

# Precariousness and Everyday Life

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What description might be adequate to the ways in which living and dying are folded together today in conditions of urban poverty in Latin America? In studies of what is termed the “new violence” (as affirmed by rising homicide rates) social scientists have portrayed low-income neighborhoods in Latin America as steeped in and largely defined by violence, a cluster of conditions involving urban gangs and criminal networks, forms of police violence, and urban poverty (Arias 2006; Arias and Goldstein 2010; Benson, Fischer, and Thomas 2008; Koonings and Kruijt 2007; Rodgers 2006; Wilding 2011). While this work has certainly gone a long way toward examining the seeming paradox of the intensification of violence during the region’s democratic transition, perhaps less attention is paid to the fragility of everyday life itself: how is the achievement of everyday life marked by loss and violence? Throughout my work in low-income neighborhoods in Santiago, Chile, I have sought to attend to the ways in which people struggle to give expression to this deep sense of precariousness, to the sense in which the smallest of actions could contain impulses to heal worlds or to poison them (Han 2012, 2014, forthcoming). I ask how these small actions, gestures, and occurrences relate to the larger forces of economic restructuring and state violence.

In May 2012, I began fieldwork in a low-income neighborhood of Santiago currently under police occupation. I will call this neighborhood “Z.” (Given the surveillance in this neighborhood, I use pseudonyms and composite characters here.) In 2001, the Chilean Ministry of the Interior enacted a policing scheme called Barrio Seguro (Secure Neighborhood) that focused intensive policing on sections of *poblaciones*, or low-income neighborhoods, understood to be sites of drug trafficking and delinquency. Secure Neighborhood

was not initiated on the basis of evidence that demonstrated certain neighborhoods to be foci of drug trafficking and delinquency. Rather, it was catalyzed by publicity around the funeral of a young man from La Legua, a neighborhood known for drug trafficking in the media and popular imaginary. A major national newspaper, *El Mercurio*, covered the funeral in the General Cemetery, in which the aunt of the young man was said to have presented herself to the newspaper as “the queen of *pasta base* [cocaine]” and to have threatened to seek vengeance for the death of her nephew.

The story spurred the subsecretary of the Ministry of the Interior to issue criminal charges against this woman for issuing a public death threat and to reassert to the press the rule of law in Chile. As he remarked then, “There is no territory in Chile where the rule of law is not in force, and the law of Aunt Nena is not in force in La Legua, the law of Chile is” (Correa Sutil 2001). Intertwined with references to the criminal underworld, with terms like “*hampa*” (riffraff or scum) and “clan” in this story and multiple stories that rapidly appeared in the days following, kinship was cast as a threat to sovereign power. Within four days of the story’s publication, the Ministry of the Interior authorized the first police occupation of a low-income neighborhood in Santiago, involving checkpoints for vehicle inspection, identity control, and the constant presence of Special Forces military police within the neighborhood.

This police occupation was replicated in a handful of small neighborhood sections popularly known as sites of drug trafficking and delinquency within the city. Only later did sociological and public policy publications lend coherence to these occupations, casting them as “necessary”

interventions that would bring these “territorially stigmatized” and “ghettoized” neighborhoods back into the normative social order (see Cornejo 2012; Frühling and Gallardo 2012). As I have written elsewhere, attending to everyday life within the neighborhood yields a very different picture of the relationship of the state and the local (Han 2013). Rather than seeing the police occupation solely in terms of an oppressive force that comes from without and enforces a social order, I observed how police officers have varied and dynamic relationships with neighbors, thus demonstrating how state violence interpenetrates the local but also how the local itself is composed of a range of relationships that express varied aspirations. Here, I turn to the ways in which life in this neighborhood is marked by loss, asking the open-ended question of how we can attend to the shadows that haunt everyday life.

## Ordinary Hauntings

Z has been under police occupation for several years and is often the subject of spectacular news reports on the violent deaths of young men. But as I worked in this neighborhood, I found myself drawn into a world in which loss was lived in the most ordinary of ways. For instance, while the cemetery may be understood as a site of memorialization, it is also a site where everyday life with the dead is stitched together. On birthdays, family and friends bring cake, soft drinks, and balloons to a young man’s grave. They sit on the grass listening to music, writing messages to the young man on the balloons and launching them into the sky. A piece of cake is cut for the young man and placed on his grave. Graves themselves may be adorned with fresh flowers by a mother, sister, wife, or girlfriend who makes weekly visits. Yet the

cemetery is not the only site where the dead are incorporated into the very rhythms of everyday life.

Each night, Martita left a kiss on her son's face. A large portrait of him—her youngest son, Camilo—hung in their house's storefront, where they had worked together. She kissed her fingers and stroked the portrait, saying to him, "Good night, my son, may you dream of angels." He had been killed during a police raid. At the time of his death, he was anxiously and joyously expecting the birth of his first child, a daughter, with his girlfriend, who at the time of his death was eight months pregnant. I met Martita when her granddaughter Vivi was nearly eight months old. She is now nearly three years old. Throughout the months I spent with her, I was struck by how she sought to give expression to the affects surrounding her father. The portrait that hung in her grandmother's house also hung in her mother's bedroom and was inserted into key chains that were distributed to kin and Camilo's friends. Before she began talking, Vivi would point to her father's photo and say, "uh-uh-uh-uh." One winter night, Vivi, her mother, her mother's sister, and her two grandmothers and I were sitting in her mother's bedroom and chitchatting. Vivi began saying "uh-uh-uh-uh," pointing strenuously at her father's photo hung above the sofa in her mother's room. "Uh-uh," she pointed to me and then pointed to her father. "Lift her up Clarita," Martita said. "She wants you to lift her up to her papá." Picking her up, I stood on the sofa. She encouraged me to lift her up high, saying "uh-uh" and pointing. As she reached the point of her father's arms, she became silent, leaning her head against his arm and breathing deeply. We were absorbed with wonder. Her maternal great-grandmother exclaimed softly, "He calls her." Later, as Martita and I were

driving back to her house, Martita said to me that the calling caused her anxiety. "I just want him to rest," she said. "I fear that he is still on the earth." She supposed that his soul may be unable to leave the earth to go to heaven and rest because he has things pending: worry over how his girlfriend is raising his daughter, the injustice of his own death at the hands of the police.

#### Losing and Remaking a World

Martita was tormented by her son's violent death. She told me that she feared that she might die of pain, for the death of her son "killed her in life." What kept her physically alive was the fear of what her own death would do to her living sons, who also were grieving the loss of their little brother. Eventually, this torment and her fear of dying from it drove her from the neighborhood; she could not live in the house where her son had been killed, yet moving from the house and the neighborhood itself was experienced as a loss. She was bedridden and unable to eat. In this moment of crisis, her daughter-in-law and a son who lived in a different neighborhood took her in to live with them. Yet shortly before I returned to Z in August 2014, Martita had returned to live in Z. She had sold her house and most of her belongings, and she was now living with her friend Blondie. Blondie's partner had moved out of their house, but they continued to live a domestic life: eating meals together, taking tea, and coordinating the daily chores of picking up the children from school. As we sat in the kitchen, Martita related to me how she "had to live my own process," and that while some days "I remember every detail and I go back [*retrocedo*]," now she only hopes that "my health accompanies me in order to see my granddaughter live." She had a long conversation with her older son, who had

said that it was she who had to care for Vivi: "He said to me, it's you and *papá* who are the ones who look after Vivi." Martita's relationship with Vivi's mother was marred by slights and cruelties that sometimes revealed themselves through the face-to-face courtesies. Martita related to me how Vivi's mother had recently taken Vivi on a three-week trip outside Santiago without notifying Martita. It was only when Martita made her daily visit to see Vivi that she discovered that she would not be able to see her granddaughter for three weeks. "I almost started to cry right there, in front of all of them [her daughter-in-law's family]."

#### Can we receive this small moment as a moment in which the world is at once lost and remade?

Martita asked me if I would like to see Vivi, and I was delighted. We walked to her house. As we stood on the street, Vivi came running out and leapt on her grandmother, who had knelt down to greet her. They gave each other a long and tight hug. Martita said, "Nos amamos. ¿Cierto?" As we sat in the living room, Vivi pointed to her mother's bedroom. Looking at me, she said, "Papá," pointing to the poster of her mother and her father that hung in the room. "Where is papá?" her grandmother asked her. "En el cielo," she responded. Her grandmother responded, "Pero no está triste, porque ¿con quién está?" "Con tío Ivo," she answered. (Ivo was her mother's brother, who also had been killed by the police, five months before her father was killed.) Then she smiled and made a twirl. Her maternal great-grandmother, seated on the sofa, let out a soft laugh. "See," she said, "they visit her at night, they speak to her at night, and because of that, she is so happy."

When I returned to Baltimore in January 2013 after several continuous months of work in Z, I attempted to write. But how to write when life and death are burned into the body of ethnography, too? The corrosions, the betrayals, and the losses are not adequately described in terms of a theory of trauma that focuses us on the repetition of an event, or in terms of a picture of healing that seeks an end to the story or seeks to erase the marks that death and violence imprint on the self and the world. Rather, the question seems to be how such darkness is lived with and gains expression. Mysteriously, it is the scorched life of the everyday itself that offers the care that heals and also offers a possibility of writing as a gesture of healing.

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