this; nothing happened. These are rumours, and it may be that they are not true, but they are stories over what has happened, what is happening, within the neighbourhood. They speak to the violence that is sometimes apparent, and its consequences, as well as the “phantom of violence” (Pansters and Berthier 2007: 36) that accompanies it in rumours and stories. These consequences are felt in a range of emotions: anger, unease, panic and fear. Fear of becoming a victim, as much as the actual experience of victimhood itself (Bannister and Fyfe 2001: 808-809).

Fear is a relational state of potentialities; things that may or may not happen to us, be done to us. This potential runs ahead of events, foreshadowing their possibility and threatening outcomes, as it is equally left in their wake. Anyone can imagine themselves or be imagined as a victim (cf. Rotker 2002), but this disguises that it is on poor, female and racialised bodies that fear and acts of violence are most heavily inscribed (Kilanski and Auyero 2015; Moser and McIlwaine 2004). Our understanding of the sources of fear also have to be expanded beyond solely criminal acts. The stigmatisation of the *olla* creates a different form of fear for the residents living in the area. They are fearful that the reputation of the *olla* will lead to outcomes similar to the Cartucho and Bronx areas of Bogotá: wholesale eviction of residents and demolition of buildings. Indeed, the legacy of urban areas such as El Cartucho and the Bronx is that demolition and renovation are seen as a means of solving the puzzle of what to do with denigrated urban space around the city (Till 2012), and it has been argued that authorities can leverage feelings of collective insecurity to pursue their own agenda of urban planning in eviction of residents for urban ‘renewal’ (Avendaño Arias et al. 2019; Hüning 2015). One resident of the *olla*, Sonia, recounted how her family – and their neighbours – had been approached by representatives from both Bogotá and the Soacha mayor’s office about the possibility of relocation to another area:

“[The Bogotá authorities] came also because like, [where I live] was practically a red zone, so they came to us to relocate [us] because we were – there are a lot of children, we are people. Because they thought that one is the same as another; no, we work! They were going to knock down all the houses and they were going to move us out and relocate us. [The mayor’s office of] Soacha was opposed, that no – that, just like that, that I don’t know what...they wronged us. Because to live next to someone that, today they come firing some shots, and the children what? Take it and hide? So, this, no...”

Sonia was in favour of the relocation, largely due to very real insecurity; she recognises that violence – and the fear of it – have become part of her life in the neighbourhood. This, however, is not normalised or accepted as simply how life is there and she has a very real desire to leave the neighbourhood. In line with Tuan’s (1980) observations on fear, she attributes the insecurity to other residents, where their actions have come to define the entire area as particularly dangerous. In defining herself against these others, she invokes fundamental humanity – “we are people” – and a moral difference in her statement that “we work!” Yet, even while Sonia is attempting to assert that the negative reputation of the *olla* is not a totalising one for her, it reveals a partial acceptance of insecurity and violence as one

aspect of quotidian life there, as well as reflecting how this has shaped outside perceptions. She accepts that the authorities want to demolish the buildings and relocate residents, even as she resists the interpretation of all the inhabitants as being alike.

### The olla

For the first time Mercedes and Alisson have agreed to take me to the *olla*. I expected them to say no, as before, but for some reason they decided today it would be possible. We are walking down the street toward the *olla* as they explain that I can't take any photos there, and just to follow them. As we approach the end of the road, passing the bus depot, the quality of the housing is declining. From brick buildings the structures are becoming more ramshackle, pulled together from sheets of metal, wood and plastic. The actual space is much smaller than I expect, maybe only two or three streets at most. The surface is not even the hard-packed earth of the road, just thick mud, and we gingerly pick a path through to the lowermost street. One side of this, effectively forming the edge of the neighbourhood, is the rubbish dump where large sacks of refuse are stacked five or six high, easily reaching to ten or twelve feet in places. I am told that nearby the local recyclers' association picks through and sorts the material they have gathered from around the city, but in this area, there seems to be little organisation to the dumping. The smell is terrible, and various liquids, unidentifiable, leak across the ground and into the puddles of mud. We pass two children I don't recognise playing with a toy bus in the mud, echoing the bus depot that lies behind us. Rubbish is scattered everywhere, and dogs scrap around in this, scavenging for food. They look unhealthy, coats thinning and sparse, or with growths and large discoloured patches of bare skin. A few houses down we stop at a door, Mercedes and Alisson calling through a gap in the wall to the occupants inside. The door cracks open an inch and I recognise one of the older girls who attended the foundation the previous year. In the background, and through holes in the board wall in front of me, I can see the smaller shapes of younger children moving around. She greets us briefly, but does not invite us inside, and so we continue down the street. As we are turning to exit back on to one of the larger roads, we pass through a group of young men, sitting in silence on upturned crates amongst the mud, rubbish and dog shit. Mercedes and Alisson offer a polite "*Buenos días,*" but there is nothing in response, just a disinterested stare.

By the time we return to the foundation it is late morning and almost time for children to start arriving. We help Paola to finish preparing the food, as children begin drifting in the door and the routine starts; pouring the juice, sorting the portion sizes by age, speaking to the children as they cluster in small groups around the tables. The children are more upbeat than usual today, chatting and joking freely. Carolina is especially happy, talking of a visit that her family made to their grandmother's *finca* in the countryside. She describes how her and her sisters played with the water hose and fed the pigs, and how the whole family travelled there divided between cars and motorcycles.

I'm eating lunch after the children have gone when Alisson walks back in from running an errand. She announces that a man has just been shot down in the *olla*. As she is speaking a distinct, rattling, popping round of gunfire sounds from outside. Alisson and Mercedes stop speaking – almost poised mid movement – and just listen. From where I am sitting the street is visible through the open door of the foundation, and I see police motorbikes bounce past on the rutted surface of the road. The sound of the gunfire intensifies, then continues sporadically for another 15 minutes. The usual sparse traffic of *motos* and pedestrians has vanished, and we just wait inside. Alisson's son runs to the door to try and see what is going on but is roundly scolded by Alisson and Mercedes both, then dragged back inside. Within a few minutes of the gunfire stopping, though, children begin arriving for the afternoon activities and motorcycles resume passing in the street outside. A tension is hanging in the air, however, and of the children that do turn up, most of them sit in silence.

It seemed clear to me, immediately following fieldwork, that fear and violence were going to be crucial to understanding life in the neighbourhood, and this was true to an extent. Moments of violence resonate deeply throughout the neighbourhood and low-level, common acts of this are frequent reminders to residents that their fear is rooted in real events of a much more serious aspect. In its ability to inhere within places, fear of violence feeds prominent understandings of the neighbourhood as dangerous, the inhabitants as morally deficient in their characterisations as thieves, rapists, addicts and murderers. The *olla* has some liminality in its position as both home and potential source of harm. For municipal authorities it appears to be simply a blight to be removed, although in its physical location on the border between Soacha and Bogotá neither city seem willing to take responsibility for this. The discussion residents had regarding the possible relocation was in fact the only

instance of municipal authorities intervening in the neighbourhood that was encountered during fieldwork. That it was predicated on negative reputation speaks to the ways in which certain areas of the neighbourhood are defined as violent or dangerous, despite this being only a partial rendering. In this instance, the relocation plan was only partially implemented; houses were demolished and some residents removed, but new (informal) houses were quickly built and new residents settled, who, in Mercedes' words "are even rougher than those who were there." Whereas the previous occupants were viewed as having "some things that weren't good" Mercedes also believed that "they cared in some sense...they helped the neighbourhood in this part." In contrast the new arrivals were seen as wanting to "destroy everything" to the extent that "anything is possible." Although there may be little to distinguish one gang of criminals from the other, for Mercedes there was a difference in the relationship that these more recent arrivals have with the neighbourhood<sup>47</sup>. The new arrivals in the *olla* have little investment in outcomes for the other residents. Whereas previously the *olla* occupied an ambiguous position in having some positives for the residents, mainly in the capacity of the gang there to offer informal protection for residents (Moser and McIlwaine 2004: 78-82), the arrival of unknown strangers had served only to further the reputation of the area as one of fear and uncertainty for other locals.

Yet, residents themselves operate with their own form of moral geography inside the neighbourhood, echoing negative opinions of the *olla*. Locals state that they "don't go down there...I don't like it" (Vanessa) because of violence in the surrounding streets and the presence of drug addicts. Those residents who live in the *olla* are marked as different and referred to as being from "down there" or "below," and people avoid walking there if possible. When the foundation first started, Alisson tells me, "the children from down there were fighting with the ones from here." Mothers worried that families from the *olla* would be a negative influence on their children. As we have already seen, while it was a motivating factor for Mercedes and Alisson in where they decided to do their work this is still a place that they regard with some fear. Visits were talked of in terms of gaining permission, literally "opening a breach" [*abriendo una brecha*] into the space of the *olla*. It is impossible to

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<sup>47</sup> In contrast to the beliefs of Mercedes here, where the previous occupants were to some degree protecting the neighbourhood, other research has shown that urban violence has a self-perpetuating energy in the form of retaliatory or tit-for-tat attacks, or attempts at informal social control by armed actors (Auyero, Burbano de Lara and Berti 2014).

overlook the fact that the *olla* was a dangerous place, and violence was by all accounts a regular occurrence in the area. Residents rightly lived in fear of what could happen to them and their families, and, like Sonia, would be only too happy to find a means of living elsewhere. Even Carmen, often obstinately upbeat, commented that she “gives thanks to God” because “none of my children have lost their way, none of them. Because that was what they were saying to me there in Soacha – that here I might lose the children.”

### The humedal

Mercedes has agreed that we can take a small walk into the *humedal*. Up until now this place has only existed for me as a patch of greenery, and the mythical location where dead bodies are dumped. Around the perimeter it's surrounded by a wire fence, the top of which is festooned with old kites caught there by the wind. Above, power lines are draped in the same flaps of tattered plastic. The fence has so many holes it may as well not be there, but as we duck through one it seems strange to me that it is as if I am crossing into the *humedal*, and this is the contained space, rather than vice versa. Buildings and the fence now bound us on three sides, while in front of us, the grass stretches out to a low rise of bushes and a few scattered trees. To the left it stretches around the rear of the neighbourhood where the rubbish stacked behind the *olla* is slowly spreading to cover more and more ground. Around us it is nature, in a way, but contaminated, almost liminal. The grass is thick and tufty in places, springy underfoot. But it is interspersed with small interruptions.

Piles of rubbish.

Faeces.

Animal bones.

Burned patches of ground from fires.

Pieces of drug paraphernalia; empty lighters, pieces of foil, blackened plastic and glass tubes, small empty plastic bags.

I comment that for a lagoon, for a wetland, it seems dry. Mercedes tells me that the pools of water are further inside, drawing my attention to the vegetation and tall reeds that form the horizon. I think about what people keep telling me about this place, about the bodies that are found here. Last year it was about the mother of one of the kids, who was mutilated and then

dumped in the water. Some children allude to seeing bodies here. Last month Carolina told me of the one she found behind the *olla*. And this week, Alisson was telling me of a man found here with his throat cut and no hands. It is the method of the gangs, apparently. This is how and where Gabriela's father reappears, intermittently, each body potentially his. Maybe this time it will be.



46 – Looking toward the neighbourhood from the humedal. Photograph by the author.

### Absences

As in narratives of displacement, the present for many residents is a constellation of absence and presence; tangible facts of everyday life and remembered or imagined events, people and places. Absence becomes something indivisible from presence, the one implying the other (Hetherington 2004; Meyer 2012; Scott 2018). Kevin Hetherington (2004) has noted that the absent always has the potential to return, and that how we consider disposal has an epistemological role to play in how the absent is understood. Hence, incomplete or temporary disposal creates conditions of liminality, what Hetherington (2004: 169) refers to as “first burial.” Lifting the concept above the literal meaning of the word “disposal,” this affords a useful tool for considering how events can mark locations within the neighbourhood. Rather than viewing the bodies found in the *humedal* or behind the *olla* as simply left there then removed, it suggests how these ‘incomplete burials’ become threaded into social space

through their capacity to persist over time, in the relational connection that is formed between place, event and meaning.

Morgan Meyer (2012: 107) argues that absences have a profound role to play in the shaping of social space through what he refers to as a “relational ontology of absence.” Taking the example of unmarked or unbounded graves, Meyer (2012: 106) contends that these have an unsettling potential through their disturbance of boundaries between the living and the dead. In disturbing the ordinary demarcations of a place, perceptions are altered. Even once the bodies have been removed their presence remains as a “trace” in memory and story;

“Essentially, this means to see absence not as an existing ‘thing’ in itself but as something that is made to exist through relations that give absence matter. It means seeing absence as something performed, textured and materialized through relations and processes. Thus, a second point to make is that, rather than talking about ‘connections’ between the absent and the present, perhaps a more fertile and less dualistic way of thinking is to conceive absence as a trace and as something that needs to be traced.” (Meyer 2012: 107)

The *humedal* is not a source of fear, necessarily, in the same way as the *olla* is but it has become marked, become re-markable to residents because of the bodies that are found there. There is significance for residents in knowing how the places of their neighbourhood are considered; as Maria states, the *humedal* has become only a “dumping” ground for “what they’ve killed.” The place of the material in forming experiences means that these markings leave traces of themselves upon places as “spatial hauntings” (Degen and Hetherington 2001), and for those who witness violence, death and its aftermath the landscape can become indelibly marked and certain locations emblematically connected with these events (Renshaw 2010). Lingering suggestions of presence invoked through space by memories of what has happened there or the stories that are told. It is the *humedal* and not the *olla* which holds the absence Gabriela’s father.

Absences also matter in that by highlighting what it is not present, they can make social, cultural and political struggles more prominent (Bille, Hastrup and Sørensen 2010). The neighbourhood itself becomes defined by multiple overlapping absences; of the state, of security, of missing or dead family and friends, of justice, rights. These are truly traces, only visible in the effects materialised by their absence. But if these traces are markers of material and social relations within the neighbourhood, it is important that these are embodied, lived,

for them to have significance for individuals; that “they call forth the emotions and the affective energy of all those – things and people, living and dead – who are involved in their creation, placement, maintenance, and evanescence” (Meier, Frers and Sigvardsdotter 2013: 424). In this way absences are also about what is struggled over and negotiated, the “contestations of the right to be present or absent” (Meier, Frers and Sigvardsdotter 2013: 426). So, even as residents may struggle to see beyond the negative influences on their neighbourhood in one respect, in Maria’s resigned statement that they are “all we have,” without alternative narratives of place the less noticeable relationalities that inhabitants have with the space of the neighbourhood take on a real material significance. Part of the struggle that the foundation is engaged in is exactly this, in the attempt to remake narratives that surround the neighbourhood, to assert the presence of living bodies that are marking out their place. But the traces of fear, and its suggestions of violence, are also contested through the spatial practices of the children.

### The Tree

We are looking at photographs that the children have taken, the prints spread out on the table in the dining room of the foundation. A number of the photos feature a small tree from the *humedal*, covered in flowers. Cristian picks his one to show at the exhibition. I ask him why he took the photograph of the tree and as he explains it has nice flowers and edible fruits that he enjoys, others join in, discussing the tree and the small path that runs next to it. Some use the path as a shortcut, others enjoy exploring the area nearby; there are pools of water with plants growing through them and birds. While they are talking, Alisson interrupts and with the air of correcting their descriptions, recounts the story of how the tree marks the site where a house burned down, killing the family inside. Mercedes nods next to her. The children fall silent, absorbing this change in meaning. The tree becomes something else.



47 – The tree in the humedal. Photograph by Fernando.

The small vignette above is not intended to suggest that the children in the neighbourhood have an innate connection to the natural landscape, or to assert that this way of seeing the *humedal* is more ‘true.’ Instead, it is an example of how meanings and significance are attributed differently. Many adults I spoke to regard the *humedal* negatively due to the connection with death and drug use, and it may be that the conflicting interpretations of space reflect attempts to control children’s use and relationship with space as a means to safeguard them. Fear can be one such powerful way of attempting to influence the behaviour of children (Punch 2000: 50-51), so it is possible that Mercedes and Alisson were attempting to re-shape how the children regarded this space. However, many of the children were already aware of the negative reputation of the *humedal*, and as noted some had physically encountered evidence of this – such as mutilated corpses – within it. Children spoke about events that have happened in the neighbourhood and where they have occurred, and it may be that the children have their own tactics for navigating these physically, socially, and emotionally (Renshaw 2010: 56-57), outside of adult supervision.

Following Berents and ten Have (2017) it is also crucial to note that violence and fear are not the only, or even the dominant, way to speak about the neighbourhood. Routines of daily

life are happening there: work, school, domestic chores. Violence may occur, but it is not normalised nor is it accepted by residents, evidenced through their rejection and condemnation of this in conversation and interviews. People who have to manage the effects of violence in their lives will find ways of navigating this day to day (Berents and ten Have 2017: 110-111), adapting to circumvent problems when they can: through keeping silent when they have to, avoiding others' problems, walking in groups and as little as possible at night, through avoiding certain locations. But these strategies of avoidance and management do not mean that people were inured to moments of violence or that there was such a thing as everyday or "banal" violence (Pécaut 1999). The people that I spoke to were at times furious, resigned, afraid, or overwhelmed with sadness and the desire to "leave this place." These emotions were not just limited to the adults. Some children, such as Gabriela, spoke of the ways in which fear had affected their use of space within the neighbourhood. Another, Enrique, refused to draw the *humedal* when it was suggested to add this to his map; "Why?" he retorted, "To show the bodies?" Mercedes, otherwise a bustling ball of energy and positivity, was still reduced to tears when talking of the violence that had afflicted her life in the past and its continuing repercussions. It is impossible to suggest that violence in whatever capacity is not deeply affecting for those involved or that it has become normalised<sup>48</sup>. Each event is marked and remembered.

### Exploring

Today one of the children at the foundation, Carolina, was telling me about what she had seen in the *olla*, where she lives. She was exploring across from her house, behind the stacked rubbish, when she came across a body. She cheerfully explains to me that there were no hands, and a large cut down the middle of the face, miming actions over her own wrists and face. She doesn't seem upset at all, more excited. I question Mercedes about this later, the seeming normality with which Carolina talked about it. She explains that in the foundation is one of the few places the children can discuss things like this; outside, in the neighbourhood, they aren't able to talk about them. They are silent, in a way, to the things that they see.

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<sup>48</sup> For a powerful, insightful and eloquent critique of attempts to position violence objectively in social science research see Mo Hume (2009: 12-18).

Yet, on revisiting the maps and photographs created by the children at the foundation, it was also striking how much happiness was contained there: not a single child directly drew or photographed violence, or its aftermath or even the suggestion of it. But every child included photographs of friends, family and animals, of nature. There were numerous photographs of the sky, clouds and sunsets, things that inspired the children and were “of God’s command, given to us to admire” (Anibal). Maps of the neighbourhood detailed their houses and those of friends. The majority had been out to the *humedal* to photograph parts of this. Some wrote eloquent statements about the need to defend natural spaces such as this from human effects such as pollution, or to safeguard wild animals. The children are not outside this symbolic world, the one seen by Alisson in her story of the burning house and how this denotes the significance of the tree, but they are engaging in a more embodied and material way (Soreanu and Hurducaş 2016). Most adults I spoke to did not go to the *humedal* as a matter of course, but for the children it was a space of play, where they explore with physical bodies the trees, flowers, fruit and paths, a relationality not yet shaped by the symbolisms exhibited in Alisson’s story nor fully dominated by fear and the lingering afterimage of violence.

The final section of this chapter will move on to consider the photographs and maps that the children created during the workshops held in the foundation. In examining these, the intention is not to present these as glimpses of a childhood that would otherwise be inaccessible to me as a researcher. The photographs don’t present any unique aspect of childhood that could not be gleaned from a similar exercise in a completely different location with different children. Similarly, the intention is not to suggest that childhood is bracketed off from the experiences of adults, that it is somehow separate from the social and political of life in the neighbourhood (Marshall 2013). Instead, what we can glean some sense of is how the children use different spaces to enact different parts of their lives, and consequently, the things and people that matter to them. It is part of taking my research participants seriously and doing them the credit of acknowledging intention and capability in what they chose to show me. In doing so, some of the unmarked everydayness of their lives can be glimpsed (cf. Brekhus 1998; Horton and Kraftl 2006a), illuminating how violence and fear are only partial narratives of life in the neighbourhood.

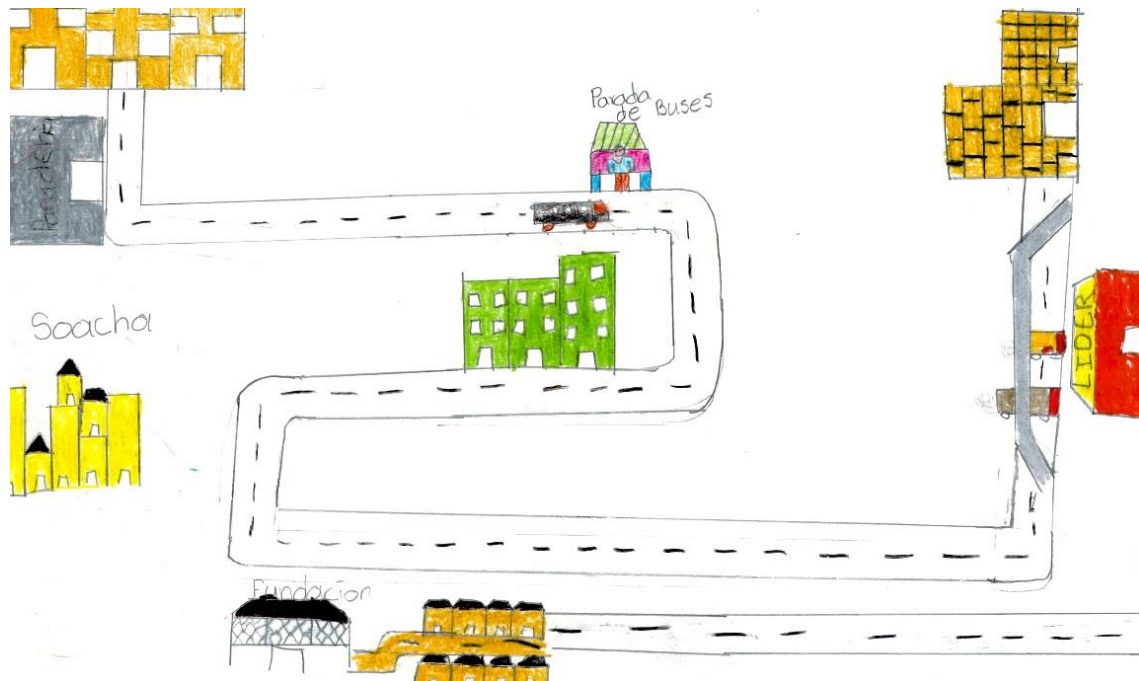


### Maps of Home, Streets of Difference

The map shown above (Figure 49) was drawn by Andrés, a ten-year-old boy who lives in the *olla*. Andrés offered no explanation for his map but was very insistent that he be allowed to completely finish it, carefully sketching out buildings and places, connecting them with roads. Arrayed around the edges of the map are the park (1), his school (2), the *humedal* (3), the houses of his aunts, uncles and cousins (4), his own house (5), the bus depot (6), the foundation (7) and finally a church in the centre (8). Lacking a clear explanation from the author himself any interpretation has to be done cautiously, but it is clearly not intended to be a map for navigating physical space. In contrast to Gabriela's map shown earlier (Figure 42), which depicts the block layout of the neighbourhood fairly accurately, Andrés' map has little correlation with where things are on the ground. Areas that are next to each other are here represented on opposite sides (such as the park and *humedal*) and distant locations (such as the foundation and the bus depot) placed side-by-side. The church was in an adjacent neighbourhood. The important locations within the neighbourhood for Andrés are centred around his immediate social world, which is to be expected; his close family, the locations where he spends time such as the foundation and school, and local landmarks such as the bus depot and *humedal*. Each of the buildings is shown in detail with the rooms of each occupant, kitchens, bathrooms, classrooms. Perhaps symbolically the centre of the map is occupied by the church, a location associated with social and moral values and depicted literally here as a building "where you confess" [*donde se confiesa*]. The spatial twisting of the other locations serves to connect each of them in turn to this religious space through the network of roads.

The map drawn by other children echo the threads from Andrés'. Houses belonging to friends and family are often shown, usually in detailed interiority with room layouts and notes of decorations, with paths or roads through the neighbourhood presented as connecting these sites. Some maps also note the physical divergences between the neighbourhood and other areas, such as Sebastián's (excerpt shown in Figure 50). Here, the neighbourhood is a cluster of small low-lying houses compared to the apartment blocks of other areas. The road difference in the neighbourhood is also marked with a change in colour to represent the shift from asphalt to dirt surfaces, and the only place of note is the foundation. This representation of difference was repeated in various forms through several other children's maps. Finally, in other maps the most remarkable feature is the sparseness of something that is intended to

represent important places. Diana, an 11-year-old girl, drew a map (Figure 51) containing only two nearby schools (1 and 2 on the map), the foundation (3), and her home (4).



50 – Excerpt from Sebastián's map.



51 - Diana's map.

Gill Valentine (2004) has argued that children's public space is produced through the activities that occur there and the "performances" that different actors adopt within it. Within this framing, she suggests that the multiple ways in which children are seen – as incompetent, vulnerable, dangerous – come to produce a vision of public space as an adult realm where young people do not belong. Studies looking at childhood and the use of space in Europe and North America have found that there has been a marked decline in the freedom of children to navigate outdoor space independently, resulting in "inhibited geographies" (2004: 73, see also Ch.5). Valentine (2004: 74) remarks that this is significant as it is through their mobility and play within space that children develop personally and form understandings of their environment. Although the research context differs significantly, it would be possible to argue that for young children in the neighbourhood there are similarly inhibited geographies, based solely on the comments made by adult residents during interviews. While children were seen in the streets, this was usually on their way to or from school, often via the foundation which may form the halfway point of their journeys. The routes plotted out through the paths or roads shown in their maps mimic the ways in which the children move through the neighbourhood itself. Any restrictions experienced by the children are far more likely to be governed temporally through diurnal cycles of light and dark, closely linked to fear of crime or violence, than by restrictions imposed by adults. Even then, there were exceptions, such as Laura's children helping her to collect recycling during the evening and late into the night.

Even as children are ascribed certain spaces by adults – the park, playground or school – and their freedom is constrained somewhat by expectations of use and behaviour, they are capable of finding novel ways of subverting these and interacting with space, giving rise to perceptions and ideas about what spaces are that can differ from those of adults (Hackett, Procter and Seymour 2015: 5). The geographies of adults and children may therefore overlap in many ways, but still remain distinct in use and meaning; spaces can become reconfigured and "othered" (Jones 2000) by children through a malleability of use, in opportunities afforded by a looseness of adult control. Within the neighbourhood there were clearly spaces which allowed this kind of swaying between use. The roads for instance, rather than being strictly adult space were also used by children for playing; racing bikes, football, or simply spending time with friends on the way to or from school. This itself may be linked to the informal nature of road construction, where there was little pavement, especially in the

'lower' area of the neighbourhood, and traffic itself was infrequent and slow due to the poor quality of the surface. Streets can also be spaces for young people to evade adult control (Matthews, Limb and Taylor 2000; Skelton 2000), and while outside space can be one of potential danger, it also offers a means of escape for young people from abuse or violence encountered at home (Sirriyeh 2013: Ch.5). In one instance, a boy who was suspected to be suffering abuse at the hands of a family member was found to have been wandering the streets unattended for almost seven hours – “walking like a little crazy person from side to side” – rather than return home.

### The Everyday Lives of Children

The children's use of neighbourhood space reflects geographies that are constrained to some degree, in the prevalence of interior spaces and relatively small set of locations depicted on maps. But it is clear that the maps are a very limited means of engaging with how children were interacting with these locations. In exhorting researchers – of all disciplines – to pay attention to “everydayness,” Horton and Kraftl (2006a) argue that much of what constitutes life everywhere, but in some places and for some people more than others, goes unnoticed. They propose that “too-much of what we *do* is ignored, because it seems too mundane, too obvious, too *pointless*, or too insignificant to write about, explain, even think about” (Horton and Kraftl 2006a: 71). Extending this, they argue that children especially have had their experiences of the everyday overlooked as lacking significance in comparison to more articulate adult accounts. Yet, children may expose some difference in the world and “give voice to the multitudinous styles in which everydayness might be theorised” (Horton and Kraftl 2006a: 72), consequently offering a different perspective on what the everyday can consist of. A similar dynamic operates through the ways in which adult narratives of the neighbourhood space and place are dominant. The repeated focus on fear and violence is not fabricated myth, as we have seen. These are very real and affective experiences for residents. But everydayness, banality, is not that of violence and fear; if anything those are the exceptions, the ruptures and inter-ruptions that can hide the everyday from view. Instead the view of banality taken here is that it is more indicative of the “affective connections between lives” (Horton and Kraftl 2006b: 272) and that these connections happen in particular places, happen through space.

Paying attention to this everydayness when looking at the photographs and maps helps to address some of the basic questions that arose on first viewing these: what significance can we read into photographs of family, friends and animals? Can these impart any sociological knowledge or are they simply aesthetic embellishments to other data? Was the intention of the exercise even understood by the children, and were they consciously addressing the task when they picked up the camera or pen? Looking at everydayness means looking at the photographs they produced as significant and intentional in their occasional banality. Not only in how they can show the aspects of life for the children that may have been considered insignificant, but also the alternative ways in which the spaces that these take place in can be experienced. That moments of connection, affection, love, care and play happen here. That these moments occur through spaces which are frequently understood in other, more pronounced ways; as spaces of fear, violence or absence.

Although animals were not a focus for research they were frequently brought up by participants both adult and child (cf. Charles and Davies 2008; Morrow 1998; Tipper 2011), and featured heavily in the photography and mapping activities undertaken with children at the foundation (see also Malone 2016). Animals were frequently something that the children would speak about, trying to impart knowledge to me of the pets that they had at home or the dogs that they knew from the street. Gabriela, for instance, would often regale me with stories of dogs. Descriptions of animals from other photographs referenced them as “playful” [*juguetón*], or “affectionate” [*cariñoso*]. Anibal took this photograph, and explained that his dog is “a special person and is my best friend”:



52 – "The dog is an animal that is considered man's best friend and for me is a special person and is my best friend." Photograph by Anibal.

Stuart Aitken (2001: Chapter Two, esp. pp. 34-39 and 43) has argued that children have in the past been uncritically connected with spaces of nature and natural life, that of plants and animals. Consequently, it is only as children age and develop toward adulthood that they are seen as losing some of this innate connection to the natural world through the effects of socialisation and acculturation. Cautioning against this, he proposes that it is important to remember that childhood – like every other stage of life – is an embodied experience for children, and that their relations with nature and animals are therefore significantly more complex than a natural connection that is gradually lost. Children's relationships with animals can also highlight the scale of children and animal geographies in themselves, what Tipper (2011: 155) refers to as their "micro-geographies of interaction." Children may find that they share the exploration and tactile experience of their landscapes with dogs, particularly when moving through areas outside of direct adult control (Malone 2016). Many of the photographs from the *humedal* also have dogs included, either as the subject or glimpsed in the background and this space is clearly explored and used by the children in conjunction with dog companions. Certain dogs are also known as street dogs by the children, and one boy, Samuel (eight-years-old), photographed the ones that lived near his home.



53 – Street dog. Photograph by Samuel.



54 – Street dogs. Photograph by Samuel.

While the children are clearly fascinated by street dogs and take an interest in the comings and goings of animals, there is little evidence of a universal attitude to them. Some days, children would try and tempt street dogs inside the foundation with morsels of food. A cluster of animals would gather at the door and the children would speak to them, try to pet them, and feed them scraps. Frequently, an adult would drive the dogs away and sometimes the children would do the same. Objects could be thrown by children to scatter the dogs, or they would shout at them and try to chase them from the door. In addition, while some children had pets at home the street dogs themselves were not sympathetic, empathic pets that could be relied upon unconditionally (c.f. Morrow 1998: 222-224), and some children were bitten by stray dogs. Absent understanding from language, relationships with animals are inherently physical (Tipper 2011: 152-153). The relationship between child and dog was an unstable one, but very much embodied; it was predicated on action and reaction, a reaching out or pushing away.

The simple act of taking the photograph itself establishes a relation between the photographer and the subject; that many of the photographs were of family, close friends, pets or domestic space speaks to the role that photographic records can play in establishing domestic space or attesting to intimate relationships (Drazin and Frohlich 2007; Parrot 2010; Rose 2003). One 13-year-old girl chose only photos of family members simply stating over and over “I love them a lot.” But taking the children seriously as research subjects means taking the statements that they were making through these photographs seriously as well. Holman, an 11-year-old living in the *olla*, not only proved to be a natural photographer – compositionally his images were striking – but he also hinted at the significance of the subjects chosen through the comments he provided. For one image, depicting two photographs of his younger siblings side by side, he states that he took the image because “they are my younger siblings and I watch their asses.” Another of his sister is explained because “out of the six siblings that I have she is my only sister.” Finally, one from his house

shows part of the *olla* and the street leading away, simply captioned as “my neighbourhood, where I always grew up.”



55 – "I took this photo of my sister and out of the six siblings that I have she is the only sister." Photograph by Holman



56 – "I took this photo because that is my neighbourhood where I always grew up." Photograph by Holman.

These are photographs of the people and places that matter to him, but more than that they are representations of relationships. His relations of care and responsibility to younger siblings and his only sister, the streets and view that he knows intimately, where he has “always” been. Also the care that he and others receive in the foundation, in his image of Alisson feeding another boy (Figure 38). The photographs taken by the children are images that attest, much as Mercedes’ old photographs did, to the importance of relationships with particular people, animals and places; certain things, even. Photographs of the *humedal* show a space of play and exploration, where the children are engaged with the landscape and what is contained there. The fruit and flowers of the tree, the sun setting over the grass and casting shadows, their dog bedding down in thick grass, smoke drifting over the mounded landscape. Two sisters stand almost silhouetted against the sun, hands on hips. A cousin crouches next to two dogs against a backdrop of reeds and bushes. These are visual documents of relationships that are tactile and grounded in the materiality of space and place.



57 – The park. Photograph by Fernando.



58 – Danna's dog in the *humedal*. Photograph by Danna.

### The Exhibition

For the final activity we will do with the children we have organised an exhibition of their photographs at Universidad Nacional in Bogotá, where they can speak with professional photographers about their pictures and take a tour of the campus. The children arrive in a noisy, yelling mass off the bus, spilling through the gates and fanning out across the grass. We barely manage to marshal them for looking at the exhibition before taking them off to see the buildings and different faculties at the university. This is a predictably high-spirited affair, and they cause chaos wherever they go. The first slope they find is used for rolling down, children emerging dizzy and covered in grass stains. Walls are clambered over, decorative fountains explored, trees climbed. A woman's football match becomes unexpectedly spectated, before some of the boys have to be removed for catcalling and wolf whistles. A weightlifting competition gains an additional unruly section of the crowd, shouting encouragement along with less welcome jeers for failure. There is a section of campus with horses, goats and other animals which manages to instil some sense of calm for a moment. Children walk quietly along the fences, reaching out to feed the animals grass

or stroke their noses. But then they are off again, and a single young man working out in an exercise park suddenly finds himself surrounded by small bodies trying to work the machines. Amid a fury of flailing arms and legs he beats a hasty retreat.



59 – The children take over. Photograph by the author.

### Conclusion – Saying Something About the Community

Children’s experiences of space are not limited by the immediate but reflect the fact that the “world with which children interact is the product of events, policies, discourses and decisions with diverse origins in time and space” (Ansell 2009: 200). Watching the children move through the university campus only highlighted the differences in how they use space. Excitement plays a role, but the freedom of movement and interaction around the space of the campus demonstrated an awareness that they were able to behave differently there. They tested boundaries of acceptability in heckling adults and their use of the space; in the neighbourhood a similar exercise park to the one at the university sat empty every time I passed it. The children are alert to how where they live has been marked by violence, and how this affects their interactions with people and space.

There is also an awareness of difference in the ways in which material changes between the neighbourhood and other areas are represented in maps, and in how the children spoke about events that take place from day to day. When Gabriela was telling me that she had fallen out with her friends over having dirty shoes, it marks a simple but profound difference between where she lives and the neighbourhoods where her friends do. The unpaved roads of the neighbourhood, which turn to mud when it rains, mark her shoes. Sebastián, when drawing his map, did not depict his house in the neighbourhood but a large apartment block in a middle-class neighbourhood. Although they live in a neighbourhood that some might call marginal, ostracised or segregated, the children are not socially or physically divorced from other people, places and ways of life (cf. Ansell 2009). They experience and notice difference. Some described visits to family in the countryside, feeding animals on the farm, or taking a plane to Mexico; “It went up, and turned like *this*...I was not afraid.” Some are from internally displaced families unused to urban living, while an increasing number of others have arrived from Venezuela. They know where they are not just physically, but socially, in relation to others. One eight-year-old boy, William, wanted to be a lawyer so that he could help his family members who had been jailed. Alejandro, nine-years-old, photographed the park and stated “I like it because I train there to play football, to become a good footballer and to make something of my life and to help other people.”

There are real constraints and dangers that come from living in the neighbourhood, and the fear exhibited by adults is a consequence of past and ongoing events. In tracing the ways in which stories come to structure relations between one person and another, between one place and another, we can see how the stigma of the neighbourhood arises from the marking of space, place and people. In doing so it becomes a manifestly real thing for those living there, felt in a number of tangible ways. Fear of crime and violence lead to a physical disconnect caused by the lack of transport links and amenities. Stories and rumours of what happens in the neighbourhood lead to the taint of social stigma in the attitudes of the authorities, media and wider public. Residents come to feel defined in part by their relationship with other people and places. Yet, even internally within the neighbourhood there is a difference between the *olla*, which occupies what residents refer to as the “lower” area, and the rest of the neighbourhood. Places in the neighbourhood become entangled with nested relationships of boundaries and difference, associated with particular occurrences and

stories, whether half-heard rumour or literal fact. Space becomes layered with violence and fear. Certain streets are avoided, and the tall grasses, reeds and lagoons of the *humedal* become known as a dumping ground for bodies, echoing Carmen's recollections of the dead horses and deep pools she found there more than twenty years ago.

My own experience of the neighbourhood is very different from that of the children; the discussions of fear and violence in this chapter are partially due to my own position as an outsider and how this inflects my own interpretations. The street was off-limits to me in a way that it was not to the children. I was more closely shepherded by Mercedes and Alisson than the children were, and I was noticeably out-of-place, the gringo researcher. In comparison, the children were in their space, their home, where they have grown up and the space they move through every day. The street did not stop being a place of fear and potential harm, necessarily, but it was also other things: the route to school, the foundation, church or their grandmother's house. A space to play football, to race bicycles, to escape, even from fear or violence in other locations. This helps us to see the neighbourhood as social space in the most explicit way, as different meanings and symbolisations of space overlap with lived realities and the impositions of others. Locations such as the *olla* and *humedal* oscillate between two different forms of urban imaginary, recalling their physical liminality between two cities. Through this the children – and adults – are threading their own “practices of everyday life” that contest, acknowledge and occasionally submit to these renderings.

The photographs are one means of defining a sense of self against the “background of things that matter” (Taylor 1991: 40); of positioning bodies in relation to others, of visualising meaningful relationships. More succinctly, it is perhaps a way of saying; “This is who I am and what is important to me.” The relationships depicted within these materials are part of what has significance for the children living in the neighbourhood. The photographs are showing their answers to exactly the questions that were asked when the exercise was first proposed to them, sitting around the battered lunch table of the foundation – what are the important things in your neighbourhood? They show the important moments of Sennett's moral communities and, if we follow Taylor (1991: 33-36) a little further, they are one way of looking at an attempt to establish dialogical relations with others, one of his prerequisites for finding paths to recognition of and by others. The simplicity of family, friends and a love for animals

and nature is unremarkable in one sense, in its everydayness, yet in the other remarkably universal.

Through asserting these aspects of their lives the children are complicating what can be considered the substance of their everyday. Yes, it is true that their neighbourhood is marked by fear and violence but it is also true that the reality of their lives gives a deeper, more complex and uneven meaning to the place they call home; that these are local and contextual everyday lives negotiable and navigable through the “contingency of social place” (Stewart 1996: 123). That there is something other than violence going on – and “on-going” (Horton and Kraftl 2006b) – in the neighbourhood. Viewing the photographs at the exhibition, one girl, Carolina, stated that “I like the photos because they say something about the community.” Carolina was more astute than me at that time – and most likely still is – as to what mattered for her friends and family who took these photographs. She did not create any photographs herself, and did not draw a map, but she understood why these were the images that were created. More than scholarly arguments over the banality of everyday violence, the photographs articulate the world that she is intimately familiar with. Alternative ways of seeing and speaking are possible.



60 – Children in the *humedal*. Photograph by Fernando.

## Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to listen carefully, to words but also things unsaid, actions and relations. When residents speak about the lack of paved roads or sanitation, or the lack of support for the displaced, these are practical things that can be seen and identified as lacks and challenges within their lives. But they reflect a deeper scepticism and suspicion about the words and promises of those in power, whether the local mayor's office or the national government. The neighbourhood is a place where sometimes conflicting values mix; independence, supporting yourself, working hard, even rough local justice are all valued, doubly so in the absence of state support. But communitarianism, support for those in need through acts of care and kindness – small and large – are also at the forefront. Sometimes these can seem contradictory, such as those who have been displaced campaigning for social justice, human rights and accountability all while maintaining a fierce resistance to and suspicion of any peace deal. Among the university students and middle class Bogotanos that I spoke to, the peace deal had widespread support. They organised vigils, disseminated information through social platforms, held media events. All to promote a peace deal that, by the time it filtered through to the neighbourhood, clinging on to the edge of that middle-class social world, was either unpopular or irrelevant. Relating this observation to a friend in Bogotá, she lamented “the lack of education” that led to the deal being rejected by the women I had spoken to. But to classify this as ignorance on the part of women who have lived the cruellest consequences of the conflict only highlights the “abyssal gap” (Santos 2018) in understanding between these social worlds. Instead, listening to what the women were saying, trying to pay it the courtesy of serious attention, suggests to me that this is not about a lack of education or a failure on their part to imagine how the future could be with peace. It is that, for people who have little to no support from the government, who are victimised and subjugated by those with more power, the peace deal offers no hope of change in their circumstances.

This is not to argue against the peace deal, which was – and remains – vital and necessary. It is simply to observe that there are more immediate struggles for the families living within

the neighbourhood. These are struggles which are often limited in their aims: a better house, a better job, better services within the neighbourhood. But paying attention to the myriad ways in which people living within the neighbourhood weave an uneven path through the many obstacles and restrictions that affect their lives draws out the creative potential in their everyday. There is, in fact, already another way of being taking place there, one which draws from the positive and negative aspects of life, staking quieter revolutionary claims to the spaces of the city (cf. Lefebvre 1996).

These are lives rooted in struggles which connect to the multiple ways inequalities and historical dispossessions are linked to the expansive conflicts that have and continue to permeate Colombian society. Speaking sociologically, I could attempt to categorise these: politically, through the conflicts between guerrilla, paramilitary, narco-traffickers and the state; economically through the liberalisation of rural economies, the lucrative drug trade and their corrosive influence on indigenous, Afro-Colombian and *campesino* ways of life; culturally through stigmatisation and marginalisation of the rural which was carried with migration and displacement to become embedded in the spaces and lives of the new urban poor. Yet, time and history are made unstable in how these conflicts reoccur and continue, woven through memory and narratives to become present in the everyday: loss, fear, violence and poverty. That sometimes it can “feel like I’m living it again” (Mercedes) and that for many residents it is a continual struggle against the equations and forces that produce social constellations of injustice. It is in recognising that for residents every day might be a struggle, but it is not always a conscious struggle against *something*; it is struggle that is lived and where neat boundaries – political, social, economic, cultural – collapse into something messier that is felt and experienced more than it can be described in words (cf. Escobar 2016). In doing so, it reveals the shaky foundations of an “unjustly imposed marginality and inferiority” (Santos 2014: ix) and the accompanying futility of moralising projects to remake communities, peoples, and places into the image of another.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014; 2018) argues that subaltern and repressed groups – ranging from indigenous peoples to the urban poor – produce unique and embodied

knowledges through their struggles against dominant forces of the state, capital, colonialism and patriarchy. These are struggles that take place out of necessity, in order to find whatever small margins of freedom are available and turn them into opportunities for emancipation and liberation<sup>49</sup> (Santos 2018: 65). Rather than disciplined epistemologies of the academy or science, these are first and foremost embodied knowledges and ways of knowing that arise from social practices, bearing an “immediate and intense relation to facts” (Santos 2018: 79, 3). This is the complexity reflected in the neighbourhood, where struggle is not a choice but a lived “necessity or inevitability” (Santos 2018: 80) denoting a way of living *through* struggle; it is endured and understood through the everyday. These struggles, Santos (2018: 2) argues, can not only teach us that there are other ways of living, through revealing the contradictions, shortfalls and limitations of society – they can be used to identify and validate that there are other ways of knowing what shape alternatives can take; they can break from dominant epistemologies:

“We should learn about democracy from the perspective of slaves and slave-like workers; we should learn about citizenship from the perspective of noncitizens, refugees, undocumented migrant workers and colonial subjects; we should study the concept of civil society from the perspective of those abysmally excluded, living under conditions of social fascism; we should evaluate human rights from the perspective of large populations considered subhuman or of nature.” (Santos 2018: 297)

In the neighbourhood these struggles could sometimes erupt into moments of organised resistance, such as when Mercedes and other displaced families occupied empty housing blocks to campaign for homes of their own. But for the most part there is just the day-to-day of getting by. Yet, as Santos (2018: 66) notes, “that there is no confrontation does not mean that there is complicity, consent, or unawareness that the situation is unjust.” The foundation itself, rooted in a practice of community care at an interpersonal level, is an immanent

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<sup>49</sup> Santos’ (2018: 1) conception of these struggles encapsulates an “epistemological, non-geographical South” that is focused on how these struggles contain attempts by groups to “represent the world as their own and in their own terms.” This does not mean that the epistemologies of the south are completely distinct and independent of from those of the global north, as many are influenced by concepts of rights, citizenship and the law – that descend from the ideas and philosophy of the north – which serve to make them “intelligible and politically effective in a society saturated with the idea of human rights” (Santos 2014: 11).

reaction to hardships and injustices suffered, circumventing the absent state and building on the embodied and local knowledges held by Mercedes and Alisson to respond to this. It connects with their visions of what life could be like, a more just vision of their neighbourhood, or in the terms of this academic work, a moral space in the city. Their work in the foundation, I argue, attempts to carve out some small space where the children – and sometimes their families – could find some measure of freedom from their “immediate context of experience” (Santos 2018: 82), some space within which possibilities were, even if only marginally, different. Other spaces lend themselves to this more or less partially; the *humedal* and the street as an escape for children, or domestic space to a lesser extent. Each space can allow something distinct. Opportunities for socialising, in the foundation, or to experience care in situations where this might be lacking. Privacy, sometimes, in domestic space; although more than others, perhaps, this is qualified by conditions of everyday life, particularly the corrosive effects of drugs, alcohol, poverty and abuse. The *humedal*, in its oscillating meaning and significance, is a less certain one, offering freedom for children while containing the potential for encounters with some of the most horrific consequences of violence, addiction and fear. These are spaces, then, which operate with very small margins of freedom.

Ultimately, this thesis is arguing that through their creative everyday the urban poor find and use these small margins to establish moral spaces within the city. These moral spaces are understood as being built from a shared understanding of things that matter, a dialogical framework built up from the rote interactions of life within a particular place. With Lefebvre’s work on the city and social space as a guide, rather than strict framework, I have examined the different moments that comprise the neighbourhood. The spatial practice of residents as they move through, shape and interact with their surroundings, the mutually constitutive practice of making a place. How these collide with representation of space and attempts to impose visions of what it should be or is, especially in the formation of symbolic understandings of this. The stigma of people and place that runs through the neighbourhood and which has prompted resistance in the form of the foundation. The ways in which real violence and its close companion, fear, invest places and lives with symbolic meaning and

shape the practices of residents. But also, that this way of looking at the neighbourhood ignores the quieter everyday of children and its own entwinement with people, animals and places. That these are overlapping, multiple moral topographies of the same space.

To call the neighbourhood a moral space is to engage with Sennett's understanding of this as somewhere where struggles and moments have an importance that is recognised and respected. This is difficult to discern, but I understand the practices of care and moments of kindness that residents enact as constituting a delicate, contextualised recognition of the shared hardships faced. It is all the more important as it is a respect that is only achieved in a fragile way, as lives are still susceptible to the pressures that come from living within conditions of chronic injustice. Importantly, the neighbourhood is a moral space that may not be understood as such by those not living there, where stigma influences preconceived perceptions of the inhabitants and their lives. This is where the duty of sociology is apparent as a trustee of knowledge, to step into Abbott's (2016: 280-282) argument, responsible for communicating a deeper social knowledge of one, admittedly small, slice of life.

In doing so, this thesis contributes to existing literatures around urban social space and social marginalisation, offering a deep contextual engagement with the everyday of those living within marginalised urban areas. My findings suggest that while urban marginality can be a useful lens through which to look at the experiences of the poor and subaltern, it is only a partial fit that obscures everyday lives and the significant moments that populate these, in the people, places and struggles of the marginalised. Theoretically, in joining Lefebvre's work on space and the everyday to the moral foundations of community and the self explored by Sennett and Taylor, I have shown how these theories offer some universal qualities applicable to all situations of social marginality, whilst also arguing that exactly this kind of close ethnographic work is needed to understand the contours and specificities of the everyday struggles within which marginalisation is contested. This, in turn, demonstrates how ethnographic work such as this is best suited to unpicking the formation, maintenance and alteration of urban social space, and the key role that informal institutions, such as the foundation, can play in this. In particular, the work of Mercedes and Alisson in the foundation

and the key role of women in shaping the neighbourhood against stigma and marginalisation suggests that there are interesting avenues for future research to explore the gendered nature of the everyday and its interplay with social marginalisation, while the role of everyday practices of care and acts of kindness in other contexts of urban marginalisation is another. Finally, I have used a lyrical approach to writing and engaging with my data to suggest one way in which research can foreground the lives of research participants in order to imbue sociological work with emotional resonance that embraces our own felt reactions to the experiences of fieldwork, rather than carefully edit these out. I argue that this is a necessary extension of ethnographic fieldwork – especially participant observation such as that undertaken in this project – which reinforces the inherent strengths of these methods.

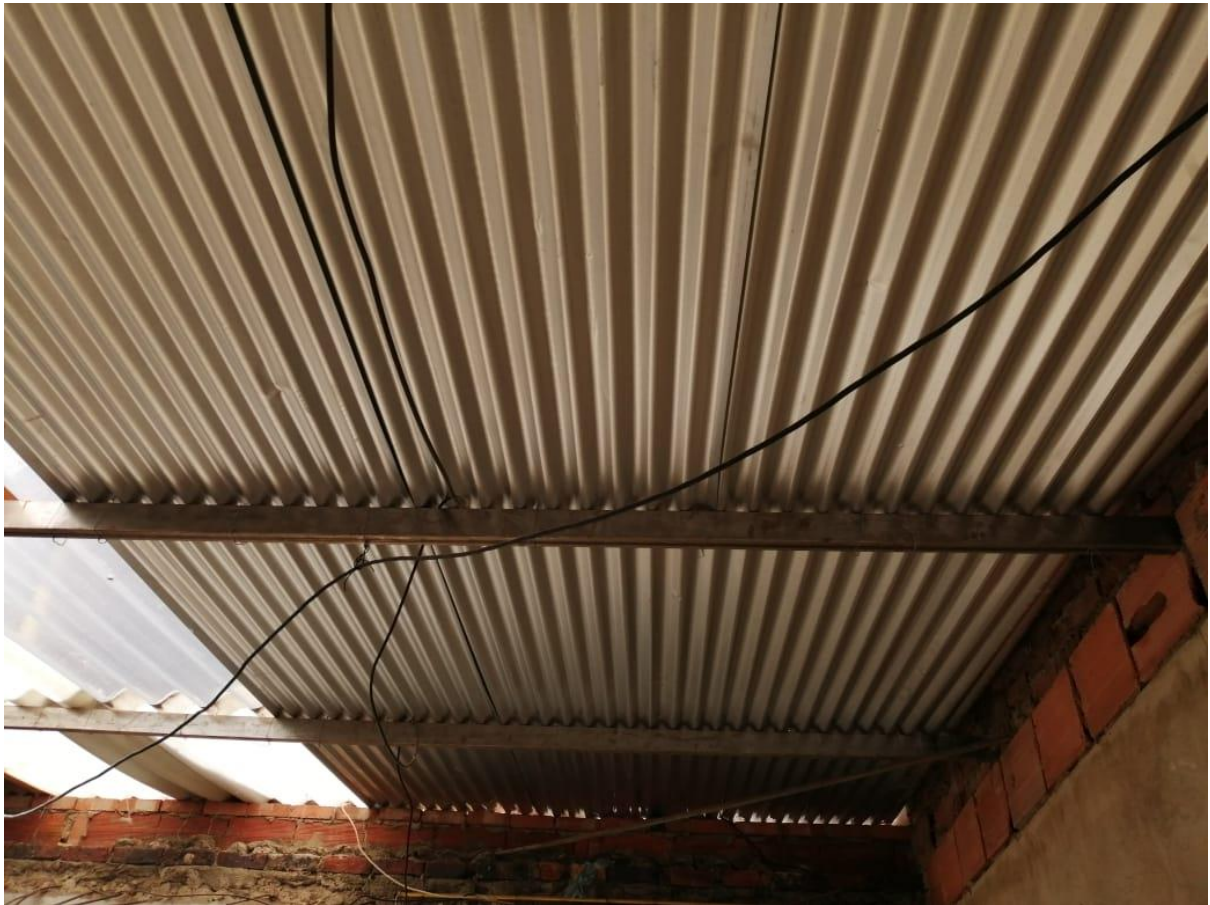
This thesis is now based on a reality that, while it is and always was changing, has now shifted dramatically. Mercedes, Alisson and I still keep in touch by WhatsApp. They send me messages and photos to update me on the activities of the foundation, on how this or that child is doing, or what new projects they have in mind. There have been robot building workshops, a partnership with some university students, an initiative to promote the local community. Parties have come and gone, then come around again; Halloween, Christmas, Semana Santa. Birthdays. And, of course – because this is still the same space – there have been losses that keep falling like blows. A grandmother has passed away, the last guardian of one girl. A family gone, and they don't know where. Some children that have stopped attending. Since the time of my fieldwork events in Venezuela have instigated a new influx of displaced persons to Colombia, estimated at close to 1.8 million people (GIFMM 2020; NRC 2019). Of those people, more than 340,000 are believed to be in Bogotá, with a modest estimate of 26,000 in Soacha as of August 2019 (GIFMM 2020; Migración Colombia 2020). Mercedes tells me that a large number of Venezuelan families have ended up in the neighbourhood, and that a significant number of their children are now attending the foundation. The roster of children might not be the same ones as when I was there, but the numbers have not diminished.

There was little let-up as protests erupted across Colombia in late 2019, citizens angry at perceived corruption and a lack of progress in implementing the 2016 peace deal, among other factors (BBC 2019). While protests were roiling in central Bogotá they were also marching through the streets in Soacha, with Mercedes wryly commenting that she hoped the protestors would repair the street when they were finished. And, regrettably, as I was nearing the end of writing, the coronavirus pandemic also reached the neighbourhood. As things stand it is hard to know how this will affect life in the neighbourhood in the long-term. Similar to many other poor neighbourhoods across the globe, multiple threats have risen up to afflict the inhabitants. The lockdown was especially disastrous for families relying on work such as recycling, where materials are gathered from wide-ranging searches across the city. But for most, from what little can be gathered by speaking to Mercedes and Alisson, there are economic impacts. Put more directly: for the poor, having a little less is catastrophic. In April 2020, Mercedes tells me of soaring food prices and empty shelves, and families trying to isolate within their homes with no clear guidance or support. She is fearful of what will happen to her and her family, of the poor health services that are available in the area being critically overloaded if the virus arrives there. In July, she tells me that her niece's husband – “who was like a son to me” – has been murdered during a street robbery. She asks me if I remember her niece, their house, their dogs and I say I do and I'm taken back to her showing me photographs at her kitchen table, insisting that I – or someone, maybe anyone – “look, see.”

Santos (2018: 293-301) compares the situations of subaltern groups to that of a state of uncertainty, existing between what is and what is not possible, defined by fear and hope. For those who live more in fear of what possibilities might bring, the world is something that “happens to them” (Santos 2018: 293). This is where the acts of recognition explored in this thesis, and that this work is also offered as, are particularly important; in being witness to what others have gone through, in listening to their stories of hardship, triumph, struggle; in caring for others as an attempt to build something different, against other narratives of stigma and violence, as well as the very real effects of violence on the social space of the neighbourhood. And in the recognition that through everyday relationships residents are able

to constitute their life on their own terms. That life may happen to them, but there is a small margin to move in, to push the limits a little, to see the possibilities of something different.

One final photograph, to finish. Mercedes sent this in May, one more thing to look at, to see; her new roof. One more piece of the house, which I hope is followed by others.



61 – Mercedes' new roof. Photograph by Mercedes.

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## Appendix A

### Context of the Municipality of Soacha (Unpublished ACNUR Document)

- The municipality of Soacha is part of the department of Cundinamarca, directly neighbouring the city of Bogota. Soacha covers 184.45 km<sup>2</sup>, of which 19 km<sup>2</sup> are urban areas and 165.45 km<sup>2</sup> are rural areas. Composed of six communes (urban areas) and two districts (rural areas), which conform almost 400 neighbourhoods, 50 of which (13% of the neighbourhoods) are illegal settlements with no titling. These have high seismological risks and precarious access to public services such as water, sewers and energy.
- The population is of 398,295 persons. According to the 2005 census, it was estimated that this number would reach 477.918<sup>50</sup> by 2012, making it the most populated municipality in the department after Bogota. The Secretariat for Planning maintains that if this trend continues, the municipality will reach close to one million persons by 2018. Some organisations state that this is the actual number of inhabitants at the moment.
- Forced and economic migration are the first cause of the municipality's growth, with the pressure rate close to 50% (arrival of persons who were not born in the municipality). This indicates that growth in Soacha has accelerated, with percentages close to 60% between 1993 and 2003.
- According to the Unique Victims Registry (RUV), as of November 30 2014, Soacha had received 50,154 persons who were forcibly displaced, while expelling another 2,829. This makes it the second biggest host of displaced persons in Cundinamarca (after Bogota), and among the biggest IDP hosts at a national level. According to the Public Ministry (the Ombudsman and the Municipal *Personeria* of Soacha), there is a sub-registration of 40%, which indicates that close to 12% of the population in the municipality is victim of the armed conflict that affects the country.
- Since the Early Warning System (SAT) came into force, six Risk Reports (IR) were processed between 2001 and 2011. The last report, IR-044 from 2011, has four existing monitoring notes, and identified the persistence of risk factors such as<sup>51</sup>:

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<sup>50</sup>Source: DANE – Census 2005: <https://www.dane.gov.co/files/censo2005>

<sup>51</sup>Intersectorial Commission for Early Warnings, CIAT, (previously the Intersectorial Commission for Early Warnings, CIAT), report IR-044 of 2011.

- i. The persistence of forced displacement, as explained earlier.
- ii. The presence and action of illegal armed groups that came about after the demobilisation of the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC)*, called the “*Aguilas Negras-Bloque Capital AUC*” and “*Rastrojos Comandos Urbanos*”, as well as possible FARC militias. The SAT has established that, despite the measures adopted by the authorities, the risk and threat situation has persisted and is aggravated by the arrival of another illegal armed group, “*Los Urabeños*”. The aims of these groups are to extend their inderence and their territorial and social control through the prosecution of educational, social and cultural processes.
- iii. Constant intimidation and constraints for civilians, organisational leaders, and displaced persons via threats or flyers, intimidating telephone calls or direct aggressions in order to prevent the reporting of their illegal actions, generate forced displacement, facilitate the forced recruitment of children and adolescents, and weaken organizational and communal processes.
- iv. Few measures have been implemented to solve the socio-economic precariousness that affect the residents of the communes, and that make these people extremely vulnerable in situations of threat. To date, no report has been closed (the risks remain) and there has been limited advance in fulfilling the recommendations of the Intersectorial Commission for Early Warnings (CIAT) in spite of efforts made by the municipal administration in response and attention to forced displacement and increases in numbers of the national police.

- High levels in the lack of fulfilment of basic needs, especially among displaced persons in Soacha. In spite of efforts by the national, departmental and municipal governments, access to rights such as health, education and housing are limited.
- In regards to human rights violations, the cases of disappearances and subsequent execution of several youth should be mentioned. These youth were recruited by individuals and handed over to the army in order for them to be executed and presented as combat deaths. This

situation, which became known as “false positives” in Colombia, was repeated in several parts of the country during different times, the most recent being the end of 2008.

- Similarly, systematic violations to the right to life and personal security and increases in the homicide rate over the last two years demonstrate the grave situation of violence present in the larger cities of the country. This is a transformation of the conflict, characterized by the presence of criminal bands that micro-traffic narcotics, create gangs, and threaten local populations, resulting in fear among communities.

### **Altos de la Florida**

- It is located in the south-western part of the municipality of Soacha and is part of Commune 6.
- The populations settled here is the result of a process of invasion, among them persons displaced by violence and economic migrants who, because of their past vulnerability, hope to acquire housing and reduce their payments for public services. They come from the centre of Soacha, Bogota, and other parts of the country.
- Altos de la Florida has a population of 2,439 persons, or 992 households<sup>52</sup>.
- According to the Unique Victims Registry, 23% of the population in Altos de la Florida is officially registered as displaced<sup>53</sup>.
- 51% of residents in Altos de la Florida are men and 49% are women.
- 41% of the total population in Altos de la Florida is less than 18 years old.
- 0.4% are indigenous persons
- 0.7% are afro-descendant persons
- Violations to the fundamental human rights of the population settled in the sector constantly take place, and there are difficulties with access to housing, potable water and income generation.
- In 2006, UNHCR led in coordination with the community, UN agencies, national and international NGOs and universities, among others, a participative diagnostic that allowed the identification of needs and protection gaps from the point of view of the community.

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<sup>52</sup> Characterization carried out on October 2013 by the University Minuto de Dios in collaboration with the Mayor's Office of Soacha and support of the TSI initiative – UNHCR/UNDP.

<sup>53</sup> According to the Ombudsman and the Municipal *Personería* of Soacha, with regards to the sub-registry, this number could reach 40% or more.

- Towards the end of 2009, UNHCR, OCHA and UNDP initiated the accompaniment of the Negotiation Board of Altos de la Florida. This board came about as an alternative mechanism to solve the judicial conflict of a penal process resulting because of an invasion of land lots that gave way to the eminent land grabbing of a sector of Altos de la Florida.
- Between June 2010 and November 2012 the programme “For a More Humanitarian Soacha” took place. Eight UN agencies, financed by the UNTHFS/Human Security Trust Fund: UNHCR, FAO, OCHA, UN WOMEN, PAHO, WFP, UNICEF y UNODC. The programme had the following two specific objectives:
  1. Protect vulnerable groups (children, adolescents, youth and women) in a systematic, integral and preventative manner, through the design and support in the implementation of five public policies.
  2. Improve the security of 3,200 displaced and highly vulnerable persons in Commune 6 of Soacha, through community empowerment and by facilitating access to basic social services, education, protection, food security, nutrition and housing.

Each agency carried out its intervention in Soacha and in particular in Altos de la Florida, according to their mandate.
- From June 2012 until now, the programme “Transitional Solutions Initiative” (TSI) has been implemented in Altos de Florida, Soacha, (local urban integration). Emphasizing its work in three axes:
  1. Improvement of living conditions (land, education, basic services)
  2. Community and institutional strengthening
  3. Protection and rights of victims
- The UN intervention and in particular that of the UNHCR in Soacha, especially in Altos de la Florida, has favoured the presence of public State institutions in highly conflictive places, with a positive impact in decreasing human rights violations, the recognitions and rights of displaced persons, and integration with host communities.
- The authorities make important efforts to assist and integrate displaced persons. However, these efforts are still insufficient. In Altos de la Florida, it is urgent to continue with the process of legalization, the supply of potable water, sewage treatment and sewers, improvement of

community and health infrastructure, preservation projects and environment management that avoid future tragedies because of structural collapses or landslides.

Protection Unit, Bogota, March 2015.