

Inhabiting the City:
Citizenship and Democracy in Caracas

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of
Cultural Anthropology in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation, *Inhabiting the City: Citizenship and Democracy in Caracas*, asks how multiple modalities of citizenship arise in order to facilitate working-class and middle-class strategies to negotiate formal and informal structures of rights and obligations among individuals, local communities, and the nation-state. By examining mobile and locally fixed practices in multiple sites of Caracas, Venezuela, this work explores the ways that individuals assert claims to political and social rights that are bound to particular spaces of the city.

Based on a year of ethnographic fieldwork in one middle-class and two working class communities, this dissertation explores the discursive formation of citizenships that are based on divergent conceptions of democracy. Although the notions of this mode of political organization are based on understandings of equality in the capital's working-class communities, many middle-class ideas are quite different. In more affluent communities, democratic ideals grounded in equality do not take into account popular notions of meritocracy that reinforce class hierarchy. Although many individuals in Caracas work to produce democratic spaces throughout the city, exclusions persist—and some go largely unnoticed.

Finally, I argue that the modes of belonging that many residents employ to negotiate spaces of citizenship vary according to factors such as race, class, gender, age, and geographic location. By analyzing citizenship in a city space that is as divided as Caracas—especially along class lines—I argue that studies of citizenship

require attention to cultural transformations that are tied to social, geographic, and political relationships in local spaces. To primarily conceive of the citizen as an individual with ties to the nation-state is too broad a scope to begin understanding the nuances of social and political belonging that ensure active participation within contemporary societies.

To my parents, Dr. Faye V. Harrison and Dr. William L. Conwill.

*Thank you for telling me that a Ph.D. isn't hereditary, even though it probably
disappointed a four year old.*

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1. Introduction

Salsa blared from the speakers at the wall as two couples danced. One pair was the oldest in the room. Mia's great-grandfather slowly shuffled his feet with his wife to the sound of the clave. The distant cousin whose name no one could (or wanted to) remember twirled his date, circling the white-haired lovers under the party room's disco light. Everyone was having a good time at that point in the night. Mia's mother was celebrating her fifty-sixth birthday, so the family had reserved the salon within the fenced off apartment building where they lived.

When the music changed, the unnamed cousin loudly complimented the elderly couple's dancing before refilling his drink, and approached me. There, he asked me who I was, offered me a drink, and quickly started to tease. "An anthropologist, huh? So why are you in Caracas? There aren't any bones to dig up here. You should go to the interior to investigate *los indios* (Indians)." He continued speaking about indigenous communities, their baskets, and rural poverty. Insisting that his impromptu list would interest me, he assured me that I had chosen the best country in Latin America to do my "type of work." "So where are you going to look for your bones?"

He paused to drink from his cup, and I began to explain that I planned to stay in Caracas. Confused, he asked, "What? Why? There aren't any Indians in Caracas for you to study!" I responded, telling him that I worked on citizenship and democracy in the capital, and he stopped me. "*¿Qué?* You think there is democracy

here? Just a second—Hey!” He quickly stepped toward the table where Mia’s mother and grandmother sat. “This *loco* is talking about democracy in Venezuela. Did you hear? He thinks that we still have democracy.” He turned back to me as he took another drink from his plastic cup. “*Mira, mi pana* (Look, buddy), you ought to go look for your *inditos* (Indians). You aren’t going to find democracy here. Look around outside, and tell me what you see.” Before I could answer, he continued. “It’s nothing but a big slum. It’s closing us in. The government—Chávez—is letting it all happen too. Should this happen in a democracy? Surely not! We have the right to live as we please, but Chávez wants to take that away.”

This dissertation explores the assumptions and experiences underlying the sorts of comments offered up by Mia’s distant cousin. It examines the production of various notions of citizenship and democracy that *Caraqueños* negotiate in their day-to-day lives in the capital. Focusing on a middle-class and two working-class communities in Caracas, I ask how individuals enact diverse modes of citizenship through actions that are explicitly tied to the social and geographic construction of local communities. I argue that citizenship does not simply mediate a relationship between individuals and the nation-state. Rather, this work investigates the production of this socio-legal construct in local and regional terms that may dissociate the citizen of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela from the member of the Venezuelan nation. Ultimately, the development of multiple citizenships based on social and political participation brings to light the different and competing

notions of democratic life as individuals work to make Caracas home.

Many individuals characterize Caracas as a site of placement and possession, but others believe that it also serves as an example of the contrary. Throughout this dissertation, individuals and communities work toward ideals of democratic life that construct belonging in different ways. In addition, the strategies for gaining access to power that are available to individuals depend upon changing interrelations of race, class, and gender—interrelations that are spatialized in particular ways that I will explore throughout these pages. Processes of spatialization, moreover, lead *Caraqueños* to experience citizenship in different ways. For some, contemporary political and social processes have brought about loss and unanswered claims upon the nation-state. For others they have provided a newfound chance to participate.

Arriving in Caracas

I came to Caracas with hopes of carrying out a very different sort of work. My graduate career to that point had revolved around my interest in sexual identities, sex tourism, and nationalism in the Dominican Republic and elsewhere throughout the Caribbean region. Between 2001 and 2005, I made short trips to Santo Domingo during breaks from coursework to explore the city, and to listen to Dominicans and tourists share stories of work, travel, and desire. As I observed the influence of the country's varied tourist economy on the production of sexual and racial subjectivities, I became increasingly interested in questions of space—national, regional, and local—as they related to sets of practices that defined

individuals as Dominican, men, women, queer, and workers.

During this period, I focused on two male subjectivities in the Dominican Republic. The first category referred to *sanky pankys*, men who frequently made themselves available to tourists (male and female) around beach communities as travel companions and sexual partners in order to earn a living and to possibly leave the island. The other consisted of *bugarrones*, non-gay men who penetrated other males for pay. While both groups exchanged sexual services for gifts, individuals that identified as *bugarrones* and *sanky pankys* explained that sexual desire was their motivation for engaging in this economic activity. In fact, they often considered financial gain an added benefit. Significantly, male Dominicans engaged in sexual labor spoke of a spatial divide between the two classes of queer identity in the country.

Bugarrones were largely urban subjectivities. In contrast, *sanky pankys* supposedly existed outside of cities like Santo Domingo and Santiago, and in beach towns like Boca Chica and Puerto Plata. Not only did these two classes of male identity tend to different spaces within the territorial boundaries of the nation, the ways in which Dominicans spoke about and performed race differed markedly. As “blacker” features like dreadlocked and braided hair as well as darker skin met the demands of the tourist market in and around beach resorts, *sanky pankys* and others seeking a favorable place in the local economy frequently referred to themselves in racial terms uncommon in the Capital. *Sanky pankys* were commonly Rasta, *negros*,

mulatos, and “my brothers.” In contrast, Dominicans in Santo Domingo rarely used terms such as *negro* and *mulato* to refer to themselves. Rather they utilized the term *indio* to express a broad range along a color-racial continuum. Physical “blackening” was also rare in the capital, as Afro-Dominicans (men and women) frequently relaxed their hair to different degrees, and at times avoided the sun in order to avoid becoming darker.

During the majority of this time, I thought very little of Caracas. In the rare occasion that the Venezuelan capital entered my mind, I was in Santo Domingo’s international airport. There, the city was listed amongst other popular destinations within a transnational Dominican community. Regular flights to New York, San Juan, Madrid, Miami, Curacao, and Caracas hinted toward the many possibilities for investigating globalization’s impact on Dominican social networks within and beyond the borders of the small island nation.

In 2005, I found myself thinking much more about Venezuela as a site for ethnographic work after reminding myself of the regular contact between that country the Dominican Republic. In addition, the questions of racial identity that were prevalent in the Dominicanist work of scholars like Jorge Duany and Steven Gregory attracted me to the possibility of thinking about Dominican identity and identification in a national space not heavily influenced by North American notions of race. Although my previous exploration took place in tourist settings, Venezuela’s oil economy and its general independence from international tourism provided an

exciting frontier to explore the transnational Dominican community.

Enthusiastically, I arrived in Venezuela for the first time in 2006 to examine the production of local Dominican identities in Caracas—a location that had been associated with economic opportunity in the Dominican Republic. Although members of my graduate committee encouraged me to consider the role of President Hugo Chávez’s leftist government in the fantasies of mobility (spatial and economic) that brought migrating Dominicans to Venezuela, I did not anticipate the significance of local political discussion in the work that I would undertake. In Santo Domingo, explicit talk of local and national politics rarely arose in interviews. However, things were different in Caracas. I arrived in Venezuela with a presidential election fast approaching. Although I would find that political discussion was a common element of popular discourse in my new research site, the timing of my entry to the field urged me to shift my attention to the role national and local politics in day-to-day construction of individual and collective identities.

For the first months I spent in Venezuela, I pursued questions of race and national identity in Caracas and the city’s Dominican community. However, I quickly found that while I wanted to open discussions regarding race, my *Caraqueño* counterparts were having discussions about class politics. I wanted to explore the ways in which Dominicans maintained relationships with their home communities, but the individuals who were willing to speak with me wanted to talk about their relationships in Caracas—the social and political bonds that permitted them to take

part in an ongoing conversation about belonging in Venezuela. I arrived prepared to investigate members of transnational communities as they remade their racial selves, but *Caraqueños* of diverse origins offered discussions of rights, citizenship, and access to local spaces of the city. By early 2007, my research began to take a new direction. I began to consider how Caracas itself influenced the ways in which the city's communities organized themselves politically, socially, and economically. As I directed my attention towards local class politics, I found myself examining a range of meanings associated with democracy and citizenship that varied as individuals navigated the city and its social hierarchies.

Establishing Citizenships

Discussions of modern citizenship have taken many forms. Although we might simply define citizenship as a universalizing mode of belonging within the community of the nation-state, the ways in which it functions within diverse histories of liberalism are quite variable (Ciprut 2008). Although classical liberal political philosophy presumes that the state might advance the interests of citizens as they act as rational and self-governed beings, this view does not take into account the various social and political exclusions within modern societies. States frequently play a significant role in the production of social hierarchies that favor some populations over others (Kumar & Silver 2008). James Holston and Arjun Appadurai have been especially critical of notions of citizenship that have emerged from liberal political philosophy. Liberal citizenships, as they have argued, produce

individuals who are passive in their citizenship, subjects who are not actively engaged in processes of rule (Appadurai 1996; Holston 1999).

In addition, questions of cultural diversity within liberal societies have raised important questions regarding citizenship's association with conceptions of equality and uniformity. As the nation-state's production of the citizen frequently calls upon notions of equality by subordinating alliances—such as those based on gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity—identity politics have come to play an essential role in negotiating belonging within liberal society (Collective 1995; Thomas 2004). Scholars such as Basch, Schiller, and Szanton Blanc are among those who have discussed the role of transnational migration in rearticulating belonging in the nation-state (Basch et al 1994; Chamberlain 2006; Foner 2001; Joppke & Morawska 2003; Laguerre 1998; Olwig 2007). In addition, others have undertaken studies of widely diverging relationships between cities and citizenship. Some of these authors have pointed out possibilities for cosmopolitan-based citizenships in large urban centers, which potentially link individuals through a larger human community (Cheah 2006; Gilroy 2004). Others illustrate the ways in which the capitalist accumulation contributes to the disappearance of public cities, which further divides populations into full and unrecognized citizens in contemporary urban spaces (Caldeira 2000; Davis 2006a; Fernandes & Varley 1998; Hannigan 1998).

Of particular significance for this project are theorizations of cultural

citizenship, a term coined by Renato Rosaldo (Rosaldo 1989). His work has been extremely important for discussing the limitations of understanding citizenship as a socio-legal construct based upon a notion of equality (Trouillot 2001). Addressing the diverse ways in which communities negotiate their relationships with the nation-state and other populations, Rosaldo's work has invited scholars and groups of activists to consider new strategies for making claims upon rights. Because national membership has comprised an important element of constructing citizenship, the experiences of belonging amongst communities living on the social peripheries of the nation are informed by histories of marginalization and subjugation by nation-states (Hall 1989). Notably, his use of the term cultural citizenship refers to the range of claims that subordinated groups of citizens make upon the state that include rights to employment, fair wages, social welfare, and dignity. Thus, the liberties in question include formal rights such as voting as well as less quantifiable demands such as recognition of full belonging in state society (Rosaldo 2003).

Because of the nation's role in the production of citizenship, a number of scholars have utilized cultural citizenship as a mode of linking cultural production with notions of belonging that are closely related to Benedict Anderson's work on imagined communities (Anderson 1991; Chen & Churchill 2007; Miller 2007; Stevenson 2003). Though these works on cultural citizenship gesture beyond the confines of the nation, this work is firmly situated within discussions of global

media's role in producing collective identities. Amongst the scholars concerned with popular consumption and cosmopolitanism, García Canclini's ideas are a departure from those most interested in international media's cultural expressions. Instead, his work explored the proliferation of media and commodity markets with the production of citizen-consumers that are less tied to states than they are to global markets (García Canclini 1995; 2001). Though the mobility of citizens is an essential element of his work, García Canclini notes that the unequal distribution of cultural capital within national and global communities delimits the types of access

Notably, Aihwa Ong's work on cultural citizenship within the Asian diaspora has approached the topic through a different lens. While Rosaldo consistently focused on marginalized communities attempting to gain social acceptance within the territory of the nation-state, Ong has focused on the role of global capital and biopower as states work to include new citizens (Ong 1999; 2003). Her more recent work has stretched to focus on neoliberalism as a "new relationship between government and knowledge through which governing activities are recast as nonpolitical and nonideological problems that need technical solutions" (Ong 2006). Arguing that nation-states exercise sovereignty in multiple ways, she enframes the stratification of personhood within national territories. Thus, although she writes about deterritorialized citizenships within transnational space, she also refers to spaces of alternative citizenships within the geography of the nation-state. For Ong, the production and "juxtapositioning of go-getter citizens and neo-slaves" occur as

states redefine themselves within the global economy (Ong 2006). With regularity, citizens increase and decrease in social value depending on gender, age, place of origin, and potential for capital accumulation.

In the context of Latin America, hierarchies of spatially bound and culturally defined subjectivities produce populations with varying access to the privileges of citizenship. Marisol de la Cadena's work in Peru illustrates the ways in which class and cultural expressions permit individuals to shift between mestizo and indigenous identification, which greatly inform social hierarchies between urban and rural citizens within the nation-state (Cadena 2000). Although Cadena refers to a spatial divide between these two groups, a number of Latin Americanist scholars such as James Holston illustrate the ways in which the nation-state supports and denies rights to citizenship for groups of internal migrants as they inhabit cities such as Brasilia, Havana, and Venezuela's Ciudad Bolívar (Evelyn 2004; Holston 1989; Holston & Caldeira 2005; Rodriguez Abreu 2007). Notably, although the encouraged migrations of Brasilia and Ciudad Bolívar have been closely associated with state sponsored urban development, migrants from the nation's peripheries live as second-class citizens in their new urban homes. Although these migrations are often motivated by economic and social mobility in new or recently developing older cities, poorer residents from impoverished regions of the nation-state frequently find themselves marginalized in new ways that impede their lives as full participants in urban social and political life (Caldeira 1999; Caldeira & James

1999).

Of particular significance for the notion of citizenship that I employ in this dissertation is the work of William Flores and Rina Benmayor. Cultural citizenship, as they define it, is a process of affirmation in which communities define their interests, binding solidarities, boundaries, its space, and membership. In doing so communities are enabled to establish and assert human, social and cultural rights, which lead to the production of values that organize individual and collective identities and practices (Flores & Benmayor 1997). Most importantly, individuals contributing economic and cultural wealth of a community may be recognized as legitimate political subjects, claiming rights for themselves and their families.

In recent years, a significant shift in studies of publics arose with scholarly work by Paul Gilroy, Houston Baker, Steven Gregory, and others interested in questions of ethnic and racial minorities such as communities throughout the African Diaspora (Collective 1995). Approaching histories of exclusion from “the public sphere,” members of the Black Public Sphere Collective acknowledged the production of alternate publics engaged in the political life of the nation-state.

I have also been influenced by Giorgio Agamben’s discussions regarding stateless people. For him, populations excluded from national citizenship exist within the condition that he calls bare life (Agamben 1998). Although, Hannah Arendt argued that a notion of a unified human condition legitimated claims to citizenship by stateless people, Agamben argues that nation-states permit and limit

access to humanity by protecting or excluding citizens and those who can be killed without remorse (Arendt 1958). Although I argue that sovereign states provide and restrict rights as they produce a range of political subjectivities, I consider it imperative to recognize that those without citizenship continue to live under the subjugation of local, national, and global power structures.

These populations are not simply wandering souls without a claim to home. Rather, they are overwhelmingly acted upon with little potential for legitimate negotiation. Timothy Mitchell's discussion of citizenship within colonial Egypt has been an influential work with respect to subjugation and the exclusivity of citizenship. In his work, he makes a notable distinction between colonial citizens and subjects (Mitchell 1988). For Mitchell, the essential difference between the two lies in the possibilities for individuals to make claims upon the state. The subject is bound to the colonial state, obligated to serve the sovereign under the threat of violence or death. Though citizens are undoubtedly obligated to states, this relationship is also based upon the sovereign entity's duties to a right holding citizenry. My work argues that Caracas-based citizenships frequently require individuals to enact citizenship through public action. Without doing so, many residents of the city become subjects of a nation-state that live existences that approach bare life.

The Modern City and the Limits of Community

Scholars have taken various positions on the role of the modern city in

producing collective subjectivities. Significantly, James Holston has argued that the city has been an essential element in the production of insurgent citizenship. Arguing that urban citizenships challenge modes of national belonging, the city has become the home of diverse urban cultures that may not be closely tied to colonial memories and nationalist fictions support the rule of the nation-state (Holston 1999). Urban modes of belonging might permit the proliferation of diverse cultural identities, ways of life, and usages of public space that permit the transformation of social categories and legal regimes. In turn, these urban movements may produce new articulations of rights that stand outside of institutional frameworks (Hannerz 1989).

Although the city provides great potential for examining new, more egalitarian modes of belonging, in most cases scholars point toward the modern city's production of inequality. Although urbanism scholarship illustrates various ways in which groups struggle for control over the built environment, the ways in which contemporary cities embody these challenges vary greatly. Scholars working in US cities such as Chicago and New York have dealt with questions surrounding divides between suburban development and inner-city deterioration, as well as more recent gentrification of so-called urban wildernesses of the twenty-first century (Smith 1996). Neil Smith argues that changing political economy and failing liberal urban policy have led to an attack upon the city and the working-class subjectivities that never left. Notably, Smith's work presumes that the urban

working-class is constructed as part of the wild city that must be tamed by pioneering wealthier residents. Although gentrification is not the dominant theme within the literature on cities, processes of displacement and the accompanying spatialization of race and class variably arise in urbanism work across national and regional boundaries.

Elijah Anderson, Mitchell Duneier, and Steven Gregory illustrate the ways in which working-class African-American communities socially and politically organize in order to establish a place within local and mainstream society. While making note of urban politics and economies that threaten to marginalize the Black working-class, Gregory's work primarily approaches the subject of community empowerment and political organization (Gregory 1998). The scholarship of Anderson and Duneier, on the other hand, shows the ways in which Black work-class men negotiate systems of class and moral order in order to make claims upon "respectable" society, and the larger city (Anderson 1999; 2003; Duneier 1992; Duneier & Carter 1999).

For these urbanism scholars, questions regarding urban belonging and race have been essential factors in the construction of local community. Although these writers illustrate the ways in which national and local racial hierarchies frequently limit social inclusion for citizens within the African Diaspora, modes of exclusion vary throughout these settings. Although interconnections between race and class frequently lead to widespread racial exclusions within cities, Vargas and others such

as John Jackson and Loretta Lees point out the role of class diversity in complex negotiations between working-class and middle-class Afro-descendants in shared geographic territories such as South Central LA, Harlem, and Chicago (Jackson 2001; 2005; Lees 1996). While fear of Blackness is firmly situated in all of their work, histories of migration, economic disenfranchisement, and legal structures that divide the racial communities of the city work differently to create urban sites of white privilege.

Additionally, Setha Low illustrates the ways in which North American communities of privilege control neighborhood spaces in their processes of forming collective identities. Low's contribution has explored the ways in which upper and middle class groups (mostly white) in the US fearfully enclose themselves in gated communities. In addition, her writings on the production of exclusive neighborhoods in the US explore the production of local belonging as communities police borders. As they define themselves, they not only welcome individuals and families like themselves. They open doors to the types of people they hope to become. For Low, protecting one's community may establish individuals as members as they undergo ongoing processes of identity formation (Low 2003).

Notably, these issues of racial and class exclusion are not only US-based phenomena. João Costa Vargas' work on the diversity of urban exclusion and racial politics within cities such as Rio de Janeiro and Los Angeles provides examples of marginalized communities working to define themselves using various methods

(Vargas 2006a; b). This is particularly clear in his work on favelas in Rio de Janeiro, as residents close community borders to unwelcome visitors while working to protect communities.

In addition to his US scholarship, Mike Davis has illustrated the long histories of exclusion that link many of the world's cities (Davis 2006b). Though Holston refers to the city as a space disjointed from colonial memory, Davis associates the contemporary production of spaces of inequality with histories of colonialism and subjugation. In some cases he has produced cities in which populations are contained by limiting structures such as walls. Teresa Caldeira has made important contributions to examining the division of urban space and fear of the surrounding city (Caldeira 1999; 2000). While Caldeira's Brazilianist work mostly focuses on the limitations of democratic life because of the geographic and social obstacles to accessing the public city, she acknowledges the importance of histories of migration, class, and race within São Paulo's social hierarchies.

While Caldeira writes of middle-class wishes to produce safe and exclusive domestic spaces within a city that appears too public for their liking, James Holston's work on the city of Brasilia illustrates the ways in which the state's production of modernist space restricts possibilities for public life in the city (Holston 1986). Exploring the absence of "street life" in Brasilia, Holston explains how the Brazilian state and urban planners produced streets without crowds. By making the most traditional of public spaces inaccessible to pedestrian traffic, the

political arena remains out of the reach of many residents. In contrast, John Hannigan's work on the decline of the public city shifts focus from the state to trends in neoliberal governance (Hannigan 1998). In his work, the widespread production of private spaces that closely resemble traditional public spaces such as streets and plazas in the Global North severely restricts the participation of populations deemed incapable of economic access.

Rather than presuming that these restrictions to public life are problems that the modern city must remedy, scholars such as Michel de Certeau and David Harvey have argued that the modern city produces the social ills that it purports to mend (de Certeau 1984; Harvey 2000). In response, scholars such as AbdouMaliq Simone and Achille Mbembe have contributed to the discussion by illustrating the ways in which residents of cities such as Johannesburg adjust to the inequalities produced in contemporary modern cities as they negotiate structural adjustments that exacerbate conditions of spatial segregation and poverty (Mbembe & Nuttall 2008; Simone 2004).

Furthermore, a number of scholars have discussed the varying ways in which gender contributes to the types of social, economic, and political agency available to individuals in urban settings (Bondi 1992; Lees 1996). Some literature primarily focuses on phenomena of women's limited participation in urban politics and economic opportunity (Mei-Po 1999). Modes of gendered citizenship frequently arise in sites where state institutions work to "normalize" and scrutinize the social

and economic practices of men and women living in poverty (Klugman 2008; Korteweg 2006; Ong 2003). Others such as Deborah Thomas and Gina Ulysse shift attention from women's poverty and dependence to survival strategies that include delving into informal economies as "higglers" (street vendors) and small business owners to gain independence and social status (Thomas 2004; Ulysse 2007).

Although there is a longstanding association between domestic space and femininity, some have examined the ways in which reconfigurations of urban space have produced spaces of intimacy outside of the homes as globalized economies give rise to new consumer desires (Allison 1994; Yang 1999).

Where and How

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Caracas, Venezuela for a total of eleven months between 2006 and 2009. My first, and most lengthy stay was from October 2006 to July 2007. Later, I visited Caracas for six weeks between January and March 2009. When I arrived in Caracas in October 2006 I had just read John Griffin's book, *Black Like Me* (Griffin 1962). His nonfictional piece gave an account of a white man's journey through a Black man's South. By darkening his skin with the help of dyes, tanning beds, and medications, Griffin set out on a six-week trip from his home in Texas to Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia to write about the experiences of the "black world." Though he was forthcoming about his identity throughout the experiment, he found that his physical appearance would greatly contribute to the routes he would travel and the places he would stop. His

newly blackened skin meant living a new life even when others knew his story. As I read the book, I could not help but be critical of his attempt at seeing through black eyes. At the same time, I had and would continue to research in a similar guise—though my methods were never so extreme. My work within Caribbean and Latin American territories of the African Diaspora consistently placed me, a Black man from the United States, in a position of ambiguity. Whether or not I liked it, my “passing” influenced the experiences that provided me with data, opportunities, and obstacles in the field. Still, when I arrived in Caracas, I felt compelled not to replicate Griffin’s 1959 project that I found troubling despite its contributions to the Civil Rights Movement in the US¹. Writing *Venezuelan Like Me* was not an option.

Like Griffin, I informed individuals with whom I worked of who I was and where I was from. However, as a number of my working-class and Afro-Venezuelan collaborators promised me, people would see *negro* before they see *Norte Americano* (North American). I had experienced Blackness for most of my life in the US to that point. However, I had to quickly learn to work productively while being *negro* in Venezuela. The people with whom I spoke, the routes that I walked, and the places where I stopped were all results of negotiations within local, social, and geographic structures in Caracas. Though I was aware of my relative privilege as a citizen of the Global North, a male anthropologist, a funded researcher, and an

¹ Griffin’s *Black Like Me* was credited as an important work in the early stages of the Civil Rights Movement in the US. Utilizing his social authority as a white male, the book created widespread awareness of racial discrimination in the Jim Crow South. While the publication garnered local extreme disapproval in the US South—particularly in Griffin’s hometown of Mansfield, Texas—it also brought him international attention as a human rights activist.

owner of an airline ticket back to the US, these did not always permit my access to the concessions of class. Ultimately, race did not become the primary focus of this dissertation, but it did significantly influence the methods with which I conducted my research.

From my arrival in October 2006 to February 2007 I lived in Chacao, a middle-class community in Eastern Caracas. I lived in two different apartments during this time. Prior to my arrival, I arranged to rent a room from a family, which was immensely helpful for learning to quickly find my way through Caracas. Because of my unfamiliarity with the city, the community's location was convenient starting point for my daily travels. The apartment was situated between two metro stations, and close to countless bus routes. It was located near the Eastern border of Chacao, where the less affluent municipality of Sucre began. The building contained residences and offices, so the middle-class inhabitants were not the only people that passed through the guarded doors. Though working-class guards worked at the entrances, locks did not restrict passage into the building. In December, I moved into another apartment in Chacao with a roommate.

This apartment was equally well situated for public transportation, but it was in a "better" location within Chacao than the first apartment. The second home was in a residential building that was smaller than the tower where I lived before. In addition, my new building was better maintained—it was shinier, newer, and cleaner. Both buildings had employees for maintenance, but the appearance of the

employees in the “nicer” place was much different than that of its residents. Unlike the first building, maintenance employees wore lightweight uniforms as they mopped in the hallways. When I moved, friends and acquaintances throughout Chacao assured me that I would appreciate living in a more exclusive location in the neighborhood because of its supposed additional security. Within weeks, the building residents’ cautious gossip of a large black man roaming in the building made the dwelling uncomfortable, but a fruitful site for examining relationships between race and class in Chacao. Many of the working people living nearby were entrepreneurial professionals that practiced a wide range of professions. It was not uncommon to meet neighbors that were lawyers, architects, and doctors. Most adults had post-secondary educations, and many married women living in the area did not work outside of their homes.

Chacao’s immigrant community was much different than that of the working-class communities where I conducted research. In the former, I came across small numbers of affluent professionals and entrepreneurs from Latin-America. I encountered very small numbers of Chinese and Lebanese business owners, many of which lived with or near compatriots and relatives. In addition, some European immigrants that arrived in Venezuela between the 1970s and early 1980s lived in Chacao. Notably, all but the few Chinese residing in the area fit within Venezuelan racialized images of the middle-class, which associated whiteness with privilege. In fact, some of the least affluent of Chacao’s immigrants that I met were

white immigrants from Spain that managed my apartment building.

As I became more familiar with the city and the people with whom I worked, I moved from Chacao to an apartment in Altagracia, a less affluent community in Central Caracas. Many of my working-class neighbors worked multiple low-paying service jobs throughout the city, often for short periods. Some lower-middle-class residents in the neighborhood worked low paying white-collar jobs in the private and public sector. Some professionals such as lawyers lived nearby. However, they frequently earned much less than their counterparts in Chacao, as they tended to for public institutions and non-profit organizations.

Between March and July 2007, I rented a back room in an apartment that housed two young couples, one of which gave birth to a son in June 2007. The men spent their days working jobs in restaurants and looking for work. The women worked in the food service industry also. In June, the new mother began to stay at home with her newborn son during the days. In addition, two other working class men rented rooms next to mine during the time that I lived there. They worked odd hours, and they rarely came home for any purpose other than sleep. The two men rarely spoke to one another, the two married couples, or me. My tiny room was situated under a metal roof that sounded loudly in the rain, and heated considerably in the morning sun. The two married men in the apartment were cousins, and they had other relatives that lived in the building. One of their cousins, a friend of mine, lived two floors above my apartment. In fact, I learned of the vacancy in the building

through a network of friends and acquaintances that I will describe below.

As in Chacao, the location of this apartment was conveniently situated near two metro stations and close to a major roadway with easy access to buses that traveled throughout the city. However, unlike the more wealthy community to the East, most of the public spaces surrounding this home were not well maintained by the municipal government. Commonly trash piled along the curbs, leaving the smell of garbage in the road even when trash collectors and rain carried the litter away. Many of the local roads were particularly narrow, and difficult to navigate. Some ended without warning. At times they split into smaller pedestrian pathways that were not navigable by cars and motorcycles. My apartment in Altagracia was a particularly important site for beginning my exploration of informal spaces of the city, as the back window of the home offered my first glance at the hidden dwellings and pathways that some individuals in the neighborhood occupied on a daily basis.

Although the material conditions of life in this neighborhood were not as comfortable as they were in Chacao, I considered the social conditions more welcoming to my presence. The racial diversity of the class communities that occupied the neighborhood was greater. My presence as a Black male may not have constituted the threat to my neighbors that it did in Chacao. However, this community in Altagracia vigilantly monitored members of the city's abject poor such as the homeless and substance abusers that seemed to carelessly stumble through the streets. Crack addicts, *huelepegas* (glue sniffers), and drunks walked amongst

residents and commuters on main roads like Avenida Urdaneta and Avenida Fuerzas Armadas while seeking shelter in nooks under bridges and in shoddy temporary structures.

Although moving to Altagracia from Chacao would have constituted a sharp decline in social status for most *Caraqueños*, my departure from Chacao altered my ability to develop rapport amongst many working-class collaborators in the field. I found that many of these individuals considered Chacao a space of privilege that was inhospitable to them. For some, my daily return to the wealthy community after days of asking questions and peering into working-class lives garnered suspicion. While many of my valuable collaborators did not live with me in the same neighborhood, living in Altagracia allowed me to share experiences of daily intra-urban travel, and to gain familiarity with the same sites in Caracas. In addition, working-class friends and acquaintances that helped me find my new home were increasingly willing to speak with me about their living conditions after knowing that I lived in a similar environment.

Significantly, the social networks that I managed to access included *Caraqueños* from diverse geographic and class groups throughout the city. One of the most important was the sizable capoeira community in Caracas². I had practiced

² Capoeira is a popular Afro-Brazilian art form that incorporates elements of music, dance, acrobatics, and martial arts. Although its history is unclear and debated, its use during and after the period of slavery in Brazil has been associated with resistance. Prior to the 1920s, the practice of Capoeira was a punishable offense in Brazil. However, its legalization and the development of systematic pedagogies by figures such as Manuel dos Reis Machado (Mestre Bimba) and Vicente Ferreira Pastinha (Mestre Pastinha) led to the production of

capoeira for nearly three years with Grupo Capoeira Brasil in Durham, North Carolina when I left for Venezuela. By my second day in the city, I found Caracas' largest group, Raízes do Brasil. With close to four hundred members, the local branch of this international organization put me in contact with a large number of people. By December I made contact with another of the city's bigger groups, Centro Cultural Senzala de Capoeira (Senzala). One of the largest international capoeira groups in the world, Senzala had nearly two hundred members in Caracas. Nearly half of the members in both groups were women, but the majority of the higher-ranking capoeiristas were men.

Although I was new to Caracas, my limited experience as a capoeirista provided me the necessary social base to explore the city's communities beyond the limits of Chacao. Because of my background in a group with differing techniques and approaches to the game of capoeira, I had something with which to barter amongst fellow capoeiristas. Openly sharing my knowledge and participating in regular events such as public performances, classes, and *batizados*³ permitted me to build trustful relationships with new friends and willing research participants.

In both groups, the members' ages ranged widely. At times, parents brought children between five and eight years old to classes. The younger students who

contemporary forms of Capoeira. Today, Capoeira constitutes a central cultural practice in its own transnational community of practitioners.

³ The term, *batizado*, refers to regular events held by capoeira groups in which new students are "baptized" into the capoeira community. These events often include *troca de cordas*, or a change of cords for students who advance to new levels of group hierarchies.

regularly trained were around twelve and fifteen years of age. The ages of the vast majority of capoeiristas in Caracas were between eighteen and thirty-five. Most of the individuals younger than eighteen were students. Some people between eighteen and their mid-twenties were pursuing post-secondary education in different schools throughout the city. The majority of capoeiristas between twenty and thirty-five worked a variety of jobs. There were a few doctors, architects, lawyers, and other middle-class professionals. However, most had low paying service jobs in stores, internet cafes, and restaurants. A minority relied heavily on small incomes generated by performing as acrobats, actors, capoeiristas, and musicians in small gigs throughout the city.

These groups differed in more ways than their numbers. Class prices and the places where they trained played a role in composing membership. *Raíces do Brasil* was less expensive, and regularly met at the Universidad Central de Venezuela's *Ciudad Universitaria*—an autonomous space in Caracas where working-class and middle-class *Caraqueños* frequently gathered for cultural events, public lectures, and group activities like dance and martial arts. Some of the capoeiristas who trained on the university's campus expressed interest in attending classes with Senzala. However, one middle-class woman was especially concerned with making the trip to the academy in Parque Central, as she did not deem it a secure location.

Senzala, like *Raíces do Brasil* did have middle-class members. However, both groups had large working-class membership. In fact, both conducted social

programs in which they taught capoeira to children and teens that they called “at-risk” in different areas of the city. Raíces do Brasil focused on communities near the university while Sensala developed programs in peripheral communities such as El 23 de Enero. In addition, both groups utilized different professional contacts that permitted them to make public performances and establish new projects in conjunction with specific institutions. Sensala received many invitations to perform for state and privately funded shows because of their collaborative relationship with numerous performing groups in Caracas, government institutions like the Ministry of Culture, and the personal networks of its members. I became more familiar with Sensala’s network, as I participated in a number of these performances. In time, the group’s leadership allowed me to utilize their contacts to enter and work in spaces as a capoeirista long before I could do so as an anthropologist.

Significantly, the way in which I learned to see and travel the city was a result of the collaboration of groups of these young *Caraqueños*. Their willingness to share insights and interpretations of Caracas’ sensational and mundane events, as well as their readiness to interpret my positionality provided me with a wealth of information regarding social, political, and geographic organization in the city. They regularly spoke of their concerns with national and local governance. They—regardless of their class identifications—complained about injustice, crime, and discrimination frequently (though they did so in ways that would surprise me). Although I assumed that I was learning about Venezuela at the start of my fieldwork,

my friends, collaborators, and fellow capoeiristas made clear that I was learning about Caracas. I could not—according to them—understand the rest of Venezuela in the same way that I could the capital, as “Caracas is Caracas.”

Because of my commitment to providing anonymity for my collaborators, I chose not to focus on the practices and organization of capoeira in Caracas in my dissertation. Although my involvement in capoeira certainly played a role in developing my interest in spatial practice and local political action, I found it essential as a methodological tool while in the field. The majority of my collaborators were contacts that I made through my association with the two groups mentioned above. Although many of my interviews were not with capoeiristas, quite a few informants were part of the personal and professional networks of members of *Senzala* and *Raízes do Brasil*.

In view of the fact that I chose a diverse social base from which to develop my research, I directed much of my attention to experiences of home and urban travel amongst collaborators. This led me to a multi-sited approach within the spaces that my contacts regularly traversed, particularly Chacao and communities of El 23 de Enero—one of the city’s largest slums in the Western periphery of Caracas. In addition, the networks of public travel in Caracas become important sites for ethnographic work. In some cases, this meant observing and negotiating crowds in buses and metro cars. In other moments, it meant conducting interviews in the more open spaces of metro stations.

Most informants under the age of thirty lived their entire lives in Caracas. A few of these *Caraqueños* had short experiences of residing in the US, Spain, and Argentina before returning to live in Caracas. An overwhelming majority of my collaborators came from families with origins outside of the Caracas region. It was common for the parents of *Caraqueños* under the age of thirty to have come from other regions of Venezuela or other countries. Many of the immigrant families in the working-class areas that I explored were from Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Peru, Panama, and Brazil. Though most young, single informants lived with parents and siblings, a few lived away from their families. In most cases, these individuals left their family homes, coming to the capital to work or study. More infrequently, those with the means to do so lived apart from their Caracas-based family households in attempts to gain independence. Because of the high cost of housing, the overwhelming majority of *Caraqueños* with supporting families lived with others in their nuclear and extended families.

In most cases, my access to the domestic spaces of my collaborators was considerably limited throughout the majority of my fieldwork. Exceptions included the rare case of young *Caraqueños* leasing their own apartments rather than renting rooms or living with their own families. In addition, individuals with close friends and relatives with their own homes frequently congregated in these residences. In some cases, interviewees wanted to express themselves away from the influence and distraction of parents and family. In addition, household rules prohibiting

visitors was common for individuals that rented rooms within landlords' homes.

This, in turn, contributed to my use of public and semi-private spaces for conducting interviews.

Throughout my research, I utilized participant observation as well as formal and informal interviews to glean data. Significantly, a great deal of the material in this dissertation came from impromptu conversations between small groups of friends from similar class backgrounds. The locations of most meetings for both social and research purposes differed amongst members of the middle and working classes in Caracas. Middle-class participants frequently met in sites such as restaurants and bars, arriving separately in their own cars. In contrast, working-class informants frequently met in public spaces, and our conversations regularly took place while passing through public spaces such as streets and plazas. At times, these public locations influenced the direction of interviews, as the lack of isolation deterred free conversation regarding controversial topics such as national politics.

In some cases, informants permitted me to record interviews. This was especially helpful in some of the formal group interviews that I conducted with representatives from non-governmental organizations and state institutions. While many individuals were discouraged from speaking in the presence of a recorder—for fear of endangering themselves or those of whom they spoke—others saw the device as a sign of sincere interest in their work. These groups frequently wanted to express and to promulgate their “official” perspectives on politics, social

organization, and rights. Thus, recording allowed me to ensure that their views could be accurately represented. In these cases, my ability to set up informal follow-up interviews with individuals in these organizations was often limited by busy work schedules, changing employment, and geographic distance (within Caracas).

Because I found “working-class Caracas” more accepting of my presence, the majority of my research took place within the spaces frequented and claimed by less affluent individuals with whom I maintained contact. Although my middle-class informants were frequently enthusiastic to share their thoughts in conversations and interviews with me, I encountered obstacles to entering many of the spaces that they inhabited. Their preferred meeting-places were in businesses such as restaurants, bars, and lounges throughout wealthier zones like Chacao and Las Mercedes (which is discussed in Chapter 2). I quickly learned that “Americanizing” and whitening myself by speaking English potentially opened doors literally and figuratively that were closed to most *Caraqueños* of African descent.

As my working-class informants worked around the city’s obstacles by seeking protection outside of what I call the “formal city,” they guided me through many spaces that my middle class collaborators had never seen. Though race played a significant role in my experiences of prejudice in locations such as Chacao, many working-class informants considered my Blackness a gift of sorts. According to them, it helped me to travel safely through their Caracas without encountering discrimination for being American.

Although some informants stated that they did not mind if I were to identify them in my work, I told all collaborators that I would not refer to them with their names or nicknames in my writing. Although I changed the identities of all the individuals that are described in this dissertation, I did not modify the titles of the organizations mentioned in Chapters 4 and 6 (Colectivo Alexis Vive and AMBAR). Part of my reasoning was that neither group had reservations about my using their names. In fact, both were particularly interested in sharing information on their work, and preferred that I give credit. In addition, I could not faithfully write about the tasks that they undertake in Western Caracas without imparting information that could be used to identify the organizations. I do, however, omit information that could serve to easily identify the representatives whom I interviewed.

Theoretical Contributions

Although I argue that *Caraqueño* political life takes place within diverse public spaces throughout the city and is enacted through the creation of alternative publics, these groupings function in a rather disjointed manner. Because of social and political divisions throughout the city based on variables such as class, and the jurisdictions of local governments, one's access to public spaces outside of home communities is often limited. The daily workings of the city's publics are frequently based upon regular, local gatherings in which residents express opinions and share information without interference by state or local powers.

While foundational work of Habermas and Arendt stress the importance of

collective discussion in the formation of publics, I argue that modes of meaningful communication are not confined to these traditional forms (Habermas 1989). The gatherings of *Caraqueño* publics may result in collective expressions that reflect and communicate public opinion. Importantly, the actions in question are not simply acts of individuals in public spaces of the city. Rather, these are cooperative undertakings in which the welfare of the community is addressed. Although citizens might enter the public arena to negotiate collective notions of the good, I argue that “the good” in democratic society is closely associated with general participatory access within the affected citizenry.

Because citizenship in Caracas is based upon political and social participation, public spaces are an essential element in the production of the city’s democratic life. Although the city has few public spaces that are accessible to most of its residents, the disarticulated sites of public life throughout the capital create small territories in which local citizenships thrive. Within these locations, social and political contributions to community occur through modes of political agency. Individuals recognized as contributing members of community—which may be defined differently from group to group—not only have access to local public spaces. Frequently one’s involvement in the political life of the neighborhood is considered an obligation for full-fledged citizens. Importantly, in Caracas’ public life, participation realizes active citizenship.

While this permits local residents to gain access to power within their home

communities, traveling outside of these borders leaves many citizens unprotected. Ong's discussion of the nation-state's use of variegated sovereignty alludes to these limited territories of citizenship within Caracas. Outside of these protective spaces, one's ability to make claims upon the nation-state and society is often in question. At times, leaving one's community of origin may nullify demands for material support and basic services from an unresponsive state. At the same time, *Caraqueños* often find difficulty in legitimating claims to equal treatment and recognition as full members of society as they travel outside of local communities. This is because, as Judith Butler argues, "the public sphere is constituted in part by what cannot be said and what cannot be shown...certain kinds of [subjectivities] appear as viable actors" (Butler 2004). Therefore, public spaces frequently produce exclusive political collectivities rather than inclusive partnerships amongst diverse populations. Certain people are not deemed appropriate for political inclusion, and public spaces must be guarded from those threatening unity with dissent and general disruption. Therefore, many of Caracas' public spaces are now sites of conflict, as one public's formation often precludes that of another. For many residents of Caracas, defending public spaces is to support citizenship and one's ability to participate as a political actor in the capital.

Because more recent articulations of public life frequently have embraced the restructured urban terrain, private collective spaces have come to house many of the social and political processes of citizenship. In many cases, this means that

communities define themselves in different terms within overlapping territories. Discourses of violence and social value have exacerbated the divisions between semi-private spaces and locations like parks and streets as active spaces of citizenship recede throughout the public city. While many *Caraqueños* seek political life within enclosed collective spaces that intend to facilitate the exchange of discourse, groups of the excluded work to establish themselves as public actors by reclaiming abandoned spaces. These groups, which I call corner publics, are essentially small communities in flux that illustrate the improvisational nature of political life in the city. While many publics that utilize privatized collective spaces rely upon regular planned meetings, corner publics regularly gather in open locations. Although its members often experience exclusion from local political participation, their relegation to the street—generally deemed a dangerous and inappropriate place for public assembly—permits them to engage in discussion, and to organize for action in nearby spaces. Although political engagement is not frequently the intended outcome of meetings, their politicized spatial occupation serves to reclaim local streets as politically viable spaces.

Chapter Summary

The start of this dissertation takes a step away from “traditional ethnography.” Chapter 2, “Considering Caracas: an Aesthetic of Modernity,” examines the city as a social actor in the lives of *Caraqueños* and as an ethnographic collaborator. Beginning with a historical account of the city’s construction and the

development of modern *Caraqueño* subjectivities, this chapter illustrates the ways in which spatial order influences notions of human agency. Focusing on the aesthetic and structural features of urban spaces, I indicate the divergent ways in which borders facilitate and restrict movement for different communities. Next, by discussing common strategies with which residents negotiate urban space, I demonstrate the ways in which systems of knowledge associated with modernity contribute to popular inability to navigate Caracas. Most importantly, this chapter's discussion on varying ways in which the city is divided and distributed amongst residents constitutes the foundation on which the following chapters are built.

Chapters 3 and 4 are concerned with localized political struggles. However, both chapters examine class communities that ascribe to different notions of political legitimacy and democracy. Chapter 3, "Slipping from the Middle: Class and Anticipating loss in the Chavista State," focuses on the panic of the middle-class community of Chacao following President Chávez's reelection in late 2006. I start with a historical description of Caracas to establish the city as a site of privilege since the colonial period. Here, I argue that leadership in Venezuela's capital has worked to protect class and racial privilege, and much of this has occurred through spatial policing. Next, I discuss the role of demonstrable wealth in gaining access to the experiences of full-fledged citizenship enjoyed by members of the middle-class in much of the city. As they predict the loss of property in a socialist Venezuela, they fear the possibility of restricted class-based rights. After the election, middle-class

preoccupations with the working-class presence in Chacao illustrate the spatial dimensions of classed experiences of loss. Ultimately, this chapter places rights and citizenship established with class hierarchy in opposition to the emerging forms of social and political life that the Chavista government supports. For most members of the middle-class, this means that democratic forms centered on conceptions of equality challenge “traditional” rights associated with meritocracy.

Chapter 4, “*Caraqueño* Publics and the Confederitization of a City,” focuses on the emerging public life responsible for *Caraqueño* citizenships. Here, I focus on two working-class communities. The chapter begins with an ethnographic discussion of neighborhood councils. As an expansion of the state apparatus, these local groups permit members of communities to direct and collaborate in projects of civic engagement. I argue that these groups facilitate regular and local modes of political life that make actual citizenship a matter of everyday life, as opposed to infrequent practice (such as in major elections). Although these councils have played an important role in the expansion of new citizenships, some members of local communities have been regularly excluded from their processes. In the second half of this chapter I argue that informal corner publics and the organizations that grow out of them play a significant role in the reconstruction of traditional public spaces that allow widespread access to public debate. In doing so, I also discuss the ways in which gender, age, and local economies of social value shape the spatial dynamics of political participation.

While the preceding chapters are largely concerned with local politics fixed within territories, Chapters 5 and 6 discuss movement throughout the city. Chapter 5, “Life Under the City: Mass Transit’s Promise to the People,” addresses Caracas’ metro system as a rare site of Citizenship that appears to support democratic ideals of egalitarianism. Addressing the diversity of interpretations regarding gender discrimination, I argue that the metro constitutes a location in which citizens express public opinion through collective action to preserve public space. Next, I discuss the illusory nature of the metro’s utopian spaces. By illustrating the exclusion of those identified as the abject poor, I affirm that the modernist spaces of the metro reproduce inequalities while concealing them. Not only are the poor not welcome in the new spaces of citizenship. I argue that their general absence from sight allows citizens to uncritically exclude others from political life and personhood.

Chapter 6, “Policing *Malandros* and the *Malandros* Who Police: Social Rights and Violence in a Fractured Police State,” focuses on policing throughout the city to examine spaces of gradated sovereignty in Caracas. Here, I begin with the ways in which discourses surrounding crime and security constitute subjectivities such as the poor and Afro-Venezuelans as threats to society. As such, members of these populations become targeted by the state’s police forces. Although some in Caracas consider these supposed criminals (*malandros*) problems, large populations of *Caraqueños* have reclaimed the term. Next, this chapter examines the popular use of

malandreo as a collection of urban survival practices that largely permits working-class males access to the sites and paths of the “informal city.” While many young men that engage in these activities may not have unrestricted access to middle-class spaces, they consider *malandreo* a valued and explicitly classed act that preferences *Caraqueño* working-class cultural tastes over those of the city’s more affluent society. At the end of this chapter, I discuss the growth of armed collectives—also referred to as *malandros*—in El 23 de Enero, a community in the Western periphery of the city. Having expelled state police forces in the 1990, these groups mimic state structures as they administer social and security services that serve residents. Although these groups have acted in opposition to state power, I argue that they have played an important role in negotiating *Caraqueño* citizenship due to the interdependence of these collectives and the Venezuelan state. Although armed collectives of El 23 de Enero work in autonomy, their goals are to facilitate local residents’ access to power and participation in local and national politics. Ultimately, power works throughout the city in varying manners as groups work to negotiate life within spaces of violence and security.

2. Considering Caracas: an Aesthetic of Modernity

What is the city? How do cities present themselves to us, the walkers of their streets? Not just a series of properties in congested space, cities are also collections of disjointed discourses that bump against and graft themselves onto one another. Cities like Venezuela's capital are difficult to define precisely because of the nature of these multiple—and sometimes conflicting— notions of what these urban locations are and ought be. After listening to only a few *Caraqueño*¹ stories one may realize that speaking of Caracas in the singular is a difficult task. Personal accounts of the city construct a collection of images under a shared title.

There are many ways we might define a city such as Caracas. It is a collection of properties. It is an assortment of bricks and concrete blocks. Caracas is also an assembly of populations. We often define cities by their histories. In the process of living with and within them, we often transform these collections of people, bricks, and stories into larger things with social lives of their own (Appadurai 1986; Komter 2001). We create these social entities through relationships between human actors and the spatial practices that bestow meaning to all involved. The living city, as the individual imagines it, is the reconciliation of this messy discursive jumble.

¹ The term, *Caraqueño*, refers to someone or something from Caracas, Venezuela.

As one collects stories, it becomes clear that the city looks and feels different to individuals based on a number of complex social factors. For this reason, the accounts of Caracas that I recount will consistently contain elements that others will both support and deny. While the discourses circulating throughout the city may provide the ethnographer with pieces of a puzzle that seem incapable of fitting properly, the imaginaries born of shared experiences and traded tales in this urban network are not as fractured as the discourse may appear to critical listeners.

Commonly, this diversity of accounts leads many of the city's residents to point toward those with differing stories as misinformed or even dishonest. Many struggle to establish singularity in truth and fact, limiting recognition of alternative realities. However, entertaining the possibility of a plurality of experience opens discussion toward a more inclusive narrative of social worlds. By taking this epistemological perspective in this discussion of the city, we are no longer forced to verify events through unfaltering reason. Rather, in contemplating the multiplicity of the imagined city we avoid the need to replicate official *Caraqueño* testimonials that purge and disqualify the accounts of silenced subjectivities within a hierarchy of truths. It is this complexity, the incompatible stories and the fractured discourses that contribute to the ethnographic richness of Caracas as a city space. Because these discourses contribute to the production of social imaginaries that constitute conceptions of the whole of Caracas, this chapter embraces the possibility of recounting stories that do not conform to "official" images of the city.

To each individual, Caracas is a singular, distinct place. Intertwining urban discourses produce the city as a geographic and social unit. As people interact and experience the city in intimate ways, it is not surprising that individuals commonly attribute personalities to Caracas. In doing so, Caracas becomes a character with whom the resident lives. Caracas tells its own stories in the tales told by individuals. The brick and concrete mass calls upon residents to speak for it. It is an impossible question: “What is Caracas?”

This chapter examines the multiple ways in which Caracas that comes to life as a social entity in the daily lives of *Caraqueños*. I argue that the life of the city is pertinent to an examination of human life—and particularly human agency—especially if one wishes to thoroughly investigate social structures in urban spaces such as Venezuela’s capital (Lefebvre & Goonewardena 2008). Because the discursive elements composing *Caraqueño* space are numerous—and sometimes conflicting—the task undertaken in this work requires asking urban denizens what Caracas ought to be as much as investigating what they feel it is. Significantly, the gaps and intersections between these notions of the city that I will present are where we are likely to find individuals and their communities at work, striving to live within the fantastic creature we call the city. In the processes of reclaiming spaces, communities work to bridge the gap between fantasies of urban life and realities that never quite catch up to the former.

Though details of urban life differ from person to person, the universalizing

concept of the city is closely associated with the production of a social imaginary that engenders collective identities such as the *Caraqueño*. This urban imaginary, then, contributes to the interpretation of Caracas as a singular site despite its diverse social and geographic compositions that work on individuals differently (LiPuma & Koelble 2005). The resulting city, like other social imaginaries such as the nation, produces large communities that often define themselves with common terms despite the great diversity of experience attributed to social division and hierarchy within the large collectives in question (Anderson 1991).

Situating *Caraqueño* architecture and urban planning within a larger history of modernist urbanism, this chapter begins with late-nineteenth century Caracas' ties to Paris and Haussmannian modernism. Haussmann's Paris was as important for its stylistic contributions as it was as a tool for the deployment of the nation-state's power. President Guzmán Blanco's small-scale replication of Parisian architecture was primarily geared toward demonstrating the state's power by thrusting Venezuela into the civilized world. As the city expanded in the twentieth century, the state has utilized the appearance of order and progress that characterized that nineteenth century project to consolidate its power. During this period, the production of the capital as a businessman's paradise accompanied the rapid growth of the city's slums that continue to grow today.

Realizing that spatial policing would result in the expulsion of scapegoated communities such as those working in the informal economy, middle-class and

working-class *Caraqueños* petitioned city governments to reestablish order. The resulting actions would maintain the appearance of control in the capital, but it would reify the city's social hierarchies. Here, the preservation of a modernist aesthetic would serve to organize the city by controlling spatial practices in the zones in question. In producing beautiful and secure spaces, the internal borders of the city that I will discuss in this chapter become porous while making passage into other areas of the city prohibitively frightening for many residents. Significantly, one's origin within Caracas' geographic and social communities would play a part in determining the extent to which specific urban boundaries protected, excluded, and allowed passage.

Next, I offer a discussion on the effect of supposed spatial disorder. I ask how space engenders feelings such as anxiety. Further, how does this influence those that live in the "informal" city? Because the presentation of the city influences the ways in which people interact with space, I explore the difficulties of approaching frightening spaces in Caracas. Arguing that perceptive experiences such as seeing are particularly limited, the diversity of *Caraqueño* terrain appears largely unapproachable to residents.

The chapter ends with a discussion of local geography in a working-class community that I called home for nearly six months. I illustrate the difficulties of rendering *Caraqueño* spaces outside of the formal city legible. Ultimately, the modes by which government institutions and communities utilize modernity in attempts to

establish order also create the notion that Caracas is inaccessible to individuals and communities. Here, institutionalized modes of spatial representation in contemporary Caracas—such as mapping and address systems—contribute to the notion of Venezuela’s capital as untamed territory.

Ultimately, this chapter provides an account of the terrain in which the rest of this dissertation’s findings operates. Countless *Caraqueños* consider their access to numerous public spaces throughout the city limited. The development of social and political life that I discuss in the following chapters is closely tied to the discursive production of local spaces throughout the city. In later chapters, I will discuss the production of Caracas’ varied modes of citizenship, but because the strategies with which communities negotiate rights in Venezuela’s capital are social and political effects of the city’s spatial organization, we must first gain insights into the apprehensions of this organization.

Birth of the Modern City

Although the subject of this chapter is *Caraqueño* modernity, Mid-Nineteenth Century Paris is where the story begins. Before the French Revolution, before the French Republic, Paris was medieval city (Farmer 2002). It consisted of narrow roadways, shabbily constructed buildings, and unruly crowds that came to inhibit political and civil order in the center of the French world. Paris was not the first city that was explicitly targeted with a modernizing project within Europe or elsewhere. However, it was one of the most influential projects, as it became a model for future

urban planning far beyond France. Strongly influenced by steps undertaken to modernize London, France's self-titled *Prince-Président* (Prince-President)—and later, Emperor—Napoleon III set out to transform Paris' physical organization and the Parisian quality of life in 1852 (Papayanis 2004).

With the emergence of social medicine in France, the nation-state had already begun to target populations through biopolitical modes of governance in the decades following the French Revolution (Frangos 1997). No longer in the service of the sovereign, government officials began to regularly discuss the city's overcrowding and accompanying traffic problems a hindrance to the health of Parisians by the 1830s. However, the government would not take significant steps to remedy the city for nearly another two decades. Having only recently taken power in 1848, Napoleon III sought to control a Parisian population that had played a significant role in various revolutions and rebellions since 1789. His goals were two-fold. On one hand, he sought to improve hygiene throughout the city by developing sanitation systems. On the other, he intended to make the city more accessible to the state's military forces throughout the capital (Fournier 2008). The Paris to come would establish order through the creation of new infrastructure, which, it was argued, would allow power "to operate more and more in a manner that is slow, uninterrupted and without external manifestation" (Mitchell 1988).

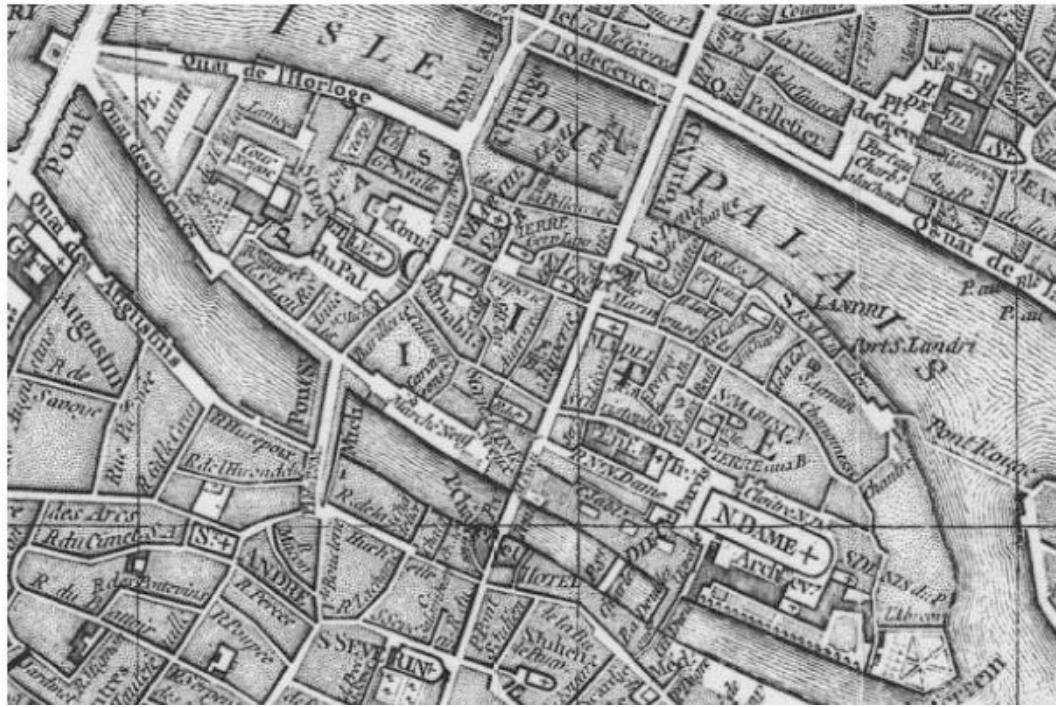


Figure 1: Ile de la Cité, Paris before Haussmann's renovation.

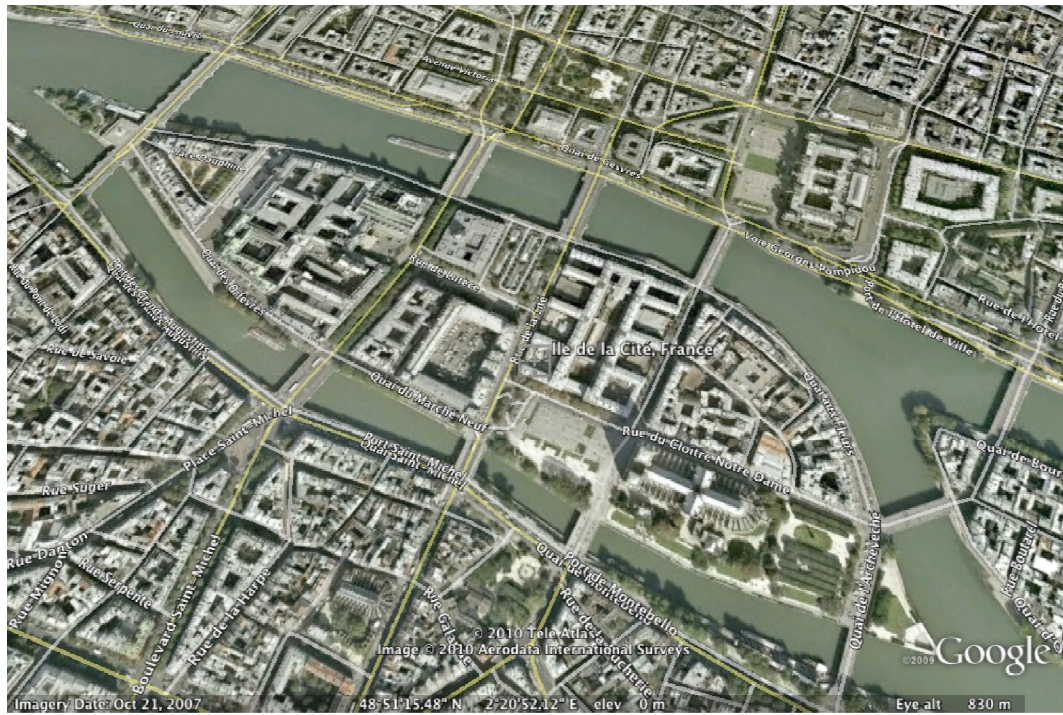


Figure 2: Ile de la Cité, Paris after Haussmann's renovation.

In 1853, Napoleon III appointed Georges-Eugene Haussmann (better known as Baron Haussmann) to undergo the task of remodeling Paris. Haussmann's project included the destruction of the old city (see figures 1 and 2), and the construction of wide avenues to cut through the city, linking Paris' center with its peripheries. These avenues opened the city to the North, the South, the East, and the West. Next, Haussmann's plan introduced a series of boulevards in rings that intersected the previously mentioned avenues, allowing traffic in the periphery to bypass the center of the city (Saalman 1971). Paris' new system of roads utilized the form of radiating circles to create a large urban network of interconnected nodes. For example, numerous intersections along the Boulevard Périphérique form central points from which minor avenues spread into the city (See figure 3). While his work transformed the roadways, this project led to the construction of a system of new aqueducts and reservoirs in Paris. Prior to 1852, the hygienic conditions of the city were associated with health problems such as deadly cholera epidemics. These new aqueducts brought new sources of water into the city while disposing of waste in reservoirs rather than directly into the Seine (Jordan 1995).

century. Venezuela was largely rural, and unlike many larger Latin American urban areas, the capital's population had not grown uncontrollably, unlike many larger Latin American capitals. Not only had the city's population been relatively stable, the geographic borders of Caracas had not expanded considerably. As recently independent nations throughout Latin America began their projects of governance, the national-elite found themselves entering some of the same debates as leaders such as Napoleon III. By the 1850s the city's hospitals had taken the place of the church as a site for maintaining the health of the city's poor during a period when the Roman Catholic Church experienced a decline in power within Caracas (García Ponce 2005). While Haussmann's project focused on public health, the *Caraqueño* project did not start with the same concerns. Venezuela became thoroughly engaged in maintaining national populations by deploying a biopolitical power that would permeate society and establish the modern nation-state's control some time after many other Latin American capitals (Almandoz Marte 2002). Though the Venezuelan state would concern itself with questions of public health in the late nineteenth century, Caracas' early remodeling was directed more toward a concern with European aesthetics.

Paris became the model to which Caracas looked to solidify its place in modernity. The *Caraqueño* elite began their processes of modernization by establishing hygiene codes throughout old Caracas (Almandoz Marte 1999). These new rules would determine the construction of new buildings and the uniformity of

new roadways. Though Haussmann aggressively destroyed large sections of medieval Paris before constructing his city, *Caraqueño* officials did not take the same aggressive approach. Venezuela had never been a wealthy colony. However, after winning independence from Spain, the Caracas-based government did not have available funds for to remake the entire city at once.

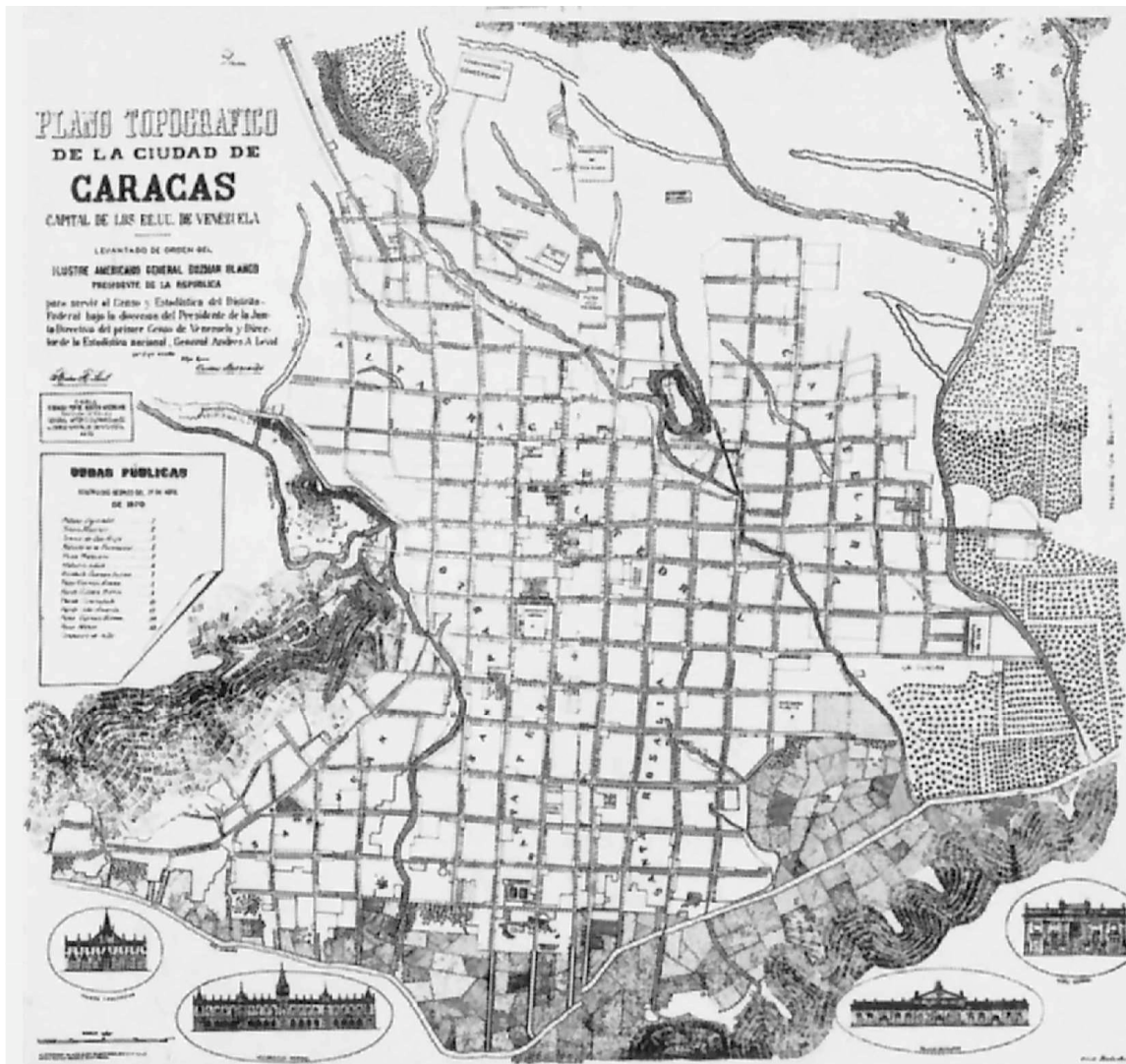


Figure 4: 1870s map of Caracas including Guzán's plans for public works

Caracas's modernization took place slowly. The most notable of early developments occurred in the 1870s, as President Antonio Guzmán Blanco sought to fabricate a small-scale Paris in old Caracas (See figure 4). Not only would *Caraqueño* buildings look like Parisian structures, but the President also hoped to engender a particular "civilized" form of social life within transformed spaces of the capital. A few roads were widened, and a handful of new public buildings arose along-side monuments situated throughout the vicinity of Capitolio (Almandoz Marte 1999).

Starting from the historic centre, there was the 1874 renewal of the "former 'Plaza Major', until then an open market in the colonial Spanish tradition:

the new 'Plaza Bolívar' was cleared and redesigned, following a *rond-point* pattern, presided over by a statue of the Liberator, forged in Munich. Further southwards was built [architect] Luciano Urdaneta's new Capitolio, including the Palacio Legislativo (1872) and the Palacio Federal (1877)... the façade of the former University was recreated (1873 – 75) by J. Hurtado in a flourished neogothic style, according to the fashion of 1860s Paris where he had lived. Guzmán's favourite 'architect' also designed a museum... which later became the palace of the 1883 Exposición Nacional—devoted to commemorate the first centenary of Bolívar's birthday – a marvellous coincidence in that history offered Guzmán the chance to re-create in Caracas the progressive ethos of world exhibitions he had visited before. (Almandoz Marte 1999)

This process of modernization utilized the architectural forms that Baron Haussmann employed to facilitate the French nation-state's deployment of power in Paris. At the same time, Guzmán wished to emulate an aesthetic that he associated with both political and social development. The *Caraqueño* elite had a special

relationship with Paris, as it had long been considered an optimal site of higher education. It was, for privileged men like Guzmán, the center of the civilized world. Thus, he did not wish to only replicate architectural forms. Rather, he hoped to modify the public comportment of Caracas' residents. However, after the renovations of the 1870s, Caracas did not again undergo significant changes until after the 1930s.

Though Caracas experienced a great deal of geographic growth throughout the twentieth century, much of this occurred after Venezuela began to exploit its oil wealth. After World War I, the United States displaced European nations like France and England as the primary political and economic influences in Venezuela. As the US became the new model of progress, New York became a more common site for international travel and education for Venezuelan elites. During this period of rapid change, many sections of Caracas stretched outward. The city's population had grown forty-five percent since between 1926 and 1935 as new residents had flocked to the capital during its petroleum boom. In addition to the influx of people, traffic had grown considerably worse with the increasing presence of cars. By the 1930s, ideas regarding the plans for changing the capital were quite diverse. The expansion of Caracas was just as much a question of what officials believed the city needed—in terms of new infrastructure—as it was about linking fantasies of distant locations. One proposed plan presented the fantasy of digging a canal that would connect Caracas to the nearby Caribbean Sea (see figure 5). The Caracas Bay would

have an appeal similar to a Venetian Channel. In addition, it was proposed that people would be able to travel via a “subway” from Plaza Bolivar to the littoral, and that Venezuela should even have its own “Coney Islands” (Almandoz 1999).

With new possibilities for growth afforded by the oil economy, architectural adjustments were a primary means of transforming the old city into a new and more appropriate home for twentieth century society. “Architecture, that costly refinement [that] only a few could afford and even fewer appreciate, suddenly became a leading emblematic and driving force in a process through which society faced its challenges and tried to decipher its rising symbols” (Lejeune & Centre international pour la ville 2005). Venezuela’s new economic and political stability had brought about the opportunity to construct an image of a refined nation within the limits of Caracas. The government hired architects that were trained outside of Venezuela—some of whom were foreigners—to lead the city’s growth. In 1939, Caracas contracted Maurice Rotival, a French urban planner, to reshape the city in Caracas’ first major transformation since the 1870s. Plan Rotival would superimpose a system of boulevards, avenues, and *rond-points* over the colonial grid. The plan began with Avenida Bolivar, a Paris-inspired roadway that would cut through the old city.

Caracas soon spread toward towns at its peripheries, such as Chacao to the east. As the city’s limits radiated from the colonial borders, architects and planners designed strips of urban territory. These spaces would reflect Haussmannian

influence, as they eventually linked recently annexed regions with the rest of the city. Newer sections of modern Caracas brought about a growing network of wide, uniform passageways organized around a grid of streets between the main arteries of the city. However, as the twentieth century progressed, productions of *Caraqueño* architecture came to look less like Paris, and more like US cities such as New York as Caracas began to grow upward with the construction of towering skyscrapers.

Throughout Caracas' twentieth century history, the state has utilized urban planning to satisfy its own goals. In the first half of the 1900s, government projects led to the construction of large housing complexes in the city's peripheries to shelter the city's growing landless poor. Squatter communities were frequently destroyed by the state prior to the 1940s, forcing communities to rebuild or move into new, towering housing complexes (Davis 2006b). In the 1950s, however, General Marcos Pérez Jiménez's dictatorship began to develop Caracas as a site for international business investment. As Fernando Coronil has demonstrated, "the capital received a major portion of government income in the form of projects designed to [transform] Caracas into a glittering tourist and commercial center" (Coronil 1997). Significantly, Pérez Jiménez's plans were not only concerned with economic development. The military government of the 1950s' management of urban space sought to impress the national elite while controlling the Venezuelan populace.

Essentially, the construction of modernist space in Caracas has consistently

played a role in the Venezuelan nation-state's deployment of power. Yet, the goals of the state have been diverse. At times, it worked to facilitate public life. In some moments, social welfare appears to motivate new urban growth. In the mid-twentieth century, it was dominated by the government's attempts to attract foreign capital.

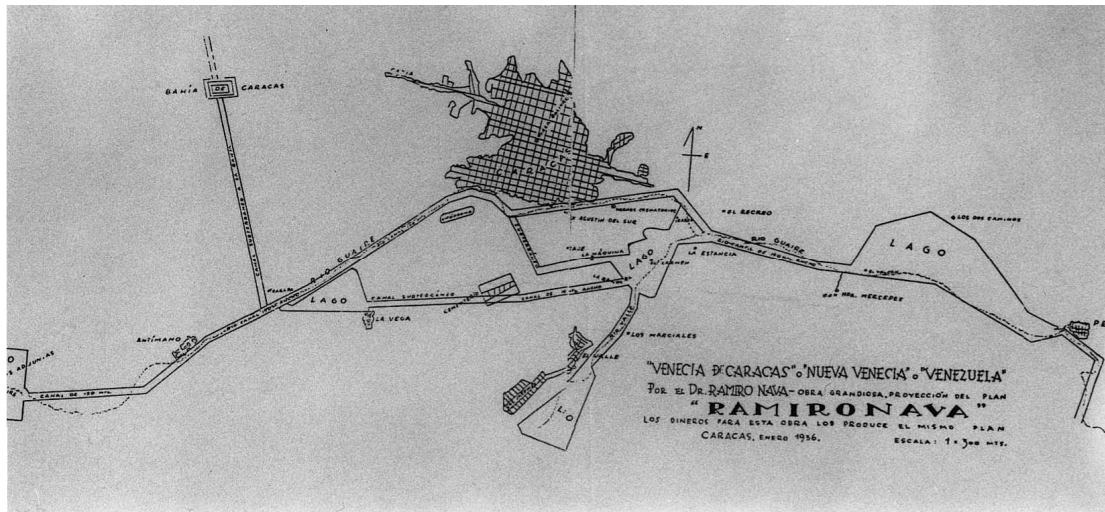


Figure 5: 1930s plans for fluvial development in the Caracas region.

Just as Haussmann's restoration of Paris was situated within Napoleon III's political project, Caracas's spatial organization was inculcated in the Venezuelan nation-state's methods of producing particular types of subjectivities. Since the earlier half of the twentieth century, modernist structures explicitly related to the production of welcoming and habitable city flourished during hopeful periods of establishing democracy. Large public structures arose in attempts to safely house the city's poor, to provide spaces of leisure, and to promote the arts. Providing an array of public and collective spaces throughout the city, much *Caraqueño*

architecture is based on the accessibility of urban space. The city's use of open walkways, public parks, navigable roads, and generally uniform organizational structure reflects a longstanding relationship between modern urban space and modes of liberal governance that facilitate inclusion into the city's public life.

Caracas had produced itself in the image of modernity, but large portions of the city remained outside of these spaces of order as the city continued to grow.

Establishing the Modern

In late 2006 the wide boulevard of Sabana Grande was a preferred location for one of Caracas' most popular informal markets. There, *buhoneros* positioned themselves and their goods everyday on what was nearly a one-mile strip of the city that generally conformed to modernist urban styling of Baron Haussmann.

Buhoneros, significantly, were street vendors—and a part of the city's large informal economy—that had become the subject of popular conversation in 2006. They were scapegoats for many of Caracas' problems with crime and urban decay.

Caraqueños longing to revisit the boulevard as an open pathway for leisurely pedestrian traffic—as it had been in the past—deemed the daily occupation by *buhoneros* inappropriate use of the once beautiful Sabana Grande. In January of 2007, police cleared the *buhoneros* from the site, and the market ceased to exist. Though the informal labor characteristic of the market was and continues to be legal in Venezuela, municipal officials informed vendors that they would be able to resituate themselves in a set of institutionalized spaces that had not yet been

constructed. While the national government tolerated the informal economy—and sometimes embraced it—the local government decided that the boulevard was not the right location for a market.

Before the police rushed the street vendors from their stations Últimas Noticias, a popular newspaper in Caracas, published an interview with the municipality of Libertador's Director of Urban Management on the plan to dismantle Sabana Grande's informal market. While expressing concern for upholding the rights of the *buhoneros*, he repeatedly urged readers that the informal workers must be managed and controlled in order to ensure the wellbeing of *Caraqueño* citizenry. Explaining that the push to organize these laborers would result in reclaiming a number of public spaces, he stated:

We do not want to leave them without work nor do we want to violate their rights. We want to organize and remind them that there are rules that they must follow and respect. We have to find a solution that benefits them and the rest of the community. (2007)

Although Libertador offered to find a new site for *buhoneros*, the director declared that recognition would be granted to “only those workers ready to follow the rules and agree with the decree established by the municipality overseeing their activities” (2007). While the municipality would construct and define sites for this informal market within the next two years, by early 2007 it was clear that the local plan was to simply clear the boulevard, as their use of it was seen as an illegitimate occupation. While many *Caraqueños* expressed concern for the economic rights of *buhoneros*, the primary question in public debate was whether the vendors' access

to public space deterred the type of public life promised by the modern city.

Many argued that citizens had a right to enjoy public spaces of the city that were clear of traffic, clean, and generally pleasant (Josko de Guerón 1996). Before mid-January of 2007 hoards of *Caraqueños*—many of whom frequented the market—complained of the unsightly congestion of bodies and goods cluttering the once beautiful Sabana Grande Boulevard. Its crowds had been difficult to navigate, so leisurely passage amongst the people, tables, stands, and the occasional vehicle was virtually impossible. Many people in Caracas complained that Sabana Grande dangerous, but they also insisted that it was particularly ugly. The beautification of the area would mean sweeping the streets of the aforementioned clutter, particularly the people. Thus, these changes that ensued in central Caracas were as much about spatial reorganization as they were about defining the public that would occupy public space in Sabana Grande. The disenfranchised *buhoneros* of this street market were to become conditions of the sanctioned public.

Notably, many *Caraqueños* stated that their preference for the free passage of pedestrians on the boulevard was grounded on concerns for safety as well as the city's beauty. As I demonstrated above, these free pathways and general accessibility to the public sphere were features of an architectural and social aesthetic that have dominated the construction of modern Western space since the time of Baron Haussmann's renovation of Paris in the nineteenth century. The traditional public spaces—particularly its streets—were to remain open and

available to individuals that comprised the city's social and political communities. In addition, the modern urban experience was to be paralleled by a political life that nurtured similar values of openness (Holston 2001). Essentially, the development of the modern city was closely linked to modern liberal democratic governance, which is imagined as being constructed upon a foundation of social contract among equal members of society (Holston & Caldeira 2005; Low 1999).

However, plans to “reinvigorate” pedestrian commons such as Sabana Grande frequently identify particular subjectivities—in this case, those identified as poor and excluded from the formal economy—as representative of crime and general social disorder. Thus, their mere presence imposes a threat to functioning public spaces. As Teresa Caldeira has argued for the case of São Paulo, the “traditional public sphere of the streets [had been abandoned] to the poor, the ‘marginal,’ and the homeless,” but the state would maintain the “principles of openness and free circulation that have been among the most significant organizing values of modern cities” (Caldeira 1999). If this would take place at the cost of the *buhoneros* and *malandros*², then so be it.

Although the presumed social class of the *buhoneros* was a likely factor in the immediate clearing of Sabana Grande, the municipality of Libertador's popular support in the recuperation of this space pushes the current discussion beyond class politics. While scholarly attention to similar movements reclaiming urban space

² *Malandro* is a term that generally refers to a range of masculine subjectivities that are associated with illicit activity. *Malandros* are criminals, and at times someone who appears to be a thug.

often point towards an attempt to attract a returning middle class, the outcome in Sabana Grande illustrates a relationship between *Caraqueños* and the city mediated by a universal spatial aesthetic. Within this framework, certain sociocultural expressions and subjectivities are more permissible than others. In other words, while many *Caraqueños* participated in the vitality of the informal market of Sabana Grande as shoppers, the presence of the *buhonero* and his unauthorized—not necessarily illegal—activities obscured the legibility of modern urban space.



Figure 6: Sabana Grande, situated in Caracas' geographic center.

In addition, working-class *Caraqueños* often speak fondly of the boulevard's past. They commonly refer to it as one of the spaces in Caracas where people from different class communities shared public space (Romero 2007). Some residents

explained that the path's central location in Caracas contributed to its popularity (see figure 6). At the same time, the boulevard marked the limits of two significant spaces in the *Caraqueño* imaginary (see figure 7). The East of the city began at the Eastern end of the boulevard where the municipality of Libertador met Chacao, a middle class community that I will discuss further in the next chapter.



Figure 7: Sabana Grande Boulevard is situated between Plaza Venezuela and Chacaito (Chacao).

Illustrating the contrast between the two locations, the prosperous Eastern end of the boulevard neighbored an ordered arrangement of neatly maintained buildings and streets. *Buhoneros* had not populated Chacao's pathways, and residents of the municipality wanted to prevent the spread of Caracas' disorder into

their communities. Conferring with a man from Chacao in his mid-thirties about the city's actions in Sabana Grande, he quickly supported the move to force informal vendors from the boulevard. "I might go back Sabana Grande [in the future] but we'll have to see how if it really is better. It got bad. But we have to stop the *buhoneros*. They're everywhere, and it would be too much in Chacao." I asked if there was any reason why Chacao's occupation by *buhoneros* would be any less appropriate than another part of the city. He responded, "¡Imaginate! *Buhoneros* selling phone cards and candy in *el country* (the country club). That's just crazy." For him, Sabana Grande served as a buffer that prevented undesirable subjectivities and the chaos they engendered from entering Chacao (see figure 8). Notably, the man's comments make no reference to crime—a commonly articulated theme in *Caraqueño* discourse of poverty. Rather, Chacao's classed spaces such as country clubs, golf courses, and upscale businesses faced a threat to their aesthetic uniformity.

On the other hand, the other end of Sabana Grande neighbored a business center and utilitarian transportation hub permitting access to the city's highways (see figure 9). There, public spaces often juxtaposed images of wealth with abject poverty as affluent businessmen, working-class commuters, and the homeless navigated heavily policed streets. Although a scene like this in Chacao might bring about concern from local residents, the layout of the area around Plaza Venezuela permitted a different notion of appropriate spatial use. There, diverse crowds from

around the capital and neighboring satellite cities passed through and labored in ways that permitted the passage of commuters through a dense node in Caracas' network of roads. While Sabana Grande's recovery took place with the intention of promoting efficient passage, it's use as a leisurely path for pedestrians between Plaza Venezuela and Chacao influenced the location's relationship between class, appropriate use of space, and aesthetic continuity.



Figure 8: Golf courses in Chacao to the Northeast of Sabana Grande.



Figure 9: Plaza Venezuela to the West of Sabana Grande.

The aesthetic driving the recuperation of Sabana Grande does important symbolic work. It extracts a presentable and legitimate *Caraqueño* space from a largely disorganized and illegitimate urban world. Within the ordered spaces of modernist Caracas certain types of social life can be more easily imagined.

However, not all of Caracas conformed to Haussmanian form as neatly as Sabana Grande and the adjacent regions of the city. Venezuela's capital comprises diverse spaces whose externality to the modernist city exposes the unfulfilled promises of Venezuelan modernity. This is particularly significant because the limited expansion of modernist structural order leaves the majority of the city's residents outside of spaces that have come to represent the nation-state's social and political commitments to its populations. Although the short range of the easily

navigated urban spaces such as Sabana Grande does not trace territorial limits of modernity, it does suggest varying levels of access to political rights, state resources, and social value for communities throughout the city.

(Re)Partiendo la Ciudad (Dividing and Distributing the City)

Although inhabitants of the city speak of Caracas as a single entity, the political institutions and the social relationships constituting the capital serve to divide the city into smaller units. Venezuela's capital consists of five municipalities. El Hatillo, Libertador, Chacao, Baruta, and Sucre are further divided into *parroquias*. Some municipalities are much larger than others. Some are more affluent as well. Class, local politics, and access to public and private services are some of the factors affecting *Caraqueño* communities that negotiate the borders that divide the city's communities. For example, as I will discuss more fully in the next chapter, Chacao is a mainly middle-class community in which residents oppose the current national government's rule, and prefer to avoid crossing into neighboring municipalities where greater presence of the poor, badly funded municipal police forces, and lack of architectural order signify danger.

In my first weeks in Caracas, many individuals strongly advised against crossing the city's various borders. Initially I assumed that their warnings were based on my unfamiliarity with the city, that they assumed I would lose my way, never to return. However, I discovered that many individuals simply deterred me from going to places that *they had never been* for fear of violence and geographic

disorientation. In time I decided what parts of the city to avoid, just as they did. Our reasons for choosing routes and spaces to occupy were perhaps different.

Nonetheless, as I learned to live in Caracas, the internal borders of the city became increasingly significant factors in relation to the spatial practices that I enacted everyday.

When I initially arrived in Caracas, I settled into an apartment near the border dividing Sucre and Chacao, two municipalities in Eastern Caracas. I rented a room in the apartment of a middle-class family. The landlord was a middle-aged divorcee who spent most of her days in her apartment. She left her home on occasion to shop for groceries, to meet with friends for coffee, or to take music lessons on the cuatro, a traditional string instrument. She did not work outside of the home, and she frequently shared stories about friends of friends of friends that experienced robbery, kidnapping, and other types of violence in Caracas.

Though I had become relatively familiar with Chacao as a result of my daily travels to the West, I frequented a large grocery store in Santa Eduvigis, a neighborhood on the Sucre side of the border. After my return from the emporium I stopped to speak with my landlord as I emptied my bags, placing basic items such as fruit, bread, milk, and cheese onto a cold shelf. She stood in the kitchen, watching as I placed each item neatly in the space I would claim. Before long she asked where I got the fruit and how much I had paid, perhaps checking to see if I had been cheated during my short journey to the store. I responded, telling her that I found

everything in the Excelsior Gama only a few blocks from the apartment. Although I thought that my answer was sufficient, my landlord quickly informed me that Excelsior Gama was a chain with two different stores nearby. “Did you go to the one in Chacao or in Sucre,” she asked. Unaware that I had crossed into Sucre to shop, I pointed to the East while answering that I bought my groceries in Chacao.

Suddenly, my landlord grew nervous as she pushed against her counter to stand straight. She rubbed her wrinkled hands as she tried to calm herself. “That isn’t Chacao! You went into Santa Eduvigis to get there,” she called irately. She cleared her throat and quieted her tone before speaking again, “Look, you’re a foreigner and you don’t know where you are going. I already told you that you have to be careful when you go outside.” She pointed to the East, stating, “but you have to be more careful when you go over there. You don’t know where you are yet, and you could get robbed, or worse.” I responded, asking if I should be aware of any particular differences between Santa Eduvigis and Chacao, as she seemed bothered by my unawareness. “Well, Santa Eduvigis isn’t a bad area, but I don’t usually go into Sucre alone. There is too much crime. I certainly don’t go far. You probably shouldn’t either,” she said.

I thanked her for the advice before asking why crossing into Sucre could become a reason for concern. She responded by telling me that going to the Excelsior Gama might not be a great risk, but I should definitely avoid going too far East into the neighboring municipality. She continued:

It isn’t safe over there.

It’s ugly too. There is the
69

industrial district and the slums—these kinds of places. You don't want to go there. Tourists should see nice things. Go to the parks—the nice ones. There are places in Chacao you can go—people your age like to go to Las Mercedes. Go there. The sites (*sitios*) are beautiful. The people are too.

My landlord's comments illustrate the ways in which spatial practices reify borders defined by multiple discourses throughout the city. Her recognition of the dividing line between the municipalities of Sucre and Chacao was a significant factor in her choices for movement in Caracas. Notably, the territories in question are divided not only by the movement and prohibition of people such as my landlord. Sucre and Chacao are separate municipalities run by different local city governments, and protected by different police forces. Sucre is much larger than Chacao in terms of its geographic size as well as its population. In addition, the latter is home to one of the city's larger middle-class populations. Although the municipality of Sucre contains middle-class communities such as Santa Eduvigis, the large *alcaldia* (town) also houses a number of Caracas' slums—one of which is Caracas' largest.

Although she suggested against crossing into Sucre, she characterized other municipal borders as more porous. My landlord's suggestion to visit Las Mercedes, a small commercial district in the neighboring municipality of Baruta, suggests the ease with which she might travel through this particular municipal limit. As she to spoke, she explained that Las Mercedes—located to the Southwest of her home in Chacao—was a safe location where the young people of the city enjoyed their days without fighting through crowds of commuters. In addition, she explained that the

city's youth could spend nights in Las Mercedes without fear of nocturnal crime. In fact, this small area of the city was one in which police forces and private security monitored clean, wide streets. Its pathways were largely unobstructed. Many *Caraqueños* explained that Las Mercedes was particularly attractive because of the ways in which the urban planning diverted traffic from the center of the district. The closest metro station was nearly a half-mile to the Northwest in Chacaito, dislocating the area from city's popular transportation system. The area was not isolated from the rest of Caracas, but most access to public transportation was possible only on the outskirts of Las Mercedes. Roadways like the northernmost Avenida Rio de Janeiro saw a great degree of Las Mercedes' through-traffic and bus stops while minor roadways running perpendicular remained relatively clear (see figure 10). Young middle-class *Caraqueños* explained that the informal economy had no visible presence in these streets largely because of the lack of *buhoneros*. The *buhoneros*, in turn, had not attempted to occupy the area because of the area's inaccessibility to crowds that would comprise clientele.



Figure 10: Las Mercedes, Caracas

The solely commercial spaces of Las Mercedes, however, stand in stark contrast with many areas of Sucre that my landlord referenced. She commonly described many of Sucre’s residential and industrial zones as ominous and ugly arrangements of brick, concrete, and iron. Pathways were cluttered with trash and loiterers. Even middle-class residential buildings were covered with graffiti. According to my landlord, the apparent breakdown of Sucre’s appearance was representative of or contributed to the area’s danger to unfamiliar visitors and residents of Caracas alike.

Approaching Urban Fear and Seeing Modern.

Just as my first landlord in Chacao equated Sucre’s ugliness with crime, many

of the capital's residents associate spatial regulation with civil order. At the time I assumed that she had over-exaggerated in her preoccupation with crime in locations that I did not perceive as dangerous. However, many *Caraqueños* were engaged in this ongoing conversation on impending threats of violence throughout the city. Stories of kidnapping, murder, robbery, and general moral indecency were exchanged in an economy of anxiety and fear that also contributed to the restricted movement of many of the city's residents (Caldeira 2000). Certainly, physical violence is not uncommon in Gran Caracas, but the reach of violence talk is far more expansive. For example, congested public spaces come to evidence potential threats, as crowds are seen to produce a degree of anonymity that may facilitate criminal acts (Arendt 1972). Stories of public assaults taking place within the crowds are common in Caracas. While she had never been robbed or attacked, a middle class *Caraqueña* named Sara confidently stated the following:

With respect to security, I always preferred to go to places that are not too populated... it's just me against another person. But when I'm alone in a crowd, it kind of scares me. A lot of things happen in this kind of situation. [I remember that] there was a person one time that was walking [in a crowd], and a *buhonero* started to shout, "*¡Agarrenlo! ¡Agarrenlo* (Grab him)!" Then everyone jumped on the guy. They took his money and all the things that he bought in the market too. You know, they robbed him. And it can happen to any idiot who decides to walk through Sabana Grande.

For many *Caraqueños* the crowded street menaces society. There, danger circulates unseen by potential victims. Anything can happen at any moment, and the individual has little chance to defend himself.

On the other hand, the city's seemingly desolate spaces are also associated with similar danger. A working class *Caraqueño* informant explained one evening, "most of the places where the streets are abandoned are really dangerous. All these empty streets with no lights at night—those are the places where people get robbed and shot. Nobody is there to see anything, so anything can happen." I pointed to an empty, lit street before us as we walked. I asked him if it were one of the dangerous, abandoned paths to avoid. "No. The light is on," he answered. When I asked why people didn't simply turn on the lights in abandoned streets to allow their use at night, he stated that no one would turn on the lights because these streets were abandoned.

Essentially, certain streets are vacant because they are too dangerous for people to occupy. The street's emptiness, however, is not the problem. The individual cannot easily discern his surroundings on the abandoned street because of the lack of light. To the contrary, the interpretation of the empty, but well-lit street was more flexible. It was not necessarily safe, but it was not undoubtedly unsafe. The commonality amongst these conditions of fear is an inability to identify the subjectivities with which individuals negotiate the spaces in question. These comments illustrate the role of belief in the ways people interact with and imagine the city itself.

Every night many *Caraqueños* embody this discourse of fear as they hurriedly empty city streets in the evenings. As the sun sets, hoards of commuters rush to

their homes. Though the dominating discourse that I identify above may urge individuals to identify threat social objects, the absence of a discernable other is particularly significant in this widespread anxiety. Just as de Certeau questions how the legibility of modern city may lend itself to the erotics of knowledge rooted in a relationship of desire between a subject and an other, the anxiety of *Caraqueño* social life stems from an analogous interconnection between individuals and urban unintelligibility (de Certeau 1984). This relationship concerns the subject's transformation the "object-instrument of the other's lack" (Žižek 2001). Essentially, the individual becomes the object acted upon by an ambiguous subject. Perhaps the individual is the object of anonymous *Caraqueños* throughout cluttered spaces in which individuals are difficult to identify. In most cases, Caracas—the city itself—stands in as the acting subject that imposes its will on individuals in unfamiliar and frightening territories. Because a large portion of the city presents itself as indecipherable, the organization of the capital into neat pieces that can be clearly observed in modernist fashion points toward the production of Caracas as fantastic place and desired object.

I have shown that Caracas like many other cities frequently deviates from these desired forms of modernity. Realities do not permit the realization of the fantastic—a city under control. On the contrary, the city's refusal to comply is a noteworthy condition of *Caraqueño* anxiety. Although never fully controlled, the spatial order of modernity permits the fiction of knowledge through its legible

spaces, momentarily satiating desire for the city. The unknown—the unseen or the indistinguishable—therefore, produces the city as a perpetually incomplete project of order. Though many individuals never comprehend or even visit many of these sites of supposed disorder, they acknowledge the existence of these spaces in their attempts to bypass unfamiliar locations of illegibility.

Caraqueños, then, must grapple with an ongoing relationship with an indistinguishable subject as they navigate the city's pathways in their regular commutes. A sense of vulnerability may enframe many commuting *Caraqueño* experiences beyond the delimited borders of the modernist city, and within the spaces of ambiguity. Because the other's desire remains unknown, the possibility of violence provokes a powerful reaction from anxious urban residents, even if physical attack has not occurred. Though this talk of fear may produce pockets of neglected and barren territories throughout the city, it also urges individuals, communities, and government to focus their attention on the organization of public spaces and the policing of borders.

Reading Space

As I have been discussing, the ways in which residents read space in Caracas is informed by popular interpretations of spatial organization that the modern Venezuelan state has consistently used to produce its citizens and subjects since the nineteenth century. Because the state's production of modernist space accompanied the development of *Caraqueño* civil life, popular discourse regarding

the possibilities for living in a public city regularly references the physical structure of Caracas. Though modern modes of social and political organization articulate with state-sponsored notions of spatial, social, and economic structure throughout the city, only privileged regions of Caracas approximate the organizational ideals of the modern. Although the architectural form of the capital varies greatly, this modernist discourse greatly impacts the ways in which residents throughout the city decipher urban space and options for public life.

As a result, locations such as Sabana Grande and Las Mercedes may appear more familiar—and even more comforting—than many other regions of the city. These alternative spaces merit particular attention, as they comprise a large portion of the city’s residential territories. In addition, the populations residing outside of areas granted legitimacy by mainstream discourse in Caracas do a great deal of semiotic work to recuperate the city as a viable home for residents’ cultural and political lives. Because the distinctive nature of urban life is established in the order of “its streets and the discipline of those who [move] through them,” individuals and communities do the symbolic work of claiming space through occupation and use (Mitchell 1988). In Caracas, the modernist promises of liberal society are kept alive outside of the Haussmannian city by the actions of residents striving for inclusion in the public sphere as they attempt to produce modernity through their usage of space.

Patterns of spatial use are strongly influenced by the formal and informal

codifications of the location in question. Furthermore, these codes link places to already-existing systems of meaning. In addition, multiple codes may be employed to decipher any particular place, so readings of space reflecting dominant discourse may be contested by a number of distinct interpretations. These negotiations may result in differing understandings of the proper use of space that result in shifts in the realization of popular practices. Thus, limited agency in urban space may be a consequence of discursive restriction rather than structural obstruction. This is not to say that a wall cannot impede movement. However, the wall also enables a number of possibilities for spatial agency.

One of the most common occurrences that demonstrated the possibilities of spatial enabling can be found in the games of children in many parts of Caracas. Their play illustrates the ways that meaningful expressions make use of a range of possibilities by individuals who are not contained, but facilitated by space. I regularly watched games of soccer in the streets of a working-class neighborhood in central Caracas in which I lived for six months. There, children had no access to large fields, and their access to small concrete courts was limited. One afternoon I came across Antonio, a neighbor, as I watched a game of soccer on a crowded street. Copa America was fast approaching, and children taking a short break from baseball, attempting to get the most out of the international soccer tournament that Venezuela would host in 2007. I asked Antonio, a man in his mid-twenties if he too played as the children that were now dribbling a multicolored ball as they ran the

length of the street. “What? Did I play *fútbol*? Not much. You know baseball is our game.” I responded, asking him if he played baseball or any other game in streets like these. Did he and his friends considered the cramped spaces of local streets obstacles to their play? He answered:

I imagine that we could have played differently if we had a real field. The bases would have been farther apart, and it would have been harder to hit a homerun. It didn’t really matter though. We just made our own rules. We changed them if we played on a bigger street. I don’t know—that’s how kids are supposed to play, right? I guess the [professional] baseball players come from the interior where you can play on a real field, but the kids won’t let all this stop them.

He pointed at the buildings along the narrow street where the children played. Just as their game was not inhibited due to the lack of an expansive site of play, he had also enjoyed himself as a child in similar ways, playing a different game. That day, the walls of buildings along the street became objects that enhanced rather than prevented their play. Children passed the balls to themselves against the facades of buildings, embracing the structures that stood along their paths. They learned to play with the buildings with creativity that would not be possible on an “official” field. The walls that might have constituted a limitation for an individual who had not experienced urban terrain in this manner became functional elements in the local children’s street soccer. In many ways the children of San José were enabled by localized perceptions of space that they shared with neighbors and regular passers-by.

My neighbor did not see anything particularly special about the inventive

play of the children, as this was simply “how kids are supposed to play.” Although the children’s perceptions of the street as a location for play were informed by the occurrences of daily life, the modes of spatial occupation that allowed people to quietly codify the locations that they occupied often escaped critical questioning. Ways of experiencing space—namely through perceptive senses—are often naturalized, which prevent their critique as practice. These specific acts, however, are the intimate means through which individuals access their social realities.

Significantly, the gaze permits most individuals to experience space long before touch, smell, sound, and other seemingly simple modes of gaining entry to the world beyond our bodies (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Not to be confused with passive experiences in which the outside world acts upon people, the use of perceptive senses requires a degree of learning and cultural acquisition in order to interact with our environs in a meaningful way. The naturalization of sensory experiences such as sight conceal the cultural construction of local knowledge that mediates our most basic interactions with the world (Geertz 1983). Notably, Seeing is a subjective act. It articulates a relationship between a seeing subject and a visible object through the gaze—a perceptive act that expands the reach of the subject far beyond the body (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Although visual experience always has its limitations, it is particularly significant in the urban experience, as the gaze often allows individuals to penetrate space before the body can physically traverse it. Enmeshed with power, the gaze offers the seeing subject pleasure

through taking in and knowing the other (Frank 1988; Urry 2002). To employ the gaze, therefore, is a sensual encounter imbued with power and desire. However, because seeing is a limited mode of experiencing space, the quality of perception greatly changes as the gazing subject's notion of space is informed by the integration of multiple senses. Essentially, being within space permits individuals to more intimately encounter it.

Hiding in the Cracks

Because a primary mode of interaction with Caracas is through sight, the diversity of architectural forms within urban geography is a significant concern for residents as they traverse the city. Frequently, the spaces most easily accessed with the gaze are the modernist strips within the expansive urban network comprising Caracas. The spaces that most closely conform to the structure associated with urban modernism exist within expanses of less intelligible—but densely populated—urban growth.

Indeed, Caracas is full of rather abrupt shifts in its architectural form. Neat blocks of streets and buildings arranged in a series of rectangles often extend until reaching the base of the next small hill. There, the streets cease to conform to this spatial arrangement. They begin to twist, forming dizzying loops that mimic those of a parted onion. Maps of the city illustrate some of these sudden shifts of urban terrain throughout the city (see figure 11). The paths on each mound are as unique as the rings of a tree. Their primary commonality lies in improvisational growth, as

each street seems to bud from a prior branch. They extend themselves throughout the hill, twisting and cutting until territory is exhausted. One could argue that this Caracas was never meant to be. Planners and governments had attempted to prevent this growth for such a long time, as early twentieth century squatter communities were frequently bulldozed to prevent the landless poor's inhabitation of the capital (Davis 2006b). The city had been planned and built in neat sections, mimicking the forms of model cities far away. Still, something happened in between these chunks of "civilized" Caracas. Perhaps they were the *terrenos*³ imagined least productive, but urbanity's barren land would eventually see life sprouting from the cracks of the modernist dream.



Figure 11: Abrupt change in spatial organization in El Cementario, Caracas.

³ A *terreno* is a plot of land.

What is more, one may find these cracks without stepping into one of Caracas' many *barrios* (slums). While the city's slums are the most visible spaces of this type of growth, the locations that escape the regulation of the modernist cityscape are plentiful throughout Caracas' topography. Wide avenues and tall buildings often conceal such hidden spaces. Though Fernando Coronil speaks of an underworld as he refers to legitimacy and political life in the capital city, his apt use of metaphor also urges us to imagine the various layers of terrain in Caracas (Coronil 1997). The concept of an underground *Caraqueño* political life cleanly transposes onto a literal underground urban network, as the architectural development of the city has led to upward and internal construction. In other words, while the tall residential and commercial towers have stretched upward throughout the late twentieth century, communities have carved caves into the lower levels of the city where they now find themselves concealed within crevices.

Although these gaps may prove difficult to discern, they are a regular part of the urban landscape. Individuals commonly tread through *Caraqueño* streets without realizing what remains outside of their view. In early 2006 I lived in a neighborhood in central Caracas for months before I began to realize how few habitable spaces I had encountered. I had seen hints of this from my bedroom window, but it would take much longer for me to realize the extent to which I was unaware of the terrain that I called home after leaving my temporary residence in the more easily navigated Chacao.

Buses traveling along Avenida Urdaneta stop under the bridge that lifts Avenida Fuerzas Armadas over the heads of the chattering crowds on the corners—all eight of them. The traveler walking from the north side of the la Urdaneta onto Av. Fuerzas Armadas sees kiosks, children playing, vendors selling, and figures crouching in the shadows at the wall. Farther up the slope traffic splits, directing vehicles over or toward the intersection below. Traffic passes along all axes, as cars, buses, and people, move between east and west, north and south, as well as above and below. The maps of Caracas do not seem to help much in locating oneself, as the streets escape the two-dimensional order of the printed page. A number of times I met with friends and informants in the area, but I learned that organizing meetings in the neighborhood caused confusion for those not already familiar with the area. Individuals who did arrive at my door made sure to tell me of the adventures that brought them to Edificio (Building) Salim. Most only came once, and some were infuriated by my apparent disregard for their safety, requiring them to move through such a confusing place as this community in the Parroquia Altagracia. In some cases, visitors reported seeing menacing pedestrians (sometimes armed with knives or guns) while they approached my home, which roused discomfort. Adding to their unease, the complicated network of roads occupying multiple topographical planes provided the opportunity to find oneself lost in the unfamiliar community.

Just north of Av. Urdaneta, for two busy blocks children play with toys while weaving between pedestrians that rush in every direction with bags full of groceries

and other goods on their way home or anywhere else. The congested roadway roars with the sounds of shouting voices, horns beeping, and the occasional siren from a stuck ambulance among the vehicles inching their way down the hill. Each intersection along the principal avenue offers a break from the busy traffic along the avenue, as calm, narrow streets open to the East and West. Everyday, I turned onto the street that opened to the West at Esquina San Ramon⁴.

There, residential buildings line the street on both sides, and people pass in and out of the doors at the ground levels. A few stores and restaurants face the pathway while sparse traffic slowly ambles up and down the gentle slope. Taller buildings to the north peek from above those along the street, hinting at an intermingling network of streets that continue until the end of Av. Fuerzas Armadas in the North. Importantly, the streets appear to organize this section of the city along a neat grid (see figure 12), a feature that neighbors referenced in attempting to convince me of the area's safety when I moved.

⁴ Here, the corner is posted rather than a street name. It is common to reference locations in this region of the city by corner rather than by listing intersecting street names.



Figure 12: Streets on a grid along Av. Fuerzas Armadas and Av. Urdaneta.

Everyday I walked along this street, examining the residential buildings that aligned it. They stood tall, enveloping me in narrow concrete space that spanned the distance of a block before splitting open at the next intersection where a new corridor would present itself. Embraced by the tall facades of the buildings on the streets of San José, I passed through tight passages ventilated by small rifts between residences, stores, and restaurants.

One hot day in March, shouting and laughter sounded from below as I walked from Edificio Salim to Esquina San Ramon. It was the first time I thought to look between the buildings' cracks. There, a perpendicular street passed under my own. I leaned over the edge through the space wondering how I had not seen this street

before until a man noisily shuffled from a fissure at the seam of two buildings behind me. I crossed the street to look into the space where he emerged moments ago. The continuation of the underlying street I had just seen on the south side stretched below my feet to the north. There, narrow steps led from my street to a tapering isle below. The narrow alley that crossed under my street gave way to rows of small concrete homes just East of the residential building where I lived. The houses piled upon one another until an abrupt stop at the base of a large concrete structure to the North. Six meters above this abrupt end, cars passed as they wound themselves around internal pillars to climb the parking garage at the bottom of a residential building facing the street parallel to mine.

During the hours of the early evening I heard sounds from below where cars passed along another path lined with small homes and stores into a garage that somehow situated itself under my building. The illusion of spatial uniformity presented by the elevated streets—the ones that most often appear in maps of Caracas—withheld much of the neighborhood from my view. Upon viewing a street map of Caracas, the diversity of spatial attributes within the territory of a single community is often difficult to imagine, particularly because most maps portray only formal routes and locations. Locations such as my street, adjacent to Esquina San Ramon, often posed a problem for individuals seeking strategies to quickly situate themselves within the area, as the space was not easily legible to those without prior knowledge of the terrain. The traveler employing his map was only

capable of deciphering a vague semblance of the space, as inhabited sections of the neighborhood leaned upon others in awkward juxtaposition akin to that of an Escher print. Because the pathways and residential spaces of the city frequently exist outside of and between locations that are most easily recognized, modernist representations and interpretations of space render much of the city illegitimate and therefore dangerous. For the visitor, these virtual sinkholes—such as streets near Esquina San Ramon—convert the Caracas into an unstable space where vulnerable passers-by are always at risk of being swallowed by the city. Thus, the risk of finding oneself lost in an urban labyrinth is too great for many to venture into unfamiliar territory.

In some cases, the difficulty of communicating locations within Caracas lies in the format of geographic information. This is particularly relevant in older sections of Caracas where locations are not conveyed in the same style as in some other parts of the city. While my neighbors communicated their address in Altigracia by referring to the nearest intersection and the building's name, this stylistic form was a source of confusion for many visitors. Edificio Salim, Esquina San Ramon utilizes spatial references that are meaningless to those without previous knowledge of the area because in some cases (but not always) corners are labeled, and because the names of the corners in Central Caracas are frequently associated with local histories rather than the names of the streets at their intersections. Antonio explained that most of the local residents knew the names of the corners in the

community. He supposed that individuals would have trouble finding their way through his neighborhood without prior knowledge of its terrain, but he insisted that “once you get used to it, it’s easy.”

In contrast, not all addresses in Caracas are communicated in that way. In some areas of the city, addresses utilize a number-street format. Communicating locations with alternative style does not prevent confusion. However, the relationship between the terms of an address in this format does not rely on the same degree of local knowledge as the building-corner arrangement necessitates. This system employs a hierarchical relationship between the elements of the phrase, expressing a degree of spatial dimensionality in which one term is bound within the other. Both styles of address are systems of meaning with which *Caraqueños* navigate space. Nevertheless, the use of both modes of organization in different parts of the city makes clear the hierarchical production of representable territory in Caracas. Thus, this registry of space works to codify pieces of the city, extracting them from the local contexts where they are always entrenched in local practice. In doing so, it obligates places such as the narrow pathways of my Altagracia neighborhood and entire *barrios* to navigate relationships of power that classify them as threats or even deny their existence.

Of course, residents of Caracas experience their own communities intimately, granting them a nuanced knowledge of the spaces they inhabit. Correspondingly, unhindered access to many *Caraqueño* spaces are unavailable to people living in the

city. Clearly, some of the city easily translates into styles of public visual knowledge that one may communicate with maps. However, only a fraction of the city's spaces are easily communicable in this form. Like me, in most cases, individuals gain familiarity with the streets of Caracas by traversing them.

Home

By examining the city as a social entity, we come to terms with many of the inconsistencies of experience that make its spaces habitable, and make it such a rich ethnographic site. As an urban imaginary, Caracas begs us to question the production of its spaces, and the discourses that allow the city to construct the *Caraqueño*. While human voices serve as accessible data, the city's stories are told in a number of ways that are often left unarticulated by the individuals the ethnographer seeks as primary sources in his work.

While dichotomies such as legible/illegible as well as legitimate/illegitimate appear to outline the forms of the city, the relationships between *Caraqueño* spaces and the language used to describe them are never quite sufficient. Doubtlessly, there exists a gamut of meaning within the innumerable urban sites affecting human lives. This unstable relationship between space and language not only challenges the production of official knowledge. The difficulties of articulating space in Caracas complicate scholarly methods of investigation and analysis. Even with intense investigation the polarizing relationship between these categories masks messy truths, glossing over the details of city life while denying the paradoxes that render

the city fruitful territory for cultural expression and social life. As artifacts of modernity, these simplistic classifications adhere to the internal logic of the city's discursive foundation.

Throughout this chapter I have shown how aesthetics of modern urbanity delimit the territorial limits of legitimacy while establishing forms of legibility. The visual interpretations of *Caraqueño* spatial organization play a significant role in producing overlapping and diverting pathways that moderate the flow of bodies, reinforcing and breaking social as well as political borders throughout the city. These totalizing discourses of modernity produce Caracas as a virtual wilderness capable of violently acting upon individuals within it. Significantly, the city is not only capable of constructing and harboring dangerous agents. In addition, everyday talk transforms the city into a subject that steps forth as a perpetrator of violence while rendering human actors anonymous. In many cases the dangers of *Caraqueño* realities stand in stark contrast with the sociopolitical ideals that the city maintains. However, the hauntings of the city are difficult to confront without investigating their origins.

The so-called problems of *Caraqueño* society that are symbolically linked to notions of illegibility and illegitimacy are manifest in complex manners, often depending upon multiple factors such as place of residence and social class. As a result, as I have already hinted, the millions living in this urban network do not occupy the same city. Still, these spaces—as multiple and disjointed as they are—

collaborate to in the totalizing project, producing the universal subject that is Caracas. Importantly, This chapter's focus on the aesthetics of modern urban space is merely a starting point from which the inconsistencies of the city's logic may be questioned. As individuals and communities navigate power within the city, the ways in which quotidian life encodes and utilizes space reveal a great deal about communities and the mechanisms of power that permeate inhabitants' ways of being.

3. Slipping from the Middle: Class and Anticipating Loss in the Chavista State

Chávez had won again. The muffled moans of protest from Caracas' middle-class were not what I had come to expect after witnessing the highly charged presidential campaign come to a close. Neighboring friends and acquaintances had humored themselves for weeks as they narrated elaborate fantasies of the UNT's (Un Nuevo Tiempo) candidate, Manuel Rosales, taking office and forcefully tossing Hugo Chávez onto the steps of Miraflores, the presidential mansion. However, as the election ended the voices of the poor and the working-class masses boomed through the city, loud enough to overpower the piles of speakers that stood upon the trucks and platforms stationed throughout the festive nation's capital. The electoral outcome of the Venezuelan presidential race in 2006 would secure the stay of the boisterous and charismatic man from the rural plains of Venezuela. Policies and public opinion would change in the months to follow, but on the fourth of December the smiling president waved to the impassioned crowd before him. At the year's end I witnessed President Chávez renew the hope of an enthusiastic and mobilized populace as the campaign came to a close. The way that the crowds cheered, it seemed that the man living in Miraflores had promised them the world, or at least a new place in it.

While lengthening President Chávez's time in office, this event marked a period of change in Caracas' political and social life. The outcome of the 2006

election brought about heightened middle class fear of the city's poor and the possible social and political futures that Chávez continues to represent within and beyond the borders the Venezuela. That middle-class *Caraqueños*¹ envision Chavista rule as a significant threat to class culture and political life raises questions regarding the ways in which communities such as those in the Municipality of Chacao negotiate systems of meaning associated with class culture. Significantly, this takes place in the face of social changes that frame burgeoning forms of democracy as threats to middle-class social identity and the rights that bind the state to these particular citizens. In short, middle-class notions of liberty appeared to stand at odds with popular and state sponsored rhetoric embracing processes of participatory democracy that would purportedly address the stark inequalities present in contemporary Venezuelan society. This becomes especially clear with middle-class discourse surrounding working-class spatial transgression in Chacao's public spaces.

Drawing on ethnographic data from middle-class *Caraqueños* residing in Chacao, an affluent municipality within Greater Caracas, I illustrate the ways in which they perceived President Chávez's reelection as a threat to their social lives and as a threat to the nation. By examining Caracas' history as a site of class and racial privilege, this chapter links the contemporary middle-class' claims on exclusive privilege to the social formation of the nation. After a historical

¹ Here, *Caraqueño* refers to a resident of Caracas.

discussion, this chapter argues that challenges to middle-class social and political dominance primarily occur in three manners. First, after President Chávez won the election, they anticipated some form of military intervention that never occurred. Their belief that the state would defend the nation as they conceived it illustrated the ways in which middle-class notions of citizenship and society have omitted marginal social groups from democratic community. In turn, residents of Chacao frequently considered political processes that did not directly favor middle-class interests to be illegitimate.

Second, the president's reelection prompted many middle-class *Caraqueños* to imagine the possibility of material loss. In Chacao the popular understanding of the Chavista government's leftist leanings led many to believe that the state would soon attempt to redistribute middle-class assets. Here, I argue that although accumulation of wealth may have been important to the middle-class, the demonstration of affluence determines the ways in which individuals claim the sets of privileges to which the middle class have grown accustomed. Although they feared material loss, they were most concerned with the notion of social equality that threatened to erase distinctions between groups such as professionals and workers.

Finally, the ongoing presence of *Caraqueños* that many identified as poor within middle class spaces like Chacao constituted a threat to a notion of middle-

class rights to particular spaces. Although fears of economic loss had not materialized in the months after the election, an increasing presence of supposedly impoverished Chavistas in middle-class communities served as proof of President Chávez's allowance and promotion of social and institutional breakdown. Working-class presence in and near places like Chacao was particularly troubling to neighboring residents, as the middle-class frequently insisted upon the poor's inability to act suitably as citizens in the same right as more affluent members of society.

Ultimately, middle-class assertions of the current government's illegitimacy in late 2006 illustrate the conflicting notions of democracy in play in the city's class communities. The current form of democracy embraced by the Chavista state apparatus is neither compatible with existing class hierarchies, nor with widespread notions of political liberty that have supported Venezuelan social structure since the Nineteenth Century. Today, popular notions of equality associated with the dominant political ideology threaten to dismantle the rules by which many Venezuelans have lived, and in some cases, have achieved wealth and status. Chávez's presidency not only urges individuals to examine what it means to be Venezuelan. It also forces many to consider how life in Venezuela—and especially in the capital city—must change as so-called traditions like democracy take new meanings.

Democracy and Disappointment

The expressions of joy and dismay after election day rendered the divisions between Caracas' class communities glaringly visible. Normally, residents of Chacao accepted the daily commutes of the working-class into well-off neighborhoods of Eastern Caracas like Altamira as an unpleasant but necessary fact of life. After all, who would work the many low-wage service jobs in homes and businesses if not for the daily commuters from the city's working class? However, on December 4 much of the daily commentary regarding *los pobres* (the poor) of the city was hushed. That day my middle-class neighbors would not fight back with arms, poster board signs, or their voices. For a moment it appeared as though they had surrendered to the Bolivarian Revolution—a social movement led by Hugo Chávez implemented grassroots democracy in Venezuela, which acknowledged an economic component to producing social equality and democratic society—that they so frequently criticized (García 2006; Haro G & Romero Martínez 2000). Bolivarianism's leftist leanings caused it to stand at odds with neoliberalism and ideological stances based upon liberal thought, such as Venezuelan class hierarchy. That day, the audible voices were those of the celebratory working-class masses claiming the streets with music, dance, and exuberant oration.

The silent middle-class reaction to defeat on the fourth of December was contrary to what many of my neighbors predicted in the preceding days. After months of preparation, organizing, and talk of liberation from the leftist threat

posed by Hugo Chávez and his followers in the PSUV (Partida Socialista Unida de Venezuela) dominated national government, banners and flags brazenly displayed national and regional iconography in bright red as though it were meant to taunt my neighbors. Since the late 1990s, President Chávez had used red to symbolize the leftist politics of the PSUV in its public relations campaigns. During the election, large groups of Chavistas dressed in red marched through the streets while opposition supporters marched in bright yellow. Both colors of the Venezuelan flag competed to mark the city with their presence and political thought. During this period, one's use of red clothing came to illustrate support of Chávez and, therefore, one's class identity.

After the election, Caracas' middle-class watched crowds of festive Chavistas dance under the lions' heads waving in the wind. The maned beast of the city would not purr at the feet of the middle-class residents with whom I lived in my first months in the city. They were members of the political opposition who were preoccupied by the uncertainty of their future. That day they refrained from protest. They quietly locked themselves in their homes while celebrations continued in the streets. Many did nothing more than hope for military intervention.

This was not the only part of the city where deafening silence accompanied dashed political hopes for Venezuela's future in late 2006. However, Altamira and

neighboring communities in this section of Eastern Caracas constituted a refuge for a moneyed class of *Caraqueños* in the recently founded municipality of Chacao. These clustered neighborhoods composed one of the larger territorial zones in the city where supporters of the political opposition's presidential candidate proudly shouted enthusiastic slogans to smiling champions of the status quo while demonstrating in Chacao. There were other middle-class territories throughout the city, but the formation of this municipality in the 1990s permitted a degree of political, territorial, and economic insulation that many other middle-class communities in Caracas could not attain. In Altamira the rhetoric surrounding the presidential race frequently reflected a fantasy of governance that fundamentally upheld middle-class liberties. According to my neighbors, Chávez would lose, and the country would be reintroduced to neoliberalism as well as economic and social stability. The results of the election, however, illustrated that much of the city—and the nation—housed voices to the contrary.

Upon my arrival in Caracas in October 2006, I entered into an ongoing conversation about Venezuelan politics revolving around the central figure of Hugo Chávez. On one hand, a few people were curious to know what I, a US citizen, thought about the president of Venezuela, his leftist politics, and especially his consolidation of natural resources. Frequently, our conversations ended with my interlocutors urging me to either support or oppose president Chávez's continued stay in office. Friends aligned with the political opposition commonly argued that

Chavista policy discouraged foreign investment, sending sought-after jobs with large transnational corporations to neighboring countries such as Colombia. On the other hand, Chavistas frequently stated that the programs funded by nationalized oil and developed by the current government benefit *Caraqueño* communities in various ways unthinkable before Chávez's ascension to power.

Notably, the state's control over Venezuelan Petroleum enabled the development of many of the Chavista government's social programs that won over many voters in Caracas and other locations throughout the country. While many poor Venezuelans explain that they had lived at the social and economic margins before benefiting from the state's oil funded programs, positive associations with the nationalization of petroleum are not universal amongst the nation's poor. Although these programs presumably sought to improve the lives of Venezuelans living in poverty, many individuals in the oil rich state of Zulia disapproved of the government's actions, as the new oil industry forced significant changes in the state's local economies. Those economically dependent upon Zulia's service industry saw these changes as lost opportunities, as large numbers of well paid foreign workers left the country with their money. Most of the wealth generated from Zulia's oil began to leave the state to be distributed throughout the country, and especially in Caracas.

While both these classes of statements rouse concern for millions of

Venezuelans, they also illustrate the vastly different ways in which individuals identified the obligations of the nation-state to its citizens. They provoke questions regarding conceptions of liberty, democracy, and citizenship in contemporary Caracas. Notably, Chavista governance inspired middle-class fear for a number of reasons. Although many significant worries stemmed from the possibility of socialism—as they knew it—disrupting their middle-class lifestyles by distributing the wealth that they had worked to accumulate, this was only the most superficial layer of their anxiety. They believed that the leftist leanings of the Chavista government would eventually lead to an aggressive restructuring of middle-class culture as communities such as those in Chacao faced the possibility of systemic adjustment in Venezuelan society. Chávez’s electoral win would give much more than their economic wealth to the disenfranchised of the city. He could possibly give them the city that the middle-class deemed theirs.

Histories of Race, Class, and *Caraqueño* Urban Geography

As discussed in Chapter 2, present social hierarchies defined by liberalism and spatial organizations based on aesthetics of modernity play a significant role in structuring life in Caracas (Bayon & Gasparini 1979; Bullrich 1969). While Venezuela makes use of a multi-racial national creation myth, those identified as indigenous and Afro-descendent members of the nation frequently find discriminatory reminders of their exclusion from full citizenship. The spatialization of race and class throughout the city continues to produce whiter zones of privilege

as well as areas associated with marginality and Blackness. Though the capital's present relationship between race, class, and urban space emerged in the mid twentieth century, Black and white *Caraqueños* have occupied distant locations in the racial-class continuum in the capital since the colonial period (Ferry 1989). Although twentieth century Venezuelan nationalism came to embrace the notion of racial democracy, Blackness has constituted a threat to notions of political and spatial security for white populations since before the time of Bolivar. As the *Caraqueño* elite came to heavily rely on Black slave populations to support the cacao haciendas outside of the city limits, the colonial city became associated with a privileged white elite and an educated middle-class (Arcaya Urrutia 1968; Rama 1984).

Although largely considered a colonial backwater before the eighteenth century, the Caracas region's cacao production began attracting the attention of Spanish immigrants from poor, rural backgrounds in search of new economic opportunities by the early 1700s. Spanish administrators wished to populate its colonies as it attempted to establish further control despite competition from other colonial powers such as the Dutch, the French, and the English. Stories of immigrants becoming large cacao hacienda owners in the fertile territories near Caracas also attracted poor Spaniards from agrarian regions of Galicia and the Canary Islands. As a result, although the majority of new residents in the Caracas province consisted of African slaves, one of the larger groups outside of Black

laborers were Canary Islanders (*Canarios* or *Isleños*)—many of whom had been small farmers before their arrival in Venezuela.

Many *Isleños*' ambitions of becoming hacienda owners were largely unsuccessful, and so they became wage laborers who worked alongside Black slaves for the *Caraqueño* elite. Conflicts between poor, sharecropping Canary Islanders and *morenos libres* (free Blacks) in parts of the Caracas region such as Curiepe arose as the free Black communities began to build homes and plant their own cacao. Since 1702 free Black communities had fled slavery under the Dutch to Spanish territory. Eager to challenge the authority of colonial competitors, Spanish Colonial officials permitted the *morenos libres* to live on plots of land in Curiepe. Although they supported themselves through small-scale farming, they worked on neighboring haciendas as well. Though they had not amassed great wealth, free Blacks were occupying more land. Although Spanish officials granted some slaves their freedom after fleeing other colonial powers, the Caracas region quickly became home to numerous *cimarrones* (free Black communities) that would constitute a threat to poor whites and the capital's elite until the mid 1800s. By the end of the first decade of the Eighteenth Century free Blacks began to compete with ambitious Islanders for rights to land in the region (Arcaya Urrutia 1968).

As the *Canarios* went to Caracas to petition for land in Curiepe, they warned that the *morenos libres* would uncontrollably multiply, appeal to the British, and

convert the region into “*Nueva Jamayca*” (Arcaya Urrutia 1968). Making reference to ongoing attacks by British buccaneers, they apprehended free Black settlers as threats to Spanish colonial rule. Insisting that the free Blacks would aid the British if an invasion ensued, Islanders offered themselves as suitable replacements in the region. Although landless *Isleños* opposed the growth of free Black communities (*cimarrones*), the royally appointed colonial officials—many of whom were not from the region—did not.

In the 1720s wealthy *Caraqueños* became much more involved in the struggle over land in Curiepe after free Blacks managed to occupy valuable land around Caracas. The *cimarrones*—some of which had been legally granted land by the authorities in Santo Domingo, who were responsible for Venezuela’s administration—stood in the way of the plans of members of the local elite that then appealed to the colonial government to defend their claims to land ownership in sites of Black settlement. White opposition to Black settlement in the region differed according to class. While the *Canarios* regularly based their claims on the dubious loyalties of free Blacks, the *Caraqueño* elite based their claims on the illegitimacy of *moreno libre* claims to land. Though both cases illustrate Black competition with white communities in the Caracas region, elite *Caraqueños* based their claims on traditions of privilege and declarations of legitimacy. Ultimately the administrators in Santo Domingo sided against the *Caraqueño* elite. The struggles over free Black settlement that took place in Caracas led to the 1722 burning of

homes and crops in *cimarrones* in Cureipe, but the communities remained throughout the region.

As the Caracas elite grew increasingly at odds with Spanish rule, relationships between class and race in Venezuela changed as well. Venezuelan cacao was sought after in the New Spain market, but the Guipuzcoana Company controlled the *Caraqueño* cacao economy. The monopoly had driven down the price of local cacao to the point that most small-scale (non-elite) planters could no longer profit. In opposition to the Guipuzcoana Company an *Isleño* planter named Juan Francisco de León led a rebellion into Caracas in 1749. After a royal force made its way to Venezuela, León conceded defeat, claiming that he did not intend to resist the Spanish crown. In the following years colonial officials would deter future uprisings by punishing all *Caraqueños* with harsh new laws and taxes. Brigadier Felipe Ricardos became governor in 1751, bringing six hundred soldiers with him (Ferry 1989). In his first months in office, Ricardos worked to establish control in Caracas—in part by forcing social undesirables like the poor out of the city.

[He ordered] out of Caracas men who had been away from their wives for three or more years. All foreigners were obligated to leave, and all individuals aged twelve to sixty without satisfactory employment were classified as vagabonds and given ten days to find work. Men who failed to do as the governor ordered were sent to Spain as criminals to work for the king. (Ferry 1989)

In addition, Ricardos created a number of new offices to ensure that his new rules were executed. He appointed “a public defender to serve the incarcerated

poor, a director of public works, and inspector of city streets, and assessor of real property, and auditor of estates of the deceased, a recorder of mortgages, and officer who evaluated the worth of slaves, and a supervisor of food stores” (Ferry 1989). Notably, he believed that the creation of these public offices would make Caracas modern and—more importantly—loyal. Because of the new laws forcing men to seek work, the region’s landless underclass found work on the neighboring haciendas where slave labor no longer met the demand for cacao production.

Although Ricardos had firm control over the city of Caracas, he was not able to establish the same control in the neighboring region. There, slaves frequently sold cacao to smugglers without significant interference from the planter elite nor the policing officials. Law enforcement was often disinterested or unable to prevent smuggling. Although overseers worked on the haciendas, many were slaves or free Blacks that often engaged in the illegal sales. In addition, the *Caraqueño* elite refused to relocate to the haciendas, as residence in Caracas was one of the privileges of their status. As the century came to a close, white mistrust of Blacks, mulattos and zambos² turned into fear. The Haitian revolution intensified fears of slave rebellions in Venezuela and the rest of the Americas. Growing eager to displace the Spanish authority, Venezuelan elite began their war of independence in

² The term, zambo, refers to the progeny of Black and indigenous parents. They were deemed particularly dangerous, as they were the product of illicit unions. Colonial officials especially supported laws that prohibited Black and Indian social interaction. Although Spanish colonials may not have been explicitly opposed to the idea of free Black social mobility, Blacks were not permitted to share in all the some class privileges such as keeping Indian servants.

1811. During the war many slaves fled their masters, and joined militias. Although in the war's earlier years, some militias that included Venezuelans of color fought against the nationalists, Venezuela's "Liberator" (Simón Bolívar) recognized the need to include non-whites into his movement. Although he feared the non-white masses of Venezuela, he understood that their military support was necessary for his success in the fight against Spain (Wright 1990).

As in Cuba, this war had afforded some non-whites some social mobility (Ferrer 1999). Because of the inclusive nature of the war of independence, most parts of Venezuela would see major adjustments to the colonial social structure, as many non-white *caudillos* (regional political-military leaders) assumed power with military prowess rather than hereditary right. After Independence from Spain in 1821 Venezuela still had slaves, but haciendas continued to seek out workers to satisfy the unmet demand for laborers. Militias consisting primarily of non-whites fought an ongoing war between regional caudillos throughout the country. The reputation of the ferocity of Black and zambo fighters led whites in Caracas to live in constant fear. They were especially concerned with the possibility of violent slave insurrections, as the region contained nearly 58 percent of the slaves in Venezuela by the 1820s (Wright 1990).

Although there were wealthy and educated Blacks throughout Venezuela in the nineteenth century, most Blacks lived as poor *campesinos* on the land where

they were born. Options for uneducated and underskilled workers were limited, despite the remaining need for rural labor. In cities such as Caracas, Blacks often worked as domestic servants, street sweepers, and vendors (Wright 1990). Options for Black women were often less favorable, as they received lower wages for their work than men. In addition, Black working-class women seeking supplemental income often resorted to prostitution for survival, comprising the majority of Caracas' prostitutes until the early twentieth century (Hudson 1860).

In the latter half of the 1800s Venezuelan intellectuals adopted new ideas regarding the improvement and modernization of Venezuela, part of which would encourage the whitening of the population. The educated *Caraqueño* elite's use of positivist thought from the United States and Europe embraced evolutionary theories that they would put to use in their attempts to develop the nation. This process would presumably transform Venezuela from a poor, backward young nation to a thriving civilization. The national elite "accepted climate, race, hygiene, and technology as important factors in determining the evolution of modern societies" (Wright 1990). Throughout this period Venezuelan leadership established whiteness' association with progress and civilized society. The largely white *Caraqueño* elite made the poor, colored majority of Venezuela the scapegoat for the nation's political instability, as they argued that building civilized society was not possible with its mixed-race majority. Although Venezuelans did not engage in the aggressive racial policing that took place in the US, their discourse did not

discourage racism. Moreover, it has produced Blackness as an obstacle to the production of Venezuelan modernity. Creating immigration laws between 1831 and 1840, the national government attempted to attract European agricultural workers with subsidies. This plan failed, as many European immigrants entered Brazil, Argentina, and the United States instead of Venezuelan. Instead, many Blacks from Guyana and the Antilles arrived to work as miners in the East of the country before the government attempted to ban Black immigrants from entering Venezuela in the 1850s.

Throughout the nineteenth century Caracas was still a small town despite being Venezuela's capital. In addition, the majority of the city's population was living in poverty. Although the poor often worked in Caracas as beggars, prostitutes, domestic workers, vendors, and more, the possibilities for settling within city limits were extremely limited. The majority of the city's poor lived in squatter settlements (*ranchos*) in the hills outside of the city limits. In addition, many of the city's Black families lived in shacks on busy cobbled streets that would expand as the century ended (García Ponce 2005). These communities continued to grow through the late 1800s at the geographic and social fringes of the city.

At the same time the physical layout of Caracas began transformation as the city's leadership explored European architectural forms to construct a Venezuelan civilization that would diverge from its Spanish colonial roots. France and England

were deemed examples of ideals of civilization, and Venezuela would soon attempt to follow in their footsteps. Paris was recently transformed into the modernist city of the present, and cities such as Caracas and Buenos Aires were soon to emulate its plans. As I discussed in the previous chapter, President Guzmán Blanco was particularly important in this process, as he directed the first major aesthetic changes in the 1870s in order to replicate Parisian architecture in central Caracas. In the twentieth century *Caraqueño* architecture and city planning came to employ modernist aesthetic forms that would generally facilitate popular access to the public spaces of the capital. This style of modernist urbanism, which focused on the visibility and legibility of urban space, became an important tool for the state's modes of social control in the city (Jordan 1995; Saalman 1971). More than a mode of arranging a city's spaces, the aim of Caracas' urbanism was to contribute to the development of "civilized" forms of social and political organization that would allow Venezuela to progress into the modern era (Almandoz Marte 2002).

While Caracas's development began to reflect new aesthetics and concerns for health and safety through the late nineteenth century, this was not evident outside of the limited borders of the small city. At the start of the 1800s, Caracas spanned nearly fourteen blocks from North to South by thirteen *cuadras* (blocks) from East to West. Land within the city was extremely limited, making *Caraqueño* residence quite exclusive. Squatter settlements surrounded the city throughout the century. These colonies of precarious structures did not contribute to permanent

residence, as torrential rains and other weather related events were a significant threat to these communities built outside of the city's limits during this period. These spaces were home to many of the landless poor in the city. There, predominantly non-White residents crowded in small homes connected by muddy roads that were difficult to travel (García Ponce 2005).

Throughout the twentieth century the Venezuelan state's exploitation of petroleum played a large role in the first significant expansions of the capital's borders, as well as the centralization of political power in Caracas. By 1925 petroleum comprised fifty-eight percent of the nation's total exports, and it would rapidly increase to over ninety percent by 1945 (Baptista 1991). As oil became more significant in the national economy, the government's control over petro-wealth permitted the rapid growth of the city's territorial limits and population. Until the late 1950s residence within the limits of Caracas was largely a privilege held by landowners. A series of political developments in Venezuelan democracy in the late 1950s, however, brought about a significant demographic change in Caracas. The state's social welfare programs and possible employment attracted large numbers of poor Venezuelans from the country's interior to the capital between the 1940s and the 1958 fall of Dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez. During this same period, the formation of modern Venezuelan nationalism began to amass racialized images from throughout the nation-state that the state used to contribute to the production of less regionalized forms of national belonging. An example of

such action is the National Folklore Service's organization of the "Festival of Tradition," which took place in 1948. There, Performers from around Venezuela performed music and dances that were largely forms of religious devotion. Appearing on stage before large audiences and outside of their "traditional" contexts, regional cultural expressions took on meanings as national symbols in Caracas (Guss 2000). Projects such as the Festival of Tradition played an important role in the popular discourse of Venezuelan democracy.

Although the capital emerged as a site where the state employed Venezuela's racial and ethnic diversity for the centralization of power, this did not mean that Caracas' political leaders welcomed many of the newcomers migrating from the interior of the country. *Caraqueño* elites preferred not to allow the poorest of the capital's population to remain as squatters in the capital, but earlier practices such as forced migration and the destruction of informal settlements would cause political problems for Venezuela's hopeful young democracy (Coronil 1997; Davis 2006b). Although the push to modernize Caracas persisted, by the mid twentieth century the central government hoped to produce Caracas into an impressive example of Latin American civilization in order to attract foreign business. The state's control of the populace was not the sole focus of mid-century urban development, but controlling the population did contribute to an aesthetic of order that national leaders hoped would draw transnational investment to the capital (Coronil 1997). Still, continued urbanization in Venezuela's largest city brought

large numbers of poor and working-class residents into spaces that were traditionally the territory of a privileged class, particularly during and after Pérez Jiménez's dictatorial regime between 1952 and 1958.

For much of its history Caracas housed a land-owning national elite, but as the Venezuelan capital grew, so did its *barrios* (Coronil 1997; Davis 2006b). As Caracas became what many consider a model of the Latin American modern city between the 1950s and 1970s, large populations of Venezuelans and foreigners migrated to the urban center seeking employment during a period of prosperity and democracy. During this process of urbanization, Caracas also became a two-tiered city, composed of what many deem an exemplary modernist urbanity and its slums. The small squatter settlements of Venezuela's capital grew to house nearly 60 percent of the city in large informal colonies that stretch into the city like groping fingers (Brillembourg Tamayo & Schroder 2007). In most cases, *Caraqueños* plainly see the contrast between the carefully organized public spaces of planned middle-class communities and the informal and organic spatial productions housing what many call the *clase baja* (lower-class). Because many *barrios* are built upon land to which residents have no legal claim, the illegality of these informal settlements reinforce associations between the urban poor and illegitimacy (Dowall 1991; Fernandes & Varley 1998; Wu et al 2008). For many *Caraqueños*, popular notions of class and crime justify social distance between working and middle-class communities, calling for raised concerns for security within middle-class regions of

the city like Chacao.

More recently, middle-class attempts to maintain distance from the urban poor took a special form in Chacao. Although Acción Democrática's (AD) candidate won the 1988 presidential election, the waning strength of AD in national legislation led to a decentralization of state power during a period of mass disapproval of the president, Carlos Andrés Pérez (O'Neill 2005). In 1989 the institutional structure of local governance changed greatly in Caracas. With the reforms of the Ley Orgánica de Régimen Municipal (Law of Municipal Regime), the current municipalities of Baruta, El Hatillo, Sucre, and Chacao would emerge in the following next three years. The ways in which these spaces divided, however, were not arbitrary in nature. Although Chacao had been part of the larger District of Sucre, in 1991 the state's legislative assembly permitted Chacao's autonomy in order to establish its own government the following year. By drawing the geographic borders of their own community, local politicians in Chacao divided the small but affluent zone from larger—in terms of population and geography—neighbors that experienced much more class and racial diversity. Ultimately, Chacao worked to maintain its spatial and social order just as a young Hugo Chávez emerged as a revolutionary figure after a failed coup in 1992.

Intervention And The Natural Order of Things

Throughout November 2006 a discursive progression of political predictions

had taken place in the streets of Chacao. At the start of the month many of my neighbors argued that the people of Venezuela had endured enough at the hands of bad political leadership. They argued that after years of President Chávez's lies, bribery, and embezzlement—after all, they said that he had stripped the nation of its precious oil wealth—voters had to recognize the financial losses and social confusion suffered by the people of Venezuela, regardless of their social class. It was precisely for this reason that many residents of Chacao spoke about the failed coup of 2002 with regret. During the overthrow the military detained the president for nearly forty-eight hours, but popular support led to his reinstatement. Four years later President Chávez was nearing another victory, and my neighbors were growing anxious. As November neared its end, faith in the earlier middle-class predictions began to change. While opposition to Chávez remained intact in Chacao, residents' expectations of electoral victory seemed to fade. Many of the same *Caraqueños* who professed their faith in the opposition, the Venezuelan people, and abilities of the political opposition's Manuel Rosales to lead the nation away from Chavista policy began to talk about the possibility of Hugo Chávez winning yet another presidential election.

Most of my neighbors believed that a Chavista win would constitute a setback, but it would not mean defeat for the political opposition by any means. Intrigued by the political prophecies of a friend and neighbor, I met with her and two of her friends who volunteered their thoughts on Venezuelan politics. As we ate

sushi on the patio of a restaurant in Chacao, Sara—a middle-class woman in her early thirties—started the meeting with a warning. “If Chávez wins, everybody knows it will be terrible for Venezuela. [Right now] I think he might win, but it’s only because he’s cheating. You know, he can do it by buying votes. I hope you are buying all your supplies for your emergency kit now, because there will be a coup.” She continued, instructing me to buy gallons of water, bread, cheese, meat, flashlights, batteries, and a long list of other items that would increase my chances of survival while the military would dismantle the “mess” left by Chávez. Sara explained that the army would have to fix the errors of the defrauded voters. Unlike the last coup, she insisted that this one would be successful. After enduring a full term of Chavista power, Sara promised that the Venezuelan people would forgive a military attack upon the current government, particularly since Chavista politics had adversely affected all the people in Venezuela that she knew. She proposed that the 2002 coup might have been too soon. Enough people had not yet grown skeptical of Chávez’s government, and some former Chavistas had become members of the political opposition since Chávez’ first successful presidential campaign in 1998. While Sara told me to buy enough “supplies” to stay inside for at least four days, her friends all nodded in agreement while they quietly dipped their California rolls in soy sauce.

I pushed away my tray, dissatisfied by the food and unnerved by the thought of experiencing a coup during my fieldwork in Venezuela. I asked if they were

serious about the possibility of a coup, and the three eating at the table with me calmly nodded their heads in agreement. “Well, hopefully it won’t have to happen. But if Chávez wins, you should be ready. I already got everything for my kit,” suggested the short, vocal Sara seated across from me. For some, the thought of another six years of Chavista governance was intolerable, and someone had to protect the nation.

On the fourth of December Hugo Chávez ended the election with nearly sixty-three percent of the popular vote, gaining more support than in his two prior presidential races (Corrales & Penfold-Becerra 2007; Electoral 2007). That day no one came to rescue the middle-class nation from the clutches of the Chavista threat. Weeks after the election, I spoke with Sara. This time, she was not as animated as she had been when she advised me to prepare for the post-election coup. Relieved, I told her that I was happy that I had not yet found need for an emergency kit. “Yeah, I guess so. But now things will only get worse.” I asked her how a coup might be an improvement upon the situation, particularly if it undermined democratic processes. She responded: “Well, Chávez won the election by making promises—lying—to those people. They made a big mistake... he controls so much here in Venezuela that—well, we don’t have democracy anymore. For god’s sake, we don’t even have food.”

Middle-class denial of the election’s validity generally reflects “the notion

that democracy is not well served when elections favor candidates who galvanize social tensions and privilege the poor strata of the population” (Ellner & Tinker Salas 2007). Sara’s comments illustrate the ways in which she and many others in Chacao declared democratic processes illegitimate, justifying military intervention. For her, a coup would not constitute a challenge to legitimate political process, as she did not recognize Chavista governance as such. Although Hugo Chávez would continue to amass power in the following years, the president’s growing power was not in itself the primary concern for Sara. She was particularly worried because the President’s attacks upon the capitalist market economy affected the lifestyles of both Venezuela’s haves and have-nots. Her reference to food alludes to the government’s price fixing—a policy closely associated with the president’s notions of fairness (i.e., the cost of basic necessities ought not be out of reach for the majority of Venezuelans). The government threatened to punish businesses caught offering essential items such as meat, cheese, beans, and sugar at prices higher than the stipulated limit with nationalizing properties. The response of most vendors was to stop selling these items, as they could no longer profit legally.

The perception that middle-class *Caraqueños* would not be forced to suffer six more years of Chavista politics despite the overwhelming popular support the president garnered that December is telling of their conceptions of social worth within the nation-state. Although Chacao’s residents had perhaps grown to expect a response from a state in support of their potential plight, marginal *Caraqueño*

communities often encountered the state in vastly different ways. The increased presence of the police state in the lives of the capital's subjugated populations has accompanied the comfortable pursuit of liberties in middle-class spaces like Altamira and other the neighborhoods in Chacao. Ultimately, the state to which my neighbors pledged their allegiance would permit their economic liberty to flourish while sacrificing the civil and political freedoms of the less fortunate.

Though the silence of December 4, 2006 was an undoubtedly disappointing experience for many of my neighbors, the widespread belief held by the *Caraqueño* middle-class suggesting that the state would protect Chacao before serving the nearest *barrio* is not without basis. Often the images as well as sets of values and beliefs associated with nation represent populations such as the middle-class while omitting other members of the imagined community. While nationalism does not have to disrupt identifications based on social categories such as class or race, it creates fragile unities that are regularly challenged by the phenomenon's inability to include all members of the imagined community to the same extent (Dávila 1997; Hobsbawm 1992). Within class societies, state-sponsored nationalisms commonly incorporate middle-class populations to a greater extent than those of the working-class that challenge the status quo from marginal social positions (Thomas 2004).

Purchasing Power

Class hierarchy heavily influences Venezuelan social organization.

Possession of status symbols like expensive clothing, certain cars, and even race may determine one's access to public and private spaces, entry to particular communities, and even rights of full-fledged citizenship in some cases. Although immaterial markers of status such as race, speech, education, and profession play a large role in social positioning within *Caraqueño* class society, one of the primary ways that social rank is represented in daily *Caraqueño* life is through daily expressions of material wealth. Put simply, one can determine social value by estimating the individual's net worth. Notably, individuals must make their value legible to others. In order to claim middle-class privilege, demonstration of one's acquisition of preferred forms of social capital is essential. Thus, possession of status symbols and performances of class identity impact experiences of social and political belonging in varying ways in Caracas.

These social rules do not only apply within spaces firmly established as middle-class areas of the city. However, preferential treatment in areas like Chacao requires different performances of class status than many other parts of the city. For example, nightclubs frequented by working-class and middle-class *Caraqueños* may deny seating to customers unwilling or unable to buy liquor by the bottle. Ordering *el servicio* (full service) in some Central Caracas hangouts such as the popular El Maní permits customers the assistance of an employee who will occasionally add ice, rum, and a splash of coca-cola to the glasses at the table. Anyone else must stand where they can find appropriate space while sipping drinks

from the bar or remaining empty-handed. If customers sit at unoccupied tables without ordering *el servicio*, waiters routinely ask customers to leave the seat. While one's entry to this popular nightclub is not determined by the same parameters as some venues more commonly frequented by the middle-class in areas like Chacao and Las Mercedes, class markers do ensure preferential treatment in sites frequented by Caracas' working-class.

One evening I met with three working-class, Afro-Venezuelan friends to go to El Maní. We met at the Sabana Grande metro station, and walked to the club through the sparsely populated streets. Three of us were dressed in t-shirts and jeans. Luis, perhaps the most appropriately dressed of the four, wore a button-down white shirt. When we arrived, a large man at the door waved us in before we stepped into the dark, humid building. The club was crowded, but most people were packed onto the dance floor as a band played Salsa classics on the stage. As we entered, we stopped at the bar to order drinks after quickly perusing the packed room. Weaving through the standing bodies, we separated as we approached the dance floor. Within twenty minutes, the band stopped playing to take an intermission, and I searched for a chair.

I quickly found one of four unoccupied tables, chose a chair, and sat. Within moments my three companions joined me at the table before asking me what I thought of the club. Shouting over the stereo that had taken over the party,

everyone leaned toward the center of the circular table to join the conversation.

“This is a cool place, right? Now you get to see what Caracas has to offer,” shouted Luis. He wiped the sweat from his brow as the others sat back into their chairs, looking around the room and tapping rhythms on their laps.

“Excuse me, *Señores*, but you can’t sit here,” said a voice. A short, dark man with heavily gelled hair leaned over the table before speaking again. “This table is reserved. You can’t sit here.” We agreed to move before asking if the other seemingly unoccupied tables neighboring us were available. “No. They’re reserved.” The man left us to stand at the bar where he waited for seated customers to call him for service. Three of us stood with smirks. Luis, on the other hand, remarked that he was disappointed, but he had not come to El Maní to sit at a table. The four of us stayed at the club, and my friends did not appear bothered by the incident for long. Within minutes we all found dance partners, and for the rest of the night everyone stayed on their feet until El Maní ended the party.

At a later date, I accepted an invitation to go to the same club with a group that consisted of three middle-class *Caraqueños* and two friendly tourists from Switzerland and Australia. We agreed to meet at a friend’s apartment in Chacao before taking a taxi directly to El Maní. When we arrived, the same large man at the door greeted waved us all in. This time, the club was more crowded than before. Passing through the crowd, everyone used their elbows to pry open spaces to pass

between the dancing couples that overflowed from the dance floor. We found two unoccupied tables, and we sat. Within moments a man with a notepad approached, and explained that we had to order *el servicio* in order to claim the table. “And if we don’t want *el servicio*?” asked Lucero, the woman from Chacao who organized the meeting. The man responded, stating that we would have to leave the table for customers who would agree to the deal. After short deliberation, we agreed. The man quickly returned, placing a twenty-ounce bottle of coca-cola and a metal bucket containing ice and a .750ml bottle of rum on the table. He prepared our first drinks, and left for his station at the bar.

At some point that night, I asked Lucero why she had chosen El Maní rather than a place closer to her home in Chacao for the group. She stated that she wanted to have a good time without having to bother with the necessary preparation to get into and enjoy a club or a bar in a place like San Ignacio, a shopping mall in Chacao known for its exclusive nightlife. “Here, *el servicio* isn’t cheap, but this is a lot easier than having to wear the right clothes and spend a lot more money. I think it’s fun to go to those places. But if I go, I have to drink whisky, not rum.” In response, I asked her why she had mentioned whisky as an element in her outings in San Ignacio’s bars. She stated, “Whisky is more—you know. I mean, rum is more common. There are things people just don’t do in those places—things that you might do at home. Like, to drink a beer.”

The treatment that I received during these two trips to El Maní differed greatly. During my first trip I arrived with a group of Afro-Venezuelan men. Although others in the club were dressed similarly, we were casually attired. Because blackness in Caracas is often equated with lower-class status, it is very likely that our racial identifications aided in our identification as individuals who would not or could not order *el servicio*. Whether or not we would have agreed to pay the costly fee to sit was not likely, especially because Luis did not regularly drink alcohol. However, the employee that insisted that the table was reserved never made the option available either.

The second group with whom I appeared in El Maní included recently arrived tourists and middle-class *Caraqueños*. Although we were not as casually dressed as my friends and I had been in the earlier outing, the racial and national identifications of the group in the later trip was more notable. The Australian and Swiss tourists attracted curious looks from many when we entered El Maní, as they spoke to one another in English over the loud music. The man from Switzerland's skin was bright red from sunburn, and his blond hair stood out in the dim lights of the club. The Vietnamese-Australian woman wore a bright, traditional Vietnamese dress as a top over her jeans. Earlier that night the two middle-class *Caraqueñas* in the group admired the Australian woman's clothes for its exotic appeal, stating that they had never seen such a wonderful dress in Caracas. Regardless of the ways in which others would have read the *Caraqueños* and I individually in El Maní that

night, we accompanied two individuals that stood out in as tourists. Significantly, foreigners, especially those who are white or English speakers, stand out as a category of consumers with considerable amounts of money at their disposal. During this trip, we were greeted politely at a table, and presented with the option of asking for *el servicio*.

Lucero's comment regarding bars and clubs in San Ignacio further demonstrates the ways in which the expressions of class are closely associated with visible modes of consumption. She produces a short checklist of actions that she believed must occur in order to enjoy an outing in more exclusive locations. One of such measures includes the purchase of whisky, a choice of alcohol that stands in opposition to more common rums and beers. In her comparisons, she establishes the purchase and consumption of whisky with more upscale locations. She does not necessarily enjoy this drink more than others. However, its use is part of a set of social rules by which she navigates particular middle-classed spaces. Rum, on the other hand, is not associated with the same type of performance of class. In El Maní, the purchase of rum by the bottle means something very different than buying the drink one at a time. At the same time, its widespread availability makes it an unfavorable drink during Lucero's nights in San Ignacio. Alternatively, consumption of beer in these spaces affords individuals much less symbolic power. It may even render a customer undesirable in more elite locations.

In mainstream *Caraqueño* society one's ability to demonstrate wealth through ostentatious spending and presentation of material wealth is more socially valuable than mere ownership of property. Because *Caraqueño* social organization attributes a great deal of importance to these markers of class, the middle-class fear of Chavista politics stems from the close relationship between social status and material possession. The current government's socialist leanings pose a challenge to this form of social organization by potentially limiting contemporary middle-class Venezuelans' access to the symbols that they have most commonly utilized to occupy their social positions within the city. After the 2006 election Sara's boyfriend—a middle-class man in his late twenties— stated, “my father has friends who have to sell their [other] houses...they have to sell before Chávez takes them away, and he gives everything to the Chavistas.” I asked if they were worried that they would not be able to sell for a favorable price. He answered: “They will get fair prices, but nobody wants more bolivares (the national currency). There are two things you can do with them. The smarter option is to buy dollars. The other thing you can do is simply to spend it on trivial things (*tonterias*).”

When I asked why he had not considered saving the bolivares instead of spending them, he paused for a moment before answering:

Look, the bolivar isn't very stable. Here [in Venezuela] there is a lot of inflation. Everyday, the price of bread changes. But if I buy a nice house, its value shouldn't change as much as the bolivar. A lot of people spend money going out, but if you are going to try to save money, you have to buy dollars. The dollar is safer—even better if

you can find euros. And if you buy dollars, you can at least spend them when you travel outside of the country.

I asked if one might transfer all his money into dollars, but Sara and her boyfriend insisted that doing so would not make sense. “When people buy dollars, they want cash that they can bring with them when they leave. But you can’t go to the airport with a bag full of money, because you will get into trouble or someone will take [the money].” As I jotted notes, Sara excused herself for a moment. Her boyfriend told me that everyone bought dollars on the black market if they could afford to do so. However, he explained that the government imposed a limit on the number of dollars each Venezuelan can buy legally. “The money isn’t worth anything. Everyone works for the things that money buys.”

Sara’s boyfriend signaled toward preferred modes of investment in Venezuela when he made note of national currency as a medium of exchange. Because the value of the bolivar fluctuated widely, individuals preferred to accumulate forms of capital with value that would hold outside of Venezuela’s borders (such as US or European currencies). Also, limited assets within the country such as real estate were attractive to many Venezuelans. Unlike accumulating Venezuelan currency, saving dollars and euros, as well as holding real estate were the “smart” ways that middle-class Venezuelans invested their wealth. Although buying additional homes may have been out of reach for many families, the pursuit of dollars was a common practice for many of my neighbors that strove

to shop with fewer restrictive limits during holiday trips to places such as Miami and Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

Although the government had not stripped properties from this homeowner, the feared potential of socialist policy made some forms of ownership and material accumulation highly impractical. The president's role in nationalizing Venezuelan petroleum, and the government's willingness to oust transnational corporations from the nation's most lucrative industry illustrated the possibility of a state-enforced redistribution of wealth (2008). Although Chavista political rhetoric often includes talk of nationalizing private properties, in late 2006 middle-class property-holders had not seen their cars, real estate, and other possessions wrested from their hands. Nonetheless, many members of the *Caraqueño* middle-class began to liquidate their resources, converting valuable assets such as real estate into less favorable forms of value such as unstable domestic currency. They felt that it was necessary to do so before Venezuela became what many Venezuelans called, "the next Cuba."

Many middle-class *Caraqueños* not only saw Hugo Chávez's continuation of power as a threat to their economic lives. President Chávez also embodied a threat to middle-class symbolic survival. If display of material resources mediates access to middle-class privilege, the possibility of widespread loss of material wealth poses a problem for the middle-class as it currently exists. With the population incapable

of accessing the material resources necessary for navigating contemporary *Caraqueño* social hierarchy, its members face a challenge to the stability of their social identities. By threatening to disrupt the socioeconomic life of Venezuelan society, Chávez's reelection momentarily jeopardizes middle-class claims to preferential status.

Importantly, the threat of financial loss in itself is not cause for societal concern. For many self-proclaimed members of the *Caraqueño* middle-class, social position is already precarious. A lost job or an unforeseen expense could disrupt the financial and social stability of many individual families. However, uncertainties of this sort affect individuals and small groups without necessarily challenging class culture at large. For example, a former lawyer that was living in the streets and addicted to crack spoke with me about his fall from grace and the lack of concern from the middle class community from which he came. After losing his job, he said that his wife left him with their children when he was unable to pay for the family's apartment. He said that his friends and neighbors considered him unlucky, but after inviting him to drink beers and to complain about his situation, they returned to their lives without thinking of him. Although this man's downward mobility was a series of major events in his life, these types of small-scale changes do not threaten to force systemic adjustments in the way that the middle-class fear of Chavista political dominance did in late 2006. At that moment, many had to question the significance of their social positions as they imagined the most common modes of

occupying their cultural category suddenly out of reach.

The City Is Mine

Although the democratization of urban space has been an important goal for some *Caraqueños*, it has also been an extremely threatening development. Everyday talk in my neighborhood construed the sea of brown bodies in red t-shirts tumbling through the streets in support of Hugo Chávez in late 2006 as an act of transgression. Because of the Chavista occupation of the most traditional of public spaces—the streets—“the city [would appear] under siege, imperiled by spatial mutations and occupation by uncivil masses” (Prakash & Kruse 2008). The poor brought with them the slumification of the city. Essentially, the preservation of middle-class Caracas would mean the purging of the poor.

Nonetheless, the outcome of the election reflected the middle-class’ inability to reclaim the city. Hugo Chávez’s political strength laid in the mobilization of previously disenfranchised masses throughout Venezuela, and particularly in the capital. Many considered Greater Caracas an important location for the campaign’s success, as it comprises the most populated regions of the country. Notably, Caracas had become a prime location for the reinvestment of the nation’s oil money by implementing plans such as *Misión Negra Hipólita*, a diverse social program that utilizes public resources to improve material conditions for those living in abject

poverty³. Thus, poor *Caraqueño* voters were an important demographic for the 2006 Chavista electoral success. The Venezuelan capital was home to millions, and the leftist policies of the national government appealed to a large population within Greater Caracas. However, six more years of Chavista governance embracing social democratic policy was a strong point of contention for many in the middle-class, especially when Chavista discussions of citizens' rights seemed to contradict middle-class rights to privilege.

As I have been arguing, while Chavista political rhetoric embraces socialist principles that threaten to claim material possessions of the national elite and the middle-class, redistribution of wealth is not the only cause of widespread fear throughout my former neighborhood. Rather, the continuation of Chavista power and apparent popular acceptance of leftist notions of social justice attack the legitimacy of contemporary society's dependence upon class stratification. Although many individuals—not only the middle class—utilize demonstrable wealth to navigate Venezuelan social hierarchies, access to greater degrees of privilege is ultimately the result of their daily performances of social status. Venezuelan society is certainly not free of class hierarchy, but the popular embrace of these ideals and of a national leader who seemed to charismatically offer middle-class communities like Chacao to the eager *Caraqueño* masses demonstrated a rapid

³ Misión Negra Hipólita works with municipalities throughout the nation to provide services meant to improve the living conditions of Venezuelans living in poverty. Its projects include the construction of shelters, job training and placement, and even cultural programs meant to promote social justice and inclusion.

dismantling of the spatial policing of the city. As the working-class commuted to the parks and plazas in middle-class communities, many residents of Chacao between twenty-five and thirty years of age reminisced about times when they comfortably enjoyed locales such as Parque del Este without the menacing presence of poor people showing support for President Chávez .

During the months that I lived in this area of Eastern Caracas, Parque del Este was no more than a ten-minute walk from my building's entrance. Every weekend its crowds attracted vendors and their small carts selling a diverse selection of goods at the park's entrance. The expansive public space provided a welcoming space for recreational groups of many types. Normally, couples walked hand-in-hand, athletes jogged, and children rolled in the dirt during the day. On occasions, free performances took place. The park was almost always occupied when open, but it was rarely uncomfortably crowded. It contained grassy fields, concrete platforms, sheltering gazebos, tall trees, and small ponds. For many it offered an oasis of calm in an otherwise busy and chaotic city. Perhaps city streets commonly held clutter in the form of disposable cups, food wrappers, and soiled papers. However, Parque del Este stood in stark contrast with the surrounding city, as municipal employees meticulously maintained the aesthetic qualities of the carefully designed landscape (Berrizbeitia 2005). Although the park neighbored middle-class communities, it provided a space of leisure for people throughout the

city.

While people from across the city frequented the park, some neighbors complained of the regular presence of the Caracas' presumed poor. Importantly, residents of Chacao did not necessarily complain that other *Caraqueños* frequented their community. There were pockets of middle-class life outside of the area in question, and residents from these locations frequented the spaces of Chacao during periods of leisure. The presence of these *Caraqueños* did not inspire concern in my neighborhood. One such individual, Mia, informed me that I was lucky to find residence in the East of Caracas. She stated that it was a secure location with many nice places such as bars, restaurants, and shops to enjoy. In addition, I would not have to bother with crossing the city and its dangerous zones when traveling between home and many of the places she deemed appropriate to spend my free time. One evening in November I met with Mia and a group of her colleagues at the end of the workweek. They met at a bar situated above a tall hotel to share a bottle of whiskey and to talk about family, friends, and work. When I arrived Mia introduced me to the group, and the topic of conversation quickly shifted from upcoming travel plans to the US and Europe to Venezuelan politics. They agreed that I had come to Venezuela during difficult times, and that I would have been able to enjoy such a trip much more had I visited before Chávez had mustered so much support from his supposedly misinformed constituents.

Mia stated that she wished that the Chavistas would somehow disappear, as Venezuela could not free itself from his hold as long as the president had support. The others at the table agreed, offering anecdotes of recent confrontations with individuals that appeared to be Chavistas. Mia laughed for a moment before admitting:

If someone drives badly, I shout, “¡Chavista !” Really, whenever someone does something stupid or bad, we call him a Chavista . Usually you can tell who is a Chavista . Most of the people who have poor upbringing (*que no tiene educación*) are Chavistas . They don’t have any sense of civic duty, and they don’t think about what is best for Venezuela when they allow Chávez to buy votes with petroleum in Venezuela and around the world. They don’t realize the damage that they’re doing.

As Mia continued, she referenced the deterioration of Caracas’ public spaces while insisting Chavista culpability.

When I was younger Parque del Este was nice. Good people used to go there all the time. Every weekend I would go with my sister. These days the park is a mess. Have you been there yet? Well, you shouldn’t. Nobody goes anymore. It’s a dangerous place now. It used to be nicely cared for, but now it is falling apart. In the US people think that Latin America is a jungle, but Venezuela is one of the most developed countries [in the region]. Now *los monitos* (the little monkeys)—that’s what we call them sometimes—are destroying Venezuela with Chávez .

The lack of recognition of the *Caraqueño* working-class and poor in Mia’s recollection of Parque del Este signals toward the social invisibility of a politically impotent sector of the city’s population. The political environment of 2006 had granted the working-class a degree of mobility outside of the social margins of the

past. Though the poor had not escaped their socioeconomic status, local and national authorities were not keeping *los pobres* “where they belonged.” Because President Chávez and his popular politics produced an especially frightening and visible poor citizenry, they had driven the middle-class nation into its homes to ensure security and order.

In addition, Mia’s comments illustrate the racialization of class and politics in Caracas. In addition, the racist undertones of her reference to Chavistas as monkeys returning Venezuelan civilization to a primitive state typify a notion of the classed city. Routinely, my middle-class informants deemed the Chacao and its public spaces inappropriate spaces for the presence of working-class and poor *Caraqueños*. Of course, the working poor that entered the community every day played a productive role, which local residents acknowledged. However, leisurely bodies of color increasingly inspired middle-class concern as Chavista political rhetoric challenged Venezuelan social hierarchies.

Although Mia stated that “nobody” goes to Parque del Este these days, the steady flow of *Caraqueños* into this recreational space throughout the week suggests otherwise. Her comment, however, does raise questions regarding conceptions of social worth in the communities to which she belongs. In addition, the meticulous care of the park does not indicate a state of deterioration or an urban return to nature, as she suggested. Importantly, the famed landscape designer, Roberto Burle

Marx, designed the urban Parque del Este and many other parks and gardens throughout the world with a nature-based aesthetic (Montero & Burle Marx 2001). In addition, since the early 1960s *Caraqueños* have enjoyed the park as a reserve of sorts within an urban world of steel and concrete. In other words, the park's presentation of a cultivated form of nature has always been an aesthetic concern since its planning stages in the late 1950s. The presence of supposed Chavistas in this so-called space of nature invite criticism of the very aesthetic elements that inspire praise from the many who still choose to frequent this public space.

While Mia spoke, two of her older coworkers squirmed in their seats uncomfortably when she admitted to calling Chavistas monkeys. None argued with her, but Mia's companions displayed their discomfort as they looked toward me, and quickly turned away. Their looks were possibly silent protests. This may have been a moment of embarrassment. Either way, Mia's racist remark had exposed an idea that the others would rather have kept from me. There is a possibility that some of the individuals present that night knew that due to this racialization of politics, many would easily be confuse me for a Chavista during my stay in Caracas. Moreover, this possibility had been confirmed earlier that evening before I joined them, as I was denied entry to the bar prior to uttering a few words in English that transformed me from an undesirable into a *gringo* with access to the lounge overlooking Chacao.

Inheritance and Meritocracy

Ultimately, many middle-class *Caraqueños* emerged from their homes, attempting to live life as usual. Within weeks costly celebrations of Christmas and the New Year carried many of my neighbors to the malls, outside of the city, and outside of the country. I decided to take a similar approach for the holidays, and I left Caracas. After a taking three bus rides with my knees pressed against the backs of the seats in front of me, I arrived in a small beach town called Santa Fe. While walking along the beach, I walked past a middle-age couple seated outside of a rented beach property. We began a friendly conversation after they mentioned the great pleasure of leaving their city home for a chance to enjoy a calm and quiet vacation outside of Caracas. As I slowed to a stop, the woman seated in a seemingly unstable folding chair situated at the edge of the nearby concrete pathway leaned forward to ask, “Where are you from?” I told her that I was from the US, but was living in Caracas.

She quickly took the opportunity to tell me that Venezuela is a wonderful country, but that today the people are living through a crisis. “It’s Chávez’s fault that things are like this today,” she said in a louder voice. “He wants to take what we have worked so hard to get, just to give it away. That’s socialism, *oiste* (did you hear)? But everyone should work for what they get” she exclaimed. “I understand that it is hard for poor people who work too, but they can’t just take from the people with money. You know, the problem with socialism is that they want to give

everybody the same thing—as though I am any common worker, but I’m a professional. *¡Soy profesional!*,” she said as she rearranged her hair before settling into her chair again. She paused for a moment, but then decided that “it might be alright to make sure the poor can eat,” as she noted that inflation is a major problem. “If you have a bad job or no job, I don’t know how you can survive without living in the countryside.” Her husband nodded in agreement as he covered his red face with a straw hat. “But Chávez is horrible,” he added.

The comments of the vacationers—the professional and her husband—show how some members of the *Caraqueño* middle-class negotiated the losses of the middle-class during the election. The professional refused to undergo the traumatic withdrawal from the social category of the middle-class regardless of the recent reminder of its instability in the new Bolivarian state. Also, she rejected the association with the common *obrero* (worker). While her comments began with a critique of socialism’s approach toward the redistribution of wealth, she quickly shifted her argument. If the government were to seize economic capital that she and her progenitors accumulated, perhaps she could tolerate sharing. She had already begun to come to terms with that possibility. After all, she knew of the working poor’s struggle to survive in the capital. She considered the naturalization of property an unjust act by the state, but “giving everybody the same thing” implied the loss of something immaterial as well.

The elevated status of the common worker accompanied the devaluation of professionals like herself. Perhaps pay vaguely reflected the more profound problem with this socialist plan, but her ability to live life in the capital as she had come to expect would end. Caracas would no longer be the familiar city she had learned to see with privileged eyes. Perhaps her street would become more crowded. Maybe the people she learned to fear would move into a neighboring apartment. What if she became like the person she most feared? The professional grew irate as she imagined the *obrero* praised and rewarded alongside her for his work. The fundamental difference between the two classes of people, as far as she was concerned, was that she rightfully earned her prestigious status. The unworthy working class subject had not—his exclusion from the middle-class served as evidence of his lack of merit. As she clung to her professional rank, her determination of the injustice inherent to Bolivarian notions of social equality largely stemmed from the naturalization of class hierarchy in Venezuelan society.

Fundamentally, democracy had become an obstacle to middle class liberty (Einhorn 2006). By its apparent attempt to grant all citizens the same rights, the state had alienated many members of Caracas' middle-class. On one hand, contemporary Venezuelan democracy called for grassroots participation in order to legitimate social and political processes. On the other, middle-class notions of belonging, rights, and natural order called for the social and political subordination of a lower class in order to maintain the significance of the collective identities in

question. Not only did this incompatibility between competing notions of order (the way things ought to be) justify middle-class fear of the possibility of successful social democracy in Venezuela. It also exposed the construction of privilege itself as a middle-class right. Many interpreted the election results of December 3, 2006 as a step in the direction of equality and the expansion of universal rights, but for many residents of Chacao this day represented a moment of a loss of exclusivity.

Although the Chavista government began work to institutionalize its ideological position by drafting a new constitution in 1999, the popularization of socialist rhetoric and the spatial transgressions of the poor in middle-class space made social and political change appear underway. The 1999 constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela sought to outline a relationship between the state and society in which liberty, justice, equality, and democracy function cooperatively within the nation-state (Haro G & Romero Martínez 2000). In doing so, the document outlines a commitment to social, economic, and political rights of citizens that attempted to remedy common forms of disenfranchisement within the new Bolivarian state. However, many middle-class claims upon state and society utilize logic that does not mesh with contemporary notions of equality and liberty in Venezuelan society.

While contemporary political rhetoric amongst the Chavista majority commonly references and validates socialist ideas, the ideological dominance of

Venezuela's moneyed elites continues to urge individuals and communities across class lines to seek full social acceptance on terms imposed by traditions of liberalism. Although this ideology associates class privilege with merit, the means of upward social mobility are not available to all. Thus, despite efforts to ascend social hierarchies, most individuals never succeed. This ideological stance represents privileged members of society as deserving recipients of beneficial treatment. Denying recognition of the histories of exclusion and exploitation on which class privilege depends, middle-class notions of Venezuelan meritocracy conceal inequality. The resulting notions of justice naturalize class hierarchy. In doing so, political and social structures organized around a notion of equality—like those proposed by Chavista political rhetoric—constitute a threat to middle-class culture.

Of course, not all middle-class residents of Chacao reacted to President Chávez's electoral win with fear and claims of illegitimacy. However, the diversity of political opinion within Caracas' middle-class was not easily perceptible surrounding the time of the highly charged election. During the electoral race, most vocalized perspectives regarding Venezuelan politics were quite polarized. Although, some members of the political opposition wholeheartedly supported Manuel Rosales, the majority of those who spoke with me simply wished to see President Chávez ousted from office. Very rarely did my neighbors attempt to explain to me why Rosales might have been the better candidate in the race. Rather, they frequently listed reasons for why Venezuelans and members of the

international community ought to fear President Chávez .

Chacao and other middle class communities were and continue to be important spaces for the political opposition, but there are middle-class Chavistas. I did not encounter any that lived in Chacao . Some self-identified middle-class *Caraqueños* showed support for President Chávez . Most of these individuals lived in less affluent areas of the city, where the geographic and social borders between class communities were not as clearly defined as in Chacao. On occasion, I encountered Chavistas from middle-class backgrounds that were students and faculty at academic institutions such as the Central University of Venezuela (UCV). Nevertheless, many of these individuals explained that the UCV—Venezuela’s flagship university—and many other universities were spaces dominated by middle-class presence. In the following months, student organizations emerged as significantly vocal civic groups for the opposition in ongoing political debate in Caracas and throughout Venezuela.

Fundamentally, as Caracas’ middle-class struggled to legitimate claims to their relative privilege in late 2006, they illustrated the precarious nature of their social position. Although the election may not have brought about significant material changes in the lives of most *Caraqueños*, many members of the middle-class spoke as though the world as they knew it were on the verge of destruction. This, however, is not a new development. The precariousness of the middle-class and

other communities of relative privilege is an ongoing phenomenon in Venezuela and abroad (Allison 2006; Richard 1984). In the colonial period the Spanish colonial officials and subordinate groups such as Blacks and zambos terrorized the city's elite. Today members of the middle-class such as residents of Chacao articulate social threat through the agents of President Chávez and poorer *Caraqueños*. In these cases, individuals and families have taken defensive positions in order to resist a forceful evacuation of their changing social categories. Rendering defunct collective identities such as Caracas' planter elite does not enact the same type of violence as militarized purging of a social group. However, my neighbors in Chacao illustrated the ways in which social and physical threats became difficult to distinguish as they struggle over space, material ownership, and ideological power.

Making sense of a historical moment like this poses some difficult questions for anthropologists, as well as for the individuals who are living them. As the reelection of president Chávez urged what seemed to be an entire city to political action, many middle-class beliefs regarding the nature of rights, privilege, and class identity were thrown into doubt. The daily negotiations of urban space and social relations that *Caraqueños* undergo on a daily basis consistently force negotiation of social identity to take new forms. Regular and infrequent events such as elections, outings to a city park, and festive celebrations all drive the discursive changes that provide the terrain for future social organization as well as political alliance in

Venezuela's ongoing project of democracy.

4. *Caraqueño* Publics and the Confederitization of a City

Finally I would stop sweating. Claudia waved to the *vigilante*¹ as he watched a small television in the guard station, never glancing toward the window between us. We shared an awkward handshake before she led me from the sunny lot to the staircase where she emerged just moments ago. After we greeted each other, she asked a few routine queries, and started walking into the shade. The first moments of interaction included rhetorical questions that I attempted to answer as seriously as possible. I wanted to keep silence from preventing the ease of the meeting yet to begin. Immediately, she spat out questions that simply seemed to test the presence of company more than anything else: “¡Que calor! ¿No?” On a hot day like this one, the answer was obvious, but I still responded. The game lasted only for a moment longer before everyone involved had obviously lost interest. When we reached the bottom of the steps I enjoyed the slight breeze passing through the dusty gray parking garage that stood between the bright opening we had just crossed and the large apartment buildings now to my front. Claudia crossed her arms and forcefully exhaled before she flipped open the springy top of her cellular phone. She excused herself for a moment, and dialed.

After twenty minutes of dialing and pacing she led me into a small room adjacent to the parking structure’s exit. We quickly pulled apart the chairs that were stacked in the corner opposite the door, arranging them around a heavy table.

¹ security guard

While we prepared the room, the tight enclosure began to fill with a small energetic crowd. Moments later we were sitting at the table, and the room's chatter grew quiet.

"Meeting with consejo communal" was the first line I wrote before placing my notebook on the table. I quickly scribbled the date, as I calmed my nerves. I felt out of place, exceptionally foreign. The room was cold, only containing stacks of chairs, a few tables, and us. We sat in a concrete enclosure with an air conditioner unit closing out the warmth and light from outside. I sat alone at one end of a wide table while six stern faces stared at me. They waited, and I struggled to think despite my distractions. Was it really this cool in the room? Is there a reason why the concrete walls seemed to create such distance between my seat and the sun beating on the pavement outside? I tried not to fidget noticeably while adjusting my position in the white plastic chair. For a moment I hated the florescent lights forming rows along the ceiling. Their bland, cold light only brought my attention to the pair of tiny square windows squeezing out the warm sunlight from the open parking lot. The legs of my plastic seat seemed to slightly bow under my weight as I shifted my weight, leaning forward to speak. After sucking in a deep breath, words spilled from my mouth more refined than I anticipated. Quickly, I reached for the voice recorder on the table, pressing the red button before I could lose treasured words to my memory and the poor handwriting in the pages of my notebook. If things were to as hoped, I would only need to speak for a short time before they

would volunteer all the material that I came prepared to ask.

On that warm February day in Caracas I found myself surprised to enter a cold chamber that would quickly reveal itself as an important space of *Caraqueño* public life. Before arriving I had crossed the city, squeezing myself through tight spaces between moving bodies in the streets, on busses, and in the metro. As I passed moved through them, public spaces of the city appeared as chaotic and full of life as usual, despite governmental attempts to order them. The night before I made my way to the cold subterranean room in the outskirts of Caracas, I prepared questions for the day to come. However, on the hot bus *en route* to my meeting I scribbled new ideas and questions in the small notebook that would accompany me until its pages would fill themselves at a later date. I now questioned how the animated bodies and clamoring voices in Caracas' streets, parks, and plazas negotiate power in order to make claims upon the city, the nation-state, and the social belonging necessary to legitimate other demands. How might this be possible in a city grossly divided by fear, violence, and class in the midst of a rapidly changing political structure that threatens to upset prior systems of meaning foundational to Caracas? How do the capital's citizens negotiate belonging in a city they find difficult to occupy?

At this point, I had witnessed the transformation of a number of public spaces in the time that I had spent in Venezuela. Even during my short stay in 2009 I saw the rapid changes in the broad main streets of Eastern Caracas during the

mobilizations for the referendum approved by a majority in February. Certainly, marches and other momentary gatherings transformed spaces throughout the city. Citizens in red shirts claimed central Caracas, as men constructed tent-like structures that would provide comforting shade for what looked like conference panels in the street. Still, the organized political voices of individual communities remained hidden from me as I walked through public spaces. I would regularly hear individuals in small groups complaining or praising Chavista policies throughout the city. However, the organization of a public voice was often lacking as groups spoke privately in open spaces of the city. Where, then, does public debate occur when the *periodistas*² and cameramen leave the streets? Who has the power to debate, speak, and evoke changes in whole communities without an invitation to Chávez' weekly television program, *Alo Presidente*³?

In February that year, I found an answer to the aforementioned questions in the cold concrete room below the first level of a residential parking lot. I was surprised to find that many functional spaces of public life in Caracas would defy the spatial organization of classic modern urbanism in order to work toward the ideals of a contemporary political life. As this process takes place in the capital, groups of

² journalist

³ *Alo Presidente* is a weekly television program hosted by President Chávez, and aired nationally. The general format for the show is that the president calls upon local officials to answer his questions publicly. There, he speaks of the glories and goals of the Bolivarian revolution with skillful improvisation. In addition, Chávez is known for publicly attributing blame for many political, social, and economic problems in Venezuela on the show.

Caraqueños utilize diverse strategies while attempting to establish more control over their daily lives.

While President Hugo Chávez and the national government regularly refer to the Bolivarian Revolution and the pursuit of socialist democracy, local politicized bodies such as *consejos comunales*, or neighborhood councils, illustrate some of the common ways in which the flexibility and the penetration of the state's official network may grant communities greater degrees of autonomy within the state's institutionalizing structure. Through this process self-defining communities may transform spaces that many *Caraqueños* associate with quotidian life into fertile grounds of political change. The production of neighborhood councils and other local collective entities illustrate the politicization of daily life, where many of the ideals of a Bolivarian Caracas may materialize.

In this chapter I argue that active citizenship requires individuals' participation in public life and public action in order to make political and social participation a part of regular life. Starting with a discussion of citizenship and civic life, I examine the different ways in which these terms of belonging structure depend on one another. In the rest of the chapter, I examine the role of local political organization in a pair of working-class communities.

First, I focus on a neighborhood council in a community in the South of the capital. Here, I illustrate how *consejos comunales* permit *Caraqueños* that considered themselves to be formerly excluded citizens to gain access to power

while they define the social and spatial limits of “official community,” as defined by the state. In the last part of the chapter I concentrate on informal groups that address the exclusions engendered by the neighborhood councils. While these two types of political structures played an important role in providing local access to the public arena, the organizing strategies of the latter half of the chapter utilized space in different ways than the *consejo communal* did. These differences, in turn, permitted local people—particularly those not included in processes of the neighborhood councils—to participate in the production of public space and public debate. Ultimately, this chapter argues that local organizations are largely responsible for providing possibilities of active citizenship throughout the city. Although I insist that these groups produce spaces of citizenship, they are accepting of only particular people. Thus, individuals find that spaces of citizenship are often limited to local communities in which they are recognized as contributing members.

Citizenship and Civic Life

The vocabularies used to articulate belonging in the modern nation-state permit discussion to approach different overlapping spaces regarding political subjectivity within Caracas. By analyzing the ways in which individuals articulate these languages of politicized being it becomes possible to examine interconnected modes of existence that *Caraqueños* occupy simultaneously. My focus on citizenship and the formation of publics in the capital focuses on the strategies used by individuals and groups in order to access a public voice, political representation and,

legal rights.

To begin, the citizen finds himself engaged in a relationship with state and society driven by historical and cultural processes that produce imagined communities such as the nation (Anderson 1991). Large, diverse, and hierarchical, these imagined communities link its members at the scale of the nation or even the city despite cultural, social, and economic differences—many of which, people may experience as social inequality. While the citizen is classically a legal designation establishing a relationship of obligation between members of citizenry and state, its production of the universalized subjectivity of citizen stands at odds with the hierarchical nature of the imagined communities to which he belongs (Trouillot 2001). The limitations of this notion of citizenship are clearly noted by popular recognition of differing degrees of privilege and variable recognition of rights. While the inconsistencies of belonging in the nation state come to fruition through legal and social exchanges, the symbolic work underlying these events evidences tiers of citizenship (Flores & Benmayor 1997; Rosaldo 2003; Sahlins 2004). Thus, because we are left uncertain of the limits of this form of belonging, it becomes important to question who really counts, and how much marginalized populations count in social systems that regularly render selected groups illegitimate and invisible within the institutional and social structures of the nation-state (Krysan & Lewis 2004; Kymlicka & Norman 2000).

Importantly, the rights of the citizen—which in liberal democratic societies

are not to be confused with promises—are an important element of the relationship between individuals, populations, and the nation-state. The possession of and access to rights are two vastly different conditions within neoliberal states. While pre-modern constructions may have produced a racialized citizenship as a thing possessed by birthright, the modern liberal state commonly presents citizenship as something to bestow or withdraw (Butler 2004; Grant 1987). Moreover, modern citizens are often permitted sets of liberties, but individuals bear the responsibility of exercising these rights in order to benefit from them. For those unable to access these privileges, citizenship remains a theoretical and abstract offer—a fantasy that remains out of reach so long as action cannot bring it to fruition (Carrera et al 2009; Dagger 1997; Spinner-Halev 1994). Despite the efforts of contemporary Venezuelan political leaders to produce a socialist and Bolivarian state, the language of citizenship is one born of liberal political thought. Thus, the very convention of citizenship is defined by the inconsistencies of an impossible offer from state to subject.

Moreover, citizenship is further complicated when approached as a moral obligation that states have to people. Although globalization has changed the way that the state relates towards mobile citizens outside of its sovereign territories, this contemporary process also urges us to direct attention toward transnational subjects who are non-citizens residing within its borders (Ong 1999; 2003). While we speak of this socio-legal construct as obligation, it is made formal for only some

living under the power of the nation-state. While the Chavista state regularly utilizes moralizing political rhetoric to support foreign and domestic policies as Venezuela emerges as a powerful leftist state in Latin America, those not protected by the legal distinctions of citizenships within its borders are left asking how the ethics of belonging continue to exclude.

While citizenship occupies symbolic and legal space in this discussion of belonging in modern state societies, public life enables an alternate articulation of membership, as individual and collective agency greatly determines the production of a discursive economy within the modern nation-state (Benhabib 1992; Habermas 1989). Although public discourse may not always support state apparatuses, public opinion can potentially drive political action. Because the production of this voice necessitates the meeting of private citizens and the formation of a public, the spatial organization of urban space is of significant concern. Individuals congregating within a particular discursive arena are capable of discussing ideas, common concerns, and potential resolutions. However, the physical locations of such acts greatly determine the composition of publics throughout a city partitioned by geographic distance, class segregation, and other potentially dividing social factors. Furthermore, the various modes of community production and policing borders in Caracas make many traditional public spaces of the city particularly unwelcoming to many *Caraqueños*. As the public spaces most associated with power in the capital become less accessible to many of the city's residents, marginalized groups

negotiating belonging find innovative ways to organize and gain visibility throughout the capital (Asen & Brouwer 2001; Collective 1995).

One of my primary interests here, then, is to analyze membership and ways of belonging as defined within *Caraqueño* communities. While experiencing belonging in state-sponsored community is an exclusive privilege, for many *Caraqueños* the possibility of accessing the rights of citizenship is made possible through more localized modes of belonging and political participation. While citizenship dominates popular discourse regarding belonging in modern state societies, the official terms of citizenship are not sufficient for many Venezuelans unsatisfied with the lived experience of marginality. Importantly, the commonality of this condition poses a challenge to the concept of the citizen, as it implies a universalizing effect upon groups wherein all its members theoretically count. In reality, one's legal status as citizen does not always translate into *de facto* social and political participation within the nation-state. However, if people express and produce collective identities through social and cultural processes, democratic societies place a great deal of importance on civic participation in the construction of the citizen. For many *Caraqueños* involvement in civil society may bridge the gap between the individual and the promises that the state offers its citizens. Essentially, civic life becomes the strategy through which individuals may access rights, and realize the promises of the Bolivarian state. There are a number of ways that people attempt to meet this goal of civic engagement in Caracas. I focus on two

types of civic organization that have greatly affected the ways in which *Caraqueños* experience belonging and rights to the city, even if in very localized manners. Through the city's *consejos comunales* and what I call corner publics, everyday modes of practicing citizenship may become accessible to many of Caracas' residents in ways that are not possible with infrequent, but formal rituals such as voting.

To clarify, our understandings of *Caraqueño* civic interventions should not be limited to the infrequent and momentous events that often frame popular notions of historical chronology. While these grand, memorable events that grant meaning to histories do important work in popular conceptions of time and historical progress, there are innumerable events that are both consequential and mundane in which we take part. In Caracas routine acts taking place throughout the city form the basis of a daily political life that renders groups with disparate political, economic, and social goals visible in a city wherein race, class, and ethnicity—among other factors—continue to determine access to the most recognizable public spaces of the capital. The result is an urban network populated by many, but accessible to few.

Participatory Democracy and Exclusion

Many *Caraqueño* communities navigate daily political life by forming local civic groups that grant their members access to privileges ranging from material resources to a public forum. In some cases these groups may become part of the state apparatus, particularly as the Chavista political machine seeks strategies to

establish power throughout its popular base. Since April 2006 the formation of the *consejos comunales*, or neighborhood councils, has become one of the most visible examples of the Chavista government's push toward grassroots democracy and a promotion of *poder popular*⁴. By 2009 communities throughout Venezuela have become accustomed to this distinct form of civic organization to negotiate a shift in the relationships between private citizens and the nation state. As individuals are included in the work of the *consejo comunal* familiar faces of the community become those representing the Bolivarian state.

On February 11, 2009 I sat in a sparsely furnished room with six members of a *consejo comunal* from a community on the outskirts of Caracas. After getting settled, we quickly delved into a conversation fluctuating between serious contemplation of contemporary Venezuelan politics, friendly jokes, and party planning. Claudia, Oscar, Melissa, Laura, Elizabeth and Yaneth had begun to take an interest in the conversation as I explained my interest in local political participation and *Caraqueño* democracy. When I asked them to explain the general task of the *consejo comunal*, Claudia answered enthusiastically:

The *consejo comunal* is really a form of power that the people can utilize at the micro level. So, what are the tasks of the *consejo comunal*? To solve the problems of the community...First, we identify issues. Next, we work to find solutions with the help of the residents

⁴ Explain Poder popular here.

of the community... But the *consejo comunal* came about with the passing of a law meant to deal with some of the prior problems of governance. The state or the municipalities, they normally come from above to make changes for a *pueblo* without the power to do so. On the other hand, the constitution that we approved in 1999 gives people the power to decide what the problems are and to solve them on our own or by requesting resources directly from the state.

GHC: How does the *consejo comunal* represent a departure from previous relationships between citizens and the state?

Claudia: The *consejo comunal* has empowered us. It gives us a way to do as much as we can for the community. We have gone into our own pockets to get the money to undertake the work happening in the community. We only hope that in the future this work will be undertaken by more people.

Laura: Yes! It's just that this is so new.

Claudia: That's right. And we're learning as a community as we do this work. It's really interesting, and its beautiful to see because now the people are more connected to the government and politics.

Laura: That's a really important part, the connection with the government.

Claudia: And it's more than that. As people learn more about the

process, they seem to come together more as a community. That's why we call this "power of the people." Its interesting because for the first time in my life—since I was a little girl I have asked myself how could I ever get closer to someone like a governor. You know, so I could to tell him that there are so many negative things on television. For example, the bad influences that only provoke violence. It promotes so many false values, and there are so many people who are left feeling powerless. But recently I started to see that with the help of *consejos comunales* we are connecting with each other. Many feel that they have no ability to relate with anyone because they feel disconnected... And the people—they have been expressing their restlessness. Being a part of the *consejo comunal* seems to calm the anxiety and the impotence that people were feeling as citizens.

Throughout this short exchange, Claudia and Laura state the importance of a direct relationship between state and community. While their newfound ability to establish contacts with powerful government officials such as President Chávez and near-by governors means a great deal to them, the *consejo comunal's* ability to expand social and political networks at the local level have changed the way that communities may understand their status within the nation-state. Today Claudia and Laura feel empowered. Not only do they see themselves as individuals who matter

enough to form relationships with high-ranking political officials. In addition, they see their work with the *consejo comunal* as a way to empower marginalized citizens in the community. In this conversation they do not offer an inventory of material gains resulting from their work with the *consejo comunal*. Rather, the resulting interconnectedness of individuals in community, and the awareness of this newfound power to affect change within and beyond the neighborhood council's borders are some of the new possibilities that people recognize as results of *consejos comunales*.

GHC: How might *consejos comunales* aid people who are looking for ways to claim the rights of citizenship? I mean, are people negotiating with city governments and the state to find ways to feel that they are really a part—

Claudia: People are working with all the levels of government, and the *consejo comunal* does a lot to make regular people a part of things.

GHC: So, how do the *consejos comunales* facilitate a relationship between individuals, communities, and the state?

Oscar: Look. If someone wants access to a neighborhood like el 23 de Enero, they can do it with help from *consejos comunales* in the area. You understand? I mean, many other people may not be able to go because they wouldn't [be] safe. But to answer your question, the *consejos comunales* open doors [to communities].

Laura: From the start we were told that we have to make this process that we're undertaking available to everyone. For a long time people have said that the petroleum is for everyone, but this is the first time [leadership] has bothered... to help us at the bottom... you know, us people who don't have much. I even tell my kids about this—how I've never in my 63 years seen a president concerned with the poor. You know, Venezuela is a rich country, but now he's trying to distribute the money.

Oscar: These days people realize that the *consejos comunales* are really working to help with the minor local problems in the community. Now we don't have to wait for a corrupt municipality or the governor to do something for us. Since *consejos comunales* are becoming obligatory, communities see that they have to work for themselves. That's why it's so important that people participate. They have to work to resolve their problems with the resources that are available.

For Oscar and Laura, the induction of the *consejo comunal* marks a moment in Venezuelan history where they—Caracas' working-class—feel included in the city's public life. Importantly, this sense of inclusion of which they speak is both local and national. They state that more people within the community are working together to improve living conditions within the neighborhood. At the same time,

the works of *consejos comunales* have changed the relationship between each community and the nation-state, as each neighborhood council may operate with a degree of autonomy. Not only do *consejos comunales*, a new political concession, provide a way for individuals to approximate themselves to the state. They also present a new means for civic engagement in the communities they serve. Because of these groups, civic action has a direct relationship with the conditions of one's local community. Although the work carried out by these groups is public, the commonly intended outcomes are small-scale and local.

Unlike many of Caracas' larger politicized bodies, these civic groups formed around this state apparatus work at much smaller scale than those whose goals are to organize masses throughout the nation or the city. In fact, large-scale action is not a goal of the *consejo comunal*.

GHC: I have some trouble keeping track of all the borders between communities... especially when there are two communities that look the same to me. But there are also places where neighboring communities are politically at odds. Could these places share the same *consejo comunal*? Do *consejos comunales* play a role in drawing these borders?

Claudia: In a way they do. Each *consejo comunal* claims the territory of the community. In the case of these communities that have very different political goals, they are guaranteed to have different *consejos*

comunales.

GHC: But does the *consejo comunal* play a role in marking that border?

Claudia: Well, yes. Each *consejo comunal* has jurisdiction over a geographic zone.

Oscar: But when the *consejo comunal* meets everyone has to go.

People from the middle-class, the working-class... everyone is supposed to meet together.

GHC: *So how are the communities defined?*

Claudia: The community decides for itself. For example in this neighborhood, there are between 200-400 families that can be a part of this community...so of course, there are big neighborhoods that are divided by the laws defining the *consejo comunal*. In that case, each council will establish its limits between this street and that street... So the people have to know the limits of their *consejo comunal*. But there can be more communities than *consejos comunales* as groups unite because there are cases where people are dealing with the same problems.

GHC: *So communities can split and join if people want?*

Laura: Absolutely! But even when we work together it is important that each community have its own *consejo comunal*. For example, the *barrio* just up the hill has different needs than we do.

Claudia: They have problems with access to basic things

Laura: Things like power and potable water.

GHC: What are the limits of this *consejo comunal*, and geographically where do these problems we're talking about end?

Laura: We work within this apartment complex.

Claudia: Exactly! This *consejo comunal*'s territory covers all these buildings in the complex.

Eventually Yaneth—who had been quiet most of this meeting—announced that she had to leave to meet her daughter, a student at the Universidad Central de Venezuela. We all said our goodbyes, and I thanked her for meeting with me. She gave a final wave to the group before she turned to exit. As the door closed Laura leaned toward me to quietly inform me of Yaneth's political affiliations. "She is with the opposition," she said quietly. "But she lives here with us in this complex."

Claudia: There are more of them here too—I mean, people with the opposition. They're still part of the *consejo comunal*. Her specific job is to administrate resources for the maintenance of these buildings. If there is a problem with a service in the building, she is the one to see.

Laura: But you can see that we have tried to integrate people from the political opposition too. There are quite a few of them.

Importantly, *consejos comunales* are not necessarily the primary organizing forces defining communities within residential areas. They do, however, require

that the community fit neatly within governmental policy, producing manageable social and geographic units produced by state power. Communities cannot grow uncontrolled, like many would believe the city already has. People may leave a community, but to do so without the ability to formally register as a new community makes the positions of some individuals particularly precarious. On one hand, members of the community feel as though they belong for the first time in their lives. Those who belong may express their ideas, and they can act to affect change within in their neighborhoods. As long as one remains a recognized member, (s)he can expect to act as a beneficiary of the community's work. While this style of sociopolitical organizing illustrates new modes of participation in *Caraqueño* democratic life, the communities defined by the neighborhood councils are not egalitarian spaces. Power permeates the communities, and the sociopolitical life of the larger imagined communities encompassing these local groups contributes to the possibilities for navigating local social life. Even though these newly articulated communities are sites of increased access to state power, democratic participation, and social inclusion for many, changing power relations may produce new forms of marginality.

While the majority of the members of this *consejo comunal* declared themselves Chavista s, the community is not politically homogeneous by any means. Although Yaneth was present for much of the day's meeting, she rarely spoke. She did not reveal her reasons for doing so, but the others in the meeting expressed

their political opinions passionately, praising President Chávez and the leftist agenda of the Chavista government. The Chavistas outnumbered Yaneth, and her opinions remained largely unknown by the end of the meeting. She was likely uncomfortable with my presence. She did not know me, and many of the political opposition's supporters expressed fear of the possibility of violence through silence. This was particularly the case in the presence of people they did not know and trust.

Despite her politics, Yaneth was a participating member of the *consejo comunal*. In addition, she oversaw an important task in the community. However, something kept her from participating in this gathering. Melissa, a Cuban woman who had lived in the neighborhood for over fifteen years, was not very active in the meeting either, but Claudia and Laura drew her into the discussion when questions regarding immigrant participation in the *consejo comunal* arose. Yaneth, despite her silence and possible discomfort with my presence, stayed at that afternoon's meeting for over an hour. After Yaneth's departure, Laura exposed her as a political outsider in an overwhelmingly Chavista neighborhood. Despite the *consejo comunal's* welcoming gestures and government policies calling for popular support and participation, power within the community produces its others—those who will find obstacles to participation in the *poder popular*.

Significantly, membership in communities defined by a *consejo comunal* is defined by a sense of local belonging and civic duty. In addition, many *Caraqueño* neighborhoods are transnational communities where large immigrant populations

have settled. Although many other immigrant groups call Venezuela's capital their home, everyday *Caraqueño* rhetoric makes note of the city's foreign-born communities. While *Caraqueño* stereotypes of immigrants often paint these newcomers as masses who never quite fit in with the national community because of peculiar racial and cultural differences, local political forums produce a place wherein many immigrants find entry to public forms of belonging.

GHC: Can someone join or help with the *consejo comunal's* work even if you're not Venezuelan? I mean I do not know if this is strictly something for Venezuelans, but I know that there are many people in Caracas that aren't citizens here.

Laura: Some may be illegal, but lots have been integrated.

Claudia: There's nothing that would keep them from joining us.

Laura: There are so many in this condominium that have already joined us. Before we just had a few, but today there are a lot more.

Oscar: We're used to living with immigrants here in Caracas. Of course, there are places where people have more trouble with accepting foreigners. But this isn't Spain. Here, we're all equal.

Melissa: the *consejo comunal* has been great. I was excited to join, and the community has accepted me. I am Cuban, and I've been living here for many years. People have treated me great. I have participated in the work with them since the start.

While nationalist rhetoric may frequently coincide with xenophobia in Venezuela and elsewhere, these sites of local political action present spaces wherein cultural, economic, and civic contributions to the local community are taken into account. Although, the social capital that many *Caraqueños* wield holds currency in limited home territories, enacting social and political belonging in the capital most frequently takes place in the very spaces wherein one may claim this influence. Thus, local *Caraqueño* communities are places where Venezuelan and foreign residents engage in an everyday life that brings citizenship to fruition.

Although the gatherings of the *consejo comunal* provide an arena for public discourse, access to that space may be limited for some residents. Importantly, the degree to which individuals gain a sense of belonging is related to the facility with which they engage in the community's activities. According to Claudia, the registration process for a *consejo comunal* is not particularly cumbersome, but the population and territorial requirements limit the possibilities of self-determination. These obstacles may render less powerful groups unable to define themselves in a moment when local identity is quickly becoming one of the requirements for claiming resources—spatial, financial, and social—in Venezuela.

As we spoke, members of the neighborhood council listed the various projects that they were bringing to fruition at the time of our meeting. The tasks included maintaining recreational sites such as a neighboring field where many of the community's youths regularly met to play baseball and soccer. They were

constructing a playground near the field with the help of a resident who worked as a contractor. They had hired the same man in the past to help construct other communal spaces, such as large salons. This construction, however, was still unfinished. The contractor was carrying out the work in stages whenever the *consejo comunal* could invest more money into the project. While the community elects the members of the neighborhood councils, the latter accomplishes goals by establishing relationships with residents who offer services, time, and financial resources. Those who are encouraged to play a role in this form of civic life are somehow deemed valuable to the community. Therefore, local discourse determining the social value of potential human resources is a determining factor in facilitating access to public forums provided by *consejos comunales*.

Notably, the *consejo comunal's* entrenchment in locality is what makes the political life facilitated by it particularly important. *Caraqueño* social structure often divides the city's communities—even those belonging to similar class groups—and borders are prohibitively policed. Therefore, spatially grounded groups such as the *consejo comunal* play a large role in producing a notion of citizenship based largely upon local political, economic, and social participation. Although class hierarchy may produce obstacles within large diverse populations throughout the city, the possibility of defining and redefining borders of community as people see fit creates communities wherein marginality has less opportunity to thrive, as Elizabeth stated.

Because *Caraqueño* communities routinely form publics that act within local

borders, and because belonging in the local community affects one's access to resources and political participation, these localized civic bodies produce important space wherein individuals enact citizenship. In other words, individuals' relationship with a local community to which they feel close affinities becomes a primary mechanism through which contemporary *Caraqueño* citizenship is produced. For outsiders these localized civic groups are not as visible in national politics as some larger groups with organizational structures less dependent upon geographic boundaries. However, the consejo comunal's structure brings the Venezuelan state into communities as much as it lends the state's power to communities who may not choose to act in conjunction with or support municipal and national governments.

While *consejos comunales* are relatively inclusive groups allowing local participants greater degrees of agency in their neighborhoods, only one of these administrative bodies may serve its self-defined community. In addition, there are demographic and territorial requirements for establishing a new community that may register its own *consejo comunal*. There are many instances when neighboring communities may work together to accomplish shared objectives, but it is not uncommon that the political and economic goals of two neighboring *Caraqueño* collectives stand at odds. This is particularly common when community relations link geographic proximity with social distance fostered by fear. Essentially, *consejos comunales* are to serve administrative duties in local communities. However, their

methods may differ significantly. Because *consejos comunales* commonly seek to utilize resources already within the community in order to carry out operations when possible, the ways in which each community manages duties and rights may greatly differ.

Although part of the work of the *consejo comunal* is the production of a local public arena, they are also spaces within communities where state power is deployed throughout the country. While much of the work of these groups ought follow state-approved procedures, its organizing members often emulate an aesthetic of political legitimacy as they socially, politically, and physically transform the communities they claim and serve. For instance, official gatherings take place in communal spaces, but this does not eliminate the possibility of utilizing private property for meetings. Although the privatization of public services and the production of private and commercial properties that emulate public space have become commonplace in many neoliberal societies, these incarnations of civic organization demonstrate a push toward the privatization of the public arena (Caldeira & James 1999; Clarke & Pitelis 1993; Donahue 1989; Hannigan 1998). Although this does not prevent *consejos comunales* from functioning, it does limit the extent to which all individuals residing within the territorial limits of any *Caraqueño* community may participate in all aspects of local public life. Frequently those existing within the margins of community, such as the chronically unemployed and the homeless, find their value to the neighborhood council

understated as they experience exclusion from public debate and civic organization.

Importantly, the *consejo comunal* is not the individual's only option for civic involvement in the city. There are numerous collective bodies throughout Caracas that allow for greater access to public debate and a range of politicized activities. The *consejo comunal*, however, is one of the most important vehicles for localized civic engagement in the capital. Although these neighborhood councils have territorial and social limitations, they allow the individuals of the community a means to create a meaningful link with the state wherein they may participate in the political life of the city. The reach of each *consejo comunal's* influence may not extend into neighboring territories, but it does link the community with seemingly distant governance at the municipal and national levels. On one hand, this mechanism of governmentality permits the state to deploy power and to reinforce legitimacy as it penetrates communities throughout the nation-state. Conversely, the local population may utilize this instrument of power to make claims upon the state as residents contribute to local political processes.

Although the *consejo comunal* plays an important role in local public life, there are numerous alternative manifestations of civic activity that many *Caraqueños* incorporate into their daily lives. At times these modes of political activity go largely unnoticed because of their loose organization as well as their lack of dedicated purpose. In other words, there are countless groups throughout Caracas that function as publics despite the fact that politicized action and public

discourse may not be primary motivation for members' involvement. This is particularly the case for many small informal collectives that form within larger communities. While many of the individuals taking part in these groups mainly do so because of an enjoyable social experience with friends, neighbors, and relatives, they also share in producing and circulating public discourse even if it is not one of the collective's prioritized tasks.

Thus, today *consejos comunales* are exemplary of an increasingly accessible formal political structure in Venezuela, as previously underrepresented peoples—particularly women—assume positions within this changing political environment. However, many *Caraqueños* excluded from many other formal public groups throughout the capital utilize other strategies to take part in the city's public life. Many of those most often alienated by *consejos comunales*, such as youth and those excluded from employment in the formal economy, make use of informal social arrangements and spatial occupation of public spaces. While the street becomes a less appropriate space for official organizing, many *Caraqueños* already familiar with local public spaces like streets, corners, and plazas utilize them for gathering despite widespread fear and prohibition of street life.

Reclaiming Abandoned Spaces

As the city becomes more inaccessible to residents, rights to urban space become a significant concern for participation in *Caraqueño* public discourse. While access to healthcare, education, and public services remain important goals for the

city's communities, limited means of appeal restrict the possibility of making necessary claims to these rights. Thus, access to public space becomes a difficult challenge, but a significant element in realizing citizenship in Caracas. Generally, the codification of *Caraqueño* urban space affects the city's populations, but gender, class, race, and age are factors influencing the types of spaces that individuals seek.

While *Caraqueño* popular discourse tends to characterize the city's streets as dangerous terrain, many continue to use these terrestrial passages for more than transit. During daytime hours, and especially at *la hora pico*⁵, a broad demographic of commuters fill the streets. However, as traffic slows at the end of the day, most of the city rushes to find refuge behind secure doors. While some forms of public life in many communities move into private spaces, marginalized residents without access to these new controlled spaces find themselves more likely to frequent urban streets as sites of public discourse. Perhaps the easily accessible street is not a preferred location for most, but it is familiar and habitable territory for many *Caraqueños* that may not feel welcome in the closed spaces of legitimate social and civic life. While the obstacles to their involvement in some of the discursive spaces of their local communities are not always physical, their exclusion is often experienced through others' general disregard and fear of their presence. Frequently those relegated to the street are individuals deemed the least productive members of the community. Even when they attempt to participate in the type of

⁵ Rush hour.

community work discussed earlier in this chapter, they are commonly turned away. This group generally consists of young men no longer in school, the unemployed, the homeless, and alcoholics. While others undoubtedly occupy Caracas' streets, disenfranchised *Caraqueños* increasingly utilize this space as an important element in daily social and public life as those with means to civic engagement via groups like *consejos comunales* those abandon more traditional sites.

To be certain, there are civic groups that address this form of political isolation. Alexis Vive—an organization that is variously considered revolutionary, terrorists, gangster, or leftist social movement—is based in the slums of Western Caracas that has grown out of the previously described circumstances of social and political isolation. Much of the local work undertaken by Alexis Vive to this day harks to the group's beginnings in el 23 de Enero, the large *barrio* named for the date of the fall of Gen. Marcos Pérez Jiménez's dictatorship in 1958. Importantly, the collective's local leadership consists of working-class males under the age of thirty. Alexis Vive has grown into a significant social and political force in some neighborhoods in el 23 de Enero, but it has also become an outlet for many poor young *Caraqueños* that experienced political and social marginalization in the communities in which they live. When asked how he became involved with local civic organizing with Alexis Vive, Miguel replied:

A lot of us started in the street. It wasn't really a movement then. We were just guys from the neighborhood that used to mess around (*tripear*) near the store that on the main street at the neighborhood's entrance. For the most part a lot of young people from the community would go there to talk. Maybe we'd have a few drinks or

play dominos or something, but we just tried to have fun. I'm from here, and I grew up with lot of the guys who were there everyday... but on April 11 of 2002—you remember this date, right? That was when they forced President Chávez from office, and they established an illegitimate government...There were a few of us that tried to meet with established [civic] groups in the area, but they didn't always take us seriously. They thought we were playing around, you know? To be honest, that hit us hard.

As a community leader in his late-twenties, Miguel's memory of the 2002 coup marked a significant moment in his life. President Hugo Chávez' election in 2000 had essentially been a rite of passage for Miguel and his peers, as they grew into adulthood while participating in Venezuela's political process. Miguel characterized the relationship between the state and the impoverished communities of Western Caracas prior to Chávez's political ascent as one of repression. Thus, Miguel's participation in the citizen's ritual of voting illustrated a momentary break from the usual negotiations between those around him and the Venezuelan state. He characterized daily political life as follows:

The Venezuelan people went into the streets everyday in fear. They lived in a state of war against a repressive police force, against many of the politicians in power that wanted to buy the favor of the people without allowing real participation. They didn't allow debate or discussion. They only maintained an aesthetic of democracy while making their decisions... They used to turn off our electricity and water for complaining...We had become a subjugated people.

The 2002 coup nullified the already circumscribed agency that he exercised as a Venezuelan citizen. Voting was a defining moment for his political life as an adult in democratic society. In 2000 he and a majority of Venezuelan voters placed President Hugo Chávez in office only to find that power could be wrenched from

government officials and the political community to which he belonged. The limited power that he exercised quickly slipped away from him. As he and his friends began to consider methods of civic participation in order to claim space in public debate, they found that their youth, limited education, and their reputations as idling miscreants and clowns would translate into illegitimacy in the eyes of many of the community's established civic organizations.

Miguel and his peers found themselves seeking a forum where they could express their views on contemporary Venezuelan politics. Because many of the channels through which they initially sought to accomplish this goal were not available, they found themselves beginning to do so in the very spaces they already used to congregate. Although this small group was beginning to see their meetings produce more politically oriented discourse, their primary motivation for gathering was social interaction with members of the local community. There, next to the small store at the barrio's entrance they regularly passed time by gossiping, playing games, and telling jokes. While *Caraqueño* discourse regarding exposure to danger in the city's streets frequently deters actions such as theirs, the presence of a familiar group of residents and friends as well as a spatial proficiency within the territorial borders of their community helped them to claim this location as a safe place.

Notably, Miguel and his friends were not just a group of youth

“messaging around,” despite what many members of the community may have thought at the time. Rather, they had begun to organize themselves as a corner public. To clarify, I define corner publics as local informal groups whose primary goals include gaining access to the public sphere and participating in public interest debates. By forming publics, individuals may voice their opinions, and even make demands before an audience beyond the intimacy of the private spaces such as the domestic sphere and, to a lesser degree, the workplace. Thus, a particular group’s access to public space and civic organization are essential factors in the formation of the public (Arendt 1958). The city’s occupation by a public allows its members’ to attain recognition as a politicized social body with legitimate rights of citizens in *Caraqueño* society. Consequentially, the formation of publics is a commonly used strategy in Caracas for negotiating citizenship within a highly stratified system of social organization wherein class, national origin, race, and gender are among factors greatly informing recognition of legitimacy in urban life. Within local structures, one’s involvement and contribution to a self-determining community play a significant part in one’s ability to take part in political discussion and local civic action.

Corner publics differ from many other types of publics throughout Caracas in that participation is largely based on familiarity with the nearby geography and social community. As discussed earlier in this chapter, traditional public spaces of

the city are decreasingly available to city residents. However, the excluded populations that occupy these locations often seek to assert their rights as full members of *Caraqueño* society. Because they form in accessible spaces like streets, local spatial knowledge and social capital within the immediate community become the primary factors in one's ability to take part. In addition, many *Caraqueños* excluded from many formal modes of civic organization, particularly the young, the unemployed, and anyone else with restricted access to the city beyond their own neighborhood, make use of local corner publics to gain entrée to the public forum.

Since 2002, Miguel has seen his involvement in local politics increase significantly. Alexis Vive developed out of the organizational work of nearby corner publics. Also, its focus on accessible public spaces provides a way for many of the area's residents—especially those without access to formal entities—to more easily access public debate before the eyes of the immediate community and the city. Presently, the goals of Alexis Vive place a strong emphasis on the improvement of local living conditions and political empowerment of the community. While they utilize enclosed structures that resemble the secluded sites of public life that many *Caraqueño* civic groups increasingly seek and produce, they also work to transform quotidian spaces of public life that are available to all members of the community. In many cases, these sites consist of outdoor recreational spaces, streets, and other urban pathways that organizers may utilize to facilitate political participation in el 23 de Enero.

For all of our activities...

We'll call them political

activities... We like to manage them in two ways. First, we discuss things amongst ourselves. Next, we make sure we have more opinions involved. To involve as many people as possible, we have our assemblies outside. They're in the street, in front of buildings, in the little pathways of the community... In this type of gathering we ask people to join us. They aren't members of the organization, but we consider them friends and participants. We can't work without the active participation of the community. The folks who are with us are friends and neighbors... and we have an obligation to them because we're part of the same community.

While Miguel speaks of Alexis Vive's duty to include the community in decisions that will affect the community, they invite people to meet with them in spaces that are often intimidating for many *Caraqueños*. Unlike most areas of the city, residents of many neighborhoods of el 23 de Enero now utilize the streets and passageways of the barrio for utilitarian and leisurely pursuits. Although this is a section of the city greatly affected by poverty, residents occupy the barrio's streets with regularity. This stands in stark contrast to many other communities throughout the city, in addition to many of the middle-class residential neighborhoods where security is supposedly better provided by private and public policing bodies.

Alexis Vive regularly organizes community meetings in the spaces that are often most accessible to all members of the communities they serve, but the group also strives to reclaim public spaces that have been abandoned by the community. Many locations that the community considers dangerous range from open spaces to presently inconvenient pathways that are often neglected, and left in ruin. In order to make these places appropriate for public gatherings, Alexis Vive and community

sympathizers engage in projects of renovating the community's deserted public spaces.

We ask ourselves how we can get as many people in the community to participate as possible. One of the things that helps the most is recuperating communal spaces. For example, in the space behind these buildings where [some musical groups] practice... it was one hundred meters of rubble from front to back. It was a mountain of rubble... We saw that there was a community that would cross through this mess on foot everyday on the way to the metro... So we asked what we could do to encourage this community to join us to produce a dignified space that they can enjoy—where they can relax... We started with that space, a community pool, a stretch on the main street at the entrance, and a walkway over the street. Through that path to the metro people were robbed and raped. There was a lot of drug use there. People left stolen cars and motorcycles there. Anything you can think of was done in this area... The way that people dealt with this in the past was to ignore the problem and just avoid these areas.

Members of Alexis Vive invited people from the neighborhoods most likely to benefit from these projects to aid in rebuilding. By doing so, and they have transformed multiple spaces that many residents use for multiple purposes. As members of the community see many nearby locations that were avoided becoming viable public spaces, Alexis Vive is able to draw individuals out of the private and limited communal spaces that many deemed safe havens from urban street life. Unlike many other civic organizations throughout the city, many of the spaces that Alexis Vive seeks to utilize for public debate are not private spaces wherein collectives may occasionally gather. Rather, they commonly choose to use spaces that are markedly not private to organize public forums. As they render these sites functional community spaces through debate, participants may, according to Miguel,

“call the work their own while being a part of a social project...fundamentally, in all [of Alexis Vive’s] activities, the people who want to incorporate participate are welcome. They will help with project that is political and ideological while advancing a social project.”

By providing a discursive arena within these recuperated spaces, Alexis Vive changes community views on the occupation and use of urban public space. Importantly, the many of the streets in el 23 de Enero are not to be feared because of the change the discourse associated with the community’s public spaces. Notably, Alexis Vive’s attention to the structural arrangement of public space and its relationship with *Caraqueño* urban aesthetics and social organization has played a large role in the transformation of public life in the immediate community. As these locations change form, the organization encourages local public debate while revitalizing traditional urban public space.

The goal of much of this work is to facilitate open public debate, and it manages to do so by making community spaces available to many residents that most resemble Miguel and his peers at their start of political organizing in 2002. Like many of the city’s communities, this neighborhood in el 23 de Enero is not politically or socially homogeneous. Although Alexis Vive is clearly aligned with the socialist Chavista regime, community members who do not support Chávez regularly participate with the group’s projects. According to Miguel, “they make sure that they are a part of the community by working for it. Even if our politics are

in favor of socialism and revolution, people know that we help the community.”

Miguel continued:

We’re just like you. We’re asking questions. We know we have to investigate—to do research... With the little that we know, we try to bring this knowledge to the *barrio* through practice. We tell the community that it’s their job to be critical. And when we meet we they have to tell us what they think, why they think these things, and how we can correct the problems in the community. If we challenge someone’s beliefs, it’s done to improve conditions, and not out of malice.

Because facilitating public debate in the community is a primary goal for Alexis Vive, community involvement—regardless of one’s opinions on national politics—is imperative to exercising political power through local civic engagement. In addition, their loose relationship with the Venezuelan state contrasts to that involving the *consejos comunales* of the city, as collectives like Alexis Vive are free from many of the formal and informal rules structuring the latter’s processes. As Alexis Vive organizes locally, the exclusion felt by many of those fitting the classed and raced profiles of the marginalized *barrio* dweller lessens within these circumscribed urban territories. Essentially, one’s access to everyday citizenship—such a simple right to public space—may be restricted to familiar territories where the individual can claim rights provided by a capable local community. These articulations of political life less frequently extend beyond the territorial limits of these communities.

By changing the structural organization of physical space and the local discourse surrounding the community’s public spaces, Alexis Vive not only

encourages participation amongst near-by residents in their own activities. They also facilitate the organization of independent corner publics throughout the community. Importantly, the reclaimed public spaces of the community bolster local power as they become sites that residents occupy for a variety of purposes, but often utilize for political debate and the exchange of ideas.

Importantly, Alexis Vive facilitates a somewhat autonomous relationship between communities and the state. Despite this, groups such as Alexis Vive tend to include community organizations that co-exist in the neighborhoods. Therefore, communities such as those within el 23 de Enero still maintain many ties to the Venezuelan state through state apparatuses like *consejos comunales* and clinics run by the Barrio Adentro, a state healthcare program utilizing Cuban doctors who offer medical services in poor communities free of charge. Conversely, these communities often seek out community resources to provide many services that the state offers many *Caraqueño* communities, even if inconsistently.

Modes of civic organization made possible by *consejos comunales* and Alexis Vive may function differently, but both do important work for conceptualizing belonging and citizenship in the capital today. While neither type of organization remedies many of the systemic problems within the neoliberal Venezuelan state. Still, the most feasible project for political empowerment, actualized citizenship, and mass participation in contemporary *Caraqueño* society is grounded in the small-scale successes of civically engaged communities. Miguel appropriately states:

Right now we're in the process of changing the way

things work in Venezuela. It has become a country where people need to learn to participate, and to take control of their lives. It has been a place where people don't have debates, where they don't take part in the *consejos comunales* and community politics, where the people don't participate in elections. Only now is the youth beginning to find ways to play a role...but a lot of this has recently become a goal because people can see that there is support.

As much as *Caraqueños* have protested and sought modes of voicing their opinions, often the outcomes of their attempts have resulted in loud days and nights, a violently reacting state or political opposition, and even enormous block parties. These local modes of action are much less about requesting a favorable response from a possibly apathetic state or government leadership. Rather, as an articulate young friend of Miguel said, they "try to express...politics through action." The possibility of change is greater when the project "comes from the veins of the [community]."

There are multiple ways that we may conceive of citizenship, many of which mask inequalities within the nation-state. As nation-states deploy power in new ways, they may define the role of individuals and communities in alternative manners. In Caracas this civically engaged element of citizenship empowers many of the city's residents in ways not possible in the recent past. Sensational events urging mass action throughout the city and country such as the 2002 coup and 1989's Caracazo certainly play important roles in the negotiation of rights and citizenship in Venezuela. However, these events and the more regular protests that enframe contemporary *Caraqueño* political life tend not bring about favorable

results for most communities in the ways that the small scale civic engagements can and do bring about change.

Although many wish to become rights-holders within a state that is highly attentive to the requests of its citizenry, lived experience rarely reflects the type of social and political balance emblematic of a social contract (Rousseau et al 2002). Because citizenship is virtually nullified without a relationship defined by accessible rights and obligations between populations and a nation-state, the actions of publics and civic discourse may be essential for the transformation of *Caraqueño* subjects into citizens. Without imbuing meaning to citizenship by facilitating the possibility of exercising rights subjects of the state merely expose themselves to state power without legitimate claims upon the state. Rousseau would perhaps argue that if members of society are to consent to a controlling political system, the latter ought serve the former in some manner (Rousseau et al 2002). While coercion is frequently employed by nation-states to maintain control over citizens and subjects, democratic governance ought not call for heavy-handed force if truly implemented. However, democratic governance is a more realistic possibility when democratic society provides the structure upon which political institutions may develop. Popular civic engagement is one way that this social transition is taking place in Venezuela's highly contested political climate. Importantly, democratizing Venezuelan society does not mean that all members of society will see the political, social, and material changes that they may like. However, *Caraqueños* have begun to

find multiple ways to include more people and communities in the conversations that influence the futures available to citizens. The small-scale changes we see today in each *Caraqueño* community are greatly responsible for making the city feel like a place that many can call their own.

5. Life Under the City: Mass Transit's Promise to the People

To my surprise, rush hour was one of the most calming moments of the day. A gentle sway accompanied a dull mechanical moan as the metal box swept piles of commuters across the city along the four working lines of Metro de Caracas. By 11:00 a.m. the crowds would thin, but at the seventh hour strangers press against one another as they rock in unison between stops that send everyone's weight to the front of the car. Every few minutes the doors open following the muffled voice announcing the train's current location in the underground network. As the entrance slides open, commuters spill onto the platform before a new wave of waiting bodies enters in time for the train's departure. While many consider the cramped spaces of the metro physically uncomfortable, individuals may also find them to be unifying as *Caraqueños* file through the system regularly. People from across the city join to form community for short periods of time during their commuting days. Much more than a mode of mass transportation, the metro's subterranean network has become a space in which the city's commuters navigate social, political, and aesthetic realities that merge to comprise *Caraqueño* modernity.

Today many residents of Greater Caracas claim that political and economic uncertainty has eroded relationships between citizens and traditional public spaces throughout the city. Dividing class politics of *Caraqueño* life finds its roots in the two-tiered organization of urban space distinguished by abrupt breaks in

architectural forms and stark divisions in social class that have produced spaces of legitimacy alongside the informal city discussed in Chapter 2 (Brillembourg Tamayo & Schroder 2007; Kenneth 1971). For years those with the means to do so have ascended the city's towers, fleeing from the crowded surface where confrontation and conflict are deemed inevitable. However, while the city reached toward the sky in the latter half of the twentieth century, Caracas began to stretch into the earth as construction for its metro system began in the 1970s.

Notably, much of the capital's urban development in this period accompanied the abandonment of many traditional public spaces such as parks, plazas, and even streets for many *Caraqueños* (Quantrill 2000). A prime example of this type of urban development is the construction of Parque Central, the modernist structure in Central Caracas intended to be an insulated middle-class community, much like the community discussed in Chapter 3. There, residents could meet all their needs within the massive concrete structure supporting this collection of towers in the middle of Caracas (see figure 13). Parque Central contains a diverse collection of stores, restaurants, and other service providers. Although these businesses draw much traffic from less affluent city travelers, the many shops and restaurants make trips into the city largely unnecessary for residents of Parque Central. Today the residential towers remain largely middle-class settlements, but the business oriented lower levels of the massive concrete structure closely have closely come to resemble the older public spaces that have become sites of political, economic, and

social conflict throughout much of the city (Jakubowicz 2006). The middle-class inhabitants of Parque Central descend their towers to find that the rest of the city has met them in the ordered and accessible space originally intended to provide a retreat from the outside world.



Figure 13: Parque Central

In contrast to Parque Central's intended middle-class isolation, I argue that the construction and use of the Metro de Caracas reflects a resurgence of popular hope in the utopian project of modernist urbanism in Venezuela. Notably, Venezuelan modernist architecture had largely shifted away from the populist commitment associated with Caracas' early public projects by the 1950s (Ades & Hayward 1989; Quantrill 2000). However, since its opening in the early 1980s the metro has grown into an extension of the dominant political

ideologies—also populist—of the first decade of the twenty-first century (Bayon & Gasparini 1979; Bullrich 1969; Hitchcock 1955). The continuing construction of this system of transit not only connects commuters to new destinations, as the metro's motto—*Enlazamos nuevos destinos*—suggests. It also produces an arena where urban residents may reclaim and restructure urban space as they move within and beyond the circumscribed spaces of political, economic, social communities. As commuters traverse these underground pathways they simultaneously navigate social and political discourses that converge within Caracas' modernist aesthetic. The metro, therefore, comprises a location to explore modernity's production of the illusion of "progress" as it quietly excludes. Because the metro's adherence to a modernist aesthetic conflates modes of physical and social order, the legibility of its uniform pathways, the rhythms of daily traffic, and the disciplinary nature of its often constricting spaces inform the production of a utopian space linking the limited territories of social and political belonging in Venezuela's capital city.

While conducting dissertation research in Caracas, Venezuela, the Metro de Caracas was my primary means of transportation. I rarely used taxis, and I began to use buses more frequently as I slowly expanded my knowledge of the city. At times I traversed these paths with friends and other more expert travelers. In those cases we held conversations in cramped quarters, rarely speaking to strangers, but always pressed against them. As the train twisted through the tunnels, the momentum pushed us all into the next person. Throughout our rides no one made any attempt

to situate himself better as he lost his balance during the ride. I would sway uncontrollably into my neighbor, who would fall onto his neighbor in turn. The cramped train cars were too full for anyone to fall to the floor, so most passengers learned to find comfort in the protective restraint of the crowd. In the following pages, I show how the spaces throughout the metro's underground network stand out in Caracas as locations where discriminatory voices and actions are largely silenced, and commuters unify to defend general rights of use when disturbances arise.

In this chapter I argue that the Metro de Caracas serves a significant purpose in daily *Caraqueño* life that goes beyond its role as a system of mass transit. As many of the city's public spaces are replaced by privatized collective spaces, this mostly underground network containing subway trains, tunnels, and platforms brings residents into communion through discursive acts, and corporal intimacy at different moments throughout the workday. Between 5:00 a.m. and 11:00 p.m. as trains rush between stations, *Caraqueños* identifying as middle-class, working-class, professional, workmen, poor, unemployed, immigrant, and native meet in close contact as they bypass less familiar zones of the city appear dangerous, chaotic, and unjust to individuals for a variety of reasons associated with race, class, and geographic origin.

Although the most peripheral stations in the network as it existed in 2007 did not see as much diversity as stops located toward the center of the city, the

geographic proximity of poor and wealthy communities within most of the city prevented spatial polarization in the majority of Caracas. Communities at the ends of metro lines, however, tended to house poorer communities while seeing no through-traffic. Nonetheless, passengers from stops such as the ones that serviced the city's enormous slums at the Eastern and Western ends of the city joined individuals from throughout Caracas as they moved throughout the system. The metro serves both working-class and middle-class commuters, but many *Caraqueños* with access to a personal transportation (very often the most affluent) avoid using the metro. Still, the metro's significance lies in working-class and lower-middle-class *Caraqueño* assertions that associate the site with popular notions of equality and civility that starkly contrast with the discourse surrounding the terrestrial pathways of the city. In short, the metro illustrates the ways in which individuals associate *Caraqueño* modernist development with the modes of democratic public life in the nation's capital.

Significantly, my references to publics in this chapter require an explanation. I am essentially commenting on assemblies of private individuals engaging in debates that contribute to the public opinion. Here, exchange of information and discussion constitute important elements of public life. Additionally, I assert that collective action comprises a significant element in expressing consensus. Thus, as explained in the dissertation's Introduction, I consider active citizenship a result of one's involvement in and access to public spaces and exchange.

This chapter investigates the public spaces of the metro as a site of modern citizenship that functions differently than many of the local modes discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. Here, the modernist aesthetics considered in Chapter 2 provide a space in which popular access to public space becomes associated with a universal social right to the city. Here, I am referring to guarantees allowing access to the public spaces of Caracas without discrimination based on factors such as class, race, nationality, gender, or sexuality. I use the ethnography provided in these pages to illustrate the ways in which systems of belonging based upon a notion of equality produce the metro as a protected space that must be defended against threats to the ideals of *Caraqueño* democracy.

In the first half of this chapter I focus on sexual harassment and gender discrimination to investigate the ways in which popular ideals of citizenship engender selected urban spaces as safe and welcoming. I show that while underground commuters might collectively act in defense of those women who form part of the community of the metro at a particular moment, outside of this space, individuals experience similar forms of chauvinism. Outside of the metro, however, people do not necessarily act in ways that show that they think of themselves as a community with collective interests. Essentially, these occurrences demonstrate the ways that *Caraqueños* collaborate to engender the metro as a space of public equality and democratic agency. In the latter half of this chapter I focus again on the exclusionary dimensions of modernist development by showing that within the

space of the metro, populations such as the homeless are denied access to spaces of citizenship like the metro. These exclusions contradict popular discourse regarding the metro as egalitarian space, but commuters do not react in the defense of the homeless as they are escorted out of the subway. Like the *buhoneros* of Sabana Grande in Chapter 2, the presence of the abject poor disrupts the aesthetic order of the metro. Thus, the Caracas Metro demonstrates the tension between social realities and ideals associated with modernity and democratic citizenship.

In earlier chapters I have argued that collections of rights offered within liberal democratic states are largely inaccessible for substantial populations of Venezuelan citizenry. As *Caraqueño* communities work to locally construct new forms and practices of citizenship, individuals often find that their ability to claim what they consider basic rights— such as a right to security, a right to social and political participation, and rights to the city itself—is restricted based on their limited access to particular spaces of the capital. In other words, most of the city's residents experience the spaces of *Caraqueño* democratic society as islands here and there within a sea of bare life (Agamben 1998). The Caracas metro, in contrast, functions unlike most public spaces throughout the capital in that it is generally accessible to the city's residents regardless of their communities of origin, class background, gender, or race.

A World Apart

Systems of mass transit like the Metro de Caracas transform travel from a

practice deeply enmeshed in individual experiences of social community and spatial knowledge (as discussed in chapters 2 and 6) to one of universalizing regulation. As individuals join the diverse traveling crowds of the underground system, they become subject to the rules of metro mobility. The possibility of constant vigilance and the transport system's spatial forms greatly hinder actions unintended by the system's planners. Cameras, unobstructed space, and even the use of glass partitions instead of walls allude to the monitoring involved in producing the disciplinary space (see figure 14). The metro offers very little room for variability, and the uniformity of routes and rhythmic movement urge constant passage of bodies along the network's intended pathways.



Figure 14: View of open and symmetrical space within the Metro de Caracas

While the metro's utility as a transportation system is particularly important for most passengers, the locations to which the paths carry commuters is as important as the locations the metro permits individuals to bypass in their day to day travel. Although Caracas presents itself as a patchwork of urban styles and conflicting populations, the uniformity of Caracas' metro system

undertakes the great task of linking the city's communities despite popular aversion to intra-city commuting. There are other available modes of transport in the city—such as busses, taxis, and *mototaxis*—but the metro's spatial properties make it particularly important for conceptualizing geographic and social communities in new ways.

Notably, many residents of Caracas explained that they chose commute via metro when affordable modes of transportation like buses were more conveniently located near their homes or places of work. They insisted that bus travel was particularly unsafe because it traveled through the city's communities, allowing entry to "*cualquier persona*" (whomever) without any methods of control. Although most *Caraqueños*—including members of the working class—did not express concern for traveling through areas like Chacao on bus, they stated that passing through "bad" neighborhoods using public transportation was especially dangerous.

Because the metro permits waves of people to regularly traverse the city without seeing it, the significance of geographic distance between urban communities may vary based on the modes of travel most readily available to commuters. Moving through the city on foot, by bus, or by car expose travelers to the dangers and inconveniences of street traffic. Because many of the forms of violence that *Caraqueños* commonly fear are steeped in the politics of belonging in the diverse and divided city, some residents see the metro as an underground refuge.

While many residents characterize the city's surface as chaotic, the metro is a largely uniform space throughout the network. There are slight variations in station designs, but the physical forms of the network are based on a number of easily recognized patterns. At some stations cars open to a center platform allowing the emptying of two trains, headed in different directions along the same route. These walkways usually span the length of trains, and open to multiple staircases and escalators. There, people find paths to line transfers as well as to exits that will lead to the surface.

The simplicity of the metro's spatial organization makes travel markedly easy in comparison to navigating the surface. The maps of the entire system that are placed throughout stations and train cars and that mark all stops and points of transfer (see figure 13) are infinitely more transparent than the maps of city streets that I discussed in Chapter 2. Concrete and tile cover the walls of the stations. Metal and plastic line the passenger equipped interiors of the trains. Travelers see nothing else. As trains rush through the dark pathways between stations, the lengths traveled remain unknown to most while the stops conform to the diagrams displayed throughout the metro system. Only the gradual sway of the humming metal vessels situated upon tracks offers a hint of the lengths traversed between each magical ride. I argue that as the relationships between individuals from diverse communities shift due to metro use, diverse assemblies of *Caraqueños* fluidly constitute mobile publics in the spaces beneath the terrestrial locations

where similar gatherings are unimaginable for many of the city's diverse residents.

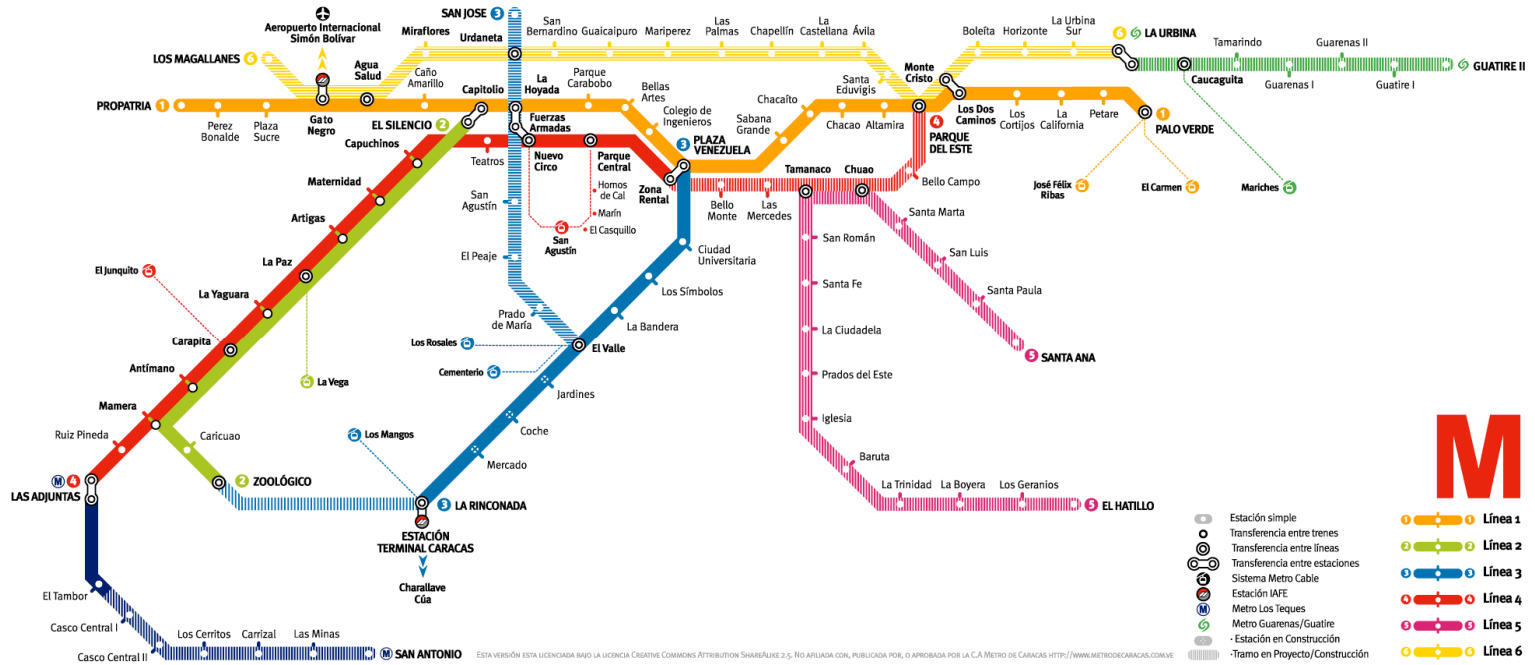


Figure 15: Map of the Metro de Caracas.

Maintaining the Underground

In early 2007, I left my home in Central Caracas to begin a trip between Estación La Hoyada and Estación La Paz. The trip lasted only five stops, but it felt like an especially long journey. The day was ending, and a sea of bodies rushed into the metro lines, only to form impatient crowds at the edges of the platforms leading to the trains. I made the transfer from line 1 to line 2 at Estación Capitolio, letting the rushing crowd carry me to the next train. When the doors to the arriving train slid open, I joined countless others as we tumbled into the quickly filling metal box. A few men offered women with children and nearby senior citizens their seats as we all scrambled for a space to claim. A chime sounded, and the doors attempted to close before sliding open once again. A second time the chime rang, and the doors shut—this time with success. Suddenly, an elderly man turned to a group of three women standing next to him in the middle of the car. Their hands clinging to the rails for balance, the women's bodies had nudged and awakened the man. He looked from side to side while his mouth formed a cheeky smile. Breathing on their shoulders, he started to speak. "*¡Que lindas son!* You're all so beautiful! I wish I were only a little bit younger."

Initially, most of the passengers attempted to ignore the man while a few people in the vicinity began to snicker. The eldest of the women, perhaps in her sixties, twisted her face in disgust after looking back at him for a moment. The two

neighboring women only looked away. The man, however, would not be ignored, so he stood on his toes before offering to buy the two younger women hotdogs in order to watch the women consume them. "In fact, I give all good little girls hotdogs," he exclaimed. By now he had attracted the attention of most of the commuters in the rear half of the car, and the woman directly in front of the man had begun to dig her elbow into his ribs. The train stopped, and he continued talking. All three of the women were now calling him *sucio* (dirty), but continued to address him politely as *Señor* as they asked him to move away. The doors opened, and they closed again before the train began to continue along its route. As the old man continued speaking, his voice grew louder as the train twisted and threw his body into the female passengers that he had continually abused for a few long minutes.

By the time the train slowed for the next stop, a chorus of voices had begun to reprimand the man, imploring him to silence his absurdities. He stopped speaking for a moment to look at the metro map. "What stop is this?" Before he could find his place on the guide, the eldest woman shouted, "It's your stop! ¡*Vayase, sucio!*" (Leave, you nasty man!). She and the younger women slapped him on his head and shoulders, the crowd miraculously parted, and surrounding passengers pushed him onto the platform when the doors opened at Estación Maternidad. The other commuters clapped and cheered as they watched him stumble before the door when the chime sounded, and the doors shut again.

With the man gone, the women began to speak amongst themselves about how they should not have to endure such treatment. Quickly, the crowd began to

respond. Some expressed wholehearted agreement. Others insisted that the man had gone too far, but he had not done a bad thing by flirting with the women. As debate continued, a middle-aged man in a faded New York Yankees cap spoke up. “What happened was that this man had no *conciencia ciudadana* (citizen’s conscience). *Señora*—and *Señoritas*—you all, as Venezuelans—as human beings—shouldn’t have to tolerate such treatment.” He continued, speaking of rights and the Venezuelan constitution as the surrounding chatter lessened momentarily. When the chime rang, he left the train where the conversation about justice and rights abated.

The responses to the elderly man’s comments that included his ousting from the train only demonstrates a willingness to recognize the legitimacy of citizens’ claims to basic rights within particular spaces. It also indicates a popular commitment to defending public life in the capital by policing public space. Still, reactions to forms of discrimination targeting individuals or small groups at intersections of race, class, and gender in many other public spaces in the capital may not elicit reactions beyond avoidance. Notably, the ways in which individuals, especially men, speak of women in Caracas vary widely. Race, class, and nationality are among the factors that contribute to the “acceptable” treatment of women. For example, during my first day in Caracas, a man urged me to visit Isla Margarita—a Caribbean island within Venezuelan territory known for its tourist industry—in order to find a “*negra Caribeña*” (Black woman from the Caribbean). He insisted

that these women were naturally more sexual than Venezuelan women that were not “made for sex.”

Essentially, people did not reprimand the elderly man’s behavior merely because it was offensive. Rather, the maintenance of a culturally valued aesthetic demanding order was also an important variable of the event (Ramadier & Moser 1998). The man’s behavior was not as troubling as the location in which he committed this act of discrimination. Because the metro was served as an emblematic space of *Caraqueño* democracy, his behavior threatened a cultural ideal that others were willing to protect. In cases like these, modes of spatial occupation deemed inappropriate within this disciplinary structure become heavily policed by authorities such as metro employees and police in addition to the publics inhabiting them. To disrupt the order within the metro challenges the modes of social organization and notions of the citizen that are built upon its modernist aesthetic.



Figure 16: Metro map reminding users to "Take care of our metro"

This example shows that there are moments of conflict in Caracas’ metro, but the limited area greatly circumscribes the possibilities for social and spatial

transgressions. In most cases commuters witness general adherence to social conventions that are vaguely reinforced by reminders of good citizenship posted throughout the system (see figure 16). Though territorially fixed, modes of *Caraqueño* citizenship based on local civic engagement have begun to facilitate relationships of mutual obligation between individuals and states. Notably, the metro has begun to complement these recent developments in Caracas' public life. Because the metro's utilitarian purpose is mass transportation, these passing moments of integration provide a location within the city's gradations of sovereignty for widespread recognition of shared status and equal access to public space and services. This is especially significant because common modes of urban policing in Caracas frequently excluded poorer and darker urban residents that commonly utilized the metro in daily travel.

The preceding anecdote appears sensational, and that is largely because this behavior is rare in the metro. The crowd's defense of the annoyed and insulted women on the train is an illuminating example of public disapproval of an everyday form of discrimination. However, the daily reactions to this type of inequality throughout most of the city are extremely tolerant. Mundane forms of discrimination such as sexism are commonly excused as normal and even appropriate. One might go further by suggesting that sexist comments are flattering and sincere responses to female performances of beauty. Although the elderly man's comments were perhaps outrageous, they are not extraordinary in their comedic attempts at over-the-top masculine performance. Similar occurrences

happen regularly throughout Caracas. Not all men act in this way. However, when they do, the consequences are frequently different than those of the man in the metro car.

On the Surface

At a restaurant on one of the city's busier streets between the Hoyada and Parque Carabobo stations, a group of loud and drunken men received their orders on a Saturday night. It was midnight, and the men continued to drink beers as they quickly devoured their plates of overcooked meat lasagna, buttered *arepas*, and a salad that resembled coleslaw. Halfway through their meal, a party of female police officers took a table toward the rear of the restaurant as the other customers watched. The officers appeared to be in good spirits as they laughed and joked amongst themselves. They took off their jackets, adjusted their thick, heavy belts, and sat at their seats before quietly studying the greasy, laminated menus offered by the waitress. One of the women at the table quietly spoke to her coworkers while pointing at the menu, and she left for the bathroom. She quickly returned to take her seat just as one of the intoxicated men raised his hand to order another beer.

"Hey, give me another Polar—and another arepa for my friend here. Oh, and tell the officers that I invite them to have a drink with me," he shouted. Turning to his friends and back to the women at the end of the room, he continued his rant. "My God! I've never seen an officer look so good in uniform before. Arrest me!

Arrest me, *mi amor!* I don't care if you beat me. I think I would like it. Ladies, I've been very bad."

As he spoke, most of the customers in the restaurant timidly laughed. The men joining him at the table giggled as they pushed food into their mouths. The waitress showed an uncomfortable, forced smile as she brought the men more beers and arepas. The policewomen sat in silence attempting to ignore the man. While the cooks leaned against the stove to watch the performance, the officers cowered in their seats. They stared at the silverware on the tabletop waiting for the display to end. After nearly ten minutes of joking and comments, the men prepared to leave. They paid their bill, and stumbled out of the door toward their nearby car.

As the drunken men giggled at their friend's jokes, I nervously waited for the officers to react with anger. Although the women could utilize police authority to quell the man's verbal attacks, they sat uncomfortably in silence. They neither joined the men in laughter nor basked in male approval. The man's comments may have recognized the women's relative power as agents of state power. However, the women's power over the unfolding situation appeared minimal. I expected the officers to demand an apology. I thought that perhaps an employee would suggest that the man stop his babbling. Instead, laughter and uncomfortable silence dominated the scene until the men finished their meals.

Had male officers been present, would this have happened? Would the man dare to comment on the women's uniforms, their bodies, or their potential use of state-authorized violence? Certainly, the officers possessed the authority to chastise

the man for his comedic attempts at their expense. However, the women's superiors and many of those present might consider use of police force unsuitable conduct. After all, many could consider the man's performance flattery or "just a joke." That the women did nothing at their tables was not a practice of self-restraint. They were not edging towards an attack—physical or verbal. While many of the laughing men appeared nervous as they waited for the women's reactions, no one showed explicit disapproval. Even as I watched in awe of the situation, I prepared myself to leave rather than continue witnessing the even. Everyone had stood by as they watched the man's performance. There was no moment when the clients in the restaurant attempted to silence the steady stream of comments referring to the women's bodies and the man's desire. No one shouted "*Vayase, sucio,*" and there was no applause at the men's departure.

Significantly, their behavior serves as an example of masculine performance associated with *machismo*. Although I do not wish to portray Latino masculinity as essentially problematic, the *machista* displays portrayed in this chapter thus far permit men to position themselves as acting subjects upon objectified women. Although popular associations with the term, *macho*, are not restricted to these exaggerated and abusive performances, enframing these acts within normative gender identity hint toward the regularity of tolerated discriminatory acts outside of the protective spaces of citizenship. This type of intimidating and insulting treatment that may occur without consequence in public spaces demonstrates the metro as an exception to the phenomenon of declining rights to the city.

The Exclusivity of Egalitarianism

In my most recent trip to Venezuela I agreed to meet with a small group of friends, all of whom lived in different working class communities in Central and Western Caracas. We arranged to gather inside of Estación Maternidad, a metro stop in providing access to working class neighborhood with a large immigrant population, and considered a dangerous part of the city by most *Caraqueños*. That day I arrived in Maternidad thirty minutes late after a series of complications that included long lines in the early evening and a wrong turn at the start of my trip. To my surprise I was not the last person to arrive, but the few who had arrived before I did teased me about my purported loss of cultural ties to the US as evidenced by my less than punctual arrival.

“*¡Coño de la madre! ¿Chamo, ya ‘tas Venezolanizao?*” The three men in their twenties laughed as Marco, the most boisterous member of the group, shook his open hand before him as he claimed that I was now becoming Venezuelan in his thick *Caraqueño* accent. As he spoke, I remembered middle-class friends’ desire to rid themselves of the accent they had developed in a lifetime in Caracas. They stated that they wished to speak “correctly” like Chilenos¹, but they were destined to talk like poor *malandros*—like Venezuela’s thugs and hustlers—that “*hablan feo*” (speak poorly). The disappearing D from words like *Venezolanizado* was a traumatic loss for Venezuelan Spanish according to some informants in the middle class

¹ *Chileno* refers to a Chilean.

community of Chacao. There, middle-class political opposition to Chavista rule accompanied social distance from the “ugly talking” poor. However, that day in Estación La Maternidad nobody raised any concerns for dropped sounds and syllables.

After a short laugh, Alex interjected, “It’s good that you’re adjusting to things in Venezuela.” Fumbling through the contents of the bag on his hip until finding his cellular phone, he said that Venezuela was a place where everyone can be accepted as an equal. He raised his arm to his side, gesturing past the turnstile as a wave of passengers began to surge from the steps leading from the platforms below. “Look,” he instructed. “We have *el blanco, el negro*, Chavistas, and even those guys with the opposition all here together. We accept everyone—even *los Chinos*” (the Chinese).

As I watched the passing crowd, I realized that the metro was not the only space of political, racial, or class diversity through which I had passed that day. It was, however, the space with less overt antagonism between the present social groups. I remembered that the path I had taken to la Maternidad began in Chacao, where supporters of President Chávez held signs to demonstrate their approval of the upcoming constitutional referendum that would remove term limits for Venezuelan political office. Walking to the metro station at the start of my day, I watched many of the more finely dressed shoppers, residents, and employees of Chacao contort their faces into sneers. There, they expressed their disgust as they walked quickly through the crowded streets. With regularity, an overwhelmingly lighter pigmented wave of pedestrians murmured expletives like “¡Coño!” and “¡No

joda!” as they passed their darker and assumingly poorer compatriots on the crowded walkways.

In Estación la Maternidad my friends continued to discuss the validity of the notion of a *Caraqueño* social equality mediated by the metro. First, they began to mention their avoidance of Chacao and other “white zones” of the city, where they believed that people like themselves—largely working class, non-white, and perpetually broke—never felt welcome. They explained that in these locations they feared police harassment in public spaces, exclusion from commercial spaces such as bars and restaurants, and the experience of a racializing classism that would transform their non-white subjectivities into potential criminals in the eyes of the reluctant host community. As their debate continued, they agreed that their home communities were the places where they least experienced the effects of discrimination and fear. Although they considered most zones of the city hostile space, the metro comprised an expansion of the territories in which they felt welcome and protected. For these working-class young men, they saw within the space of the metro evidence of the ideological promises of the Venezuelan nation. As they insisted upon the diversity of the space, they explained that they had as much of a right to use the metro as the middle-class.

Although many members of the middle-class choose not to use the metro, there are many others who regularly pass through its paths. In communities such as Chacao, some individuals leave the community for destinations outside of the metro’s range—making use of the metro unnecessary. For example, a trip from

Chacao to Las Mercedes (discussed in Chapter 2) is not possible, as the latter does not have a metro station at the present². However, middle-class residents of Parque Central simply have more use for metro travel, as a station is situated under the complex. In addition, many *Caraqueños* with private transportation choose to drive despite the city's congested roadways. The heavily subsidized gasoline in Venezuela nullifies economic incentives to use public transportation for those that already own cars or motorcycles. While many individuals in Caracas do not ride the metro everyday, residents from the city's middle-class and working-class communities pass through the system alongside one another.

As another wave of commuters passed us to leave the station, I pressed my back against the wall, sliding to the floor to take a seat. My back was beginning to ache after standing and carrying a heavy bag. Ten minutes prior to sitting I found myself wondering why I had never seen a seat of any sort in the metro. I searched for a bench, but I was content with claiming a space against the wall. In moments a distorted voice sounded from the speakers embedded in the walls. "Valued passengers, sitting on the floor is not permitted in the metro." Ignoring the muffled voice, I remained seated as I listened to the conversation continuing before me. Again, the voice came from the walls, "Sir, sitting on floor is not permitted." Looking up for a moment I noticed the metro officer inside his ticket booth tapping on the window while pointing at me.

² Future plans for the metro's expansion include introducing a station in Las Mercedes.

I situated my feet below my body, and slowly stood. Frustrated, I refused to acknowledge the reason I could not sit on the floor. If the floor were off limits, where could anyone sit? There were no benches within sight, and even the largest stations had few seats. As I leaned against the tiled wall, Marco explained, "They don't want people to stop in here and start to sleep. Imagine that. Drunks and addicts will begin to sleep in the metro like they do under the highways and the bridges." The others nodded their heads, stating that the metro would begin to smell differently as well. They explained that the metro had to be maintained. Marco insisted that without these rules, it would be impossible to keep the metro system clean and orderly.

Contesting Marco's comment about the drunks and addicts, I argued that we all had probably seen someone drunk or high on the metro before. My companions agreed, but they specified that they were not referring to someone in an inebriated state. The *borrachos* (drunks) to whom they referred were individuals who are "always drunk. If they aren't drunk now, they are trying to get drunk soon." In response, I asked how metro workers identified the *borrachos*, particularly when sober. Irritated by my persistent questioning, Marco spoke. "You know what a drunk is! They basically live on the streets. They're either living on the streets, or on their way there. They stink of alcohol, and sometimes they smell far worse. It all depends on how drunk they got before passing out." The others agreed before sharing their own opinions on how I might define and identify a drunk.

“But sometimes they get on the metro,” Alex insisted. “*Chamo*, I saw some old guy on the train. He looked like he was barely awake. Only a few people were on the train, but they all tried to sit far from him.” Alex continued, attempting to describe the man’s smell as the two other men jokingly complained of the thought of experiencing such odors. Alex described the man’s attire as dirty and tattered. His hair was reportedly unkempt, and particles of food were stuck in his beard. “While the guy tried to sleep, an old woman that was staring at him for some time started to scream, ‘get out!’” When the train stopped at the next station, metro workers escorted the man off the train to calm the screaming woman. She continued her ride quietly, no longer in the presence of the so-called *borracho*.

Although the metro does not have any rules of use that explicitly reject specific categories of society such as the homeless, guidelines dictating modes of spatial use are employed to determine who may enjoy the illusion of democratized space. Importantly, these exclusions enable the experiences of relative equality that many *Caraqueños* consider prerequisites to full participation in democratic society. Not only are the abject poor excluded. Their disappearance in functional public spaces serves to comfort the masses that regularly utilize sites like the metro. The absence of excluded populations in the city’s “surviving” public spaces frequently occurs without critical attention. Fundamentally, their absence is normalized, and members of society such as the abject poor are rendered invisible in Caracas’ social imaginary of modern democratic society. If these problematized identities do not remain inconspicuous, the excluded populations upon which modernity builds its

promises are transformed into disruptive subjectivities that are not capable of functioning properly within the same social and political worlds that we often insist upon calling democratic.

Essentially, the purported drunks and homeless men of preceding accounts were guilty of disrupting spatial and social order through their very presence. Because the metro is an attempt at a sanitized space with hygienic norms, passengers and employees may consider the presence of unclean individuals unsuitable use of public space (1999). In Alex's narrative, the supposed *borracho* had not disrupted any behavioral norms. Rather, he produced an aesthetic inconsistency to the clean and organized space of the metro system.

As Marco established, the man's odor may have produced sensorial displeasure. This is as important as spatial organization in the production of the metro as a pleasant space. In fact, the obtrusiveness of the virtually homeless drunkard described by Marco is not established by behavior at the moment of social contact in the metro system. His physical condition makes his presence intolerable in the confined spaces of the metro. While the metro functions as a disciplinary space underlying the city, the supposed disorderly subjectivities in question are obstacles to both the uniformity of normalized human bodies and the façade of *Caraqueño* social inclusion.

Mobile Citizens

The development of *Caraqueño* citizenships is a collaborative process between the city's residents and state practices of governmentality. Today the metro represents a space where spatial, social, and political ideals of modernity coincide to accommodate popular desire for a democratic present. Although I do not argue that the metro succeeds in the production of truly democratized space, its production of a space of citizenship makes this assembly of trains and subterranean pathways invaluable in Caracas. Because both the city's communities and state power have focused on the territory's capacity to restructure *Caraqueño* public life, public investment in the metro has taken financial and symbolic forms.

While some community groups such as Caracas' neighborhood councils show their support of the Metro de Caracas' goals of providing service to the city's diverse communities, not all *Caraqueños* are enthusiastic with this egalitarian image. Over the years the metro has remained an inexpensive mode of transportation. In addition new routes extend into more parts of the city. As the metro has grown more crowded, the inherent inclusivity has engendered problems for some city residents. Many *Caraqueños* began to complain of the crowding and the general misuse of metro spaces by supposedly new users. Consequentially, former metro-travelers with the means to choose modes of private transport do so in efforts to distance themselves physically and socially from the poorly mannered masses that now "infiltrate" the city's public spaces. Middle-class commuters increasingly avoid

metro use, as the universalizing space of the underground network disallows many of the privileges that designate the class identities discussed in Chapter 3.

Ultimately, the discourse surrounding the metro's spaces of equality provide rich grounds to explore what President Chávez and his supporters call *poder popular* (popular power or power of the people). At this point, many *Caraqueños* are doing much of the work necessary to amass sufficient political and social power to access rights and to realize citizenship and political participation in their own communities. Still, there are gaps to fill in the spaces between home and other locations of social, political, and economic life in the capital. While the aesthetic of modernity has produced this transit network as an underground utopia, many continue to overlook the ways in which metro's pathways fail to eliminate inequalities. This may have little to do with the metro itself, as it is only one of many attempts within a larger project of modernity.

Undoubtedly, modernist spaces such as the metro can appear to remedy contemporary social problems by producing scenes of order. However, they do little to address structural inequalities such as those upholding class hierarchies. Despite their failings, rare spaces like the Metro de Caracas greatly contribute to the growing possibilities for public engagement and social experiences of belonging. Even if the discourse engendered by the metro at best provides a bridge between isolated spaces of citizenship throughout Caracas, this limited but growing public terrain generates new possibilities for collective negotiation with power in Venezuela's capital. Nonetheless, to overlook the ways in which this style of

development both produces and works to render invisible the threats it promises to eliminate is to build future democratic lives on unstable foundations.

6. Policing *Malandros* and the *Malandros* Who Police: Social Rights and Violence in a Fractured Police State

Although I have characterized contemporary Venezuelan governance as a process of negotiating power through its burgeoning grassroots democracy, this does not exclude the possibility of the nation-state's simultaneous use of alternative technologies of power in its daily workings. Chavista rhetoric dominates national politics, but localized elements of the state apparatus such as municipal offices often act with a degree of independence from the central government. Within their own jurisdictions, local governmental structures may carry out policies that reflect and contradict dominant political rhetoric everyday. While officials throughout Venezuela may receive pressure from the Caracas based national administration, local political discourse tends to greatly influence the actions that municipal governments undertake.

In addition, the jurisdictions defined by the institutions of municipal governments frequently reflect and protect the hierarchies of social class. This is particularly visible in Caracas, as the five municipalities within Greater Caracas have differing political agendas and budgets. These disparities have a significant effect on the realization of public works and services ranging from trash collection to creating a municipal police force (Dietz & Myers 2002). Ultimately, wealthier municipalities (*alcaldías*) such as Chacao manage to protect and to keep the financial resources of

its residents within its borders¹. Importantly, larger *alcaldías* in Greater Caracas such as Sucre (discussed in Chapter 2) do not possess the same degree of disposable capital to dedicate to its operations as its western neighbor. This budgetary concern has a profound effect on the *alcaldia's* capability to support projects such as the maintenance of roads, public education, and cultural programs throughout the city. Moreover, the diverse conditions under which municipal employees such as police officers work contribute to the vast inconsistencies in the deployment of power throughout Caracas.

Further complicating the issue of jurisdiction and police authority in the capital, four policing forces join the city's five municipal departments in the task of establishing order in Caracas. While the Metropolitan Police (PM), the National Guard (Guardia Nacional), the Venezuelan Intelligence Service (DISIP), and an investigatory body (CICEP) often undertake tasks different from the role of municipal police, they are all present throughout the capital. Notably, their intended tasks are not the only differences between these departments. Like other public jobs, the politics of the individual departments plays a role in the actions carried out by officers at work in the streets. The amount of resources that are available to each force varies widely, which contributes to the type and amount of training for officers. In addition, these assets affect the salaries of the officers, which many

¹ The Municipality of Chacao was established in 1992. Many individuals believe that the motive for its establishment was the protection of middle-class financial resources. Before 1992 the municipal taxes that residents of Chacao paid could contribute to supporting services in areas that are not included in the middle-class stronghold.

Caraqueños believe influences everyday police corruption. When *Caraqueños* speak of the police, they rarely distinguish between the various forces in their stories. When asked about the difference between them, most individuals speak about the municipal forces, the National Guard, and the PM. At times people speak of individual forces with particular disdain. Most of the time, however, the people who spoke with me associated specific zones in the city with different types of police interaction. Within this discourse of place, police action is presumed fair, abusive, protective, or even non-existent in some cases.

In this chapter I argue that this institutional division of the city also produces the capital as an assembly of territories with different rules. Throughout Caracas, the degree to which the Venezuelan state achieves governance with the use of biopolitics is not consistent either. On one hand, the political rhetoric of the Chavista government's demand for civil and human rights plays a notable role in the production of new democratic forms and modes of citizenships in Caracas, especially for Venezuela's underprivileged. On the other, the ongoing aggressive policing of the city's marginalized communities has come to characterize the relationship between citizen and state in some communities (Carroll 2009; Feinman 2006; Márquez 2009). In earlier chapters, I argued that the Chavista state began working to delegitimize many of the social inequalities that state and society have fostered in Venezuela. However, the changing laws and popular discourse for which President Chávez may be responsible are not the only facets of state power with which Venezuelans negotiate.

Because of the multiple discourses at work throughout the city, there are varying notions of the terms of inclusion and exclusion in Caracas' developing democratic society. Just as the police may provide protection as well as seek out their own victims, many working class communities often articulate localized urban belonging and citizenship in ways vastly different from many more privileged communities. Essentially, the terms of belonging and the ways in which individuals gain access to political, social, and cultural community is through multiple modes of engagement. Since the deployment of power occurs through diverse means that may include regular but selective violence, it contributes to the production of Venezuela's fractured police state. Establishing power with violent repression throughout sovereign borders has not been necessary. In fact, some communities view the state's police forces as protectors that defend the Venezuelan people. In this event, state violence may occur unnoticed or be even praised by large segments of a population that experience some privileged ranks of citizenship in Venezuela's stratified sociopolitical environment. Ultimately, citizens of Caracas are not born. Rather, they make themselves as they learn to navigate the multiple layers of meanings mapped onto the physical environment of the city.

This chapter focuses on the significance of policing geographic mobility, and particularly that of *malandros*. Assumed to be criminals (or at least mischievous and idle), *malandros* provide a rationale for repressive policing. However, the segment of the urban population that has been labeled in this way has claimed the category, invested new meanings in it, and built particular modes of citizenship around it. By

discussing the widespread meanings and use of the term, *malandro*, I illustrate some of the ways in which individuals navigate local power structures to produce a range of social and political subjectivities that both resist and mimic the status quo (Appadurai 1996; Scott 1985). As I discussed crime, policing, and *malandreo* with collaborators in the field, they educated me in the varying ways in which *malandro* identity and identification worked to limit and enable different possibilities for movement and safety in Caracas. This chapter details four lessons that provide individuals with possibilities for cultivating power and making claims to rights that define citizenship.

The first refers to the roles of race and class in the identification of threats to communities in many parts of the city. While poor and Afro-descendent males inspire fear in some *Caraqueño* spaces, they are also exposed to forms of police violence that their whiter and wealthier compatriots are not. In the second lesson, young men reclaim *malandreo* as an advantageous set of practices that enable safety and mobility through local territories beyond their home communities. For them, *malandreo* is a definitively classed and masculine practice that permits its practitioners to access to the city on their own terms, rather than by the rules of the middle-class or the state's police forces. The third lesson focuses on armed militias in Western Caracas. Though considered *malandros* by many, they have displaced the state's sole monopoly of legitimate violence. Although these groups use militarized force, local residents commonly embrace local *malandro* rule that keeps state forces at bay. The final lesson illustrates the ways in which Western

Caraqueño armed groups have taken on a state-like role in local communities by administrating services that the state failed to provide. Piecing together services from multiple providers, their governance functions without state military or police interference despite the challenges these *malandros* may pose to the nation-state's sovereignty. Notably, this chapter illustrates a process in which working-class *Caraqueños* reclaim two things. First, they redeem a term frequently used to characterize the poor as abject subjectivities within Venezuelan social hierarchy. Second, they work to rescue the spaces of the informal city that houses most of Caracas' population. In doing so, individuals employ *malandreo* to significantly broaden their possibilities for achieving social liberties that remain out of reach for most *Caraqueños*, regardless of class status or gender identity.

Lesson 1: El Negro Es Negro

For nearly three months Sabana Grande had experienced a new life. Since the police cleared the *buhoneros* in January, only a few vendors were left. They sold small items such as ice cream and candies to passers-by throughout the day from small unbalanced tables and old carts on squeaky wheels. In the not-so-distant past, many of these vendors were individuals in a sea of shouting salesmen, all attempting to capture the attention of slowly passing customers on the crowded boulevard. Before January 2007, crowds congregated in Sabana Grande everyday as buyers and sellers negotiated prices and engaged in monetary transactions for displayed goods. During business hours traffic was impossibly slow, and commuters rarely used the

wide path. No longer a space of leisure for most *Caraqueños*, Sabana Grande was a chaotic place of business, and a visible center for the city's informal economy.

Before the clearing of the congested Sabana Grande, many associated the area with crime and poverty within the decaying city. Many residents of Caracas complained about it with regularity, and the Municipality of Libertador worked to satisfy the many by sweeping the boulevard clean at the start of 2007.

By February, most *Caraqueños* over the age of twenty-five had begun to talk about Sabana Grande's renewed beauty. Now the strip of pedestrian space reminded adults of all ages of the good days in Caracas. Working-class and middle-class residents remarked that the city had lost many of its public spaces due to the growth of the informal economy and lawlessness of past years, but in early 2007 individuals from across the city began to make their way to Sabana Grande once again. Most arrived with combinations of friends, significant others, and children. It was as though they wanted to experience the old Caracas. Caracas during the 1980s—when families walked together on Sunday evenings in Sabana Grande—was where most hoped to arrive. They rode buses, the metro, and drove in order to return to a better time and place. There, they would remember what life was like before the *malandros* chased them into their homes. Perhaps that was a time when the poor knew their place—long before President Chávez was a figure in national politics. However, after January 2007, Sabana Grande offered many *Caraqueños* a chance to return to 1982 with nostalgic splendor.

Many individuals in their twenties began telling stories of family outings when they played in the street with toys, running around their parents without any preoccupation of theft or kidnapping. Between February and April, 2007 neighbors from my building in Central Caracas asked me if I had seen Sabana Grande. “Have you seen how beautiful it is? It’s just like it used to be.” Some shared accounts of their regular trips to the pretty places that Caracas had in the past. Regularly, they contrasted the Sabana Grande of their memories with that of the recent past. A neighbor stated that “in these days, people haven’t been so fortunate. They have to worry about so many things... I love Caracas, but it used to be so beautiful.” Today people are not so fortunate. “Now you have to pay attention. *Malandros* can steal your cellular phone... They steal purses from the women. Anything can happen. But it’s nice that they’re making the city a better place.”

In those months I passed through Sabana Grande regularly, as its open pathways contributed to easier movement than many of Caracas’ crowded streets. Most pedestrians on the boulevard relaxed as they walked to no particular destination. There, I relaxed as I distracted myself from the noise and the contagious anxiety of a near-by rushing crowd. I would travel from West to East, momentarily escaping the rest of the city positioned to the North and South until I reached the end of the path. While I walked, I took a break from the city—from its crowds, its cars, and even its asphalt. Instead of watching for cars and motorcycles as I crossed the streets, my eyes followed the patterns of brickwork stretching below my feet between the abrupt ends in Plaza Venezuela and Chacaito.

Red gazebos stood every two blocks, providing shade to small teams of police officers who congregated on the corners. Most days they seemed to pass the time chatting amongst themselves as they fought boredom at their shaded tables. At times the men flirted with the passing women. Female officers awkwardly looked away when their male counterparts returned to the shade with smiles and comments. Weighed down with bullet-proof vests and multiple arms, they kept the intersections clear, as most intimidated walkers attempted to pass each group of officers without attracting attention. Though the police had successfully cleared the streets in January, they remained stationed throughout the area, preventing the assembly of new waves of *buhoneros* and opportunistic *malandros*.

On a sunny afternoon in April, I passed through Sabana Grande after spending a morning running errands nearby. While listening to my ipod, I began my walk through the boulevard as I prepared to enter the Sabana Grande metro station. It was a warm day, and some of the neatly dressed pedestrians were basking on warm concrete benches while they absorbed the light. Some hurried down the path while listening to music through small headphones that sent distorted sounds beyond the ears of the intended listeners. Two tall blonde men with a guidebook by Lonely Planet stood out in the thin crowd, and children stopped their games to watch the men pass while speaking German loudly. Their button-down shirts were tied around their waists so that only thin cotton t-shirts blocked their painfully red skin from the falling rays of the sun. I continued walking while I thought about a meeting I had arranged for later in the day. I stepped onto the sidewalk from the

multicolored brickwork in the street, but before passing into the shaded pathway leading to the metro's underground passages, I heard shouting over the music from my earphones. I looked to my right, and a group of five police officers standing under a gazebo gestured me toward them. I took a deep breath as my relaxing moment on the boulevard ended.

"Come here! Where are you going," asked the female officer. She stared upward toward me as a bold wrinkle grew between her eyebrows. When she began to question me, the other officers—all men—gathered to her sides. The man to her right tapped me on the shoulder with his left hand while holding his shotgun in his right.

"Answer her," he urged me.

Before I could open my mouth, the first officer commanded, "Give me your *cedula*" (national identity card). I responded, stating that I did not have one. "How can you not have one? Everyone has a *cedula*." The other officers glared at me as she spoke. I replied, stating that I was not Venezuelan while I passed the laminated copy of my passport.

"What is this," asked the officer to her right. He snatched the sheet from my hands before quickly examining it. "This is fake. What are you doing with a US passport? Where did you get this?" I explained to him that I was American (*Estadounidense*), and that the copy of my passport was all that I could offer for identification. "¡No joda! You're a *gringo*? You don't look like it." The others shook their heads, agreeing with the heavy-set man holding my card in front of the

shotgun now strapped across his chest. He continued speaking with me, stating that I had no proof that I was in the country legally as the others reached for my bag. While the team of police officers searched my pockets and my bag on the corner, pedestrians passed, attempting to ignore the event unfolding before me.

One of the officers offered me a seat while I regretted that day's trip to the bank. Normally I never carried much money, but I had planned to pay my rent later that day. They quickly found the money, and the search ended. The officer that initially called me to the gazebo handed my wallet to the armed man standing in front of me. "Look what I found. It looks like a lot," she said as she flipped through the bills and stared at me. "With this much money, he had to be buying cocaine (*perico*) up there," gesturing farther East along the boulevard.

"Ah, *puede ser* (maybe)" said the man standing next to me as he passed my wallet back to me. "Here, take this. You know it isn't safe to walk around here with this much money, don't you?" I silently nodded in agreement. "Someone could try to take it, but you're lucky we're here." I put my wallet into my pocket before the officer sat on the table, leaning forward to speak. "Whatever you were doing with that money doesn't matter. But you're in the country illegally. You need to have someone bring your passport here to show us the stamp. Otherwise we'll have to take you to jail. Remember, it's *Semana Santa* (Holy Week), so you probably won't be able to get out before next Monday. Anyway, nobody will know you're there, so who knows what could happen?" I told him that I did not have anyone who could bring my passport, and he responded, "Let's try to find a solution then."

I sat, and he waited for a suggestion until a man in his forties approached. He wiped the sweat from his brow before asking for directions. The officer next to me threatened to arrest him for getting too close, and the man left in the direction from which he came. As the officer watched me, I sat in silence. I was infuriated. I had heard countless stories of robberies in the months I had spent in Caracas, but nearly all the warnings had prepared me for confrontation with anonymous malandros. According to many, these criminals hid, waiting for victims in the shadows of the city where they could rob, kidnap, and kill outside of the view of a responsible citizenry that would never allow such injustices. That afternoon in April, however, the defenders of peace would wrest a donation from me in the middle of a populated street with a smile.

While I silently resisted, the unoccupied officers continued hunting on the boulevard. They stopped a pair of adolescents, accusing them of possessing a stolen camera. Both young men nervously scratched their heads and adjusted their baseball caps as beads of sweat ran down the sides of their brown faces. The shorter of the accused anxiously twisted the curls escaping from under his hat while the officers demanded their *cedulas*. The tall and slender teen holding the old Minolta SLR camera explained that they were students, studying journalism. "Liar! You don't even know how to use a camera," said one of the male officers. In response, the teen explained to the officers how to operate the machine, offering to take a few pictures for them. The officers insisted that they could not let the teens go without proof that the camera was theirs, suggesting that the boys show a receipt

of purchase. After a few minutes of negotiation, the teens opened their wallets to show the officers what they had to offer. The officers lost interest in the two with the sight of their empty wallets, and the teens rushed to safety. Moments later, the woman stood, pointing at a heavy-set man walking along the sidewalk. "You! Come here, and give me your *cedula*!" The coffee colored man slowed his gait, turning to his right toward the gazebo before reaching into his pocket to find his wallet.

I looked back to the officer holding me under the gazebo. "Look. This doesn't need to take all day. How do you want to do this?" I responded, asking how these things are done. "Well, how much is your freedom worth?" I thought for a moment before suggesting a price. It was too low, and they knew how much money I had that day. "Look, you can deal with this in jail where it could be more expensive, or you can do this now." Uninterested in haggling over my liberty, I suggested that the officer simply tell me what he wanted. We agreed upon a sum, and I reached for the money with which I would soon part. Quickly, the officer jumped up from the folding table, commanding me to put my money in my pocket. "We aren't thieves. Put that away. You're just going to give me a tip for making sure you get out of here safely, but all these people shouldn't see it."

The officer called one of his coworkers to join him before they returned my bag. As they escorted me to a small restaurant on an adjacent street, they joked amongst each other. When we arrived in a small and dark restaurant, the officers nodded to a white haired man standing behind the bar. He gestured us to the back with a flick of his wrist, and the officers politely invited me to walk forward. At the

back of the restaurant I counted and passed the money. They thanked me for my donation before instructing me to stay out of trouble. I left, and began to walk North into the busy crowd on Avenue Abraham Lincoln. On the congested street I disappeared in the anonymity it offered.

As I moved through the crowd, I silently recollected my neighbors' stories of the old Sabana Grande in the paradise that was Caracas. Despite the newfound beauty of the uncluttered Sabana Grande, now I sought safety in the chaotic present. If my placement in Caracas' racial-class hierarchy had produced me as a threat to social order, it had also further exposed me to the possibility of physical violence at the hands of the Venezuelan state. While the abusive officers whom I encountered in the gazebo were possibly among a minority in Caracas' police forces, they function as part of the state apparatus. Wielding the power of the state in the daily lives of many *Caraqueños*, members of these forces frequently act with impunity as they exercise sovereignty upon those whom mainstream discourse produces as society's enemies.

Moreover, my sense of security on the crowded avenue stemmed in part from the lack of rigid controls made possible by police presence. I did not decide that the type of modernist order that the new Sabana Grande presented was in itself dangerous. However, the crowded and less controlled street North of the boulevard contained many others who fit the profile of the suspect—potential thieves and drug dealers—that led to my short detainment. I was not particularly surprised that I fit such a depiction. As I navigated the city and its social terrain during dissertation

fieldwork, many strangers had met me with fearful reactions. I watched many grow nervous as I approached on the street or in hallways. Though these reaction did not occur at all times, moments when these silent interactions did take place do illustrate the different ways in which many people read my presence. Although these readings are cultural acts requiring people to negotiate the systems of meaning with which they live, bodies often respond more quickly than the reconsidering mind questions its logic. These visceral responses, therefore, imparted a wealth of information reflecting *Caraqueño* social structure.

After leaving Sabana Grande I returned to my home in Central Caracas where three friends were drinking beers with my landlord. The group of men between twenty-one and thirty-one invited me to have a drink with them. I sat as my landlord opened his styrofoam cooler, passing a green can of Solera. Antonio, my neighbor from the third floor continued his account of the stressful day at his father's shop. Afterward, he placed his empty can onto the wet sidewalk next to the group's collection of empties. "What's with you? What did you do today," he asked.

I took a drink from my beer as I leaned back onto the plastic chair that bowed under my weight. "Well, I got robbed." The others quickly sat forward, asking how and where it happened. I told them that the police robbed me in Sabana Grande that afternoon, but before I described anything in detail my landlord interjected. "They stopped you because you're American. There are a lot of tourists that go there." I disagreed, explaining that there were plenty of people that were obviously tourists. They were calmly walking without police interference. I described the German men

who walked the boulevard while reading their guidebook. I continued, explaining that the police stopped others while I was held under the gazebo. “Not all of us were foreigners (*extranjeros*), but we were all black (*éramos todos afros*),” I said.

“*¡Que bolas!* Do you know what that is?” asked Antonio as he pointed toward his olive skin. Both of us simultaneously answered the question, giving different answers. I stated that it was racism, while he declared that classism motivated the police that day. He explained to me that the officers probably thought that I was poor because of my clear African descent. In addition, “many people think that if you’re poor, then you have to be a *malandro*. If your shirt isn’t worth 30,000 Bolívares², they will avoid you because you’ll look like a criminal.”

“But look at the guy,” said Antonio’s childhood friend. He pointed at me, explaining that I wasn’t dressed like a *malandro*. David, a short and thin Afro-Venezuelan man, placed his arm next to Antonio’s. “There’s a lot of racism in Venezuela. You don’t see it because you’re not black. They don’t discriminate against you for it.” David opened another beer while Antonio looked at the floor as he contemplated the possibility of overlooking his close friend’s experience of discrimination, even as they accompanied each other throughout most of their leisure time. Antonio made a rebuttal, insisting that people seemed to treat him politely in Caracas and in his travels throughout Venezuela. He gave an example of their recent trip to the Andean city of Mérida, explaining that people had treated

² In early 2007, Bs. 30,000 was worth nearly \$20. Now, Venezuela has used the Bolívar Fuerte since January 2008. Bs. 30,000 is worth Bs. F. 30.

them nicely even though they were not from there. “They treated you well, but a lot of them wouldn’t even look at me,” said David. “Here in Caracas—well, in Venezuela—*el negro es negro* (the black man is black). I mean, if you’re black, people let you know. Some people treat you like you’re the very bottom [of society],” David said before finishing his beer and fishing for another in the cooler.

That day, my experience in Sabana Grande was unlike any others when I passed through the boulevard without a problem. Police were present, but less visible during the period when the strip of land was tightly contested with *buhoneros* and the crowds of consumers. Even after January, 2007, I walked through the Sabana Grande with relative comfort, and without the harassment of local authorities until that day in April. The frequency with which police stopped me in Caracas, however, is not the subject of this discussion. The timing and the manner in which the officers quickly screened passers-by are, in contrast, quite relevant.

In early 2007, there was both praise and criticism for the decision to force *buhoneros* and their informal market from the area. While the area was consistently deemed dangerous when these markets dominated the zone, popular discourse pointed toward *malandros* as the culprits of these crimes. The assembly of tables stacked with goods, dense crowds, and the widespread belief of the area as a hunting ground for petty criminals deterred the use of Sabana Grande as a space of leisure for many *Caraqueños*, regardless of class. Police often monitored the peripheries of the large market by patrolling the intersections where busses

stopped to allow passengers entry into the boulevard. However, the expectations and possibilities for police action changed dramatically in January.

With pressure from throughout Caracas, and especially from the residents of the Alcaldía de Libertador, the police patrolling the area took on the task deterring the presence of those associated with the city's informal economy such as *buhoneros*, *malandros*, and prostitutes. This not only meant that certain populations attracted increased attention from the authorities. It also made the screening and public detainment of select pedestrians visual evidence of good police work to those freely roaming the boulevard. That day the most notable commonality between myself and the other pedestrians stopped along the boulevard was our Afro-descent. Although the officers' tactics of freestyle accusation are not uncommon practice, the general perception that Afro-Venezuelans represent the city's criminalized abject poor likely plays a role in selecting individuals upon which authorities may act with diminished consequences. Significantly, the repercussions of such actions are linked to public interpretations and responses. David's comments make this particularly clear, as his identification of discrimination is rooted in his experience as the discriminated. Though the two friends regularly traveled throughout Caracas and other cities, David insisted that exchanges between each of the young men and the individuals with whom they came into contact during their adventures were vastly different. David argued that differential treatment frequently occurs. Moreover, the comments make note of Antonio's disregard of possible discrimination in his presence.

Lesson 2: Malandreo as Passport

For young working-class and lower-middle class *Caraqueños* like Antonio and David, preoccupations with the police are significant concerns as they traverse the city. Though many of my former neighbors in Chacao attempted to limit their own movement beyond the small municipality, the varying extents to which police view young people like David and Antonio as citizens or threats greatly determine the routes and destinations that residents frequently choose. Popular discourse of violence makes note of dangerous and anonymous *malandros*, but many believe that travel outside of safe territories at particular times increases the likelihood of police behaving “more criminally than the actual criminals (*más malandro que los propios malandros*).”

While the *malandro* is a prominent figure in the *Caraqueño* imaginary, the meanings associated with the term are not universal. Its flexible usage not only reflects the societal clash implicit in Venezuela’s stark socioeconomic disparities. On one hand, this figure personifies informality and illegality. Conversely, the *malandro* and his defining acts (*malandreo*) are not always defiant in the face of state and society. Rather, I argue that *malandreo* can function within and permit entry to legitimate society. This does not mean that government unquestioningly embraces *malandreo*, particularly as public discourse produces the *malandro* as an omnipresent threat to civil order and economic stability. Nonetheless, organized groups of so-called thugs may function within the state apparatus in ways similar to

private corporations and non-governmental organizations that often play significant roles in the workings of contemporary nation-states.

In addition, somewhere between these two conceptions of the *malandro* lies a populist notion that fits the lives of many *Caraqueños* in a manner distinct from either of the aforementioned possibilities of unabashed illegality or state service. In this case, the *malandro* becomes an admirable figure due to his ability to navigate the informal spaces of Caracas. While many individuals find the fractured city a severe limitation to their capacity to access basic rights, the *malandro* may gain the social and geographic skills necessary to expand the spaces in which he safely lives and travels. Essentially, *malandreo* may include a set of tools permitting the individual to claim rights to the city, despite Caracas' general inaccessibility to residents.

One evening after a meeting with a group of friends in Parque Central, I checked the time on my cellular phone before excusing myself from the small circular table seating six. As I stood, Marco's voice brashly sounded above the steady chatter surrounding us in the café. "Hey *huevo*, wait a second. Lets all go together in a second." He smoothed the frizzy hair escaping from his unsettled cornrows before squeezing his baseball cap over his head. The others gulped down their remaining drops of juice and water before picking up their bags. The six of us walked between the concrete pillars supporting the enormous structure of Parque Central above our heads until escaping into the open air that smelled of trash and urine a block away from the nearest metro station. Marco's girlfriend stopped to say

goodbye to the male companions before entering the subway. “No. Come with us. I’ll accompany you to your house to make sure you get there safely,” urged her boyfriend as he held onto her arm. She grasped at his bicep, and agreed to continue her trip with the group. We passed the metro entrances while squeezing our way through the streets crowded by *buhoneros* and pedestrians. Men, tired from their day’s work, shouted destinations beside the rusting buses with bright decals on the windows as passengers squeezed into the seats and isles. Horns beeped as we moved through the slowly moving traffic that passed along scented corners. Fried chicken, popcorn, fresh fruit, and diesel exhaust rushed into our noses until we arrived at a bus stop near an overpass some fifteen minutes from the café where we began.

Along the way, Juan tried to convince the group that English was an impossibly difficult language to learn. However, he insisted that his above average intelligence permitted him to learn it well. This was particularly humorous to most of the friends present, as they consistently teased Juan for his awkward presence and frequent state of confusion. “*Pollito*, chicken. *Gallina*, hen,” he sang as the others laughed. Marco, being the quickest to pick at Juan’s efforts, asked me if his friend’s attempts at speaking English were intelligible. After two careful listens I made sense of the heavily accented words, “chicken” and “hen,” before joining the others in banter. I sarcastically stated that Juan’s English was good enough to sound like a native speaker. Everyone burst into laughter as Juan’s face stretched into a broad smile.

“But you shouldn’t speak too much English like that in the street though. Your English is too good not to get robbed around here,” I joked. The others laughed as they mimicked Juan’s poorly pronounced song. Suddenly, the small crowd at the bus stop grew silent, and heads turned toward oncoming traffic as we all made note of the scene developing across the street. Two police officers dressed in black escorted a drunken man along the sidewalk with their arms drawn and pointed. Everyone silently watched from the corners of their eyes, making sure they escaped direct contact with the men at work. While we eagerly anticipated the bus’ arrival, the officers guided the stumbling man across the overpass, down the iron staircase, and onto the sidewalk. They spoke quietly to the man as one officer rummaged through his wallet. Within moments, the man was pressed against a neighboring building with his limbs spread along the wall.

Two buses stopped, and the entire crowd shuffled onto the vehicles before the vehicles moved forward, throwing standing bodies into collision in the cramped isles. While we bumped into each other on the bus, Marco remarked. “*¡Coño maricos!* Do you see how this *Americano* acted out there? How funny is it to see that he came here for anthropology, but he’ll only go back to [North] Carolina with an education in *malandreo?*” Marco’s girlfriend, who had been inaudible for much of our short journey, added many *Caraqueños* had not seen parts of the city that I, the

“*criollo*³ anthropologist” had visited. As the bus swerved through traffic the men in the group added to the conversation, listing sets of knowledge and behavioral adaptations that they deemed representative of *malandreo*.

The list began with activities such as eating *arepas*⁴, particularly outside of nicer locations such as el Budare⁵ (Counihan & Van Esterik 2008). In addition one could not have aversions to drinking *caña* (liquor, most likely rum) in the streets as opposed to places such as bars and restaurants. *Malandros*, they insisted, danced to Salsa, listened to Vallenato⁶, and did not dance to Techno music. Most importantly, a *malandro* did all these things whenever and wherever he wants. As they spoke, they exaggerated their regional accents by dragging out vowels and dropping unessential consonants like the letter S.

Though this group of young *Caraqueños* produced this list in jest, their associations define *malandreo* as a collection of practices firmly situated in working class culture. As they catalogued stylistic preferences many of the listed items were

³ The term, *criollo*, has its origins in the colonial period, as it referred to Spaniards born in the colonies. In contemporary use, however, the word references something or someone of local origin. In addition, it can denote race in ways unintended in its original usage. This is especially so in many parts of Latin America where national identity is overtly tied to histories of racial mixture rather than “pure” Spanish descent.

⁴ The arepa is a flat bread made from cornmeal. They are fried, grilled, or baked, though the two former options are the most common. They are commonly cut open, and stuffed with a variety of ingredients ranging from meat, cheese, and fish. They are an extremely cheap and common food in Venezuela and Colombia. While they are a staple of the Venezuelan diet, the nation’s poor tend to rely upon the arepa as a daily source of nourishment. At times people refer to the arepa as “poor people’s food.”

⁵ El Budare is a chain of restaurants throughout Venezuela that offers selections from soups and steaks to hamburgers and arepas. They specialize in Venezuelan traditional fast foods like arepas and cachapas. The prices of these particular items at el Budare are frequently higher than many other areparias. In addition, the restaurants in Caracas under the name of el Budare are frequently situated in wealthier neighborhoods such as la Castellana and las Mercedes.

⁶ Vallenato is a Colombian music genre that has become extremely popular throughout much of Venezuela. Though popular in Caracas, it is a style of music frequently heard in the street or in small working-class bars rather than in most dance clubs.

antithetical to middle-class tastes. The *malandro's* supposed appreciation of Salsa and Vallenato—two styles of music frequently audible throughout working-class communities as people enjoy the sounds in their cars and homes—coupled with his disdain of Techno exemplify the class-identifying preferences endemic to *Caraqueño* communities associated with social marginality and poverty (Thompson 1963).

While middle-class friends frequently called me to join them for whiskey at Whiskey, a bar in Chacao, my companions on the bus more frequently gathered in or around a friend's home, and drank beverages traditionally produced nationally such as rum. Although the *malandro* supposedly may go wherever he likes, most working-class *Caraqueños* do not have the ability to travel through middle-class territories at all times without consequence. However, the *malandro's* presumed lack of interest in many of the spoils of middle-class inclusion makes class-based exclusions less significant factors in their analysis of this valued form of agency. The working-class youth's glorification of the *malandro* is based upon his unhindered agency, despite the challenges that the city often offers its residents. Notably, Marco and his friends' articulation of the *malandro* is not so sensational that they cannot envision themselves performing the subjectivity.

Importantly, social relationships underlie the *malandro's* widespread access to the city's public spaces. For the group traveling with me on the bus, to go whenever and wherever one wants presumes an absence of adverse repercussions. Thus, free passage does not occur if the individual in transit loses all possessions to robbery upon arrival. More than a coerced transfer of possessions, theft may signal

exclusion through terror and violence. Not only does coerced “sharing” mean a possible material loss. It frequently includes identifying individuals and populations that are the least protected within the spaces of exposure. As a neighbor insisted, “people don’t rob neighbors—the ones that know you. You get robbed away from home.” Essentially, those who are not considered members of community are exposed to violence.

This is particularly evident in *Caraqueño* communities where social repercussions for local transgressions may greatly affect one’s exposure to violence. Frequently, one’s safe passage to many communities is ensured by relationships with community members with some degree of social capital. Entering unfamiliar communities without some degree of approval increases the chances of violent deterrence. This is not to say that knowing a few people keeps the *malandro* secure in all places at all times. Rather, he must learn to traverse the city safely by avoiding danger when necessary. However, an excessive preoccupation with peril ought not deter individual agency to the point of fearing transit through the capital.

Notably, Marco and the others with me deemed the location in which I witnessed the police robbery dangerous, particularly at night. Still, we regularly chose this route over using the “safer” metro. Taking the bus and walking through these spaces of supposed danger, on the other hand, allowed us to make decisions that would not have been options in underground travel. Not only did we have the ability to decide where to go on the way home. We could also choose when to move through the city, as the metro closed at eleven PM.

Though *malandreo* is often associated with criminality in popular discourse, it is not limited to sensationalized illegality. I argue that at its core, the term *malandro* refers to an individual with a developed ability to navigate the city despite the presence of diverse obstacles to individual passage. Some of the most powerful of these hindrances are the city's discourses of security and fear. To an extent we can associate *malandreo* with something that many might call street smarts. However, I am hesitant to embrace such a translation. Though street smarts may be a widespread urban survival strategy, *malandreo*, as I have discussed thus far, is a local knowledge and a set of practices explicitly linked to social and political rights. In the context of Caracas it is a subaltern strategy enabling a mode of political subjectivity that actively claims sets of rights not made easily accessible to large sectors of the population in the Venezuelan police state.

Regarding gender, the *malandro* is an overwhelmingly masculine subjectivity. Although women may engage in *malandreo*, the gendered dynamics of public and domestic spaces influence the ways in which *Caraqueños* engender this identity of informality. Women do, of course, occupy public spaces throughout the city. However, individuals and families frequently consider male companionship and protection when imagining and even permitting female movement through the streets. In essence, men may utilize these pathways as a space for socializing while women travel through Caracas' streets to shift between domestic spaces. In addition, males may commonly travel in groups as they traverse the city. Nevertheless, the collective nature of this transit is less frequently articulated as an

explicit strategy for protection. Rather, men commonly insist that groups of travelling males form packs for reasons such as efficient transportation costs and socializing.

In contrast, my experience of exploring the prohibited spaces of the city was largely possible due to my positionality as an outsider in Caracas. To an extent this permitted me to question and even disregard many of the social rules presented to me throughout my term of research. My early attempts at subjectively comparing communities and my inability to internalize many *Caraqueño* systems of meaning greatly influenced my willingness to seek passage into presumably dangerous areas of the city. Perhaps my decisions to transgress Caracas' internal borders were heavily based upon naïveté and audacity. However, I felt urged to question the fearful discourse that consistently constructed poor *Caraqueños*, particularly those who looked like me, as mischievous or malicious criminals. Though this talk was present throughout the city, it became clear that it affected distinct communities in different ways. As the discourse pushed large sectors of the urban population into Caracas' shadows and out of many public spaces of the ordered city, many people clearly found ways to claim rights upon the city for diverse purposes. Ultimately, my understanding of how people commonly made sense of my presence influenced the routes and sites of research I chose while in Caracas.

My conversations with Marco, a working-class Afro-Venezuelan man in his mid twenties, forced me to consider how others' readings of my presence made a difference in my daily workings in Caracas, as he regularly reminded me of my

outsider status. Though I may have been welcome in his neighborhood and in his home, he frequently insisted upon calling me *el Americano* upon meeting. The regular exchange of jokes between Marco and me initiating many of our exchanges made note of cultural differences despite our shared Afro-descent. As we explored national and regional discourses by *hablando paja* (talking shit) and honest questioning, it became clear that the rules governing my access to a particular experience in Caracas were not the same as those of many *Caraqueños* from a similar class background as my own.

In one of our meetings, Marco asked if I have experienced any discrimination during my time in Caracas. I had been in many conversations since my arrival in which individuals prompted me for signs of recognition of Venezuela's racial democracy, but this conversation would take an unexpected turn. Immediately assuming that I understood his question, I quickly responded by telling him that I had encountered discrimination that I interpreted as racism. Marco quickly interrupted to clarify his question. He was not particularly interested in hearing me talk about racism, especially when he assumed that race was one of the primary reasons why he imagined that I would not encounter the discrimination to which he referred. Marco continued, "I mean, people probably think you're Venezuelan." He held his arm before me while pointing at my hand. "Look at your color. You don't look American, so they won't mistreat you for that." Frankly, the physical traits that I assumed roused suspicion and anxiety in spaces of middle-class privilege could contribute to my safety and greater comfort in many areas associated with the social

and economic margins. In addition, Marco's question was concerned with my experiences within the Caracas that he knew well. To be more precise, the city of which he spoke consisted of spaces between his home on a populated hill in the Western periphery and Central Caracas.

Significantly, the comments of Marco's girlfriend during the earlier described bus ride parallel his statement on race and "looking Venezuelan." They reflect notions of national and local belonging that associate race and class with political subjectivity. While this working-class couple explicitly refers to national community through the use of titles like *criollo* and *Venezolano*, popular discourse imbues nationalist signifiers with sets of social and political rights and obligations to national and local communities. Individuals who stand out as outsiders may find themselves identified as foreigners (potentially US imperialists)⁷ or *sifrinós* (snobs). Both terms can carry unfavorable associations and even suspicion in the politically charged climate of *Caraqueño* streets.

Bound by the rules of national and local social hierarchies, it is extremely difficult for individuals visibly marked as members of the middle-class to break the rules of popular discourse dividing the city into presumably safe, ordered spaces and dangerous, chaotic areas. One's speech, attire, and use of other status symbols may expose individuals to greater risk of violence outside of welcoming

⁷ Political demonstrations were extremely common in Caracas. While living in Central Caracas I silently passed through anti-imperialist rallies multiple times. Frequently, speakers holding megaphones spoke about the unjust policies of President George W. Bush, and the purported selfishness intrinsic to North American culture. Crowds would cheer as they filled intersections while chanting catchy phrases rejecting President Bush and US capitalism.

communities. Thus, just as those identified as poor could become defenseless victims of discrimination in many parts of Caracas, my middle-class peers had significant reasons to limit their circulation beyond the spaces they considered safe and orderly. Perhaps I could safely enter Marco's neighborhood, but many of my former neighbors from Chacao could not do the same without relinquishing attachments to their own class positions momentarily. Many would have to dress differently. Although members of working-class neighborhoods are not all black or Afro-Venezuelan, many middle-class Venezuelans believe that they would racially stand out in poorer communities. As a man told me, he was "too white to go" into the spaces of Caracas that *malandros* now claimed.

Lesson 3: Policing Power in People's Hands

Although the term, *malandro*, has a range of meanings in Caracas, it may take on particular emphases in marginal communities. While the meanings that Marco and his friends communicated were particularly invested in avoiding violence through cunning and transit, other connotations of the term are associated with more aggressive confrontation between individuals and institutions such as the police. In the latter case *malandros* take on roles of local autonomy while working for the inclusion of local community members in the national public arena.

Throughout the city, individuals talk about avoiding conflict with groups associated with organized crime. This is of particular concern in areas where city residents believe that police do not properly control illegality. Of course, part of this

popular concern with safety in unprotected zones is that the police engage in extortion and other acts of *malandreo*. Because there is a general mistrust of the state authorities, many *Caraqueños* find security in local social networks. Frequently, forging relationships with feared or respected individuals in the community produce the social capital necessary to evade violence. While these protective social networks exist throughout the city, Western Caracas is a zone where they have become increasingly significant factors in people's daily life within and beyond the borders of local communities. There, one of Caracas' largest barrios, El 23 de Enero, houses a collection of armed *colectivos* that play a large role in the discourse on *malandreo* as it relates to social and political organization (Lowy & Pearlman 1992). Notably, El 23 de Enero was named after the date of the 1958 fall of General Marcos Pérez Jiménez's dictatorship. The popular uprising that played a significant role in the change of power in the mid twentieth century is part of the heritage that today's Tupamaros of Caracas claim in their current work.

Popular discourse constructs these bands of *malandros* in multiple ways. On one hand, many people insist that they are bands of criminals. Terrorists who stretch their reach far outside of the barrio into the formal city, their presence in Caracas has been felt as a militarized force throughout the Northwestern region of the city. They are purportedly involved in regional drug trafficking, prostitution, and extortion. Their engagement in all of these activities supposedly goes unchallenged, as gangs back up their local power with the threat of violence. Although armed groups control communities throughout this region of the city, no

single group has established control over the entire area. Rather, these gangs have established power in small territories that correspond to the communities from which its members hail. Because their goals for local social empowerment are supposedly analogous, armed groups may create alliances. However, there is regular conflict between armed groups over territory throughout the region.

Although some residents may consider the acts of these *malandro* collectives criminal, members of these groups are often respected members of their communities. The control that they collectively maintain throughout this highly populated part of Caracas is not only reinforced by the threat of violence. These groups, collectively known as *Tupamaros*, define themselves as part of a social movement that grew out of the context of declining state services and an increased state violence in the 1980s⁸.

During this period of what Roland Denis called a socialization of violence, social militias began to organize in response to the social, economic, and political conditions that culminated in a series of strikes, protests, and martial law in 1989 (Denis 2005). Here, Denis' term refers to the Venezuelan state directing violence at society during its period of social and political turmoil. The unrest of the 1980s was not only defined by increasing political and daily violence. It was also a public response to the doubling poverty rates between 1981 and 1989 (Lustig 1995).

⁸ Venezuela's *Tupamaros* borrow the name of the MLN (National Liberation Movement), an urban guerrilla movement from Uruguay. They were active in the 1960s and '70s. The MLN used the name of Tupac Amaru, the leader of an Incan Uprising against the Spanish in the 1780s.

Today these groups of *Tupamaros* are hierarchical organizations that commonly articulate their goals as permitting members of their marginalized communities to access power, particularly by means of local and cooperative efforts. In the early 1990s these militias began an ongoing process of protect neighborhoods from the state's forces and the uncontrolled violence associated with worsening crime throughout Caracas. Groups such as Alexis Vive—a collective currently engaged in the facilitation of local public life through community meetings and reclaiming abandoned spaces—have grown out of the conditions engendered by state neglect and violence. Contemporarily, these efforts have resulted in the region's extremely limited state control and social order unparalleled in much of the rest of the city.

While the residents of locations like El 23 de Enero are subject to the rules enforced by these groups, nongovernmental organizations, state institutions, and independent visitors commonly learn that interaction with the armed collectives in control of the zone is unavoidable. Because *Tupamaros* have taken on a state-like role in these communities, they now administer many of the “public” services available to residents. Perhaps at their start, these groups were commonly deemed militias, but today they have transformed themselves into community organizations that assemble individuals for diverse tasks in the service of local people. In El 23 de Enero trusted entities from outside of the *barrio* considered capable of providing beneficial services are frequently welcome, and granted safe passage. These offerings may include legal aid, health services, in addition to cultural and recreational programs.

One such entity is the Asociación de Mujeres por el Bienestar y Asistencia Recíproca (AMBAR), a Caracas-based NGO that primarily works to protect the social and human rights of sex workers. The additional services that they provide in and around El 23 de Enero include childcare, job training for at-risk teens, and psychological and legal services. They were especially clear about the paradox inherent in *malandro* rule of the barrio:

Here, the *malandros* are the good guys. People don't trust the police—they can't trust [the police]. There has been too much abuse of power in the past. They used to enter the communities looking for drug dealers, but they would arrest, harass, and even kill innocent people in the process. Now the *malandros* watch over everything, which is good and bad... I mean, they do some things that we would like to see stopped, but people are happy to be able to walk the streets without worrying about the type of *malandreo* that most sectors [of Caracas] fear... The *malandros* control prostitution rings, and even produce pornography that circulates in the barrio. At AMBAR we're concerned with the sexual abuse that accompanies these informal networks.

Though my interviewee asserted that AMBAR's concern with sexual coercion taking place in the barrio at the will of gang members, she avoided vilifying the young men (*muchachos*) holding power. These *muchachos* had, after all, permitted much of the NGO's action in the community based on mutual interest in the wellbeing of local residents. Though these new local authorities purportedly engaged in modes of sexual violence, they also disallowed many common sociolegal transgressions such as theft, murder, and even rape within territories of influence. AMBAR's strategy of providing options for women and youth outside of the informal economies that they believed exposed individuals to abuse was not in conflict with the goals of these community groups despite the inherent criticism of local power.

Making no attempts to construct El 23 de Enero as an urban utopia, my collaborator stated that the *malandros* of the barrio reinforced their authority by explicitly threatening with the use of force. She, a lower-middle-class Afro-Venezuelan woman that lived in Central Caracas, provided legal services alongside a friend and colleague that offered psychological services. Both women were in their thirties, single, had lived in Caracas their whole lives, and did not live in El 23 de Enero. They regularly shared a small satellite office inside the *barrio* when they were not working in AMBAR's central office, where staff carried out daily work and most of the NGO's programs.

She described AMBAR's process of opening a small location within the barrio: "The first day we were there, armed men in masks stopped us to ask why we were there. We explained that we wanted to offer psychological and legal services for free in the community. They left us, and came back later unarmed to inform us of the *colectivo's* approval. They said that we should continue to come, and that nobody would bother us." She continued, remarking on her surprisingly tranquil passage through the community's streets where residents increasingly interacted with the AMBAR staff as the news spread.

Although the NGO's presence was approved, the initial contact was an intimidating moment in which everyone involved came to terms with the local balance of power. The threat of physical harm was not subtle, as the masked men brandished a small collection of arms. However, once a common understanding is established, overt threats were no longer preferred. At some point, I asked if these

armed collectives gain popular disapproval due to their use of violence. My interviewee answered:

There is violence in El 23 de Enero, but it's a lot more controlled than it used to be. The fighting is between armed groups, and people know when and where it happens, so they can avoid it. In the cases where the *malandros* kill individuals [in their neighborhoods], it is usually because someone breaks the rules. Maybe they robbed some old women or something like that. It's harsh, but that's why there is so little crime inside the controlled zones.

Notably, *malandro*-caused violence in many communities of El 23 is controlled to a greater degree than it is in many other parts of Caracas. Residents are aware of this, and they often talk about it. In addition, the force used in this particular mode of *malandreo* differs greatly from other meanings associated with crime in other regions of the city. The actions constituting *Tupamaro* police work is considered legitimate in the communities where these armed collectives most frequently function. In an already violent world, this precise application of force makes the *malandro's* methods of policing more acceptable—and legitimate—than those of the state.

Although women's access to the city outside of local communities frequently appears to depend upon male protection (discussed in Chapters 4 and 5), the women working with AMBAR challenge this notion. These women enter the *barrio* regularly without male company. Although many women enter El 23 de Enero without help, these women frequently live in or nearby the community. It is extremely rare for individuals who are not from a *barrio* in Caracas to enter, regardless of gender. Importantly, the lawyer and psychologist worked in the

satellite office while providing services to men and women. In many cases, their clients had been required by courts to seek out aid after finding themselves in legal troubles. Thus, these women were no more in need of protection, as their work situated them as defenders of local communities, and allies in Tupamaro governance.

Importantly, to speak of these two individuals from AMBAR only as women omits important information. Their roles as professionals with useful sets of knowledge garnered in Universities helps to differentiate them from many of the working-class residents of El 23 de Enero in terms of class. Here, my interviewee's reference to the *malandros* as *muchachos* might pertain to her age in relationship to that of the average gang member. She explained that the lives of *malandros* are frequently short, as they are more regularly engaged with violence than others in the community. However, referring to gang members as boys may also establish class markers in speech in the same ways that members of middle-class households commonly refer to female domestic workers as *muchachas* regardless of age (Bakan & Stasiulis 1997).

Still, local *Tupamaro* groups held the power that permitted AMBAR's work in the *barrio*. Although my informant from this local NGO associated local male leadership with sexual exploitation of women, she explained that smaller numbers of women are members of these gangs. In fact, I met two at the start of a small meeting with a one of the revolutionary groups of El 23 de Enero (discussed in Chapter 4). These women participated in conversation for a short while, but they

left quickly. Later, they returned with plates of cookies and cups of coffee for four men still in meeting.

Thus, the ways in which gender influences the types of power that individuals come to possess within different types of sovereign spaces are diverse. Although gangs have established control within this *barrio*, the distribution of power and ways that gangs utilize it on members of the community differs greatly. Certainly, men tend to experience violence in different ways than women in El 23 de Enero do. However, factors such as age and class also determine the complex workings of power, safety, and participation.

Lesson 4: Surviving Sovereignty and the Noninterfering State

While these armed groups displace the nation-state as a source of legitimate violence in these communities, they seek to use a more subtle power within El 23 de Enero. Frequently, formal representatives of *Tupamaro* groups carefully construct their public images as groups that are willing to use militarized force for the protection of home communities from external forces. However, they simultaneously portray themselves as social and political organizations that promote justice and equality in the marginalized Western periphery of Caracas. Utilizing a discourse of civil and human rights, vocal *Tupamaro* leadership attempts to distance the groups with negative popular associations with *malandreo* by commonly claiming the classification, *colectivo*.

Although my collaborator from AMBAR spoke about the types of violence with which many of the organization's beneficiaries negotiated in El 23 de Enero, many residents addressed the improved security and possibilities for political participation in their communities. Perhaps local *malandros* exhibited force as a means to establish order, but the resulting lawfulness set this particular barrio apart from many parts of the city where mundane violence adversely affects social life. Although some individuals involved with the *colectivos* do embrace the title of *malandro*, many shun the association with crime and illegitimacy. These individuals insist that their quasi secession from the state is based upon the same ideals that the contemporary Bolivarian constitution claims.

Notably, many claim that *Tupamaro* use of militaristic force is not merely a ploy to maintain power. Rather, many community members embrace this new form of power, because it appears to protect from illegitimated modes of violence and provide welfare to communities within the marginalized spaces of the *barrio*. Many residents of El 23 de Enero have, however, accused the state of serving private interests, and maintaining power in the hands of the national elite. As police misconduct directed at the city's poor has become the primary means of contact between some *Caraqueños* and the state, some communities have sought out ways to govern and protect themselves against external power. While state forces acted upon the communities of El 23 de Enero without regard of consequences, the possibilities greatly differed for local powers.

Essentially, the groups governing these spaces autonomous from direct state rule gain support in multiple ways. Tupamaros are members of the communities they serve. Therefore, the supposed *malandro's* involvement in local governance may improve the economic living conditions for his neighbors, friends, and relatives. At the same time, the former is accountable to the base of his social power in ways that many politicians or government officials may not be. In other words, these *colectivos* establish their legitimacy by effectively granting many of the social, political, and economic rights denied by the nation-state within their own sovereign space. These collectives, then, not only possess policial power. They have managed to convert it into a more pervasive authority by effectively producing a social contract in their spaces of influence.

The incidence of criminalized entities establishing power within the sovereign borders of the nation-state is not limited to this particular example in Western Caracas. It is not uncommon that gangs in many places established control over already marginal territories associated with crime and poverty to varying degrees. Kingston, Jamaica's slums and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's favelas are among the most popularly recognized examples of cities where gangs have become significant forces in the production of local systems of order facilitated by blurred boundaries between crime and political power (Austin-Broos 1984; Clarke 2006; Harrison 2008; Marotti 2009; Zibechi 2010). Currently, in the Brazilian and Jamaican cases gangs stand at odds with the state. The state's opposition to these local groups is commonly based upon a notion of the illegitimacy of gang violence

and the nation-state's concern for the wellbeing of citizens. Frequently, state action against these armed groups results in applying militarized force on poor communities (Zibechi 2010).

In some cases, these gangs garner unofficial support from the state. This is especially likely when the former offer services to local officials or state institutions (Yuan 2009). At times, state officials may simply overlook organized crime as long as it does not threaten the state's general control within its territorial limits. Although multiple entities may coexist in the same space enacting violence, the nation-state continues its monopoly of legitimacy. The widespread phenomenon of organized crime takes diverse forms as sovereign states and delegitimized groups negotiate power in their own ways.

The Venezuelan example, however, differs from the examples mentioned above. Not only have local *malandros* banded together in order to protect communities from the city's increasingly violent crime—a common motivation for gang formation (Sobel & Osoba 2009). In addition, Western Caracas' *Tupamaros* situate themselves clearly in opposition to a nation-state whose diminishing local support allowed for their controversial reproduction of state-structure in communities like El 23 de Enero without regular violent interference from the state. Although some consider these groups to be rebels and terrorists, their autonomy is largely possible due to their ability to redefine the terms of negotiation between communities and the Venezuelan state. If state power makes possible the production of law and logic, local conventions have taken precedence in the modes

of governance ranging from the production of rules to the application of state-like force. The withdrawal of state police forces in addition to the petitions of state and non-governmental institutions to community leaders for entry and action illustrate the acknowledgement of Tupamaro authority in the area.

Although the state's recognition of legitimized power held by *colectivos* might constitute a threat to state sovereignty, the relationship between these armed groups and the current government is currently mutually favorable. On one hand, many community members and local leaders in El 23 de Enero believe that leftist Chavista governance marks a significant shift in Venezuela's political history. Chavista policy and rhetoric that demand equality and integration for marginalized communities throughout the nation-state provides the moral backing with which Tupamaros rule in their communities. Although Tupamaro leaders often do not consider themselves Chavistas, they acknowledge the popular support of the current president in working-class zones of the city. In addition, they consider themselves to be significant actors independent of Hugo Chávez in the Bolivarian Revolution. Thus, the contemporary Venezuelan President is less a superior in the same organization's hierarchy than he is an ally with a common goal.

On the other hand, the communities in question have accepted the newly created state sponsored institutions meant to enact grassroots democracy such as *consejos comunales* (neighborhood councils). Significantly, groups such as Colectivo Alexis Vive (discussed in Chapter 4) consider neighborhood councils an important tool in "*sembrando poder popular*" (planting popular power) in the communities

they serve. Though the nation-state's direct influence within El 23 de Enero has declined, many residents believe that the barrio's influence upon local and national governments has quickly become more significant. As the national government continues to rely on locally engaged forms of political participation, the actions of state-police forces within communities like El 23 de Enero have become increasingly problematic for the city and national governance. Today governments in Venezuela attempt to dissociate themselves from policies of the pre-Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, many of which were criticized for unabashed discriminatory application of policial and penal power (Charles & Clara 2000; Hoag 1996). Although nation-states may not seek popular support for their deployment of power, the legitimacy of President Chávez's national leadership depends greatly on the approval of the citizenry that he purports to serve. Thus, violent state confrontation with Tupamaros would likely challenge the integrity of Venezuelan democratic processes.

Importantly, the resulting relationship between these supposed *malandros* of Western Caracas and the Venezuelan state is interdependent. Although these *colectivos* have produced spaces of relative autonomy at the city's periphery, they are not external to the Venezuelan state. Ultimately, *Tupamaro* groups such as Colectivo Alexis Vive insist that their goals consist of social, economic, and political inclusion within Venezuelan society for members of their communities and themselves. Residents seek participation in local and national politics, and many individuals do so by utilizing the community resources that include infrastructure

produced or controlled by *Tupamaros*. Because local democratic forms throughout Caracas have become the tools with which individuals gain access to rights and power, community participation in the projects of local *colectivos* are now as essential to accessing liberties as involvement with state-based institutions.

Finding Cohesion in the Cracks

The varying methods with which the state manages populations throughout its sphere of influence helps to establish the physical and discursive terrain that individuals and communities navigate in their daily lives. In many cases, the state's deployment of violent power serves strikingly to mark the limits between legitimate and illicit worlds within society and space. In Caracas this has designated the geographic and popular majority of the national capital as illicit or illegal. Specific strategies of rule exercised by the state, then, circumscribe the agency of urban subjectivities as power defines the very terms with which individuals produce systems of meaning.

The popularization of a *Caraqueño* discourse of criminality has perhaps produced the *malandro*, but the meanings associated with the term have escaped the regulatory capacity of the nation-state. The methods of rule utilized by the contemporary Venezuelan state have situated a large portion of Caracas' population at the fringes of society, and many of these citizens seek to reclaim political and social recognition (1995). Moreover, they often do so through methods that address the discursive and material possibilities within local spaces. Practices associated

with the varying interpretations of *malandreo* have become familiar modes of both resistance and survival in locations where the state regularly exercises power through violent and aggressive policing of the poor. In Caracas individuals and entire communities negotiate access to rights in spaces that are outside of well-established state control or where the state denies civil liberties as it exerts militaristic force. Therefore, the selective application of policial authority produces a range of political subjectivities and practices that vie for power within the nation-state.

Though the sovereign territory of the modern nation-state may often produce the universalizing subjectivity of the citizen, constructions of variegated sovereignty may easily contribute to the plurality of citizenship even within the nation-state. Discussions such as the one presented in this chapter recognize that race, class, and gender all play roles in determining one's access to particular modes of citizenship. Because I focus on the *malandro* as citizen, this chapter primarily examines some of the avenues available to criminalized males that are frequently deemed expendable to society and vulnerable to state violence. In Caracas this carries distinct racial and class implications as well, particularly as these social constructs engender poor young men of African descent as threats to society. Not only does this social hierarchy expose these men to violence, it also adversely affects these men's access to economic and social opportunities for mobility. If these conditions do not urge so-called *malandros* into criminal activity, they certainly force many young men of color into marginal and illicit spaces of the city.

Caraqueños, in varying situations and contexts, insist that *malandros* are terrorists, petty thugs, folk heroes, as well as legitimate political and social leaders. The flexibility of meanings and the ambiguity of their actions contribute to the diverse interpretations of the expression in the city's communities. The term has even been stretched to include agents of the state. Whether we deem the *malandro* society's threat or its hero, it has become associated with the acquisition of power beyond one's station. As the impetus of territorial controls or the possessors of such authority, these are salient figures in the production of Venezuela's discourse of security. Ultimately, militaristic management of this particularly divided city makes spatial transgression and management political acts that extend the limited scope of the spaces of citizenship.

Conclusion

During the last days that I spent in Caracas in 2009, President Chávez won another important electoral victory. He failed in 2007, but two years later—February 16, 2009—he passed a referendum that eliminated presidential term limits by a narrow margin (2009). Though the margin of victory was not as large as his 2006 election, fifty-four percent was enough to prompt Venezuelans and others beyond the nation's borders to imagine a political future that approximated Chavista predictions. Perhaps Chávez will stay another six years—or more. After all, there are *Caraqueños* who call him *el Rey* (the King).

As one could imagine, Chacao's residential buildings were in silent mourning. There were no accusations of fraud, but frustration was evident in the apartment overlooking Avenida Francisco de Miranda, where I was staying during my short trip. Although my friend and host only wished to wake the following day to realize that the electoral outcome was an occurrence in a bad dream, I left the apartment with a camera and an audio recorder. As I prepared to leave, Abdul—a French-Algerian living in Caracas—excitedly did the same. We rushed to the avenue while Abdul expressed his awe by mumbling to himself in French, English, and Spanish. As we walked Eastward, Abdul joined the thickening crowd in its chant, "*¡Sí, se puede! ¡Sí, se puede!*" (Yes, we can!) Although I had not yet relaxed as we moved through the drunken celebration, Abdul jumped up and down—celebrating with anyone accepting of a partner in the loud, musical, scene. Cars sped, motorcycles

rushed down the avenue, and busses filled with people honked their horns while each vehicle with a radio played its own song.



Figure 17: Celebrations after 2009 referendum on Av. Francisco Miranda

As we enjoyed the celebration, I could not help but relax and enjoy the scene. The emotion in the street was as thick as the humid air, but the live music being played in the backs of large trucks massaged the tension out of me. I had no clue what sort of cargo these trucks normally transported throughout the city, but that night they urged me to enjoy the party regardless of my ambivalent feelings toward the election. Eventually Abdul and I began to walk back home while taking photos. I snapped away from the sidewalk. Abdul danced in the street with his camera flashing in all directions while people reached out of car windows, waving at him and smiling. As I took the last photo of the night, Abdul rushed past. A moment

later, a thin teenager—maybe fifteen years old—sprinted after my friend with impressive speed. After seeing me, the adolescent ran to the street, mounted a moped with three others, and rolled away at a moderate pace.

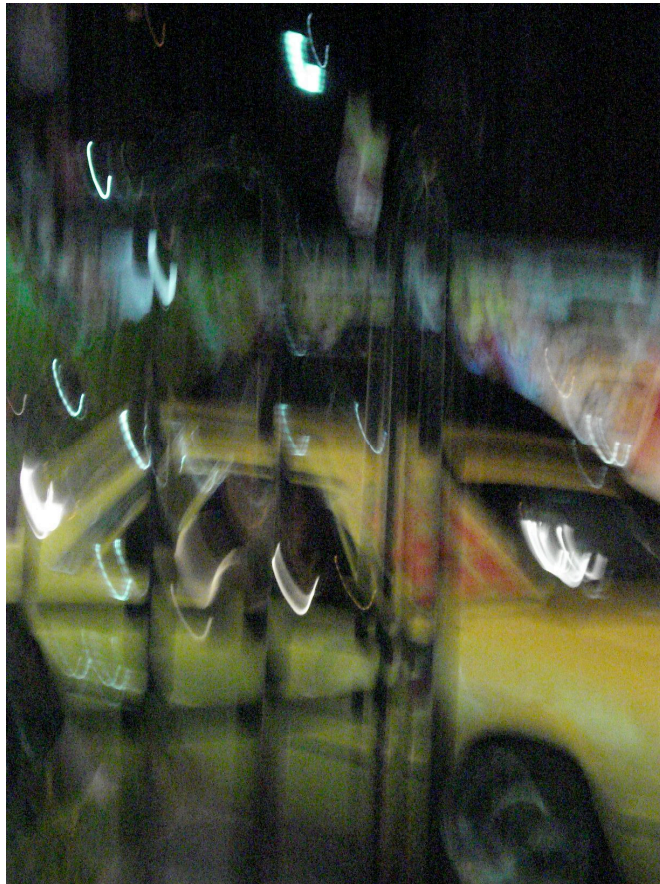


Figure 18: Last photo taken on February 16, 2009

Abdul returned, breathing heavily and cursing in French. He rubbed over his chest and arms, checking for injuries. Explaining that the teens had attempted to rob him of his camera, he resisted while they pulled him to the scooter. He showed me the red marks around his neck and arms from being grabbed, saying that nobody could take his camera. He declared that it was his, and “no kids were strong enough

to take it” from him. As he spoke, he stomped the teen’s dirty baseball cap that fell during the chase.

Although the night of the referendum was a joyous moment for some *Caraqueños*, this adventure reminded me that the possibility of a Chavista future was not enough to mend the problems of the present. Days before the election, a friend told me that he and other Chavistas were “afraid that [the political opposition] will take away all the things that Chávez gave [the people].” Still, many of the people had not yet been satisfied. The current government had granted some sectors of the citizenry possibilities to grasp the necessary power to shape their local communities in ways they saw fit. Despite these developments in political and social life in Venezuela’s capital, Abdul’s old battered camera offered an attractive opportunity for poor youth that continue to experience alienation.

Throughout this dissertation, I have explored the various ways that *Caraqueños* conceive of citizenship in their city. Although we might think of it as a universalizing construct, I assert that meanings and forms of citizenship are diverse within the space of the nation-state. Categories of identity such as race, class, and gender are among the many factors influencing the ways in which individuals navigate the forms of belonging that constitute citizenship in Caracas. Because, as illustrated in Chapter 2, the city is geographically difficult to traverse, finding common ground (literally and figuratively) for fruitful debate amongst the city’s diverse communities is not easy. Thus, the formations of local publics of Chapter 4 that lead to civic engagement allow different small-scale negotiations take place. At

times, the goals of adjacent communities coincide, which calls for collaboration. However, the grassroots democracy that has taken hold in Caracas and other parts of the country has given communities more opportunities for citizens to act on their own behalf within spaces of daily life that facilitate participation for many *Caraqueños* that complained of exclusion.

As illustrated in Chapter 3, the discourse surrounding Hugo Chávez's presidency reflects the divergent meanings of democracy in Venezuela. The ways in which communities believe that political participation ought function are not always the same, despite their use of shared terminology. For *Caraqueños* of certain backgrounds, democratic life does not ideally lead to the same types of social and political organization that others desire. The production of more egalitarian spaces in the capital—referring to degree and quantity—like in Chapter 5's discussion of the Metro de Caracas does not necessarily mean a better or more just city. For some, this transformation of urban space appears as problematic as the semi-autonomous communities led by gangs in the West of the city that I discussed in Chapter 6.

I argue that the plurality of citizenship in Caracas facilitates the development of Venezuelan democratic society, as many *Caraqueños* have found new ways to ensure their rights by entering into conversation with state institutions. Nonetheless, over the next two years the residents of Caracas will prepare for the coming presidential election with hope. Those who continue to support President Chávez may see him continue power. However, the political opposition's power is

significant, and it appears to have grown since 2006. Although I see Venezuela growing increasingly democratic, I fear that increasing political and economic instability may lead to significant challenges for *Caraqueño* public life.

In late 2012, Venezuelans will have chosen their leader for the next six years. At the present, I believe that important questions regarding political and social organization amongst the growing political opposition I ask how the political opposition's demographics have changed since 2006? Might *Caraqueños* view continued Chavista power as a necessity to preserve today's local democratic life? How might increasing working-class involvement in the political opposition influence the city's class relations in both the short term and the long term? How might Chavista rule take new forms in the face of increased dissonance?

Though the future in Caracas is uncertain, I am optimistic. Why am I hopeful? If one might call a city an underdog, Caracas is that. There are many reasons to doubt the capital of Venezuela's ability to sustain comfortable existence for its crowded population. New homes arise despite the lack of new terrain in the Caracas valley. The city does not have enough roads to support its volume of traffic (Brillembourg Tamayo & Schroder 2007). President Chávez is called the King, but there are still free elections. Although I cannot pretend to understand how the city functions, it does. Despite my preoccupations with its political future, I saw communities prepare for coups that never burst into violence. I tasted cakes made when stores no longer sold sugar. In the end, people often find ways to make things work, even when broken.

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Biography

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