From the streets to digital spaces: Citizen media practices toward the generation of dialogue and collective memory in Medellín, Colombia

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Declaration of Authorship:

I, Thomas Greenwood, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.
Signed: _T. G. Greenwood_____ Date: 31.3.2023

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful those who helped me imagine and realise this project:
my supervisor Natalie Fenton, everyone at Mi Comuna, and my family and friends
in London and Medellín who have inspired me, been patient with me,
and encouraged me through these years.
I could not have done it without you.
For Juli, Mum and Dad, thank you.

Abstract

Research into alternative and community media has often idealised participation or, amidst the proliferation of digital communications technologies, tended towards media-centric approaches. This thesis examines the case of the Mi Comuna media collective whose work has developed to open space for communication, interaction and reflection with residents of Santa Cruz in northeast Medellín, Colombia. As the Covid-19 global pandemic developed, Mi Comuna's work was forced to shift almost entirely into digital spaces, where significant challenges were encountered in reproducing engaging, creative and interactive activities, risking the furthering of exclusions and divides. This brings a critical interpretation of digital spaces which have been associated with facilitating participation and enhancing the possibilities of social movements and alternative media alike.

Rooted in Participatory Action Research, this research project sought to develop interactive rather than extractive research in northeast Medellín, a place that has been both subjected to violence and represented as violent. While methods were necessarily adapted as Covid-19 reshaped the world, this thesis attests to the ongoing relevance of collaborative approaches to research, provided that they are reflexive and flexible in accordance with the research site.

The empirical material covers the cooperative opening and defence of Mi Comuna's physical assembly space; the generation of engaging spaces for communication and interaction in the streets of Santa Cruz; the evoking of collective memory, knowledge which contributes to local cultural imaginaries celebrating the agency of collective founding rather than the victimisation of displacement or violence; and the way Mi Comuna adapted to the Covid-19 rupture and the shift to all online working.

The significance of this study is that it informs the theoretical understanding of community and alternative media through detailed analysis of the possibilities and limitations of this work in physical and digital spaces. Additionally, this study informs our empirical understanding of the importance of collective memory and non-contestatory cultural politics to citizen media practice in a putatively 'post-conflict' urban settlement in Colombia.

Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction: Citizen media practices toward the generation of dialogue and collective memory

Many theorists have outlined how research into alternative media has often idealised community or participation (Downing, 2001; Costanza-Chock, 2014; Cammaerts, 2016; Nossek and Carpentier, 2019) or, amidst the proliferation of digital communications technologies, tended towards media-centric approaches (Stephansen and Treré, 2020; Couldry; 2019; Rodriguez, Ferron and Shamas, 2014). This thesis examines the case of the Mi Comuna media collective whose work has developed to open space for communication, interaction and reflection with residents of Santa Cruz in northeast Medellín, Colombia. Santa Cruz is an informally developed urban settlement characterised by limited state presence, structural disadvantages and persistent violence, a context in which research into media practices remains underexplored.[1] This thesis examines creative street based practices which open 'collective spaces of encounter' and build 'local cultural identities and geographies' (Rodriguez, 2011: 243). In the right conditions these practices can engage young people in educational and artistic activities, potentially drawing them away from the threat of violence. Media practices linked to collective memory generate reflection about common histories of struggle, strengthening understanding and belonging amidst conditions of marginalisation and stigmatisation. Amidst the persistent threat of violence which has impacted social movements and those deemed political, Mi Comuna have developed these practices in a non-contestatory way, which can be quietly subversive enabling the conditions for counter politics to emerge and evolve.

This thesis conceptualises 'counter commoning' as related to the more implicit political practices of providing protective space for social relations and escape from violence. In this context, to be explicitly counter-hegemonic or subversive is potentially dangerous. 'Counter commoning' (as opposed to for example 'subversive commoning', Birkinbine, 2018), connected to cultural activities and collective memory, presents itself as non-contestatory rather than oppositional to hegemonic power. Indeed evidence presented in this thesis suggests that the spaces that Mi Comuna open in the Casa and in the streets of Santa Cruz can afford safe, engaging and emboldening situations for assembly with distinct possibilities

[1] Rodriguez's seminal work theorizing citizens' media amidst civil war in Colombia, spoke to the way that creative media practitioners operate to bring people together in the midst of violent conflict. (2001, 2011). Colombia is now in its 'post-conflict' moment since peace accords were signed between the Colombian state and guerrilla group *las FARC* in 2016, though significant violence persists.

from those in other public and private spaces in Medellín impacted by surveillance or violence.

As the Covid-19 global pandemic developed at the outset of my PhD fieldwork, Mi Comuna's work was forced to shift almost entirely into digital spaces. Mi Comuna's proficiency with digital media technologies enabled them to broaden their online movement building work and lobby for constructive state intervention in Santa Cruz during this extraordinary moment. Nevertheless, significant challenges were encountered in reproducing engaging, creative and interactive activities, risking the furthering of exclusions and divides. Evidence put forward in this thesis advances a critical interpretation of digital spaces which have been associated with facilitating participation and enhancing the possibilities of social movements and alternative media alike.

Rooted in Participatory Action Research, this research project sought to develop interactive rather than extractive research in northeast Medellín, a place that has been both subjected to violence and represented as violent. While methods were necessarily adapted as Covid-19 reshaped the world, this thesis attests to the ongoing relevance of collaborative approaches to research, provided that they are reflexive and flexible in accordance with the research site. That recognition of 'popular' and 'experiential' knowledge is fundamental to Mi Comuna's praxis, made this approach to research more viable despite the challenges of distance and digital spaces during the Covid-19 conjuncture, and my background and positionality as a privileged, western, male researcher entering a research site facing marginalisation and stigmatisation.

Amidst the contemporary proliferation and impact of digital communications technologies, research into alternative and community media has tended to focus on how digital technologies 'enable non-institutionalized actors to disseminate media *content* that challenges dominant discourses or makes visible hidden realities' (Stephansen and Treré, 2020: 1). Meanwhile, important calls have been made for a practice approach to media research (e.g. Couldry, 2004), in order to focus on 'the social, material, and embodied aspects of citizen media' and avoid more media-centric approaches (Stephansen and Treré, 2020: 1). In Santa Cruz, Medellín, a place that faces structural disadvantages, persistent violence and a significant digital divide, questions of communication and dialogue are related not only to communicative products and digital media technologies, but also to space. My previous experience working with community media in Medellín had highlighted the importance of coming together around food and music and using creative activities to

reappropriate public space, albeit temporarily. Indeed, Rodriguez's seminal work theorizing citizens' media amidst civil war in Colombia examined how media practitioners operated to bring people together in the midst of violent conflict. (2001, 2011). With Colombia now in its 'post-conflict' moment, though with structural disadvantages and the threat of violence persisting, novel conception of the opening of safe, intimate and emboldening spaces in informal urban settlements like Santa Cruz is required.

Memory is another crucial element in the work of Mi Comuna and other social organisations in Medellín. Indeed, memory is important to 'those who have been oppressed, uprooted, and massacred [who] cannot afford to forget (Burke 2011, 191 cited in Kaiser, 2020: 91). Victims' groups are, according to Rolston and Ospina (2017: 29), in a 'subaltern position, as defined by Gramsci, namely a group under the hegemonic domination of a ruling class so that it is unable to participate fully in the making of history and culture'. Through the challenging of official narratives, by means of intergenerational dialogue and the passing on of practices and experience, Latin Americans have long been 'memory activists' (Kaiser, 2020: 91). My prior experience working in Medellín (2014-2016) had shown the institutional side of memory work, represented perhaps most emphatically by Medellín's *Museo de la Memoria*, with its focus on the history of armed conflict across Colombia. Within the community media project I was part of between 2014 and 2016, memory was much more connected to the founding of neighbourhoods and the collective struggle to survive through structural disadvantages. Yet existing frameworks are insufficient for interpreting these practices, in districts of Medellín like Santa Cruz, of evoking and celebrating collective memories in a non-contestatory way amidst the ongoing presence of armed actors linked to historic violence.

Questions of culture run through the fields of alternative and community media, as well as communication for development and social change (CDSC).[2] UNESCO's MacBride report *Many Voices One World* (1980) highlighted concerns of 'cultural imperialism' and communication injustice of the 20th century, promoting community media as part of a solution. Freire's (1970) 'dialogue of knowledges'[3] was in part a response to his warning of a 'culture of silence', whereby 'people without access to power lose their own voices and learn to mimic the voice of the powerful' (Rodriguez, 2020: 72). Rodriguez (2001, 2012) has in turn theorised 'citizens' media' as 'communication practices through which men, women, and

[2] Williams stated that culture is 'one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language' (Williams, 1976: 87), which has 'come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought (ibid.)
[3] Freire's (1970) 'dialogue of knowledges' finds within 'media practices an existential and political scenario of expression in people's own codes, symbols, and rituals' (O. Rincón and A. Marroquín, 2020: 45).

children learn to manipulate their own languages, codes, signs, and symbols, gaining power to name the world…[giving] citizens the opportunity to restructure their identities into empowered subjectivities strongly connected to local cultures and driven by well-defined utopias (Rodriguez, 2020: 77). Development discourse during the 20th century commonly disregarded or labelled as backward the culture of subaltern classes (Dutta, 2015). Culture would be incorporated into subsequent incarnations of development discourse, albeit 'tied to reductionist logics of economics…recognizing the importance of culture as an economic resource and as an integral player in economic growth' (Dutta, 2015: 126).[4]

Culture has also been discussed as that 'which indicates a specific way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general' (Williams, 1976: 90). Additionally, in what has perhaps 'become the most widespread use of the word culture', describing 'the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity…**culture** is music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film (1976: 90). This second meaning of culture has long been part of alternative and community media practice and theory. For Downing it was important that the 'huge gamut of activities, from street theatre and murals to dance and song' (2001: 8), was also developed interdependently with social movements and with a counter-hegemonic approach. Medellín is home to a flourishing of street art, theatre, music and dance in the face of structural disadvantages and persistent violence. However, this activity must remain non-contestatory amidst the ongoing threat of violence. In turn these social and cultural practices demand a new frame for interpretation, as this thesis seeks to develop through 'counter commoning'.

The question of participation was also central to my approach to this project, both in relation to participatory alternative media as well as participatory research processes. Literature in media studies has at times conceived of participation as a panacea for injustice and resistance. Yet participation is often instrumentalised by powerful actors (for example the Medellín city government), which while providing the appearance of a morally superior approach can risk the reproduction of inequalities even more effectively than top-down approaches (Newman and Clarke, 2009). Crucial therefore, are considerations of power imbalances and the transformational potential of any participatory process (Downing, 2001; Costanza-Chock, 2014). 'Participation washing', or the presentation of research as having involved participation or collaboration without actually redistributing power, has become an

[4] The UNESCO and World Bank commissioned paper *Recognizing culture: A series of briefing papers on culture and development* (2001) notes that 'cultural resources are replacing natural resources as the primary raw material of economic growth' (Matarasso, 2001: 4, cited in Dutta, 2015: 126).

issue of concern and increasingly common amidst contemporary pressure in UK Higher Education to demonstrate quantifiable research 'impact'.[5]

This thesis adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach in order to examine rather than evade this complex issue of participation in academic research, in media theory, and in Medellín. A main objective here was to acknowledge and understand Mi Comuna's work connected to knowledge, representation and the contestation of dominant narratives. Mi Comuna's work unavoidably involves interaction, reflection and participation in different ways, for example through creative activities in the streets of Santa Cruz. Furthermore, through interactive research I sought to bring together different forms of knowledge (experiential and academic) with those who deeply understood the context of Santa Cruz and the media processes of Mi Comuna.

With the declaration of the Covid-19 pandemic two months into the start of my fieldwork, I was faced with the significant challenge of enacting a large part of this plan from a distance and through digital spaces. My iterative approach allowed me to adapt my preliminary plan without descending into confusion, and I sought to make the best of this extraordinary moment to further understand whether these sorts of methods were viable through remote and digital research.

The research questions that I set out to answer in this thesis are therefore as follows:

1. How far and in what ways do the media practices of Mi Comuna open space for communication and dialogue in Medellín, Colombia?
2. What is the role of Mi Comuna's media practices in developing collective memory and local culture in Santa Cruz in Medellin?
3. How do digital media contribute to this work? How has this been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and what are the consequences for RQs 1 and 2?
4. What can Participatory Action Research bring to media research and the exploration of media processes? Is digital and distanced research (during the Covid-19 pandemic) conducive to the democratic and transformative principles of PAR?

[5] The UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF), established in 2008, has since introduced impact measures as part of quality assessments. This has been underlined as 'explicit steering' (Smith et al. 2011: 6; cited in Williams and Grant, 2018: 98) of 'researchers, research units, and universities through strong incentives' (Smith et al. 2011: 6; cited in Williams and Grant, 2018: 98). 'The introduction of impact has thus been re-defining what is meant by 'research excellence' (Watermeyer, 2012), which has vast implications for universities and researchers (Williams and Grant, 2018: 98).

The research site, Santa Cruz in northeast Medellín, Colombia

This section introduces the socio-political context of the research site, the district of Santa Cruz (Comuna 2) in northeast Medellín, Colombia. This social and political context is presented because of its central importance to Mi Comuna's media practice. This thesis will argue that we can only properly understand Mi Comuna and their media processes within the complex context in which they work from the national to the local level. Colombia has a paradoxical history, as Latin America's oldest democracy yet it is also the most war ravaged and the most unequal, with wealth and power dominated by a small elite.

Colombia's long civil war has a violent legacy which impacts the research site of Santa Cruz and Medellín to this day. The civil war led to what García Villegas & de Sousa Santos (2004: 76) describe as 'violence, corruption, social conflicts, [state] weakness, the privatisation of justice, marginality, the vulnerability of social identities...and the collapse of social expectations'. Highly unequal land distribution was a major factor in the establishment in 1964 of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) (Rochlin, 2011). The FARC were Colombia's largest and longest serving guerrilla army, and state failure to deal with their expansion stimulated the growth of paramilitary self-defence forces. Anti-subversion efforts of the paramilitary and state forces would involve the targeting of social leaders, journalists, trade unionists and anyone deemed political, as well as the victimisation of the general population, reflecting counter-insurgency tactics across Latin America (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2005; Taussig, 2006; Vargas, 2009; Indepaz, 2020).

Violence has been a notable characteristic of contemporary Medellín, with the city facing the influence of national and local non state armed actors. By the mid-1980s Medellín had become, according to Colombia's Centro Nacional de Memoria Historica (CNMH), 'a dying city' marked by 'killings, the bombs in public places, the annihilation of left-wing leaders and human rights defenders, the kidnappings, the massacres of whole groups of young people, the terrorist and explosive attacks, the fear and collective anxiety' (CNMH, 2017: 18). During the 1990s, Medellín experienced the urbanisation of war as a strategic zone for both the national civil war and the narcotics trade, which by then had become destructively intertwined. In 1991 Medellín recorded 6,800 killings, one of the highest rates for a city worldwide. The great majority of the victims of homicides were young men between 20 and 24 years old, in what has been described as a generational massacre (CNMH, 2014; Franco, 2009; García et al, 2012). Violence therefore became an everyday reality for the population of Medellín (CNMH, 2014).

State violence in Medellín has at times been as destructive as that committed by non-state armed actors, and has often been oppressive and unequally targeted at poorer districts (Pearce & Abello Colak, 2015). The most notorious episode of state violence in Medellín took place in 2002. 'Operación Orión', one of the largest urban military interventions in the Colombian civil war took place in San Javier (Comuna 13), a district on the western border of Medellín with similar characteristics to Santa Cruz (Comuna 2). Approximately 2000 soldiers and police entered San Javier accompanied by military helicopters, armed vehicles and masked members of the paramilitary group Bloque Cacique Nutibarra. During the siege (which lasted for two days), alongside the capture of supposed collaborators of guerrilla groups, 17 people were killed by the armed forces, 71 people were killed by the paramilitary group, 105 persons were forcefully disappeared, 12 people were tortured, more than 71 were wounded, 370 arbitrary detentions and hundreds of families displaced (CNMH, 2017). A struggle for truth and justice has for many years been brought by the victims of Operación Orión, most notably by the mothers and families of the 105 disappeared persons. Some of the details have been uncovered but many of the disappeared remain unaccounted for.

While a peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC was reached in 2016, a challenging 'post-accord' period has seen much continued violence. This violence has especially targeted individuals identified as social leaders, human rights defenders, or demobilised FARC combatants. On 3 December 2018, the UN special rapporteur on Colombia Michel Forst, stated: 'Since the adoption of a peace agreement in Colombia two years ago, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of killings, threats and intimidation of human rights defenders in the country' (UN Security Council Report, January 2019 Monthly Forecast). The Observatorio de Derechos Humanos y Conflictividades at the Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz (Indepaz, 2023), report that between the signing of the peace agreement in November 2016 and February 2023, 1426 social leaders and human rights defenders have been killed in Colombia. Additionally, there have been 349 recorded killings of demobilised FARC combatants.[6]

Medellín is Colombia's second most populous city, with approximately 2.5 million inhabitants (DANE, 2018). Medellín's rapid population growth, from just under 60,000 inhabitants in 1905, was stimulated by Colombia's violent conflict and the forced displacement of millions

[6] This includes trade unionists, community leaders, indigenous leaders, Afro-Colombian leaders, campesino leaders, LGBT leaders, environmental defenders, human rights defenders. This follows the systematic killings of Unión Patriótica (the political party associated with the FARC) politicians and electoral candidates in the 1980s, and the targeting of demobilized M-19 combatants from the 1990s.

of Colombians from rural zones to urban centres.[7] Santa Cruz (Comuna 2) has a population of over 110,000, the second most densely populated of Medellín's 16 Comunas (districts). Santa Cruz and other districts like it in north Medellín and on the city's eastern and western peripheries, were founded and built by families displaced to Medellín by the armed conflict. The lack of a viable state presence during the founding years of Santa Cruz left incoming migrants with little alternative but to organise and construct their own settlements. The constructions of Santa Cruz are characteristic of the multiple ways that its inhabitants have taken possession of and responsibility for the territory. Alongside the challenges of the lack of a viable state presence, the district has faced persistent violence, structural disadvantages and stigmatisation. Economic and social development and the provision of fundamental services was markedly different in informal neighbourhoods than in the formal districts of Medellín. This was accentuated by inequitable planning policy which disfavoured 'pirate' settlements (Botero, 1996: 522).

Districts like Santa Cruz were described as 'invasions' or as 'pirate settlements' by the state, which opposed their construction (albeit while providing no alternative to displaced migrants). At the outset of Santa Cruz's development residents occasionally had to physically defend their homes from demolition by city officials. Citing a lack of planning permission these officials arrived with force, but with nowhere else to go communities stood in the way and physically defended their homes and territories. Districts like Santa Cruz have since been legalised and recognised by the state, though this initial opposition has contributed to a persistent stigmatisation of districts on Medellín's north, east and western peripheries, which are often referred to pejoratively as 'Las Comunas Populares'.

Medellín is a notoriously classist city which stratifies residents by their neighbourhood as level 0-6 (Santa Cruz includes stratums 0-3). This level denotes on an ostensibly progressive scale the rates paid for utilities and council tax, and even public university fees. However, lower rates are also associated with poorer quality provision and services, and there is much anecdotal evidence of how a low stratum can negatively impact job applications and other opportunities. While university fees are lower if you live in a lower stratum neighbourhood, subsidised places in public universities are highly competitive and oversubscribed, and consequently unattainable for many (Laboratorio de Economía de la Educación, 2021). Healthcare is also under-resourced in districts like Santa Cruz with significant structural poverty (Abello Colak et al, 2021; Medellín Cómovamos, 2021).

[7] Through the past 70 years of armed conflict, an estimated 7 million Colombians have been displaced within Colombia (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2018).

Demographic characteristics including high teenage pregnancies and high numbers of single-parent families, as well as high suicide rates among those aged 20-34, are a part of the significant inequalities that exist between Santa Cruz in Medellín's marginalised north-eastern zone and wealthier districts of the city (Medellín Cómovamos, 2021).

The inhabitants of Santa Cruz are nonetheless a fundamentally important part of the urban fabric of Medellín. Along with the residents of Medellín's other northern comunas; 1, 3, 4 and 5, the inhabitants of Santa Cruz make up the majority part of Medellín's labour force. Key trades include domestic workers, security guards, construction workers and sewing machine operators in the city centre and south, with a substantial movement of people every day from north to south to work and back again.

Persisting challenges of representation and marginalisation

The dominant commercial media of Medellín do not have dedicated reporters or offices based in north Medellín. Many times during my fieldwork I was told that these media are interested in 'la noticia roja' such as crime or violence, but rarely otherwise report on northeast Medellín. This includes Q'hubo, the most popular tabloid newspaper in Medellín and widely read in Santa Cruz. Journalists from the city centre who are unfamiliar with the context of Santa Cruz, nonetheless impact its external perception across Medellín. Outsider commentators may be influenced by fear or prejudice, or by the police or government narrative that labels these places as criminal and illegal.

Negative representations of Santa Cruz and Medellín's other 'comunas populares' have, I was told many times during my fieldwork, impacted the external interventions in the district. For example, interventions such as the military encirclement of barrio el Sinaí in 2020 (discussed in Chapter 7) and the urban military intervention Operación Orión (2002), have at times taken precedence over more constructive state interventions in fundamental services. As recently as 2017, the Mayor of Medellín Federico Gutierrez claimed that the inhabitants of northern Medellín were responsible for the majority of the crime committed in Medellín (discussed further in Chapter 8). And when I lived in Medellín from 2014-2016, as well as during my fieldwork in 2020 and 2021, I regularly encountered negative and fearful perceptions of Santa Cruz (and other 'comunas populares') from those who lived in the centre and south of the city. When the state has intervened in a non-militarised way in northeast Medellín it has often done so without taking into consideration the perspectives or priorities of the residents, for example in the construction of the Biblioteca España, on the

border of Santa Cruz in Popular (Comuna 1). Homes were demolished to build a showpiece library complex on the mountainside named in honour of the King of Spain (Hylton, 2007). Local residents welcomed the investment but called for a less ambitious library alongside other amenities including a new health clinic and a school. Yet the development of a very large and expensive building proceeded. Today the library is closed, the structure was too big and heavy for the steep mountainside on which it was built and reported corruption in the construction process resulted in the use of inferior building materials. As such the library is cracking and shifting and is unsafe to use. Local residents, had they have been allowed to genuinely influence the planning of the development, would have contributed their own knowledge of building on these steep Andean slopes. But they were not listened to, the Mayor's developers from the city centre had their own grand designs to 'integrate the north' of Medellín through a striking project. But it has become a hugely expensive white elephant in this northeast zone of Medellín (Hylton, 2007).

Colombia's mediascape has long been dominated by 'wealthy Colombians deeply entrenched in traditional politics' (Rodriguez, 2011: 25). For example El Tiempo, Colombia's highest circulating broadsheet newspaper and news website (MOM, 2020, Alexa.com, 2020), was owned from 1913-2007 by the Santos family. Eduardo Santos was Colombia's president between 1938 and 1942, while his great nephew Juan Manuel Santos was Colombian President 2010-2018. El Tiempo is now owned by Colombia's wealthiest individual, Luis Carlos Sarmiento (Vice, 2015, La Silla Vacía, 2017, Rathbone, 2013). Sarmiento also owns the free newspaper title ADN, distributed widely across Colombia's main cities, along with multiple magazines and website-based outlets.[8] El Espectador, Colombia's second highest circulating newspaper, is owned by another significant media proprietor, Alejandro Santodomingo, who also owns Caracol, one of Colombia's principal television and radio networks, as well as Blue Radio.[9] The tabloid newspaper Q'hubo has the highest circulation among print media of 38 per cent of readers. The free paper ADN has 24 per cent, followed by El Tiempo newspaper and the weekly Semana magazine on 16 per cent each. El Colombiano, the regional newspaper printed in Medellín, is at 4 per cent along with the national newspaper El Espectador. Q'hubo and El Colombiano are both owned by the Gómez and Hernández family (MOM, 2022).

[8] Sarmiento's Grupo Aval controls the largest financial organisation in Colombia as well as banking, pensions, insurance and infrastructure businesses (Abril, 2020; Rathbone, 2013).
[9] Santodomingo is also the owner of the large supermarket chain D1, financial, cinema and drinks companies and made a large donation to the successful 2018 presidential campaign of the ex-President Ivan Duque (Abril, 2020; Las 2 Orillas, 2018).

The Monitorio de Medios de Colombia (MOM, 2020) states that 57 per cent of the print, broadcast and online media are owned by Colombia's three wealthiest businessmen.[10] In 2019, Reporters Without Borders stated that the 'media's close links to Colombia's business empires and political class undermines their editorial independence and reinforces self-censorship' (RSF, 2019). One notable example of 'self-censorship' was in 2019 when it emerged that an important investigation into the Colombian military abuses had been temporarily shelved by the *Semana* magazine while it held discussions with then President Ivan Duque (Quiñones-Moncaleano, 2020). The story was released by the *New York Times* (Casey, 2019), but it remains unclear whether this investigation would have emerged otherwise.[11]

Critical journalism in Colombia has historically been hazardous, with Colombia ranked in 145th in the World Press Freedom Index 2022 (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Reporters Without Borders stated in 2019 that journalists continue to be 'permanently threatened by criminal gangs and paramilitaries…Death threats are common and physical attacks or abduction are a factor, particularly in rural areas, where persisting guerrilla armed groups react violently to attempts by alternative or community media to cover their activities' (Reporters Without Borders, 2018). In 2013, Ricardo Calderon, a prize-winning investigative editor of *Semana*, faced an assassination attempt linked to an investigation being undertaken into the military (Cardona, 2013).

Grassroots media processes have a long and rich history in Colombia, since 1947 when Colombian liberation theologian José Joaquín Salcedo founded Latin America's first 'alternative radio' station, *Radio Sutatenza* (Rodriguez, 2011: 26). The station ran for 43 years until 1990 as a 'radio school for illiterate adults in rural [Colombia]' (Rodriguez, 2011:

[10] The Monitoreo de Medios (MOM) provides an analysis of the broader reach of media through the different mediums in Colombia. Television: Caracol Television has the highest viewing figures, regularly watched by 72 per cent of viewers. RCN television has 60 per cent, while Citytv (*El Tiempo*'s channel) has 13 per cent. The publicly owned but independently run channels, Canal Uno and Señal Colombia, have 4 per cent and 3 per cent viewing figures respectively. On 3 per cent and 2 per cent viewing figures are the regional television broadcasters including Canal Capital and Teleantioquia (both publicly owned) and Telepacifico and Telecaribe (both privately owned). Radio: Olímpica Stereo has the highest listenership in Colombia, at 21 per cent of listeners, followed by Caracol Radio (13 per cent), W Radio (9 per cent), LA FM (8 per cent), Blue Radio (6 per cent), RCN La Radio (6 per cent). The largest non-private radio station is the Radio Policia Nacional, which has 4 per cent in terms of listeners (MOM, 2020, see also Estudio General de Medios, 2014). El Tiempo is the most visited general news website, followed by Minuto.30.com, El Espectador and Semana. Noticias RCN, El Colombiano follow, with Las 2 Orillas the largest the 'alternative' or 'independent' media websites behind them (MOM, 2020, Alexa.com, 2020).

[11] Lucrative advertising revenues may be another factor in the 'self-censorship' of the mainstream commercial media. For example, in 2013 journalist Daniel Pardo lost his job at KienyKe internet news site after publishing a critical piece about Pacific Rubiales, a Colombian-Canadian oil company which had bought significant advertising space across Colombian media (Rathbone, 2013).

26), including educational and healthcare programming (Osorio y Vargas, 2019). This focus on popular education became a core element of a burgeoning alternative media across Latin America, inspired by liberation theology[12] and the work of Paolo Freire in resistance to war, poverty and injustice. Colombian community media organisations come 'in every style and form, from banal replicas of commercial radio and television, to fascinating experiments in citizens' media and participatory communication' (Rodriguez, 2011: 31). Linares Sánchez (2018: 245) described how these organisations have emerged in response to top-down media models, generating 'spaces of real dialogue and communication based social awareness and criticality, and thought as a form of communication and popular education'. On 5 September 2019, el Día Nacional de la Radio, there were 626 'community' radio stations featuring daily programming in 602 municipalities of Colombia (Osorio and Vargas, 2019). In 2008 there were '553 community television stations, and 26 indigenous radio stations' (Rodriguez, 2011: 28). The case of the Mi Comuna media collective, sits within this rich tapestry of community, alternative, independent and citizens' media organisations in Colombia. My methodological approach to researching with Mi Comuna in northeast Medellín is outlined in the next section.

Methodological approach to researching with Mi Comuna in Santa Cruz

Planned within a framework of Participatory Action Research (PAR), my methodological approach sought to undertake interactive rather than extractive research. This approach was informed by my previous work with community media and research with PAR in Medellín and the UK, and my own background and positionality operating in the context of northeast Medellín, a place that has been both subjected to violence and represented as violent. My approach sought to recognise the 'accumulated history of research used in extractive ways' (Pearce, 2008: 15), particularly between European or north American research focusing on the so called 'global South', but also within Medellín or the UK in relation to places facing structural disadvantages. As a privileged, western, male researcher entering a research site that has faced marginalisation and stigmatisation, it was important for me to build trust that I was not seeking to extract knowledge or to sensationalise narratives of violence in northeast Medellín. Significant here was the fact that I had worked previously with another community media organisation in Medellín between 2014 and 2016, where I had developed a prior connection with Mi Comuna. Additionally, the Mi Comuna team, who are deeply committed

[12] Liberation theologists attested that 'the Christian Gospel requires that Catholics support the struggles of the poor for freedom and economic justice. Many Catholics, especially in South America, have advocated a mixture of faith and social activism as part of their religious commitment' (Rodriguez, 2001: 57).

to regular reflection and learning on their action, were keen that any research include them and be returned to them, rather than be conducted on them from a distance. Nevertheless, I sought to remain mindful of power differentials and oppressions throughout the research (Friere, 1970) and be aware that as an external researcher my background, positionality, preliminary framing of the research and restricted timeframe would inevitably impact the process (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2010).

PAR is part of a genealogy of participatory methodologies that challenge the assertion of positivism that the goal of scientific research is to uncover universal, objective truths and value-free facts. Rather it is maintained that scientific knowledge is based on relative truths and always carries implicitly the 'biases and values which scientists hold as a group' (Fals-Borda, 1991: 7). In turn, knowledge will always favour those 'who produce and control it' (ibid). Considering my prior experience working in Medellín with residents of the city's peripheral neighbourhoods facing structural disadvantages (discussed further in Chapter 3), pertinent are approaches to knowledge that explicitly recognise that 'those who have been *most* systematically excluded, oppressed or denied carry specifically revealing wisdom about the history, structure, consequences and the fracture points in unjust social arrangements' (Cammarota and Fine, 2008: 215). I therefore aimed to bring together different forms of knowledge (experiential and academic) by undertaking research in a collaborative way with those who deeply understood the context of Santa Cruz and the media processes of Mi Comuna. This 'sum of knowledge' would generate knowledge 'much closer to reality than [through] any extractive research' (Abello Colak & Pearce, 2015: 212), and feasibly combine 'social scientific knowledge with non-scientific, popular, vernacular knowledge' (while avoiding romanticisation of the latter) (Bhambra and Santos, 2017: 4-5).

As Covid-19 reshaped the world at the outset of my fieldwork, significant challenges were encountered in the enacting of collaborative and interactive knowledge production. Given the particularly challenging circumstances for Mi Comuna during 2020-2021, the capacity of the organisation for strong participation in the research was restricted. Principles key to the PAR tradition, including flexibility and reciprocity, were of crucial importance to the undertaking of my research through difficult conditions and an extraordinary conjuncture. The approach enabled me to adapt the research and to develop strong relationships within Mi Comuna even amidst crisis moments and the difficulties of distance and digital interface. Despite this, during moments when I was distanced from northeast Medellín during the Covid-19 lockdowns, and as my fieldwork ended and I entered the final writing stage of the PhD project, my positionality as an external researcher was evident. For example, during the initial Covid-19 lockdowns in 2020, I shared experience from organisations and community

media in the UK who were shifting work into digital spaces and communicated the developments of Covid-19 guidelines and advice in Europe, where the first wave of infections was a few months ahead of Medellín. Yet due to the very different socio-economic contexts and digital access, comments from a researcher positioned in a very different situation were not always useful or suitable. I worked hard to balance the undertaking of collaborative research with the expectations on me to produce a sole-authored thesis written in English within a set timeframe, though this issue required much reflection and adaptation. Despite many challenges through the 2020-2021 Covid-19 conjuncture, I was able to contribute to the work of a busy and dedicated organisation and to gain empirical understanding of social and media practices in the process. Being part of the work of Mi Comuna through this significant moment, in the space of the Casa, in the streets of Santa Cruz and in digital spaces, allowed me to recognise the social relations, the commoning, at the centre of their work, in a way that would have been unattainable for a researcher observing 'objectively' from an external standing. This research process with Mi Comuna during this extraordinary moment, produced several important findings, which are outlined in the following section.

What this thesis argues: from media to social practices and counter commoning

There has been substantial scholarship investigating community, alternative and citizens' media, prompted particularly by the proliferation and impact of digital communications technologies, and their adoption in notable social and protest movements (Downing, 2001; Atton, 2002; Rodriguez, 2001, 2011; Stephansen and Treré, 2020; Baker, Blaagaard & Jones, 2021). Alternative media that is anti-capitalist, counter-hegemonic, diverse, inclusive and small scale (2002: 25) is centred in Atton's seminal work *Alternative Media* (2002). Through a Gramscian (1971) emphasis on resistance, Downing describes radical alternative media as those that 'express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives' (2001: v). Rodriguez's work amidst civil war in Colombia spoke to the way that community and alternative media practitioners operate creatively to bring people back together in the midst of violent conflict. (2001, 2011). It is indeed a distinct proposition to be anti-capitalist or counter-hegemonic in this sort of context (that is far from an idealised Western liberal democratic public sphere, Fenton, 2016).

Through research into the case of the Mi Comuna media collective in northeast Medellín, this thesis explores creative, artistic, itinerant, street based practices, and those linked to memory work which generate collective reflection about common histories. This memory

work is not simply nostalgic or melancholic, nor is it centred on histories of violence or human rights abuses (Kaiser, 2020). This thesis builds on commons theory (Ostrom, 1990; Harvey, 2012; Birkinbine, 2018; Federici & Caffentzis, 2019) in relation to Mi Comuna's practices opening space for communication, interaction and dialogue in their Casa and in the streets of Santa Cruz. This is not a commons in the liberal sense, the bounding and management of a valuable natural resource (e.g. Alpine grazing fields or the Maine lobster catch, Federici, 2019). The commons as an idea has indeed 'come to cover a proliferation of proposals, some highly radical, but also some reformist, and others even potentially reactionary' (De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2010: 31, cited in Freedman and Fenton, 2020: 156). Accordingly the frame of *commoning* is useful, representing the understanding of the commons not 'merely as sets of things or resources, but as social relations' (Fernández, 2021: 75; see also Harvey, 2012; Federici & Caffentzis, 2019). Birkinbine (2018) has developed the concept of 'subversive commoning', going beyond reformist frameworks to actively appropriate 'resources away from capital and the state into circuits of commons value' (Birkinbine, 2018: 290), or release 'knowledge and information that has been closed off from public access' (Birkinbine, 2018: 303).

The formulation of 'counter commoning' builds on the concept of 'subversive commoning', and is distinctive in two fundamental ways. First, amidst a history of violence in Colombia, in particular the ties between state and non-state armed groups and the ongoing violence targeting social leaders and young people, there remains risk to and wariness of being perceived as 'subversive' or 'political'. These sorts of creative and emboldening activities were largely unattainable during the extraordinary moment of Covid-19 lockdowns and through digital spaces, highlighting how 'counter commoning' is only possible when it engenders forms of qualitatively meaningful sociality and relationality.

The term sociality has been utilised in many distinct ways, 'ranging from the experience of co-presence with other humans, as in a crowded cinema (Chau 2006) to the forming of politically motivated associational communities (Sunder Rajan 2008)' (Long and Moore, 2012: 41). Sociality has been described as 'the essence of human interaction and the shared context of practical activity' (Saxinger, 2021, 196). Long and Moore's conceptualisation of human sociality is as 'a dynamic relational matrix within which human subjects are constantly interacting in ways that are co-productive, continually plastic and malleable, and through which they come to know the world they live in and find their purpose and meaning within it' (Long and Moore, 2012: 41). This work traces an anthropological tradition from Strathern et al. (1990: 8-10), who posited that 'sociality be understood as 'the relational matrix which constitutes the life of persons', who in turn should be apprehended as

‘simultaneously containing the potential for relationships and always embedded in a matrix of relationships with others’ (Strathern et al. 1990: 8–10, cited in Long and Moore, 2012: 41). Long and Moore (2012) build on this tradition, along with ‘recent theories of actor-networks and affect’ in its recognition that this ‘dynamic matrix of relations [is] with human, non-human, and inhuman others, but combines this recognition with attention to the distinctive capacities of human subjects’ (40). This thesis argues that Mi Comuna’s interactive and creative activities in the Casa and the streets of Santa Cruz may have ‘opened up new possibilities’ for Santa Cruz and ‘its sociality might be changed for the better in years to come’ (Long and Moore, 2012: 45-6).

A second distinguishing characteristic of ‘counter commoning’ relates to knowledge and the evoking of collective memory and histories of cooperative building in Santa Cruz. This is distinct from the releasing of ‘knowledge and information that has been closed off from public access’ (Birkinbine, 2018: 303). Instead in Santa Cruz this is linked to the uncovering and recognition of knowledge that may have been silenced by more dominant mediated representations of northeast Medellín. This sort of knowledge can emerge in spaces for communication and dialogue opened by Mi Comuna in the Casa and in the streets of Santa Cruz. Mi Comuna’s work here is inspired by what Paolo Freire (1970) called a ‘dialogue of knowledges’ which recognises that ‘each can learn and make proposals from his/her world, experiences and aesthetics’ (O. Rincón and A. Marroquín, 2020: 44). Building on Freire, Rodriguez (2020: 72) states that spaces for communication and dialogue can enable ‘subjects who activate their own languages, use those languages to resignify their reality, and develop ways to move those interpretations of reality into the public sphere’. Opening space for dialogue has led to the evoking, sharing and recognition of collective memories of the cooperative founding of neighbourhoods, which can challenge dominant mediated realities and negative representations of Santa Cruz. This is particularly difficult in a city like Medellín where official narratives or ‘institutional memory’ tell a story of top-down innovation and pacification, or continue to denigrate places like Santa Cruz as backward or violent.

Researching the case of Mi Comuna in northeast Medellín, this thesis also contributes to contemporary debates of place and territory. *La defensa del territorio,* a subject for debate and organising throughout my fieldwork, is theorised in this thesis as a cultural politics of recognition and collective constitutive power, celebrating the common histories and traditions of building and bringing people together around food and music. This work builds on Halvorsen’s (2018) ‘open’ definition of territory: ‘the appropriation of space in pursuit of political projects – in which multiple political strategies exist, from bottom-up grassroots to top-down state, as overlapping and entangled (2018: 2). In Santa Cruz, faced with an

expanding state political strategy, and the well-established but distinct dominating power of the armed groups, Mi Comuna's work is part of a 'bottom-up grassroots' political strategy. Given the contemporary settlement and overwhelmingly urbanised habitat of Santa Cruz, the defence of this territory is distinct from struggles of Colombian indigenous and afro-descendent communities defending land of their ancestral territory from for example, resource exploitation. (So too notable examples of indigenous resistance in Latin America, such as the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, whose creative use of alternative media and digital media technologies is well documented). In Santa Cruz there is a real demand for constructive state intervention in this densely populated district. Nonetheless there is an understanding of this territory distinct from capitalist logics of accumulation (and dispossession for urban regeneration). A distinct connection to territory in Santa Cruz is contested, particularly as the founding generation ages, the state influence increases, and memories of founding and resistance risk being lost.

An outline of the structure of the thesis follows below.

Thesis outline

The next chapter interrogates relevant literature in media studies to challenge 1) The notion of participation as a panacea for injustice and resistance; 2) The way 'community' has been romanticised and instrumentalised from below and above; and 3) the enduring alignment to liberal democracy in a western frame as inappropriate to the contexts of this research. A focus on power is crucial to the analysis in this chapter, approached as a dynamic concept based in the social, political and cultural context and not reduced to binary debates of mass media corporations on the one hand and 'emancipatory' community media on the other. In seeking to build a framework through which to understand media practices in the research site, I present concepts including collective memory and cultural politics as complementary to theories of community, alternative and citizens' media. I argue these tools can enable better understanding of the generation of transformational practices amidst a context of disparaging narratives about informally built urban settlements, and the ongoing threat of violence. These ideas and concepts share a focus on social and collaborative practices. The chapter argues that these ideas guide us to an additional important theoretical element, that of the commons and 'counter commoning'.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodological approach and research design of this project, which were planned and then iterated as Covid-19 reshaped the world at the outset of my fieldwork. Chapter 4 introduces in more detail the socio-political context of the research site,

the Santa Cruz district in northeast Medellín, Colombia. The chapter discusses the Colombian conflict and its consequences, arguing the importance of the social and political context to the work of Mi Comuna and to the ongoing processes they are part of. This context includes the collaborative construction of districts like Santa Cruz by displaced migrants fleeing the armed conflict, who received little help from the state and have faced structural disadvantages and stigmatisation since. This socio-political context, characterised by violence or limited state presence, denigrating narratives and grassroots responses, is central to the practices of Mi Comuna.

In Chapter 5 this thesis moves to the analysis and interpretation of fieldwork data concerning the collective opening, development and defence of Mi Comuna's *Casa para el Encuentro Eduardo Galeano*. This chapter highlights this protective and emboldening space as a key foundation of Mi Comuna's broader media practice. The social relations central to the Casa are theorised as 'counter commoning', key characteristics of which include the creation of a safe, accessible and intimate space, responding to a scarcity of appropriate spaces for assembly in Santa Cruz. Within the walls of the Casa, described as '*a space to dream and construct*', the sharing of music, food and theatre prefigure a more creative and harmonious Medellín.

Chapter 6 discusses Mi Comuna's street based methodologies, an important part of their work generating communication, interaction and reflection with residents of Santa Cruz. Central to this work are social activities in the streets or squares of different neighbourhoods, outside the homes of those that Mi Comuna might not otherwise reach in their Casa, in more institutional spaces or in digital spaces. Participation has been actively sought yet not romanticised or overstated. Mi Comuna have worked creatively to include different publics while recognising the limitations people face and the way that participation has at times been instrumentalised by the state. These methodologies can demonstrate 'alternative experiences and definitions of 'communication'' (Stephansen, 2016: 34), reanimate public spaces impacted by violence (Rodriguez, 2011) and begin to challenge dominant mediated realities of Santa Cruz. The chapter discusses Mi Comuna's 'memory work' practices, building collective memory as a key part of countering negative representations of Santa Cruz. Opening space for dialogue has led to the evoking, sharing and recognition of collective memories of the cooperative founding of neighbourhoods. This can be understood as an 'exemplary memory' (Todorov 1995), recognising the past to shape the present and the future.

Chapter 7 focuses on Mi Comuna's work in digital spaces and in the stark context of the 2020 Covid-19 lockdowns in northeast Medellín, as Mi Comuna's street based activities were restricted and their Casa closed. During this extraordinary situation as Medellín was locked down, certain groups were either locked out or locked in to digital spaces. The structurally disadvantaged are locked out; the advantaged are 'locked in' and when everyone is 'locked down' whether you are in or out is experienced very differently. Digital technologies, digital spaces and 'social' media platforms have been associated with facilitating participation and enhancing the possibilities of social movements and alternative media alike. Mi Comuna's technical proficiency with digital technologies enabled them to lobby the city government, gather and disseminate information, and recreate cultural and artistic events in digital spaces, for which they gained recognition from across Medellín. But Mi Comuna faced significant challenges in reproducing in digital spaces the sort of engaging, creative and interactive activities they had been developing in the Casa and in the streets of Santa Cruz. Insufficient access in Santa Cruz to the connections, the devices or the digital literacy was an important factor, particularly with the children Mi Comuna regularly work with. Just as significant were the difficulties replicating in digital spaces the creative and emboldening activities that generated interaction between participants, as had been possible with activities in the Casa or in the streets of Santa Cruz.

The final analysis chapter of this thesis brings these themes together, arguing that Mi Comuna's practice contributes to a cultural politics of recognition and collective constitutive power. This is not a politics in the restricted sense of state institutions, seen 'exclusively in terms of struggles of power at the level of the nation-state' (Nash, 2002: 85). The complex dynamics of power in Santa Cruz have been shaped through the collective construction of neighbourhoods, an absence of state sovereignty, and violence from state and non-state actors. Amidst this context Mi Comuna's work has become inhabited in creative practices, presented as non-contestatory to those holding power.

Analysis in this chapter focuses principally on two areas of Mi Comuna's work. Firstly, the chapter explores Mi Comuna's work in the face of top-down planning and infrastructure interventions from the state. This work must be undertaken in a non-contestatory rather than openly counter-hegemonic way, and is not a co-optation of culture in communication processes to facilitate top-down development interventions (Dutta, 2015). Rather this is a cultural politics strongly connected to place, often described in Mi Comuna as *la defensa del territorio*. Mi Comuna actively support the cultivation of a more assured territorial identity in response to everyday social challenges and denigrating external narratives. In the context of Santa Cruz this work is fundamentally connected to the territory and to the social

organisation that has enabled these neighbourhoods to flourish amidst violence and structural inequalities. This work enables residents here to, individually and collectively, identify as subjects of these neighbourhoods and this territory in a positive rather than a fatalistic way. Secondly, the chapter explores Mi Comuna's creative practices which engage young people in educational activity in the streets and in the *Casa para el Encuentro Eduardo Galeano*. This creative and educational practice becomes yet more relevant and captivating when it prompts collective reflection about life in Santa Cruz.

The concluding chapter of this thesis presents an overview of the discussions and debates in preceding chapters, examining how they have responded to the research questions. The chapter reflects on the knowledge that has emerged through this research process and contemplates the significant hurdles and challenges faced researching with a community organisation in Colombia during the Covid-19 moment. The chapter considers the implications of this research, including the importance of a focus on social practices, the contribution of the media elements within Mi Comuna to relationship building and shared understandings. Rather than focusing on whether the media is participatory, radical or counter-hegemonic, this research directs our attention to the commons-building practices that function through the media forms. These commons-building practices may be non-contestatory, but they are not about consensus building. They are framed as 'counter commoning' because they deal with dissensus and discord and seek to contend with and defy normative understandings of place and space. Amidst many challenges in Medellín and beyond, including poverty and inequality, climate breakdown, displacement and war, we urgently need commoning practices to be more than just liberal or reformist. Culture and memory are significant here, critical to enabling counter commoning to emerge in non-contestatory and captivating ways. Evidence presented in this thesis indicates that recreating these social practices online is very difficult. While this practice and experience is specific to Mi Comuna, the context of Santa Cruz and the Covid-19 moment, it is nonetheless significant for those fields that see online media forms as offering ready and effective means of resistance and social change.

Chapter 2

Theoretical framework: from community and participation to culture, memory and the commons

Introduction

There are several bodies of literature that are relevant to the subject of this thesis but work in the areas of alternative and community media are key. This chapter interrogates relevant literature in media studies to challenge 1. The notion of participation as a panacea for resistance to tackle injustice; 2. The way 'community' has been romanticised and instrumentalised from below and above; and 3. the enduring alignment to liberal democracy in a Western frame as inappropriate to the context of this research. A focus on power is also crucial to the analysis in this chapter. But power is here approached as a dynamic concept based in the social, political and cultural context and not reduced to binary debates of mass media corporations on the one hand and 'emancipatory' community media on the other.

This chapter begins by exploring how alternative and community media theory have centred participation as key to the emancipatory potential of media (Atton, 2001). Sometimes this is referred to as 'participatory media' (Fairey, 2018; Bau, 2015). Media scholarship has however idealised participation in and of itself (Fairey, 2018), with scholars focusing too often on clearly demonstrable short-term outcomes rather than the long-term impacts that develop for example through critical consciousness (understood as in-depth understanding of the world and perception of its social and political contradictions) (Costanza-Chock, 2014). Rather than participation for its own sake, the 'critical tools' of communication and dialogue (key to Freire's formulation of comunicación popular), can enable 'subjects who activate their own languages, use those languages to resignify their reality, and develop ways to move those interpretations of reality into the public sphere' (Rodriguez, 2020: 72). It is important to situate the study of (participatory) media at the heart of social tensions and struggles and in their political, economic and cultural context (Fenton, 2016). Furthermore, under neoliberal conditions in which participation is often instrumentalised, this project concurs with scholars (e.g. Downing, 2001; Costanza-Chock, 2014) that argue radical alternative media must be connected to a transformational or counter-hegemonic approach.

It is argued that the retheorization of 'movements and the media as interlocking systems' (Costanza-Chock et al., 2017: 195) can enable better comprehension of how media projects can create space for the development of critical consciousness and leadership (Freire, 1970;

Costanza-Chock, 2017). This thesis will explore how in northeast Medellín, where historic state and non-state violence has impacted social movements and those seen as 'political', community media develop creative, non-contestatory practices to avoid confrontation. Moreover, that media practices open space for reflection about histories of cooperative building and defence of neighbourhoods, strengthening understanding and belonging amidst conditions of marginalisation and stigmatisation. This work corresponds to Freire's conception of praxis, 'the means whereby one stands back from what one lives through to obtain critical distance, thus engaging in reflection for collective action…that helps transform the reality in question' (Mayo, 2019: 310).[13] In seeking to build a framework through which to understand these social and media practices, here I introduce concepts including 'collective memory' and 'cultural politics' as complementary to theories of community, alternative and citizens' media.

Secondly, this chapter analyses the inherent contradictions of the categorisation and use of 'community' in alternative media studies, both in its nature as an inclusive and exclusive category, and one which can be romanticised or instrumentalised. Media theorists have not always acknowledged that communities are socially constructed and contested spaces (Nossek and Carpentier, 2019). Moreover, community media have been routinely under-analysed due to an idealised assumption of the emancipatory potential of 'community'. Traditional conceptions of communities as defined by ethnicity or geography (Cohen, 1989; Nossek and Carpentier, 2019) are problematic in the research site of this project, where the collective auto-construction of neighbourhoods is a strong determining factor of attachment. Santa Cruz, on the northeast margin of Medellín, was substantially self-built by families displaced to the city by the armed conflict from different regions of Colombia. Yet the residents of this district have been stigmatised by association with Santa Cruz, by mainstream narratives about poverty and informality, violence, crime or underdevelopment. Dominant narratives in Medellín have denigrated these auto-constructed districts, leading some to want to exclude themselves from this place while others work towards celebrating this common history of struggle. Amidst the potential for what Freire (1970) described as a 'culture of silence', discussions of a 'cultural politics of place' and a 'territorial place-based identity' (Harvey, 1993) are considered.

Thirdly, the chapter proceeds to explore how these challenges of comprehending media 'participation' and 'community' have roots in the way that media literature has been often

[13] This is a praxis in Freire's conception linked to pedagogical politics, slightly different from Gramsci's 'philosophy of Praxis', which he contrasted with 'common sense' (Mayo, 2019: 310).

limited by its focus on an idealised liberal democratic sphere which no longer or never existed for marginalised groups in the so called 'global North' and 'global South' (Fenton, 2016). This framework is too accepting of the existing Western structures of institutions and mass media which have been moulded by powerful interests (Fenton, 2016). Moreover, communities impacted by authoritarianism, war or structural violence figure only cursorily in the western 'canon' of alternative and radical media.

Media research on marginalised groups has too often centred on 'development' and top-down processes that are designed, led and evaluated by 'expert' outsiders, often informed by processes in entirely different contexts (Tufte, 2017). Participation has also become so central to orthodox approaches that funders of research and 'development' practice routinely require initiatives to pay lip service to participation, which has often led to contradictory objectives and outcomes. I argue that this instrumentalization of participation, while providing the appearance of a morally superior approach, risks the reproduction of inequalities even more effectively than top-down approaches (Newman and Clarke, 2009). The development dilemma, which magnifies the challenges identified with community and participation, is pertinent to the research context of Santa Cruz in Medellín. Research with groups facing violent conflict or marginalisation in Colombia (amidst its long civil war) and elsewhere has advanced valuable understanding of media processes outside of the liberal democratic sphere, including the concept of citizens' media (Rodriguez, 2001, 2012). Research for the current thesis was undertaken in 2020-21 in Colombia's 'post-conflict' moment in northeast Medellín, an urban settlement impacted by historic state absence, structural disadvantages and persistent violence, and related struggles over narratives and representation.

This chapter also argues that if we start from a position of understanding the 'social, political and economic context' of media processes, and analyse them through the lens of power and how power is produced, we can advance theories that take us beyond the accepted terrain of liberal democratic frameworks (Fenton, 2016; Mouffe, 1992). This is crucial to the experience of marginalisation and stigmatisation in Medellín where the ability to generate power has been seriously compromised. Drawing the ideas and concepts integrated in this chapter together, they share a focus on understanding social and collaborative practices, for example, explaining memory in a collective rather than individualising way, or cultural activities as evoking and celebrating local customs and projects. The final section of the chapter advances ideas concerning the commons and commoning as important theoretical elements to aid the understanding of social relations and practices, the sharing of

knowledge, memories and customs, and the opening of safe and emboldening physical space in the research site.

A participatory, radical or alternative media?

Key scholarship within the field of alternative and radical media has focused on participation as central to more democratic media processes. Participatory media has been recognised as enabling engagement, dialogue, and a collective examination of the issues that affect people (Walsh, 2012; Mitchell, DeLange et al., 2005). Participatory media can open space for storytelling, 'through which individuals attribute meanings to the reality that surround them', which can promote dialogue between people who may not usually interact (Bau, 2015: 127). Costanza-Chock also discusses the 'personal healing potential of storytelling', while also highlighting the lack of understanding of long-term impacts of participatory media projects (2018: 81-82). This may be related to the idealisation or co-optation of participation, which can obscure the contested reality of media processes (Fairey, 2018: 621). A broad range of alternative media publications, channels or instruments, while enabling participation in their composition, have in some cases foregone focus on issues of social and economic injustice (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2014; Downing, 2001). Focus on participatory approaches has been critiqued as liable to 'idealize small-scale production and to neglect orientation toward the political public' (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2010: 174). Fuchs and Sandoval point to 'the danger that small-scale local alternative projects will develop into psychological self-help initiatives without political relevance that are more bourgeois individualist self-expressions than political change projects' (2010: 189). Consequently, the potency of participation in alternative media production has been questioned, particularly in neoliberal conditions which convey greater legitimacy on the individual 'produser' over the collective, not least when facilitated by digital media platforms (Cammaerts, 2016). What participation is for then becomes a key question.

Building on critical theory and historical materialistic approaches, scholars including Downing (2001) have argued that genuinely participatory and radical alternative media must be *inter*dependent with social movements. Nonetheless, scholarship has routinely theorised alternative media and social movements independently, undermining comprehension of the actual forms and processes of participation (Costanza-Chock, 2017; Fenton, 2016). 'Transformative media organizing' is outlined by Costanza-Chock et al. (2017: 180) as a 'liberatory approach to integrating media, communications, and cultural work into movement building.' This media work is based on participatory processes that enable individuals and

organisations to 'build power together…and gain skills, relationships, opportunities to express creativity, and space for healing and growth along the way' (ibid).

Social participation in the 'creation, production and dissemination' of alternative media that is anti-capitalist, counter-hegemonic, diverse, inclusive and small scale (2002: 25) is centred in Atton's seminal work *Alternative Media* (2002). Atton advocates for the 'alternative media' definition 'out of a desire to range more widely in [his] examination of media practices' (2015: 6). Alongside the more explicitly politicised media at the heart of Downing's *Radical Media* (2001)[14], Atton highlights arts-based publications that either provided platforms for 'creative practice itself (short stories, poetry, comic books) or as opportunities for audiences…to make public what is most often a private or narrow social activity: talking about music, films, television, books, sport' (2015: 6). Atton incorporates Williams' notion of 'democratic communication', with origins that are 'genuinely multiple…[where] all the sources have access to the common channels…[and where those involved are able] to communicate, to achieve…[a]ctive reception and living response' (Williams, 1963: 304; cited by Atton, 2002: 9).

Amidst the growth of digital media technologies and the materialization of web 2.0, perspectives on the empowering relationship between the digital and alternative media have been interspersed with flourishes of optimism and pessimism. As Gilbert (2020: 154-6) explains, enthusiasts have highlighted the 'democratic and liberating potential' of digital communications technologies, particularly the potential affordances for 'community-building, democratic mobilization and creative expression'. The generation of international solidarity toward the Zapatista uprising is an important and often-cited example of the potential of digital communications technologies and alternative media. Also the utilization of social media platforms in the so called 'Arab Spring', as well as by social movements in Greece and Spain in the early 2010s (Gerbaudo, 2012). But while the use of digital communications technologies and social networking sites undoubtedly played an important role in these uprisings, it is important to acknowledge that these events were influenced by their distinct historical, cultural, social and economic contexts (Fenton, 2016).[15] Notable sceptics (e.g.

[14] Downing (2015) describes his research on radical media as 'rather narrowly obsessed with the relation between media of all kinds and struggles for social justice, and against racism and war' (2015: 100).

[15] Here Fenton cites Barnett's (2011) caution against 'revolutionary universalism' and the call from Bayat (2010) 'to consider contextual factors, conditions and causal processes. For Bayat, events in Tunisia and Egypt and beyond are indicative of processes of rapid urbanization and the associated socio-cultural developments of increasing literacy, high levels of education, professionalization, changing gender relations, the emergence of a middle-class poor and other new forms of inequality, and, yes, the development of new media cultures' (Fenton, 2016: 48-9).

Zuboff, Davies, Couldry & Mejias) have meanwhile highlighted 'the socially, politically and psychologically deleterious consequences of unchecked digital capitalism' (Gilbert, 2020: 156), accompanied by the increased powers of surveillance (for example of social movements) by states and corporations, and the potential atomizing effects of social media. Amidst this complex and rapidly evolving environment, I echo Gilbert in considering that 'some of the most thoughtful of the most recent commentary…makes deliberate efforts to avoid simplistically 'utopian' or 'dystopian' claims as to the political effects of new media technologies (Fenton; Treré)' (Gilbert, 2020: 157).

Amidst this contemporary context of 'communicative abundance' afforded by digital media technologies, Mowbray (2015) stresses the need to 'differentiate *superficial* modes of participation from…*intensive* modes.' (24) 'Superficial modes' are linked to Dean's notion of 'communicative capitalism' which both 'produces and thrives upon a 'fantasy of participation'' (Dean, 2009: 109-110; cited in Mowbray, 2015: 24). In Dean's formulation 'our individual desire to see our contributions take a place in the circulation of content online works to displace real-world struggles, and technology acts as a fetish, helping us understand ourselves as active' (Mowbray, 2015: 24), even as inequality grows and personal privacy is squeezed (Barassi, 2020). Cammaerts also warns against a more pronounced focus on individuals as alternative 'produsers', as free labourers, as activists and advocates, with less attention being paid to the collective dimensions and internal structures' of media producing organisations (2016: 2). Highlighting the pitfalls for online participatory media lacking social change objectives, Atton (2015: 11) argues: 'in light of social media, features that once made alternative media unique - open access, interactivity, mobility - are now commonplace'.

The presence of a counter-hegemonic approach within participatory media, that it should work interdependently with social movements, is the focus of Downing's concept of *radical media* (1984, 2001). Centring a Gramscian (1971) emphasis on resistance, Downing describes radical alternative media as those that 'express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives' (2001: v). Downing has explored the 'radical uses of the technologies of radio, video, press, and internet' and also the 'huge gamut of activities, from street theatre and murals to dance and song' (2001: 8), foregrounding not the type of media, the specific technology used or the mere presence of participation, but rather the interdependence with social movements and its counter-hegemonic approach. In the research site of Santa Cruz, hegemonic narratives and perspectives have so often maligned the district's informal development or centred on crime or violence. Countering these narratives is important to those who have built and live in these neighbourhoods. Yet amidst

historical connections between state and non-state armed groups and the ongoing violence targeting social leaders and young people, there remains risk to being perceived as 'subversive' or counter-hegemonic. Thus, the countering of hegemonic narratives, perspectives and priorities must but undertaken in a non-contestatory rather than oppositional way, for example through practices bound up in cultural activities and collective memory, as this thesis explores in forthcoming chapters.

Concepts of collective memory (Halbwach, 1992) and mediated memories (van Dijck, 2007, 2011) are useful to the comprehension of these practices in cultural and memory work in Santa Cruz. As Kuhn argues, memory work can contribute to 'unearthing and making public untold stories...the lives of those whose ways of knowing and seeing the world are rarely acknowledged, let alone celebrated, in the expressions of a hegemonic culture' (Kuhn, 2002: 9, cited in MacDonald et al, 2015: 107). The concept of 'collective memory' posits that memory is social and exists both within and beyond the individual. The individual's understanding of the past is substantially linked to a group consciousness in which members of a group contribute different perspectives and memories. 'What makes recent memories hang together is not that they are contiguous in time: it is rather that they are part of a totality of thought common to a group, the group of people with whom we have a relation at this moment, or with whom we have had a relation on the preceding day or days' (Halbwach, 1992: 52, cited in MacDonald et al, 2015: 105). van Dijck has developed a focus on the cultural aspect of collective memory, pointing to the absence in Halbwach's work 'of a specific consideration of cultural frameworks, technologies and processes as the means through which both personal and collective identities are shaped' (MacDonald et al, 2015: 107.) van Dijck (2007, 2011) has in turn developed the concept of 'mediated memories' which are 'the activities and objects we produce and appropriate by means of media technologies, for creating and re-creating a sense of past, present and future of ourselves in relation to others' (van Dijck, 2007: 21 cited in MacDonald et al, 2015: 106-107). According to MacDonald et al (2015), projects in collective memory can in the right conditions enable 'individuals and groups without access to large-scale economic and symbolic resources [to] challenge their general lack of recognition' (MacDonald et al, 2015: 105).[16] Through the lens of these complementary ideas, I seek to better understand collaborative work that evokes and shares memory in order to build counter-narratives to the dominant denigrating representations of Santa Cruz. Media technologies are important to the archiving and sharing of these narratives and related movement building work. But as this thesis explores

[16] This research focused on Salford, a place facing the 'disruption and discontinuity of regeneration and displacement' (MacDonald et al, 2015: 105).

in empirical chapters (particularly Chapter 5 and 6), activities and practices in concrete spaces are key to enabling the collective evoking and sharing of these memories and histories. While these media practices actively seek to generate 'participation', this is not romanticised or overstated amidst the limitations on capacity that local residents face and the way that tokenistic participation has been instrumentalised by the city government.

Alternative to what?

The definition of media as 'alternative' has also hampered scholarship which 'finds itself seduced by the need to constantly describe and map what it is, as distinct from what it is not' (Fenton, 2016, 10).[17] Thus I follow Fenton (2016) and Kejval (2010) in arguing that alternative media 'must be analyzed and understood within their own particular economic, political, cultural, and social contexts' (Kejval, 2010) and 'through the lens of power' (Fenton, 2016: 11). Like Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier (2008), Vinelli and Rodríguez Esperón (2004) consider alternative media to be 'an ongoing practice, not a state of being, making a fixed definition not only impossible but also undesirable, given dynamic, contextual alternative media that change depending on local specificities' (Harlow, 2015: 3723).

Being 'alternative' is therefore heavily dependent on the societal context. Alternative media has often been framed within an idealised conception of Western liberal democracy and contrasted with what Dean describes as the 'corporate oligopolies' controlling 'large sections of the mainstream, mass market media' (2007: 207). Yet the framing of the 'alternative' (and participating within it) is wholly different in circumstances of, for example, civil war or military dictatorships in Latin America which held strict control over the media and, since the 1980s, sweeping neoliberal reforms that privatized media, often in a highly concentrated way (Hintz, 2011). Through the Colombian civil war, reporters and media organisations have been censored, threatened, stigmatised and assassinated by state and non-state armed actors (Reporters Without Borders, 2018). In these conditions, community media approaches have needed to appear as non-contestatory, often involving art, music and performance instead.

Furthermore, it is important to avoid simplifying the framework of power, to conceive of power as 'a binary opposition between the powerful versus the powerless' (Rodriguez, 2001: 11). In this scenario, media scholars have disregarded alternative media as 'failures', 'fragmented', or 'dispersed' (Portales, 1983; Paiva, 1983; cited in Rodriguez, 2001: 12), or

[17] A principal critique of the broader definition of 'alternative' media is that it is 'almost oxymoronic. Everything, at some point, is alternative to something else' (Downing, 2001: ix).

having too little impact on mass media (O'Sullivan-Ryan and Kaplún, 1978). Rodriguez (2001, 2011) explores the limiting nature of these binaries and oppositional thinking, stating that the 'alternative media' concept limits the understanding of these media to 'their ability to resist the alienating powers of mainstream media', an approach which impairs our comprehension of the 'other instances of change and transformation brought about by these media' (2001: 20).

Exploring the key task of properly analysing the relationship between social movement studies and the media, Fenton (2016) cites della Porta's criticism that both the fields of social movement studies and media have tended to 'consider both political institutions and mass media as given structures' (2013: 28) when, of course, in reality, they have been moulded by powerful interests to appear as 'desirable' and 'immutable'' (Fenton, 2016: 348). The research of Downing (1984, 2001) and Huesca and Dervin (1994, 1997) is therefore part of a tradition of attempting 'to free the study of alternative media from binary essentialist categories' (Rodriguez, 2001: 14). Power must be understood within specific contexts of alternative media production and use, how processes of participation effect change, and relating to popular knowledge (Fals-Borda, 1991) and radical democracy (Mouffe, 1992).

A democratic lens for power and voice

To challenge these binary interpretations of power, Downing's conceptual instrument of considering alternative media through the lens of media democracy is valuable. Rodriguez (2001) has distilled this in four points:

1. the need to acknowledge oppression as a heterogeneous and fragmented reality;
2. the need to build lateral links between fragmented movements against oppression(s)
3. the need to visualize the struggle against oppression in terms of movements and not as institutions
4. the need to think of liberation as an everyday process that disrupts immediate realities' (Rodriguez, 2001: 14).

In trying to conceptualise experience working with media processes in contexts of marginalisation, Rodriguez (2001) found existing theoretical frameworks 'too narrow to encompass the lived experience of those involved with alternative media' (2001: 3). Rodriguez furthered the conceptual framework of Downing to 'capture how democratic communication *happens* within alternative media' (Rodriguez, 2001: 10), in turn developing the concept of 'citizens' media'. This was based around the theory of 'radical democracy'

(Mouffe, 1992), which explores power, how it is produced and by whom, and 'how processes of constitution and reconstitution of power affect democratic processes' (Rodriguez, 2001: 20).[18] The concept of citizens' media is situated around a collective enacting of citizenship by 'actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape…contesting social codes [and] that these communication practices are empowering to the community involved, to the point where these transformations and changes are possible' (Rodriguez, 2001: 20). In Rodriguez's framing, citizenship is 'enacted through participation in everyday political practices' (2001: 19). The citizen is not, as in the liberal ideal, a 'passive recipient of specific rights [and] protection of the law (Mouffe, 1992, 235; cited in Rodriguez, 2001: 19).[19]

Conceptions of space and performance are key to Rodriguez's citizens' media, which were associated with bringing people back to the streets and squares amidst a context of violent conflict in Colombia (Rodriguez, 2011: 236). These 'collective spaces of encounter' could 'foster horizontal communication' between residents and even build 'dialogue between citizens and local governments' (Rodriguez, 2011: 233).[20] In the urban environment of Santa Cruz and with Colombia in a putatively 'post-conflict' era, media practices (not least the street-based methodologies theorised in Chapters 5 and 6) respond not to the immediate shock of war but to persisting violence coupled with structural disadvantages that restrict residents' time and capacity for communication, interaction and dialogue. Residents of Santa Cruz include those displaced by armed conflict or poverty, and those maligned or targeted for diverging in some way with regards to politics or sexuality. The streets and squares of Santa Cruz are contested spaces, and these long term, quotidian struggles pose a distinct set of challenges to those faced by communities that Rodriguez (2001, 2011) researched in the midst of violent conflict.

The pull of young people towards the power and status of non-state armed actors remains a persistent factor in Santa Cruz. Attempts to 'seduce' young people in Santa Cruz away from these risks is complex work, not least with family members, uncles or cousins involved in

[18] Mouffe's radical democracy in turn builds on Foucault's analysis of power: 'in the details of social practices, at the points at which it produces effects, as a fluid, reversible, and invisible 'microphysics' of power. Power is productive in the sense that it works to produce particular types of bodily discipline and subjectivities in practices which remain invisible from the point of view of the older model of power as sovereignty. Power is plural: it is exercised from innumerable points, rather than from a single political centre, as the possession of an elite or the logic of bureaucratic institutions, and it is not governed by a single over- arching project' (Nash, 2001: 82).

[19] Rodriguez further cites Wolin's (1992) definition that citizenship is 'about the capacity to generate power, for that is the only way that things get established in the world' (2001: 19).

[20] In these 'collective spaces of encounter', Rodriguez posits that 'local cultural identities and geographies' can emerge (Rodriguez, 2011: 243), which can 'encourage children and youth to be "seduced" by their natural and cultural environment, potentially reducing the attraction of the promise of life as a warrior and/or drug trafficker' (Rodriguez, 2011: 244).

these armed groups. Collective identity in Santa Cruz, an urban settlement with over 110,000 residents, is also distinct from the conflict-affected villages and towns at the centre of Rodriguez's 2011 study. But as this thesis explores in forthcoming chapters, media practices here generate space for engaging cultural activities and the evoking of memories of the collaborative founding of these neighbourhoods.

Amidst the ongoing threat of violence in Santa Cruz, the lens of radical democracy is therefore useful for the interpretation of creative practices in communication and memory work. An additional theoretical tool is helpful here, the framework of 'cultural politics' (Nash, 2001), which can be understood in light of the 'cultural turn' in social theory, described as taking two main forms: 'Firstly, the idea that culture is universally constitutive of social relations and identities...Secondly, the claim that *in contemporary society* culture plays an unprecedented role in constituting social relations and identities' (Nash, 2001: 82). Nash argues that 'if it is the case that social life is now thoroughly mediated by culture, then culture must also be seen as the site of politics' (ibid.) As with Mouffe's radical democracy, Nash builds on Foucault's analysis of 'power and the conception of politics derived from it' (Nash, 2001: 82). This lens is useful for grasping the complexity of media practices in Santa Cruz, where dynamics of power have been shaped through auto-construction, an absence of state sovereignty, and violence from state and non-state armed actors. These are more implicit political practices of providing protective space for social relations than explicit political practices of direct conflict with powerful forces.

Toward a media practices approach

Since Rodriguez's seminal work on citizens' media (2001, 2011), research into this field has burgeoned, prompted particularly by the proliferation and impact of digital communications technologies.[21] Amidst this backdrop, a practice approach to citizen media is important in order to focus on 'the social, material, and embodied aspects of citizen media' (Stephansen and Treré, 2020: 1) and to challenge media-centric approaches ('i.e. the tendency to take media technologies and media content, rather than broader social practices and relationships, as a starting point for enquiry' (Stephansen and Treré, 2020: 1). The concept of 'media practices' (Couldry, 2004) has therefore become an important and useful 'means of developing socially grounded analyses of citizen and activist media' (Stephansen and Treré, 2020: 1). Much of this work has built on Couldry's broadly embraced approach to

[21] With much focus on how digital technologies 'enable non-institutionalized actors to disseminate media *content* that challenges dominant discourses or makes visible hidden realities' (Stephansen and Treré, 2020: 1).

media practices, or 'what people are doing in relation to media in the contexts in which they act' (Couldry, 2012: 35). Long before Couldry's (2004) 'call for a new practice paradigm' however, there was a strong tradition of 'interest in practices among Latin American communication scholars' (Stephansen and Treré, 2020: 2).

Recent literature on media practices has sought to rectify a lack of discourse between the anglophone and Latin American traditions in this field, and to acknowledge the impact of Latin American theory and practice on alternative media and how it is understood (e.g. Stephansen & Treré, 2020, Rodriguez, O. Rincón and A. Marroquín, Pertierra & Salazar eds, 2020). Rodriguez (2020) foregrounds how Peruvian media scholar Rosa María Alfaro's text *De la Conquista de la Ciudad a la Apropriación de la Palabra* (1987), was 'instrumental in transforming communication scholarship in Latin America' (Rodriguez, 2020: 78). Alfaro's analysis of 'what Peruvian women did with media technologies in a poor urban market in Lima drove us away from researching media as media and towards the praxis of media, or exploring "how media are embedded in the interlocking fabric of social and cultural life"' (Couldry, 2004, cited in Rodriguez, 2020: 78).[22]

Researching at the World Social Forum with activists of 'shared communication', whose work involves the 'sharing of content but also collaborative production processes and the exchange of knowledge and experience', Stephansen categorises four distinct types of citizen media practices (2016: 33):

> '*organizational practices* aimed at enabling collaborative production processes that stimulate an exchange of skills, experiences and ideas;
> *capacity-building practices* such as training grassroots activists to produce their own media;
> *networking practices* such as setting up dedicated spaces for alternative and citizen media at social forums that bring communicators from different parts of the world together; and
> *movement-building practices* that help develop a sense of shared purpose and collective identity – for example, seminars to share knowledge and debate strategies for media democratization' (*emphasis* added, 2016: 33).

This useful typology is representative of the work of multiple media organisations from different regions and nations collaborating at the World Social Forum. It therefore includes

[22] Kaplún's work on dialogic communication (1983, 1986) and the 'emancipatory potential of community media as tools for empowerment and concientizacion', is also highlighted by Rodriguez as a significant contribution from Latin American theory (2020: 74).

practices that operate on a larger scale than the work of Mi Comuna in Santa Cruz and Medellín. Nonetheless it is highly relevant to this PhD thesis which explores media practices that open space for communication and dialogue in Santa Cruz. This keenly political work is also creative, artistic and cultural, and linked to collective memory, in order that it can remain non-contestatory in a context of structural disadvantage and violence. This chapter now advances to its second main section, to analyse the contradictions and instrumentalizations of the categorisation and use of 'community' in alternative media studies.

Community media – an idealised picture

The framing of 'community' within alternative media studies is another challenging and significant area of debate, with traditional conceptions of communities as defined by ethnicity or geography inadequate for the context of Medellín. Attempts to theorise community media have too often romanticised people and place with an idealised assumption of their emancipatory potential - insufficient for a full understanding of the role of community media (Lewis, 2002). Like 'alternative' media, community media have been acclaimed for horizontal practice and democratic potential, yet this assessment has at times been assumed a priori rather than analysed in context (Cammaerts, 2016; Nossek & Carpentier, 2019).

The very notion of 'community' in community media, which must be understood as socially constructed and contested rather than bounded definitively by, for example, geography or ethnicity, is rightly questioned by Nossek and Carpentier (2019) and Cohen (1989). Nossek and Carpentier seek to reconceptualise and complement the traditional 'structural-geographic community approach', incorporating Cohen's (1989) 'community of meaning', Newman's (1980) 'community of interest', and the 'subjective construction of community' as illustrated by Rlindlof (1988) (Nossek & Carpentier, 2019). A community may therefore share a common identity, customs, or religion, or be situated in a virtual space through digital platforms. 'Discursive and material conflicts' are also 'a constitutive part of these very same communities, including the discursive struggles over the meanings of communities and the material struggles over memberships, territories and frontiers, within the communities, as well as in relation to their outside worlds' (Nossek & Carpentier, 2019: 2). Common risks, resources or needs may impact cohesion within and between communities. Rock (2005: 96) highlights the fact that 'each individual simultaneously inhabits different communities', and complications can arise when groups are referred to as a community irrespective of whether they see themselves as one.

Jankowski (2002) attested to the resilience of the concept of community, particularly in relation to studies of the internet at the turn of the 21st century, making the qualification that '[t]he main difference seems to be redirection of emphasis from geographic place to a feeling or sense of collectivity' (2002: 37). Jankowski cites a central question from van Dijk (1998: 48); 'to what extent can virtual communities replace organic communities and provide forces to countervail the present social processes of fragmentation and individualization?' van Dijk contends that virtual communities may 'supplement organic communities, but are unable to replace them' (van Dijk, 1998: 59 cited in Jankowski, 2002: 40). Ross highlights Hess and Waller's concept of the geo-social, which 'broadens ideas of localness and community to account for complex social relations and formations, as well as social spaces that transcend a narrowly fixed idea of place'. These remain pertinent discussions, particularly amid the growing ubiquity of digital communications technologies and considering how Covid-19 and associated lockdowns reshaped the world (and how organisations like Mi Comuna endeavoured to shift their dialogic processes into digital spaces).

Community media have been strongly associated with participatory and democratic praxis, with the 'ideal-type' community media distinct from public service or profit orientated media through 'horizontal and participatory structures and by their embeddedness in strong democratic cultures' (Cammaerts, 2016: 2). Nossek and Carpentier similarly highlight the 'participatory' and 'democratic' elements of community media, 'organisations that allow the democratic to be translated into everyday life…where internal participatory-democratic cultures and horizontal decision-making structures are realised' (2019: 1-2). Moreover, they champion community media as 'nodal points' in networks between individuals, 'communities' and organisations (Nossek and Carpentier, 2019: 2). Methods including photovoice and digital storytelling are claimed by their proponents to 'empower and 'give voice' to participants…increasing community identity, capacity and cohesion' (Fairey, 2018: 619).

Community media are however innately heterogenous and difficult to define, which is reflective of the disparate contexts in which they have emerged and developed, including in conditions of inequality, poverty and violent conflict. Community media have emerged amidst radical, reformist or conservative traditions (Gilchrist, 2004). And also in the 'social guidance, mobilising and learning traditions of community development' (Westoby, 2019: 4), harnessing media, arts and culture as 'tools for social education, inclusion and empowerment' (Freire, 1970). Community media's potential for healing and reflection in the context of violent conflict, not least through the fostering of intercultural dialogue and critical engagement has also been underlined (Voniati et al., 2018).

‘Dialogic communication’ is at the centre of Kaplún’s (1983, 1986) understanding of community media, emphasizing the ‘emancipatory potential of community media as tools for empowerment and concientización’ (Rodriguez, 2020: 74). What Freire called a ‘dialogue of knowledges’ (Freire, 1970), finds within ‘media practices an existential and political scenario of expression in people’s own codes, symbols, and rituals. Speaking from themselves and with their own words makes it possible for the subjects of communication to abandon passivity before the media, and to develop the capacity of enunciation and a critical awareness of their voice, their presence in the media, and their ways of resisting and imagining social life’ (O. Rincón and A. Marroquín, 2020: 45).

Rigorous analysis of community media has at times been limited by the ‘tacit acceptance of a political economy perspective’ which assumes that ownership ‘by ‘the people’ resulting in ‘the people's voice’ is its own justification’ (Lewis, 2002: 55). Some community radio stations produce relatively mainstream content, while others seek to be ‘radically complementary to state and commercial broadcasters content-wise, and to provide a platform for protest movements and activists operating in a community’ (Cammaerts, 2016: 2). Cammaerts has encouraged the grounding of analysis in ‘a set of normative and ethical dimensions that differentiate between content that refers to or is part of democratic and emancipatory struggles on the one hand, and content that is anti-democratic or reactionary on the other’ (Cammaerts, 2016: 2). For community media can also be used as ‘an instrument to promote hatred…or to incite violence’ as experience has shown in the USA, Rwanda and elsewhere (ibid).

In contexts like the research site Santa Cruz, where associations with ‘left’ or ‘subversive’ politics have long been dangerous, and given the historic role of residents in the physical construction and the social production of these spaces, ‘community’ may here connect with a ‘cultural politics of place’ (Harvey, 1993: 26). Harvey (1993) theorises that in postmodern capitalist societies, where the ‘cultural mass has dropped its association with proletarian movements and has sought to avoid a directly subservient position to capitalist bourgeois culture, it has become more closely identified with a cultural politics of place’ (Harvey, 1993: 26). Moreover, that a ‘territorial place-based identity’ is ‘one of the most pervasive bases for both progressive political mobilization and reactionary exclusionary politics’ (ibid.) This framework is additionally relevant considering the denigration of districts like Santa Cruz in dominant narratives, which can be understood as a form of ‘reactionary exclusionary

politics', othering these places as part of shaping a Medellín identity connected instead to contemporary urban renewal.[23]

In Chapter 8 of this thesis, I build on the framework of a cultural politics of place in analysing *la defensa del territorio*, which was a constant subject for debate and organizing in Santa Cruz during my fieldwork. As Halvorsen notes, '*territorio* may sometimes be better translated as "place" [given that] contemporary uses of territory in Romance languages are more expansive than Anglophone definitions, incorporating a broader social component' (Halvorsen, 2018: 6). Nevertheless, there is value in 'maintaining a focus on territory (in English)' for two reasons. The first is in distinguishing territory from place 'by focusing on the political projects/strategies that appropriate space'. The second is 'in acknowledgement of grassroots strategies to contest the modern notion of territory precisely by expanding and (re)inventing its definition in the course of struggle' (Halvorsen, 2018: 6-7). As Chapter 8 discusses further, faced with an expanding state political strategy, and the well-established but distinct dominating power of the armed groups, Mi Comuna's work in *la defensa del territorio* is part of a 'bottom-up grassroots' political strategy, distinct from capitalist logics of accumulation and connected to collective memories of founding and cooperation.

Idealisation and instrumentalization from above

The under-theorisation of community media has also been driven by idealisation or instrumentalization from institutional levels. Particularly since UNESCO's MacBride report *Many Voices One World* (1980)[24], community media have been promoted by institutions and governments as partners in development processes, dialogue and peacebuilding (Voniati et al, 2018).[25] MacBride (1980) highlighted concerns of 'cultural imperialism' and communication injustice of the late twentieth century and recommended that existing global

[23] These struggles over place representation in cities can be, according to Harvey, 'as fiercely fought and as fundamental to the activities of place construction as bricks and mortar' (Harvey, 1993: 22). '[A]ll manner of (mis)representations to which places are prone' have, in turn, 'material consequences...particularly to the plans of policymakers' (ibid.) With places in cities 'dubbed as 'dubious' or 'dangerous', leading to patterns of behaviour, both public and private, that turn fantasy into reality' (ibid).

[24] The Macbride report investigated issues with communications across the world, relating to news and mass media, the emergence of new technologies and made policy recommendations with a view of solving the issues identified and to further human development and peace.

[25] The European Parliament's Resolution on Community Media in Europe and the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters have since defined and promoted community media as 'non-profit organisations accountable to the community that they seek to serve', that offer 'a service to the community in which it is located, or to which it broadcasts, while promoting the participation of this community' in the media (European Parliament 2008, AMARC-Europe, 1994: 4, Nossek and Carpentier, 2019: 2).

communications monopolies be transformed 'by a scenario where many diverse social subjects could have access to the media, not only as audiences, but also as producers' (Rodriguez, 2001: 7).[26] MacBride's analysis and recommendations fell short of more structural approaches (e.g. Downing) that built on the work of the Frankfurt School (e.g. Horkheimer and Adorno), exploring the impact on democratic practice of mass communications and culture within the capitalist framework.

In the years following MacBride (1980) 'global communications monopolies' only grew in reach, while any regulation of cultural imperialism was 'undermined by the United States and its allies under the argument that media ought to be governed by markets and the free flow of information, with the United States and United Kingdom withdrawing from UNESCO' (Dutta, 2015: 128). Moreover the most effective responses to international power imbalances are not necessarily driven from multilateral Western institutions like UNESCO. Indeed Sparks and Roach (1990: 280) argued that 'it is not in the corridors of power that the new order will be forged but in the little experiments in which workers and peasants attempt to find new ways of communicating their ideas and experiences to each other'. Conferences held in Barcelona and Caracas, and the publishing in Mexico of a new journal on alternative media and social change, advocated the potential of alternative and community media to 'counterbalance the trend toward transnational communication and cultural imperialism…The hope was now for these newly political social subjects (social movements, grassroots organizations, *grupos populares*) to establish their own small-scale media outlets and to spin their own communication and information networks' (Rodriguez, 2001: 8-9).

Public policy and funding have impacted the reach and scope of community media (Segura et al, 2019). Jesús Martín Barbero (2009) has recognised the significance in Colombia of the development of community radio and television in recent decades. Funding from governments and other institutions may cause the softening of the 'politics' of community media organisations - as they have become accepted and even funded by the establishment. Whereas community media has had radical political roots it has also been appropriated by establishment players and depoliticised or liberalised in the process. These issues are highly pertinent to community media processes in Medellín, where organisations like Mi Comuna were established through participatory budgeting initiatives in 2008 and have since received government funding in different forms. This funding has not however

[26] Information and communication flow from the USA and Western Europe to so called 'global South' countries was shown to be ten times stronger than in the opposite direction. (2001: 4). In addition, that South-to-South communication was 'practically non-existent' (ibid). Crucial also here was 'the fact that most of the globe's media traffic was controlled by a few transnational communications corporations (TNCCs), all located in the United States, Western Europe, and Japan' (Rodriguez, 2001: 5).

been sustained through successive city and national administrations. Meanwhile since 2009 the work of organisations like Mi Comuna has, through their praxis and dialectical change, become less institutional, more dialogic and further connected to collective memory and struggles for more constructive state interventions. The chapter now proceeds to its third main section, examining the enduring alignment to liberal democracy and development in a Western frame as inappropriate to the context of this research.

The liberal democratic sphere

These challenges with the (mis)conception of media 'participation' and 'community' have roots in the way that media scholars have routinely framed 'alternative' media within an idealised conception of a liberal democratic sphere. This framing has become less admissible where critical democratic processes have been undermined in the face of neoliberal reforms and austerity (Fenton, 2016). Moreover, this framework has never been fully appropriate for understanding media processes in contexts of authoritarian states, violent conflict or structural inequality.

Rodriguez (2001) has made valuable inroads in better understanding media practices amongst marginalised groups outside of the liberal democratic sphere, not least by exploring citizens' media within the framework of 'radical democracy' (Rodriguez, 2001; Mouffe, 1992). But even this valuable work lacks important nuance for the complex context of Santa Cruz, which has through decades been both subjected to violence and represented as violent. Dominant narratives have characterised Santa Cruz as illegally settled, underdeveloped and criminal. This has the potential to lead to a 'culture of silence' (Freire, 1970), whereby 'people without access to power lose their own voices and learn to mimic the voice of the powerful; they internalize negative notions of themselves and their environment and adopt stigmatized versions of their neighbourhoods and communities' (Rodriguez, 2020: 72).

The next section of this chapter examines another area of media theory which is highly relevant to the research context, one which has struggled with the pitfalls of 'expert' driven outside interventions and inappropriate developmental or modernization frameworks.

The development dilemma in communication for 'social change'

Media and communications scholarship centring on development and social change has too often done so from the conceptions of development as inevitable and linear across distinct contexts. Communication for development and social change (CDSC) emerged during the

twentieth century within the hegemonic capitalist conception of the 'developed' and the 'underdeveloped' worlds and framed around Rostow's influential evolutionary schema of the *Stages of Economic Growth* (1960).[27] Crucial to the conception of communication in this framework was 'the imagery of the passive Third World subject, depicted as a receptacle of traditional traits, and as the target of top-down interventions of development' (Dutta, 2015: 123). This uncomplicated linear progression to development would be critiqued effectively by theorists including Andre Gunder Frank (1969) and Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) who highlighted the historic impact of colonialism and capitalist expansion, where countries targeted for 'development' were negatively impacted through deeper involvement in an unequal and exploitative global economic system. Dependency theory held that development as conventionally practiced was an exercise through which powerful international actors were able to impose their interests, values and customs onto those targeted for 'development'.[28]

There has been insufficient recognition of the need to question this normative framing of development within CDSC. One explanatory factor is that the field is associated principally with 'the *institutionalized* practice of communication' (Tufte, 2017: 19), as opposed to the communication practices of potentially counter-hegemonic social movements 'that typically stand outside of institutionalized settings and organizational practices' (ibid; see also Downing, 2001). Key principles in the field also hold 'an implicit imperative of having predefined goals…[rather than] more open-ended processes of social change', and the 'common concern for strategic communications' as a means to effect and measure predefined goals. The concept of 'social change' and what 'differentiates social change from economic, political, and cultural change' (Waisbord, 2014: 155) is also an important consideration. Waisbord states that social change:

> 'refers to changes in norms, attitudes, socioeconomic structures, policies, beliefs, information, behaviors, and so on. No single definition of social change captures the richness of a cross-disciplinary field of inquiry and practice. Unlike concepts such as development, modernization, reform, and revolution, which were once proposed as the normative horizons of social change, the notion of "social change" lacks concise, unanimous definitions' (Waisbord, 2014: 155).

[27] Rostow argued that all societies would ultimately progress from a 'backward' state towards norms and values associated with capitalist development.

[28] This was in effect a continuation of colonialism by other means, and in the context of the Cold War (and subsequently the global 'War on Drugs' and 'War on Terror'), development and related communication projects have been used to reinforce the economic and security interests of the 'developed' countries. During *Plan Colombia* (2000-2008), Colombia was the second highest recipient of US military aid as they sought to make progress on the 'War on Drugs' against the narcotics cartels and then (post-2001) the 'War on Terror' against the guerrilla.

The field of CDSC has been split between the 'informational and participatory paradigms', a divide grounded in 'fundamental theoretical differences that articulate competing understandings of communications [and] models of social change...' (Waisbord, 2014: 149) The informational paradigm was posited on the idea that information is the 'gateway to social change', and furthermore that the 'accumulation of individual, psychological changes' was the route to social change (ibid). Rogers (1962) understood communication as key to the process of 'diffusing' strategies which aimed to deal with the problem of a 'lack of knowledge and information' in the 'developing' world. That people could in effect be equipped with information to make better behavioural choices. Waisbord's (2014: 151) critique is useful here:

> 'nuanced analysis of social problems would suggest that individual changes are neither sufficient nor are they always the best "point of entry" to promote wide transformations. Changing social structures that affect people's opportunities to improve their social condition demands redressing systemic inequalities in the distribution of power and resources. Likewise, improving the quality of basic systems and social services is basically a question of politics and policy. Addressing such problems require much more than disseminating information among individuals about ideal practices. They are inconceivable without significant political transformations.' (Waisbord, 2014: 151)

CDSC scholars have, according to Craig and Porter (2006) too rarely been critical of processes that are designed or led by 'expert' outsiders, informed by experience in entirely different contexts, and implemented on or with 'beneficiary communities'. This lack of critique can be linked to the cultural and physical proximity of many CDSC scholars (in a field which emerged principally in north America) to the outsider 'experts' and institutions driving these projects. Development communication strategies were 'primarily expert-driven', with 'external change agents as their drivers…[and] linear, monologue-like communication in top-down processes' (Tufte, 2017: 12). The 'liberal and travelling formalism' (Craig and Porter, 2006: 120) of development works to frame practice in terms of lessons distilled from elsewhere, allowing for 'for the universal to assert itself over the particular, the travelled over the placed, the technical over the political, and the formal over the substantive' (Craig and Porter, 2006: 120).

The second key paradigm of CDSC, the participatory paradigm, has espoused the 'etymological roots of communication – the cultivation of a sense of community and commonness through dialogue and action' and questioned 'expert-driven definitions of

problems and solutions' (Waisbord, 2014: 151-2). 'Participatory approaches foreground the notion that communication should activate critical reflexivity, dialogue, and consciousness-raising. Communication opportunities are not conceived as "strategies" to modify informational ecologies and motivate people to abandon practices. Instead, they are tools designed to facilitate community dialogue to articulate demands and solutions, and stimulate social mobilization' (Waisbord, 2014: 154). Communications practices, not least in Latin America, would become bound to efforts to recognise different types of knowledges, for example in the tradition of popular education (Freire) and Participatory Action Research (Fals Borda) which would value the stories and everyday narratives of marginalised communities (Gumucio, 2012; Garcés Montoya & Jiménez García, 2016). Nevertheless, distinct traditions of participation within CDSC have emerged, with CDSC involving actors such as governments and international NGOs, with their own institutional objectives and understandings of development and social change. With participation instrumentalised to present processes as democratic and inclusive, inequalities can be reproduced even more effectively than through top-down approaches. Amidst the advance of neoliberalism and its focus on the primacy of the market and competition, the language of participatory choice within CDSC has been deployed in efforts to privatize natural resources and public infrastructure (Dutta, 2015: 127).

Approaches to culture are another important complexity of CDSC. As Bolivian communication theorist Beltrán (1975) and postcolonial scholars like O'Sullivan-Ryan and Kaplún (1978) have argued, early development interventions, 'rooted in colonial notions of tradition and modernity', either disregarded culture or labelled it as backward (Dutta, 2015: 124). Serveas and other scholars set out 'the notion of multiple cultures of development, issuing a call for dialogic conversations on the meanings and pathways of development' and not 'removed from the materiality of the struggles of the subaltern classes' (Serveas, 1999, cited in Dutta, 2015: 126). Culture would be incorporated into later incarnations of development discourse, yet would be 'tied to reductionist logics of economics…recognizing the importance of culture as an economic resource and as an integral player in economic growth' (ibid.)[29] Culture would become key to development communication in 'tailoring development strategies. Culture, as a reflection of values and communication characteristics, informed culturally sensitive messaging strategies' for advancing capitalist markets (Dutta, 2015: 126). Additionally, the evaluation of culture becomes important to the 'development of culturally sensitive development programs. The role of academic experts,

[29] The UNESCO and World Bank commissioned paper *Recognizing culture: A series of briefing papers on culture and development* (2001) notes that 'cultural resources are replacing natural resources as the primary raw material of economic growth' (Matarasso, 2001: 4; in Dutta, 2015: 126).

project managers, and researchers in figuring out a culture shapes culturally sensitive development programs that would be both effective and efficient' (Dutta, 2015: 127).

Post-development discourse, critiques of neoliberalism and significant mobilizations around, for example, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the so called 'Arab Spring', have led to 'epistemological rupture[s]' in CDSC (Tufte, 2017: 16). Setting out a binary categorisation of 'recognising and exploring the common challenges of the 'noisy' activist social movements often seen in the cities, and the more 'silent' community work of civil society organizations often seen in rural areas', Tufte argues that the former is receiving lots of attention at the expense of the latter (2017: 10). Tufte calls for 'comparative analysis and the posing of similar changes to both processes of social change' to avoid the risk that 'while research into social movements tends to concentrate on the peaks of mobilization and contestation, development research and communication for development research have traditionally been far more orientated towards the slow, less noisy and difficult-to-see-or-grasp processes of change' (2017: 11). As Couldry (2012) notes 'much is made of the use of social media in, say, times of political protest, but political upheavals are poor guides to wider change, since they are precisely exceptional.' (19). On the other hand, these ruptures can be precisely the moment when long term change is forged.

Post-accord Colombia – open for business?

This development dilemma within CDSC, which augments the challenges related to 'participation' and 'community' in the global South, is highly relevant and instructive to this project in a 'post-accord' Colombia and Medellín that are increasingly the focus for 'development' and modernisation interventions. The international support for the Colombian peace process was based on more than good will. For example, the 'UK Prosperity Fund for Colombia', worth £25.5million over five years between 2017-2022, was 'designed to support economic development, unlock economic opportunities and drive growth in the country's post-conflict and conflict-affected regions' (Gov.uk, 2018) The main objectives of the programme are to '1. Achieve inclusive growth, poverty reduction and gender equality. 2. Contribute to improving the commercial environment so that international business, including UK companies, can compete favourably in new markets' (Gov.uk, 2018). Additionally the Global Challenge Research Fund (GCRF), launched by the UK government in 2015 to support 'collaborative' and 'cutting-edge research that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries', has already developed a number of projects in Colombia. The UK is not alone here, with multiple other states and transnational corporations either already

operating in Colombia or seeking to promote development in Colombia and access its abundant natural resources.

In this context, calls like that from Bau (2015) for 'a new examination of Communication for Social Change and its linkage with conflict transformation theory' must be considered with care. Key here is whether research is framed within the same flawed developmental or modernisation models. Scholarship exploring the relationship between development communication and peace studies, and 'how community involvement in the media has seen the creation of important peace initiatives in conflict-affected areas' (Bau, 2015: 122; see also Rodriguez, 2000, 2011). The dominant approach to CDSC, through a development paradigm that is too often uncritical and too regularly driven and analysed from above, provides for important learning. Framed within the much critiqued but still broadly accepted modernisation theory, and in the context of international capital which uses development to support the economic, energy and security interests of more powerful nations, the objectives and impacts of communication processes on the intended beneficiaries are seriously compromised.

Towards the commoning of knowledge and space

So far, this chapter has analysed literature and theory on alternative and radical media, problematising approaches to participation and community that have been romanticised and instrumentalised, leading to their under-theorisation. It has highlighted the importance of avoiding the idealisation of alternative media organisations as 'participatory heavens' (Nossek & Carpentier, 2019: 2), and being aware of the discrepancies between 'a discourse of participation and the actual participatory practices or lack thereof' (Cammaerts, 2016: 2). The framing of alternative media within an idealised Western conception of a liberal democratic sphere or amidst top-down encouragement of development has contributed to these misinterpretations of participatory and community media processes. Accordingly, the chapter has highlighted the importance of a deep understanding of context when considering notions of community, participation or citizenship. This is particularly pertinent given the impacts of structural disadvantages, persistent violence and denigrating dominant narratives in the research site of northeast Medellín.

In seeking to build a framework through which to understand media practices (more than texts and technologies) in the research site, I have presented concepts including collective memory and cultural politics as complementary to theories of community, alternative and citizens' media. I reason that these tools can enable us to better understand the

development of transformational practices amidst a context of disparaging narratives and the ongoing threat from state and non-state armed actors linked to past violence. The evoking and sharing of collective memories of collaborative building of these neighbourhoods (explored further in Chapter 6), can be understood as claiming the past to shape the present and the future, countering institutional or hegemonic portrayals. Likewise, cultural activities developed around theatre or music and connected to local histories and customs, are understood as opening safe space for interaction and dialogue, undertaken in a subtle and non-contestatory way.

These ideas and concepts share a focus on social and collaborative practices. They help us to understand memory not as individual but as shared by groups. They enable comprehension of media products and cultural activities not simply as tools for disseminating messages or generating economic development, but as part of evoking and celebrating local customs and cooperative projects. Brought together with the intention of interpreting media practices in Santa Cruz, these ideas guide us to a final theoretical element of this chapter, that of the commons and commoning.

Theories related to commoning and the commons can aid the understanding of social relations and practices, the sharing of knowledge, the opening of safe and emboldening physical space in the research site, Santa Cruz. The term *commoning* represents the understanding of the commons not 'merely as sets of things or resources, but as social relations' (Fernández, 2021: 75; see also Harvey, 2012; Federici and Caffentzis, 2019). Accordingly, the commons are '[n]ot the material wealth shared but the sharing itself and the solidarity bonds produced in the process' (Federici and Caffentzis, 2019: 94, cited in Fernández, 2021: 75). Therefore the 'rights but also [the] obligations – developed by the community around a given resource' are central to the commons, 'in order to be common, it must be managed and protected by its own users' (Fernández, 2021: 75). 'Commoning' is connected by Birkinbine (2018) to 'the reproduction of both the objects that comprise the commons and subjectivities in which mutual aid, care, trust, and conviviality are reproduced over time...the active pooling of common resources with a deep connection to the history, culture, and ecology of the place where they exist' (299).

Interest in theories of the commons and commoning has blossomed since the seminal work of Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons* (1990), which disrupted entrenched presumptions about common resources and their collective management. Ostrom refuted Hardin's (1968) influential '*Tragedy of the Commons*' thesis which had been promoted as 'an irrefutable argument for the superior efficiency of private property rights with respect to land

and resource uses, and therefore an irrefutable justification for privatization' (Harvey, 2012: 68). Ostrom, a 'critic of market totalitarianism' (Federici and Caffentzis, 2019: 231), also contested the economic orthodoxy that the only way to manage common pool resources was for 'external authorities to impose full private property rights or centralized regulation' (Harvey, 2012: 68-69). Commons literature has, since Ostrom's intervention, burgeoned to explore 'emergent ways that communities negotiate their relationship with either the state or capital' in relation to 'natural resources like water, fish, grasslands, forests, or the atmosphere, to human-created resources like education, housing, or ideas and their expression' (Birkinbine, 2018: 290).

The commons as an idea has however 'come to cover a proliferation of proposals, some highly radical, but also some reformist, and others even potentially reactionary' (De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2010: 31, cited in Freedman and Fenton, 2020: 156). This breadth echoes discussions from earlier in this chapter regarding the conceptualization of alternative and participatory media. Birkinbine reflects on the work of Broumas (2017), who highlighted some of these 'ontological and epistemological differences between varieties of scholarship on the commons', differentiating between 'liberal-democratic and critical theories of the commons. Liberal-democratic theories tend to position the commons alongside market growth and the expansion of individual liberties, whereas critical theories understand the commons in an antagonistic relationship to capitalist logics and position commons movements as sites of social struggle' (Birkinbine, 2018: 299). 'Subversive commoning' is the framing given by Birkinbine (2018, 2020) to commoning that operates beyond reformist frameworks, a 'commons-based praxis informed by radical politics' which would 'actively appropriate resources away from capital and the state into circuits of commons value' (2018: 290).

Significant work towards a 'knowledge commons' (Madison et al., 2019: 77) has also developed, particularly in the context of information technology, the internet and the networked media (Fernández, 2021: 77). In forthcoming chapters, this thesis argues that knowledge is central to commoning processes in Santa Cruz, evoking and sharing the history and memory of cooperation and auto-construction. This knowledge, which contests dominant narratives that denigrate northeast Medellín as illegal and criminal, develops through interaction and dialogue in spaces opened in the streets of Santa Cruz and the Mi Comuna Casa that are distinct from other public and private spaces in Medellín (that may be impacted by surveillance or violence). Opening space for dialogue has led to the recognition and celebration of knowledge that may have been silenced by more dominant mediated representations of northeast Medellín. This is particularly difficult in a city like Medellín where

official narratives or ‘institutional memory’ tell a story of top-down innovation and pacification, or continue to denigrate places like Santa Cruz as backward or violent. Key to this work are not only the resources of knowledge and safe space, but the social relations that enable the resources to be developed and shared. These social relations are theorised in Chapters 5 and 6 as ‘counter commoning’, which builds on the concept of ‘subversive commoning’ advanced by Birkinbine (2018), but which through cultural activities and collective memory, presents itself as non-contestatory rather than oppositional to hegemonic power.

As Chapter 7 explores in detail, the sustaining of these social relations and the opening of creative and emboldening spaces during the extraordinary moment of Covid-19 lockdowns and through digital spaces, was much more complicated and at times unattainable. This highlights how ‘counter commoning’ is only possible when it engenders forms of qualitatively meaningful sociality and relationality, with sociality here understood as ‘a dynamic relational matrix within which human subjects are constantly interacting in ways that are co-productive, continually plastic and malleable, and through which they come to know the world they live in and find their purpose and meaning within it’ (Long and Moore, 2012: 41). These complex ideas and debates require and merit further examination and discussion, work which is undertaken alongside the empirical data in forthcoming chapters.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined literature and theory in building a framework through which to understand media practices in the complex research site of Santa Cruz, a post-conflict urban settlement in Colombia. Discussion has challenged the instrumentalization of ‘participation’ and the romanticization of ‘community’ in alternative media, and the importance of situating analysis amidst political, economic and social context. My approach concurs with key authors cited in this chapter (e.g. Downing; Rodriguez) that key to radical alternative media is its connection to a transformational or counter-hegemonic approach. In the context of Santa Cruz however, counter-hegemonic work necessarily ties together with collective memory and cultural politics, in order to avoid direct confrontation with violent actors. Debates surrounding the positive and negative potential of digital communications technologies on communities and social movement have been introduced. And I have proposed the commons and commoning as key to a framework for understanding social relations and practices that open protective and emboldening spaces for communication and dialogue, and the sharing of knowledge and culture in this complex research site.

During my fieldwork, the planning and undertaking of which is analysed in the next chapter, I observed community media practices that worked energetically to involve local residents, albeit in the knowledge that many had limited time and capacity to consistently engage. In these conditions, Mi Comuna do not overstate the notion of 'participation', which is regularly instrumentalised in institutional discourses in Medellín. Their work is creative, artistic and cultural, in order that it can remain non-contestatory. Culture also links here to the customs and traditions of a place largely auto-constructed by its residents, many of whom arrived as migrants displaced to Medellín by war and economic necessity. The evoking and sharing of collective memories – not least of collaborative building and cooking - can help build neighbourhood identity and subjectivity in the face of disparaging representations of the district. Influential here are the local conditions, where there is a persistent threat of violence from state and non-state actors (in addition to risks online and in homes). Culture and cultural activities are not utilised towards generating economic development and tourism, but to defend this territory for the people that have established it, to challenge dominant negative portrayals and perceptions. This connection to place and territory demand a nuanced understanding of community and community media practices in this complex urban settlement. The importance of the opening of protective and emboldening spaces for encounter, for social practices linked to the generation of dialogue and communication, also emerges. The value of these spaces was appreciated even more so in their absence during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns. Despite determined efforts, it was much more difficult to develop these practices in digital spaces during lockdowns than in concrete spaces, especially with the young people and women Mi Comuna typically worked with. These compelling issues are examined in the forthcoming empirical chapters, building on the existing literature in this complex field and aided by the complementary theory and frameworks introduced in this chapter.

The next chapter discusses the methodological approach and research design of this project, which were planned and then iterated as Covid-19 reshaped the world at the outset of my fieldwork.

Chapter 3

Methodological approach and design

Introduction

This thesis examines the media practices of Mi Comuna in northeast Medellín, considering how they can open space for communication and dialogue, and how they are bound up with culture and memory. My research, undertaken from early 2020 through to mid-2021, coincided with the onset of the Covid-19 global pandemic, which turned out to be a particularly challenging moment for Mi Comuna.[30] This chapter discusses the methodological approach and methods of this research project, which were planned and then iterated as Covid-19 reshaped the world. Planned within a framework of Participatory Action Research (PAR), this methodological approach sought to undertake interactive rather than extractive research with a commitment to the struggles for social transformation of Mi Comuna. This plan was informed by my previous work with grassroots media and research with PAR in Medellín and the UK, and my positionality as a privileged, western, funded researcher. This chapter explores and examines the methodology and methods through their iteration, arguing this was an appropriate research approach in a particularly challenging context. It asserts the ongoing relevance of collaborative and participatory approaches to knowledge creation, provided that they are reflexive and flexible in accordance with the research site.

An iterative approach that could adapt to the conditions and priorities of the research participants was a central tenet to my methodological design. This flexibility proved especially important during Covid-19, where existing complexities in Santa Cruz and for Mi Comuna increased significantly. As national and regional governments in Colombia responded with policy interventions including strict lockdowns, social distancing and travel restrictions, Mi Comuna's physical spaces were closed and their street-based methodologies were halted. Mi Comuna were compelled into a significant transformation, organising in response to the impacts of the pandemic and related policy interventions, and working through digital spaces more than ever before. They utilised their experience, capabilities and relationships in this unprecedented moment to support their community in Santa Cruz and beyond. Nevertheless the impacts of the initial strict lockdown and the subsequent intermittent restrictions that persisted throughout my fieldwork, were significant both to the work of Mi Comuna and to my research approach.

[30] The global pandemic was declared in March 2020 by the World Health Organisation.

Serious dilemmas emerged as to the feasibility of undertaking collaborative knowledge production with participatory methods within an organisation in crisis, facing multiple difficulties caused or exacerbated by Covid-19. Moreover, strict lockdowns and travel restrictions resulted in me being distant from the research site and Mi Comuna being socially distanced from their 'social base', as their work moved into digital spaces for a significant part of my fieldwork.[31] I was mindful of the additional demands of participatory research on research participants, even in projects which attempt to share power. The priority for Mi Comuna was to get through this crisis while continuing to reflect on their action wherever possible. I committed to supporting Mi Comuna's work and to producing knowledge in a collaborative way where appropriate, but to not imposing additional demands on them during this difficult time. My research was ultimately less participatory than I had initially planned and would rely more on observational and ethnographic methods in seeking to develop valuable and relevant knowledge through this unprecedented moment.

The chapter begins by introducing the research site, case study, and methodological approach. I then justify the use of PAR in the circumstances, before exploring the methods of data collection which adapted during the undertaking of the research. Some of the challenges of research and analysis in a non-native language are discussed, with the chapter closing by examining my positionality as the researcher, discussing my previous experience working in Medellín which was instrumental to the methodological approach, methods and the ethical principles that were followed.

Research site and case study

The context of the research site and the work of Mi Comuna were central to the methodological approach and its iteration through the fieldwork. The Mi Comuna media collective are based in the Santa Cruz district ('comuna') in northeast Medellín. Districts like Santa Cruz, which was substantially self-constructed by its residents, are home to a significant part of the population of Medellín and Colombia's urban zones (Samper, 2017). These settlements on the margins of Medellín, places of refuge for the displaced which have become complex and thriving localities,[32] have also faced historic and persistent structural disadvantages and violence from state and non-state armed actors.

[31] Mi Comuna describe their 'social base' as those they regularly work with in Santa Cruz.
[32] Santa Cruz is the second most densely populated of Medellín's 16 comunas, with a population of approximately 110,000.

It was in this context that Mi Comuna were established in 2009, initially to print a local newspaper for Santa Cruz and funded by a local participatory budgeting initiative. Today their media processes encompass significantly more, encouraging 'interaction, communication, and trust' through dialogue and creative street-based practices (as Rodriguez, 2011, theorised of *citizens' media* in Colombia). Popular history and knowledge of the settlement and ongoing struggles of Santa Cruz have been central to Mi Comuna's work. So too reflections of collective experience which seek to challenge disparaging dominant narratives of illegality and underdevelopment, and contribute to a more assured territorial identity.

Santa Cruz was hit particularly hard by the strict lockdown in response to Covid-19 implemented in Medellín from April 2020 (April-September 2020) (Pronunciamiento Público 1 *Alerta temprana* Zona Nororiental de Medellín, 2020; Abello Colak et al., 2021). Pre-existing social, economic and healthcare inequalities made the impacts of strict lockdowns especially severe. The high proportion of elementary, manual, and informal occupations left many workers unable to switch to homeworking. Precarious labour rights and scarce government support left many without any income (Abello Colak et al., 2021). Moreover, the significant digital divide (inequalities in access to digital tools and connections) in Santa Cruz (Encuesta de Calidad de Vida 2019 / Quality of Life Survey, Medellín Mayor's Office, 2019, Abello Colak et al., 2021) would restrict the ability of residents to do homeworking via digital platforms, so too for school pupils to connect to classes that were shifted online for much of 2020 and 2021.

This conjuncture compelled a significant change in the work of Mi Comuna. They were required to close the physical space of the Casa and halt their street-based activities. The media work and meetings had to convert from predominantly in-person to almost exclusively digital spaces. Mi Comuna disseminated important information about Covid-19, recreated artistic spaces online with music and theatre presentations, and broadcast regular panel debates and interviews on social media. However due to structural disadvantages and the digital divide in Santa Cruz, many of Mi Comuna's social base were marginalised from these digital spaces. Additionally, Mi Comuna struggled to recreate in digital spaces the accessible, dialogic, supportive and convivial conditions so central to their work. Covid-19 also led to serious financial difficulties for Mi Comuna. Key here was the suspension of grant funding related to in-person projects with young people, which had been an important financial support to the broader work of Mi Comuna. Over the course of my fieldwork more than half of the Mi Comuna team members had to seek alternative paid employment in

addition to their work at Mi Comuna (the financial remuneration for which ended). Alongside the uncertainty and anxiety of Covid-19, these issues would contribute to considerable burnout within the Mi Comuna collective.

Methodological approach

My methodological approach was informed by the complex context of Santa Cruz, as well as Mi Comuna's commitment to dialogue, popular knowledge and to challenging the dominant narratives that denigrate this territory. My approach sought to understand and explain the work of Mi Comuna, and to produce knowledge of value and significance. Reciprocity and a commitment to actively supporting Mi Comuna in accordance with their priorities was key to this approach. At the outset of my in-situ research I intended to build reciprocity through collaborative knowledge production, opening constructive space for dialogue, action and reflection with the Mi Comuna team and their social base, involving them in the shaping of research questions, methods and analysis. I committed to engage in a continuing knowledge sharing process with Mi Comuna throughout the research process and to generating collective spaces for reflection. Following Tuhiwai Smith (2012), the sharing of knowledge was an important part of my approach; 'the responsibility of researchers and academics is not simply to share surface information (pamphlet knowledge) but to share the theories and analyses which inform the way knowledge and information are constructed and represented' (17).

As the arrival of Covid-19 in Medellín in 2020 prompted and exacerbated several serious problems for Mi Comuna, the scope for participatory research changed. Mi Comuna shifted their work to continue supporting the people of Santa Cruz, to move their processes into digital spaces where possible, to advocate for constructive external (government and NGO) intervention in northeast Medellín. In this unprecedented situation Mi Comuna's capacity for a strong participation in the research was restricted. I committed to not imposing additional demands on an already overstretched organisation. We agreed that I continue as part of the team and support them where they needed, participating in media processes, team meetings and contributing to collaborative spaces of reflection and knowledge production where appropriate. Mi Comuna had an increased need for practical support through this crisis, ongoing reflection on action through Covid-19 and in digital spaces, for support in funding applications and other areas, so the reciprocal nature of my research adapted accordingly.

Why Participatory Action Research?

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is part of a genealogy of participatory methodologies that challenge the assertion of positivism that the goal of scientific research is to uncover universal, objective truths and value-free facts. Rather it is maintained that scientific knowledge is based on relative truths and always carries implicitly the 'biases and values which scientists hold as a group' (Fals-Borda, 1991: 7). In turn, knowledge will always favour those 'who produce and control it' (ibid). The notion of co-producing knowledge with 'the researched' seeks to address this power imbalance. Participatory methodologies commit to developing more reciprocal relationships between 'researcher' and 'researched', rejecting the asymmetrical subject/object relationship that has characterized much academic research and involving 'co-researchers' in the composition of research questions and methods, in the examination of findings, and in the incorporation of knowledge in action (Fals-Borda, 1991).

Participatory research methods have sought to contest the scientific imperialism of European modernity and the colonial project. Here feminist struggles over knowledge creation have been important, with principles of equality, reciprocity and partiality, while acknowledging the inevitable impact of the researcher and their position on research and research subjects (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2010).

PAR developed amidst the legacies of colonialism and in conditions of inequality, injustice and violence, drawing from the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, adult education projects in Brazil, and movements across India and south Asia. A new approach to knowledge and power was sought through the explicit recognition that 'those who have been *most* systematically excluded, oppressed or denied carry specifically revealing wisdom about the history, structure, consequences and the fracture points in unjust social arrangements' (Cammarota and Fine, 2008: 215). In the struggle for social, economic, cultural and political transformation, PAR methodologies would foreground the issue of the production of knowledge and the 'control over the social power to determine what is useful knowledge' (alongside more traditional Marxist debates about control of the means of material production) (Rahman, 1991: 13). This related to international spheres of knowledge and the pre-eminence and power of European or north American ideas and cultural influences. It was also important *within* 'global South' nations like Colombia, considering the continuing inequalities related to power and knowledge creation. PAR methodologies sought instead to undertake collaborative research with the 'exploited classes' to 'serve as a corrective to certain destructive tendencies of the predominant forms of science' (Fals-Borda, 1991: 7).

PAR developed around experience (*vivencia* in Spanish) and authentic commitment, through research combined with adult education (Freire, 1970) and sociopolitical action (Fals-Borda, 1991). It explicitly acknowledges actors as 'external to and internal to the exploited classes', with their different knowledge, techniques and experience that 'stem from different class conformations and rationalities (one Cartesian and academic, the other experiential and practical)' (Fals-Borda, 1991: 4). These differences create a 'dialectical tension which can be resolved only through practical commitment, that is, through a form of praxis' (Fals-Borda, 1991: 4). Put together, the 'sum of knowledge' from internal and external actors makes it 'possible to acquire a much more accurate and correct picture of the reality that is being transformed' (ibid.). Through this 'experiential methodology',[33] knowledge that is both 'serious and reliable' is developed, upon 'which to construct power, or countervailing power, for the poor, oppressed, and exploited groups and social classes - the grassroots - and for their authentic organizations and movements' (Fals-Borda, 1991, 3). Moreover this 'sum of knowledge' can contribute to 'ecologies of knowledges' by 'confronting social sciences and social scientific knowledge with non-scientific, popular, vernacular knowledge' (Bhambra and Santos, 2017: 4-5).

PAR has also appealed to researchers in the 'global North' seeking to replace an extractive model of social science research 'with one in which the benefits of research accrue more directly to the communities involved' (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2010: 1). It has developed across multiple disciplines including sociology, public health and education studies, and community development. Methodologies have drawn heavily upon the distinct Action Research tradition associated with Lewin (1946), linked more closely to organisational change and achieving particular goals or problem solving (James et al. 2012), alongside the aforementioned Freirean tradition related to fostering critical understandings or 'conscientization' (Freire, 1970).

PAR projects are not without difficulties and have been criticized from poststructuralist perspectives for reproducing power inequalities, for example by pushing research onto subjects, or reinforcing existing hierarchies among participants (Kesby, Kindon and Pain, 2010: 21). PAR processes have also been criticised for romanticising 'local' knowledge, being too distant from theory or being too limited in their scope to impact broader social transformation. The adoption of PAR by NGOs and even the World Bank in development-

[33] An 'experiential methodology' is 'a process of personal and collective behaviour occurring within a satisfying and productive cycle of life and labor' (Fals-Borda, 1991: 3).

focused projects have generated yet further distance from the transformative roots of PAR (Lomeli and Rappaport, 2018). Even where these projects involve research participants, projects are more likely to have been designed and framed from afar, with key objectives and decisions in the hands of external actors rather than participating researchers. Co-optation and manipulation of PAR can therefore facilitate the furthering (rather than the reduction) of power imbalances and oppression.

Interest in PAR in the UK has increased in recent years, corresponding with the developing focus on 'impact' within the increasingly marketized higher education and public research policy. The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the funders of my PhD scholarship, have emphasised the importance of collaborative approaches to knowledge production which enable 'the slow development of understanding that creates exchanges that enable the production of living knowledge' (Connected Communities, 2016: 147-8). Yet this sort of knowledge production requires 'the intangible infrastructure of time', which is not conducive amidst 'instrumental demands for quick wins from short term projects' (Connected Communities, 2016: 147-8). Moreover if the resulting written outputs or academic qualifications are ultimately attached principally to one of the participants (i.e. a PhD candidate like me), it is less clear how power imbalances are really being overcome (Byrne Armstrong, 2001). Given the pressure to present research as having involved participation, collaboration or generated quantifiable 'impact' without actually redistributing power, what has been described as 'participation washing' has become an issue of concern and increasingly common.

Justification of the PAR approach

I adopted a PAR approach for several reasons. First, the commitment of PAR methodologies to reciprocity, power sharing and social transformation were crucial considering the research context and the work of Mi Comuna. I was conscious of the 'accumulated history of research used in extractive ways' (Pearce, 2008: 15), particularly between European or north American research focusing on the so called 'global South', but also within Medellín or the UK in relation to poor or disadvantaged places. As a privileged, western, male researcher entering a research site that has faced marginalisation and stigmatisation, it was important for me to commit to reciprocity and to construct interactive rather than extractive research. Mi Comuna also told me that they had grown tired of being an object of research on many occasions (particularly for undergraduate students in Medellín) without receiving research findings or much else in return. My collaborative approach to knowledge production also

sought to honour an aspect significant to Mi Comuna's work in Santa Cruz, namely the importance of knowledge, representation and the contestation of narratives. It was important to be transparent and build trust that I was not seeking to sensationalise narratives of violence in Santa Cruz or to romanticise Medellín's contemporary renewal or community resilience. I planned with Mi Comuna to support their work as a team member and adapt the research in accordance with their priorities during the fieldwork. The flexible approach was particularly important when significant adaptation of my preliminary plan was necessary due to Covid-19.

Second, I sought to bring together different forms of knowledge (experiential and academic) by undertaking research in a collaborative way with those who deeply understood the context of Santa Cruz and the media processes of Mi Comuna. This 'sum of knowledge' would enable the research to 'acquire a much more accurate and correct picture of the reality that is being transformed' (Fals-Borda 1991: 4), or at least to generate knowledge 'much closer to reality than [through] any extractive research' (Abello Colak & Pearce, 2015: 212). Moreover, that 'serious and reliable' knowledge could be developed upon 'which to construct power' (Fals-Borda, 1991: 3). I sought to remain mindful of power differentials and oppressions throughout the research (Friere, 1970) and I was aware that as an external researcher my positionality, preliminary framing of the research and restricted timeframe would impact the process (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2010).

Third, through PAR I sought to examine rather than evade the complicated and at times problematic issue of participation in Medellín, in academic research and in media theory. In Medellín, procedures framed as participatory have been key to recent city government initiatives to develop influence and urban renewal interventions in Santa Cruz and other districts like it. During my prior work in Medellín (2014-2016) I had witnessed the frustration of people involved in inconsistent processes of participation linked to research or development projects. Mi Comuna have faced many of these contradictions since their inception and have developed their own methods to involve the people of Santa Cruz in their media work. Amidst Covid-19 and associated lockdowns, Mi Comuna would attempt to shift their own participatory processes into digital spaces. Academic research (not least in Medellín and the UK) has also in many cases used the language of participation while doing little to genuinely share power, including processes labelled as PAR. Furthermore, media theory focusing on alternative and community media have often romanticised and idealised participation, as discussed further in Chapter 2.

Methods of data collection in a PAR framework

Central to my research planning was a flexible approach that could adapt according to conditions and priorities in the research site.[34] This adaptability proved especially important as Covid-19 reshaped the world and compounded existing challenges faced in Santa Cruz and by Mi Comuna. The fieldwork included three distinct stages. 1: Seven initial weeks of in-situ participatory research (January-March 2020). 2: Nine months of remote and digital research as lockdowns and travel restrictions prevented me from physically accessing the research site and I sought to mitigate the problem of 'studying local phenomena from afar' (Postill, 2017: 63) (April-December 2020). 3: A final six months of in-situ participatory research, impacted by ongoing intermittent lockdowns, social distancing and restrictions on assembly (January-June 2021). Below I reflect on the three phases of research, and the mixed methods deemed appropriate and adequate to data gathering amidst the challenging conditions of the research site. First I introduce three key methods used:

Participatory research. My in-situ fieldwork was undertaken not from a distanced or 'objective' observation, but one in which I took part in participatory activities and 'support[ed] reflection and encourage[d] analysis' within Mi Comuna (Pearce, 2008: 16). I sought to affirm rather than deny the subjectivity of the research participants, to break down the barriers between myself and the 'researched' and to acknowledge my privilege, biases and positionality (Fals-Borda, 1991; Lassiter, 2005). Though the emphasis was on participation, through interactive observation I aspired to develop a 'depth and fullness of texture' (Deacon et al, 2007: 259) to my understanding, to experience things that I could not gain through discussion, questioning or gathering documents alone.[35]

Collaborative research workshops undertaken as part of PAR, sought to open space for group or collective analysis and reflection. This process of sharing experience and reflection promoted the recognition of reoccurring challenges for collective members and the interactions between them.[36] Opening space for group reflection within the Mi Comuna collective, these workshops sought to share emergent findings and observations from the research as part of a continuing knowledge sharing process Tuhiwai Smith (2012).[37] I was

[34] This approach also sought to remain reflexive, considering my positionality as an external researcher in the preliminary and ongoing planning and undertaking of the research project.
[35] Below I discuss how field notes were taken and how fieldwork data was analysed.
[36] Below I discuss in more detail collaborative research workshops undertaken face to face and in digital spaces.
[37] I had initially planned to involve those from Mi Comuna's social base in the workshops, but it was less feasible amidst Covid-19 restrictions. While the Mi Comuna team were working again in the physical space of the Casa from late 2020, restrictions on assembly limited who else could use the space of the Casa (i.e. Mi Comuna's social base).

conscious that group work could be impacted by power imbalances and relationships within the Mi Comuna collective.

Semi-structured interviews became a pivotal and stabilising component as conditions impacted participatory methods. These interviews, which aimed at a form of 'triangulation of evidence', can sometimes reflect more traditional 'positivist' endeavours (Pearce, 2008: 16). Nonetheless I sought to make these exchanges as collaborative and reciprocal as possible. I scheduled return interviews with several participants, particularly those who were most involved in the work of Mi Comuna and were willing and able to meet again. I shared interview transcripts to open the possibility for further discussion with those members of Mi Comuna that had lower capacity to meet or were busy with other work or responsibilities, and those external to Mi Comuna. And I offered an archive of anonymised interview transcripts to Mi Comuna (where participants agreed, and redacted where necessary).

Interview participants were selected in 'purposive' sampling (Deacon et. al, 2007). This was not random nor seeking a representative sample of the Santa Cruz population, but instead one which sought those who had understanding and experience of the work of Mi Comuna. In practice, this meant that all the interview participants were connected to Mi Comuna in some way, or to community media in Medellín. I undertook interviews until reaching a certain 'saturation point', where interview participants began to reiterate issues that had already emerged in the research (Deacon et al, 2007). I undertook 30 semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour in length (the majority in phase two and three of the research). The interview participants (listed anonymously in table appendix 1) included; current members of Mi Comuna, former members and founders of Mi Comuna, members of organisations associated with Mi Comuna, individuals who had worked with Mi Comuna on specific projects, those undertaking university placements with Mi Comuna, members of Mi Comuna's 'social base', academic researchers who had worked with Mi Comuna or other community media in Medellín. In the majority of cases I first built an in-person connection and a degree of trust before asking them to take part in an interview. Towards the end of phase three of the research and largely due to the ongoing restrictions and disruption related to Covid-19, I was connected to several interview participants through Mi Comuna team members.[38] [39]

[38] This was more akin to 'snowball sampling', which involves 'initial contacts [suggesting] further people for the researcher to approach…a method widely used in research into either very closed or informal social groupings, where the social knowledge and personal recommendations of the initial contacts are invaluable.' (Deacon et al, 2007: 55).
[39] Below I discuss methods of analysis and how interview transcriptions were analysed.

Research phase one – building trust within an overstretched organisation

At the outset of the in-situ fieldwork in January 2020, before Covid-19 reshaped the world, I travelled to Medellín and met with the Mi Comuna collective. This first face-to-face meeting followed several email exchanges and online meetings with the director of Mi Comuna who I had met a few years earlier. We agreed that I become a working member of the team for the following six months, supporting their media practice while opening spaces for reflection and knowledge production, according to their needs and priorities.[40] During the initial weeks I planned to involve members of Mi Comuna in the shaping of the research questions and methods, for which I needed to build good relationships, trust and credibility (Deacon et. al, 2007: 260). I also began the observational aspect of my research, as an active participant, seeing the 'interactions and behaviours' in this everyday setting (Deacon et. al, 2007: 249). As Barrios (1988: 57, cited in Deacon et al, 2007: 258) argues, '[b]eing there means that verbal and non-verbal behaviour ('body position, togetherness, interruptions, parallel activities') could all be observed as they happened'.

This initial seven-week period coincided with an existential struggle for Mi Comuna, regarding the lease of their base the *Casa para el Encuentro Eduardo Galeano*.[41] This occupied a significant amount of Mi Comuna's capacity and was their priority. I adapted my approach to support where they needed, and to not impose additional demands of participatory research on them at this difficult time. I participated in crisis meetings and more general events and assemblies in the Casa and around Santa Cruz. This included the planning and realization of the *Fiesta de la Utopia*, an annual two-day celebration bringing together social organisations and artistic collectives from across northeast Medellín. (I made a large batch of Colombian chilli sauce to go with the *empanadas* and *sancocho* at the fiesta, which felt to me like a useful act at this time.) I also participated in Mi Comuna's dialogic methods to produce short video documentaries and the newspaper *Mi Comuna 2*. Midway through this first stage I was invited to join the weekly meetings of the core Mi Comuna collective, an encouraging sign that I was building trust and legitimacy within the organisation.

As Mi Comuna's participation in the research was limited at this stage, the observational aspect of my research took on greater precedence, albeit as an active participant rather than a distanced observer. While I took part in these everyday activities of Mi Comuna I avoided

[40] This role was based on my previous experience working in community media in Medellín (2014-2016), though it would inevitably take me time to learn the practices of Mi Comuna.
[41] This struggle would become a key discussion point in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

shifting emphasis from the principal objectives to centre myself or the research. I was mindful however that as an external researcher I would never be entirely unobtrusive. I made detailed field notes and reflections either during or as soon as was practicable following the activities. These notes were never the whole picture and were based on my own biases and interpretations (which I would explore further in informal discussions, semi-structured interviews and workshops).

Participating in and observing the work of Mi Comuna through this crisis moment, I found 'rich encounters' which added 'a density of colour and three-dimensional realism' to my preliminary understanding (Deacon et. al, 2007: 260). I built appreciation of the roles and interactions of the Mi Comuna collective and their social base, and was significantly impacted by the struggle to save the physical space of the Casa (central to the analysis in Chapter 5). I sought to remain mindful of the impact of my participation on my analysis, to 'note things before they become so familiar that the observer takes them for granted', before what anthropologists have called 'going native' (Deacon et. al, 2007: 260).

After seven weeks of in-situ research I returned to London on 10 March 2020 for a planned two weeks, because my partner Juli (who is Colombian) had to renew her UK visa. At that point there were significant numbers of confirmed cases of Covid-19 in London. As I arrived in London the global pandemic was declared (World Health Organisation, 11 March 2020). The UK government advised against all 'non-essential' travel, Goldsmiths graduate school and CHASE-AHRC subsequently advised that associated researchers halt any in-situ fieldwork. The Colombian government closed its international borders, and while Medellín still had very few confirmed cases of Covid-19, the city entered a strict lockdown (April-September 2020). As *la cuarantena* commenced in Medellín, Mi Comuna shifted their activities into digital spaces where possible, a dramatic change for an organisation working principally through in-person activities in the Casa and out in the streets. My in-situ research was interrupted indefinitely it was unclear when or whether I would be able to return to Medellín during the timeframe of my PhD.

Research phase two - The challenges of remote and digital research during Covid-19

The second phase of my research was an enormously uncertain and anxious time. Limitations on Mi Comuna's capacity for a strong participation in the research, which had become evident during my initial weeks in Medellín, were exacerbated during the onset of

Covid-19.[42] I had to be flexible to researching with an organisation facing serious additional challenges, and to being distanced in space and time from the research site (Colombia is 5 hours behind UK Standard Time/GMT). I sought to learn from established and emerging experiences of undertaking research during crises as well as digitally and remotely (e.g. Lupton, 2020/21). I also sought to learn from other researchers reacting to similar challenges in 2020. In this unprecedented moment I sought to help Mi Comuna reflect on their hasty and radical shift into digital spaces. However it would ultimately prove much harder to participate in or research this work remotely in a collaborative way.

My participation in the work of Mi Comuna was restricted by the challenges they faced and my distance from the research site. It was notable that Mi Comuna often lacked the capacity to involve me in the work that I was distanced from. This was understandable, particularly as I was still relatively new to their methods and the context of Santa Cruz. I continued to attend regular team meetings which had shifted onto videoconferencing platforms. Attending these meetings online was workable, digital communications technologies (email, WhatsApp, videoconferencing software) had after all been crucial to the initial coordination of the fieldwork, and to my personal and professional communications between London and Medellín in previous years. But the experience of being there digitally rather than physically was distinct, and interruptions and lagging prone to online video technology were common. With a view to avoiding interruptions, team members regularly attended via audio-only connections, but this only further inhibited interaction, reaction and perception.

My ability to participate in Mi Comuna's public events and assemblies was also radically impacted by digital platforms and distance. These emergent digital spaces, attempts to (re)create dialogic and creative processes online, including panel discussions, events or performances (e.g. music or theatre) were often more one-way broadcasts rather than multidirectional conversations. And due to the time difference, many meetings and events were too late in the night for me to attend, meaning that I would experience most of these spaces after the fact. Being dependent on recordings of meetings or events restricted my participation, interaction and any 'immediacy' of observation.

Seeking to open space for reflection with Mi Comuna on the conjuncture and on their accelerated digital media work, I planned and facilitated an initial collaborative research workshop. This took place via digital interface and with the (vital) support of another member

[42] Including that Mi Comuna had just negotiated a new lease on the Casa, yet now had to maintain it closed while paying the rent.

of Mi Comuna. The workshop was planned initially for a two-hour session, extended for a second two-hour session a fortnight later. While there was good cooperation in the workshop, it was a challenge for me to facilitate and interact effectively. Despite being connected digitally, I lost much of the 'immediacy' of 'being there' and ability to respond to and observe verbal and non-verbal communication. Interruptions added further complications, and at one point (during a thunderstorm) the connection from the workshop cut out entirely.

I held one-to-one conversations with team members either in synchronous (e.g. videoconferencing or WhatsApp calls) or asynchronous dialogue (e.g. WhatsApp text and voice notes).[43] This included online synchronous interviews with members of the team and others who I had met during phase one of the research.[44] Undertaking online interviews was a challenging but invaluable tool while I was distanced from the research site and as lockdowns or social distancing restrictions persisted. While these one-on-one conversations were more straightforward than team meetings or collaborative workshops through a digital interface, a similar set of challenges were faced, including; restricted eye contact, diminished perception of body language and non-verbal communication, intermittent connections, a lack of adequate space within shared homes in which to meet.

A palpable sense of burnout would also emerge during this phase, linked to the anxiety of Covid-19 but also to this augmented screen time and the extended separation of lockdowns. In the second half of 2020, lockdown restrictions in Medellín eased and most of the Mi Comuna team could meet again face-to-face. This was a positive moment for them to be reunited and together, able once again to cherish the physical assembly, or a customary coffee or lunch between meetings. This offline-online scenario would however prove even more challenging for me to participate effectively from distance.

This was therefore a particularly complicated period for the research process; Mi Comuna's participation in the research was restricted, while my contribution to Mi Comuna were impacted by distance and digital interfaces. The quality of my reflection through fieldnotes suffered as a result. This was the moment when my position as an external researcher was most stark, amidst significant differences between the situations and pandemic responses in London and Medellín. I shared experience from social organisations in the UK who were shifting into digital spaces and communicated the developments of Covid-19 and policy

[43] Asynchronous dialogue, a technique of one-to-one dialogue mediated by technology, mitigated the challenge of finding an appropriate time in which to be co-present (Lupton, 2020/21).
[44] See Janghorban, Latifnejad Roudsari and Taghipour (2014).

responses in Europe, where the wave of infections was a few months ahead of Medellín. I tried to act as a 'critical friend', though due to the challenges Mi Comuna were facing and the very different socio-economic contexts and digital access, comments from a researcher positioned in a very different situation were not always useful or well received. In the face of many challenges exacerbated by distance and the digital, my determination to return physically to the research site increased.

Research phase three – return to Medellín amidst the ongoing impacts of Covid-19

By late 2020, Colombia's international borders had reopened and Medellín's continuous lockdown had been replaced by a range of interventions including compulsory mask wearing, restrictions on assembly and intermittent lockdowns. Following discussion with Mi Comuna and my PhD supervisor, and with support from the Goldsmiths Graduate School and CHASE-AHRC, I returned to Medellín to recommence in-situ fieldwork. The ongoing impacts of Covid-19 on Mi Comuna were notable. Restricted funding opportunities during 2020 had reduced resources within the organisation, with some team members having left for alternative employment and others now with Mi Comuna only part-time. Ongoing Covid-19 related restrictions on assembly impacted Mi Comuna's work, preventing for example the running of participatory projects in the Casa. Moreover during 2021 there were regular short lockdowns over the weekends, when Mi Comuna would normally have been working out in the streets of Santa Cruz. Medellín was also facing unprecedented protests in response to health and legal reforms and tax increases. The state (in Medellín and across Colombia) responded to the protests with brutal violence.

With Mi Comuna reeling from the impacts of Covid-19 and their work still relatively restricted, the possibility of further involving members of Mi Comuna and their social base in the research were limited. Perhaps the most frequent action I was involved in were the weekly team meetings, planning the year ahead amidst changing circumstances and a funding crisis. I also contributed to Mi Comuna's regular space for dialogue and reflection on action (Fals-Borda, 1991), the meetings of *Comuna Escuela*. These are key to the praxis of Mi Comuna in which they seek to reflect on and understand the local context and their own action in order to operate effectively (Freire, 1970). *Comuna Escuela* became particularly important for Mi Comuna during this phase to reflect on the challenges they were facing. So too for my research, where I could support and build knowledge with Mi Comuna without imposing excessive additional demands of participatory research. I shared theory and practice experience where useful, including academic literature examining the use of digital

technologies in social and political movements and in moments of crisis and upheaval (e.g. Fenton, 2016). And also my experience working with social organisations in Medellín and the UK in which administrative and financial challenges, and organisational burnout, had been encountered. I brought bread and brownies to break up long meetings and tried to be a stable member of the team, available to support work when it could proceed: I was involved in the planning and realization of the 2021 *Fiesta de la Utopia*. I supported the production and distribution of the newspaper Mi Comuna 2, including the reading of the newspaper through a loudspeaker in the streets of Santa Cruz. I supported the production of short audio-visual outputs and a number of outdoor neighbourhood assemblies to discuss the protests in Medellín. I was also able to hold lots of informal and enlightening conversations in the Casa, for example over lunch or coffee. In the face of financial pressures exacerbated by Covid-19, Mi Comuna asked that I support the development of new projects and funding applications (not least due to my perceived access to institutions and opportunities in the Anglophone exterior).

I planned and facilitated a second collaborative workshop, this time in-situ with participants together in the Casa. The workshop utilised cooperative techniques and tools and the physical meeting space, including the drawing of large maps and the construction of a physical timeline across the room.[45] Together we reflected on the digital work and connections of Mi Comuna during Covid-19, how their relationships, power and accountability dynamics had shifted, within the collective and external to it. We shared coffee, and bread and brownies. The workshop discussions, reflections and my own observations were of a higher quality than those that emerged from previous online workshop. I was however conscious of the impact on the discussion of my positionality and my continued outsider status (particularly having been away from the research site since March 2020). Parts of the session felt more like presentations of how much had been achieved online through the lockdowns, rather than critically reflecting on the challenges and difficulties faced.[46] I had planned the session meticulously and sought to prepare colleagues in advance with a view to encouraging cooperation and critical reflection. Nonetheless the session, which felt different to a *Comuna Escuela* space, was perhaps impacted by my presence, planning and/or and the audio recording of the session.

[45] Mapping has conventionally been undertaken by powerful actors such as governments or military forces, centring physical features of the earth and physical infrastructure. 'Counter-mapping' may instead be undertaken 'from below' and can consider more 'popular' or symbolic place, space, resources, environment and the related belonging and identity.
[46] There is no doubt that they achieved an enormous amount amidst the circumstances of Covid-19.

Research analysis

Data analysis was undertaken through an iterative process in which I read and re-read fieldnotes, interview and workshop transcripts multiple times, developing mind maps to visualise the data and generate categories. This 'intellectual *labour*…an embodied, material labour process', took time (Morley, 2006: 77 - interview by Claudio Flores). I would, in an ultimately subjective way, consider the categories that were emerging from the data, then develop and use the categories that 'produce the most efficient and meaningful way of dividing up the data' in the least complex system that worked (Morley, 2006: 76 - interview by Claudio Flores). I combined related data in documents for further consideration and used literature and theory as a tool to understand and further excavate the data.

A continuous knowledge sharing process with Mi Comuna was an important part of this work. I sought to create space for dialogue on this developing knowledge through workshops, interviews and informal discussions. I prepared documents of emergent findings and anonymised data for sharing with Mi Comuna collective members. I decided against using data analysis software (e.g. NVivo) in my research analysis. I had previous experience working with NVivo, which had been useful for sharing the intellectual and practical labour of analysis with two colleagues, but the format was ultimately exclusive of other colleagues and research participants.

Another important part of my analysis was considering not just what was said, but also the silence and what was left unsaid. That which is left unsaid in community spaces is linked to the context of violence in Medellín. Mi Comuna's media processes may counter denigrating narratives, celebrate common histories, and even work through historic traumas. But amidst the persisting presence of violent state and non-state armed actors, any direct denouncement or investigative reporting could be dangerous.

The challenges of researching in a non-native language

My fieldwork was undertaken primarily in Spanish, including the day-to-day activities and conversations, interviews and workshops. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by a native Colombian, who was not connected to Mi Comuna and agreed to maintain strict confidentiality and data protection. Mi Comuna's media work and archives were also all in Spanish. My fieldnotes were written in a combination of Spanish and English. Extracts included in the thesis were translated from Spanish to English by me. I sought always to do

this in a way that reflected as accurately as possible the emphasis of the original extract and developed a reference file for the original Spanish and English translation. But this was always a challenge, certain things did not translate literally into English, while my positionality impacted my ability to understand other things (given the very different ways of living and being in Santa Cruz.) I also translated work from English into Spanish for discussion and reflection with Mi Comuna.

For example, through the many meetings, events, workshops and interviews during my fieldwork, *la defensa del territorio* was a frequent point of reference. As a white, European raised in a terraced house in south London, territory resonated only faintly with my life experience. I had heard reactionary politicians speak of defending the territorial waters of the UK, and I had known school friends caught up in neighbourhood conflicts in south London. Similarly I was aware of Medellín's 'fronteras invisibles' which have violently divided parts of the city from others. Nonetheless, understanding the significance of *la defensa del territorio* to media, cultural and memory work in northeast Medellín, a place that was largely self-constructed by its residents, was a complex issue that required much contemplation. (*La defensa del territorio* is discussed further in Chapter 8).

Undertaking research in a non-native language, communication was always challenging. While I was able to understand and be understood throughout my fieldwork, this was another notable difference between me and my colleagues and research participants (all native Castilian Spanish speakers). There were many key terms and references linked to local vernacular and culture that I could not understand through a dictionary alone. I depended on colleagues and friends who answered regular questions in informal conversations and interviews, helping me address a challenge I faced as both a non-native speaker and an outsider to Santa Cruz. It is tiring operating in a non-native language, a factor which no doubt impacted my participation, cooperation and observation at times during the fieldwork, and the scope of the knowledge sharing process. Moreover, translating interviews (from Spanish into English) and emergent findings (from English into Spanish) was complicated and laborious, and an issue which undoubtedly restricted me in terms of returning emergent findings to Mi Comuna as regularly as I had intended. On the other hand, my English was one of the things Mi Comuna regularly asked me to help them with, for example in building their networks, as well as searching for and writing funding applications.

Situating the researcher

The methodological approach set out above has been fundamentally influenced and inspired by my experience working in Medellín between 2014 and 2016. During this time I was confronted by the contradictions of participatory processes. Furthermore the biases that I held about knowledge and its production were sharply revised through working alongside activists with sophisticated critical understanding through their experiences (as opposed to any academic training or method). This background is outlined here to provide a transparent and considered explanation for the research approach and undertaking outlined above.

My introduction to and initial comprehension of Medellín was strongly impacted by the media. I had developed an interest in the history and context of Colombia whilst undertaking a masters in Anthropology of Conflict and Development Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. My research there was based on academic literature alongside source material from humanitarian organizations and the press, most of which was in the English language and written by European or North American authors. While many of my SOAS peers were also researching foreign situations from their London desks, it nonetheless left somewhat of a void.

When I completed my masters, I wanted to further understand the issues explored in my thesis (on 'everyday violence' in Colombia), so in January 2014 I moved to Colombia. Residing with the family of a friend in Medellín, I initially worked as a volunteer English teacher at Fundación Las Golondrinas, a school in a central-eastern hillside district of Villa Hermosa (Comuna 8). Astrid, who I was staying with, was concerned about the prospect of me working in Villa Hermosa which was known as a violent place, from her perspective at least. To emphasise her point, Astrid insisted that I watch two films. The first was the documentary, *La Sierra* (2005)*,* the title taken from the barrio (neighbourhood) on southeastern border of Villa Hermosa on Medellín's urban-rural periphery. The documentary was made by two Press Association journalists, Scott Dalton (USA) and Margarita Martínez (Colombia), directing their first documentary film. *La Sierra* narrated the devastating journey of three young men caught up in gang and paramilitary violence in barrio la Sierra. The second film was *La Vendedora de Rosas* (1998) by Víctor Gaviria, a Colombian director known for working with non-professional actors, inhabitants of the marginalised places at the centre in his films portraying tragic everyday stories in Medellín.

The two films impacted me strongly and made me cautious, to the extent that I enquired with Fundación Las Golondrinas how safe it was for me to travel to and work at the school. They assured me that I would be secure and that a number of 'international volunteers' had worked at the school previously without incident. They qualified this by advising that I should

avoid exploring the Llanaditas neighbourhood surrounding the school. I was shown the bus route to the school, which I caught from the very first to the very final stop each day. There I travelled for three months, taking small groups out of the overcrowded English classes to work on specific topics. While we studied English, the young pupils inadvertently taught me Spanish, including the accent and adolescent vernacular of Villa Hermosa. After three months I was offered a full-time job to teach English at the school. I contemplated anxiously about the offer, realistic about my limitations as a teacher (I had never been trained) and command of Spanish. I ultimately declined the offer, concluding that I had not travelled to Colombia to teach English. While English is my native language, I did not feel that this gave me the right to teach it. Another reason I decided not accept the job offer was that I had just begun working with Ciudad Comuna, a community media collective also based in the district of Villa Hermosa.

In one of the first activities I took part in with Ciudad Comuna I explored the neighbourhoods of Villa Hermosa for the first time. The *Revelando Barrios* project, in which young people documented through photography the issues important to them in their neighbourhood, was underway in barrio el Pacífico.[47] The young people were fascinated with the digital cameras (smartphones were not yet widespread in Medellín) and became animated telling stories through photography. During the photography tour, I accompanied a group of 15 budding photographers around the neighbourhood, including 3 nine-year-old boys who showed me their homes, their football pitch, their pets and their breathtaking view over the sprawling city of Medellín below. The children had space to be creative, to think critically about the challenges in their neighbourhoods, the way the homes had been built, the way rubbish was often left uncollected, the multitude of roles of the mothers heads of households; paid employment, cooking, caring and even collecting water. At subsequent sessions during which we reflected on the photos that had been taken, some of the young people opened up about difficult events that had impacted their lives.

My mediated experience of Medellín had come almost full circle, beginning with Eurocentric academic literature and north American documentary film, through Medellín perceptions of the ‘wrong side’ of the city, to social photography of home through the lens of adolescence. I had experienced acutely the prejudicial impact of documentary film and the constructive possibilities of grassroots media processes in developing young voices and their stories. A few months later we would run the *Revelando Barrios* photography project in barrio la Sierra and barrio Llanaditas, including with some former pupils from my time teaching in the school.

[47] This method draws many inspirations from the *Photovoice* method.

In the planning phase of *Revelando Barrios* in la Sierra we met with a group of community leaders there to discuss the documentary film *La Sierra*. They were enormously frustrated with the documentary, which they explained had manipulated and exaggerated events in their barrio and associated violent events from other parts of the city with their neighbourhood. Their view was that the film had added significantly to the challenges inhabitants already faced, when waste collection and transport services refused for a time to enter la Sierra, fearful of its enhanced infamy (Ortíz Franco, 2015, 'La Sierra, 10 años después', *Pacifista* [https://pacifista.tv/notas/la-sierra-10-anos-despues/], accessed 1 May 2019). During the *Revelando Barrios* project in la Sierra one young participant told me "la Sierra, well, it's very nice. It's the best. It's my home" (Greenwood, 2015).

While la Sierra has faced serious problems and violence, this experience demonstrated the extremities of perception of the unknown and the familiar. It also demonstrated the impact of external narratives and the way they can become self-fulfilling. The documentary film had a brief designed far from barrio la Sierra to produce a film that would generate interest. Those who lived in the neighbourhood were not included in the planning or production of the film, their experience was superseded by the objectives of the producers of the film.

This experience of the use of knowledge and the development of narratives is very important for my research and my choice of PAR as a methodological approach. Experiences like this mean that community leaders in Medellín are understandably wary of external actors and seek certain assurances about collaboration and control before agreeing to support a project. PAR approaches seek to build trust by making collaboration and control over information a fundamental part of the approach.

'Unofficial knowledge, history and research'

For the following two years I worked as part of the Ciudad Comuna media collective as well as on a collaborative project between a community social movement in Villa Hermosa and a research centre at the University of Antioquia (the Observatorio de Seguridad Humana de Medellín, OSHM). This work transformed my understanding of what constituted knowledge and history, and the impact of power and privilege on their production and dissemination. The contradictions of 'participatory' processes were also highlighted to me, linked to community media processes, academic research projects and also to state interventions regarding the 'legalisation' and 'development' of informal settlements which at times

threatened to displace residents (many of whom had settled in Medellín after being displaced by violent conflict).[48]

Projects with Ciudad Comuna involved participatory counter-mapping methodologies and storytelling, through which memories of the historic events of Villa Hermosa were reanimated and retold in detail.[49] This included the Villatina tragedy of 27 September 1987, when 500 people lost their lives in a landslide on this steep eastern mountainside of Medellín. Popular knowledge or historical memory shared by local residents contested the 'official' history of this tragedy as merely a natural disaster for which no authority was responsible (Delgado, 1997 - INER). This contestation was valuable when challenging state proposals to intervene in and redevelop these hillside settlements based on the narrative that this was an inherently high-risk zone. Local residents insisted that it was a large explosion that caused the landslide, one which they heard that day and clearly remember. Thus they argued that the 'high-risk' narrative should not be used to justify the displacement of many existing residents from the homes they had collectively constructed many years ago and lived in safely since, only to be replaced by more formal state-sponsored projects with smaller homes and higher rents.

The collaborative project with the OSHM developed an alternative grassroots policy to these city redevelopment proposals. I facilitated the project alongside three colleagues who had academic training and were external to the district. It was evident that the local residents held the valuable knowledge and experience of the challenges they faced and the solutions they needed. The powerful knowledge and wisdom the residents held came not from an academic training but through their experience of displacement, collective rebuilding and mitigation of the risks and challenges they faced. What my colleagues and I could usefully contribute was access to city planning documents, the facilitation and recording of meetings and the write up of the proposals developed in the large assemblies. The proposals were brought back to assemblies for approval, following which we collectively publicised, shared and advocated the alternative proposals at the district and city level. This project, which

[48] Arnstein's (1969) 'Ladder of Citizen Participation', which will be discussed further in the analysis chapters, described a range of citizen participation in institutional processes in the USA. At the high point of the ladder was 'citizen control' and 'partnership, moving down through the 'consultation' or 'placation' of tokenistic participatory processes, to processes in manipulation described as nonparticipation.

[49] These counter-mapping exercises sought to create an 'alternative discourse of space and its inhabitation relative to state-sponsored boundings, privatisations, categorisations, and inscriptions' (St. Martin and Hall-Arber, 2007: 52). In the context of state absence and marginalisation in Santa Cruz, these 'boundings' may be enforced instead by armed actors or the negative discourses of mainstream media.

used collective learning and collaborative research to drive sociopolitical action, effectively rejected the asymmetry of a subject/object relationship in order to produce valuable knowledge for social transformation (Fals-Borda, 1991: 4).

Research principles and ethical considerations

I have sought to establish this research process through general principles that have been explored in practice, appraised in the literature and my own experience (Hume-Cook et al, 2010). I began undertaking research with Mi Comuna negotiating the purpose, the process, the scope and the outcomes of the research project. I developed an agreement covering research principles and ethics, research objectives. These aspects were negotiated with Mi Comuna throughout the fieldwork as conditions changed. The project was flexible to fit in with existing practice and local priorities in order to better understand them and build reciprocity. While seeking to implement an anti-oppressive PAR project I was conscious that I may subject others to the oppression I sought to counter (Friere, 1970).

In order to continually assess the complex security situation in Medellín and in order to ensure that I did not place research participants or myself in danger, I established a panel of advisors to develop a security protocol for undertaking my research. The panel included a member of Mi Comuna, two academics and a social leader from Medellín. Residents of Medellín with a range of backgrounds and experience of different security situations in Medellín and participatory research, they contributed a broad understanding of the situation. The panel convened on 1 March 2020 and committed to meeting regularly during the research period and/or to maintain regular communication with them about any changing or developing issues. The ethical issues and risks of undertaking research with marginalised groups were at the forefront of the research as it was undertaken. So too the threat in present day Colombia to social leaders, as well as journalists and academics. I worked through research ethics with particular focus on research methodology and its implications, with advice from my supervisor, who has significant experience in PAR and played an important role in facilitating a positive, if immensely challenging, encounter with PAR. I gained ethical approval from my Departmental Ethics Committee and the Goldsmiths Ethics Committee for fieldwork in 2020 and 2021. Through PAR I nonetheless sought to move ‘beyond the conventional ethical dictate of ‘do no harm’’ towards efforts to ‘bring above positive change’ (Klocker, 2012: 156).[50] Information and data were anonymised and

[50] PAR researchers have criticised the ‘ill-fit between a one-size-fits all ‘restrictive, inflexible and top-

protected in encrypted hard disks and servers. Attributable files were saved on the Microsoft OneDrive server recommended and provided by Goldsmiths, rather than on google drive, dropbox or on social media.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the methodological approach and methods within a PAR framework, planned in consideration of the complex research context and my own positionality and background. Significant challenges were encountered in the enacting of this plan. Crucial here were the multiple issues facing an overstretched community organisation in a research site with significant challenges and inequalities. These issues were exacerbated by the global pandemic. It was certainly ambitious to set out (even before the global pandemic, in early 2020) to undertake research in this way, particularly considering the limited resources, timeframe and the set milestones of my PhD process. Moreover considering that ultimately the core written output and academic qualifications of the research would be attached principally to one of the participants (i.e. me) (Byrne Armstrong, 2001).

Nonetheless, principles key to the PAR tradition, including flexibility, reciprocity and a commitment to social transformation, were of crucial importance to the undertaking of my research in an appropriate way through challenging conditions and an extraordinary conjuncture. The iterative approach meant that I could adapt to the conditions without descending into confusion. As Klocker (2012: 153) reflects: ‘Realistically, there are few research projects that end up where they started—PAR PhDs are not alone in this regard’. The approach meant that I was able to develop strong relationships within Mi Comuna even amidst crisis moments and the difficulties of distance and digital interface. Given the particularly challenging circumstances for Mi Comuna during 2020-2021, it was understandable that the capacity of members of the organisation and their social base for a strong participation in the research was limited. Nonetheless I was able to build understanding of the complex processes of Mi Comuna and support their work in certain ways. Finally, the fact that the PAR approach aligned closely to Mi Comuna’s praxis, meant that I could participate in action and reflection without imposing excessive additional spaces for research.

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down’ institutional ethics, and a participatory ethics of care that involves negotiation with participants’ (Cahill et al., 2007: 307; cited in Klocker, 2012: 156).

Near the end of my PhD process, I asked members of Mi Comuna whether my research process had fulfilled their expectations and what they had taken from it. One team member underlined that it had not been easy to carry out research in the midst of the pandemic, during a moment that Mi Comuna had to *"reinvent ourselves to survive economically and continue doing work in the territory."* He said that *"in this process, you were an important support, not as part of an extractivist investigation, but by putting into words and actions your perceptions and proposals to improve our processes. That's what I think is most important…The activities that we were able to carry out with you were very good because mutual learning was achieved. You taught us other ways, from personal reflections, your studies, other areas and other knowledge such as integration with the community with your famous chili sauce and bread. This interaction and this possibility of sharing knowledge helps a lot to resignify our processes. Another thing was the interaction with the children because, without wanting to encourage eurocentrism…it was very important to have a foreign friend who speaks another language, who lives in another country, who knows another reality, but that that friend has an opportunity in which you open the possibility that they share knowledge with you (as was your case). I value that a lot."*

The next chapter introduces in greater detail the socio-political context of the research site, arguing the importance of this context to the social and media practices of Mi Comuna and the processes they are part of. This context includes the collaborative construction of districts like Santa Cruz by displaced migrants fleeing the armed conflict. These conditions, characterised by violence and limited state presence, denigrating narratives and grassroots responses, are central to the practices of Mi Comuna.

Chapter 4

Socio-political context of the research site, Santa Cruz, Medellín

This chapter explores the socio-political context of the research site, the district of Santa Cruz (Comuna 2) in Medellín, Colombia. This context is presented because of its central importance to Mi Comuna's media practice. This thesis argues that we can only properly understand Mi Comuna and their media processes within the complex context in which they work from the national to the local level. Colombia has a paradoxical history, as Latin America's oldest democracy yet it is also the most war ravaged and the most unequal, with wealth and power dominated by a small elite. The aim of this chapter is therefore to provide a sound understanding of the research site, a base from which this thesis will analyse Mi Comuna's media processes.

The mass displacement of people from rural Colombia to Medellín is considered, including the collective construction and persistent stigmatisation of districts like Santa Cruz. The context of Santa Cruz is discussed through the multiple challenges faced including protracted violence and stigmatisation, where the principal responses from government have been militarized or counterproductive. The ways Mi Comuna have developed and responded in this context are introduced below. These themes are analysed further in forthcoming empirical chapters. This chapter seeks to provide a solid foundation from which to do so.

The Colombian civil conflict

García Villegas and de Sousa Santos (2004: 76) describe Colombia's long civil war as leading to 'violence, corruption, social conflicts, [state] weakness, the privatisation of justice, marginality, the vulnerability of social identities...and the collapse of social expectations'. Prompted by the assassination in 1948 of the popular Liberal Party presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, 10 years of civil war known as *La Violencia* began. Fought mainly in rural Colombia between supporters of the Colombian Conservative Party and the Colombian Liberal Party, *La Violencia* is estimated to have taken the lives of 200,000 people, injured up to 800,000, and displaced one million. Amidst this political violence in the rural areas of Colombia, peasant communities (campesinos) fled to the cities.

The 1958 resolution of *La Violencia* is cited as tragically important to the protracted civil war that would follow. *La Violencia* was ended by the bipartisan coalition between the Conservatives and Liberals known as the Front Nacional, which followed a military coup and brief military rule led by General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1953-57). The Front Nacional

effectively silenced the burgeoning political voice of the peasant majority that had emerged during *La Violencia*. This suppression of calls for a fairer land distribution was a major factor in the establishment in 1964 of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army (FARC-EP) (Rochlin, 2011). The FARC were Colombia's most influential and longest serving guerrilla army, until they signed a peace agreement with the Colombian government in 2016.[51]

FARC expansion and paramilitary response

The expansion of the FARC across Colombia was financed by increasingly oppressive methods including violent extortion and expropriation (Vargas, 2009). Gutiérrez Sanín (2005) notes how paramilitary self-defence forces, long a factor in Colombia, were stimulated by state failure to deal with the expanding FARC. These paramilitary groups soon proliferated, exceeding their inceptive remit of local defence and transforming to sustain their own growth (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2005). Paramilitary forces gained notoriety utilising brutal violence (Taussig, 2006), and were soon deeply connected with the criminality of the burgeoning narcotics trade, as too were the FARC from the mid-1980s (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2005).

As the FARC and other guerrilla movements, including the ELN and the M19, expanded their threat and territorial control, anti-subversion efforts of the paramilitary and state forces escalated, involving the victimisation of more of the general population (Vargas, 2009). The targeting of social leaders, journalists, trade unionists and atrocities against the civilian population in general, at times enabled by state complicity, reflected counter-insurgency tactics across Latin America (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2005; Taussig, 2006), practices that continue to have a violent legacy in Colombia today (Indepaz, 2020).

Taussig (2006) has explored the paramilitaries' use of highly brutal and symbolic violence, including systematic rape and murder. 'We do what the regular army can't. We do the dirty work, we sow the terror. You hack a couple of people to pieces with power saws and leave them hanging on a barbed-wire fence. That's more effective than killing large numbers' (Taussig, interview with ex-paramilitary, 2006: 39). Conversely, the disappearance of individuals at the hands of unknown assailants 'intentionally promoted the unreality of death', a trauma which would 'leave survivors in a state of ontological insecurity' (Hamber and Wilson, 2002: 41). In Medellín alone between 1980 and 2014 there were 2,784 forced

[51] The majority of FARC-EP troops are undergoing demobilisation, though some splinter groups have resisted this process and returned to armed struggle.

disappearances (CNMH, 2015). Bourgois (2001) highlights the cognitive impacts of war violence, stating that these can lead victims and witnesses to turn blame upon themselves. 'Blame and feelings of betrayal over human failures abound' as an inevitable part of surviving armed conflict, which contribute to 'a form of symbolic violence whereby survivors focus their recriminations on their fellow victims' as well as their own character flaws, rather than on the agents who actually perpetrate terror' (2001: 13).

Pitched battles involving guerrilla, paramilitary and state forces blighted towns and cities for years (Vargas, 2009). Often paramilitary forces served 'as a rear-guard that consolidates – with an antisubversive programme – the territories taken by the army', solving the strategic problem of the army being less mobile than the guerrilla forces (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2005: 6). Gutiérrez Sanín (2005) and Taussig (2003) document how these periods were utilised to control and build leverage with the population, through protection of supporters and repression of opponents and 'undesirables'.

Of those displaced by the armed conflict through the past 70 years, estimated at over seven million by the Norwegian Refugee Council (2018), Medellín has been the site of refuge for a significant majority of those displaced from within Antioquia state and from the neighbouring state of Chocó. The experiences of these internally displaced persons can amount to that which Arendt (1982) described as the 'triple loss' of European refugees during the first and second world wars – 'the loss of social connection, the meaning of experience, and their political and civil rights' (Pécaut, 2000: 93).

As this chapter explores below, a dysfunctional or absent state provided little in the way of material support for displaced migrants, many of whom would construct their own neighbourhoods on the peripheries of cities like Medellín. Materially independent, the displaced also developed their own forms of processing their experiences and building a new reality.

The path to a peace agreement, and the ongoing violence

In 2012, following a significant intensification of the civil war during the first decade of the 21st century, peace negotiations with the FARC were established by President Juan Manuel Santos. Negotiations were held on neutral territory in Havana, Cuba for almost four years. An agreement was reached in August 2016, but a plebiscite to gain national support for the deal in October 2016 was unsuccessful when 50.2 per cent of voters (on a 37.4 per cent

turnout) voted against the agreement. The referendum was marked by a comprehensive campaign against the peace agreement, fronted by former President Alvaro Uribe Vélez and featuring a strong digital campaign on social media channels (El Universal, 2016). The campaign chief of the 'No' campaign, Juan Carlos Vélez, gave a candid interview following the referendum in which he highlighted the powerful impact of targeted messaging that sought to provoke outrage about the peace process, which effectively appealed to the varied concerns of middle class, working class and regional voters through social media and regional radio (Semana, 2016, El Universal, 2016). To middle class voters the messaging was about impunity and tax reforms to fund the peace and demobilisation, to working class voters the campaign focused on the subsidies demobilised combatants would receive over and above struggling citizens (El Universal, 2016). The right-wing populism and 'mano dura' (Iron Fist) democratic security approach of ex-President Alvaro Uribe, and Colombia's military industrial complex were also key here (Abello Colak and Pearce, 2015).[52]

The legitimacy of the referendum result was undermined by voting data which demonstrated that the regions hit hardest by the conflict had voted most strongly in favour of the agreement. To the victims in these regions, peace was the most important thing, ahead of any concerns around impunity or justice. The town of Bojayá, for example, was affected by multiple massacres through the civil conflict, but still voted 96 per cent in favour of the peace agreement. Meanwhile areas more insulated from the conflict had voted in significant numbers against the peace agreement. A mass movement 'Paz a la Calle' flooded the streets of cities and towns in silent marches in solidarity with those most affected by the armed conflict who had nevertheless voted for peace.

President Santos and the FARC leaders committed publicly to the ongoing ceasefire in spite of the failure to win popular approval for the peace agreement. International actors including Norway and Cuba who had helped facilitate the peace process, committed their ongoing support and in the days following the referendum President Santos was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. 'By awarding Juan Manuel Santos the Peace Prize, the Norwegian Nobel Committee has wanted to encourage continued dialogue and struggles for peace and reconciliation' (Nobel, 2016). The campaign against the peace agreement were consulted on for revisions to the peace deal. An amended peace agreement was signed by the government and the FARC on November 24 2016 and ratified thereafter by Congress,

[52] *Mano Dura* was a response in Latin America to 'drug and gang related urban violence...Based on the assumed deterrent capacity of harsh punishments, hard-line responses implemented within the legal frameworks of Latin American democracies also saw an increase in extra-legal and vigilante responses to insecurity.' (Abello Colak and Pearce, 2015: 200).

where Santos had a working coalition majority for peace. The challenging 'post-accord' period has however seen much continued violence, with 1426 social leaders and human rights defenders killed in Colombia since the signing of the peace agreement and February 2023 (Indepaz, 2023).[53] The next section focuses on the local context of Medellín, characterised by informal development, violence from state and non-state actors, factors and conditions important to the establishment and ongoing work of the research organisation, Corporación Mi Comuna.

Settlement and development of Medellín

Medellín is Colombia's second most populous city, situated in the Aburrá Valley of the Andes Mountains in north-western Colombia. Today Medellín has a population of approximately 2.5 million people (DANE, 2018). As Medellín's population grew rapidly during the 20th century, the scarcity of housing provision and economic resources led incoming communities to collectively self-construct their houses and neighbourhoods on vacant land. Described as 'invasions' or 'pirate settlements', they were a lifeline to migrants seeking refuge from the armed conflict and economic insecurity in rural zones. By 1972 these settlements had approximately 600,000 inhabitants, over 50 per cent of the population of Medellín (PRIMED, 1996). As the population of Medellín developed, efforts were made to control and organise the city expansion through its first Plan Piloto ('Master Plan'). But this plan was unable to provide for or contain the significant growth of the city, which by 1973 had a population of more than one million.

These new neighbourhoods were developed with little territorial control, given the local and national government's inability to contain or organise these spaces, nor to provide fundamental public services such as security, education, and healthcare (CNMH, 2017). Economic and social development was markedly different in newer, informal neighbourhoods (particularly in the north of the city, neighbourhoods such as Santo Domingo Savio, Popular 1 y 2, Manrique Oriental) than in the formal portions of the city, a fact that was accentuated by inequitable planning policy which disfavoured these new settlements. Moreover, governance and public policy were inherently unstable and disorientated in Medellín during this time, with city administrations lasting on average one

[53] This includes trade unionists, community leaders, indigenous leaders, Afro-Colombian leaders, campesino leaders, LGBT leaders, environmental defenders, human rights defenders. This follows the systematic killings of Unión Patriótica politicians and electoral candidates in the 1980s, and the targeting of demobilised M-19 combatants from the 1990s.

year between 1958 and 1982. In Bogotá during the same period the average term length was four years (CNMH, 2014). Restrepo (2011) and Pécaut (2012) relate this instability to a rupture between the business and political elites of Medellín, with a corporate political class developing that were more interested in reproducing their own power than the public interest (CNMH, 2014).

The next section presents a brief analysis of historic state deficiency and presence of armed actors in Santa Cruz. Important here is the particular impact of violence in Medellín on young people and anyone deemed 'political', and how this has shaped the development and ongoing work of Mi Comuna. For as I was told during my fieldwork:

> *"When they historically began to participate within the organisations, the social organisations of northeast Medellín especially, because it is one of the places where leaders and others have been targeted most. When these leaderships began to emerge, they emerged to say 'well, we're young and we don't want that they keep killing us, because we want to live peacefully, and for that we have art', right? So it was also a participation of the territory that said "we don't want more deaths within our territories, we don't want to be afraid to go to school, we don't want more fear." And of course there was a whole issue of very strong violence at that time and so the only way they could survive, until today, was that, it was art, right? It safeguarded them." (Interview 9)*

An absence of state sovereignty and the presence of armed actors in Santa Cruz

Armed actors and violence were not a central focus of my research design and process, not least because there exist many studies that focus on historic violence in Medellín (e.g. CNMH, 2015, CNMH, 2017; Abello Colak & Pearce, 2015). But this social and political context is fundamental to understanding the work of Mi Comuna. Also important is the changing role of the state, not least because of recent strategies to exert more control over Santa Cruz.

In 2015 the Medellín Mayor's office described a historic lack of 'effective and active governance' in Santa Cruz, with weak institutional presence to 'exercise the authority of the State and protect and enforce the social, economic and cultural rights of the population' (Mayor of Medellín, 2015: 36–37). An absence of state 'sovereignty' in Santa Cruz has been highlighted by academic researchers, with 'different dimensions that range from generating order, security, justice, social regulation, coexistence, health, education, among other

aspects, in which the State has been weak, negligent and absent' (Observatorio de Seguridad Humana de Medellín, OSHM, 2018: 172).

In the absence of 'official security actors (State) to assert and maintain their Westphalian monopoly of violence' (Samper, 2017: 186), multiple non-state armed actors (NSAA) have contended to exert control over Santa Cruz.[54] Initial iterations included local self-defence forces established by residents to deal with theft and violence, part of what García Villegas and de Sousa Santos (2004: 76) describe as the 'privatisation of justice'. Then in the 1980s and 1990s, Medellín experienced the insertion of militias linked to guerrilla armies in the 'urbanisation' of the civil war. Medellín was also a key strategic zone for the narcotics trade which had become violently intertwined with the national conflict.[55] In Santa Cruz and northeast Medellín, a local armed group played a similar role, violently consolidating territorial control from the mid-1990s onwards, eliminating militias, other NSAAs and anyone else in their way.

Killings known as 'limpieza social' (social cleansing) were a ruthless part of this violence. The Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórico describe this as a 'misnamed violence', more akin to 'extermination, annihilation or social slaughter' (CNMH, 2015: 17). The most comprehensive dataset that exists on 'social cleansing' identified the killing of 4,928 people in 28 states and 356 municipalities of Colombia between 1989-2013 (CINEP, 2014: 18 cited in CNMH, 2015: 17).[56] This violence remains poorly understood due to under-reporting, witnesses or families fearful of speaking out, a lack of action or complicity from the state (CNMH, 2015). Broadly speaking however, 'social cleansing' was the merciless killing of those deemed 'undesirable' in a neighbourhood or place' (OSHM, 2018: 70), at times with the 'passive approval of the neighbourhood' (Martin, 2012: 137, cited in OSHM, 2018: 71). This included those associated with theft, drugs, sex work or homelessness. Those with distinct social, ethnic, or political identities were also targeted, those said to be 'subversive' and even those said to have been 'too noisy' (CNMH, 2015: 46-47).[57] Bodies were often left

[54] This is a factor across Colombia in places where state institutional power is not sovereign, with NSAA often legitimising themselves by offering 'security' or 'protection' through force and intimidation, alongside other things. (Uribe, 1999: 28, cited in OSHM, 2018: 172).
[55] Recent Mayors of Medellín have also tolerated these armed groups in a tacit agreement regarding the minimisation of open violence and territorial disputes (e.g. the *pacto fusil* or 'arms pact' under the previous Mayor Federico Gutierrez, Abello Colak & Pearce, 2015).
[56] Colombia is made up of 32 regional states or *departamentos*. Medellín is the capital city of Antioquia state.
[57] A 2012 testimony from an ex-paramilitary stated that targets of social cleansing included 'presumed members of the subversion, common criminals, homeless people…drug dealers and consumers and, in general, people with criminal records' (defendant testimony to the Supreme Court of Justice, 2012,

with signs stating ‘thug’, ‘gang member’ or some other (mis)characterisation. Press reports highlighted purported crimes or characteristics of the victims, thus leading to the reporting of ‘two criminal subjects, the perpetrator and the victim’ (María Catalina Rocha, 2009, cited in CNMH, 2015: 77). This vilification of the victims coupled with fear of the perpetrators and state complicity, means that many victims and their stories remain unknown.[58] ‘Even today, more than 20 years later, the fear of retaliation to denunciation is still present: “Here the one who saw the attacks and killings…he didn't see anything. Everything was seen through the slats of the windows, and there it stays.” Fear leads to resistance even to mentioning the names of the victims, even if they are relatives’ (CNMH, 2015: 88-89).

This violence is associated with an absence of state sovereignty, occurring more often in ‘peripheral’ or auto-constructed settlements like Santa Cruz than the ‘planned’ neighbourhoods of cities like Medellín or Bogotá: ‘The absence of the state in the mental and material universe of the peripheral neighbourhood is one of the great wellsprings of the annihilation operations’ (CNMH, 2015: 59). This CNMH report, focusing on Ciudad Bolivar (approximate population 700,000), the largest auto-constructed settlement in Bogotá, emphasises the unresolved conflictual relationship between the people and state caused by the state’s informal presence; the state complicity in the violence; and the state silence, lack of condemnation or policy to address this violence. Moreover, international actors e.g. Amnesty International (2013) have highlighted impunity as key to the persistence of ‘social cleansing’. Tragically the 1990s was also the decade from which the first generation of young people born in settlements like Santa Cruz were coming of age. Armed actors victimised groups of young people, persecuting those they saw as a threat or characterised as gangs (CNMH, 2015: 103). This violence contributed significantly to the ‘generational massacre’ of young people in Medellín. Many were victimised simply for being young, ‘the methodical murder of the youth population led people to say “here it is a crime to be young”’ (CNMH, 2015: 67).

Where state responses to this violence have emerged, they have often been oppressive, suffocating and unequal. Marginalised areas have been militarised and young men have faced regular coercion. Until recently, a common army practice was to establish checkpoints at transport intersections to investigate whether young men had completed their military

June 6, cited in CNMH, 2015: 47.

[58] CINEP, who have done the most comprehensive recording and investigation of social cleansing, suggest that guerrilla groups were responsible for approximately 2 per cent of these killings, while paramilitary groups employed this tactic in a more systematic way, often in collaboration with the police (Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, cited in CNMH, 2015: 47).

service. Any who had not were summoned to begin immediately or were even seized and transported directly to a military base. Continuing in education can delay the national service, while the paying of an expensive waiver tax is the only legal route to avoid military service (Libreta Militar, Colombian Government, 2020). These two options have been systematically inaccessible for young men in Santa Cruz and districts like it. Accordingly, there have been significant inequalities to those who undertake and who can avoid their military service.

In Santa Cruz, the consolidation of control by one armed group came through an extremely violent period from the mid-1990s. In recent decades there has been less open violence and fewer homicides. The territorial control of this armed group is expressed in areas in which 'the State has been absent, negligent and ineffective, as in matters of security, order and justice' (OSHM, 2018: 74). They impose widespread extortion of businesses and residents in the name of 'protection' and run micro-trafficking narcotics operations.[59] With homicide rates maintained at a lower level in Santa Cruz compared with other areas of Medellín and Colombia, there is a curious perception of security provided by this threatening presence. This armed group are also said to be 'tied to the social fabric' of Santa Cruz, not outsiders but residents of the district or northeast Medellín, even linked back to the founding of the zone (OSHM, 2018: 71). Importantly to the work of Mi Comuna and broader social organisation in the territory, is the fact that members of these armed groups are also 'subjects, neighbours, relatives, pupils/students, among many aspects that lead them to be part of the story' (OSHM, 2018: 83).[60]

Indeed, during my fieldwork in early 2021, at the annual *Fiesta de la Utopia*, on the first evening of artistic presentations, one member of Mi Comuna said to me nervously, *"it's them, they're here"*. He was referring to a senior local commander of the armed group controlling Santa Cruz, who had arrived at the fiesta to watch a performance involving young members of his family. *"Well, I guess it is both bad and good"*, was the response when I asked what this meant. The suggestion being that Mi Comuna's work and the fiesta was tolerated, not seen as a confrontation. These family connections were not uncommon, with

[59] Many local residents and small businesses pay protection money ('la vacuna') because of the fear of returning to a time of violence, war and death, and they prefer this 'uneasy peace' (OSHM, 2018: 81). Mi Comuna have so far resisted paying, responding to the request from the armed group stating that their work is for the community, for everyone, including in many cases family members of armed actors.

[60] This analysis features in an academic report undertaken in Santa Cruz and 3 other Medellín comunas, the development of which Mi Comuna often support through their reading and understanding of the territory, and through opening space for dialogue and discussion. These reports are ultimately published and attributed to external researchers rather than those based within Santa Cruz and more exposed to its everyday dynamics.

the children, nephews and nieces or cousins of armed actors regularly included in the activities of Mi Comuna.

This context has had a significant impact on Mi Comuna and the work they undertake.[61] The consequences of this history can be seen in the curbing of certain activities and the stimulation of others. The history of violence, the 'social annihilations' impacting the young and those deemed too political, restrains the holding of open political positions in and around the work of Mi Comuna, including the spaces they open, the processes they run and the products they publish. During my fieldwork, Mi Comuna were occasionally asked to host events for those shifting from social movement work into political campaigns. After extensive discussions within the collective, Mi Comuna generally declined these requests to share their space with these political projects. This was although these requests almost always came from individuals or groups working towards similar aims to those of Mi Comuna, including acquaintances or valued partners of Mi Comuna. It was not that their 'politics' was different or at odds to that of Mi Comuna, rather that they had moved to holding an openly 'political' position. Another restriction that this violent context places on Mi Comuna is any denunciation of the activities of the armed group, what Mi Comuna describe as a form of 'self-censorship'. *"We cannot confront them, us being directly in the territory, that would kill us, it would be to end the process immediately"* (Interview 1). On the other hand, this context has stimulated Mi Comuna's artistic and creative practices as methods for engaging young people in a non-contestatory way.

Comuna 2 Santa Cruz, northeast Medellín

This section explores the context of the research site Santa Cruz, conditions which stem from the broader Colombian context set out above. Mi Comuna, established in 2009, has been shaped by this context and the ongoing community imperatives of today. In 2020 Santa Cruz had a population of over 110,000, the second most densely populated of Medellín's 16 comunas. Santa Cruz and other districts like it were founded and built by families displaced to Medellín by the armed conflict. As outlined above, the lack of a viable institutional presence during the founding years of Santa Cruz left incoming migrants with little alternative but to organise their own systems and construct their own settlements. The constructions of Santa Cruz are characteristic of the multiple ways that its inhabitants have

[61] It is important to note here that this context is always understood in different ways and moreover it is always changing. Mi Comuna always highlight the importance of understanding the current context in order to most effectively support those they work with. They do this by being out in the streets and through consistent dialogue, things which became much more difficult during pandemic lockdowns.

taken possession of and responsibility for the territory. Alongside the challenges of the lack of a viable state presence, the district has faced persistent violence, structural poverty and stigmatisation. Mi Comuna were established amidst and have been shaped by these necessities. Moreover, they work amidst negative dominant narratives about the district, for example the stigmatisation which has emerged externally but also permeated perspectives within Santa Cruz.

Photo: Santa Cruz, looking south to Medellín, with the Casa left centre

Collective construction – 'el convite'

The physical characteristics of Santa Cruz emerge from the conditions in which its development took place. Displaced migrants arrived in socio-economic precarity and received little support from the state. They had scarce resources to buy materials, lacked access to heavy machinery, and could only afford small parcels of land. Given these factors, construction through 'convite' was an important organising strategy for displaced migrants arriving in Medellín. A convite is a collective construction where neighbours come together to build homes, to pavement the roads or to install drainage systems. While neighbours and communities worked together to build their neighbourhoods, in the absence of a viable state

presence there was no formulated plan of the district. Santa Cruz is therefore made up of *"houses on top of houses"* (Interview 2) along the narrow streets, alleys and steps snaking up the steep mountainside.

A lack of state investment and support has also affected the quality of primary and secondary education, and access to higher education has traditionally been low (Laboratorio de Economía de la Educación, 2021). Educational processes have been a key part of the work of Mi Comuna, they run regular projects in literacy and itinerant libraries around the district. Artistic and cultural processes are used to involve and inspire young people giving them confidence in their own talents and potential. These creative activities can draw young people into educational processes and away from risks on the streets.

Mi Comuna are based in the *Casa para el Encuentro Eduardo Galeano* (Eduardo Galeano Meeting House or the 'Casa'). The Casa is a former old people's home, built in 'convite' by the inhabitants of barrio Villa Del Socorro. Mi Comuna took on this site in 2015 with the aim of creating space in Santa Cruz for social and cultural interaction. This is so important because the district lacks public space. Despite campaigns for the state to invest in adequate spaces for social and community groups to meet, development has not been forthcoming. When I began fieldwork in January 2020 the central importance of this physical space to the work of Mi Comuna was clear. Activities undertaken in the Casa included the working space of the collective, regular meetings, and the production of media including the newspaper, website, radio and video. It was also the place where young people came together for reading, music and arts clubs, where the annual *Fiesta de la Utopia* took place, the meeting place for a number of connected groups, including a women's group (Grupo Semillas) and youth human rights group. Larger assemblies were also hosted in the Casa. It was a place where empanadas and 'sancocho' (a meat and vegetable soup cooked over a fire with collectively contributed ingredients) were made, and where radio programmes were played on a loudspeaker from the roof. Much of this changed at the outset of Covid-19 however, as social distancing and lockdown policies were implemented, a key point for discussion in forthcoming chapters.

Stigmatised and marginalised

Districts like Santa Cruz were described as 'invasions' or as 'pirate settlements' by the state, which opposed their construction (albeit while providing no alternative for displaced migrants). The district continued developing and was ultimately legalised and recognised by

the state, but fundamental public services were for many years left to the residents to resolve. At the outset of Santa Cruz's development there were episodes when residents had to physically defend their homes from demolition by city officials. Citing a lack of planning permission these officials arrived with force, but with nowhere else to go communities stood in the way and physically defended their homes and territories. These stories, while not celebrated in Medellín's institutional history, are etched on the memories of senior residents of Santa Cruz and Medellín's border settlements. One interview participant explained:

> *"there was a gigantic exercise in defence of the territory, because 'los Carabineros' (public order police) came to knock down the houses of the people who didn't have planning permission. And the people made a barrier so that they would not demolish our houses that we were building when we didn't have anywhere else to live."* (Interview 2)

A very real issue that impacts this stigma is the established control of armed groups in the district. Viable district or community policing has for a long time been as absent as provision of quality education and healthcare in Santa Cruz. Extortion by armed groups is a reality and the threat of violence hangs overhead. Open violence in Santa Cruz is kept to a minimum because the controlling armed group maintains such a strict control. This means however that other forms of violence, such as sexual violence, trafficking or intimidation, can persist or thrive (Abello Colak et at, 2021). The presence of armed groups offering wealth and status, coupled with the deficiency in educational opportunities mentioned above, heightens the risk of young people being co-opted into armed groups, drug addiction and/or being pressed into prostitution.

For many years since its founding, Santa Cruz and northeast Medellín have been denigrated in dominant narratives as illegally settled, lawless or backward, or not legitimately part of Medellín. Indeed one Mi Comuna staff member told me that she had previously been influenced by dominant mediated narratives representing Santa Cruz as illegal and backward and she had wanted to leave it for another place. She has since described her work with Mi Comuna as *"[helping] people understand the beauty in the Comuna"* (Interview 2).

The Medellín city government, so long absent from this informally built part of the city, has more recently sought to exert its control, its political project over northeast Medellín. This intermittent but increasing presence has been characterised by military interventions, as well as a 'programme of showpiece public works' of library complexes and new schools. Hylton (2007) describes this as the 'architecture of pacification', with the government establishing a

'non-repressive presence' for the first time in northeast and western Medellín hillside settlements 'where the state has either been absent, or manifest only as a heavy fist' (Hylton, 2007).[62] Interventions like the Biblioteca España have been formulated externally and accompanied by narratives of development and progress, and coated in the language of citizenship, culture and participation. Indeed, tokenistic exercises in consultation have been employed, with local residents invited to participate in planning but ultimately denied any real power over outcomes:

> "*this happens a lot in the city, they give us the discourse of participatory processes, but sometimes the participation is really just discourse, adornment. An adornment to do these types of things, mega projects that they have built across the city, pure marketing."* (Interview 14)

This performative approach disregards the legitimacy and agency of local residents and indicates a material impact (on city planners) of the negative representations of these districts as dubious, backward and illegal (Harvey, 1993). The planning model within Medellín's city government instead extols the virtues of top-down intervention.

> *"The trajectories and the history are super important and this city, the city model that Medellín promotes is a model without a social trajectory. It's a model of a completely private trajectory, as if it just arrived, only the economic and political elites had arrived here, made certain interventions and then suddenly a miracle occurred. Completely ignoring the trajectories, the migratory movements, the forms of settlement, the memories of the displaced persons and all the actions and practices that have been put in place so that the territories continue to survive.* (Interview 6)

Mi Comuna's work is influenced by their context, in fact there is a recognition that this is their reason for being. The context of a place self-built and self-organised, that had to physically defend itself in the face of threats of eviction and has since faced stigma that disfavoured social development. A common reference point in Santa Cruz and Mi Comuna is 'la defensa del territorio' (discussed further in Chapter 8). Today this remains related to the physical defence of these neighbourhoods during their foundation, but nonetheless different, more

[62] The most emblematic and contested of these grand infrastructure projects, the Biblioteca España, was described to me by one member of Mi Comuna as 'a *structure of colossal urban marketing'*, which sits on the mountainside above Santa Cruz, today closed, cracking and in need of structural fortification.

nuanced. Perhaps a more social or symbolic defence of community processes, through the changing of the narrative and the development of alternative opportunities, more than it is a physical defence of homes (though this is still a factor, with the threat of development projects and 'regeneration').

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the Colombian conflict and its consequences, arguing that this national and local context is of central importance to Mi Comuna, to their creation and to the ongoing processes they are part of. The chapter has explored the circumstances in which these events were able to occur, highlighting examples in which the state's constructive action has been limited and where alternative collective responses have emerged. This includes the collaborative construction of districts like Santa Cruz by displaced migrants fleeing the armed conflict, who received little help from the state, in fact their settlements were opposed and have since been marginalised by the state.

This socio-political context, characterised by violence or limited state presence, denigrating narratives and grassroots responses, is central to Mi Comuna and their work. Work which opens space for communication and interaction through art, music and the sharing of food. Work which involves storytelling and cultural processes which celebrate the creative and determined legacy of Santa Cruz. Work which seeks to counter dominant mediated narratives and representations in a divided city. These debates are analysed further through the forthcoming chapters. This chapter has sought to provide a good foundation from which to do so.

The next chapter moves to the analysis and interpretation of fieldwork data concerning the collective opening, development and defence of the Mi Comuna *Casa,* their organisational base that has become a colourful and vibrant meeting space. This chapter highlights this safe, intimate and emboldening space as a key foundation of Mi Comuna's broader media practice, part of their work responding to a scarcity of appropriate spaces for assembly in Santa Cruz.

Chapter 5
The Commoning of Space and the Space of the Commons?

Introduction

> *"In short, so many obstacles for young people to meet…and with this knowledge of the situation, we said like 'well, as this space [the Casa] is so large, it will also have to serve a little to help this situation" and we began to say that it is an open space and that it is not only for Mi Comuna but that the people can come."* (Interview 11)

> *"It is such an important space to be able to get away from those cruel realities, let's say it like this, a space to dream and construct, to find oneself in the place, laugh, cry if that's the case, right? It is a space to explore all those feelings and those feelings of the community, in a free way, and these are the situations that hardly occur, right?"* (Interview 9)

The question of how community media practices impact a place like Santa Cruz, northeast Medellín, is a question not only of dialogue and communicative products, but also of space. The newspaper *Mi Comuna 2* and its digital archive, video documentaries and social media channels are the most well recognised media products of Mi Comuna. Since 2008, 96 editions of the newspaper have been produced and distributed through northeast Medellin, along with short and long audio-visual outputs and a rich variety of material published on social media channels with thousands of followers. But behind these media products, practices within protective and emboldening spaces have enabled dialogue, the flourishing of creative and artistic groups, and a protective environment for young people to simply be. This chapter analyses fieldwork data concerning the collective opening, development and defence of Mi Comuna's *Casa para el Encuentro Eduardo Galeano* (the *Eduardo Galeano Meeting House*), showing it to be a key foundation of Mi Comuna's broader media practice. Moreover this chapter argues that the Casa, distinct from typical public and private spaces in Medellín, can be considered a form of commoning, shaped by the local context and need and representative of historic struggles in the district (Linebaugh, 2008; Harvey, 2012). Here I theorise this as 'counter commoning', key characteristics of which include the creation of a safe, accessible and intimate space, responding to a scarcity of appropriate spaces for assembly in Santa Cruz. Within the walls of the Casa, described above as *"a space to dream and construct"*, the sharing of music, food and theatre prefigure a more creative and harmonious Medellín. The evoking of histories of cooperation and resistance are part of this, central as they are to countering denigrating dominant representations of northeast Medellín.

The Casa was where I spent the majority of my first six weeks of in-situ fieldwork in early 2020, before the Covid-19 global pandemic was declared and strict lockdowns and social distancing measures were implemented in Medellín. The Casa is Mi Comuna's organisational base that, since opening in 2015, has also become a colourful and vibrant meeting space. Through the days I spent there in February and March 2020, the Casa accommodated small team meetings, larger assemblies, children reading, playing or making theatre, as well an annual celebration of artistic collectives from northeast Medellín (and lots of food and music), *la Fiesta de la Utopia*. The Casa was also the base from which Mi Comuna's activities around the streets of Santa Cruz, such as the itinerant editorial committee, audio-visual productions and the delivery of newspapers, were coordinated and led. The Casa was a welcoming, creative but also intimate space, manifestly a vital element in the broader work of Mi Comuna.

Despite the Casa's evident significance to those attached to it, its existence remains a precarious one, and is an ongoing struggle. In late 2019 a decision had been reached to close the Casa following a hike in the rents by the landlords. The Mi Comuna team had become resigned to the view that they could better utilise their limited financial resources on activities in the streets around Santa Cruz. That despite the Casa's many virtues, it was also enclosing and restrictive. The closure of the Casa was ultimately avoided and an improved rent settlement negotiated. This reversal followed meetings and assemblies contemplating options for the future of the Casa, as well as a significant intervention from the children who regularly use the space. This dramatic moment demonstrated the significance of the Casa to those attached to it, particularly amidst the scarcity of other meeting spaces in northeast Medellín. Moreover, it demonstrated that the social relations that have formed and developed within this common space were fundamental to its defence at this critical juncture.

Knowledge is central to this counter commoning, evoking and sharing the history and memory of collective construction and cooperation in Santa Cruz. This knowledge, produced from below, contests dominant narratives that denigrate northeast Medellín as illegal and criminal. Much of this dialogic work is undertaken outside the walls of the Casa in street-based methodologies (explored further in the following chapter), to then be shared through the newspaper *Mi Comuna 2* or through digital platforms. Nonetheless the Casa is a crucial, safe base from which these activities can be imagined, planned, sheltered and shared. If Mi Comuna's media practices are focused around building a more assured territorial identity through the acknowledgement of a common history, the Casa represents a physical embodiment of this initiative.

To illustrate this argument and the importance of counter commoning to Mi Comuna's media practice, this chapter explores the collective reopening of the Casa, shaped by the context of Santa Cruz and the need for safe space in which to assemble. The way the Casa has been developed by those that use it in a generative way, rather than imposed from above, is also explored. The Casa has been a collective endeavour and a site of struggle since its inception, in this sense it embodies historic struggles in Santa Cruz. A dramatic moment in the defence of the Casa from closure exemplifies what the Casa has enabled, including the space for dialogue and a certain confidence and independence that was ultimately crucial to the defence of the space. The chapter begins by theorising counter commoning amidst the context of Medellín and following the ideas and debates outlined initially in Chapter 2.

From the 'tragedy of the commons' to 'counter commoning'

Here 'counter commoning' is theorised amidst the literature on the commons and commoning (Ostrom, 1990; Harvey, 2012; Birkinbine, 2018; Federici & Caffentzis, 2019), and in relation to the circumstances of Medellín. Counter commoning opens space in the Casa that is distinct from public and private spaces in Medellín typically tied up with security, economic development and profit. The accessible, emboldening but also intimate environment of the Casa meets local need in a district with little alternative safe space to assemble. The collective reopening and care of the Casa has been a generative process, led by those that use it rather than imposed from the top down. Counter commoning in the Casa is representative of historic struggles for survival and recognition in northeast Medellín. The Casa has in turn provided a base from which these histories can be evoked and shared, a theme which develops further through forthcoming chapters. However, this counter commoning must remain non-contestatory, not appear as subversive, anti-capitalist or anti-state amidst the ongoing threat of violence from state and non-state armed actors in northeast Medellín.[63]

As this thesis has discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2, the term *commoning* represents the understanding of the commons not 'merely as sets of things or resources, but as social relations' (Fernández, 2021: 75; see also Harvey, 2012; Federici & Caffentzis, 2019). Accordingly, the commons are '[n]ot the material wealth shared but the sharing itself and the

[63] This context includes the historic civil war centred around land distribution, as well as the 'social cleansing' of social leaders or young people associated with left politics or 'subversive' activities.

solidarity bonds produced in the process' (Federici and Caffentzis, 2019: 94, cited in Fernández, 2021: 75). Therefore the 'rights but also [the] obligations – developed by the community around a given resource' are central to the commons, 'in order to be common, it must be managed and protected by its own users' (Fernández, 2021: 75). Birkinbine (2018) builds on these ideas to connect commoning to 'the reproduction of both the objects that comprise the commons and subjectivities in which mutual aid, care, trust, and conviviality are reproduced over time...the active pooling of common resources with a deep connection to the history, culture, and ecology of the place where they exist' (299). 'Subversive commoning' is the framing given by Birkinbine (2018, 2020) to commoning that operates beyond reformist frameworks, a 'commons-based praxis informed by radical politics' which would 'actively appropriate resources away from capital and the state into circuits of commons value' (2018: 290).

Key to the 'counter commoning' in the Mi Comuna Casa is therefore the opening of space that is distinct from Medellín's more typical public and private spaces, which are generally controlled by police or private security, or alternatively by non-state armed actors. Public meeting space is scarce in districts like Santa Cruz, the second most densely populated of Medellin's 16 districts, tightly packed with homes and small businesses. Recent Medellín city administrations have sought to open new 'public space', particularly in densely developed districts like Santa Cruz. Yet these interventions, often involving grand infrastructure works such as large showpiece library complexes, characteristically have 'security functions built into design', what Hylton (2007: 87) has described as the 'architecture of pacification'. Moreover, these institutional meeting spaces have notable barriers to access and limitations on activities. Spaces in Medellín are also being increasingly privatised, with markets and highstreets replaced by shopping centre developments and gated communities. The appeal of this sort of privately guarded space perhaps reflects (or takes advantage of) the history of insecurity on Medellín's streets. The shopping centres appear as public space that are nonetheless private, with access and conduct controlled by private security and premised around consumption of homogenous retail and coffee shops. Gated communities are also ever more present in Medellín for middle and upper class residents, often with shared gardens for their inhabitants, what Stavrides would describe as 'collectively privatized space, space which repels strangers' (Stavrides, 2016: 101).

Evidence presented in this chapter speaks to a collective endeavour to make the Mi Comuna Casa accessible, free of charge to its users and without prescriptive conditions. Moreover, while dialogue and creative practices in the Casa work towards peaceful coexistence, this is not part of a top-down 'pacification' strategy. The Casa is not however

without boundaries, indeed certain restrictions are fundamental to producing a safe, emboldening and intimate environment. For example, the Casa necessarily excludes state and non-state armed actors who could undermine the safety of the space. That the younger family members of local armed actors are regularly involved in activities in the Casa has contributed to a tacit acceptance that the Casa is not a site of confrontation (and also on the basis that Mi Comuna's media work does not directly confront the armed actors). Additionally, during my fieldwork Mi Comuna declined several requests from campaigning politicians to hold assemblies in the Casa. Whether or not the politics of these campaigns was consistent with the objectives of Mi Comuna, avoiding any such political associations was an important protection for the Casa (particularly with those perceived as on the left or subversive). Federici and Caffentzis (2019: 90–91) have criticised the sort of bounded commons theorised by Ostrom (1990) as potentially 'indifferent to or even hostile to the interests of 'outsiders'', suggesting that collaboration around these commons rarely takes on 'a transformative character' (Federici and Caffentzis, 2019: 91 cited in Fernández, 2021: 75). Evidence presented below supports the argument that counter commoning in the Casa and in the context of northeast Medellín, is indeed an example where a relatively bounded commons, while not openly subversive or anti-capitalist, can also take on a 'transformative character'. Here I draw on the work of Jorge Saavedra Utman (2019), who highlights the significance to the 2011 Chilean students' movement of 'local realms of intimacy within the enclaves of homes, classrooms, and occupied buildings nesting local dialogues, conversations and debates' (83). These encounters within 'enclosed locations of walled intimacy…signalled the foundations of a commoning process that, from the very beginning, confronted the fears and constraints of neoliberal culture and formed the crucial building blocks of the movement's development' (83-4). The current thesis discusses the constraints and possibilities for Mi Comuna and associated social organisations in northeast Medellín, and these are of course distinct from those faced by the Chilean students' movement. Mi Comuna's is also a more consistent and necessarily non-contestatory project than the grand mobilisations of Chile in 2011. Despite this, the concept of 'walled intimacy' is a useful one for understanding the significance of the Casa's protective environment to Mi Comuna's broader media practices.

The accessible yet intimate environment of the Casa responds to particular needs of Santa Cruz, which lacks suitable space for assembly and has faced persistent violence from state and non-state armed actors. Counter commoning here opens space for dialogue, often accompanied by the sharing of food, music, dance or theatre. In this environment a group of younger regular visitors to the Casa have appropriated the space as their own, to escape to, read a book, play an instrument. As evidence presented here suggests, these children were

so emboldened by the environment of the Casa that they acted independently and decisively to defend it from closure. More generally the Casa has enabled those associated with it the scope to build connections and campaigns. The Casa has therefore become a common space distinguished, as Stavrides has theorised, by 'a relation between a social group and its effort to define a world that is shared between its members' (Stavrides, 2016: 54).

The Casa has been a collective undertaking since its inception, a generative process, led by those that use it rather than imposed from the top down. In many ways the Casa is a symbolic and physical embodiment of the historic cooperation and struggle of Santa Cruz. The sort of struggle developed in the Casa is not discussed often enough in the commons literature, which focuses more readily on the sharing of resources rather than on the structures and struggles that make the sharing possible.

The Casa was originally built collectively by the residents of barrio Villa del Socorro as a meeting place for senior adults, which was subsequently closed, then occupied by non-state armed actors before falling into disrepair. Since its reopening in 2015, the Casa has been transformed through *convites*, a form of collective organising in Colombia where neighbours and friends coordinate to build or repair each other's homes, pave sections of roads or install sewage lines.[64] The Casa has since 2015 become a base from which histories of collective construction and resistance in northeast Medellín can be acknowledged, evoked and shared. This chimes with Birkinbine's 'subversive commoning', which cites the work of 'organisations that provide digital infrastructures, tools, and services to assist in the project of bringing about social change', and attempts to 'release knowledge and information that has been closed off from public access' (Birkinbine, 2018: 303). The evoking of local memory and histories of cooperation in Santa Cruz, is not so much the releasing of knowledge and information that has been enclosed, but rather uncovering knowledge that has been suppressed or silenced by more dominant representations of the district.

The collective construction of the Mi Comuna Casa: Commoning as process

Since its opening in 2015, the Casa has been a collective undertaking, encouraged and enabled by the social relations and processes Mi Comuna have forged in Santa Cruz. Mi Comuna's activities had by 2015 broadened significantly and they had outgrown their existing space. Their activities included open editorial meetings, spaces of dialogue and

[64] Convites, as Samper (2017: 195) explains, literally means 'invites', 'a gathering of community members to achieve a single goal. This can be a public project, like a road paving, or the construction of a sewer line or a private goal like building a roof for a family house'.

training, media study groups and assemblies. A large, dilapidated but affordable space was found in barrio Villa del Socorro, Santa Cruz. Since 2015 this space has been transformed; the walls adorned with murals, libraries of books and photos, meeting spaces where food, music, theatre and much else are made and shared. The Casa is Mi Comuna's administrative and planning base, and site of the coordination of creative projects with young people, as well as the newspaper and other media products (e.g. audio-visual material and the website). The Casa was affordable only due to its deteriorated condition and need for renovation and repair. Mi Comuna lacked the resources to renovate the Casa themselves, so they coordinated *convites* to collectively undertake the necessary repairs and redecorations. Indeed *convites*, often accompanied by big pots of *sancocho* (meat and vegetable soup cooked in the street over a fire) and music, were crucial to the original construction of Santa Cruz and even the Casa itself, through decades when the state presence was minimal.

> *"the key was that we began to call convites, that in convite the people brought paint and helped us paint the walls, they brought the shovels and helped us with the space of the allotment and the space of the Casa. Together we made the sancocho, we took advantage of the convites to also do radio programs from the terrace, so in the middle of the convite, 'who wants to dedicate a song?' 'Which neighbour can tell a story about the district?' We already had our digital platforms so we began to publish that we had this space, that it was open. So many other people began to arrive, along with donations and books and chairs and other elements that allowed us to be a much more harmonious, more enjoyable space, which made the people want to stay in this space. So it has always been like this, a collective construction where reflection has always been, precisely as we want it to be, it is a space where many ideas have the possibility of being, right, and to interact and mingle."* (Interview 11)

Crucial to the *convites* were the relationships Mi Comuna had built across northeast Medellín in the years before the opening of the Casa. Connections built through dialogue in the streets of Santa Cruz, the itinerant editorial committees, and the interaction in the busy, smaller spaces they had previously borrowed from and shared with other local community organisations. By 2015 Mi Comuna had produced and distributed 60 editions of the newspaper. These relationships enabled the *convites* and the opening of the Casa, the collective construction of a space which would in turn open many more possibilities. Mi Comuna also used their emergent digital platforms to spread news about the Casa and share invites to the in-person convites.

"One day I had an editorial meeting, I can't remember with who, and we had to meet outside because inside the space there were two other different groups and there we said like 'in what moment did this all grow so much that now we can't fit into this space?' Right? That before we were five people and now we were, I don't know that day we were about 30 in a small space, everyone interrupting each other because we were various meetings at the same time. So then we said 'this needs to change somehow' and from then we started to look for this bigger space." (Interview 9)

"because we had in our dynamics these training processes, participatory processes, media study groups, editorial committees, spaces for community journalists, that were spaces of dialogue and formation, where there was a lot of integration of people." (Interview 4)

"I believe that we could have continued in the [previous space] and continued managing projects to sustain ourselves as an organization. But of course, here we have more possibilities, so what we can develop for example a 'casa cultural' there are then other possibilities, right? We can develop a reading room and everything that goes with it, or exhibitions being generated, we can develop…the space opens the spectrum, but let's say that would not have happened if we had not first opened the spectrum or vision as an organization." (Interview 9)

These interview extracts highlight how the emergence of Mi Comuna's communication and pedagogical practices in turn led them to seek out a larger space. That it was those activities and the social relations built through them, in addition to the connections Mi Comuna had developed through the newspaper and digital platforms, that enabled the collaborative renovation of the Casa. Without the social relations, the Casa would not have been renovated and inhabited in the same way. Additional activities were then stimulated by the environment afforded by the Casa, but the Casa would not have come into being without the social processes having already developed.

"And we moved to the Casa Eduardo Galeano and, well, of course, it opened much more the outlook, because it is a big space, the artistic things entered with much more strength, the theatre and other expressions from the Casa." (Interview 9)

> *"we began to seek out ideas and resources for these ideas so that other people could come. Not just those interested in the media training processes, but we said that the people who can come, well, what are they going to find? Right? What do we have to offer them? So we started to plan all the cultural processes as a cultural agenda where there would be photographic exhibitions, artistic exhibitions, where there would also be concerts with the artists principally from the northeast of the city. So we started to go out and say 'this is an open space, you can come and use it, you can tell us to lend you a space and we'll lend you the space.'"* (Interview 11)

Opening the Casa through this cooperative effort, there was a sense within Mi Comuna that the space must be filled with activity, not least for those who had been part of the reopening of the Casa and also for the broader community of Santa Cruz that faced a scarcity of safe space to meet. Mi Comuna's activities expanded further to include theatre, music and arts, not least in cooperation with other artistic groups from northeast Medellín, who were encouraged to use and inhabit the Casa. In this sense, what Harvey calls the 'social practice of *commoning'* is also inventive rather than fixed or pre-determined (Harvey, 2012: 73), 'a process; not a state of being, but a state of becoming' (Birkinbine, 2018: 299). The opening of the Casa has therefore had a generative effect, creating the conditions which encourage and sustain further activity.

Common space as accessible and emboldening as well as intimate

These efforts to fill the Casa with activity, to make it as accessible and welcoming as possible, respond to the local scarcity of affordable and appropriate space for meeting, organising and being creative. The institutional meeting spaces (i.e. buildings managed by the city government or local District Action Board) that do exist in northeast Medellín have certain barriers to access and limitations. These include costs to book, requirements to make reservations in written form or online, or restrictions for those under 18. Limitations are also placed on the activities that can be undertaken in these spaces, for example in relation to making food and music. Mi Comuna have therefore endeavoured to make the Casa free of charge and rigmarole and with relatively few restrictions (cooking and noise are indeed positively encouraged.)

> *"we realized that many of the initiatives of the young people were disappearing because they did not have a space to meet, right? Back then there were the Junta de Acción Comunal [District Action Board] spaces…what they were doing was asking the young people to pay up to more than $20,000 pesos per hour*

> *so that they could meet there and do their artistic practice. In the streets there are times it was difficult due to the conditions of the streets, also due to the weather, because of the rain or the sun and also because there are some spaces that although they are public and they are also semi-private. So here are, for example, the sports venues, but then they have to process permits that take a long time."* (Interview 11)

The Casa has become the regular meeting space of a women's collective, a youth human rights group, dance and music groups, among others. The women's collective Grupo Semillas aim to bring together women from across Santa Cruz to *"lobby in the district, to generate action to help us change, or at least highlight the issues faced by women"* (Interview 12). One of their members explained to me the importance of the space and stability of the Casa for the development of their work and broader connections. *"Us as a women's group, as a women's movement, we did not have any space of our own. So, there [Mi Comuna] opened the doors to us, and we began to meet there…So from there, we saw the necessity of articulating our processes, undertaking action, to work together all the women's collectives"* (Interview 12).

> *"In no other place we feel like we do here, and we want to stay. Why? Because it allows another energy. There you feel free. You feel like you can build, from another point of view, well, from another perspective. So it's that. You know, well, here I feel super good and here I want to stay. We have spoken and they always say 'you know this space is available so that the women's group can meet'. But in other places we haven't felt like we do in the Casa with Mi Comuna."* (Interview 12).

While in Santa Cruz there is a particular scarcity of affordable and available space for meeting, organising and artistic processes, there is also a notable deficiency across Medellín. Seeking to deepen my understanding, I interviewed a community leader involved with the Casa Vivero Jairo Maya, in the district of Villa Hermosa (Comuna 8) on Medellín's eastern periphery. While I was conscious of this leader's commitment to community run spaces, her insight was nonetheless significant for my understanding, particularly in two areas. Firstly, regarding the practical challenges of accessing or borrowing space within an institutional, city government run building. That this relative inaccessibility is especially severe for those already marginalised, for example in relation to literacy, digital literacy or digital access, and those under 18. She explained differences between two spaces in Villa Hermosa; the Unidad de Vida Articulada, a large, newly built government run civic centre

and sports complex; and the Casa Vivero Jairo Maya, a small, community built and managed space.

> *"So to request the space at the Unidad de Vida Articulada you have to send a letter, whereas to request the space at the Casa Vivero you just have to ask 'can I borrow the space?' In other words, it is just a conversation, which is very different from having to write, upload, send an email, waiting for them to respond to you and meanwhile you are on edge, wondering 'will they lend us the space?' Meanwhile, the activity that you are programming or that you are going to do on that date, you cannot continue with its planning. So I think there's a big difference there, for sure."* (Interview 10)

Secondly, on the importance of having spaces for meeting and organising with the appropriate sense of safety and intimacy. Access to physical space may seem principally a practical issue, such as having the space in which to meet sheltered from the elements. But this is also political, if in the context of Medellín you are organising around challenges you face, then having an intimate space in which you can speak with confidence is vitally important.

> *"The issue of space is crucial, it is fundamental. Although I know we can sit in a park or under a tree, but that is not a guarantee for an effective participation, let's say we can generate a debate there, but it is very very necessary, it is very necessary to contemplate these spaces because it is a way of having privacy in what we are going to discuss, of having let's say more than anything, that is, more than anything let's say, one can see it from, from that point of view, of privacy. Because the thing is, when you decide, I repeat myself, when you decide to organize collectively, it is not because you are living well, you know? You decide to organize because there is, there is a thorn that is bothering you, something that is moving you. Of course, at this moment and in this situation that we have to think differently from the other, this is also generating a lot of problems, but we cannot either, that is, I would believe that we cannot stop there either, we should not allow ourselves to stop the fight that is, that they attack us for thinking differently, for being critical... Now today, let's say, the warning is: If you think differently you will be targeted, if you are critical you will be targeted."* (Interview 10).

> *"Because we cannot ignore the mistrust of the communities and the organizations with regards to the state, the [city, regional and national] governments. I believe that*

> *the state, if we reflect on it ourselves and that mistrust, let's say it is evident. So if I, that is, if I am going to meet in a place, let's say, of the state institutions to plan some activity, there will always be that distrust, because the question is there, 'are there cameras?' 'Could it be that they are watching us?' They cannot know what is our strategy to address X or Y or any subject, right? Because then it is always, it is always like they are one step ahead. For one to speak and to guarantee that participation. So there is a difference in these community spaces that are created by the communities, that are created, let's say, by the same organizations, why? because there is that mistrust."* (Interview 10)

An appropriate space to meet and organise therefore requires more than just a physical site. As the extracts above suggest, the forms of access, that you can rely on the space being available, and that there is an appropriate amount of privacy, are all important conditions that impact what is possible within a space. The Mi Comuna Casa, similarly to the Casa Vivero Jairo Maya, offers an important service to the community around it. Managed by those that use it, it is as accessible as it can be, enabling activities to be undertaken free of charge or rigmarole, and with confidence that the space will be available. Additionally the Casa affords a protective intimacy to those that use it, in contrast to activities in the streets or in institutional spaces, to be able to hold sensitive conversations and to organise collectively. While successive Medellin city administrations have opened new spaces such as the Unidades de Vida Articulada and library complexes, the security apparatus including CCTV and security guards that characterise these spaces, afford an altogether different set of conditions. Pertinent here is Harvey's observation that 'public spaces and public goods in the city have always been a matter of state power and public administration, and such spaces and goods do not necessarily a commons make' (2012: 72). And given the historic ties between state and paramilitary groups in Medellín and Colombia, and the ongoing violence targeting social leaders, there remains a wariness of being perceived as 'political' or 'subversive' within these institutional spaces. Another aspect of 'walled intimacy' in the Casa is what has been described as the 'protective environment' afforded to a group of younger regular visitors. While not concerned about appearing as subversive or political, these young people are nonetheless unable to book and use the institutional spaces themselves. They have instead made the Casa their own as they avoid risks on the streets or at home. It is to this 'protective environment' that this chapter now turns.

A space shaped by context. The Casa as 'protective environment'

During my initial in-situ fieldwork in early 2020 there were almost always children in the Casa. During a meeting one day a young boy came running up the stairs from the entrance shouting excitedly *“no class tomorrow, no class tomorrow, no class tomorrow*!!!” his voicing growing louder until he rounded the stairs and saw a group of adults sat together. He stopped in surprise and everyone laughed, momentarily denting his confidence before one team member jumped up and led him to another room. Through the days I spent at the Casa in February and March 2020, in small team meetings, larger assemblies, as well as the *Fiesta de la Utopia*, I noticed young people with an apparent comfort and confidence in the space, and a degree of independence, often arriving and leaving at will. They kept themselves busy if there was no organised activity, or found a space to do their homework, read a book, make music or play. Sometimes there were one or two children, sometimes there were many more.

The Casa was described to me by Mi Comuna team members as an *entorno protector,* a ‘protective environment’, for the children that spent time in it. It was a place where they could escape certain risks on the streets or tensions at home. This environment was provided by the physical structure of the Casa, its enclosing walls and roof, as well as a convivial and relaxed atmosphere created by the people and processes in it. In fostering this *entorno protector,* the Casa was reflecting the local context and the needs of those that used it.

> *“because on every street corner, or on every phone or computer that a child finds themselves alone with that device or in that environment, on that corner where they sell, well, like narcotics and we start talking about micro-trafficking, as these gangs are always on the lookout to attract more and more children, not only to consumption, but to carry out, like this, this work of the micro-trafficking. So how they find alternatives in a space that also generates other types of proposals; to pick up a camera and film, to do photography, to be musicians, to be actors. So that is where we conceive [the Casa] as a protective environment, where the community, principally the children, feel tranquillity to be there…they don't exactly go with the mentality ‘I'm going to read a book!’, ‘it's because reading is very wholesome for me, so I'm going to read a book’, ‘it’s that music is very beneficial for me and I want to be someone, an artist.’ No, no, they don't think about that, but they go and play there, they go and play gunslingers, or they play marbles, or they play catch, or whatever. But in that after arriving from their day, from their game, they find a book, find an instrument, right? So it is something that they are also adopting as in their everyday, and that is how the Casa has the, it is becoming a structure so that when the children enter as part of their everyday, they also find and permeate in a load of things and*

tools and situations and different alternatives to the same old…if the gangs want to send a weapon to another neighbourhood, they look at a child and think, we can get him to deliver it. So that's where it becomes that protective environment. Without realising it, and that's what I'm saying, the Casa gradually became an environment where the boys and girls could do their everyday thing but also protected them from a lot of dangers outside." (Interview 8)

"but one thing that gives you happiness is that children and young people appropriate it the way they do, which is also very cool and that is that they can find spaces there, a space to be. Because basically it is that, it is that they can be, where they can be themselves, right? Because many are not, because they think differently, we have had, kids who think differently so no, they don't fit in very well at school, they don't get on well at home, or with their neighbours, with the peladitos (youngsters) of the same age, but the Casa becomes that space where they can simply be, they can be. They can be quiet, they can be boisterous, they can be creators, they can be, they can be homosexual too, they can, they can be, they just can be". (Interview 14)

These reflections from two Mi Comuna team members point to what becomes possible for the children in the protective structure provided by the Casa. A welcoming and secure space that is habitually open to them can become part of their everyday. Music, games and books are additional attractions of the space, to learn and practice and perform, or even dream of becoming musicians or actors. In the absence of restrictions or the discipline of school, conditions are created in which delicate conversations, understandings and even a certain independence can develop. This is so important in the context of Santa Cruz where, as I was told on several occasions during my fieldwork, children must grow up fast, where childhood involves many risks and responsibilities. Violence is prevalent in homes, online and on the streets. In the Casa, the fact that the children can simply be in the space creates a sense of security, which then allows a sense of freedom to develop.

The two previous sections have explored the sense in which the Casa is an accessible, safe and intimate environment which can embolden those that use it. Yet the Casa is used by a relatively limited set of people, groups such as Grupo Semillas who help manage the space, the artistic groups who practice there regularly, others who request the space for specific meetings or events, or by the younger children, most of whom live in close proximity or are connected to someone else that uses the Casa. Indeed it has been a constant challenge for Mi Comuna to bring a broader set of people from across Santa Cruz to the Casa, an issue which is also linked to capacity and resources to run projects.

> *"we have also had to generate strategies so that people: first that they have the information that there is a space for them, that is also free to access, right? Where they can go, where families, young people can also go. Mainly children and young people are the ones who enjoy these spaces the most. So, then I also believe that, that it is a space that makes the Casa possible, and that also the children appropriate this in a big way, and well, and we must continue making strategies, we must continue making strategies. A great challenge for the Casa is precisely to generate appropriation strategies so that other people in the Comuna [district], not even from northeast Medellín [districts 1, 2, 3 & 4], but from other parts of the Comuna, from other neighbourhoods so that they also know that there is a space here and they can also participate in the processes. The Casa is a large space, so having an offer of activities in the Casa and having an offer outside the Casa is an immense challenge, sometimes we do not see the dimensions of it but it is difficult, it is complicated, it is very hard."* (Interview 14)

This bounded and enclosing nature of the Casa is key to why Mi Comuna have endeavoured to take their activities to the streets of Santa Cruz when possible (Mi Comuna's street based methodologies are discussed further in the next chapter). The restrictions of the Casa were also central to considerations during the critical moment at which the Casa was almost permanently closed.

The collective defence of a precarious common space

The Casa's existence remains precarious, an ongoing struggle despite its significance as a site for assembly in Santa Cruz. In late 2019 a decision had been reached to close the Casa following a hike in the rents by the landlords, the local Catholic parish. The increased rents were onerous as well as unfair, based as they were on the improved condition of the Casa. The landlord had been unwilling to even engage, with multiple meeting requests ignored, rejected, or cancelled at the last minute. On one occasion, Mi Comuna and the children attached to the Casa prepared a breakfast and artistic presentation for a meeting with the local priest, who then failed to attend or even send a message. The Mi Comuna team had by the beginning of 2020 become resigned to the view that, considering the increased rent payments, they could better utilise their limited financial resources on their activities in the streets around Santa Cruz. Mi Comuna members told me that these processes would thrive nonetheless without the walls of the Casa, which they described as enclosing as well as protective.

As the date of the planned permanent closure of the Casa approached in early 2020, members of Grupo Semillas grew more candid about the importance of the physical space and the vital need to protect it. In one meeting I attended, one member of Grupo Semillas suggested mischievously that if the collectives couldn't stay in the Casa then they should tear it down, for it was only inhabitable due to the maintenance and care they had invested since 2015. The Mi Comuna collective were more subdued, even fatalistic about closing the Casa. They were after all the most established group with responsibility for the contract, for paying the rent and seeking the funding to do so. Moreover, they faced a situation in which they were being squeezed by the private logic of increased rent payments, in addition to a lack of financial support from the public sector, evidently unmoved to act in defence of this important (if atypical) space.

The decision to leave the Casa was ultimately reversed and an improved rent settlement negotiated, in part due to an intervention from the children that use the Casa. This episode, outlined below, reveals a number of important things about this space. Firstly, a more nuanced understanding of the significance of the Casa emerged, how important it is to those that use it, including the children, Grupo Semillas and others. Second, that what the Casa has enabled is inherently linked to the emboldening of the children to defend it. That is to say that the social relations that have developed within and formed this common space, characteristics which gave the children a strong sense of appropriation over the space and the creativity and independence to defend it, were key to this significant juncture. Third, the fact that these spaces are so scarce in Medellín further raised the stakes for the defence of the Casa.

In a dramatic, decisive intervention a few weeks before the planned closure of the Casa, a group of about ten children went to confront the priest, in the middle of Mass, about his unwillingness to compromise. The priest responded furiously and the children ran back, upset and crying, to the Casa and the Mi Comuna team, and told them what they had done. There they held a long, tearful conversation in which they committed together to doing everything possible to keep the Casa open. The recounting of this story became a regular fixture in informal conversations with members of Mi Comuna and Grupo Semillas, who were clearly awestruck by this act. The episode was highlighted by several interview participants, particularly during interviews undertaken amidst the 2020 Covid-19 lockdowns, when the Casa was closed, albeit temporarily. One interview participant from Grupo Semillas described how the children had been formed, inspired and emboldened by their activities in the Casa. That the activities they are involved in, the opportunity to be independent and

develop confidence, had in turn encouraged them to organize and intervene in this powerful way.

> *"they saw the situation and they came up with the idea, so they went to appeal to the priest… all those processes, all that they have acquired at the Casa para el Encuentro, I think that has developed them as the human beings they are, the autonomy, the independence of expression, all this has been developed there."* (Interview 12)

During the *Fiesta de la Utopia* in late February 2020, an assembly was held with other groups from northeast Medellín, a number of whom who had lost their own spaces in recent years. The intention for this discussion, at least the one stated in planning meetings, was to hear about how these groups had persisted and thrived even without their own space. What transpired instead was that the various participants expressed the broad negative impacts experienced following the loss of their space, particularly amidst the scarcity of suitable alternative spaces in northeast Medellín. At the end of the meeting the then-director of Mi Comuna recounted emotionally the story of the children confronting the priest a few days previously. She was demonstrably impacted by the act of the children and the assembly during the *Fiesta*, despite seeming previously to be the most resigned of all Mi Comuna members to closing the Casa.

Following these interventions the campaign to defend the Casa broadened and became noisier. Attempts to pursue confidential, patient dialogue with the landlord toward a fair rent settlement had been unsuccessful. Now was time to reach a broader public and key power-brokers, even if that meant jeopardizing the relationship with the landlord or acting in an openly confrontational or political way. The campaign reached the attention of senior members of the Catholic diocese, who stepped in to make a compromise rent settlement, claiming they had been unaware of the situation and keen to avoid being publicly discredited with the eviction of Mi Comuna and others from the Casa.

What the Casa has enabled, including a space for assembly and patient dialogue as well as an emboldening space for those that use it, one that they become attached to, were instrumental to its defence during this dramatic moment. While the Mi Comuna team held the responsibility for rent payments and fundraising, at no point did they shut down debate and instead they promoted deliberation. Members of Grupo Semillas had been vocal in their opposition to closing the Casa during several meetings I attended. The children, included in plans to negotiate with the landlord but otherwise not usually involved in planning meetings

or fundraising endeavours, intervened by holding the priest accountable in his own space during Mass. The assembly to discuss space at the *Fiesta de la Utopia* was a powerful moment in which a variety of experienced voices external to the Casa argued in defence of the space. Commons are often associated with democratic processes or management. While there was no formal democratic procedure in this decision, no vote taken or consensus reached, the conditions were nevertheless created in which those that relied on the space could voice their opinions, to disagree, push back and intervene where necessary. These groups have not suppressed their differences in the space of the Casa, but they have complemented each other in the process of commoning. It seems that, as Hardt and Negri posit (2005: 349), it is the collectives' 'diffuse set of singularities that produce a common life; it is a kind of social flesh that organizes itself into a new social body'.

Photo: The Casa. Fiesta de la Utopia 2020

Conclusion

This chapter has tried to depict the protective and emboldening environment of the *Casa para el Encuentro Eduardo Galeano*, to demonstrate its foundational contribution to Mi Comuna's media practice. In this space dialogue has developed alongside communicative practices linked to literacy, music, theatre and the sharing of food. The Casa and the struggle to reopen and defend it are representative of historic endeavours to construct and protect the neighbourhoods of Santa Cruz. I have argued that the Casa can be understood as a form of commoning, distinct from public and private spaces in Medellín where (in)security generally exerts influence. The Casa is not a commons in the liberal sense, the bounding and management of a valuable natural resource (e.g. Alpine grazing fields or the Maine lobster catch, Federici, 2019). Nor is the project of the Casa openly subversive, actively appropriating 'resources away from capital and the state into circuits of commons value' (Birkinbine, 2018: 290), or releasing 'knowledge and information that has been closed off from public access' (Birkinbine, 2018: 303).

This chapter has framed the Casa as counter commoning, which builds on the concept of 'subversive commoning', but is distinctive. Amidst a history of violence in Medellín and Santa Cruz, in particular the persistent violence targeting social leaders and young people, there remains risk to and wariness of being perceived as 'subversive' or 'political'. 'Counter commoning' is therefore about the more implicit political practices of providing protective space for social relations and escape from violence than the explicit political practices of either subverting capital or direct conflict with powerful forces. In this context to be explicitly counter-hegemonic or subversive is potentially dangerous. Evidence presented in this chapter suggests that the Casa has afforded safe, engaging and emboldening conditions with distinct possibilities from those in other public and private spaces in Medellín impacted by surveillance or violence. The Casa, opened by and sustaining of social relations in Santa Cruz, presents itself as non-contestatory rather than oppositional to hegemonic power. The dramatic defence of the Casa is demonstrative of the significance of this space and the transformative potential it holds to embolden and inspire those attached to it. The Casa accommodates activity that is prefigurative of a creative and peaceful future freer from logics of violence, security or profit. This is despite its relatively bounded nature, necessary in the context of northeast Medellín and impacted by Mi Comuna's relative lack of resources and capacity.

The Casa and the struggle to defend it became a central focus for my research, from my initial in-situ fieldwork and thereafter. As the Covid-19 global pandemic was declared and strict lockdowns were introduced, the Casa was nevertheless forced to close. Though this was a temporary closure, the loss was keenly felt after the endeavours to keep the Casa

open. During 2020 I asked myself whether, had the Casa's lease come up for renewal a few months later once the strict lockdowns had already commenced, might the Casa have simply closed permanently, already separated from the social processes that crucially defended it? This question brought to the fore the importance of the social relations in the physical space of the Casa, which might not have been replicated in the digital spaces we were limited to during the lockdowns. The children, for example, could not have confronted the landlord in the way they did via digital spaces. Indeed as forthcoming chapters attest, the children attached to the Casa were largely absent from (or at least without agency in) digital spaces generated during 2020, in spite of the efforts of Mi Comuna to include them. Instead, the events of early 2020 in defence of the Casa meant that, by the time lockdowns were implemented, there was renewed comprehension of the significance of the Casa.

While the Casa is an important foundation for Mi Comuna's work, it has never been the whole, nor the most important part of their media practice. Mi Comuna's street based methodologies have been central to the development of the organisation and their dialogue with the people of Santa Cruz, evoking and sharing knowledge and collective memory of the district which can counter dominant mediated narratives. It is to these activities this thesis now turns.

Chapter 6

Street based methodologies and memory work

The previous chapter discussed Mi Comuna's *Casa para el Encuentro Eduardo Galeano* and the social relations that have formed it as an emboldening space for assembly. This chapter builds on the considerations of communication and interaction by focusing on the processes that Mi Comuna develop in the streets of Santa Cruz, beyond the walls of the Casa. For while the Casa is an important foundation for Mi Comuna's work and a valuable meeting space in Santa Cruz, the walls of the Casa are also enclosing and limiting. The onset in early 2020 of Covid-19 lockdown and social distancing policies restricted Mi Comuna's street based methodologies during extended periods of my fieldwork. Nonetheless through limited direct experience and extensive conversations in meetings and interviews during lockdowns, when the loss of this interaction was so keenly felt, I developed an understanding of the significance of these activities to Mi Comuna's work in Santa Cruz.

Mi Comuna's street based methodologies are key to their work generating communication, interaction and reflection with residents of Santa Cruz. Itinerant and engaging, these activities have enabled Mi Comuna to involve a broader range of residents in their work and better understand the priorities of Santa Cruz. These methodologies have emerged in an iterative manner in response to structural disadvantages faced by residents of Santa Cruz, as well as the dynamics of public spaces in the district. In opening space for interaction and dialogue, Mi Comuna seek to reflect with rather than simply represent residents of Santa Cruz (Huesca, 1995).[65] These methodologies can moreover demonstrate 'alternative experiences and definitions of 'communication'' (Stephansen, 2016: 34), reanimate public spaces impacted by violence (Rodriguez, 2011) and begin to challenge dominant mediated realities of Santa Cruz.

Challenging dominant mediated realities requires the deep processes of 'memory work', building collective memory as a key part of countering negative representations of Santa Cruz. Street-based methodologies are central to this work because this is about a collective and shared history not an individualising project. Crucial here are the narratives of cooperative establishment and development of neighbourhoods in Santa Cruz in the face of multiple challenges. This recognition of knowledge which has been suppressed or silenced by more dominant representations of Santa Cruz is a second distinguishing characteristic of

[65] Huesca contrasts this to journalism of a more traditional nature, 'where a trained professional ascertains and reflects reality' based on the knowledge of 'experts' and back to a public (Lippman, 1922 cited in Huesca 1995: 113).

‘counter commoning’. Birkinbine has related the concept of ‘subversive commoning’ to attempts to ‘release knowledge and information that has been closed off from public access’ (Birkinbine, 2018: 303). The evoking of local memory and histories of cooperation in Santa Cruz, is not so much the releasing of knowledge and information that has been enclosed, but rather uncovering knowledge that may have been silenced by more dominant mediated representations of northeast Medellín. In turn this knowledge contributes to local cultural imaginaries celebrating the agency of collective founding rather than the victimisation of displacement or violence.

Mi Comuna’s communication and memory work practice in the streets of Santa Cruz have emerged through a ‘dialogue of knowledges’ (Freire, 1970), recognising that ‘each can learn and make proposals from his/her world, experiences and aesthetics’ (O. Rincón and A. Marroquín, 2020: 44). Through iterative methods to open spaces of communication and interaction in the streets of Santa Cruz, Mi Comuna work towards a form of praxis, ‘the means whereby one stands back from what one lives through to obtain critical distance, thus engaging in reflection for collective action…that helps transform the reality in question’ (Mayo, 2019: 310).

This chapter begins with a discussion of Mi Comuna’s street based methodologies, exploring the itinerant and creative elements on which they are founded, and the way in which they have developed in an iterative manner. The chapter then moves to discussion of Mi Comuna’s memory work practice, drawing on theories of collective memory and mediated memories introduced in Chapter 2.

Street-based methodologies: itinerant, creative and iterative

> *“and to get to know the territory, we began to generate and undertake a series of strategies, for example, we started as the Mi Comuna work team going out on neighbourhood walkabouts. So with the help of various people who knew the neighbourhoods very well, we walked, even with maps in hand, we went out and undertook photography tours, we went out and spoke with the people in the territory, we asked the people how they came to live there, how the neighbourhood was formed, who were its founders, what happened there? And with that information we started to think what stories should be told. So we started to tell the stories of the neighbourhoods, and every time we started to tell the stories of the neighbourhoods, there would be emerging more and more information and more elements and then this led us to think and talk*

about this in other types of action and other types of communication. For example, we invented an event called 'mi comuna al cuento' inviting people to write stories, for example, about their territory, or to write a story, or at least animate them to narrate, right?...let's say that these are the bases of what for us and for me, right, is to speak of historical memory in the northeastern zone of the city of Medellín, and in the notions that we have of what must change, what is due, or the reason we do what we do, right, as a media, let's say those are the bases, and those are the ideas." (Interview 4)

Street based methodologies hold a wide-ranging and enduring importance to the work of Mi Comuna, as the above reflection attests. A principal characteristic is the itinerant nature of this work, beyond just being out in the streets, crucial is the way that Mi Comuna have toured their communication processes through the district of Santa Cruz. They have visited places that they know well or did not know at all, usually supported by friends or associates (internal or external to Mi Comuna) more familiar with the different neighbourhoods. This peripatetic approach has enabled Mi Comuna to generate communication and interaction with a broader range of residents, building understanding about the territory of Santa Cruz, its qualities, customs, problems and priorities.

In taking their communication processes across the district, and through the use of creative and artistic practice to engage residents, Mi Comuna have also offered a lived experience of 'another communication' (Stephansen, 2016), distinct from the media and journalism of external media outlets reporting on Santa Cruz. I was told on several occasions during my fieldwork that the journalists of the commercial news outlets of Medellín, based in the city centre, very rarely visited Santa Cruz and if they did it was only to report on the *noticia roja* (i.e. crime or violence). There is an important practical element to Mi Comuna's eschewing of focus on crime and violence, which would be unsafe to pursue as a locally based organisation. Given the violence faced by journalists in Colombia, the investigation of non-state armed actors is feasible only really for external journalists who can subsequently leave an area, or even report remotely (Miller, 2020; Rodriguez, 2011). Beyond this practical need to avoid confronting armed groups, Mi Comuna's approach is informed by their appreciation of other characteristics and customs held in Santa Cruz.

This work reflects and is inspired by what Paolo Freire (1970) called a 'dialogue of knowledges' which recognises that 'each can learn and make proposals from his/her world, experiences and aesthetics' (O. Rincón and A. Marroquín, 2020: 44). The 'critical tools of communication and dialogue' at the centre of Freire's comunicación popular can, according

to Rodriguez (2020: 72) enable ‘subjects who activate their own languages, use those languages to resignify their reality, and develop ways to move those interpretations of reality into the public sphere’. Opening space for communication and dialogue in Santa Cruz is nevertheless extremely challenging, not least due to significant structural disadvantages and the dynamics of public spaces.

> *“So the participation was a bit diminished, well you know, we invited people to an editorial committee, but people didn't come, initially we didn’t worry much, because we were also very comfortable saying ‘we are the community too so we can also decide’, or that the people know us, the community leaders could come to us and say ‘look, I have this issue for the newspaper.’ Then back in 2014 we made a very nice plan, and we sought to generate strategies, that's where the Día Naranja [itinerant editorial committee] emerged, which was very interesting, it was very interesting. That process was beautiful and I think it was one of the things that stuck, that worked very well, Día Naranja, because it generated two things: first it was going to the territory, we were decentralising, so we reached some places where we never imagined reaching, not even the [state] institutions go there, but we arrived there with our offer of communication, it was very interesting! Of communication, talking with the people who were passing by and we got the themes for the newspaper from there. Obviously that process, you know social processes are very interesting and complex because they can work really well but then something can happen where they don’t work as well again, and the Día Naranja it went like this.” (Interview 14)*

Through regular itinerant street based events Mi Comuna have attempted to generate communication and interaction with those that might not otherwise be able to participate, due to economic or caring responsibilities or other restrictions. Mi Comuna visit neighbourhoods across Santa Cruz, including to places where the state institutions rarely go. In other words they have taken their offer of communication to places that may be marginalised or stigmatised, or face structural disadvantages. Mi Comuna have not left the reach of their communicative processes to chance, or as Huesca has warned media practitioners (1995: 115), if participatory procedures are left to chance they will ‘inevitably reflect relations of power in societies, neighbourhoods, and households’.

> *“Another thing is the issue of time, and sometimes people in the district go out at six and come back at six…then there is a whole issue, or many, for example the case of mothers, many heads of households, ‘I came home from work but it is to take*

care of my children, that is, I don't finish working, and I keep working and I get up at six in the morning and I keep working until twelve at night, because I get home, but I know that I have to, or to take care of the husband sometimes', well, also that this kind of thing happens and that it is indeed, a person is going to say 'no, I don't have the time'". (Interview 12).

Mi Comuna have also utilised creative activities to engage a broader set of people for a few minutes or hours, or as part of an ongoing dialogue. Arriving in a neighbourhood with a creative or artistic offer, for example music or theatre, or workshops in painting or drawing. Or even animating and training people to narrate their own stories in different ways, for example through photography:

"there's photography, the photography group, the audiovisual training process, which are like the school of communications, right? That even though it stopped this year [in 2020, during Covid-19 lockdowns], there it is as the project and it is precisely that, how to give people tools, from community communication but it is so that what they tell are the stories they want to. So through these lines of work we don't get as much into the technicality, but rather, into promoting, those things that are already in the neighbourhood. Well what do you want to narrate, right? Ok you want to tell that story, then I give you some tools so that you can tell them, right? So to teach, for example, redaction, the styles of writing, then how to handle a camera, right, how to make videos or, well all this kind of stuff." (Interview 5)

"we go to the streets, we take out everything we have in terms of communication and we do exercises that allow us, in addition to letting people know about the newspaper, 1; that people make proposals for the process and 2; that people even become part of the process. In other words, they were also invited into those spaces to tell them, you can write, come on, let's write and one of our journalists accompanies you, helps you with the investigation and the whole thing, but, but come on, it's possible right? Your voice counts, your voice can be put in the newspaper, the newspaper is also yours." (Interview 12)

"and then I came to an activity called Día Naranja that was undertaken in a part of barrio la Rosa known as la Encocada. And then I could see like all the action of [Mi Comuna]. So it was like a super big thing, it was literally an event, so it was held in a

> *football pitch [cage], and there were workshops in painting, drawing, photography, audio-visual, there was a mural space where people were writing. There was another group there conversing with the people that were around the football pitch, about the newspaper, I don't know. So I always reiterate this because I think it was very beautiful and it's that this day I understood what was community media."* (Interview 2).

These activities can transform the streets and squares into welcoming spaces, in turn generating the conditions for people to come together, interact and converse. Rodriguez theorises 'collective spaces of encounter', where citizens' media brought people back to the streets and squares amidst a context of violent conflict in Colombia (Rodriguez, 2011: 236). In the urban environment of Santa Cruz and with Colombia in a putatively 'post-conflict' era, Mi Comuna's street based methodologies respond not to the immediate shock of war but to persisting violence coupled with structural disadvantages that restrict residents' time and capacity for communication and interaction. The streets and squares of Santa Cruz are contested spaces, in everyday as well as mediated realities. State and non-state armed actors exert their presence in these public spaces, but if residents come out of their homes to join creative activities that do not directly confront armed groups, then the re-appropriation of public space (even temporarily) is practicable. Not least if it is the aunties or grandmothers or nephews or nieces of the local armed actors that are out joining these activities. Dominant mediated narratives might heighten fear of these public spaces, even as residents might (if given the opportunity) want to recount stories of how they paved the streets or installed the drains.

Rodriguez further theorises that in 'collective spaces of encounter', 'local cultural identities and geographies' can emerge (Rodriguez, 2011: 243). These can 'encourage children and youth to be "seduced" by their natural and cultural environment, potentially reducing the attraction of the promise of life as a warrior and/or drug trafficker' (Rodriguez, 2011: 244). The pull of young people towards the armed groups remains a persistent factor in Santa Cruz. Attempts to 'seduce' young people in Santa Cruz away from these risks is complex work, not least with family members involved in these armed groups. Mi Comuna's determined efforts are nonetheless centred around engaging and creative activities in the streets of Santa Cruz and the Casa, alongside the development of local cultural identities linked to the collective founding of neighbourhoods. (Even if collective identity in Santa Cruz, an urban settlement with over 110,000 residents, is distinct from the conflict-affected villages and towns at the centre of Rodriguez's 2011 study.)

> *"So that is communication, being able to express ourselves, being able to start speaking about those things that happen, through different strategies. So it is not that our strategy is simply going to be 'ah, let's get together and communicate from the newspaper' and that's it, but that they are communication strategies, for example, like the assembly, that becomes a communication strategy where we are talking with people and expressing all that is happening…That becomes a communication strategy that in some way will contribute to the construction of digital content and that of, that of the newspaper. So it is to be able to make that distinction, of how we understand communication, not only a mediatic form of media, but also of that construction with others and the construction of new meanings, right? To modify representations and developing the collective or individual*." (Interview 5)

Encouraging communication and interaction in Santa Cruz has been a complex undertaking, and methods have emerged and been adapted in an iterative manner. Some methods have not functioned effectively, for example the original form of Mi Comuna's open editorial committee. Adhering to a condition of the newspaper's initial participatory budgeting grant, Mi Comuna held regular open editorial meetings, at a set time and place, for residents of Santa Cruz to attend. Mi Comuna publicised and promoted the meetings, yet they were poorly attended, or attended by the same small group of mainly male participants each time. Whilst Mi Comuna were adhering to the funding conditions, they recognised the significance of the absence of women and young people from the editorial committees. This deficiency was particularly significant considering the prevalence of women heads of families in Santa Cruz. Mi Comuna went to the streets and door to door with the newspaper inviting people to attend their events and meetings and to contribute to the process of the newspaper. A common response from residents, including many mothers who were heads of households, was that they were keen to contribute to the newspaper as long as they could do so from outside their home, in their street and their neighbourhood. Mi Comuna adapted their process accordingly, reinventing the editorial committee as an itinerant street based event (what has become known as *Día Naranja*) where they could build a dialogue around the newspaper, involve local residents in the process and offer them the support to narrate their own stories. What Huesca (1995: 115) acknowledges as the 'paradoxes and limits of participation' are pertinent to Mi Comuna's efforts here to include those facing structural disadvantages. As you seek to include certain groups, you inevitably exclude others from this work, for example the mainly male community leaders who attended the editorial committees.

***Día Naranja* - itinerant editorial committee**

One emblematic iteration of Mi Comuna's street based work is the itinerant editorial committee, *Día Naranja*. Undertaken regularly in different neighbourhoods of Santa Cruz, latest editions of the newspaper are distributed and artistic and cultural activities set up in the street, including photography, music or theatre. Through these activities Mi Comuna have sought to create space for communication and interaction in the streets, in a square or football cage. Those drawn in might learn about Mi Comuna's work for the first time, be engaged to discuss the challenges they face, what stories should be told in the next edition of the paper, and whether they could help tell them. *Día Naranja* arriving outside the homes of residents in different parts of Santa Cruz, partly addresses structural disadvantages or limitations of residents impacted by economic, caring and other responsibilities, who might otherwise be restricted from participating in activities. Moreover, by transforming their open editorial committee from a conventional meeting to something more creative, Mi Comuna actively seek to engage different people, including young people or those nervous of speaking in a formal meeting environment.

The onset in 2020 of the Covid-19 pandemic and related policy interventions limited Mi Comuna's street based methodologies during extended periods of my fieldwork. I was nonetheless able, at the beginning and end of my in-situ fieldwork, to participate in Mi Comuna's work around the streets of Santa Cruz. This street based interaction would moreover become central to discussions in meetings and interviews during the moments of lockdowns and social distancing, when its loss was so keenly felt. In early 2020 I participated in what would be the final *Día Naranja* before the lockdown. I recorded the following reflections:

Diary entry, Friday March 6 2020.

> *About ten of us, a few members of the Mi Comuna team, two students doing their placements, two women from Grupo Semillas and me, set off from the Casa in the early afternoon after a short briefing. A key objective was to speak to residents about access to public space in Santa Cruz, a main theme of the latest edition of the newspaper and an issue high on the agenda for Mi Comuna at that time (with the Casa threatened with closure).*
>
> *We took several cameras, a batch of the latest edition of the Mi Comuna 2 newspaper, Mi Comuna branded reporter vests and the megaphone. We began by*

walking from the Casa up the steep streets and stairways for about 15 minutes, handing out some of the newspapers and asking people if they had anything they wanted to share for the upcoming newspaper edition. We encountered people outside their homes and businesses, or going about their day. I stopped to offer newspapers to several people, some who knew the newspaper and received it gladly, some who were unaware of it or uninterested.

A woman approached us to tell us that she had lived in the neighbourhood for 40 years since it was just 'ranchitos en el campo' (small wooden ranches in the countryside). She spoke about how she and others had together built the neighbourhoods. I asked her if she wanted to tell the story in more detail for a future edition of the newspaper and whether I could take her portrait. She declined, saying she had an appointment to keep and did not want us to take her photo at that time.

We carried on up the hill to meet another member of Mi Comuna, waiting for about ten minutes just as the children began to emerge from the school on that street. The children asked us what we were doing and we told them about Día Naranja and gave them copies of the newspaper to take home. They were more interested in the cameras and asked us to take their photos in groups of friends. We showed them the photos on the camera screens and they seemed impressed.
We then continued walking, now back downhill. After a short time, we stopped to buy empanadas at a stall on a street corner. As we sat with the empanadas a woman approached us keen to talk about the streets and sidewalks which were often blocked by parked cars and motorbikes. This issue was featured on the front page of the latest edition of the newspaper, which we were handing out.

We headed on down the hill and I noticed an older man on a first floor balcony and offered him a newspaper. By the time I had retrieved one, he had descended from his balcony. He told me the newspaper made a very important contribution to the district and congratulated me for the work! He said that we needed to collaborate more around some of the issues facing the district. He told me that he was a founder of the neighbourhood 40 years ago, that prior to living here he had been displaced from his rural home, then re-displaced from another town in the Antioquia region, after which he came to Medellín and this neighbourhood. He had been head of a neighbourhood committee formed to resolve issues with the drains and potable water and other utilities. A couple of Mi Comuna team members asked to record his reflections with the camera, to which he obliged. Unfortunately we were interrupted every minute or so by noisy motorbikes passing up and down the steep slope. We thanked the man and asked him to get in touch with Mi Comuna through the telephone number on the inside of the newspaper. We then caught up with the

others from the group, who had stopped to meet some other women from Grupo Semillas in a small square in the middle of some busy streets. The route culminated here, opposite the proposed site of the Centro Intergeneracional, a community centre promised by successive Medellín Mayoral administrations, but after many years still undelivered.

This event enabled many interactions through several different neighbourhoods, spanning senior residents to school children. The newspaper and its themes prompted conversation, for example the problem of cars and motorbikes blocking the routes of the pedestrians. The children were most interested in the cameras, while the adults were more enthusiastic about the physical copy of the newspaper, and many asked for a second for a family member. These media technologies, crucial though they were, served principally to open an interaction during this particularly social event. Being in the streets enabled discussions of a different sort to those in an assembly at the Casa or other meeting venue. Certainly it was different from the sorts of interactions that would be possible a few weeks later in digital meeting spaces, amidst the lockdown. Several of the senior residents were especially keen to talk about the history of their neighbourhood, their role in its founding and development and the need for ongoing cooperation. This was not a nostalgia but a certain pride for how the neighbourhoods had developed through adversity, not least while the state was largely absent. It felt to me that there was an ongoing dialogue between the stories and photographs that have appeared in the newspaper, and the enthusiasm of local residents to share their own accounts and memories.

These histories of settlement and collective construction contest more 'institutional' memories of Medellín, which often highlight instead the illegal settlement or the persistent violence in the 'comunas populares' like Santa Cruz, or alternatively speak of top-down innovation or pacification. This binary between 'popular' and 'institutional' or 'top down' and 'bottom up' memory is often polarised in situations of violent conflict (e.g. South Africa or Chile, Aguilar-Forero, 2018).[66] Through the opening of space for interaction and communication in the streets of Santa Cruz, dialogue so often connects to the construction of collective or popular memory and non-official histories. It is to this aspect of Mi Comuna's work that this chapter now turns.

[66] 'Institutional' memory is linked by Bodnar (1992: 14; cited in Miller, 2020: 537) to leaders, authorities and those seeking continuity of the status quo.

Collective memory, memory work and mediated memories

The concept of 'collective memory' (Halbwach, 1992), discussed in greater depth in Chapter 2, posits that memory is social and exists both within and beyond the individual. van Dijck (2007, 2011) has in turn developed the concept of 'mediated memories' which are 'the activities and objects we produce and appropriate by means of media technologies, for creating and re-creating a sense of past, present and future of ourselves in relation to others' (van Dijck, 2007: 21 cited in MacDonald et al, 2015: 106-107). In Latin America, '[h]uman rights memory media' has emerged from movements responding to the 'state terrorism and brutal dictatorships' in the region of the 1970s and the 1980s (Kaiser, 2020: 91). Activists developed 'media strategies as key tools for their work' denouncing the atrocities, challenging impunity, and calling for accountability and remembering in their aftermath (ibid.). These 'memory activists' focus not exclusively on past atrocities but also on contemporary human rights issues. 'In denouncing genocide and its legacies and linking past and present injustices, they illustrate the concept of "exemplary memory" (Todorov, 1995), a memory that is at the service of justice and that calls for action in the present' (Kaiser, 2020: 91). This concurs with Wiesel's assertion that '[to] remember is to allow the past to move into the future and shape its course' (Wiesel, 1997: 15, cited in Miller, 2020: 536). Kaiser argues that:

> 'Latin Americans have been memory activists for centuries, writing history and memory, adapting and updating strategies, collaborating in the intergenerational transmission of experiences and practices, and countering official narratives. They have been pioneers in calls for decolonizing history and memory and in proposals for imagining a different world. The history of struggles for memory in Latin America illustrate Israeli author Gutman's definition of memory activism as the "strategic commemoration of a contested past outside state channels to influence public debate and policy"' (Kaiser, 2020: 91).

Victims' groups are, according to Rolston and Ospina (2017: 29), in 'a subaltern position, as defined by Gramsci, namely a group under the hegemonic domination of a ruling class so that it is unable to participate fully in the making of history and culture'. Yet those who undertake memory work or establish memorials are not 'simply stuck in perpetual melancholia':

> ‘On the contrary, such memory work triggers agency, not stasis. In refusing to let the memory of abuse die they are ultimately harbingers of a society radically different from the one which gave rise to the abuse. Their memorial is built on the premise that ‘a different world is possible’, one based on human rights and justice, and their challenge to the state is to be at the forefront of establishing and guaranteeing such a society. In this sense, memorial murals, although looking back to the past, can have a very clear role in conflict transformation, firmly planted in the present, they link the past and the future.’ (Rolston and Ospina, 2017: 41)

Considering Medellín’s contested history of violent conflict, the concept of ‘human rights memory media’ is highly relevant to the city, for example regarding the disappearances, forced displacement and the ‘limpieza social’ (discussed in Chapter 4). However, struggles for justice in relation to historic violence in Medellín and Santa Cruz are not the central focus of Mi Comuna’s memory work. As indicated earlier in this chapter, there are several reasons preventing Mi Comuna’s communication processes from focusing on violence. Not least that this sort of memory work could appear as contestatory to those still holding power in Santa Cruz (state and non-state armed groups) who may be linked to the historic violence.

Theory concerning collective memory, exemplary memory and mediated memories are nonetheless immensely useful for understanding Mi Comuna’s memory work, which links overwhelmingly to histories of collective founding and development of these neighbourhoods in the face of adversity. The cultural frameworks through which collective identities are shaped (van Dijck, 2007, 2011) are central to this work, for example the history of the collective construction or *convite*, or gatherings around the *sancocho* or music. The idea of exemplary memory (Todorov, 1995) is key here, this is not nostalgia or melancholia, but you remember ‘to allow the past to move into the future and shape its course’ (Wiesel, 1997: 15, cited in Miller 2020: 536) This is not about victimhood but rather about agency, especially compelling when reflecting on a history of agency and social organisation in the construction of these districts. ‘Collaborating in the intergenerational transmission of experiences and practices, and countering official narratives’ (Kaiser, 2020: 91) also feels highly pertinent to Mi Comuna’s work with young people. Discussing the history of the neighbourhoods can influence the sorts of leaders the young people admire or aspire to emulate, those who built the neighbourhoods rather than the armed actors that hold a certain power or status today (as this thesis discusses further in Chapter 8). Memories mediated through the physical newspaper, digital spaces, and audio-visual technologies are of course key to Mi Comuna’s

memory work, but these would not be possible without bringing people together to evoke, recognise and share memories:

> *"So that gives it like a potency. In what sense? First when it begins to configure, that is, it begins to develop an important process which is to understand ourselves from the collective memory as a neighbourhood, right? So of course, all our media begin to generate an exploration of the territory we inhabit to be able to show in these media, right? But this exploration begins to give us, or make us feel, thanks to the collective memory exercise, and we also understand memory as a very important exercise in not only Medellín, but in a country like Colombia, right? Where the issue of the armed conflict is so strong and memory and reconciliation, well and all these kinds of things that come from the peace processes, are also beginning to have a very relevant exercise.*
>
> *Then memory begins to have that good impact, we are rooted in a territory, we are a neighbourhood, how did we get there? Why did we get there? Why is it like that? Right? Why is Medellín so fragmented, so notoriously fragmented? Why are there such strong divisions? And we began to ask ourselves all this and to understand well in a certain way and to the ways in which we began to arrive, we began to inhabit this neighbourhood, this territory and that began to reinforce an ideal of being part of a community, of the importance of being part of a community and the importance of being a community that begins to participate and that way of participating is the community media."* (Interview 9)

During my in-situ fieldwork, I spent a day with Mi Comuna recording a short film celebrating the women who had worked in textile repairs and alterations from their residential street in Santa Cruz. A mural depicting a woman at work on a sewing machine had recently been painted there (by Mi Comuna's graphic designer, who lived on the street). Mi Comuna were making a short film about the mural and the generations of women who had worked and raised their families there. We visited and recorded in several homes, meeting the mothers, aunties and grandmothers who showed us their sewing machines, their place of work, their family photos. Afterwards we set chairs, cameras and microphones in the street in front of the mural to record a discussion with several of the women. The discussion was broadcast live on facebook and an edited film including the scenes from inside the homes was returned to the street in a neighbourhood screening a few weeks later, as well as shared via digital channels.

This work recognised and celebrated a group of women who had spent a life labouring in the textile industry while raising their families. Rarely acknowledged in dominant mediated narratives about Santa Cruz, these women are nonetheless an important and emblematic example of how families have survived and flourished in northeast Medellín. This work was documenting the everyday realities of Santa Cruz, when dominant mediated narratives have so often focused on crime or violence. In seeking to understand this work I draw on research on collective memory work in Salford in the north of England, a place facing the 'disruption and discontinuity of regeneration and displacement' (MacDonald et al, 2015: 105). MacDonald et al (2015) note the work of Honneth (2007) in highlighting how 'collective projects of memory preservation are sites where, if conditions are favourable, individuals and groups without access to large-scale economic and symbolic resources can challenge their general lack of recognition' (MacDonald et al, 2015: 105). Memory work can therefore become 'a method of unearthing and making public untold stories…the lives of those whose ways of knowing and seeing the world are rarely acknowledged, let alone celebrated, in the expressions of a hegemonic culture' (Kuhn, 2002: 9, cited in MacDonald et al, 2015: 107).

The example of the mural, the mediated memory of Santa Cruz women, and the interview extract above, attest to how memory work enables people of Santa Cruz to produce their

own history, their own knowledge, at 'far remove from the dominant institutions of historical production' (MacDonald et. al, 2015: 106).[67] The exercise, which took place over the course of a day of filming and another evening for a neighbourhood screening, brought people together on a neighbourhood street. The video and photos of the events and the mural itself, were also captured and disseminated through digital media technologies (and stored for posterity on Mi Comuna's website and social media channels).

This sort of digital mediated memory work is an important element of Mi Comuna's street based work and serves as an important connection to Mi Comuna's broader media practices, for example their movement building practice (campaigning or lobbying at the district and city level). The example of the mural, the audiovisual recording, the neighbourhood screening and the sharing through digital channels can serve to change perceptions within Santa Cruz, for example when young people see the stories of their families and neighbours. Also these digitally mediated memories can build a dialogue between residents of Santa Cruz and those in other parts of Medellín, either in neighbourhoods with similar characteristics and challenges, or in more affluent neighbourhoods, completely divided from the 'comunas populares' like Santa Cruz, with an understanding shaped (or alarmed) by dominant mediated narratives. This concurs with the analysis developed by MacDonald et al (2015: 103) of 'how digital technologies (image and audio capture, storage, editing, reproduction, distribution and exhibition) have become embedded in wider memory practices of storytelling and commemoration in a community setting'. Moreover that 'contrary to prevailing characterizations of digitization [linked to digital forgetting], that under specific conditions, digital resources facilitate new forms of materialization that contribute to sustaining a civic organization's intergenerational continuity.'

Mi Comuna's practices in memory work serve to acknowledge and evoke shared histories and even encourage a collective territorial identity. These practices have emerged in an iterative manner in response to the knowledge and memories of residents of Santa Cruz. Reflecting with rather than simply representing residents of Santa Cruz, Mi Comuna have supported the development of a collective memory that can counter dominant mediated narratives and build dialogue between Santa Cruz and those external to it. The evoking of collective memory and histories of cooperation in Santa Cruz, is less the 'release knowledge and information that has been closed off from public access' (Birkinbine, 2018: 303), more

[67] E.g. the city or national government, or even the north American producers of the documentary *La Sierra*, as discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

the uncovering knowledge that has been suppressed or silenced by more dominant representations of the district. This celebration of historic cooperation and agency, along with the reanimation of public and common spaces, is important for the present and the future. For as Harvey (1993) has argued, the struggles over place representation in cities are often 'as fiercely fought and as fundamental to the activities of place construction as bricks and mortar' (Harvey, 1993: 22). This is a political act, not connected to politicians, anti-state or anti-capitalist, but politicising of residents of Santa Cruz in the defence of their neighbourhoods (discussed further in Chapter 8).

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed Mi Comuna's street based methodologies, an important part of their work generating communication and interaction with residents of Santa Cruz. Itinerant and engaging, these activities have developed in response to structural disadvantages and the dynamics of public spaces in Santa Cruz. Central to this work are social activities in the streets or squares of different neighbourhoods, outside the homes of those that Mi Comuna might not otherwise reach in the Casa, in more institutional spaces or in digital spaces. Through creative activities, these street based methodologies have produced what Rodriguez (2011) has theorised as 'collective spaces of encounter', albeit in the distinctive context of northeast Medellín and with Colombia now in its 'post-conflict' era. This activity is prefigurative of how public space might be in a more peaceful and secure future. These itinerant and creative communication practices are also performing another communication, distinct from the external media outlets reporting on Santa Cruz. Collective spaces of encounter can 'foster horizontal communication' between residents and even build 'dialogue between citizens and local governments' (Rodriguez, 2011: 233), as is discussed further in Chapter 8.

This chapter has explored how memory work (Kuhn, 2002) and mediated memories (van Dijck, 2007, 2011) have become an important part of Mi Comuna's media practice. This memory is not simply nostalgic or melancholic, nor is it focused on histories of violence or human rights abuses (Kaiser, 2020). Described within Mi Comuna as collective memory, popular memory, or historical memory, this is also an 'exemplary memory' (Todorov 1995), recognising the past to shape the present and the future. Opening space for a 'dialogue of knowledges' (Freire, 1970) has enabled the evoking, sharing and recognition of collective memories of the cooperative founding of neighbourhoods, common knowledge which can challenge dominant mediated realities and negative representations of Santa Cruz. This is

particularly difficult in a city like Medellín where the official narrative or 'institutional memory' tells a story of top-down innovation and pacification. In turn this knowledge contributes to local cultural imaginaries celebrating the agency of collective founding rather than the victimisation of displacement or violence. As this thesis explores in other chapters, the focus on violence in Medellín's 'comunas populares' by external journalists has real material consequences. These narratives can influence the way residents view their own neighbourhoods and can influence external interventions these places. Examples of this include the temporary withdrawal of refuse collections from barrio la Sierra following the notorious documentary (Dalton and Martinez, *La Sierra*, 2005) about that neighbourhood, or the broader 'architecture of pacification' approach of successive Medellín Mayors (Hylton, 2007). The military encircling of barrio el Sinaí, established for two weeks during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown and discussed further in the next chapter, is another episode where mediated narratives of illegality in northeast Medellín have accompanied an overzealous state intervention into Santa Cruz.

In opening space for interaction and dialogue, Mi Comuna seek to reflect with rather than simply represent residents of Santa Cruz (Huesca, 1995). Participation has been actively sought yet not romanticised. Mi Comuna have worked creatively to include different publics while recognising the limitations people face. Accordingly Mi Comuna do not overstate the participatory element of their work. 'Participation' has also been employed in a tokenistic way by successive city governments in Medellín, for example in connection with regeneration interventions. *"For them, participation is that people go and sign the list and they can take a photo, but what is done there…the real process of participation is of, it turns out, is not the priority"* (Interview 12). Mi Comuna actively seek to involve residents from across Santa Cruz in spaces of communication and interaction, including older and younger residents that they might not reach in digital spaces, or those with caring responsibilities that limit them from attending events in the Casa. Moreover these practices in communication, interaction and memory work seek to bring about political subjectivities, more than just a form of representation. So there is a political project tied to this participation (Downing, 2000), even if Mi Comuna avoid compounding the expression of participation as little more than a 'floating signifier' (Carpentier, 2011).

The onset of the Covid-19 lockdown and social distancing policies restricted Mi Comuna's street based methodologies during extended periods of my fieldwork. Nonetheless through my in-situ and remote fieldwork during the lockdowns, I developed an understanding of the significance of these activities when their loss was so keenly felt. The next chapter focuses on Mi Comuna's response to the lockdowns and social distancing restrictions, when their

street based activities were restricted and the Casa was closed. Discussions of inclusion and exclusion, reflection and representation are extended in light of Mi Comuna's work moving into digital spaces. Digital technologies, digital spaces and 'social' media platforms have been associated with facilitating participation and enhancing the possibilities of social movements and alternative media alike. This thesis has thus far sought to explore and interpret Mi Comuna's work in physical spaces and face to face activities. It now moves to discussion of work in digital spaces and in the stark context of the 2020 Covid-19 lockdowns in northeast Medellín.

Chapter 7

Shifting media practices into digital spaces during Covid-19: 'Locked out' or 'locked in' when Medellín was 'locked down'

The previous two chapters have explored Mi Comuna's work generating space for communication and interaction in their Casa and around the streets of Santa Cruz. The safe, accessible and intimate environment afforded by the Casa responds to a scarcity of appropriate assembly spaces in Santa Cruz. Mi Comuna's street based methodologies, itinerant, engaging and iterative, have been undertaken across the district to reach those that Mi Comuna might not otherwise connect with in the Casa, in more institutional spaces or in digital spaces. These methodologies can perform an alternative experience of media and communication and reanimate public spaces impacted by violence (Rodriguez, 2011). Opening space for dialogue has led to the evoking, sharing and recognition of collective memories of the cooperative founding of neighbourhoods, knowledge that may have been silenced by more dominant mediated representations of northeast Medellín. These social relations that have promoted dialogue and opened creative and emboldening spaces with distinct possibilities from those in other public and private spaces in Santa Cruz, have been theorised as counter commoning.

In April 2020 the Casa was forced to close and Mi Comuna's street-based activities were halted, following the declaration of the Covid-19 global pandemic and the implementation of strict lockdown and social distancing policies in Medellín.[68] This was just weeks after the Casa had been dramatically saved from permanent closure, and two months into my in-situ field research. In this unprecedented context, Mi Comuna shifted their work almost entirely into digital spaces, for much of 2020 and early 2021. The forthcoming chapter explores Mi Comuna's work during this extraordinary situation, discussing the way that certain groups were locked out or locked in to digital spaces as Medellín was locked down. The structurally disadvantaged are locked out; the advantaged are 'locked in' and when everyone is 'locked down' whether you are in or out is experienced very differently.

This chapter argues that those who are most excluded in society suffered the most from the shift to all online working, with the danger of entrenching further oppressions and exclusions and accelerating divides. Mi Comuna faced challenges in reproducing in digital spaces the

[68] Residents of Medellín were initially allowed to leave home just once a week, exacerbating existing socio-economic challenges in northeast Medellín.

sort of engaging, creative and interactive activities they had been developing in the Casa and in the streets of Santa Cruz. Insufficient access in Santa Cruz to the connections, the devices or the digital literacy was an important factor, particularly with the children Mi Comuna regularly work with. Significant also were challenges developing online pedagogy to replicate creative and emboldening activities that generated interaction between participants, as had been possible with certain activities in the Casa or in the streets of Santa Cruz.

As Medellín's strict lockdown was implemented, Mi Comuna's technical proficiency with digital technologies enabled them to lobby the city government, gather and disseminate information, and recreate cultural and artistic events in digital spaces, for which they gained recognition from across Medellín. Where this movement building work was effective it was nevertheless related to strong existing offline relationships, not least formed in the dramatic campaign to defend the Casa in early 2020. These practices in communication and movement building (what Huesca (1995) describes as 'dialogic process and strategic networking'), when shifted into digital spaces, began to privilege the latter over the former. In other words, without their street based work or activities in the Casa, Mi Comuna's work became less interactive and reflective, and more one-directional and representational.

This experience in the stark context of northeast Medellín during Covid-19 speaks to an important question that dates to the turn of the 21st century; 'to what extent can virtual communities replace organic communities and provide forces to countervail the present social processes of fragmentation and individualization?' (van Dijk, 1998: 48, cited in Jankowski, 2002: 40). van Dijk's 'overall conclusion that virtual communities cannot reclaim 'lost' community in society' and that 'the quality of discourse is 'poor' and genuine dialogue is missing' feels particularly prescient to the experience of Medellín in 2020 (van Dijk, 1998: 59 cited in Jankowski, 2002: 40). Nonetheless this remains a much deliberated question. As examined in Chapter 2, the proliferation and impact of digital communications technologies has accompanied a burgeoning interest in alternative, community and citizen media, with much focus on how digital media technologies 'enable non-institutionalized actors to disseminate media *content* that challenges dominant discourses or makes visible hidden realities' (Stephansen and Treré, 2020: 1).[69] This thesis has so far approached Mi Comuna's media work through the lens of media practices, in order to focus on 'the social, material, and embodied aspects of citizen media', rather than a media-centric approach (Stephansen

[69] This links to Claudia Magallanes-Blanco and Emiliano Treré (in Periterra & Salazar, Media Cultures in Latin America, 2020: 113) 'Social movements throughout the globe appropriate digital communication technologies, challenging mainstream media, and then deploy them in the construction of communication bridges among organizations, individuals, collectives, and territories to gain both visibility and support' (Treré and Magallanes-Blanco, 2015).

and Treré, 2020: 1).[70] This chapter, which focuses on Mi Comuna's work in digital spaces, seeks to continue this approach, while following important recent work (e.g. Fenton, 2016) in seeking to 'avoid simplistically 'utopian' or 'dystopian' claims as to the political effects of new media technologies' (Gilbert, 2020: 157). This was a particularly difficult moment to research in this way. I was distanced in time and space from Mi Comuna (stuck the wrong side of the Atlantic in London, and five hours ahead), and communicating and researching with them via digital spaces. Mi Comuna faced a severe restriction on their finances as funders and advertisers reduced their support during this time (the assumption is that online work incurs fewer costs, of course.) Reflecting with Mi Comuna during this time, it was clear that in the absence of social interaction in the Casa and the streets, much more focus was placed on media products published and metrics such as audience numbers, likes and shares. It was an enormously difficult, debilitating and frustrating moment.

This chapter begins by exploring Mi Comuna's urgent response to the pandemic lockdown, including to the military encirclement of the neighbourhood of el Sinaí. The second section of the chapter discusses Mi Comuna's attempts to reproduce artistic and conversational events in digital spaces. The final section then explores how certain groups that Mi Comuna work with were excluded or locked out of digital spaces during the lockdown.

From street based dialogue to movement building in digital spaces during Covid-19

> "*there are families that definitely do not have the economic resources to have an electronic device with which the children can connect, there are families who do not have access to the internet, there are girls and boys who do not have the accompaniment of their family, because the issues that happen in the territory are much more than economic, and it is that family relationship and that social relationship that is the one that also makes actions difficult, right, so I believe with this that we as community media are called is, to maintain the presence in the territory reporting from the grassroots, reporting from the experience of the people as it is to live in the middle of situations. Many details escape of what in reality are the effects on people, the [lockdown] measures that are taken at the national level,*

[70] The concept of 'media practices' (Couldry, 2004) has become an important 'means of developing socially grounded analyses of citizen and activist media' (Stephansen and Treré, 2020: 1) This work has built on Couldry's broadly embraced approach to media practices, or 'what people are doing in relation to media in the contexts in which they act (Couldry, 2012: 35), and a strong historic tradition of 'interest in practices among Latin American communication scholars' (Stephansen and Treré, 2020: 2).

> *especially from the governments or from the market, [but] our greatest characteristic, it is direct contact with people and that we had through the delivery door to door and one by one in the printed newspaper, and [the pandemic] puts us in the fragile position of not being able to do so, for both reasons, because we do not have the economic resources to think and make a printed edition and because of the restrictions."* (Interview 4)

The pandemic lockdown initiated in April 2020 placed many restrictions on the work of Mi Comuna, limiting their face-to-face work in the Casa and out in the streets. Denied their *"greatest characteristic"*, the *"direct contact with the people"*, Mi Comuna faced a debilitating challenge. The relationships that Mi Comuna had built in Santa Cruz since 2009, including building trust as source of information and an interlocutor, were extremely important to their work during the pandemic. Mi Comuna were proficient in interacting with, gathering information from and, when necessary, communicating and lobbying on behalf of residents in Santa Cruz. These practices in communication and movement building (what Huesca (1995) describes as 'dialogic process and strategic networking') were previously more balanced, with the street based communication and dialogue informing the movement building. One example of this work is the *Líderes somos todos* (We are all leaders) campaign that Mi Comuna developed alongside local residents and social organisations in Santa Cruz, in response to construction plans which would have led to the displacement of many families:

> *"the development projects proposed by the Mayor's office. Last year they also began to convey to the community about a project that was going to be undertaken on Carrera 52, and that, that meant that they were going to tear down the houses of all the people who live on that street, which is a very large main street. And the people generated a movement around 'this house is not for sale, this house is not negotiated, we are all leaders'. And so that was the name of the movement, then it was a group of people from that area who decided no, that they were not going to leave there. And what were the guarantees for them? Because this city also has a history of projects that are supposedly going to buy people's houses and, well they don't conclude well, they pay very poorly, or don't pay. Or when they agree, for example, to relocate the residents elsewhere, they don't find them other houses or they send them very distant places. So the city has a very strong antecedent with this and people don't trust [the city] for that. So they made all that movement, including that caused that the project was stopped. So far the project has not been reactivated, because they even had to change the operator in the project, they had to redo the*

study, to find out what guarantees they were going to give people, I don't know. And [Mi Comuna] were like accompanying the whole process, publishing that 'We are all leaders', because all the houses had a sign that said 'this house is not for sale, this house is not for sale' and then that clearly boosted the action. That is, it was not only that people were doing it, but it was also already in the voice of us as a media, so it reached the Mayor's office also. It also reached other parts of the city and that also boosted the action. So I believe that this is the way, that is, although there were very strong historical struggles, in the present day there are also some very valid and very powerful struggles." (Interview 2)

This campaign was prompted by local residents alarmed by plans which threatened their homes and neighbourhoods. Mi Comuna were invited to meetings and gatherings in the streets of Santa Cruz, and sought to amplify the campaign through digital media channels. Mi Comuna also highlighted the history of similar projects in northeast Medellín. Mi Comuna were therefore able to help develop a dialogue between these local residents and the Mayor's office. The pandemic lockdowns, when Mi Comuna had to operate almost entirely in remote and digital spaces, would cause a shift in this balance between movement building practice and street based dialogic work.

The Mi Comuna team, themselves residents of Santa Cruz, were nonetheless living the everyday and seeing first-hand the consequences of the strict quarantine. Theirs was a different insight to that of city government officials or external media outlets based elsewhere in the city. Mi Comuna's early response to the strict lockdowns was to use their connections and their platform to understand and narrate the situation in Santa Cruz and seek constructive intervention from the government.

"Let's say that our presence in the territory has been important, because with our friends in the northeast alliance, we have managed to let the city know about the principal concerns that exist in the territory. So for example when the pandemic started, we published an 'Alerta Temprana'. This was put out as a public statement, also calling for dialogue with the municipal administration to let them know the conditions in this area compared with the rest of the city of Medellín, and what we believed were the measures that the local government should take, to prevent contagion and to prevent the pandemic from affecting these districts. That the [lockdown] measures had much stronger effects, negative effects on the population, we made a couple of public announcements and those statements. And we shared those with a variety of communication strategies, one of which was sharing through

our media platforms where we had a lot of reach, and used strategies to combine for example the use of WhatsApp, the use of Twitter, the use of those other tools, which allow us to make visible the information that we held." (Interview 4)

Mi Comuna's movement building practice involved working collaboratively with other social organisations in northeast Medellín (the four districts of Popular, Santa Cruz, Manrique and Aranjuez) in response to the consequences of the strict lockdown. The *Alerta Temprana* was published to highlight the increasingly desperate situation facing northeast Medellín to city and national governments. The lockdown (initially implemented from April-September 2020) restricted residents to leaving their homes just once per week and was in place across the whole of Medellín. But multiple factors meant that the restrictions had a disproportionate impact on districts like Santa Cruz and the northeast zone. For example, high levels of pre-pandemic economic insecurity, precarious and informal forms of employment (very little of which could be continued remotely from home) and a significant digital divide. Santa Cruz had at the outset of the pandemic lockdowns lower access to the internet compared with other parts of Medellín (Encuesta de Calidad de Vida 2019 / Quality of Life Survey, Medellín Mayor's Office, 2019), with many families lacking the digital connections or devices to study or work remotely.[71] The *Alerta* demanded more constructive government intervention in the zone, including financial and healthcare support. The way that the *Alerta* was written, designed and disseminated, was indicative of its external target audience at the city and national government level, a statement of over 2000 words, communicated principally on social networking sites, websites and digital mailing lists.

The coalition of organisations that published the *Alerta Temprana,* including Convivamos, Nuestra Gente and Sumapaz, is one which has collaborated on projects and campaigns before the pandemic. For example, the first large assembly I attended at the Mi Comuna Casa in early 2020, included representatives from these organisations meeting to plan the celebration of 100 years since the settlement of the northeast zone of Medellín. These organisations had also regularly contributed to the *Fiesta de la Utopia* and have collaborated with Mi Comuna in producing special editions of the newspaper. As more established organisations (Nuestra Gente and Convivamos have been running for more than 30 years), the relationship with Mi Comuna had been historically imbalanced. A younger organisation, and one with a technical proficiency with digital technologies and audio-visual equipment, Mi

[71] The Comunas of Popular, Santa Cruz, Villa Hermosa and Manrique are those with the lowest percentage of homes with internet connection in Medellín, with connections for approximately half of the homes (versus 93 per cent and 88 per cent connection in the more affluent El Poblado and Laureles-Estadio Comunas) (Encuesta de Calidad de Vida 2019, Medellín Mayor's Office, 2019).

Comuna had often been asked to join an event or campaign in order to make a media product, for example a short film. One Mi Comuna team member told me that Mi Comuna ultimately stipulated that they be involved in the strategic work of these campaigns and events or not at all. That they would not continue to simply turn up and film. An agreement was reached and the relationship between the organisations developed a better balance.

Now that the collaborative work of these organisations, which had developed principally in concrete, face to face environments, was now shifting into digital spaces, Mi Comuna's technical proficiency in terms of digital design and dissemination was again in particular demand. For while Nuestra Gente, for example, have been an established social organisation for longer than Mi Comuna, they have less digital expertise. Mi Comuna have been developing their online presence via websites and social media platforms since 2012. A timeline of the development of Mi Comuna's digital work is as follows: Mi Comuna created the micomunados.com website in 2010, and opened a twitter account that same year. In 2010 they borrowed their first cameras, audio recorders and computers. In 2011 Mi Comuna bought their first computer. In 2011 the first Facebook group was established for the newspaper, this was switched to a 'fan page' in 2014. Youtube channel set up in 2012 by Mi Comuna to share these videos (181 subscribers, 2022). In 2014 an instagram account was created for Mi Comuna and for the newspaper. In 2014 the website micomunados.com won best website in the Medellín community journalism awards. In 2014 Mi Comuna also developed their first Digital Newspaper Plan for *Mi Comuna 2*. In 2015 the Facebook page for Casa para el Encuentro Eduardo Galeano was created. In 2015 the first WhatsApp groups for Mi Comuna were created. In 2016 the website micomuna.org was created (for the whole organisation, work and services) in addition to the micomunados.com newspaper website. The Facebook page for Mi Comuna was created in 2017. The Facebook page currently has more than 5000 followers.

Mi Comuna were also commissioned to support other organisations with digital communications during the initial months of the lockdowns. While this gave Mi Comuna an important role at this crisis moment, and brought in some much needed financial resources, they were also conscious of the need to balance this work with their efforts to communicate with and understand the everyday needs of residents of Santa Cruz, many of whom they had not previously interacted with or reached through digital spaces.

Another important aspect of Mi Comuna's movement building practice, was their ability to communicate the struggles and priorities of Santa Cruz externally. Mi Comuna facilitated food and aid parcels for Santa Cruz supported by la Universidad CES. CES is a private

university in an affluent part of Medellín that wanted to support families in Santa Cruz during the lockdown. Yet the university did not know how to identify or get aid to those in need, so Mi Comuna helped channel this support into the district and to those in the most vulnerable conditions. The Casa, although officially closed, also served as the site at which food parcels could be delivered organised and collected.

> *"the outside organizations, if they came to the territory alone, their work would be much more complex because they have neither identified the neighbourhoods, nor the problems, nor the families, nor the people and well, it is much easier for us, because we have all that information in our work."* (Interview 4)

Building dialogue and countering narratives amidst the military lockdown of el Sinaí

> *"On May 31, 2020, photos and videos of police and military in Comuna 2 - Santa Cruz de Medellín circulated through channels such as WhatsApp, Facebook, among other networks. The panorama was horrifying, more than a quarantine it seemed like a curfew from those times when violence was the permanent language of the city's [self-built] neighbourhoods. On June 1, all the mass media made known the measures that the state forces had taken in Santa Cruz, the enclosure of the el Sinaí neighbourhood justified by an outbreak of COVID-19, presenting this action as a form of protection for citizens, both inside and outside the cordon.*
>
> *From the first day of closure, the interior of the neighbourhood was completely locked down. Despite this, on Saturday, June 6, the Nuestra Gente Cultural Corporation and Mi Comuna, in the company of some public servants, were able to enter to accompany the population through recreational and cultural activities. Likewise, we returned on the [final weekend of the curfew] Saturday, June 13. As a requirement to enter the neighbourhood we dressed in white [hazmat] suits and masks that covered us from head to toe, we hardly recognised each other but for our shape or the colour of our eyes. Putting on these suits reminded me of the images on the internet of Chernobyl and even at one point I felt as if I was going to step on some place unknown to humans and outside of planet earth.*
>
> *Stepping into the streets of El Sinaí, or rather its alleyways, raises questions about this city, the 'most innovative' city, in the 'valley of software'. The precarity here contrasts with the projected image of a touristic Medellín that is presented to the world. This neighbourhood is a complex case of neglect of successive local governments, whose presence is principally felt through their repressive forces. The*

> *enclosure by the military and police is not a new image, in the past this panorama has been seen in several eviction attempts. This measure unleashed for the pandemic is just another manifestation of the constant violation of rights to which the population has been subjected to."* (By Christian Álvarez López, MiComunaDos.com 15 June 2020)

This extract is taken from an article published on the *Mi Comuna 2* newspaper website in the aftermath of the military encirclement of the el Sinaí neighbourhood in Santa Cruz. el Sinaí is one of Santa Cruz's most marginalised neighbourhoods, situated between the banks of the Medellín river and a main highway. The neighbourhood was encircled by police and military forces following reports of a cluster of Covid-19 infections. It was a severe and drastic reaction from the state, particularly to what was a public health crisis. Moreover, this was a distressing intervention for residents who had previously faced similar interpositions in the name of security or the control of space. It was as if history was repeating itself, faced with a challenging situation in northeast Medellín, the response of the government was first and foremost a militarised response.

While Mi Comuna were alerted to the intervention by personal contacts in el Sinaí, through phone calls, text messages and via social media, Medellín's commercial media outlets were reporting on the intervention from the outset. Narratives prior to the intervention had suggested that residents in Medellín's 'comunas populares' were not adhering to the lockdown. Given that there are fewer state and media institutions based in these areas, it is unclear whether any concrete evidence supported these narratives or whether assumptions were made about places which have long been stigmatised. A narrative emerged that the military curfew of el Sinaí was a response not only due to a spike in cases, but due to a lack of adherence to the quarantine restrictions. The action sent a powerful message across the city that the police and military would respond if they felt the lockdown restrictions were not being adhered to.

Mi Comuna gathered information on the situation remotely via telephone and digital media channels, and face to face across the barriers of the security cordon. They heard that many residents were unable to travel past the cordon to work. The only people permitted to leave the neighbourhood were those who had their jobs registered and approved on the *Medellín Me Cuida* Covid-19 smartphone app (Abello Colak et al., 2021: 28). This meant that those in more informal employment and those without access to the app were more likely to have their movement restricted. Moreover, due to insufficient access to digital devices and connections in el Sinaí, many children were unable to join their online school classes from

home. Residents were therefore struggling financially and materially through the curfew, and while they were offered food packages by the city government these were wholly insufficient.

Mi Comuna sought to narrate the situation with and on behalf of the residents in order to change the narrative about what was going on and lobby the state to de-escalate. Articles were published on the *Mi Comuna 2* website including audio files from residents of el Sinaí. Mi Comuna also recorded interviews at the security cordon with residents who were willing to speak there. These audio-visual materials were presented on their website and social media channels alongside interviews with representatives of the city government, attempting to build a dialogue here. Mi Comuna sought to amplify community voices beyond the military cordon, and to lobby the government and police for a de-escalation of the curfew.

Mi Comuna negotiated access to el Sinaí at the end of the first week of the curfew, alongside Nuestra Gente. As well-established social organisations in Santa Cruz, Mi Comuna and Nuestra Gente were recognised at the institutional level of the city government and police. They were allowed access for a limited time period and on the condition that they wore hazmat suits. Mi Comuna brought with them the loud speaker to amplify music and stories that they would read aloud. They also took a projector and screen to show short films, seeking to bring residents young and old to their windows and balconies for some interaction amidst this difficult situation. That the Mi Comuna team were dressed in hazmat suits (perhaps adding to the perceived gravity of the situation) and that the neighbourhood was encircled by police, meant this was a complex and difficult undertaking. This was despite Mi Comuna's experience engaging publics in the streets of Santa Cruz and their previous work in el Sinaí, where they had worked with local residents in 2015 to campaign successfully for a new traffic light school crossing.

This episode highlights several key challenges for Mi Comuna's work in Santa Cruz. First, the impact of persisting stigmatisation of Santa Cruz and neighbourhoods like el Sinaí. If there was a lack of adherence to the lockdown rules in el Sinaí, this was also surely the case in other parts of Medellín, even in more affluent neighbourhoods with larger homes with more outside space. Nonetheless it was el Sinaí which was surrounded by the military and made an example of. And while Mi Comuna and other established organisations sought to de-escalate the situation, as one resident commented (for the *Mi Comuna 2* article referenced above), *"[the] constant question in a community, where in a neighbourhood there is a dialogue between administration and community, but only after militarisation."* For this reason Mi Comuna's broader movement building practice is so connected to countering negative external narratives and interventions (a discussion developed further in Chapter 8).

While Mi Comuna were unable to rapidly de-escalate the curfew, they highlighted a different narrative from those denigrating el Sinaí as (once again) illegal and dangerous.

This episode is also demonstrative of a broader point about the way that the digital can heighten inequalities. Mi Comuna team members told me that those whose informal employment was not recognised by the Medellín Covid-19 app were more likely to have their movement out of the neighbourhood restricted during the curfew. The following two sections explore further evidence as to the way that the emphasis on digital spaces heightened inequalities in northeast Medellín during Covid-19 lockdowns.

The challenge of opening artistic events and dialogue in digital spaces

During 2020 and 2021 Mi Comuna sought to recreate in digital spaces the sort of communication and interaction they had been working to generate in the Casa and around the streets of Santa Cruz. Artistic and cultural events or the sharing of coffee, empanadas or sancocho had brought people together in concrete spaces before the pandemic. At times these spaces fostered an environment for reflection about everyday issues, for the evoking of memories of Santa Cruz, or a space to simply be. During the pandemic lockdowns, discussions, theatre and musical presentations were all moved into digital spaces, live streamed on social media and recorded for later viewing. Mi Comuna's technical proficiency, creativity and relationships with artistic groups in northeast Medellín led them to gaining plaudits for this work from across Medellín.

> *"With the digital, it's just more visible if a process is active or not. [In 2020] the Casa gained a lot of recognition, or the process rather than the Casa, gained a lot of recognition from many people outside [Santa Cruz] saying 'the Casa is more alive than ever! I've seen them, I've followed them' and we constantly receive those comments, 'everything they do is so cool', and we have always been a reference point…but even more prominent last year with all the activities we did digitally. When you are quiet in the digital world, nobody says 'hey! why are you so quiet?', why haven't you published?' Except those who are particularly interested. But generally, when you are very active they make the comment and the recognition and you become visible and you are in a good place. That is to say you are in the public interaction, also access to economic resources, being active or making ourselves visible and active on the website, leads to us being recognized and in that recognition they seek us out for advertising, or to build partnerships, or ask us to*

provide a service, that is also part of the benefit of that access to economic resources that we need in Mi Comuna and that can serve the organisation." (Digital workshop, 2021)

Mi Comuna developed relationships with groups of musicians and actors during this time, running these digital events in collaboration with them. That these events were now in digital spaces meant that music or theatre groups could share the events with their own contacts even if they were geographically remote from Santa Cruz. Consequently, Mi Comuna connected with a different range of people through these digital cultural and artistic spaces. These artistic groups were mainly those who Mi Comuna had held relationships with before the pandemic, including those who came annually to the Casa to perform at the *Fiesta de la Utopia*. The campaign to save the Casa in early 2020 was crucial to the strength of these offline and online relationships at the outset of the pandemic lockdown. The dramatic moment and the support, in offline and online campaigns, in defence of the physical space of the Casa, was therefore crucial to the online possibilities during the pandemic lockdowns.

"we could easily fall into the error of saying that many of those connections were brought by the pandemic. But no, it was also the fact of the discussions saying that we were leaving the Casa, that there were people who were there as close but not at all, at least not immersed in what we went through with the Casa and like that with that alert that we were leaving they got together. That was at the end of 2019…Then comes La Fiesta de la Utopia that makes us think about the need for these spaces and there some people came and warned us about leaving the Casa, and they were super aware. And then a pandemic arrives that thankfully people continued with that interest, to start with very disconnected because that is how we did it, we were disconnected, but then they began to connect. So like those two things, not fall into the error that the pandemic was the one that did this to us, no! I think we have it clear, they are two very fast historical moments, and the other thing is that there were also articulations from before these moments that endured." (Digital workshop, 2021)

Another series of events, a *Ciclo de Conversaciones* run online between June and October 2020, included 22 facebook live discussions with guest speakers. Speakers included mental and physical health professionals, academics, social and community leaders from Santa Cruz, and government or institutional representatives. Most of the discussions ran for approximately one hour.

"the conversations worked very well and indeed they worked very well at first, but then later they had very few viewers, those who connected live were very few.

Then it was also there that we realised that the digital agenda was too broad, we were all doing talks and for people at home it was also going to become very boring to see five talks a day from different organisations. Besides, there were several at the same time, so, there is a lot of competition." (Digital workshop, 2021)

The 22 events were viewed on average 638 times (a high of 1800, a low of 198), either live or after the event (recordings were stored on the Mi Comuna facebook page.) However not every view represents a person watching the whole discussion. The average number of comments (14) and the average number of likes or reactions (22) were much lower and Mi Comuna were conscious of live viewer numbers dropping as the lockdown went on, as more and more events were run by different organisations in digital spaces. While these view numbers suggest a broad reach, larger than Mi Comuna's events in the Casa or the streets of Santa Cruz, they were characterised as broadcasts (one-to-many) as opposed to anything more interactive or dialogic. These events were more about the dissemination of what was deemed as useful information at this difficult time, or alternatively the broadcasting of a musical or theatrical performance. The 'technological affordances' (Cammaerts, 2020) of facebook's live broadcast function was influential here, more suited to a small group broadcasting to a larger audience. Moreover, given the possibilities of surveillance on facebook and the ongoing insecurity in Santa Cruz, deeper, more reflective or political discussions were silenced. It was not possible to recreate on facebook the sorts of 'spaces of walled intimacy' (Saavedra Utman, 2019) which had been possible in the Casa.

Mi Comuna were also conscious of the limitations of these events in relation to those they have sought to reach through their street based methodologies.[72]

Locked out of digital spaces amidst the Covid-19 lockdown

"I think that the biggest weakness was with the children, because although we developed many strategies, they were insufficient to really pull them in. Even up to

[72] In 2019 Mi Comuna undertook an Audience Study related to the newspaper in which they undertook survey interviews with 1003 adults across the 11 neighbourhoods of Santa Cruz. Of the respondents, 67.3 per cent said they were familiar with and read the printed edition of the newspaper. Only 8.4 per cent of respondents stated that they were aware of the website MiComunaDos.com, and only 10.4 per cent followed the *Mi Comuna 2* Facebook page. Of those who were aware of these online spaces, the majority of respondents identified as in the age range 18-28.)

this moment [April 2021], we've passed a long time without consistent or proper processes with the children." (Digital workshop, 2021)

This section argues that those who are structurally disadvantaged in Santa Cruz suffered the most from the shift to all online working during the Covid-19 lockdowns. These conditions risk further entrenching oppressions and exclusions and accelerating divides. Several factors are important to the significant challenges Mi Comuna faced shifting their work online. The 'digital divide' in Santa Cruz was a significant factor at the outset of the lockdown. Santa Cruz had lower rates of internet connection and use, fewer electronic devices and lower digital literacy than other districts of Medellín (Encuesta de Calidad de Vida 2019 / Quality of Life Survey, Medellín Mayor's Office). Santa Cruz (along with neighbouring districts of Popular, Manrique and Aranjuez) was reported to have internet connections in approximately 5/10 of the homes, compared with 9/10 homes in the more affluent El Poblado and Laureles-Estadio districts (ibid, 2019). Mi Comuna team members told me that some of the children regularly involved in activities in the Casa were without internet connections or devices. With schools in Medellín shifting their classes online, some children were using their mother's phone or going to the homes of neighbours to connect to school.

"it was also because the population that we work with in the Sala [reading room] who are precisely the children, as well as people with disabilities, it was very difficult to have that continuity in the pandemic, due to what we have discussed about the connectivity gap that exists in the Comuna, right? Where not everyone has that access to the internet, where they will not be able to enjoy the digital content that we were doing in that digital structure, of that digital strategy, precisely because they do not have that connectivity. Either they do not have the internet, or they do not have the device to connect." (Interview 19)

Practical challenges beset Mi Comuna's attempts to move work into digital spaces, demonstrating that this was not just about access to devices and connections. For example, the gathering of young people to attend an activity. Pre-pandemic, young people would be invited to an activity ahead of time and perhaps signed up for a weekly schedule. Nevertheless, on the day of the activity, project facilitators would go round knocking on doors, collecting young people for workshops in the Casa or out in the street. This was done with the experience that families were busy and schedules often went awry. During lockdown, attendance at an event in a digital space might be just a click away, but a reminder on the day was nonetheless important. That this had to be undertaken remotely, a

call or a text rather than a knock at the door, was a significant limitation. These reminders could more easily be missed, not least if parents were out at work.

> *"So it is very difficult for them to sit down and watch [an online] theatre class, very difficult, because if it is not like in their priorities either and this is the training, and for example with the face to face workshops one has to go out and call them and remind them etc, so there isn't the habit of saying 'there is this theatre class, at this hour, no they do not live like that, but you need to remind them and they arrive…and there are many even who do not have computers, and they are like at the neighbours doing their homework, so for them the online did not work, we wrote to them but nothing."* (Interview 7)

Recreating in digital spaces the engaging, creative and interactive methodologies Mi Comuna had developed in the Casa and the streets of Santa Cruz proved extremely difficult. As this thesis has discussed (in Chapters 5 and 6), these methods, activities and events serve to draw in, engage and stimulate young people. Drawing in and gathering participants to digital spaces is more difficult, so too the development of engaging and interactive exercises online.

> *"I was even thinking how can we like do theatre exercises with them there virtually? But it is very difficult because already bringing it down to our context, it's very difficult, for example, there are children who attend school from their mother's cell phone.*" (Interview 7)

> *"it was very difficult for me because I have always valued working face to face, really for the connections that the participants generate. Online there is the distance, in fact I also did not have the skills, the knowledge of how to undertake a workshop virtually, through the digital."* (Interview 19)

These two extracts come from interviews with Mi Comuna team members with significant experience working with young people. Indeed, one is a teacher by profession and the other trained in theatre practice with young people. So, while they were among Mi Comuna's most proficient, skilled and confident creative and educational practitioners, both had little confidence reproducing their pedagogy in digital spaces. Through the pandemic, Mi Comuna's work in digital spaces adapted and developed in an iterative manner. Nonetheless an intractable issue was the difficulty of enabling interaction *between*

participants in digital spaces. Evident also was the inability to develop in remote, digital spaces the sorts of feelings of confidence or freedom as had been developed in the Casa.

> *"Well first they really make this space their own, then what the Casa allows is that they can feel that freedom to express themselves, to be able to play, to be able to have books to read, to be able to dialogue with each other, to be able to be part of all the activities that they do, to be able to be in a theatre class, to be able to hold the instruments in the music classes. This being present is very different from leading a virtual music workshop. It is very different also because that experience, for living it, and for what is being built as a being/person."* (Interview 19)

Children including those who had in early 2020 intervened courageously to save the Casa from permanent closure, were the most vocal in calling for its reopening amidst the lockdowns.

> *"the children said 'profe when are you going to return?' they asked 'when are you going to reopen la comuna [the Casa]?' Because the space is very important to them and they say 'this Casa belongs to everyone, why is my Casa closed?' 'Profe I haven't anything to do in my house', or 'in my house they scold me a lot' or 'in my house I am bored, when will they open la comuna so we can return?'. So they are one of those who most demand space normally and during the pandemic."* (Interview 11)

These extracts highlight the fact that even with sufficient internet connections and devices, it is still a real struggle to recreate what was missing from a space like the Casa. The musical instruments, the books and the space to practice and read. Moreover the sense of safety, being able to express yourself, hold a difficult conversation, to let off steam. For example, the practice of making masks with the children to give them the space and confidence to open up about sensitive issues, to speak from behind the protection of a mask.

Hybrid online-offline methods were utilised during the second half of 2020 in an effort to more effectively reach the young people in the district. This included working in small groups or one on one via video call connection, reading together and making recordings, then sharing these recordings with other young people via messenger services. Mi Comuna also recorded and disseminated performances by theatre and artistic groups.

"on the [online] agenda here which is the Thursday and Friday events and the conversations, we realised the children were not attending, so we had to generate strategies to connect with them. Because for example we sent to them via WhatsApp the videos that we created and they didn't respond to those, they weren't interested. So there the connection with them was that in addition to sending videos to them, we put together the videos of Lectura en Alta Voz (Reading Aloud) with those children, so that's how we connected with them. So we met with one or two of the children and read together, and from that reading we created a video to publish and there it was like the first link from where the topic of, creating a virtual space that is led by children that allows us as a strategy to be close to them." (Digital Workshop, 2021)

"Readings from the terrace also arises from the same need and evaluation in our process that we were disconnected from the people of the neighbourhood and from the people with whom we were doing the processes. Because we opened ourselves to a lot of people outside [Santa Cruz]. And in [Santa Cruz], well, as we no longer had activities in the middle of the pandemic. So we decided to do readings from the terrace where we linked up with leaders of the neighbourhoods and there we established ourselves on four terraces where we would connect with the children of the Sala de Lectura (Reading Room). So we would do a dramatic reading from a balcony and then the people would come out of their windows or balconies, on the pavement and be part of the activity." (Digital Workshop, 2021)

In some cases, this work was detached entirely from the digital. For example, educational materials were delivered to the homes of young people, readings were conducted on megaphones from balconies, and theatrical performances presented in the streets. While this work reached some of those who Mi Comuna struggled to reach in digital only spaces, they were limited in scope. Moreover, amidst lockdowns and social distancing restrictions, even if you could reach young people or generate communication from one to another, it was difficult to develop interaction and dialogue between them.

Conclusion

"the fragility of our methodologies and our process, for us we had to reinvent ourselves, to say 'but well what are we going to do?', right, what is our alternative, it's worked for us so far, we've been able to be effective, is to throw everything into

the online…keeping in mind that our audiences are not on the web, rather they are here in the territory with us, right." (Interview 4)

This chapter has discussed Mi Comuna's work in digital spaces amidst the stark context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the related strict lockdown imposed on Medellín April-September 2020. This was a difficult and debilitating moment for Mi Comuna as their street based activities were largely halted and their Casa closed for much of 2020 and early 2021. During the pandemic Mi Comuna had to operate almost entirely in remote and digital spaces. They utilised their technical proficiency to campaign on behalf of Santa Cruz at the city level. In the midst of a crisis, their movement building practice would take greater precedence over their more dialogic work. The relationships that Mi Comuna had built in Santa Cruz since 2009, including building trust as source of information and an interlocutor, were extremely important to their work during the pandemic. They organised many artistic and cultural events in digital spaces, though these were generally more characteristic of transmissions than interactive or dialogic spaces. While Mi Comuna worked creatively and imaginatively to make their digital spaces as engaging and accessible as possible, collective construction in digital spaces is so much more difficult (i.e. than coming together in convite to paint the Casa or cook the sancocho). Especially when the context (of the Covid-19 lockdown) is so extraordinary, the shift to digital so sudden and dramatic. Nonetheless Mi Comuna gained recognition from across Medellín for their creativity and diligence during this time, particularly from other social organisations and institutions who were, like Mi Comuna, more 'locked in' to digital spaces during this moment. Through imaginative and determined efforts Mi Comuna sought to maintain connections with their younger cohort, who were largely 'locked out' of digital spaces. Hybrid offline-online methods were however labour-intensive and difficult to undertake at scale, and generating meaningful social interaction between distanced participants was near unachievable.

Prior to the pandemic, the generation of spaces of communication and interaction in the streets of Santa Cruz and the Casa have taken precedence over the development of this work in digital spaces. This relates to the digital divide in Santa Cruz, but more importantly to the scarcity of appropriate sites for assembly in the district and the way that existing public and private spaces are impacted by surveillance or violence. In this context and considering the structural disadvantages in the district, Mi Comuna's work has come to focus on generating space for people to come together and meet face to face. Indeed, while digital media technologies or even 'new media' (McQuail, 1994, cited in Jankowski, 2002: 35) have been acclaimed as involving the 'decentralization of channels for the distribution of messages…[and] an increase in the options available for audience members to become

involved in the communication process', the experience of Mi Comuna has been the reverse. As previous chapters have highlighted, going to the streets has been Mi Comuna's way of decentralising and involving people in their communication process.

Meanwhile the Casa, described as an 'entorno protector' for the young people that use it, has become "*a space to dream and construct, to find oneself in the place, laugh, cry if that's the case, right? It is a space to explore all those feelings"* (Interview 9). I was told during my fieldwork that the women who regularly spent time in the Casa, for example in the Grupo Semillas collective, considered it somewhat of a sanctuary from the more patriarchal society in the streets and homes of Medellín. Moreover as one member of Grupo Semillas told me: *"In no other place we feel like we do here, and we want to stay. Why? Because it allows another energy. There you feel free. You feel like you can build, from another point of view, well, from another perspective"* (Interview 12). These social relations, that have emerged through Mi Comuna's street based methodologies and developed within the protective and emboldening space afforded by the Casa, have been theorised in Chapters 5 and 6 as 'counter commoning'. In spite of the inventive and resolute efforts of Mi Comuna during the Covid-19 lockdowns, these social relations could not emerge in digital spaces, indicating that counter commoning is only possible under certain conditions and only when it engenders forms of qualitatively meaningful sociality and relationality. Long and Moore's conceptualisation of human sociality is as 'a dynamic relational matrix within which human subjects are constantly interacting in ways that are co-productive, continually plastic and malleable, and through which they come to know the world they live in and find their purpose and meaning within it' (Long and Moore, 2012: 41). In creative spaces for interaction in the streets of Santa Cruz, or the sorts of 'spaces of walled intimacy' (Saavedra Utman, 2019) which have been possible in the Casa, the search for purpose and meaning, *"to build…from another perspective",* has found a degree of sustenance. With the possibilities for surveillance in digital spaces and the ongoing insecurity in Santa Cruz, deeper, more reflective or political discussions were stifled. It is to discussions of spaces in which a non-contestatory cultural politics can develop, spaces which came to be understood with an even greater appreciation as the strict pandemic lockdowns in Medellín eased and the Casa reopened, that are examined in the next chapter.

Chapter 8

La defensa del territorio: understanding the cultural in politics and the political in culture in the work of Mi Comuna

Introduction

The previous chapter explored Mi Comuna's work in digital spaces during the stark context of the 2020 Covid-19 lockdowns, as their street based activities were restricted and the Casa closed. During this extraordinary moment, Mi Comuna's technical proficiency with digital technologies enabled them to lobby the city government, gather and disseminate information, and recreate cultural and artistic events in digital spaces. But Mi Comuna faced significant challenges in reproducing in digital spaces the sort of engaging, creative and interactive activities they had been developing in the Casa and in the streets of Santa Cruz. By late 2020 Colombia's international borders had reopened and Medellín's initial strict lockdown had eased. Following discussion with Mi Comuna and with support from the Goldsmiths Graduate School and CHASE-AHRC, I returned to Medellín to recommence in-situ fieldwork until June 2021. The impacts of Covid-19 persisted, with intermittent lockdowns and social-distancing policies, and Mi Comuna's resources limited by a reduction in funding opportunities during 2020. Medellín was also facing unprecedented protests in response to health, legal and tax reforms. The state in Medellín and across Colombia responded to the mobilisations with brutal violence (Indepaz, 2022).

The forthcoming chapter explores data gathered during this uncertain moment as Mi Comuna sought to reconnect with residents of Santa Cruz and navigate this polarising political conjuncture. In doing so I seek to build on the themes developed through this thesis, arguing that Mi Comuna's practice contributes to a cultural politics of recognition and collective constitutive power, involving as it does the 'contestation of social relations and identities in everyday life' (Nash, 2001: 81). This is a politics in the broader sense which is 'inherent in every human society and…determines our very ontological being' (Mouffe, 1995: 3, cited in Nash, 2001: 81). Yet this politics is not as we may understand it from a Western liberal democratic perspective. Here politics must be non-threatening, made ordinary and inhabited in creative practices so that the struggle to gain power (e.g. over territorial identity) is constitutive, collaborative and experienced by those with power as non-contestatory. This is a necessary (for fear of violence) and strategic (to move forward) act by Mi Comuna.

This chapter discusses what is cultural about politics and why it is important in the specific context of Santa Cruz. This is not a politics in the restricted sense of state institutions, seen

'exclusively in terms of struggles of power at the level of the nation-state' (Nash, 2002: 85). Indeed the emphasis on the representation of the state in politics is here less relevant with the state largely absent for so long. Rather this corresponds with a cultural politics in which 'all social life must be seen as potentially political where politics is the contestation of relations of power' (Nash, 2001: 77). Importantly here, Nash has built on the work of Laclau and Mouffe in modelling a cultural politics using Foucault's analysis of 'power and the conception of politics derived from it' (Nash, 2001: 82).[73] This framing is useful for understanding the work of Mi Comuna given the complex dynamics of power in Santa Cruz, which have been shaped through auto-construction, an absence of state sovereignty, and violence from state and non-state actors. [74] Indeed amidst the context of Santa Cruz in which it has historically been dangerous to be 'political', this work is framed as *la defensa del territorio.* This work is connected to collective struggle and appropriation through cultural and artistic practices for a place that has been both subjected to violence and been represented as violent.

> *"So when we begin to understand those organisations within the territory, we begin to, well, thanks to working with memory, we also begin to appropriate it...that is to understand what is the defence of the territory and also be part of the defence of the territory, because then we said, right, if those collectives have struggled so hard, to be in this territory, to defend the, its space, their place but from the cultural, from the artistic, from the mobilisation of feelings and things within a community that has always been affected and that has never been seen as distinct from a violent community, right? So then we began to understand that we also have to appropriate and help defend; so we began to join this mobilisation."* (Interview 9)

Analysis in this chapter is undertaken principally in relation to two areas of Mi Comuna's work in *la defensa del territorio*. Firstly, this chapter explores Mi Comuna's work in the face of external interventions into and representations of Santa Cruz. During the founding years of Santa Cruz, forty and more years ago, the territory was physically defended by residents raising picks and shovels against city bailiffs who sought to evict them from their nascent settlements. Broad legalisation of homes and land use since then, as well as significant

[73] 'Foucault is concerned to analyse power in the details of social practices, at the points at which it produces effects, as a fluid, reversible, and invisible 'microphysics' of power. Power is productive in the sense that it works to produce particular types of bodily discipline and subjectivities in practices which remain invisible from the point of view of the older model of power as sovereignty. Power is plural: it is exercised from innumerable points, rather than from a single political centre, as the possession of an elite or the logic of bureaucratic institutions, and it is not governed by a single over-arching project' (Nash, 2001: 82).

[74] In Weberian theory, the state is conceived as the political centre of modern societies through its legitimate monopolisation over the means of force (Weber, 1948: 78).

violence from state and non-state armed actors in the intervening years, means that today *la defensa del territorio* in Santa Cruz must be more nuanced. Representation of Santa Cruz is a key area of contestation, dominant narratives have characterised it as illegal, violent and underdeveloped. This has prompted conditions akin to a 'culture of silence' (Freire, 1970), whereby 'people without access to power lose their own voices and learn to mimic the voice of the powerful; they internalize negative notions of themselves and their environment and adopt stigmatized versions of their neighbourhoods and communities' (Rodriguez, 2020: 72). Freire (1970) asserted that people could become passive, disconnected or lose agency within a 'culture of silence'. Yet while Santa Cruz has been impacted by socio-economic inequality, violence and political exclusion, social organisation in the face of these challenges has enabled these neighbourhoods to flourish. Moreover, this history of collective founding and resistance (against eviction and violence, among other things) bears a notable agency and power within Santa Cruz.[75] Mi Comuna do not seek to represent in a political way the residents of Santa Cruz against powerful actors. Instead they seek to open space for reflection, for the development of territorial appropriation and identity, and support the building of dialogue between citizens and the state.

Secondly, this chapter analyses Mi Comuna's creative practices which engage young people whilst providing cover from confrontation with armed groups in Santa Cruz. Given the historical violence this approach has been a necessary safeguard and has shaped Mi Comuna's methods. There is a subtle contestation here with armed groups holding power in Santa Cruz, based around creative practice in the streets and in the *Casa para el Encuentro Eduardo Galeano* (as the previous chapter argued, it was very difficult to recreate this work in digital spaces during the Covid-19 lockdowns). This creative and educational practice becomes yet more relevant and captivating when it prompts collective reflection about life in Santa Cruz. Arts and cultural processes involve reading the district and its history, enabling young people to broaden knowledge and understanding of their local context.[76] This argument builds on discussions advanced in previous chapters, of Mi Comuna's work with young people, but here the political nature of this work is further explored. This must remain non-contestatory, with 'strategic political banality' key to the reading of the local history and intergenerational dialogue.

[75] In his celebrated theory of the social production of space, Henri Lefebvre reflected on how the 'vast shanty towns of Latin America (favelas, barrios, ranchos) manifest a social life far more intense than the bourgeois districts of the cities…Appropriation of a remarkably high order is to be found here' (1991: 373-4).

[76] This work corresponds to Freire's conception of praxis, 'the means whereby one stands back from what one lives through to obtain critical distance, thus engaging in reflection for collective action…that helps transform the reality in question' (Mayo, 2019: 310).

The cultural politics of *la defensa del territorio* is strongly connected to place. Harvey's (1993) conception of a 'cultural politics of place', explored further in Chapter 2, is pertinent to the distinctive context of Medellín in two particular ways. Firstly, any association with proletarian or class mobilisation or around left politics has long been problematic or dangerous in Medellín. In this context it has been more feasible to mobilise around *territorio*. Moreover, work towards a 'territorial place-based identity' is especially apposite here given the historic role of residents in the physical construction and the social production of these spaces (Lefebvre, 1991). Secondly, the denigration of the 'comunas populares' ('popular' or poor districts) like Santa Cruz in dominant narratives can be understood as a form of 'reactionary exclusionary politics', othering these places as part of shaping a Medellín identity connected instead to contemporary urban renewal. Harvey (1993) argues that struggles over place representation in cities are often 'as fiercely fought and as fundamental to the activities of place construction as bricks and mortar' (Harvey, 1993: 22). '[A]ll manner of (mis)representations to which places are prone' have, in turn, 'material consequences...particularly to the plans of policymakers' (ibid.) With places in cities 'dubbed as 'dubious' or 'dangerous', leading to patterns of behaviour, both public and private, that turn fantasy into reality' (Harvey, 1993: 22).

To understand Mi Comuna's work in *defensa del territorio* in the context of Santa Cruz, I draw on knowledge from Latin American literature and social movements which have repurposed the concept of territory in recent decades (Halvorsen, 2018; Coryat, 2020; Escobar, 2008). The 'genealogy of the contemporary resignification of the concept of territory' has been traced by Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar and Brazilian geographer Walter Porto-Gonçalves, among other scholars and movement activists (Coryat, 2020: 164, see also Escobar, 2016: 82–4). Escobar highlights the importance of large mobilizations and 'movement-led dialogues' of 'Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and peasant communities and movements in Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, and Brazil at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s', which constituted 'the most advanced theoretical-political debates of the time about nature, territory, and territorial rights' (Coryat, 2020: 164). Latin American social movements have been inherently connected to the 'right to occupy and produce land', indeed these struggles go back centuries to the outset of the Western colonial project.[77]

[77] European 'claims to colonial territory' have been met with 'resistance and alternative claims to space, such as the Mapuche rebellions in the 15th and 16th centuries that forced the Spanish crown to recognise their autonomous territorial governance' (Llancaqueo, 2006 cited in Halvorsen, 2018: 7). Coryat (2020: 163) cites social movements involved in protracted struggles over territory including the 'ACIN (the Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas del Norte del Cauca, Colombia), CONAIE (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de Ecuador), the Mapuche (Argentina and Chile), PCN

Contemporary struggles for territory go further, to 'challenge modern/Eurocentric epistemologies of territory based on private property and concentrated land rights and also their Cartesian rationality that separates social and natural processes, reducing land to its quantifiable and objective dimensions' (Halvorsen, 2018: 10).[78] Understanding of territory is therefore 'much more than political-economic and political-strategic relations tied to the sovereignty of the modern state' (Halvorsen, 2018: 8). In fact these movements have 'explicitly mobilised territory in tension with the (post)colonial state' (Halvorsen, 2018: 5; citing Porto Gonçalves, 2012), where territory has been valued in principally monetary and extractive terms (Coryat, 2020). Coryat acknolwedges the work of the scholar and activist Vilma Almendra (2017) who draws a 'sharp distinction between the indigenous Nasa concept of territory, which includes land, bodies, and imaginaries, and the capitalist logics that drive the need to accumulate and occupy ever-increasing amounts of land' (Coryat, 2020: 164).

Following significant mobilisation and dialogue around territory in the 1980s and 1990s, territorial rights were ultimately inscribed in numerous international declarations, notably the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 'recognizing other ways of living, appropriation of space and inhabiting the world' (Porto-Gonçalves and Leff, 2015: 72, cited in Coryat, 2020: 164). The Colombian Constitution (1991) also recognised indigenous and afro-descendent territories in a legal framework (Escobar, 2008). However, this turn to indigenous and afro-descendent rights in Latin America was accompanied by neoliberal restructuring, where 'World Bank lobbying led to land reform (selling off to transnational, private interests)…[also] justified under a modern territorial logic of parcelisation and privatisation' (Halvorsen, 2018: 8).[79] Thus territorial struggles across Latin America became entangled with the 'very structures of dominance that these communities intend to resist' (Hale, 2011: 7, cited in Halvorsen, 2018: 8).

(Proceso de Comunidades Negras, Process of Black Communities, Colombia), and the Zapatistas (Mexico)'.

[78] Halvorsen (2018: 10) cites the example of the 'territory of black communities along the Colombian Pacific' which is 'shaped by multiple human and non-human (e.g. mangrove) lives within a dynamic 'aquatic space'…whose tidal rhythms are deeply inter-twined with social interactions and identity building.'

[79] Latin American cities were also from the 1990s shifting toward property titles for the dwellers of informal settlements, again linked to neoliberal restructuring and the influence of the World Bank (Halvorsen, 2018: 10). While urban scholars like Davis (2006), Borrell (2016) and Varley (2017) have framed this as undermining 'collective solidarity and relations in the land' (cited in Halvorsen, 2018: 11). (That may be easier to imagine from a Western perspective. In Medellín I have heard from residents about the stress of not holding legal titles for the properties they have built).

Cities in Latin America have also been at the centre of territorial struggles 'to appropriate space in the context of informal state presence combined with neo-colonial practices of urban 'accumulation by dispossession' (Halvorsen, 2018: 11, see also Harvey, 2012). Halvorsen (2018: 11) describes the Latin American 'slum' as 'representing a hybrid and paradoxical territory', which on the one hand 'reproduces and sustains colonial territorial relations based on socio-economic inequality (e.g. supplying cheap labour) and political exclusion (e.g. lack of welfare state or institutional representation)'. While on the other hand the state imposes 'violent dominant territorial logics' through militarisation or 'practices of bordering/walling that materially and symbolically control the agency of favela dwellers' (Halvorsen, 2018: 11). These contradictions are pertinent to Medellín, where the collective appropriation and production of space in districts like Santa Cruz have enabled social life to flourish, even as conditions of socio-economic inequality and political exclusion persist. The 'comunas populares' of Medellín's western and northeastern margins are home to a major part of the city's labour force, while the districts are persistently represented as backward or illegal. The attempts by the city administration to increase its presence and control in these districts have been characterised by military force[80] and more recently by top-down planning and infrastructure interventions that have generated dispossession.[81]

Useful for interpreting Mi Comuna's work in this context and in the *defensa del territorio* is Halvorsen's (2018) 'open' definition of territory: 'the appropriation of space in pursuit of political projects – in which multiple political strategies exist, from bottom-up grassroots to top-down state, as overlapping and entangled (2018: 2). Halvorsen emphasises the 'plurality of power relations and political projects (both emancipatory and dominating) through which territory is produced' (ibid.). 'This open reading of territory – overlapping and entangled political appropriations of space – allows contrasting understandings of territory to be reconciled without negating the hierarchal and violent relations between different usages' (Halvorsen, 2018: 2).[82]

Defensa del territorio through strategic political banality

[80] For example during Operación Orión as well as the two week military encirclement of barrio el Sinaí during the Covid-19 lockdowns in mid-2020 (discussed in Chapter 7).
[81] Including the library parks project of Mayor Sergio Fajardo and the electric stairways in Comuna 13, described by Hylton (2007) as the 'architecture of pacification'.
[82] Halvorsen describes this definition as 'common within Latin American literatures (e.g. Giménez, 1999; Manzanal, 2007; Reis, 2005; Sandoval et al., 2016; Schneider and Tartaruga, 2006; Souza, 1995) where it is frequently traced to Swiss geographer Claude Raffestin's notion of territory 1980)…which draws on Lefebvre's understanding of the social production of space and Foucault's work on power (see Klauser, 2012; Raffestin, 2012)' (Halvorsen, 2018: 2).

Diary entry, Saturday 20 March 2021:

The 'Cartografía del Sancocho' was an assembly discussion involving approximately 20 participants, most of them adult women with a few men and younger adults, and lasted for approximately 90 minutes. The session was facilitated by a local resident and filmmaker. The discussion was audio-visually recorded (with a camera on a tripod and a microphone passed around) and broadcast live on facebook.

The discussion focused on personal stories and memories of 'el sancocho', the Colombian meat and vegetable soup made with collectively contributed ingredients. The interventions evoked connections to the history of the district, cooperation and resistance, and reminiscence of family or friends. Interventions discussed tradition, recollection of parents, grandparents, old friends; significant occasions shared together around the sancocho.

Other participants reflected on the importance of the sancocho for the development of Santa Cruz, providing the much needed sustenance as homes or streets or drains were built collectively by neighbours (in the 'convites'). Sancocho fed large groups even in times of scarcity or poverty, with the key ingredients those things that families grew in Medellín or were cheaply available; plantain, potato, corn, yuca, onions, tomatoes, cilantro and any meat that was available. These ingredients were contributed based on who had what, then cooked in a large pan over a wood fire on the street.

One participant described the sancocho as 'a political act, an act of resistance'. For her the sancocho was of central importance to the history of Medellín, populated by peasant farmers displaced to the city, managing to survive through collective struggle. I had been involved in making and sharing sancocho at many community and family events before, and previously I had celebrated the practical success of the sancocho in feeding so many people at relatively low cost and complication. But now we were exploring the historical meaning of this meal and highlighting its significance in the founding, establishment and survival of a community. It was very special to hear these reflections. It was also just good to be together with people again. After the discussion we ate sancocho together which had been prepared by many hands during the morning (along with a traditional

Colombian chilli sauce I had spent the morning chopping and mixing with two aunties of my partner Juli).

Photo: El sancocho at la Fiesta de la Utopia

Assemblies like this one in Mi Comuna's *Casa para el Encuentro Eduardo Galeano* had been largely restricted since the declaration of the Covid-19 pandemic. During the strict lockdowns of 2020 there had been a sharp scarcity of assembly space in Santa Cruz as Mi Comuna were forced to close the Casa and shift their activities (where possible) into digital spaces. Intermittent lockdowns and social-distancing policies persisted in early 2021, along with significant cautiousness in relation to Covid-19. To be there together sharing food, stories and music, was a really powerful moment, heartening to be in this space, within the bounds of the Casa but outside (in the fresh air) on the patio. Perhaps also as this was one of Mi Comuna's first face to face events since the pandemic lockdowns had been eased, since I had returned to Medellín, and recently recovered from a heavy bout of Covid-19. The social relations central to practice of Mi Comuna, theorised in previous chapters, had returned to the physical structure of the Casa.

Alongside the sharing of the sancocho, this gathering provided an important opportunity to recognise and reflect on memories of Santa Cruz and Medellín. Some stories that emerged that day were personal and melancholic. Yet the evoking and sharing of stories about the sancocho connected to the history of Santa Cruz, to the survival of displaced families facing deprivation and to the cooperative construction of homes, streets and aqueducts. There is significant pride in this history of the physical and social production of space (often

embellished with tales of raising picks and shovels to resist city bailiffs attempting to tear down the original settlements) in which residents and communities have been able to flourish. As Chapter 6 discussed, this reflection can challenge dominant mediated realities that might disparage Santa Cruz or extol the potential of externally planned redevelopment. This can be understood as an 'exemplary memory' (Todorov 1995), recognising the past to shape the present and the future.

> *"but I do firmly believe that as a media we have also contributed especially to that neighbourhood identity, right? At least to narrate to the people that this is Comuna 2 [Santa Cruz] that we are part of the city of Medellin, that we have different neighbourhoods, right? Because before that in that derogatory label that we had, as if the entire territory were called 'el Popular'. And there's no problem right, there's no problem in that they name us all 'el Popular'. But let's say what is important is that people have the knowledge in mind when government interventions are going to be carried out, if they take advantage a bit of that lack of information with the people to be able to make interventions that don't entirely benefit them. And with that I want to link the other idea that we have in our commitment, for example, of identity, is also wanting to show the inhabitants of this territory that our belonging here has real value."* (Interview 11)

Mi Comuna actively support the cultivation of a more assured territorial identity in response to denigrating external narratives as well as everyday social challenges. This work recognises and appreciates what is held in the territory of Santa Cruz, "*wanting to show the inhabitants of this territory that our belonging here has real value"* (Interview 11). This work corresponds to Rodriguez's understanding of citizens' media, where communication practices contest social codes (Rodriguez, 2001: 20) and 'aim primarily not at state-promoted citizenship but at media practice in constructing citizenship and political identity along with everyday life' (Atton, 2008: 31).[83] In the context of Santa Cruz this work is fundamentally connected to the territory and to the social organisation that has enabled these neighbourhoods to flourish amidst violence and the absence of state sovereignty. This work enables residents here to, individually and collectively, identify as subjects of these neighbourhoods and this territory in a positive rather than a fatalistic way. Moreover, given the historical lack of a legitimate state presence here, this neighbourhood identity and subjectivity is perhaps stronger than any identity as citizens of Medellín or Colombia.

[83] In Santa Cruz, guarantee of fundamental rights and the protection of the law has for many years been scarce, what might be described as the absence of a liberal democratic public sphere (Fenton, 2021).

"If I had not heard the story of the convites, if I had not heard the history of these streets, I wouldn't have generated this appropriation of the territory. So I think that for this we develop communication, so that not just me entering this story, but to be able to write it, to disseminate it. So that other people who maybe aren't necessarily part of Mi Comuna can understand that their house, well the fact that their house is here has a great story. So I think that for this the communication is important, to generate identity, appropriation, and to enhance this defence of the territory. Because yes we are now a neighbourhood legally recognised, but also it is clear that from the city government projects and plans arise that could lead to the displacement of many people from this territory." (Interview 2)

The recognition and celebration of these histories demonstrates the legitimacy held by residents, and has been key to supporting the social appropriation of these territories, building a subtle counter-power in the face of complex challenges.

"if we do not have our means of communication in this territory we cannot tell the city that different things happen here than what they have in their imagination, which was what happened for example [a few years ago]… that the Mayor at that time, Federico Gutiérrez, released a statement where he said that the robberies in this city, that most of the robbers were from the northeastern area…We immediately made a campaign called "La nororiental somos esperanza (in northeast Medellín, we are hope)"…and then right there we told stories about what happens in this territory and that is that here we are not thieves, here we are artists, here we are communicators, here we are storytellers and, well I don't know, infinite trades and professions right, um then it is also like putting that discussion even to the state that is responsible for stigmatizing us all the time, where it comes is that we recognize that here there is a difficult past but also look at what is happening at the moment, so I think that is like the task and the strength of a community media to tell what really happens in its territory, not the rumours of the city..' (Interview 2)

This extract highlights the way that Mi Comuna have at times had to respond directly to unfair mischaracterizations of Santa Cruz in external narratives. More generally, the media products and processes of Mi Comuna do not function as an alternative to dominant narratives from the city government or mainstream media (e.g. the most widely read newspapers of *el Colombiano* or *Q'hubo*). Instead Mi Comuna open space in the Casa and in the streets of Santa Cruz for communication and critical reflection. This helps Mi Comuna understand the ever-shifting local context, to learn about emergent issues, to share or discuss important information with residents. Meetings and assemblies about planning proposals allow the

reading, decoding, and discussion of relevant and technical information. From this point Mi Comuna can support the campaigns of local residents where needed and to help build dialogue between residents and the city government.

Mi Comuna's cultural politics meanwhile focuses on the evoking and recognition of, for example, Santa Cruz's social and collective dynamics. This relates to the interconnections between neighbours, families and social organisations that have been crucial to the flourishing of this place despite multiple challenges. This social life is rarely recognised in development proposals which pledge a more organised territory, impressive architecture or newly built housing. Rather than opposing development plans from a particular perspective (i.e. anti-developer or anti-state), Mi Comuna open space for discussion and celebration of the social organisation, networks of care and mutual support that exist within the territory.

> *"Moreover to reinforce with people that importance of the social and collective dynamics, that sometimes there are projects that have arrived here in the territory and they sell you the idea that you are going to progress because they are going to put you in a much smaller house in a more remote area, but that because you will live in a horizontal property [i.e. not in an auto-constructed settlement on steep mountain slopes] you will automatically have a better social status. And we have sought to push back, it is not just the form of a house, but the relationships that have been woven around it, because if I tell you, if you sell your house you go somewhere else, well, who is going to take care of your child, eh, which neighbour is going to pay for your shopping if you are short? It's that. So it's like acknowledging the territory, telling stories not simply for fun but with the firm intention of generating appropriation and identity in the territory of what we have been doing, for many years, to highlight that yes there is a difference."* (Interview 11)

> *"Well, here we don't understand communication just from one medium. So communication is not only done from the construction of the newspaper or from the construction of digital content, or from audiovisual production, right? But communication is being able to offer and begin to build those new meanings in people, right? That those people reflect on their territory, reflect on their everyday, that they can identify those tensions that are personal, but also those tensions that exist from the collective. Communication then is that they can express all those experiences that happen daily. So from the sala [reading room] that's it, so come and let's do a workshop and let's begin to recognize ourselves from the intimate, from the individual, right? To begin to communicate with ourselves as well, which is very important to be able to be part of participatory actions. If I recognize what my speech is, what is my political position, what are the social*

perspectives that I have, right? That reading of the context that I have will allow me to have a collective work; look with whom I can meet from my ideas and discuss them and all that and carry out participatory actions." (Interview 18).

Through the opening of space for dialogue with residents of Santa Cruz, Mi Comuna have come to understand the impact of disparaging dominant narratives on the district. The impact of discourses of development or modernisation and the offers of moving to a more 'organised' public housing scheme are notable (even as these same proposals could move residents to smaller homes far from their social ties). While pledging progress and development, these infrastructure works have often failed to improve the general material conditions of residents (Hylton, 2007), and have led to eviction and displacement for others. Other development proposals which threatened homes and livelihoods have been effectively opposed by residents with the support of Mi Comuna and other social organisations (as discussed further in Chapter 7 in relation to the 'We are all leaders' campaign).

Importantly this celebration of culture and customs in Santa Cruz is not a co-optation of culture in communication processes to facilitate top-down development interventions (Dutta, 2015). Rather this is a cultural politics of recognition and collective constitutive power. This work reflects Downing's (2001: v) theorisation of radical media, which 'express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives'. Albeit here this work must be undertaken in a non-contestatory rather than openly counter-hegemonic way, and through media processes as much as products. In Santa Cruz this work is more fundamentally connected to the territory and to the social organisation that has enabled these neighbourhoods to flourish amidst violence and informal state presence. This work supports the social appropriation of the territories, building a more assured identity and subjectivity connected to these neighbourhoods.

This *defensa del territorio* has necessarily been non-contestatory amidst a history of violence and political exclusion in Santa Cruz.[84] The legacy of the 'heavy fist' (Hylton, 2007) security approach of the state and the persisting threat of non-state armed actors has a restraining effect on organisation around class or 'subversive' politics. While this *defensa del territorio* challenges contradictory planning process or false participation, it is not anti-state, rather it seeks a constructive state presence to improve education, healthcare, transport, and other services. One illustration of this is that during my fieldwork, Mi Comuna were

[84] Though this resistance may be more conspicuous here in relation to the city government or external developers as opposed to the internal armed actors.

occasionally asked to host events for those shifting from social movement work into political campaigns. After extensive discussions within the collective, Mi Comuna generally declined these requests to share their space with these political projects. This was in spite of the fact that these requests almost always came from individuals or groups working towards similar aims to those of Mi Comuna, including acquaintances or valued partners of Mi Comuna. It was not that their 'politics' was different or at odds to that of Mi Comuna, rather that they had moved to holding an openly 'political' position. Avoiding any such political associations was an important protection for the Casa (particularly with those perceived as on the left or subversive).[85]

This cultural politics of recognition and collective constitutive power, celebrating the common histories and traditions of building, sharing food and music, is intrinsically connected to territory. Returning to Halvorsen's (2018) 'open' definition of territory: 'the appropriation of space in pursuit of political projects – in which multiple political strategies exist, from bottom-up grassroots to top-down state, as overlapping and entangled (2018: 2). In Santa Cruz, faced with an expanding state political strategy, and the well-established but distinct dominating power of the armed groups, Mi Comuna's work is part of a 'bottom-up grassroots' political strategy. With its relatively contemporary settlement and overwhelmingly urbanised habitat, this territory (and its defence) appears to differ significantly from other struggles in Colombia, i.e. indigenous and afro-descendent communities defending land inhabited for centuries (Escobar, 2008). In Santa Cruz there is no equivalent ancestral connection to the land, nor is this territory shaped by 'multiple human and non-human…lives' (Halvorsen, 2018: 10), albeit amidst the constant awe of Medellín's mountain slopes. But there is certainly a distinct understanding of this territory, which Mi Comuna support through their work, different from capitalist logics of accumulation (and dispossession for urban regeneration). There is also real need for constructive state intervention to provide fundamental services within a densely populated district. So this is a distinctive struggle from those where external intervention is associated with resource exploitation (where territorial struggles may more categorically wish to exclude actors completely and maintain autonomy over the territory and its governance). A distinct connection to territory in Santa Cruz is contested and tenuous, particularly as the founding generation ages and the ever-increasing connections to the economic logic of central Medellín. One way in which Mi Comuna's practice intervenes here, is in the opening of space

[85] Federici and Caffentzis (2019: 90–91) have criticised the sort of bounded commons theorised by Ostrom (1990) as potentially 'indifferent to or even hostile to the interests of 'outsiders'', suggesting that collaboration around these commons rarely takes on 'a transformative character' (Federici and Caffentzis, 2019: 91, cited in Fernández, 2021: 75).

for intergenerational dialogue and reflection about the history of this territory, to which the next section now turns.

Artistic, educational methods for *la defensa del territorio*

> *"When they historically began to participate within the organisations, the social organisations of northeast Medellín especially, because it is one of the places where leaders and others have been targeted most. When these leaderships began to emerge, they emerged to say 'well, we're young and we don't want that they keep killing us, because we want to live peacefully, and for that we have art', right? So it was also a participation of the territory that said "we don't want more deaths within our territories, we don't want to be afraid to go to school, we don't want more fear." And of course there was a whole issue of very strong violence at that time and so the only way they could survive, until today, was that, it was art, right? It safeguarded them." (Interview 9)*

As discussed in previous chapters, Mi Comuna's work in the Casa and in the streets of Santa Cruz has become inhabited in creative practices that seek to open protective and emboldening spaces, particularly for young people. The Casa was described to me by Mi Comuna team members as an *entorno protector,* a 'protective environment', for the young people that spend time in it. Meanwhile beyond the walls of the Casa, itinerant and engaging street based methodologies have sought to reach a broader range of residents across Santa Cruz. Comparable to the 'collective spaces of encounter' theorised by Rodriguez (2011: 236), in the urban environment of Santa Cruz and with Colombia in a putatively 'post-conflict' era, Mi Comuna's street based methodologies respond not to the immediate shock of war but to persisting violence coupled with structural disadvantages that restrict residents' time and capacity for communication and interaction. Young people, community leaders and social organisations have historically been subjected to targeted violence, so art has been a necessary cover for work in this context. Through creative practice this work presents itself as non-contestatory to armed groups in Santa Cruz, and can even 'encourage children and youth to be "seduced" by their natural and cultural environment, potentially reducing the attraction of the promise of life as a warrior and/or drug trafficker' (Rodriguez, 2011: 244).

> *"So I also began to do the promotion of reading in the street, and we began to work that more cultural aspect and we decided like to propose a popular school of journalism and literacy…So all this opened the spectrum of Mi Comuna, not just making the*

newspaper but that we could do other types of things also focused on communication. Because for us the promotion of reading is undoubtedly a mode of communication and everything starts from there, right? So the theatre comes and the music comes, that came after." (Interview 9)

"from the reading room, from its beginnings, it has always been thought of as the possibility of promoting reading in other ways. So taking advantage of the fact that the team had then, there was J who did music, there was me who did theatre, it was the possibility of how to orientate that promotion of reading from those more scenic and more artistic forms." (Interview 7)

"you also have the topic there of culture, and it is Mi Comuna also like, how we have related communication and culture. Well with the community communication, something very interesting and that has been a battle great, for example, at the district level, where culture is much more for young people and communication is more linked to the institutional. And I say no, well, that communication is precisely for sharing what we are. I believe that this perspective is fundamental, this relationship of culture and communication. How community communication first becomes a channel for us to spread what we are, our identities, our memories. But it is also an action to generate ourselves, to be makers of culture, right! Because when we do community communication we are creating that cultural and artistic being. That seems very interesting to me." (Interview 16)

Creative and engaging practices can become more captivating and transformational when they prompt collective reflection about life in Santa Cruz. Building on the promotion of reading and literacy using musical instruments, artistic materials or cameras, in the reading room in the Casa and itinerant library in the streets of Santa Cruz, where feelings can be expressed and stories can be told. This is when the strategic potential of artistic practice can emerge, creating opportunities for recognition of the local context, the histories of how and by whom these neighbourhoods were established. Where possible, this work enables young people to consider and interpret the territory from a different perspective, for example to reconsider who are the leaders of the district.

"to recognise those other people who live in our neighbourhood and to give them like more elements, so for example to talk about who the leaders were. So the boys and girls don't know how they built the neighbourhood, so to be able to talk about that, that not everything was given, but it has been like a process. Before that, for example, last

year we had a conversation, well, the children said that they understood the gangs as the leaders of the neighbourhood." (Interview 7)

Storytelling in intergenerational spaces has been an important aspect of this work. This has the potential to shift the understanding of who are the referents for the district, with children hearing first-hand about the development of their neighbourhoods and the struggles faced by their neighbours or elder family members. Highlighting and recognising the history of the neighbourhood and how it came to be, has helped build, as the interview extract below notes, a 'territorial identity' with the children and encouraged them to reflect on their present and their future. This can reveal the common history of Santa Cruz to young people who hear about or connect with the founders and the builders of their neighbourhoods, learning about the rich history of collective struggle, distinct from more dominant narratives.

"we held an intergenerational conversation in that same process constructing a territorial identity with the children. It was with their parents, with their neighbours and we were talking about the history of the neighbourhood. We had to do this through lots of activities because these are children working with older adults, but in one of these activities we discussed what the leaders are like in the neighbourhood. So for example the children said that the they understood the leaders of the neighbourhood to be the gang members…there was a woman who began to tell us her story, how she had been displaced from her place by those armed groups and she began to cry as she told us of building her house and that they had torn it down, and of course the children began to cry too and the woman began to collapse and their innocence was impacted, here is a person that everyone respects. So from there began to emerge other discussions about the cooking of the sancocho and to learn about convites, how we got together to build the houses as a community... And I spoke to the children later and they said to me, 'profe, I didn't know the importance of this before' so these things become more visible…The intention of the [theatre] play is precisely this, it's called 'My neighbourhood is from another planet', we began by identifying certain things and they said 'no profe that doesn't happen, those type of people don't live here', but afterwards we saw that it was our neighbours that have these characteristics, we realised that the music teacher and the neighbour and others are the superheroes." (Interview 7)

Understanding, challenging and rebuilding notions of identity and leadership in the context of Santa Cruz are an important part of Mi Comuna's creative practice. Artistic and educational work that also reflects critically on everyday life can be captivating and transformative for

young people. Through learning about the elder neighbours or family members involved in founding and building this territory, different conceptions of leadership and identity can emerge. Crucially this work involves the celebration of neighbourhood founders rather than the condemnation of armed actors. To undertake the latter would be dangerous. Indeed, during the annual *Fiesta de la Utopia* in March 2021, on the first evening of artistic presentations, one member of Mi Comuna said to me nervously, *"it's them, they're here"*. He was referring to a senior member of the armed group controlling Santa Cruz, who had arrived at the fiesta to watch a performance involving young members of his family. These family connections were not uncommon, with the children, nephews and nieces or cousins of armed actors regularly included in the activities of Mi Comuna.

This 'contestation of social relations and identities in everyday life' (Nash, 2001: 81) brings us back to cultural politics. The history of social life in Santa Cruz and the traditions and practices that brought it into being are celebrated. Moreover they are celebrated through artistic practices such as music and theatre which bring people together in convivial atmospheres. Consequently a neighbourhood identity connects to collective founding and struggle. The leaders are recognised as those who worked together to build homes and streets, and cook the sancocho and the empanadas, rather than the armed groups.

Another key methodology has involved creative processes in theatre production. With no set scripts but plays instead created in group work with notebooks and the method of senti-pensante ('feeling and thinking', Fals-Borda, 1991). This work has enabled the discussion of sensitive subjects through the protective cover of play acting, putting on masks and playing roles where there would be *"the courage to say things that I would not say…This is helpful because these are children from difficult family environments, parents that work a lot, children who are left alone a lot, environments that are complex due to domestic violence"* (Interview 7). Mi Comuna team members could see that violence had permeated the speech and the understandings of the children. One boy spoke of his uncle as the man in the neighbourhood that carries a weapon and that everyone is afraid of. Previously he wanted to be like his uncle, and he teased his brother for being involved in theatre and music work with Mi Comuna. But that changed when he found his own love for music:

> *"And for example, a very powerful example is that of the two brothers. I think it is a very potent example to remember, because it was like, so [brother 2] was always with me in the theatre processes, and [brother 1] always offended him a lot, like 'hey surely you are soft if you are in those processes, I don't know, what a shame.' So I always talked a lot with him, intending to like seduce him into the theatre work, but*

no, he was always a child who had the mentality of strong man, right? Ok then, but he starts to like music more and when he enters the music process, he at once took to singing and we see that he sings beautifully, and many people say so. I feel like that changed completely like his way of thinking. Because it was like others recognized that he had a talent, that he knew how to do something and for example, you already talk to him and he wants to be, he wants to be a singer and wants to be a footballer. So he no longer has that discourse that I want to be like my uncle. No, he wants to be a singer and he wants to be a footballer. And in all the events were have, he's like 'profe, will you let me sing, profe this or that', well he appropriates the events, the stage." (Interview 7)

Conclusion: Mi Comuna's work as collective constitutive power

This chapter has examined Mi Comuna's work towards *la defensa del territorio* in the complicated context of Santa Cruz, revealing the necessity for deep contextualisation and a situated understanding of how political activity and social change are able to take place in a post-conflict situation. Mi Comuna's work has become inhabited in creative practices, presented as non-contestatory to those holding power. Meanwhile the important stories of collective founding are remembered and celebrated to defend this territory, the people in it and their customs, homes and neighbourhoods. The recognition of common histories is contested and tenuous in what is a complex struggle from below in the context of denigrating dominant narratives. Culture is key to this work, both from the perspective of arts, music and theatre as well as the collective customs and social life that have played a historic role in the formation of this territory. This culture is not co-opted by discourses of development or top-down regeneration (Dutta, 2015). What has developed here is a cultural politics of recognition and collective constitutive power that reveals politics as an ordinary creative phenomenon in extraordinary circumstances. This cultural politics must however present itself as non-contestatory as opposed to openly counter-hegemonic. This is not about being anti-state or opposing 'progress' but rather about responding to potentially negative impacts of top-down proposals that prioritise development over existing social ties.

The history and context of violence, from narratives espoused by city Mayor's, to films like *La Sierra* (2005) to what is seen in the streets, have permeated the understandings of young people in Santa Cruz. But there is a different side to this story, one which is evoked and celebrated through dialogue, encouraged and safeguarded by artistic and creative spaces. Community media is here focused on *defensa del territorio* rather than externally designed

development or social change. It plays an important role in encouraging a more assured territorial identity in the community-state interactions and interventions.

This work then connects to the histories of this territory, how it has developed through collective construction and convivial, persistent social life. In the face of dominant narratives highlighting violence or illegality, and the very real threat of violence in homes, in the streets of Santa Cruz or online, Mi Comuna's creative practice plays a part in the cultural politics of 'contestation of social relations and identities in everyday life' (Nash, 2001: 81). Through creative processes, Mi Comuna eschew any signs of claims over direct power, building forms of counter-power instead in collective and constitutive ways. This work shows itself as non-threatening, not openly counter-hegemonic or confrontational to those holding power in this place. This chapter has framed this work as 'strategic political banality'. This is nonetheless deeply political work; opening protective space for young people, stimulating literacy and creativity, and encouraging a critical reading of the local reality (Freire, 1970). Artistic and educational processes captivate young people whilst also providing a necessary safeguard. In the face of multiple threats and insecurities that persist, these creative and artistic communications processes offer greater latitude than products like written articles or videos where a certain self-censorship is necessary.

Chapter 9
Conclusion

This thesis has discussed Mi Comuna's media practice in their *Casa para el Encuentro Eduardo Galeano*, in the streets of Santa Cruz and in digital spaces during the stark context of the 2020 Covid-19 lockdowns. The previous chapter, the final chapter which analysed fieldwork data, sought to build on the themes developed through this thesis, arguing that Mi Comuna's practice contributes to a cultural politics of recognition and collective constitutive power, involving as it does the 'contestation of social relations and identities in everyday life' (Nash, 2001: 81). Here politics must be non-threatening, made ordinary and inhabited in creative practices so that the struggle to gain power (e.g. over territorial identity) is constitutive, collaborative and experienced by those with power as non-contestatory.

The forthcoming chapter, which begins by recounting the main argument of this thesis, seeks to provide a review of what this thesis has discussed and how it has answered my research questions. The chapter then reflects on the knowledge that has emerged through this research process and through this thesis in order to consider where this takes our thinking. I reflect critically on the significant hurdles and challenges I faced during this research process, seeking to build participatory research with an overstretched community organisation in Colombia just as the Covid-19 moment was emerging. The chapter then discusses the implications of the research findings, before reflecting on where and how this research can be extended.

In Santa Cruz, Medellín, a place that faces structural disadvantages, persistent violence and a significant digital divide, questions of communication and dialogue are related not only to communicative products and digital media technologies, but also to space. My previous experience working with community media in Medellín had highlighted the importance of coming together around food and music and using creative activities to reappropriate public space. Memory is another important characteristic in the work of social organisations in Medellín, particularly given the history of violence from state and non-state armed actors, displacement and persisting structural disadvantages. Questions of culture run through the fields of alternative and community media and are relevant to contemporary Medellín. The culture of subaltern classes have either been labelled as backward or alternatively co-opted into 'reductionist logics of economics…recognizing the importance of culture as an economic resource and as an integral player in economic growth' (Dutta, 2015: 126). My prior experience working in Medellín was remarkable for a flourishing of street art, theatre, music and dance in the face of structural disadvantages and persistent violence. What I did not

know was how to explain this burgeoning art and activity, it was enormously important yet evidently permitted by non-state armed actors controlling parts of the city.

The question of participation was also central to my approach to this project, both in relation to participatory alternative media as well as participatory research processes. Crucial are considerations of power imbalances and the transformational potential of any participatory process (Downing, 2001; Costanza-Chock, 2014). I adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach in order to examine the complex issue of participation in academic research, in media theory, and in Medellín. Mi Comuna's work involves interaction, reflection and participation in different ways, although this is not overstated amidst the prevalent instrumentalization of participation in Medellín. With the declaration of the Covid-19 pandemic I sought to make the best of this extraordinary moment to further understand whether interactive methods in media as well as research were viable through remote and digital spaces. The research questions that I set out to answer in this thesis were therefore:

1. How far and in what ways do the media practices of Mi Comuna open space for communication and dialogue in Medellín, Colombia?
2. What is the role of Mi Comuna's media practices in developing collective memory and local culture in Santa Cruz in Medellin?
3. How do digital media contribute to this work? How has this been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and what are the consequences for RQs 1 and 2?
4. What can Participatory Action Research bring to media research and the exploration of media processes? Is digital and distanced research (during the Covid-19 pandemic) conducive to the democratic and transformative principles of PAR?

Chapter 2 interrogated relevant literature in media studies to challenge 1. The notion of participation as a panacea for injustice and resistance; 2. The way 'community' has been romanticised and instrumentalised from below and above; and 3. the enduring alignment to liberal democracy in a western frame as inappropriate to the contexts of this research. A focus on power was crucial to the analysis in this chapter, approached as a dynamic concept based in the social, political and cultural context and not reduced to binary debates of mass media corporations on the one hand and 'emancipatory' community media on the other. This chapter explored concepts including collective memory, cultural politics and place in proposing a framework through which to understand media practices in the complex research site, a post-conflict urban settlement in Colombia. I presented the commons and commoning as key to a framework for understanding social relations and practices that open

protective and emboldening spaces for communication and dialogue, and the sharing of knowledge and culture.

Chapter 3 discussed the methodological approach and research design of this project, which were planned and then iterated as Covid-19 reshaped the world at the outset of my fieldwork. Planned within a framework of Participatory Action Research (PAR), this methodological approach sought to undertake interactive rather than extractive research. This approach was informed by my previous work with community media and research with PAR in Medellín and the UK, and my own background and positionality operating in the context of northeast Medellín. Significant challenges were encountered in the enacting of this plan, including the issues facing an overstretched community organisation in a research site with structural disadvantages. These issues were exacerbated by the global pandemic. Given the particularly challenging circumstances for Mi Comuna during 2020-2021, the capacity of the organisation for strong participation in the research was restricted. Principles key to the PAR tradition, including flexibility and reciprocity, were of crucial importance to the undertaking of my research through difficult conditions and an extraordinary conjuncture. The approach enabled me to adapt the research without undue confusion, and to develop strong relationships within Mi Comuna even amidst crisis moments and the difficulties of distance and digital interface. Importantly, that the PAR approach aligned closely to Mi Comuna's praxis, meant that I could participate in action and reflection without imposing excessive additional research demands. The chapter argued that this was an appropriate research approach in a challenging context, asserting the ongoing relevance of collaborative and participatory approaches to research even when undertaken remotely, provided that they are reflexive and flexible in accordance with the research site.

Chapter 4 introduced the socio-political context of the research site, the Santa Cruz district in northeast Medellín, Colombia. The chapter discussed the Colombian conflict and its consequences, arguing that this national and local context is of central importance to Mi Comuna, to their creation and to the ongoing processes they are part of. This context includes the collaborative construction of districts like Santa Cruz by displaced migrants fleeing the armed conflict, who received little help from the state and have faced marginalisation and stigmatisation since. This socio-political context, characterised by violence or limited state presence, denigrating narratives and grassroots responses, is central to Mi Comuna and their work. The chapter sought to establish that Mi Comuna's work seeks to shift narratives through storytelling and cultural processes which celebrate the creative and determined legacy of Santa Cruz. Processes which provide space and opportunities to the young and old to interact through art, music and theatre.

Chapter 5 explored the importance of space to citizen media practices in Santa Cruz. Analysing fieldwork data concerning the collective opening, development and defence of Mi Comuna's *Casa para el Encuentro Eduardo Galeano*, this chapter highlighted this protective and emboldening space as a key foundation of Mi Comuna's broader media practice. The social relations central to the Casa were theorised as 'counter commoning', key characteristics of which include the creation of a safe, accessible and intimate space, responding to a scarcity of appropriate sites for assembly in Santa Cruz. Within the walls of the Casa, described as *"a space to dream and construct"*, the sharing of music, food and theatre prefigure a more creative and harmonious Medellín.

Chapter 6 discussed Mi Comuna's street based methodologies, an important part of their work generating communication, interaction and reflection with residents of Santa Cruz. Central to this work are social activities in the streets or squares of different neighbourhoods, outside the homes of those that Mi Comuna might not otherwise reach in the Casa, in more institutional spaces or in digital spaces. Participation has been actively sought yet not romanticised or overstated. Mi Comuna have worked creatively to include different publics while recognising the limitations people face and the way that participation has at times been instrumentalised by the state. Through creative and engaging activities, this street based work has generated conditions akin to what Rodriguez (2011) theorises as 'collective spaces of encounter', albeit in the distinctive context of northeast Medellín and with Colombia now in its 'post-conflict' moment. These methodologies, the chapter argued, can demonstrate 'alternative experiences and definitions of 'communication'' (Stephansen, 2016: 34), reanimate public spaces impacted by violence (Rodriguez, 2011) and begin to challenge dominant mediated realities of Santa Cruz.

Challenging dominant mediated realities requires the deep processes of 'memory work', building collective memory as a key part of countering negative representations of Santa Cruz. This is particularly difficult in a city like Medellín where the official narrative or 'institutional memory' tells a story of top-down innovation and pacification. Collective memory developed in Santa Cruz is not simply nostalgic or melancholic, nor is it centred on histories of violence or human rights abuses (Kaiser, 2020). Opening space for dialogue has led to the evoking, sharing and recognition of collective memories of the cooperative founding of neighbourhoods, which can challenge dominant mediated realities and negative representations of Santa Cruz. This is therefore an 'exemplary memory' (Todorov 1995), recognising the past to shape the present and the future. In opening space for interaction and dialogue, Mi Comuna reflect with rather than simply represent residents of Santa Cruz

(Huesca, 1995). These practices in social interaction, memory work and dialogue therefore seek to bring about political subjectivities. This participation is immensely political, even while Mi Comuna avoid overstating the element of 'participation', amidst common instrumentalization of the idea.

Chapter 7 discussed Mi Comuna's work in digital spaces and in the stark context of the 2020 Covid-19 lockdowns in northeast Medellín, as Mi Comuna's street based activities were restricted and their Casa closed. During this extraordinary situation as Medellín was locked down, the chapter argued that certain groups were either locked out or locked in to digital spaces. The structurally disadvantaged are 'locked out'; the advantaged are 'locked in' and when everyone is 'locked down' whether you are in or out is experienced very differently. Digital technologies, digital spaces and 'social' media platforms have been associated with facilitating participation and enhancing the possibilities of social movements and alternative media alike. Mi Comuna's technical proficiency with digital technologies enabled them to lobby the city government, gather and disseminate information, and recreate cultural and artistic events in digital spaces, for which they gained recognition from across Medellín. But Mi Comuna faced significant challenges in reproducing in digital spaces the sort of engaging, creative and interactive activities they had been developing in the Casa and in the streets of Santa Cruz. Insufficient access in Santa Cruz to the connections, the devices or the digital literacy was an important factor, particularly with the children Mi Comuna regularly work with. Just as significant were the difficulties replicating in digital spaces the creative and emboldening activities that generated interaction between participants, as had been possible with activities in the Casa or in the streets of Santa Cruz. This evidence highlights the difficulty of developing counter commoning under these extraordinary conditions and through digital spaces, indicating that counter commoning is only practicable when it engenders forms of qualitatively meaningful sociality and relationality.

Bringing these themes together, the final chapter of the thesis argued that Mi Comuna's practice contributes to a cultural politics of recognition and collective constitutive power. This is not a politics in the restricted sense of state institutions, seen 'exclusively in terms of struggles of power at the level of the nation-state' (Nash, 2002: 85). The complex dynamics of power in Santa Cruz have been shaped through the collective construction of neighbourhoods, an absence of state sovereignty, and violence from state and non-state actors. Amidst this context Mi Comuna's work has become inhabited in creative practices, presented as non-contestatory to those holding power.

Analysis in this final chapter focused principally on two areas of Mi Comuna's work. Firstly, the chapter explored Mi Comuna's work in the face of top-down planning and infrastructure interventions from the state. Representation of Santa Cruz is a key area of contestation, dominant narratives have characterised it as illegal, violent and underdeveloped. Mi Comuna's memory work practices, discussed further in Chapter 6, help 'express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives' (Downing, 2001: v). This work must be undertaken in a non-contestatory rather than openly counter-hegemonic way, and is not a co-optation of culture in communication processes to facilitate top-down development interventions (Dutta, 2015). Rather this is a cultural politics strongly connected to place, often described in Mi Comuna as *la defensa del territorio*.

Secondly, the chapter explored Mi Comuna's practices which engage young people in activity in the streets and in the *Casa para el Encuentro Eduardo Galeano*. This creative and educational practice becomes yet more relevant and captivating when it prompts collective reflection about life in Santa Cruz. Arts and cultural processes involve reading the district and its history, enabling young people to broaden knowledge and understanding of their local context. This work corresponds to Freire's conception of praxis, 'the means whereby one stands back from what one lives through to obtain critical distance, thus engaging in reflection for collective action…that helps transform the reality in question' (Mayo, 2019: 310).

Mi Comuna actively support the cultivation of a more assured territorial identity in response to everyday social challenges and denigrating external narratives. This work recognises and appreciates what is held in the territory of Santa Cruz, '*wanting to show the inhabitants of this territory that our belonging here has real value'.* This work corresponds to Rodriguez's conception of citizens' media, where communication practices contest social codes (Rodriguez, 2001: 20) and 'aim primarily not at state-promoted citizenship but at media practice in constructing citizenship and political identity along with everyday life' (Atton, 2008: 31).[86] In the context of Santa Cruz this work is fundamentally connected to the territory and to the social organisation that has enabled these neighbourhoods to flourish amidst violence and the absence of state sovereignty. This work enables residents here to, individually and collectively, identify as subjects of these neighbourhoods and this territory in a positive rather than a fatalistic way. Moreover, given the historical lack of a legitimate state

[86] In Santa Cruz, guarantee of fundamental rights and the protection of the law has for many years been scarce, what might be described as the absence of a liberal democratic public sphere, Fenton, 2021.

presence here, this neighbourhood identity and subjectivity comes over and above identity as citizens of Medellín or Colombia.

Towards the social relations of counter commoning

This thesis contributes to citizens' media research, interest in which is developing rapidly across numerous research fields, prompted particularly by the proliferation and impact of digital communications technologies, with much focus on how digital technologies 'enable non-institutionalized actors to disseminate media *content* that challenges dominant discourses or makes visible hidden realities' (Stephansen and Treré, 2020: 1). Amidst this burgeoning field, this thesis builds on calls for a practice approach to citizen media in order to focus on 'the social, material, and embodied aspects of citizen media' (Stephansen and Treré, 2020: 1) and avoid more media-centric approaches. This thesis does so through examining the case of the Mi Comuna media collective, tracing Rodriguez's (2001, 2011) seminal work theorising citizens' media in Colombia amidst its long civil war. The research for this thesis was undertaken in 2020-21 in Colombia's 'post-conflict' moment in northeast Medellín, an urban settlement impacted by historic state absence, structural disadvantages and persistent violence. This thesis explores creative, artistic, itinerant, street based practices, and those linked to memory work which generate collective reflection about common histories of struggle, strengthening understanding and belonging amidst conditions of marginalisation and stigmatisation. This memory work is not simply nostalgic or melancholic, nor is it centred on histories of violence or human rights abuses (Kaiser, 2020). Amidst the persisting threat of violence which has impacted social movements and those deemed political, Mi Comuna have developed these practices in a non-contestatory way in order to open 'collective spaces of encounter' and build 'local cultural identities and geographies' (Rodriguez, 2011: 243). In the right conditions these practices can engage young people in educational and artistic activities, potentially drawing them away from the threat of violence (Rodriguez, 2011).

This thesis has also built on commons theory (Ostrom, 1990; Harvey, 2012; Birkinbine, 2018; Federici & Caffentzis, 2019) to explain Mi Comuna's practices opening space for communication, interaction and dialogue in their Casa and in the streets of Santa Cruz. This is not a commons in the liberal sense, the bounding and management of a valuable natural resource (e.g. Alpine grazing fields or the Maine lobster catch, Federici, 2019). Rather, the frame of *commoning* is used here to represent the understanding of the commons not 'merely as sets of things or resources, but as social relations' (Fernández, 2021: 75; see

also Harvey, 2012; Federici & Caffentzis, 2019). Birkinbine's (2018) outline of commoning speaks to much of Mi Comuna's practice in Santa Cruz:

> 'the reproduction of both the objects that comprise the commons and subjectivities in which mutual aid, care, trust, and conviviality are reproduced over time...the active pooling of common resources with a deep connection to the history, culture, and ecology of the place where they exist' (299).

Relatedly, Birkinbine has developed the concept of 'subversive commoning', going beyond reformist frameworks to actively appropriate 'resources away from capital and the state into circuits of commons value' (Birkinbine, 2018: 290), or release 'knowledge and information that has been closed off from public access' (Birkinbine, 2018: 303).

The formulation of 'counter commoning' builds on the concept of 'subversive commoning', and is distinctive in two fundamental ways. First, amidst a history of violence in Colombia, in particular the ties between state and non-state armed groups and the ongoing violence targeting social leaders and young people, there remains risk to and wariness of being perceived as 'subversive' or 'political'. 'Counter commoning' is therefore about the more implicit political practices of providing protective space for social relations and escape from violence than the explicit political practices of either subverting capital or direct conflict with powerful forces. In this context to be explicitly counter-hegemonic or subversive is potentially dangerous. 'Counter commoning' on the other hand, connected to cultural activities and collective memory, presents itself as non-contestatory rather than oppositional to hegemonic power. Indeed evidence presented in this thesis suggests that the spaces that Mi Comuna open in the Casa and in the streets of Santa Cruz can afford safe, engaging or emboldening situations for assembly with distinct possibilities from those in other public and private spaces in Medellín impacted by surveillance or violence. However, these sorts of creative and emboldening activities were largely unattainable during the extraordinary moment of Covid-19 lockdowns and through digital spaces, highlighting how 'counter commoning' is only possible when it engenders forms of qualitatively meaningful sociality and relationality.

A second distinguishing characteristic of 'counter commoning' relates to knowledge and the evoking of collective memory and histories of cooperative building in Santa Cruz. This is distinct from the releasing of 'knowledge and information that has been closed off from public access' (Birkinbine, 2018: 303). Instead in Santa Cruz this is linked to the uncovering and recognition of knowledge that may have been silenced by more dominant mediated representations of northeast Medellín. This sort of knowledge can emerge in spaces for

communication and dialogue opened by Mi Comuna in the Casa and in the streets of Santa Cruz. Mi Comuna's work here is inspired by what Paolo Freire (1970) called a 'dialogue of knowledges' which recognises that 'each can learn and make proposals from his/her world, experiences and aesthetics' (O. Rincón and A. Marroquín, 2020: 44). Building on Freire, Rodriguez (2020: 72) states that spaces for communication and dialogue can enable 'subjects who activate their own languages, use those languages to resignify their reality, and develop ways to move those interpretations of reality into the public sphere'. Opening space for dialogue has led to the evoking, sharing and recognition of collective memories of the cooperative founding of neighbourhoods, which can challenge dominant mediated realities and negative representations of Santa Cruz. This is particularly difficult in a city like Medellín where official narratives or 'institutional memory' tell a story of top-down innovation and pacification, or continue to denigrate places like Santa Cruz as backward or violent.

Researching the case of Mi Comuna in northeast Medellín and in Colombia's 'post-conflict' Covid-19 conjuncture, this thesis also contributes to contemporary debates of place and territory. *La defensa del territorio* is here theorised as a cultural politics of recognition and collective constitutive power, celebrating the common histories and traditions of building and bringing people together around food and music. This work builds on Halvorsen's (2018) 'open' definition of territory: 'the appropriation of space in pursuit of political projects – in which multiple political strategies exist, from bottom-up grassroots to top-down state, as overlapping and entangled (2018: 2). In Santa Cruz, faced with an expanding state political strategy, and the well-established but distinct dominating power of the armed groups, Mi Comuna's work is part of a 'bottom-up grassroots' political strategy. Given the contemporary settlement and overwhelmingly urbanised habitat of Santa Cruz, the defence of this territory is distinct from struggles of Colombian indigenous and afro-descendent communities defending land of their ancestral territory from for example, resource exploitation. In Santa Cruz there is a real demand for constructive state intervention in this densely populated district. Nonetheless there is an understanding of this territory distinct from capitalist logics of accumulation (and dispossession for urban regeneration). A distinct connection to territory in Santa Cruz is contested, particularly as the founding generation ages, the state influence increases, and memories of founding and resistance risk being lost. Researching with Mi Comuna in this territory (and from afar) through the extraordinary moment of Covid-19 was an immensely challenging experience. The next section reflects on some of the hurdles I faced and what I learned along the way.

Learning through the challenges of participatory research

Mi Comuna are a busy, overstretched organisation who faced significant additional challenges throughout my fieldwork, restricting a strong participation in my research. At the outset of my research, the struggle for the future of Mi Comuna's *Casa para el Encuentro Eduardo Galeano* occupied a significant amount of Mi Comuna's time and was their priority. The arrival of Covid-19 and related policy interventions in 2020 exacerbated the challenges Mi Comuna faced as they had to close the Casa, halt their street-based activities and shift their work into digital spaces. The reduction of grant funding for in-person projects with young people, which had been an important financial pillar for the broader work of Mi Comuna, exacerbated financial limitations during the Covid-19 lockdowns. In turn, Mi Comuna team members had to seek alternative paid employment, with the financial remuneration in Mi Comuna largely suspended. In addition to the uncertainty and anxiety of Covid-19, these issues placed considerable strain on the Mi Comuna team.

I had set out with an adaptable approach to research, conscious of the conditions within which Mi Comuna were working. As this extraordinary moment placed significant additional demands on Mi Comuna, my response was to avoid being an imposition and to support their work in team meetings, events, and contributing to regular spaces of reflection. The situation restricted my aim to shape the research in a collaborative way with Mi Comuna from the outset. Given the pressures on Mi Comuna at the outset of my fieldwork and the lack of time among team members for a strong participation in the research, the project was shaped much more by my own observations and experiences at this point. On reflection, while it was important to avoid imposing on Mi Comuna, I could have been more assured in the value of furthering the participatory element of the research even during this difficult time.

As my fieldwork advanced, efforts toward building reciprocity adapted according to the conditions. During phase two of the research, for example, my in-situ fieldwork was interrupted and I sought to research remotely (from London) through digital interfaces. It proved much harder to build reciprocity through participatory work and research during this extraordinary moment (April-December 2020). Mi Comuna were yet more stretched during this uncertain moment, and they lacked the time to involve me in the work that I was distanced from, understandable considering that I was new to the context of Santa Cruz and to Mi Comuna's work there. I spent much time in long meetings late at night (Colombia is 5 hours behind UK Standard Time/GMT), but distanced from the everyday of northeast Medellín at this moment, my positionality as an external researcher grew more evident (not least as I was living through a distinct pandemic situation in London). I facilitated collaborative research workshops seeking to open space for reflection with Mi Comuna. It

was clear however that the burnout emerging during this phase was linked to augmented screen time as well as the extended separation of lockdowns and the general heightened anxiety of the Covid-19 moment. I did not sense that opening further spaces for collaborative research via digital platforms was desirable for the Mi Comuna team during this moment.

During research phase three, as I returned to in-situ fieldwork in Medellín, the impacts of Covid-19 on Mi Comuna were stark and the possibility of building a stronger participatory research process remained limited. Intermittent lockdowns limited Mi Comuna's ability to open space for communication and interaction in the Casa and the streets of Santa Cruz. I participated in regular team meetings, planning the year ahead amidst changing circumstances and a funding crisis. I also contributed to Mi Comuna's regular space for dialogue and reflection on action, key to the praxis of the organisation in which they reflect on the local context, the challenges they face and their action. These spaces were particularly important to my research, where I could support and build knowledge with Mi Comuna without imposing excessive additional demands of participatory research.

As my fieldwork ended and the focus of my research moved to analysis and writing, the distance of 'researcher' and 'researched' between myself and Mi Comuna began to gradually increase. While particularly strong participatory research methods can develop deep processes of co-analysis, considering resource and time pressures within Mi Comuna and on the submission of my written PhD thesis, this was not entirely practicable or appropriate. I sought to build a feedback process around the emergent findings in meetings, workshops and informal discussions. I prepared documents of emergent findings and anonymised data for sharing with Mi Comuna team members. Translating interview excepts (from Spanish into English) and emergent findings (from English into Spanish) was complicated and laborious, and an issue which undoubtedly restricted me in terms of returning emergent findings to Mi Comuna as regularly as I had intended. Moreover, I was also striving to develop my skills in research analysis, interpretation and writing. Nevertheless I see my engagement with Mi Comuna as ongoing work, beyond the submission of my thesis, in ongoing spaces for learning, reflection and action.

Undertaking research in a non-native language, communication was always challenging. While I was able to understand and be understood throughout my fieldwork, language inevitably impacted my research at times, restricting my comprehension of issues and moments. There were many key terms and references linked to local vernacular and culture that I could not understand immediately or directly translate. I depended on colleagues and friends who answered regular questions in informal conversations and interviews, during the

research and analysis phases, helping me address a challenge I faced as both a non-native speaker and an outsider to Santa Cruz.

In essence, this PAR approach faced multiple challenges. Starting with myself, a privileged, white, western researcher with Spanish as a second language. Notwithstanding the fact that I had previous experience working with community media in Medellín and had learnt Spanish (and local vernacular) in the city. Secondly, as a PhD student I had a set timeframe and expected outcome (of a sole-authored thesis written in English). Nevertheless I have also been funded by CHASE-AHRC and as such I have had more time to dedicate to and immerse myself in this project, relative to the majority of researchers and research projects. Regarding the research case, I encountered a busy and dedicated organisation facing an acute crisis with regards (initially) their Casa and (subsequently) their response to Covid-19. The Mi Comuna team are on the other hand deeply committed to action, reflection and a dialogue of knowledges, and have been enormously generous with their time and insight since early 2020.

The Covid-19 conjuncture was a particularly uncertain and anxious moment, in general but more so whilst trying to undertake a PhD. As international travel was restricted during 2020 and 2021, I was either distant and remote from my family in London, or from my partner's family in Medellín. Incertitude over whether and how I would be able to undertake my PhD project only added to anxiety here, as well as to additional screen time and associated burnout, not least when trying to operate alongside colleagues in another time zone. On the other hand, I was in a fortunate position in having funding from CHASE-AHRC through this time, including to travel to and from Colombia, and having to work from home was certainly feasible (if enormously isolating) for a PhD candidate, as compared with other workers during this time. I also gained insight into the insufficiencies of online and digital spaces for the social and media practices I experienced in concrete spaces in Medellín.

One key justification for undertaking a PAR approach was my awareness of the 'accumulated history of research used in extractive ways' (Pearce, 2008: 15), particularly by European researchers focusing on the so called 'global South'. Given the context of northeast Medellín and Mi Comuna's work, I knew that it was important that I was not there to simply extract knowledge. Nonetheless, perhaps I was not helped by the way that, as Klocker (2012: 157) underlines, 'influential segments of the PAR literature have also been highly critical of 'traditional' research (Reason & Rowan, 1981; Chambers, 1997; Zuber-Skerritt & Perry, 2002), effectively creating a binary of morally good research ('authentic' PAR) and morally bad research (conventional research and 'inauthentic' PAR).' As

challenges to my research process mounted, particularly amidst the Covid-19 conjuncture, my own disquiet emerged that I would be condemnable of the worst of all worlds; an exploitative and 'inauthentic' PAR project. Moreover, this would happen amidst a contemporary neoliberal moment in which the instrumentalization of participation is rife (in Medellín as well as London.) Considerable fretting about the incoherence or hypocrisy of my approach left me regularly stuck in holes.

With greater wisdom and research experience, I would have been better able to avoid the 'at once seductive and unreachable' (Klocker, 2012: 158) ambitions of PAR projects to partake in the 'enlightenment and awakening of common peoples' (Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991: vii, cited in Klocker, 2012: 158) or the liberation of the 'human body, mind and spirit in the search for a better, freer world' (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Reason & Bradbury, 2006: cited in Klocker, 2012: 158). Following Pain (2004) and Maguire (1993) I might rather acknowledge 'the attempt (at achieving meaningful and appropriate social change), no matter how flawed, small-scale or less than ideal' it was (Maguire, 1993: 176; cited in Klocker, 2012: 158). As indeed I learnt through my research process that Mi Comuna's efforts to open space for interaction and participation with residents of Santa Cruz are often fraught with challenges and imperfections. But this does not stop them trying. The participatory element of my research process may not have met the expectations I had at the outset of my PhD, but amidst the particular conjuncture for Mi Comuna in Medellín during 2020-2021 I was nonetheless able to learn an enormous amount. Being part of the work of Mi Comuna through this significant moment, in the space of the Casa, in the streets of Santa Cruz and in digital spaces, allowed me to recognise the social relations, the commoning, at the centre of their work, in a way that would have been unattainable for a researcher observing 'objectively' from an external position.

Towards the end of my PhD process, I asked members of Mi Comuna to share their reflections on my research process and whether it had been useful for them. One team member told me that *"Tom understood our essence from the beginning, he really saw us, he saw us, me, my co-workers as human beings who have a life purpose to do what we do and act as we act… Tom with his project enhances our own confidence and with it helps us to believe even more in what we do. In addition to helping us to question ourselves, because by narrating our process, by explaining, by showing, by inviting him to be and do with us, we are at the same time speaking to ourselves and with this we evaluate ourselves, question ourselves, and generate new knowledge…There was a real exchange of experiences and knowledge because the process was carried out in a constant, direct dialogue and in the key of making contributions so that the process could be strengthened…"*

In spite of the many hurdles faced since the outset of my research process, along with the particular challenges posed by participatory research, I nonetheless attest to the ongoing relevance of collaborative and participatory approaches to research, as long as they are flexible in accordance with the research site. I also believe that strong PAR projects can be developed by PhD candidates and by non-native speakers or outsider researchers. Key here is the time and resources available, and the involvement of research participants as much as possible from the outset, to shape the research questions, methods, analysis etcetera. The adaptable and iterative element of my PAR approach was crucial to the viability of my research project as the shock of Covid-19 impacted the world. Though the research process was ultimately less participatory and collaborative than I had envisaged at the outset, importantly I had avoided a detrimental imposition on Mi Comuna at a difficult time for the organisation. Comprehending this actuality was difficult amidst the binary in PAR literature of 'morally good' and 'morally bad' research (Klocker, 2015). An important learning through this thesis is that efforts towards building what we might call 'participation' are always charged with challenges and imperfections. No project of research is perfect, as well intentioned plans meet reality. But if there are sincere efforts to share power, then these imperfections should not curb genuine attempts to build participatory and collaborative research processes. Following the consideration of these challenges and experiences, the chapter now turns to the implications of the findings of this research process.

The implications of this research

In considering the implications of the findings of this research process, it is useful to return to discussions presented in Chapter 2 of this thesis, which examined media studies literature that has theorised what alternative and community media are, and what they can do. Important here are not the type of media, the particular technology used nor the mere presence of participation, but the ability to 'express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities and perspectives (Downing, 2001: v). As the current thesis has explored, amidst the context of Santa Cruz in northeast Medellín, particularly the way that young people and social leaders have historically faced violence, there is risk in being perceived as 'subversive' or counter hegemonic. Instead, practices have emerged bound up in cultural activities and collective memory that present as non-contestatory rather than oppositional to hegemonic power. Opening spaces and cultural activities can engage and inspire young people, and even build intergenerational dialogue about the history of this complicated place. Alternative visions here are not principally about resisting or competing with dominant

mediated narratives.[87] Instead, collective memory work can enable 'individuals and groups without access to large-scale economic and symbolic resources [to] challenge their general lack of recognition (MacDonald et al. 2015: 105, see also Honneth, 2007), particularly when undertaken in the Casa or the streets of Santa Cruz generating safe, engaging and emboldening situations for assembly. Evoking and celebrating histories of neighbours cooperating in the construction of their territory, building homes and paving streets, offers a quite distinct, less fatalistic perspective.

This research demonstrates the importance of a focus on social practices. The media element within Mi Comuna is of course significant in forging self-narratives and building collective identities. But in themselves these are more about relationship building and shared understandings. Rather than focusing on whether the media is participatory, radical or counter hegemonic, this research directs our attention to the commons-building practices that function through the media forms. Mi Comuna is not an organisation which produces abundant media content for its own sake, but rather as an organisation it uses media and communication as a way to strengthen social processes in Santa Cruz and northeast Medellín. Media products and technologies, for example the newspaper *Mi Comuna 2* or audio-visual documentaries, are an important part of this work, but it is through their social practices that Mi Comuna have made an impact on their territory.

Mi Comuna's commons-building practices may be non-contestatory but are not about consensus building. They are counter because they deal with dissensus and discord and seek to contend with and defy normative understandings of place and space. Culture is key to this work, in the sense of creative and artistic practice as well as the recognition of customs and traditions of people and their neighbourhoods. Culture in the form of art, music and theatre should not be dismissed as light-hearted, ephemeral, or even aloof. In the Casa and in the streets of Santa Cruz, this culture can engage, captivate and inspire whilst providing a necessary safeguard. Culture in the form of customs and traditions in a place settled by displaced *campesinos* (peasants) may too be disregarded by those in Medellín more interested in urban innovation and attracting international tourists. But this culture of the *convite* and the *sancocho* is one on which Santa Cruz was founded and still has the potential to bring people young and old together. Amidst many challenges in Medellín and beyond, including poverty and inequality, climate breakdown, displacement and war, we urgently need commoning practices to be more than just liberal or reformist. Cultural politics

[87] Indeed Rodriguez (2001, 2011) has highlighted the limiting nature of this oppositional thinking, which can impair our comprehension of the 'other instances of change and transformation brought about by these media' (2001: 20).

is significant here, critical to enabling counter commoning to emerge in non-contestatory and captivating ways.

If qualitatively meaningful sociality and relationality are key to Mi Comuna's social practices and counter-commoning, an important question is whether this can ever be recreated online. For example, if we understand human sociality as 'a dynamic relational matrix within which human subjects are constantly interacting in ways that are co-productive, continually plastic and malleable, and through which they come to know the world they live in and find their purpose and meaning within it' (Long and Moore, 2012: 41). The experience of Mi Comuna certainly indicates that recreating this sort of interactive work online is very difficult. While this practice and experience is specific to Mi Comuna, the context of Santa Cruz and the Covid-19 moment, it is nonetheless significant for those fields that see online media forms as offering ready and effective means of resistance and social change. When Mi Comuna's work was forced online it was immediately insufficient in comparison with practices in the Casa and the streets of Santa Cruz.

What next for this research

While this PhD process must come to an end, my aspiration is that collaborative research with Mi Comuna will continue. I maintain good relationships and regular communication with Mi Comuna team members, even as my contact with the everyday workings of the organisation has distanced. One plan for ongoing collaboration includes the co-authoring of work reflecting on the research process, on Mi Comuna's work and the challenges they face. Additionally to support them in the building of connections with other community and alternative media organisations outside Colombia and in the UK, a venture we initiated in 2021 but which was not immediately successful in the pandemic moment. Mi Comuna's practice and methods have developed in response to the specific conditions they are working within, and could not be simply replicated in other contexts. Nonetheless there is much to be gained through the sharing of experience and knowledge with other social and media organisations seeking to build communication and dialogue with their publics, to reach across structural disadvantages, to operate in situations of violence or post-conflict, and to challenge denigrating and damaging representations of marginalised districts, not least through the evoking, recognition and sharing of collective memory.

I hope to utilise the insight I have gained through this research project in Colombia and the UK to support collaboration between academic research and social organisations. In Medellín, a city with several public and private universities, I experienced broad, well

established and creative connections between research and social organisations (notwithstanding the restrictions caused by Covid-19, and great upheaval to defend public higher education in Colombia in recent years). Several of the Mi Comuna team were also studying or researching at universities in Medellín, a contributory factor to Mi Comuna's practice and to their regular spaces for reflection on their action. Indeed the work of many social organisations in Medellín is largely sustained by young people, undergraduate and postgraduate students, who build a dialogue between their theory and practice. Given the relative lack of financial resources within these social organisations, this work is only possible alongside low student fees and/or housing costs. Other participants in Mi Comuna's work were students doing placements or otherwise fulfilling their 'labor social' (a condition of their subsidised place in the public university to spend time working with social organisations in the city). This obligatory community work often develops into enduring, elective commitments (as with several long term Mi Comuna team members). Additionally, residents of Santa Cruz involved in for example, Mi Comuna's memory work practices, are also occasionally involved in university research projects. While these relationships have many limitations, with Mi Comuna's research experiences at times draining as well as illuminating, there is evident constructive and generative work.

Finally, as debates about the commons and commoning continue to gain stature, it is important to nurture the discussion beyond reformist or even reactionary frames (Broumas, 2017; Birkinbine, 2018; Freedman and Fenton, 2020). The concept of 'counter commoning', can be usefully extended in relation to places that face ongoing violence, recovering from violent conflict, or in the urban settlements where distinctions between state and private spheres is complex or state sovereignty is absent.

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Appendix 1: List of anonymised interviewees.

Interview number	Role	Gender	Age bracket: 18-25 / 26-40 / 40+
1	Mi Comuna team member	M	26-40
2	Mi Comuna team member	F	26-40
3	Mi Comuna team member	M	18-25
4 & 11 (return interview)	Mi Comuna team member	F	26-40
5	Mi Comuna social base. Regular contributor to events and newspaper Mi Comuna 2.	M	26-40
6	Academic and former member of community media organisation in Medellín	F	26-40
7	Mi Comuna team member	F	26-40
8 & 27 (return interview)	Mi Comuna team member	M	26-40
9	Mi Comuna team member	M	26-40
10	Community leader in Comuna 8 Villa Hermosa	F	40+
12	Member of Grupo Semillas Women's group	F	40+
13	Regular collaborator with Mi Comuna	M	26-40
14	Mi Comuna team member	M	26-40
15	Member of Hacemos Memoria, University of Antioquia.	M	26-40
16	Former Mi Comuna team member	M	26-40
17	Member of Nuestra Gente, a community theatre in Santa Cruz that regularly collaborate with Mi Comuna	F	26-40
18	Former member Mi Comuna. Member of Grupo Semillas Women's group	F	40+
19	Mi Comuna team member	F	26-40
20	Media academic at the University of Medellín.	F	40+

21	Former Mi Comuna team member	F	26-40
22	Member of Esquina Radio. Regularly collaborate with Mi Comuna	F	40+
23	Member of community media outlet in Santa Elena, a rural suburb of Medellín	F	40+
24	Member of Playoneando Audiovisual Collective. Regular collaborator with Mi Comuna.	F	18-25
25	Former member of community media organisation in Medellín.	F	26-40
26	Former member of community media organisation in Medellín.	M	26-40
28	Academic at University of Antioquia and regular collaborator with projects in northeast Medellín.	F	40+
29	Comunicracia media campaign, Medellín.	M	40+
30	Resident of Santa Cruz and member of Pasolini in Medellín media collective.	M	26-40