

Oikos: Affects, Economies, and Politics of House-ing'

Birds without Nests; Dwelling and Possibility in Colombia

I had known Estela several months when one day, sitting on the roof of the foundation, she told me:

“Being displaced is like a being a bird that doesn’t have a nest. There is no place to build and protect, to tend to or return. There is no respite, no rest.” We sat overlooking an unfamiliar city while Estela told me how guerrillas threatened her family’s life, tried to recruit her children – the oldest of whom was 14 – and took their farm and everything in it. Together with her husband Ricardo and their four children, she left their farm in northern Colombia, where the western arm of the Andes slopes into the Atlantic. They left behind a small farm they had tilled over the last six years, their crops of plantains, yucca and cocoa, their chickens and the one head of cattle they had bought not six months before, and which they couldn't sell fast enough when they left. Hoping that a physical proximity to the governmental and economic centers of the country would ensure their speedy access to aid and employment, that their children would go to school and that they would find a home in which to begin to rebuild their lives, they came to Soacha, a city immediately south of the country's capital. They came not knowing the city or anyone in it, not knowing where to ask for help, where to find a job or where they would sleep that first night. Estela and her family found refuge in the Colombia New Horizons Foundation, a shelter offering free housing and support to displaced families.

In the spaces of a shelter for displaced persons time is offered as a salve that can postpone the contradicting impositions of bureaucratic waiting or economic immediacy. In the momentary abeyance of other temporal regimes, residents can take their time to find their footing in an unfamiliar city, to come to grips with their dispossession, and to establish a relationship with a space that signals stability and possibility. The idea of dwelling is crucial here both as a sense of being present and of holding on to

a lingering past. In the contrasting images of nest-less and sheltered lives we gain a purchase on the painful and staid process by which displaced persons breath renewed life into expectations of their future. By focusing on the continuous and quotidian efforts to rebuild a sense of permanence through impermanent housing solutions, I argue that these families strive to reckon with their dispossession and rebuild a sense of their possible futures.

When Estela and her family came to Soacha they joined the more than six million persons who have been forced to leave their homes in the aftermath more than half a century of fighting. Unlike the swelling populations of internal refugees elsewhere in the world, displaced Colombians are not ushered into camps; instead, they are largely left to their own devices, alone to find housing through acquaintances or to brave the city's streets as best they can. Under the so-called Victims' Law, the country's government has strived to offer immediate aid and reparations to those affected by the war. Those who have been forced to leave their homes because of the war and who are able to demonstrate high "levels of vulnerability" are entitled to an emergency aid package that includes "temporary lodging" for one month. In Soacha, however, the state is unable to offer temporary lodging to newly-arrived families since the funds allocated for such purpose are perpetually "missing" and there are no official institutions capable of providing such services.

It befalls to institutions like the New Horizons Foundation, which are privately funded and independently operated, to do what they can to provide housing to displaced families. The foundation's director, Marino Rivera, is also a victim of the war. In the early 2000's Marino worked as a school administrator in Puerto Rico, a town at the edge Colombia's southern jungle. When the guerrillas came to his town, they demanded a cut of the school's budget. When he refused they threatened his life and his family's and he was ordered to leave town. He ended up in Bogotá, the country's capital, living in its streets, panhandling for food and sleeping under bridges. After six months, he found a shelter that offered emergency housing for three days. Marino strived to earn a permanent place in this shelter,

taking over cooking and cleaning duties. He stayed for two years. The organization, however, was working under the auspices of the local government and after its political defeat its contract ended. Unable to raise new funds, the shelter was closed.

Knowing well that its closure meant a return to homelessness for many of its residents, Marino started the Colombia New Horizons Foundation. He rented a first story apartment where twenty displaced residents shared two bedrooms and single bathroom. Over the next eight years, New Horizons would move to more spacious houses and out of Bogotá and into Soacha. Also over this time the foundation's particular practice of care took its shape. In contrast to most large shelters housing displaced families in Bogotá and elsewhere, New Horizons does not impose a time limit on residents' stay. Rather, Marino stresses "residents here give themselves the time in the foundation; as long as they comply with the house rules – a curfew, cleaning and cooking schedules, general respect towards fellow residents – they can stay as long as they need for free."

In February of 2003, Marino was approached by the mayor's office with an offer to be contracted by the administration to provide emergency housing to displaced persons. Although such an agreement could have been lucrative for the foundation, it was ultimately rejected when the state demanded that residents only be allowed to stay in New Horizons for one month. Although conflicted, Marino explained to me his decision: "Look, right now we don't have enough money to eat and I don't know how we are going to pay for the electricity, but I'd rather we go hungry or be in the dark than put people in the street. I do more with forty hungry people here than with an empty house full of food." The foundations' treatment of time stands in stark contrast to the state's overall assessment of the nature of displacement and its remedies. By invoking the language of emergency aid and describing displacement as a crisis, both the law and the institutions charged with its implementation inscribe the forms of care available to families like Estela's within a logic of rupture and foreclosure. Such language demarcates not only a break in displacement but seeks to impart a temporality that anticipates its own conclusion: it

sees the fulfillment of legal claims as the end of the relationship of restitution owed to the victims of the war.

New Horizons, in contrast, sees its intervention as a therapeutic opening of the temporalities of care. The foundation offers a space of dwelling as an invitation to occupy a place of shelter but also introducing a call for being present. Marino explained to me the importance of the routine household chores to his process; “the people from the mayor’s office wanted us to hire a cook and a cleaning lady. They were saying that we were revictimizing the residents by making them do all of that. But for me, not letting them do anything would be more victimizing. I think it is important for them to be a part of the house, to feel responsible for it and for each other. It also gives them something to do instead of watching TV or waiting for their state aid to come.” For Marino, exclusion from household responsibilities represented a further distancing from a domestic space, while engaging in the mundane chores of house maintenance offered an opportunity to once again partake and benefit from the shared responsibilities of a home: to dwell in company and to be present. As Vena Das would put it, participating in the quotidian acts of a home offered an initial opportunity to “descend into the ordinary.” For Estela this descent was an echo of a previous life; “I used to clean my house every day; you know how it is, I always liked to keep my house tidy. So cleaning once a week is not a big deal. And I like cooking. At home I cooked for my family, for the farm workers from around. Cooking for strangers is hard because everyone has an opinion, but it was also like that when my family visited.” Yet the “weave of the everyday” that such a descent repairs is one whose strands continue to be frayed and may still appear strange and tattered.

That day on the Foundation’s roof Estela spoke of the loss she and her family experienced she recalled the sense of restlessness and uprootedness borne from her displacement. She was also speaking to a

lost sense of possibility, a disruption of the future. In going over the loss of her farm, she was also describing how the articulations that connect the past with what's to come were unhinged in their displacement, dislocating a sense of the possible, annihilating the foreseeable. Horizons lost, now their family was stuck in a cycle of rushed reaction, a constant emergency, whose outcome was unknown. Like the bird without a nest, Estela and her family were condemned to continuously drift, searching for respite here or there, unable to settle and never to return.

For Estela and Ricardo, the family's plans for the future were attached to the farm; the kids were learning to take care of the animals and to cultivate the land; they had, after much effort and saving, bought a cow. They had hoped to sell the milk and make cheese. Ricardo was, together with his neighbors, building another room in the back of the house so the girls could have some privacy. "My kids were going to school" Estela told me one day while we tried in vain to enroll them in the overcrowded local public school "they liked to work in the farm and with the animals. Jairo, my oldest one, had already helped the neighbor's mare give birth and he was going to learn how to milk cows and do artificial insemination. But now I don't know... I used to think that my kids would go to school and some of them would help me and their father and others would do different things. I had so much faith on that little house, I saw so many things in it."

All of these are mundane signs of place-making as much as they are points charting a particular hoped-for trajectory for the family. Each of these investments of time, money or energy brings with it an expectation of their fulfillment, sketching an image of a prosperous future. In this sense, the constellation of objects, of places and of people that constitute this image of the home demarcate also the space of the possible, outlining the contours of a future in familiar horizons of expectations. What was lost in the rushed moments of escape was not just the livelihood of livestock, the equity of land, nor the value of a house with a half-built room; they also represented the expectations of a shared future, hopes of professions and promises of growth and maturity.

Over the next few months, I would talk with Estela, with Ricardo and with their children about the farm they had lost. Laura, a lanky 12 year old, missed her cat and her twin Carla would speak of her toys. Their two eldest brothers were an inseparable pair who often reminisced about massive soccer tournaments in the school yard and days playing hooky in the river. Ricardo remembered the lazy afternoons, when the chores of the farm were finished and he would cross the street to a local cantina to play pool and have a few beers. Estela missed church and her friends, and the sun and the open fields of a small rural town she had known since she was a child. The foundation was, in fact, full of people telling stories about their childhoods, about their friends and families, and about their experiences of displacement. Elsa Maria, a blind Afro-Colombian woman in her 70's would often sit in the plush couches in the common room and narrate her life through a series of recipes she accumulated from her years working as a chef. People would often roll their eyes at the prospect of hearing her story for the n- the time, but they would stay nonetheless paying attention intermittently and offering commentary regularly.

Dwelling on a previous life, on things taken and friendships lost, was one of the main vernaculars of sociality within the space of the Foundation. Even Marino, who projects an air of stolid impenetrability saved, in a hidden corner of his closet, an old poncho he shows to incoming families from time to time: "it was the poncho I had when I got out of the streets and into the shelter. I keep it because it reminds me that it always kept me warm." Foundation residents invariably turned to lives lived elsewhere, towards a past that, though recent, felt irretrievable, and onto futures apparently irredeemably lost. Thomas Wolfe remarked "you can't go home again" a sentiment often echoed among displaced families. While Wolfe's was a forlorn realization that the changes time inflicts on us are too deep to be reversed, among displaced families such loss is not the result of ineluctable progression; rather, their homes snatched in a violent instant, the possibility of return is effaced suddenly and vividly. Being like a bird

without a nest meant being robbed of the possibility of return and of the future such return might entail.

Gaston Bechelard wrote of the house that it “would appear to have become the topography of our intimate being. A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability.” Yet thinking with Estela, we may wonder about what happens to a sense of intimacy when such topography is lost. Dwelling in the foundation provides a novel, if temporary field of intimate relations; a sustaining milieu of presence that animates friendship, enmities and mundane attachments. It is also a space in which to linger on the memory of what has been lost, to dwell together on things robbed and to recognize a common plight of dispossession. It is in the crux of these two apparently contravening tendencies that the passage of time has time to become apparent and that illusions of stability are given shape once again.

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Estela and her family moved out of New Horizons in May 2013 after a fight with another resident. It was, she told me, “the drop that overflowed the cup.” Her family wanted to eat whatever they wanted, to come and go as they pleased, in short, their own place. They moved two blocks away from the foundation to an apartment that her family shared with two other ex-residents. They found a place a few months after that in an apartment building up the street next to a woman Estela had called an enemy, the reason for her departure from the Foundation. It was in fact this former antagonist who had informed her of the vacancy. After a few months of living across the hall from each other they became intimate friends, sharing food and child care duties, loaning money to each other, gossiping in the afternoon over endless cups of sweetened coffee. We successfully enrolled her children in school and Ricardo found a job as a security guard after taking the necessary training while in the Foundation. Sitting in her sparse living room, a gift of a two wooden chairs and a table from the shelter, she told me:

“When I got here it was like I was blind. I just didn’t know where I was or where I was going. But the Foundation gave me time. I think that’s what it was, it gave the time to find myself again, time to think. It is difficult living with so many strangers; it causes trouble. But look now, they are my only friends around. Who knows better what we’ve been through? You leave the foundation and you realize you get lonely in this city. You need someone to listen to your shit, no?”