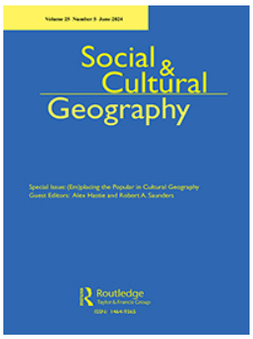

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Disappearance, emergence, and appearance: garbage and the politics of placemaking in Cartagena, Colombia

Laura Neville

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Disappearance, emergence, and appearance: garbage and the politics of placemaking in Cartagena, Colombia

Laura Neville

Department of Geography and Sustainability, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the politics of placemaking in an expanding self-built settlement in the city of Cartagena, Colombia, under everyday conditions of disposability and waste toxicity. Based on 11 months of ethnographic research, the paper introduces the triptych of disappearance, emergence, and appearance to categorize residents' everyday garbage-based practices. The paper argues that these three forms of garbage-based practices are racialized and forged through historical processes of urban displacement, shifting socio-political backgrounds, and legacies of violence. This paper highlights the intimate links between the material and social production of Black placemaking and embodied experiences of toxicities in Cartagena. It draws attention to the multiple ways in which Afro-Colombian residents endure and contest cumulative processes of embodied experiences of waste exposure through politics of placemaking. Garbage socio-material entanglements allow for the acknowledgement of the relationality of space, materials, people, and politics, which are constitutive of contentious relational politics of placemaking. As residents in urban contexts contend with ever-evolving waste challenges, this paper proposes novel ways of reading the inherent plurality of relational politics of placemaking, which can foreshadow alternative urban environmental futures.

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MOTS-CLEFS
Déchets; jetabilité; toxicité; race; dépossession; violence

PALABRAS CLAVE
Desperdiciar; desecho; toxicidad; raza; despojo; violencia

Disparition, émergence et apparition : les déchets et les politiques de création de lieux (*placemaking*) à Carthagène, en Colombie

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine les politiques de création de lieux (*placemaking*) dans un quartier autoconstruit en expansion dans la ville de Carthagène, en Colombie, dans les conditions quotidiennes de jetabilité et de toxicité des déchets. S'appuyant sur 11 mois de recherche ethnographique, il introduit le triptyque de catégories « disparition, émergence, apparition » pour classer les pratiques quotidiennes des résidents basées sur les déchets. Il soutient que ces trois

CONTACT Laura Neville laura.neville@unil.ch Department of Geography and Sustainability, University of Lausanne, Institute of geography and sustainability, Mouline - Géopolis, Lausanne 3527 CH-1015, Switzerland

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formes de pratiques sont racialisées et forgées par des processus historiques de déplacement urbain, de contextes sociopolitiques changeants et d'un engrenage de violence. Il met en lumière les rapports intimes entre la production matérielle et sociale de la création de lieux Noirs et la corporéité des expériences de la toxicité à Carthagène. L'article met l'accent sur les manières diverses par lesquelles les habitants afro-colombiens endurent et contestent les processus cumulatifs des expériences corporées d'exposition aux déchets par le biais des politiques de création de lieux. Les imbrications sociomatérielles des déchets permettent la reconnaissance de la relationalité de l'espace, des matériaux, des personnes et des politiques qui sont constitutifs de politiques relationnelles controversées concernant la création de lieux. Alors que les habitants des villes sont confrontés à des défis en constante évolution face aux déchets, cet article propose de nouvelles façons de lire la pluralité inhérente aux politiques relationnelles de la création de lieux, qui peuvent préfigurer des futurs envrionementaux urbains différents.

Desaparición, surgimiento y aparición: la basura y las políticas de *placemaking* en Cartagena, Colombia

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina las políticas de creación de lugares en un asentamiento autoconstruido en expansiónen la ciudad de Cartagena, Colombia, en condiciones cotidianas de desechabilidad o toxicidad de los residuos. Basado en once meses de investigación etnográfica, el artículo presenta el tríptico de desaparición, surgimiento y aparición para categorizar las prácticas cotidianas de los residentes basadas en los residuos. El artículo sostiene que estas tres formas de prácticas están racializadas y forjadas a través de procesos históricos de desplazamiento urbano, contextos sociopolíticos cambiantes y legados de violencia. El artículo destaca los vínculos íntimos entre la producción material y social de la creación de lugares de la negridad y las experiencias encarnadas de toxicidades en Cartagena. El articulo busca llamar la atención a las múltiples formas en que los residentes afrocolombianos soportan y cuestionan procesos acumulativos de experiencias encarnadas de exposición a desechos através de políticas de *placemaking*. Los entrelazamientos socio materiales de la basura permiten el reconocimiento de la relacionalidad del espacio, los materiales, las personas y la política, que son constitutivos de políticas relacionales polémicas de creación de lugares. Mientras los residentes en contextos urbanos enfrentan desafíos en constante evolución en materia de residuos, este artículo propone formas novedosas de leer la pluralidad inherente de políticas relacionales de *placemaking*, que pueden presagiar futuros ambientales urbanos alternativos.

Introduction

> It was struggling, struggling that I took this little piece of land. [. . .] There was *mi ranchito* [little house] that would get flooded, nothing else! And they would tell me: 'Rosita, get out of here!', but I stayed. And that is how it has been until today. You see that little plot over there,

> that was mine. I sold it so I could help myself here and throw some *relleno* [mix of waste materials]. (Rosa,[1] April 2019)

Rosa is a 57-year-old Afro-Colombian[2] woman. Since arriving in the city of Cartagena de Indias,[3] Colombia, in 2005 with her six children, she has been living in La Bendición, an expanding waterfront self-built settlement in the urban margins. La Bendición is the result of a land reclamation process that involved depositing multiple layers of waste materials on the *Ciénaga*, the city's largest coastal mangrove swamp. As one of the country's 8.4 million internally displaced people (Unidad de Víctimas 2023), Rosa fled the violence of Colombia's armed conflict, leaving behind her land and rural livelihood in historically Afrodescendant territories in the Montes de María region (Rosero, 2002). Amid these uneven modes of displacement and dispossession, she accessed urban land *rellenando* - gradually filling the *Ciénaga* with mixed construction waste and household waste. Today, like an estimated 40 million people in Latin America (The UN Environment programme, 2018), she still lacks access to garbage collection. These successive layers of waste materials gradually became the material foundations of her emplacement in the city. Negotiating with absent and failing waste infrastructures, she makes a living *with* garbage and its toxins in the city's unequal geographies of disposability. However, garbage in Rosa's daily life is not just a metaphor for her placelessness and exclusion from urban life. She engages in complex and sometimes contradictory forms of everyday garbage-based practices to make subtle claims on the city with and through garbage. The multifaceted implications of living amid conditions of toxicity explored in this paper are entangled with Rosa's place-based struggle to circumvent the everyday conditions of exclusion, racialized dispossession and overarching logics of violence.

This paper examines the production of struggles over urban space in one of Cartagena's expanding self-built settlements, inhabited by Afrodescendants and internally displaced people, under everyday conditions of disposability and waste toxicity. By focusing on residents' everyday practices with garbage, it sheds light on the sociomaterial relations and bodily processes surrounding waste that extend across urban scales and temporalities. This paper draws on understandings of space as socially produced (Massey, 2005), relational placemaking (Pierce et al., 2011), and Black Geographies (McKittrick, 2011), to emphasize the intimate link between the material and social production of Black placemaking and embodied experiences of toxicities in Cartagena. I introduce the triptych of disappearance, emergence, and appearance as an illustrative metaphor to categorize residents' everyday garbage-based practices. I use the triptych as an analytical lens to examine how residents cope with and respond to the presence of garbage in their daily lives. Residents' agency manifests differently along the triptych, following a continuum, and defining their space of manoeuvre while making a living in continued proximity to toxicity. The triptych of disappearance, emergence, and appearance that I advance in this paper is inspired by and extends the use of Zeiderman's (2016) concept of 'submergence', in an attempt to understand the role of the socio-material conditions of garbage for relational Black politics of placemaking in an urban setting. The triptych highlights the multiple ways in which Afro-Colombian residents endure and contest cumulative processes of embodied experiences of waste exposure through politics of placemaking. In so doing, it sheds light on the historical constitutiveness of human and more-than-human socio-material entanglements in shaping contentious relational

politics of placemaking. The triptych metaphor allows for the consideration of 'alternative geographical imaginations' (Fall & Minca, 2013, p. 550), as residents enact differing imaginaries of urban environmental futures.

This paper draws on historically and contextually situated understandings of waste and disposability (Liboiron & Lepawsky, 2022; Reno & Halvorson, 2021). As a 'flexible category grounded in social relations' (Hawkins, 2005, p. ix), waste is fundamental to organizing social space and mediating social relations (Butt, 2020; Whitson, 2011; Wittmer, 2022). Moreover, race and coloniality undergird the production of racialized socio-material relations organized around waste (Fredericks, 2018; Millar, 2020). By looking at Afro-Colombian residents' everyday practices and bodily processes with waste, this paper highlights the ways garbage-based practices are racialized and forged through historical processes of racialized marginalization, dispossession, shifting socio-political backgrounds, and legacies of violence in urban Colombia. By situating how Afro-Colombian residents endure and contest spatialized inequalities of disposability, this paper recognizes the relationality of space, materials, people and politics which are constitutive of relational politics of placemaking (Pierce et al., 2011) and contributes to understandings of the plurality of Black spatial resistance (Alves, 2014) by emphasizing the embodied aspects of everyday life with waste.

In the following sections, I review literatures concerned with geographies of disposability in the city, relational placemaking, Black Geographies of placemaking and Afro-Colombian politics of place. Next, I describe the methods used and continue by detailing the historical articulations of urban development, displacement, and race in Cartagena. I then discuss residents' seemingly opposing forms of garbage-based practices through the triptych of disappearance, emergence, appearance, and argue residents engage in relational politics of placemaking to endure and contest cumulative processes of embodied experiences of waste exposure. Disappearance draws attention to residents' embodied experiences of toxicity in the social production of space. Emergence points to the ways in which residents' bodily practices of filling with waste are constrained by wider structures of power that define their place-based struggles. Appearance highlights collective waste-based practices that are sustained by an affective dimension of politics of placemaking. I conclude with some reflections on Black spatial resistance, Afro-Colombian urban politics, and alternative urban environmental futures.

The relationalities of waste and place

Waste is relational, situational, social, political, and thus an important vantage point for exploring politics of placemaking in circumstances of exclusion and toxicity. For this reason, in this section I bring the literatures on the relationality of waste and on relational placemaking into dialogue to consider the relationalities of waste and place that constitute the ever-changing changing prospect of placemaking. Relationality is useful for rethinking Caribbean reality as a site of relations and transformations (Glissant, 1997), and it denotes the multiple and sometimes conflicting political trajectories that make space, taking place 'within and between both human and non-human' (Massey, 2005, p. 140), simultaneously involving symbolic and material elements (Allen et al., 2019).

Waste 'acquires its meaning according to the different contexts and ways in which it has been historically put to work' (Hawkins, 2005, p. ix). Dirt and the

stigmas of both waste and waste labour have been theorized as relational, underpinning the maintenance of social categories and places (Douglas, 1966, in Doherty, 2021, p. 6). Discard studies are concerned with the relational politics and power relations that shape the ways in which particular people, places, and things are discarded (Liboiron & Lepawsky, 2022). Capitalist logics of accumulation, for example, are central to understanding geographies of disposability in the city and how certain disenfranchised populations and places are cast as 'wasteful' (Gidwani, 2013; Inverardi-Ferri, 2018), 'wasted lives' (Bauman, 2003), or urban 'surplus populations' (Doherty, 2021).

The implications of past and present waste management regimes, and of the production of disposability in cities, are materialized through the reproduction of social inequalities and distinctions (Alexander & Sanchez, 2018; Fredericks, 2018, 2021; Gidwani, 2013). Waste is a useful socio-material for examining everyday city-making at the urban margins, the production of socio-spatial exclusion (Baumann & Massalha, 2021; Wittmer, 2022) and socio-environmental inequality with marginalized groups bearing the burden of uneven waste distribution (Baabereyir et al., 2012; Cornea et al., 2017; Njeru, 2006). The material presence of waste reproduces socio-spatial inequalities and historical exclusion along intersecting axes of social difference, including gender, class, religion, caste, ethnicity, and race, reinforcing the stigmatization and marginalization of the population living from or in close proximity to waste (see Butt, 2019; Fredericks, 2018; Millar, 2020).

The governance of and through disposability is a window into struggles over urban belonging (Doherty, 2021; Fredericks, 2018) by showing how places, bodies and materials that have been 'classified as waste' can generate new values by escaping binary waste-value classifications (Alexander & Sanchez, 2018). Millar (2020), in her study of Brazilian *catadores* on a garbage dump in Rio de Janeiro, shows the relationships between the naturalization of race and representations of garbage. Millar (2020) cautions against waste becoming a metaphor for 'disposable lives' and argues that "a different theorization of garbage is necessary to recognise and make space for 'alternative genres of the human' (Millar, 2020, p. 7). She suggests that 'a liberatory politics of waste' (Millar, 2020, p. 7) would recognize the lives of the *catadores* who chose to locate themselves with and within garbage at the dump. By drawing attention to the racial regimes that underpin multiple forms of living with waste, Millar (2020) moves beyond reproducing logics of Black disposability.

The relationality of waste is important for understanding how it holds the potential to reinstate structures of power and reproduce exclusions, but also how waste is at the heart of power relations, overt conflicts and inspires disruptive political action through garbage strikes and protests (Arefin, 2019; Fredericks, 2018; Moore, 2009); acting as leverage for development (Moore, 2009); forging local and global connections (Millar, 2012); or shaping collective identities (Nucho, 2019; Whitson, 2011). Fredericks (2018) shows how garbage infrastructures are used by Dakar's residents in the context of a garbage crisis, becoming a tool for forging collective identities, mobilizing collective political action and, in turn, shaping urban citizenship (Fredericks, 2018). The less overtly political or conflictual waste practices explored in this paper, however, represent politics of placemaking which are continuously contested and reshaped by the social and political relations that unfold with and from proximity to garbage.

Relational placemaking

Relational placemaking acknowledges the socio-material and political relations that are constitutive of the production of urban space (Allen et al., 2019) as 'a product of relations-between' (Massey, 2005, p. 9) that constitute a 'set of social, political and material processes by which people iteratively create and recreate the experienced geographies in which they live' (Pierce et al., 2011, p. 55). This theoretical lens considers the 'place/politics conjuncture' with 'place as relational, and politics as both networked and placed' (Pierce et al., 2011, p. 55), thus illuminating the set of connections between spaces, politics, bodies, and materiality that are central to understanding the relationship between the dynamics of disposability and place-based strategies explored in this paper. This framework assesses the multiplicity, relationality and openness of place which is constantly under construction (Carter et al., 2007). I further engage with the Black Geographies of placemaking scholarship, which focuses on Black agency in the politics of place (McKittrick, 2011) and acknowledges the racialized politics that sustain and are produced by relational placemaking (Allen et al., 2019). To understand the inherent plurality of politics of placemaking, it is crucial to look at the situated specificity of Afro-Colombian politics of place. By using waste as an entry point, in this analysis, I seek to draw out the relationship between spatial life and Blackness in urban Colombia by revealing how politics of placemaking can become intimately connected to the production of embodied experiences of toxicities.

Black geographies of placemaking

Black Geographies scholarship emphasizes the 'inherent spatiality of Black life' (Hawthorne, 2019, p. 5; McKittrick, 2006; McKittrick & Woods, 2007). McKittrick's (2011) conceptualization of 'black senses of place' as geographically and historically situated argues for a material and imaginative re-situating of 'historical and contemporary struggles against practices of domination and the difficult entanglements of racial encounter' (McKittrick, 2011, p. 949). The conceptual lens of relational placemaking is particularly congruent with Black Geographies' interests in 'black articulations of place' (Allen et al. 2018:1012) and 'black spatial praxis' (Alves, 2014). It opens possibilities for attending to 'the ontological plurality inherent in space' (Allen et al. 2018:1013) through alternative Black experiences or resistances (Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2011). Black Geographies resonate with the Afro-Latin geography scholarship developed in Colombia since the 1990s, foregrounding the importance of race and coloniality in the social construction of space (Mosquera-Vallejo, 2022). Black Geographies continue Afro-Latin geography's call to reject the understanding of Black territories in Colombia as 'zones of non-being' (Mosquera-Vallejo, 2022, p. 124). Similar to the Colombian context of necropolitical governance, Alves (2014) argues that in urban Brazil 'black agency takes the form of black spatial praxis' (p.324) and constitutes a political resource through which residents can reclaim their placeless location in the city.

Relational placemaking offers a spatial explanation that furthers McKittrick's (2006) claim for 'engagement with the symbolic and material elements' for understandings of the production of space (McKittrick, 2006, in Allen et al. 2018:1013). Black Geographies connect past (Winston et al., 2021) and present Black placemaking, which is useful for explaining the long-standing

racial violence that underpins Afro-Colombian relational politics of placemaking. Conversely, the situated histories of coloniality, racialization and dispossession for Afro-Colombian urban territorial struggles and lived realities shed light on the need for decentring understandings of Black spatial imaginaries and strengthening hemispheric dialogues on Black Geographies beyond the Anglophone world (Berman-Arévalo & Valdivia, 2022; Mollett, 2021).

Afro-Colombian politics of place

Colombia has the second-largest population of Afrodescendants in Latin America, and Black spatial life connects historically with communities of maroons known as *palenques*. Afro-Colombians' fight for political recognition is embedded in a historical struggle for the defence of Black collective territories (Wade, 1995) in a national political context shifting from colour-blindness (Paschel, 2016), to adopting an ethno-racial legislation[4] (Wade, 1995), and later granting Black communities collective title to rural land[5] (Restrepo, 2004).

The scholarship on Afro-Colombian territorial struggles has mainly focused on the collective land titling process and identity politics of rural Black communities on the Pacific coast in the face of racialized dispossession and violent displacements sustained by the socio-political context of the armed conflict and neoliberal development (Escobar, 2008; Oslender, 2016, etc.). Oslender (2016) argues that the dynamics of placemaking among rural Afro-Colombian communities on Colombia's Pacific Coast are entangled with an 'aquatic space' that sustains the collective actions and social movements of Black communities. However, there has been less scholarly attention given to the study of Colombian Black political ecologies in the Caribbean region where a significant Afrodescendant population resides (see Berman-Arévalo & Valdivia, 2022; Berman-Arévalo & Ojeda, 2020), shedding light on the diversity of the 'quiet ontologies of black aliveness' (Berman-Arévalo & Valdivia, 2022, p. 846) and the plurality of 'territories of blackness' (Mosquera-Vallejo, 2020, p. 15) shaped throughout Colombia.

The relationships between the salience of dispossession, racialized conflicts over land, urban environmental degradation and the possibilities engendered beyond outward resistance have received limited systematic attention in the scholarship on urban Colombia (Agudelo, 2004; Torino, 2021; Zeiderman, 2016). Zeiderman's (2016) research is an exception as it shows how Afro-Colombian territorial struggles in a waterfront self-built settlement in the expanding port-city of Buenaventura on Colombia's Pacific coast are defined by racialized politics of precarity under late liberalism. His concept of 'submergence' highlights 'the sociomaterial relationship between land and sea as well as to the political condition of being resigned or forced to descend below the surface, to cover oneself or be covered over, to remain obscure and invisible' (Zeiderman, 2016, p. 825).

By analysing the everyday experiences of residents of a self-built settlement in Cartagena, I seek to untangle the complex relationships between the situated socio-material relations of waste, urban environmental degradation, racialized marginalization, dispossession, and violence. Relational Black politics of placemaking become continually contested, reshaped and forged by human and more-than-human relations, social and political frictions, and contradictions that sustain the material politics of city making.

Methodology

The paper draws on 11 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Cartagena between 2017 and 2023 as part of my PhD research. The multi-sited fieldwork involved extensive participant observation and interviews with residents and waste pickers in four socially differentiated neighbourhoods in the city. In general, the research took garbage-based everyday practices as an entry point to examine processes of urban belonging.

In this paper, I build on the neighbourhood ethnography conducted in an expanding self-built settlement located in the south-east of the city, next to the Ciénaga, which lacked an adequate waste management system. In this specific neighbourhood, I carried out individual and group interviews with inhabitants mainly at their homes ($n = 41$), community leaders and members of community-based organizations ($n = 25$), waste pickers living or working in the neighbourhood ($n = 21$), *volqueta* truck drivers ($n = 2$). They were complemented with a series of interviews with state officials, representatives of garbage collection companies and NGOs employees working in the area. In addition, I carried out focus groups ($n = 5$) with residents to discuss garbage practices and concerns in the self-built settlement and conducted regular transect walks with residents and community leaders. These were complemented by informal conversations over the years.

The participant observation in the self-built settlement, was made possible by taking part to a women's community-based organization's activities. I spent my time participating to the meetings (both internal and with other actors, NGOs or institutions), to the community activities organized by the women's organization, and progressively to the neighbourhood's social life more broadly. Through participant observation, I also began to witness the rhythms, temporalities, and practices of the actors involved in the garbage-based filling practices in the self-built settlement. These experiences helped me to gradually unpack the complex ramifications of the garbage infrastructure in the self-built settlement; its connection to the city's broader political economy; and to witness the expansion of the self-built neighbourhood over time. These experiences troubled my understanding and expectations of waste/wasting in everyday spaces of urban life. Cautious not to appropriate, as a white woman researcher, what speaking of Black life and Afro-Colombian resistance in Cartagena means, I experienced, observed, and listened to the multiple uses and meanings given to garbage by the residents and critically reflected on my understandings through open collective discussions with the residents on several occasions during fieldwork.

Geographies of disposability and race in Cartagena

Attending to the historical articulations of urban development, aesthetics of hygiene and modernity and race in Cartagena are central to explore inhabitants' politics of placemaking in the self-built settlement. Cartagena currently has the highest percentage[6] of self-identified Afrodescendant population among Colombia's five main cities (DANE 2018, in Meisel-Roca & Aguilera-Diaz, 2020, p. 24).[7] However, the city's geographies of disposability continue to reflect the colonial-racial grounds of urban planning, historical configurations of power, and racialized dispossession.

Cartagena was founded in 1533 on indigenous land and became one of the major colonial cities of the Spanish Empire in Latin America (Abello & Florez, 2015). It played a central role in the transatlantic slave trade (Abello & Florez, 2015) and by the late 1770s, it

had become the most important city in the Caribbean New Granada (Helg, 2004, p. 81). The slave trade shaped the city's economic, social, political and architectural structures. The city initially grew within its fortified walls, with neighbourhoods segregated according to socio-racial hierarchy, which nonetheless allowed spatial proximity (Cunin, 2005; Helg, 2004). As the city expanded beyond its walls, its spatial segregation sharpened (Cunin, 2005), laying the foundation for the colonial-racial dynamics of contemporary urban life in Cartagena.

During a period when Latin American elites' modernist ideologies of architecture and urban planning were influenced by eugenics ideas and practices, the construction of the built environment and spatial production became intertwined with race, gender discrimination, and class distinctions (López-Durán, 2018). Similarly, Cartagena's spatial division was exacerbated over time by urban hygiene projects and public health policies justified by racist ideologies and discourses. At the beginning of the 20th century, the city underwent a new phase of industrial development and urban expansion beyond the walled city, having lost its importance to the Andean interior in the centuries following the colonial period (Helg, 2004). Due to the lack of a sewage and waste management system in Cartagena, the government began to prioritize urban sanitation projects to ensure the city's reputation as a reliable seaport (Casas, 2000).

The affirmation of Cartagena as a tourist destination since the 1920s (Cunin & Rinaudo, 2006) further exacerbated the city's socio-spatial division and the displacement of mostly black and mulatto populations (Abello & Florez, 2015). The local elite justified these displacements as a means to 'clear' and 'clean' (Abello & Florez, 2015, p. 24) urban space for tourism in the name of modernization. The walls suffered partial destruction, and the low-income neighbourhoods situated outside the walled city were stigmatized as 'anti-hygienic' and an obstacle to urban modernity (Cunin & Rinaudo, 2005). In the 1960s, the 'eradication of Chambacú' (Abello & Florez, 2015, p. 36) became an evocative example of urban development projects that symbolized the height of spatial polarization and racialized marginalization of Afrodescendants in the city (Ortiz, 2007). The Chambacú neighbourhood had been built outside the city walls, amidst mangroves and portions of land and sea. To provide solid ground for its residents, water was filled with sand, rice husk, and waste (Cunin, 2005). With the touristic development of Cartagena in the 1970s, and in the name of 'progress' and 'salubrity' (Abello & Florez, 2015, p. 36), the neighbourhood was destroyed, its residents evicted and displaced, allowing the city's elite to reclaim strategic land of high value (Cunin, 2005; Ortiz, 2007).

Land speculation and transnational capital continue to support the racialized processes of displacement and dispossession of Afro-Colombian communities in contemporary Cartagena. In La Boquilla, north of Cartagena, national and local elites have gained economic benefits from touristic projects that have flourished on the community's collective territories, despite their collective land title (Hernández Ospina & Deavila Pertuz, 2022).

La Bendición

The waterfront self-built settlement is located in Cartagena's south-eastern periphery. This area has a history of constant expansion and transformation, dating back to the intensification of urban development outside the walled city in the 1940–1960s (Gómez, 2004). During the economic boom of the 1960s and 1970s, these neighbourhoods received rural migrants in search of economic opportunities; followed by an internally displaced population fleeing the violence of the armed conflict (Cunin, 2005); inhabitants displaced by the evictions in the city

centre (such as Chambacú) (Ortiz, 2007); and in the past years migrants coming from Venezuela. Today, this area concentrates low-income housing, high-rise social housing projects and expanding self-built settlements.

The situated continuities of racialized exclusion in Cartagena are exacerbated by the socio-economic and political marginalization of living in the urban margins. In a national context where Blackness is associated to poverty (Viveros Vigoya, 2022), the sectors located next to the Ciénaga concentrate the highest proportion of Afrodescendants in the city. Residents in La Bendición face race-based injustices, precarious living conditions, systemic disadvantages, material and infrastructural deprivation, and lacking access to water, waste collection, and sanitation services. La Bendición is situated in the areas most vulnerable to the effects of climate change in Cartagena (Ayala García & Meisel Roca, 2017), and is at a high risk of environmental degradation, due to frequent flooding (Oldenburg & Neville, 2021) and pollution due to decades of dumping the city's waste in the Ciénaga.

Situated between land and water, facing the touristic district's skyline from afar, La Bendición is at the heart of territorial conflicts fuelled by constant threats of dispossession ranging from state-led evictions to recuperate state-owned land; to demolition of housing located in high-risk zones; or of large urban development projects' economic interests. These conflicting territorial struggles are intertwined to widespread violence. Inhabitants' collectives memories of the '*limpieza sociales*' targeted killings[8] in the 1990s and 2000s by paramilitaries, urban militias and the police (Cobos, 2003) are juxtaposed with current experiences of policing; violent evictions; gang violence imposing territorial control over so-called 'invisible boarders'; death threats to community leaders; narcoparamilitary presence and extorsions; and countless unsolved murders. The diverse forms of pervasive violence experienced by inhabitants define their place-based struggles.

Cartagena's waste infrastructures reflect and reproduce the city's racialized divisions. The spaces in the city that lack access to waste collection, and wider range urban services, are expanding self-built settlements, such as La Bendición, with the highest presence of Afrodescendant and internally displaced populations, where the inhabitants partake in garbage-based practices of disappearance, emergence and appearance described below. These practices are racialized, in the continuities of the dynamics of waste labour predominantly carried out by Afrodescendant waste pickers at the city scale and, of the former and present localization of municipal dumps and landfills next to Afrodescendant neighbourhoods (Neville, 2024).

Forms of garbage-based practices: disappearance, emergence, and appearance

In the following sections, I examine three forms of garbage-based practices through which garbage is at the heart of placemaking processes along the tryptic of disappearance, emergence, and appearance. These are not the only ways in which waste management is envisioned in the self-built settlement, but they are the most important garbage-based practices for the reconfiguration of politics of placemaking. Together, these forms of garbage-based practices constitute embodied territorial practices for the creation of spaces of Black life that occur under dynamics of displacement, dispossession, and violence.

Disappearance

Residents of the self-built settlement, like Rosa, are surrounded by garbage. Within this ubiquity, they endure daily and continuous bodily exposure to garbage and its toxicity. Disappearance foregrounds the importance of embodied experiences of toxicities in the social production of space. It encompasses residents' everyday alternative practices to dispose of their daily waste in the absence of an official garbage collection service. To render garbage invisible and minimize the health consequences of accumulated waste and toxins, residents resort to a wide range of practices, including open dumping, burning, back-yard filling and selling recyclables. Disappearance practices within domestic spaces largely rely on women's labour, as waste management is associated with cleaning and cooking tasks, and gendered roles of housekeepers and of domestic work carried out in wealthier neighbourhoods. Similar to Fredericks (2018) notion of 'salvage bricolage' which depicts 'innovative bodily technologies' (p.152), the failures and absence of a functioning garbage infrastructure in the self-built settlement are devolved onto the labour and bodily experiences of its residents. In this sense, residents' daily bodily activities of maintenance to remove garbage further make reference to Simone's (2004) notion of 'people as infrastructure' which views residents' daily practices as having infrastructure-like effects.

The inhabitants of the self-built settlement resort to disappearance to minimize the presence of garbage, yet these practices constitute attempts only, as garbage remains with continued proximity and residents pursue life with toxins (Fredericks, 2021). Disappearance highlights the relationship between the body and the infrastructure (Andueza et al., 2021; Desai et al., 2015) with garbage exposure and toxicity (Fredericks, 2021). Disappearance points to the body as a 'site and scale of analysis within environmental politics' (Mollett et al., 2020, pp. 274–275), and in particular on the ways Afrodescendant bodies historically and strikingly carry the burden of tangible and intangible exposure to waste-based toxicity in Cartagena.

Beyond the tangible and highly visible presence of garbage materials in residents' daily environments, garbage pollution becomes an intangible toxic burden which translates into bad smells, contaminated water, mosquitoes and related illnesses – deeply affecting the residents' health and sensorial environment. Sandra, an Afro-Colombian resident who lives with her teenage daughter and grandchild, describes the implications of toxicity in her daily life, suggesting a limited agency. She says:

> Here they burn the garbage, they burn it without thinking about the children. This is toxic, you know. (*Pause*) But sometimes I also burn the rubbish.

The material presence of garbage disproportionately affects the inhabitants of Cartagena's urban margin who carry the burden of everyday 'environmental suffering' (Auyero & Swistun, 2009) caused by garbage toxicity. Pollution happens through 'governing through disposability' (Fredericks, 2018) and constitutes the 'violence of colonial land relations' (Liboiron, 2021, p. 6). Interwoven with race and class-based injustices, garbage pollution and toxicity further entail 'violent uneven bodily burdens' (Fredericks, 2021, p. 1) on its inhabitants. Daniela, an Afro-Colombian resident, explains how she manages her daily waste in a context of widespread feelings of state abandonment:

> The garbage, well as nothing happens, we burn it. Nobody solves anything! The neighbourhood leaders should take care of it. The issue with garbage is the most polluting. The garbage, the smell, everything.

In addition to burning, and due to the garbage infrastructure's inefficiencies, residents resort to dumping their daily trash it in their back yards. Yulisa, an Afro-Colombian woman living in one of the houses closest to the Ciénaga, points to her back yard and explains the harmful consequences of the continued proximity to garbage. She says: 'I dump my rubbish behind, it's disgusting'.

The inhabitants of La Bendición endure garbage and its embodied experiences of toxicity, reflecting inequalities in ecological distribution (Baabereyir et al., 2012) as they cope with failing infrastructures and state neglect. By responding to the challenges of racial banishment and proximity to toxicity, disappearance represent historically and locally situated spatial practices of the everyday which seek to circumvent the conditions of urban exclusion. Drawing on Massey's (2005) relational understanding of the social production of space, disappearance is 'embedded material practices' (Massey, 2005) that assemble with the racialized politics and trajectories of placemaking.

In the next section, I move from disappearance to emergence, a second form of garbage-based practice that centres on the waste materials buried and given another purpose by residents to create urban land. Emergence constitutes forms of living with waste that sustains residents' place-based struggles in the long run.

Emergence

La Bendición is being built *rellenando* (by filling). Emergence relates to the *relleno* practices used to fill the waterbody with waste materials, as described by Rosa in the introduction, making parcels of land 'emerge' out of water and expanding the self-built settlement. Through emergence residents enact forms of living with and giving new uses and values to waste. Through the bodily experiences of filling with waste, residents draw intimate relationships with wider structures of power that subtly shape their possibility to make claims on the city.

Emergence relies on a variety of waste materials according to the stages of the filling process, ranging from household waste, to construction waste (*escombros)* from building sites transported by tipper trucks or small carts, bypassing their intended final destination in the city's landfill. Mud from the Ciénaga is used to reduce the depth of the water, then household waste is added to consolidate the soil. These layers are covered with a thicker layer of *escombros*. Finally, a layer of clean, firm earth *(zahorra)*, which is more expensive than *escombros*, is placed on top (Figure 1). Young Afro-Colombian men from the neighbourhood play a central role in the labour of filling, unloading, transporting and carrying the *escombros* within the self-built settlement. Their bodies extend the infrastructure-like effects of the practice (Simone, 2004), exposing them to its intense policing. Women take care of the *relleno* within domestic spaces and their bodies enact infrastructural practices of care (Oldenburg & Buelvas, 2023).

The materials used and the practices vary over time, responding to seasonality before rainy seasons (Oldenburg & Neville, 2021); increases in the price of the materials; or policing. Duvan, an Afro-Colombian young man who performs filling tasks, explains how intensified policing is affecting *relleno* practices:

Figure 1. Wooden markers of the future plots to be built on the water with mixed waste materials. (photo by the author, 2019).

> With the new law, there are fines of three minimum wages if you fill with *escombros*. If they have the resources, people buy *zahorra*; otherwise, they fill with rubbish, like here. [. . .] A truck of *escombros* was worth between 20'000–30'000 pesos before.[9] [. . .]. Now, because of the pandemic, it is approx. 80'000 pesos. I bought this [pile of *zahorra*] for 180,000 pesos.

The *relleno* is not only sold to the residents of the settlement to improve their housing, but it also connects to the dynamics of urban speculation. So-called *urbanizadores piratas* (pirate developers) fill the waterbody and make profit from the commercialization of the plots of land. The chosen sectors respond to a logic of anticipating urban infrastructural development, including a future road infrastructure on the banks of the *Ciénaga*. According to residents, the plots are sold while still submerged in water for two to three million pesos[10] (in 2019) in exchange for unrecognized property titles. Yoselin, an Afro-Colombian resident, explains the multiple rationales behind the *relleno* process:

> There are people who invade out of necessity, others for business. Some build a house here even though they have another one and hope that one day they will be given a VIS[11] to relocate to. It's a business for some. But the people who live here are humble people.

Emergence is entrenched in complex networks of economic interests and political alliances both within and outside the neighbourhood. The commercialization of the plots of land in exchange for unrecognized property titles involves actors operating far beyond the settlement, denounced by community leaders for having a modus operandi similar to mafia-like groups, and involving lawyers, elected politicians, powerful entrepreneurs, police officers, and illicit actors threatening the residents who denounce these practices. Residents' agency is constrained by internal power relations and intimidations by illicit actors. '*Acá te mandan una moto*' (here they'll send you a motorcycle), explains Antonio, a community leader, referring to the violent silencing by *sicariatos* modes of killing of community leaders who denounce illicit practices. In conditions of heightened insecurity, residents like Antonio engage in 'politics of *submergence*' which are 'underwritten by a tacit devaluation of black lives' (Zeiderman, 2016, p. 826, original emphasis) to make claims collectively in a mesh of violent actors.

Emergence facilitates connections with otherwise disconnected social and political worlds, where space is 'an opening up to the very sphere of the political' (Massey, 2005, p. 9). The practices of *relleno* constitute a 'political materiality' (Pilo' & Jaffe, 2020) that act as mediators with the state for residents' place-based struggles. For instance, emergence materializes clientelistic relations, as the exchange of votes for favours relies on essential goods – such as *relleno* or *zahorra*. Clientelism sustains the specific temporality of emergence, whose rhythms accelerate before elections. Roger, an Afrodescendant community leader, argues that these practices benefit from a certain laissez-faire:

> How many times have they said until here and no further. An inspector only comes every few years. Neither the EPA, nor CARDIQUE,[12] nor the mayor come in the electoral period. They would lose votes to ban the filling.

Against the progression of the filling, the municipality has developed a discourse to stop the *relleno* practices, posited as a threat to environmental sustainability on state-owned land. Policing of *relleno* practices and state-led evictions are framed around risk management, environmental preservation, and the recuperation of state-owned land. Similar to Zeiderman's (2016) analysis of the converging forces of port expansion, climate change adaptation, and paramilitary violence in Buenaventura, the underlying logic of the recuperation of state owned-land adjacent to the Ciénaga in Cartagena places the Afro-Colombian population under multiple and constant threats of displacement. The official discourse perpetuates the stigma that local communities are responsible for harming the environment and enforces 'spatial-racial boundaries' through policing practices (Alves, 2019) targeting the inhabitants. The dominant narratives overlook the complexity of *relleno* practices and its connections to broader issues, such as political clientelism, illicit actors' urban speculation and violent intimidations, pointing to the 'ambivalence' of governing logics (Ranganathan, 2022) surrounding the Ciénaga.

Residents cope with and anticipate the non-linear rhythms and temporalities of displacement, dispossession and violence within shifting socio-political settings through bodily practices of emergence. The temporalities of emergence become a terrain for the reshaping of urban citizenship (Fredericks, 2018). Emergence is struggles against practices of governing and domination that are locally and historically situated and link, 'through a common place-frame' (Pierce et al., 2011, p. 55), the material and socio-political relationships and contradictions that constitute the possibilities of Black placemaking.

In the next section, I continue with the third form of garbage-based practice: appearance. These practices occur alongside the practices of disappearance and emergence, yet here recyclable materials, such as plastic bottles, used tires, wood plastic composite, etc. are deliberately and explicitly displayed in public space by residents.

Appearance

In contrast to the garbage-based practices of 'alliance through disposal' (Lau, 2022) that challenge state neglect and abandonment, in the self-built settlement, the beautification of public space with recyclable materials collected by residents or available on the street

comes to form a collective sense of place (Carter et al., 2007). The practices of appearance stem from a shared project of resisting the class and race-based stigma surrounding dirtiness, lack of environmental consciousness, violence and delinquency ascribed to the inhabitants of Cartagena's urban margins. Through the practices of appearance, the residents come together to draw attention to new narratives of the self-built settlement, centred on the care of a shared *territorio*[13](territory), and aimed at environmental preservation. The collective shaping of urban futures is framed within a discourse of environmental conservation of the Ciénaga and its mangrove. The project emerges from grassroots collective initiatives and is supported by local NGO's rhetoric based on logics of individual responsibility.

The pendulum between placelessness and placemaking, is being reversed by forging *un sentido de pertenencia* (a sense of belonging) among residents. Unlike nearby Afrodescendant rural areas, in La Bendición, in the absence of a collective land title, collective place-based claims organized on the basis of Afrodescendant ethno-racial identity and territorial rights are not clearly articulated within the community. According to Pedro, an Afro-Colombian community leader, this puts the community at further risk of dispossession in the face of ecotourism projects and property developments around the Ciénaga. During a community meeting in 2019, he stands up and makes a thought-provoking argument to the other community leaders in the room:

> In *La Boquilla*, they have the *territorio*, here we don't! If they want to take it, they'll take it! [. . .] We must unite to face what is coming!

Rather, the meaning-making of a shared *territorio* is articulated at the level of the community around the Ciénaga, which was once a place for children to swim and provided residents abundantly with large fish, shrimps and crabs. The relational logics underpinning the dynamics of placemaking are thus not supported by a clear discourse of Black resistance. Rather, a 'black spatial praxis' (Alves, 2014) is entangled in the environmental imaginaries of the residents, with an 'aquatic space' (Oslender, 2016) in which the Ciénaga appears as both a site of pristine nature and harmful toxicity. In La Bendición, both urban land and water are part of the contradictions with which residents contend with urban life, where the seemingly paradoxical practices of both reducing the waterbody through the dumping and filling, and caring for it, merge to sustain the fabric of everyday life.

Residents' practices of appearance are also intimately linked to reverting territorial urban conflicts, violence and insecurity at the urban margins (Alves, 2019). An eloquent example of this is the *Triángulo de la Convivencia*, or the 'Triangle of Cohabitation', a reference to its former name when it was known as the 'Triangle of Conflict'. This public space upgrading programme was set up by NGOs together with the community, and sponsored by CSR entities, to transform what used to be a garbage dump and battleground for the local gangs, into a public space, using recyclable materials to 'beautify' the built environment, accompanied by community cleaning days, etc. Placemaking sustains the pacification of a contested territory divided by gang violence through an affective dimension. As Daniela, an Afro-Colombian resident and community leader, suggests, the project connects to a meaning-making and emotional process of creating an attachment to place in the midst of residents' experiences of violent displacements and sate neglect. She claims:

> One appropriates the place where you arrive. To have a *sentido de pertenencia* [sense of belonging] is to learn to love the place. [. . .] We are trying to revive this.

Overcoming dominant representations of garbage as abjection (Millar, 2020), appearance is forged in the interstices of territorial conflicts, state disinvestment, policing and violence. Here, the dynamics of placemaking transcend the opposition between urban land and urban nature, sustaining residents place-based identity and hopes for change. Appearance sheds light on the existing tension between placelessness and placemaking (Alves, 2014; McKittrick, 2011) amidst experiences of urban violence, as residents make a place in the city *on* and *with* the ubiquity of waste. Appearance relies on an affective dimension of placemaking and connects with collective politics at the community level in the long run. Simultaneously as residents seek to secure land (emergence), practices of appearance constitute residents' responses to ongoing threats of violence, dispossession, harm and domination, beyond overt resistance, and that hold space for the symbolic dimensions of relational placemaking.

Conclusion

Rosa grows plants and trees among the *escombros* and garbage she has used to build her back yard on the Ciénaga. Their presence reminds her of the days when she lived in the *campo*, as she takes roots in the city where she says she envisions her future life. Rosa simultaneously performs garbage-based practices of disappearance, emergence and appearance. These forms of everyday garbage practices represent the socio-material conditions of her constant struggle to stay afloat in the city.

Disappearance, emergence, and appearance garbage-based practices are all means of producing place *through* and *with* waste, highlighting the contradictions inherent to placemaking. The struggles of Afro-Colombian women – like Rosa – to emplace herself in the city while composing *with* and *on* garbage, have sought to reveal the racialized processes of embodied experiences of waste exposure in Cartagena's self-built settlements. The body appears as an intimate site, both of the reproduction of urban inequalities and of political possibilities. As the practices of disappearance, emergence and appearance demonstrate, disposability and abjection can be transformed into the socio-material foundations from which Afro-Colombian populations sustain a 'black sense of place' (McKittrick, 2011) and thread contentious relational politics of placemaking. As residents grapple with environmental degradation, they enact a 'black sense of place' through a series of bodily practices that unfold with more-than-human materialities, in continued proximity to waste and toxins, and that are not clearly articulated on the basis of Afrodescendant identity or right to territory. The socio-material entanglements of garbage can be considered as placemaking possibilities that challenge unequal geographies of disposability and 'create new avenues to rethink blackness and spatial resistance' (Alves, 2014, p. 335), sustaining alternative urban environmental possibilities.

Today, garbage is being generated at unprecedented scales globally (The World Bank, 2018) and the Anthropocene is to be understood as 'an epoch governed by waste and wasting processes' (Fredericks, 2021, p. 2). Negotiating with absent or failing waste infrastructures, urban residents across the globe make a living *with* garbage and its toxins. The practices embodied by residents at the urban margins, who are constantly exposed to waste

in their everyday environment, starkly illuminate the harmful consequences for their daily lives. However, by looking at the wide range of practices forged through waste by the residents of the self-built settlement, the urban margins emerge as a place from which the city's marginalized residents resist the sigma assigned to 'wasted lives' (Bauman, 2003) beyond overt resistance. The juxtaposition of disappearance, emergence and appearance draws attention to the ways in which the agency of the inhabitants manifests itself differently, and to the entanglements with the material conditions of relational politics of placemaking. Residents in the self-built settlement engage in relational politics of placemaking to circumvent the everyday conditions of violence and power structures they inhabit, and to assert differing imaginaries of urban environmental futures.

Through a relational consideration of waste and placemaking, the paper highlights the paradoxes of placemaking as residents lacking access to garbage collection infrastructure contend with profound environmental degradation. It contributes to Massey's (2005) claims regarding the multiplicity of the political trajectories that sustain politics of placemaking by pointing to the importance of urban materialities. The entanglements with the material conditions of relational politics of placemaking 'recognise the value forged in the material intimacies between human and non-human agencies' (Fredericks, 2021, p. 18) and the contradictions through which placemaking is constantly created. It highlights the ways in which the material and social production of Black placemaking is intimately linked to embodied experiences of toxicities, and urges to consideration of the broader implications of living under conditions of disposability in urban Colombia and elsewhere in similar circumstances. Through the lens of waste, the paper proposes novel ways of reading the inherent plurality of relational politics of placemaking that can foreshadow urban futures.

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. Ethno-racial categories of self-recognition are contested in Colombia (Restrepo, 2004; Wade, 1995). Despite the complexity and heterogeneity of ethno-racial categorization in Cartagena (Cunin, 2005), I use the terms 'Afro-Colombian', 'Afro-descendent' and 'Black' interchangeably.
3. Referred to as Cartagena here.
4. Constitutional reforms of 1991.
5. Law70 of 1993.
6. Cali has the largest Afro-descendent population in terms of number. Beyond these five main cities, more than 80% of the population in Buenaventura identifies as Afro-descendant (DANE 2018, in Meisel-Roca & Aguilera-Diaz, 2020, p. 24).
7. According to the DANE census, in Cartagena 35.7% of the population identified as Afro-descendants in 2005 and 20.3% in 2018. The differences in the 2018 census were strongly criticized by Afro-Colombian organizations, claiming the population officially counted as Afro-descendants is underestimated.
8. Disposability is linked to the value given to life and death in Colombia. Forced disappearance has been central to the armed conflict.
9. Approximately 5 USD.
10. Approximately 500–750 USD.
11. Stands for *Vivienda de Interés Social*, the government's social housing programme.
12. The city and regional environmental authorities.

13. I use the term *territorio*, as used by the residents. The concept of *territorio* has been extensively studied in Latin American critical geography in relation to power, identity, social movements, and place-based collective struggles (see Escobar, 2008).

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