

Amoebas:

Socio-territorial metamorphosis in venezuelan migrants' neighborhood. The case of Villa Caracas in Barranquilla (Colombia)

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract: Is *Villa Caracas* a neighborhood? For Colombian neighbors, this settlement of Venezuelan migrants in Barranquilla is a “no place”. For the ancient residents, this locality is just a deplorable shantytown that invaded a clay territory. However, the inhabitants do their best to transform their shacks into a home, the quagmire into streets with an even urban sense. This photo-essay emerged from an ethnographic investigation. This study wants to capture the daily socio-territorial metamorphosis through which this space is transformed into a neighborhood, even if it only exists in the imagination and in images.

Keywords: Caribbean Studies, Suburban Culture, South-South Migrations, Trans-peripheralism, Colombian Internal Armed Conflict, Lived Politics, amphibian cultures.

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Introduction

This visual ethnography is the result of a field work that we have realized for 11 months, during 2019, in *Villa Caracas*.

This shantytown is located on the clayey hill in *El Bosque* neighborhood, in the periphery of Barranquilla, one of the most important cities of Colombia and Continental Caribbean.

Most of the inhabitants of *Villa Caracas* arrived from Venezuela in 2011, the year in which the humanitarian crisis broke out in the `Bolivarian Republic`. They came especially from the periphery of Maracaibo, tracing a linear migration from periphery to periphery identifying and defining this phenomenon as `trans-peripheralism` (Alvarez, Romero and Villadiego 2021; Riccardi, Romero and Díez 2021).

Migrants tell us they benefited for a decade from the Chavism¹ subsidy policies. These were on one hand, an important tool to manage poverty as symbolic capital to prop up the regime; on other hand, one of the actions strictly linked to the Country crisis factor as deflation, oil rents (Peters 2019) and foreign interference (Uzcátegui 2013). The progressive collapse of socioeconomic conditions forced these Venezuelans to emigrate in inhumane conditions (Gratius and Rivero 2018).

Other important Colombian urban phenomenon regards the common peripheral neighborhood building process. Lot of this city areas were the product of a series of internal forced displacement waves, caused by the internal armed conflict.²

The first occurred due to the massive expulsion of peasants who suffered the rural violence of the guerrillas during 50s and 60s years of XX Century. In this period people took refuge in *Las Ceibas* neighborhood, which today surrounds *Villa Caracas*. The second wave increased between the end of Millennium and the first decade of 2000s. In this period the military intervention against the new “narco-guerrillas”³, sponsored especially US Government, caused millions of internal refugees that was victims by the main three actors of the Colombian internal conflict: The State, the paramilitaries and the guerrillas. However, some sectors of *Las Ceibas* came out of extreme poverty, due the people resilience and the compensation for victims of displacement begun especially after the law 1448/2011, known as “Victim and Land Restitution Law” (Riccardi and Agudelo, 2015).

In 2011, it was the turn of the Venezuelan diaspora. These migrants, similar the neighborhoods in the Brazilian favela’s urbanization phase (Magalhães 2021), suffer discrimination from those who have already moved to better living conditions, when at the beginning they had similar problems. This type of discrimination among the oppressed is not new, especially in the (neo) colonial realities like Colombia and Latin America. Already Frantz Fanon (1963: 53) reflected about how colonized individual “is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor”. In the specific case, those who were previously stigmatized in *Villa Caracas* now denigrate the new arrivals. In fact, the name *Villa Caracas* was born as a sarcastic term that Colombian neighbors use to make fun of the origins and socioeconomic condition of its inhabitants. The same happens in other areas of the city where groups of Venezuelan migrants live. This is the case of *Villa Tablita*⁴ neighborhood, it is object of mockery for the material used for its homes. However, the inhabitants of *Villa Caracas* make the neighborhood denomination their own with pride, transforming the derogatory charge of the original term.

These ethnographic photographs investigate the capacity of its residents to transform what at first glance is perceived as misery, into a reality with surprising dignity. Hence all the symbolic load of the title of this work: *Amoeba*.

From the Latin *amoeba*, it takes up the Ancient Greek ἀμοιβή, which is given in exchange for something, alternation, transformation. The Greek word goes back to the Indo-European root *mei-* from which our concept of mutating

1 The expression `Chavism` is referred to identify the socio-political regime born under Hugo Chávez presidential periods (1999-2013) and consolidated by his successor Nicolás Maduro.

2 The Colombian internal armed conflict is considered the longer active war in Western World. Formally begun in 1964, some social scientists consider it as the consequence of the *Violencia* period, the civil war exploded after the assassination, in 1948, of the liberal-populist presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán (Riccardi and Agudelo, 2015).

3 After the end of Cold War, the main active guerrillas - ELN and FARC-EP - begun to finance their insurrectional activities through narcotraffic (Riccardi, Romero and Bossio, 2021).

4 *Villa Tablita* meaning village of little boards.

5 For ethical reasons we have changed the name of all protagonists.

6 Original title: *Historia doble de la Costa*

radiates semantically. Amoeba is also an insult to despise someone for their ineptitude and simplicity, as the neighbors of *Villa Caracas* do.

Talking to Luis⁵ from El Bosque, every time I mention Villa Caracas as a neighborhood, he laughs and blurts out: “What a neighborhood is going to be!”

It is precisely not capable of perceiving a reality that is metamorphosing, since the transformations are as subtle, minimal and invisible as amoebas. The fragility of its consistency makes what Julieta Quirós (2014: 49) calls “lived politics” to emerge, that is, “the social as living process” and, therefore, changing. That is why, behind the shell of marginality, we find a place with a special energy, which conveys, for example, a deep sense of belonging to the neighborhood of its inhabitants who claim in each action (it is never taken for granted that it is a neighborhood).

As we go deeper with the ethnographic investigation, the rubble is transformed into recycling material, the plastics that cover the shacks, into solid roofs; the alleys are laid out like the Parisian Haussmanian boulevards: rectilinear, polished, flanked by slats that, although chipped, promote the perception of geometricity. Through a byway, 76-year-old Mrs. Elsa comes towards us with two large cans of water on her shoulders. She tells us that the same roads are also routes used by criminals to flee from the police. The trucks dump rubble and rust from adjacent works before the impassive gaze of the police: the waste falls right next to the slums, with all the danger that it entails, because it is a slope. People have such a vitality that they make capital that garbage, using it to cement their homes or recycle. Children look for objects in the rubble, which can serve as temporary games or material that they take to their parents to complete their house or enter the recycling capital with which to trade and get some money. Magda, an “amphibian” girl, approaches a puddle on her bicycle with a pot of food in her hand, and she is reflected in the mirror of water. This image shows her double condition according to the “Double History of Coast”⁶ (Fals Borda, 2002). In this work, the Colombian social scientist studies the amphibian cultures typical of these territories that fluctuate to the rhythm of growth, atmospheric phenomena, or the layout of an orography in which the water sets the pace. The territory is transformed, and its people with it. Through our gatekeeper Father Andrés, we meet Lucy, who invites us to her house. Her home has a single board wall; the others were made up of an amalgam of recycled elements, the most solid we saw was a reddish sheet of asbestos. Fluctuating objects invade her delay: plastic jugs that they sell or pieces of bricks that serve to settle a house on a mound of clay that takes shape at intervals.

The photographic essay we present below captures vitality, avoiding showing the decadence or marginality shaped by the Western discourse linked to what Arturo Escobar (2011: 11) calls “the problematization of poverty” as a consequence of “the tale Three Worlds and Development”. This work touches on lived politics, the metamorphoses of matter, of bodies, of territory.

The pictures were taken with a mobile phone, due, even under the protection of the police, you cannot enter the neighborhood with professional cameras. In fact, our device was stolen in a robbery at gunpoint, but after a few days people from the neighborhood were able to have our mobile phone returned.

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Photo 1 Children search in the rubble some objects to play or recycle.



Photo 2 Recyclers.



Photo 3 The grass sprouts and some little brush of the barren. These girls futures may arch like “roughness territory” (Santos, 2012).



Photo 4 The territory fluctuates from rugged to tropical.



Photo 5 Magda, an “amphibian” girl.



Photo 6 The bogey-child watches his friends play with a snake in the puddle.



Photo 7 Evolution of the church pantry.



Photo 8 Outside of Lucy's house: a rag is a curtain.



Photo 9 Lucy's home interior with fluctuating objects.



Photo 10 The fountain surrounded by tables that turns the space into a charming square with some green space.



Photo 11 Geometric layout of two alleys through various urban resources (boards or rags).



Photo 12 Daily conversation between neighbors, where the topic of the day's food purchase is avoided.



Photo 13 Horizon.



Photo 14 From the green subsoil (like Gaudí's luminous crypt of La Sagrada Família).



Photo 15 *Te convido a creerme cuando digo futuro* (“I invite you to believe me when I say future”). This verse by Cuban singer-songwriter Silvio Rodríguez came to mind when the shutter opened to portray Sofía.