

Dining in Bethlehem: Food, Charity, and Growing Old in Bogotá

by

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I dedicate this work, its struggles and its promises, to my parents, María and Eduardo Ruiz. *Este trabajo les pertenece a ustedes, y se los obsequio de todo corazón. Porque todo tiene su recompensa en esta vida...*

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Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
List of Figures	xiii
List of Appendices	xiv
Glossary	xv
Cast of Characters	xvii
Abstract	xviii
Chapter One: Introduction: <i>En Colombia se vive bien/ In Colombia one can live well</i>	1
<i>Bogotá sin Hambre/Bogotá Without Hunger</i>	7
Charity, Social Welfare, and Gifts.....	12
Food and Charity from the “Ground Up”	16
The Making of Humanitarian Subjects.....	19
Food, Belonging, and Growing Old.....	21
<i>La Violencia</i> , Migration, and Urbanization	23
Conceptualizing the “State” in Colombia.....	33
Methodology	36
Writing Anthropology.....	44
Chapter Breakdown	48
Chapter Two: The House of Dignity	50
Soup kitchens, Famine, and Communal Dining	54
The History and Place of <i>Comedor María es Mi Madre</i> in the Cityscape	65
The Social Geography of Giving.....	75
Commensality and Spirituality	88
<i>Un pequeño cielo / a small heaven</i>	100
Conclusion	113
Chapter Three: A Sense of Obligation.....	114
The Constitution of 1991 and the Politics of Inclusion	118
<i>Viejos y Viejas</i> : Aging and the State.....	128
Colonial Families and Immoral Women.....	145
Everything has its “pay back”: “Bad” Children and “Bad” Parents.....	152
The Violence of Growing Older	164
<i>Desaparecida/Disappeared</i>	174
Conclusion	178
Chapter Four: The Pantry of Bogotá.....	181
The Food Bank of the Archdiocese of Bogotá	183
Bogotá Isn’t as Cold as Some People Think.....	193
The Pantry of Bogotá.....	199
Other People’s Leftovers	204
A Race Against Time.....	212
Unintended Consumers: Food Banks as Spaces of Transformation.....	230

Conclusion	239
Chapter Five: <i>Sopa y Seco</i>	241
<i>Sopa</i> : The Value of “Export Quality” Turkey	245
<i>Seco</i> : French Fries and a Sense of Belonging	258
<i>Jugo</i> : The Milk of Well-being	267
The Children of Violence	293
Conclusion	299
Chapter Six: <i>con todo se llena el costal / every little bit helps fill up the costal</i>	301
The Art of Waiting.....	304
<i>Con todo se llena el costal</i>	311
<i>Rebuscando la Vida</i> : Circus Dancers, Recyclers, and <i>Desechables</i>	319
<i>Habas y Maní</i> (Fava Beans and Peanuts)	338
Transforming the <i>mercadito</i>	356
Conclusion	372
Chapter Seven: <i>de piezita y de calle</i>	377
Houses, Streets and the Spaces in Between.....	380
<i>El Niño de la Calle</i> /The Christ Child of the Street.....	385
Doors, Doorknobs, and Thresholds	400
<i>Piezitas</i> as Houses, <i>Piezitas</i> as History.....	406
Houses as Rainy Places.....	415
Conclusion	430
Chapter Eight: Epilogue: The Gleaners of Bethlehem	433
Return.....	437
Appendices.....	442
Bibliography	445

List of Figures

Figure 1: <i>Nuestra Señora de Belén</i> (photo taken by the author in June 2007)	68
Figure 2: <i>Comedor Comunitario Belén - Comedor</i> sponsored by the Bogotá Without Hunger campaign located in Belén (photograph from <i>Integración Social</i> n.d.)... 70	
Figure 3: <i>Comedor María es Mi Madre</i> (taken by the author in June 2007).....	78
Figure 4: Layout of the tables and rooms of the <i>comedor</i> and the interior residence.....	84
Figure 5: Image of a <i>menú del día</i>	88
Figure 6: Food awaiting to be consumed (photograph taken by the author in January, 2007 at <i>Comedor María es Mi Madre</i>).	91
Figure 7: <i>Comedor María es Mi Madre</i> prior to Hermano Miguel's arrival.	101
Figure 8: Photograph of <i>Comedor María es Mi Madre</i> taken in August 2006, four months after Hermano Miguel's arrival.	105
Figure 9: Example of a ballot from the <i>Séptima Papeleta</i>	123
Figure 10: <i>Alcaldía Mayor de Santa Fe de Bogotá</i> 1999: 17.	137
Figure 11: Fruits and vegetables waiting that formed part of <i>Comedor María es Mi Madre's</i> groceries from the <i>Banco de Alimentos</i>	185
Figure 12: Photograph of patrons waiting in line for their lunch meal in front of <i>Comedor María es Mi Madre</i>	301
Figure 13: Images of the <i>Niño de la Calle</i> , taken December 12, 2006 by the author.....	391
Figure 14: Image of the <i>Divino Niño</i> from the cover of Eliécer Salesman's prayer book (2003).	395
Figure 15: Photo of houses built on the Andean slopes in Las Cruces (2008). The photograph is of an eastern view of the mountains taken by the author from the perspective of a window inside a house.....	411
Figure 16: <i>The Gleaners</i> by Jean-François Millet, 1857, Oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.....	433
Figure 17: Division of the <i>localidades</i> of Bogotá by <i>estrato</i>	442
Figure 18: <i>Localidades</i> of Bogotá.....	443

List of Appendices

Appendix A	442
Appendix B	443
Appendix C	444

Glossary

Ancianato	Old age facility
Abuelo/Abuela	Grandparent; identifier for an elder
Almuerzo	Lunch
Aguadepanela	Hot beverage made with water and panela
Carne	Beef
Casa	House
Cena	Dinner
Cerro	Mountains
Comedor Comunitario	Community dining facility
Chocolate/cacao	Hot chocolate
Colada	Breakfast shake
De la calle	Of the street
Curuba	Banana passion fruit
Desechable	Disposable/waste
Desayuno	Breakfast
Familia	Family
Fruta	Fruit
Hambre	Hunger
Hijos/hija/hijo	Children/daughter/son
Hogar	Home
Maracuyá	Passion fruit
Menudencias	Marginal parts of chicken
Pavo	Turkey
Plaza de Mercado	Market
Pollo	Chicken

Sopa

Seco

Vendedor/a Ambulante

Tinto

Viejo/Vieja

Soup

The “dry” portion of a meal

Street peddler

Black, sweetened coffee

Older adult

Cast of Characters

Pachito

Manuel

Leguizamón

Señora Ricarda

Señora Berta

Claudia Marcela

Padre Daniel Saldarriaga

Hermano Miguel

Deibid

Rubén

María *la bandida*

María *perro*

María *tacones*

Gladys

Roberto

Hermano Roosevelt

Hermano José Fernando

Abstract

This dissertation is about practices of giving and receiving of food assistance in a diverse range of contexts, including *comedores* (public dining facilities) for elderly residents of Bogotá. I focus on the ways religious charity organizations (with the assistance of multinational corporations) focus not only on nutritionally assisting elders by curbing hunger through gifts of food, but also endeavor to transform the lives, personhoods, and social relations of their recipients through practices of feeding.

My ethnography is a “ground-up” analysis that moves beyond understandings of how social welfare and religious based charity affect people, and focuses on what the intended receivers do with the food and aid they receive, how they transform these material forms, and recirculate them in new communities with new registers of value. I argue that practices of *rebusque*, or the practice of finding one’s livelihood in the street, are not passive ones, but rather are forms of work that position the poor elderly of the Colombian capital as active agents in securing their own futures and well-being. In doing so, I complicate dyadic representations of the “givers” and “receivers” of charity, and position food practices as material and spiritual response to the deep social and economic inequalities that are connected to histories of violence, migration, and urbanization in Colombia. In doing so, I show how every food product that is given, transferred, and consumed is connected to sets of local and global relations and histories, and the ways elderly patrons of *comedores* embody and reproduce these relations with every bite.

Chapter One

Introduction: *En Colombia se vive bien/ In Colombia one can live well*

On a crisp December morning in 2006, Hermano Miguel, Hermano Carlos, myself, and about thirty-five patrons of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, a community dining facility run by a Franciscan order in central Bogotá, boarded an aging *ejecutivo* bus that would take us down the Andes and away from the chill and rain of the capital. Our destination was Tocaima, a small municipality about one hundred kilometers (approximately three hours) from Bogotá. As our bus descended from about 8,530 feet to 940 feet above sea level through the winding Andean roads, we were greeted by a changing ecological and topographical landscape. The misty green mountain peaks surrounding the *altiplano* (or the high plains of the Andes) settled into leafy trees sprouting countless bright green bananas and plantains, as well as coffee plants dotted with their signature red and green berries. As we descended further, plantains turned into mangoes, papayas and *curubas* (banana passion fruit) -- all of these growing only a couple of feet from the side of the road.

Tocaima, which is located in the department¹ of Cundinamarca, is known for its sulfuric pools of mud and as soon as we arrived at *tierra caliente* (as it is called due to its hot climate), shirts, shoes and pants were peeled off and bodies were quickly covered with grey, therapeutic mud. Some of the older women concentrated on rubbing the mud

¹ The word *departamento* or department is used in Colombia to identify the thirty-two political regions of the country. *Departamentos* are similar to the geo-politics of “states” in the United States.

in areas where they felt aches and pains, while others simply enjoyed the idea of covering their bodies with the sticky substance.

Hermano Carlos, a friend of Hermano Miguel's, the Franciscan brother who had organized the trip and administered the day-to-day activities of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, and I sat talking about the day's events and the verdant beauty that encircled us. As we lounged under the shade of a palm tree and watched the patrons of the *comedor* enjoy a meal and a splash in a swimming pool, Hermano Carlos said to me, "People are poor because they want to be poor. There is so much natural abundance here in Colombia, that if you plant seeds, you will be able to eat. *En Colombia se vive bien.*"²

Hermano Carlos' statement was a paradox to me given that we were on a fieldtrip with individuals who visited a public dining facility on a daily basis because they did not have access to food, or to the capital necessary to purchase food for themselves and their families. His observations regarding the natural surroundings were indeed correct in that Colombia's location in the tropics, its vertical economy, and the range of ecological niches (including the Amazon basin, the Pacific and Caribbean coasts, and the *llanos*, or plains that extend into Venezuela), made it possible to grow an amazing diversity of potatoes, leafy greens, passion fruit, and a range of vegetables and tropical fruits year round. Colombia, after all, is the second most-bio-diverse country after Brazil,³ and some say that the stretch of the Pacific coastal area in the department of Chocó, Colombia's

² *En Colombia se vive bien* might be translated to, "In Colombia, one can live well." The statement connotes that an individual should not experience lack given the natural abundance of the country.

³ Colombia is the second most biodiverse country (in terms of genes, species, and ecosystems) after Brazil. However, the country is ranked first in terms of birds, fowl, and orchids (*Instituto de Investigación de Recursos Biológicos Alexander von Humboldt Colombia* 2011).

poorest and most marginalized department, is one of the most bio-diverse hotspots on the planet.

However, Hermano Carlos' statement also had moral connotations that implied a critique of the poor in Colombia, and by extension, the patrons of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. His words in Spanish were the following: *Uno es pobre porque quiere ser pobre. Hay tanta naturaleza...si uno siembra, uno come. En Colombia se vive bien.* The notion that poverty might exist in the context of what he understood as “natural abundance” was seemingly unacceptable given the range of opportunity and wealth offered by the earth. If one was poor, then one hadn't taken advantage of the fertility that existed all around; one hadn't planted the seeds in the earth where everything had the possibility to grow. Hermano Carlos' comment thus assumed that if an individual worked hard enough, Colombia would offer its bounty; if an individual was poor, it was because they chose to be.

Still, the question remains, if Colombia was so rich in natural resources, and so fertile that anything could seemingly grow off the side of the road, why were there so many individuals, and so many older adults dependent on places such as *Comedor María es Mi Madre* for their daily sustenance? This paradox of “need,” poverty, and hunger amidst “abundance” has been well documented by historians, geographers, and anthropologists through research focused on transnational commodity networks and the demands of global markets (Larson and Bromely 1991; Stonich 1992; Ross 2003; Freidberg 2004). It is this paradox, and the diverse ways that people find sustenance for themselves and for others under these circumstances, that motivated the research and writing for this dissertation.

This dissertation is thus about practices of giving and practices of receiving within the paradox of need, hunger, and poverty amidst different kinds of “abundance.” Much of this giving happens in the form of what we might call charity, and most of this charity happens through the giving and exchange of food. The goals of organizations such as *Comedor María es Mi Madre* and the *Banco de Alimentos de la Arquidiócesis de Bogotá* (Food Bank of the Archdiocese of Bogotá), both of which are central in this dissertation, focus not only on assisting people nutritionally and curbing hunger, but also endeavor to transform the lives and personhoods of their recipients so that they may live “dignified” lives. In this sense, dignity is constructed as a necessary part of personhood for individuals that various social welfare organizations, as well as the local government, feel have been historically “socially excluded.” However, while the giving of charity is a material and spiritual response to the deep social and economic inequalities that are present throughout Colombia, I show how sometimes practices of charity and giving also reproduce and reify practices of inequality.

This dissertation is also about how “gifts” of charity, of which food is central, are transferred to *Comedor María es Mi Madre* from providers, such as local State agencies and the *Banco de Alimentos*. I highlight the meanings the providers and the organizers of the *comedor* make of this charity, and the ways the *comedor* then transforms these goods and gifts to suit their goals, which are sometimes quite different from the aims of providers. For the organizers of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, practices of feeding are linked to a range of social services, and food becomes a central way by which to offer care to older adults who many feel are lacking the kin relations that would otherwise offer them social, economic, and emotional protection in the latter stages of their lives.

At the heart of the dissertation are those who receive this charity, the poor, mostly elderly *Bogotanos* who obtain their food at *Comedor María es Mi Madre* everyday. I engage the various ways they use this food, sometimes profit from it, contest it, and transform these products into social and nutritional support, security, and independence. As implied by Hermano Carlos' comment, the poor persons who receive charity are often constructed in moral terms. One of the aims of this dissertation is to respond to this critique, and I do so by highlighting how patrons of the *comedor* work quite hard to find sustenance in their own terms, such as in the "informal" economy. In this sense, I show that most of those who wait in line to receive a plate of food at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, or a cup of hot chocolate at a local church, are not simply passive receivers of charity, but are active agents in securing their own wellbeing and future.

Partially veiled and implicated within the relationships and exchanges among these "givers" and "receivers," are a range of corporate and economic relationships that make much of this giving possible. Throughout the dissertation, I show how food, in the context of "charity," is also transferred to social welfare organizations such as the *Banco de Alimentos* from multinational and national corporations. While several of these companies are well known for their charity donations both in Colombia and around the world, I show how many of them also financially secure their own futures through the charity they give. I highlight how these sources of charity, companies such as Coca-Cola and the French company *Carrefour*, are indelibly linked to the markets that create economic inequalities that make charity necessary in Colombia in the first place. In this sense, every meal that is served at *Comedor María es Mi Madre* is connected to sets of

local and global relations, and the patrons of the *comedor* embody and reproduce these relations with every bite.

These *barrios* are some of the oldest in the country, dating back to the 17th century. Because the residents of this area are quite poor, there are many social welfare and private charity organizations of various sizes and formality, including at least thirty *comedores*, as well as *refrigerios*, or snack services provided at local schools. There are many poor neighborhoods in Bogotá, especially when we consider the *invasiones*, or squatter settlements in the peripheral southern areas of the city where internally displaced persons have made homes for themselves after being forced out of their towns due to increased violence in the countryside.⁴ Though there are many government agencies, social welfare organizations, and NGOs that have focused their energies in these areas, the historic neighborhoods where I conducted my fieldwork have a deep history of charity and social welfare that has its roots in the colonial structures of the country. This historicity related to charity, beneficence, and Catholicism, which is connected to the history of colonial assistance to the subjugated indigenous groups that initially inhabited the area, plays a critical role in how charity is constructed and understood in the present.

Comedor María es Mi Madre is located within these neighborhoods, in a *barrio*, or neighborhood known as Belén (or Bethlehem), and offers daily meals to a primarily elderly demographic. The *comedor* served as my point of arrival and departure in that it offered a day-to-day “home base” for exploring the complex processes and relations

⁴ According to former mayor Enrique Peñalosa (2011), approximately fifty percent of Bogotá has sprung up illegally. The author tells us that most of these illegal settlements are built on steep mountainsides, and are at risk of soil erosion and landslides. These neighborhoods are difficult to access, and thus do not often have services such as energy and water.

associated with the giving and receiving of charity at various scales of action in the capital.

Bogotá sin Hambre/Bogotá Without Hunger

While my dissertation explores the ways social welfare organizations, especially those with a religious affiliation, have a deep history in the capital, it is important to note the visibility and recognition that *comedores* have recently gained due to a development campaign enacted by Bogotá's former mayor, Luis Eduardo Garzón (2004-2008).⁵

Bogotá Sin Hambre, or Bogotá Without Hunger, was a crucial part of Garzón's election platform and formed part of a much broader urban development plan known as *Bogotá sin Indiferencia: un compromiso social contra la pobreza y la exclusión 2004-2008* (Bogotá Without Indifference: A Social Commitment Against Poverty and Exclusion, 2004-2008). The campaign, which aimed to offer nutritional security to poor *Bogotanos* through *comedores* and a range of other measures, was modeled after *Fome Zero* (Zero Hunger), a Brazilian program launched by former President Lula da Silva (2003-2010) that aimed to end hunger, and guarantee poor sectors of the Brazilian population food security and adequate nutrition.

A 2004 booklet called *Comedores Comunitarios: un medio para restablecer el derecho a la alimentación* (Community Dining: a way to reestablish the right to food), which was widely circulated throughout the capital at various local mayoral offices,

⁵ Luis Eduardo Garzón, more commonly known as Lucho, was elected mayor of Bogotá as the candidate of the *Polo Democrático Alternativo* (Alternative Democratic Pole), a left leaning political party that was politically opposed to Colombia's former president, Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010). Garzón was also a candidate for Colombia's presidency in 2002 and 2010. The former mayor has described his childhood as quite poor, and in interviews he has said that as a child he worked as a golf caddy, a bricklayer, and a carpenter to help feed his family. Part of his motivation to make hunger and food security one of his government's key initiatives came from his own life experiences as a child laborer.

community centers, and in zones with high incidences of poverty and malnutrition,⁶ tells us that *comedores comunitarios* aim to protect individuals' inalienable rights to food and offer a space wherein food and other social services can be made accessible to persons who experience malnutrition in their daily lives. Through the giving of food and nutritional support, the local government aimed to combat the social exclusions that were part and parcel of poverty and inequality, as food was viewed as vital for the social reproduction of healthy bodies, habits, relationships, and citizenship (2004: 7). In doing so, *comedores* would not only help create better nutritional conditions, but would promote healthy lifestyles, strengthening the social fabric of the city (6).

In 2004, there were 165,826 households in Bogotá where less than three meals per day were consumed. Twenty three percent of children living in *estratos* one and two⁷ had

⁶ Nine thousand of these booklets were printed and circulated throughout Bogotá in 2004.

⁷ The government of former Colombian President Ernesto Samper (1992-1996) introduced the SISBEN, or "System for the Selection of Beneficiaries of Social Programs" (*Sistema de Selección de Beneficiarios para Programas Sociales*). SISBEN is a tool that is used to index a person's, household, or community's economic well-being to indicate eligibility to receive social benefits. The system, which was instituted in 1994, classifies individuals according to six socio-economic levels, or *estratos*. A person or household that is classified as *estrato* 1 indicates that that individual or family is homeless or experiencing extreme poverty. A person or family classified as *estrato* 6 signals that the person or family has the highest level of wealth and access. The SISBEN system was designed as a way to help local governments, especially those with limited administrative capacity, target the poorest and most vulnerable constituents in their area so as to best allocate social expenditures. Persons or groups classified as *estrato* 1 and 2 are identified as being the most vulnerable, and thus are accorded access to subsidized (or reduced cost) health care, reduced education costs, as well as other services from different government entities. The majority of social subsidies and public health programs are focused on the populations in *estrato* 1 and 2. Households classified as *estrato* 1, 2, and 3 also receive public subsidies on electricity, water, and sewage (if these services are available in these homes) on a tiered system. The public services of *estrato* 1 households are subsidized by 60%, *estrato* 2 by 50% and *estrato* 3 by 15%. Households classified as *estrato* 4 do not receive subsidies for public services, whereas households classified as *estrato* 5 and 6 contribute toward the subsidies of *estratos* 1, 2, and 3 (with those classified as *estrato* 6 contributing a higher percentage than *estrato* 5). Colombians who are 65 years and older and who are classified as *estrato* 1 or 2 (and thus, are classified as "indigent"), those who live in public centers of social welfare, those that are *habitantes de calle* (e.g. inhabitants of the street), and poor indigenous elders who live in *resguardos* (socio-political territorial entities akin to reservations in the United States) have access to subsidized health care and nutritional subsidies from different levels of the government. Additionally, persons who have been legally declared as *desplazados* (internally displaced due to continuing violent encounters in the countryside) are also eligible for a range of benefits. Most elders and residents of *barrio* Belén, Santa Bárbara, Las Cruces and other surrounding neighborhoods are classified as SISBEN 1 or 2. In areas such as these that have a

lower than average weight, while 17.3% presented malnutrition, and 6.3% presented what was classified as “acute malnutrition.” Additionally, according to the *Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadísticas* (National Administrative Department of Statistics, or *DANE*), 8.6% of Bogotanos experienced hunger on a daily basis (2004). Thus, according to these statistics, eight to nine hundred thousand persons suffered from hunger in the capital everyday in 2004, when the program began. *Comedores* run by the local government in Bogotá thus aimed to fulfill 35% - 40% of the recommended daily calories for persons the categorized as vulnerable, specifically children, pregnant and nursing women, and older adults.⁸

According to the publications of the Bogotá Without Hunger campaign, Colombia is a country with one of the highest indexes of inequality in Latin America, and moreover, the Latin American region has some of the highest levels of inequality in the world (*Cambio* 1995). Due to this, *comedores comunitarios* endeavored to promote, prevent, guarantee and re-establish the rights of those in situations of poverty and “vulnerability.” Following the discourse of rights that are evident in Colombia’s 1991

high incidence of poverty and need. Housing is one of the primary characteristics that determines a household’s or individual’s *estrato* (e.g. the kinds of materials used to build the house, whether there are existing walls, the kind of flooring, the accessibility of services such as running water, electricity and sewage disposal). Since many of the homes in this area are over one hundred years old (and some are up to two hundred years old), some of these structures do not have access to public services, and some have a simple flooring of packed dirt or a layer of cement. Higher *estratos* can also be designated to entire neighborhoods. For example, an apartment complex in the affluent northern neighborhood of Los Rosales (where the U.S. ambassador resides alongside prominent and wealthy *Bogotanos*) will almost always be automatically be classified as *estrato* 6. It is important to note that a person cannot be reclassified as belonging to a lower *estrato* if they are experiencing economic difficulties and reside in one of these neighborhoods or apartment buildings. However, an individual living in barrio *Belén*, for example, can request that a government representative visit their home to survey it for reclassification so that they may be eligible to receive public benefits. Also, it is important to note that a household or community, or apartment complex can go up or down in terms of *estrato* if the survey of the family or neighborhood (conducted every three years) reveal socio-economic changes. (See APPENDIX FOR MAP OF CITY BASED ON ESTRATOS) (Uribe-Mallarino 2008).

⁸ In order to receive a *carne*, or identification card that would allow entry into a *comedor*, an individual or family would have to be classified as SISBEN 1 or 2.

Constitution (which I discuss in chapter three), the Bogotá without Hunger campaign recognized the rights of every inhabitant of the city to have secure access to quality food in a dignified manner, as well as create better access to social services and sustainable structures for persons to overcome poverty.

During the span of its first fourteen months, Bogotá Without Hunger fed more than one million individuals of low economic resources inside *comedores*, especially in peripheral areas of the capital such as in squatter settlements, and other geographically and economically marginalized parts of the city. By March 2005, there were one hundred thirty-seven *comedores* in the six regions with the highest indexes of poverty in the capital, which did not include the historic neighborhoods of Bogotá (*Cambio* 1995). By August 2007, four months before Garzón left office and the original program was set to end, there were two hundred eighty *comedores comunitarios* that served eighty-four thousand lunches daily to approximately three hundred people per *comedor*. Additionally, one hundred thousand meals were served at thirty-two *comedores* located inside public schools in the capital (*nutrinet* 2007).⁹ Though Bogotá Without Hunger endeavored to offer emergency assistance through *comedores* as well as through meals inside schools, a critical objective of the campaign, known as *El plan maestro de Abastecimiento y seguridad Alimentaria de Bogota* (Master Plan for the Creation of Food Security in Bogotá), was to create a sustainable structure by which quality food could reach diverse areas of the capital and be purchased by residents at reasonable prices.

While the Bogotá Without Hunger campaign officially ended when Garzón finished his term as mayor in 2008, the efforts to end hunger and malnutrition were

⁹Website accessed August 6, 2011: <http://nutrinet.org/ae-noticias/205-resultados-de-qbogota-sin-hambreq>

continued through the *Secretaría Distrital de Integración Social* (District Council of Social Integration), a social welfare agency previously known as the *Departamento Administrativo de Bienestar Social* (Administrative Department of Social Welfare). According to documents made available on their website, between 2004-2010, access to food in *comedores* played a critical role in the reduction of chronic malnutrition in Bogotá, dropping from 13.4% to 10.9%. Additionally, in 1995, chronic malnutrition among children younger than five years old was at 19.6%, whereas chronic malnutrition among children younger than ten years old was in 2010, reduced to 10.9%. Moreover, the mortality rate due to malnutrition was reduced by 80% in Bogotá between 2009 and 2010 (*Secretaría Distrital de Integración Social* 2009).¹⁰

Since the original campaign ended, the number of *comedores* have increased to three-hundred and ten, and while patrons previously had to contribute a small fee (between three hundred and one thousand *pesos*, approximately fifteen to fifty cents USD) to enter the *comedores*, as of 2009, there is no fee for the meals offered inside any of the *comedores* connected to Bogotá's local government. In addition, six hundred seventy thousand children receive a snack, breakfast, and lunch free of charge at schools throughout the capital. The local government continues to fund *comedores*, and each year, the budget that supports *comedores* and other kinds of "food aid" in the capital increases dramatically.

Much of this money, however, is made possible through alliances with the "private sector," that is, social service organizations, including humanitarian NGOs, religious charities such as the *Fundación Banco Arquidiocesano de Alimentos of Bogotá*

¹⁰ Website accessed August 6, 2011:
<http://www.integracionsocial.gov.co/modulos/contenido/default.asp?idmodulo=1405>

(the Food Bank of the Archdiocese of Bogotá) as well as national and multinational corporations. While these organizations and corporations helped provision *comedores*, their participation was also viewed as a way to promote a commitment to ending poverty and hunger from outside of the structures of the government.

Charity, Social Welfare, and Gifts

In an April 15, 2004 article in Colombia's most widely circulated daily newspaper, *El Tiempo*, the writer described a press conference where Mayor Lucho Garzón announced a new alliance between the local government and *Carulla/Vivero*, Colombia's oldest national chain of supermarkets.¹¹ Garzón told the audience that *Carulla/Vivero* was donating thirty tons of food to the Bogotá Without Hunger campaign to mark the new alliance between the corporation and the mayor's government campaign to end hunger. During the press conference, Samuel Azout, then president of *Carulla/Vivero* stated the following: "The *lucha*¹² against hunger is not an act of charity, but rather, is one of social justice." Azout's comments were telling in that the president of this corporation, one that is connected to both the Bogotá Without Hunger campaign and is on the Board of Directors of the Food Bank of the Archdiocese of Bogotá (a relationship I will discuss more thoroughly in chapter four), was making a key distinction between the aims and work of charity, and the goals of the Bogotá Without Hunger campaign. For Azout, the struggle for "social justice" did not have its place in "charity," but rather, was connected to the aims of the Colombian State, which endeavored to bridge

¹¹ Founded in 1905 in the coastal port city of Barranquilla, *Carulla* was one of Colombia's largest, and oldest, supermarket chains. In 2000, *Carulla* merged with *Vivero*, and in 2006, *Carulla/Vivero* merged with *Almacenes Éxito*, Colombia's largest supermarket chain, which is owned by a French Company.

¹² The term *lucha* may be translated as "to struggle" or "fight," and in Latin America, the term *luchar* has often been used amidst a discourse of rights, that is, to fight or struggle for social justice.

inequalities and protect and transform the city and its citizens through social welfare in the form of food distribution and food accessibility.

But what is charity? Is there a difference between “charity” and the social welfare work of the State? While words such as “development,” “dignity,” “citizenship,” “social inclusion,” and “*bienestar*” (well being or welfare) are commonly used in the literature about Bogotá Without Hunger and other social welfare programs run by the local government, the word “charity” does not appear in any of the materials disseminated by the Bogotá mayor’s office, nor did I ever hear any these programs talked about in relation to “charity.”

Development programs such as Bogotá Without Hunger and cash transfers to Bogotá’s impoverished elderly (which I describe in chapter three), form part of an increase in social welfare programs in “developing” countries. In an article in the December 27, 2010 issue of Newsweek magazine, writer Mac Margolis highlighted innovative forms of social welfare being put in place in countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Chile, Malawi, Indonesia, the Philippines and Turkey. This “Welfare 2.0” (as the author terms it), aims to better pinpoint those in need and strategically use scarce resources to offer cash and other forms of assistance to the most impoverished. Brazil’s program, *Bolsa Familia* (which is part of *Fome Zero*), is perhaps the most well known of these and has served as a model for various social welfare campaigns around the world. *Bolsa Familia* requires that parents who receive assistance vaccinate their children and send them to school, among other requirements. Through the program, 18 millions households (74 million people, roughly equivalent to 39% of the population) receive grants and assistance (Hanlon, Barrientos, and Humle 2010).

Rather than seeing cash transfers as simply a distribution of funds that promote dependency, scholars have suggested that these funds will increase capital in poor communities (which might assist families in testing new businesses or crops), encourage people to support their local economies, as well as provide their children with education. Reliable aid to impoverished families thus has the potential to be “an investment in growth and in the future” (2010: 7).

But, what is the difference between such social welfare programs and charity? In Colombia, charity has often been perceived as a practice of *asistencialismo*, positioning charity as a non-productive form of assistance that offers needed services, but does not suggest solutions and does not work toward transforming the structures that create this need in the first place. Charity and the giving of food have been at the heart of religious practices and have served as a response to the biblical call to feed and assist the poor. For example, the practice of feeding the poor is directly related to the vocation of mendicant religious orders such as the Order of Saint Francis or the Order of the Capuchins, who directly engage with being “in” the world through vows and practices of poverty, as well as with their service to the poor. Such a model of Christian giving creates an egalitarian expectation that positions all persons as worthy recipients, and all human beings as deserving of care and love. Michael Barnett and Thomas Weiss (2008) thus argue that charity is part of well-established religious values, noting that Christianity and faith based organizations have played a critical role in the work of contemporary international humanitarian practice (19).

Indeed, for many Catholics, charity has been viewed as a “Christian duty.” Colombian historian Beatriz Castro Carvajal (2007) notes that while charity in Colombia

was offered to assist the poor, the giving of food and charity was also intimately tied to the Christian idea of saving one's soul through the process of giving throughout the course of one's lifetime. "The Christian concept of charity," the author tells us, "has always contained an element of self interest, as charity was one of the virtues that contributed to the salvation of the soul, and the exercise of charity was an obligation" (309). Carvajal continues by arguing that in 18th and 19th century Colombia, the importance of charity as a means to help the poor and thus contribute to a more harmonious society was not a common conception. Therefore, according to the author, the "gift" of charity was implicated with a gift to the self, that of preserving the soul upon biological death.

Let us, however, return to Samuel Azout's comments, which make a distinction between charity and social justice. In his statement, "The *lucha* against hunger is not an act of charity, but rather, is one of social justice," the president of *Carulla/Vivero* was also presuming a division between "secular" and "religious" forms of giving and charity. Indeed, the humanitarian efforts in the context of *Comedor María es Mi Madre* and the Food Bank of Bogotá did not prioritize "development," and instead focused on the spiritual, nutritional, and moral effects food might have in the lives of its receivers. In this sense, while the Bogotá Without Hunger campaign aimed to offer food aid and secure the nutrition of citizens in order to create "social inclusion," its efforts also promoted the development and health of the city as well as the Colombian nation-state.

However, the direct goals of charity organizations such as *Comedor María es Mi Madre* and the *Banco de Alimentos* are not antithetical to or fundamentally different from those of the social welfare program, Bogotá Without Hunger. In fact, most of the

comedores run by Bogotá Without Hunger received food assistance from Bogotá's food bank. Through my dissertation, I aim to show the various ways the social welfare offered by Bogotá's government was intertwined with practices of charity and religiously based organizations, and not ideologically distinct from the goals of social welfare programs. In doing so, I highlight the ways the practices of giving food managed by the local government and the charity organizations such as the Food Bank of the Archdiocese of Bogotá, are connected to each other and a range of organizations and corporations that make giving possible, thus complicating neat divisions between practices of charity and social justice, and between constructions of the "secular" (Asad 2003) and religious humanitarian endeavors.

Food and Charity from the "Ground Up"

In his seminal work, *The Gift* (1954 [1990]), Marcel Mauss tells us that all gifts are imbued with self-interest. The author suggests that gifts are linked to networks of social relations that impose and create obligations, ideas of reciprocity as well as hierarchy. For Mauss, "it is not individuals but collectives that impose obligations of exchange and contract upon each other" (5). Thus, every gift demands a return of some kind, and it is through these exchanges that persons become connected to a larger social world.

With Mauss in mind, how might we then understand charitable gifts to the poor? What are the expected obligations between "givers" and "receivers?" While I highlight the ways the giving of food and charity are employed as a means by which to "dignify" and "transform" persons, throughout the dissertation I also bring to the fore the social obligations embedded in practices of charitable giving. While the poor and poor elderly

receive gifts of food, clothes, and occupational therapies (among a range of other services and things), these gifts are not “free.” The receivers of these gifts are expected to reciprocate in socially appropriate ways, such as by cleaning one’s plate, saying “thank you,” and praying prior to eating a meal. Receiving charity thus positions elders within a web of social obligations that highlight their positionality in relation to those that are doing the “giving.”

While charity organizations, such as the *comedor* run by the Franciscan brothers, and government sponsored *comedores* do indeed give food and other kinds of aid to elderly persons and poor individuals, the roles of the “givers” and “receivers” in these contexts are not stable categories, nor are they easily defined. In my dissertation, I move beyond dyadic representations of the distribution of aid and consider the complicated positions and entanglements in practices of giving. For example, while the *hermanos* at *Comedor María es Mi Madre* offer food aid to the elder patrons of the dining house, these gifts of food are also dependent on the availability of foods at the Food Bank of the Archdiocese of Bogotá, the ability of individuals to donate money and other material goods to the *comedor*, as well as the willingness of larger corporations to donate and give to the Food Bank. At times the givers of food at the *comedor* are in fact receivers of food aid and are dependent on these larger organizations and corporations for their own meals, as well as to carry out their charitable goals.

Additionally, most research on charity and humanitarianism focuses on the practices and intentions of “giving” (with notable exceptions, such as Myerhoff 1979; Caldwell 2004). My dissertation makes a contribution to this literature by examining how those who receive the “gifts” of charity often transform these to suit their own purposes

and needs. I explore the ways individuals transform and extend the gifts of charity, securing friendships and their own futures through the exchange and giving of food to other persons in need. Thus, the voices and experiences of those who receive, take, and often contest this aid, are at the very heart of my dissertation. In this sense, my ethnography is a “ground-up” analysis that moves beyond understandings of how social welfare and charity affect people, and instead focuses on what the intended receivers do with the aid they receive, as well as how they transform it to suit their own needs.

Anthropologist Sidney Mintz (1996) reminds us that “food eaten have histories associated with the pasts of those who eat them; the techniques employed to find, process, prepare, serve, and consume the foods are all culturally variable, with histories of their own” (7). I find Mintz’ statement to be quite telling because while the foods donated and subsequently consumed by the patrons and organizers of the *comedor*, do indeed have histories that are embedded in political economic relations and connected to multinational corporations (that too have a wide range of economic relations with distributors and growers), the relationship the patrons have with these gifts of food may also have a different history, and a slightly different future from those imagined by their producers and those who “give.” Part of this dissertation aims to consider the kinds of stories people tell about their food and the techniques they themselves employ to find food and sustenance. I thus bring into focus the ways those who “receive” this aid, the elderly poor of the central neighborhoods of Bogotá, use, transform, and re-circulate this charity, and in this process, imbue these materials with new and different registers of value

Positioning these issues in the context of Colombia and Latin America also widens the boundaries of how gift giving, charity, and humanitarianism have been constructed. In much of the literature, charity comes into being from the “outside,” that is, from international NGOs or other multinational organizations. While my dissertation looks at practices of giving that are connected to broad international networks and corporations, my close ethnographic focus on the work and people of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, locates these practices as emanating from the labor and energies of a Colombian community (albeit, a community that is marked by internally distinct hierarchical and social inequalities).

The Making of Humanitarian Subjects

Carolyn Bynum (1985) has described the giving of food as a “mark of privilege during times of scarcity and hunger” as “sharing one’s own food with a stranger (who might turn out to be an angel, a fairy, or Christ himself) was...a standard indication of saintly generosity (2). Yet, historically in religious charity, distinctions *were* often made in terms of who “deserved” assistance or who was a worthy subject of charity in part because practices of charity also functioned as a way to protect the social order from persons deemed “immoral.” Specifically in Colombia, charity has its roots in Spanish civilizing projects that attempted to care for colonial populations (a topic I examine in chapter two). Throughout the dissertation, I look to this history to explore the ways certain individuals have been identified as deserving of charity, whereas others have not. I explore the gendered relations embedded in these distinctions (van Deusen 1997), as well as the ways suffering has been moralized and continues to structure social practices and identities in the present.

But who are “worthy” humanitarian subjects? And how are they made? In her article, *Speechless Emissaries: Reflections, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization*, Liisa Malkki (1996) explores the role of humanitarianism in the construction of “refugees as a singular category of humanity within the international order of things” (378). The author notes that the “refugee” has often been constructed in a “depoliticized space” and as an “ahistorical, universal humanitarian subject” (378). She argues that the individual personhood and historicity of refugees is oftentimes ignored, and instead “refugees stop being persons and become pure victims in general: universal man, universal woman, universal child, and when taken together, universal family” (378). In an earlier publication (1995) Malkki describes refugees and especially children as embodying a “bare humanity” stripped from culture, place and history (1995: 11).

Anthropologist Erica Bornstein makes a similar argument in her work about orphaned children in India (2010). The author suggests that orphaned children evoke pathos and in the “humanitarian imagination code as ‘pure humanity’”(130). She tells us that orphans play a significant part in the what she calls “the discourse of humanitarianism” because of the powerful reactions orphans, especially those orphaned by HIV/AIDS, inspire from donors (127). Yet the parents of children who become orphans, many of whom gave up their children due to their dire circumstances of poverty, are excluded from much of this humanitarian assistance.

The work of both Malkki and Bornstein offer us entry into further examining the relationship between charity and those that are viewed as deserving of charity. As I will show in chapter two, orphanages were some of the first social welfare and charity institutions that appeared in the colony due to high rates of mortality and abandonment in

the 17th century (Ramírez 2006). Additionally, children, gestating and nursing mothers, and older adults were categorized as “vulnerable” by the Bogotá Without Hunger campaign, and were thus its primary beneficiaries. While children are constructed as innocent subjects and as part of the “future” (and mothers as potential carriers of that future), older adults are often viewed in relation to the past, or as relics of the past. Unlike the children, and unlike the creation of the category of “refugee” without history, place, or culture that Malkki describes, older adults are marked by history in multiple ways. While this history may be made visible in their bodies and faces, the Colombian elders with whom I worked also narrated a history of violence, poverty and the loss of kin. In many ways, it is this difficult past, which forms part of a century of brutal violence, suffering, extreme poverty, and the decimation of family and loved ones, that might position them as “worthy” of receiving charity. In this sense, the beneficiaries of charity are socially identified and often made into potential subjects through the organizations that construct them as “needy” or view certain kinds of people and their suffering as worthy of assistance (Ticktin 2006).

Food, Belonging, and Growing Old

Food is also central to how distinctions are created among persons, as well as how different kinds of belonging are reckoned. As Gillian Feeley-Harnik has noted, “Whom may eat what with whom is a direct expression of social, political, and religious relations” (1981[1984]: 2). Janet Carsten and Hugh Jones tell us that food and commensality are intimately connected to the interrelated processes of becoming a person and becoming related, and moreover food and other material forms such as houses, may

be viewed as a kind of shared substance that nourishes relatedness and belonging to particular groups (2004).

Food then, among other material forms, may be viewed as substances with the potential to create relatedness among individuals. The practices surrounding the getting, making, and sharing of food, however, also have the potential to define who does not belong, and may mark distinctions between persons and groups. In my dissertation, I show the ways the giving of food and practices of feeding are central in creating “social inclusion” of different kinds. While the exchange of food creates connections among people, it also creates disconnections, and constructs hierarchies among persons and groups – in effect marking differences among socio-economic class (Roseberry 1996), ethnicity (Bahloul 1999), and colonial subjectivities (Freidberg 2004).

My dissertation also suggests that expectations and constructions of age, aging, and growing older in Bogotá cannot be viewed as stable categories, and must instead be examined in relation to the transformation of urban spaces, the reconfiguration of social relations, and the presence and absence of food and care practices. “Age” in Colombia can thus be understood as a process and experience that is culturally and historically constructed and is vital for understanding how persons constitute themselves as political and historical actors (Myerhoff 1979; Lock 1993; Lamb 2000; Cohen 1998). The aging of persons and bodies, in this context, must thus be seen as a shifting category, as persons are constructed in and through social, class, and gendered dimensions and must be examined in relation to local political economic structures and the configuration of social relations (cf. Lock 1996).

Social hierarchies, sharp economic inequality, and histories of conflict in Colombia play a central role in the lack of access to food and nutrition. As scholars (Scheper-Hughes 1993; De Waal 1997) have argued, hunger, famine, and scarcity, have political economic origins that are often connected to a heritage of colonialism, war, and migration (Richards 1939). My dissertation points to how despite the differential access to resources, people work to find sustenance amidst difficult circumstances. In many ways, this dissertation is about the absence of food in people's homes and lives, and the ways they go about getting food outside of the places people might perceive as traditional (e.g. the home, supermarket, or in Latin America, the *plaza de mercado*). For the individuals with whom I worked, finding one's meals or finding things that may be transformed into food and other subsistence products is a kind of everyday labor that is often not valued as such. Such labor plays an important role in how social relations are constructed, as well as elders' relationships to the cityscape.

La Violencia, Migration, and Urbanization

In order to better understand the history of inequality, poverty, and migration in Bogotá, it is necessary to offer a discussion regarding the history of violence, especially the turmoil that Colombia experienced during the 1940s and 1950s. While Colombia has been described as a country that has endured violence since its conquest (Garcia Márquez 1996), the period known as *La Violencia*, or the "The Violence," was one of the most destructive and bloody conflicts that permeated the country roughly between 1946 and 1964. The complex social movements, partisan confrontations, and peasant uprisings, among other struggles that were the hallmark of *La Violencia*, had many expressions and ranged from labor uprisings, to the usurpation of land, to the massacring of whole towns

by state sponsored forces. Often described by Colombian writers and scholars of the region as a civil war *a posteriori* (Arciniegas 1952), *La Violencia* claimed the lives of an estimated three hundred thousand people throughout the country, and forcibly removed over two million Colombians from their homes and towns.

The majority of early writings about *La Violencia* depict the mid-century violence as largely a partisan conflict that polarized factions of the country's two principal and heterogeneous political parties, the *Partido Social Conservador* (Conservative Party) and the *Partido Liberal* (Liberal Party) (Guzmán 1962). Scholars have suggested that the violence and the extensive casualties endured were a direct result of longstanding political competition between members and leaders of both political parties. David Bushnell (1993), a U.S. American historian of Colombia, contends that partisan rivalries between Liberals and Conservatives were the primary impetus for violence and most scholars agree that political animosity between members and leaders of both parties was, for the most part, due to a lack of bipartisanship at all levels of the government. The election of a Conservative president or departmental governor after years of Liberal rule often called for the reorganization of the central and regional governments, forming a coalition leadership where members of both parties were represented. While such coalition governments aimed to ease the transition of leadership, Liberal officials and representatives were often replaced at the federal, regional, and municipal levels, causing an acute reversal of power and sparking tensions and violent outbreaks between members of both parties. In time, this conflict between peasants, landowners and state officials with divergent political, social, and class affiliations, exploded into a full-scale war that is

commonly depicted as a senseless phenomenon particular to Colombia (Sanchez 1984; Blackwell 1985).

Norman A. Bailey, a North American contemporary of Guzmán, suggested in 1963 that unlike the wars for independence and previous civil wars in Colombia, *La Violencia* was not an organized civil war with a distinct elite leadership and specific social or political objectives (Bailey 1963: 564). Like Bushnell, Bailey argues that the history of Liberal and Conservative disputes are an important component for understanding the initial cause of violence, highlighting the 1946 presidential election where a Conservative president came to power after fifteen years of Liberal hegemony. He contends that Conservatives attacked Liberals in retaliation for unfair treatment during the years of Liberal dominance, while Liberals refused to leave the seats that Conservatives had won during the election. Both groups ultimately resorted to armed resistance and formed various Liberal guerilla organizations as well as Conservative counter-guerilla bands. The formation of such groups, in conjunction with the 1948 assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a prominent left-Liberal populist leader and presidential candidate who led the popular masses in protest of the oligarchic government, among other events, planted the seeds for the extensive political killings that occurred throughout the country.

While scholars have written with a sense of puzzlement regarding the brutal ways violence was enacted, which have prompted debates about “cultures” and psychologies of violence in Colombia (Villar-Borda: 2004), recent scholarship has contested explanations that polarized political rivalry was the sole cause of violence, suggesting that while political party animosity was a key factor, emergent class consciousness, the politics of

racial ideologies and nation building (Roldán 2002), and struggles for the control of land (Bergquist 1992) were also central facets of the conflict. Some historians have argued that extreme manifestations of violence, such as the *Bogotazo* (1948), the uprising that destroyed a large part of Bogotá shortly after the assassination Gaitán, must also be viewed as a social and political protest to the long-standing oligarchic structure of the government (Sánchez 1992).

The *Bogotazo* is a critical set of events necessary for understanding the history of the capital, as well as the history of violence throughout the country. Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was born in 1898 in the historic neighborhood of Las Cruces, just south of Bogotá's downtown area where I conducted most of my dissertation fieldwork. He was a prominent labor lawyer, professor, had been mayor of Bogotá in 1936, Minister of Education in 1940, and Minister of Labor from 1943-1944. He was a left-leaning member of the Liberal Party, and ran for president in 1944 as a Liberal candidate. At the time he was assassinated, Gaitán was running for Colombia's presidency for a second time, and was expected by many to win. A charismatic and influential leader and public intellectual, Gaitán represented a connection between the *pueblo* (or the Colombian people) and politicians during a time when the political elite, including the Conservative leaders of the time, were largely out of touch with the *pueblo* (Braun 1985: 189). He had a wide following from a range of citizens, including professionals, shop owners, artisans, landless rural workers, and was a defender of the proletariat classes and peasants. During the afternoon hours, his office, which was located in the heart of Bogotá's historic center, was open to anyone who wanted to meet with him. In fact, on the day he was assassinated, a young Fidel Castro, who was in Bogotá for the Ninth International

Conference of American States (during which the Organization of American States [OAS] was created) had an appointment to meet with Gaitán.

In the early afternoon of April 9, 1948, Gaitán was assassinated as he walked out of his office. His death set off an uprising of devastating proportions. *Bogotanos* took to the streets and marched to the National Palace (dragging Gaitán's assassin as they walked), initially seeking justice for his death from the Conservative government they believed had assassinated their leader. In the hours and days that followed the assassination, most of Bogotá, especially public buildings, which were symbolic of the power structure, went up in flames. Historian Herbert Braun (1985) has suggested that citizens began to systematically destroy "the symbols of power, inequality, and exclusion that had once been so easily accepted" (158). While the author argues that the *Bogotazo* was "a momentary equalization of society" (166), the uprising quickly surpassed party affiliations, becoming one of the deadliest and most destructive events in the history of the capital. Through the course of two days, thousands of *Bogotanos* lost their lives, and much of Bogotá was destroyed.

While some scholars suggest that the *Bogotazo* was the primary impetus for *la Violencia*, most historians agree that violence was already widespread across the country and that the events of the *Bogotazo* intensified this violence (Henderson 1985). Colombian historian Gonzalo Sánchez (1992) argued that the *Bogotazo* must be examined as a potential social revolution led by the Colombian *pueblo* that aimed to increase the participation of the masses, level the means of production and economic redistribution as well as a reaction to decades of violence, the taking away of familial lands, hunger and political repression (Fals Borda 1962).

Violence both in the capital and in the countryside was one of the primary reasons for the mass migrations that occurred in Colombia throughout the 1940s and 1950s, and then again in the 1980s and 1990s. While the intensity of rural violence during this time did indeed play a crucial role in the movement of people to urban centers, social, economic, and educational opportunities in the newly industrializing cities as well as a decrease in agricultural employment in the countryside due to agrarian reform, were also primary in the decision to migrate to urban areas (LeGrand 1992; Preciado, Beltrán, et al: 1998).

Migration to urban centers was “rapid and traumatic,” as Bogotá’s population nearly doubled in the 1940s, with the capital absorbing approximately 78% of rural migrants (Mejía Pavony 1990: 14). In 1938, Colombia’s urban population was less than half of the rural population, whereas in 1993, the population of the *campo* (or rural zones) was less than half of the population of urban areas (Flórez 2000: 63). While Bogotá had 145,000 inhabitants in 1918, by 1938, the number had grown to 325,000, and then to 378,200 by 1942. By 1950, Bogotá’s population had grown to 638,562, and increased to 1,661,935 by 1964 (Mejía Pavony 1990: 130; Aprile 1993: 631).

The rapid movement of people quickly overwhelmed housing in the capital, limiting access to food, as well as necessary public services, such as water, electricity, and sewage (Beltrán and Pulido 2007: 129). While in 1939, there were 1,792 *viviendas*, or houses, registered in Bogotá, that number increased to 4,417 by 1955, an increase that highlights the swiftness of urban growth and the efforts to rebuild after the *Bogotazo* (Pantoja and Gonzalez 2009: 153).

It is interesting to note that while Bogotá was receiving a high influx of migrants from the countryside, a large number of wealthier *Bogotanos* were also moving out of the traditional historic center and into the northern areas of the capital. During the 1930s, a range of social classes resided in the capital's historic center, and very few sectors exclusively housed the "elite" or "lower" socio-economic classes (153). Though this migration began in the 1930s when Bogotá's population reached 300,000, many more left the historic center shortly after the events of the *Bogotazo* (approximately 1946-1956), leaving their *casonas*, or large houses, behind. Migration of the wealthier classes to the northern periphery of the capital and the high increase of migration from peasants and residents of the countryside into Bogotá, began to solidify the spatial socio-economic polarization that exists in the capital today.

Though intense migration into the capital was reduced by 1973, the intensification of conflict in the Colombian countryside since the 1980s has again generated an increase in the displacement of communities and in migration to urban areas, and thus, an increase in the urban labor supply. Between 1988 and 2003, approximately two million people were forcibly displaced from their communities due to armed conflict (Flórez 2003: 4, citing Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2002) and in 1998 alone, the number of displaced persons reached 308,000 (Sánchez 2001: 16). In 2005 – that number had increased to 2.9 million (Ibañez and Vélez 2008). In 2001, one in every forty Colombians was displaced from their regions of origin due to violence (16). While Bogotá has absorbed most of these recent migrants, the internal process of migration in Colombia has been quite different from other countries in Latin America. While citizens of other Latin American countries generally migrated to a single urban area, Colombian

migrants moved to several urban centers throughout the country (Silva, Roa, and Román 2007).

Rather than viewing “violence” as emanating from a single historical point or event, Colombian historian and *violentólogo* (as Colombian researchers who focus on the strategies, struggles, and experiences of violence are known) Gonzalo Sánchez (2001) suggests that we must think of violence in Colombia in multiple terms. The author highlights differentiated and intertwined forms of violence, such as organized crime, guerrilla struggles, auto-defense armies, and drug trafficking as all playing a crucial role in the current articulations of violence throughout the country. Much of this violence, the author suggests, has to do with the struggle for the control of land, where guerilla and auto-defense (paramilitary) armies often “operate as protectors of certain sectors of the peasantry against landlords, local political leaders, and the army and the police” (3). Such control of land by guerilla forces and paramilitary organizations (that have historically been connected to and politically sanctioned by local governments to combat the private armies of guerilla organizations),¹³ have limited access to local wealth and natural resources in various regions, resulting “in a new social, geographical, and political configuration of the country” (3).

As with many other countries throughout the world the abundance in and competition for natural resources has been central to violent struggles for land in Colombia, and the displacement of residents of these areas. The privatization of violence in zones of “abundance,” such as in emerald, gold, and coal mines, as well as in the vast

¹³ In some regions, in spite of rejection of the citizenry and the warnings of the international human rights organizations, self-defense groups received a kind of legalization hidden under a rubric known as CONVIVIR (Decree 356 of 1994).

oil fields near the Venezuelan border, have often required that residents, owners, and workers of these areas pay a “tribute” to each of the multiple security forces. Moreover, in the late 1990s these areas, especially the oil fields, were one of the most significant sources of financing for the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army), one of the principal anti-state organizations in Colombia (5).

Abundance has also become a significant threat to indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations, especially in the resource rich areas of the department of Chocó. In 2008 the majority of *desplazados* (internally displaced persons), and persons whose lands, lives, and livelihoods are threatened by violence are those identified as Afro-Colombian and indigenous, as well as poor *campesinos* (persons who live and work in rural zones) and women. In the department of Chocó, violence between paramilitary forces, the military, and other armed groups is especially pronounced. The competition for rich, fertile land ideal for the cultivation of palm¹⁴ and coca in a region considered to be one of the most bio-diverse spots on the planet, has provoked the eradication of whole towns and ethnic groups, threatened protected environmental zones, and has produced mass exodus of a significant percentage of the population.¹⁵

Finally, it is important to highlight urban violence, given that my field site was located in Colombia’s largest urban center, which received the most migrants from the

¹⁴ Colombia is one of the largest exporters of African-origin palm oil to Western Europe (England and Belgium, in particular), as the rich tropical terrain provides the perfect environment for its cultivation outside of Africa. Palm oil is a multi-purpose oil used in the manufacturing of bio-diesel, food products, and a host of other goods. Multi-national corporations and other interest groups who cultivate palm in Colombia have encountered territorial restrictions in the tropical terrain of Chocó and Antioquia due to constitutional laws protecting the lands of ethnic groups and the environment. Such limitations have fostered competition for valuable land, prompting murders, forced disappearances, massacres, and mass displacement in an attempt to seize land and remove the region’s ethnic population from coveted soils. In doing so, they have also limited the local population’s access to food and resources. This area of Chocó is cited as having the worst record for human rights violations in Colombia (cf. Migorance 2006).

¹⁵La Agencia de la ONU para los refugiados. “El ACNUR alerta sobre grave situación humanitaria en Chocó,” October 24, 2007. http://www.acnur.org/index.php?id_pag=6930. Accessed on October 30, 2007.

countryside. Violence in cities has taken on multiple forms, and includes “social cleansing” projects, which were frequently managed by police or ex-police against prostitutes, beggars, and persons classified as “street delinquents” (7). Urban militias, as well as organized crime funded by narco-traffickers played a significant role in the increase of homicides. In 1985, homicide was the leading cause of death in the city of Medellín,¹⁶ with 100.8 violent deaths per 100,000 inhabitants” (12). Moreover, while Colombia had the highest rate of economic growth of any other Latin American country during the 1980s, in the 1990s (especially in the latter half of the decade), the country experienced extremely low economic growth, resulting in an economic crisis which some scholars view as a consequence of the sharp increase of violent crime, insurgent activities, and drug trafficking of the 1980s (Cárdenas 2007).

This history of violence is critical for understanding the everyday lives of *Bogotanos* and is still very much present in everyday urban relations. It is common for security guards to search the possessions of individuals as they enter shopping malls, or for the dogs that accompany security guards and police to sniff cars as they enter the large parking lots of, for example, shopping centers. Military police officers are also visible throughout the city, guarding pedestrian bridges, busy streets in the downtown area, as well as public buildings. It is therefore important to consider how urban violence, as well as the measures enacted to prevent violence (e.g. social cleansing) have affected the lives and livelihoods of individuals who inhabit and labor in the street given that factions of the Colombian State have historically been complicit in much of the violence the country has experienced.

¹⁶ Medellín is Colombia’s third largest city in terms of population. It is located in the department of Antioquia, approximately one hundred fifty miles from Bogotá. However, due to the Andean terrain (and a lack of tunnels through the mountains), it takes approximately seven hours to reach Medellín by car.

Conceptualizing the “State” in Colombia

Given that I discuss various government projects and agencies throughout the dissertation, it is important to engage the ways the “state” and “government” have been conceptualized in Colombia. Colombia has historically been viewed as a country composed of many states. The nation-state we know as Colombia, made up of thirty-one interdependent departments plus one district capital, is a recent phenomenon. According to Nancy Appelbaum (1999) up until the latter part of the 19th century, Colombia was more accurately described as a “loose federation of sovereign states” (637) rather than a coherent nation-state. Each state, commonly known as a *país* (country) or *patria chica* (small nation), possessed its own currency, army, passport, postal service, and constitutional government (cf. Bushnell 1993). While actual distances between regions, regional capitals and other cities and towns were not great, the country’s location amidst the three ranges of the Andes made communication, travel, and trade between cities, towns, and rural areas quite difficult.

Scholars have suggested that Colombia’s broken topography, the establishment of distinct colonial and political centers, as well as other historical and ecological causes have produced a “country of regions” (Appelbaum 1999: 636). According to Peter Wade (1993) Colombia’s regions and departments have also historically been constructed and represented in racial and cultural terms. Wade tells us that colonial seaports, especially those in and around the Caribbean city of Cartagena in the department of Bolívar, were important points of entry for slaves entering the “New World” and that such histories of migration and settlement have contributed to the geographic location of various social, and often racialized groups. While Colombia’s Caribbean coast, including but not limited to the departments of Chocó, Bolívar, and the former territory of Panamá, have

historically had a high population of inhabitants of African descent, areas of the interior (including much of present day Antioquia)¹⁷ were settled primarily by *mestizos* and persons of European descent.

Efforts at “whitening” (*blanqueamiento*) have also contributed to what Appelbaum has called an “inter-regional geography of race”(Appelbaum 1999: 632) in Colombia. The inhabitants of the present day department of Antioquia have historically and colloquially been spoken of as a “Conservative,” “white,” “European,” “progressive,” and colonizing race. The dominant narrative of Antioquia highlights a history of European pioneers who “civilized” the land and its inhabitants through “internal colonization” and incorporated Colombia into the international market economy through the growing and marketing of coffee. Appelbaum tells us that in the nineteenth century, regions directly outside of Antioquia (i.e. the present-day departments of Caldas and Cauca) sought to transform their territories and people through “Antioqueño-ization.” In the department of Cauca, an area that has historically had a significant population of persons of African descent, the regional government aimed to culturally and economically “modernize” the region by encouraging and facilitating inter-regional immigration from the Antioqueño “race” (cf. Roseblatt 2000). Appelbaum thus suggests that in Colombia, perceptions of a geography or regionalization of race and status favored certain places within the nation as racially and economically civilized and progressive, while positioning others as uncivilized and inferior. Moreover, she argues that these strong regional identities “emerged in tandem with a national discourse of

¹⁷ Antioquia is a department located in the northeastern part of Colombia.

racial and regional differentiation that served to organize the emerging nation-state in space” (Appelbaum 2003: 19).

Aline Helg (2004) has suggested that since independence, Colombians have transformed a caste based colonial society into a “raceless” nation founded upon the notions of *mestizaje* (racial mixing). Though creole, white elites controlled wealth, authority and land, “visions of the new nation had to include the racially mixed majority...to increase the Indo-European population to the detriment of the indigenous inhabitants” (240). In other parts of Latin America, elite notions of *mestizaje* (which often included competing ideologies of racial mixing) recognized perceived biologically ascribed attributes of being, such as class, sexual behavior, and morality, and mapped these qualities on to a social taxonomy, often used for discriminatory purposes (de la Cadena 1996). Helg notes that the Andean-centered notion of *mestizaje* primarily focused on reducing indigeneity (in part by taking away indigenous lands and removing the protected colonial status of indigenous persons) while pushing the Afro-Colombian population into the fringes of the mestizo nation -- “into a zone of allegedly inferior mestizaje” (2004: 241). Yet, it is precisely in these seemingly inferior “fringes” of the country (and fringes of Antioquia) where experiences of *la Violencia* were most acute.

This history of region making and racialization is key for understanding the history of states, state-formation, and *la Violencia* in Colombia as violence during the 1940s and 1950s was often racialized along partisan lines, which were also connected to regional proclivities. Throughout various parts of the country, but especially in and around the area of Antioquia, violence was also the result of conflict between state-sanctioned forces aiming to protect region-specific economic interests, political

identifications, and moralities. With this history in mind, it is critical to note that the “State” in Colombia cannot be discussed as an autonomous being or as a unitary actor. In this context, what is termed the Colombian “State” is the product of a multiplicity of states formed in and through geographic, social, and racial fractures.

Through social welfare programs such as Bogotá Without Hunger, the policies of Lucho Garzón (whose position as mayor of Bogotá was widely understood as the second most powerful in the country) were a response to the fractures that have historically formed part of the Colombian nation-state. In offering a history of the place of violence and *la Violencia* in Colombia, as well as how these experiences are connected to processes of migration, urbanization, and aging, I highlight the ways state-relations are very much implicated in the inequalities that have made social welfare and humanitarian aid an everyday and necessary fact of life. Though the “State” in Colombian is not a unified actor, the conflicts and fractures that have historically created competing States are made visible both in the inequalities that people experience, as well as in the social welfare efforts to ameliorate these.

Methodology

My research in central Bogotá (2005-2007, August 2008) consisted of participant observation, ethnographic interviews, and archival and textual analysis. Inside one *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, I participated in the preparation, distribution and eating of meals, gaining insight into local ideologies of nutrition, regional food traditions, and sensory relations between persons and food. I made four visits to the food bank of the Archdiocese of Bogotá to better understand the often invisible economic markets and exchanges embedded in every meal. I also made routine visits to two nearby state-run

comedores, a community center, as well as three churches that offered meals and activities for older adults on a regular basis.

Though I began dissertation fieldwork in Bogotá in August 2005, I did not begin to think about the interrelationship among issues of food, charity, aging, and the city until I arrived at *Comedor María es Mi Madre* in August 2006. When I first travelled to Colombia to conduct pre-dissertation fieldwork during the summer of 2003, I did so with the intent of researching the topic of aging as experienced by Colombian Korean War veterans. Upon my return in 2005, I reconnected with the association for Korean War veterans and with the individuals I had met two years earlier. I began to conduct interviews, attend various meetings and ceremonies at memorial sites, and was given access to the organizations' collection of photographs, publications, and veteran records.

Through the course of my time with the Korean War veterans, I had the opportunity to speak to and work with veterans of the war, high-ranking military officers, Korea's ambassador to Colombia, and even had the chance to meet then president Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010). I also worked with a foundation that supports soldiers who have been injured during combat, as well as the families of soldiers that have been killed through violent encounters with various guerilla organizations and para-state forces in different parts of the country. However, this fieldwork proved to be incredibly difficult given that research connected to the military in Colombia is extremely politicized in ways that run counter to my own political views and beliefs. Additionally, research among military personnel, especially among the older veterans of the Korean War, was gendered in such a way that my access to a range of activities that were central to my fieldwork was quite limited because I was a woman.

The day I decided to discontinue my work with the veterans, I walked one and a half blocks north on *carrera 4* (fourth street) and into a house that had piqued my interest every morning while on the bus en route to the Korean War veterans organization's office. I had seen the line of older adults cued up alongside the house most every morning for a year, and had always wondered why there were so many elders enduring the chill of the mountain air for what seemed like hours. At some point during that first year, I learned that these individuals were actually waiting to enter a *comedor comunitario*. Seeking to expand my interests in the processes and experiences of aging in Colombia, I introduced myself as an anthropologist to the organizer, a *costeño*¹⁸ by the name of Hermano Miguel, and told him I was interested in learning more about the *comedor*, the experience of aging, and the role of food in the aging process. The next morning, I arrived at the house at eight am and began to chop onions, carrots, beets, and a range of other vegetables. I continued to visit the *comedor* several times a week through June 2007.

My interest in food stemmed from previous research in Baja California, México in 2000, where I conducted my first independent project after graduating from college among a group of individuals who carefully peeled diminutive carrots from their home. Boxes of carrots were dropped off by a distributor every morning, were peeled by a group of ten or so persons, and then picked up and exported to the United States the next day. This previous experience regarding the movement of food across national borders, as well as the role of the individuals that transformed that food for U.S. appetites, played a key role in my immediate attraction to food practices in Colombia. Where did the

¹⁸ The words *costeño/costeña* are identifiers for individuals from the coastal regions of Colombia.

comedor get the food that was prepared for the many elders that lined up outside of the door every morning? Why would elders need to rely on a *comedor* to feed themselves to begin with? These were the questions that prompted my initial curiosity about *Comedor María es Mi Madre*.

While I spent much of my time chopping vegetables and assisting in preparing and serving the *almuerzo*, or lunch meal, I also spent a lot of time with the patrons of the dining house as they waited in line or participated in various activities inside the *comedor*. For several months from September through December 2006, I embroidered table cloths with several women who were participating in what Hermano Miguel termed an “occupational therapy” class, lead by a woman in her late thirties who volunteered her time at the *comedor*. The time spent learning how to embroider small flowers on to blue cloth offered me the opportunity to learn about the issues that were important to the women elders, as well as a bit about their life histories.

Through the course of my fieldwork I was able to conduct twenty interviews with patrons and organizers, as well as with employees from the Food Bank of the Archdiocese of Bogotá. However, I quickly learned that scheduling interviews was by far the most difficult way by which I could learn information, and thus, decided that participating in activities or simply having conversations with people as food was served and eaten, offered much insight and prompted a host of questions. The *abuelitos*, it seemed, were always in movement – on their way to the *Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de Belén* around the corner from the dining house to claim a cup of hot chocolate and bread on Wednesday afternoons, on their way to Chapinero, a *barrio* about three miles north where patrons participated in various workshops, or walking to a meeting or group

activity they were required to attend in order to continue to receive their *bono*, the small stipend offered to them by the local state. However, when I did manage to schedule interviews with patrons and organizers, it was not unusual for individuals to not show up due to rainy weather, an illness, a class or workshop they had to attend, or because they simply forgot that we had made plans to meet.

Though I did have the opportunity to conduct some interviews inside the dining room, many of my conversations (recorded and not recorded) occurred on a brick stoop across the street from the *comedor*, inside the corner bakery only a few establishments down the block, or while visiting people at their homes. When I realized that the most appropriate and convenient way to “interview” individuals was in the context of movement or in their own terms, I began to have more in depth conversations with patrons while walking through the neighborhood, while waiting in line for a *mercadito*, or a small bag of groceries with them, or while accompanying an individual on an errand. Movement through each of these sites uniquely informed the ways persons narrated past and present food traditions, communal dining, and hunger in relation to urban space. Visits and interviews inside patrons’ homes offered poignant understandings of aging, of the presence and absence of food in the home, as well as the connections and disconnections of kin relations.

Additionally, because of the difficulty in conducting recorded interviews, participant observation and the daily conversations that flourished while I helped prepare meals, ate meals, or waited in line with patrons, form the ethnographic core of my dissertation. I soon discovered that it was these everyday interactions and unexpected conversations and visits that offered me the most ethnographically rich material. Most of

these events occurred without my audio recorder in hand, however. In fact, the only time I audio recorded an interview was during a walk around the neighborhood with an elder by the name of Manuel. Unfortunately, I accidentally erased the interview upon my return to Ann Arbor. Though twenty of my interviews were audio recorded, most of the conversations and descriptions I detail are remembered conversations that I wrote down immediately following my interactions with patrons and others persons related to the *comedor*.

My ethnography is limited by self imposed ethical boundaries and Institutional Review Board (IRB) restrictions. I chose not to conduct interviews or have in depth conversations that might end up in my field notes with individuals who clearly did not have a home, or a place to sleep. Though, as I will show in chapter seven, individuals construct “home” in diverse ways, it was important for me to respect this vulnerability given that the safety of these individuals was already at risk in multiple ways. Additionally, I chose not to interview elders who exhibited a cognitive or mental health impairment, of which there were many among this population.

I would be remiss if I did not make clear that a significant part of my data and analysis is based on the thoughts and experiences of women research collaborators. Though I spoke to and learned a great deal from the men that I interviewed and with whom I interacted, due to concerns regarding my own safety and local norms regarding boundaries between men and women, the majority of my research informants were in fact women. The stories of women thus have a prominent place in this dissertation.

My positionality also shifted throughout the course of my fieldwork. At times I was viewed as an anthropologist, and at other times, as a volunteer, a social worker, and a

practicing Catholic. It was not uncommon for social work students, all of which were women who were doing their *práctica*, or internships for their degree, to arrive at the *comedor* and conduct a range of activities with the patrons (including screening films, teaching dance classes, as well as occupational therapy workshops). Because I was present at the *comedor* at least four days per week, I was often associated with the women social workers, and was also asked by the organizers to hold workshops, photograph special events, or type out letters or documents (since I had my own computer), which I most often agreed to do.

Sometimes I also unwittingly positioned myself in ways that veiled my anthropological objectives and identity. Given that both of my parents are Catholic, from Latin America, and that I attended Catholic parochial schools from kindergarten through the twelfth grade, it felt quite natural for me to describe myself as a Spanish-speaking woman who was born in Los Angeles, who was Catholic, and who was of Mexican and Colombian parentage. However, my connections to Catholicism are cultural and not religious in that many of the rituals and practices of Catholicism are intimately connected to family relations. I am not a practicing Catholic, and in fact, do not ascribe to many of the beliefs and expectations of Catholicism. Yet, in describing myself as Catholic, many people automatically viewed me as ascribing to the belief system that harnessed the work and religious practices of places such as *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. I am quite aware of the fact that I was granted access to the Food Bank of the Archdiocese of Bogotá in part because of my Catholic roots, so to speak, and because it was assumed that my beliefs would be in accordance with the foundational principles of the food bank.

In many ways, I began to understand my own intellectual and spiritual position in relation to Catholicism *through* my fieldwork. Conducting research in a Catholic context challenged me to tease out my own experiences and discomfort with Catholicism through the contradictions, beauty, and expressions of faith I encountered on a daily basis. In future research, I hope to make my thoughts and beliefs more transparent so that the boundaries that position me as a researcher, and the history that marks me as Catholic, might be less fuzzy.

While the majority of my research involved participant observation and interviews, much of my research in Bogotá was also archival. At the *Archivo de Bogotá* (Bogotá Archive) I examined newspapers, photographs, and oral narratives of older residents that were collected by city workers who canvassed the central neighborhoods of the capital from 2004-2007. These narratives formed part of a project called *Tú Historia Cuenta*, or “Your Story Counts” (a play on recount your story), which was an initiative by a local state project called *Misión Bogotá*, as well as the *Archivo de Bogotá* in an attempt to preserve the historical and cultural patrimony of the oldest neighborhoods of the capital.

This collection illuminates histories of local food traditions, diverse forms of communal dining and living, moments of food scarcity and illness during times of violence, migration and flu epidemics, as well as the role of the state and the Catholic Church in the creation of social service programs. At the *Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango* (Luis Angel Arango Library) I also examined publications about the Bogotá Without Hunger campaign, census information about colonial family organization, patterns of

rural-urban migrations of the 20th century, as well as publications that shed light on the processes and problems of growing older in Colombia.

Writing Anthropology

Much of the ethnography in this dissertation is presented in dialogue form. While I have transcribed some of this dialogue directly from interview transcripts, a good portion of the dialogue that appears in this dissertation was not audio recorded, and instead is derived from careful field notes. During my time in Bogotá, I carried a small notebook in the back pocket of my jeans and would quickly write down interesting dialogues, or conversations, jokes, and interactions. I spent many bus rides and taxi rides attempting to write down as much detail about the day and my interactions as possible, including the particular words and expressions people used. I would then type out these notes with as much remembered and written detail as possible in the form of dialogue and conversations. I did not do this with the explicit intention of using this dialogue in the dissertation, rather, I wanted to preserve my own memory of past conversations, interactions, smells, and tastes that animated my fieldwork and often prompted more questions than answers.

When I first began the process of dissertation writing, my thoughts and analysis were inspired by these detailed interactions and conversations. I came to realize that my understanding of the places I visited and events I participated in came through the recounting of these conversations and dialogues in my field notes. These dialogues, words, and bits and pieces of conversations thus became the core of the dissertation and helped me position events, activities, and everyday interactions in relation to people, specific moments, activities, and in relation to my own positionality at the time. As

scholars have noted, “ethnography itself is revealed as an emergent cultural (or intercultural) phenomenon, reproduced, and revised in dialogues” (Mannheim and Tedlock: 1995). I have attempted to offer the reader entry into my analysis by prominently engaging the dialogical ground of social interaction that animated and constituted much of my research, including histories of conversations, my writing of those conversations in field notes, and the social world and analytic views they prompted and helped convey.

Following the work of (Marcus and Fisher 1986; Behar 1996) among others, this dialogue also offered me the opportunity to make visible “how I came to know what I know” (or think I know). Using dialogue as a methodological tool offered me the opportunity to bring to the fore a multiplicity of often competing voices. For the same reasons, I decided to include some of the original Spanish in the text or in footnotes, rather than always offer translations. Given that there are many local Colombian expressions as well as words in Spanish that convey a range of meanings, I felt hesitant in replacing these with English versions that might not convey the subtlety or range these words or sayings express. Thus, I have offered clues that help communicate what a particular word might mean in the body of the text and have also offered explanations for other potential meanings of these words in footnotes.

Many of the Spanish words I have included throughout the dissertation are in the diminutive form, which include words ending in *ito/ita*, *cito/cita*, *ico/ica*, among other variations. I included words in the diminutive an attempt to use the everyday terms of the people with whom I spoke. However, since I am also a Spanish speaker and use the diminutive quite often, I am certain that the form also found its way into the dissertation

due to my own style of speaking. The diminutive form makes something “small” and is commonly used in Spanish as a form of endearment or affection, or in an attempt to make certain words or critiques ^{sound} less harsh or aggressive. In addition to “encoding good feelings,” the diminutive may also be employed as a “dismissive device” to express contempt (Travis 2004: 266).

Throughout the dissertation, I refer to the older adults I came to know as *señora* or *señor*, terms that may be translated as Mrs. or Mr. and that connote a respect for an elder. Given that I am a Spanish speaker of Mexican and Colombian heritage, I have always spoken to my aunts, uncles, grandmother and great-grandmother in the form of *usted*, or with some other kind of honorific. This history of linguistic engagement with my family members played a role in how I spoke to the older folks I came to know in Bogotá. Upon first meeting people, I instinctively referred to them as *señor* or *señora* since I felt it would be disrespectful to engage them by their first names. Due to these daily interactions with them, these spoken honorifics were replicated in my field notes.

When I began to write the dissertation, it felt natural to continue to refer to the elders I met in Bogotá as *señor* or *señora* in my writing. I have thus chosen to continue to use these forms of address because they reflect the ways I engaged them as elders, and simultaneously communicates my positionality in relation to them. Through the process of writing, these terms, as well as my use of *hermano* in engagements with the Franciscan brothers I came to know at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, continually reminded me of my social positions in relation to a host of different people. Moreover, making these forms of address visible through this manuscript informs the reader that every interview, dialogue,

and relationships was in fact mediated by my positionality as a younger, female anthropologist born in the United States, but of Colombian and Mexican heritage.

Throughout the dissertation I also use local terms that Colombians commonly employed to refer to persons in the latter stages of their lives. *Viejo/vieja* (gendered terms which may be translated to English as “old”) were the most commonly used adjectives, though these were usually used in the form of the Spanish diminutive, *viejito/viejita*, which often connoted endearment. However, the use of the diminutive may also signal to the perceived “smallness,” or the infantilization of older persons, a topic I further discuss in chapter 5. *Personas de la tercer edad* (persons of the third age), *ancianos* (a term that describes elderly person, but also connotes advanced old age) and *adultos mayores* (older adults) were terms that were also commonly used, and appeared most frequently in published materials about aging and the elderly. Following *viejita/viejito*, the term *abuelito/abuelita* was the most commonly used word to refer to elders. *Abuelito/abuelita* literally means grandfather and grandmother, respectively, and while many of the elders I came to know did indeed have grandchildren, those that did not were still named under the category of *abuelo*. It is important to note, however, that the term *abuelo/a* was also used as a way to refer to ancestors, or ancestral understandings of the world. In this sense, grandparenthood was not always a position or a relational kinship status achieved through generational descent. Often, older adults were constructed as *abuelitos* based on the perceived shared physical features connected to aging (e.g. wrinkles), and customs that corresponded to what many perceived *abuelos* should look and act like. Thus, the term itself positioned older adults under the expected social role of an *abuelito* even if that individual did not have lineal kin.

Chapter Breakdown

I view chapter two as a framing chapter where I introduce the reader to the spaces, history, and goals of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, as well as the social history of charity, social service organizations, and secular social welfare in Colombia across time and space. Chapter three brings to the fore the struggles of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*'s primary demographic, the older adults of the central neighborhoods of Bogotá. I discuss the different perceptions of aging in Colombia, highlighting the way Hispanic models of family and gender have played a role in how aging is experienced in the capital.

In chapter four, I explore the diverse sets of relations that play a role in the movement and distribution of foods, as well as the practice of food banking. I focus on the ways foods and other commodities that were received by the Food Bank of the Archdiocese of Bogotá, and how these “leftover” foods and products were transformed into meaningful substances that might then transform their future eaters, such as the patrons of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*.

In chapter five, I again move to the spaces of *Comedor María es Mi Madre* to show how providing foods that were similar to the meals that were typical of the region, or that were somehow luxurious or “special,” was a central way by which *comedor* organizers aimed to create a sense of belonging and include older adults into a broader community of eaters. However, I show that in many cases, the ways these foods were prepared and given to the patrons often reified the divisions and social and economic inequalities the *comedor* aimed to counter.

Chapter six brings to the fore the ways older adults find creative ways to *rebuscar*, or sustain themselves, their homes, and their families in circumstances of

insecurity through diverse sets of relationships, forms of labor, and social and economic exchanges in the “informal” economy. In doing so, I look at how this kind of “work,” which is often undervalued and overlooked, has played a significant role in shaping social life and gender dynamics in the capital. I also highlight the ways older adults redistribute and recirculate the material forms of charity in new communities, imbuing these with new kinds of value.

While food is a central aspect of the dining house and of the lives of its patrons, one cannot speak about or think about food practices without engaging the houses, rooms, and spaces where food is made, smelled, eaten, shared communally, and more often than not, absent. In chapter seven, I examine the history of houses and the built environment and consider the diverse ways that elder patrons understand what it meant to have a “home,” as well the ways they constructed their own “landscapes of living” in relation to the street.

Chapter Two

The House of Dignity

It was August 2008, *el mes de los vientos*, or the windiest month of the year in Bogotá. *Cometas*, or kites, soared high above the city, dotting the sky with multiple strings and wings of color. Many -- what seemed like hundreds -- of multi-colored kites of different shapes and designs were wrapped around poles, stuck on to the antennas and balconies of the modern brick apartment buildings, and riddled around the ground of the neighborhoods of Nueva Santa Fe and Belén. It was about two in the afternoon, well past the traditional *hora de almuerzo* (or lunch hour) when I left the *Archivo de Bogotá* (Archive of Bogotá) in Nueva Santa Fe in search of a late lunch. I had just finished looking through documents and oral histories about Bogotá's historic neighborhoods and was on my way to see which of the restaurants located at the base of the modern apartment complex across the street from *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, were still open. My favorite restaurant, a small and simple one where patrons sat on rustic, wooden chairs around similar, small tables, sold *corrientazos*, or "ordinary" prefixed lunches for four thousand pesos (approximately two USD). While the price of the lunch meal at this particular restaurant had been three thousand five hundred *pesos* since 2003, the owners had recently raised their prices due to the increasing cost of food in Bogotá.

This particular restaurant was located about one and a half blocks north of the *Archivo*, and two blocks west of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. As I sat alone eating my lunch, I noticed a face looking into the restaurant from a small window. The person, who

I recognized as a patron of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, but with whom I had had few conversations, walked closer to the entrance of the restaurant, making his presence visible to me and to the restaurant employees. I smiled at the man at the door, and he returned the smile of recognition telling me, “*Hola señorita, buen provecho.*”¹⁹ As I continued to eat my rice and tomato and avocado salad, I noticed the teenage son of the restaurant owner (who also served as a waiter once he was let out of school in the afternoons) take a small plastic bag of food to the man at the door. The boy again entered the restaurant, this time with an old looking cup, and filled it with a beverage. He walked back to the doorway, and returned the cup to the man, who was now holding the plastic bag of food.

“Thank you,” the man told the boy. No other words were exchanged between the man and those that worked at the restaurant. Somehow the man had made his need for food known simply by appearing at the doorway of the restaurant at a certain time of day. Though the man had not crossed the boundaries that separated the restaurant from the street, the boy had understood what the man’s presence meant and had quickly packed a lunch of what I assumed were the days’ leftovers. From the swiftness of the boy’s response to the man’s presence, I gleaned that such exchanges took place quite often.

Upon finishing my meal, I walked a block further north on *carrera 6* along the stretch of small restaurants at the base of the apartment complex. I noticed that *Chilindrina*, a younger patron of the *comedor* who had been absent for several weeks, was also standing at the doorway of a restaurant and was being handed a bit of food. As I continued to walk, I saw other people standing near the doorways of most of the small restaurants, and as if on cue, the workers of these establishments offered each of these

¹⁹ *Buen provecho* is an expression that communicates one’s desire for a person to have a good meal. It might be equivalent to the French term, *bon appétit*.

individuals the food that was still on the stove after the lunch crowds had disappeared.

Given that it was about three pm and the *almuerzo* was usually served between noon and 1:30, most of the restaurants were in the process of cleaning up, and packing or giving away whatever prepared foods were left from that day's *menú*.

Such forms of giving and receiving were quite common in the neighborhoods of central Bogotá, and have been for quite some time. It was within these neighborhoods that the first colonial hospitals and institutions to assist the poor, young, old, and sick first came to be. In 2007 and 2008, there were still many organizations that offered food and other necessities to the urban poor. Some were a one-person operation that involved giving out hot chocolate or bread on specific days of the week; some formed part of charity works by religious sisters who opened the doors of their houses to pass out a hardboiled egg, bread, or a sandwich to a long line of people; and some, like these restaurant owners, gave away the excess of what they had produced for the day to those in need. It was also not uncommon for a neighbor to ensure that other residents, especially their elderly neighbors, were okay by taking or sending over a plate of food on a rainy day.

Comedor María es Mi Madre, a dining facility with a primarily elderly demographic, formed part of the practices of giving and receiving of these neighborhoods and is part of a history of charity that is critical for understanding the history of social welfare and practices of giving in the area. In this chapter, I introduce the reader to the spaces, people, and goals of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. The *comedor*, which I call a “dining house” since it is located inside an older house, was organized by a group of Franciscan Brothers from a local Colombian order known as the *Fraternidad de la*

Divina Providencia or the Fraternity of Divine Providence. Through the work of the Franciscan brothers, the *comedor* aimed to provide nutritional support to older adults and poor individuals who could not afford to purchase food on their own.

While nutritional support was the initial goal of the *comedor*, given the high rates of malnutrition and poverty in the area, its primary organizer, Hermano Miguel, also endeavored to nourish other kinds of “hungers” through food practices and other kinds of sustenance. The organizers of the *comedor* instituted a range of activities, such as literacy classes and occupational therapy classes, so that an invitation to dine was transformed into a wide array of services that aimed to assist in transforming and “redignifying” (in Hermano Miguel’s terms) the lives of the patrons of the dining house. Food, in its multiple forms, was thus viewed as having the potential to transform personhood and the moral social relationships of older adults.

I begin the chapter by discussing histories of food giving practices in different parts of the world and at different historical moments so as to position the work of the *comedor* within a broader understanding of charity. I specifically focus on charity practices in relation to scarcity, hunger, and abundance. I examine the history of “giving” in Colombia, and specifically in Bogotá, to show the ways practices of social welfare, such as the giving of food and charity by religious organizations, have historically been inextricably linked to state politics. I then embark on a tour of the areas surrounding the *comedor* across space and time, placing the dining house amidst urban relations and the geography of city. I explore the history and social geography of the house itself, showing how the transformation of the house, as well as the ways the materiality and spatial

organization of the *comedor*, all played a critical role in Hermano Miguel's aims to transform persons and social relations.

Soup kitchens, Famine, and Communal Dining

Social service organizations and communal dining have a long and complex history in Colombia and throughout the world. Though the term *comedor* has come into local discourse through the Bogotá Without Hunger campaign, in fact, services of individuals and groups providing persons in need with food are not a recent phenomenon. Though soup was indeed offered at various social service organizations throughout Bogotá, the use of the expression "soup kitchen," that is a dining center that offers individuals a bowl of soup along with other kinds of food, is not a local term in Colombia. Instead, words such as *comedor*, *caridad* (charity) *beneficiencia* (beneficence) *hogares* (homes), *casas* (casas) and *asilos* (institutions of care for elders and persons who are ill, physically disabled, or viewed as cognitively disabled) are key terms for exploring a variety of religious and state organized social welfare initiatives and programs.

"Soup kitchen," however, is an expression in English that has become synonymous with communal dining and hunger in various parts of the world. Scholars have suggested that the response to the Irish famine of the 1840s, after the failure of potato crops due to blight, marks one of the "first" archival references for the term "soup kitchen" (Glasser 1988: 15 [citing Akroyd 1975]). The Temporary Relief Destitute Persons law, more commonly known as the "Soup Kitchen Act," was passed into law in February 1847, and aimed to offer the starving population of Ireland food without requiring them to labor in the already overcrowded workhouses for their meals.

“The Great Famine,” a famine due to Ireland’s dependence on potatoes, was connected to a history of British mercantile colonialism and the plantation economy (Braa 1997; Harris 1999). Through the plantation economy, Irish Catholics were stripped of their lands, positioning many British settlers as part of the ruling class, and former Irish landowners as tenant farmers. Since most peasants only had access to marginal and small plots of land, it was difficult for them to grow a variety of crops, such as wheat and other grains. The potato, however, could flourish in these circumstances, and thus became a crucial staple subsistence crop for the Irish poor. By 1845, one third to one half of the Irish were dependent on the potato (Braa 1997).

Since British taxpayers were wary about paying for the nutritional needs of the Irish during this time, the Irish government was dependent on private benevolence and charity. Many soup kitchens had already been established in Irish towns by Quakers, however, their organizational efforts were often too small (approximately 150-180 gallons of soup daily in one town) for the ever-increasing number of persons in need of food. Additionally, Quakers focused on establishing soup kitchens in rural areas, positioning this food out of the reach of many. By June of 1847 (the worst year of the famine) four months after the Soup Kitchen Act was passed, there were at least 1,850 soup kitchens in operation throughout Ireland. By July of the same year over three million people were collecting daily rations of soup (Strang and Toomre 1999).

While soup kitchens in Dublin were funded by the government, one in particular was presided over by French chef, Alexis Soyer. Soyer was working in London’s Reform Club (a gentleman’s club for the well to do) when he began to concoct recipes for inexpensive soups to feed the London poor. Soyer arrived in Dublin to install soup

boilers of his own design that might be used to feed the starving population in a streamlined, mass-produced fashion. Soyer's kitchen was capable of producing approximately 8,750 rations of soup every day (1999: 69), and one boiler in particular had the capacity for three hundred gallons of water. While Soyer's model kitchen aimed to produce soup at an immense scale, Soyer also carefully calculated the cost of every ingredient in his soup. During this time of crisis, Soyer endeavored to fashion a soup that was elegant, appetizing, nutritious, and that could be prepared in the least expensive manner possible.

One of his soup recipes called for a quarter pound of beef without the bone, two onions, two turnips, fifteen green leaves (e.g. the leaves of celery stalks), the green part of two leeks (the chef noted that this section of the leek was usually thrown away), half a pound of flour, half a pound of pearl barley, three ounces of salt, a quarter of an ounce of brown sugar, and two gallons of water. While such a soup might offer warmth and satiate hunger pangs, a quart of this soup (a portion much larger than what was offered) probably had three hundred sixty calories and fourteen grams of protein, which amounted twenty-five percent of the protein and ten to fifteen percent of the calories need by adults (Strang and Toomre 1999 [citing Carlin 1980]). Though this soup may not have offered much needed nutrition, Soyer's recipes were generally in accordance with Irish Board of Health regulations concerning the nutritional needs of its citizens. Regardless, as Woodham-Smith (1962) cited eloquently notes, "Much of the soup...was not so much soup for the poor as poor soup" (127).

It is important to note however, that during the height of the famine 100,000 tons of grains (wheat, oats, barley) continued to be exported from Ireland (Braa 1997: 212).

The capitalist economy was thus kept intact while Ireland lost 2.5 million of its citizens due to migration and death by starvation -- even in the context of other kinds of abundance.

Though dependence on one crop played a significant role in the starvation and suffering of Ireland's poor, and thus, was the primary reason why state and private relief in the form of soup kitchens developed, communal dining in Soviet Russia has distinct ideological roots. While the Soviet Union did indeed suffer from intense food shortages, which scholars have argued are central for understanding the major events of the first half of the 20th century, rationing and communal dining in Soviet Russia came to be seen "not as a temporary solution to shortages, but as a foundation for the distribution of a new society" (Borrero 2002: 260). During the first years after the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, communal dining was central to the Bolshevik plan to construct a new and different society, and part of a "radical social transformation that extended beyond the traditional arenas of political struggle" (2002: 263). Melissa Caldwell (2004) adds that while soup kitchens were indeed established to help solve the problems of scarcity, the replacement of household kitchens and restaurants with communal kitchens, state owned cafeterias, and canteens (often on the sites of former restaurants) offered a space to inculcate socialist values and "reinforce the ideals of social equality...while simultaneously utilizing scarce food resources in the most efficient manner" (Caldwell 2004: 9; cf. Verdery 1996).

Social equality through communal dining was also ideologically connected to issues of gender emancipation and the "liberation of women." Bolshevik leaders proposed communal dining as a way to advance the liberation of women by relieving

them from the oppression of housework and simultaneously economize scarce resources (Borrero 2002: 258). Vladimir Lenin argued that women would continue to be “domestic slaves” if housework remained isolated labor inside the home (Reid 2005: 291). By taking labor out of the home and into the public sphere, state-run facilities, communal kitchens, laundries, collective childcare, and socialized housework were expected to release women from “domestic slavery” (Borrero 1987: 165).²⁰

While communal and public dining were positioned as ways by which to manage scarcity and enforce ideological values, the work of sociologist Janet Poppendieck (1986) shows us how during the Great Depression in the United States, food scarcity amidst an abundance of resources was the product of a different kind of economic ideology -- that of capitalism. The author highlights what she calls a “paradox of want amid plenty” (or “the paradox of scarcity and abundance”) in the United States during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Because much of the citizenry was unable to purchase foods due to a lack of resources, foods that could not be commercialized were routinely destroyed. Poppendieck tells us that, “While oranges were being soaked in kerosene to prevent their consumption in California, whole communities in Appalachia were living on dandelions and wild greens...Dairies were pouring unsaleable milk down the sewers, while unemployed parents longed to provide even a pint a week for growing children” (Poppendieck: 1996: xi). Food itself was thus not the scarce resource. Scarcity, in this context, was connected to the lack of capital necessary to purchase foods that were otherwise abundantly available in the national and international global markets. As a response to the mass

²⁰ Public dining, however, did not achieve its full ideological potential as homes again became the primary sites of food preparation and consumption. In 1936 and 1944, legislation again positioned the family as a “pillar of society,” emphasizing women’s “social obligation to reproduction as well as production” (Reid 2005: 292).

starvation that was occurring, social welfare through the private sector, such as breadlines and communal kitchens, were organized throughout the United States to offer relief to the famished population.

Similar to *comedores* in Colombia, communal dining and cooking have also been positioned as a corrective measures for extreme poverty in other parts of the Americas. Since the late 1970s, women-run organizations in Peru, such as *Vaso de Leche* (Glass of Milk), *Clubs de Madres* (Clubs of Mothers), *Red de Madres Educadoras de los Wawa Wasi* (Network of Mothers who are Educators of the *Wawa Wasi*), and *Comedores Populares* (Popular *Comedores*) have used *comedores* and communal cooking as spaces and practices by which to mitigate the widespread hunger that was the result of economic crises, poverty, and violence in that country. In 1992, Alberto Fujimori changed the monetary unit from the *inti* to the *sol*, and overnight, basic staples such as bread, flour, milk, gasoline, and public services increased by 859% in price. Products such as kerosene increased by 6,964%, and gasoline increased by 3,139.5%. Because the prices of these goods had previously been controlled by the government, these increases left Peruvians looking for alternatives to sustain themselves (Iguñiz 1993 [Cited in Blondet and Montero 1995: 35]).

Originally, *comedores* were visible in the *pueblos jóvenes* of Lima, that is, in the poor and “younger” neighborhoods that were formed in and through migration processes from the Andes and the Amazon forest to the Peruvian capital. These *comedores* were also often connected to local churches. In 1983, there were approximately three hundred *comedores* in Lima, and by 1989, these numbers had increased to about 3,000. The *comedores* were established as places wherein individuals could gather and communally

prepare meal rations for their families and other individuals (Blondety and Montero 1995). Their primary aim was to reduce the cost of food through collective cooking and then take this food home to feed their families.

Most *comedores* allocated ten percent of the food prepared for individuals who could not otherwise afford daily meals. In 1992, approximately 120,000 families in Lima relied on *comedores populares*, which corresponded to approximately 9% of *Limeño* families (1995: 92).

As I have previously noted, charity, such as the giving of food to the poor and communal dining facilities such as *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, have a deep history in Colombia, and one that extends into its colonial foundations. *Obras sociales* (or social works) for the poor and “needy,” have been central to Catholic religious practice and beneficence sponsored by local governments. An extensive range of social service and charitable organizations, such as *hogares, casas* (e.g. homes for children, or older adults), *asilos*, hospitals, *orphanatos* (orphanages), and educational institutions have historically been inextricable from religious endeavors, given that for many years, the Catholic Church in colonial Latin America fulfilled the role of the local government.

During colonial rule, the connections between the Catholic Church and the Spanish Crown were structured by the Royal Patronage of the Indies, and through this, the crown offered the Church protection and privileges “in exchange for the Church’s promise to evangelize the conquered populations and legitimate the process of colonization” (Villar 1999: 2). The Crown assigned the managing of hospitals, education, and orphanages in the colonies to the church, which were supported in part by donations and local municipal funds. For example, one of the first hospitals in Bogotá, *Hospital San*

Pedro, founded in 1564 by Fray Juan de los Barrios (a Franciscan friar), also served as an *asilo* for the elderly and “indigent.” Colombian historian María Himelda Ramírez (2006) tells us that hospitals often “substituted the family” for persons who could not depend on their own families for care during times of illness or old age (131). Castro Carvajal (2007) adds that hospitals such as these also offered support to travellers and poor individuals who did not have a place to sleep, needed a coat, a plate of food, or were looking for a place to rest in safety.

While the church played a critical role in the everyday life of the colony, with the Bourbon Reforms in the 18th century, the Crown attempted to control the ecclesiastical governments of the colonies, as well as education, property, and health (Villar 1998:3). In many ways, these efforts to control were some of the first attempts at secularizing the colonies. During this time, a vast array of social welfare organizations, or *obras de caridad*, were created, such as *hospicios*, *casas de mendigos*, or *casas de rufugio* (houses of refuge). However many of these were introduced as a mechanism of social control against certain “kinds” of poor individuals, especially those socially classified as *vagos* (vagrants) and *mendigos* (beggars) and other persons that were viewed as contributing to the moral dissolution of society, including some women who did not follow the norms set by the patriarchal structure²¹ (Castro Carvajal 2007: 18). During this time, begging or *mendigando*, also became against the law.

²¹ Beginning in the sixteenth century, *casas de recogimiento*, or institutional settings wherein women were voluntarily or forcefully enclosed, were used to separate some women from society in order to ensure the sanctity of family life. *Recogimiento*, according to historian Nancy van Deusen 1997, “acted as enclosures for women, operating in the roles of schools, asylums, prisons, religious homes, or places where women were sent while awaiting their divorce or annulment, or during their husbands’ absence.” I discuss this topic further in chapter three.

Later, in 1869, the *Juntas de Beneficencia* (social welfare commissions or charity commissions) were created throughout Colombia as a way to secularize social welfare, and “exercise greater control over charitable organizations that were typically operated by private, mainly religious, agencies and funded heavily by public resources” (Villar 1999: 416). Charity organizations (*asilos*, *comedores*, hospitals, *hogares*, schools, and *casas* for the poor), many of which were run by religious sisters and other religious organizations, had to formally request funds from the *juntas de beneficencia* by explaining their aims, the kind of charity they provided in the last year, how previous funds had been administered (along with proof of these activities), and how this work had benefited Colombian society. These requests were considered by a commission, and either approved or denied. While the *juntas* helped secularize social assistance and gave the state more control over social welfare, they also offered local governments control of education, institutional social welfare, and hospitals in diverse areas of the country (Castro Carvajal 2007).

However, there were private charitable organizations outside the control of the *juntas*. Among them was the *Sociedad de San Vicente de Paúl* (Society of Saint Vincent de Paul), which was founded in the mid 19th century. The *sociedad* organized and ran Bogotá’s *Asilo de Mendigos* and *Leprosario Agua de Dios*, as well as a range of charitable organizations.²² The Saint Vincent de Paul society, for example, sponsored various events to raise funds for charitable organizations, and the names of donors were

²² Bogotá’s *Asilo de Mendigos* was an institution where individuals who begged in the streets of Bogotá were incarcerated or enclosed, depending on the circumstances of their offenses. The *Leprosario Agua de Dios* housed lepers and was located in Tocaima, Cundinamarca (in part because of the therapeutic hot springs located there). Once relegated to the *leprosario*, persons who had leprosy were not allowed to exit and were thus confined there for the rest of their lives. In 1891, Salesian brothers with the assistance of the *Sociedad de San Vicente de Paúl*, arrived at the *leprosario* to aid the sick, and offer spiritual, social, and material guidance and support.

later published in local newspapers so that readers would be made aware of the gift that had been made.

Houses were also an important part of charitable giving. Often, individuals donated properties to religious organizations in their wills, and thus a high percentage of the property where churches and other religious buildings are now located were originally owned by wealthy Bogotanos (Ortiz Gaitán 2005). For example, in 1889, Lorenzo Cúellar left all of his property and wealth for the construction of an orphanage to be named *Instituto Cristiano de San Pablo* (Christian Institute of Saint Paul) (Castro Carvajal 2007). Though I did not have the opportunity to check historical records, I was told that the house where *Comedor María es Mi Madre* was located was originally bequeathed to a group of *Hermanitas de la Caridad* (religious sisters who focused on charity works), who then transferred the property to the brothers of the *Fraternidad de la Divina Providencia*.

However, the Catholic Church and practices of charity were inextricably tied to political conflict in Colombia and to tensions between Colombia's two dominant political parties – the Liberals and the Conservatives. The contested roles of the church and the state in the secularization and “modernization” of social assistance were central to divisions between the two parties, especially at the end of the 19th century during political efforts to build the Colombian nation-state (Castro Carvajal 2007: 22). While Conservatives historically were aligned with the Catholic Church and advocated for the central presence of the church and government, as well as its central place in education and in the administering of hospitals, most Liberals aimed to withdraw the special privileges of the church (Bushnell 1993: 109).

During the years of Liberal dominance between 1851-1876, the government attempted to relocate the responsibility for educational institutions, hospitals, and other social welfare organizations to local governments. According to Villar (1998), control over education and other forms of social welfare became one of the primary points of dispute, given that the Liberals wanted the secularization of the government and its institutions, whereas the Conservatives wanted the Church to continue to have ecclesiastical privileges over education. The author argues that because of this, “a powerful and long-lasting alliance was formed between the Conservative party and the Church” (3) which continued to play a role in the increased polarization of the two parties which was later “radically expressed” during *La Violencia* (5).

The growth of Bogotá’s population and increased urbanization coupled with inadequate and scarce housing, access to water, and poor waste removal, made public health an issue of critical concern. In 1918, the *Dirección Nacional de Higiene* (National Hygiene Commission) was created as a secular institution in order to direct hygiene and vaccination campaigns, as well as to administer hospitals, *asilos*, and orphanages. Through these commissions, poverty was often positioned and moralized as a source of infection, especially in 1918 during the influenza pandemic (Castro Carvajal 2007: 39). In attempts to prevent the spread of disease and to respond to the scarcity of resources that were the result of the pandemic, religious organizations as well as government commissions instituted *ollas populares*, or communal soup pots. These were set up in the *barrios populares*, or “popular” neighborhoods with high indexes of poverty and where services, such as water and electricity, were scant or non-existent.

I offer this brief history of the politicization of “giving” to show how the practices of charity and social welfare in the central neighborhoods of Bogotá have been intimately tied to religiosity and state projects. The diverse origins of these histories are important for understanding the aims and roots of places such as *Comedor María es Mi Madre*.

The History and Place of *Comedor María es Mi Madre* in the Cityscape

Comedor María es Mi Madre forms part of a long history of religious giving and beneficence, of which the giving of food to the poor has been central. In order to more thoroughly understand how *Comedor María es Mi Madre* came to be, as well as the *comedor's* place in the historic neighborhoods of Bogotá, I sought out Dr. Fernando Ruiz. Fernando was a medical doctor who travelled to the *comedor* every other Friday to offer *consultas*, or medical consultations, to the patrons of the dining house. In 2008, Fernando, who was endearingly called Fercho by the *hermanos* and those who knew him, was a man in his mid forties who was married to another physician who also volunteered her time at social service organizations for the poor. He would arrive to the dining house with a black leather bag containing his stethoscope and other equipment, and set up his doctor's office in a small room to the right of the entrance of the house. During these five to ten minute consultations, which had to be scheduled in advance, Fercho examined his patients and pointed out their potential medical problems, giving them prescriptions or medication from the small pharmacy located in the adjacent room.²³

²³ Even though patrons were able to receive medications if they were available in the *comedor's* pharmacy, many of their conditions were often prolonged and difficult to treat solely with medication. For some, the medication that was offered most often only aided in suppressing the symptoms of more serious and chronic conditions.

Fercho's commitment to *Comedor María es Mi Madre* stemmed from his own experiences as a "homeless child"²⁴ who grew up in one of the *hogares*, or homes run by the *Fraternidad de la Divina Providencia* (Fraternity of Divine Providence) in Bogotá, the community of Franciscan religious brothers to which Hermano Miguel, Hermano Roosevelt, and Hermano José Fernando belonged.²⁵ The *Fraternidad de la Divina Providencia* was founded by Ray Schambach in Bogotá in 1977, who was renamed Sandalio María after he was ordained as a priest (*Fraternidad de la Divina Providencia* n.d.).²⁶ The *comunidad*, or community, as this particular Franciscan order was colloquially called, consisted of religious brothers and priests inspired by the works and miracles of Saint Francis of Assisi and who aimed to offer material and spiritual assistance to the poor. Headquartered in Usaquén, a neighborhood in the wealthy northern areas of Bogotá, the *Fraternidad de la Divina Providencia* oversaw several *obras*, or works of charity, such as *ancianatos* (old age homes) *hogares* for *habitantes de calle* (homes for "inhabitants of the street," a term I more fully discuss in chapter seven), as well as homes for children suffering from a range of illnesses. Though the *comunidad* operated seven *hogares* throughout the country, *Comedor María es Mi Madre* was the

²⁴ Several individuals I came to know in Bogotá grew up in *casas de niños* (homes for children). Many of the children that grow up in homes such as these are not orphans, and do indeed have parents. Some end up at such institutions because their parents cannot afford to feed and care for them. Others worked on the streets to financially assist their families, and were later offered a place to live in one of these *casas*. Though Fercho did indeed grow up in one of the homes administered by the *Hermanos de la Divina Providencia*, I never asked him about the circumstances of his childhood and whether he continued to have a relationship with his biological parents.

²⁵ It is interesting to note that Fercho received monetary support from donors and the *hermanos* to study medicine at the *Universidad Nacional de Bogotá* (National University of Bogotá).

²⁶ Website accessed June 20, 2011: <http://www.hsfafdp.org/rayschambach.html>

only one of these located in the capital, and also the only one where those receiving assistance did not live in the *hogar* full-time.²⁷

Comedor María es Mi Madre is located in a small neighborhood called Belén (or Bethlehem), an area that is approximately three-square blocks in size. Bogotá is divided into twenty *localidades*, which offer a geographic, administrative, political, and economic organization for the city. Each *localidad* has a mayor and a local government. There are several *barrios* within each of these *localidades*. For example, Belén and Santa Bárbara form part of the *localidad* known as Candelaria, whereas Las Cruces (a neighborhood only two blocks south of the *comedor* where many *comedor* patrons live) is in the *localidad* of Santa Fe. It is important to note, however, that though these neighborhoods belong to different *localidades*, they have many shared characteristics and histories.

Barrio Belén was named after the church located around the corner from the *comedor*. The church, *Nuestra Señora de Belén* (Our Lady of Bethlehem) is bright yellow

²⁷ To better understand the vision and goals of the *Fraternidad de la Divina Providencia* it is important to offer a brief sketch on the life and work of the founder of one of the most influential mendicant orders, the Franciscan order begun by Saint Francis of Assisi. Saint Francis was born in 1181 (1182 depending on the source), in the city of Assisi, in Umbria, Italy. His father, Bernadone, was a cloth merchant who travelled throughout Italy and France selling his wares, while his mother, Pica, was French and possibly of noble origin. As a young man, Francis began to work for his father, but felt increasingly called to assist the poor and those that had to beg for their livelihoods in and around Assisi. According to hagiographic accounts (Sabatier 1894; Gobry 2003), during a trip to Rome, Francis wanted to experience what it might feel like to be destitute, and thus, borrowed the clothes of a beggar, fasted, and begged inside Saint Peter's Cathedral for a day. Upon returning to Assisi, Francis came across a leper, and after giving the individual all of his money, proceeded to kiss his hand in the same way that it was custom to kiss the hand of a priest or royalty. It was these experiences, along with his work rebuilding the local churches of Assisi, which inspired Francis' calling to renounce his possessions and live his life imitating Jesus Christ by preaching peace and compassion. Wearing a simple tunic and cowl, Francis began to evangelize to the inhabitants of the area, highlighting peace, love, and penitence. Before long, Francis had several followers, and the men moved throughout the countryside of central Italy building a spiritual family, living in poverty, and evangelizing. Since the number of friars increased daily, Francis went to Rome to ask for approval from Pope Innocent III to create an order and was consequently granted permission to continue evangelizing "under the spiritual authority of the Catholic Church" (Sabatier 1894:100). According to hagiographers, the Franciscans aimed to preach to ordinary persons and poor persons in open-air sermons, evangelizing through a message of love and peace. On April 26, 1210, the "Order of the Brothers Minor" was officially founded, and in 1211, the brothers organized the first Franciscan convent. Along with the deliberate pursuit of poverty, the life of Saint Francis of Assisi is often narrated in relation to his intimate connection to nature and non-humans, as well as his efforts to evangelize and treat all beings with compassion (Sabatier 1894: 178).

in color and its steeple is shaped in the form of a queen in a game of chess (perhaps signaling to the importance of the Virgin Mary in the very architecture of the church). On Wednesday afternoons, the patrons of the dining house would make their way to the church after the lunch meal had been served to partake in a snack of hot chocolate and bread that Doña Olga, a parishioner, and her two grandchildren, made possible through donations.



Figure 1: *Nuestra Señora de Belén* (photo taken by the author in June 2007)

The late Colombian architect Alfonso Ernesto Ortiz Gaitán (2005) tells us that, historically, the names of the *barrios*, or neighborhoods of the city, corresponded to the names of the local churches. For example, the *barrio* Catedral was named after Bogotá's central and most important church, *Catedral Basílica Metropolitana de la Inmaculada Concepción de Bogotá*. The significance of the church was also reflected in the neighborhood's residents, as *barrio* Catedral was the most exclusive and important

Bogotano neighborhood during the 18th century as it housed prominent Bogotanos, the offices of the police and church authorities, as well as most commercial establishments (57). During this time, the neighborhood was also home to more than half of the residents of the city. Similarly, *barrio* Santa Bárbara, located only one block west of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, was named after the 16th century church, *Iglesia de Santa Bárbara*, and both the neighborhood and *localidad de la Candelaria*, were named after the recently restored colonial church (completed in 1703), *Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria* (Our Lady of the Candelaria).

Comedor María es Mi Madre was one of at least one fifty *comedores* and social service organizations (at various levels of formality) located within walking distance from *barrio* Belén. In fact, there were several *comedores* in the streets surrounding the dining house, most of which were subsidized by the Bogotá Without Hunger campaign. One of these was *Comedor Comunitario Barrio Belén* and was located around the corner from *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. One of the most popular *comedores* in the area was a place colloquially known a *Perseverancia*, named after the neighborhood where it was located. This particular *comedor* was approximately twenty blocks away from *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, and was viewed by many as being quite “rough.” The *comedor* also had an open door policy, that is, anyone off the street could enter and receive a meal. *La Perseverancia* was also a relatively large *comedor* where more than two hundred people could eat at one time while sitting on stools alongside long rectangular tables. This *comedor* was run by the *Hermanas de la Caridad de la Madre Teresa de Calcuta* (Sisters of Charity of Mother Teresa of Calcutta), and received subsidies from the Bogotá Without Hunger campaign. It was not uncommon for some of the patrons of *Comedor*

María es Mi Madre to arrive late for the lunch meal after having already consumed one meal at *Perseverancia*. It was also not uncommon for patrons to be accused of having already consumed a meal, even if this was not always the case.



Figure 2: Comedor Comunitario Belén - Comedor sponsored by the Bogotá Without Hunger campaign located in Belén (photograph from *Integración Social* n.d.).²⁸

Other places around the neighborhood also welcomed elders and residents of the area to participate in meals and in other activities. On Saturday afternoons, the *salón*, or parish space where Doña Olga offered the snack of hot chocolate and bread on Wednesday afternoons, also became a lunchroom where the parish's priest engaged the residents of the neighborhood in activities, such as dancing and or watching a film. The *Iglesia de Santa Bárbara*, which is located two blocks west of *Comedor María es Mi*

²⁸ Website accessed August 2, 2011: http://www.bogota.gov.co/mad/info_sitio.php?id_sitio=87143

Madre, also offered Saturday activities to the elderly residents of the area. At *Centro Comunitario de Lourdes*, a publicly funded community center located in the neighborhood of Lourdes, about five blocks southeast of the *comedor*, also organized workshops for older adults. Though the relatively large community center was open to persons of all ages, older adults who received *bonos*, or small stipends of about fifty thousand *pesos* (approximately thirty USD), were required to attend, a topic I further describe and discuss in the next chapter. At these workshops, older adults participated in arts and crafts, often making seasonal home decorations such as Christmas ornaments, which in some cases, decorated the bedroom walls of local elders. These sessions would usually culminate with a juice, banana and a piece of shortbread being given to all attendees. Because of the range of services offered throughout the neighborhood, I often heard patrons and organizers of the *comedor* suggest that one had to be really *bobo*, or stupid, to go hungry in Bogotá.

According to Hermano Miguel, the *comedor* did not have to limit its services to a specific population because it was not subsidized by the Bogotá Without Hunger campaign, and thus, did not have to adhere to the local government's guidelines regarding who was eligible to receive a meal. Instead, *Comedor María es Mi Madre* received a monthly stipend of two million four hundred *pesos* (approximately \$1,200 USD) from the order of the *Fraternidad de la Divina Providencia*. This money was to be used to pay for the cost of services such as water, electricity, natural gas, as well as the maintenance of the house. The money was also intended to cover the monthly costs of purchasing the food that would be prepared for the patrons.

Additionally, *Comedor María es Mi Madre* was located only six blocks north of the center of power in Colombia. The *Palacio de Nariño*, home to president Alvaro Uribe (2002-2006; 2006-2010), was a five-minute walk from the dining house. The *Plaza de Bolívar* (Bogotá's main square), *Catedral Basílica Metropolitana de la Inmaculada Concepción de Bogotá*, the *Palacio de Justicia* (Supreme Court Building), the *Liévano* building (where the Bogotá's mayors' offices are located), and a range of administrative buildings, were also only blocks away from the *comedor*. Though Bogotá is a militarized city, where the National Police and other military personnel are on regular patrol, the streets surrounding the *Palacio de Nariño* were constantly guarded and protected by the *Batallón Guardia Presidencial*, a battalion designated to protect the president. Because of this, the area surrounding *Comedor María es Mi Madre* was highly militarized, with barracks and military offices located minutes away.

A few blocks west of *Comedor María es Mi Madre* (and only three blocks away from the *Palacio de Nariño*) lies *Parque Tercer Milenio*, or the Park of the Third Millennium. This park was made up of sixteen hectares of land that until recently were known as the *Calle del Cartucho*, one of Bogotá's most violent slums. In 1998, then Mayor Enrique Peñalosa's government (1998-2001) aimed to "recuperate" Bogotá's historical center by razing the *Cartucho* and building a park to inaugurate Bogotá as a city of the new millennium. The *Calle del Cartucho* was originally the neighborhood of Santa Inés, where many of Bogotá's elite had large homes, or *casonas*. Shortly after the *Bogotazo* of 1948, many of these wealthy families left the neighborhood for the northern areas of the city, abandoning their homes and businesses in the process.

During the 1960s and 1970s, many of these houses were converted into *inquilinos*, or tenement style housing where travelers and poor persons could rent individual rooms at very low rates. As these structures deteriorated, they became recycling sites and *ollas*,²⁹ or places where drugs were sold. Colombia's weekly magazine, *Semana*, described the *Cartucho*, named after the Spanish word for the calla lilies that used to grow in the neighborhood of Santa Inés, as a "gloomy urban myth of the capital" (*Semana*, February 19, 2002). At its height, the *Cartucho* was home to over 10,000 residents, and extended from *calle 6* (sixth street) to *calle 9*, and *carrera 10* and 14. The zone has been described as "lawless" and "miserable," where black market arms, drug trafficking, and murder were an everyday occurrence.

Though the demolition of the *Cartucho* happened in stages, as the local government aimed to "resocialize" and socially "reinsert" the residents of the zone through professionalization, placement in drug treatment and other programs, and relocation to other parts of the city or to old age facilities for those of the "third age," many of the residents of the former *Calle del Cartucho* live their lives finding sustenance through informal labor on the street, without a place to call home, and relying on places like *Comedor María es Mi Madre* for their nutritional needs.

It is also important that I offer a description of how Bogotá's *calles* and *carreras* are organized so that the reader might better locate the *comedor* and the neighborhoods in the cityscape. The eastern edge of the capital is flanked by the eastern range of the Andes Mountains, or the *Cordillera Oriental*. The *cerro* or mountain of Monserrate, which is at 10,341 feet above sea level, is located directly above the downtown historic district

²⁹ An *olla* literally means a cooking pot in the Spanish language. In Colombia, however, the word has also come to mean a location where drugs are sold (perhaps similar to the expression "drug den" in English).

known as the Candelaria. The *Santuario del Señor Caído de Monserrate* (the Sanctuary of the Fallen Christ of Monserrate) sits at the summit of the *cerro*. Both the mountain and the church serve as an important point of reference throughout the city. During my fieldwork, there were several times when I became lost after taking the wrong bus, or hopping off the bus at the wrong street. In an attempt to locate my place in the city, I would first look for the eastern Andean range, and then attempt to spot Monserrate. Though I was often able to find my way with the assistance of this geographic and architectural compass, dense fog and heavy clouds frequently obscured my view and made my task difficult.

The streets of Bogotá are organized in a grid pattern in relation to the mountains. *Carreras*, or streets, run parallel to the mountains from north to south, while *calles* (also streets) run perpendicular to the mountains, from west to east. *Diagonales* run diagonally, but like *calles*, they do so following an east/west direction. *Transversales* also run diagonally, but do so from north to south.

While the mountains serve as a geographical point of reference, they also played a central role in the founding of the capital. According to historical narratives, the original settlement of Bogotá was located in these *cerros*, only a few blocks away from the current location of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. The area that is now *calle 13* with *carrera 2* is home to the *Chorro de Quevedo*, the region where many historians and architects suggest the modern capital was founded by Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada in 1537 (Roa 2000). This area was originally the center of *Muisca* territory, where indigenous groups were protected by the incline and forests that blanketed the mountains and from where they could observe the vast Andean plain. Additionally, the oldest

buildings in the capital, the few that have survived the years of colonization, fires, wars, riots, and erosion, were originally built on the incline of the mountains as they edged into the savannah.

The Social Geography of Giving

It was March 2007 and Hermano Miguel, the organizer of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, and I were seated around a large, rustic wooden table inside the residential space of the dining house. As we sipped our orange juice, the noontime sounds of one hundred spoons touching metal plates made their way from the public *comedor* for the older adults of the neighborhood, to the inside residential dining area inhabited by the *hermanos* and their guests. This residential *comedor* within a public *comedor*, was surrounded by a dense jungle of anaconda and jaguar skins, woven baskets, wooden spears, tropical flowers and other material representations of Mitú, the small capital of the Amazonian department of Vaupés in Colombia, where Hermano Miguel had lived for seven years prior to his arrival in Bogotá in April 2006. It was decorated in much the same way that a *comedor* inside any other home in Bogotá might be, reflecting Hermano Miguel's personal and family history, tastes, and life experiences.

“*Malokas* have many kitchens,” Hermano Miguel told me, describing the indigenous practice of multi-generational family dwelling common in Vaupés.

“In Mitú, indigenous families prepare various meals in individual hearths inside the *maloka*, but share them with all of the families that reside inside the house. Eating with someone,” he continues after a pause, “is an intimate act. If we travel to *la costa* for Holy Week you will notice the significant role *dulces* (sweets) play for the *costeño* family,” he continues, shifting his focus to the domestic practices of a completely

different region of the country.³⁰ “They make amazing sweets. My mother prepares candies made from yucca, candies made from *patata* (sweet potato), mango *biche* (green mango), potato, candies made from everything. Every family prepares their own sweets and the table is full of the different plates and candies offered by each family,” he says as he moves his hands forward as if here were placing invisible plates filled with sweets on to the table in front of us. His gestures brought to the fore an imaginary table, much like the wooden one inside the *comedor*, decorated with plates belonging to different kitchens and filled with homemade sweets from an array of distinct family recipes.

This image of a table replete with food that has its origins in the efforts, skills, and generosity of a range of donors is not all that different from the diverse ingredients that make up the meals that feed the over one-hundred individuals who eat at *Comedor María es Mi Madre* on a daily basis. *Comedor María es Mi Madre* is a dining facility that primarily tends to an older demographic and is located inside a Republican³¹ style house. The house also served as the primary residence for Hermano Miguel, and two other Franciscan brothers, Hermano Roosevelt and Hermano José Fernando. Carlos, Hermano Miguel’s twenty year old nephew who had moved to Bogotá to study at a local university, Deibid an eighteen year-old who befriended Hermano Miguel in November 2006, and Rubén a twenty-two year old man who had lived part of his life in an *hogar*, or home run by the Franciscan brothers, also lived and volunteered at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*.

³⁰ Hermano Miguel had invited me to *la costa* (as the Colombian coastal area is colloquially called) for the Holy Week celebrations during the first week of April 2007. Hermano Miguel, his nephew, Carlos, Deibid and Rubén (two other volunteers), and myself all travelled to a rural area in the coastal department of Córdoba to visit his family and friends.

³¹ The term “Republican” refers to Colombia’s nation-building period post-independence (declared in 1810), but some architects refer to this architecture as neo-classical, making reference to formal styles that were adopted from Spain in an attempt to create a new and uniquely “Colombian” architectural style.

Though the house where *Comedor María es Mi Madre* is located is approximately one hundred fifty years old and has endured earthquakes, riots, a host of residents, and renovations, it still bears many of the tell-tale signs of its original architecture and is stylistically similar to many of the other homes on the street. If one is facing the house from the perspective of the street, one will notice that the façade of the house is characteristic of a Republican era home with colonial influences (Zuloaga Lozada 2002).³² The thick walls of the house are smooth and have little decoration, and the door of the house is located at one end of the façade. In 2007, the door of *Comedor María es Mi Madre* was made from metal and was painted bright blue, but the original *portón*, or door, was most probably made with thick pieces of wood, covered in leather, and framed by decorated wood. This type of facade is usually found on houses located on *carreras*, that is, on streets that run in a north/south direction across the city. Most of the architecture during the 19th century was relatively modest, and single level homes were the most common kinds of domestic structures.

³² Zuloaga (2002) divides the facades of Republican era houses into three categories. Houses such as the one where *Comedor María es Mi Madre* was located were usually the simplest of the three in terms of decoration. Their doors are located at one extreme of the façade, which correlates to the location of the inner courtyard (43).



Figure 3: *Comedor María es Mi Madre* (taken by the author in June 2007).

True to its Republican architecture, the windows that face west toward the street are not sealed with glass. Instead, shutter doors that open inward allow for the entry of light into the house (cf. Ortiz Gaitán 2005). From the outside, the windows are decorated with wrought iron, which also serve as a protective mechanism. The house is also separated from the street with thick walls, while the “modern” thick, blue metal door offers entry into and exit from the house on to *carrera* 4.

Most of the houses in this neighborhood (as well as in the surrounding neighborhoods of Las Cruces, Santa Bárbara, Lourdes, among others) have been classified as *estrato* 1 or 2 given their age and construction, as well as the high rate of poverty that is localized in these zones. The house wherein the *comedor* is located is classified as *estrato* 2, in contrast to the *estrato* 4 *conjunto residencial*, the large

apartment complex located directly across the street that houses approximately one hundred middle class and professional Bogotanos and their families. This *conjunto*, which takes up an entire city block, is one of three newer apartment complexes of the same size on this street. Though these buildings are across the street from some of the poorest areas of the city, these complexes, built approximately ten years ago, make up an entirely new neighborhood called Nueva Santafe, or New Santafe. Their brick construction makes them architecturally distinct from the Republican and colonial style structures of the neighborhoods that surround them, and their name positions them as a beacon of “newness” for the “recuperation” of Bogotá’s city center. Their construction and design complements the many other apartment complexes and high-rises that are prevalent in middle class and wealthy neighborhoods of the western and northern parts of the city.

Though the entrance to this apartment complex is less than thirty feet away from the front door of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, the homes that each reveal are quite distinct from each other. While the apartment complex has a *celador*, or guard that lets people in (and keeps “undesirables” out) of the complex, the blue, metal door of *Comedor María es Mi Madre* is open for most of the day, with a line of patrons extended alongside the building’s façade. Though I did not have the opportunity to enter and explore the apartment complex, I always wondered how these “well-housed” Bogotanos felt about the view from their *estrato 4* windows, as half of the apartments in the complex faced the *abuelitos* and other patrons who were lined up along the street waiting for their food everyday. That view of the line from these apartments marked sharp architectural and socioeconomic distinctions that were divided only by the traffic of a narrow street.

These distinctions, however, were transgressed on a daily basis, as many patrons of the *comedor* often sat or slept on the grass that surrounded the apartment complex while they waited for their meals.

Upon entering *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, one walks through a short hallway and into the space that was used as the public dining area for local elders. This space, which was originally an open-air patio or courtyard, housed twenty plastic tables, and one hundred chairs for the *comedor*'s lunch patrons. The floor of the courtyard was carpeted with red *baldosa*, or tiles made from clay. In 2007, the courtyard was no longer open to the elements, and was instead covered with clear and white plastic tiles. On afternoons when the sun decided to emerge from the thick clouds that usually blanketed the sky at this elevation, the sharp, tropical rays of the sun beamed into the courtyard and had the potential to cause sunburns to exposed skin.

Courtyards such as these were prominent between 1830-1935 and were typical of Republican and some colonial architecture. Houses sometimes had two or three indoor courtyards and often housed small gardens where residents grew potatoes, onions, and maize to feed those living inside the house. Isaac Holton, a north American naturalist and theologian who travelled throughout Colombia for about two and a half years in the 1850s, offers vivid descriptions of the patios of the houses in which he stayed. He notes that in addition to gardens, small trees, such as fig, plum, and papaya, were commonly planted inside these courtyards and that small animals such as goats also lived inside houses (Holton 1857: 140). Renowned Colombian architect Alfonso Ernesto Ortíz Gaitán (2005) further notes that because Bogotá had few parks and public spaces during the 19th

century, houses were often enclosed entities, where everything one needed was contained inside the house.

In 2007, however, no such gardens existed inside *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. Instead, most of the rooms of the house were used to store the hundreds of kilograms of non-perishable and perishable food that had been purchased or donated to the *comedor* in order to prepare the mammoth sized meals that would feed the patrons on a daily basis. However, to better understand how space was used inside the house, it is necessary for me to continue to offer the reader a walking tour of the geography of the house.

When a visitor entered *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, one passed through a hallway, which led the visitor directly into the house's main courtyard. If one stopped and made a right turn while in this interior hallway, one would enter through a door that led the visitor into a room that was sometimes used as a storage facility, an office, Dr. Fercho's medical consultation room, as well as a space where I sometimes conducted interviews. Connected to the room was another space that was used as a pharmacy, that is, it stored hundreds of medications that were donated from a *banco de medicamentos*, or pharmaceutical "bank" that offered various social service organizations in Bogotá access to surplus and expired (but still usable) medications.

If we return to the courtyard from the perspective of the hallway and walked past the plastic tables, the visitor would come across a thick marble counter that divided the dining area from the kitchen on the left hand side, and a doorway that led into the "residential" portion of the dining house on the right. Inside the kitchen, Señora Myrian, the *comedor's* only paid employee, prepared breakfast, lunch, and dinner for the patrons from Monday through Friday. Señora Myrian usually arrived at the *comedor* between six

and six-thirty in the morning to begin fixing the breakfast meal and to start prepping for the day's *almuerzo*. There was a short flight of wooden stairs in the kitchen that led into a small room with a freezer on one side, and a space to store food products on the other. A small ladder in the room also provided access to a crawl space that was also used to store food products.

The residential portion of the dining house consisted of the kitchen area I have just described, four small bedrooms, a living room, dining area, an area for prayer and reflection, laundry room, and two bathrooms. Hermano Miguel's bedroom was located directly to the right upon entering the hallway through the door that divided the "public" part of the house from the "residential" area. This "private" area was quite protected, as only those who had been given permission were able to cross the boundaries that led into these living spaces. Señora María *la bandida* (María the bandit, as she was known), a round and quick witted woman in her seventies, spent most of her Tuesday mornings ironing the *hermanos'* clothes for a few *pesitos* and special snacks in between meals. Carlitos, a younger patron, was paid to sweep and mop the living areas of the residence, while Señora Myrian *la chiquita*³³ chopped up vegetables for the *almuerzo* in a back room.

However, if the visitor continued through the short hallway, she or he would enter the dining room where Hermano Miguel and I sat drinking orange juice while discussing the *malokas* found in Vaupés and the tables of the *costeño* family. This dining area was also once an open-air patio, and in 2007, it too was covered with clear and white plastic tiles that were arranged to create a roof that still allowed for the sun's light to beam into

³³ The descriptor *la chiquita*, or "the small one," was given to another woman named Myrian in order to differentiate her from the woman who cooks the meals at the comedor, also Myrian. Myrian *la chiquita* was diminutive in size, hence the nickname.

the room in a controlled way. There were five doors located around the courtyard, which led to two separate bedrooms, a bathroom, a laundry room that also served as storage space for fruits and vegetables (and which led into to another small bathroom), and a living room.

Returning to the public *comedor*, the visitor would notice that all of the walls were painted in bright colors and that the room was decorated with hanging ferns and several religious images, including a four-foot statue of *María Auxiliadora* (Our Lady Help of Christians), where Mary is holding the infant Jesus in her left arm. The money for this particular statue was donated by a women's group from *el norte*, a geographic idiom for the wealthier neighborhoods in the northern areas of the capital.

The wall on the south side of the courtyard was adorned with a mural of Saint Francis of Assisi, who was painted wearing the characteristic robe and cowl that also clothed the members of the *Fraternidad of the Divina Providencia*. In the mural, Saint Francis of Assisi was depicted amidst a lush landscaped flanked by trees, a range of flowers, and a river. In this profile depiction of Francis of Assisi, the saint was tending to a small animal resembling a deer.

There were three doors on the western wall of the dining area, both of which were always locked. One of these opened into the *comedor's despensa*, or pantry, where non-perishable foods were stored. The lock ensured that only those authorized had access to the food, as thefts were often a problem at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. The second door provided access to a bathroom that had a toilet and a sink. Patrons were rarely allowed to use this bathroom, because according to Hermano Miguel and others, the dining house patrons had not been careful about cleaning after themselves upon being

given access to the bathroom. The third door led into a room with a large sink, where patrons who also volunteered at the *comedor* assisted Señora Myrian in washing the dishes used during meals.

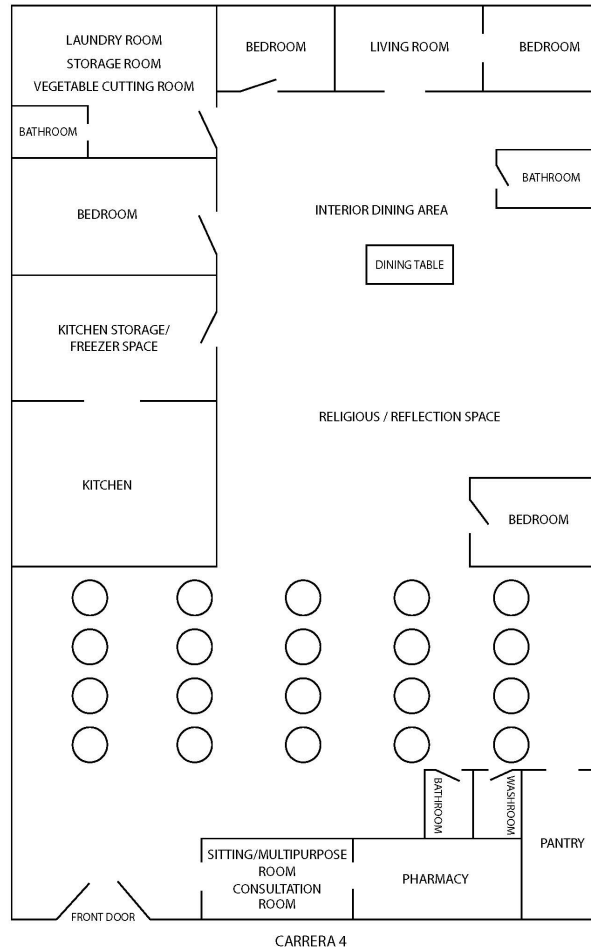


Figure 4: Layout of the tables and rooms of the *comedor* and the interior residence

I spoke with Fercho about the goals and history of the *comedor* while sitting at a bustling Juan Valdéz Café in a wealthy, northern neighborhood of the capital during a return trip to Bogotá in August 2008. Fercho told me that the house where *Comedor María es Mi Madre* was located was originally donated to the *Fraternidad de la Divina Providencia* by a group of *monjitas de la caridad*, or religious sisters who focused their

energies on charity projects for the poor of the neighborhood. Religious orders, such as the *Hermanitas de los Pobres*, or the Sisters of the Poor, have worked in the central neighborhoods of the capital for over one hundred years and have historically assisted the local population by creating *hogares* and spaces of care that appear similar to the kinds of work done by *comedores* in the present.

According to Fercho, during the 1980s, the neighborhoods of Belén, Santa Bárbara and Las Cruces become *barrios difíciles*, that is, these neighborhoods became increasingly violent and generally unsafe for residents and visitors. During this time, the *monjitas* decided that they could no longer live in and care for the house given the difficulties of the neighborhood. In an effort to ensure that the house went to good use, they decided to donate it to Hermano Ray. Fercho told me that when Ray Schambach³⁴ received the house in 1991 he determined that the best way to use the space was to designate it as a place where *viejitos de la calle*, “or old persons of the street” could eat an *almuerzo*.

Fercho told me that shortly after the house was donated to the community, several people began to gather at the headquarters of the *Fraternidad de la Divina Providencia* in Usaquéen to prepare sandwiches made from sliced bread, cheese, ham or chicken and tomato. Everyday, the brothers and volunteers would make a different type of sandwich and then at approximately 10:30am, Fercho and the *hermanos* would make their way to *barrio* Belén on the winding Avenida Circunvalar, the road embedded into the Andean slopes that cushion the city from north to south. Initially, Fercho and others would prepare about one hundred and twenty sandwiches for the *abuelitos* of the neighborhood.

³⁴ It is important to note that I never had the opportunity to speak to Ray Schambach directly. I made several attempts to connect with him through his secretary, but each time I was told that he was not available or travelling.

After several weeks of preparing and giving away sandwiches, Fercho told me that he began to notice that these sandwiches did not seem like an appropriate kind of food for the elders.

“We began to see that the *viejitos* were not happy with a sandwich. A sandwich is a light meal that is very much of this generation, don’t you think? It is a food of a different generation. A sandwich takes away hunger in any generation, but the sensation of well-being and plenty, that is something that a sandwich couldn’t provide,” Fercho told me. Fercho and the *hermanos* thus decided that they would make soup, a more common and local kind of food, and distribute it to the elders of the neighborhood.

“We started right there, where the *comedor* is now. There wasn’t a roof, it was uncovered,” Fercho told me, referring to the courtyard that in 2007 served as the public dining area. “We would build a fire and make the soup there with a basket of vegetables and some *menudencias*³⁵ we brought from Usaquén,” he added. Fercho also told me that during that time, the dining house was not equipped with a kitchen.

Shortly after the shift from sandwiches to soup, Fercho and others realized that even soup was not a suitable meal for the elderly persons that went to the *comedor* everyday. “We could tell that the *viejitos* weren’t satisfied with the soup because they ate a lot and weren’t receiving enough food. Usually, one receives a *sopa* and then a *seco*; the *seco* could be a simple plate of rice and that can physiologically and sociologically...that can leave one satisfied. But if you only drink soup you might feel *pobre*, like, ‘this is too *pobre*, just soup.’”

³⁵ *Menudencias* refer to the feet, neck, and other inexpensive and marginal parts of chickens that are used to flavor soups, sauces, and other dishes.

Fercho's words here are significant because he notes that while sandwiches and soup might satiate the pangs of hunger, "hunger" extends far beyond the physiological need for food. While a sandwich might be a food of a "different generation," or a food that has historically not been a part of Colombian cuisine, soup (a very typical food), on the other hand, might be seen as an *incomplete* meal given that it wasn't accompanied by a *seco*. Even the least expensive *almuerzos* in Bogotá were typically composed of a *sopa* (soup) and a *seco* (the "dry" part of the meal, such as a plate of rice). By offering the patrons *sopa* without the *seco*, Fercho and the brothers realized that were only giving them a partial meal – a meal that was socially incomplete – and thus, the elders were left still feeling hungry for more. Moreover, this meal might be classified as *pobre*, or poor, because it lacked important components.

Food may also be classified as *pobre* when meals do not meet certain expectations of quality. For example, when my seventy-seven year old uncle, who also lives in Bogotá, was unsatisfied with a hearty bowl of soup that was accompanied by a plate of rice, he would often state that it was *pobre*. He frequently classified his *almuerzo* as *pobre* when it didn't contain an appropriate piece of meat, or was composed of chicken instead of red meat (as chicken had become an everyday food in his household due to the rising cost of beef), or if the meat itself was of a lower quality or had a chewy consistency. For my uncle, eating foods that he felt were *pobre*, made him feel *pobre* and unsatisfied with both his meal and his social situation.

"Satisfaction," as Fercho noted, is connected to feelings of well being where multiple kinds of hungers are satiated, rather than simply eating something so that one's belly might be full. While Fercho and the *hermanos* aimed to offer the elders of the

neighborhood nutrition, they also wanted to privilege the social aspects of the meal that delivered a sense of well being and belonging by serving portions and courses that were locally traditional, such as serving both a *sopa* and *seco* (a topic I develop in chapter five).

Commensality and Spirituality



Figure 5: Image of a *menú del día*.

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, the streets of Bogotá are lined with a diverse array of restaurants. In the central areas of the capital, one can find highly rated fine dining restaurants, *comida casera* (home-style restaurants), Argentine style steakhouses, vegetarian cuisine, restaurants focusing on coastal flavors, places where one can purchase a very simple *almuerzo*³⁶ (or lunch) for 1,000 pesos (approximately fifty-five cents USD in 2007), and *chuzos* (tiny, “hole in the wall” restaurants) where one can

³⁶ An *almuerzo* refers to the lunch meal in most parts of Colombia. However, in other parts of Latin America, such as in México, the word *almuerzo* also refers to a breakfast meal, while *comida* is used to describe the lunch meal (usually, the largest meal of the day).

find inexpensive, yet filling snacks, such as *arepas* (corn cakes) filled with cheese, meats, and vegetables.

The colonial center of the capital has recently experienced what some have called a “cultural resurgence.” A group of neighborhoods that were known for high levels of violence and poverty in the 1980s and 1990s, and that scared many of Bogotá’s citizens from visiting after dark (or even during daylight hours), in 2007 hosted a variety of cafes where patrons could drink coffee and hot, spiced wine while sitting on pillows in front of one hundred and fifty year old fireplaces. Many of these establishments have been carved out of colonial and Republican style structures, often preserving some of the original details and architecture of these historic buildings. In these instances, waiters and patrons must make their way through tiny doors, narrow staircases and hallways to reach tables. Many other restaurants have also opened up in newer structures, such as in the ground floors of newly built red-brick apartment buildings that have become the structural symbol of the modern capital.

The *menú del día* above is typical of local restaurants. Most restaurants serve a *menú del día*, that is, a set of daily dishes that are prepared in advance from which the diner can choose. This *menú* is often visible at the entrance of a restaurant to entice potential diners, or may be recited by a waitress or waiter once a patron sits down to eat. In less expensive restaurants, this type of meal is known as a *corrientazo*,³⁷ and usually consists of a *sopa* (soup) and a main dish known as a *seco* (or the “dry” part of the meal), and can cost between 3,000 *pesos* to about 6,000 *pesos* (approximately \$1.50-3.00 USD in 2007). The *seco* most often consists of a protein such as chicken or beef which is

³⁷ Something that is *corriente* is ordinary, or “everyday.”

sometimes cooked *a la plancha* (pan grilled), rice, fried plantains or yucca, potato, a tiny salad, a portion of garbanzo or lentils, and sometimes another vegetable option such as a *torta de zanahoria*, or a carrot torte. To drink, the restaurant might offer a *limonada* or *naranjada*, beverages which are prepared with the blended juice and the rind of fresh limes and oranges (respectively), which are then mixed with water and sweetened with sugar. Fruit juices such as *jugo de mora* (blackberry), *lulo* (an acidic tropical fruit found only in Colombia and Ecuador), *maracuyá* (passion fruit) *curúba* (banana passion fruit) or *tomate de árbol* (tree tomato) or a glass of Coca-Cola poured from a two liter bottle, might also serve as a refreshment for the meal. Depending on the price of the *menú*, the food might include a dessert, which could consist of anything from a mint candy to a puree made from fresh fruit and sweetened with sugar or honey.

Like many of these restaurants, *comedores* funded by the local state and other privately run communal dining facilities such as *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, also served a *menú del día*, that is, a preset “menu of the day.” The *comedores* that formed part of the Bogotá Without Hunger campaign each wrote out the names of the dishes that would be served (as well as the total grams per serving of each) on a white board or chalkboard, and made sure that this *menú* was visible to the patrons as they entered the dining facility. At *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, however, no such system existed, and patrons usually only became aware of the meal being prepared when the smells of cooking food reached the noses of those in line. Though I would often assist in preparing the meal by helping cut up onions or peel hard-boiled eggs (I once peeled over one-hundred hard boiled eggs and ended up with many cuts on my fingers from the edges of

their hard shells), I would also spend time with the patrons who were waiting in line, often giving them details regarding the meal they were about to consume.

Unlike the restaurants where patrons can personalize their meal by choosing their dishes from the available *menu del día*, the *comedores* run by the local state and those run by private organizations, such as *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, did not offer such options. When patron walked into the dining area at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, four bowls of *sopa* and four plates of *seco* were already placed on the twenty white, plastic tables, alongside four large spoons, and four freshly prepared juices.



Figure 6: Food awaiting to be consumed (photograph taken by the author in January, 2007 at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*).

Every morning, approximately sixty persons, most of them older adults, line up alongside the front door of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. Patrons usually began to arrive around six am and waited until 7:30 am for the breakfast meal. When I first arrived at the *comedor* to conduct my fieldwork in August 2006, Hermano Miguel would stand outside the front door wearing his grey Franciscan robe and cowl and holding a pitcher of hot

colada, a milkshake that was made from a mixture of *Bienestarina* (a powdered food product that is made from non-fat powdered milk, soy proteins, cereals, maize and wheat) and *agua de panela* (a beverage made from *panela*, the hardened molasses that is the result of the first pressing of sugarcane, and hot water). Hermano Miguel would then pour the drink into the waiting cups of those standing outside the door of the *comedor*.

Because many of the patrons did not have access to running water inside their homes, some of the cups they used to drink their *colada* were visibly dirty, as they did not always have the opportunity to wash them after each use. Hermano Miguel would then give each patron a bread roll from a bag filled with bread that had most likely been donated from a local bakery, or Bogotá's Food Bank, where most of the food that was prepared inside kitchen of the *comedor* was acquired.

The way breakfast was served changed in October 2006 when Hermano Miguel decided that the breakfast needed to be offered to the patrons in a more "civilized" manner. Instead of serving a cup of *colada* and a piece of bread on the street, Hermano Miguel wanted the patrons to eat at a table in the way any other *Bogotano* might eat their breakfast. From that point on, approximately fifty or so *viejitos* lined up outside of the *comedor* beginning at about 6:30 am and waited to be led into the house at around 7:30 am for their breakfast meal. The meal usually consisted of hot chocolate and a piece of bread, *caldo de costilla* (a breakfast broth made with beef rib meat, potato, and a sprinkle of chopped cilantro), a version of *changua* (a soup made from equal parts milk and water, eggs that cooked in the hot liquid, garnished with cilantro and green onions, and served with a *caladito*, or hardened bread on the side). The breakfast meal was usually over by 8

am, and shortly thereafter, the patrons would again line up alongside the yellow façade of the house for their next meal.

The numbers of those waiting for the lunch meal would usually increase to about ninety persons by 11:30 am, when the patrons were ushered into the dining house for their *almuerzito*. In Bogotá, the *almuerzo* is the main meal of the day, and is usually heartier than the *cena*, or dinner, which is usually made up of leftovers from the *almuerzo*, or an *arepa* accompanied by a beverage. At approximately 11 am, Señora Myrian and Hermano Roosevelt would begin the process of serving up eighty bowls of soup, and plates of *seco*, which often consisted of rice, turkey, and salad (or whatever other dish Señora Myrian had prepared for that day). Señora Myrian and Hermano Miguel would leave the served food on the counter that separated the kitchen from the dining area, and I, or a trusted patron, would place four bowls, four plates, and four cups full of juice along with spoons at each of the tables. Sometimes, an orange, banana, or another fruit would take the place of the *jugo* if there wasn't enough fruit or juice mix to prepare the juice, or if fruits were in abundance and in danger of spoiling.

Once the *seco*, *sopa* and *jugo* were served at every table, Hermano Roosevelt and Rubén would usher the diners into the *comedor*. The rules for entering the *comedor* and sitting at the lunch tables were as follows: the women, who were usually lined up on the left hand side of the house (if looking at the façade of the *comedor* from the perspective of the street), entered first and were asked to take a seat at the furthest table toward the left, next to the kitchen. Some of the chairs were a tight squeeze and the person sitting closest to the wall and kitchen counter usually had a difficult time making their way to their seat. Some patrons often tried to avoid sitting in the harder to reach chairs and

instead found a seat at a different location, a transgression that rarely went unnoticed. The men, whose numbers exceeded the number of women patrons and who waited in line on the right side of the door (again, from the perspective of the street), entered second. Persons who were elderly or “older” or who appeared to have a disability, were always given priority over those patrons that looked to be “younger” and more able-bodied.

“No, don’t sit there. Señora... Señora! You must sit over here. Please maintain the order!” Rubén yelled one morning in February 2007 when a woman bypassed her place in the line and instead sat at a chair of her choosing. On another occasion, two men decided to sit at a middle table that didn’t correspond to their place in the line. Rubén noticed that the two men had disobeyed the rules of the house, and exclaimed, “Please do me the favor of sitting by the corner!” The two men eyed the plates in front of them, and hesitantly got up and made their way to a corner table. They proceeded to look at the plates that corresponded to their new seats, and quickly moved back to the middle table attempting to escape Rubén’s field of vision. As I saw them move from seat to seat, I realized that their desire to sit at this particular table was connected to the amount of food on the plates. The plates on the middle table appeared to be overflowing with food and at least two chicken wings were visible poking out of the lentil stew.

Rubén again noticed that the two men had not followed his directions and once again yelled, “I’ve already asked you to sit over there!” The men again stood up and sluggishly walked over to the corner table. On that particular day, two younger patrons Carolina (a woman in her late thirties or early forties) and Beatriz (a street vendor who sold cigarettes, gum, and other items from a box that was connected to a chord she hung around her neck) had helped place the *jugos*, *sopas*, and *secos* on to the tables. The ever

observant Carolina quietly stood up from her seat near the door, picked up the plates from the empty middle table, and handed them to the men so they could enjoy the chicken wings they had been eyeing. Carolina then took the plates from the corner table, stealthily replacing the ones she had removed from the middle table. Fortunately for Carolina, Rubén did not notice the switch as such actions sometimes resulted in being asked to leave the *comedor*, or being banned from entering for several days.

On some days, especially on days when other *comedores* in the neighborhood were closed, more than one hundred people lined up outside of the *comedor* to receive lunch. Since only one hundred people could sit and eat inside the public dining room at a time, those that had not been offered a place in the first *tanda*, or shift, had to wait for those already inside to finish their meal. The plates used for the first round of lunches were quickly rinsed with water (or not), and Señora Myrian would serve up whatever was left in the pots on to the plates so that those waiting outside could also eat. The line of patrons, however, was also sometimes incredibly short, an occurrence that corresponded to Thursdays, the only day *Comedor María es Mi Madre* charged the patrons 200 *pesos* (approximately 11 cents USD in 2007) for their meals.

Many of the individuals who arrived late for the *almuerzo* or who were forced to wait at the end of the line, were relatively young, and some were as young as twenty years old. Though Hermano Miguel described *Comedor María es Mi Madre* as a *comedor* for *abuelitos habitantes de calle*, that is a *comedor* for elderly persons who were “inhabitants of the street,” approximately 35% of the patrons were younger than fifty years old (and most of these younger individuals were in their late twenties and early thirties).

Prior to his arrival in Bogotá to administer *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, Hermano Miguel had been preceded by a different Franciscan brother, Hermano Ramón, who had lived in and organized the *comedor* for several years. Hermano Ramón only allowed *abuelitos*, or persons that could be categorized as elders, into the dining house to receive an *almuerzo*. However, after Hermano Miguel arrived to replace Hermano Ramón, he unofficially widened the scope of the *comedor*, telling me that, “everyone gets hungry, not just *viejitos*.”

As I will show in chapter four, Hermano Miguel would spend approximately six to eight thousand *pesos* (approximately three to four hundred USD) every week acquiring food for the *comedor* at the Food Bank of the Archdiocese of Bogotá. The cost of the foods obtained from the food bank exceeded that which was allocated for the *comedor* every month by the Franciscan order. From what Hermano Miguel told me, it seemed that Hermano Ray, as Ray Schambach was called by most, was constantly worried about having to close the *comedor* due to the fact that he could not afford the cost of maintaining the house and the services it provided. Regardless, the *comedor* was able to continue operating due to a range of donations from local businesses, friends of Hermano Miguel’s, church groups, as well as from individuals who walked into the *comedor* after seeing the line of *abuelitos* and decided to contribute. These donations often came in the form of money, appliances, and of course, food.

While the *abuelitos* did indeed have hunger and old age as points of connection among them, it is important to take into account that many did not have much else in common, and in fact, had strikingly different personal histories, interests, and geographic, cultural, and ethnic origins. It is thus essential to note that while the organizers of the

comedor aimed to create a family-like atmosphere inside the dining house, the *comedor* was very much also a space of collision. The primary reason individuals came to the *comedor* on a daily basis was due to their lack of access to nourishment. According to the rules of the dining house, food was not to be taken from the premises. Because of this, individuals from diverse walks of life were forced to eat their meals alongside potential strangers, not friends, family, or persons of their own choosing. Though close friendships among patrons did develop among some, and though friends and neighbors often came to the *comedor* together, patrons weren't always assured that they would be able to sit next to a friend or relative. In fact, it was not uncommon for individuals to partake of their meal while seated alongside long-time enemies. Because of this forced sociality, the *comedor* also frequently became a space of violence and disconnection.

I witnessed many collisions between patrons of the dining house and between patrons and organizers. It was not uncommon for weapons such as knives to be brandished or appear in an instant, or for harsh words to be flung across the room or while waiting in line. It also was not uncommon for the organizers of the dining house to speak to patrons and each other in harsh or aggressive language, and violence against (and among) patrons was an almost daily occurrence. One particularly difficult incident involved a woman of about fifty years old, and one of the *comedor* organizers. The woman arrived late to the lunch meal and began to verbally assault the organizers, stating that she wanted her meal served to her instantly. She was immediately asked to leave. However, when the woman refused to move, a scuffle ensued. The woman left the *comedor* with a purple eye after having been punched in the face by one of the organizers of the dining house.

Patrons of the dining house also sometimes arrived with visible wounds from altercations they had had on the street during the night. Sometimes the other person involved in the altercation was also a patron of the dining house, and both individuals would have to continue to partake of their meals with someone who had committed violence against them in close proximity.

Silverware, however, was often at the center of arguments and accusations given that it often went missing. The *comedor* offered the patrons spoons with which to eat their meals, rather than forks and knives. This was done to prevent the loss of silverware as one missing spoon was viewed as better than a missing spoon, knife, and fork. Spoons also prevented the use of forks and knives as weapons. Several times, patrons of the *comedor* who had become well trusted by the organizers would take it upon themselves to ensure that items such as silverware were not taken. During my first few days at *Comedor María es Mi Madre* in August 2006, *Chilindrina* approached Marlene, a woman who was in her fifties and who did indeed spend her nights sleeping on the street, and told her, “I am going to have to conduct a *requisa*.”³⁸ Marlene more than obliged and pulled up her shirt exposing her white bra. Annoyed at the fact that Marlene had pulled her shirt up quite high, *Chilindrina* told her that there was no need to expose herself, and began to pat Marlene down searching for any dish or spoon that may have disappeared into her clothing. *Chilindrina* did not find anything, but it was very evident that missing dishware was always a big deal, and that preventative measures were being taken to make sure that utensils and other things did not disappear.

³⁸ A *requisa* in this context refers to a search.

Yet, as I have noted, deep friendships also developed among patrons, which most always extended beyond the boundaries of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. For example, Señora Gladys, a vibrant and jovial *costeña* in her seventies who always carried a guitar and entered the *comedor* by vocally declaring her arrival, and Señora Berta, a *costeña* also in her seventies who grew up in Medellín, shared meals both at the *comedor* and inside their respective *piezitas*. They usually arrived to the *comedor* together, but when they didn't, they immediately made an effort to locate each other so as to have the opportunity to sit at the same table. Pachito, a *paisa*³⁹ in his seventies who had lived in the *Cartucho* for many years, also usually arrived with Señor Ruiz, an elder who was blind and was originally from Ibagué, a medium sized city in the department of Tolima, approximately ninety miles from Bogotá.⁴⁰ Pachito would usually arrive at the *comedor* holding Señor Ruiz's hand, and would carefully usher him into the dining area, pull up a chair for his friend, and then sit alongside him. On Wednesday afternoons, Pachito would lead Señor Ruiz by the hand to the *Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de Belén* so that he too might have the opportunity to partake of the snack of hot chocolate and bread.

Many patrons were also very protective of Hermano Miguel. Señora María *la bandida*, the woman who ironed the *hermanos* clothing on Tuesday mornings, and who like Pachito had lived in the *Cartucho* for many years, would sharply defend Hermano Miguel whenever anyone spoke ill of him or his efforts, sometimes even threatening

³⁹ The term *paisa* refers to a cultural region of the country, which includes the departments of Antioquia, Risaralda, Caldas, and Quindío. The inhabitants of the present day department of Antioquia, who are known as *paisas*, have historically and colloquially been spoken of as a “conservative,” “white,” “European,” “progressive,” and colonizing race. The dominant narrative of Antioquia and other *paisas* highlights a history of European pioneers who “civilized” the land and its inhabitants through “internal colonization” and incorporated Colombia into the international market economy through the growing and marketing of coffee. Like Señora Berta, Pachito also grew up in Medellín.

⁴⁰ Pachito always referred to Señor Ruiz as my *paisano*, or countryman, because we shared the same last name and because my father was also born in Ibagué.

people with her cane. She and many other patrons referred to him by using the honorific *Padre* or Father, even though he was not ordained as a priest.

Un pequeño cielo / a small heaven

Creating satisfaction and satiating different kinds of hunger was also a central goal for Hermano Miguel upon his arrival to *Comedor María es Mi Madre* in April 2006. Prior to being sent to Bogotá to oversee the activities of the *comedor*, Hermano Miguel had spent seven years organizing social programs and offering religious counsel to indigenous communities in and around Mitú, the capital of the department of Vaupés.⁴¹

When Hermano Miguel arrived to *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, he arrived to a dining house that only served food once a day at lunchtime. The walls of the courtyard where the patrons ate their meals were painted blue and white and had very little decoration except for a six by two foot image that was painted on to the southern wall of the space. Three long tables were positioned in the center of the dining area, and small stools were organized around each of these tables. The tables each had a blue and white plastic checkered protective covering to make cleaning them easier. Hermano Miguel and others told me that during that time, the door of the *comedor* remained closed throughout the day (except during mealtimes), so that it was evident that the *comedor* was just that, a *comedor*, and not a house that welcomed its patrons.

⁴¹ The *Hermanos de la Divina Providencia* were assigned to various locations throughout the country and often stayed for one to three years at the same location. Hermano Miguel, however, had spent seven years in Mitú, a length of time that was uncommon. In 2007, Hermano Miguel was unsure as to how long he would be at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, though he speculated that he would probably be reassigned within two years of his arrival. Though he aimed to make many changes to the *comedor*, he was concerned that many of these would not be carried through by the *hermanos* that would take his place once he was reassigned. From what I was told, the *hermanos* were shuffled around every two or so years so that they would be *bien preparados*, that is, would be trained and experienced to carry out the goals of the order in a range of arenas.

According to Hermano Miguel, Hermano Ramón, the *comedor's* previous administrator, wanted to make poverty visible as he operated under the assumption that a decorated *comedor* might communicate to potential donors that the *comedor* was not in need of donations. Hermano Miguel described the state of the dining house to me by saying, “It was a poor house for poor people.”



Figure 7: Comedor María es Mi Madre prior to Hermano Miguel’s arrival.

Hermano Miguel’s aim, however, was to create a restaurant type environment where all persons were welcomed and treated as clients. Simultaneously, Hermano Miguel endeavored to transform the *comedor* into a “home,” where older adults might feel safe and cared for and were always ensured a hot plate of food. In an interview held inside the *comedor* in December 2006, Hermano Miguel told me that initially, the dining house only aimed to offer people assistance for their immediate needs by killing hunger

(*matando el hambre*) through a plate of food. Much like Fercho, Hermano Miguel recognized this goal as inefficient. “Our goal,” he told me, “is to help them recuperate their human dignity, which can’t be offered with a plate of food. It is a continuous job. We want to remove the label of *pobrecito*⁴² from people.”

Hermano Miguel’s vision for the *comedor* aimed to transform it into a place that might offer various kinds of assistance, including psychological counseling, occupational therapy, and literacy classes. At various times during my fieldwork, he was able to bring professionals to attend to the patrons. At one point, dentists fitted several people with dentures, as many patrons had not had previous access to dental care. On another day, two women hairdressers, one of whom was related to Señora Myrian, cut and styled the hair of every person who desired a haircut. On the same day, Hermano Miguel gave each of the patrons new clothes with donations he had received from various clothing stores. On another occasion, a volunteer psychologist had consultations with individuals in the small room to the right of the entrance to the dining house.

“Hunger,” Hermano Miguel told me, “goes far beyond our biological need for food. We need food, yes, but my vision – and perhaps it is *una visión pendeja*⁴³ – is to create a holistic *comedor* – a holistic *comedor* covers all kinds of hunger – hunger for health, hunger for recreation, intellectual hunger, a hunger for a roof. All of this is hunger.”

⁴² While the term *pobrecito* may connote poverty in Spanish, the term is more similar to the expression “poor little thing” in English. Someone who is viewed as a *pobrecito* is someone who elicits pity or sympathy.

⁴³ While the word *pendeja/pendejo* is a curse word in other Latin American contexts (particularly in México), *pendeja/pendejo* might be equivalent to the word “silly” or “dumb” in Colombian Spanish. Thus, Hermano Miguel’s use of the words *una visión pendeja* might be translated as “a silly vision.”

Though Hermano Miguel did not explicitly use the word “spiritual” to describe the various forms of hunger that he believed existed, his emphasis on the different kinds of hunger that extended beyond an individual’s material, nutritional and physical needs (such as a roof over one’s head) points to his goal to feed the spiritual and emotional needs that he feels all persons have and need fulfilled to live a dignified life. This “food” however, often came in the form of material things or practices, that is, through a haircut, new clothing, the organization of the dining tables, and of course, meals.

“This is charity,” Hermano Miguel told me, explaining his vision of the *comedor*, “but *caridad con caridad* (charity with care), not a charity that promotes *asistencialismo*.⁴⁴ Charity is something that should redeem man, not make him poorer, telling him, ‘oh poor things, those poor people,’ but rather, ‘Blessed be the poor!’ as protagonists of their own lives. But not, ‘come here, *pobresito*.’”

Hermano Miguel continued by telling me that he wanted to make the *comedor* into a space of “re-education,” stating, “Our first goal is to make them into persons. Why persons? Because their dignity has been stepped on, has been devalued by a system...the Colombian system has not taken them into account. It’s a government where people are not taken into account, but rather, they are looked upon as things. They have been stepped on, and this is how we get to a place where a human being can be called a *desechable*.⁴⁵ We are trying to create a process of re-education so that they can again be

⁴⁴ Hermano Miguel used the expression *caridad con caridad*, or charity with care, in order to emphasize the love and attention that went into the charity he aimed to offer to the patrons of the *comedor*. Additionally, *asistencialismo* refers to assistance or charity that meets the immediate needs of individuals, but is not long lasting because it does not focus on changing the structures that create these needs in the first place.

⁴⁵ Something that is *desechable* is something that is viable for short-term use, and then thrown away, much like a plastic grocery bag. The term, which reduces persons to things that become trash, is used in everyday discourse to describe persons who people categorize as being “of the street.” I discuss this term and its use more fully in chapters six and seven.

persons, because they are not *desechables*, because they are not things. They are human beings, human beings with all of their rights, and with all of their dignity.”

In addition to responding to the spiritual needs of the patrons through medical attention, clothing, haircuts, literacy classes, religious services, and a range of amenities and services, Hermano Miguel also hoped to transform and “make persons” and assist them in creating a dignified life by transforming the space of the *comedor* into a kind of restaurant. Hermano Miguel often described the taste of the foods and the physical aesthetics of the *comedor* as critical to his goals of creating a sense of belonging for the patrons. Since he arrived at the *comedor*, the *hermano* had placed an emphasis on its décor and organization, and decorated it in such a way so that it would physically resemble a restaurant any resident of Bogotá might frequent. Shortly after his arrival, Hermano Miguel had the long tables switched out for smaller, square tables that sat four individuals. These tables would provide a connected space where patrons might eat and talk, similar to the way a family unit might reconnect after a long day during mealtime inside their homes.

By decorating the dining house much like a restaurant, which included the placement of tablecloths embroidered by several women who participated in what Hermano Miguel called an “occupational therapy” class after the breakfast meal, hanging ferns throughout the dining area, and mounting a television set in the corner of the room, Hermano Miguel also aimed to offer the *abuelitos* the experience of being lunch patrons and citizens, rather than solely constructing them as passive receivers of a free bowl of a soup in an institutionalized setting.



Figure 8: Photograph of *Comedor María es Mi Madre* taken in August 2006, four months after Hermano Miguel's arrival.

However, unlike restaurants throughout the capital, Hermano Miguel did not view *Comedor María es Mi Madre* as a place of business, and did not construct the patrons solely as customers. While recreating the *comedor* into a place that might resemble a restaurant and in striving to prepare “restaurant quality” food, Hermano Miguel aimed to communicate to the patrons that they, like any other Colombian, were entitled to the pleasures and nutrition of good, quality food and a caring, calm environment. Additionally, by offering them silverware, Hermano Miguel made sure that the patrons did not have to eat with their hands or with their *cédulas de ciudadanía* (Colombian identification card), as had been the case in the past.

Moreover, by transforming the materiality of the interior spaces of the house Hermano Miguel also aimed to refashion the *comedor* it into a “home” for the patrons. Though *Comedor María es Mi Madre* served the function of a dining facility, the institution was legally registered as *Hogar María es Mi Madre*, a distinction Hermano Miguel made clear to me during an interview. While the word *comedor* connotes a physical eating space (and may also be translated as “dining furniture” in Spanish), the term has also become increasingly synonymous with communal/public dining facilities, or *comedores comunitarios* due to the work of the Bogotá Without Hunger campaign. The word *hogar*, on the other hand, signals to particular sets of social relationships, and connotes the warmth, safety, and privacy of a home, which often includes living alongside and interacting with family members.

More than a home, however, Hermano Miguel aimed to create what he called a *pequeño cielo*, or a “small heaven” for the patrons. “People say that heaven is the most tranquil and most beautiful place that exists,” Hermano Miguel explained to me when I asked him what he meant by a “small heaven.” “If I live on the streets, in hell, in a place where I can be killed, or stabbed by people, or by the police...how nice that at a specific time, I can come in here and find a place where I am loved; where I am accepted the way I am. For me, that is a small heaven. In his attempt to make the *comedor* into a “home” and “small heaven,” Hermano Miguel introduced a range of activities that transcended the practice of eating. During the course of my fieldwork, holidays such as Mother’s Day, *Día de los Abuelito* (the “Day of the Grandparent,” celebrated on August 28th), *Día del Amor y la Amistad* (a holiday similar to Valentine’s Day that is celebrated in Colombia on September 17), birthdays, Christmas as well as other important religious holidays such

as Ash Wednesday, were celebrated with special meals, music, dancing, and prayer services.

In 2006, the patrons of the dining house were invited to the *comedor* on the evening of December 23 to partake in a traditional Colombian Christmas dinner. Because the *comedor* was going to be closed on December 24th so that the *hermanos* might have the opportunity to spend the holiday with their family and friends, Hermano Miguel celebrated Christmas for the patrons one day early by serving up a decadent meal consisting of stuffed turkey breast, potato salad, wine, and desserts. The organizers and patrons ate their meal inside a *comedor* that was decorated with a brightly lit Christmas tree, a nativity scene Hermano and I had built and that had been named *el niño de la calle* (the Christ child of the street, a topic I return to in chapter seven), as well as Colombian holiday music.

Since under “normal” circumstances it was expected that individuals spend the Christmas holidays with their families and friends, an opportunity that most patrons did not have, Hermano Miguel aimed to recreate this same kind of celebration inside the *comedor* for the patrons. Thus, the celebration of holidays that were oftentimes intertwined with practices of kinship that might usually occur inside family homes, were reproduced inside a home of a different kind among friends, strangers, and even enemies.

If we return to the materiality of the interior space of the *comedor*, we can observe the ways the array of decorations, the organization of tables and chairs, the placement of the Virgin Mary, and the large mural of Saint Francis of Assisi (along with the giving of clothing, the cleaning, cutting, and styling of hair, and of course, the giving of food), were central to tending to the “spiritual” needs of individuals, as well as in “making”

them into dignified persons. For Hermano Miguel, the dignification of persons was connected to offering the patrons a sense of kinship and “home,” as well as giving them access to fresh hair cuts and clothes so they might physically resemble other, perhaps “middle-class” Colombians.

We might look to the work of Krisztina Fehérváry (2002) to consider the ways the transformation of interior spaces can play a role in how individuals work toward constructing themselves as particular kinds of persons, as well how the reorganizing of spaces and materials of the home are intimately intertwined with family, gender, and social relations.

In her article *American Kitchens, Luxury Bathrooms, and the Search for a ‘Normal’ Life in Postsocialist Hungary* (2002), Fehérváry discusses the transformation of interior spaces in attempts to create “sites of autonomy and refuge” in the context of an intrusive state and in relation to a perceived “normal” world outside of the socialist context (372). The author describes modern socialist style buildings and the ways individuals managed to transform their interior spaces to create “‘a relatively pleasant livable and even enjoyable home out of the much maligned world’ of the panel apartment” (387). Citing a state interior décor magazine, *Lakáskultúra*, the author shows how one particular couple removed the bits and pieces of their home that were iconic of socialism’s housing estate patterns, such as an area rug and wallpaper “which spoke of undemanding people” (387), as well as the removal of doors and all of the accouterments of ‘socialist-era’ housing. The magazine highlights these transformations as “demonstrating a sense of self-worth” in creating a livable home (387-388).

According to the author, the socialist style kitchen was widely criticized in that it prevented the simultaneous seating of a family for dinner and was designed under the premise that the kitchen “would eventually lose its importance in the house as the woman shed her role as a housewife and most dining would take place outside of the home” (393). However, when the concept of the “American kitchen,” which had an open design, became popular in the 1980s, individuals “began to hack holes in kitchen walls to ‘open’ them onto the living room, giving the illusion of more space and allowing the mother/wife to watch television or be engaged with the family while she cooked” (392). The author notes that this transformation of the built environment and the material spaces in the interior of the home played a role in how persons constructed themselves as “western” and “normal.” Moreover, the reorganization of interior spaces lent itself to certain kinds of family relations, physically structuring the ways families might sit together during mealtimes.

Though Fehérváry’s ethnographic example is situated within a socialist and post-socialist political-economic context, her arguments about the material transformations of interior spaces might offer us entry into thinking about the role the transformation of *Comedor María es Mi Madre* might play in Hermano Miguel’s aims to transform personhood and reinforce certain kinds of social relations. In changing the physical environment of the *comedor* by painting the walls, including a mural of Saint Francis of Assisi, bringing colorful vegetation into a once stark institutional setting, reorganizing the seating so that four individuals were seated around smaller tables instead of around long tables that fit more than twenty persons, and even the replacement of stools with chairs that might offer back support for aging bodies, Hermano Miguel aimed to replace the

signs of poverty with more “dignified,” comfortable, and aesthetically pleasurable material forms.

By creating such a “dignified” space through materials, Hermano Miguel was defining the standards for a dignified life, and thus communicating the “worth” of those who might partake of a meal inside the *comedor*. In doing so, Hermano Miguel was directly responding to commonly held assumptions that socially and linguistically categorized certain people as “things,” or *desechables*. By making the *comedor* into a proper restaurant and a place that served quality food, Hermano Miguel aimed to provide a certain kind of social positioning to the patrons. While eating at a particular kind of restaurant might position someone as wealthy or as having “high” social capital (e.g. the possibility of being waited upon), eating at *Comedor María es Mi Madre* similarly conferred a form of dignity that was connected to social and economic capital, as well as to a capitalist market from which many had been disenfranchised.

Moreover, by recreating the dining room into a space that might resemble a restaurant yet also espoused the organization that might reproduce a family-like encounter, Hermano Miguel communicated the message that “dignified” people ate their meals in a space that was cared for much like a home, subsuming the often accepted notion that only *desechables* and “poor” people (or *pobrecitos*) “of the street” would eat inside a public *comedor*.

The use of smaller tables that sat four persons were thus also a way by which Hermano Miguel communicated the conditions and relations required for a “dignified” life. Most of the elder patrons of *Comedor María es Mi Madre* lived alone, in *piezitas* or bedroom homes, and did not often have the social and economic support of family

members. “Family,” as I will show in the next chapter, was viewed by the local state, by Hermano Miguel, and by some of the patrons themselves, as one of the key components for living a secure and dignified life for older adults. Several times during my fieldwork, Hermano Miguel, Rubén, as well as Leo, an employee at the Food Bank of the Archdiocese of Bogotá who was also a friend of Hermano Miguel’s and a frequent visitor at the *comedor*, told me that a *comedor se vuelve como una familia*, or “a *comedor* becomes like a family.” By reorganizing the dining space with smaller tables that intimately sat four persons instead of the long communal tables where patrons who may have not known each other and thus might remain anonymous, Hermano Miguel aimed to reproduce practices of a nuclear family and family dining outside of a traditional domestic space.⁴⁶ In doing so, he aimed to recreate an ideal of what family might “look like” inside the dining space of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. Additionally, as I have already noted, while the celebration of holidays, as well as events that might often be recognized among families or close friends, such as birthdays, Mother’s Day, and Christmas, were celebrated to improve the social and psychological well-being of elders, these celebrations also aimed to reproduce expected practices of family inside the *comedor*.

Moreover, while Hermano Ramón had kept the *comedor* looking “poor,” that is, as a functional space where foods were served for people that were also viewed as being “poor” in hopes that visitors would want to respond to that poverty by donating, Hermano Miguel endeavored to make people’s donations visible through the transformation of the space and its patrons. By painting the walls in bright colors and decorating the space with

⁴⁶ It is important to note that long, communal tables may be defined as “family” tables in other contexts.

new tables, fresh plants, and even a modern television set, Hermano Miguel was showing donors that might visit the dining house the material ways their money and other contributions had been put into action.

Receipts, Bornstein (2006) notes in her writing about divergent notions of charity among Hindus in New Delhi, are essential in NGO philanthropy. The author tells us that unlike other forms of gift giving (such as *dān*, a donation wherein the donor cuts off all ties with the gift, and it becomes an “unreciprocated sacrifice” [166])), receipts in the context of NGOs serve as a “moral measure” that is connected to the accounting of funds (171). Though Hermano Miguel was unable to give contributors an official receipt regarding where and how their funds had been used, he did this in other ways – for example by inviting donors to a special *almuerzo* to show them the elders enjoying the meal and have them taste the transformation of their donation. The visibility of change and improvement in the interior space was constructed as a direct result of these contributions, and according to Hermano Miguel, inspired and convinced donors that *Comedor María es Mi Madre* was a worthy receiver of their continued contributions. In this sense, the materiality of the *comedor* and the phenomenological experience of being there served as a kind of “receipt” or proof that the contributions people had made had indeed been utilized to improve the *comedor* in some way, and for the people for whom they were intended. Moreover, by inviting donors to participate and see the *comedor*, Hermano Miguel was experientially reciprocating the their donation – that is, allowing them to experience the product of their gifts.

Conclusion

By suggesting that he did not want the *comedor* to be *asistencialista*, or a form of charity that meets immediate needs but is not long lasting, Hermano Miguel aimed to create a *comedor* that might “redignify” and thus, have a sustainable effect in the lives of its patrons. In viewing the *comedor* as a space of dignity, Hermano Miguel not only aimed to offer classes and services that might transform the lives of the elders, but also endeavored to inculcate a kind of reeducation and conferral of dignity through the very materials that made up the interior spaces.

It is also important to note, however, that while the foods and décor of the *comedor* were in many ways recreating the privileged status of being a patron at a restaurant as well as the sentiments and belonging attributed to the “home,” these places index different registers of value, different kinds of social relationships, as well as dignity. Whereas by turning the *comedor* into a “home” Hermano Miguel aimed to position its patrons within a web of kinship and filial obligations that are reminiscent of notions of care and family, the creation of a “restaurant” type environment offered the patrons the opportunity to eat alongside fellow diners rather than having to wait outside of restaurants for the leftovers at the end of the day. In doing so, Hermano Miguel was inviting the elders to walk through the doorways of the restaurants, to sit and be waited upon as clients, rather than waiting by the door to be given a bag of leftover food because they are poor.

Chapter Three
A Sense of Obligation

Bello, Antioquia, May 16 1991

*Doctores:
Antonio Navarro Woolf
Alvaro Gomez Hurtado
Horacio Serpa Uribe
Bogotá D.E.*

Dignified Members of the National Constituent Assembly:

With all due respect I direct my thoughts to those of you that hold power, wisdom and eloquence in your hands and I plead that you please not abandon those of us who are in the third age.

I am an elderly woman and have seen the condition of elderly individuals living in old age homes where the state is not present and where beneficence is unheard of. On television, one can see the absolute misery of these homes for the elderly.

In France, the state holds dear the rights of the elderly; here in Colombia, our descendants and family members easily separate from and throw away their elders.

The “viejitos chochos”⁴⁷ return to being children, cannot take care of themselves, and are thus viewed as nuisances.

I plead for a sense of obligation that binds descendants and family members to their elders and prompts them to protect and serve their guardians, in the same way that it was our duty to protect and care for them through adulthood, and beyond...

I appeal to your political influence and to the influence of your magnificent allies. And to you, Doctor Woolf, I am aware that the mother

⁴⁷ A *viejito chocho* may be translated as an unruly or “bratty” old person.

you love so much is still alive, and for her I beg that you do something for the elderly.

During this month of May when mothers are honored, I ask two things of you: that you take into consideration everything that I have said, and that you offer me some kind of monetary support given that I am a woman, old, sick with diabetes, and am alone.

Sincerely

Helena Agudelo de Bedoya

Helena Agudelo de Bedoya directed the above letter to the three co-presidents of the National Constituent Assembly, who along with sixty-seven other elected and appointed representatives from diverse political parties and ethnic and religious groups, were in charge of drafting the modern Colombian constitution. In her typed letter, written two months prior to the nationwide adoption of the new constitution in July 1991, Señora Bedoya tells the three men that she like the many other “abandoned” elderly individuals she describes, is alone, sick, without care from her family, and without the means to care for herself.

Affixed to the letter was a short newspaper clipping of unknown origin that compared the present, often difficult conditions of the elderly to a description of Colombian families and family obligations of the past.⁴⁸ The author of the article writes that in generations past, the economic aspirations of children were directed at supporting the families that had supported them during their formative years. Older persons, or *viejos*, the writer suggests, were once considered an important aspect of the family and were viewed as archives of experience and knowledge. He further states that in the

⁴⁸ Though I have searched for the author and title of the article Señora Bedoya included in her letter, I have been unable to locate more information since she attached only a snippet of the article.

present, families' view older adults as a *carga*, or heavy loads that are more easily cared for by state run facilities for the elderly, "where one will find men and women who have sacrificed to educate their children, many of whom are now professionals who do not recognize their obligations to their parents." He continues by suggesting that while the rights of children and parents' economic, social, and moral obligations to their children have been legally established and are universally thought of as the norm, the obligations to and the rights of the elderly are not taken into account in like manner. The author of the article concludes by suggesting a call to legislate the obligations of children toward their aging parents.

Señora Bedoya had carefully underlined the passages of the article that I have reproduced above. In the postscript to her letter, she tells the reader that a young student of law at the University of Antioquia and a person I presume to be a relative given that she shares her last name, helped her write and type the letter. She seemed to have included the article with the letter to the co-presidents of the National Constituent Assembly as evidence that her own difficult experience of growing older without the care of her family and descendants is an experience that is widely felt among Colombia's older population. Much like the author of the article, Señora Bedoya tells us that she is not the only older person experiencing the unmet filial, moral, and economic obligations of care that she feels should be expected from kinship. Through her letter and through the words of the author of the article she includes, she asks the leaders of the Constituent Assembly, those responsible for writing Colombia's new constitution, for the state's assistance in meeting the legal, intimate, and economic needs that she feels kinship should have met, but has not. In writing to these particular lawmakers, she implicitly asks that the plight of older

adults and the expected obligations of kinship and care be considered and written into the new constitutional laws that dictate and are supposed to protect the rights and dignity of the Colombian citizenry, and simultaneously positions older adults as viable citizens.

I found this letter while searching the electronic files at Colombia's National Archive (*Archivo Nacional de la Nación*) located only two blocks from *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, as I was curious to see how persons deemed "elderly" had been characterized at different historical moments in and around the capital.⁴⁹ The letter struck a reminiscent chord as Señora Bedoya's sentiments and words evoked the complex ways older adults who depended on the *comedor* and lived in the central neighborhoods of the capital expressed their experiences of abandonment and understanding of kinship obligations, their expectations of what family and kin relations should and should not do for them, as well as the role of state in defining and protecting their rights as citizens, parents, and older persons.

In chapter two, I introduced the reader to the spaces and goals of *Comedor María es Mi Madre* and showed the ways Hermano Miguel aimed to transform the lives of the patrons of the dining house, who are predominantly elderly. In this chapter, I focus on that elderly demographic and bring to the fore their everyday struggles. I use Señora Bedoya's letter to the co-presidents of the National Constituent Assembly as a point of entry into the ways the Colombian state has attempted to respond to the histories of

⁴⁹ I typed several iterations of the term "elderly" into the archival search engine at the *Archivo de la Nación* (National Archive) in Bogotá, and only this letter and a couple of other documents that contained words similar to "elderly" formed part of the search results. I later realized that terms like "beneficence" and *asilos* (homes for the elderly, disabled, sick, orphaned children and other populations) provided a wider range of search results. Though I did not have the opportunity to look through all of the archives that included forms of the word elderly, beneficence, or *asilos*, I was unable to find many documents that revealed much about the process of aging in Colombia even though this particular archive stores records that go back to the sixteenth century.

inequality that exist among a diverse range of Colombians, as well as the experiences of violence that have played a role in the intensification of these inequalities and human rights violations. In doing so, I discuss the different perceptions of aging in Colombia and consider the role of family relations and ideologies of family in the process of aging.

Older adults who live alone and depend on *comedores* for their livelihood are often described as being without kinship or family, that is, without a kinship network that meets the moral expectations of what family and social relations “should look like” in Colombia. I show how different sets of actors (the State, Hermano Miguel, and the patrons themselves) view family as a key component necessary for living a secure and dignified life in the latter stages of an individual’s life, and the ways kinship is constructed as one of the primary vehicles by which “caring” of older adults should happen. “Family,” however, is not a singular or static structure. I show how the Hispanic, patriarchal model of family has in fact played a role in structuring and perpetuating inequalities in Colombia in the present. I conclude the chapter by showing the ways “everyday” forms of violence that are not always viewed as such, are in fact central for understanding experiences of growing older in Bogotá.

The Constitution of 1991 and the Politics of Inclusion

Colombia’s 1991 Constitution replaced the original 1886 Constitution, which marked the beginning of what is now known as the Republic of Colombia.⁵⁰ Though

⁵⁰ Shortly after independence from Spain 1819, the countries that are known as Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, and Panama were known as Gran Colombia. In 1930, Gran Colombia dissolved after Venezuela and Ecuador became independent Republics, and Colombia and Panama were known as *Nueva Granada* (or New Granada). Between 1893 and 1886, the areas that are now known as Colombia and Panama were called the *Estados Unidos de Colombia* (the United States of Colombia). The “Republic of Colombia” did not come to be until the 1886 constitution, though it is important to note that Panama seceded in 1903 under pressure and with help from the United States.

Señora Bedoya addressed her letter to the three co-presidents of the National Constituent Assembly, the 1991 constitution was in fact written by a diverse group of seventy individuals that were elected to form part of the Assembly by a popular vote in December 1990. Many of the individuals elected to the assembly represented groups and sectors of the population that had historically been excluded from public and political life.⁵¹ Along with the three co-presidents to whom Bedoya's letter was addressed, the assembly consisted of representatives from the Liberal and Conservative parties, the Democratic Alliance Movement of the 19th of April (M-19), of which Antonio Navarro Woolf, co-President of the National Constituent Assembly, formed part, the Revolutionary Worker's Party, the *Quintín Lame* Indigenous guerilla movement, the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), non-Catholic Christians, and representatives for students and children, among others. Delegates also included former presidents, ministers, academics, journalists, politicians, and other prominent persons. The Constituent Assembly thus brought together persons and groups from across the political and social spectrum, many of whom had historically been in conflict with one another.

The idea to promote a political transition through constitutional reform gained prominence during the 1980s. The decade of the 1980s was a particularly difficult one for Colombians, as the country and capital experienced violent confrontations among different sectors of society, including the military, various guerilla organizations such as the 19th of April Movement (M-19), the EPL, and *las Farc*, as well as the violence of drug trafficking. For example, in November of 1985, the M-19 seized the *Palacio de Justicia* (Supreme Court Building), which is located on the north side of the *Plaza de*

⁵¹ It is important to note that 40% of the delegates did not belong to the two dominant political parties at the time: the Conservative and Liberal parties.

Bolívar, directly across from the Colombian capitol building (and only one block from the *Palacio de Nariño*, where Colombia's president resides). Members of the M-19 killed two security guards as they entered the building in an attempt to take it over. However, rather than attempting to negotiate with the M-19 forces, the army quickly responded with a major assault, which included a tank that was driven through the front entrance of the building. While some of those inside the building managed to escape or were rescued, half of the Supreme Court judges were killed during the siege, as well as all of the members of the M-19 that had participated in the assault.

In the 1980s, murder was the leading cause of death in Colombia, “with more than twice the number of murders in Colombia than in the United States (despite its 33 million citizens as compared 250 million)” (Kline 1999: 155). Between August 1989 and 1990, at least fifteen hundred people were killed, including judges (as well as Supreme Court magistrates), Colombia's Attorney General, union leaders, journalists, peasant leaders, and civilians were killed throughout the country (1999). While criminal activity was high, political factors such as the drug trade and ongoing confrontations with guerilla organizations also played a key role in the increase of urban violence (Bushnell 1993: 252). Because of the intensity of such widespread violence, it was often difficult to distinguish the origins and players in the many attacks and killings (Ahumada 1995). Additionally, four presidential candidates were assassinated in the span of three years, including the leading candidate, Luis Carlos Galán, who was killed on August 18, 1989 at the order of Pablo Escobar.

In 1989, the government of then president Virgilio Barco (1986-1990) opened peace negotiations with guerilla organizations (primarily the M-19), and in January 1990,

Barco attempted to link these agreements to ongoing discussions about how best to reform Colombia's constitution.⁵² In 1989, Barco introduced the *Referendo extraordinario por la paz y la democracia*, or the Extraordinary Referendum for Peace and Democracy, wherein Barco's government aimed to offer concessions to the guerilla organizations that accepted the peace agreements, such as the possibility of recognizing them as a political parties. However, as the referendum was being debated in Congress, the House of Representatives passed a bill that would include the continuation of extraditions as part of the referendum. Because of the opposition to extraditions by many sectors of society,⁵³ this referendum failed, as did Barco's attempt to reform Colombia's constitution and thus "institutionalize" peace.

The inability of the Colombian government to appropriately and successfully respond to these transformational and violent events, the complicity of politicians in much of the political conflict, as well as a lack of emphasis on human rights, were all critical in spurring civilian movements that aimed to transform Colombia's political

⁵² The 1886 constitution stated that constitutional reform could only take place through the legislative branch of the government. Barco and others had attempted to find new and creative ways by which to reform the constitution. In May 1998, President Barco, Liberal leaders Luis Carlos Galán and Hernando Durán Dussán presented the National Congress with a written plan for constitutional reform that aimed to strengthen Congress and the judicial system, and increase the protection for human rights, among other reforms. Additionally, it is important to note that the idea to reform the constitution was not a new one, and according to Kline (1999: 155), during times of intense violence or difficulty, Colombians often went back to the possibility of constitutional reform as a way to change and strengthen the country's legal structures. Kline notes that this has happened five times in Colombia, beginning in 1827, when the chaos of the formation of the new country pushed congress to call for a constituent assembly. Prior to the 1990s, the most recent attempt had occurred in the 1950s with the creation of the National Front via a plebiscite. The National Front was a coalition government made up of Liberals and Conservatives that was created to ease the inter-party strife and quell the escalating violence by promoting a bipartisan government.

⁵³ The powerful drug cartels were going to be greatly affected by an extradition law, since those charged with drug trafficking as well as the violence associated with the illegal import and export of substances could be extradited to be tried in the United States. Moreover, Carlos Lleras Restrepo (president of Colombia from 1966-1970) opined that a yes or no vote on extradition highlighted the potential associations and alliances that some members of congress had with members and leaders of the drug cartels (Kline 1999: 157).

system.⁵⁴ The intensity of violence during the 1980s particularly inspired the mobilization of various student groups. On August 25, 1989, one week after Galán was buried, at least twenty-five thousand university students from both public and private schools, marched through the streets of Bogotá. This protest was known as the March of Silence (*marcha del silencio*), and culminated at Galán's burial site in the capital's central cemetery.⁵⁵

The March of Silence was one of the first visible and collective responses to the marked and visible experiences of violence, deep inequality, human rights violations, and state inaction. Though the various student groups failed to generate a unified movement after this initial manifestation, one group of students with the help of Fernando Carillo, who was a professor of law at Bogotá's *Universidad de los Andes*, proposed that voters add an additional vote to their ballots in the upcoming March 11, 1990 elections.⁵⁶ On that date citizens were going to be voting for the Senate, Chamber of Representatives, departmental assemblies, governors, municipal councils and mayors. The group proposed that voters deposit an additional ballot into their voting boxes, in what has since been

⁵⁴ This aim at constitutional reform was in fact embedded in a wave of political transitions that were taking place in Central and Eastern Europe, South Africa, and in several other countries in Latin America. In many places, the crafting of new political constitutions marked moments of transition from authoritative regimes that were often characterized by a lack of guarantee of human rights and democratic principles, to regimes where the defense, protection and promotion of democratic principles and human dignity and fundamental human rights were central (Restrepo 2002: 1).

⁵⁵ After Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was assassinated in 1948, *Bogotanos* took to the streets in a protest that has since been termed the *manifestación de silencio*, or the "manifestation of silence." Though the *Marcha de Silencio* after the death of Galán occurred under different circumstances, the protest recalled the *manifestación de silencio* and the turbulent times of *La Violencia* in the 1940s. On February 7, 1948, Gaitán asked his followers to convene at the *Plaza de Bolívar* at dusk. At least one hundred *Bogotanos* responded to his request and arrived wearing black and holding large black banners, as they had been instructed. The gathering took place in silence as a way of mourning those that had died as a result of *la Violencia*. Gaitán spoke for five minutes during the gathering, addressing the crowd and the president with a public call for peace, by saying, "Señor President Ospina Pérez. Under the weight of a profound emotion I address Your Excellency, interpreting the wishes and the will of this immense multitude that hides its burning heart, lacerated by so much injustice, under a clamorous silence, to ask that there be peace and mercy for the nation" (Braun 1985: 127).

⁵⁶ There are various narratives regarding how the idea for the "seventh ballot" came to be. The March 16, 2011 publication of *Semana*, a weekly magazine in Colombia, tells readers that the first draft of this idea was written onto a napkin inside a hotel in Bogotá by representatives of the M-19.

called *la séptima papeleta*, or the seventh ballot. Through this ballot, voters were asked to request the convocation of a national constituent assembly that would reform Colombia's constitution. The proposal was supported by the newspaper *el Tiempo*, four Liberal candidates for the presidency, as well as former Colombian President Alfonso López Michelson. Though these ballots were not officially counted, some say that at least two million of these "seventh" votes were cast.

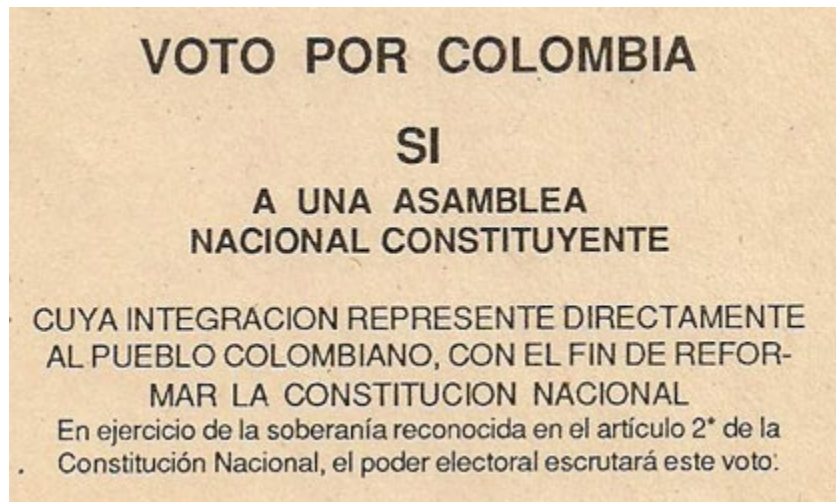


Figure 9: Example of a ballot from the *Séptima Papeleta*

The Electoral Counsel, however, did not initially accept the official inclusion of that vote. Nevertheless, Colombia's Supreme Court ultimately validated the efforts of the *séptima papeleta*, ruling that the convocation of a constituent assembly "was an acceptable way of changing the 1886 constitution" (Kline 1999: 158). On May 27, 1990, Liberal candidate César Gaviria was elected president (1990-1994), and during that same election, Colombians had the opportunity to vote for the convocation of a National Constituent Assembly. Eighty nine percent of voters voted in favor of the creation of a constituent assembly, though fifty percent of eligible voters abstained during this

election.⁵⁷ In August 1990, President Gaviria issued decree 1927, formalizing the election of a constituent assembly (Ramírez 2002: 133).

On December 9th, 1990, the seventy members that would compose the National Constituent Assembly were elected through a proportional representation system that aimed to “represent all sectors of the country” (2002: 132). This election, however, has been disputed given that only 3,710,557 of 14,237,110 potential voters participated in the election (a rate of abstention of 74%). Of the 3,686,091 valid votes, 81% voted in favor of the assembly (133-134). The election assigned twenty-five seats to the Liberal Party (given that it was the dominant party at the time), nineteen seats to the *Alianza Democrática M-19* (Democratic Alliance M-19, a political party based on the guerilla group M-19, which had demobilized in 1989), eleven to the *Movimiento de Salvación Nacional* (MSN, Movement of National Salvation, an offshoot of the Conservative Party), five to the Conservative Party, four to Independent Conservatives, and eight to Independents” (Kline 1999: 159). Among the delegates were former presidents, ex-*guerilleros*, politicians, academics, and other prominent individuals. The three co-presidents to whom Señora Bedoya addressed her letter, were chosen from the country’s most prominent political parties: Álvaro Gómez Hurtado belonged to the Movement of National Salvation, Horacio Serpa Uribe to the Liberal Party, and Antonio Navarro Wolff to the AD-M19.

The formation of a constituent assembly that purported to represent all regions of Colombia and include individuals from diverse and minority sectors of society (some of

⁵⁷ Colombian voters voted yes or no on the following question: "In order to fortify participatory democracy, do you vote for the convocation of a Constituent Assembly with representation of social, political, and regional forces, integrated democratically and popularly, to reform the Constitution of Colombia?" (Kline 1999: 158).

whom had been violently at odds with each other) aimed to model democracy and the practice of inclusive politics. Such a representational assembly reinforced the notion that Colombia wasn't necessarily just a mestizo nation, but rather a nation that was racially, ethnically, socially, economically, and politically heterogeneous (Appelbaum 2003). In doing so, the representatives of the constituent assembly attempted to model a way by which institutions could be peacefully changed, rather than resorting to the kind of violence the country had been experiencing. In a piece written for his family's newspaper, *El Tiempo*, Enrique Santos Calderón, brother of current Colombian President Juan Santos Calderon,⁵⁸ and Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper from 1997-2007, described the formation of the assembly as "an emotional scene of national reconciliation" (quoted in Kline 1999: 162).

The assembly began sessions, which lasted one hundred-fifty days, on February 5, 1991. Through the course of six months, the delegates aimed to make Colombia a more democratic country by: requiring a conclusive majority in presidential elections, limiting the extraordinary powers of the government, requiring that departmental governors be elected via popular vote (the 1886 Constitution stated that governors were to be appointed by the president), decentralizing the government by creating new electoral districts, strengthening the judicial system (e.g. by choosing indigenous judges in indigenous areas), creating social protections for ethnic groups (primarily, those that

⁵⁸ His great uncle, Eduardo Santos, a vocal member of the Liberal, party served as Colombia's president from 1938-1942, and also served as editor of the newspaper *El Tiempo* for fifty years. He purchased the newspaper in 1913 from his brother-in-law, Alfonso Villegas Restrepo, a Colombian lawyer and intellectual who founded the daily in 1911. The Santos family was the newspaper's main shareholders between 1913-2007, after which the Spanish company, *Grupo Planeta*, became the primary shareholders. Calderon's cousin, Francisco Santos, also served as Vice-president during Alvaro Uribe's two terms as President of Colombia (2002-2006; 2006-2010). Three of Eduardo Santos' children have served as editors, directors, and journalists for *El Tiempo*, and several other family members have also held prominent roles at the newspaper. I offers this historical lineage in order to politically position the newspaper, as I cite several articles from *El Tiempo*, Colombia's most widely circulated daily, throughout the dissertation.

identified as indigenous), and ensuring housing, health and environmental safety, and a social security system for Colombia's citizenry.

Additionally, the assembly prioritized reforming the structures of congress by limiting the number of positions a congressperson could hold, as many had previously held elected positions in their respective departments and towns. The congress that had been elected in 1990 was dissolved shortly before the beginning of the Constituent Assembly's sessions to pave the way for the transformation of what many viewed to be a corrupt, nepotistic, and "broken" branch of the government (Kline 1999:164).

Prior to the beginning of the Constituent Assembly, the Colombian government had also asked the citizenry to present their own ideas and proposals for constitutional reform through *mesas locales, regionales y nacionales de trabajo*, that is, through local, regional, and national "working tables" (Restrepo 2002: 2). The Constituent Assembly did in fact take these proposals into account, privileging participatory politics in the practice of negotiating and writing the new constitution. In this sense, the delegates endeavored to directly respond to the needs of the citizenry, and simultaneously acknowledged the Colombian states' weakness in protecting human rights and dignity and promoting social justice. The new constitution was signed by each of the delegates and promulgated on July 4, 1991. The constitution was relatively successful in promoting citizen participation by creating institutions to protect the rights of citizens,⁵⁹ and also widened "the channels of citizen access to the process of State decision making" (Bejarano 2001: 63-67).

⁵⁹ *Acciones de tutela*, or actions for protections, gave citizens access to the courts when they felt that public officials had failed to protect or violated their constitutional rights.

Yet, in many other ways, the constitution failed to effect change in a country deeply marred by decades of violence, poverty, and inequality, as the promised transformations did not really affect everyday social life in Colombia. In the years following the declaration of the new constitution, the social, political, and economic circumstances throughout the country actually worsened (Restrepo 2002).⁶⁰ Bejarano (2001) notes that the Constitution of 1991 did not produce the effects that were envisioned because the Colombian state was not “capable of supporting and enforcing constitutional norms. The efforts to democratize the State were not simultaneously accompanied by parallel efforts to strengthen it” (70).

The fervor to transform Colombia through constitutional reform and thereby legislate the rights of Colombian citizens during a time of violence and deep social, political, and economic fragmentation, might bring a new understanding to the letter I reproduced at the beginning of this chapter. In her letter to the three co-presidents of the National Constituent Assembly, Helena Agudelo de Bedoya, who describes herself as an old woman who is sick and who seemingly has nobody to care for her in her old age, asks to be remembered by those who were eagerly attempting to bring peace to her country. While the high profile negotiation of human rights concerns and the political participation of groups such as the M-19 were visible aspects of the constitutional sessions, the abandonment of older adults, and the social and economic needs and protection of elders, were not visible aspects of the motivations that led to reforming the constitution. Unlike

⁶⁰ For example, in elections since 1991, voting for Congress and Senate were still part of national elections. Though there were many regional political parties that represented local politics and groups, the Liberal and Conservative parties continued to dominate because elections of individuals who represented and made decisions for cities and towns outside of Bogotá took place at a national level.

the voices of the students and those of political groups, voices like Señora Bedoya's did not initially result in the same kind of visible and compensatory response.

However, it is important to note that the climate during this time offered the sense of feeling that women such as Señora Bedoya did in fact have rights to claim. By asking to be remembered, Señora Bedoya was asking the three co-Presidents to make her needs, and the needs of the elderly, visible and include them in the writing of the constitution that was supposed to breathe new life into her country. In simple terms, Señora Bedoya was asking not to be abandoned by the state during her time of need. In writing her letter, Señora Bedoya was perhaps responding to the Constituent Assembly's invitation to Colombian citizens to politically participate in reforming the government. Through her letter, she was expressing a hope that constitutional reform would create a structure that would enact laws that would care for *viejitos* and *viejitas* in their old age, and that would obligate their kin to do the same. Moreover, through her letter, Señora Bedoya was also asserting her positionality as a Colombian citizen, positioning the elderly as citizens with rights to claim.

Viejos y Viejas: Aging and the State

Given that I have offered a historical discussion of the writing of the new 1991 Constitution with the rights and requests of elders in mind, it is important to consider the ways processes of aging are viewed in Bogotá, and throughout Colombia. How does "old age" happen in Colombia? What are the political, economic, and social ways "oldness" is constructed? When and how does one become a *viejito/viejita* or an *abuelito/abuelita* in Bogotá?

According to Colombia's National Department of Statistics (*Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística*, or DANE), in 2005, 9% of Colombia's population was older than sixty years old, a number that continues to rise. In the 1950s, public health campaigns and increased medical knowledge and care contributed to a drop in infant mortality and a rise in fertility, which resulted in the predominance of a *población joven*, or the demographic characterization of Colombia's population as "young" (Ferrufino 1990: 13). However, after 1964, a drop in fertility rates (due mostly to access to contraception), as well as lower mortality rates, led to a demographic transition wherein Colombia's poor population "grew older," that is, the number of young people decreased, whereas the number of adults and older adults in Colombia increased (Flórez 2000: 6). In the early part of the 20th century, the number of Colombians that were younger than fifteen-years old represented 40.6% of the population. This number increased to 45.3% in 1964, but decreased to 34.5% in 1993. Colombian economist and demographer Carmen Flórez tells us that such a decrease in this age group implies a change in the population between 15-64 years old as well. The author states that while the population aged 15-64 dropped from 56.4% to 52% between 1905 and 1964, that percentage increased to represent 61% of the total population in 1993. Additionally, those of the "third age" (64+) also gradually increased to represent 4.3% of the total population in 1993 (2000: 8).

In combination with increased migration to cities, urbanization, and experiences of violence, the "aging" of Colombia's population has affected the demand for social services in the capital and throughout the country, including housing, health, education,

and employment, as well as access to food and other resources necessary for public health.

Currently women in Colombia are eligible to receive their pensions once they reach 55 years of age, whereas men become eligible at 60. However, these regulations will shift in 2014, when the age of eligibility will increase to 57 for women, and to 62 for men. For many, the age at which an individual becomes eligible for social security benefits, which often coincides with retirement, marks that persons' transition into "old age." Yet, in Colombia, as in most places throughout the world, age and aging form part of a complex process and experience that is culturally, historically, and economically mediated (Lock 1993; Lamb 1997; Cohen 1998).

Upon first arriving in Colombia to conduct my fieldwork, I often heard about how difficult it was for individuals in their late twenties and early thirties to find employment. According to many individuals with whom I spoke, high rates of unemployment had created competition between similarly qualified individuals, so that young persons were often offered positions, and persons in their thirties and forties were cast off as being "too old," or too *viejos/as* for these jobs. Persons over the age of forty-five also had a difficult time finding employment in both the public and private sector because employers did not want to be obligated to pay the higher cost of insurance and other benefits for older persons (Ferrufino 1990). In an article published in the inaugural issue of the journal *Trabajo Social* published at the National University of Colombia in Bogotá (*Universidad Nacional de Colombia*), renowned Colombian anthropologist Virginia Gutiérrez de Pineda notes that women who retired *en la tercer edad*, or the third age, which she marks as beginning after the age of forty-five, often became care-takers for their children's

children, or their siblings children (1998: 47). What is significant about the author's writing is the fact that she positions the "third age" as beginning after an individual's forty-fifth year, a year that in other contexts may correspond to "mid-life" (Locke 1993). Though individuals in their twenties, thirties, and forties may not have been experiencing the physical processes that corresponded to "old age," they were frequently socially constructed as too "old" and too much of a liability to participate in the workforce.

"Aging" and "old age" did not only correspond to the possibility of employment, however. Several persons with whom I spoke described hunger as an experience and circumstance that played a significant role in "aging" a person. As Scheper-Hughes carefully notes in her ethnography about hunger and everyday forms of violence in northeastern Brazil (1992), hunger and chronic malnutrition have an obvious physical component and are manifested in the bodies of persons, affecting height, growth, learning, and a person's vulnerability to opportunistic diseases and infections. Scheper-Hughes describes how chronic hunger has contributed to the diminished stature of rural workers, what some have called the "pygmitization" of Brazil's northeastern population (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 153 [citing Chaves 1983: 81]). The author further notes that middle class children in the same region reached puberty at an earlier age, and that the height of middle class teenagers and adults corresponded to the norms for the average population. With Scheper-Hughes arguments in mind, we might consider the role that nourishment plays in the social and physical perceptions of age and aging, as children who were chronically hungry often did not reach puberty or develop along the same timeline as their middle class counterparts. The smallness of children, as well as the physiological problems (such as stunting) associated with chronic malnutrition often

inhibited their development. Similarly, we might consider the ways chronic hunger contributes to bodily weakness, and a person's inability to stave off opportunistic infections and diseases that deteriorate bodies and minds, which often leads to premature fragility and death.

Gender is also critical for understanding the different ways processes of aging are locally understood. One afternoon as we waited for the *comedor's* groceries at Bogotá's food bank, José, one of Hermano Miguel's nephews who regularly visited the dining house, told me that women aged faster than men. José supported his argument by telling me about the role of women in the Caribbean region of Colombia, where he was from. "In *la costa*," he told me, "there is a lot of *machismo*. Men do what they want with women...with their wives. They expect women to do everything they ask, that they clean, cook, that they do everything!" Though José didn't explicitly state how these gendered relations "aged" women, or why he believed women aged faster because of the expectations and experiences of *machismo*, his comments highlighted the hard work that was often expected of women throughout the course of their lives, pointing to the ways such hard gendered labor might debilitate or weaken the bodies of women who were relatively "young" in terms of biological years. Though women had a lifetime of "work" experience in relation to their home and families, this labor was not often valorized both in and outside of the home, as such work was normalized as expected female labor through the entitlements of *machismo*.

According to researcher Cristina Gomes Da Conceição (2003), Brazilian women who worked inside the home caring for their children or in the informal economy were eligible to receive a pension once they reached retirement age, whereas in Colombia, this

was not the case. The author argues that such economic coverage in Brazil “[guaranteed] homogeneity between genders within the domestic income structure” (164), that is, entitled women who labored inside the home to the same kinds of benefits men might receive by working in a more formalized sector. In Colombia, however, women who had been caretakers, labored inside the home, and who may have also worked outside of the home as informal employees were not eligible for any kind of state benefits once they reached retirement age. Thus, the long and difficult work that was expected and demanded of many women in Colombia was not recognized as a kind of labor that entitled them to economic return.

In Bogotá, the local government (as well as agencies affiliated connected to different branches of the local and national government) has attempted to highlight the particular needs of aging persons in Colombia, and in Bogotá in particular, through the publication of various informational and pedagogical booklets. These booklets most often form part of current and future city development projects, such as “Bogotá Without Indifference,” “Bogotá Without Hunger,” “For the Bogotá that We Love,” or “Colombia is Passion.” Among these publications, which were widely available at local mayoral offices located throughout the city wherein citizens can enter to request information, libraries, community and cultural centers, and other social service organizations, I found several books and booklets regarding the difficulties experienced by older adults, as well as strategies aimed at responding to the needs of elder *Bogotanos*. One of these booklets, *Hacia una política integral para la vejez* (“Toward an integrative political strategy of aging”), was published in 1999, during the International Year of Older Persons, as

declared by the United Nations.⁶¹ The booklet formed part of a local development campaign called, *Por la Bogotá que queremos*, or “For the Bogotá that we love.”

I found this particular booklet at the Luis Angel Arango Library, located in the Candelaria neighborhood, only a few blocks north from *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. The booklet aimed to position the importance of the needs of older adults, and also communicate the political strategies and social programs for the elderly that were sponsored by the *Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá*, or the government of Lucho Garzón, including recreational activities, occupational therapy, health services, memory workshops (that highlighted the knowledge older adults have accrued throughout their lifetimes), excursions, nutritional programs and subsidies.

The first pages of the booklet contained a snippet of the inaugural speech of Enrique Peñalosa Londoño, who was mayor of Bogotá from 1998-2000 and, who along with former mayor Antanas Mockus (1995-1996 and 2001-2003), played a critical role in transforming Bogotá’s urban landscape through often unorthodox means.⁶² In the bits of the speech reproduced in the booklet, the former mayor tells the reader, which presumably include the elderly, among Bogotá’s other citizens, that “Our elders are our collective memory, living history and a testament to the past; not only do they desire and have the ability to learn more, they also accumulate wisdom; to be elderly is to become

⁶¹ The United Nations declared 1979 as the “International Year of the Child” to bring attention to the problems that children faced worldwide, such as malnutrition, poverty, and disease. Additionally, 1994 was declared the “International Year of the Family” by the United Nations.

⁶² Given the general lack of respect for as well as fear of law enforcement in Bogotá, Antanas Mockus used alternative means by urge citizens to follow traffic and others laws that impacted public space. Mimes were hired to direct traffic and taunt drivers who went through red lights, or did not give pedestrians the right of way. Mockus also took a shower on a television commercial in order to help promote the conservation of water in the capital. Enrique Peñalosa’s government developed *Ciclovía*, one of the world’s most extensive bike paths in order to increase mobility across the city and decrease congestion. He also instituted *pico y placa* (which may be translated as “peak” or “rush hour” and “license plate”) during which license plates ending in specific numbers could not circulate on particular days of the week. *Pico y placa* helped cut traffic by 40%. Additionally, Peñalosa helped developed Bogotá’s first mass transit system, *Transmilenio*.

more of a person everyday, to be an active agent regarding what they deserve as citizens and members of a family” (Alcaldía Mayor Santa Fe de Bogotá D.C. 1999: 3).

Londoño’s powerful statements regarding the significant place of older adults, however, were not generalized sentiments that were publicly espoused or reflections about how older adults were generally regarded or treated throughout the country. Instead, his words were directive, aimed at convincing readers that older adults deserved to be treated as “active agents,” that their presence, experience, and knowledge were critical for the country’s collective memory, and that they too were deserving of the rights of citizenship and care. This booklet thus served as a pedagogical tool aimed at educating the reader regarding the rights of older adults, the role of the government in protecting these rights and increasing the quality of life of elders, as well as the role of the family in caring for the elderly.

The booklet makes these needs present by including several images of older adults whose dress signaled that they were experiencing or living in poverty or that they lived in outlying and marginal rural areas of the capital.⁶³ Two sketches drawn by older adults that communicated their own image of family and home also appeared in the booklet (1999: 7). One of these included a drawing of the elder with her family, including her grandchildren (one of which was depicted in a stroller), as well as a dog. The artist drew herself standing slightly behind her family members wearing a dress and steadying her body with a cane, which she held with her right hand. Above the drawing of the family were the words, “to live in peace with my family” (*Vivir en paz con mi familia*). The second drawing depicted a house, complete with two front windows (with half open

⁶³ It is interesting to note that at least two of the individuals pictured in this booklet were patrons of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*.

curtains), a front door in the middle of the structure, a smoking chimney, and a sunflower to the right of the house. The lines that made up the house were clearly sketched with the assistance of a ruler, as they were very straight, with sharp edges. The words, *Deseo mas grande y tener una casa*⁶⁴ (“I would like a bigger house”) were written above the drawing of the house.⁶⁵ Though houses resembling this type of architecture were not common in and around Bogotá, as most *Bogotanos* in this particular area lived in apartments, bedroom homes or *piezitas*, or structures with local architectural styles, the house depicted in the drawing is relatively common in other parts of the world, especially the United States.

⁶⁴ The phrases *deseo más grande y* (“I would like a bigger and”) and *tener una casa* (“have a home”) appear to be written separately by the author, and not initially meant to be one single phrase, which is why they are grammatically incorrect in Spanish when combined (though I have translated them as a single phrase in English in the body of this chapter). The words *deseo más grande y* were written near the top of the picture of the house in small letters, and the phrase *tener una casa* was written directly below *deseo más grande*, right above the house, and in much larger letters.

⁶⁵ I presume that the pictures that were drawn by the older adults and were included in the booklet were part of activities that were often held in workshops sponsored by the Bogotá mayor’s office, community centers, as well as places such as *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. For example, in September 2006, Hermano Miguel asked me to pass out paper and markers to the patrons, and then asked them to draw their “ideal *comedor*” prior to the lunch meal.

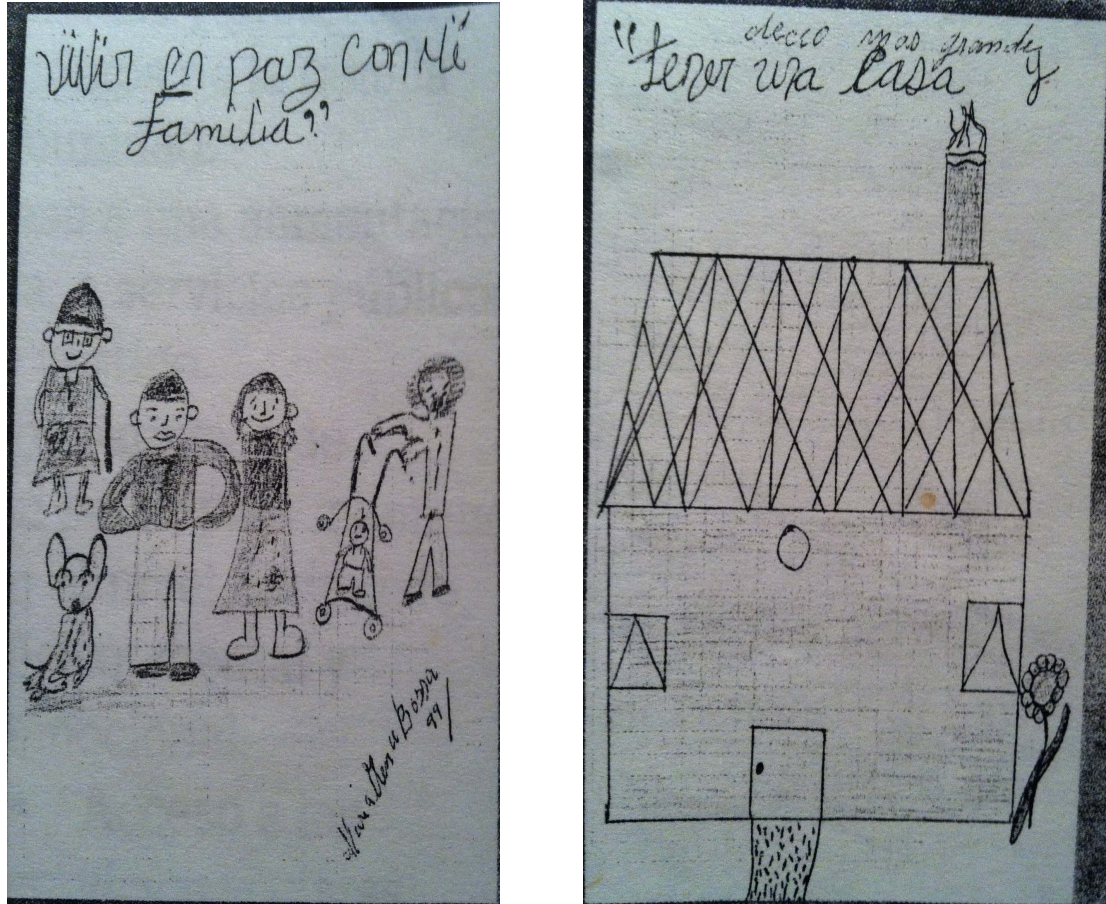


Figure 10: Alcaldía Mayor de Santa Fe de Bogotá 1999: 17.

In their introduction to *About the House* (1995) Janet Carsten and Hugh Jones note that persons often make and imagine houses in their own image and simultaneously use “houses and house-images to construct themselves as individuals and groups” (3). The authors note that Western children often draw houses with two windows and a door, which might symbolize two eyes and a mouth, “underlining [sic] the projection of the self in the house (Carsten, Hugh Jones 1995: 3). As I have mentioned, the sketch of the house that was depicted in the booklet portrayed architecture that was quite different from the ways most homes and apartments were designed in the capital (and differed from most of the homes I had seen in various regions of the country, both rural and urban). However, this kind of drawing of an imagined house located “elsewhere” – perhaps a house the

elder had seen on television or in a magazine – potentially illustrated an expectation of a house where one might live alongside family, sharing meals in “peace.” Though one of the authors of the drawings did not include a sketch of her family along with house, the other drawing depicting family members was positioned directly above the drawing of the house on the same page of the booklet. The placement of these two drawings above one another in the booklet communicated the importance of and correlation between houses and family living, a topic I further discuss in chapter seven. Moreover, the drawing that did include depictions of the elder alongside two generations of family members framed by the words, *Vivir en paz con mi familia*, may have also communicated a desire for peaceful domesticity with family members inside a family home.

These drawings also communicate perceptions of what “good,” “healthy,” and “peaceful” aging might look like for elders. Peaceful aging, it seemed, involved living at home alongside one’s family, and receiving social, emotional, nutritional, and financial support from them. The inclusion of the notion of “peace” in these drawings and throughout the booklet, is not an insignificant sentiment. The booklet makes clear that while the family should be the primary space and structure of care, the Colombian State is responsible for creating the conditions for ensuring the social “participation of older adults in the design of their own well-being” (Alcaldía Mayor Santa Fe de Bogotá D.C. 1999: 13). In a section, called *Sus sueños* (or “Their dreams), where the desires of elders are narrated from the perspective of older adults, the authors suggest that while older adults seek “spaces of peace, love and affection,” in the context of family, the State must support them by guaranteeing services such as accessible healthcare, recreation, pedestrian bridges, and “streets that are not fatal traps” (13). Peace in this sense, not only

includes a response to the conflicts that Colombia has experienced for the last century, but also the safety of Colombian's older citizens in relation to the conditions of the streets of the capital, public space, as well as the physical and emotional well-being of persons.

The role of the Colombian State is clearly brought to the fore with the inclusion of five carefully chosen articles from the 1991 Constitution that pertained to the rights of older adults alongside the drawings I've described. One of these articles stated that, "The State, society and the family will together protect and assist persons of the third age, and will promote their integration into social and community life" (Article 46 of the Constitution). Another noted that, "The State will guarantee the services of Social Security and a nutritional subsidy in the case of indigence" (1999: 6-7). In addition to this, the pamphlet also reproduced what were termed the "Five Principles of the United Nations toward older persons," which stressed the importance of dignity, care, independence, self-realization, and social participation (8-9).

The place of the State in ensuring the rights of older adults "in a way that the country's constitution and laws demand" (1999: 16), was also made visible throughout the pages of the booklet with the suggestion that, "The city, its communities, and the local authorities, should forcefully commit themselves to the well-being of the elderly as a strategy of equality and social justice" (1999: 5). However, in order to achieve this in a "dignified" manner, government entities, the family, the academy, the private sector, and all citizens "should commit themselves to ensuring the security and well-being of *ancianos* and *ancianas* of the *Distrito Capital*" (1999: 13)

An attempt at such a commitment to "respect and human dignity of older adults" (1999: 9) was legislated four years later through the legal enactment of subsidies for older

adults from both the federal government and the local district government. In 2003, the *Alcaldía Mayor* of Bogotá began to distribute monthly *subsídios* or subsidies (colloquially called *bonos* by the older adults who received them) of 50,000 *pesos* (equivalent to about twenty four dollars in 2007) to qualifying persons of the “third age,” that is, women who were 57 years or older, and men who were 60 years and older. The *Ministerio de Protección Social* (The Ministry for Social Protection), part of the federal government, also created a separate program that distributed cash transfers amounting to 80,000 *pesos* (equivalent to about thirty-eight USD in 2007) to qualifying elders every two months. Older adults could only qualify for one of these programs, and in order to be eligible, they needed to prove that they had no other income (that is, they could not have a pension), and demonstrate that they were “indigent” and living in *estrato* 1 or 2 housing. Moreover, while the *bonos* indeed assisted elders with their everyday needs, individuals who received this *bono* were not eligible to receive meals from any *comedor* that was affiliated with Bogotá Without Hunger or that received any kind of funding from the local state, even though these subsidies did not even cover cost of renting a *piezita*, or bedroom home in the neighborhoods in and around the dining house, which could range between 60,000 and 100,000 *pesos* (between thirty and fifty dollars USD in 2007). These requirements were thus a factor in many elders’ decision to patronize *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, a “private” *comedor* that did not have any official eligibility requirements.

The government of former Colombian President Ernesto Samper (1992-1996) had also attempted to improve the social and economic conditions of older adults and other Colombians by introducing the SISBEN, a system aimed at classifying and targeting poverty (a topic I describe in chapter one, footnote #5). Through the SISBEN, twenty-

three million Colombians were offered government subsidized access to health services (though various *abuelitos* often had difficulty proving that they were “indigent” enough to qualify for such services). In addition to the SISBEN, Samper’s government created the *Ministerio de Cultura* (Ministry of Culture), which helped protect the land rights of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, as well as the *Red de Solidaridad Social*, a government agency that aims to assist vulnerable populations (a topic I further discuss in chapter five).

But why is the situation of so many older adults in Colombia difficult and why would the State need to ensure their rights and encourage others to do the same? The booklet takes a historical perspective in an attempt to position *la situación*, or situation of aging in the capital amidst local and national histories of violence and migration, noting that the “transformation that the Capital District has suffered due to the migrations that began in the 1940s, which are connected to the growth of the city and urbanization, gave way to many sectors of poverty and misery in peripheral zones of the country. In these shantytowns a significant portion of older adults lack conditions that guarantee them housing, health, adequate nutrition and peaceful urban spaces for recreation and enjoyment of the city” (1999: 11). On the following page, the authors of the booklet add, “Is it possible that the social crisis, the decomposition of the family, poverty and the violence that currently affects us, are all a product of a society that does not confront its own history?” (1999: 15).

Additionally, the authors suggest that, “The family should be primarily responsible for the care of the elderly, offering them affection and protection” (1999: 5). While the family is highlighted as the ideal support and care structure for the elderly, the

publication also notes that this potential space of care and nurturance has been disrupted by the political violence of the last century, and the movement of Colombians from tight knit, rural communities to urban spaces. Citing violence, poverty, and the “decomposition of the family” as structural and traumatic processes that have confronted the elderly through their life course, the publication observes that because of this, older adults live alone, or in smaller groups, isolated from family members rather than living in nuclear and extended families (1999: 15). By informing the reader that the State is directly confronting the difficult situation of aging through social welfare programs, structures that had been highlighted as critical and necessary during the writing of the 1991 Constitution, the authors of the booklet simultaneously tell the reader that the Colombian State is performing the work that the family is not.

Booklets published by the local mayor’s office are not the only publications that discuss the “decomposition” of the family in relation to political violence and displacement. In the same issue of the journal *Trabajo Social* (1998) (Social Work) that I cite earlier, social worker and anthropologist María Himelda Ramírez tells the reader that Colombian society has in the last fifty years been transformed by a set of contradictory and complex processes that have altered the organization of the family and everyday life. The author notes that the family has been transformed through the forced displacement of persons due to violence, “the increase of poverty and pauperism due to economic and neo-liberal policies,” continuous ecological disasters, the increase of the urban population in often precarious and difficult circumstances, and “the transformation of values caused by diffusion, which have had repercussions on the intimate and private domains of persons (1998: 11).”

While Ramírez historicizes the Colombian family as dynamic sets of gendered social relations linked to colonial structures in other scholarly publications (2006), the perspective of the Colombian family as a structure that has been transformed through processes of violence and displacement, which has consequently isolated older adults from family members, thus altering how “aging happens,” was a perspective that was shared by the *hermanos* of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, various social workers that visited the *comedor*, and, as I will show, the patrons themselves. Moreover, my social understandings of aging are also framed as a social process that occurs with and among family, and are drawn from my experiences with my own relatives in Colombia, as well as with my Mexican family in Los Angeles.

Like many older adults in Colombia, my 77 year-old uncle who lives in Bogotá, also did not have a pension, even though he had owned a small textile business for many years (his business went under in the mid-1990s during a time of deep national economic crisis). One of his sons, who lives in Los Angeles, sends my uncle and his wife a monthly stipend, and in fact purchased the apartment where the couple lives with their daughter, who is a single mother to three grown children (two of whom also live in the apartment). Another son who lives nearby pays for the medical care of his parents, and their three daughters also contribute by cooking, cleaning, and generally caring for their aging parents on a daily basis.

In Los Angeles, my maternal grandmother, who is 95, receives daily care from her daughter, who is a paid care worker in the state of California.⁶⁶ Each of my grandmother’s daughters (including my mother) takes turns helping their mother get

⁶⁶ California provides in home care for elders who are unable to care for themselves, as well as for disabled individuals. In order to receive these services, persons must have very little or no income, though those that already receive public state benefits are usually eligible.

ready for bed every night. My grandmother's son, who lives in a house on the same property as my grandmother's home, visits her every morning and evening. Though my grandmother receives Supplemental Security Income (SSI)⁶⁷ from the State of California, the amount she receives is minimal, and each of her children (and some grandchildren) contributes by giving my grandmother money, or buying food when necessary.

Additionally, my maternal great-grandmother, or my *Nina* (as her great-grandchildren called her) who died at the age of 96, also received care from both the state and her children during the latter years of her life. Her children made daily visits to her apartment, which was located directly across the street from the home of one of her daughters. When it became necessary for someone to spend the night with her for fear that she might fall when getting in and out of bed, I was asked to take on the role of caretaker. At the age of sixteen, one year before my *Nina* passed away, I moved in with her and became her everyday companion. Before going to school, I would help her get out of bed and dressed, and upon returning from school we would take a walk around the block, and then sit in front of the television together as I did my homework. I made sure that my *Nina* took her daily medications, listened to many stories about my family's hometown, a *pueblito* (village) in Michoacán, México, and learned about a host of homemade and homeopathic treatments for her various ailments (e.g. according to my *Nina*, inserting a lit cigarette into one's ear helps relieve ear pain!).

These experiences greatly shaped my perceptions about how "aging happened" or should happen and were the points of origin for my relationships and interactions with elders in the central neighborhoods of Bogotá. Initially, seeing so many older adults

⁶⁷ SSI provides elders and disabled persons who otherwise do not have any other income or property with money to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing.

living alone without the assistance of family members was rather shocking to me. However, few Colombians with whom I spoke about my research topic (including my own relatives in Bogotá) shared in my surprise. It seemed that the difficult situation of many elders was a circumstance that had become part of everyday life in Colombia. Regardless, every person I spoke with shared their disapproval about the high incidence of poverty among the elderly, and the general poverty that existed throughout Colombia. This disapproval was usually accompanied by statements regarding the state of the Colombian family, noting that the family is “not what it used to be.” Most also pointed to the disinterest or inability of the government in doing much to respond to issues of poverty, as well as their belief that the government was complicit in propagating the deep structures of inequality that engendered poverty in the first place.

Colonial Families and Immoral Women

But if the family is “not what it used to be,” if Colombia has experienced the “decomposition of the family” (as the booklet notes), and if the “family has been transformed through the forced displacement of persons due to violence” as Ramírez suggests, what then, did the “Colombian family” look like prior to the experiences of violence of the last century?

While the transformative events of the 1940s and 1950s have indeed played a significant role in the loss and separation of family through violence, and the interrelated processes of immigration and urbanization, to suggest that the structure of the family in Colombia (and by extension, the care structure for older adults) has been “broken” or “disrupted” due to these assumes a pre-existing and static ideology of the “family.” Historically in Colombia, what is termed the “family” has had heterogeneous

configurations connected to colonial structures of power. Guiomar Dueñas Vargas (1994), a historian of family and gender in Colombia, argues that the patriarchal household sanctioned by the Catholic Church consisting of a male and female union, children, and extended biological relatives, has not been the norm in Bogotá. Additionally, in her historical account of poverty and gender in *Bogotano* colonial society during the 17th and 18th centuries, María Himelda Ramírez (2006) argues that moral disorder was often attributed to women, especially indigenous women, who did not follow the norms set by the Catholic Church and went against the Marian ideal of female behavior. According to the author, matrimony was presented to women as a sacrament that dignified them and guaranteed them protection against insecurity, and also created a built-in structure by which women could avoid poverty. Women who did not stay in marriages, wanted divorces, were accused of infidelities, bore children out of wedlock, or cohabitated without having experienced the sacrament of marriage, were sometimes reported to the local authorities (2006: 22). Poverty was thus often viewed as a result of not observing the moral ordered behavior that was dictated by the colonial authorities and the Catholic Church.

Women who were classified as “disobedient” by colonial authorities were sometimes castigated by being incarcerated inside *casas de recogimiento de mujeres*, or homes where “immoral” women were housed. Many of these places also housed orphans, the poor, and ill of the city. These *casas*, or institutional centers, which also served a charitable function, thus also played a critical role in establishing the expected morality of the capital by protecting the city from the immorality and poverty of women.

Yet, according to 19th century marriage and baptismal registries in churches across the colonial center of the city, only a small fraction of the population had state sanctioned (Catholic) unions while the majority lived in *uniones libre* (comparable to civil unions), were single parents, or lived alone (Dueñas 1994). The census of 1801 suggests that the organization of nuclear and extended families constituted only a small proportion of households, while women centered households (especially poor women who were single parents) were quite prevalent in most neighborhoods. Additionally, the majority of children were the product of single parent households or relationships outside of the dominant Catholic tradition (which were often referred to as “sinful” unions). Because the majority of the population did not follow the norms that the patriarchal society of Hispanic roots attempted to impose, these customs were viewed as being of the “poor” and were interpreted as “anomalous behaviors that were pernicious to morality, order, and the economic life of the crown” (1994: 2).

Additionally, it is important to note that the colonial family was not generally large or composed of multiple generations. Because regions of Colombia have diverse histories of immigration, the social practices of kinship and housing also differed greatly throughout the country. Colombian historian Pablo Rodriguez (1997) tells us that regions across Colombia were formed through different colonial processes, and some were quite distant from colonial settlements. Cartagena, for example, is a port city located in Colombia’s Caribbean coast that was at the center of the slave trade. Because of its location and its place as a gateway for travellers and slaves, the region was influenced by a range of social practices and experiences. Tunja, on the other hand, was a city built in the center of what was known as the indigenous *Muisca* territory (of which Bogotá also

formed part), while Medellín was founded as a commercial center for miners and Spaniards (1997: 37).

Historians (Rodriguez 1997; Castro Carvajal 2007) note that in the 19thth century, the number of people that resided together in the regions surrounding Tunja and Cartagena were quite small and that households exceeding ten persons were usually those of nobles. The houses of nobles were most often located near the center of colonial plazas, and slaves and servants were counted as part of the household, as all persons living in one household were counted as part of the same family. Whereas such noble families had an average of four children, poorer families had an average of 2.1 children, which suggests that social status and wealth played a significant role in the number of inhabitants in each household, as well as the number of children (Rodriguez 1997).

The formation of households and ways of living, however, are also linked to regional histories of slavery. Using census information from 1797, Rodriguez (1997) tells us that there were 1,120 slaves in Cali,⁶⁸ which represented 18% of that city's population (46). Of the nine hundred eighty-one households counted, two hundred and one owned slaves (which the author states were usually a "family of slaves" or slave women and their children). Sometimes the number of slaves living in one household numbered in excess of seventy. However, it is important to note that while slaves were counted as part of larger households (that is, the households of their owners), Rodriguez does not include information about the domestic and family relations of slaves, perhaps because this kind of data was not included in the census.

⁶⁸ Cali is located in what is now known as the department of Valle del Cauca, and is Colombia's second largest city.

Dueñas (1996) further notes that white, wealthy *peninsulares* or *criollos*⁶⁹ were the primary beneficiaries of the Catholic sacrament of marriage. Those categorized as *blancos*, or white, had the highest rate of marriage, whereas populations of African descent had the lowest rate of marriage (in part because of their enslaved status), and those categorized as *mestizos* or *mulattos* also had lower rates of marriage (137). Marriage registries from the *Catedral*, Bogotá's central church located adjacent to the *Plaza de Bolívar*, and only about six blocks from *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, reveal that between 1765-1799 in the neighborhood surrounding the church, the number of marriages registered with the church numbered more than the total registered marriages in poorer neighboring *barrios*, such as Las Nieves and Santa Bárbara (138). Additionally, one-third of the *mestizos* that were baptized in the churches of Las Nieves and Santa Bárbara were viewed as "illegitimate" and were born outside of Catholic unions.

According to Rodriguez, while a considerable number of male older adults of the 18th century continued to be heads of households in their advanced age, widowed women often lived under the care of their unmarried daughters. However, the majority of widowed women and unmarried women who did not have children lived in precarious circumstances in *inquilinos*, or rented bedrooms in tenement style structures. Begging was a common occupation for many older women, and many survived through the assistance of neighbors, and ultimately died alone in their rented bedroom homes (120). Elderly women who were categorized as *blancas* and whose finances were stable, were often aided by indigenous or enslaved women, whose freedom was guaranteed through the care of their elderly owners. Conversely, poor, *mestiza*, indigenous and women of

⁶⁹ *Peninsulares* were those that were born on the Iberian Peninsula, but were residents of the colony. *Criollos*, on the other hand, were born in the colony and were primarily of Iberian descent.

African descent “lived their abandonment inside their only patrimony, a thatch *ranchito*⁷⁰ in the humble *barrios* of the city” (121).

I offer this history of marriage, domestic social relations, and household structure throughout Colombia to demonstrate the diverse ways the “family” has been defined and practiced. Though Hispanic, Catholic notions of family have indeed served as a hierarchical model and expectation for social relations from the colonial period through the present, what is called the “family” in Colombia has in fact meant different things and has been practiced in diverse forms. It is also important to point out the social and kinship relations that do not always form part of dominant historical narratives about the family and census data, such as the domestic relations of slave families that were simply subsumed into the households of their owners.⁷¹

Moreover, while Catholic marriage was the expected form of union, and one which has dominated ideal models of kinship relations in Colombia through to the present, Dueñas points out that not everyone had access to the structure of marriage -- a structure that Ramírez suggests was supposed to “protect” women from poverty, as well as from their own potential immorality. In this sense, we might understand the Hispanic structure and model of the family as one that created and perpetuated inequalities between men, women, poor, wealthy, “old,” and those categorized as *blancos*, indigenous, or of African origin (among a range of other racial classifications that were common in the colony).

⁷⁰ While a *ranchito* may be translated as a ranch style home located in a more rural area of the country (and one in which livestock are raised), the author seems to be using the word *ranchito* to describe a small (note the Spanish diminutive *ito*), simple, or humble home in marginal areas of the city.

⁷¹ Additionally, the notion of marriage discussed in the booklets also disregards forms of housing and unions that existed in other parts of the country, such as indigenous dwellings (cf Jackson 1974; 1995).

Additionally, it is interesting to note that women who had access to capital were able to ensure their care in their old age by having somebody else care for them, such as a slave or another individual who might receive their freedom by fulfilling this duty.⁷² Yet, the descriptions of the colonial record as narrated by Dueñas, highlight the precarious situation of poor older women who had never married, were widowed, had not had children, or could not rely on their children for assistance. These descriptions position women, and especially older women, as icons of poverty (cf. Cohen 1995). Such descriptions have similar threads of comparison to the living situations of several older women patrons of the dining house whose homes and living practices I describe throughout the dissertation, but especially in chapter 7. While the author notes that poor, indigenous, mestizo, and black women lived alone in their old age inside *inquilinos*, it seems that their “abandonment” was directly linked to the absence and lack of access to a family structure that might have provided them care in their old age. In this sense, the expected obligations of family and the constructions of the family as a structure of care there are present in the booklet I have described (and in others published by the local state in the 1990s), as well as in Señora Bedoya’s letter, are perspectives that are also present in the colonial record.

The privileging of family as a structure of care is a view that is also shared by many of the older adults I came to know at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. In the section

⁷² During the course of my fieldwork, I came to know a woman in her late seventies who owned her own home and lived in a middle class neighborhood of Bogotá. Her husband, who had died several years earlier, had been a famous cartoonist for the newspaper *El Tiempo*. Though all of her children and grandchildren lived in various parts of Europe, she had the regular company of a woman who had been the family’s housekeeper for many years. The housekeeper, who was in her late sixties, poor, and originally from *el campo*, or a more rural area of Colombia, also had her own children and family, but was paid to accompany the home owner through the course of her old age. I do not offer this example to directly compare the circumstances of these women to the cases that Dueñas highlights in her text, however, it is important to note that these kinds of social relationships do indeed exist in Bogotá in the present.

that follows, I show the meanings patrons of the dining house, as well as Hermano Miguel, ascribe to obligations and kinship relations, as well as how “aloneness” in the latter years of an individual’s life is often read in moral terms.

Everything has its “pay back”: “Bad” Children and “Bad” Parents

Every morning upon arriving at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, I would make my way through the line of *abuelitos* who were waiting on the sidewalks of *carrera 4* to be ushered in to *comedor’s* dining area at approximately 11:30 am. After I had greeted most everyone in the line, I would usually sit down next to Señora Ricarda, a woman in her seventies who patronized the *comedor* at least four days per week. Señora Ricarda was usually wrapped in a *reboso*, or shawl, and was always seated on top of a piece of cardboard on the front concrete stoop of the house next door. Her curly, graying black hair was always arranged into two braids that snuck out from underneath her baseball cap and lay neatly on her shoulders.

Señora Ricarda and I had many conversations on that front stoop. Through the course of countless mornings, I learned that Señora Ricarda had lived all of her life in the central neighborhoods of Bogotá. Her mother had been born in a *pueblito*, or small town outside of the capital, and had given birth to Ricarda at the *Hospital San Juan de Dios*,⁷³ Colombia’s first modern hospital originally located on *carrera 10* between *calle 11* and *12*, only a few blocks away from the *comedor* and her current bedroom home.

⁷³ *Hospital San Juan de Dios* was founded in 1723 and was one of the first hospitals in Colombia, though it closed in the late 1990s. Initially, the hospital was funded by the *Junta General de Beneficencia de Cundinamarca* (General Council of Beneficence of Cundinamarca), and offered free medical care to Bogotá’s poor. Through the course of its existence it continued to serve its objective as a public hospital, but also became a research and teaching institution. It is still considered one of the most important scientific institutions in the history of modern Colombian medicine.

“I was born here, *su merced*.⁷⁴ I was raised here, married here. I had my children here, and was widowed here. Everything, everything here in Bogotá, *su merced*,” she once told me.

As we sat on that front stoop one morning in March 2007, I began to ask Señora Ricarda questions about her home, about the distance she traveled to get to and from the *comedor* everyday, as well as about her current family life.

“Do you live alone?” I asked as I sat beside her on the cold, concrete stoop.

“Well, yes *señorita*, who else would I live with?” she responded. I then proceeded to naively ask why she lived alone and whether any of her children lived nearby.

“Yes, but they are bad children. They don’t worry about me,” Señora Ricarda told me, responding to my second question. She then began to tell me a bit about each of her children, pointing in the direction of where they lived by signaling in the air with her finger. “They don’t visit me, and since I can’t see very well, I can’t get on the bus to see them. I would get lost, *señorita*.”

The topic of children and family came up again a couple of days later, as Señora Ricarda and I walked up the inclined streets of *barrio* Belén towards her *piezita*. When I asked her to tell me a little bit about her children, her immediate response was: “They are

⁷⁴ Colombians, specifically in the Andean region surrounding Bogotá, commonly interchange the use of *usted* with *su merced*. There are many arguments as to why *su merced* has been used as an everyday form of address in Bogotá and in the neighboring department of Boyacá. *Su merced* (perhaps originally used as *vuestra merced*) can roughly be translated as “your mercy,” “at your mercy,” or “your grace” and is pronounced without the final dental consonant “d” so that the words sounds like *su mercé*. While *tú* is usually reserved for neutral interactions in Spanish, and *usted* is often used for more “formal” exchanges, these distinctions do not always apply in the Colombian case. Adults with whom I spoke often addressed me, their children, and even family pets using *usted* and *su merced*. However, these linguistic practices are generational in that younger Colombians more regularly use *tú* when speaking to each other, though usually still reserve *usted* for speaking to older persons or in formal situations. While *su merced* was originally used as a sign of respect, especially under colonial circumstances, it became a common form of speech that is used in both formal and informal circumstances.

*malos, malos.*⁷⁵ I'm not important to them...I'm not worth anything to them." I was taken aback by her sharp response, and replied by telling her that I didn't believe her children could truly feel this way about her.

"Yes, *señorita*. My daughter who lives up there, when she found out that I had fallen, she just told me to walk with my stick like this," she replied, first pointing her finger further up the Andean streets signaling toward where her daughter lived, and then grabbing her walking stick, which was actually a curtain rod, and moving it back and forth across the ground, mimicking the way her daughter had advised her to use it after her fall.

"They are bad, bad. I'm not important to them. I don't mean anything to them," she concluded.

Comments such as these were common among older adults and among organizers of the *comedor*. At various points throughout my research, I myself wondered why there were so many older adults living alone and without family members. Did their families really not care for them? Weren't older adults and family relations particularly valorized in Colombia and in the Latin American region?

Older adults often talked openly about their relationships with their children. Some like Señora Ricarda, expressed sadness at the disconnections that existed between her and her children, and the loneliness and abandonment she experienced due to her isolation. Others like *el Tigre* (the Tiger), a man who ate his meals at the *comedor* everyday and lived in a dormitory for older adults, spoke with pride about the professional lives of his children and grandchildren who lived abroad, even though he

⁷⁵ Throughout this section, I have translated the Spanish word *malos* as "bad."

had not seen or heard from his sons in over twenty years. When I asked *el Tigre* upon first meeting him in August 2006 if he had children, he responded sharply, by saying, “Men don’t have children, they just engender them.” This was a telling comment, as *el Tigre* had already mentioned to me that he hadn’t played a role in raising his two biological children. He told me that he had one son living in Toronto and that though his sons had returned to Colombia to visit, he didn’t have contact with them and did not receive any kind of assistance from them. “My *comadre*⁷⁶ is the person who enjoyed them,” he added. Unlike Señora Ricarda, *el Tigre* did not seem to be visibly perturbed about the lack of communication between him and his sons.

Still others, like Señora Cecilia, received financial support from their children, though only interacted with them on rare occasions. Señora Cecilia was a stout woman in her late seventies, with tightly curled salt and pepper hair that was usually parted in the middle and combed so that the curls fell against her chin. Her eyelashes were always made prominent by a few coats of black mascara, and her nails were most always adorned with brightly colored (and sometimes chipped) purple nail polish. She usually wore a knitted sweater, a knee length skirt, ankle socks, and tan low-heeled shoes that had a strap across the top of the foot.

When I first met Señora Cecilia as she waited in line outside of *Comedor María es Mi Madre* in August 2006, I asked her whether she had any children. “I had six children,” she responded, linguistically putting her children in the past tense. Though she had given birth to six children, Señora Cecilia only spoke about one of her children in the present tense, a daughter who paid the nightly rent for her *piezita*, and who lived a

⁷⁶ A *comadre* or *compadre* is an individual who is made into kin through various rites of passages, including, but not limited to, becoming the godparent of a persons’ child, through marriage, and close friendship through the course of many years.

distance away in the southern *barrios* of the capital. Because her daughter was a *vendedora ambulante*, or a street vendor, she paid the \$6,000 pesos in rent payment (approximately \$3.25 in 2006) on a nightly basis, using the money she had earned selling her wares throughout the course of the day.⁷⁷ Since Señora Cecilia's daughter gave the rent money directly to the *dueña*, or owner of the house, after the end of her workday and after Señora Cecilia had already gone to sleep, Señora Cecilia seldom had the opportunity to see her daughter.

While the children of the older patrons of the dining house were often spoken about and were thus made present through language and storytelling, they were rarely, if ever, physically present. Though elders narrated both the presence and absence of kin relations in diverse ways, it is important to note that in the sixteen months I spent with the residents of the neighborhoods in and around the *comedor*, I never had the opportunity to meet any of the children that came across so vividly in the many conversations I had with local elders.

Often, the women elders assigned me the role of “daughter” or “granddaughter” by asking me to assist them in tasks that a relative might normally assist with. It was not uncommon for them to ask me to explain a doctor's notes or decipher the dose of a particular medication, or even to accompany them on a bus trip to request a clinic appointment. I often responded to them much like I would have my own grandmother, and volunteered to, for example, call clinics to verify doctor's appointments since most elders did not have their own phone and sometimes found it difficult to make their way to

⁷⁷ The amount that Señora Cecilia's daughter paid for her mother's rent was quite expensive in comparison to most *piezitas* of similar quality and size in the neighborhood. I assume that this price increase was due to the fact that Señora Cecilia's daughter paid the rent every night, rather than in a lump sum at the beginning of the month.

a *cabina telefónica*, or public calling center. I also made visits to their homes, ate lunch with them, and spent holidays with them in much the same way that a family member might have done.

Early in my fieldwork, José Luis, a younger patron who regularly assisted in cleaning the *comedor* after the *almuerzo* for a few *pesitos*, and I were wiping down renegade grains of rice and bits of beets from the twenty plastic tables and eighty white plastic chairs inside the *comedor*. I had met José Luis one afternoon in August 2006, after the *almuerzo* that had consisted of stewed turkey, soup, rice, and beet salad had already been served to and consumed by over one hundred patrons who had spent their morning waiting in line outside of the dining house. Unlike most of the *comedor's* patrons, José Luis was quite young as he looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties. His body was seemingly strong and youthful, which is why he, not an elder like Señora Ricarda, had been delegated the task of scrubbing the floors and wiping down the lunch tables. Although older patrons also volunteered for tasks, such as running errands, wiping down tabletops, and placing plates full of food on to the tables for the *almuerzo*, the most laborious work was allocated to those viewed as *jóvenes*, or youthful. Younger patrons, it seemed, were expected to “earn their keep” by contributing their labor to the maintenance of the *comedor*.

As we wiped the white table-tops and swept the tiled floor of the covered courtyard inside the dining house, I expressed my astonishment at the sheer number of older persons who depended on *comedores*, the care provided by religious organizations, as well as other residents of the neighborhood, for their daily sustenance. “I’m surprised to see so many *viejitos* here and around the street,” I said to José Luis.

José Luis's response to my naïve observation was quick and unexpected. *Todo tiene su recompensa en ésta vida*,⁷⁸ he said to me. He continued by telling me that children expect to be given *estudio*, or education, and expect to be treated well and be loved by their parents. "I have two daughters, one lives in Bogotá, and the other in the coast and I provide and care for them both. My parents provided for my education. But if parents don't provide for your education, if they treat you badly... *todo tiene su recompense en ésta vida*," he repeated, shaking his head in disapproval while vigorously wiping down the last of the tables.

José Luis's sharp words highlighted an expectation of kinship as a set of moral and filial obligations between parents and children. While he did not explicitly state that the older men and women who were patrons of the *comedor* were "bad" parents, his comments implied that the past actions of parents, such as providing for their children's education, offering them support, love and care, determined whether or not one would reap the future benefits of having been "good" parents. For José Luis, "good" kinship was thus "paid back" in like manner and obligations of kinship formed part of a reciprocal exchange of care. From this perspective, "kinship," regardless of the quality of the relationship, was a political-economic as well as a morally charged practice that not only played an ideological role in providing a structure of nurturance and care in the future, but also potentially contributed to its own abandonment.

⁷⁸ While the word *recompensa* may be translated as "recompense," the expression "payback" may be more appropriate in this context given that José Luis was referring to the idea that adults who don't care for their children in particular ways do not receive care in return, and due to this, live under difficult circumstances. This lack of return can thus be viewed as a kind of negative reciprocity. I have chosen to leave the original Spanish statement and offer potential translations given the varied possible meanings José Luis may have given to the word *recompensa*.

Elders and patrons, however, were not the only individuals who connected kinship relations of the past to the difficulties of aging and living of the present. In October of 2006, a man known to most as *el Gordo* (literally translated as “the fat one” or “fatso”) was lingering inside the dining area while Señora Aurelia, a woman who was about seventy years of age and who picked up lunch for her and her home-bound mother on a daily basis,⁷⁹ was exiting the *comedor*. As Señora Aurelia was leaving, *el Gordo* made a loud comment about Señora Aurelia, stating that her children and her *parientes* (relatives by marriage) should be taking care of her needs. *El Gordo*’s comment positioned the family as responsible for the care of Señora Aurelia (and by extension, her mother), while implicitly suggesting that feeding her and her mother should not be the responsibility of the *comedor*. Hermano Miguel was only a few feet away from *el Gordo* when he made this comment, and quickly responded to him by saying, “If you had been more *organizado* with your life you wouldn’t be here, you would be doing better!” *El Gordo* simply laughed at Hermano Miguel’s response as the *hermano* angrily stormed out of the dining area.

Though *el Gordo*’s comment did not come across as a judgment regarding the quality of Señora Aurelia’s past kin relations and the reason why she could not depend on her family for her meals in the present, Hermano Miguel’s response to *el Gordo* did indeed highlight his lack of responsibility in “getting his life together” in the past as a reason why he too was reliant on assistance from the *comedor* for his daily needs. In Colombian Spanish and in the context in which Hermano Miguel spoke, the term

⁷⁹ Taking food out of the *comedor* was not generally allowed, and when patrons attempted to do so, they were immediately reprimanded. Only Señora Aurelia and one other woman who I only knew as *la monjita* (or nun) were allowed to leave the premises with their food packed into containers they brought from home.

organizado (which Hermano Miguel used in the past tense) signaled to the decisions and practices of an individual in their efforts to economically, educationally, or socially enhance and be responsible for their lives and their future. For example, a couple that is unmarried but is serious about their relationship might *organizarse* be it through marriage, by making a home together, having children, or getting employment and education that might make their future possible. Hermano Miguel's comment suggested that such practices in *el Gordo*'s younger years might have led to different circumstances for him in 2007.

By telling *el Gordo* that he would be “doing better” if had he been more *organizado* earlier in his life, Hermano Miguel was suggesting that such responsibility might have prevented *el Gordo* from waiting in line for his food and perhaps he might have had the opportunity to live and be cared for by his family. Thus, Hermano Miguel was implying that *el Gordo* had not fostered significant social and kin relations, had potentially not cared for his own children (though it was not clear if he had any), and thus, had not been an active participant in securing his future. Because of this, he too did not have family or *parientes* that were willing to offer him care as he entered the later years of his life.

It is interesting to note, however, that while Señora Aurelia did depend on the food prepared at the *comedor* for her daily nutrition, she in fact lived with her mother and helped care for her with the assistance of the *almuerzos* provided by the dining house. The fact that she did not live alone and shared a meal with her kin (albeit, a meal that came from outside her home and was not prepared by a family member or friend), tells us that reliance on the *comedor* for one's meal did not necessarily imply that an individual

did not have significant kin relations present in their daily lives. In fact, there were several patrons who often arrived at the *comedor* with their family members, including an elderly father with his cognitively disabled daughter, as well as a husband and wife approximately in their late forties or early fifties.

The examples I offer above position kin relations as moral relationships, depicting perspectives regarding children's obligations to their aging parents, and parents' obligations toward their children. Such understandings of "good" kin relations position kinship as a moral mechanism that might "secure" an individual's future, as well as the care, nurturance, and financial assistance that older adults require to live a dignified life. In this sense, the view of the local state regarding the role of the "family" as a care structure for the aged (and one that has been "broken" as a result of the interconnected processes of violence and migration) is not too distinct from the perspectives of the various older adults with whom I spoke. For Señora Ricarda, for example, the obligations of kinship that she feels should provide her with care in her old age are not present, even though some of her children live only blocks away. In her description of them, Señora positioned her children as "bad" children due to her feeling that they had not met their filial obligations.

Additionally, by implying that individuals such as *el Gordo* hadn't met their obligations or had not been "organized," Hermano Miguel and José Luis's comments also intimated that not having significant kin that might care for an elder implied that an individual had not honored these kin obligations in the past. Thus, according to this argument, having the "security" of family in one's old age indicated that an individual had led a moral life, whereas those that were not cared for by their relatives, had not. In

this sense, the present circumstances of many elders, such as living alone and having to depend on external sources such as *Comedor María es Mi Madre* for sustenance, indexically positioned older adults as not having offered proper care and nurturance to their children.

If we return to the letter Señora Bedoya wrote to the three co-presidents of Colombia's 1991 National Constituent Assembly, the author makes clear that she believes kinship is about obligations, and the expectations of care that are connected to these obligations. According to Señora Bedoya (as well as the author of the article she includes in her letter), children benefit from the love and care giving of their parents, and thus should be obligated to reciprocate that care once their parents are no longer able to care for themselves. For Señora Bedoya, such obligations of care are part and parcel of kinship, and thus, should be officially secured through state intervention in the context of constitutional reform.

However, it is important to note that I do not mean to imply that the care and nurturance of children is solely done under the conditions of expected reciprocity, or that Señora Ricarda, for example, cared for her children in an effort to preserve her future self in her old age. Rather, my ethnography reveals the ways individuals, positioned as older adults in quite vulnerable circumstances, often constructed their filial kinship relations as obligations of care and personal security in the context of difficult experiences.

Regardless, some of the elders with whom I spoke did constitute themselves as having been "good" and caring parents by describing the ways they cared for their children. As I will show in chapter six, Señora Ricarda took on various jobs and sold fava beans and peanuts on the same street corner for forty-eight years as part of her efforts to

levantar (raise or “lift”) her four children and create a home for them as a poor, single mother. By telling me that her children were *malos* (a comment that she repeated several times during the course of my fieldwork), Señora Ricarda was critiquing her children because they had not reciprocated the care that she had provided for them as their parent. Her critiques of their lack of filial obligations, and her expectation that they should offer her care, positioned Señora Ricarda as having been a “good” and “giving” other. In this sense, Señora Ricarda was highlighting her investment in her children as one that should have secured her future.

The creation of the person through processes of caring, as well as ideas regarding the expected reciprocity of care are highlighted in Nancy Munn’s ethnography, *The Fame of Gawa* (1985). In her research on the island of Gawa, Munn emphasizes the notion that the giving of things, such as food to a child are practices that also maintain, extend, and preserve the self. Munn describes a *vaakam* relationship, which offers the means by which to achieve influence by consistently nourishing others with food. The author tells us: “When a man or woman who has regularly fed a child grows old, the child in turn should care for this person – for instance, by giving daily food when the latter is ill (cf. Weiner 1976: 125). The long-term outcome of this food giving is thus a return of bodily care to the original donor at a time when he or she requires the kind of help that has been given to the recipient in the past. This spatiotemporal cycle inherent in the *vaakam* relationship points up the difference between nourishing one’s own body (eating) and giving food to another to eat” (Munn 1985: 50).

For Munn, giving food and caring for other Gawans is a practice that nourishes ongoing relations, which in turn, secures the nourishing of an individual’s own future in

and through these relations. By not solely focusing on the self, that is, solely feeding one's own body rather than caring and nourishing a child, an individual nourishes their relations to others, which also offers them a way to preserve their future "selves." In this sense, feeding, caring, and nurturing others has a temporal dimension in that such care may be returned to the giver at a future point when it is needed.

While my discussion of Señora Ricarda and other elders at *Comedor María es Mi Madre* is socially, economically, and political distinct from the Gawan communities that Munn describes, her work offers us a way to think about how the giving of care, love, and sustenance is not only about reciprocity and the nurturance of others, but is also a way by which persons constitute themselves as "good" persons and "good" parents amidst difficult circumstances.

In the next section, I highlight the ways older adults experience these "difficult circumstances" in their everyday lives. Focusing on two ethnographic examples from my fieldwork, I endeavor to make visible and examine some of the structural inequalities that are part of "growing older."

The Violence of Growing Older

Older adults were quite visible in the central areas of the capital as they shuffled in and out of the various social welfare programs, community centers, training programs, and churches of the many small central *barrios* of the capital. In order to continue to receive their *bono*, elders were required to regularly attend workshops run by various state agencies held inside church activity rooms and community centers. Most workshops included activities such as *manualidades* wherein approximately thirty to thirty-five *abuelitos* exercised their arms, hands and fingers by making various crafts such as

Christmas ornaments, greeting cards, and clay masks dusted with gold glitter. Group facilitators also screened films or read stories aloud for the purposes of entertainment, but that were also intended to serve an educational purpose.

The person in charge of the meeting, usually a representative of COINFA, a non-profit organization that aims to assist vulnerable populations through classes and recreational activities in an attempt to “strengthen dignity” (*coinfa* n.d.)⁸⁰ or the *Departamento Administrativo de Bienestar Social* (DABS),⁸¹ always took a roll-call to ensure that the *abuelito* who received the *bono* was present, and as a *supervivencia*, or evidence that they were still alive and thus, still eligible for their *bonito*. In most of the workshops I attended, the *abuelitos* were given snacks often consisting of a banana, a bag of milk, and a small *bizcochito*, or sweet pastry. While the giving and eating of food only occurred for about fifteen minutes at the tail-end of these meetings, the act of feeding assured that attendees remained for the duration of the gathering, long after attendance had been taken.

These meetings were usually small, assembling approximately twenty to thirty elders in a classroom type setting. However, every few months state affiliated agencies would convene all of the older adults who received *bonos* in their jurisdiction for larger gatherings. *Abuelitos* were informed of these assembly type meetings during their regular visits to the community center, but news and *chisme* (gossip) traveled relatively fast, and it seemed that both old and young knew when and where such a meeting would be held.

⁸⁰ Website accessed July 8, 2011: http://www.coinfa.com/quienes_somos.htm#p

⁸¹ In 2007, the *Departamento Administrativo de Bienestar Social* (DABS), which was created by the federal government in 1968, became the *Secretaria Distrital de Integración Social* (District Council of Social Integration).

On a chilly gray morning in August 2008, I made my way to the *comedor* to meet Pachito and Manuel (two patrons I had come to know well), who had agreed take me to an 8 am assembly being held at the *Centro Comunitario de Lourdes* only a few blocks up the Andean foothills. My *colectivo*, or small vans that are used as public transportation throughout Colombia, had arrived at a deserted *comedor* slightly after eight in the morning. Breakfast was clearly over as the streets in and around *carrera* 4 were nearly empty and there was no lunch line of older adults in sight. María Elvira, wrapped in a burnt orange suit jacket and a thick woolen scarf, stood lingering at the entrance of the dining house. Unlike most of the older adults I have met in the neighborhood, María Elvira did not receive a *bono*, and thus, was not required to attend the assembly.

“Come on, I’ll accompany you. I know everyone at *Lourdes*,” she told me as soon as I greeted her and mentioned that I had arrived late to meet Pachito and Manuel for the assembly. We left the dining house and turned left on *carrera* 4, and then made another left on the next corner and began our walk up the inclined road. The streets were unusually quiet and empty, and I could only surmise that most of the older residents of the neighborhood had already made their way to the mass meeting at *Lourdes*, as the residents termed the community center. As we walked I tried to geographically orient myself amidst the thick adobe walls of the houses that surrounded us and asked Señora María Elvira whether we were still technically in *barrio* Belén, the neighborhood where the *comedor* was located. “Yes, this is Belén,” she responded. Most of the adobe houses along the street were quite old, with deep fissures that looked beyond repair. Others looked to be newly renovated to correspond to Republican-era architecture, with recently

replaced wooden window frames and wrought iron that served as both decoration and protection.

The inclined streets were becoming steeper as we continued our walk up the mountainside, yet María Elvira at seventy-two years old, appeared to walk up the broken streets with ease. “Why don’t we walk on the sidewalk,” I suggested several times, moving my feet toward the curb, as cars, trucks, and public buses were continually speeding down the road, only inches from our bodies. As we continued our climb, I noticed a large truck heading down the mountain road at high speed. María Elvira was walking along the side of the street a few feet in front of me when I saw the truck moving toward us to make a sharp, downhill turn. It was clear that the driver was not looking in our direction as he maneuvered the vehicle near us, grazing her clothing as he sped by. I yelled out to María Elvira as soon as I saw the truck’s shift in direction, and she was quickly able to move out of the way so as to avoid a direct impact. The motorist, it seemed, was unconcerned with the close call and continued his high-speed drive down the *cerro*.

“He didn’t honk,” María Elvira said in a somewhat exasperated tone. “One time a car almost hit me and I broke the window. A man passing by said the incident hadn’t been my fault because the driver hadn’t honked,” she added as we continued our uphill walk.

“And...your *piezita*?” I ask María Elvira, knowing that her home, which had consisted of a small room inside an abandoned structure, used to be on the other side of a street now empty of buildings.

“I don’t like walking near there, it gives me *guayabo*,” María Elvira explained. Though *guayaba* may be translated as guava in English, the expression *tengo guayabo*, or *me da guayabo* in Colombia refers to the experience of being “hung over” after drinking too much alcohol, but also corresponds to a feeling of sadness and nostalgia.

“All of the those buildings were demolished to make way for the *avenida*?” I asked, remarking on the now bare landscape that would soon be fully transformed into a modern highway. In an effort to *recuperar*,⁸² or improve the neighborhood, ease congestion, and more swiftly connect the central areas of the city to the southern sectors, many homes, along with Señora María Elvira’s *piezita*, had been torn down and a large *avenida*, or transit boulevard, was being built in their place.

“Yes, but the sisters of the *viejito* had already thrown all of my things away. Remember the bed I used to have? They threw it away,” María Elvira told me, referring to the possessions that only a few months earlier, had been housed inside her *piezita*. The *viejito* to which Señora María Elvira referred had been her common law husband for many years, and had died ten years earlier after being hit by a bus only a few blocks away from where we stood. Because Señora María Elvira and her *viejito* were not married and because she found it difficult to legally prove that they had lived together for an extended period of time, the *viejito*’s family had legal rights to the now non-existent *piezita*. According to Señora María Elvira, the *viejito*’s sisters had removed all of her belongings prior to selling the property to the federal government for the building of the highway.

⁸²In this context, the term *recuperar*, or to recover, has a double connotation in Spanish. To *recuperar* the neighborhood signals to the physical projects, such as the transit boulevard, that in 2008 was being built to connect the neighborhood to other parts of the city and that may economically and socially improve its connections and status in relation to the rest of the city. Additionally, in recovering this neighborhood, there is also an aim to socially restore a landscape that has a violent past (and present) and that is constructed as “backward” by many citizens of the capital.

“What about your photographs?” I asked, recalling the various photos she had shown me when she had taken me to her bedroom home the previous year.

“Those too...they threw away everything, even the photos of the *viejito*.”

As we continued up the winding street Señora María Elvira told me that she would be celebrating a birthday on Friday.

“How old will you be?” I asked María Elvira after gauging whether asking her this question was socially appropriate.

“How old do you think I will be?” she responded.

“Maybe sixty-nine?”

“I will be seventy-six! You can’t tell, right? I was born August, 22 1936.”

“So, then you’ll be 72?” I asked hesitantly after doing some quick mental math.

“Yes...72. You can’t tell, right?”

“Not at all!” I responded.

“It’s because I walk a lot.”

The narrow, broken concrete streets had now turned into ankle-deep mud. Recent heavy rains had caused the newly exposed earth from the expansive construction site to stream down the mountainside, making our climb messier and clumsier than I had expected. While finding creative ways to subsidize rent payments or accessing food on Sundays and holidays when *comedores* and other social service centers were closed made housing and a food-getting a challenge, seemingly trivial things like muddy streets, exposed sewer and water holes (as their metal coverings are often stolen and sold as profitable scrap metal), and the indifference of drivers can make even a short walk a potentially life-threatening routine for elderly persons.

We arrived at the entrance of *Centro Comunitario Lourdes* and walked past the security guard that stood watch at the main entrance, following a large group of elders as they headed into the *teatro*, or auditorium where the meeting was to take place. The chilly auditorium with theater-like seating was filled with a few hundred older residents of the nearby neighborhoods who were all bundled up in layers of coats, scarves, and hats. As we entered, I could hear the voice of a woman coming from the stage calling out name after name, as if she were conducting a roll call in an elementary school classroom.

“Juan Manuel Montes Parra,” the female voice said loudly.

“*A la orden*,” responded a male voice using a common local expression that means, “at your service.”

“María Augustina Monroy Piñeda,” the voice called out.

“*Presente*,” yelled a female voice from the first few rows of the right side of the theater.

“Carlos Eduardo Pinzón Ovieda,”

“*Presente*.”

“María de los Dolores Rodriguez Cruz”

“*¡Falleció!*,” responded several loud voices from different parts of the theater to let the woman know that María de los Dolores Rodriguez Cruz had died.

“*¡Falleció?*” repeated the voice on the stage, raising her head from her desk to look at the audience, revealing her face for the first time.

Several voices respond with a loud “*¡Sí!*” while many loudly repeated, “*¡Falleció!*” The woman on the stage made a quick note of the death with a stroke of her pen.

“Alvaro Gustavo Santos Rojas,” continued the voice, calling out several more names off her list.

Those whose names had already been called began to shuffle about, gathering their belongings and making their way out the doors of the auditorium. The woman behind the desk tried to persuade everyone to participate in the second portion of the assembly, which consisted of a film about what she termed “the beautiful role of *abuelitos*.” The opening credits of the film were projected on to a screen erected at the front of the *teatro* and those remaining inside the auditorium settled in to watch a movie about the life of a seventy-year old retired professional living with his son, daughter in law, and grandson in a house located in the picturesque *campo*, or countryside on the wealthy northern outskirts of the capital.⁸³ In the film, the protagonist made monthly trips by taxi into the heart of Bogotá to stand in line to receive his pension payment. Through the course of standing in the cue month after month, he fell in love with a much younger woman who waited in a separate line alongside him. However, this budding romance was mired by the fact that his pension would soon be direct deposited into a bank account, taking away his monthly routine of traveling to the center of the capital to line up to receive his income. The eradication of the line not only compromised his monthly mobility, but also took away his place among the line of people he had come to know in intimate ways. Additionally, his son and daughter in law had decided to separate, and his rebellious teenage grandson got into continuous trouble, which threatened to separate his family and support structure.

⁸³ Unfortunately, I neglected to ask the person organizing the event for the title of the film that was screened. I have been unable to find more information regarding this film, and thus, do not know the title.

Halfway through the film, the theater was still relatively full, though several individuals had already packed up and walked out the door. Most, if not all of the elders seated inside the theater watching the film lived alone, and had little to no contact with their family members. Like Señora Bedoya, some *abuelitos* I came to know had described the distance they felt between them and their relatives as a kind of familial abandonment, rather than a separation that harnessed their independence. Films such as the one screened at this particular meeting were often shown to reflect the challenges of how aging was experienced by older adults in Colombia. Like many of those seated in the theater, the lead character in the film was experiencing the loneliness of familial disconnection, the loss of independence that often came along with aging, while simultaneously creating and maintaining intimate relationships with others that surrounded him. Gray hair, wrinkles, and advanced biological age also physically aligned the protagonist of the film to those elders viewing the life on the screen inside the auditorium, while the routine of waiting in line for their livelihoods was also an experience with which most viewers could empathize.

Yet, the film also portrayed an idealized model of aging that was quite distinct from the everyday social experiences of aging that were common among the elders I came to know in central Bogotá. None of those sitting inside the theater received a pension and subsisted mostly from the tiny monthly *subsídio* they received, which in most cases was direct deposited into a bank account created solely for that purpose. In fact, scarcity and the lack of access to economic and nutritional sustenance were the primary reasons why elders were required to be present at meetings such as this one in the first place. Their verbal responses of “present” or *a la orden* upon hearing their names

called out by the woman behind the desk, not only affirmed their presence at the meeting (and affirmed their existence for and by the State), but also served as a *supervivencia*, or proof of their biological existence, and thus their continued eligibility to receive their *bono*.

Even though the protagonist of the film struggled to negotiate the challenges of family life as well as those that accompanied growing older, his family ultimately continued to serve as a support system for him. Though the elder's son had separated from his wife, the protagonist continued to reside at the home of his son and grandson, and he continued to play a significant role in family decisions. This model of aging, where elders live in relative safety, with their families, inside houses, receive retirement pensions, and where commuting via taxis was the norm, is an experience of growing older that was not found among the older adults I came to know in Bogotá. Rather than serving to show the presence of sameness and shared struggle among *Bogotano* elders, the film highlighted the stark social, economic, and familial differences that existed among those constructed as “aged.”

Additionally, death and illness among members of this cohort, it seemed, were not constructed as states of being that were out of the ordinary or even unexpected. Whereas the deaths of individuals from a younger cohort of names, perhaps those of teenagers, middle aged persons, women and even elders from other social and economic groups, may have garnered more surprise, death, illness, and disappearance were often constructed as inevitable and “natural” among the older adults in the area, and could happen even while walking up the *cerro* on one's way to a meeting that would otherwise ensure one's continued sustenance, and thus, economic support.

Desaparecida/Disappeared

A familiar face peered into the dining area of *Comedor María es Mi Madre* on a rainy February morning in 2007. **DESAPARECIDA**, read the small sign that was posted to the right of the entrance to the *comedor*. The anxious word was printed in bold, capitalized block letters above the image of a gray haired, elderly woman. The name Margarita Durán was written alongside the photograph, and several telephone numbers framed the underside of the woman's face. Though the face looked familiar to me, I had a difficult time placing her countenance amidst the many faces of the numerous *abuelitos* who make their way in and out of the *comedor* every week.

“How long has this been here?” I asked Señora Myrian, who was standing behind the counter that separated the industrial kitchen from the dining area. “The family came by on Saturday to post the flyer,” Señora Myrian informed me as she chopped a huge pile of onions in preparation for the afternoon lunch. “Why don't we call one of those phone numbers to see if she has been found?” she continued as she picked up the phone. After several attempts at calling, Señora Myrian was informed by the person who had answered the other end of the line that the family had just learned via a local radio broadcast that Margarita Durán was in the hospital and that her relatives were already en route to verify the patient's identity.

“She was hit by a *buseta*,” Agustín, a patron who sometimes helped the *hermanos* with various errands, told me later that day, as the sign and unknown whereabouts of Margarita Durán had been a reference point for all those who had visited the *comedor* that afternoon.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Individuals who are over sixty years of age are the primary victims of traffic accidents (Gómez et. al 2010 [citing Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá, Bogotá 2009]). During my time in Bogotá, two other elders that I

During my time at the *comedor*, relatives of patrons of the dining house would frequently come in during the lunch meal and ask Hermano Miguel, another worker, or myself if they could look around for a family member, sometimes a mother, father, uncle or aunt with whom they had lost touch. They would often walk around each of the lunch tables looking into the faces of patrons for an inkling of familiarity. Many had not seen their relatives in years. Others, it seemed, lived in different neighborhoods and had not heard from their kin in several days or weeks, and dropped in out of concern for their safety or to get a sense of their whereabouts. At times, relatives came into the *comedor* after the death of a family member who frequented the dining house to glean information about potential property inheritances, or even to inform the organizers, volunteers and fellow patrons of the death of the *abuelito*.

Throughout the course of the day I began to wonder, what would happen if Señora Ricarda or Señora María Elvira suddenly stopped coming to the *comedor*? How would we know if they were okay? Would anyone post a flyer or sign with their photo if they too were to “disappear”?

It is interesting to note that the sign with the photo of Señora Durán that was posted at the entrance of the dining house included the word *desaparecida* rather than *extraviada*, the word for “missing” in Spanish. The word *desaparecido* carries with it the presumption of the death or the non-existence of an individual. It was used as a euphemism during the dictatorships of Chile and Argentina in the 1970s to refer to individuals who were presumably killed by the dictatorship. The non-existence of a body or a trace of that person made their death part of that disappearance.

came to know (neither of whom were patrons of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*) were hit by vehicles as they crossed city streets. One survived, while the other one was fatally wounded.

There is a violence embedded in the use of the verb, which points to the vanishing or erasure of a person and their body by another individual or groups of individuals, and the presumption of the death of that individual. Syntactically, the term “to disappear” is an intransitive verb, but has been transformed into a transitive verb given that persons did not disappear themselves, but rather, were made to disappear, often by what was perceived as an intangible force.

The word *desaparecida/o* has been used in Colombia and other parts of Latin America to describe persons who have been forcibly disappeared, made to strategically vanish, and often presumed dead by various factions. In Colombia, a country that has historically had one of the highest kidnapping rates in the world, the term “disappeared” has connotations to persons who have been kidnapped for political motivations, especially young members of the military and police officials stationed in “red zone” areas controlled by *las Farc*, as well as high profile politicians.

Only a few blocks away from the *comedor* at the *Plaza de Bolívar* where the *Palacio de Justicia* (Supreme Court building) and the national capitol buildings are located, signs and images of men and women who have been disappeared are often draped across the *Liévano* building that houses the mayor’s office. Signs similar to the one posted inside *Comedor María es mi Madre* were also often affixed to the sides of buildings and light posts throughout the capital and came in many different sizes, colors, and fonts. These signs visually identified individuals who had gone missing or somehow disappeared and asked the public’s assistance in determining their location or information about the circumstances of their disappearance. Their strategic placement in the political center of power also served as a critique of the government who many felt had done little

to prevent kidnappings of this kind, find and prosecute their captors, and rescue those who had gone missing. In doing so, these signs and the family members who frequented the site to participate in rallies, aimed to make visible and public the cause of those who had disappeared or gone missing. Many of these “disappeared” individuals had been missing for months, and even years, and vanished with little trace.

Politically and economically motivated kidnapped individuals, however, do not “disappear.” The images of kidnapped persons, such as those of Ingrid Betancourt and Clara Rojas, two women who were kidnapped in February 2002 and released in 2008, and Jhon Frank Pinchao, a policeman who escaped in 2007, made their way into the media by their captors in order to prove that they were still alive, and thus negotiate their release. These individuals, as well as other persons who have been kidnapped, have gained visibility through public rallies and via their families’ efforts to continue to make their plight known through their many years of captivity.

However, for Margarita Durán and for the older adults who spend their days in and around the dining house, the term *desaparecida/o* had different connotations. It seemed rather obvious to all at the dining house that the image of a missing gray-haired woman posted inside the *comedor* was not that of a young person, someone that had vanished and was presumed dead, a political figure, or someone who would likely be a victim of a kidnapping motivated by political affiliations or by a large ransom.

There were many moments throughout my time at the *comedor* when an *abuelito* who was a regular patron would suddenly stop showing up. Their absence would be noticed after several days when someone would wonder out loud about their whereabouts. “Where is that *abuelita*?” or “That *viejita* has become lost,” Hermano

Miguel or Myrian would say. It seemed that Margarita Durán and the other *abuelitos* represented an entirely different kind of disappearance; a disappearance that was usually not due to the direct actions of another person or group. Instead, these disappearances were often related to a *resfriado* (a cold), a lack of proper medical attention, unsuitable housing, a fall while walking along a muddy street or into an exposed sewer hole, a traffic accident, lack of good nutrition, or the cold Andean air. On more than one occasion, *abuelitos* did indeed seem to vanish without a trace due to such circumstances.

Conclusion

In his monograph, *Pathologies of Power* (2005), Paul Farmer highlights the often unrecognized forms of violence that critically affect people's lives. The author makes visible the experiences of suffering and the death of individuals in Haiti to show that suffering and risk are "structured" by deep historical and economic processes. AIDS, tuberculosis, infectious and parasitic diseases, hunger, and poverty are all forms of suffering that Farmer argues are the product of direct or indirect human action, as well as political and economic forces. Farmer notes that poor persons are not only more likely to suffer from disease and poverty, but "are also less likely to have their suffering noticed" (50). By using the term "structural violence," Paul Farmer attempts to make visible "the violence of everyday life" and the socio-political-economic matrix in which this suffering and violence is embedded.

In an effort to understand the diverse and shifting categories, locations and practices of violence, recent ethnographic scholarship has made the study of violence an object of analysis, acknowledging both the extra-ordinary and everyday dimensions of violence. Working against perceptions of violence solely as an external force that

ruptures ordered, everyday life, Coronil and Skurski (2007) engage violence “as a complex set of practices, representations, and experiences” (2) that are at the heart of social life and relations. With the work of Farmer, Coronil, and Skurski in mind, we might reconsider Señora Duran’s “disappearance” as well as the everyday potential for injury and death for the *abuelitos* of the neighborhood, as deeply connected to the same structures and experiences of inequality, human rights violations, and violence to which the National Constituent Assembly was responding in their aim to reform Colombia’s constitution.

Such “everyday” forms of violence are often occluded and trivialized in the case of Colombia, where violence has historically been experienced, studied, and narrated in brutal and “extraordinary” ways. As I discussed in chapter one, the experience of *la Violencia* in the 1940s and 1950s resulted in the deaths of between 250,000 and 300,000 Colombians throughout the countryside, as well as the destruction of much of the capital during the *Bogotazo*. The sheer magnitude of human destruction, and the often brutal ways violence was marked on Colombian bodies, has sparked many debates that have narrated violence in Colombia as “pathological” and psychological in nature (Villar-Borda 2004). Such widely read and accepted narrations of violence have played a role in constructing conflict in Colombia as haphazard, dysfunctional and aberrant (Bailey 1967), thus situating violence as unparalleled and distinct from other conflicts in Latin America and the world (Guzmán, et. al: 1962). It is important to note, however, that such narrations of violence disregard the social, economic, ethnic, and racial dimensions of *la Violencia*, and the role of the Colombian State(s) in fostering and perpetuating violence.

More recently, the experiences of violence of the 1980s and 1990s, which included the social “cleansing” (*limpieza social*) of undesirables (often called *desechables*, a term I further discuss in chapter five) by para-state and state forces, violence enacted by *guerilla* organizations, and paramilitary groups that have attempted to respond to *guerillas* through other extreme forms of violence, have also become experiences that are a part of everyday life. With this understanding of violence in mind, it seems plausible that the structural violence of poverty and the conditions that might lead to the disappearance of an elderly woman in these neighborhoods may not generally be categorized as a form of violence, but rather, as a part of the normal process of “becoming old” in these neighborhoods. Following the work of Paul Farmer, we might consider the lack of attention to something as seemingly ordinary as a cold, the gaps left uncovered from the theft of sewer covers, and the close calls that Señora María Elvira experienced as she walked down muddy streets, as forms of violence that have become expected parts of everyday life and aging.

Chapter Four
The Pantry of Bogotá

GROCERY LIST

Ten 20-pound bags of rice
Pasta
Potatoes
Bubble gum flavored Yogurt
Ketchup
Chocolate *Boyacense*
200 one-liter bags of Alquería brand milk
10 one-pound bags of Salt
Fideos *Doria*
Sugar
27 containers of *Leche Klim* (powdered milk)
300 bottles of *Sedal* shampoo
40 heads of organic Romaine lettuce
40 pounds of plantains attached to the vine

Our large shopping cart was filled to the brim with groceries. Among them were Sedal brand shampoo, Head and Shoulders dandruff shampoo, Baby Quaker instant cereal, *Galletas Caravana* (multicolored frosted cookies), 2 liter bottles of Coca-Cola, bags of Alquería brand milk, Christmas cookies in a shiny, tin box, *Caldo de Gallina* (chicken bouillon cubes), shaving cream, spiced drinking chocolate, coffee, and a variety of organic produce. This *mercado* was composed of goods and food products that might

resemble the pantries and refrigerators of many *Bogotanos* as well as the grocery lists of numerous Colombian families. Given the high price and limited accessibility of organic produce in Bogotá, one might assume something about the economic class to which this family belonged and thus, where in the capital they might reside. The presence of *Baby Quaker* cereal and frosted cookies might further prompt one to speculate that young children or infants formed part of this family. Some of the groceries in the shopping cart might also signal to the gender and ages of family members, the size of the family, taste and hygiene preferences, as well as the food traditions of the Christmas and New Year's holidays to come.

It was March 2007, three months after the end of the year holiday season. The vegetables, sweets, toiletries and other foods in the oversized wooden shopping cart were not being purchased for a family with young children, or for a family of five, six, or even seven. They weren't being purchased for a consumer of one particular age or gender, and the taste preferences of a specific person did not figure into the decision to purchase one product over another. Instead, the "family" that would receive, consume, and transform these products, the "family" Hermano Miguel often referred to as his "children," were composed of the over one hundred elders who ate their breakfast, lunch, and dinner at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*.

In this chapter, I shift my analytic focus from the spaces of the *comedor* and the neighborhoods of central Bogotá to the warehouse headquarters of the *Fundación Banco Arquidiocesano de Alimentos of Bogotá*, or the Food Bank of the Archdiocese of Bogotá. The food bank was one of the primary organizations that supplied *Comedor María es Mi Madre* and many private and government-run social service institutions with foods and

other goods necessary to carry out their goals. I begin by introducing the reader to the history, goals, and social actors of the food bank, and position the work of the *Banco de Alimentos* within the social history of food banking in the United States. I show the various ways the food bank purchases and receives donated foods from a variety of multinational corporations, and the implications involved in redistributing foods that come from corporations that are often knee deep in producing the inequalities that make such food charity necessary in Bogotá. However, in the process of redistributing this food to the poor so as to interrupt the hunger that exists, the food bank assigns a new kind of value to goods that are embedded in the economic market, and re-imagines them as substances of “dignity” that have the potential to transform the bodies and lives of their new consumers.

The Food Bank of the Archdiocese of Bogotá

Every Thursday morning, Hermano Miguel, *comedor* volunteers, or other Franciscan brothers living at the dining house, made their way to the *Banco de Alimentos de la Archidiócesis de Bogotá* to purchase the groceries that would be transformed into meals for the *abuelitos* of the neighborhood. On this particular Thursday in October 2006, Señora María Elvira and I were busily organizing the bottles and boxes of donated pharmaceuticals in alphabetical order on the shelves of a small room to the right of the entrance of the *comedor* that served as an unofficial pharmacy, storage facility, medical and dental consultation room, as well as a space where I conducted fieldwork interviews.

As María Elvira and arranged bottles and tablets with complicated chemical names Hermano Miguel came into the room and asked if I would like to accompany him to the *Banco de Alimentos* for the *comedor*'s weekly shopping appointment. Every

Thursday afternoon since I first arrived at the *comedor*, Hermano Miguel would return from the food bank in a 1954 bright, aqua-blue Ford truck that was overflowing with foods of different kinds. The bed of the truck usually contained crates of fruits, vegetables, bags of rice, sacks full of a variety of potatoes, bananas and plantains still attached to their vines, as well as a host of other consumables. Everyone inside the *comedor* would assist the driver, who was the owner of the truck and was hired to haul the food, in unloading the vehicle, making many trips carrying the food into the dining house, and placing everything on to the floor so that the red, clay tiles that carpeted the ground were almost completely covered. The food was then organized so that non-perishable dry goods such as salt, flour, pastas, beans, and other grains and cereals were placed inside the large and always locked *despensa*, or pantry, that was located in a corner of the public dining area. Milk and other perishable items were organized inside a refrigerator and freezer located near the kitchen area, whereas fruits and vegetables were placed in crates in a laundry room located inside the residential area of the dining house.



Figure 11: Fruits and vegetables waiting that formed part of *Comedor María es Mi Madre's* groceries from the *Banco de Alimentos*.

Hermano Miguel and I arrived at the *Banco de Alimentos* precisely at eleven am, just in time for the *comedor*'s Thursday morning shopping appointment. The *Banco* was located in an industrial center of Bogotá and was adjacent to the *Plaza de Mercado de Paloquemao*, one of Bogotá largest and busiest markets. At *Paloquemao* one was able to find exotic flowers from the Amazon region, freshly butchered meats of all kinds, an array of fruits and vegetables piled high atop *costales*, or burlap sacks, animal feed, cooking supplies, eggs, milk, and a host of everyday and esoteric products from all regions of the country and beyond. Like *Paloquemao*, one might also find a diverse set of foods and supplies at the *Banco de Alimentos*, but unlike *Paloquemao*, the foods and products inside the food bank were not accessible to the general public and came from a wholly different set of sources – regional, national and international grocery chains and corporations.

Monseñor Pedro Rubiano Saenz, the Roman Catholic Cardinal of Bogotá, founded the *Fundación Banco Arquidiocesano de Bogotá* in 2001. According to the official website of the *Banco*, Monseñor Cardenal Pedro Rubiano Saenz, Arturo Calle Calle, owner and founder of Arturo Calle, a national chain of clothing stores for men, and Jenny Tamayo, then executive director of the *Fundación Éxito* (Éxito Foundation), met on May 8, 2001 to discuss the possibility of creating a food bank to serve the nutritional and social needs of the changing city and its expanding population (*Banco de Alimentos Arquidiócesis de Bogotá* 2010).⁸⁵ Their website states that the idea for this project was inspired by Pope John Paul II's call to action, as written in his apostolic letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, or "On the Beginning of the New Millennium." In this letter, written

⁸⁵ Website accessed November 5, 2010: <http://www.arquibogota.org.co/index.php?idcategoria=5470>

to Christian communities worldwide toward the end of the Catholic Jubilee of the year 2000, Pope John Paul II asked Catholics to continue the spirit of the Jubilee celebrations through an *obra de caridad*, or work of charity, “which would in some way be the fruit and seal of the love sparked by the Jubilee.”

In his letter, the Pope argued that such an *obra de caridad* at the beginning of the new millennium was critical because there were an increasing number of people who were living within the economic and social margins, amidst conditions well below those necessary for human dignity. The Jubilee, the Pope asserted, had brought attention to the poverty that existed in the world, and thus, this work could serve as “an enduring legacy and remembrance of the communion experienced during the Jubilee.”

The founding of the *Fundación Banco Arquidiocesano de Bogotá* was a concrete response to Pope John Paul II’s call to social action, making visible the Christian obligation to help the poor through the giving of food to marginal and vulnerable communities throughout Bogotá. According to the food bank’s website, “The purpose of the Foundation is to rescue the perishable and non-perishable products of large food companies and food industries, preventing them from becoming food for animals or from being considered trash. Our goal is that these foods end up on the tables of the institutions that help the poorest individuals of the city and nearby municipalities” (*Banco de Alimentos Arquidiócesis de Bogotá* 2010).⁸⁶

Much like a financial institution, the *Fundación Banco Arquidiocesano de Alimentos de Bogotá* accepted deposits of different kinds from donors and private benefactors. However, unlike a bank that primarily handled and negotiated transactions

⁸⁶ Website Accessed January 11, 2011: <http://www.arquibogota.org.co/index.php?idcategoria=8871>

through money or official representations of money for profit, the deposits and withdrawals made at this bank primarily took the form of food, personal hygiene products, clothes, computers, lamps, and a host of other goods. Bogotá's food bank received large deposits of foods such as potatoes, corn, tomatoes, and lettuce from a diverse number of sources at different levels of the food chain and local commerce. The *Banco* created an inventory of these products and determined the amount of money the social service organizations, otherwise known as the "affiliated institutions" (such as the *comedor*), needed to contribute in order to receive that product, which was usually set at ten percent of the potential commercial value of the good. The institutions affiliated with the food bank then made a monetary deposit, known as an *aporte solidario* (a contribution of solidarity) to the bank account of the *Banco*. Representatives of the institutions then made their way to the *Banco*'s warehouse and withdrew foods and other goods equivalent to their deposit.

These types of bank-like transactions of the exchange of money for food, and the practice of "food banking" in general, were not unique to Colombia. According to Padre Daniel, the coordinator of the Bogotá's food bank, the *Fundación Banco Arquidiocesano de Alimentos de Bogotá* was modeled after the U.S. based non-profit known as America's Second Harvest,⁸⁷ one of the largest anti-hunger organizations in the country. Second Harvest has played a key role in institutionalizing what are now colloquially referred to as "food banks" in the United States and worldwide. The organization, which in 2010 had over two hundred member food banks across the country, has its roots in Phoenix,

⁸⁷ As of 2008, this organization is officially known as Feeding America. However, because Second Harvest was the official name during the period of my research, and because organizers at Bogotá's *Banco de Alimentos* referred to it as Second Harvest in interviews, conversations, and publications, I have chosen to continue to use the name Second Harvest in this dissertation.

Arizona in the late 1960s and early 1970s. According to Janet Poppendieck (1999), a sociologist who focuses her scholarship on the history of food relief charities and their place in public policy in the United States, a man by the name of John Van Hengel who volunteered at a dining hall affiliated with St. Mary's Church in Phoenix, arranged with managers of local grocery stores to divert unsalable foods that were being tossed into dumpsters. Van Hengel, who had previously organized a small distribution center to store and redistribute food that he and other volunteers had gleaned from private properties around Phoenix, arranged to have these unsalable foods diverted to the distribution center so that they might then be rerouted to local charity organizations and families in need. The author tells us that the person who initially showed Van Hengel a dumpster full of food outside of a grocery store had illustrated the process by which these foods could potentially be redistributed by "drawing a cartoon of a bank in which excess and unsalable food could be deposited and where people and organizations who needed these foods could withdraw it" (1999: 113).

Van Hengel named this new endeavor St. Mary's Food Bank, and shortly after its inception in 1967, the food bank received a federal grant from Nixon's Community Service Administration program so that the organization could show other groups how to set up comparable projects. The organizers of Saint Mary's created a separate project they named Second Harvest with this grant money, and during the five years Second Harvest was funded by the federal government, the organization received more than half a million dollars. According to Poppendieck, the establishment and institutionalization of Second Harvest spurred the creation of food banking projects throughout the country and by 1982, there were forty-four member banks (1999: 125). While Second Harvest is

perhaps the most well-known organization that seeks donations of unsalable foods from grocery stores at different levels of the food chain, other groups and churches had also created similar kinds of projects at approximately the same time.

These types of exchanges between grocery stores and representatives from institutions such as *comedores*, are not a new phenomenon, and in fact preceded the founding of the food bank in Bogotá. While some grocery stores and other companies had in the past made individual agreements with representatives of *comedores*, *hogares*, or *casas geriátricas* (dining facilities, homes for the children, and geriatric facilities for the elderly), so that they might receive these unsalable products, there was not a central way by which social service organizations could retrieve these goods. Because many unsalable foods were thrown away by grocery stores and manufacturing and distribution companies, representatives of institutions had to arrive at individual stores to pick up foods that had been set aside for them, or sometimes, look through the trash for these unsalable, yet still viable foods.

The Fundación Banco Arquidiocesano de Alimentos de Bogotá was not the first food bank in operation in Colombia. Food banks in the Colombian cities of Medellín and Cali were already established and running when the *Banco* first opened its doors in Bogotá on August 27, 2001. However, in 2007, the *Banco de Alimentos* in Bogotá was the largest of any in the country, had the most financial and political support, and the most affiliated institutions. The *Banco's* support and organizational efforts were buttressed by an influential and powerful *junta directiva*, or board of directors. Among the members of the board were representatives of national and multinational corporations

in the food industry, such as Coca-Cola, Alquería (Colombia's largest milk distributor), Carrefour, Carulla, Nestlé, and Éxito.

These companies (among others) supported the *Banco* at a structural level, donating supplies, money, and services on a regular basis. Monetary donations not only helped the *Banco* sustain its operations, but also made possible the purchase of necessary staple foods that most stores and companies would not likely donate, such as oil, salt, grains, or sugar. The food bank also had agreements with other food producing companies that gave the *Banco* the opportunity to purchase foods at or below wholesale cost. The *Banco* then repackaged these foods using their own private label, and re-distributed them to their affiliated institutions below commercial cost.⁸⁸

In 2007, the *Banco de Alimentos* employed seventy-five employees at all levels, including social workers, nutritionists, information technology specialists, customer service agents, operators, secretaries, cleaning staff, accountants, graphic and web designers, development coordinators, drivers, and warehouse staff, among a host of other employees. Drivers picked up donations from the grocery stores or distribution centers and delivered them to the *Banco* where warehouse staff selected the donated merchandise, and repackaged them in the form of *mercados* for the affiliated institutions. The *Banco* also hosted *practicantes*, or interns, from several local universities. According to the *Banco's* website, in 2009 there were fifteen universities affiliated with the food

⁸⁸ Not all of the foods repackaged in the *Banco's* own label were purchased directly from producers. Some of the goods that were repackaged were also donated by a range of companies and producers. According to the September-October bulletin, *Entre Amigos*, the numerical codes that appear on the receipt/itemized list an institution receives from the *Banco* along with their *mercado*, a document known as *Salido de Mercancia*, identifies which products were donated and which were purchased by the *Banco*. This distinction was made apparent to the institutions so that they would be able to offer suggestions regarding the products the *Banco* purchased in the future, and so that they were aware of the donors who had made these products available to them (Boletín, Septiembre Octubre 2010). *Entre Amigos* ISSN: 2145 – B022 Septiembre –Octubre 2010 Número 14 Año III Bogotá D.C. Colombia.

bank, and 295 students from 24 academic majors, including accounting, business, education, gerontology, and social work.

As of July 2010, there were twenty-eight interdependent food banks throughout Colombia, most of which worked closely with each other (and primarily with the Bogotá food bank) to achieve their goals. In 2007 there were about four hundred institutions affiliated with the *Banco de Alimentos* in Bogotá. That number increased to five hundred and fifty-one institutions in 2008, and in 2009 the number of institutions increased to six hundred and seventy-six, thus reaching approximately thirteen thousand four hundred and one persons per day. Approximately 70% of the affiliated institutions were geared towards the needs of children, and about 20% were *hogares* or *casas geriátricos* or *ancianatos*. The remaining institutions focused on the needs of individuals between twenty and fifty years old and persons categorized as *habitantes de calle*, or persons who inhabit the street in some way or another. Additionally, on November 29, 2007, the *Fundación Banco Arquidiocesano de Alimentos de Bogotá* became a member of the Global Food Banking Network, a food security organization that includes food banks in the United States, Canada, Mexico and Argentina, among other countries (see Appendix C).

Through the course of my research, I had the opportunity to visit the *Banco* four times. During these visits, I accompanied Hermano Miguel on trips to pick up *Comedor María es Mi Madre's* weekly groceries, and attended an instructional workshop with representatives from other *comedores* and social service organizations in Bogotá. I also spoke with and interviewed Claudia Marcela, a development coordinator, Leo, a warehouse employee who I initially met and interviewed at *Comedor María es Mi*

Madre,⁸⁹ and had conversations with Father Daniel Saldarriaga, a Catholic priest and the executive director of the *Banco de Alimentos*.

Bogotá Isn't as Cold as Some People Think

On this particular Thursday morning, Bogotá's *Banco de Alimentos* was a flurry of activity, with the many representatives of *casas* and *hogares* for children, *comedores*, and *ancianatos* doing their weekly "grocery shopping" for thousands of potential recipients. I followed Hermano Miguel to the front desk near the entrance and watched as he handed the customer service representative a receipt for a deposit payment that *Comedor María es Mi Madre* had made to the *Banco de Alimentos*'s bank account that morning. Hermano Miguel then walked over to a representative at another desk to negotiate which foodstuffs and what amounts of each the *comedor* needed.

"Do you have hair cream?" asked Hermano Miguel, beginning the negotiations.

"No, we've run out, responded the representative.

"Then, give me 150 shampoos," Hermano Miguel replied.

Every institution that is affiliated with the *Banco de Alimentos* is given a designated appointment and must arrive at the *Banco* on their assigned date and time in order to request services. Prior to the appointment, a representative of each institution must deposit their *aporte solidario*, or contribution of solidarity, into a bank account belonging to the *Banco de Alimentos*. The *Banco* then reciprocates by offering groceries that correspond to the value of that deposit and that are redistributed to the institutions at

⁸⁹ Leo was a personal friend of Hermano Miguel's and was often invited to the *comedor* to share meals with the *hermanos*. On the day that I interviewed him on a Sunday morning in March 2007, Hermano Miguel had asked Leo to visit the *comedor* so that I might have the opportunity to ask him questions about the inner workings of the food bank. Hermano Miguel's contacts and his own affiliations with the food bank are the main reason I was granted limited access to the *Banco*.

ten percent of their commercial value. This week, Hermano Miguel had deposited upwards of four hundred dollars into the *Banco*'s account.

Usually, a representative of the *Banco de Alimentos* will inform the buyer about the products and foods that are available and will then print out a “grocery list” of the items and quantities that will be received based on the amount of the *aporte solidario* the institution has deposited into the bank account. While the grocery list generated by the representative is usually based on the availability of products at the food bank (that is, their scarcity as well as their surplus), and not the specific needs of a particular institution, Hermano Miguel was able to negotiate items he did and did not need as well as the quantities of each, concluding the transaction by saying, “And please, don’t give me any more potatoes. I have too many potatoes!”

Once Hermano Miguel had discussed the kinds of products and the amounts needed for the *comedor* with the customer service representative, we walked next door to the receiving area to wait for our *mercado*. Employees of the *Banco* were wheeling out flat bed carts replete with boxes of fruits, vegetables, and snack foods as they called out the names of the institutions to which the groceries belonged.

“San José Home for the Elderly!” said a loud voice as a cart of groceries was wheeled out by an employee into the receiving area.

After each *mercado* was brought out, the representatives of the institution to whom the groceries belonged, removed the foods and other products from boxes and crates and then placed them into their own storage bags and containers, which were mostly made up of old milk crates or *costales* (burlap sacks). The names of *hogares* and *comedores* such as *Cielo de María* (Mary’s Heaven) and *Soñrisa de Mañana* (Morning

Smile) were written on the storage crates with permanent marker. Priests, religious sisters, and brothers, many of whom were part of the Franciscan order, were all busily removing individual sized packets of *Trix* cereal from boxes and placing them into large potato sacks. Some were carrying crates of carrots, potatoes, onions, eggplant, lettuce, spinach, tomatoes, curly parsley, peppers, mangoes, *maracuyá* (passion fruit) *curuba* (banana passion fruit), *tomate de árbol* (tree tomato), papaya, and a host of other fresh produce out of the building and into the antique aqua blue Ford rental trucks that were waiting to be hired outside of the doors of the *Banco*'s receiving area.

As I stood watching packages of cookies labeled *surtido navideño* (Christmas cookies) *chocolate boyacense* (hot chocolate tablets from the department of Boyacá), and all kinds of fruits and vegetables make their way into crates and cars, I overheard one religious sister comment on the low quality and amount of *fruver*, or fruits and vegetables, available. Though she was going to be leaving with one hundred kilos of produce, she still noted, "There are less fruits and vegetables available because of the summer weather." Indeed, the month of January 2007 had given *Bogotanos* clear skies and a blistering sun that was atypical for this elevation. However, while the days peaked at 75 degrees Fahrenheit, the nights dipped into freezing cold temperatures, damaging local crops. The warmer Bogotá and its fertile *Sabana* (the savannah region outside of the city) were during the day, the colder the temperature would be during the night, and in the early morning.

"*Comedor María es Mi Madre!*" called out another voice as a wooden crate full of fruits and vegetables was wheeled out into the receiving area. Deibid and another volunteer who had arrived separately began to unload the cargo while I was assigned the

job of packing up individual sized bags of *Trix* cereal that had been pasted across a long strip of cardboard by the manufacturer. I filled up four burlap sacks with the sugary cereal that would soon turn into a warm breakfast for the patrons, *onces* (literally translated as eleven, but referring to the time for a snack in between breakfast and lunch), for the women who participated in the embroidery class, or a treat for María *la bandida* as she ironed the laundered clothes of the *hermanos* on Tuesday mornings. There were also four boxes filled with bags of Alquería brand milk, and at least twenty-five two liter bottles of *Coca-Cola*, which very much pleased Hermano Miguel as he told us that this *gaseosita*, or soda, would be a huge treat for the special meals he had planned. Several boxes of men's razors, a large *costal* of rice that weighed approximately thirty kilos, plastic bags filled with a variety of several day-old bread rolls and sliced bread, and several boxes of *panela* and drinking chocolate also formed part of the *comedor's* groceries.

After everything had been placed into boxes and sacks, Deibid carried the items to the truck and proceeded to pack the foodstuffs until the bed of the truck was completely full. Deibid climbed into the back of the Ford along with the food, while Hermano Miguel and I sat in the front seat to make our way back to the *comedor*. As we drove through the downtown streets of the capital, Hermano Miguel showed me the receipt for the items the *comedor* had received from the *Banco de Alimentos*, as well as a sheet of paper with a nutritional analysis validating the viability of the chocolate tablets that were included in the *mercado*, but had been labeled as "expired" by the manufacturer. I was astonished at the cost of the groceries, all of which looked to be at least ninety percent off their potential commercial value. A *Tetra Pak* container of lactose free Alquería brand

milk, which usually costs about 2,000 *pesos* at a local grocery store, was acquired at the *Banco de Alimentos* for about two hundred *pesos*, approximately twelve cents in early 2007. The total bill for that week's purchase – a truck full of food and personal hygiene products -- amounted to approximately \$800,000 *pesos*, equivalent to about three hundred seventy-five U.S. dollars. At the *comedor*, these foods would be transformed into thirty-two weekly meals, which had the potential to feed at least one hundred individuals per day.

The efforts of the *Banco de Alimentos* to furnish organizations with *mercados*, as well as the number of institutions that were present and shopping at the *Banco* that Thursday morning, was just as surprising. During the hour and fifteen minutes that Hermano Miguel and I spent at the food bank, at least fifteen organizations that offered meals, housing and other services to diverse populations all over Bogotá received large amounts of groceries for a fraction of their retail value. The receiving area of the *Banco* made visible the work of many organizations whose primary concern, it seemed, was to feed individuals who may not otherwise have had access to food to feed themselves. The number of representatives who were packing their groceries into boxes to then transport them to their respective institutions offered a glimpse into a kind of social engagement that still exists in a Bogotá that is often perceived as cold, indifferent, and unsafe.

Cold, coolness, heat, and warmth are sensual adjectives that Colombians frequently use to describe both the climate of a particular place, the sentiments of persons, as well as the “territorial mood” (Riaño-Alcalá 2002: 294) of a specific city or town. The capital is often described as “cold” both because of the altitude that produces perpetual fall-like temperatures, as well as the perceived chilly and apathetic sentiments

of its inhabitants. As the economic and political center of the country, Bogotá is often spoken about as a place that privileges mercantile relationships over efforts to create a sense of “community” or communal living among its inhabitants. Unlike warmer areas of the country, where people often sit outside their homes greeting neighbors and passers-by, *cachacos* or *rolos* (as *Bogotanos* are known) exist ensconced in their rooms and apartments, guarded by the locks that protect them from the unsafe city.

Cities and towns at lower elevations, and thus in warmer areas of the country, are frequently spoken about as *tierras* or lands that are *cálidas* (warm) or *calientes* (hot). Likewise, their inhabitants are viewed to exhibit warmth, kindness, and openness, qualities that are not often associated with the people, spaces, and temperature of the capital. Warm or hot temperatures are also linked to experiences or acts of violence in particular places. According to Riaño-Alcala (2002), “Images of heat and verbs associated with fire function as symbolic and sensorial descriptors of evil and violence: the individuals, groups and territories ‘se calientan’ (literally, ‘heat up’). Individuals and territories become dangerous, and sectors or *barrios* become territories of fighting and violence” (294).

As we drove in the packed Ford truck on the *Avenida Circunvalar*, an elevated road that is built into the Andean peaks that flank Bogotá from north to south, Hermano Miguel responded to my surprise regarding the low cost of the groceries and the large number of social service institutions shopping at the *Banco* by saying, “See, Bogotá isn’t as cold as some people think...”

The Pantry of Bogotá

I met Claudia Marcela, a coordinator and development director at the *Banco de Alimentos*, for an interview on a sunny Saturday afternoon in late June 2007. The bustle and activity that I had observed at the *Banco* on previous occasions was absent, and only a few people milled around the customer service area near the entrance of the building. My earlier visits to the *Banco* had occurred during the business week, when representatives of the various institutions served by the food bank were busily purchasing, receiving, and packing their *mercados*.

I had already conversed with Claudia Marcela, Padre Daniel, the executive director of the *Banco*, and Leo on several occasions both at the *Banco* and at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. A few months earlier, I had also participated in a workshop at the *Banco*, an event that all representatives of affiliated institutions that serve populations in the central zones of the capital, including *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, were required to attend as part of the conditions of their affiliation. The workshop, which was administered by Padre Daniel and attended by Claudia Marcela, had been held inside a large, modern conference room beyond the receiving room doors and had offered me my first glimpse of the inner workings, spaces, and goals of the *Banco de Alimentos*. Today, however, Padre Daniel had agreed to give me limited access to other areas of the *Banco*, something that he and other employees had been reluctant to do in the past.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Though I positioned myself as an anthropologist when I spoke with people, I was also viewed as a Catholic and active volunteer at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. The line that divided me as an “anthropologist” and a “volunteer” was often blurred by the religious practices that were part of my childhood and elementary and high school education, as well as the assistance I offered the *comedor*. Not until Padre Daniel and others felt that I was open to and supported their organization (and until they saw me with Hermano Miguel and knew that he too supported my work), was I offered the opportunity to visit the *Banco* in such a capacity.

The modern brick building that housed the *Banco de Alimentos* was still relatively new. In February 2005, the Archdiocese of Bogotá purchased the current warehouse installations of the *Banco*, which had previously been the local distribution center for the Frito Lay Company. When the *Banco* first opened its doors in 2001, it was located in a rented warehouse that measured 450 square meters and was situated not too far from its current installations. During these first few years of operation, the *Banco* employed ten staff members, possessed one cargo vehicle, and had access to two donated cargo trucks paid for by the local Coca-Cola distribution company.

Construction for the renovation of the building to suit the changing needs of the ever-expanding *Banco* began in June 2005, and in May 2006, the new space was inaugurated and blessed by the Cardinal of Bogotá. The expansive brick building measured 4,500 square meters, which housed a conference room with state of the art sound, the *bodega*, or warehouse space where foods were selected and packaged, receiving and loading docks, cold storage rooms, a wing of offices, a customer service area, and a kitchen, among other rooms, took up an entire city block in the industrial neighborhood.

Prior to beginning my tour of the facility, Claudia Marcela walked me to the curb outside of the receiving area where Padre Daniel was supervising the loading of *mercados* on to one of the 1954 aqua-blue Ford trucks. As soon as he saw me, Padre Daniel, a tall and youthful man in his early to mid forties, greeted me hello by giving me a welcoming kiss on the cheek.

“Why don’t you take her to see the warehouse from up above, Marcela,” he said, and then turning to me, continued, “There is a lot of chaos in the area where the packing

takes place. You can see everything from up above, it isn't necessary for you to go down there." Though there were only a few employees present on this Saturday afternoon, I had still hoped for the opportunity to closely interact with the staff and the foods and other products that were being selected and sorted for the *mercados* that would later be offered to the affiliated institutions. However, it seemed that my observation of the space and process by which foods were received, selected, and then repackaged for distribution would have to take place from an aerial distance.

Marcela led me back into the building and walked me through several open metal doors that rolled down to divide the *bodega* from the loading docks. Though the receiving and loading docks were closed over the weekend, Claudia Marcela told me that all of the merchandise received by the *Banco* entered the building through those doors, and was then sorted, temporarily stored, and then repacked by the employees inside the warehouse space.

"We won't go into the receiving and sorting area because we'll need little hats, and besides, we can see everything from above," Claudia Marcela told me as we walked up a flight of stairs. From the stairs we stepped on to an elevated walkway from which we had a bird's eye view of several huge crates of carrots and potatoes on the ground floor of the *bodega*. As we walked, Marcela told me a bit about the origins, histories, and routes of the various vegetables and tubers that were piled on to the ground floor of the warehouse space.

“The potatoes come from Armenia,⁹¹ and the carrots come from *la Sabana*. We receive them by the ton,” Claudia Marcela informed me, pointing out the regional and ecological origins of the foods below us. From up above the warehouse floor and all it contained offered a concentrated glimpse of the abundance of the country, as it seemed that diverse fruits and vegetables from various ecological niches and regions of Colombia were all living in masse below our feet. As I stood twenty feet above several tons of vegetables, I wondered, how were these foods sorted by the *Banco* for re-distribution? What properties or particular details (or defects) did these carrots and potatoes need to have (or not have) to be viewed as appropriate for the various affiliated institutions? And how did all of these pounds and pounds of potatoes and carrots get to the *Banco* in the first place?

In order to begin to explore the third question I have posed, it is necessary to consider Bogotá’s geographic and ecological location in relation to its status as the center of political and economic power in Colombia. The capital is located in the geographic center of the country in *la Sabana de Bogotá* (literally translated as the Savannah of Bogotá) on the *Altiplano Cundiboyacense* (Cundiboyacense Plateau), and is bordered by the *Cordillera Oriental*, or eastern range of the Andes Mountains. The savannah that is home to Bogotá and its surroundings is an area rich in flora and fauna, where a variety of root vegetables, fruits, leafy greens, and flowers for export are grown. This area has also historically been highly agricultural and is a hub for the production of dairy products.

The fertile vegetation of *la Sabana*, its rich ecosystem that provides for the cultivation of a host of foods even at an elevation that often makes growing crops

⁹¹ Armenia is a city in the department of Quindío. It is located approximately two hundred and ninety kilometers west of Bogotá.

difficult, its scenic location amidst the peaks of the Andes Mountains, and its place relative to the capital has historically inspired much scholarly and reflective travel writing about the region. French traveller Charles Saffray described *la Sabana* as a land of plenty, stating that the “children of Bogotá have many reasons to be proud of these vast plains. At their reach they have quarries of sandstone, gypsum, and marl, as well as an abundance of iron deposits. Moreover, the earth marvelously lends itself to the cultivation of diverse crops” (Cited in Pavony 1999: 39). This narrative of abundance also led Swiss writer Ernest Röthlisberger (who lived in Colombia from 1882-1885), to describe la Sabana as the “pantry” of the *Bogotano* table, and Bogotá as the destination point for the products of Colombia’s expansive eco-diversity. He wrote: “If to the natural richness of the *Sabana* we add the fact that the capital has access to not only the products of the tepid zones, but also those from the torrid slopes of the mountains that descend toward the Magdalena River, and the warm, rich valleys of the Orinoco River...one might come to see that Bogotá’s *mercado* as one of the richest that any city in the world can have” (Cited in Pavony 1999: 42).

Such writing has historically positioned Bogotá as part of a zone of eco-privilege due to its location, as well as its place as the political and geographic center of the country. Because of this positionality, the authors argued that the citizens of Bogotá not only had access to the products of this regional fertility, but also were politically and geographically connected to a multi-regional and national wealth. This potential abundance, and Bogotá’s proximity to it, situated the capital as the “pantry” of this wealth, where all food that came from the earth could be accessed.

While it is evident that not everyone has had equal access to this proverbial *Bogotano* pantry, it is important for us to consider the role such spacialized privilege has played in the *Banco de Alimentos*'s capacity to extend the abundance of this pantry to the capital's marginal populations. The many tons of vegetables and foods housed inside the *Banco*'s *bodega* that represented most regions and ecological niches of the country brings to the fore the images of fertility and abundance described by these authors. The *Banco de Alimentos*'s location, political and economic access to the food industry (including its powerful connections to national and multi-national corporations), and the social and religious links to organizations (such as other food banks and churches) also positions the *Bank* itself within a landscape of geographic, political, and economic power and eco-privilege that makes the presence of such a diversity of foods and products in its warehouse possible. Thus, in much the same ways that travelers, scholars, and other writers have described (and idealized) Bogotá as the pantry of the "natural" wealth of the *Sabana*, so too does the *Banco de Alimentos* become the pantry and the nexus of traffic for social service organizations and marginal sectors and citizens of the capital that wouldn't otherwise have access to this often inaccessible abundance.

Other People's Leftovers

Many of the foods and products received by the *Banco de Alimentos* of Bogotá were connected to the demands, desires, tastes, and economic access (or lack thereof) of the purchasing public, as well as those of the companies that produce food products geared to that public. Most of the foods donated to the *Banco* came mainly from larger grocery chains and national and international hypermarkets, such as Éxito, Carulla, and Carrefour.

Grocery stores primarily donated products that Claudia Marcela called *productos de baja rotación*, or merchandise that had low or poor circulation, as well as seasonal items, such as the boxes of *surtido navideño*, or Christmas cookies, included in *Comedor María es Mi Madre's mercado* in March 2007. Though these seasonal products were often stamped with expiration dates that reached far into the future, Claudia Marcela explained that, “Nobody is going to want to buy Christmas cookies in January. Even if they will not expire in the near future, commercially this is not an attractive product.”

During our interview in June 2007, Claudia Marcela told me that prior to the formation of the *Banco de Alimentos*, many grocery stores threw away food products that were still viable. While grocers often dumped foods that were expired, or close to expiring, they also threw away foods that were relatively fresh because they did not expect to be able to commercialize this food prior to its expiration date. As I mentioned previously, representatives of *comedores* or other social service organizations in Bogotá would go to the dumpsites of grocery stores such as Carulla or Éxito to rummage through this waste for fruits, vegetables, and other products that might benefit their institutions.

“This is something that many people still do at the *plazas de mercado*,”⁹² Claudia Marcela told me. “They go and search and pick through things because there is so much produce that falls to the ground. There are things that one can find quite easily, but this isn’t an ideal situation; they shouldn’t have to resort to that type of thing to acquire their food. It doesn’t seem to me to be a dignified way to acquire food for persons whose lives we want to dignify.”

⁹² A *plaza de mercado* is a market where a variety of vendors sell fruits, vegetables and other goods.

Claudia Marcela explained that many of the relationships the food bank had with their donor stores came into being through pre-existing connections between grocers and institutions affiliated with the *Banco*. Since many of the representatives of *comedores* and *hogares* already had agreements with the grocery stores regarding how and when to pick up the store's unsalable products, the institutions were able to offer a list of potential benefactors and donor stores with whom the *Banco* could begin to work. Through these existing relationships, the organizers of the *Banco* (among them, the Cardinal of Bogotá), created *convenios*, or agreements, with these companies so that viable foods were not thrown into the garbage, and were instead donated to the food bank for re-distribution. Claudia Marcela stressed that the *Banco* had to guarantee two things to the donor stores: 1) that they would make every effort to ensure that these donated products would be consumed by the receivers prior to their expiration date, and 2) that the donated foods would not be resold for profit.

The historical account told to me regarding the origins of the *Banco de Alimentos* and the ways the representatives of *comedores* and other social service organizations initially procured foods by rifling through the waste of grocery stores is reminiscent of the narrative of the birth of St. Mary's food bank, and the subsequent founding of Second Harvest. Like Second Harvest, the *Banco de Alimentos* also received financial and material support from the local government. For example, former mayor Lucho Garzón's campaign, *Bogotá sin Hambre*, played a critical role in the development and growth of the *Banco*, initially subsidizing the food bank with two hundred million *pesos* (approximately 107,000 dollars in 2007). According to financial documents made public by the food bank in 2006, this monetary support facilitated the expansion of the *Banco de*

Alimentos, funding the positions of two nutritionists, a social worker, and information technology specialists, among others.

Additionally, through a *convenio* (created April 2008) with the *Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar* (ICBF), a social welfare agency founded under Colombia's Ministry of Social Protection (*Ministerio de la Protección Social*) in 1968, the *Banco* received food subsidies in the form of *Bienestarina*.⁹³ *Bienestarina* is a powdered food product that is produced by ICBF and is made from non-fat powdered milk, soy proteins, cereals, maize and wheat. It has a high nutritional value and is often is often mixed with milk and/or water and consumed in the form of a shake. It is offered free of charge in clinics and social service institutions, and is especially beneficial for children, pregnant women, nursing mothers, older adults, and persons experiencing malnutrition. In 2006, the *Banco de Alimentos* received five tons of *Bienestarina* per month, which it then re-distributed to sixty-three of its affiliated institutions that did not otherwise receive subsidies or assistance from ICBF.

Donations from grocery stores and private enterprises, however, continued to be critical for the *Banco de Alimentos*. The tastes of the public have played a significant role in the kinds of products certain grocery stores carried, and regional appetites often determined the kinds of items and flavors stores stocked in different areas of the country. For example, a Carulla grocery store near the Caribbean coast may stock less potatoes and more manioc, whereas in Bogotá and in other Andean regions where potatoes are

⁹³ It is interesting to note that in a government document regarding the 2008 agreement between the ICBF and the Food Bank of the Archdiocese of Bogotá, article 46 of the 1991 Constitution (which I also cite in chapter 3) is quoted in order to legitimate the linking of two institutional entities (one run by the Catholic Church, and one run by the government) in an effort to ensure the social welfare of Colombian citizens. The quote from the Constitution is as follows: "The State, society and the family will together protect and assist persons of the third age, and will promote their integration into social and community life."

plentiful and figure prominently into local cuisine, Carulla and other grocery stores may stock a variety of potatoes and tubers. However, some flavors had little to do with region specific ingredients in Colombia or the environmental niches that oftentimes play a role in what is locally available and deemed “tasty.” Claudia Marcela described one such product that wasn’t readily accepted by Colombian consumers, and hence ended up at the *Banco de Alimentos* in abundance.

“We received a bubble-gum flavored yogurt from Alpina⁹⁴ one Saturday. It was a new flavor that Alpina was testing out in the market, but commercially, this yogurt wasn’t successful. These are products of low circulation.” Yogurt is a food that is widely consumed in Bogotá, and one can find a variety of packaged drinkable yogurts of different fruit flavors at grocery stores and freshly made yogurt at many bakeries. Often, bakeries add fresh fruit such as mango, blackberry, or passion fruit to flavor the yogurt. As Claudia Marcela told me about Alpina’s donation of bubble-gum flavored yogurt, I recalled an urgent phone call received by the *comedor* from the *Banco de Alimentos* early one Saturday morning a few months prior to our interview. Upon answering the phone, a representative from the *Banco* informed me that they had received four hundred bags of yogurt, including the bubble-gum flavored ones. The caller wanted to know whether the *comedor* would be interested in some of these yogurts, and if so, if someone would be available to pick them up that afternoon.

When perishable items such as these are received in abundance by the *Banco*, they must be redistributed immediately so as to avoid spoilage, and are sometimes offered to the affiliated institution without the expected monetary contribution, or *aporte*

⁹⁴ Alpina is a national company that commercializes a variety of dairy products.

solidario. Not charging for these kinds of food items increased the likelihood that the food would be redistributed and consumed prior to expiring, and thus would not become waste. Moreover, while the food bank did have cold storage rooms inside their warehouse, perishable items needed to be quickly redistributed to allow for space for other perishable foods that were received on a daily basis, especially when they arrived unexpectedly and in abundance. In circumstances such as these, the *Banco* allowed employees, volunteers of the *comedores* or *hogares* and the populations they served, to take foods such as yogurt and milk home to increase the likelihood that they would be consumed in time and not go to waste.

“There are products that sometimes arrive on Saturday and since we don’t normally work on Saturday, the product will lose its quality. The goal then,” Claudia Marcela told me, “is to not have or redistribute expired items.”

A representative from *Comedor María es Mi Madre* did indeed pick up the yogurts that Saturday afternoon after receiving the urgent phone call. Because they were perishable and close to expiring, some of the yogurts were given to the *abuelitos* after the lunch meal in quantities of two or three. Other yogurts were offered to volunteers and employees, and the rest were frozen. Though the yogurts did indeed expire, freezing them helped prolong their reach and provided dessert and a mid-morning snack for the *abuelitos* for an entire week thereafter.

Whereas a blackberry, mango, strawberry, and even a plain, sweetened yogurt would have been commercially successful, the bubble-gum flavoring in the yogurt donated to the *Banco* made it a weak product in a market wherein certain kinds of tastes are privileged. Because these yogurts did not conform to the expectations of the tastes of

the purchasing public, they were consequently rejected by consumers. These yogurts were thus transformed into “left overs” after persons with a specific economic reach could exercise their tastes and purchasing power. Additionally, though the flavor of the yogurt was unappealing to most consumers (which resulted in a surplus due to low demand), the abundance of bubble-gum flavored yogurt in the context of the *comedor* became a kind of “luxury” good for the patrons, a topic I discuss in the next chapter.

Yogurt wasn't the only kind of food that found its way into the dining house through an urgent request from the *Banco*. I recall arriving to the *comedor* on a Monday morning early in 2007 and being greeted by a pan full of the remnants of Cornish hens that had been roasted in the oven over the weekend. Luis, another live-in volunteer at the dining house, who was busily washing dishes in the kitchen, informed me that the *comedor* had received a phone call on Saturday morning from the *Banco de Alimentos* letting them know that they had received live Cornish hens and needed to redistribute them immediately because they could not store them. A representative from the *comedor* picked up about thirty-five of the hens and transported them to the dining house. Later that day, as the hens were scrambling around the kitchen floor, Luis began to cut off their heads in the sink one by one. The Cornish hens were then plucked, seasoned, and roasted in the brand-new industrial oven Hermano Miguel had procured from a donor a few weeks prior. The *hermanos*, Deibid, and Luis prepared and consumed most of the delicacy over the weekend, even though the *Banco* had most likely intended this food to benefit the older patrons of the *comedor*.

“You should have seen the kitchen,” Deibid recalled as he served up plates of rice for the *abuelitos*’ lunch, and placed them on the stone counter that divided the kitchen from the public *comedor*.

“The sink was full of blood!” he continued. Later that afternoon, Señora Myrian tossed the remaining bits of the roasted Cornish hen into the big pot of soup that was bubbling over the stove for the *abuelitos*’s dinner. Without knowing it, the *abuelitos* ate up a soup that was flavored with the tiny bone remnants of Cornish hen that had been the leftovers from the *hermanos*’ Sunday dinner, and had been running around the *comedor*’s kitchen only two days prior (and that had previously been somebody else’s “leftovers,” as the hens had been delivered in haste to the *Banco de Alimentos* only a few days earlier).

Foods with low or poor circulation, and perishable foods with nearing expiration dates, or animals that needed to become food quickly, weren’t the only kinds of products donated to the *Banco* by grocery stores and larger companies on a regular basis. Organic produce of all kinds and of high quality was ever present in the *Banco de Alimentos*, as well as in the meals prepared inside *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. In 2007, all of Bogotá’s major supermarkets (*Carulla, Éxito, Carrefour, Vivero*) carried at least some organic produce, as did a few neighborhood grocery stores in the capital. As in the United States, organic produce in Colombia can sometimes cost fifty percent more than conventional produce of the same kind at the same store. Additionally, organic produce at these larger grocery store chains often costs at least three times as much as non-organic produce purchased inside many *tiendas de barrio* (small neighborhood grocery stores) or large markets such as *Paloquemao*.

Given the high cost of organic produce and the limited purchasing power of most Colombians, organic produce is often beyond the reach of many consumers. Though there is indeed a definite market for organic produce in Bogotá, that market is relatively small, specialized, and socio-economically classed. Grocery stores such as Carulla thus attempt to recirculate this type of produce they expect will not sell during a given period of time by donating it to the *Banco de Alimentos*. The *Banco* then redistributes it to its affiliated institutions. In this circumstance, the high rates of poverty in Colombia, the lack of purchasing power of most Colombian families, or the choice not to buy organic produce, results in the abundance of what are often viewed as luxury goods in some of the most unexpected places. Consequently, some of the poorest members of Bogotá's constituency consume meals prepared with "high end" ingredients (such as organic tomatoes) that are inaccessible to most *Bogotanos*.

A Race Against Time

Nearing expiration dates, low rates of circulation, difficulties in commercializing items that are out of season or that do not conform to the aesthetic tastes of the purchasing public, and an abundance of perishable food products that cannot possibly be sold during the height of their freshness, all highlight the critical importance of time in the movement of food from grocery stores, manufacturers, or from the commercial food industry, to the *Banco*, and then to the affiliated institutions. Grocery stores must first gauge how long they must keep fresh and non-perishable foods on their shelves to ensure that they are sold. The grocers must thus have an accurate sense as to how much of a specific product will be purchased by consumers and by when, and how the purchasing trends of the public might fluctuate depending on the time of month, year, or season as

well as the location of a particular store. They must then estimate the point at which certain foods should be removed from store shelves so that they might be re-routed to the *Banco de Alimentos* while they are still fresh and suitable for human consumption. If the company or grocery store waits too long to donate a particular product, the foods may no longer be fresh enough to be donated to the food bank. However, if a food product is removed from store shelves too soon, the store will lose potential profits from the sale of that food.

The *Banco de Alimentos* must in turn ensure their benefactors that these donated products are processed and redistributed quickly upon their arrival at the warehouse so that they may be consumed before they expire. In this sense, much of the *mercado* the *comedores* and institutions received from the food bank was established by the way grocers determined the potential shelf life of food products, as well as understandings of the qualities of “freshness” that made a product “salable” or not.

But how do grocers, manufacturers, and *Banco* employees decide what is fresh, expired, perishable, or still viable for the commercial food market and or for redistribution to social service institutions? Colombia’s geographic location in the tropics, the country’s vertical economy due to the Andean range, as well as the ecological zones of the Amazon, the eastern plains, and the Caribbean, provide access to ecological niches that have the potential to produce a wide range of fruits and vegetables year round. A lot of what ends up on *Bogotano* tables, such as passion fruit, potatoes, leafy greens, bananas, and rice, is fresh and “local” in that such foods can be linked to ecological zones within the country. It is also not uncommon to find meat products from freshly killed animals, especially in areas outside the city. For example, during a trip to the Caribbean

department of Córdoba during Holy Week 2007, we were unable to eat beef on Easter Sunday because most people were celebrating the holiday, and thus, cows had not been slaughtered on that day. Though not everything that Colombians consume comes from the local food economy, there are certain expectations of freshness due to Colombia's ecological and agricultural history.

Recent trade agreements with the United States (and recent negotiations for free trade with the European Union), however, have eliminated duties on a significant percentage of imports into Colombia from the United States (up to 80% of U.S. imports are not taxed) such as milk, meat, and processed foods, such as frozen French fries. The introduction of duty-free goods into Colombia has not only created competition for local producers (resulting in surpluses), but has introduced foods identical to those produced locally. Thus, fruits and grains that have traveled from the United States may look identical to those produced outside of the city and picked only days earlier.

Thus, "freshness" as Susanne Freidberg (2009) notes, is a fuzzy, often contradictory state of being. Forms of preservation, such as salt and technologies of refrigeration have historically transformed foods into materials that are clearly different from what many might consider "fresh." The "real" ages of foods that have traveled across time, place, and season and that appear to look "good" and "healthy" are often occluded by the technologies that guard the visible or tactile qualities that one might use to measure their "freshness" (2009: 2). Such demands for fresh foods (broadly conceived), Freidberg notes, plays a critical role in "shaping livelihoods and landscapes all over the world" (11).

Conceptions of “freshness” and the importance of time in the donation of food and perishable consumables brings to the fore a secondary purpose of food banks, that of rescuing foods and thus preventing or decreasing waste. Food banks offer a central place where grocery stores and other food companies can divert products that would otherwise become or go to waste, thus extending the organic life of foods while simultaneously preventing them from filling up landfills. For example, by quickly finding a home for time sensitive donations, such as the bubble gum flavored yogurt, the *Banco de Alimentos* was able to rescue and prevent these from being thrown away, and thus becoming waste.

According to Mark Winne (2008), a U.S. activist and scholar who has been involved in and has written extensively about sustainable agriculture, food policy reform, and urban hunger and poverty, the prevention of waste has been one of the primary goals of Second Harvest and food banks. The author tells us that until recently, Second Harvest’s website prominently featured a counter which told the viewer how much food had been wasted during that year. Below the counter was a bolded, red colored link that read, “Stop the Waste.” Once the viewer clicked on the link they would be connected to Second Harvest’s donation page. Winne points out that rather than highlighting ending hunger as their central point of social action, through their website Second Harvest communicated that a “sense of moral outrage was more likely to be heightened by a [sic] national profligacy toward food than by the existence of hunger in the world’s wealthiest nation” (2008: 70).⁹⁵ Poppendieck (1998) adds that much of the success of the emergency food movement and feeding projects in the United States in the early 1980s occurred

⁹⁵ As of October 2010, the website for the Global Food Banking Network prominently features two counters. One counter is prefaced with the statement, “Enough food is wasted each year to provide over 2 trillion meals. Metric tonnes of food wasted this year: 2.5 billion +.” The second counter was prefaced by the statement, “A child dies every 5 seconds from hunger-related causes. Hunger related deaths this year so far: 5,200,177.” This second counter seemed to increase by one or two every few seconds.

because the foundational movers of these programs went beyond the “traditionally liberal supporters of expanded public food assistance” (1998: 43). She notes that the privileging of waste prevention over the donation of food products to assist the public brought an untapped set of support to the movement.

“And why would stores such as Carulla or Carrefour want to donate food to the *Banco de Alimentos*? What’s the incentive?” I asked Leo, as we sat at the heavy, wooden dining table inside the residential portion of the dining house on a Sunday morning, a few months prior to my tour of the *Banco* with Claudia Marcela. I had previously met Leo during my first trip to the *Banco* in October 2006, but on this day he sat wearing a pressed white shirt and black pants, in sharp contrast to the rubber boots and white pant overalls and hair net he wore while at work inside the *Banco*’s warehouse. Though Leo was a full-time student at a local university, he was employed as an *auxiliar de bodega* (warehouse assistant) picking up merchandise from the warehouses and storage facilities of stores that donated to the *Banco de Alimentos*.

“Well, Carulla has their own *fincas*,”⁹⁶ Leo explained. “They offer the excess of the products they know they will not commercialize during any given period. They have an agreement with the *Banco*. Their donations help them reduce up to 30% of the taxes they would otherwise have to pay.” Though reduced taxation may have offered an incentive for companies to donate merchandise they would otherwise throw away, donating food also helped protect certain food markets and maintained the economic value of particular merchandise. Leo explained that Alquería, one of the largest milk distribution companies in Colombia, often had a significant surplus of fresh milk that it

⁹⁶ *Fincas* are properties where foods, such a coffee, are harvested.

could not commercialize before it went bad. Transforming milk into yogurt and into longer lasting dairy products by manufacturing it into powder form had historically assisted in reducing this surplus and creating new products from which the dairy industry could profit.

However, according to Leo, before the *Banco de Alimentos* offered an organized central structure by which to redistribute the extra milk that was produced, the milk companies threw away much of this fresh, excess milk. “It isn’t economically wise to lower their prices under these circumstances,” Leo told me. “Lowering prices would widely affect the price of dairy at large, so they would dump the milk instead. Now, they are able to donate this milk to the *Banco*.⁹⁷ Also, if a bag of milk rips open contaminating the other bags,” Leo added, “the bags of milk surrounding it cannot be sold because grocery stores such as Carrefour or Carulla have strict hygiene standards. Alquería replaces these bags of milk, and they used to throw away perfectly good milk only because the bag itself was viewed as contaminated.”

Leo’s discussion of the place of surplus milk in the local market is critical for understanding the ways “freshness” and its seeming opposite, “spoilage,” are deeply political and economic “states of being” (to quote Freidberg) that have the potential to threaten markets and profits. For example, in order to maintain the price of milk in Colombia, Colanta, one of Colombia’s largest milk companies, passed out 55 million liters of excess milk free of charge in *barrios populares*, or poor neighborhoods in Bogotá and Medellín between 1995 and 2000. This milk was transformed into a donation

⁹⁷ Another national milk distributor known as *Colanta*, responded to surplus by distributing 55 million liters of excess milk in *barrios populares* in Bogotá and Medellín” (*el Tiempo*, January 29, 2010).

for the poor because such excess fresh milk could potentially devalue the price of dairy and “spoil” the economic market.

After listening to Leo explain the ways food is moved and diverted from earth to vendor, to grocery store, sometimes back to the manufacturer or distributing company, then to the *Banco de Alimentos*, and finally to local institutions such as *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, I asked him whether this cycle of movement and redistribution could be viewed as a form of recycling. As soon as the words had left my mouth, I realized that comparing the work the *Banco* performs to recycling would likely be constructed in negative terms, though that had not been my intent. Recycling and recyclers are an activity and an occupation that is frequently associated with poverty, waste, violence, and illegal practices. Recyclers are ever-present in the streets of Bogotá and in most other major cities in Colombia and Latin America. Using a wooden cart attached to a small horse or *burro*, recyclers often rummage through landfills, *potreros* (undeveloped urban plots of land), and the dumpsters of businesses and apartment complexes for metals, the bone remnants of butchered animals, food, clothing and any other products that might have monetary or use value. A rusted alarm clock or cassette player that may never again serve its original purpose, and the metals contained therein, can be sold to private recycling companies or at local flea markets.

Several times during my fieldwork I arrived to *Comedor María es Mi Madre* to find that the electricity and telephone services in the neighborhood had been disrupted. The underground wiring that connects communication networks and electricity was made from copper and was frequently stolen because it is a metal that nets sizeable profits in the recycling/waste economy. Missing sewer covers were also an everyday fact of life in

these neighborhoods (and in many other parts of the capital and in Latin America), as they too were sold or bartered. The holes the missing metal covers exposed on the ground became an everyday hazard for pedestrians, and several older adults I came to know suffered sprained ankles and other injuries after having walked into sewer openings unexpectedly.

While not all recyclers participate in unlawful acts, the occupation is often associated with theft and illegal activity. Moreover, many of the patrons of the *comedor* worked as recyclers at some point in their lives and many still depended on some form of recycling or other exchange practices for their livelihood, a topic I further discuss in chapter 6. Frequently, patrons arrived at the dining house carrying dolls, pieces of clothing, plastic toys or other trinkets they had found and attempted to sell these items to each other, to myself, or to others that worked at the *comedor*.

Given this perception of recyclers, recycling, and waste, I understood why Leo might be somewhat annoyed at the associations he felt were intimated by my question. He responded by telling me that he was going to attempt to answer my question without sounding too harsh, saying, “I wouldn’t call this recycling. Things that are ‘recyclable’ are things that are thrown away. You see people looking for recyclables in the trash. Look, I’m going to give you an example. A few weeks ago we received some *cazuelas de mariscos*.⁹⁸ You know that seafood is a luxury food and in order for it to be stored and consumed, it must be kept under very specific conditions. The *cazuelas* were missing a key ingredient, but that ingredient didn’t arrive in time, and the *cazuelas* weren’t able to be commercialized without that ingredient. So, the *Banco* received them and distributed

⁹⁸ A seafood stew common along Colombia’s Caribbean coast.

them. That's not something that can be called recycling. This food did not come from a dumpster. Things that are recycled are transformed into other kinds of products. Take another example: Carrefour bakes bread all day. They have very strict hygiene and preparation standards. But, what happens when they can't sell the bread on the same day that it is baked?" he asked me.

"They probably throw whatever is leftover away," I responded hesitantly, carefully assessing my words before doing so.

"That's right...and yet we buy bread and we keep it in our homes for two or three days. The bread is fine, we eat it a day later, and there isn't a problem. But Carrefour can't sell day old bread, so they donate that bread to us. That bread is not recycled. The image of recycling that we have is of *comida de quinta*.⁹⁹ We don't want the bank to become like a *plaza de mercado* where people purchase food for the poor. We don't want this to become a *plaza* where people get an apple thrown their way. We at the *Banco* want persons with dignity to be able to purchase dignified products for people with dignity."

Leo's description of the standards of hygiene that would categorize a product as too "contaminated" to sell, but still viable for consumption when donated, brings to the fore how standards related to a product may shift depending on who is the potential consumer. If a bag of milk that was sticky from spilled milk were to be purchased by a customer inside a grocery store, this bag would be viewed as unacceptable and unhygienic. Yet, a bag that appeared to be sticky from old, spilled milk was

⁹⁹ In this context, *comida de quinta* may refer to the quality of the food – that is, food that is of "fifth quality" or bad quality. However, in Spanish, a *quinta* is also large house. Thus, Leo's words might refer to the food that is leftover from a *quinta*. I offer these translations because I am unsure about exactly what Leo meant by the term *comida de quinta*. However, I am certain that he used *comida de quinta* in a very negative context.

unproblematic as a donation as long as the food it contained was still viable. The value of this bag of milk in the consumer market was lost through the contamination of its packaging, even though the food it contained was equal in quality to any other bag of milk of the same brand. However, diverting this bag of “contaminated” milk to the *Banco de Alimentos*, and thus, to a different kind of consumer, rescued it from becoming waste or from being destroyed.

Leo’s words also categorized the selection and distribution of foods by the *Banco* as quite different from forms of recycling, telling me, “This food did not come from a dumpster. Things that are recycled are transformed into other kinds of products.” For Leo, to compare the *Banco*’s process of selection and redistribution of food to a form of recycling would imply that the products the *Banco* received and redistributed existed within the category of “waste” or “trash.”

His fervent response to my seemingly naïve question not only made a distinction between his understanding of recycling and the work the *Banco de Alimentos* performs, but simultaneously marked what he viewed to be key differences between the traditional *plaza de mercado* and the *Banco de Alimentos*. Though there are many *plazas de mercado* throughout Bogotá and the rest of the country (as well as throughout Latin America) where one can purchase fruits, vegetables, cheese, meats, and prepared local meals quite inexpensively, *plazas* are viewed by many to exist in contrast to more modern, hygienic and haggle-free supermarkets or hypermarkets (cf. Herzog 1993). It is not uncommon for individual vendors of food stands inside *plazas* to leave the *desechos* or waste of their wares, such as bruised and rotten fruits and vegetables, or the entrails of the unwanted parts of butchered animals piled up near trash bins. However, it is also not

uncommon for vendors to offer a fruit, a piece of bread, or a bowl of soup to a hungry person or family. Throughout the course of the day, and especially once the market has closed, individuals (often recyclers or persons in need of food) gather amidst piles of these *desechos* and rummage for foods they might be able to consume or items that they can transform into or exchange for economic substance.

This distinction between “traditional” ways of getting food from the *plaza de mercado* and more “modern,” and seemingly seamless economic exchanges, such as those that take place at the *Banco de Alimentos*, positions the *Banco* much like supermarkets run by the members of its board of directors, such as Carulla, Carrefour, or Éxito. The ease of depositing money (the *aporte solidario*) and receiving groceries that are determined to be equal to that amount (albeit with very little negotiation regarding what kinds of foods and other products one might get) recalls how exchanges of money for food take place inside supermarkets. Unlike the *plaza de mercado*, all merchandise received by the *Banco* was catalogued and electronically inventoried so that an employee could easily see how many bottles of shampoo or kilos of organic tomato were available at any given time by punching a few numbers into a computer. Much like supermarket grocers, the *Banco*’s employees sorted through the foods, determining which ones were “fresh” enough to be re-distributed and consumed by the patrons of their affiliated institutions. In much the same way that a product that leaves Carulla or Éxito represents the quality of the merchandise that the particular store carries, so too did the food that left the warehouse doors of the *Banco* represent and communicate the quality of its goods as well as its social mission.

Leo's response and his description of the food found on the floors of *plazas* or of *comida de quinta* and the food its affiliated institutions receive might also prompt us to recall Claudia Marcela's account of the ways the representatives of the institutions had in the past rummaged through dumpsters to obtain food for their patrons prior to having access to products from the *Banco de Alimentos*. During our interview, Claudia Marcela told me several times that the food the *Banco* redistributed went through an internal sorting process. She stated:

For the institutions, it was great that the *Banco* became a center for redistribution and one that delivers a product that has already been selected because the products that we receive go through a process of selection. They are classified and then they are redistributed to them. So, they know that the product they receive has already gone through a selection process and that the product is still viable. So, the dynamic shifts and this creates a more dignified situation. It isn't a situation of *limosna*¹⁰⁰ because the institutions have to give an *aporte solidario*, and they have to require that their patrons also give them an *aporte solidario* because we are not in support of just giving things away. That creates mendicity.

Though I did not learn about the specific characteristics that determined how a donated food or product was selected for redistribution,¹⁰¹ both Claudia Marcela and Leo did make a distinction between "dignified" and "undignified" foods. Undignified foods were foods that fit within the category of waste, that were potentially recycled (or recyclable), that were found on the floors of the *plazas de mercado*, or foods that were thrown into dumpsters. "Dignified" foods, on the other hand, were foods determined to be viable and that were donated to the *Banco de Alimentos*, foods that would fulfill their

¹⁰⁰ *Limosna* may be translated as charity or alms.

¹⁰¹ Since I expected to be offered the opportunity to observe this process during a return trip to the *Banco*, I neglected to ask Claudia Marcela and Leo about how such a process of selection occurs. Unfortunately, I was unable to return to the *Banco* after my interview with Claudia Marcela.

original purpose, that were not picked out of a trash can, that went through a process of selection, and that had the potential to dignify their future eaters.

Additionally, though Leo clearly and strongly communicated to me that the food the *Banco* received and sorted through was not trash, as I noted earlier in the chapter, much of this food would most likely have become trash at some point in its life cycle had it not been donated to the *Banco*. The bubble gum flavored yogurts or the fruits and vegetables *Comedor María es Mi Madre* received during the shopping trip I described at the beginning of this chapter, might have easily ended up as trash inside a dumpster behind a Carulla grocery store. In this sense, though waste prevention was not the primary goal of the mission of Bogotá's *Banco de Alimentos*, the *Banco* did indeed play a critical role in interrupting food from becoming waste, and thus, rescuing it from becoming "undignified."

At this juncture, it is important to note a key difference between the aims of the *Banco de Alimentos* and Second Harvest's twin goals of waste prevention and ending hunger. To reach their initial goals, Second Harvest had to move beyond food security and their intent to feed the hungry in order to expand their constituency, as well as their economic and political support. Privileging waste prevention as a moral issue thus became the route by which they carried out their intentions and activities to curb hunger. However, following Leo and Claudia Marcela's description of the *Banco's* intentions to feed the poor and the practices involved in transforming rejected commodities into foods that were "dignified" and had the potential to "dignify" their eaters, we might argue that interrupting hunger and the Christian obligation to feed the poor was the primary and foundational goal of the *Banco de Alimentos*.

As a response to the papal call for an *obra de caridad* or work of charity that would directly respond to the structural inequalities that position people “below the margins necessary for human dignity,” the food bank provided food assistance as a way to mitigate hunger and disrupt the indignities (e.g. begging, rummaging through waste) that are engendered by inequality. According to the mission of the *Banco*, rescuing food “to ensure that such foods ended up on the tables of their affiliated institutions” and reached “the poorest inhabitants of the city” was the principal motivation, while waste prevention was instead a byproduct of this mission (*Banco de Alimentos de Arquidiócesis de Bogotá* 2010).¹⁰²

Yet, foods weren’t the only products received and redistributed by the *Banco de Alimentos*. Non-food products that might complement the goals of the affiliated institutions, such as kitchen appliances and home electronics, had in 2007, arrived at the *Banco* in increasing quantities. Items such as computers, clothing, radios, furniture, tools, toys, office supplies, lamps, televisions, and even decorative items such as overstock Christmas decorations that stores donated to the *Banco* after the Christmas season, had a more visible presence in the donations as well as in the *mercados* offered to the institutions. Christmas of 2006 was a festive occasion at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, as the public dining area of the house was decorated with a Christmas tree, lights, garland, and other embellishments, all of which had come from the *Banco de Alimentos*. Such items were donated to the *Banco* because of a visible defect such as a scratch, scuff, dent, or a missing accessory, such as a remote control. These defects and damages prevented manufacturers from selling these items at full retail value, and had they not been donated

¹⁰² Website accessed February 15, 2010: <http://www.arquibogota.org.co/index.php?idcategoria=8870>

to the *Banco*, they may have been recycled for parts or simply thrown away. However, once these items arrived at the food bank, an in-house technician tested them, selected those that were working or had the potential to function at full capacity, and then repaired them. Such appliances were only repaired and redistributed if the appliance could meet its original purpose and function.

Unlike foods recovered from the trash bins and the floors of *plazas*, the food and merchandise offered by the *Banco* were selected, sorted, cleaned, repaired, and thus, imbued with intention. Products that were expired were thrown away; products that were nearing expiration were redistributed to affiliated institutions as quickly as possible, often by placing urgent phone calls so that the merchandise spent very little time inside the spaces of the warehouse.

Though, I was not able to observe much of this process of selection, I do know that the moving, sorting, repairing, and categorization of foods and other goods was not haphazard nor was it impersonal. Employees' attention to the foods and merchandise received at the *Banco* was in part shaped by the training sessions they were expected to attend for their respective positions several times per year, weekly meetings, as well as other events aimed at promoting solidarity. The *Banco* aimed to extend these experiences of education and *convivencia* (sharing or partaking of an experience together that sometimes involved the eating of food) by requiring representatives of its affiliated institutions to attend similar training sessions and workshops. For example, on several days I played a more prominent role in the preparation of the lunch meal at *Comedor María es Mi Madre* because the cook, Señora Myrian, was attending a mandatory three-day workshop at the *Banco de Alimentos* regarding the hygienic handling, storing, and

cooking of food in institutional settings. Her attendance at this workshop was required to maintain the *comedor's* good standing as an institution affiliated with the *Banco de Alimentos*.

Hermano Miguel and I also attended a meeting with fellow representatives of the institutions who belonged to the *zona pastoral* of the central areas of Bogotá. Every *comedor*, *hogar*, and *casa* was grouped into a *zona pastoral*, or pastoral group, by the *Banco de Alimentos*. These groups were usually composed of institutions located in specific geographic areas of the capital. A social worker was assigned to each *zona pastoral*, and most institutions received a visit from that social worker at some point every year. Because there were a large number of institutions affiliated with the *Banco*, following up to see whether each institution was meeting the guidelines of their affiliation was quite difficult. Thus, creating small cohorts of institutions and meeting with the representatives two to three times per year at the workshops as well as receiving visits from a social worker, offered the *Banco* a way to connect with each institution beyond the receiving of food during their weekly appointment.

During the workshops inside the conference room of the *Banco*, Padre Daniel affirmed the *Banco's* religious and social aims, as well as the expectations of each of its affiliated institutions. At the workshop I attended with Hermano Miguel in April 2007, Padre Daniel communicated to those present that reselling products from the *Banco de Alimentos*, even if necessary to financially keep ones institution afloat, was prohibited. Doing so could potentially cause companies to cease their donations to the *Banco*, and would also make institutions ineligible to receive future *mercados* and other support from the *Banco*. This workshop also informed the representatives about recent changes at the

Banco, offered an opportunity for representatives from different institutions to interact, and proposed examples regarding what could be done when certain foods were donated in abundance, and consequently received by the institutions in excess. For example, on one occasion, the *Banco* received a substantial amount of cantaloupes. Using a power point presentation, Padre Daniel offered suggestions for the ways this excess cantaloupe might be “transformed” into meals, such as fruit salad, juices, and soups.

All of these activities – whether they were classes on how to handle and cook food in a hygienic manner or how to select and sort foods so that the freshest available products reached the intended eater – were enacted with an imagined consumer in mind. This intent, and the knowledge and practices of care toward food that were imparted to the employees, all played a role in transforming this food from a simple nutritional material, to a dignified and moral substance that had the potential to enact these qualities of dignity and morality into the lives, bodies, and social relations of their consumers.

This intentionality, it seems, is critical for understanding the invisible qualities food can embody. The foods that left the *Banco* were imbued with these intentions, care practices, and social relations that had touched, extended, and re-routed their lifecycles. Thus, for Leo and Claudia Marcela, an orange found on the floors of a *plaza* existed within an entirely different ontological category from an orange in the same condition that was donated to the *Banco de Alimentos*, sorted, and then redistributed. While both of these oranges may have identical brightly colored outer shells, may be firm (but not too ripe), and may have a crisp and sweet flavor, only one of these oranges had the potential to transform personhood and “dignify” its eaters. Foods that were plucked from a dumpster or trash and retrieved without a certain kind of person in mind as a potential

consumer, were not imbued with this “dignity” and thus, could not pass on or transfer this dignity to the person whose body and spirit they aim to sustain.

While intentionality and care were central in the creation and transferring of dignity, it is important to note that money was also a vital aspect of sustaining this “dignity.” Let us recall Claudia Marcela’s statement regarding the *Banco*’s internal sorting process that played a role in transforming foods into substances that were dignified and had the potential to dignify their eaters and consumers. Claudia Marcela stated, “So, they [the affiliated institutions] know that the product they receive has already gone through a selection process and that the product is still viable. The dynamic shifts and this creates a more dignified situation. It isn’t a situation of begging because the institutions have to give an *aporte solidario*, and they have to require that their patrons also give them an *aporte solidario* because we are not in support of just giving things away. That creates mendicity.” According to Claudia Marcela, part of what creates “a more dignified situation” is the fact that the *Banco* is not giving away these products and expecting nothing in return. Instead, foods and other materials are exchanged for an *aporte solidario*, or a “contribution of solidarity” in the form of money from the affiliated institution.

Verbs such as “purchase,” “pay,” “buy,” or “sell” – all of which connote economic exchanges -- were never used by any of the employees of the *Banco* when describing these transfers, though money was indeed changing hands. The absence of this contribution, as Claudia Marcela stressed, would create mendicity, which was the opposite of a dignified situation. Thus, this contribution in the form of money was

constitutive of the “dignification” of foods and in ensuring that that these foods would dignify their future eaters.

Unintended Consumers: Food Banks as Spaces of Transformation

As Claudia Marcela and I continued our tour of the *Banco* from the perspective of the elevated walkway, I caught sight of many plastic bottles and containers of different colors, shapes, and sizes that were organized on to shelves in a small partitioned corner of the warehouse.¹⁰³ These containers, which looked to be personal hygiene products, were reminiscent of the many bottles and tubs of shampoo, conditioner, and hair lotion that Hermano Miguel had purchased during one of our previous grocery trips to the *Banco*.

“If grocery stores donate foods because they can’t commercialize them before they expire, why would a company or store donate personal hygiene items such as shampoo and conditioner that have a longer shelf life?” I asked Claudia Marcela, as we approached the enclosed corner and the contents of the space came into clearer view.

“Well, we receive different kinds of cleaning and personal hygiene products. Like you said, things like shampoo and lotions have a relatively long shelf life. Sometimes, companies try to change the image of their products, that is, their packaging, and they don’t want an old image to continue in circulation. Sometimes the *Banco* also gets these directly from grocery stores that are having difficulty commercializing products that have old packaging,” Claudia Marcela explained.

A company’s advertising decision to change their appearance through the packaging or design of their products (such as the design on a bottle of shampoo) are

¹⁰³ It is interesting to note that I probably wouldn’t have been able to see the contents of this corner had I not had a bird’s eye view of the warehouse space. The limitations [or at least, what felt like limitations at the time] placed upon my visit actually offered a perspective that made this observation possible.

often done to recreate an injured or dated image, to maintain a “fresh” image for a potential new set of consumers, or possibly re-interest past consumers in that product, and thus, increase sales and circulation. Therefore, when manufacturing companies change their aesthetic presentation, they do so to make that product more attractive to a potential clientele, locality, or a past generation of consumers.

However, persons such as the older adults who frequented the *comedor* were not often viewed as potential consumers within the purview of manufacturing and distributions companies such as Pantene or Sedal. They were not their “target group” as their economic reach did not usually extend to these products, and thus, the company’s products were most likely not explicitly manufactured and marketed towards their tastes, preferences, or hygienic needs.

However, by being rerouted to the *Banco de Alimentos* (instead of finding a grave inside a dumpster), items such as Pantene hair lotion or organic tomatoes had the potential to reach new and unintended consumers. Products were received by the *Banco* and inventoried in order to be selected and redistributed to institutions and social service organizations, and through this process, the *Banco* played a role in reframing and re-imagining the intended consumer of these products. More often than not, these consumers were markedly different from those manufacturing companies had in mind when planting, harvesting, or producing a particular product.

Many companies also supported the *Banco* at a structural level, in that they not only donated merchandise that was of low circulation, with a nearing expiration date, with a scratch, or an antiquated design, but also offered financial contributions and what Claudia Marcela termed “first quality” products. According to Claudia Marcela, the

Banco received such contributions directly from members of the *junta directiva*, or board of directors. These funds not only helped the *Banco* sustain its operations, but as I previously noted, also offered the *Banco* the opportunity to purchase necessary staple foods that most stores and companies would not likely donate, such as oil, salt, grains, or sugar. Claudia Marcela explained, “A lot of time has to go by before a *panela* or a bottle of oil expires. There have to be awful conditions of conservation for rice to go bad. So, stores don’t often donate these goods because they last a long time and they are usually able to sell them.”

The potatoes that Claudia Marcela described as having their origins in the region of Armenia during my tour of the warehouse were purchased directly from the producer at a lower, wholesale price. Fruits such as pineapples were also purchased directly from their producers, which made access to fresh food less dependent on the ever-shifting scarcity and abundance of grocery stores. Close relationships with other food banks, such as the *Banco de Alimentos* of the Archdiocese of Medellín, otherwise known as *Fundación Saciar*, also contributed to this supply. For example, Bogotá’s *Banco de Alimentos* purchased bananas that were still green and attached to their vines from a producer in the coastal region of Urabá, Antioquia. *Fundación Saciar* helped transport these bananas to the *Banco*’s warehouse in Bogotá, where they were allowed to ripen before being redistributed. Close relationships between food banks in different parts of the country widened the range of access to particular foods, and also helped balance out supply and demand in their respective areas. Prior to the existence of these relationships and donations, the organizers of institutions such as *Comedor María es Mi Madre* had to

purchase such food staples at local grocery stores, and thus pay the full commercial cost of the product.

Contributions to the food bank also came in the form of transportation and cargo services in order to move donations from vendors to the *Banco*'s warehouse. For example, the two-liter bottles of Coca-Cola that Hermano Miguel received during the visit to the *Banco de Alimentos* were not nearing their expiration date, were of identical packaging as *Coca-Cola* that is currently on the market, and did not have any visible damages that would otherwise preclude their commercial sale to the public.

Leo told me that these types of donations not only assisted companies in reducing taxes, but also offered them good, healthy publicity. He added, "They [Coca-Cola] give us monetary donations and lend us two big rigs on a permanent basis. They contract the big rigs every day and they pay the salary of the drivers, maintenance, they take care of everything. They also give us products, give us storage items and about one-hundred and fifty boxes that our patrons can use to transport the foods they receive from us. In all of this, the name of Coca-cola is evident, generating healthy publicity. How much do you think a business pays for this kind of publicity? It is less expensive for them to be a sponsor through their agreement with us, and Coca-Cola becomes a symbol of humanity."

Indeed, the Coca-Cola brand was in need of healthy publicity as the bottling company (known as Pamamco) in Urabá, Antioquia had been accused of colluding with paramilitary security forces, connections that allegedly carried out killings upon trade union workers and forced other Panamco employees to write letters of resignation to the union. With the help of U.S. based activists, the Colombian trade union

SINALTRAINAL (the National Union of Food Industry Workers) brought a 500 million dollar lawsuit against The Coca-Cola Company and two of the company's Colombian bottlers in U.S. Federal District Court in Miami and called for an international boycott of Coca-Cola products. Through this transnational coalition, groups attempted to bring international pressure to Coca-Cola by shaming the brand through negative publicity, drawing attention to the "disparities between the iconic vision of Coca-Cola as the quintessential American soft drink and the allegations of murder and collusion with right-wing paramilitaries in the corporations' Colombian bottling plants" (Gil 2009: 671). Several universities across the United States, including the University of Michigan, suspended their contracts with Coca-Cola in 2005 due to this, as well as allegations of environmental abuses in other parts of the world.¹⁰⁴

While companies such as a Coca-Cola, Carrefour, and Alquería did indeed donate labor, transport vehicles, and most significantly, food, to the food bank, it is important to note distinctions between these donations and the goals of the *Banco de Alimentos*. Leo's discussion regarding why milk companies could not lower the price of milk and how, in the past, had to throw it away to protect the market and future profits, highlights the central place of "charity" for these corporation. For many of these companies, "charity" was a byproduct of their aims to protect the market, their image, and profits. By transforming bubble-gum flavored yogurts, and other products into "charity" instead of throwing them away, corporations were able to secure their financial stability through tax write offs, as well as control their public image. Though the yogurts that were donated

¹⁰⁴ Some university contracts with Coca-Cola, including contracts with the University of Michigan, were reinstated in 2008 after an independent, third party assessment of the company's bottling plants in India and Colombia. In 2003, a federal judge dismissed The Coca-Cola Company from the lawsuit filed by Sinaltrainal citing an absence of evidence that Coca Cola operated the Colombian bottling plants. In 2006, the case against the bottling plant was also dismissed.

were indeed viable and offered protein to people who were experiencing malnutrition, they were first and foremost, a rejected commodity -- rejected both by the purchasing public as well as the corporation that had commodified them. Their lack of value in the capitalist market was the primary reason why these yogurts could then be donated as a form of charity to the *Banco de Alimentos*. In this sense, the donation or “gift” of yogurts and other products masked the profit-taking behind the ostensible gift.

Moreover, though the food bank aimed to feed the poor and reach the vulnerable through “dignified” foods, it is important to note the ways the food bank was also deeply embedded in the economic markets that produced and maintained the inequalities that engendered the “undignified” situations of many of the persons it served. Though its primary goal was to offer *caridad* through food, the *Banco de Alimentos* was also constantly moving through different domains of market exchanges. The economic inequalities that give consumers differentiated access to resources were central to the production of surplus that made corporate donations to the *Banco* possible. Moreover, what constituted a “dignified” food was the expectation that the affiliated institutions had to pay for that food. While the exchange of money for food may have been enacted to prevent the reproduction of distinctions and hierarchies between “givers” and “receivers,” a power dynamic that is part and parcel of charity (Appadurai 1986; Mauss 1925; Castro Carvajal 2007), such an exchange was also a practice that positioned the work of the food bank, and by extension, the affiliated institutions and their patrons, within an economic market. In this sense, the hard rock of the market framed and made possible the soft coziness of *caridad*.

We might suggest that for the *Banco de Alimentos*, it was precisely because of the inequalities engendered by the economic market that dignity needed to be restored to Bogotá's poor. For the representatives of the food bank with whom I spoke, dignity formed part of a domain of value and social experience that needed to be defended, and charity toward the poor was a moral obligation that was tied to faith and to the Catholic Church. While the *Banco* received products that had little to no value in the commercial economic market, such as products of low circulation, damaged goods that could no longer be commercialized, or foods no longer deemed "fresh," the *Banco* transformed and assigned a new kind of value and potential to these products. While a bottle of shampoo or an organic, vine-ripened tomato may have originally been produced with an aim for sale and profit, the *Banco* ceased engaging these products solely as commodities, and positioned them as substances that had the potential to not only interrupt hunger, but also to transform the bodies and personhood of their eaters.

While foods may be transformed into new forms through diverse cultural practices of cooking (as well as through processes of decay) (Levi-Strauss 1963), or converted into entirely new substances (as in the Christian belief in transubstantiation), for the *Banco*, the process of food transformation was also a process of dignification, and the *Banco's* warehouse, a space of transformation. As I discussed earlier, in order to make sure that the foods that left the *Banco* had the potential to dignify their future eaters, the food bank made sure that its staff was well trained in all areas of food hygiene, and that foods and other goods were selected and repaired before they were sent off as part of a *mercado*. Moreover, meetings with representatives of the *comedores* and other

affiliated institutions aimed to ensure that the *Banco*'s goals would be carried out by the social service organizations that redistributed these foods to Bogotá's inhabitants.

It is important to note that it was only when these foods were distributed as part of *mercados*, that their potential to transform the personhood and bodies of their future eaters could be enacted. The work of Nancy Munn (1986) might prove helpful for thinking about the ways foods acquire positive value through practices of giving and exchange. Munn argues that for Gawans, eating foods for the purpose of filling up one's own body rather than giving it away to visitors only "swelled" the belly and canceled out the possibility of return (Munn 1986: 60). "The food," Munn argues, "itself is destroyed, losing its capacity to produce anything else for the consumer. The comestible and the fame, its potential product, disappear." On the other hand, giving food away to overseas visitors initiates "a spatiotemporally extending process – an expansion beyond the donor's persons and the immediate moment" (Munn 1986: 50). Thus, the transmission of particular foods, especially those that were central to the *kula* exchange, "may be considered a subjective potential or conversion power of an act – its capacity for affecting actors' attitudes or intentions" (Munn 1986: 60).

With Munn's arguments in mind, we might more robustly engage the practices of exchange between the *Banco* and the affiliated institutions as relations of more than just the exchange of food for a contribution of solidarity. By redistributing foods to the affiliated institutions, the food bank was also distributing the potential of that food, that is, the possibility that its consumption would lead to the embodiment of dignity. For the representatives of the *Banco de Alimentos* with whom I spoke, dignity was positioned as

necessary for personhood, and the dignity accessed through material forms such as food, had the potential to transform both the person and the body of that person.

“Dignity,” however, is not a static or unproblematic concept. The 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights positioned dignity as an inalienable right of humans, legally framing an assault on human rights as an assault on dignity. Yet technologies of life and bioethics have pushed scholars to consider the relationship between the meaning of “humanness” and differing constructions of “personhood,” thus reconfiguring our understandings of when life and death begin and end (Lock 1996; Rabinow 1999; Sharp 2006). Among Christians (specifically, Roman Catholics) dignity is spoken about in relation to that which is sacred. In this sense, the all too common human experience of “living below the minimum demanded by human dignity,” as the Pope asserted in the Apostolic letter I cite at the beginning of this chapter, is a direct attack on that which is sacred.

In all of these instantiations and descriptions, dignity is something that is felt, experienced, and embodied. With the case of the food bank in mind, we might understand dignity and the process of dignification that Leo and Claudia Marcela often described, as embedded in social relations. Dignity, it seemed, is felt, experienced, and incorporated through people’s relationships to things such as food – foods that had been chosen, selected, and cared for by the employees of the *Banco*. In this sense, dignity may also be viewed as a relational concept born from sets of relationships between and among people and things.

Moreover, while I have discussed the role of the food bank in “rescuing” food from becoming waste and have suggested that this was secondary to the goal of feeding

the hungry through *caridad*, it is important to note that the *Banco* was not only interrupting food from rotting or “dying” in the organic sense of the term. While manufacturing and distribution companies, as well as larger grocery stores may not have envisioned the elders of a small *comedor* as potential consumers of their products, the *Banco* trained its staff, selected, sorted, repaired, and repackaged these donated foods and goods with the patrons of the affiliated institutions in mind. By diverting these foods to new consumers, the *Banco* was also “rescuing” the potential of these foods to transform persons, and thus live on in forms distinct from those imagined by their manufacturers.

The foods and products the *Banco* repackaged for its affiliated institution thus constantly moved beyond their intended reach each time they were diverted to a new place. As they flowed through these new channels, they took on new meaning, unexpected lifecycles, and reached new and unintended consumers. Though the *Banco de Alimentos* played a critical role in extending the organic life of products, it also played a role in extending their social lives as well.

Conclusion

The *Banco* and its employees aimed to reconstitute foods that had little to no market value into meaningful substances that were imbued with value of a different sort. By caring for these products, sorting them, selecting them, and packing them with a new imagined consumer in mind, the *Banco* transformed items that were deeply entrenched in market relations and inequalities into foods and goods that had the potential to enact qualities of dignity, and simultaneously created new and unintended consumers. While food entered the food bank as a rejected commodity, its meaning, potential, and future

was changed once it formed part of a *mercado* for one of the *Banco*'s affiliated institutions.

Through this reframing, the *Banco de Alimentos* resignified these products with a new kind of value in a new kind of "market." *Comedores* and other social service organizations, in a sense, became the new spiritual market for goods whose value had diminished in the capitalist market. The redistribution of these items to individuals who were never imagined as consumers by corporations and manufacturing companies also aimed to reconstitute people's relationships to foods and other material forms from which they had been disenfranchised.

Chapter Five

Sopa y Seco

On Ash Wednesday 2007, a day when Catholics are asked to abstain from the meat of warm-blooded animals, Señora Myrian stood in front of a steaming pot stirring the contents of a seafood stew with a thick, wooden spoon inside the kitchen of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. A few weeks earlier, the *comedor* had received approximately twenty-five individual portions of *cazuela de mariscos* in their weekly *mercado* from the *Banco de Alimentos*. *Cazuela de mariscos* is a seafood dish typical of the coastal regions of Colombia. While the ingredients vary based on family recipes and local availability, the dish is usually made from conch, shrimp, calamari, clams, *langostinos* (crayfish sized shellfish), and corvine fish stewed in coconut milk and/or heavy cream. The fish is first cooked in an *hogao*, a common base for many Colombian dishes made from sautéed tomatoes, onions, garlic, and spices. The *Banco de Alimentos* had frozen the seafood stew, which had arrived to the warehouse in black, plastic bowls that resembled the traditional black, clay bowls that were used to serve many regional soups and dishes throughout the country.

Earlier that morning, Señora Myrian had emptied the frozen contents of the bowls into the large pot she usually reserved for the turkey soup. She added water to *rendir* the contents of the stew, that is, to stretch the reach of the dish so that everyone would have a taste of the rare treat. By adding this water, Señora Myrian transformed about twenty

individual portions of *cazuela de mariscos* into a more watery soup that would feed about one hundred individuals.

Señora Myrian and Hermano Roosevelt began to pour the fish stew mixture into the metal soup bowls, and with the help of a few volunteer patrons, placed each bowl on the tables alongside the dish that contained the *seco*, that is, the “dry” portion of the meal, which on that day was composed of rice and a carrot and beet salad. As they did this, Hermano Miguel held a prayer service in the front dining area in order to commemorate the beginning of the Lenten season.

“This isn’t an everyday food,” Hermano Miguel exclaimed once everyone had entered the *comedor*. “You even have *cazuela de mariscos*!”

Hermano Miguel’s statement, “this isn’t an everyday food” pointed to the extraordinariness of the food that was being served on the occasion of Ash Wednesday. Though Colombia has a Pacific and Caribbean coast, as well as many rivers with abundant fish, seafood in the interior of the country was quite expensive and, some said, not nearly as tasty. Additionally, though there were restaurants throughout downtown Bogotá that cooked fish with traditional “coastal” flavors, such as coconut milk, these restaurants were limited and pricier than most restaurants in the area. Indeed, Ash Wednesday was a special day in that fish, especially prepared as a delicate *cazuela de mariscos*, was a food that most patrons of the *comedor* (as well as many *Bogotanos*) had only consumed on the rarest of occasions.

While the patrons ate their *cazuela de mariscos* in the metal soup bowls that afternoon, the seafood stew they were served was quite different from the one that Myrian prepared for the *hermanos* and for myself shortly after the *almuerzo* that had been

served to the patrons of the *comedor*. As the *hermanos*, myself, and a representative of an NGO sat at the long, wooden table inside the residential portion of the dining house, each of us were served a generous portion of *cazuela de mariscos* in the black, plastic bowls in which the food had arrived frozen. Our *mariscos* were served with a little bit of rice on the side, a couple of slices of avocado, as well as a tall glass of *jugo de lulo*, a bright green juice made from the pulp of the tropical *lulo* fruit. Unlike the seafood stew the patrons had been served as a starter, our *cazuela de mariscos* was the main course of the meal, rather than a precursor to the *seco*. Moreover, the version of the soup we received was not stretched thinly with water, and was thus thick, creamy, and replete with diverse kinds of seafood. It was evident that this *cazuela de mariscos* was distinct from the diluted version the patrons had consumed only one hour earlier.

In chapter four, I explored the diverse sets of relations that played a role in the movement and distribution of foods, as well as the practice of food banking. I focused on the ways foods and other commodities were received by Bogotá's *Banco de Alimentos*, and how these "leftover" foods and products were transformed into meaningful substances that might then transform their future eaters, such as the patrons of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. As I discussed in chapters two and three, the primary goal of the *comedor* was to create a space of "social inclusion" as well as to offer a structure of care that might take the place of kinship relations that many felt older adults in the neighborhood were lacking. In this chapter, I shift back to the spaces and people of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. I show how providing foods that were similar to the meals that were typical to the region, or that were deemed luxurious or "special," much like the *cazuela de mariscos* served on Ash Wednesday, was a central way by which *comedor*

organizers aimed to create a sense of “belonging” and include older adults into a broader community of eaters. However, while the foods I highlight in this chapter, which also include turkey, French fries, and baby formula and Ensure, were used to blur distinctions and create belonging between the *comedor* patrons and other Colombians, in many cases, the ways these foods were prepared and given to the patrons often reified the divisions and social and economic inequalities the *comedor* aimed to counter.

I organize this chapter by moving through a typical Colombian *almuerzo*, which usually began with a *sopa*, or soup, followed by the *seco*, or “dry,” savory portion of the meal. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of infant formula and Ensure, which represents the *jugo*, or beverage that might be included in an *almuerzo*. I show how the feeding of these food products, which symbolize distinct stages of biological and social life, as well as illness, positions the work of the dining house amidst discourses of progress and situates the lives of older adults within a narrative of history from which they have been excluded. Whereas the giving of such food might be offered as a socially inclusive practice, the inclusion of infant formula and Ensure in the *comedor*'s meals also simultaneously conflates the needs of older adults with those of children, and plays a role in denying the historicity and personhood of local elders.

In the sections that follow, I explore how foods were received by the *comedor*, how they were transformed, consumed, and what meanings they communicated. While “food” entered into the dining house in many forms and from many sources, such as the *Banco de Alimentos* or the Food Bank of the Archdiocese of Bogotá, in this chapter I also highlight a range of other benefactors, such as state agencies, corporate donors, local businesses, and the work of volunteers.

Sopa: The Value of “Export Quality” Turkey

A huge pot of turkey soup bubbled atop the industrial sized stove inside the kitchen of *Comedor María es Mi Madre* in April 2007. Señora Myrian was busily preparing the *menú del día*, which on this particular day consisted of stewed peas cooked in the *olla pitadora*, or pressure cooker, turkey simmering in its own broth, salted potatoes, white rice, and a turkey soup cooked with finely chopped carrots, potatoes, and *ayuyama*, a kind of orange squash. Everything in the kitchen was of mammoth proportions, mirroring the large scale-operation that unfolded inside the dining house every morning. Giant ladles, five-gallon drums of oil, institutional size jars of mayonnaise, and bucket-sized tubs of salt and spices assisted in the daily preparation of twenty pounds of rice, salad, soup, and juice.

As I peered into the three-foot high pot of soup, I noticed a pointy, floppy piece of flesh popping out of the thick, brownish broth. I picked up the heavy ladle to inspect its contents more carefully and was immediately greeted by a whole turkey head with its beak, skin, eyes and neck intact. Adjacent to the stove near the marble counter that divided the dining area from the kitchen, sat another heaping pot of turkey meat -- cooked turkey heads, feet with claws, as well as cut up bits from the turkey’s posterior were floating around a pool of broth alongside herbs that had been added for flavor. Jacqueline, a neighbor and friend of Hermano Miguel who was helping prepare the day’s lunch, squirmed a bit when I pointed out the various heads sticking out from the broth.

“Have you ever eaten turkey heads or feet?” I asked her.

“No, I don’t eat *that*,” she replied with a look of disgust on her face.

The food that entered the *comedor* came from a wide variety of sources. Turkeys arrived at the dining house two or three times per month and were donated by *La Casa*

del Pavo (The House of the Turkey) a company that (I was told) raised turkeys in Peru, and processed them in Colombia for domestic consumption as well as for export. Every two or so weeks the *comedor* received a phone call from the owner of the *La Casa del Pavo* to ask whether the dining house could use more turkey. Hundreds of turkeys arrived at the *comedor* frozen and sealed in clear plastic bags, usually atop the bed of a truck. Their awkward bodies were held together by tiny bones, as the most desirable and valuable flesh, such as the breast, drumstick, and thighs had been removed by the company prior to donating them. Most of these marginal parts of the turkey became the central protagonists of soups for the *abuelitos*, but their skin, bone, neck, and feet, the parts of the animal known as *menudencias*,¹⁰⁵ were also frequently used to flavor vegetable dishes, rice, soups, and sauces.

“Be careful not to fall!” exclaimed Deibid one afternoon as I walked into a pool of light pink blood near the entrance of the dining area. Deibid was wearing black rubber boots, a white plastic apron that was splattered with blood, and was surrounded by turkey carcasses piled on top of each other. Without hesitation, he continued to chop the frozen turkey that lay on a wooden bench with the quick swing of an ax.

“All of the turkeys won’t fit in the refrigerator, so we have to cut them into pieces and freeze them so that they won’t rot,” he said as he continued to cut up the turkeys. The amount of turkey that was donated to the *comedor* usually exceeded that which might be consumed in any given week, and thus needed to be cut into pieces, frozen, or salted for preservation.

¹⁰⁵ Though *menudencias* usually refer to feet and other marginal parts of chickens, I have applied the term here to describe the similar ways such comparable parts of the turkey were cooked at the *comedor*. The word *menu* denotes the diminutiveness of the pieces of meat that are used to flavor broths and other dishes.

Every day, at least one hundred bowls of soup were served from the large metal pot that sat atop the stove that took up one entire wall of the rectangular kitchen. The bowls were usually arranged on a large plastic tray and whoever was serving the soup had to contend with a huge, metal ladle as they carefully poured the steaming hot soup into each bowl. The server then needed to place the still boiling bowls of soup on to the counter without burning their fingers and arms. The ingredients used for the soup varied throughout the week: sometimes Señora Myrian would make *sopa de pasta* (soup with bits of pasta) or *sopa de cebada* (barley soup). At other times, the soup was made from a mixture of vegetables, such as freshly shelled *arvejas* (peas), *ayuyama*, *papa criolla* (a species of small round potatoes locals claim are found only in highland Colombia), *cebolla cabezona* (round, yellow onion), and flavored with turkey *menudencias*, that is, the odds and ends of turkeys. The muscles of servers became sore from lifting and serving gallons and gallons of soup regularly and one had to be sure that every bowl had a bit of meat or a bone along with the vegetables and broth. Serving equal portions helped prevent conflict among the patrons and assured everyone was offered a similar amount of food and meat in their meal.

Beef did make rare appearances at the *comedor*, but usually did so in the form of cow cheek, which had a gelatinous texture, and bumpy appearance. Like the turkey, this cut of beef was donated, and generally unappealing to the patrons. “Don’t leave any of the beef behind,” Alex and Hermano José Fernando would joke when patrons would leave portions of the cow cheek behind or even when there wasn’t any visible meat included in the lunch meal. Some would laugh at the sarcasm dripping from these kinds of statements, as *carne*, or beef, was a rare occurrence (even in the form of cow cheek)

and such jokes only served to highlight the fact that beef was relatively non-existent on the plates of food inside *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. Instead, it was turkey pieces that were given as protein to the *abuelitos*, and that were usually cradled by a bed of rice, potatoes, or beet and carrot salad.

“This one is a prized one!” said Carlitos, a younger patron in his thirties who regularly assisted in serving the *almuerzo*, as he eyed the sizeable piece of turkey meat inside a bowl. He quickly poured the soup into a red plastic container and set it aside for his own meal. Señora María Elvira did the same when she saw a bowl containing a large piece of *pesquezo*, or the neck of the turkey.

As I recall the way Carlitos and María Elvira reserved their bowls of soup containing a hefty portion of turkey meat, I am reminded of a conversation I had with another patron of the dining house, Señora Cecilia, in December 2006 regarding her aversion to the consumption of animal entrails and *menudencias*.

“I remember when food was plentiful, when the beef was selected from the best cattle, and the pieces of the animal, such as tongues, tails, and feet were discarded,” Señora Cecilia had told me as we walked by a restaurant across the street from the *Iglesia de Santa Bárbara* that sold *almuerzos* for 1,000 pesos (approximately 50 cents in late 2006). Señora Cecilia’s comment intimated that the *almuerzos* offered inside this restaurant were relatively inexpensive because the meats that were used to prepare them were of low quality. Her remark also positioned the past as a nostalgic time when cuts of meat that were perceived as valuable were bountiful, and was simultaneously a pointed critique of the present.

While *menudencias* formed the basis for many soups I ate while in Bogotá, the fact that these pieces of meat came from turkey instead of chicken (a meat that is more commonly used and widely available) positioned the *menudencias* served at the *comedor* within a very different margin of value. Turkey is one of the more expensive meats in Colombia, as a pound of sliced turkey breast can range from 20,000 to 30,000 *pesos* (approximately ten to fifteen USD) depending on what store it is purchased in and where in the city that store is located. Turkey, however, makes a yearly appearance in an everyday manner during the Christmas and New Year's season, when makeshift stands selling turkey breasts and thighs stuffed with quail eggs, ham, and other ingredients open up throughout the city streets. Though turkey is the typical meat served during these holidays, the high cost of this food makes it inaccessible to a large percentage of Bogotá's inhabitants during most of the year.

Though most donations of turkey that came from *La Casa del Pavo* were in the form of *menudencias*, on rare occasions the *comedor* would also receive turkey breast and thigh cutlets from the company. For a Christmas Eve dinner held for the *abuelitos* at the *comedor* on December 23, 2006, the meal included a thick slice of stuffed and roasted turkey breast, potato salad, a glass of red wine, along with cherries that had been distributed to the *comedor* by the *Banco de Alimentos*. The cherries, a fruit that is very difficult to find in Colombia, had been stranded at the Bogotá airport while en route from Chile to Miami when the cargo flight that carried them had been cancelled.¹⁰⁶

On most days, however, the protein prepared for and consumed by the patrons was composed of turkey *menudencias*. However, many of the patrons, such as Señora

¹⁰⁶ Cherries were so uncommon in Bogotá that most patrons had never seen the fruit and did not know what to call them in Spanish.

Gladys, still enjoyed and appreciated what many perceived to be lower quality cuts of meat.

“We eat export quality turkey almost every day!” exclaimed Gladys one afternoon as she sat savoring the piece of turkey that had accompanied her meal. Throughout grocery stores in Bogotá, a significant number of products (particularly coffee) are labeled as *tipo exportación*, or “export quality” goods. “Export quality” merchandise must meet high standards of presentation and flavor, and respond to the expectations and desires of a global market, especially consumers in the United States and Western Europe. These goods are generally more expensive than their non-labeled counterparts, and thus, are less accessible to domestic consumers. However, because there is not one standard regarding what can be called “export quality,” many domestic products are often marketed to Colombians as possessing attributes of “export quality” merchandise. This form of advertising not only makes a product more attractive to the domestic consumer, but also signals to the potential availability and consumption of a “worldly” and “luxurious” product in a local context.

Though meats sold at even the most upscale grocery stores were not usually labeled as “export quality” (though I did once see “artisanal” turkey at the deli counter of a Carulla¹⁰⁷ grocery store), Señora Gladys was most likely referencing these visual markers of quality, difference, and luxury that were widely present on the packages of certain foods when she remarked on the turkey she and her fellow patrons ate on a daily basis. Through her comment, she positioned herself and others as eaters and consumers

¹⁰⁷ As I noted earlier, Carulla (now Carulla Vivero) was founded in 1905. Though *Carulla* was one of Colombia’s largest, and oldest, supermarket chains. In 2000, *Carulla* merged with *Vivero*, and in 2006, *Carulla/Vivero* merged with *Almacenes Éxito*, Colombia’s largest supermarket chain. Depending on the neighborhood, some *Carulla* grocery stores carried more “specialty” items.

of quality and luxurious foods (and potentially “worldly” foods), even though the cuts of this meat would not typically be viewed as valuable in the local market and would never be sold as an “export” quality product at a Colombian grocery store.

The preparation of meals using the entrails and cuts of meat that are often viewed as being quite low on the gastronomical order, such as tongues, necks, and feet, in local cuisines, has a deep and difficult history in the Americas. Sidney Mintz (1994) has written extensively about the significant role slaves played in cultivating Caribbean cuisine, noting that their “cannons of taste” greatly influenced the tastes of their masters (1994: 36). Mintz tells us that “nearly all the slaves had something to do with food, with its production or processing or distribution. In these differing tasks (and in eating), they were able to exercise the human potentiality to taste, to compare, to elaborate their preferences” (Mintz 1994: 37). Caribbean slaves often kept small gardens where they cultivated both new and old world plants, and through this found new ways to combine the parts of animals that were discarded by their masters. Even after emancipation, the descendants of slaves continued to produce and consume dishes that have their roots in slavery (Poe 1999; Hoskins and Rouse 2004).¹⁰⁸

In Colombia, as in many other regions of the world, foods derived from the less economically valuable parts of animals are central to local cuisine. *Fritanga* is a typical dish found in many parts of the country. A plate of *fritanga*, which is often consumed as

¹⁰⁸ Many of these foods were marketed as Soul Food in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. Poe (1999) has argued that slaves “developed an affinity for the parts of animals normally discarded by whites: entrails, known as “chitterlings” (pronounced “chitlines”); pigs’ heads, which were made into “souse,” a kind of headcheese; pigs’ and chickens’ feet” (1999: 11). However, the marketing of these dishes as “Soul Food” often occluded the political contestations regarding the place of poverty and slavery in the social transformations of these foods into a “cuisine.” Hoskins and Rouse (2004) note that Mintz’s arguments do not include these 20th-century debates among African Americans, especially regarding what historical significance should be given to the “foods of slavery.”

street food, in food stalls inside *plazas de mercado*, but may also appear on the menu of more expensive eateries, consists of different kinds of meats such as pork and beef, but may also include chicken and lamb. A *fritanga* is usually comprised of *morcilla* (blood sausage), *chunchullo* (the small intestine of pork, beef, or lamb), pig's feet, *chicharrón* (pork belly), pork ribs, chorizo (pork sausage), *longaniza* (beef sausage), *bofe*, or the lungs of the pig or cow, and cow heart, among other meats. These meats are deep fried and served alongside plantains, potatoes, and *arepas*, or corn cakes. Though most of the meats served in *fritanga* may be less expensive than other parts of the animal, they are nonetheless a valued and desired part of local cuisine. While the consumption of marginal cuts of meat may point to limitations that are linked to socio-economic class (Limón: 1994),¹⁰⁹ typical dishes such as *fritanga* also have the potential to transcend class positions

Unlike pork, beef, and chicken, turkey does not have a prominent place in Colombian cuisine. As I mentioned previously, The House of the Turkey removes the pieces of the turkey that will offer the most economic return prior to donating the turkeys to the *comedor*, as turkey *menudencias* are not widely commercialized. The desired parts of the turkey, such as thighs, breasts, and legs, are indeed sold at a high price, but the *vísceras* or entrails of turkeys, as well as the heads and feet, do not figure into local dishes in ways that have been historically important for Colombians. Thus, though turkey may indeed be expensive when compared to popular cuts of chicken, beef, and pork, the

¹⁰⁹ José Limón discusses the ways the Mexican men with whom he worked in Texas prepared and consumed “undervalued” meats such as the internal organs of an animal or skirt steak. He argues that these meats were “culturally mediated to convert them from low-prestige, rather tough and stringy protein into tasty, valued, social food” (1994: 136). The author adds that the use of the Spanish diminutive, such as *fajita* instead of *faja* (skirt steak), or *mollejita* instead of *molleja* (gizzards) also “linguistically softens” the meat, and corresponds to the ways these often tough proteins were softened through secret marinades (1994: 136).

marginal parts of the turkey, such as the those served at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, are not as valued as those of more commonly consumed animals. Thus, if these donations of turkey had been refused by the *comedor*, this meat would most likely have become waste.

Turkey *menudencias*, however, were often positioned as a luxurious or valuable food in the context of the *comedor*. The *hermanos* or Señora Myrian often described the exclusiveness of the lunch meal telling the patrons how extraordinary it was for them to have turkey, and sometimes milk, on a daily basis. Hermano Miguel frequently reminded the patrons that this opportunity was not available to most Bogotanos.

“Do you see how much I spoil you?” Hermano Roosevelt told the group of *abuelitos* assembled at the lunch tables one morning after having served lentils that had been prepared with milk and turkey, as well *jugo de maracuyá* and *curuba* made with a mix of milk and water, or *agualeche*.

“You have juice prepared with milk, lentils in milk and turkey,” Hermano Roosevelt added.

Hermano Roosevelt’s words detailed the quality of the meal and the diverse foods the patrons were being offered that day. Through his description, he was not only making the patrons aware of the foods they were eating, but was also communicating that being fed turkey, lentils, milk, and fruit juice, a combination of foods not usually accessible to Bogotá’s poorer inhabitants, was an indulgence. His statements conveyed to the patrons that these foods, particularly the turkey, went beyond the expectation of what could locally be viewed as a “normal,” everyday meal in this context. Thus, the turkey and the other foods that were offered, were being constructed as an exception to the everyday, as extraordinary, and consequently, as luxuries.

With this example in mind, let us shift back to the soup containing the odds and ends of turkey I described at the beginning of this narrative and recall Jacqueline's reaction when I asked her if she had ever eaten turkey heads, necks, or legs. Her quick response, "No, I don't eat *that*," was not a neutral one, but rather, was expressed with revulsion towards the food inside the pot. For Jacqueline, these pieces of turkey meat did not form part of an ontological category of what she might consider "food." Her reaction not only communicated that these bits of turkey were not adequate ingredients for her own meal, but also highlighted the moral qualities attributed to certain substances (including visual aesthetics and smells), which often determine whether or not persons view certain substances as edible forms.

Moreover, it is important to note that though the turkey served to the patrons was framed as a luxurious food by the *hermanos*, it was not always well received by patrons. On several occasions, individuals walked out of the *comedor* leaving behind full servings of turkey on their plates.

"It's because the turkey is really greasy," a patron once told me as he signaled to a pain in his belly while referring to the piece of turkey he had left behind. The piece of turkey posterior he had received had a large amount of fat, which had caused him indigestion. On another occasion, Señora Berta abruptly left during the lunch meal, leaving a plate replete with turkey on the table. As she walked away from the table, Hermano Miguel called out telling her that she was *despreciando la comida*, an expression that signaled to a lack of appreciation of the food one had been offered, as well as the efforts of the person who had prepared it. According to Señora Berta, she began to feel sick to her stomach while eating the turkey and had to leave to take care of

the mounting illness. She returned to the *comedor* a day later to explain to Hermano Miguel that she had been feeling ill and had not meant to appear unappreciative of the food she had been given.

Additionally, by telling the patrons that they were being spoiled through the food they were receiving, and by consistently reminding them that access to this kind of meat was a rare opportunity for most, the *hermanos* were also positioning the patrons as privileged eaters in comparison to other Bogotanos, as well as positioning them within a potentially global community of eaters. These everyday linguistic reminders of the “specialness” or “luxuriousness” of the meal also highlighted the critical role of talk in reframing a marginal cut of meat, into a meat of value.

As I have noted, however, these “luxurious” foods did not always meet the changing needs of older adults, including gastrointestinal sensitivity and aging dentition. While the food was not always prepared in accordance to the specific needs of the bodies of an aging population, its “special” qualities were also often not in accordance with the tastes of many of the patrons of the *comedor*. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, several patrons and volunteers expressed to me that they were tired of eating turkey everyday -- that even the smell of cooking turkey was overwhelming and sickening to them. In this sense, the active work involved in constructing this meat into something that was “luxurious” simultaneously suppressed any existing competing aesthetics of taste. Any kind of protest on the part of the patrons regarding such “special” foods was viewed as unacceptable and as unappreciative of the “value” of the food they were being served.

Foods that were luxurious for some persons, however, were not always viewed as such for others. Though the turkey pieces I have described were framed as extraordinary

in the context of the patrons' meals, these cuts of meat rarely, if ever, took part in the foods prepared for the *hermanos* and their guests. Once the lunch meal for the *abuelitos* had been served, Señora Myrian would begin the process of preparing a second lunch meal, what she called the *almuerzo de los hermanos*, or the *hermanos*' lunch meal. This second *almuerzo* was geared towards the tastes of the *hermanos*, but was also offered to friends of the *hermanos* who often visited, special guests, as well as volunteers.¹¹⁰ These meals varied in terms of content, but were usually composed of rice that was cooked separately from the large pot of rice the patrons consumed, a freshly made side of vegetables or salad, a piece of beef, chicken, turkey breast or thigh, and some kind of carbohydrate such as French fries, *patacones*,¹¹¹ fried sweet plantains, as well as a fruit juice or soda such as Coca-Cola or *Colombiana* (a local brand of soda). On special occasions, Hermano Miguel made delicacies such as roasted duck, lamb, *sancocho* (a chicken or seafood stew thickened with plantains and potatoes), fried chicken, and desserts with fruits such as tamarind and mango. These meals were quite delicious, and usually were comparable to or even exceeded the quality of meals served at local restaurants.

Though I never directly asked Hermano Miguel why a second meal made from different ingredients and cuts of meat was prepared for non patrons, from my observations, the foods that were described as “luxurious” and exceptional for the *abuelitos* were not foods the *hermanos* deemed as such for their own meals. In this sense,

¹¹⁰ Some of these visitors included police officers that were friends of Hermano Miguel, other *hermanos* from the Franciscan order, and at one point, even the governor of the department of Vaupés.

¹¹¹ *Patacones* are made from pieces of green plantain that are fried, mashed into a disk, and then fried again.

what was deemed a “luxury” shifted depending on who was consuming the food, making the idea of “luxury” very much a relational construct even in the same local context.¹¹²

Additionally, the *almuerzo de los hermanos* was always served in the interior dining room of the house, on dishes that were designated as “inside” dishes. Whereas sets of metal and thick plastic dishes, as well as large spoons were reserved for the patron’s lunch meals, which took place in the “outside,” public dining area, a set of ceramic cups and plates decorated with small, pink flowers, knives, spoons, forks, and glasses were only used for the meals and snacks served to the *hermanos* and their guests. Each time I was offered a food or beverage, whether I was sitting in the large wooden table inside the residential portion of the dining house or in the public dining area, I was served in and given utensils designated for “inside” use.

Plates, cups, spoons, and forks, as well as where in the dining house one ate, were material forms and spaces that distinguished the *hermanos*, their friends and guests from the older patrons of the dining house. Additionally, the use of lower quality dishware that was similar in shape and color, made it difficult for patrons to distinguish themselves from each other. Even though the Hermano’s goal was to include the patrons into a broader social community by feeding them certain foods and creating a space similar to those of restaurants, such practices often reconstituted divisions between the *comedor’s* patrons and Colombians who did not have to depend on a *comedor* for their daily sustenance. Moreover, the distinctions that were evident in the kinds of meals that were served for different cohorts of persons, as well as the spaces, utensils, and dishware in

¹¹² It is interesting to note that the patrons who assisted in cleaning or serving would volunteer to clean after the meal so that they might be offered this second *almuerzo*. Several times, I encountered individuals who had purposely not eaten during the first lunch meal in hopes that they would be given a share of the food the *hermanos* consumed.

which this food was served, sharply differentiated the “givers” of this food, from the circumstances of the *abuelitos* who consumed it.

Seco: French Fries and a Sense of Belonging

I arrived at the *comedor* late one morning in March 2007 and smelled the distinct aroma of fried potatoes, a smell that was never present during the preparation of the patrons’ lunch. Piles of cut up potatoes were sizzling in two pots of hot oil, competing with the loud exhale of the *olla pitadora* for attention. Each of the pots seemed to measure approximately the same as the diameter of a small bicycle tire.

“Today is a special day,” Hermano Miguel said to me as Señora Myrian flipped over the pieces of potato in the hot oil with a fork.

“For breakfast, we offered them a piece of ham and a cup of yogurt,” Hermano Miguel added.

“And why is this a special day?” I asked.

“Because we have a lot of yogurt and potatoes!” was his answer. Hermano Miguel had gone to *mercar* (to shop for groceries) at the *Banco de Alimentos* the previous day and had returned with fifty twenty-pound bags of cut up, frozen potatoes and many bags of yogurt drinks locally known as *kumis*.

On several occasions, there had been an overabundance of a particular food at the *comedor*, such as the week the *Banco de Alimentos* included fifty cantaloupes in the weekly *mercado*. Cantaloupe became a prominent figure in the foods prepared at the *comedor* that week, starring in everything from fruit salads to cantaloupe juice, to soup. Often, this kind of overabundance led to the preparation of unique and unexpected meals. Though potatoes were a staple in the *comedor’s* lunch meals, as well as in most meals

throughout highland Colombia, often served boiled with a topping of crumbled salt, cheese, stewed in milk, in soup and in myriad other ways, fried potatoes, or French fries existed in a different league from these other dishes.

Though fried strips of potatoes, or French fries, are for most, an inexpensive and easily prepared everyday dish that is served at local restaurants and in meals inside the home, serving *papas a la francesa* at a public dining facility that provided lunch meals for at least one hundred people was a bit of a luxury (as is giving every patron a piece of ham for breakfast!). In order to produce enough fried potatoes for all of the patrons, Señora Myrian would have needed to wash, peel, and then cut up at least one hundred potatoes by hand, which even with her skill for making vast amounts of food at lightning speed, would have taken at least a couple of hours. Frying this amount of potatoes was another task altogether, as Señora Myrian would have needed to stand next to the pots filled with oil and individually flip each potato piece, and then remove them from the hot oil one by one once they were fully cooked. According to Señora Myrian, the time and energy it would take for her to cut up and fry the hundreds of potatoes needed to feed French fries to each of the *abuelitos* was difficult to find, as such time could instead be used to cook other portions of the meal, clean up the kitchen, prep and prepare the *hermanos*' lunch meals, the late afternoon dinner soup, or the next day's meal.

Additionally, receiving an abundance of packaged cut up potatoes ready to be made into French fries was not a weekly occurrence, and hence, marked this particular meal as special and distinct from the everydayness and simple preparation of most other meals served at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. Offering such a meal was an active attempt on the part of Hermano Miguel to create a collective sense of belonging and

affiliation between the patrons and Colombians who were able to choose their meals. Through the act of preparing and feeding foods that were typical of Colombian “tastes,” and that were not commonly eaten by or accessible to the patrons, Hermano Miguel aimed to diminish the boundaries that “socially excluded” them from the Colombian social body due to poverty and the process of aging.

“Taste,” scholars have shown, is not a static concept or experience. “Tastes” and preferences for certain flavors, textures, and kinds of food go beyond ecological, materialist, and cultural understandings and are enmeshed within a broader set of unseen relations that often include some, while excluding others (Mintz 1985). In his article “The Rise of Yuppie Coffees and the Re-imagination of Class in the United States,” William Roseberry (1996) details the ways social actors at different levels of the coffee industry (including growers, distributors, buyers, and roasters) have played a role in the transformation of taste preferences and consumption patterns of consumers from a variety of socio-economic positions in the United States and beyond. The author argues that niche marketing, changes in production, and economic relations have played a critical and complex role in consumer desire for specialty coffees that had previously been viewed only as “luxury” goods in the United States. These desires, or the process of the attunement of tastes for particular flavors and things, Roseberry notes, is historically deep and connected to global relations.

Sidney Mintz (1985) was one of the first scholars to link issues of taste and power, and the creation of consumers to the politics of demand and global relations. Mintz argues that the often taken for granted human taste for “sweetness” is a historical one, and one that is embedded in the transformations of the industrial revolution, the

growth of cities, class based economies, colonial societies, and slave labor in the Americas. In much the same way, the growing “taste” for sugar, and the value attributed to sugar at different historical moments, played a critical role in buttressing and transforming the global economy and societies around the world.

Melissa Caldwell (2002) furthers this discussion by highlighting the place of sentiments of taste and the relationship among taste, food, and political economy in the cultivation of notions of belonging and Russian nationalist identities. Caldwell shows the ways the products of capitalism and global exchanges were viewed as a threat to “the nostalgia of an idealized socialist system” and a sense of “Russianess” after socialism (297). The author illustrates how certain Russian products invoked the concept of *nash*, which she translates as “ours” or “local.” Things that were *nash* identified persons and things that were Russian, and thus belonging to a particular history, religion, ethics, and culture. Simultaneously, products that were *ne nash* invoked what was foreign, not Russian, and outside of a particular frame of belonging to the collectivity (though the author points out that both *nash* and *ne nash* were indeed shifting ideological concepts). Caldwell, as well as Roseberry and Mintz, might offer us entry into thinking about how a person or groups’ “taste” for and of things might play a critical and ideological role in determining practices of belonging, exclusion, and inclusion.

Hermano Miguel had often described the taste of the foods and the physical aesthetics of the *comedor* as critical to his goals of creating a sense of belonging for the patrons. As I noted in chapter two, since his arrival to the *comedor*, Hermano Miguel had placed an emphasis on the décor and organization of the *comedor*, and decorated it so that it might physically resemble restaurants in the neighborhoods. Moreover, in decorating

the dining house similar to a restaurants (e.g. with the use of embroidered tablecloths, decorative plants, and a television), Hermano Miguel aimed to offer the *abuelitos* the experience of being lunch patrons and citizens, rather than solely constructing them as passive receivers of a free bowl of a soup in an institutionalized setting.

For Hermano Miguel, the taste, preparation, and presentation of the food also needed to have the same kinds of “restaurant” qualities to create a feeling of affiliation between the patrons and other Colombian eaters. A week prior to “French fry day,” Hermano Miguel had instructed Señora Myrian to prepare a special version of fried plantains for the lunch meal. Señora Myrian had added a light spicing of cinnamon to soft, sweet plantains she had mashed together. She then rolled the mash into a golf ball size, and fried each of them individually. While plantains were an ever-present food in the dining house, Señora Myrian usually served them boiled, or cut them into pieces and added them to soups. Much like French fries, plantains, be they ripe plantains or *patacón pisao*, double fried green plantains, were a common component of meals found in any *corrientazo* and in the homes of most Colombians. However, their preparation required much more work and investment, as each plantain piece needed to be individually fried rather than simply boiled or added to soup, and served warm on to one hundred plates. Such a process may not have been viewed as equally labor intensive if one were preparing these for one’s own family, or if the plantains were being prepared in a restaurant where there was usually more than one cook preparing the meals.

French fries and *patacones* are foods that require individual care, that is, they are not foods that can easily be thrown into a pot then removed from the heat and automatically be transformed into French fries or *patacones*. *Patacones*, for example, are

made by cutting a green plantain into two or sometimes three pieces, depending on the size of the plantain. These pieces are fried in vegetable oil, and are then removed from the oil and smashed using a *pataconera* so that what results resembles a disk. Señora Myrian would usually sprinkle some water flavored with minced garlic, and then toss the plantain disks back into the oil until they were crunchy. Stewed turkey, rice, and soups were thus more communal meals in that they were transformed into dishes inside a pot, without much human intervention during the cooking process. Aside from the chopping involved prior to cooking these foods, the lack of effort required during the cooking process, and the ease of preparation, were the primary reasons why such foods formed part of the everyday meals at a communal dining facility. Thus, the cooking process played a significant role in the “individuality” of certain foods, as well as the communal aspect of others.

Yet, it is important to note that the “individuality” of foods such as French fries and the “communalness” of soups and stews were not antithetical states of identification. We might argue that the process of serving soup into individual bowls and the varying contents of the bowl, given that it was quite difficult to ensure that each bowl had an equal amount of meat, marked each bowl of soup as different. In fact, often individuals attempted to bypass their order in the line and sit at a different table because a particular bowl of soup looked to have more meat than others, as I described in chapter two. Conversely, French fries, which required individual care in their preparation were received by the food bank in generic bags, and were pre-cut and frozen. They arrived as a commodity, cut up and processed by a machine, so that the potatoes from which they were produced were distant icons. Because the *comedor* received so many bags of these

generic, cut up frozen strips of potatoes (fifty twenty-pound bags), these potatoes continued to make guest appearances in soups and vegetable dishes, replacing the traditional *papa criolla* with a less tasty, more processed potato for weeks on end.

“This is another way to give them plantain. It doesn’t always have to be stewed,” said Hermano Miguel when he saw me tasting the yummy plantain dough balls.

“We have to offer more variety. Myrian always prepares the plantains by stewing them because it’s easy, but no, that stresses me out,” Hermano Miguel told me in an exasperated tone. “The same food all of the time? No, no, no...” he continued, shaking his head.

While the patrons of the dining house were offered the same staple foods as those found inside restaurants and in the homes of other *Bogotanos*, Myrian often cooked these foods “simply,” rather than in the mode of preparation that was more typical of the region. Though Señora Myrian stated that she did this because her daily responsibilities and duties far exceeded those that might be accomplished during one work day, the differences in how these foods were prepared marked distinctions between different kinds of eaters -- those that waited in line to eat a free meal because they could not afford not to, and those who were able to prepare their meals to their liking and eat them at home or choose what the content of their meal at a restaurant.

While the ingredients added to staple foods did indeed alter their taste, form, and presentation, the ways by which they were prepared (whether they were fried or boiled) also positioned certain foods within a specific cultural logics of “taste.” By asking Myrian to prepare foods that complemented or echoed those of local restaurants, or the taste of foods that were traditionally prepared inside Colombian homes Hermano Miguel

aimed to include the patrons of the *comedor* within a broader community of Colombian tastes, eaters, and consumers.

As the French fries were being put on to the plates, Hermano Miguel asked Deibid to gather up twenty-five pouches of ketchup, or *salsa de tomate*, from the pantry and had him place one ketchup pouch on to every table so that the patrons could add ketchup to their fries as they pleased.

“They can add as much ketchup as they want,” Hermano Miguel said as Deibid placed a ketchup pouch at the center of each table.

Though there was usually a large stock of ketchup safely kept inside the locked pantry of the *comedor*, Señora Myrian most often used it as a base for sauces or added it to dishes to add flavor, a practice that was relatively common in Colombia. Patrons did not have access to foods or condiments outside of what they were served, as non-perishables were locked away in the pantry, while fresh foods were kept out of reach inside a storage space behind the kitchen, in the laundry room, and in an attic crawlspace directly above the kitchen. By stating that the patrons “could add as much ketchup as they want” and asking Deibid to place a pouch of ketchup on each of the tables, Hermano Miguel was giving patrons the opportunity to flavor and spice their food based on their own senses of taste. In doing so, he aimed to offer the patrons the chance to play an active role in their meal.

Such an opportunity was rare, as the tastes of the patrons were not usually taken into account. Frequently, patrons would ask for salt to make their meals more appealing to their own tastes. However, before any salt was given out, Señora Myrian or one of the *hermanos* would taste the food to verify that it indeed lacked salt. If they determined that

the food did not need salt and had adequate flavoring, they would not give the patrons the salt they had requested. However, several times Señora Myrian did in fact forget to salt the food, and salt was freely passed around so that everyone could add some to their own food. Such incidents communicated a kind of “hierarchy of tastes” that was ever-present at the *comedor*, as persons who were not going to consume the meal (and were in fact going to consume a higher quality meal) determined whether or not the patrons’ food was acceptably flavored and spiced. This “hierarchy of tastes” brings forth a tension between Hermano Miguel’s goals to offer the patrons dishes that might include them within an idea of the Colombian social body and giving them the opportunity to play an agentive role in their meals, and the common practice of denying their tastes and personhood as important in the preparation or flavoring of the meal.

While most of the patrons enjoyed the special dish of French fries, toward the end of the meal, I noticed that many of the plates still contained neat piles of untouched French Fries. Señora Myrian noticed this as well, and began to yell at a few patrons as they exited, warning them to eat all of the food on their plates.

As Jorge, an older patron, got up from his seat leaving his plate of French fries behind, I asked him why he hadn’t eaten all of his *papitas*. “I can’t because of my teeth,” he said as he pointed to his gums, where several of his teeth were missing, and others looked to be decayed and weak. The potatoes, which had been specially prepared as a treat for the patrons, were too fried, and thus, too hard and crunchy for older individuals whose aging dentition could not withstand the texture of the dish. Missing and brittle teeth were not uncommon among patrons, as access to dental care for most residents of the neighborhood (and many Colombians) was minimal, even in a country where the ratio

of citizens to dentists is 1,100:1 (Jaramillo 2010). While most older adults had missing, aging, and decaying teeth, most did not have dentures, thus making eating anything but soft food a difficult task.

Though the intent of the meal had been to offer a food that was special and that would resemble the kinds of dishes often prepared inside Colombian homes or at restaurants, as well as to give individuals the choice to add a condiment often associated with French fries (e.g. being given access to ketchup), the food had not been prepared with the particular needs and bodily difficulties of older persons in mind. Aging, frail teeth did not form part of the description of the eater that was being imagined when this meal was being planned or prepared. The eater that was being imagined, if in fact there was one, was therefore, markedly distinct from the people who were actually eating this food. Hence, a food that was intended to offer a kind of social inclusion as part of a community of eaters and position patrons in relation to other Colombians who were able to choose the kinds of foods they would eat, in fact excluded the patrons from the proverbial Colombian dining table.

Jugo: The Milk of Well-being

My blue sneakers had specks of white on them from the papaya juice Manuel, a patron who regularly helps serve the lunch meal, spilled while placing the multi-colored Ice-Age themed cups the *comedor* had received from the *Banco de Alimentos* on the serving trays. “Don’t serve so much!” he would tell me. “It’s better to serve a little bit so that we don’t run out. The juice is well prepared.” He was right. The juice had a thick, milky consistency and was bright orange in color, unlike some of the previous water-downed artificially flavored powdered “juice” mixes, or *frutiños*, that are often served at

the *comedor*. During the month of March 2007, the juice portion of the lunch meal had been fulfilled by large amounts of blackberry, pineapple, and *lulo* pulp concentrates that were stored in blue bins and had been acquired from the *Banco de Alimentos*. Getting the juice just right was always a small feat, as it was usually a bit too watered down, or, on rarer occasions, not enough water was added to the large plastic trash can where the water, juice, and sugar were mixed prior to being served.

“Don’t add any more water!” yelled Beatriz on one occasion when the person who had been preparing the juice was about to add a pitcher-full of water to the juice mix. Beatriz was one of the younger patrons who looked to be in her late thirties and who peddled candies and cigarettes on the streets of the capital. She usually arrived prior to the lunch meal to assist in serving and setting the plates on to the tables.

Juice, or lack thereof, was always a topic of conversation at the *comedor*, as well as an index of the quality of the meal. Sometimes there would be no juice at all, and Deibid would sarcastically joke with the patrons, telling them all that was available was *jugo de tubo* – literally translated as “pipe juice,” referring to the water that moved through the house’s pipes. Other times, bananas and oranges (at different degrees of ripeness) were passed out to each patron in place of juice. A full-flavored juice, or a juice that was *bien preparado* had just the right balance of water and fruit/mix, unlike *jugo rendido*, which was primarily water with fruit or a powdered drink mix added alongside sugar to give it slight color and flavor. A juice, or any food for that matter, that was prepared with milk, was a rare treat.

On several occasions, the kitchen area of the *comedor* was stocked with piles and piles of bags and cartons of milk of all different kinds and brands: lactose free, low-fat

milk, whole milk, and skim milk enriched with calcium. The milk had arrived via the *Banco de Alimentos* during a time when the *Banco* had received milk in abundance. Some of the bags of milk had arrived at the *comedor* adhered to each other and emanating an odor of spoiled dairy. The culprit, it seemed, had been a ruptured bag, and the milk the bag contained had, in time, turned into a binding agent. However, a quick rinse under hot, running water ensured the food the bags contained was safe from further contamination.

During these rare times of excess, milk would be added to the meals in unexpected and untraditional ways. On one particular morning, Señora Myrian had cooked up a huge pot of fresh green and black-eyed peas in a *guiso*, or base of sautéed tomatoes, red bell pepper, and onion. The beans and vegetables had been mixed with milk and had resulted in a delicately flavored and delightful dish.

“Well, there is a lot of milk over there...that’s what its for. When we have milk, I prepare their food with milk,” Sra. Myrian told me when I asked her how she had made the stew after I had eaten two hearty bowls of it.

Though widely available and locally commercialized, milk is a valued, yet scarce commodity in the local neighborhoods, as well as for many families living in other parts of the capital. One can find fresh and *leche larga vida* (“long life milk” that need not be refrigerated) sold by the liter in plastic pouches and Tetra Pak sealed containers at any corner *panaderia* (bakery/cafeteria) or *tienda de barrio* (small neighborhood grocery store).¹¹³ Many families in this neighborhood, however, did not have the economic means to purchase even one liter per day and thus water was commonly added to broaden the

¹¹³ “Long life” milk, or *leche larga vida* can be stored in liquid form in sealed containers or bags for sometimes up to six months, whereas less processed milks have a much shorter expiration date and must always be refrigerated and consumed shortly after opening.

reach of everyday staple foods such as milk. While it was common to prepare hot chocolate with a mix of water and milk (especially in warmer climates), in many cases, more water was added than milk so that at least some of the nutritional substance contained in the milk found its way into the stomachs of all family members. Powdered milk, such as *Leche Klim* by Nestlé (note that *Klim* is milk spelled backwards), is often viewed as a suitable alternative, as a canister of powdered milk can provide more than three times the amount of servings as milk that is purchased in liquid form, and at a lower price.

The abundance of a resource such as milk, however, also produced scarcity. Much of the milk consumed in Bogotá was produced in smaller municipalities in the *campo* surrounding the capital. For many of these towns, the production of milk formed the center of the local economy. In order to sell and commercialize their milk to the companies that dominated Colombia's milk industry, small dairies needed to reach a certain daily liter quota that was often disproportionately high in comparison to the size and production output of the dairy. Only if this quota was met could these dairies commercialize and distribute their milk products to other municipalities through national companies such as *Alquería*, *Colanta*, and *Alpina*. However, in order to meet contract quotas to sustain the local milk economies, most, if not all of the milk produced needed leave its area of production to feed those living in larger municipalities. The movement and commercialization of milk thus influenced local diets and contributed to the scarcity of this food product in these areas even in the presence of its abundance.

“Do you want some chocolate?” Señora Myrian asked me one morning in May 2007 as she served me a cup of spicy, hot chocolate prepared in a mixture of milk and water.

“You should have seen what they gave the *abuelos* for breakfast. A *colada* with Ensure!” she exclaimed with an inflection of awe in her voice.

“We gave them the *Ensure* in *pura leche*! Look, there are the cans,” she continued, emphasizing that the morning *colada*, or shake, had been prepared in *pure* milk that had not been diluted with water. At the top of the short flight of the wooden stairs that connected the kitchen area to the refrigerators and the residential portion of the dining house, was one can of Ensure as well as several gold and blue colored cans of what looked to be powdered milk. Most powdered milk used at the *comedor* was manufactured by the Swiss company, Nestlé. The *Banco de Alimentos* supplied the milk to the *hogares* and *comedores* in large quantities. However, the cans of milk strewn around the floor did not resemble any of the brands of powdered milk commonly found in the dairy section of grocery store shelves or in the *mercados* the *comedor* received from the food bank. I picked up one of the cans to inspect it and read the following: “For nursing infants ages 0 to 6 months.” Seven cans of powdered baby formula had been mixed with water, pureed aging mangoes, and one can of powdered Ensure to replace the breakfast milkshake of the *abuelitos*.¹¹⁴

Since the morning I first arrived at the *comedor*, the morning *colada* had been prepared with water sweetened with *panela*, the hardened molasses that is the result of the first pressing of sugarcane, or from *Bienestarina* prepared with *aguadepanela*, a hot

¹¹⁴ Unfortunately, I did not write down and cannot recall the brand of baby formula that was used to make the *coladas*.

beverage made from *panela* and water. While *Bienestarina* was common in the households of poorer Colombians, as it was accessible free of charge from the *Banco de Alimentos*, clinics, and other social service organizations, Ensure and baby formula were costly foods that were not commonly circulated by these organizations. Where, then, had the Ensure and baby formula come from? How had the Ensure and baby formula made their way into the *colada* of the *abuelitos* inside *Comedor María es Mi Madre* that morning in May 2007? And why had the two been mixed together? In order to respond to these questions and better understand the potential meanings of how these products were used at the *comedor*, I must first present a short history of the development, commercialization, and uses of Ensure and infant formula.

Ensure is a protein supplement that is often used to augment the diets of older adults or individuals experiencing or recovering from illness. According to the website for Abbot Nutrition, the company that manufactures and distributes Ensure, Ensure was first introduced into the market in 1973 by Ross Laboratories and was promoted as the first lactose-free nutritional product in the United States. In 1977, the company introduced Ensure Plus, which offered a concentrated amount of calories and protein in one shake (*Abbot Nutrition* 2011).¹¹⁵

Ross Laboratories initially formed part of M & R Dietetic Laboratories, originally known as the Moores & Ross Milk Company, which was founded in 1903. Moores & Ross was one of the first companies to produce and market a milk-based infant formula in 1925 in the United States. In 1964, Ross merged with Abbot Laboratories, and in 2007 became known as Abbot Nutrition. Abbot Nutrition currently manufactures and

¹¹⁵ Website accessed: February 23, 2011: <http://abbottnutrition.com/About-Us/Our-History.aspx>

distributes all Ensure products as well as supplements for young children, including Similac infant formula, Pedialyte, and Pediasure. Abbot Laboratories also continues to introduce pharmaceuticals into the market, which in 2005 accounted for 40 percent of the company's revenue (Turner 2005; *Abbot Nutrition* 2011).

While Abbot Nutrition currently distributes Ensure products geared toward an array of nutritional needs, such as weight gain, muscle, bone, and immune system health, among other formulas, the Ensure that was served to the *abuelitos* in Bogotá was marketed simply as a nutritional shake and was available in vanilla, strawberry, and chocolate flavors. Ensure was an expensive food product, especially when viewed in relation to the average income of most *Bogotanos*. In 2003, a can of powdered Ensure (400 grams) cost approximately \$16 – more than the amount a person who makes minimum wage will earn in one day in Colombia (which in 2007 was 433,700 pesos [approximately \$230] a month, and in 2011 is 535,600 [approximately \$286 with the current exchange rate]). At pharmacies, canisters of Ensure were often stored behind locked glass cases or were marked with inventory control tags as they were one of the more expensive products the stores carried next to infant formula, pharmaceuticals, and imported cosmetics.

Moreover, though none of the Ensure formulas I have seen at grocery stores and pharmacies in the United States and Colombia explicitly state in their packaging that the product is specifically for older adults,¹¹⁶ Abbot Nutrition does target the elderly as a

¹¹⁶ My great-grandmother, who died at the age of 96 in Los Angeles, received strawberry, chocolate, and vanilla flavored Ensure through her Medi-Cal benefits (public health insurance for low income families with children, pregnant women, disabled persons, and older adults in California). She received the Ensure because her doctor believed that it would offer her nutrition given that her health was compromised by her advanced age. I offer this example to highlight the consumption of Ensure as a common practice among older adults who have access to the product.

consumer group in other ways. For example, a pamphlet I found on Abbot Nutrition's website (*Abbot Nutrition* 2011) advertising a bottle of an Ensure shake described the product as assisting in "muscle health" and containing "Revigor" (advertised as having the amino acid metabolite HMB). The pamphlet depicted a caricature of the product surrounded by fruits and vegetables. The graphic of the Ensure bottle had two outstretched arms, one holding a bunch of asparagus, and the other, a slice of yellow cheese wrapped in plastic. Five other wrapped cheese slices, an apple and a pear surrounded the Ensure shake. Each stalk of asparagus, as well as the pear and the apple, were portrayed with eyes, which were glancing toward the bottle. The eyes signaled to the consumer that what was contained inside the bottle was derived from a source of nature, and that the vitamins that made up the shake, though unrecognizable as fruits and other foods while in liquid form, were indeed vibrant and alive.

The pamphlet communicated to the reader that aging and bed rest (when compared to bed rest due to illness among a younger, "healthy" cohort), as well as illness and injury, play a role in decreased protein synthesis and increased protein breakdown (respectively), and consequently, in the loss of lean body mass. Loss of lean body mass leads to other complications, such as increased susceptibility to illness, risk of falls and fractures, loss of strength and independence, and increased risk of mortality. The "advanced science and nutrition" of Ensure with "Revigor," which also came in "clinical strength," aimed to assist in maintaining and rebuilding the lean body mass that can be lost through the complications experienced by the aging process (*Abbot Nutrition* 2011).

Another example that suggests that older adults fill a consumer niche for Abbot Nutrition came from the 1994 Nutrition Screening Initiative (NSI), a project of the

American Academy of Family Physicians, The American Dietetic Association, and the National Council on the Aging, funded in part through a grant from what was then the Ross products division of Abbot Laboratories, Inc. This screening checklist was developed by NSI to alert family members and physicians of the warning signs of malnutrition and aimed to target “the identification of elderly individuals who are at nutritional risk.” The screening is made up of a checklist of statements and asks the respondent to answer yes to those that apply to their circumstances. Each of these statements is accorded a number if they are answered in the affirmative, and when added, those numbers represent the respondent’s nutritional score.¹¹⁷

In 2003, my uncle, who is now 77 years of age and also a resident of Bogotá, became quite sick after undergoing a heart valve transplant. While recovering from the surgery at the hospital, he was infected with tuberculosis. He subsequently spent several weeks in the hospital subsisting only on intravenous foods. When he finally made it home, he was fed glasses of Ensure instead of solid foods, as his body was quite weak and he had difficulty digesting foods for several months after the surgery and the onset of infection. His family believes that he would never have recovered from the surgery and survived the infection without the nutrition offered by the servings of Ensure he drank three times per day. Because my uncle could not afford to purchase powdered canisters of Ensure on his own, family members took turns purchasing the food supplement each time it was needed.

¹¹⁷ Some of the statements include, “I eat fewer than 2 meals per day,” “I have tooth or mouth problems that make it hard for me to eat,” “I don’t always have the money to buy the food I need,” or “I eat alone most of the time.”

The examples I have cited show the ways the supplement Ensure is advertised and viewed as a primary source of nutrition that caters to the biological needs of the elderly, especially in cases where individuals have difficulty consuming or digesting other forms of food. The images of Ensure disseminated by the company on their website also communicated the notion that Ensure can take the place of food under certain circumstances, as it was visually depicted to contain the same kind of nutrition one might get from fruits and vegetables. It is important to note, however, that while it is problematic to consume Ensure as a replacement for food (as is communicated through the advertisement), Ensure does indeed provide calories for older adults who would otherwise suffer the deep effects of malnutrition due to disease and the process of aging.

Unlike Ensure, which is connected to the needs of the ill and the elderly, and signals to the potential purchasing power and economic access of an individual or family, *Bienestarina* is a food that is connected to circumstances of poverty. As I discussed in chapter four, *Bienestarina* is manufactured by a government agency known as the *Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar* (ICBF), and is distributed to social service organizations in a large *costal*, or sack, that contains smaller bags of the formula. In Bogotá, *Bienestarina* is relatively accessible to those the state socially categorizes as “vulnerable populations,” including children, pregnant and nursing mothers, and older adults. Bags of the nutrient are often included in *mercaditos* (small bags of staples that are given to individuals by various charity and social service organizations), served inside *comedores* and centers run by the ICBF (such as orphanages), and passed out at community centers. Although it is illegal to sell *Bienestarina*, it is not uncommon to find the supplement being exchanged on the black market for profit. Individuals who consume

Bienestarina in their homes most often do so to augment a diet that is lacking in protein and vitamins, as meats, milk, and other nutrients are not readily accessible given the income of most residents in the central areas of the capital.

Like Ensure, *Bienestarina* is an important source of calories, protein, and carbohydrates, and contains substantial amounts of iron, vitamins A and C, niacin, thiamine (vitamin B1), riboflavin (vitamin B2), and calcium. While Ensure contains many chemically derived and synthetic ingredients, *Bienestarina* is said to be produced in Colombia from locally sourced ingredients such as wheat, non-fat, powdered milk, and soy, and is also quite low in cholesterol. According to a nutritionist interviewed for an article in *El Tiempo* published on May 24, 1997, *Bienestarina*, “Can replace a serving of milk or eggs, but should not become a substitute for these.” It can be fed to children once they reach seven months of age, and is often used to maintain the weight of children, adults, and the elderly who do not otherwise have access to adequate nutrition.

Distinct from Ensure, a supplement that is often associated with the needs of older adults, *Bienestarina* comes in only one formula and is targeted toward all age groups. Because its use is quite common in most parts of the capital (and the country), people have developed many recipes that call for *Bienestarina* as a key ingredient. For example, Señora Berta described her novel use of the nutrient in her preparation of both sweet and savory foods, such as baked goods and pasta dishes. The website of the ICBF includes several recipes that incorporate *Bienestarina*, such as breads, cakes, cookies, soups, sauces, and *arepas*. *El Tiempo* has also published recipes with *Bienestarina* as a central ingredient. One such recipe is for *croquetas de zanahoria*, or carrot fritters, which are made with grated carrots, egg, grated cheese, sugar, salt, and *Bienestarina*. These

ingredients are mixed and then formed into balls and fried in vegetable oil (*El Tiempo*, May 24, 1997). Foods prepared with *Bienestarina* not only add nutritional value to meals, but also offer receivers the possibility of transforming potential surpluses of the nutrient (or *Bienestarina* that has a nearing expiration date) into everyday foods.

While the use of *Bienestarina* in *coladas* and other foods might be common in a place such as the *comedor*, the presence of Ensure and infant formula, food products that are very expensive and not sold in stores in and around the *comedor's* neighborhood, are a rare, if non-existent phenomenon. Though the use of Ensure, a product geared towards the nutritional needs of the elderly and those with compromised health, may be viewed as nutritionally appropriate in a *comedor* for older adults, the utilization of infant formula as part of the breakfast shake, seemed out of place.

In order to better understand the place of infant formula in Latin America and analyze the potential meanings of its use at the *comedor*, it is important to consider the social history of infant formula. The “modern” infant formula industry had its beginnings in the middle of the 19th century, when food companies such as Borden in the United States and Nestlé in Switzerland started to produce and market sweetened and condensed milk, and later evaporated milk (Miller 1983). In the United States, physicians and chemists began to develop alternatives to breast milk using cow’s milk in a variety of processed forms.¹¹⁸ Many early recipes for commercial infant foods in the United States and Europe were a result of the research of German chemist Justus von Liebig, who in 1865 “developed, patented and marketed infant food, first in a liquid form and then in powdered form for better preservation” (Stevens, Patrick, and Pickler 2009). Around the

¹¹⁸ It is important to note that recipes for artificial feeding have existed in many parts of the world for hundreds of years.

same time in Philadelphia, Dr. A. V. Miegs determined the chemical components of both cow and breast milk, and argued that other ingredients must be added to cow's milk to both dilute and augment it so that it might better match the components of breast milk (Apple 1987). Additionally, English pharmacist James Horlick aimed to produce a powdered formula made from cereals and milk that would offer infants nutrition, but would also be less vulnerable to spoilage. Another food, "Wells, Richardson, Company's Lactated Food: A Scientific Food for Infants and Invalids" (among others), highlighted their foods as scientific, and moreover, marketed it not only for infants, but also for adults who were experiencing physical ailments that might have prevented them from eating whole meals (Bentley 2002: 98).

In the middle of the 19th century, Henri Nestlé also began to develop an alternative to breast milk in Switzerland. Nestlé's efforts were influenced by the high Swiss infant mortality rate, where one in five babies died in their first year of life (Barnet and Cavanagh 1994). Nestlé combined sweetened condensed milk, wheat flour and cooked this solution with malt to make it more digestible for infants.¹¹⁹ Nestlé described this milk as "good Swiss milk and bread, cooked after a new method of my invention, mixed in proportion, scientifically correct, so as to form a food which leaves nothing to be desired" (Apple 1987: 9). By the beginning of the 1870s, Nestlé's Milk Food Company began to distribute this formula in the United States, Australia, and throughout Europe. By 1873, Nestlé "was selling half a million boxes [of his formula] annually in Europe and in North and South America" (Tenner 2003: 39).

¹¹⁹ The ingredients for Nestlé's first recipe vary, as some authors state that he combined sugar, milk, and malt, whereas others suggest that sweetened condensed milk was the primary ingredient.

In her book, *Mothers and Medicine*, Rima Apple (1987) tells us that at the turn of the 20th century, emerging knowledge of bacteriology, nutrition, and human physiology offered new understandings of infant nutrition. These discoveries, as well as “analysis of high infant death rates that often demonstrated the inadequacy of breast milk,” suggested that children’s lives could best be protected through new, scientific ways of infant feeding (16). Such new understandings of infants’ diets played a central role in emerging medical practices, marking certain practitioners as ‘scientific’ and mothers who followed those methods as “modern” (Apple 1987: 16). This ideology of a “scientific mother,” as Apple terms it, “elevated the nurturing of children to the status of a profession” (99-100), a viewpoint that was often supported and maintained through advertisements for infant formula and other “modern” child-rearing services. Infant formula, thus, was viewed as a more “scientific” and “modern” way to offer nutrition to children, especially when mothers were ill or experiencing emotional difficulties that many believed could be passed on to the child through their breast milk.

By 1967, approximately 25% of women were breastfeeding at hospital discharge (Van Esterik 1989: 7 [citing Minchin 1985: 216]), though that number had climbed to 46% by 1978.¹²⁰ The three major companies that manufactured and distributed infant formula in the United States (Bristol-Myers, Abbot, and American Home Products) all began to market their products in other parts of the world when birth rates in the United States and other industrialized countries began to decline, and when rates of breastfeeding began to increase. Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and other parts of Latin America became key sites for expanding the markets of infant formula companies. By

¹²⁰ Also Bentley (2002) argues that introduction of Gerber baby food also became a substitute for breast milk and played an important role in the decline of breast-feeding in the twentieth century (93).

1978, Nestlé held about a 50% share of the world market in infant formula (Miller 1983: 4) and Latin America had become a profitable outlet for surplus milk.

In the 1960s and 1970s, activists linked the decrease of breast-feeding in the “Third World” to aggressive marketing practices of infant formula by companies such as Nestlé. One of the primary factors that contributed to the decline of breast-feeding was what some have called the inappropriate promotion of breast-milk substitutes as “scientific,” which endorsed the idea that bottle-feeding was more “elite” and “modern,” especially among urban, populations (Miller 1983: 65; Dettwyler and Fishman 2002; Tenner 2003). In late 1970s, Derrick Jellifee, a pediatrician at UCLA and former director of the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute of Jamaica, noted that the misuse of formula, poor sanitation, lack of access to clean water and sterilization facilities (for bottles and nipples), combined with illiteracy and poverty, effected high rates of bacterial contamination and the dilution of formula. The combination of these factors resulted in high rates of infant morbidity and mortality in the Caribbean and other countries (Miller 1983; Tenner 2003). A well-organized boycott of Nestlé by social activists resulted in the World Health Organization creating a UNICEF code limiting mass advertising and the distribution of samples of formula.

In order to better understand how the Ensure and infant formula (a product that, as I have shown, has a difficult and complex history in Latin America) had become central ingredients in the patrons’ breakfast, I took the opportunity to ask Hermano Miguel specific questions regarding how these foods had been acquired as he began to tell me about the donations the *comedor* had received in April and May, 2007.

“Xochita, someone gave us a car! It needs to be fixed up, but with about two million *pesos*¹²¹ it should be okay. We really needed a car. And, did you know that we are now giving them Ensure?” Hermano Miguel told me, referring to the patrons. “We are going to prepare the *colada* with Ensure everyday and we will see how they are doing after thirty days.”

“And, how did you acquire it?” I asked Hermano Miguel as we sat at the “inside” dining table in the residential portion of the *comedor*. I had already attempted to ask Hermano Roosevelt and Deibid questions about how the *comedor* had obtained the Ensure and infant formula, but had only received indirect responses.

“From the *DIAN*,”¹²² responded Hermano Miguel.”

“But how did you know that the *DIAN* had Ensure and powdered milk available to give away?”

“A friend told me,” Hermano Miguel said with a wry smile, offering an ambiguous and hedgy answer. Hermano Miguel had the uncanny ability to acquire funds and other materials needed by the *comedor* (such as a refrigerator, an industrial sized oven, and a car!) through his contacts and friendships with a diverse network of people, some of whom had connections to influential persons, including well-known politicians.

“And why would the *DIAN* have these kinds of products to give away?” I asked him.

“Because it’s contraband. They are products that were confiscated because they were brought into the country illegally,” responded Hermano Miguel. I giggled at the

¹²¹ Two million *pesos* is equivalent to approximately one thousand USD in 2007.

¹²² *DIAN* (*Dirección de Impuestos y Aduanas Nacionales*) is the Colombian federal agency that handles custom issues, and oversees all imports and exports.

thought of the patrons of the dining house benefiting from confiscated contraband as many of them were stereotypically viewed as persons who used and sold contraband products, such as drugs or stolen goods. Moreover, one usually envisioned items such as laundered money or drugs as the primary forms of contraband that flowed in and through Colombia, rather than smuggled cans of vitamin supplements, baby food, and as I later learned, personal hygiene products.

“Do you know that the milk is for babies?” I asked, attempting to verify that he and others indeed knew that the milk they were feeding the patrons of the dining house was formulated for the nutritional needs of infants.

“Of course,” he responded in a low voice. “That milk has a lot of vitamins and it will offer them nutrition. This is a luxury! Do you know how much a canister of that milk costs at the store? 33,000 *pesos*.¹²³ It’s because some of them arrive looking very skinny so that they look sick. We estimate that we have enough Ensure to give them for thirty days. We’ll see how they are doing once the month is over,” he responded.

“And what will you do once it’s all gone?” I asked.

“I’ll go and ask for more. If they have some, they will give it to me,” was his response.

In his answer to my query regarding whether he was aware that the powdered milk was infant formula, Hermano Miguel referred to “that milk” without specifying to which of the two powdered foods he meant. Given the question I had posed and that both Ensure and baby formula cost approximately 33,000 pesos at the time, I assumed that he was indeed referring to the baby formula. However, toward the end of his statement he

¹²³ Thirty-three thousand *pesos* was equivalent to approximately sixteen USD in mid 2007.

noted that the *comedor* had enough Ensure to give the patrons for thirty days in their morning *colada*. It seemed that his use of “that milk” referred to both of the powdered substances, that when mixed with water, resembled the consistency of fresh or reconstituted powdered cow’s milk. While it was evident that he viewed these foods as nutritious, and that nutrition was a key reason why he chose to replace the *Bienestarina* with baby formula and Ensure in the morning milkshake, in his response, Hermano Miguel also positioned the baby formula and Ensure as luxuries given the high commercial cost and general unavailability of such a foods to most living in the neighborhoods surrounding the *comedor*.

In his statement, Hermano Miguel also noted that “that milk” contained many vitamins that would offer nutrition to patrons who, according to him, looked to be “skinny” and “sick.” Baby formula does indeed contain a high amount of nutrients, as most (if not all) is iron fortified, and enriched with a host of other vitamins important for a baby’s health. Additionally, infant formula contains a significant amount of coconut oil, soy oil, and/or safflower oil, as babies require an increased amount of fat (and fatty acids) for their growth and development, as well as for the digestion of vitamins. However, it is important to note that while infant formula is vitamin rich, nutrition it contains is geared towards the particular needs of babies, needs that are markedly different from those of older adults. Why then would such a food be viewed as a suitable meal for the patrons of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*?

Hermano Miguel’s use of the term “skinny” was obviously not offered as a response to a positive aesthetics of bodily expectations of beauty. “Skinny,” in this context, was a visible sign that the patrons were not receiving enough nutrition or calories

in their diet, and thus looked sick.¹²⁴ It was quite common for many persons I came to know in Colombia to drink certain foods they believed to contain a high amount of calories, such as *aguadepanela*. *Aguadepanela* is a staple drink in Bogotá that is very inexpensive to prepare. Though its cost is minimal, *aguadepanela* often transcends class distinctions, and can be found in most bakeries and cafes. Patrons as well as other acquaintances in Colombia told me that they drank *aguadepanela* for breakfast (or fed their children *aguadepanela*) because it helped keep them warm and also had a significant amount of calories, which provided energy (cf. Scheper-Hughes 1993). Given that *aguadepanela* is made from *panela* (the result of the first pressing of sugar cane) and hot water, its caloric content was indeed high, while its nutritional value, low. With this in mind, we might frame Hermano Miguel's comments and his decision to feed older adults a mix of Ensure and infant formula within this same logic, that is, as a way to assist the patrons in acquiring much needed calories in a context of high malnutrition. If infant formula contained both a significant amount of calories and fat, two things seemingly missing in the patrons' diets, and if it could sustain a baby during the first few months of life, such a food could be viewed to offer a similar kind of nutrition to older adults who were "skinny" and lacked adequate nutrition.

The "luxuriousness" of these products, that is, the fact that infant formula (as well as Ensure) were both costly foods, was not trivial in the decision to include such foods in the morning *colada*. As I mentioned in chapter two, Hermano Miguel had told me several times that the previous administrator of the *comedor*, Hermano Ramón, had purposefully

¹²⁴ It is important to note, however, that even persons who look to be "overweight" may still be experiencing malnutrition because they are not consuming the diversity of foods that provide daily nutrition (Encuesta nacional de la situación nutricional en Colombia 2005).

kept the comedor looking “poor.” “He wanted visitors to see a house for the poor. He didn’t think people would donate if they didn’t see a poor house,” he had told me, describing the reasoning behind the shabby appearance of the *comedor* prior to his arrival. Hermano Miguel had consistently expressed that he didn’t want potential donors to construct the patrons as *pobresitos*, or as “poor little things” and donate only because they felt sorry for them.

Unlike the previous *comedor* administrator, Hermano Miguel aimed to make the efforts of the *comedor* visible to visitors by decorating the space similarly to a local restaurant, serving both a *sopa* and *seco*, portions of a meal which are typical to the Colombian *almuerzo*, as well as using the space of the *comedor* to commemorate holidays, such as *Día del Anciano* (Day of the Elderly, traditionally celebrated in August in Colombia), Mother’s day, and Christmas, among other holidays. While *comedores* were indeed often constructed as places for *pobresitos* (as I discussed in chapter 2) that is, as places for poor persons that also generally serve poor quality foods, serving products that were known to be expensive and iconic of a privileged status, communicated that this particular *comedor* was distinct from most social service organizations in the area. Moreover, by giving the patrons infant formula, the organizers were also ensuring that patrons were not being given a food of poverty, and thus, constructed solely as “people of poverty” or “poor people.” Additionally, by offering patrons infant formula and Ensure instead of *Bienestarina* (a food, that as I have mentioned, is associated with circumstances of poverty), Hermano Miguel made visible the perceived quality and value of the foods served inside the *comedor* to all who might visit the *comedor*, including potential donors.

With the social history of infant formula in mind and the understanding of Ensure as a nutritious drink for older adults, we might consider the ways foods such as Ensure and infant formula also served to position the *comedor* and the patrons themselves, not only within the realm of luxury and prosperity (and outside the construct of poverty), but also as “modern” and “progressive.” The use of foods that have been scientifically sanctioned as nutritious and have the potential to sustain the life of an infant, plays a role in legitimating the use of these foods for older adults. By feeding the patrons such “modern” nutrition, Hermano Miguel was aligning the *comedor* to perceived notions of progress, and scientific knowledge. Moreover, in feeding older adults a food that was scientifically and medically sanctioned, he was also aligning the *comedor* and its patrons within a “worldly” context, as well as to material substances that were not accessible to most Colombians. Such practices of feeding were even more marked by the fact that Hermano Miguel was able to acquire such goods under marked circumstances of scarcity and poverty.

Hermano Miguel and other persons who worked at the *comedor* never explicitly stated that the patrons of the dining house were being given baby formula because they viewed them as children or because their needs were the same as children. However, it is nonetheless important to note the kinds of messages that are communicated through practices of feeding (and the filial relations often associated with feeding), as well as through the mixing of Ensure, a food associated with the needs of the elderly, and infant formula, a food source for babies.

“Why do so many people compare elderly persons to children?” I asked Señora Myrian the morning I first came across the empty cans of infant formula and Ensure on

the kitchen steps. I asked Señora Myrian this particular question because she had in the past made comments regarding what she perceived to be the “child-like” temperaments of the *abuelitos*.

“Because they become children again,” Senora Myrian responded. “They complain about everything, they don’t like many foods, they become picky about things...they don’t like anything,” she continued.

In stating that older adults “become children again” because “they complain about everything” and “become picky about things,” Señora Myrian was comparing the wants and needs older adults express to common perceptions of children as dependent and finicky. The tastes and desires of the patrons of the dining house were thus being viewed through the lens of an aging personhood that is conflated with what are often perceived as the capricious and unpredictable desires of children. Such a comment was similar to the statement Señora Bedoya made in her letter to the writers of the 1991 Colombian Constitution which I offer in chapter 3, when she noted, “The *viejitos chochos* return to being children, cannot take care of themselves, and are thus viewed as nuisances.”

Writers have described the process of aging as one that is often interpreted “as a stage of life when the life cycle returns to its beginning” (Covey 1993: 81). The “losses” that accompany old age, such as the loss of bodily functions and memory, often construct older adults as dependent in relation to their families and caretakers. In their monograph about identity and the life course, Jenny Hockey and Allison James (2003) argue that older adults are often treated with the same care strategies caretakers might use in their interactions with children. The use of such care practices, and the subsequent infantilization of persons who are perceived as dependent, naturalizes the treatment of

older adults in relation to an ideology of childhood. Such interactions with and treatment of older adults diminishes their status as adults, and positions them as “children,” rather than as socially viable members of society (Lock 1995: 230). In doing so, that individual’s history of decision making, tastes, desires, likes, and dislikes are disregarded, often reframing roles between parents and children. Moreover, in likening their needs and choices to those of children, the historicity of older adults is brought into question, positioning their “adulthood” as part of the past, and to borrow the words of Johannes Fabian (1983), denying their “coevalness” or place and history in the present.

Comedores, as I suggested in chapter three, were often situated as structures of care, and the *hermanos* often positioned themselves as caretakers of the elders who ate many of their weekly meals at the dining house. Throughout my time at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, there were many instances that highlighted potential filial, fosterage, and “dependence” relationships between the *hermanos* (or other volunteers) and the patrons. On one occasion, Hermano Miguel described to me his affection toward patrons because many of them called him *papá*,¹²⁵ or father.

“*Papá*, I really love that they call me this because it communicates a connection. Because of this, they are my children. When we took the vow of chastity, we didn’t do it because we didn’t want children. No, no, no. We often refer to our superiors as *padre*. The word *padre* comes from the *papá* of the house. Why *padre*? Because they have spiritual children. But a *padre* that loves his children also reprimands them. You also have to be hard on them, because that’s also part of the role of being a *padre*. Because they are my children, because I feel like their father, I love them as if they were my children. I feel that I have a responsibility to them, that they have the best food available, to fight for their rights. If I didn’t see them as my children, I would just be like the administrator of a restaurant. That’s the difference.”

¹²⁵ *Papá* is also a term of endearment in Colombia. Men and women may call older men *papá* even when a kinship relationship does not exist.

In the above statement, Hermano Miguel highlights a philosophy of parenting as well as a model of kinship that helps structure his role as organizer of the dining house. In telling me why priests were referred to as *padres* as well as the *papá* of the house, Hermano Miguel positioned himself as the *papá* or *padre* of *Comedor María es Mi Madre* as well as the *papá* of its patrons. His position as a kind of foster father, he notes, is the key element that makes *Comedor María es Mi Madre* distinct from any other restaurant. Though Hermano Miguel decorated the dining house so that it might resemble a restaurant and thus potentially position the elders as “clients” and consumers, the sentiments of kinship were at the core of marking the *comedor* as entirely different from the economic exchanges that are part and parcel of restaurants. In this sense, the kinship relations between the *Hermano* and the *abuelitos*, as well as the obligations that are associated with such filial relations, play a role in making the *comedor* a “home.”

Additionally, Hermano Miguel noted that as a “spiritual father” to the older adults, part of his fatherly duties called for him to reprimand his “children.” In telling me that reprimanding his children was part of his responsibility to them as a father, Hermano Miguel was invoking a particular ideology of parenting as well as positioning himself as a moral guardian and protector.

What is also significant is the fact that Hermano Miguel, a man in his forties, was viewing himself as the “father” of individuals who were not children, and in most cases, were significantly older than him. Indeed, some of the elders, who as I have mentioned, ranged from fifty years old to upwards of eighty, did indeed refer to him as *Padre*, even though Hermano Miguel had taken the vows of a Franciscan brother or *hermano*, a kinship term that connotes religious egalitarianism, and not the vows of a priest or

religious father. As their “father,” Hermano Miguel stated that he aimed to attain the best food possible for them, as well as protect their rights. Protecting the rights of the patrons was something that Hermano Miguel spoke about frequently, as he had told me that he had often accompanied people to the public hospital during an emergency to ensure that they were in fact treated and not turned away. While parents may indeed serve as protectors for their children, as the organizer for *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, Hermano Miguel also positioned himself as a protector of humans’ inalienable right to food. The active protection of such human rights echoed the kind of work done by many international NGO’s in Colombia, and aligned the work of the *comedor* to the social aims of protecting the poor and relieving suffering, albeit at a smaller scale.

Feeding the older adults of neighborhood also made visible the complex power and generational relationships that surfaced between *comedor* organizers and patrons. One morning after the patrons had settled into their seats for lunch, Hermano Roosevelt sharply addressed one of the patrons for not following the rules of the *comedor*.

“María! Why are you eating? We haven’t prayed!” Hermano Roosevelt said in a raised voice. “In the name of the father, the son, and the Holy Spirit. We give thanks for the food that you have offered us, Lord. Bless the hands of those who helped to prepare it for us. In the name of the Father, the son, and Holy Spirit. *Buen Provecho.*”¹²⁶

As everyone began to eat their *almuerzo*, Hermano Roosevelt again spoke up, saying, “Se me toman todo el jugo.”¹²⁷ That juice is prepared in *pure* milk and has a

¹²⁶ *Buen provecho* is an expression that communicates one’s desire for a person to have a good meal. It might be equivalent to the French term, *bon appétit*.

¹²⁷ *Se me toman todo el jugo* can be translated as “Drink up all of the juice for me!”

vitamin. Don't forget to come every morning for the *colada* so that you can take the vitamin."

That morning, Señora Myrian and Hermano Roosevelt had prepared the juice for the *almuerzo* with *curuba* (banana passion fruit) and other fruits, as well as with a mixture of Ensure and infant formula. In his first statement, Hermano Roosevelt loudly castigated "María" for beginning to eat her lunch prior to the prayer. Though María is a common Colombian (and Latin American) name, María was not the patron's given name. Hermano Roosevelt often referred to the older women of the *comedor* as "María" since it was difficult for him to correctly remember the names of all of the female patrons, some of whom only ate their meals at the *comedor* sporadically. Sometimes, Hermano Roosevelt would add a noun to differentiate between the various "Marías," such as "María *tacones*" (María High-heels) for Señora Cecilia, who always wore low heels with dark socks, or "María *perro*," for Señora Eugenia, who loved dogs and often walked various dogs around the neighborhood. While Hermano Roosevelt attempted to individuate the women by adding a second word that was characteristic of them, his generic use of the name María potentially occluded the personal histories that each of them brought to the *comedor*.

Additionally, I have intentionally kept the original Spanish statement, "Se me toman todo el jugo" in the body of the chapter, and have footnoted the translation ("Drink up all of the juice for me") because it is important to highlight Hermano Roosevelt's use of "se me," a possessive way of issuing commands that is common in Colombia. The use of "se me" expresses a kind of filial relationship between the speaker and listener, which can be roughly translated as "You will drink all the juice for me." In telling the patrons

that they needed to drink the vitamin for him, he was instructing them in a way similar to the way a parent might command their child to “eat up all of their food.” Such an expression is usually used between parents and children or as a term of endearment between a caretaker and another individual. Through his choice of words, Hermano Miguel was highlighting his role as a caretaker and a giver of food to a more vulnerable and dependent person. Moreover, the manner by which Hermano Roosevelt castigated María was reminiscent of the way a parent might castigate a child for crossing a boundary or for beginning to eat prior to the blessing of the food at the family table.

While affective messages are communicated through acts of feeding, the giving of food in this context also becomes a metaphor for dependency. Pointing to the feeding of Ensure and baby formula more specifically, we might consider how these foods that are produced by their manufacturers to sustain and represent two distinct stages of biological life, as well as helping both children and older adults thrive, respectively, may materially and ideologically conflate the biological and social needs of older adults with those of children.

The Children of Violence

I met María Solder in June 2007 inside her office at *Acción Social*, a federal agency that offers services to vulnerable populations affected by poverty, drug trafficking, and forced displacement from conflict. Her office was located inside a multi-story building with extremely tight security (as it housed several government offices), and was only three blocks from the *comedor*, and across the street from the *Palacio de Nariño*, the home of Colombia’s president. From the window adjacent to her desk, I had a

clear bird's eye view of the militarized streets surrounding the presidential palace, as well as the courtyard inside the *Plaza de Nariño*.

I had previously met María Soler, a young university student, during a luncheon at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. Hermano Miguel had invited her and several other employees of *Acción Social* to partake in an elaborate meal at the dining house. Hermano Miguel and Señora Myrian had prepared roasted lamb, and a range of desserts for the guests, who ate their lunch while the patrons of the dining house also ate theirs. At the time, however, I did not know that María Soler was the friend that had arranged for Hermano Miguel and the *comedor* to receive the baby formula and Ensure that had suddenly appeared in the patrons' morning *colada*.

As we sat inside her office, I asked María how *Acción Social* had gained access to the Ensure and infant formula. María informed me that both the Ensure and baby formula had come from Venezuela and had been smuggled into Colombia through Buenaventura, a port city along the porous northeastern border between the two countries.

“Did you know that foods are much less expensive in Venezuela?” María asked me, as she quickly converted Venezuelan *bolívars* to Colombian *pesos* using a calculator on her desk.

“People bring products from Venezuela to Colombia to make a little bit of *platica*,”¹²⁸ she added, telling me that certain products in Venezuela at the time of the interview cost half as much as they did in Colombia. From her calculations, María informed me that the “street value” of the confiscated products, which included Ensure, infant formula, toothpaste, shampoo, and an anti-biotic ointment that is widely available

¹²⁸ *Platica* (also often seen as *platita*) is the diminutive for *plata*, which may be translated as silver in English. In Colombia (as in many other regions of Latin America), *plata* is commonly used instead of the word “money.”

throughout Latin America by the name of *Terramicina*, was about 105 millions pesos (roughly equivalent to fifty four thousand dollars in June, 2007). Approximately eight to nine thousand cans of Ensure and infant formula had been confiscated by Colombian customs authorities and were being stored at the warehouse of *DIAN* in Fontibón, a neighborhood on the western edges of the capital. After decommissioning the foods, *DIAN* transferred these goods to *Acción Social*, and in turn, *Acción Social* re-distributed them to approximately forty social service organizations that assisted vulnerable populations throughout Bogotá.

“How did you decide who to give it to?” I asked María Soler after she had explained how *Acción Social* had acquired the goods.

“Well, since we had infant formula and Ensure, which is excellent for older adults, we looked for institutions that served the needs of children and *viejitos*,” María responded.

Given that *Comedor María es Mi Madre* was not subsidized by the local government, I was curious as to why a federal agency that normally assisted publicly funded organizations would contribute their resources to a small *comedor* run by Franciscan brothers. Why would this donation go to this particular *comedor* given that that there were hundreds of public *comedores*, orphanages, homes and activity centers for the elderly throughout the capital that might also benefit from these food products?

I asked María Soler how *Comedor María es Mi Madre* had been chosen to receive the donation. María’s only reply was that *Acción Social* was in the process of widening their goals and outreach and that it just made sense to divert these foods to organizations that assisted vulnerable older adults. After meeting with María, I still wanted more

information as to why and how *Comedor María es Mi Madre* had become the beneficiary of such a donation from a federal agency. The following day, I asked Hermano Miguel the same question I had posed to María Soler at her office. His answer was unexpected and impassioned and offered me a new and critical way of understanding the place of the older adults the *comedor* served in relation to Colombia's socio-political history. He said: "Colombia is a country that has suffered six decades of violence. Here they call it a 'problem' or an 'internal conflict,' but no, this is a war. The government doesn't care that they are the product of this war," Hermano Miguel told me as he pointed in the direction of the dining area where the *comedor*'s patrons were eating their lunch. "They are the product of an oppressive government. All of this, all of this poverty, this neighborhood, is composed of *desplazados*.¹²⁹ After three months of assistance, the government no longer considers people *desplazados*, when in reality the state of being displaced does not end. This is a history of displacement, and they are its descendants. They are the children of violence; they are the children of the street; they are the children of an oppressive system, of five decades of war in Colombia. They are not miserable because they want to be. They are the product of a conflict. Colombia is a country that has always been at war. First, the tribal wars, and then colonization. Later the *Patria Boba* and the War of One Thousand Days, the wars between the political parties, the war of the *Chusmas*..."

Hermano Miguel's response to my question did not point to how or why the *comedor* had been chosen as one of the recipients of the confiscated stockpile of Ensure and infant formula. Instead, his response aimed to legitimate the place of the older adults of the neighborhood as deserving of assistance from the federal government. Though

¹²⁹ The word *desplazado* refers to persons who have been internally displaced persons, usually due to violence.

most older adults who patronized the *comedor* did receive a *bono* from the local or federal government, Hermano Miguel has in the past made it clear that such a small amount of money could barely cover the cost of renting a small bedroom, much less provide for the nutritional needs of older adults. In his statement, Hermano Miguel makes it clear that he believes that those in power have played (and continues to play) a critical role in the oppression, marginalization, and the experiences of everyday violence and inequality endured by those who live in the areas surrounding the *comedor*. Such inequalities, Hermano Miguel suggests, can only be understood when seen in relation to Colombia's complex and violent socio-political-economic history.

Hermano Miguel's narration of conflict and the long history of violence also calls into question the social and temporal boundaries of the violence that Colombia has endured. For example, in most history books and in the popular media, *la Violencia* in Colombia is neatly shelved amidst the historic events that occurred between 1946 and in 1964. In some cases, *la Violencia* happened after 1948 and ended sometime in the 1950s. In other explanations such as in the work of famed Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez (1994), *la Violencia* in Colombia began at the moment of the Spanish conquest of the "New World" and continues up to the present. Still in other circumstances it is cast as a moment in time, as a "thing," a "war," or a "riot" that simply erupted, ripping apart the social and political fabric of the country.

For Hermano Miguel, histories of violence and conflict form part of a heritage of which the patrons of the *comedor* are descendants, even though most of them are not viewed as *desplazados* (displaced) by state agencies and organizations, or as direct victims of the civil conflict. *Desplazamiento* in Colombia is often described in relation to

the displacement of people from their homes, town, and cities due to armed conflict and confrontations between and among Colombian forces, *las Farc*, the paramilitary, drug cartels, and residents. According to the United Nations, between 2002-2009, approximately 2.4 million Colombians were forcibly removed from their homes and lands, and many have migrated to urban centers throughout the country.¹³⁰ This history of displacement is significant for Hermano Miguel because in calling the patrons of the dining house “The Children of Violence,” he was attempting to incorporate them into a Colombian historical narrative of violence and migration from which they had been left out. Additionally, by narratively re-positioning the *abuelitos* of the dining house into the Colombian past, Hermano Miguel was not attempting to deny their personhood, historicity, or agency as social actors (though, as I have mentioned, it was not uncommon for elders to be constructed in relation to the past and cared for or treated in a way similar to how one might treat a child, which oftentimes denied their history as adults). In this particular context, Hermano Miguel aimed to reframe them within a socio-political history for a political purpose. We might suggest that by positioning the patrons of the dining house as the “Children of Violence” and constructing them as *desplazados*, Hermano Miguel was attempting to make visible and historicize the experiences of poverty, inequality and other forms of violence that are a part of everyday life. Moreover, in marking them within this historical trajectory, Hermano Miguel was also justifying why they too deserved the care and social support of the State, which in this particular case, was represented by a few hundred cans of Ensure and infant formula. The infant

¹³⁰ In fact, before 9/11/2011, Colombia had the most internally displaced persons in the world. Moreover, while Hermano Miguel notes that after three months the government no longer categorizes *desplazados* as legally “displaced,” according to law 387 of 1997, the “condition” of being displaced does not end until a person who has been legally classified as displaced has a “stable” living environment and socio-economic foundation.

formula and Ensure donated by *Acción Social* thus served as the material instantiation of their potential inclusion into this history and in this context, reconfigured what counted as “violence” in Colombia.

Conclusion

In her study of Kella, a border town in what was previously East Germany, Daphne Berdahl (1999) discusses how “western” commodities in a socialist “economy of shortages” were given new cultural meanings in the shift to a market economy. In the socialist context, commodities of the “west,” such as packaged soaps, were assigned a kind of social capital that she argues was often more important than its economic value in that these goods signaled to the status and connections of consumers. Following Appadurai (1986), Berdahl notes that such “everyday” things, in this context, were constructed as luxury goods and “were capable of signifying ‘fairly complex social messages’” (Appadurai 1986: 38, cited in Berdahl 1999: 124). The author further notes that after 1989, these same products were transformed into items of everyday use, losing their social value and meaning as status markers (Berdahl 199: 133). Krisztina Fehérváry (2009) further suggests that while such commodities were used as social capital, many people also prized these objects for their “intrinsic properties – bright colors, packaging, design, or craftsmanship – and what these properties must index about life “out there” (453) or as “metonyms for another world” (454).

Berdahl and Fehérváry’s discussion about the diverse kinds of value attributed to commodities in specific social, political, and economic contexts and how such products may be socially re-imagined for strategic purposes may offer us entry into thinking about how the marginal bits of turkey, cuts of meat that had little to no economic value outside

of the *comedor*, were reframed as luxurious and valuable in the context of the *comedor*.¹³¹ The giving of food and other services that were offered by the *comedor* were most often experienced by the patrons in communal fashion. The organizers of the dining house distributed foods and other goods in a “socialized” manner, that is, they created a regulated system that aimed to ensure that all those in line would receive the same foods, as well as the same amount of food. Often, the food that was served was compared to the foods that were served “out there,” that is, to the choices available at local restaurants as well as inside the homes of other Colombians. In framing the turkey as a food that was just as good, if not better than the kinds of foods eaten inside restaurants, the *hermanos* aimed to convert an unappealing and economically null food into a delicacy.

Additionally, the Ensure and infant formula that was offered at *Comedor María es Mi Madre* was also intended to reposition and historicize the experiences of poverty that oftentimes neglected from the historical narratives of the Colombian nation-state.

¹³¹ It is important to note that by no means do I intend to conflate the distinct economic and political histories of such distinct regions by offering such a comparison.

Chapter Six

con todo se llena el costal / every little bit helps fill up the costal



Figure 12: Photograph of patrons waiting in line for their lunch meal in front of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*.

I felt a definite chill in the air when I hopped off the small yellow *colectivo*¹³² at 7:45 on a Sunday morning in June 2007. I had heard several times that the *mercaditos* would be given out at 9am, but as I hadn't confirmed the date and time with Pachito, Señora Berta, or Señora María Elvira, I had to make sure to keep my eye out for the mass

¹³² *Colectivos* are small vans that have been transformed into vehicles for public transport.

of people that would inevitably be lined up along the street if today was indeed *mercadito* day. As the bus sped down *Carrera 4* toward the neighborhood of *20 de Julio*, I saw an ocean of people queued up alongside a construction zone on *calle quinta* (fifth street), about two blocks north of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*.

The line of men, women, and even children was already quite long when I arrived; there were at least two- hundred people braving the misty chill that crept down the gray Andean mountaintops. They were wearing jackets, hoodies, hats, scarves and even blankets and sipping hot *tintico* (sweetened, black coffee) or *aromática* (herbal tea) from tiny blue, plastic cups. Some were sitting on wooden crates, others had brought small collapsible chairs from home, and others sat on the cold concrete. The line of people so early in the morning no longer surprised me as lines such as these were present in what seemed to be inconspicuous spots all over the city: along alleyways, on the front steps of churches, on street corners, outside metal doors connected to unmarked buildings or residential structures. While the men and women that waited in this line were of all ages, about seventy percent of them looked to be at least fifty to sixty years old. Their worn dress and oversized coats seemed to signal that they were experiencing economic difficulties, and the fact that many of these lines formed during the week and during traditional business hours indicated that perhaps many of those in line did not have stable employment or income.

But, why were there so many lines like these throughout the capital? Why were so many of those in line older adults? What were they waiting for? And, how long must they wait? There were always lines, lines, and even more lines.

This chapter moves through one of these lines, maneuvering not only the line itself, but also the stories that those that make up that line tell us about food, work, hunger, gender, aging, and the city. On this particular Sunday morning, the individuals that formed the long line on the narrow street adjacent to *carrera quinta* waited for *mercaditos*, or small, plastic bags filled with non-perishable food staples such as rice, salt, lentils, and elbow pasta. Every two months (and always on a Sunday morning), an elderly *padrecito* or priest, made his way down from the northern areas of Bogotá in a compact, red car. With the help of a large passenger bus that transported about six hundred *mercaditos* to *Barrio Belén*, the priest and his parishioners passed out the plastic bags of packaged food to all those waiting in the line.

Most of the lines of people in and around the capital, especially those in marginal neighborhoods, were lines to receive some kind of food: lines to enter into a *comedor* for lunch, a line to receive a cup of hot chocolate, a warm breakfast, a glass of milk and some bread, and in the case I highlight in this chapter, a line to receive a *mercadito*. Through my interactions and conversations with older adults in this particular food line, I explore the different ways neighborhood elders acquired sustenance outside of the *comedor*, how social relations between *abuelitos* were both made and maintained through the foods that were often acquired by their efforts while waiting in lines, as well as the reasons why older adults must wait in these lines in the first place. I show how older adults find creative ways to *rebuscar*, or sustain themselves, their homes, and their families in circumstances of insecurity through diverse sets of relationships, forms of labor, and social and economic exchanges in the “informal” economy. In doing so, I look at how

this kind of “work,” which is often undervalued and overlooked, has played a significant role in shaping social life and gender dynamics in the capital.

The Art of Waiting

My first inkling that something existed beyond the yellow facade of the house I now know as *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, was the long line of older men and women that was ever-present each morning and afternoon on *carrera 4*, at the foothills of the mountains. The line of people was visible on sunny days, cloudy days, cold days, and rainy days, when individuals covered themselves up with umbrellas, plastic bags, or some other kind of impermeable attire. This line of men and women was almost a fixture in the neighborhood so that pedestrians and residents often walked by those in line without giving them a second glance. However, if the line of people was missing due to a community event or an activity related to the *comedor*, passers-by and neighbors would ask, “Where is the line of *abuelitos*?” Like a neighborhood building, the line had become a daily expectation so that its presence was often only made visible by its absence. For many onlookers, the line was just that, a line; like small tiles on a mosaic, the individual faces, histories, and motivations of the persons that made up that line seemed to blend into the everyday image of the crowd their bodies had drawn on to the sidewalk.

As a temporary resident of Bogotá, I too had experienced the wait of being in lines of many different sorts: I spent hours queued in and outside government offices in order to attain temporary residency; I lined up outside of banks to pay my rent, energy, water, and cable bill every month; I waited to have my belongings searched upon entering shopping malls or other public buildings; I stood amidst a crowd of people in

unruly and chaotic lines to board buses; I waited outside of immigration offices for my *cédula temporal*, or my temporary identification card.

Older adults who received a *bono* also had to wait in line to use an ATM machine at the beginning of each month, as their monthly stipend was direct deposited into an account created specifically for that purpose. Others waited in line for different reasons, for example, to receive a gift of second-hand clothing from local organizations, or to make a medical appointment at a clinic, and of course, to receive foodstuffs of one form or another. While these lines were diverse in their form and function, their wait time, location, purpose, and the people that formed them, also indexed markedly different relations of economic class, state bureaucracy, health, and aging.

The visibility of lines of people waiting for a meal, snack, or a small bag of groceries is not a scene, activity or practice that is unique to Bogotá, or even to Latin America. Historically, long lines of individuals waiting for locally defined staple food products, such as milk, cheese, coffee, butter, meat, water and bread have been visible on street corners in cities and towns throughout the world. As recently as 2009, surging lines of people waiting for meals as well as bags of groceries were present throughout the streets of Ann Arbor, Michigan, only blocks away from the main campus of the University of Michigan. The effects of local unemployment rates, which in July of 2009 reached 14.6% in the state of Michigan (*Michigan Department of Technology, Management and Budget* n.d.),¹³³ as well as the international economic recession, overwhelmed local service organizations and played a role in the increase of such lines throughout the city.

¹³³ Website accessed July 20, 2011: milmi.org

Food lines such as these have a deep history in the United States, and have been markedly visible during times of economic recession, such as during the Great Depression. According to Janet Poppendieck's research on food assistance, in 1930-31 there were at least eighty-two documented "breadlines" in operation in New York City (Poppendieck 1986: 24-25). In Chicago, Al Capone sponsored his own breadline, and various other groups distributed unsold food from restaurants throughout the city as well. "Lines form everyday in the afternoon," read an account from the Chicago Herald regarding the lines of people waiting to scavenge dumpsites. "Men and women come there to see if they can find food to carry back home with them. They get some if they come early enough" (27).

Hunger was again made visible in the United States in the early 1980s through the surging lines of people awaiting food and other products at food kitchens, community pantries, and churches. Higher rates of unemployment and decreased job security during the recession of the 1980s, as well as cuts to Medicaid, unemployment compensation, housing, energy, and food assistance ushered in by the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, all played a role in the rising need for emergency food aid. During the winter of 1981, thousands of people formed "cheese lines," as they waited to receive thirty million pounds of government surplus cheese that had accumulated over the years as a result of federal subsidies to dairy farmers (Poppendieck 1998).¹³⁴

¹³⁴ These lines were not without their politics, however. In both of her monographs, Poppendieck notes that while many individuals did not have the capital to purchase food and everyday necessities during the Great Depression and during the deep recession of the 1980s, stockpiles of excess foods were being destroyed or were rotting away in federal storage areas. During the Great Depression, the overproduction of food and the under consumption of these goods due to peoples' inability to purchase them, resulted in an excess of foods that were usually destroyed. She argues that this "paradox" played a critical role in the food assistance programs that were developed by the Hoover and Roosevelt Administrations (Poppendieck 1986). During the 1980s, cheese, butter, dry milk and other dairy products accumulated in storage areas due to the federal government subsidies of these products. At one point, there were 777 million pounds of non-fat dry milk,

Katherine Verdery (1996) has written that in the case of socialist Romania, state policies and the state controlled scarcity of resources seized peoples' time by immobilizing their bodies in lines, rendering them impotent through this waiting. Citing Pavel Campeanu (1994 [cited in Verdery 1996]), Verdery states that, "'Time wasted' for a capitalist, is profit lost. In socialist systems, which accumulated not profits but means of production, 'time wasted' did not have this same significance" (Verdery 1996: 47). Since time spent standing in line did not have the same kind of cost to the socialist system, these kinds of "seizures of time," Verdery argues, "produced incapacity, and therefore, enhanced power" (46). Because staple food products were rationed in most Romanian cities, and arrived unreliably and intermittently, Romanians might spend hours in line awaiting these rations, which reinforced the presence and role of the state in people's lives.

Sarah Lund (2001) suggests that in the southern highlands of Peru, the state was also made visible through the act of maneuvering in and through bureaucratic spaces to acquire national identity papers necessary for everyday tasks, such as enrolling children in school or getting a job. In order to mark "life passages" through the processing of birth, marriage, and death certificates, for example, persons must wait in authorized lines, which Lund argues are "an embodied experience of the state and persons' [sic] positionality in relation to the state" (2001: 23). While the author suggests that waiting in such controlled lines plays a role in the creation of Peruvian citizenship, some people's ability to skip this wait time due to wealth and personal connections to state agents, mirrors the social inequalities that exist beyond the confines of these lines. Moreover, for

544 million pounds of cheese, and 274 million pounds of butter being stored at the cost of 36 million dollars per year (Poppendieck1998: 82).

persons who often live outside bureaucratic spaces, such as indigenous families' who do not often officially register the birth of their children, such lines also become socializing processes according to state sanctioned measures. Thus, while Verdery notes that state controlled scarcity and waiting in lines for staple foods "flattened time" for all urbanites,¹³⁵ Lund makes evident how waiting in such lines differentiates persons, reinforces existing social inequalities, and also serves as a civilizing force for those viewed to be on the social margins of society.

While lines for passports, identification cards, and marriage certificates were indeed present throughout Bogotá, the particular lines of older adults I describe throughout this chapter illustrate the diverse ways persons acquire forms of sustenance in a context where they have been unable to rely or lean on the local government for assistance. The seemingly ubiquitous presence of food lines was not a new phenomenon in Bogotá in 2006 and 2007. An oral history collection housed inside the *Archivo de Bogotá* (Bogotá's Municipal Archive), located only two blocks away from *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, offered situated narratives of the giving and receiving of food, housing, and religious practices throughout the central neighborhoods of Bogotá during the last century. *Tu Historia Cuenta*, or "Your Story Counts,"¹³⁶ was a project sponsored by the Bogotá mayor's office from 2004-2007, which aimed to collect residents' memories in and of places deemed to be of "cultural importance" in the capital. Through this project, the mayor's office provided city workers with rudimentary training in the

¹³⁵ Verdery does make it clear that some persons, such as the Party elite and the Secret Police had access to special stores, and thus, did not have to wait in these lines.

¹³⁶ In Spanish, the expression *Tu Historia Cuenta* may be translated as "Your Story Counts," but may also be understood as "Recount Your Story." I believe that the name of the project was carefully chosen so as to signal to this double meaning.

collection of oral histories. Workers then took to the streets, knocking on doors to interview residents of different ages. This project produced hundreds of pages of handwritten stories about the experiences and memories of longtime residents of the neighborhoods in and around Bogotá's historic center.

The interviews were archived inside a folder in reference to the neighborhood wherein they were collected as well as the name of the project, *Tu historia cuenta*.¹³⁷ Each interview began with the date it was collected (the hour was also sometimes included), and the name, address, and age of the person being interviewed (if available). Though the interviewees did not generally write down the questions they asked, they were instructed to ask six questions about the neighborhood in relation to the following topics: 1. Changes or transformations, 2. Customs and traditions, 3. *Personajes* or characters that were representative of their *barrio*, 4. How long the person had resided in the neighborhood, 5. Culinary and gastronomical traditions, 6. Historical documents or photographs.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ There were several folders containing interviews from a range of neighborhoods throughout the capital. I chose to look at the interviews collected from the neighborhoods of Las Cruces, La Perseverancia, La Concordia, and Las Nieves, all of which are located in and around Bogotá's historical center and were geographically closest to *Comedor María es Mi Madre* (*barrio* Belén was not among the neighborhoods where oral histories were collected). Given the proximity of these neighborhoods in relation to each other as well as to the other *barrios* I highlight throughout the dissertation, I was able to glean interesting data that was relevant for the location of my study. Additionally, because I was not allowed to photocopy these interviews, I chose to type them into my computer while paying close attention to the spaces between lines and paragraphs, as well as misspellings. I also attempted to carefully describe the handwriting in each of the pages, as well as the physical arrangement of the narrative or answers to the interview questions. In total, I was able to reproduce twenty-four interviews through the course of several days.

¹³⁸ While most of the answers to the interviews were written down by the interviewees using the third-person perspective, two of the interviews looked to be written in the handwriting of the person being interviewed, and another was a typed written historical narrative of a neighborhood. One interview included a recipe for a soup called *cocido campesino o mazamorra chiquita*, a traditional local food that is now difficult to find in the capital. Another individual included an image of a group of young women sitting around a table while eating. Though the person was not interviewed by the city worker, he did tell the interviewer that he believed the picture documented the first *comedor comunitario* in Bogotá. Though the image, which I was unable to copy for inclusion in the dissertation, was most likely taken inside a *casa*

Luz Mari, a forty-five year old woman at the time of the interview in 2007, recalled that Padre Castañeda, a priest in residence at the *Iglesia de Las Cruces*, had at one point passed out milk to residents of the neighborhood who lined up outside the steps of the church. Another woman, Doña Nanci, who was born in *barrio* Egipto (a neighborhood a few blocks east of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*) and was 72 years old when she was interviewed in 2006, told the city worker that Rojas Pinilla, who was the General of the Colombian army and President of the country from 1953-1957 (initially by way of a *coup d'état*, but officially appointed President by Congress in 1954), and his military distributed *mercados* at a health center in Las Cruces during some of the most crippling years of *La Violencia*.¹³⁹ Don Roberto, a Korean War veteran whom I met at the *comedor* in August 2008, told me that upon his return to Bogotá from Korea, he was assigned to patrol the streets of the capital while Rojas Pinilla's soldiers handed out *mercaditos* to the citizenry lined up along the city's streets.

The line of residents I observed in Belén early that Sunday morning in June was nowhere near being straight, defined, or ordered. All those awaiting *mercaditos* were clustered around each other, though everyone seemed to know their (and everybody else's) place in the cue. Waiting not only entailed socializing and standing together for a common purpose, but also involved impatience, conflict, and forced intimacy. I never learned how this particular spot on *calle quinta* became the center of waiting for *mercaditos* on a Sunday morning every two months, since there weren't any street signs

or social welfare home for young women, it is significant that this individual was historicizing communal dining through this photograph.

¹³⁹ This was verified by a document I found at the Luis Ángel Arango library entitled *El Venerable Barrio de Las Cruces* (The Venerable Neighborhood of Las Cruces), which was written by neighborhood residents Esperanza Ballen Casas and Hector Ramirez R. They state that during Rojas Pinilla's government, *mercados* and powdered milk were distributed at the *Centro de Salud*, or Health Center of Las Cruces.

on the corner, nor were there any visible clues informing people about the activities that were to take place there. Still, every two months, the line of people reappeared.

Con todo se llena el costal

“Hola, Xochitl, and you, what’s up?” Señora María *perro*¹⁴⁰ said gruffly, but with a wry smile on her face as she saw me approach the line of people waiting in line.

“Hola Sra. María. I came to learn about the *mercaditos*,” I replied.

“That’s good,” she responded. María *perro* was a patron with a bit of a tough exterior, usually expressing herself in a cynical and sometimes disparaging tone. A few days earlier, María had been slowly walking into the *comedor* for lunch behind a man who had what looked to be rickets. His knees pointed outward and he relied on two canes to maneuver his body up and down the inclined streets of Belén, Santa Barbara, and Las Cruces.

“Close your legs!” María Perro yelled out as she squeezed her way around him, obviously annoyed that his pace was slowing her down.

After greeting María *Perro*, I turned around and proceeded to scan the long line again, hoping to see the familiar faces of Señora Berta, Señora Gladys, Señora Ricarda, or Pachito. Most of the *personajes*, or cast of characters (as the elders referred to each other), I had come to associate with the *comedor* and the neighborhood were already in attendance. Though the priest and his crew of volunteers usually arrived between 8:30

¹⁴⁰ As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Señora Eugenia had been give the nickname María *perro*, or “María dog” by Hermano Roosevelt because while she owned one dog she named *la negra*, she was usually followed by a group of dogs as she walked around the neighborhood, fed stray dogs, or walked dogs for other people. Often *la negra* and other dogs waited for Señora María outside the doors of *Comedor María es Mi Madre* while she ate her lunch. María *perro* didn’t particularly like the nickname, however, I have chosen to include it here because most elders knew her by that nickname rather than by her given name.

and 9am, residents of Belén, Santa Barbara, Las Cruces and the surrounding areas, usually began to form alongside the non-descript street corner as early as 5:30am on *mercadito* days. The small street, which was adjacent to a government building in the midst of construction, was relatively quiet and saw little to no regular automobile traffic, which made it ideal for a line that would eventually grow to about six hundred people. The line and the street were surrounded on two sides by *potreros*, or urban plots of undeveloped land covered with overgrown grass and trash. *Carrera 5*, a narrow, medium trafficked street perpendicular to the line of people, was the only boundary that separated the men and women from the large *estrato 4* apartment complex inhabited by more “middle class” *bogotanos*.

As I made my way toward the beginning of the line, I noticed a man who frequented the dining house attempting to sell what looked to be a man’s dress shirt for 1,000 *pesos* (about 45 cents in 2007). One thousand *pesos* could perhaps help someone purchase a liter of milk, a yogurt, or even a hit of *basuco*, a highly addictive and inexpensive cocaine derivative.¹⁴¹ Further up the line, I could hear Gladys, who had clearly had too much to drink, loudly singing Mexican *ranchera* songs on her guitar. As I moved my eyes up toward the end of the line, I noticed a round woman wearing a white cap and purple jacket.

“Hola, Señora Berta,” I said, surprising her from behind.

“Hola Señorita Xochitl,” exclaimed Berta as she wrapped her arms around my shoulders.

¹⁴¹ *Basuco* is a very common drug in Colombia and throughout the Andean region. It is produced with very low-grade cocaine or cocaine residue and is mixed with sodium hydroxide, solvents, and a host of other ingredients. What results is a muddy, brown powder or paste that is usually smoked.

“How are you feeling? Are you feeling better?” I asked, knowing that Señora Berta had been sick for several days.

“Ah, no *niña* Xochitl. I’m going to have make another appointment because the doctor told me that this is becoming bronchitis,” Berta responded using the term of endearment *niña*, which means “little girl.” She was covered from head to toe, and only her mouth and eyes were visible from in between her brown scarf and white cap.

“I have to cover myself, otherwise, I will get sicker. I wasn’t going to come, but I noticed that that there was a little bit of sunshine, so I motivated myself. *Camine, niña* Xochitl,” she said to me, inviting me to walk down to the front of the line with her.

“I have my spot over here.” We walked down toward the front of the line where those who had arrived in the early hours of the morning had been able to score the first spots.

“How long ago did you arrive?” I asked Sra. Berta.

“Not too early...a bit before 7.”

Leguizamón, a white-haired man who regularly dines at the *comedor* and who always wears a yellow *Aguila* beer baseball cap, was seated on a red, plastic milk crate at the front of the line near Señora Berta’s spot. He quickly stood up to say hello to Señora Berta and myself as we walked by.

“And what are you doing here?” he asked with an enthusiastic smile.

“I came to learn about the *mercaditos*,” I replied, emphasizing that I was there to learn about how food is given and received, and simultaneously stressing my positionality as that of a student who viewed him and others waiting in line as my teachers.

“You should have brought the machine to take photos of everyone. This line gets very big,” he said as he looked toward the long line of people that, at this point, had increased to about three hundred.

“I don’t understand,” I said to him as I scanned around at the sea of people. “I don’t understand why so many people get up at dawn and stand here in the cold for such a long time to receive such a small *mercadito*.” While I knew any *mercadito* or gift of food was usually well received and needed by the *abuelitos* I had come to know, I was still continually surprised by the fact that so many were willing to wait several hours in the cold for a small plastic bag containing four or five packaged foods, especially given that most did not have access to a stove or gas with which to cook their meals.

Two months prior during a *mercadito* give-away in April 2007, Señora María *la bandida* had told me that she had been queued in the line since 5 am to receive her groceries. When I asked her why she had arrived so early, her only response was, “Because we’re masochists!”

“Yes, yes. People arrive at five or six in the morning and then sell their *mercadito* for two thousand *pesos*,” Leguizamón informed me. “Señora María (*la bandida*) arrives early, receives her *mercadito*, and promptly sells it. As soon as they receive the *mercadito*, they walk around the corner and sell them. I purchase the *mercaditos* from them for two thousand pesos each.”¹⁴²

In a previous interview held inside *Comedor María es mi Madre* in March 2007, Leguizamón described his practice of purchasing *mercaditos* from those who had been waiting in line alongside him, and then re-selling the packaged food from his home.

¹⁴² Two thousand *pesos* was equivalent to slightly less than one USD in 2007.

While the *padrecito* gave away bags of food to the residents of *barrio* Belén every two months, Leguizamón informed me that other local organizations, such as churches, distributed *mercaditos* and snacks of some sort more frequently.

“I keep about forty or sixty pounds of rice, semi-green peas or yellow peas, beans, pasta, rice, and *panela*. I buy five or ten *mercaditos* for 2,000 pesos each,” Leguizamón had told me, describing the variety of foods he had accumulated from his transactions with other residents who had received them in the form of *mercaditos*. Although Leguizamón purchased the *mercaditos* that residents sold for about two thousand pesos each, he resold the individually packaged items the *mercaditos* contained from a “store” he ran out of his home.

In Bogotá and other areas of the country, having small-scale stores where one sells staple food products from one’s home is not uncommon, and even residents in larger apartment complexes in more “middle-class” neighborhoods often sell staple foods such as a bag of milk, canned tuna, or rice and deliver the items directly to the doors of their neighbors. Though I never had the opportunity to see Leguizamón’s residential store first hand, I did wonder why he patronized the *comedor* rather than making his own meals from the extensive pantry of consumables he had assembled. Leguizamón has in the past described the hearty meals he occasionally prepared for his daughters, son, and granddaughters when they visited him at his home, positioning himself as a caretaker to them through the preparation of food even in the later stages of his life. While I never directly asked him how much he earned from the resale of these foods, the entire contents of a *mercadito*, such as the one given out *early* that Sunday morning in June, might be

commercially sold for about four or five thousand pesos at a local grocery store (between two or two dollars and fifty cents USD in 2007).

“So many hours only to make about two thousand *pesos*?” I asked Leguizamón, as we continued to discuss the practice of selling and buying *mercaditos* while waiting in the ever-expanding line of people.

“Yes, but they spend a thousand on *tinto*,” Leguizamón joked with a giggle, as he referred to the practice of purchasing small cups of coffee and *aromática*, or herbal tea from street vendors, many of whom also stake a spot in the *mercadito* line.

“It’s because there is a lot of mendicity in Bogotá. You have to have a *bachillerato*¹⁴³ to just work on the streets here, and in the past, it was very difficult to obtain an education. Those our age who studied only finished primary school,” Leguizamón continued.

“*Con todo se llena el costal, señorita*,” added a woman whom I had never previously met, but who was standing next to Leguizamón and had been listening in on our conversation.

“One has to rebuscar for oneself. You go to the stores, to any place and you will be given a little something... a *panelita*, a *cafecito*, and this is how one completes what one needs.”

The *costal* to which the woman referred has a diverse set of referents in the Spanish language. A *costal* is literally a burlap sack used to harvest and store foods such as potatoes, fruits, onions, vegetables, and coffee. One will commonly see *costales* filled with potatoes or onions stacked on top of each other at *plazas de mercado* or small

¹⁴³ Finishing one’s *bachillerato* means that one has earned a high school diploma.

tiendas de barrio (neighborhood stores) throughout Bogotá. In Colombia, one of the most famous images of a *costal* belongs to the iconic figure of Juan Valdez, the commercial representation of the National Federation of Coffee Growers of Colombia. Conchita, a mule that is loaded up with two *costales* filled with Colombian grown coffee, usually accompanies Juan Valdez in national and international advertisements. In Colombia, as in most other areas where coffee is produced at higher elevations, coffee berries are picked by hand, as the steep Andean terrain makes the use of machinery difficult. Workers then place the coffee berries inside *costales*, which are attached to the sides of mules, and then transport the *costales* to a *finca*, where the coffee berries are peeled so that the beans they enclose can be dried and sorted for sale and export.

The word *costal*, however, can also be employed to refer to any large bag that holds food or a person's belongings. It is quite common for shoppers to take empty *costales* to local fruit and vegetable markets so as to be better able to carry their food purchases or have them more easily delivered to their homes. Additionally, in and around the main bus terminal located near the eastern periphery of the capital, one can see arriving passengers carrying their belongings in *costales* and large plastic bags. *Costales* can thus serve as a kind of luggage that carry the material representations of people's lives, as individuals who are fleeing violence in other regions of the country often have to hastily pack and carry their property in such bags. It is also not uncommon for patrons of the *comedor* to arrive at the dining house carrying a *costal* on their back. For some, their *costal* contains items they have collected for recycling and that are waiting to be sold. For others, especially those who do not have a safe space to call home, the *costal* holds all of their possessions, including their clothes, food, money (if they have any), and

identification papers. In effect, a *costal* can be transformed into a kind of house for a persons' possessions and livelihood through its use.

The local range of meanings of the word *costal* brings to the fore a deeper understanding of the statement the woman directed toward me, *con todo se llena el costal, señorita*. By informing me that, "One has to *rebuscar* for oneself. You go to the stores, to any place and you will be given a little something...a *panelita*, a *cafecito*, and this is how one completes what one needs," the woman was detailing the diverse efforts and work that persons must perform to nutritionally and economically nourish their bodies, lives, and families.

As I will show in the pages that follow, older adults must employ a diverse set of practices and engage a wide range of social actors and locations to gather the elements to fill their *costal*, and thus sustain themselves, and potentially, their families as well. As was evidenced by the ever-increasing line of people and the fact that many individuals waited for hours to receive a *mercadito* worth about two thousand *pesos*, collecting the critical bits and pieces that made up their *costal* involved constant moving around from place to place, waiting under a chilly sky to receive minimal amounts of food, as well as selling, exchanging, and gifting the products of that wait time – activities that require a kind of work that is quite difficult for many of the older residents of the area.

Moreover, these efforts to fill up one's *costal* draw attention to Leguizamón's remarks: "There is a lot of mendicity in Bogotá. In order to work on the street you are asked to have a *bachillerato* and it used to be very difficult to obtain an education in the past. Those of our age who studied only finished elementary school." Leguizamón's comment about the lack of past educational opportunities for himself and his

contemporaries highlights the dearth and quality of social protection (e.g. social security benefits) and stable employment available to them in the past as well as in the present. Though laboring in the informal economy or seeking one's livelihood in the streets (*trabajar en la calle*) does not typically require that one have a *bachillerato*, or high school diploma, his words signal to the inaccessibility of regulated employment where even the most minimal paying job is out of reach for someone of his generation and educational history.

It seemed that the older residents of the neighborhood were always waiting in a line of some sort, be it for a cup of hot chocolate from the *Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de Belén* every Wednesday afternoon, for the Saturday lunch held at the same church, the line to be let inside for the activity groups for older adults at the *Iglesia de Santa Bárbara* that met on Saturday afternoons, and the daily lines for breakfast, lunch, and dinner in front of the *comedor*. While waiting in line for hours to receive a small *mercadito* or a plate of food might be perceived as a passive activities by some, I hope that throughout this chapter I can make visible the often difficult work and relational practices involved in filling, caring for, and nurturing this *costal*.

Rebuscando la Vida: Circus Dancers, Recyclers, and Desechables

Most *abuelitos* who spend their days in and around the dining house fashioned creative forms of self-employment in order to generate income. Among their former occupations are circus dancers, bus drivers, street vendors, *campesinos* (peasant farmers), recyclers, domestic workers, musicians, traffickers (of various substances), and a host of other professions. Because their occupations were usually not regulated by the state, they received no recompense in the later stages of their life, such as social security protection,

health care, or retirement benefits (*pensiones*). While most of the *abuelitos* did receive a small *bono* because of policies instituted in 2003 that aimed to protect elderly persons living in what the local government describes as a state of “indigence,” this stipend is minimal (between twenty five and thirty dollars per month) and barely covers the cost of renting a small bedroom in the neighborhoods surrounding the *comedor* (which can run between thirty and sixty dollars per month). While the *comedor* offers breakfast and lunch six days per week, the residents of the *comedor* must be able to sustain themselves during other times of the week. They must pay for their rent, pay for a portion of their medicines and doctor’s appointments, and feed and care for their bodies, homes, and families.

Unregulated employment such as the jobs I have described above, form part of Colombia’s ever increasing “informal economy.” According to Colombia’s National Department of Statistics (*Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística*, or DANE), *empleo informal* is a kind of employment where basic guarantees such as social security protection and stable and adequate pay are uncertain or absent. Within this category of work, DANE includes domestic workers, self-employed individuals (excluding independent professionals, such as doctors, lawyers, and engineers, etc.), and laborers who work in firms that employ less than ten persons.

Most scholars have linked the practice of informal work in Latin America primarily to processes of migration and the resulting patterns of urbanization of the 1950s. According to economist Carmen Flórez (2000; 2003), more than half of the working age population living in Colombia’s ten main cities migrated to urban areas during the 1950s and 1960s. Writers have suggested that while the intensity of rural

violence during this time did indeed play a significant role in the movement of people to urban centers, social, economic, and educational opportunities in the newly industrializing cities as well as a decrease in agricultural employment in the countryside due to agrarian reform, were also primary in the decision to migrate to urban areas (Castañeda 2005). Between 1938 and 1951, over one million people migrated from rural zones to various cities throughout the country. This large influx of migrants contributed to an increased urban labor supply that was not easily absorbed by the local economies (Flórez 2003).

The intensification of conflict in the Colombian countryside since the late 1980s has again generated an increase in the displacement of communities and in migration to urban areas, and thus, an increase in the urban labor supply. It is estimated that between 1988 and 2003, approximately two million people were forcibly displaced from their communities due to armed conflict (Flórez 2003: 4, citing Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2002). Moreover, the economic crisis of the early 1980s and the economic difficulties that extend from the mid 1990s to the present, have also generated a decrease in labor demand, and with it, a decrease in the quality of employment.

JJ Thomas (1995) has written about how individuals in different parts of Latin America negotiate such marked shifts in the supply and demand of employment by creating their own forms of work outside of a regulatory framework (cf. Hart 1973). This "informal" economy, Thomas argues, is composed of a heterogeneous group of workers that engage in a diverse array of occupations and earn a wide-ranging amount of income from their work. While the DANE defines "informal" work as employment where basic

guarantees (e.g. social security protection, secure and adequate pay) are uncertain or absent, Thomas reminds the reader that “not all of those who work within the informal sector are poor, and that some workers of the formal sector are not poor” (Thomas 1995: 55). Following this point, it is important to recognize that the number of informal laborers in Colombia or in Bogotá will increase or decrease depending on the definition that is used to categorize them as such. Moreover, given the range of occupations and incomes held and earned by informal workers, it is impossible to group all informal workers as vulnerable and/or poor.

According to Colombian economist Raquel Bernal (2009), a persons’ pension and health contributions might serve as a more suitable and stable measure of the extent and character of formality and informality of labor in Colombia. Using the statistics published in the *Encuesta Continua de Hogares* (National Survey of Households) that were collected from August -December 2006 and which included social security and health contributions, the author tells us that approximately 26% of the national work force (about four million five hundred thousand workers) contributed to both pension and health care. This statistic indicates that Colombia’s national informal sector was approximately 74% during the latter half of 2006 (a statistic not dissimilar if using DANE’s definitions of informality). Based on these statistics, Bernal suggests that informal employment is estimated at 90% in some rural areas, and at 62% in Colombia’s ten largest metropolitan areas¹⁴⁴ (Bernal 2010: 162).¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ According to *DANE*, Colombia’s ten largest metropolitan areas are: Barranquilla, Bogotá, Bucaramanga, Cali, Cartagena, Cúcuta, Ibagué, Medellín, Manizales, and Pereira. Webpage accessed July 9, 2010: dana.gov.co

¹⁴⁵ It is interesting to note that on a recent visit to Bogota, Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz emphasized how government tax breaks and the strong *peso* had encouraged Colombian companies to make capital investments rather than take on more employees.

Using the same survey, the author also argues that levels of education play a significant role in a persons' participation in the informal sector. Individuals with an elementary school education are 7.6 percentage points less likely to work in the informal sectors when compared with individuals without any formal education. Additionally, workers in urban areas who are college educated are 32 percentage points less likely to be informal workers when compared to persons without education (168).

Moreover, as Leguizamón pointed out to me, the availability of and access to education has historically been very limited, and though it has increased significantly in the last fifty years, it is still inadequately sufficient for many sectors of the population and regions of the country. According to Flórez (2000), high rates of illiteracy are generally a problem faced by Colombia's older population and persons in rural areas, as approximately 20% of the overall population does not know how to read or write (Flórez 2000: 89). During the 1950s, the Colombian government began to make efforts to create more educational opportunities both in rural and urban areas. In 1951, the illiteracy rates for persons over fourteen years of age was 38%, but had decreased to 10% by 1991.¹⁴⁶

Of the approximately fifty individuals that I came to know well in around the *comedor*, only two had finished high school, and none had completed a college diploma (though two that had completed high school told me that they had taken college courses, but had never finished a university degree). As Leguizamón asserted, some had only studied a couple of years of *primaria*, or elementary school, and most did not have any formal education at all. This is why in 2007, Hermano Miguel arranged for a literacy class to be held inside the *comedor* a few times per week. About fifteen of the *comedor's*

¹⁴⁶ There is still a difference between literacy and educational rates between individuals who live in urban areas and those who live in rural areas.

patrons, most of whom were older adults and women, enrolled in the literacy class that was sponsored by the Bogotá mayor's office. During this time, the students were instructed on how to write out the alphabet, as well as how to spell their names.

As evidenced by their diverse and creative occupations, the *abuelitos* I met at the *comedor* had found many novel ways to “fill up their *costal*” or *rebuscar* for their needs. The practice of *el rebusque* or to *rebuscar* is an activity many older adults have described to me, often in unmarked ways. For example, we might recall the comments made by the woman who stood alongside Leguizamón and Señora Berta in line saying, “One has to *rebuscar* for oneself. You go to the stores, to any place and you will be given a little something... a *panelita*, a *cafecito*, and this is how one completes what one needs.” Like the woman's statement intimates, *el rebusque* refers to looking for one's livelihood through everyday practices of searching for things or opportunities that can be consumed, sold or exchanged for money or for other items, services, or spaces of value.

Through various conversations and interviews, I have learned that the practice of *el rebusque* can refer to a diverse set of activities. Patrons would often describe forms of labor such as running errands for people, cleaning up somebody's home or *local* (commercial establishment), or selling trinkets on the street and telling me they were *rebuscando el arriendo*, (*rebuscando* ones rent) or *me tocó rebuscarme el almuerzo* (I had to *rebuscar* my lunch). For the woman standing in line, at least part of her *rebusque* involved making her presence known at local stores in order to be given “a little something” such as a *panela* or a cup of coffee.

In the pages and sections that follow I focus on the place of *el rebusque*, that is, the activities people engage in to survive on a day to day basis, which include the

recycling of different kinds of materials, working as street peddlers (*vendedor/a ambulante*), waiting in line, and even begging (among others). In doing so, I consider not only the work itself, but also the ways these kinds of activities have and continue to be evaluated in moral terms.

Often, when I inquired about the whereabouts of individuals who had returned to the *comedor* after several days of absence, some patrons would respond by telling me that they had been away *rebuscando la vida*, or *rebuscando* their life. It wasn't until I had a conversation with Roberto, a younger man in his mid-thirties, that I began to understand the central place *el rebusque* had in sustaining the lives of those that frequented the *comedor*. Though I had known Roberto for many months, we had never spoken until the morning of Ash Wednesday in February 2007 when he sat next to me inside the *comedor* after the breakfast meal. He had placed an intricate metal contraption on the table in front of us, which was composed of a metal wheel and several wires encased in plastic sheaths. Upon analyzing the object, I asked him to tell me a bit about the piece,

“This is part of a DVD player, one of those big ones,” Roberto said, responding to my inquiry. “I asked a man who was going to throw it away to give it to me, and he did.”

“And, what are you going to do with it?” I asked Roberto.

“Well, I'm going to sell it,” he replied, his voice sounding surprised by the seeming silliness of my question. “I already sold one part of it and got 5,000 *pesos*. I can sell the other pieces at the Sunday flea market at the *Parque de las Nieves*.¹⁴⁷ Someone will buy it from me there.”

“What will the buyer do with it?” I asked.

¹⁴⁷ *Parque de las Nieves* is a small park that is converted into a flea market on Sundays. It is approximately eight blocks north from *Comedor María es Mi Madre*.

“Hmphh, how would I know, but look at this,” he said as he poked the wires wrapped around the metal wheel. “This is copper. This has value.” Roberto went on to describe the various bits and pieces of the metal remains of the DVD player that had potential economic value. The pieces that made up the DVD player, he said, could be sold separately as a way to *rebuscar* for his daily needs.

“This is enough for an *arriendito*, ¿*Qué no?*”¹⁴⁸ Roberto said aloud, directing the ¿*Qué no?* in his question to *la Chilindrina*, who was arranging the tables and chairs of the *comedor*. The pronoun *esto* (or “this”) in this context, seemed to refer to two things. First, *esto* signaled to the materiality of the metal pieces that Roberto could sell at the local flea market or on the street to then pay for his rent with the money he garnered through the exchange. For some, including the man who gave the DVD player to him, the object was viewed to have little to no functional value, and thus, was considered trash. Roberto, however, would *rebuscar un arriendo* (*rebuscar* his rent) by exchanging the bits and pieces of the DVD player others might view as waste, and would use them to financially sustain himself. However, the *esto* in his statement also references the practice of *el rebusque*, or the activities through which he might generate money or things of value that might assist him in paying his rent. While the things (e.g. the copper wires) that have economic exchange value were important to Roberto, the market that existed for items such as these was also significant in that it supported and made this particular kind of *rebusque* possible for Roberto.

While Roberto’s statements about the potential value of the pieces of the DVD player showed how these objects were central to his *rebusque*, and thus his livelihood, we

¹⁴⁸ ¿*Qué no?* in this context may be translated as, “Don’t you think?”

might look to my interactions with another patron known as Chucho to further understand the diverse ways *rebusque* takes form and the different ways the products of one's *rebusque* are valued by others. Chucho was a man who looked to be in his seventies and who stopped by the *comedor* frequently, but curiously only ate his meals there on rare occasion. About once a week, Chucho arrived at the dining house after the regular breakfast meal had been served to say hello and asked for a bit of *tinto* before continuing on his way. In October of 2006, Chucho walked into the *comedor* at about 10 am wearing a blue and yellow Cal Berkeley cap and pulling a wheeled metal cart, which I later learned was full of second-hand goodies. He immediately greeted me with a wide smile and walked over to where I was sitting, took my hand and leaned his head against my shoulder. He then moved over to Hermano Miguel, who was speaking on the phone, and leaned his head up against the *hermano*'s shoulder, but quickly recoiled fearing a negative reaction from Hermano Miguel.

“The clock you gave me last week disappeared, Chucho! Do you have another one?” Myrian told him soon after Chucho had greeted everyone present at the dining house.

“I have another one!” was his reply and he quickly pulled out a blue canvas bag with the words *Aguardiente Cristal*, the brand name of a Colombian anise flavored cane sugar liquor, printed in white letters. Chucho brought the bag toward where Hermano Miguel and I were sitting and began to pull out item after item from what seemed to be a magic bag chock full of mysteries. Pens, an old glass perfume bottle shaped like a pair of red lips, two plastic clocks, six limes, a piece of yucca, a broken plastic piggy bank, a

plastic car and several other artifacts all sat on a table near us. Chucho picked up one of the clocks and handed it over to Myrian.

“What are you going to do with all of that stuff?” I asked him as I looked at the curious objects on the counter.

“I am going to sell them!” was his reply.

“How much can you make?” I asked.

Chucho looked at me and then proceeded to pick up each object, telling me how much money he might be able to earn from each. “For these, about 1,000 *pesos*,” he said holding the perfume bottle. “For these, about 200 *pesos*,”¹⁴⁹ he continued, pointing to the pens.

Before leaving the *comedor*, Chucho offered the piece of yucca from the table to Myrian, telling her that nobody in his family had been able to eat it since they were all sick. He then pulled out a cup and asked her for some *tinto*, which Myrian happily gave him. Before packing up his things and walking out the door, he gave Hermano Miguel three non-working pens and three of the six limes that had traveled in his bag.

“They call him *el Correcaminos*,” Carlos whispered into my ear as soon as Chucho walked out the door. Before I could ask why he was given the *apodo*, or nickname, Carlos continued, “It’s because you see him everywhere... in *el veinte de julio*, in *la Primera de Mayo*, in *Abastos*, in *el Centro*...”¹⁵⁰

From his nickname, *Correcaminos*, which can be translated in English as “Road Runner,” and from Carlos’s description of the distant places Chucho is usually spotted, I

¹⁴⁹ Two hundred Colombian *pesos* was equivalent to approximately 10 cents USD in 2007.

¹⁵⁰ These are all neighborhoods or areas in Bogotá, all of which are located in the southern areas of the capital. Abastos, in particular, is quite far from downtown Bogotá.

gleaned that Chucho often made his way through various parts of the city collecting bits and pieces of things and food and storing them in his metal cart for later use or sale.

While he might garner a few hundred *pesos* from the trinkets he stored in the blue canvas bag, the sale of these objects might only generate enough income to purchase a cup of coffee or a piece of bread at a local bakery. From my interactions with Chucho at the *comedor*, however, I saw how these objects that had seemingly little use or economic value became small gifts or *detallitos* for Myrian or Hermano Miguel during his visits.

Though it was not uncommon for individuals to miss the morning breakfast or lunch and come into the *comedor* requesting rice, *tinto*, bread, or whatever might be left over from the meals, Myrian, the *hermanos*, or other volunteers of the *comedor* did not usually respond to such requests graciously. Most of the time Señora Myrian, Hermano Miguel and others refused to give away the food, sometimes yelling out in aggressive tones, “It’s all finished!” or “You have to respect the schedule!” or “Too bad!”

Though Chucho’s requests for food and drink were usually small, neither Señora Myrian nor Hermano Miguel ever refused him a cup of *tinto* or a snack. Even though the gifts that Chucho offered may not have had monetary or use value (his gift of an aging piece of yucca never made it into the afternoon soup), the generosity by which they were given did not go unnoticed by Myrian or Hermano Miguel. The gifts and the short, social interactions of which these gifts formed part, played a role in sustaining his affiliation with the *comedor*, his relationship with the organizers even during long periods of absence, and ensuring that his cup was always full of *tintico*.

Persons who perform the kinds of activities and jobs similar to those of Roberto and Chucho and sustain their livelihoods, bodies, and families through the practice of *el*

rebusque, have often been referred to as *recicladoras/es*, or recyclers in Colombia.

According to the website of the *Asociación Nacional de Recicladores*, or the National

Association of Recyclers, recycling involves “finding sustenance in the trash”

(*Asociación Nacional de Recicladores* n.d.).¹⁵¹ Recyclers are quite visible throughout the streets of Bogotá, and are often seen transporting their goods, such as metals, carton, clothing, glass, and even animal remnants from local butchers, on wheeled, wooden flatbed carts that are pulled by a small horse or *burro* alongside automobile and bus traffic. Their search for these items is also quite visible in that many individuals scour trashcans throughout the capital, including those of apartment complexes, dumping sites, and the *plazas de mercado*.

According to the website of the National Association of Recyclers (from here on out, ANR), an organization which began in the 1980s and became recognized as a non-profit in 1993,¹⁵² ANR aims to protect the rights and working conditions of recyclers, addresses the social needs of recycling families, assists them in gaining access to social security and pensions by recognizing their work as legitimate, and works against the practices of stigmatization that has in the past led to violence against recyclers and their families. The ANR’s website positions recycling as an inherited tradition that has its roots in the post World War II era and that aimed to respond to the needs of a burgeoning industrializing republic. Largely because of the work of recyclers, Colombia currently

¹⁵¹ Website accessed March 15, 2010: <http://www.anr.org.co/nentidad.php>

¹⁵² The organization has its roots in recycling cooperatives that were formed in several Colombian cities. According the ANR’s website, Hernán Humaña, a Jesuit priest, began to organize recycling communities throughout the country through a Catholic organization called *Fundación Social*. Through Humaña’s work, as well as with the assistance of the *Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá* (Association of Recyclers of Bogotá), recyclers from all over the country gathered in 1980 for the first ever *Encuentro Nacional de Recicladores* (National Meeting of Recyclers). At this gathering, recyclers began to organize ways by which to create a nation-wide association that might politically represent them (*Asociación Nacional de Recicladores* n.d.).

recycles approximately 18% of the waste it produces, which is considerable amount when compared to the United States, a country with highly institutionalized public and private recycling centers, where 31% percent of waste is recycled (Ballvé 2008).

According to Unesco, there are at least 50,000 “scavenger” families in Colombia’s urban municipalities, though only about 4,500 families are affiliated with ANR (*Unesco* n.d.).¹⁵³ On their website, the ANR argues that the history of violence and migration in Colombia is the primary reason why there exists such a high number of persons who participate in informal recycling for their livelihoods in cities throughout the country. They suggest that the violence during the 1950s left thousands of *campesinos* dead, leaving behind many widows and orphans, who without few options, migrated to the city and became part of a population with little occupational opportunities. In the capital, they “found in the trash a way to survive. Men, women and children appeared looking for food to mitigate their hunger amidst the trash of the *plazas de mercado*. In the trash outside of homes and at dumpsites, they looked for elements that could re-used, such as wood that they utilized to construct their *ranchos* (make-shift homes) in areas of invasions, or as a source of heat to prepare food and warm themselves. Clothes, jars, bottles, and paper from the trash offered them a way to survive” (*Asociación Nacional de Recicladores* n.d.). Though this occupation has a complex history linked to industrialization, urbanization, political instability, and migration, the authors tell us that recyclers have been largely ignored by the state and by society, and have been frequently stereotyped as *locos*, *mendigos*, and *infractores de la calle* (“crazy” persons, beggars, and street offenders).

¹⁵³ Website accessed March 26, 2010: <http://www.unesco.org/most/southam4.htm>

Historically in Bogotá and in other urban areas of Latin America, *recicladoras/es* of different materials have been identified and categorized through the kinds of objects they collected, manipulated, and sold to dealers for profit and sustenance. Someone like Chucho who collected, sold, and gave away trinkets that, for the most part, held little economic value, may have been called a *cachivachero* (from the word *cachivaches*, which is translated as junk or a useless item). *Cartoneros* (from the word *cartón*, which means carton) makes reference to individuals who collected and sold carton and paper, whereas *chatarros* (from the word *chatarra*, which is Spanish for scrap metal) refers to people who gathered and sold metal or aluminum. *Botelleras* (an occupation largely held by women, which comes from the word *botella*, or bottle) were known as persons who collected, cleaned, and sold beer and soda bottles, plastics, and other forms of glass to recycling sites (*El Tiempo*, April 10, 2010). While these named occupations emphasize the different objects and materials handled, cleaned, and sold by individuals who sustained themselves through these activities, in the present, persons who look for their livelihoods through waste and on the street are more generally categorized as *recicladoras/es*.

Many times I have run into *Chilindrina* on *Carrera 7*, one of the busier streets in Bogotá, as she collected the plastic and carton that would help economically sustain her and help pay for her *piezita*. She would often walk holding a long, wooden stick and a large plastic bag or *costal*, collecting potential valuable items from trashcans or piles of waste on local streets. Because *Chilindrina* was a fairly young woman in her early forties and thus did not yet qualify for the *bono* the *abuelitos* received, her *rebusque* performed throughout the central streets of the capital was her primary source of income. She would

occasionally bring her *costal* full of her finds to the dining house and would ask Hermano Miguel or Myrian for permission to safely store it inside the residential portion of the *comedor*. Others who also arrived with their bags full of recyclables, some of which contained all of their possessions, would leave them at the entrance of the dining house prior to entering for the lunch meal.

While I came to know individual recyclers at the *comedor* and became acquainted with the types of objects they recycled, it is important to note that recycling is oftentimes a family occupation in that parents and children work together during the day collecting materials from which they might see an economic return. Children of recycling families seldom attend school and thus begin their work life from the time they are very young, often living and sleeping amidst the materials their family collects. Given this dynamic, some describe recycling as an “inherited occupation,” a tradition, knowledge, and also a social stigmatization that is passed down generationally from parents to their children.

The correlations among recyclers and the practice of finding one’s livelihoods amidst waste are not trivial or neutral associations. As noted above, the work of *recicladoras/es* is highly stigmatized in Colombia and is often associated with illegal activity, immorality, little or no education and “decency,” and a lack of hygiene and home. In an article written for the journal “North American Congress on Latin America” (NACLA) in 2008 on the topic of informal recycling, author Teo Ballvé highlights the discrimination recyclers experience, quoting one *recicladora* in Bogotá as saying, “They (the public) see us as street people, as ‘disposables,’ as some people call the homeless in Colombia. They believe that all recyclers are drug addicts, thieves, that the women are tramps. But it’s not true: we’re good people, and we work hard” (Ballvé 2008).

The word *desechable*, (translated as “disposable” by Ballvé for the NACLA article) is indeed commonly used in public discourse to refer to recyclers, homeless individuals, or persons who are marked by poverty and spend much of their time in the street. Something that is *desechable* is often inexpensive and viable only for short-term use, such as the disposable plastic bag one receives at the supermarket. The quality of one’s dress, the spaces one inhabits, hygiene and the odors the body emits, have all become markers of a person many in Colombia might call *desechable*. Recyclers are often associated with homelessness or of being “of the street” (*de la calle* or *habitante de calle*) given that their work requires them to not only spend time in the street, but to also find their livelihoods amidst the waste of the street. It is not uncommon for recycling families to reside in squatter settlements within the city among other recyclers, often sleeping alongside the materials of the street they intend to recycle.

A good friend of mine who worked in a small office about a block and a half from the *comedor* once narrated an experience she had when an individual walked into her office building after the front door was mistakenly left unlocked. “I didn’t realize the door was open and *un desechable* walked right in and asked me for money,” I remember her telling me only hours after the incident had occurred. I have also heard college students and other very well educated individuals colloquially employ the word to refer to persons without much contemplation about the word’s definition in the Spanish language. I offer these examples to show the way the term *un desechable* (note the use of the masculine article *un* [or “the” in English] directly preceding the word) is often used to refer to people in reference to disposable objects and the ways the terms acquires new meaning in the local lexicon. My friend’s use of the term *desechable* as a noun illustrates

how the word is not only used as a descriptor for a person, but also linguistically produces a kind of person associated with waste and the street. The act of naming someone a *desechable* thus positions persons in relation to spaces and things that are associated with immorality, a lack of hygiene, and indecency.

As I previously mentioned, the stigmatization of recyclers as immoral or *descehables* has in the past led to violent acts against them and their families. According to Harvey Kline, in the 1980s, during a time of intense urban violence, “clean-up squads” played a role in “cleansing” the streets from people viewed as *deschables* (which the author translates as “throw-away people”). He notes that in addition to recyclers, homeless persons, homosexual individuals, and drug addicts, were also targeted and that most of these murders went unreported (Kline 1999: 155).

One incident that that caused nation-wide debate among Colombians and among recycling communities occurred on March 1, 1992, when the bodies of eleven recyclers and informal workers were found inside the Universidad Libre Medical School, a private university in the Colombian port city of Barranquilla. According to an eyewitness, the men and women had been lured into the building by security guards who had promised to give them cardboard and other recyclable materials. Once inside, they were killed and their bodies were used for research and teaching purposes. Given that the medical students often took the body parts of cadavers home to study, body parts were discovered all over the city, potentially adding to the number of individuals that had been killed. Arrests at different levels of the university were made and the school was subsequently temporarily closed.

Upon the discovery of the bodies by the local police, various human rights organizations and recyclers made their protests visible throughout the streets of the city in an effort to have their rights as citizens and laborers recognized by the Colombian government and the public. March 1 is now remembered as el *El Día Mundial del Reciclador* (Worldwide Day of the Recycler) and on that date in 2008, representatives from recycling organizations from thirty-four countries came to together in Bogotá in commemoration of those that had been killed, as well as to share their grievances, and further attempt to create social programs that might assist recyclers and their families.

In November of 2006, an elementary school teacher from a school located in squatter area (otherwise known as an *invasión*) in the southern outskirts of the city brought his third grade students on a fieldtrip to the *comedor* and to the historic sector of Bogotá. The teacher, whom I call Emilio, aimed to teach his students about Bogotá's social history, as well as show them the ways inequality is experienced in the capital. He specifically took them to the *comedor* because he wanted the students to interact with and learn from *habitantes de calle* (literally translated as persons who inhabit the street), persons he felt often incite fear as well as animosity from many *Bogotanos*. The students had the opportunity to converse with the diners and learn a bit about the individual stories connected to the patrons' present circumstances. They also participated in setting plates of food on to each of the tables for the patrons' lunch meal, and after a short tour around the downtown area, returned to the *comedor* to eat soup. A week after this visit, Emilio returned to the *comedor* with a group of fellow teachers so that they too might meet and engage the men and women who ate their meals at the dining house. During this second

visit, the teachers sat around a lunch table inside a mostly empty *comedor* and listened intently to Hermano Miguel as he described the aims of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*.

“The goal of this *comedor* is to create a small heaven where patrons can feel welcome, where they can have a say in their own well being, live a dignified existence, eat healthy meals, and give and earn respect,” Hermano Miguel told the group, adding that the organizers were in the process of creating an *hogar*, or home, that would help fulfill most of the needs an *habitante de calle* might have. In response to Hermano Miguel’s description of his goals, Emilio looked to the group and said, “They are persons just like you and I. They experienced things that could happen to anyone – familial or financial tragedies, perhaps they made some wrong decisions in their lives; perhaps they are living on the street. They may have lost everything *y lo consideramos desecho*” (and we consider them *desecho*).

While the word *desechable* may be defined as “disposable” in Spanish, Emilio’s use of the word *desecho* indexes two other ways by which the word might be employed as an identifying category for certain persons. The word *desecho* or the plural *los desechos*, literally means that which may be discarded – the scraps of food on a plate that are thrown away; waste. Yet, the word *desecho* also comes from the Spanish word *hacer* (to make) or *hecho* (made). The inclusion of a *de* preceding the word *hecho* signals to the opposite of “made” or “make” – that of “unmaking.” Emilio’s use of the term *desecho* was an intentional use of a local pejorative term to offer a critique of the ways society constructs certain persons who reside in the economic, social, and spatial margins of the city and live their lives in ways not deemed socially normative.

Through his use of the word *desecho*, Emilio also points to the ways some words and categories have the potential to deny and unmake personhood. The term and colloquial usage of the term *desechables* also occludes the personal histories and multipositionality (Lewis: 1995) of persons, erasing the experiences and events that, as Emilio stated, “could happen to anyone” such as “familial or financial tragedies” from their present day circumstances. Moreover, in employing the word *desechables*, individuals are not only being constructed in relation to waste, but are also being positioned *as* the waste and scraps of the city and humanity. Thus, Emilio’s intentions to teach his students and fellow educators to move beyond these categories as well as their own fears towards persons such as those that eat their meals at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, makes visible the strong stereotypes and negative sentiments the public at large has towards certain persons and the occupational and income generating activities they perform.

***Habas y Maní* (Fava Beans and Peanuts)**

Toward the end of the line, which at this point was composed of about three hundred people, I spotted Señora Ricarda. I didn’t initially recognize her because her clothing was quite different from her standard attire. Señora Ricarda usually wore a knee length skirt or dress, dark blue knee high socks, a *delantal* or apron with two side pockets, a *ruanita* or cape, and a baseball cap of some sort. Today, however, she was dressed in a set of matching sweatpants and sweatshirt, along with her requisite baseball cap.

“I didn’t recognize you,” I told Señora Ricarda as I glanced at her outfit, smiling. “They were given to me at the *gimnasia*,” she said, responding to my observation by

explaining that she had been given the clothes during the weekly exercise class for elders sponsored by the *Alcaldía Mayor of Bogotá*.

“What is this?” I asked, pointing to the number “46” that was written on the back of her hand in black marker.

“It’s because they gave us rice a few days ago. Every little thing counts, *señorita*.” Señora Ricarda responded as she looked at the number on her hand.

Señora Ricarda had spent the previous Friday morning waiting in line for a small bag of rice at the *Iglesia de San Francisco*, only a few streets away from where we were standing. The number “46” that was still visible on her hand located her place in the long line of people that had awaited the opportunity to receive the food two days prior. Earlier that Friday morning, she had waited in line at the same church for her breakfast, which was composed of a cup of *aguadepanela* prepared with milk (a beverage commonly known as a *tetero*), a sandwich with a piece of cheese, a thin slice of ham, and a little bit of butter. And, like every Friday, she had spent the afternoon on the corner of Avenida Jiménez and Carrera 4, *buscando la vida*, literally “looking” for or “searching” for her life. On Friday mornings, breakfast and other snacks were offered at a variety of locations, and so, Señora Ricarda never appeared at the *comedor* on these days. Instead she spent Friday afternoons standing outside of a restaurant about eight blocks north of the *comedor* in the middle of the hustle and bustle of downtown Bogotá. For about two hours every Friday, she held out a small cup and quietly asked pedestrians for *una monedita para una abuelita*, a little coin for an *abuelita*.

“How did things go on Friday?” I asked Señora Ricarda one Monday afternoon in August 2008 as we sat inside the *comedor* for an interview after most of the *abuelitos* had eaten their *almuerzo*.

“Ahhh, very good, Señorita,” she replied with a satisfied smile. “I was standing there and a *jovencito*¹⁵⁴ asked me, ‘*Abuelita*, do you need food?’ I answered, ‘*Sí, necesito lo de mi semana*.’¹⁵⁵ So, he gave me 1,000 *pesos*. After he gave me the money, he returned with a small *mercadito* of *bandeja de pollo*, two ears of corn, a pound of *papa criolla* and *avichuela*.¹⁵⁶ He gave me the *mercadito* so that I could prepare myself an *ajiaquito*.”

“Was it good?” I asked.

“Yes, I put garlic and onions, it was very delicious,” she responded while describing the ingredients she added to the traditional potato and chicken soup that is traditional in the chilly, Andean capital.

“When I ran into the *jovencito* again over the weekend, he asked what I had done with the food he had given me. I told him that I had already eaten one of the ears of corn and the *bandeja de pollo*, but that I was saving one of the pieces of corn for today,” she said as she sipped a glass of *Coca-Cola*. For many months, Señora Ricarda had explained her absences by simply telling me that she was *rebuscando la vida* (rebuscando for her life) or *rebuscando lo de mi semana* (rebuscando her income for the week) or doing *usted sabe que* (doing “you know what”). Though I had gleaned from conversations with other *abuelitos* and patrons of the *comedor* what her *rebusque* might entail, she rarely

¹⁵⁴ A *jovencito* is a youth, or young man.

¹⁵⁵ This expression may be translated as, “Yes, I need my income for the week.”

¹⁵⁶ In this context, Señora Ricarda employed the word *bandeja* to refer to a restaurant order of roasted chicken. *Papa criolla* are small, local potatoes and *avichuelas* are green beans.

elaborated on the details of her activities. Not until I ran into her as she stood outside the entrance to a cafeteria on *Avenida Jiménez* holding her cup did I begin to understand what *rebuscando la vida* might mean for her in the later stages of her life.

Señora Ricarda had married at a young age, given birth to four children, and raised them on her own, though not necessarily in that order. “*Metí la pata antes de casarme,*”¹⁵⁷ she had told me several times, letting me know that she had become pregnant and given birth to her first child prior to getting married. While her first child was still a toddler, she would marry a different man – a man she refers to as “that man” and has described as “the devil” – and give birth to three more children.

“How did you support your children?” I asked her after she had told me that her husband neglected to provide for his family and was often violent toward her and her children.

“How did I support my children...I don’t know,” replied Señora Ricarda. “They experienced many hungers. And since I hadn’t been taught to beg because I was embarrassed...I don’t know how I supported them. But they were only half educated and half fed, *su merced*. They only studied up until the first grade. I was alone with my first daughter and that was when that man came into my life. I would cry. I don’t know what would have happened if he hadn’t died when he did. One day I went to the Church of *San Francisco* on *Carrera 7* and I sat in front of the church and began to feed the youngest one. I took out my breast and sat to feed the baby and a man passed by, a man that was

¹⁵⁷ While this literally means that Señora Ricarda stuck her foot out prior to getting married, in Spanish the expression communicates that she became pregnant prior to being married.

así bien como su merced.¹⁵⁸ He took out a coin. I was suffering bitterly, terribly with that man. He threw a coin toward me and said, ‘This woman truly needs this.’ He gave me the coin. But I was too embarrassed to beg. I couldn’t do that, I worked.”

Like her mother before her, Señora Ricarda had worked as a recycler. Before having children, and in an attempt to get away from her mother who she says was an alcoholic and spent her earnings as a recycler and street vendor buying alcohol instead of food, she was employed at a pharmaceutical laboratory, a tobacco factory, and then as a domestic worker for a family in Bogotá. Her most long-standing work, however, was as a *vendedora ambulante*, or as a street vendor on *Avenida 26*, one of Bogotá’s main thoroughfares, also commonly known as *Avenida El Dorado*. There, Señora Ricarda had set up a small stand where she toasted *habas y maní*, or fava beans and peanuts and sold them to the public.

The sale of snack foods such as fava beans and peanuts as well as non-food items is quite common in the city streets of the capital. One can find street vendors selling anything from freshly squeezed orange or tangerine juice, sandwiches, *empanadas* or corn dough stuffed with meats or vegetables and then fried, coffee, fruits, herbs, vegetables, a variety of *arepas*, pizza slices, *perros calientes* or hotdogs, hot tea prepared with fresh passion fruit, candies, oatmeal drinks, plantain and potato chips, yogurt, pastries, and individual cigarettes. Informal vendors also sell many non-food items, such as flowers, cell phone minutes (charging a usage fee of anywhere between 200 and 400 *pesos* per minute), spoken and written poetry and jokes, and bootleg DVDs of films that

¹⁵⁸ The word *bien* in Señora Ricarda’s statement, *así bien como su merced*, signaled to an individual she felt was distinct from her in terms of social and economic positioning. Señora Ricarda and others often made distinctions such as this, using dress, education, economic class and other signs they interpreted as being *bien*. The concept of “decency” is another commonly employed descriptor that is often used to refer to moral definitions and expectations of personhood (cf. Findlay 1999).

have yet to be released in movie theaters. Señora Ricarda's occupation, as she termed it, and her economic relationship to the preparation and sale of food on the street was thus not an uncommon kind of work. What was surprising, however, was the fact that Señora Ricarda worked on the same spot on *Avenida El Dorado* preparing and selling her *habas* and *maní* for forty-eight years.

“Almost fifty years. I think I needed two years to make it to fifty years. The families from that area would look at me and say to each other, ‘That *señora* has been selling her *habitas* and her *maní* here for a very long, long time.’”

Every morning, Señora Ricarda would walk to the *plaza de mercado* in Las Cruces to purchase fresh fava beans and peanuts. She would place half of the fava beans into one side of a large basket, and arrange the bag of peanuts on the other side of the basket. The rest of the fava beans were stored in a bag, which she carried separately. In the center of the basket she would place her gasoline powered stove, so that it seemed that most of her kitchen accompanied her to work every morning. She would then hop on a bus and travel about three miles to *Avenida 26* and find her spot in front of what used to be the *Lavanderia Imperial* (Imperial Laundry), but is now a hypermarket known as *Colsubsidio*. She chose this particular spot because the downtown area of the city where she lived was already overwhelmed with street vendors. This particular *Avenida*, located near Colombia's public National University and on the route to Bogotá's international airport, had less street vendors and would thus be less competitive for selling her wares.

“I'm not sure how I arrived there,” she told me during our interview. “I just arrived at that spot one day with my baskets...and I stayed.”

Señora Ricarda and her kitchen stayed in that spot on the street for more than half of her life. Through the sale of toasted fava beans and peanuts, she was able to economically sustain her children and home, though as she has noted on numerous occasions, her children still had to endure “many hungers.” She described the meals she prepared for her children as similar to the ones her mother prepared for her during her own childhood saying, “I would give them potatoes and sometimes rice when I had some. And when I didn’t have enough of something, I would just make a soup. Someone would give me some *mazamorra* flour (maize flour) and so I made *mazamorra* soup. And with the other foods they gave me, I would make the *recado*.¹⁵⁹ You know, with pieces of bone, *su merced*. That’s what I gave my *chinitos* for sustenance. The most I could give them was rice and potatoes. For breakfast, I would make a potato *caldo* and *cacaito*.¹⁶⁰”

“How did you begin to sell your *habas* and *maní*?” I asked Señora Ricarda as we sat inside the comedor.

“I saw a woman selling toasted peanuts at the *Plaza de Bolívar* and I thought to myself, I could do that too.” Though Señora Ricarda had very little schooling and money, she was able to carve out her own occupation in a city experiencing the continual transformations and exclusions of violence, migration, and urbanization. Through her labor in the informal economy, and the preparation and sale of her street food, Señora Ricarda supported her children without the economic assistance of her husband. By transforming two simple, raw foods by cooking them in a small stove on the street, she

¹⁵⁹ A *recado* can be prepared with a range of ingredients, such as potatoes or meats, and is a kind of filling for *empanadas* or other foods. In this case, Señora Ricarda was referring to her use of the pieces of bone as a way to give substance to the soup she was preparing.

¹⁶⁰ A *caldo* is a broth or soup, and *cacaito* refers to a cup of hot chocolate made from processed cacao tablets, respectively.

was able to obtain other foods such as drinking chocolate, potatoes, and *panela* for herself and her children.

While Señora Ricarda supported her family through the sale of the fava beans and peanuts she prepared on the street, she stressed to me that the people she met on the street and who purchased her snacks also contributed to her household in other ways.

According to Señora Ricarda, the support she received from her *clientes*, or clients, prompted her decision to continue to sell her snack foods on the same street corner for almost half a century. Through the course of those years, Señora Ricarda experienced the changes in the neighborhood along with its residents; she experienced the fluctuations in currency and the devaluation of the Colombian peso alongside them; she saw neighborhood children grow up to become adults, and experienced the transformation of the capital and the country in relation to that street corner and her clients.

“The families from that neighborhood helped me tremendously,” she recalls.

“There was one *señora* who worked in an office and she would come by perhaps around the time she received her *quincena*.¹⁶¹ She would come by and say, ‘Here, here *mi’ja*.¹⁶² I got off the bus because I saw you here. Here, here, take this for your rent.’ Everyone treated me this way. And since there was a place that roasted chickens further up the street, they would come and bring me half a chicken. ‘Okay, stop selling and start eating because you haven’t had lunch, you haven’t eaten anything.’ That’s how it was, *mamacita*. I was tended to divinely. But once the police began to bother me, I had to retire.”

¹⁶¹ A *quincena* are earnings from work paid every two weeks or fifteen days.

¹⁶² *Mi’ja* is the shortened use of the words *mi hija*, literally translated as “my daughter.” The expression *mi’ja* can connote a filial relationship, but is also commonly used as a term of endearment among persons of various ages. In Bogotá, it is common to hear older married couples refer to each other as *mi’ja* or *mi’jo*.

One of Señora Ricarda's most memorable clients was a man she referred to as the *Doctor*.¹⁶³ Señora Ricarda had mentioned the *Doctor* in many previous conversations, as she often spoke at length about the *cubrelecho*, or bedspread, and other gifts he had given her.

“When you go to my *pieza, su merced*, I will show you the *cubrelecho* that the *Doctor* gave me when I sold the fava beans. Frankly, *madrecita linda*, I didn't have anything and he saw that I was very poor. That was when he said, ‘what else do you need, tell me with *confianza*.¹⁶⁴ What else are you lacking?’ When he brought me the rug, he also gave me blankets, a mattress, and a cushion. He would tell me, ‘take this and fix yourself up a bed.’ He would pass by in his car often. ‘Here take another five, take another five,’ and I would tell him, ‘ah no, *su merced*, no more no more.’ I was embarrassed, but because of this, I didn't lack anything. Everybody supported me...*everybody* supported me.”

As evidenced by the statements I have reproduced above, each time Señora Ricarda recalled a relationship she had with a client, she would describe it by narrating her memory of past conversations between herself and that person in the form of a dialogue. As she did this, Señora Ricarda would shift her linguistic footing, taking on the role of that speaker by changing the tone of her own voice. Most of the time, Señora Ricarda would preface the reported speech by stating “he said” or “she said,” though several times she would make this shift only by changing the register of her own voice,

¹⁶³ The title *Doctor* does not solely refer to a medical doctor or persons with a doctorate degree. In Colombia, *Doctor* is commonly used as an honorific, and does not always connote a specific level of education. The use of the honorific is relational in that a person may refer to an individual with seemingly more authority, education, income, or cultural capital than themselves as *Doctor* or *Doctora*.

¹⁶⁴ In this context, to tell someone something with *confianza* (or *en confianza*) suggests that the *doctor* wanted Señora Ricarda to feel comfortable telling him what she needed.

such as when she began to tell me about the restaurant that roasted chickens near her food stand on the street and quickly moved on to perform the role of the *señora* who brought her lunch by saying, “Okay, stop selling and start eating because you haven’t had lunch, you haven’t eaten anything.” The reported speech ended when she again addressed me by saying, “That’s how it was, *mamacita*.”

In her recent article Julia Elyachar (2010) discusses how the forging of relationships through everyday practices of sociality (linguistic and otherwise) are critical for the continuous building and maintenance of communicative channels, which serve as a kind of “social infrastructure” and support for poor women in Cairo. Elyachar’s semiotic analysis focuses on social relations that do not directly produce economic value, though she argues that these are still a kind of “labor,” and thus, are essential for the capitalist system of production and for the local political economy (2010: 455). The author argues that such communicative channels, which are the result of human practices, are not always visible and leave “no marks on the ground or algorithms for engineers to reproduce” (2010: 456).

Though Señora Ricarda’s relationships and exchanges with those she called her “clients” did indeed offer her immediate economic return, Elyachar’s arguments are still fruitful for considering the ways these relationships and transactions acquired other kinds of value through everyday conversations as well as half a century of linguistic and bodily interactions with passersby on the same street. Through her performance of participant roles in her narration of past dialogues, Señora Ricarda makes recognizable the ways everyday economic transactions and conversations were transformed into channels of social support, which included gifts of money, roasted chicken, and a range of other gifts.

As Señora Ricarda has pointed out, these offerings from both the *doctor* and the *señora* were critical for the well-being and sustenance of her family.

“But, *mamita*,” Señora Ricarda told me during our interview, “I had so much support and my *chinitos*¹⁶⁵ did not have to *aguantar* because people would give me so much. People were so generous that they gave me these *mercadazos*¹⁶⁶ in such abundance. I couldn’t even carry them on the bus, *su merced*,” Señora Ricarda said while laughing at the idea that the groceries she was given were often so large that she had difficulty taking them home.

Señora Ricarda’s narrations of past dialogues and her performance of the roles of both the *Doctor* and the *señora* are also significant because it is through the telling and performance of these conversations and interactions that she makes these past persons and social connections, and the assistance they provided her, visible and significant in August 2008. We might thus view Señora Ricarda’s voicing of past exchanges between her and her clients as a way of making apparent the communicative channels that made her survival possible. By doing so, Señora Ricarda makes recognizable the ways linguistic exchanges and other social relations that took place on *Avenida 26* were transformed into other channels of social, nutritional, and economic support, including gifts of food and money for her and her children. Such practices of sociality not only assisted in creating the channels of support that made the flow of such gifts possible, but also helped maintain these threads of connections even after Señora Ricarda retired from her work.

¹⁶⁵ In Colombia, *mi chinito/a* or *mi chino/a* (note the possessive *mi* in front of the word) are used as terms of endearment for one’s children or children in general. However, adults, especially older adults, will also often refer to their husbands or wives as *mi chinito/a* or *mi chino/a*.

¹⁶⁶ If a *mercadito* is a small bag of groceries, a *mercadazo* refers to a very large amount of groceries.

It is important to remember that each of the encounters Señora Ricarda narrated had taken place on the public street corner while selling her snack foods, that is, in the context of economic transaction. Although Señora Ricarda began to tell me about these relationships by referring to people like the *Doctor* and the *señora* as her “clients,” which implied an economic relationship, she never described an economic transaction in relation to these particular individuals, that is, she never depicted an exchange of fava beans or peanuts for money. Her narrations of past dialogues focused entirely on exchanges and/or gift giving that occurred outside the frame of a particular economic transaction. Here, it seems that her “clients” were participating in her life within the context and space of her “work,” but the frame of their interactions often existed outside of any kind of economic or “work” transaction, possibly because she positioned these within a different frame of value from the fava beans and peanuts. Thus, the value Señora Ricarda attached to these individuals and her relationship to them was quite apart from that of solely a “client.” The presence of these persons was also made apparent in her bedroom through the prominent place she gave these gifts in her living space.

Through her work selling fava beans, the street offered Señora Ricarda intimate encounters with clients and pedestrians, encounters that played a primary role in nourishing her home and in feeding her body and family. Even though she didn’t explicitly describe these relationships in relation to an economic transaction, we might think about how such connections were still forged and maintained through the context of her labor. While she narrated feeling embarrassed when clients such as the *Doctor* continually offered her gifts of money, food, and items for her home, she likewise stated that because of these gifts she “wasn’t lacking anything.” Some of the clients that offered

her gifts did so in addition to purchasing the foods she produced through her labor, incorporating the gift of money, a bedspread, or even a roasted chicken into an economic transaction that was embedded in the exchange of fava beans and peanuts for money. Because of the context in which these gifts were offered, Señora Ricarda engaged these encounters and the gifts they engendered, as distinct from other kinds of *rebusque*, such as begging. Thus, Señora Ricarda's relationships to locals and her clients simultaneously existed within a range of potential social relationships. Señora Ricarda told me multiple times that the most difficult aspect of having to stop working was that she not only lost income and clients, but also lost a system of social support.

Señora Ricarda had to stop selling her roasted fava beans and peanuts when new regulations established in 2003 aimed to "formalize" informal workers. One of the intended goals of lawmakers was to "recuperate" public spaces throughout the city that had been filled with *trabajadores de la calle* (or persons who worked on the streets; street peddlers). In response to calls from organized informal workers, the local government outfitted commercial sites, such as artisan fairs and kiosks as spaces where informal laborers could sell their products. However, many of these spaces remained unfilled, and such projects could not support the large number of informal laborers in the city, as approximately 97% of persons who immigrate to Bogotá dedicate themselves to working on the street (*El Tiempo*, November 13, 2008).

Given that Señora Ricarda had told me that she spent her Fridays *rebuscando lo de mi semana*, but had not initially described her activities to me in detail, I asked her whether she spent her Friday afternoons recycling. "No, I can't work anymore. I am too old to work. Before the *bono*, I worked, but then *la vejez* (old age) arrived," responded

Señora Ricarda, describing old age as something that had appeared abruptly and had entered her body and person unexpectedly and uninvited.

Once Señora Ricarda stopped selling her fava beans and peanuts around 2003, she began to seek her income by *pidiendo*, or begging. By that time, her children had all moved out of her home, and Señora Ricarda had only herself to sustain.

“I was embarrassed to beg,” she remembered. “It wasn’t until I lost my sight that I said to myself, ‘I am not going to die of hunger and I am not going to hurt anyone or anything like that’ I wasn’t accustomed to begging and I hadn’t been taught to do that. I saw a woman begging and I noticed that she received about twenty cents around that time and I said to myself, ‘I’m old too, I’m going to do that too.’ And I went and I made my way in and people would give me twenty cents. I was embarrassed because people had seen me work. They had seen me work in a laboratory, in a factory, and now begging? I was very embarrassed. And when I saw someone I knew, I would run and hide. But a friend gave me some advice, she said, ‘Don’t be a *boba*.¹⁶⁷ You don’t eat from embarrassment nor from criticism. Go! We’re not harming anyone. Even our divine Father begged, why not us?’ They really encouraged me.”

It is important to note here that Señora Ricarda made a distinction between practices of work (*trabajar*) and begging (*pedir*), even though both of these were viewed as forms of *rebusque*. Señora Ricarda had already made this distinction quite clear to me when she described the experience of having been given a coin from a man as she nursed her infant child outside of a church, saying “He gave me the coin. But I was too embarrassed to beg. I couldn’t do that, I worked.” Though begging had become an

¹⁶⁷ The word *boba* may be translated as “silly” or “dummy.”

integral part of her *rebusque* in her old age, begging had also initially caused her feelings of embarrassment and shame, especially because those around her had seen her “work” in a factory and in a laboratory. For Señora Ricarda, these different forms of *rebusque* were marked in moral terms and carried the weight of societal judgments. Being seen as a beggar in the present may have also prompted a historical erasure of past forms of *rebusque*, such as the work she performed and the relationships she nurtured while selling fava beans and peanuts on *Avenida 26* for forty-eight years.

Women’s labor in the public sphere, such as the work that Señora Ricarda and other female patrons of the *comedor* carried out to sustain their homes and families, has a long history in Colombia. As evidenced through census records, single parentage and the experience of women as heads of households has been quite common in Colombia, beginning in the colonial period through present. In her analysis of census information of colonial Bogotá, Guiomar Dueñas (1994) states that the normative patriarchal image of the colony positioned domestic space as the “natural” space of action for women. However, the author argues that women have historically dominated public space in Colombia noting that, “The streets, the plazas, *mercados*, the public water hydrants, and communal wash basins at the edge of the San Francisco and San Agustín rivers were the spaces where the lives of *santafereñas*¹⁶⁸ took place. These public environments were the

¹⁶⁸ The region was originally named Santafe de Bacatá by settlers, and later became known as Bogotá when it became the capital of Nueva Granada. The 1991 constitution designated Santafe de Bogotá as the name of the capital, but the name was again changed to Bogotá in 2000. However, historically, residents of the city have commonly been referred to as *santafereños/as*.

spaces of encounter, of the exchange of knowledge and information, of the formation of networks of support for the social life and survival of poor women” (19).¹⁶⁹

The author adds that in a context where men and fathers were absent and transitory, the survival of the family often depended on the work of women, the majority of which, according to census statistics, were indigenous or *mestizas*. While domestic labor (e.g. cleaning, cooking, taking care of children) was one of the primary means by which women earned money, the production and sale of food products at local *mercados* was also a critical way by which women ensured their survival, as well as that of their families.

The *Plaza de San Francisco*, located along *Carrera 7*, one of Bogotá’s main arteries in the center of the city (and across from the *Iglesia de San Francisco*, where Señora Ricarda received the coin from the unknown man as she nursed her infant child), housed one of the largest fruit and vegetable markets where women sold their food in 18th century Bogotá. The Friday market at the *Plaza Mayor* (now known as the *Plaza de Bolívar*, located only a few blocks from *Comedor María es Mi Madre*) housed another *plaza de mercado* that attracted mostly women vendors from local areas, as well as those that traveled to the capital from outlying rural zones and municipalities to sell fruits and vegetables. In fact, most of the vendors at both of these markets were primarily women.

One common product sold at the *Mercado de San Francisco* as well as at many other *mercados* throughout the city, was *chicha*, a fermented drink usually made from corn that is common throughout the Andean republics. In the present, *chicha* can be found throughout the capital, sold in used soda or water bottles at bars, *mercados*, or

¹⁶⁹ In fact, the author notes that at the end of the 18th century, 48% of women in the four neighborhoods of the capital that were represented in the census were *jefas de hogar*, or heads of household (Dueñas 1994:16).

street fairs.¹⁷⁰ Historically, however, the production and sale of *chicha* was associated with women from *sectores populares*, that is, from poor, “popular” areas of the city. These women were usually *mestizas* or indigenous and most often were without a partner to assist in the raising and sustaining of children and family.

While the selling of foods and drinks derived from the grains women produced such as *chicha*, was a desirable job because it offered monetary returns and combined domestic work and the supervision of children (Dueñas 1994: 20), the production and sale of *chicha* was also marked in moral and racialized terms. Poor, single, *mestiza* or indigenous women were often constructed as *mujeres abandonadas*, that is, as women abandoned by their husbands and families. Their questionable personhood and their role in the preparation and sale of foods such as *chicha*, often positioned them as creators of moral disorder. In 1791, one colonial authority remarked on what he felt was the lack of control over *chicherías*, noting that they “wreaked havoc on the health and good customs” of the capital. “Everywhere,” he wrote, “there are stands where *chicha* is sold by *mujeres abandonadas*, who are accompanied by other women of similar kind. The *chicherías* truly are brothels where prostitution and laziness are fostered...vessels where all kinds of lost people of scandalous origin and corrupt customs infringe on the populace” (Dueñas 1994: 20 [citing AGN, 137:1-4]).

As agents in the sale of an inebriating substance to their mostly male customers, these women were viewed as a corrupting presence to the patriarchal concept of family and society (cf. de la Cadena: 2000). Don Ignacio Cavero, an 18th century municipal officer noted in a letter that, “*Indios* from all areas surrounding the capital...leave the

¹⁷⁰ Historically, there have been many (often unsuccessful) efforts to prohibit *chicha* in Colombia.

money that is the result of the products of their labor in the *chicherías* of the capital and return to their towns drunk and unable to tend to their obligations” (Dueñas 1994: 5).

While this statement highlights the potential detriments of *chicha* and *chicherías*, the authors’ words also point to the “immoral behavior” of male customers who spend their income at the *chicherías*, and disregard their obligations as providers for their families. However, in doing so, the author signals to a specific kind of man, an *indio*¹⁷¹ or indigenous man, in effect racializing not only excessive alcohol consumption and the abandonment of family, but also the behavior he and other colonial authorities felt was linked to the moral decline of the populace.

While women’s labor and the foods they sold in public spaces were often marked in moral and racialized terms, Julián Vargas (1990) has argued that the increased demand for *chicherías* also played a significant role in the growth of the city, linking the work of poor women to increases in rent for Bogotá’s inhabitants. Even public and corporate entities such as the *Hospital San Juan de Dios*, one of Colombia’s oldest and most important hospitals, and where Señora Ricarda was born, derived money by renting spaces to those operating *chicherías*. In this sense, the production and sale of food products, including *chicha*, was intimately tied to sustaining the needs of the rising number of urban inhabitants, the economic growth of the city, and the formation and transformation of the capital.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ Though the word *indio* may refer to an indigenous person, the word has a pejorative connotation, and is associated with poverty, a person of lower socio-economic status, little education, and “backwardness.”

¹⁷² Scholars such as Luise White have written about the role of poor women and women’s labor in urban and colonial settings, a topic that has been given little attention to date. White highlights the work of prostitutes in Nairobi, Kenya, noting that that prostitution was a kind of family work, where women labored to “create families’ with themselves as heads of households” (1990: 225).

Transforming the *mercadito*

At approximately 8:45am, a small, red car pulled up in front of us and an elderly priest slowly exited the vehicle. A bus, similar to those used by *Bogotanos* to commute across the capital, pulled up in front of the parked car. Countless small plastic bags were visible from the windows of the bus, as they were piled atop the first few rows of seats. Volunteers quickly attempted to organize the messy line of people so that adults were positioned on one side of the street, and the few children present were lined up on the other.

“They are going to give the children gifts,” Señora Berta told me as we watched a woman who looked to be in her early thirties and who regularly eats at the comedor usher her young daughter to the other side of the street alongside the other children.

No black markers were used to mark the bodies of those present with their place in the line. Instead, each patron was handed a *fichita*, a piece of recycled paper with a number written on it, so that they would receive their *mercadito* corresponding to their numbered position in the line. On the other side of the *fichita* was the name of the Colombian bank, *Conavi*, and I wondered how bank stationary had been transformed into place holders for those waiting in line for a bag of groceries on this non-descript street corner. The volunteers moved through the line, handing Leguizamón and Señora Berta a *fichita*, and then proceeded to extend one toward me. I quickly and politely refused and attempted to explain to the volunteer that I was only there as an observer to learn more about the giving and receiving of *mercaditos* and other foods.

“Take one, Xochitl,” said several people around me as soon as they saw that I had declined the numbered piece of paper.

“You can give it to me, or you can sell it,” added another voice.

I stepped to the right of the line in an attempt to make it clear to the other volunteers and to the *padrecito* that I did not need a *mercadito*, as I did not want to potentially take a *mercadito* that might have otherwise gone to one of the residents who had been waiting in the long line.

Nobody waiting in the line could offer me the name of the *padrecito* or to which Catholic parish he belonged. In response to my many queries, Señora Berta and Leguizamón were only able to tell me that the *mercaditos* were not from *el Estado* (the State) and were donated to the priest by families belonging to the parish. I was also informed that the priest came from a church in *el Norte*, that is, from the northern regions of the capital. For many Bogotanos, the “North” is a spatial symbol of wealth and home to Bogotá’s elite. Although not everyone who lives in the northern areas of the city is wealthy (there are in fact pockets of *invasiones*, or squatter settlements that exist without running water and electricity), much of Bogotá’s wealth is indeed concentrated in this area.

At around 9 am, the volunteers who had accompanied the *padrecito* began to remove the blue and white striped plastic bags filled with groceries from the bus, and one by one, passed out the *mercaditos* to those at the head of the line. As usual, María *la bandida* was first in line sitting on a milk crate, positioned about ten spots ahead of Señora Berta and Leguizamón. Leguizamón, Señora Berta and I began to move forward as those ahead of us received their groceries from the volunteers. As the line moved forward, another volunteer approached the children that were lined up parallel to the adults and handed each child a bag of *Bienestarina*. Within a few seconds, both Señora

Berta and Leguizamón held a plastic bag containing a small block of *panela* and little packages of elbow pasta, salt, rice, and lentils.

As soon as Señora Berta and Leguizamon had each received their bag of groceries, we walked around the corner toward the *comedor*. As Berta and I said goodbye to Leguizamón and continued to walk, I saw several individuals who had been waiting in line selling their *mercaditos* for a few thousand *pesos*. It seemed that everyone walking around the neighborhood was holding a blue and white plastic bag, and sometimes even two or three. As we walked by the *comedor*, I glimpsed several striped bags sitting on the kitchen counter, as individuals who had waited in line had gifted their bags of food to the *Hermanos* of the *comedor* in an effort to contribute to the content and preparation of their own daily meals.

Señora Berta and I, however, walked past the *comedor* with her *mercadito* in hand toward her *pieza*, located a few blocks south of the *comedor*. While Berta had access to a communal stove in the courtyard of the house in which she lived, she had previously mentioned that she had not been able to fill the *cilindro*, or tank, with gas for many months because she could not afford the cost.

“What did you do with the *mercadito*?” I asked Berta during an interview the day following the *mercadito* giveaway as we sat next to the communal laundry basin in the courtyard outside of her *pieza*.

“I take it to my *amiga*. When I don’t eat over there,” Señora Berta stated as she signaled toward the general area of the *comedor* with her hands, “I eat with her at her house. It doesn’t matter if I have food for myself, she still offers me some. As soon as I arrive, she asks, ‘are you going to eat? Are you going to have lunch?’”

The *amiga*, or the friend to which Señora Berta referred, lived only a few blocks away from her *pieza*. Several months earlier, Señora Berta and I had walked from her home to visit her *amiga*, whose *piezita* was located across the street from the *Iglesia de Las Cruces*. The *amiga* or *viejita*, as Señora Berta also called her, was a woman who looked to be slightly older than Señora Berta. She was quite plump and usually wore her tightly curled salt and pepper hair combed into two braids. Her breathing was always slightly labored, and even though she needed to be hooked up to oxygen at all times, I never saw her near her oxygen tank. Though the *pieza* she shared with her grandson measured only about fourteen by ten feet, it housed bits and pieces of many potential rooms often found inside what some might view as more “modern” Colombian homes. To the right of the entrance stood a twin-sized bunk bed, and to the left was a dresser that doubled as a stand for a small television. On the opposite side of the entrance hung a curtain that was pulled slightly open to reveal a toilet. Adjacent to the curtain was a sink and a tabletop stove connected to a tank of cooking gas. Pots and pans of different sizes were hung throughout, decorating three walls of the room.

On Sundays, *días festivo* (or holidays)¹⁷³ -- days when the *comedor* is closed or has limited service -- and on days when Señora Berta was unable to make it to the *comedor* for a meal, she was able to count on her *amiga* for warm food. During times when Señora Berta had been ill, her *amiga* had sent her grandson to deliver an *almuerzo* or *cena* (or both) to her home. In fact during our interview, which took place on a *día festivo*, I learned that Señora Berta would be making her way to her friend’s home in the evening for a *caldo*, or soup, as the *comedor* was closed in observance of the holiday.

¹⁷³ Colombia has approximately nineteen public holidays. This means that in addition to Sundays, patrons must find meals elsewhere during these days.

Curious to know how Señora Berta felt about the *comedor*'s meals and the potential absence of this food source, I asked her what she would do without the services provided by the *comedor*. The following is a transcript of the conversation that followed:

“What would you do if the *comedor* didn't exist?” I asked.

“I think about that all the time. This morning I heard people talking about the *Padre* leaving...that other people were coming to administer the *comedor*. I don't think he would leave us out in the cold. I have faith in God that if he leaves, he will transfer us to the new people. At least, I try to believe this because, what else can you do?”

“I think that one of the *hermanos* will be leaving, but not Hermano Miguel,” I assured her, offering what little information I knew about the potential transfer of the *hermanos*.

“Ah, blessed be to God. I think a lot about this, believe me. Potatoes...I'll have the cost of my funeral paid for when I die, someone is paying it for me.”

“Who is paying for your funeral?” I asked, curious to know who was paying for these costs since I knew that Señora Berta had not spoken to any of her family members in at least two years.

“The daughter of the *señora* whose house we visited,” she replied, referring to her *amiga*.

“And how long have you known the *señora*?” I asked.

“I've known the *viejita* for four years. I've known her daughter for three. A little over three years because her daughter is now three and she was pregnant with the little girl when I met her. I think she endeared herself to me because I would take the *viejita* out...she wasn't on the oxygen yet, and so I would take her everywhere I went. We

would walk around here and there. ‘Ay, my *mami* enjoys herself with Señora Berta.’ One day, she told her mother to tell me to take my *cédula*. I didn’t know why. ‘Mireya said to bring your *cédula*.’¹⁷⁴ ‘Why?’ ‘I don’t know.’ Later she told me, ‘we are going to *calle* 1,’ and we went and she left thirty thousand *pesos*. She paid the first payment, and the registration costs eight thousand *pesos*. She continues to pay three thousand *pesos* every month.”

“Until when?”

“Until you die. When you die you don’t have to continue paying. Blessed be to God.”

Through her response to my initial question – “what would you do if the *comedor* didn’t exist?” – it was evident that Señora Berta was concerned about the availability and security of her primary source of food. Her worry that the *hermanos* would leave and her hope that they would then assign the patrons to the new organizers that would arrive in their place, further highlighted this uncertainty. It seemed that she was not the only person with these concerns, as she narrated a statement or conversation she had heard from more than one person earlier that morning. “This morning I heard people talking about the *Padre* leaving,” she told me. Though I did not ask Señora Berta where she had heard this, whether what she heard was a conversation among more than one person, or whether she had taken part in this conversation or in the telling of this information, it was clear from her narration that the possibility of the *Padre* leaving brought the future of the *comedor*, and the sustenance of many, into question.

¹⁷⁴ A *cédula* is a State administered identification card.

Since its inception, many *hermanos* have come into and gone from the *comedor*, each instituting his own rules about what meals should be prepared for the patrons, whether the meals the *hermanos* eat should be different from those served to the *abuelitos*, when meals should be served, and who was eligible to receive these. Though Hermano Miguel and Roosevelt had in June 2007 only been at the *comedor* for thirteen months, during that time they added a Sunday morning meal to the *comedor*'s roster and also served breakfast and lunch on select Sundays and *días festivos*, or government observed holidays. In March 2007, the *comedor* also began to serve a 3pm soup dinner to better tie patrons' hunger over until the next morning's breakfast.

Señora Berta's concerns about her daily meals coming to an end also brought to the fore feelings and past conversations about preparations for another kind of "ending" into our interview dialogue. When Senora Berta told me for a second time *eso lo pienso*, referring to my question and our subsequent dialogue about what she would do if the *comedor* did not exist, she continued by saying, "Potatoes...I'll have my funeral costs paid for when I die, someone is paying them it for me." In this statement, Señora Berta began by telling me that she often thinks about the possibility of not having access to the *comedor*, and then quickly shifts from beginning to talk about food, specifically about potatoes, to informing me that her funeral costs are already being paid for. This sharp shift in thought and in language during the interview highlights the vulnerabilities that exist for Señora Berta in a possible past, present and future without access to food. For Señora Berta and other patrons of the dining house, an end to the *comedor* leads to a probability of hunger, which in effect, brings the reality of a nearing mortality closer to their daily lives. Her quick linguistic movement between speaking about food (and a

potential lack thereof) to telling me that her funeral and mortuary costs are already being paid for, is a logical shift in that it connects the possibility of hunger to death. Moreover, Señora Berta's statements informing me about her pre-planned funeral expense arrangements point to one of the only certainties in her life in the context of a nutritional and urban landscape that, for many older adults, is quite uncertain and insecure.

Several people, including the *hermanos* and even some patrons of the *comedor*, have told me that individuals who experience hunger in Bogotá are *bobos* (or stupid) since there are numerous *comedores* and organizations that offer *mercaditos* and snacks free of charge. The presence of multiple lines of older adults and persons categorized as *habitantes de calle* waiting for food outside the doors of religious buildings and other social service organizations seems to offer visual evidence to support this claim. Señora Berta's comments, however, point to the fear and presence of hunger that does indeed exist among many of the older patrons of the dining house. Whereas many people I came to know throughout the neighborhood can and do migrate from place to place in search of sustenance and community, it is evident that this is not always possible for many individuals, especially during times of illness or when the biological process of aging makes this kind of movement difficult.

Additionally, it is important to note that the connections that Señora Berta made regarding food, the lack of food, hunger, and death occurred during a time when discussion about death by hunger was at the forefront of news media reports and part of everyday conversation. In March 2007, media outlets reported that at least seventeen children had died of severe malnutrition in the department of Chocó, an area known to be one of the most bio-diverse spots on the planet, as well as one of the poorest regions in

Colombia. Upon investigating these deaths and the rampant malnutrition that exists, it was reported that money, medicines, and food products (including *Bienestarina*) that had been sent to hospitals and social service organizations by state agencies in Bogotá, had not arrived at their destinations. Jhon Jairo Mosquera Navarro, then mayor of Quibdó, the capital of Chocó, was arrested for embezzling at least two thousand million pesos (almost 1 million USD in 2007), among other charges. Quibdó's previous mayor and other elected officials of the Chocoano capital and surrounding municipalities were also arrested for embezzlement and for deviating resources to commercial ventures (*El Tiempo*, April 10, 2007)

Much of the *Bienestarina*, medicines, and vitamins that were destined for local hospitals and clinics were being sold on the street and at local pharmacies.¹⁷⁵ According to *El Tiempo*, five *bultos*, or sacks of *Bienestarina* were also found at a ranch on the outskirts of Quibdó, and were going to be used as feed for livestock. The ranchers had purchased the *Bienestarina* in Quibdó at the wholesale price of 10,000 *pesos* per sack, roughly equivalent to five dollars in 2007 (*El Tiempo*, April 4, 2007). The media discussion surrounding these events, as well as the local government's role in perpetuating malnutrition and in the deaths of the seventeen Chocoano children, had brought the potential of death and hunger in a palpable way into the everyday lives and conversations of elders throughout the neighborhood.

¹⁷⁵ A researcher at Bogotá's National University who traveled to Chocó in May 2007 showed me a photograph of a woman holding a bottle of children's medication marked with a price tag. The bottle had a label that clearly stated that it was unlawful to commercialize this medicine since it was given as aid, and thus, should have been distributed free of charge. The woman in the photo had purchased the vitamins for her children at a local pharmacy. This image thus demonstrates how common the unlawful commercialization of government aid is in the Chocó region.

Additionally, though the *padrecito* who gifted the *mercaditos* to the residents of the *barrio* (as well as the families who donated them) may have regarded these foods as a way to respond to nutritional deficiencies and prevent malnutrition, it is also important to consider the potential meanings these foods take on for the receivers, as well as the ways they use and transform them. As I have previously mentioned, Señora Berta often depended on her *amiga* for warm meals on days when the *comedor* did not serve a *desayuno* or an *almuerzo*, or on days when she was unable to make it to the *comedor* to receive her meal. She once told me, “Even though she is *pobresita*, because she is very poor, you saw how she lives, she still shares what she has with me. I arrive at her house and she offers me whatever she is eating. If she doesn’t have anything, she will prepare something for me, or I will eat from what she is eating.”

While Señora Berta told me that her *amiga*’s daughter offered to pay for her funeral costs because she was grateful that she spent time with her mother and invited her on trips throughout the neighborhood and city, this history of accompaniment wasn’t the only thing that contributed to their friendship and the various kinds of support that this friendship offered. As I previously noted, Señora Berta gave the *mercadito* she received every two months to her *amiga*, rather than selling it or exchanging it for money or something else of economic value. By giving her *amiga* the *mercadito*, Señora Berta not only contributed to her *amiga* and her *amiga*’s grandson’s meals, but simultaneously also contributed to her own nutritional well-being and health during times when food from the *comedor* was not accessible to her.

Because Señora Berta did not have access to cooking gas for the communal stove inside her home and therefore was not able to prepare her own meals, gifting the

mercadito allowed her to have a small stake in her nutritional future while also expressing her gratitude of friendship to her *amiga* through this food. The value of a bag of food that may commercially be worth no more than 5,000 *pesos* and whose “street value” is equal to about 2,000 *pesos*, was thus transformed into social and nutritional support, security, and independence for Señora Berta through the sentiments of friendship. The *mercadito* itself therefore formed part of the gestures involved in the social exchanges that maintain these connections of friendship and social relations. These exchanges highlight the interrelationship between food as a nutritional substance, as well as a material whose social character has the potential to preserve and transform intimate social ties for persons who are often viewed as not having the secure base of a traditional “family” unit.

The *mercadito* itself, that is, the bits of food staples that were packaged together to be taken home and prepared, also signal to certain cultural, moral, economic and nutritional expectations and experiences. The different foods that were given out on this particular Sunday morning form the basis of a diverse set of common Colombian dishes. *Panela* was the key ingredient for a drink known as *aguadepanela*, a hot beverage thought to offer “calories” and warm the body from the cold Andean morning; rice was served with every meal, often alongside other carbohydrates such as pasta, a food that has become staple to the Colombian diet and in my experience, was usually prepared with canned tuna fish. Grains such as lentils were frequently served as an accompaniment to rice, plantains, and/or potatoes, and a serving of protein such as chicken or beef.

Mercaditos such as the ones passed out by the *padrecito* were not only visible in economically marginal neighborhoods, such as Belén and Las Cruces. Packaged sets of

groceries made up of non-perishable staples that were marketed as *mercaditos* that can be given as gifts, were sold in many grocery stores throughout the capital. For example, at a *Ley*, a Colombian owned chain of hypermarkets that have since been purchased by another company, clear bags containing food staples such as powdered milk, drinking chocolate shaped into small wedges, and other grains such as rice, lentils, and garbanzos, were displayed in prominent spaces in the supermarket during the Christmas holiday season. These groceries were arranged into the bag by the grocer, and customers could buy these pre-packaged groceries for a set price, and donate them to someone of their choosing who they thought was in need of assistance, or as gifts to a family or social service organization at Christmastime.

Other kinds of *mercaditos*, such as the one that was included in one of the *mercados* received by the *comedor* from the *Banco de Alimentos*, came institutionally packaged by the manufacturer. This box of groceries, labeled as a *Mercado Básico* (a “basic” *mercado*) on the white cardboard box, included staple food products such as oil, ground coffee, chocolate, rolled oats, spaghetti, *Fideos Doria* (*Doria* brand pasta shaped into coils of angel hair-like strands), *conchas* (conch shaped pasta), *Masapán* (a brand of cornmeal for *arepas*, or corncakes), wheat flour, canned tuna fish packed in oil, *caldo* (bouillon), *color* (annatto powder), *Condimento El Rey Tricompleto* (a spice mixture of onion powder, cumin, garlic powder, and ground pepper packed by the brand *El Rey*), rice, sugar, lentils, dried peas, *panela*, salt, and *sopa instantánea* (an instant soup mix that can serve as the base for a variety of dishes). Everyone I knew in Bogotá, it seemed, had given or been given a *mercadito* during some difficult point in their lives or during

the holiday season. As a good friend once told me, “The least a person can do for someone in need is to give them a *mercadito*.”

Given the difficult current (and past) economic climate in Colombia as well as the high rate of unemployment, the practices of packaging, selling, giving and receiving of *mercaditos* was a relatively common one in the capital. Thus, seeing a line of people alongside a side street waiting for a bag of food at seven on a Sunday morning was not a scene that many would perceive as being outside of the economic and social norm for this particular area of the city. However, the ubiquity of the *mercadito* that is packaged, sold and gifted in diverse contexts and forms, points to a public and everyday knowledge regarding the experience of food insecurity for a significant portion of the population. While organizing and packaging foods in the form of *mercaditos* may offer a grocery store such as *Ley* a different way by which to market their merchandise to the consumer, and thus generate additional sales, stores such as *Éxito* (the parent company of *Ley*) have also “adopted” *comedores* throughout Bogotá and have donated significant amounts of food products to non-profit organizations such as the *Banco de Alimentos*.

The *mercadito* itself can thus be viewed as a material and symbol that interrupts and intervenes against the hunger of a fellow *Bogotano* at a smaller scale. Average citizens can easily purchase these at grocery stores and in gifting them become active participants in this intervention. The local government and formal organizations such as the *Comedor María es Mi Madre* or the *padrecito*'s parish that gave away *mercaditos*, were therefore not the only entities that were able to offer aid of this kind, as everyday customers shopping at a *Ley* grocery store were also able to participate in the social and nutritional welfare and protection of others through the purchase and giving of these pre-

packaged *mercaditos*. In this sense, the accessibility and availability of *mercaditos* inside grocery stores communicated a moral economy of giving, kindness and an everyday form of “charity.”

While we might look at the packaging of staple foods into *mercaditos* as symbols and icons of altruism and beneficence, we might also consider the ways such packaged groceries communicate notions of “Colombianess.” By including specific staple foods, these provisions were transformed from simple components of possible larger meals into moral gestures that had the potential to simultaneously transmit ideologies of charity, identity, and nutrition. Both the *mercaditos* I examined at grocery stores as well as those that were passed out by religious organizations, contained ingredients central to the creation of dishes that are common in various regions of the country, such as stewed lentils, *aguadepanela*, rice, *arepas*, and pasta and tuna fish casserole. Processed foods (except for the instant soup mix packed inside the *mercado básico*) were absent in all of these *mercaditos*. Foods considered *comida chatarra*, or junk food, such as snack chips, candy bars, soda, convenience foods (microwaveable or pre-prepared foods), or foods that are not essential for preparing typical Colombian meals, were also not included in the *mercados*.

The exclusion of certain foods and the inclusion of others thus points to an expectation of the kinds of meals one might prepare with these particular sets of ingredients. *Comida casera*, or homemade food is often spoken about as a wholesome, healthy meal, in comparison to *comida rápida*, or fast food such as hamburgers, pizza, or hot dogs that are viewed as unhealthy and as a negative external influence (primarily from the United States) to the Colombian diet. The staple ingredients included in the

mercaditos I examined are the primary elements necessary for creating a range of Colombian homemade dishes that are considered to be healthful and traditional. The omission of “convenience” or “instant” foods, such as pre-prepared *guiso* (sautéed onions, tomatoes, and garlic that serve as the base for many Colombian dishes) or microwaveable foods from the *mercadito*, point to the privileging of *comida casera*, and thus “wholesome” food that is representative of the moral qualities, social relations, and food traditions of “home” (Renne 2007) and simultaneously espouse qualities of “Colombianess.”

However, even though many Colombian dishes prepared inside the home (or in “home style” fashion) have a high fat and caloric content, such as *patacones* (twice fried green plantains), fried ripe plantains, fried yucca, and fried potatoes, their local origins, traditional preparation, and the place or style of preparation form part of an ideology of nutrition that positions these foods as healthful and traditionally Colombian, and thus situates the persons consuming these foods within a broader community of eaters. The combination of ingredients found inside *mercaditos* and the expectation that they will be transformed into Colombian dishes inside the home, encourages those that receive them toward a specific menu that communicates these local notions of health and reinforces particular social and cultural identities. In this sense, “nutrition” is not only about the vitamins, minerals, calories or fat a particular food or meal contains or lacks, but is also linked to a history of local food traditions, as well as how, where, and by whom these foods are prepared.

While I suggest that there exists a “morality of the home” that is communicated through the ingredients that make up and are excluded from the *mercaditos*, it is

important to note that most of the individuals whom I know to have received these groceries did not have access to kitchens and a traditional “home” structure wherein they might transform these foods through processes of cooking, eating, and sharing, a topic I further discuss in chapter 7. In this sense, the practices and effects that might harness the intentions behind the giving of *mercaditos* by various social service and religious organizations, are different from how the receivers use and transform them for their own benefit and necessities.

Though the *mercaditos* do not and cannot take into account the particular needs, wants, and tastes of all individuals, and do not convey the same message to each and every interlocutor, one might consider the ways they might also accord a potential for independence and creativity to the receiver. The limited number of ingredients most *mercaditos* contain requires that the receiver attain additional supplies such as water, oil, tomatoes, onions, and garlic in order to transform the food staples into meals (which was a difficult task for most). Señora Ricarda, for example, was often given foods such as corn or chicken, which she used as the base to make her own version of *ajiaco*, a starchy chicken soup common in Bogotá. In order to make this soup, Señora Ricarda needed to access other ingredients, such as onions, *guascas* (a local herb), and *papa criolla*. In this way, the staple ingredients may serve to provide a certain level of autonomy to the receiver in that they can potentially control the kinds of food they are making by combining and recombining ingredients, and adding their own *sazón*, or individual spice, to creatively construct their own dishes with what is available to them at that particular time.

The various and sometimes unexpected ways people transform their *mercaditos*, such as Señora Berta's gifting of her groceries to her *amiga*, may offer us entry into thinking about how these *mercaditos*, as well as the *rebusque* and work involved in acquiring them, play a central role in filling up a *costal* of a different kind – a dynamic *costal* that connects the social actions and relationships of older adults as well as the communicative channels that are built and maintained in and through these social exchanges. Rather than viewing the *costal* as a container that is continually filled up with food and consumed only be filled again, we might view the *costal* as constantly being reshaped and remade in and through social relations, conversations, waiting in line, and even through a simple gift of food from one friend to another.

In much the same way that the *costal* is always in the process of being made through the relationships and activities that make sustenance possible for older adults, the absences that make this kind of work and *rebusque* necessary also form part of that *costal*. The absence or lack of family members and family structures of care, a topic I discuss in chapter 7, as well as the historically ineffective role of the state in providing for the populace, were also central to the *rebusque* and social relations that continually shape the contours of the *costal* and the everyday life of the older adults of the neighborhood.

Conclusion

In her diary *Child of the Dark* (written from 1955-1960), by Carolina Maria de Jesus, the author, who lives in a shack located in a *favela* of São Paulo with her three children, poignantly reflects on her daily efforts to provide food and shelter for herself and her family. Carolina narrates the various tasks she must undertake, such as leaving

her home at 11pm to look for paper, cardboard, metal, wood and other recyclables so that she might be able to provide breakfast to her children the following morning. For most every meal or for any unexpected necessity that might arise, Carolina searched the streets for potentially valuable items that she could sell or exchange for money or items she needed or desired at that particular time. On August 22, 1958, she wrote the following account of her day:

I got out of bed at 5 o'clock and went to carry water. The line was already enormous. I only had four *cruzeiros* and an empty bottle of milk. I went to Senhor Eduardo; he kept both the bottle and the four *cruzeiros* and gave me a bread roll. I thought it was very little, but the money was also very little.

I made coffee and got the children ready to go to school. I went looking for paper. I found some rags to sell. I went by a house on Avenue Tiradentes and carried 50 kilos of paper that a woman had asked me to sell for her. I put it on my head and sold it. It got 100 *cruzeiros*. She was pleased (1960 [1963]: 102).

I offer this example of “a day in the life” of Carolina Maria de Jesus because every detail of her writing communicates the seemingly endless tasks she must perform to survive and find sustenance for herself and her children. One cannot come away from reading her diary without viewing what in Colombia might be called her *rebusque*, as a difficult form of labor – a kind of everyday labor that is often not highly regarded or even viewed as “work” by many. Rather than viewing the older adults of the neighborhood as passive agents who receive and consume whatever is given to them, such as the bubble gum flavored yogurt that was rejected by consumers in the capitalist market, we might consider the ways older adults respond to their own difficulties and contribute to their own well-being through meaningful social practices and forms of work, such as waiting in line, recycling, giving a *mercadito* to a friend, or selling fava beans and peanuts.

Julia Elyachar's (2010) arguments about what she calls "phatic labor" (citing Malinowski) might prove fruitful for this discussion. Following Malinowski (1936), Elyachar positions Cairene women's everyday practices of sociality, such as visiting, moving around the city, chatting, and making friendships as a kind of "phatic labor," that is, as social practices that create *potentia*. She states that while she does not intend to argue that friendliness and sociality "constitute a kind of opportunistic functionalism" (457) these kinds of connections were economically vital and "created, maintained, and extended channels through which all kinds of resources can potentially flow" (457). While such labor was key for maintaining privilege among the upper classes, it was also essential for the preservation of daily life among poor people in Cairo, "for whom it is both time-consuming and fragile in its outcomes. Just as poor people have to contend with fragmented physical infrastructure in all aspects of their lives...they have to invest more time in the maintenance of infrastructure of communicative channels as well" (457). Thus, Elyachar suggests that such practices, and particularly, women's practices of sociality, are politically and economically meaningful and play a critical role in the creation and maintenance of social infrastructure (cf. Verdery 1996; Berdahl 1999).

With Elyachar's arguments in mind, we might recall Chucho's frequent visits to the *comedor* and the small gifts he offered Señora Myrian and Hermano Miguel, as well as Señora Berta's visits, conversations, and the meals she shared with her *amiga*. Such everyday practices and movements were ways by which older adults created and continuously maintained bridges of social support (what Elyachar might call "social infrastructure") that assisted them in caring for their basic needs. Additionally, through waiting in lines for food and other forms of sustenance, older adults attempted to fill up

their *costal* with bits and pieces of things that might assist them in their survival. Such bridges of social support, which include diverse practices in the “informal economy” and the art of waiting for sustenance, were necessary in a context where the assistance of the local state has historically been unreliable, if not absent. In this sense, social relations became a powerful way by which residents of the neighborhoods survive and nurture themselves.

Thus, while waiting in specific lines in other contexts (for food staples in Socialist Romania, or identity papers in highland Peru), may communicate and reify the presence of the State in peoples’ lives as well as position the State as the provider for its citizens (Verdery 1996), the visibility of lines of older adults waiting for food in Bogotá may also signal to the inability of the State to provide basic necessities for its citizens during times of conflict and transformation. In this sense, the lines present throughout the Colombian capital become symbols of inequality and differentiation, rather than illusions of egalitarianism, as was the case in many socialist contexts. What is also clearly made visible by way of these lines, however, is the continued presence of the work of the Catholic Church through social service programs that feed Bogotá’s poor.

Though the various churches and organizations that provided ham sandwiches, a lunch meal, a cup of hot chocolate, or a piece of bread to the neighborhoods elders did so in an autonomous fashion (that is, they didn’t strategically organize their resources in relation to each other), the older adults of the neighborhood collected bits of food and sustenance from each, bringing them together to nourish their *costales*. Such provisions played a role in shaping people’s daily lives, but also offered the possibility of choice – that is, people could choose where and if they would wait in line, and whether they would

keep what was given to them, or exchange it for another substance or service of value.

Thus, while the work of *Comedor María es Mi Madre* and Bogotá's *Banco de Alimentos* are critical for the livelihoods of neighborhood residents, it is important to consider both the work that older adults perform to nourish their *costal*, as well as the multitude of organizations that play a critical role in this process.

Chapter Seven de piezita y de calle

It was August 2008 and I had returned to Bogotá and to *Comedor María es Mi Madre* for a month-long visit after completing twenty-two months of fieldwork in June of the previous year. Much like during my extended fieldwork in 2005-2007, I was attending and participating in the preparation of the breakfast and lunch meals at the *comedor* approximately four days per week in an attempt to see how life at the *comedor* and in the central neighborhoods of the capital had changed during my absence. I was not the only “student” regularly visiting the *abuelitos*, however. Five undergraduate social work students from a local university in Bogotá had chosen to do their *práctica*, or the field internships required for their bachelor’s degrees, at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*.¹⁷⁶ The social work students, all of whom were women, had been visiting the *comedor* for several weeks three times per week, organizing a range of activities for the patrons, such as film screenings, dance and song recitals, and birthday celebrations, among others.

One morning that August, three of the social workers were seated in an office inside the residential portion of the *comedor* conducting interviews with the older adults of the dining house. One year earlier, this space had served as Hermano Miguel’s bedroom, housing two bunk beds, a dresser, and a small television set in the place of the desk and office supplies.

¹⁷⁶ This particular *comedor* is one among many social service organizations that hosts *practicantes* from local universities. Recall that the *Banco de Alimentos* also hosts *practicantes* from diverse disciplines.

Each of the social workers was seated in separate corners of the office holding a notepad on which several questions were written. The older patrons who had been lined up right outside of the office were ushered in three at a time and seated next to one of the three social workers for a short interview. I was only a few feet away at a desk in the middle of the room using the office computer when I overheard the social workers asking the patrons what sounded like very personal questions.

“What do you think about the food you receive here? Is it bad, just okay, or good?” asked one of the social workers to a female patron.

“It’s good, *señorita!*” replied the woman.

“Do you smoke cigarettes? What about marijuana? Do you drink alcohol?”

“No, *señorita*, nothing like that.”

“Do you use any psychoactive drugs?”

“No, no, *señorita*,” replied the woman emphatically.

“Do you have children?”

“Yes, *señorita*, I do.”

“Do you live on the street?”

“No, no, *su merced*. I have a *piezita!*”

I was surprised that questions of such a personal nature would be asked without consideration for individual privacy, that is, in the presence of myself and other patrons, as well as within earshot of those standing outside of the open door. I was even more surprised at how seemingly easy it was for the social work students to obtain answers to these questions. Most of the patrons the social workers interviewed in my presence were women, and most of the interviewees responded that yes, they did indeed have children.

All answered with an empathic “no” when asked whether they used any drugs or controlled substances. Every one of the patrons also said that they indeed liked the food they were served at the *comedor* (though, many had in passing told me that were tired of the food, especially the daily servings of turkey). When asked whether they were *habitantes de calle* (inhabitants of the street), each of the patrons replied with a resounding no, telling the social workers that they did not live on the street, and that they lived in a *piezita*, or a small bedroom home.

In this chapter, I focus on the spaces and meanings of the “street” and the “house” as well as where “living” happens and is experienced by the older adults of the central neighborhoods of Bogotá. For most, *piezitas* were a central form of housing, where elders lived alone in small rented bedrooms homes that formed part of larger houses and structures. While individuals spent their nights and housed their belongings inside these *piezitas*, as I have shown throughout the dissertation, much of their lives, including many of the activities that are often viewed as “domestic,” such as eating and celebrating holidays among family members, happened outside of the traditional spaces of the home.¹⁷⁷

But, what counts as a *pieza* or home for the older adults? How do people live de *piezita y de calle* and how are these social categories and spaces defined? This chapter explores the different ways elder patrons understood what it meant to have a “home,” and the role having a certain kind of home played in constructing personhood and their

¹⁷⁷ Approximately ninety percent of the older adults who frequented *Comedor María es Mi Madre* lived independently from family members in a *piezita*, or small bedroom homes. In 2008, 25% of the inhabitants of the *localidad* of Santa Fe, a geographic area which includes the neighborhoods of Las Cruces, Santa Bárbara, Lourdes among several others in the downtown areas where elders who patronized the dining house resided, lived in a single *pieza*, and 50.38% of Santa Fe’s inhabitants earned between 1,000 and 250,000 pesos monthly (approximately forty-five cents to one hundred-twenty USD in 2008) (Parias Durán 2008: 89).

relationships to the street. Though some of older adults that patronized *Comedor María es Mi Madre* did in fact call the street home, the majority of them described themselves as having a *pieza*, and thus did not “live or sleep on the street.”

I begin the chapter by examining some of the political, social, and economic ways by which the spaces of the street and the house have been defined. I continue by offering an ethnographic analysis about how, despite their efforts to house themselves, the patrons of the *comedor* were often constructed in relation to the spaces, practices, and materiality of the “street.” I offer a historical examination of houses in Bogotá and highlight the built environment as critical for understanding the history of labor, migration, and living practices of the urban poor of the capital. I conclude the chapter by narrating my visits to the *piezitas* of the older patrons of the *comedor*. While some of these *piezitas* were indeed vulnerable spaces that did not always offer protection from the street, I show how they also provided a kind of social safety and stability, even amidst unsafe conditions.

Houses, Streets and the Spaces in Between

Having a *piezita* in which to live was not a trivial circumstance. If an individual had a *piezita*, that person (or perhaps a member of that individual’s family) needed to pay monthly rent for that living space. Such a payment communicated that the individual had the resources to pay for the rent, or that they had significant social relationships that made paying rent possible. In order to have a *piezita*, a person would also have to pay for *servicios*, that is, for water and electricity (though these utilities were sometimes included in the rent). Having a *piezita* also assumed that one had possessions, and thus, a place to store those possessions. Even the possibility of being able to wash ones clothes at home communicated that an individuals’ home had a wash basin (and thus, that the person

didn't have to take their clothing to the communal wash basins located near *Centro Comunitario de Lourdes*), that an individual could still physically manage to wash his or her own clothes, or that the person had strong social relationships that made washing one's clothes possible. Most importantly, however, having a *piezita* meant that an individual did not live or sleep on the street, and that he or she had a space of protection or home that was their own. In this sense, the *piezita* was indeed like "like a second layer of skin, carapace or second layer of clothes, it [served] as much to reveal and display as it [did] to hide and protect (Carsten and Hugh Jones 1995: 2).

However, the term *habitante de calle*, which I translate here as "an inhabitant of the street," presumes that an individual does not have any of the above. According to Colombia's Ministry of Social Integration (*Secretaría de Integración Social*), an *habitante de calle* is defined as someone who does not reside in a house, apartment, or *pieza* for at least thirty consecutive days, and in fact, sleeps and lives on the streets (*El Tiempo*, February 22, 2009). The term *habitante de calle* is a more recent term that has been employed in popular discourse (e.g. publications, news media, NGOs) as well as by the local state, as a more "neutral" word to replace pejorative identifiers that were often used, such as *desechable*, *indigente*, and *mendigo*.¹⁷⁸ The 2007 census taken by the Ministry of Social Integration identified 8,385 *Bogotanos* as *habitantes de calle*.¹⁷⁹ Of these individuals, 1,098 were women, 704 were under 18 years of age, and 2,683 were

¹⁷⁸ Recall that I discuss the term *desechable* in chapter six, and describe the meaning of *mendigo* in chapter two.

¹⁷⁹ This number had increased significantly since the city first started counting. In 1997, the first census of this sort revealed that 4,515 persons lived on the streets of Bogotá. In 1999, 7,793 people were counted as *habitantes de calle*, and in 2001 that number increased to 11,832, and then decreased to 10,077 in 2004. (*El Tiempo*, August 28, 2008).

considered older adults. Thus, according to these statistics, one third of those categorized as *habitantes de calle* were older adults.

While many of the patrons with whom I spoke did live in a *piezita*, as I showed in chapter six, older adults who live in and around *Comedor María es Mi Madre* did indeed rely on the spaces outside of their *piezitas* and social relations aside from relatives for their daily sustenance (cf. Myerhoff 1978). In many circumstances, elders and poor *Bogotanos* labored in the street, such as in the case of recyclers and other “informal” workers. For example, Señora Ricarda transported her kitchen into the same street corner every day for forty-eight years in order to make and sell her “home-made” snacks. For Señora Ricarda, the “street” offered her a space to make her living and nourish her family.

In a publication by Bogotá’s Chamber of Commerce, the authors make a distinction between persons who they demarcate as being *de la calle* and those who, like Señora Ricarda, strategically find their sustenance in the street through the sale of foods or other products. The publication states that individuals such as informal vendors and some recyclers generate their income by working in some of the most transited streets in the capital, but like “sectors from other socioeconomic groups, return to their homes to spend the night” (Cámara de Comercio de Bogotá 2007: 16). Persons who are *de la calle*, or of the street, the authors argue, also find their nourishment on the street through begging or finding food in the trash, but live their lives (and spend their nights) in the street as well.

Tobias Hecht (1998) makes similar distinctions between children in cities in Northeastern Brazil who live in the street, and those who use the street to support their

households. The author argues that children who assist in caring for their families by selling (both legal and illegal) goods on the street often construct “home” on the basis of their relationships to their mothers or mother figures. He continues by telling the reader that the home and the street are not attached to material spaces, but instead are connected to a child’s kinship relations and their expectations of and obligations to those relationships. Moreover, the author tells the reader that institutions have employed the prepositions “in” and “of” the street to define two types of relationships that children have with the street. Children “in” the street use the street “as a venue for their actions,” but according to Hecht, it is not the “essence of their character” (103). Whereas the preposition “of” is used to describe children who also spend much of their time on the street, use the street as a way as means to find sustenance, but also sleep on the street.

Though Hecht acknowledges that such distinctions are fuzzy at best, his descriptions are significant for the older patrons of the dining house given that the majority of the patrons I came to know at the *comedor* were informal vendors and recyclers and lived in *piezitas*. Though most lived in places they would describe as a “home,” they were often constructed as *de la calle*, or of the street, in part because they made their living in the streets of the capital or spent their time in and around the street finding sustenance. The majority of persons inside the *comedor* spent a large amount of time on the street selling their wares and waiting in line, but also used the space in other ways, for example, for finding food, or other necessities. It is important to note that many *Bogotanos* relied on the “street” for particular things, as the street offered quick and inexpensive meals, basic household necessities, and even the possibility of purchasing airtime on vendors’ cellular phones.

Like any geography, Bogotá's streets are socially and politically contested sites where complex social relationships, histories and personhoods are created and denied (Basso 1996; Rosenthal 2000). In an article about the making of public space in Bogotá, political scientist Stacey Hunt (2003) tells us that "public space became central to the exercise of participatory politics and the state explicitly recognized 'the necessity of offering spaces of co-existence and the democratic exercise of citizenship'" (Hunt 2009: 333 [citing a 2005 decree in Bogotá's Master Plan for Public Space]). Such participatory politics were central facets of the 1991 Constitution, and in fact two articles in the new constitution, twenty-three rulings by the Constitutional Court, and seven national laws were created to define and protect public space in Colombia.

Through this "democratization" of public space, informal laborers were forced to leave their work sites so that the street could be "recuperated" for Bogotá's citizens. Bogotá's street life has indeed been transformed in the last few years with the construction of many pedestrian parks and spaces of recreation, Sunday and holiday *ciclovía*,¹⁸⁰ street theater festivals, and even the closing of high traffic boulevards on Friday evenings for pedestrians. Yet, as Hunt asserts, the aim to "guarantee citizens' rights to walk in the street," which has been described as "dignified, natural, orderly, regulated, and democratic" has simultaneously eliminated the mobility of informal vendors, whose work has been depicted as threatening, illegal, and undemocratic (334).

Such distinctions between the kinds of access to public spaces offered certain individuals the rights of citizenship, while denying these rights to others, thus creating a

¹⁸⁰ On Sundays and holidays, many streets in Bogotá are closed to traffic between 7 am and 2pm for *ciclovía*. Bicyclists and pedestrians are given the opportunity to ride, run, or walk through the streets. Additionally, aerobics and other fitness classes are held at parks throughout the city. According to an article in the New York Times (June 24, 2008), the Sunday *ciclovía* in Bogotá is used by two million people, or thirty percent of the residents.

binary notion of citizenship. The author concludes by exploring the ways the street is also discussed in moral terms, suggesting that the State plays a critical role in promoting a “fear of contamination” (335) of the street by informal workers.

As I will note later in the chapter, not all houses have historically been viewed as moral or even safe spaces. While houses are often described as spaces of intimacy and family where kinship is made and broken (Carsten 1997; 2000), the history of the making of Bogotá, and some of the present day realities of older adults, show us how houses, like streets, are also often spaces of vulnerability, conflict, aging, illness and loneliness. In the section that follows, I show how the patrons of the dining house are often constructed by their “streetness,” despite their many efforts to house themselves in *piezitas*.

El Niño de la Calle/The Christ Child of the Street

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. Luke 2: 1-7 (New International Version: 2011).

According to the biblical verses from the Gospel of Luke, Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem shortly before the birth of Jesus. Luke’s gospel tells us that Caesar Augustus, emperor of the Roman Empire, had issued a decree requiring inhabitants of the Roman world to be counted in a census. As the narrative goes, because of the increased number of travelers in Bethlehem due to the movement of people on account of the census, Mary and Joseph were unable to find housing during their travels, and thus, Mary was forced to give birth to her son in a manger surrounded by barn animals.

During the Christmas season, most Catholic Latin American homes are not complete without a *nacimiento*, that is, a nativity scene that hosts representations of Mary and Joseph in a *pesebre* or manger surrounded by animals and awaiting the birth of their son, Jesus. Close to midnight on December 24th, the figure of an infant Jesus is placed inside the stable, cradled atop a small pillow or bed that is sometimes layered with hay. Later, on January 6th, the three *Magos Reyes*, or wise men, carrying gold, frankincense, and myrrh, are placed inside the stable. The presentation of a crèche inside one's home reminds believers of Jesus' humble beginnings, as well as the narrative of housing and homelessness that is connected to Jesus' birth.

In México and among the Mexican diaspora, this story of travel, homelessness, and the birth of Jesus, takes on the form of a performative tradition called *las Posadas*. Beginning nine days before Christmas (on December 16), children dressed as Joseph and an expectant Mary (who are sometimes accompanied by angels and shepherds) and go from house to house through a neighborhood asking for *posada*, or lodging for the night. Their request is performed in the form of a song as they knock upon the doors of these houses, which in this reenactment represent inns or places where Mary and Joseph may have looked for lodging in Bethlehem. The residents of the houses, which stand for the innkeepers, do not open their doors and instead sing their response to the pilgrims, or *peregrinos*, rejecting Mary and Joseph's plea for shelter. Finally, the pilgrims arrive to a designated house and again sing their request for lodging. The door of the house opens and the pilgrims are welcomed into the home with food, song, and a *piñata* filled with candy and peanuts.

In Colombia, the Christmas season begins on December 7, on the eve of the Catholic Feast of the Immaculate Conception, which commemorates the day the Virgin Mary herself was conceived in the womb of her mother, Saint Anne. That evening, known as the *Noche de velitas*, or the “Night of the little candles,” Colombians light numerous candles in front of their homes, on the streets, and on the front steps of their apartments. Some of these multicolored candles are positioned so that they might illuminate a path leading toward the front entrance of the home, though many are placed in a haphazard fashion around the house by both children and adults. Some believe that these candles are supposed to guide the Virgin Mary into one’s home so that she may offer blessings.¹⁸¹

On this particular night, Bogotá is brightened by thousands and thousands of candles that adorn even the busiest streets, and the night sky is splashed with the colors of pyrotechnics and small hand held fireworks. Most museums are open free of charge, and the city’s well-worn boulevards are filled with bicyclists taking advantage of the *Ciclovía Nocturna*, or public bicycle paths. Public concerts by famous Colombian musicians are held at the Simón Bolívar Park as well as the historic *Plaza de Bolívar*. The following morning, the remnants of melted wax are still visible throughout the city streets.

In December 2006, every inch of the *comedor* was covered in bright lights, garlands, ribbons, and ornaments. A large Christmas tree stood in a corner near the counter that divided the dining area from the kitchen, framing the counter and kitchen with blinking lights and multi-colored foil decorations. Each of these decorations,

¹⁸¹ On the *Noche de las velitas* in 2006, I lit candles with a friend and her children and placed these along the interior steps of her apartment. Though the candles weren’t visible from the outside of the apartment, they nonetheless illuminated the interior steps that led to her apartment door. The lighting of candles also has other connotations, however. While watching the evening news that same night, the newscaster told that audience that lighting a candle played a symbolic role in ending “indifference” and violence.

including the tree, had been acquired from the *Banco de Alimento*. Many of the Christmas themed decorations had been donated to the *banco* earlier that year, and had been stored awaiting to be included in the *mercados* of the affiliated social service organizations during the Christmas season. It is interesting to note that the *Banco de Alimentos* not only provided food, but also played a role in “housing” places like the *comedor* by including household furnishings in the *mercados*.

As Hermano Miguel and I stood in the dining courtyard organizing some of the decorations, he told me that the only Christmas decoration that was missing inside the *comedor* was a nativity scene. “I have the *niño*, but I don’t want it to be like all of the other *niños* that one sees. I want him to be black. I don’t want to put Mary or Joseph, just the *niño*,” Hermano Miguel told me.

“Yes, the *niños* are always blonde and white,” I said to him in agreement, assuming that he wanted the Jesus figure in the nativity scene to be phenotypically different from the usual images of Jesus as having sandy blond hair, porcelain skin, and caramel colored eyes.

“No,” he responded. “I want him to be black, but black from dirt. We have to *mugrearlo* so that everyone can see him! Once we finish with this decoration, you can help me dirty him up,” he said enthusiastically. Hermano Miguel quickly walked to the front of the *comedor* and pinned a black ribbon to what seemed to be the only undecorated spot in the entire house.

“This was the last undecorated piece. Come on, Xochitl.” Hermano Miguel led me inside the residential portion of the dining house and handed me a large porcelain image of a baby Jesus. This particular image was about a foot long and had brown hair,

fair skin, and light brown eyes. It was phenotypically similar to the many images of Jesus I have seen in books, prayer cards, and displayed inside churches as well as inside my own parents' home during the Christmas season. After telling Hermano José Fernando about his plans to *mugrearlo*, or to “dirty up” the baby Jesus, Hermano José Fernando and I began the task of “blackening” the porcelain colored Jesus.

Hermano Miguel first grabbed a pencil and began to shave off the lead with a pocket knife. As the shavings fell on to the face of the porcelain image, Hermano Miguel instructed me to rub the lead into the rosy cheeks of the baby Jesus, which resulted in grey smudges. When it became clear that “dirtying up” the Jesus figure in such a way would take an incredibly long time, Hermano José Fernando began to mix wet dirt from a nearby potted plant into a white, glazed clay bowl. He then dipped his fingers into the mud and allowed the muddy water to drip on to the Jesus figure and then began to rub the charcoal colored liquid into the little knees and elbows of the baby Jesus. I too took turns rubbing the liquidy mud on the legs, stomach and face of the Jesus image. Once the baby Jesus looked dirty enough, Hermano José Fernando and I took it out to the dining area where Hermano Miguel was busily building a stable for the infant in the area where a four foot high statue of the Virgin Mary usually stood.

This “stable” consisted of a stool that Hermano Miguel had covered with various pieces of cloth, as well as a patchwork blanket. These were laid across the stool in different directions to create a resting space for the infant Jesus. Hermano Miguel's placement of the Jesus inside a manger was not dissimilar to how Catholics in Colombia (or Latin America) might exhibit a *pesebre*, or nativity scene inside their house on Christmas Eve. However, there were critical distinctions between the nativity scene

Hermano Miguel had created for the celebration of Christmas inside the *comedor*, and those that commonly appeared inside Catholic homes and churches.

“We need things of the street,” Hermano Miguel told Señor Fernando, a patron of the dining house who spent much of his time sculpting ships from pieces of wood, directing him to the locked pantry where non-perishables acquired from the *Banco de Alimentos* were stored. Hermano Miguel and Señor Fernando entered the pantry and emerged moments later carrying an empty *costal*, a pile of old newspapers, and an aged woven basket. Hermano Miguel handed everything but the basket to Señor Fernando.

“Go ahead and start putting the newspaper inside the *costal*,” he instructed us as he carefully positioned the infant Jesus on to the bed he had prepared with the various pieces of cloth. Señor Fernando and I began to crumble up newspaper and placed these inside the *costal* until it was overflowing. Hermano Miguel then asked us to continue to look for things that might represent the “street,” such as empty soda bottles, and blankets. Some of these objects were positioned inside the woven basket and placed next to the porcelain image of Jesus, while others found homes in the spaces surrounding the infant’s bed. Hermano Miguel then hung multi-colored Christmas lights around the nativity scene, illuminating the infant Jesus. When everything looked to be in place, Hermano Miguel positioned the *costal* to the right of the baby Jesus, looking quite pleased with the nativity scene we had just built.

“This is the *Niño de la Calle*,” he exclaimed, clearly satisfied with his creation. “Why don’t we put up a sign?” he added as he gave me a large piece of brown paper and a thick permanent marker. I sat down with the marker in hand and wrote a saying

Hermano Miguel had suggested: *He venido a traer la buena nueva a los pobres*, or “I have come to bring glad tidings to the poor.”¹⁸²



Figure 13: Images of the *Niño de la Calle*, taken December 12, 2006 by the author.

As I taped the sign on the wall to the left of the infant Jesus, I noticed that a group of women who had donated the ingredients for the patrons’ lunch meal that day (and who had previously donated money, as well as the large statue of the Virgin Mary that usually stood near the entrance to the interior residence) were honored lunch guest, and were seated in front of the nativity scene. The patrons of the dining house were also already seated at their tables. Though the women were seated no more than two feet away from the nativity scene, they didn’t initially recognize it as such. One of the women focused her gaze on the *nacimiento* and after some time, asked the other women in disbelief, “Is this the *nacimiento*?” She quickly pulled out her phone and began to take photographs of the nativity scene that had been invisible to her only moments prior.

¹⁸² While I have translated *buena nueva* as “glad tidings,” according to the *Real Academia Española*, this expression may also be a synonym for *el evangelio*, or “the gospel.” In this sense, the statement *He venido a traer la buena nueva a los pobres* may also be translated as “I have come to bring the gospel to the poor.”

When I asked Hermano Miguel why he had created such a nativity scene and named the infant Jesus the *Niño de la Calle* he replied by telling me: “This nativity scene is the reality. We are very fortunate to have seen God, to have seen God in the faces of the humble.”

Before I further discuss the implications of such a nativity scene, it is important to understand the history of Catholic devotion to the infant Jesus in Colombia, and the relationship between such religious images and the poor. The word *niño*, which may be translated as “boy” or “children,” is a common identifier for the image of the infant Jesus or Christ child in Spanish. There are many well-known *niños* throughout the world, each with a local origin story that narrates their often miraculous incarnations as well as the miracles that have been granted to believers. Some of the most prominent *niños* are the *Santo Niño de Atocha* in Fresnillo, a city in the northern Mexican state of Zacatecas, the *Divino Niño* in Bogotá, and the *Niño de Praga* in Prague, Czech Republic. Each of these representations of the infant Jesus are prominently displayed in churches built in their honor, and pilgrims travel hundreds, and sometimes thousands of miles to pray in the presence of these *niños*, as well as to ask for assistance or miracles.¹⁸³ Devotees most often have porcelain versions of these *niños* in their homes, and recite prayers specifically for a particular *niño* from dedicated prayer books and cards. The *niños* are usually dressed in tiny clothes specifically tailored for the infant Jesus. Some of these outfits are

¹⁸³ Pilgrims visit the Sanctuary of the *Divino Niño* in Bogotá from all over the world. During a visit to the church in September 2006, I encountered a group of Ecuadorians who had travelled to Bogotá by bus on a pilgrimage to visit the *Divino Niño*. Many of them had saved for many years to make the trip to Bogotá, and several also made sizeable donations to the church. Once they left their donation, they could also leave a petition for the *Divino Niño*, though it wasn’t necessary to leave a donation to request that a petition be fulfilled. Additionally, it is important to note that there are two relatively large sanctuaries devoted to the *Divino Niño* in Quito, Ecuador.

made out of velvety fabrics to reflect the importance or “royal” status of the Christ child.¹⁸⁴

The image of the *Divino Niño*, or “Divine Child,” is central to the belief system of most Catholics in Colombia, and has a large devotional following throughout Latin America and beyond.¹⁸⁵ In Colombia, one can find images, prayer cards and books dedicated to the *Divino Niño* inside churches, religious libraries, and inside most Catholic homes. Some of the prayer books not only offer prayers specifically dedicated to the *Divino Niño*, but also attest to the many miracles that devotees have experienced through the intercession of the Christ child. According to a prayer book written by Eliécer Salesman called *Nueve domingos y novena bíblica al Divino Niño Jesús* (“Nine Sundays and a biblical *novena* for the *Divino Niño Jesús*”),¹⁸⁶ religious devotion to the *Divino Niño* has its origins in the work and beliefs of Juan Del Rizzo, an Italian priest of the Salesian order. In 1914, Father Juan, as he was known, was living in the coastal city of Barranquilla, Colombia and had been asked by his superior to collect *limosna*, or alms, from local residents to build a church in the neighborhood of San Roque. However, because the inhabitants of San Roque were very poor, Father Juan could not bring himself to ask them for contributions.

¹⁸⁴ When I visited the *Niño Jesús de Praga* in 2005, I had the opportunity to speak to the caretaker of the church who showed me the various clothes that devotees to the Christ child had sent from all over the world. In addition to clothes, the faithful had also written letters describing their faith in and dedication to Prague’s Christ child, as well as stories about the miracles they had been granted by the *Niño Jesús de Praga*.

¹⁸⁵ In 2003, during a pre-dissertation fieldwork trip to Bogotá, my Mexican relatives in Los Angeles requested that I take three hundred of Eliécer Salesman’s devotional prayer books dedicated to the *Divino Niño* back to Los Angeles. My uncle, who was in the last stages of liver cancer at the time, had become very dedicated to the *Divino Niño* through the course of his illness. His aim was to gift these books to family members and friends in Los Angeles so that they too might become devotional followers and become aware of the many miracles the *Divino Niño* had granted believers.

¹⁸⁶ While the prayer book does offer an origin history of the *Divino Niño*, this history is interspersed with various prayers as well as stories about the miracles the Christ child has granted believers.

The day following Father Juan's failed attempt at collecting donations, his superior again asked him to gather money from the residents to fund the building of the church. Father Juan decided to seek guidance by praying to an image of *María Auxiliadora*, or Our Lady Help of Christians. Seeing the smiling image of the Christ child in the arms of the Virgin Mary, Father Juan Rizzo decided he would pray to the infant Jesus and ask for his help in completing his task. Upon entrusting his mission to Jesus in the form of a prayer, Father Rizzo began to feel the strength that would guide him in completing his mission, and that very day he was able to collect a significant amount of money for the building of the church in San Roque.

In 1935, Father Juan arrived in the neighborhood of 20 de Julio (or 20th of July, named after Colombia's independence day) in Bogotá, which was a very poor and relatively unpopulated *barrio popular* located less than two kilometers south of the present location of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. As a devotee to the Christ child, Father Juan wanted to dedicate a church in the neighborhood to the infant Jesus. However, the priest was unable to use the image of the *Niño Jesús de Praga* because the Carmelite order had exclusive use rights to the image. Because Father Juan believed that devotion to the infant Jesus transcended the plaster cast that represented the child, he sought to acquire another image he might be able to use inside the church.

According to Salesman, Father Juan visited a store called *Vaticano* that sold religious articles in *la Candelaria* and there the priest found an image of the Christ child wearing a pink robe, a golden, ornate halo, and with arms outstretched. The priest was immediately captivated by the image because the Jesus figure was dressed in the clothing typical of the children of Nazareth, and had bare feet "like the poor children of Israel, the

group to which the *Niño Jesús* belonged” (2003: 86). The image was thirty-nine inches tall, and was nailed to a cross. Father Juan asked the shop owner to remove the image from the cross and add the words *Yo reinaré* (“I shall reign”) at the base of the statue.¹⁸⁷ According to the author, the image Father Juan purchased was made in Barcelona, Spain in 1897.

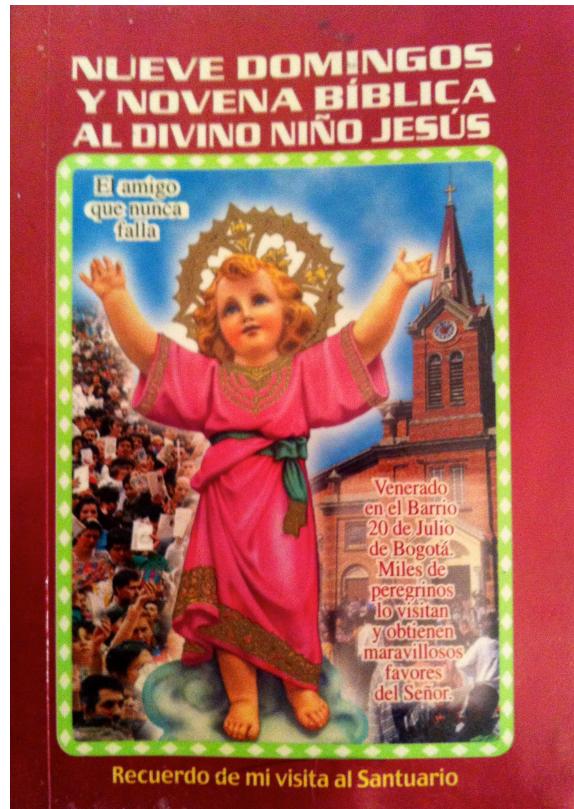


Figure 14: Image of the *Divino Niño* from the cover of Eliécer Salesman’s prayer book (2003).

Father Juan then took the *Niño* back to the neighborhood 20 de Julio and began to tell local residents about the powerful works of the infant Jesus and, shortly thereafter,

¹⁸⁷ In another version of the origin story of the *Divino Niño*, Father Juan had the image especially made so that it would look quite distinct from the *Niño Jesús de Praga*. Father Juan felt that a Christ child adorned with jewels and gold was not an adequate representation for a neighborhood as poor as 20 de Julio (Cabrera Hanna 2007).

the “miracles began to multiply” (Salesman 2003: 87).¹⁸⁸ On December 25, 1937 the cornerstone of the *Templo del Niño Jesús*, or the Church of the Christ Child, was blessed, but the church proved too small to accommodate the many pilgrims that made their way to the church to venerate what became known as the *Divino Niño*. Additionally, the dirt road that led to the site was inadequate for the number of pilgrims that travelled to 20 de Julio to visit the image, and so the local government had to build a new road that reached the previously scantily populated area.

The church was initially a religious site for the poor and the laboring classes, with Father Juan handing out hot chocolate and bread to the poor children of the neighborhood every morning, a custom that according to several people with whom I spoke, continues to this day. A new, larger church known as the *Santuario del Divino Niño* (The Sanctuary of the *Divino Niño*) was completed in 1992 to accommodate the over one-hundred thousand faithful that visit the church every week. According to Salesman and representatives of the church with whom I spoke in 2006, the *Divino Niño* has performed many miracles, and has been especially generous in granting the requests of poor devotees. Additionally, the donations that pilgrims leave at the church have not only been used for the maintenance of the sanctuary, but have funded the building of houses for Bogotá’s poor. In his prayer book, Salesman depicts images of *chozas*, or houses made from plastic and scrap metal, and shows how these have been transformed into *casitas decentes*, or “decent little houses” made from brick and cement (2003: 161).

¹⁸⁸ Father Juan had photographs taken of the image and began to disseminate prayer cards and books with this image of the *Divino Niño* throughout Colombia and beyond. According to Salesman, the initial followers of the *Divino Niño* were the residents of 20 de Julio, and then local *obreros*, or laborers of the area, also became devotees.

I offer this history of Catholic devotion to images of the Christ child throughout the world, as well as a history of the local significance and visibility of the *Divino Niño* in order to socially and historically position Hermano Miguel's version of the nativity scene, which prominently featured a Christ child he called *el Niño de la Calle*. Though I did not ask the patrons whether they had ever visited the Sanctuary of the *Divino Niño*, I'm certain that most, if not all, had and most likely even owned replicas of the image (Señora Ricarda and Señora Berta, for example, had prayer cards dedicated to the *Divino Niño* in their bedroom homes).¹⁸⁹ Therefore, the religious and social significance of images of the Christ child were already well established for the residents of the central neighborhoods of the capital.

Additionally, the history of Father Juan's devotion to the Christ child, his goal to create a sanctuary for the infant Jesus in one of the most marginal and poor neighborhoods of the capital, as well as his aim to include and assist the poor, shows us how the history and traditions surrounding the *Divino Niño* were intimately connected to a narrative of poverty and belonging.

In many ways, the story of the birth and life of Christ also resonates with a narrative of poverty and homelessness, experiences that are significant in the historical recollections of Bogotá's "popular neighborhoods." Recall that, according to Salesman, Father Juan was attracted to a particular image of the Christ child because its bare feet and clothing reminded him of what a poor child in Nazareth might have looked like, as well as the social and economic group to which Jesus would have belonged. Additionally, the Gospel of Luke tells us that for the first few weeks of his life, Jesus was in fact

¹⁸⁹ In fact, every time I have visited the church I have bumped into patrons from *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. Several individuals have also often described their trips to the church, and their devotion to the *Divino Niño*.

“homeless,” having been born in a manger surrounded by animals. The Gospel also describes a range of miracles that Jesus granted persons who were poor, sick, or often cast off from society. These narratives of Jesus’ life and works not only construct Jesus as an individual with humble beginnings who was often socially marginalized, but also positions Jesus as a religious figure that belonged to the poor and marginal.

With these histories in mind, let us return to Hermano Miguel’s presentation of the *Niño de la Calle* inside *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. In his nativity scene, Hermano Miguel was positioning the Christ child – a *Niño* that is sometimes dressed in beautiful clothing and often with flowers – as physically dirty, and surrounded by rags, and what many would perceive to be trash. Hermano Miguel also connected to the Christ child to the street by surrounding him with recyclables and other elements that he viewed to be “of the street.” Through these materials, Hermano Miguel aimed to show another aspect of Jesus’ reality, that is, a Jesus who like those who ate their meals at the *comedor*, was also *de la calle*. For Hermano Miguel, a Jesus that was surrounding by bits and pieces of the street, a Jesus that was smudged with dirt, corresponded to the “reality,” “humility,” and daily experiences of the patrons of the *comedor*. By “dirtying up” the image of the Christ child, and building a nativity scene from elements of the “street,” Hermano Miguel was attempting to create a *niño* that he felt might resonate with the daily struggles and experiences of the residents of the area. Through a nativity scene that was composed of articles of the “street,” such as recyclables and items that some of the patrons of the dining house might carry with them, Hermano Miguel also aimed to communicate that Jesus was a reflection of them and their lives, and did not only belong to those who were

“well-housed.” This was buttressed by the words that framed the Christ child in the nativity scene, “I have come to bring glad tidings to the poor.”

Moreover, through his efforts, Hermano Miguel was creating a Christ child that was exclusively for those who might identify with its “streetness,” and not necessarily for the women who were visiting the *comedor* on the day the crèche was built, and who presumably lived their lives in ways that were quite distinct from the patrons of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. In fact, the women did not initially recognize the nativity scene as such, even though they had been standing in front of it for some time that morning. This lack of recognition of one of the most visible and famous religious images that, in this context, was clothed in the “street,” highlights the continued invisibility of the poor, and those who are often viewed in relation to the dirt and trash of the street.

However, by creating a religious image that might reflect the lives of the patrons of the *comedor*, Hermano Miguel was also highlighting his projection of their “streetness.” In fashioning an image of the Christ child that he felt mirrored their lives and placing the infant Jesus amidst what many would consider the trash of the street, Hermano Miguel was materially and socially constructing the *abuelitos* as “being of the street,” a positionality that many had worked very hard to counter. As I will show in the sections that follow, Señora Berta, Señora Cecilia, Señora Ricarda and even Señora Elvira, always described themselves as having a *pieza*, and regardless of the condition of that *pieza*, would have never constructed themselves as being *de la calle*. As I pointed out toward the beginning of this chapter, each and every one of the *abuelitos* interviewed by the social workers responded with an emphatic “no” when asked if they lived on the street. Yet, in trying to create a nativity scene that might “equalize” or mirror the lives of

the patrons of the dining house, Hermano Miguel was also disregarding their efforts at “housing” themselves, effectively “streeting” them through the his creation of *el Niño de la calle*, an image that was supposed engender belonging.

By constructing the elders as “being of the street,” Hermano Miguel was also placing them outside of the thresholds that marked physical and social boundaries among houses, *piezitas*, and streets. But what are these thresholds? How might they look and what might they symbolize? In the following section I focus on the making and symbolic representations of boundaries to consider the ways thresholds not only play a role in connecting persons and social worlds, but also mark distinctions and hierarchies.

Doors, Doorknobs, and Thresholds

On a rainy August afternoon in 2008 I walked into *Comedor María es Mi Madre* after the last lunch meal had been served. The usual sounds of food and eating were absent. All the dishes and pots had been cleared and washed, the crumbs had been mopped from the red-clay tile floor, and the plastic dining tables and chairs were all stacked up against a wall. Several women in their sixties and seventies, all of whom ate their meals and spent most of their days in and around the dining house, were busily painting what looked to be rectangular pieces of cardboard. The women, along with an instructor, were in the middle of their *terapia* or occupational therapy class, and were seated around three plastic lunch tables that had been pushed together to make a long, makeshift desk.

I stood inside the wooden doorway that separated the dining area from the living quarters of the house and, for several minutes, watched the women as they diligently decorated the pieces of cardboard with tempera paint and flowers. Pens, scissors, paint,

and brushes were scattered throughout the table, replacing the usual noontime colors and sounds of vegetables, soup, spoons and rice. From my vantage point, I could see María Elvira carefully putting the finishing touches on her work, exercising her arms, hands, and fingers in the process.

This particular *terapia*, involved cutting flower petals from thin, pink and purple sheets of rubber and gluing them on to the painted pieces of cardboard. As I mentioned in chapter three, in recent years, the *Alcaldía Mayor of Bogotá* (the office of the Mayor of Bogotá) as well as other agencies, had launched a variety of social programs for the elderly, including adult literacy workshops, arts and crafts, and fitness classes. Most of these *terapias* took place in and around community centers, churches, social services organizations, and places like *Comedor María es Madre*. These “therapies” were promoted as being key to the well-being of the elderly who, in their view, lacked appropriate kinship relations due in part to the fact that most older adults in this area lived in small *piezitas*, independent of family members who might otherwise provide a structure of care in their advanced age.

Through the course of my time in Bogotá, I spent many hours participating in these therapy classes assisting in the making of decorative crafts at the *comedor*, but also at local church rooms, houses, and community centers throughout the neighborhood. It seemed that churches, houses, outdoor spaces and *comedores* were instantly transformed into unexpected places such as instructional activity centers where women (and some men) embroidered tablecloths, assembled Christmas ornaments, made Colombian flags from yellow, red and blue cloth on patriotic holidays, and molded *plastilina* or clay-dough into figurines. Instructors would often arrive at these sites with boxes and bags of

cloth, glitter, glue, scissors and other implements, along with a snack of bananas, cookies, milk or juice. While items such as the blue tablecloths had been embroidered with the expressed purpose of adorning the white, plastic tables inside *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, the participants often left these meetings with their artwork in hand. Often, these crafts, most of which were decorations for one's house, were given away as gifts, or as I observed during my visit to people's homes, became wall decorations in their bedrooms, decoratively placed alongside religious images, rosaries, medical appointment reminders, and family photographs.

"This is for you, Xochitl," María Elvira announced as she got up from her chair and handed me her freshly painted artwork. There was a hole the size of a small plum toward the top of the orange painted rectangular piece of cardboard, and she had glued tiny rubber flowers along the round cut out circle. Toward the bottom she had written an inscription that read: To Xochitl, From María Elvira. I was struck by the kindness of her gesture and the care involved in the making of the gift, but I was unsure as to the potential use for the decorated piece of cardboard. Upon careful inspection of the cardboard piece in my hand, I realized that the women had spent their afternoon making hanging doorknob adornments.

I was intrigued that the women of the neighborhood were being instructed on how to make decorations for something as seemingly ubiquitous as a doorknob. While doorknobs are a simple technology that may offer entrance into houses, passage into rooms, and privacy, doorknobs also signaled to particular kinds of domestic kinship relations, socio-economic positionalities, house spaces, and architectural and historical building styles that were quite distinct from local architecture, family relations, and the

daily lives of the patrons I came to know in and around *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. While most women and men who were making these decorations lived alone in small bedroom homes (some of which lacked traditional doors and doorknobs), the doorknob decorations pointed to an expectation of home and kinship that positioned domestic social relations, such as eating, as embedded in family and lived in relation to the spaces of one's house.

In Bogotá, the great houses of the city (including Churches [the Houses of God]) have historically been protected and framed by huge and heavy wooden doors that symbolized the importance of the house itself, as well as the social significance of the people and things housed inside them. Most of the doors of colonial and early Republican era buildings were thick and heavy, wrapped in leather, and connected to high clay or wooden walls that most often had prickly tops to prevent the intrusion of unwanted persons and pests. These doors, walls, as well as the long, narrow windows that were reinforced by intricate wrought iron, marked boundaries and differentiated between different kinds of spaces, providing refuge and protection for the persons and things within. These doors, and the locking mechanisms that functioned to make them impenetrable, were meant to keep in certain people, while simultaneously kept others out through selective use. In Bogotá, the perpetual fall cold meant that most of these doors and windows would have been closed, protecting those inside from the elements. Such closed doors and windows have also contributed to the perception of the capital as having a “chilly” disposition.

Castro Carvajal (2007) tells us that in the latter part of the 19th century, the central plaza (in the case of Bogotá, this would be the *Plaza de Bolívar*) was the orienting point

of the city, and that the residences of the rich as well as most urban commerce and activities were concentrated around the plaza. This urban area extended about five to ten blocks from the central plaza, and was made up of well-constructed houses and paved streets. The author adds that, “In these small urban centers, the houses of families, especially those that were the most well-off, were protected from the city and the interior patio, typical of Hispanic architecture, was prevalent” (48). Protection, according to Castro Carvajal, was directly connected to the ability to protect oneself from the street – a protection that was inextricably tied to wealth and social positioning.

Walls and doors, however, not only defined and signaled to who (or what) resided inside the house, but also played a role in creating and shaping local “streets.” In the center of Bogotá, many houses were built so closely together and often shared a boundary, that their respective doors and the different colors of their facades were the key architectural features that differentiated these houses. Through the course of time, however, many of these houses have been transformed into other kinds of places that host diverse activities for residents of the neighborhood. As I have shown throughout the dissertation, some of these buildings are now dining areas attached to local churches, like the *salón*, or room adjacent to *Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de Belén* where patrons received hot chocolate and bread on Wednesday afternoons. Some houses, like the one that housed an organization for Korean War veterans about two blocks south on *carrera 4*, had been transformed multiple times, having first served as a home, then a jail, then a school, and now, an association for aging veterans of a foreign war.

During my time in Bogotá, I often did not know which of these doors would open up to offer those waiting nearby a hot cup of coffee or chocolate, a piece of bread, or

even a hard boiled egg. I usually sensed that a certain door might open when I noticed a line of *abuelitos* waiting outside what looked to be an innocuous and unmarked façade. When the doors of the structure opened, however, they offered a glimpse into the world beyond the walls, where in many cases, lived religious sisters who cared for elderly individuals or orphaned children.

As architects Anette Hochberg, Jan-Henrik Hafke, and Joachim Raab tell us, thresholds, “announce the character of the place they provide access to or which they are the public face of” (2010: 12). In his book, *The Rites of Passage* (1909 [1960]), Arnold Van Gennep views doors and windows as liminal thresholds that position people between two worlds, realms, or modes of being. According to Van Gennep this threshold marks a place of transition, telling the reader that, “...the door is the boundary between foreign and domestic worlds in the case of an ordinary dwelling, between the profane and the sacred worlds in the case of a temple. To cross a threshold is to unite oneself with a new world” (20). Alaina Lemon (2000), however, argues that the crossing of a threshold such as a door is a “moment far from the liminal or the inchoate; often precisely such moments demand the most strict declarations of identity. At some thresholds – doorways just as state borders – identity must be verified, whether engraved in a passport, on the face, or in bodily demeanor. All is not in flux – there are recognized ways to cross” (205). Lemon’s analysis is critical for understanding the power of thresholds, as she brings to the fore the ways thresholds often reinforce and make visible social hierarchies. Rather than only thinking of the ways thresholds may connect persons and offer entry into different social worlds, we might consider the ways these boundaries also create divisions and mark distinctions between and among persons.

As I will show, historically for Bogotá's poor, doors and thresholds were sometimes unpredictable, often inaccessible, and frequently, physically non-existent. The making of a doorknob decoration assumed that the individual making these decorations would have a door or a house in which to place it. Thus, the crafting of this decorative piece was also the crafting of an expectation of living that was not present in the daily relations of the elders of the *comedor*. In the next section, I focus on the history of houses in Bogotá, right down to the very materials from which they were made. Through this history, I show how the materiality of doorknobs, doors, and windows played a critical role in the living practices and social relations of the urban poor.

Piezitas as Houses, Piezitas as History

Many of the houses in the blocks surrounding *Comedor María es Mi Madre* were once home to historical figures, such as the colonial home of Manuelita Sáenz (the mistress of Simón Bolívar, the “liberator” of northern South America) or the *Palacio de San Carlos*, where Simón Bolívar evaded an assassination attempt by climbing out of a window and subsequently leaving the capital. While these houses, and the historically important stories they continue to animate, have been repainted and renovated with a 21st century brush in an attempt to “recover” Bogotá's historic center, other nearby houses tell a different kind of story – a story of labor, colonialism, migration, violence, poverty, and kinship relations.

Throughout my time in the capital, I had the opportunity to visit several of the bedroom homes of elderly female patrons of the *comedor*. The *piezitas* I visited were small, usually measuring approximately nine by twelve feet. Some of these rooms formed part of large multi-room houses at various stages of deterioration and age. Bedrooms

inside older style homes were usually built around a central courtyard that had been transformed into a communal living space that sometimes housed a bathroom, and a small kitchen (usually represented by a stove and a sink with a wash basin) where residents were able to cook meals and wash clothing. In these kitchens, residents of the individual bedroom homes stored portable stoves, dishes, but kept food and other valuables locked away in their own *piezitas*. The doors that led into these bedrooms were not usually accessible by doorknobs, but instead by large padlocks that protected both the inhabitant and his or her possessions from the outside world.

Many of these structures, locally known as *inquilinos* (or tenement/rooming houses), reflected century-old architecture and ornamentation, and were built from thick adobe walls, decorated with clay and wooden windowsills, and rod-iron window coverings. Others were relatively new dwellings, constructed from cement, bricks, or cinder blocks. Some of these newer houses mimicked the multi-room architecture of older homes, whereas others consisted of several freestanding bedrooms, bathrooms, and a common area inside a walled property, as well as a larger house where the owner of the property usually resided. Though the ages of these houses ranged from the middle of the 19th century to the present, their multi-bedroom architecture served to offer inexpensive house-like, bedroom-sized housing to local residents for approximately 50,000 – 80,000 *pesos* per month (about twenty-five to forty USD in 2007).

In these *barrios* of central Bogotá, which include the neighborhoods of Las Cruces, Belén, Santa Bárbara, Lourdes, and Girardot, windows, walls, nails, tiles, and bricks animate and signal to an economic, colonial, and migratory history that in 2008, continued to shape the contours of house spaces and the lives and relations of those

housed within these spaces. During the colonial period, inhabitants of the city used local clay deposits that came from expansive sediments located in the foothills of the Andes in the center of the city to build structures such as houses and churches. With this clay (as well as with local lime deposits), many of the first buildings of the colony were crafted using traditional adobe techniques. During the 19th century, shortly after independence, most of Bogotá's elite lived within ten blocks of the central plaza (*Plaza de Bolívar*), where commerce, churches, and schools were also located¹⁹⁰ (Castro Carvajal: 2007).

The commercialization of local clay in the 19th century stimulated the growth of brick and tile factories, such as the *Fábrica de Loza* (Tile Factory), which opened in Las Cruces in 1832 (Beltrán 2002: 109). The production and commercialization of such goods in the capital not only assisted in meeting local demands (as well as the demands of neighboring departments), but also staved off competition from goods imported into the capital. However, in the latter part of the 19th century, accessibility to new techniques and industrialized products such as nails, tools, toilets, kitchen implements, and wrought iron for windows and balconies (and later, the introduction of cement), made building at a larger scale possible and less time consuming, as products which in the past needed to be laboriously constructed by local artisans became more widely available in manufactured form.¹⁹¹ The commercialization of such items and the local commercialization of brick and tile (with at least twenty-two companies selling wood for building purposes, and two factories commercializing tiles in the neighborhood by 1890) was critical in that such resources would be able to meet the needs of the ever-expanding city. Given that these

¹⁹⁰ Bogotá was already an indigenous (Chibcha) urban center prior to colonization (See Dueñas 1997: 35).

¹⁹¹ It is important to note that the importation of inexpensive goods as well as cement created unemployment for local artisans, which in turn contributed to an increase of poverty in the neighborhood.

materials for construction came predominantly from sectors in Las Cruces, as well as from the earth of surrounding areas, these central neighborhoods were the primary purveyors of products for the city until the beginning of the 20th century. The brick and tile companies that found their home in Las Cruces became some of the most successful in the country (Beltrán 2002: 102).

With the accessibility to commercial and raw materials at reasonable prices, many new houses and other structures were built in Bogotá's central neighborhoods in the middle of the 19th century during the transition from Spanish colonial rule to an independent republic. These original "Republican" homes were spacious with as many as ten independent bedrooms surrounding an inner courtyard (a design that was prominent approximately between 1830-1935). Many of these homes, especially those between *carrera* 6 and 10, were initially designed as residences for patrician families or professionals, such as doctors, lawyers, and dentists (Zuloaga Lozada 2002: 38).

Homes further east and closer to the extraction site of raw materials such as clay and lime, were more modest, and their inhabitants were primarily laborers of local factories and other working class individuals. The eastern tip of Las Cruces, nestled alongside the clay extraction sites at the foot of the Andes, became home to laborers, artisans, and proprietors of the local brick, clay, and tile factories, many of whom had migrated to the city in search of employment in the new factories. Later, during periods of violence in the 19th and 20th centuries, the factories, and the jobs they anchored, attracted mostly poor immigrants from the neighboring departments of Boyacá and Cundinamarca.

The movement of workers to these neighborhoods (spurred in part by the inauguration of the *tranvía*, or streetcar) in turn increased the need for housing, resulting in the building of houses specifically for these new migrants and travelers. Some historians have thus suggested that the capital of the burgeoning Colombian republic was built from the earth and labor that grew in and out of *Las Cruces* (Beltrán 2002).

In 1865, one writer commented on the changes to the landscape, noting, “Toward the east, all of the lower slopes of the mountains are replete with houses that did not exist during the time of the true Colombia; the route to la Peña¹ has, in the last ten years, literally been covered with houses, humble houses, but houses nonetheless...In 1825, the city reached the *Iglesia de Las Cruces*. Today, you see a multitude of houses dispersed toward all directions of the church, truly forming a new neighborhood. The geological configuration of the foothills made it possible for Bogotá to be seen from afar or from the peaks of the mountains -- a sea of tile roofs, and the floors of these houses elaborated with earthenware tiles made from clay that originated from the earth of these places” (Mejía Pavony 1999: 60).



Figure 15: Photo of houses built on the Andean slopes in Las Cruces (2008). The photograph is of an eastern view of the mountains taken by the author from the perspective of a window inside a house.

While parts of neighborhoods directly south of Bogotá's historic downtown area were home to working professionals at the turn of the 19th century, by 1920, Las Cruces and the surrounding neighborhoods of Belén and Santa Bárbara, were widely known as neighborhoods that belonged to the *clase obrera*, or the poor laboring classes of Bogotá. Through the movement of people and in effort to accommodate migrants seeking economic opportunities in the neighborhood (given the dearth of housing), many of these large houses were transformed into *inquilinos*, or shared tenement-like housing where individual bedrooms, or *piezas*, became small-scale homes where sometimes entire families resided. According to renowned Colombian architect Ortiz Gaitán (2005), some middle-class homeowners divided the first floor areas of houses into *piezas* or *tiendas*,

and added doors that faced toward the street. Such doors effectively disconnected tenants from the rest of the house, leaving them without access to bathrooms and kitchens.

In other cases, residents shared kitchens, bathroom, and living spaces. In 1920, approximately 70% of *piezas* in *inquilinos* lacked running water, electricity, and proper ventilation (Bautista 1932). By the early part of the twentieth century, Las Cruces and its surrounding neighborhoods housed more people than any other part of the city.

According to Carvajal, by 1928, Bogotá had the highest density of population in Colombia, and an average of fourteen people lived inside a house, with many living in rooms that only had doors that led into the street (Castro Carvajal 2007: 49).

Because of the lack of services in these houses, which were sometimes called *tiendas de habitación*, such homes were described as unsanitary and perceived as immoral spaces. In 1893, the then Mayor of Bogotá described such *tiendas* as “permanent sources of infection. The poor live in them, without separation of the sexes, without light, water, ventilation, drains, or latrines. Consequently, public streets replace toilets, which are used unscrupulously and without shame” (Mejía Pavony 1999: 81). While the mayor’s words highlight the difficult living conditions of such tenement living, his words show how poverty and inadequate housing were narratively connected to moral discourses about the body and the person as unhygienic, and possessing of or practicing a questionable morality that transgressed acceptable sexual boundaries and “traditional” family norms.

Three years prior (1890), physician Isaac Arias Argáez wrote about issues of home and hygiene in central Bogotá in his thesis for his medical degree. Argáez focused his study on the living conditions in the neighborhood of Santa Bárbara (which he argued

had the worst living conditions in all of Bogotá), and in another neighborhood closer to the Plaza de Bolívar. He described *tiendas* in these areas as measuring five by four meters in width, and three meters in height, noting, “Once one enters these *tiendas*, one perceives a nauseous odor due to the mixture of dirty clothes, solid and liquid excrement of young men, leftovers of food, and a host of objects used in their profession, as well as the smoke from the hearth; the amalgamation of the odors forms an atmosphere that is overwhelmed with the sour smell of overcrowding. Since the laborer only has that single *pieza*, all of the practices of daily life are carried out within this space: kitchen, dining room, workshop, and bedroom. Useless and battered furniture; a closet covered in rags; shelves full of firewood and bottles full of *mistelas* and *aguardientes*...¹⁹² In another part of the *pieza*, behind a screen made from cloth or paper, one can find one or two dirty beds with insufficient blankets destined for the entire family that dwells there in the most disgusting promiscuity” (Cited in Castro Carvajal 2007: 50).

Though Argáez was seemingly concerned with the living conditions of Bogotá’s poorer inhabitants, in his writing he also viewed family relationships, the physical boundaries of the home (or lack thereof), hygiene, and behaviors (such as “promiscuity”) as “disgusting” and physically dirty, thus positioning the ways poorer families dwelled amidst a moralizing discourse of poverty. For the author, the lack of appropriate social and physical boundaries inside the house led to inappropriate boundaries and interactions among family members, and thus, inadequate and polluted living conditions. The author points out that necessary boundaries between the spaces of “work” and “home” did not exist in the homes of laborers, and thus, the “dirtyness” of the work they performed in

¹⁹² *Mistelas* are alcoholic drinks made from wine, water, sugar, and cinnamon, while *aguardiente* is a liquor made from cane sugar and anise.

their workshops penetrated their family life. Walls and doors that might separate bathrooms, sleeping spaces, kitchens, and living spaces were also non-existent, which allowed the odors of living, food, bodies, and labor to convene into what he calls the “smells of squalor and overcrowding.” For the author, containment in the form of walls and doors was key for living a moral and “hygienic” life in one’s house.

In the early part of the twentieth century, several charity organizations, including the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, aimed to construct better housing for the workers of the area. In 1918, new laws stated that each municipality was required to contribute 2% of local taxes toward the construction of new housing for the laboring classes. By 1922, this amount had increased to 5% (Castro Carvajal 2007: 52). Such laws were not put in place solely to increase the standard of living of Bogotá’s poor, but rather, were aimed at protecting the public from the potential spread of disease. In 1918, the influenza epidemic registered its first victims in Bogotá, and since the homes of the poor were viewed as “permanent sources of infection,” it was these homes, and by extension, their inhabitants, that needed to be sanitized and improved. Thus, the laboring poor and the spaces they inhabited were viewed as a potential threat to public health.

This history prompts us to consider the relationship among industrialization, the commercialization of goods, and the movement of people to the history and difficulties of living spaces and dwelling in the capital. It is important to note that while poor individuals and laborers were often perceived as dwelling in “dirty” and “immoral” ways, such perceptions were often constructed outside of history – that is, outside of the relations of capitalism and industrialization of which this living form part. In this sense, we must consider the inequalities and vulnerability of dwelling to understand the history

of the built environment in Bogotá. Moreover, the history of *piezitas* and of *streets*, are intimately linked the labor and to the very materials that make up the house and enriched the earth of the neighborhood.

It is also important to note that a significant amount of housing in the capital in the present is not too different from the ways I have described the *piezitas* of the past. In 2008, 58% of the inhabitants of the locality of Santa Fe (which includes the neighborhoods of Las Cruces, Lourdes, Egipto, Girardot, along with several others) lived in shared housing with other families or persons.¹⁹³ Moreover 65% of renters worked in the “informal economy,” a percentage higher than any other neighborhood in the capital (Parias Durán 2008). Thus, housing in the form of *piezitas* is not a new form of dwelling, but rather one that is intertwined with the making and building of Colombia’s capital.

Houses as Rainy Places

Among the elders with whom I worked, there were different ways by which they understood what it meant to have a “home,” and the role having a home played in influencing their personhood. One morning in May 2007, I walked into the *comedor* after the patrons had finished eating the breakfast meal and saw several individuals, including Señora Berta, Señora María Elvira, and Gabriel sitting around a table. Each person had a small squared sheet of paper in front of them as well as colored bits of *plastilina*, or clay. “Hola, Xochitl,” María Elvira exclaimed excitedly as she rolled *plastilina* between the palms of her hands. On this particular day, representatives from the local mayor’s office who were sporting yellow windbreakers denoting their government affiliation, were at the

¹⁹³ The *localidad* of Santa Fe is second only to Usme where 62% of inhabitants share housing. Usme is also one of the poorest areas of the capital, as well as the country.

comedor leading a *clase de manualidades*, or arts and crafts class. Approximately two weeks before, the same two instructors had shown some of the patrons how to “build” a clay pig by forming various individual shapes with the clay to make noses, ears, and feet. Creating the diminutive size of the various body parts out of clay proved to be a difficult task for many, as the elders had to maneuver their fingers and hands in ways they were not accustomed.

After greeting everyone, I walked over to Sra. Berta, who was warming up pieces of clay between her hands to make it more pliable. I too picked up a bit of clay and began to soften it by rolling it between my own hands. As we worked with the clay, Sra. Berta began to tell me about an incident that had occurred “over there, where they take us.” “Over there, where they take us” referred to a workshop for older adults located in Chapinero, a neighborhood a few kilometers north of the *comedor*. Twice per week, a *colectivo*, or minivan that had been transformed into a small bus, arrived at the *comedor* to pick up several of the elders after the lunch meal and transport them to Chapinero. Though I never had the opportunity to accompany the elders on these trips, I was told that they would often meet with someone akin to a psychotherapist, have snacks, and participate in activities similar to those inside the *comedor* and in local community centers. These biweekly trips to Chapinero were arranged by a private organization, and offered to any of the patrons of the *comedor* that wished to participate.

“Ay Srta. Xochitl,” Sra. Berta said in a whispering tone. Señora María *la bandida* is very rude to us. Yesterday while we were waiting for the *doctora* on the bus to Chapinero, Señora Herminda sat next to her. The *colectivo* is very narrow and when Señora Herminda sat next to Señora María, she touched her feet. Ayyy! Señora María

didn't like this and would you believe that she hit her with her cane? She told her so many awful things!" Sra. Berta narrated the events as she rolled a beige piece of clay on to the paper in front of her and with her fingertips, smeared it the way one would finger paint. "And when we returned," she continued, "Señora María and the rude *viejito* they call *el Tigre* insulted us as we walked by the church. ¡Zorras, hijueputas!,¹⁹⁴ they yelled. I don't know why they act that way. There are a lot of people *de la calle* that don't care about anything. It's easy to converse with some of them, like Gabriel or Diógenes," she told me as she signaled to the two men who were sitting at the table rolling clay between their fingers. "But some of the others are very rude. It might be because they don't have an *hogar*. I know what it means to have an *hogar*. I had an *hogar* for twenty-seven years."

In her description of this incident, Señora Berta brought to the fore the everyday conflict that existed among elder patrons of the dining house. According to Señora Berta, this particular incident was triggered by Señora María *la bandida*'s response to being touched with Señora Herminda's cane, which then led to another encounter with Señora María *la bandida* and *el Tigre* wherein Señora Herminda and Señora Berta were on the receiving end of insults. Señora Berta concluded that this kind rudeness that was exhibited by "people of the street" had to do with the possibility that, unlike her, these particular individuals had never experienced what it meant to have an *hogar*, or home.

¹⁹⁴ While the expression *zorras, hijueputas* may be translated as "sons of bitches" in English, the term "sons of bitches" does not capture the intensity and strength of the expression, which is quite common in Colombia. The term *hijo de puta* (commonly pronounced and spelled as *hijueputa*) literally implies that one is the child of a whore (bastard), while a *zorra* is a fox, which may intimate that an individual is cunning. The intensity of the English expression "motherfucker" might be more in parallel with the strength of *zorras, hijueputas*.

In an earlier interview inside her *piezita* in Las Cruces, I learned that Señora Berta had been born in the department of Córdoba, near the Caribbean Colombian coast. She was one of eleven children and was the second to last to be born. “I am 72 years old, or so they tell me,” she told me. Señora Berta never knew her mother and only described her father as a drunk who treated her poorly. She told me that at the age of nine she left Córdoba to live with a *señora*, who she only referred to as the *viejita*, in the nearby department of Antioquia. According to Señora Berta, the *viejita* would come to the town where Señora Berta lived as a child and give away clothes to the people who needed it because, “she understood *la situación*.”

“Which one of you wants to go with me?” Señora Berta said during the interview, voicing the *viejita* who adopted her. Señora Berta told me that both she and her younger sister, who was eight at the time, responded that they would like to leave with the woman. “I will take *la negrita*,” the *viejita* had said, choosing the darker skinned nine year-old Berta over her sister, who Señora Berta described as *blanca*, or white.

Señora Berta lived with the *viejita* as her adopted daughter for several years, and in her late teens, met a man and moved with him to Montería, the capital of the department of Córdoba. The man’s mother had purchased a *finca*, or home, in Montería and wanted her son and Señora Berta to move into the house with her. However, Señora Berta didn’t like the idea of living amidst other relatives in the same house. “I told him that I wouldn’t go to the *finca*, that I didn’t like living with family, not his family, nor mine. That was the *compromiso*¹⁹⁵ that we made - that we wouldn’t live with his family, or mine. He was going to take care of me, and I was going to take care of him.” The man

¹⁹⁵ Though word *compromiso* may be translated as to “compromise,” in Spanish the term also refers to a commitment or promise.

then bought a house in Montería for the two of them, and according to Señora Berta, they “lived very well together.”

When Señora Berta told me that unlike some of the older patrons of the *comedor*, she had had an *hogar* for twenty-seven years, she was not referring to the home she had lived in with her family of origin or with the *viejita*. Instead, Señora Berta’s *hogar* was the home she had created with her common law husband in Montería. Though the two never had their own children, they did raise a daughter that had been “given” to Señora Berta in much the same way that she had been “given” to the *viejita* when she was a nine-year old child.¹⁹⁶ Additionally, the couple’s *compromiso* to live in their own house and apart from other family members seemed central to the creation of an *hogar*, that is, a home where Señora Berta’s relationship to her husband was the core of the household. Thus, in stating that María *la bandida* and *el Tigre* were persons *de la calle* who had not had an *hogar*, Señora Berta was not positioning being “of the street” and having an *hogar* as antithetical ways of living. Instead, their “streetness” was connected to the probability that unlike her, they had never had an *hogar* nor had they experienced what it meant to have a *compromiso* to another individual or family member. In this sense, by making the distinction between having an *hogar* and being *de la calle*, Señora Berta was highlighting the notion that a person could be shaped by the circumstances of having had an *hogar* even if their present circumstances were in the street.

For Señora Berta, having made an *hogar* was an accomplishment that made her distinct from some of the other *viejitos* who visited the *comedor*. It is important to note that both *el Tigre* and Señora María *la bandida* had in fact spent much of their lives

¹⁹⁶ See Jessaca Leinaweaver (2008) for a discussion about the informal exchange or circulation of children in highland Peru.

living in institutional settings or in the *Cartucho*, and had never spoken about having shared a house or living space with family members. Though I did not have the opportunity to visit Señora María *la bandida*'s home, she had several times described her *piezita* as a comfortable living space, where she lived alone, and paid rent, electricity, and water usage with her *bono*, or government subsidy for elder *Bogotanos* who were categorized as *estrato* 1 or 2. Much like Señora María, in 2007 Señora Berta also lived in a small, but comfortable room in Las Cruces and paid approximately 70 thousand *pesos* monthly, including utilities (approximately 35 USD in 2007). Señora Berta had a full size bed, furniture, a television, pictures of a friend's children on her wall, as well as a photo of her own daughter, a prayer card dedicated to the *Divino Niño*, and other decorative pieces. Though both women lived under similar conditions, Señora Berta felt that her history of being housed, of having had an *hogar* and family relations made her distinct from a *viejita de la calle*, such as Señora María *la bandida*. Though Señora Berta did not consider her living situation in 2007 an *hogar*, she also did not view herself as an individual who was "of the street."

Up until late 2007, María Elvira, a 72 year-old woman who spent her mornings and afternoons assisting in dish washing, cleaning, running errands, and serving food at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, lived in a *pieza* located a few blocks from the dining house. Señora María Elvira had previously described her bedroom to me, letting me know that she did not have running water or electricity. She was usually conspicuously absent from the *comedor* on or after rainy days, and I later learned first hand that the rain always cascaded into her bedroom, wetting her bed and her body as she slept.

“I got sick from the rain,” she would tell me when she would re-appear disheveled and congested at the *comedor* after an extended absence. I didn’t understand how María Elvira would get so wet from the rain. However, I learned how this might occur in February 2007 when María Elvira first took me to her *pieza*.

Two brown shutter doors that did not meet at the center were the *pieza*’s only barrier from the elements and potential thieves. Seeing the room for myself, with its cracked adobe walls and where the sky was visible from the bed through the fissured ceiling, I wondered how a woman of Señora María Elvira’s age could be in what looked to be relatively good health while living in what were obviously difficult conditions. Her bed was positioned toward the rear left of the small room, and at least four heavy, moist blankets were arranged on top of a moldy mattress. There was no paint on the concrete walls. A cat, whose name I later learned was Paco, scurried under the bed and floorboards as soon as he sensed my presence. At the bedside was a small table with a white candle that offered *candela* (candlelight) once the sun set given that the room did not have access to electricity. To the right of the bed were piles of clothing, shoes, and papers. The floor of the *pieza* was almost non-existent, as only wooden boards covered the remnants of the rotten wood floor. I was careful to step on what looked to be the sturdier part of the floor, as a misstep could easily land my foot into the building’s aged foundation.

In 2007, Señora *María Elvira* had lived in her *pieza* for fourteen years and had shared the *pieza* with her *pareja*, or common law husband, for seven of those years. During the period of my fieldwork, Señora María Elvira paid 30,000 pesos in rent per month (approximately fifteen USD in 2007). Through all of those years, she lived in that

house without electricity or running water, so that she had to climb up the *cerro*, or mountainside, to collect water in order to bathe.

“Do you want a tangerine?” Señora María Elvira asked as she reached for a clear plastic bag that contained three miniature tangerines and handed one to me. “Sit down,” she told me while moving over to offer me a space on her bed. As I peeled the tangerine Señora María Elvira began to dig through a small box for some photos of the *viejito*, which she had promised to show me. After a few moments of rifling through the box, she pulled out a red gift bag with tiny white hearts imprinted all over it and removed a small, brown photo album from inside.

“This is the *viejito*,” she told me as she handed me a black and white photograph that was glued to the brown pages of the album. The photo was that of a young man with dark eyes and hair. The album was filled with old photographs of her *pareja* with his young children and his then wife as they walked through the streets of Bogotá. “These are his children,” Señora María Elvira told me, “And she was his wife.”

“He is very attractive,” I told her. “Yes, he was very attractive,” she responded. As we turned the pages, a photo of Señora María Elvira slipped out of the album and landed on the bed. It looked like a recent photo that had been taken at a *Foto Japón* portrait studio, which are photo developing shops/portrait studios that are common throughout the country. “This is you!” I exclaimed. “Do you have any other photographs?” I asked, hoping to catch a glimpse of Señora María Elvira in her younger years.

“No, this is the only one I have.” Señora María Elvira and I then sat silently looking through the remaining photographs.

“I wanted to bring you to the *pieza* so that you might see...so that you would know,” she told to me, breaking the silence.

Señora María Elvira was not the only person who had invited me to her home so that “I might know,” that is, so that I might understand the living conditions wherein she lived. I began my visits to women’s homes because several had invited me to their *piezas* after I began to ask them questions about their lives, where they lived, and how they felt about their experiences of *la vejez*, or old age. Señora Cecilia (María *tacones* as Hermano Roosevelt called her) was the first to invite me to her home in late November 2006.

I initially came to know Señora Cecilia during the embroidery classes I began to attend in September 2006, shortly after arriving at the *comedor* to conduct my fieldwork. As I mentioned previously, Señora Cecilia was a woman in her late seventies. She was an avid fan of NASCAR and car racing in general, and followed the achievements of Colombia’s most prominent car racer, Juan Pablo Montoya, very closely.

One of the first questions Señora Cecilia asked me when we met in September 2006 was whether I had given any thought to the idea of opening an *ancianato*, or old age home. “That would be very nice,” she added after proposing the idea. Though I was uncertain as to how to answer this question given that I wanted to acknowledge its importance, I responded by telling her that I thought opening up an *ancianato* was a beautiful idea, but that I was in Bogotá conducting research and that I would be focusing on my studies for the time being.

I met Señora Cecilia for a visit to her home early one Saturday afternoon in November. Señora Cecilia greeted me across the street from the *comedor* so that we might walk toward her *pieza*, which was located in *barrio* Santa Bárbara, only a couple

of blocks down the inclined streets. Like most of Bogotá's neighborhoods, the neighborhood had been named after the local church, the *Iglesia de Santa Bárbara*, which had been founded in 1585. Señora Cecilia, who was feeling sick from a flu vaccine she had received the day before, and I briefly stepped into a room adjacent to the church to greet the *abuelitos* who were gathered there to listen to music, have a snack, and talk. Señora Cecilia usually spent her Saturday afternoons at the community room of Santa Bárbara church, but given that she was feeling sick, she decided that it would be best if we instead walked to her *pieza*. After our brief stop, she and I continued to walk west and stopped in front of an unassuming door next to a shop that sold *miscelanea*, or miscellaneous, everyday items, such as pencils, dishes, milk, and shampoo. As we approached the door Señora Cecilia greeted a woman standing nearby, who I later learned was the *dueña*, or owner of the house, by saying, "I'd like for you to meet the *doctora*." After we exchanged "hellos," Señora Cecilia opened the front door and I was immediately taken aback by the world that existed behind the unassuming door that separated the world inside the house from the street.

The structure was extremely old, as many homes in this area were, and was adorned with white and blue cracked ceramic floors, which looked to be at least one hundred years old. The front door led directly into a large courtyard where Señora Cecilia and the other residents of the house did their laundry and perhaps cooked, or used as a common room. It was evident from its size and antique décor that, at its prime, this house must have housed the elite and wealthy of Bogotá. In 2006, however, the individual *piezas* of this house were rented out for six thousand pesos per night (approximately three dollars and twenty-five cents USD in 2006, a price which was quite expensive for the

area) and were occupied by the very poor of the city. Unlike many other Republican era homes that were being renovated and were considered part of Colombian national patrimony, the house in which Señora Cecilia lived looked to be beyond repair, with demolition as its only solution.

Señora Cecilia and I walked up a winding wooden staircase, greeting the other occupants along the way. There weren't any handrails along the stairs, so Señora Cecilia had to climb the stairs carefully, putting her hands up against the wall for support as she moved. We made a left turn as we reached the top of the stairs and walked toward the back of the house. Every door was actually composed of two wooden doors, which opened outward, but were locked with a padlock in the center when shut. Señora Cecilia led me into a short hallway and welcomed me to her room when we reached the first set of doors on the right.

"This is embarrassing, *doctora*," Señora Cecilia told, expressing discomfort as she unlocked the rather large padlock (which was nestled alongside a smaller lock) with a key that hung around her neck, and opened the door. Though Señora Cecilia had told me many times that she wanted me to see her *piezita*, she would continuously offer me apologetic warnings, saying "I'm embarrassed to take you." Though there was a sense of embarrassment and shame in each invitation, she let me know that she thought it would be important for me to see how she and many other elderly persons in the area lived.

There was a white and blue sheet hung behind the door separating the room from the door and initially obstructing my view of the *piezita*. I followed Señora Cecilia into the room and as soon as I took my first breath, I could smell the musty, aging air trapped inside the room. Given the age and condition of the house, one would expect that there

would be mold growing in the wood, which would affect the quality of the air inside the house. However, the air in the room was humid and almost unbreathable as it was heavy and stifling, which surely affected Señora Cecilia as she had previously told me that she had suffered from asthma for forty years. Señora Cecilia led me in, apologizing for the condition of the room and invited me to sit in a chair positioned alongside her bed. As we sat and began to talk I noticed that she was breathing in short spurts as if she could not get enough oxygen into her lungs. Given that the air inside the room had affected my breathing quite intensely, I could only imagine how the mold and poor ventilation in the room might affect an eighty-year old woman who suffered from asthma.

As we sat down, Señora Cecilia began to tell me that there was a lot of *visio*, or drug use in the house, illustrating her comment by placing her index finger and thumb together near her mouth as if she were smoking *basuco* or perhaps marijuana. As if on cue, the loud sound of a flame being lit became increasingly audible. When I asked Señora Cecilia about the noise I learned that the flame was coming from the neighbor's stove.

Señora Cecilia then began to point out the various articles and pieces of furniture around the room. "Almost everything here belongs to my daughter," she told me, "Only the bed and the dresser are mine." Her daughter, who is a *vendedora ambulante* or street peddler, and lived in the southern region of the city with her husband and daughter, came to the house every evening to pay her mother's daily rent. Despite her daughter's daily trips to the house, Señora Cecilia told me that she only saw her daughter once every couple of weeks.

Señora Cecilia's bed was positioned up against the corner of two walls of the *pieza*. At the foot of her bed was a medium-sized, rather old television and next to the TV were a few fold-up mattresses. Two rosaries were hung along her headboard and several prayer books were hung on the wall in a whitish yet see-through plastic folder. Her clothes were neatly arranged in one corner of the room, while a child's bike and other miscellaneous items were positioned in different parts of the *pieza*. An older white dresser sat up against a wall near the door, which stored some of daughter's pots and pans.

"I wanted to bring you so that you would see how I live," she told me again shortly after we both sat down. "So that you might know, *doctora*, that things aren't always as they appear," she added. In conversations, and in a recorded interview that took place inside the *comedor* a couple of days after I visited her home, Señora Cecilia had repeatedly told me that she wanted to me to get a sense of people's reality so that I might truly understand *la situación*, or people's situation, as well as assist me with my research. "This might also prove helpful for us," she told me several times. Her use of the word "this" in her statement signaled to my research, while the word "us" denoted the elders and patrons that I had come to know, as well as others who might be experiencing similar circumstances.

In telling me that she wanted to take me to her *pieza* so that I might know that "things aren't always as they appear," Señora Cecilia was suggesting that her self-presentation outside of her home, that is, her clothing, shoes, make-up, and other accessories, did not necessarily correspond or signal to the difficult circumstances in which she lived. The idea that the presentation of self often conflicted with the living

conditions of Bogotá's inhabitants was something I had heard from various people I came to know in the capital. A friend once commented that it was common to see well-dressed people on the street and assume that they were economically secure, when in fact, many people who presented themselves in such a way did not have the resources to eat three meals per day, pay for a place to live, or send their children to school.

To an outside observer, Señora Cecilia and María Elvira's *piezitas* might have been perceived as inhospitable or inadequate housing for older women who lived alone. In fact, when I first visited each of their homes, I too strongly felt that they should not be living alone in such conditions. Señora Cecilia was fully aware that her housing was problematic for her health and age, as she told me on the day I visited that she was hoping to move out in the next couple of weeks. Regardless, she also often spoke about buying a little table top stove that did not require gas so that she might be able to cook her own meals and not have to leave her *piezita* to go to the *comedor* and be forced to interact with others even when she did not want to.

Though Señora María Elvira lived in a rainy bedroom, and Señora Cecilia's breathing was often compromised by the mold growing in her *piezita*, their bedroom homes still served as personal anchors and spaces of refuge for both women. Let us recall the walk I narrated in chapter three where Señora María Elvira and I made our way to the *Centro Comunidad de Lourdes* amidst the muddy inclined streets of the *cerros*. During that walk through a street where all the houses had been demolished in preparation for a large transit boulevard, I asked Señora María Elvira about her *piezita*. She responded by saying, "I don't like walking near there, it gives me *guayabo*." This *guayabo*, or feeling of sadness, was a marked response to the loss of the *piezita* that had

served as her home for many years. Though many might have considered this *piezita* as an inadequate and unsafe place for a woman of Señora María Elvira's age to live, for Señora Elvira, her bedroom was still a place to which she could retreat, a place where she could keep her belongings, including the photos of the *viejito* that had died eight years prior, and a place where she could escape the turmoil of the street. When Señora María Elvira lost her *piezita*,¹⁹⁷ she also lost everything that was contained within it, including her bed, mementos, and all of her belongings. Though her belongings may not have held economic value, for Señora María Elvira these things formed part of her person as well as the home she had created for herself amidst extremely difficult socio-economic circumstances.

Additionally, Señora María Elvira chose to live in her *piezita* even though she had alternative housing options available to her. In late 2006, Señora María Elvira was absent from the *comedor* for over a month, and nobody seemed to know where she was. When she finally returned to the *comedor* she told me that she had been living in an *ancianato*, or old age facility that was run by *monjitas*, or nuns. Though she had been treated well by the *monjitas* and was given daily meals and her own bed, she still chose to return to the independence and safety of her bedroom home. At the *ancianato*, Señora María Elvira had been required to follow specific rules throughout the day, whereas her *piezita* offered her a place where she could retreat and live her life in her own terms.

¹⁹⁷ Señora María Elvira would often say *perdí la piezita*, or "I lost the *piezita*." I use the word "lost" in an attempt to stay close to her terms, but it is important to note that she actually had the *piezita* taken away from her by the sisters of her common law husband. According to Señora María Elvira, her husband owned the *piezita*, but his family never acknowledged their union. Because she couldn't legally prove that they lived together for more than ten years (which is the amount of time required to legally recognize a common law marriage in Colombia), her husband's sisters took control of the *piezita* shortly before it was demolished to build the transit boulevard. Señora María Elvira had to leave behind most of her belongings, and her husband's family received compensation for the *piezita* from the local government.

When I state that Señora María Elvira chose to return to the “safety” of her *piezita*, I do not mean to diminish the fact that her bedroom home was vulnerable to thieves and rain, and thus, exposed Señora María Elvira to the dangers of the neighborhood and the elements. However, for Señora María Elvira, her *piezita* offered her a different kind of safety -- the safety of social retreat, a place to house her belongings, a place to manage her appearance and person, and thus prepare herself for the world in a social way. It is thus important to note that *piezitas*, no matter how permeable, fragile, or small, were not viewed by their inhabitants as negligible spaces. Even thin and see-through walls and rooms without doors or proper roofs could potentially provide an individual with significant social boundaries from “the street.”

Conclusion

In her ethnography *The Architecture of Memory* (1996) anthropologist Joëlle Bahloul explores the narrative memories of a Jewish-Muslim domestic community in Algeria called Dar-Rafayil. She argues that the narrative memories of the house’s residents (who at the time of her fieldwork lived in France) were structured by the material spaces and architecture of the house. She describes the house as a protected “domestic enclosure” that was simultaneously open to urban life, and thus, was both “exposed and protected” (26). In this chapter, I have endeavored to show the ways the *piezitas* and “living spaces” of the elders of *Comedor María es Mi Madre* straddled the domains and experiences of exposure and protection. Though their houses were sometimes rainy places exposing them to illnesses and danger, the spaces that were physically protected from the elements, such as *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, exposed them in other ways. For example, even a rainy bedroom would have protected Señora

María Elvira from being asked very intimate questions by social workers in a very “public” setting.

In this chapter I have also shown that social relations and identities cannot be understood without exploring the various places wherein different kinds of “living” happen – the *piezita*, the *calle*, as well as a variety of other social spaces that might stand for houses and streets. *Piezitas* and *calles* have historically been marked and created in material ways, by, for example, doors, doorknobs, and other kinds of thresholds. However, *piezitas* and *calles* are also social categories and spaces that have historically been read in moral terms. What kind of house one lived in and what kind of boundaries that house had, was a critical way by which poverty and living was moralized in the late 19th century and early 20th century in Colombia. Such moral constructions of houses continue today, as despite their efforts to house themselves inside *piezitas*, the older residents of the central neighborhoods of Bogotá were often constructed in relation to the spaces, elements, and moralities of the street.

In many ways, this chapter is also a “pre-conclusion” to the dissertation in that the stories I have told in the previous chapters make visible the diversity of spaces that are socially and economically significant for the patrons of *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, including the dining house, the street, the *Iglesia de Belén*, and the string of restaurants on *carrera 6* that offer food at the end of the business day (among others). This kind of “dispersed” living was quite extensive, and thus was often read as being entirely *de la calle*, disregarding the importance of the *piezita* as a social anchor for elder residents of Bethlehem and the surrounding neighborhoods.

Finally, my historical narrative of houses makes visible the complex socio-economic-political history that is connected to industrialization, migration, and urbanization as well as how these processes continue to animate present ways of living. I show how these processes are animated by the very materials from which the houses and neighborhoods were built and adorned. Moreover, I aim to show that the way socio-political-economic processes are interconnected with kinship relations and living spaces, right down to the lack of doors in some places, and the building of protective walls in others.

Chapter Eight
Epilogue: The Gleaners of Bethlehem



Figure 16: The Gleaners by Jean-François Millet, 1857, Oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.” Leviticus 23: 22 (New American Version, 2011)

In the book of Leviticus, the writers of the bible use the example of the harvesting of one’s field to ask the reader to leave behind the gleanings, or the bits and pieces leftover from what one sows, for the poor and impoverished. The expectation, it seems, is that these bits and pieces left ungathered might provide sustenance to those who deeply need it and depend on them for their livelihoods. This dissertation has served as a starting

point for thinking about the giving of food as a material and spiritual response to the deep social and economic inequalities that are present throughout Colombia. In this final chapter, I suggest that the gleaning practices of *rebusque* at various scales of action are not alternative forms of food-getting or subsistence practices, but rather, serve as a primary means by which many elder Colombians find sustenance and security in their own terms. Additionally, I encapsulate the analytic contributions of this dissertation for understanding the relationship among the many “givers” and “receivers” of charity, the experiences of growing older in Bogotá amidst trying conditions, and document the changes that have occurred at *Comedor María es Mi Madre* since I conducted my fieldwork.

The painting I have reproduced above the biblical quote depicts three women stooping over a field picking up the remains of the harvested wheat crop. The bounty of the harvest is revealed in the background, as stacks of wheat, which have presumably been collected for the owners of the field, make visible the abundance the earth and human labor have yielded. The women gleaners, who are holding the scraps leftover from the harvest, are visually positioned as disconnected from the abundance that exists beyond them, as well as from those who will profit from the harvest.

Much of this dissertation has focused on “bits and pieces” – that is, on the foods and other material forms that are “left over” from the harvest of the capitalist market, as well as the place of these leftovers in the context of different kinds of abundance. I have shown the ways these gleanings are redistributed by social service organizations such as the Food Bank of the Archdiocese of Bogotá and the many *comedores* throughout the capital, so that these foods may reach the most impoverished and hungry of the city.

While the writers of Leviticus instruct the owners of the fields to leave the gleanings of the harvest behind for the poor, and while the painting points to the differentiation among disparate socio-economic groups, it is important to highlight that the gleaners of Bogotá, the elderly poor of the central neighborhoods of the capital, are in fact also needed by charity organizations as well as by the corporate donors that make their lunch meals possible.

As I have shown in chapter four, multinational corporations such as Coca-Cola, Colombian companies such as the Alquería milk company and Carulla/Vivero, need the food bank and need to gift their products in order to, for example, garner healthy publicity, exorcise corporate guilt, receive tax-breaks that might help maintain the future of their financial health, or to help steady the market price of the commodities they produce, such as milk. While the mission and social vision of the food bank aims to respond to the inequalities that create poverty and hunger through the redistribution of food, the dependency of these social organizations and corporations is also made visible in and through the giving of charity. The poor are thus a necessary part of the social and economic chains of relations in a variety of different kinds of markets.

One of the central ethnographic and analytic contributions of this dissertation highlights the transformation of these foods and material forms in the context of private and state sponsored *comedores*, as well as the ways the poor and elderly poor transform these goods and find sustenance through their own practices of *rebusque*. While the poor in Bogotá “gather the gleanings” of the harvest, leftovers that are often viewed as waste, I have shown the ways these material forms have social, economic, and nutritional value in a diverse range of economic and spiritual contexts and communities.

At the heart of the dissertation and central to my ethnography is a “ground-up” analysis of the ways those that receive food charity use it and transform it in their own terms. A central aspect of the dissertation aims to privilege the work of the poor and contradicts notions of them as passive receivers of charity. Instead, I show the ways elder residences of the historic neighborhoods of Bogotá do not only receive food assistance, but also transmute these charitable forms, and recirculate them for their own purposes, imbuing them with new and innovative registers of value in different kinds of markets.

While buying one’s food at a grocery store or *plaza de mercado* might seem like a standard way by which citizens of one of the largest cities in Latin America furnish their everyday needs, through this dissertation I have shown that “food-getting” through practices of charity and *rebusque* are the principal and “normal” way by which many elders find sustenance and security. In doing so, I show the ways the poor and elderly of the city are also embedded in myriad sets of social and economic relations through practices of gift giving and charity.

Moreover, the various ways I have positioned those that “give” and those that “receive,” (and even “take”) and transform these goods throughout the dissertation problematizes and highlights the complex and dynamic relationship among various “givers” and “receivers.” In doing so, I move beyond categories that position the poor elderly as simply dependent on charity.

Analytically, I have positioned myself amidst a range of literature linking ethnographic approaches to food, the built environment, exchange, and materiality to practices of humanitarianism and aging. What makes this case unique are the ways social welfare and charity are being used as a social response to the inequalities of history,

migrations, urbanization and experiences of violence in Colombia. Moreover, this “history” and the inequalities that violence has wrought, also becomes materially present in the built environment, in the lack of food inside the home, the need to receive meals inside a *comedor*, as well as the lines of elders awaiting *mercaditos*.

Return

Thirteen months after I had finished my primary fieldwork, everything at *Comedor María es Mi Madre*, including the organizers, had changed dramatically. When I returned to Bogotá and to *Comedor María es Mi Madre* in August 2008, Hermano Miguel and the other Franciscan brothers were no longer administering the day-to-day activities of the *comedor*. In fact, the *comedor* no longer had any affiliation with the *Fraternidad de la Divina Providencia*.

In their place were Dr. Fercho, the physician who had previously scheduled medical consultations with patrons twice per month, and his two brothers, Carlos, and Eduardo. For the last ten years, Dr. Fercho and his wife have run a small foundation called *Fundación Proyecto Union*. Similar to the Franciscan order to which Hermano Miguel belonged, the foundation operates several *casas* and *hogares* for children who are chronically ill, especially those who are living with cancer and HIV.

One of the most significant changes that had taken place in 2008 was the creation of *Casa Esperanza* (House of Hope), an *hogar de paso* or space where elders affiliated with *Comedor María es Mi Madre* could live if they so desired. The house, which at one point in its history had been an *inquilinato*, and more recently, an old age facility, was a three-story structure with eight bedrooms, three bathrooms, an industrial kitchen, as well

as prominent living space. It was located only a few blocks south of the *comedor*, in the neighborhood of Las Cruces.

Señora María Elvira, Señora María *la bandida*, Pachito, and Señora Berta as well as twenty other patrons of the *comedor* lived at *Casa Esperanza*. Those that had had *piezitas* when I left Bogotá in June 2007 had left their homes and were sharing living and sleeping spaces in various bedrooms throughout the house. Each had their own bed (but not their own room) and contributed five hundred *pesos* per night (approximately forty-five cents USD in 2008) for their nightly home. During that month, I also had the opportunity to spend several nights with the elders at *Casa Esperanza*. These experiences prompted new questions about what it meant to be housed, what it meant to no longer have a *piezita*, as well as how the elders conceptualized their “independence” in new housing. I hope to be able to include their experiences in future work, adding new understandings to the complex and dynamic social, political, and spiritual relations at stake for the people who are dining in Bethlehem.

During that month, I also archival research inside the *Archivo do Bogotá*, located two blocks away from *Comedor María es Mi Madre*. While the archive housed documents pertinent to the history of Bogotá, it also aimed to collect and make publicly accessible *historias vivientes*, or living histories from Bogotá’s residents. These included oral histories about the cultural traditions of the neighborhoods, the history of soccer in the capital, and the family photographs of *Bogotanos*, as these too form part of Bogotá’s history.

I had been given access to much of this unprocessed material as well as to the oral histories from the *Mi Historia Cuenta* campaign (described in chapter five). I spent most

of the afternoon hours looking at these documents alongside Mónica, an employee of *Misión Bogotá*, the campaign sponsored by the Bogotá mayor's office that aimed to promote *Cultura Ciudadana* or a "culture of citizenship." Mónica was a woman in her late twenties who spent most of her time assisting one of the lead archivists, Juliana, in collecting oral histories and organizing the material that was being collected on a daily basis.

Juliana had previously told me that Mónica, who lived with her mother, was from a much more difficult and dangerous neighborhood than Belén or Las Cruces. She told me that Mónica grew up near a neighborhood a bit to the south known as Quiroga and described the neighborhood simply by telling me that most taxi drivers refused to make the trip into the *barrio* for fear that they would be robbed on the way down.

One afternoon as I was reading oral histories inside the office, I asked Mónica the following question: "Do you think there are people in these neighborhoods who *aguantan hambre*?¹⁹⁸ I'm curious because I've heard over and over again that hunger cannot exist in Bogotá. That, for example, many of those who come to the *comedor* are already full from eating at other *comedores*, like the one at *la Perseverancia*. So, I don't know..."

Mónica looked at me with a look of surprise mixed with certainty and responded, "Yes! I've come across children who spend the whole day having had only a cup of *aguadepanela* and bread. With *Misión Bogotá*, we come across a lot of people. The other day we were making a *chocolatada*¹⁹⁹ and I began to talk with a little boy who told me that he hadn't eaten all day. They are not used to begging or asking for things, so they

¹⁹⁸ The expression *aguantar hambre* suggests that one is enduring or experiencing hunger. However, to *aguantar* something also suggests a quietness about the experience, a suffering that happens in silence.

¹⁹⁹ A *chocolatada* is a local expression for the making and giving of hot chocolate to the public.

stay quiet and don't eat. I asked his mother for permission to give him a little something. Yes, there are a lot of people, a lot of children that *aguantan hambre*.”

Mónica's answer to my seemingly naïve question brings to the fore the amount of need that exists in Bogotá even amidst an abundance of charity organizations and government social welfare campaigns that make meeting these needs and responding to issues of hunger, their primary goal. The giving of food, however, has also played a role in reifying many of the social and economic hierarchies that prompted the creation of charitable endeavors and that have positioned the receiving of food charity as an everyday way by which individuals find sustenance for themselves and their families.

However, as intimated by my conversation with Mónica, the visibility of giving and the visibility of receiving -- that is, the practice of waiting in line for a plate of food, a *mercadito*, or a cup of hot chocolate -- creates the assumption that needs and hunger are being addressed and that there is a structure of giving in place so that *Bogotanos* do not have to *aguantar hambre*. In this sense, the lines of individuals waiting awaiting food and the visibility of charitable practices have ideological dimensions in that their ubiquity and everydayness have the potential to render “need” and “hunger” in a country of “plenty” as invisible. Additionally, these practices of charity, and specifically, the giving of food, might be constructed as the material representation of the acceptance of a history of inequality. As Mónica noted, despite the efforts of the Bogotá Without Hunger campaign and a range of other charity organizations, hunger is still an experience that is widely felt throughout the capital, and the country.

It is this continued experience of hunger amidst a range of social welfare and charity organizations, which makes further work on the topic of food, food accessibility,

and social welfare a necessary endeavor. In this sense, this epilogue serves as a starting point (rather than a conclusion) toward understanding the long history of giving, receiving, *rebuscando*, and living that is critical for conceptualizing Colombian history, and working toward changing Colombia's future.

Appendix A

Así quedará Bogotá con los cambios en los estratos

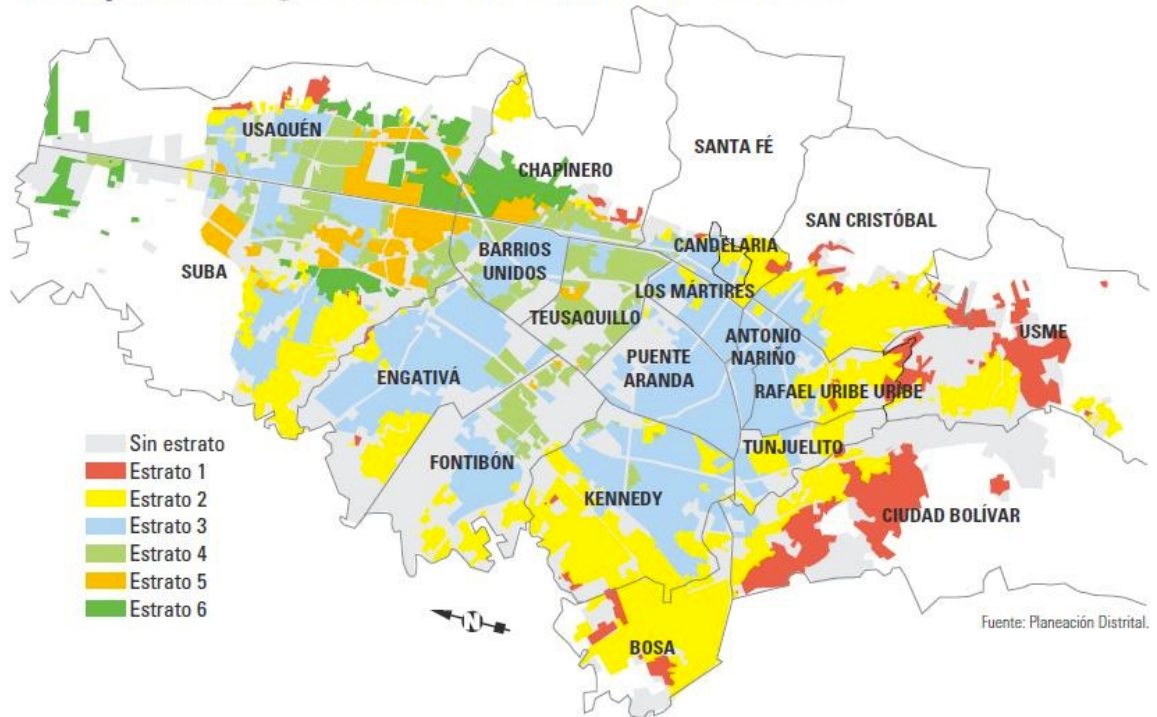


Figure 17: Division of the *localidades* of Bogotá by *estrato*.

Appendix B



Figure 18: *Localidades* of Bogotá

Appendix C

Data taken from *Banco de Alimentos*, Informe de Gestión, 2006

Table 1: Monetary Donations Received in Pesos.

	2005 ²⁰⁰	2006	2007
JANUARY	30,605,885	28,570,009	
FEBRUARY	212,710,890	111,602,500	
MARCH	33,998,580	30,352,020	
APRIL	16,304,220	92,140,978	
MAY	157,144,896	68,592,991	
JUNE	29,615,979	78,895,500	
JULY	39,642,216	20,410,000	
AUGUST	33,835,346	72,013,390	
SEPTEMBER	20,992,397	84,383,622	
OCTOBER	64,366,000	76,856,353	
NOVEMBER	33,877,780	144,872,330	
DECEMBER	593,614,187	243,800,492	
TOTAL:	1,266,706,376	1,052,323,185	

Table 2: Fruits and Vegetables Received through Donations from Benefactors in Kilos.

	2005	2006	2007
JANUARY	356,637	264,177	
FEBRUARY	290,117	260,759	
MARCH	330,912	303,089	
APRIL	335,774	296,642	
MAY	317,923	273,493	
JUNE	278,017	217,859	
JULY	250,975	234,142	
AUGUST	247,974	253,221	
SEPTEMBER	252,574	277,168	
OCTOBER	288,916	291,671	
NOVEMBER	317,111	266,421	
DECEMBER	357,462	350,665	
TOTAL:	3,624,392	3,289,307	

Table 3: Institutions Affiliated with the Banco de Alimentos.

	TOTAL NUMBER OF INSTITUTIONS	NEWLY AFFILIATED DURING CORRESPONDING CALENDAR YEAR
2005	455	47
2006		
TOTAL:		

²⁰⁰ Included in the donations for 2005 are monies that were specifically donated for the *Banco*'s new installations.

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