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Coping with Extortion: On Violence, Parasites, and Water Infrastructures in Buenaventura, Colombia

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore the coping mechanisms deployed by shopkeepers in the face of extortion in the port city of Buenaventura, in southwestern Colombia. Relying on six months of fieldwork experience in a hardware shop of Ciudad Blanca, an impoverished neighborhood, I examine the everyday violence and the responses of the population. Due to the deficient infrastructure in the city, people are forced to build small infrastructural arrangements, such as water storage systems, to access public services. Therefore, the circulation and availability of infrastructural devices such as pipes, hoses, and tanks are vital for the reproduction of life in the city. In this article, I argue that extortion (locally called *vacuna* ('vaccine')) interferes in the circulation of these vital material commodities, making coping mechanisms crucial in the face of vulnerability and uncertainty. Recent scholarly literature has pointed to the influence of illegal economies in urban planning and organization. Going beyond that, I argue that organized crime interferes in the material practices of the urban poor, turning to the term 'parasite' posed by French philosopher Michel Serres to conceptualize this form of interference in the circulation of commodities.

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INTRODUCTION

'It has been quite *caliente* the last few days,' Claudia,[1] a shopkeeper in Ciudad Blanca, an impoverished neighborhood of Buenaventura, tells me. *Caliente*, meaning 'hot' in Spanish, denotes a worsening in the security situation and an increase in murder, robbery, and extortion or simply the spectral presence of armed groups. 'The *guys* visited me twice last week. They always want money.' Later on, she tells me that these armed men ask her for money once a month, but they come more often when it gets *caliente*. The money is to pay what they call *la vacuna*, the 'vaccine,' and it is a well-known form of extortion in violence-affected zones of Colombia and beyond (Moncada 2021: 64–72). It represents a form of illicit taxation collected by armed groups who pretend to provide security services for peasants, shopkeepers, and merchants throughout the country in the selective absence of the state.[2] However, Claudia tells me, the *vacuna* only protects her and the shop from the same *guys* collecting it, who threaten and intimidate her (Moncada 2021: 19; Varese 2014). These *guys* are also called *malandros*, *pinticas*, and *ratas* (Taussig 2003). They are unemployed young people who are armed, sometimes hooded, and claim to work for larger criminal organizations. Claudia believes they act on their own, but who knows? Once in a while, she recognizes them walking by and takes pictures of them to send to local police officers via WhatsApp. Every now and again, some of the *guys* get killed, and new ones come to visit and ask for the *vacuna*.

The port city of Buenaventura is marked by the segregation of a racialized majority, mainly Afro-Colombians, from the growing economies of the port while being, at the same time, caught in a perennial cycle of violence (Appel 2012; Jenss 2021; Salazár 2007). Ciudad Blanca, like many neighborhoods in Buenaventura, represents what anthropologist Daniel Goldstein terms a 'place of insecurity' (2012: 5). These places are highly unstable due to their lack of resources that should be provided by the state, such as security and infrastructures, and are 'characterized more by fragmentation and unpredictability than by order and routine' (Goldstein 2012: 5). Furthermore, these places embody forms of 'organized abandonment' and are thus 'deliberately excluded from national consciousness and identity' (Goldstein 2012: 28; see also Das Poole 2004). Hence, the state appears, along with criminal organizations, as an actor that coproduces insecurity and poverty.

Claudia holds a small hardware store in Ciudad Blanca, in the continental zone of the port city. The shop offers a wide range of products, from construction materials to small infrastructural devices such as screws, pipes, and tubes. The demand is high due to the constant construction and maintenance work in the neighborhood. The limited and deficient provision of public services by the state forces people to build their own small infrastructural systems to ensure the access to, for instance, water and electricity. Besides that, people construct new floors for their houses and new security fences. Thus, the shop represents a nodal point in the economic and social life of Ciudad Blanca. In this article, I examine the extortion of shopkeepers as a form of interference in the social, material, and economic life in Buenaventura. What does it mean to pay for the *vacuna*? How does this affect the circulation of commodities and the 'regular' functioning of Ciudad Blanca's licit and illicit economies?

As I will show, the material circulations of these vital commodities into and within Ciudad Blanca are mediated by the shopkeepers themselves and by a series of improvised practices such as precarious storage and surveillance, price speculation, transportation, and credits. Moncada (2021), in his typification of the responses to extortion, labels these ways of coping as 'everyday resistance,' which contrasts with the phenomenon of vigilantism. While the latter denotes forms of organized and institutionalized defense to combat extortion, everyday resistance points to quotidian, improvised, and loose coping practices (Moncada 2021: 64–72).

Yet, the *vacuna* does not merely point to the victimization of shopkeepers and business owners but also to the exposure and fragility of sociomaterial relations and assemblages in the context of precarity and scarcity. My argument revolves around the idea that extortion interrupts and intersects channels. By 'channels' (semantically related to institutions and infrastructures), I mean the relation between entities, a 'kind of bridge that delimits a landscape, facilitates a

1 All names of people and places are pseudonyms for security reasons.

2 Michael Taussig (2003: 91) put it in other words: '[T]he *vacuna*, meaning vaccination—you pay a little to the guerrilla and you don't get a fatal, contagious disease and everyone is happy; the cows stay put, the family stays whole, and everyone smiles at the clever little joke of the *vacuna*.'

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passage, and forestalls a loss' (Kockelman 2010: 406). Channels are meant to enhance the possibility of social, material, and economic transactions to reproduce and maintain life in the city (Elyachar 2010). In Ciudad Blanca and elsewhere, trust, credit, knowledge, and monetary transactions, among others, enable the circulation of vital commodities in the urban space. Therefore, I argue that the interference caused by extortion represents what French philosopher Michel Serres calls a 'parasite,' which is defined as an interference in these channels (2007 [1980]). This has been broadly conceptualized in the academic literature as 'noise' (Larkin 2008; Shannon & Weaver 1963 [1949]) or 'thirdness' (Peirce 1955). 'What travels along the path [channel] might be money, gold, or commodities, or even food—in short, material goods,' asserts Serres. 'You don't need much experience to know that goods do not always arrive so easily at their destination. There are *always* interceptors who work very hard to divert what is carried along these paths' (2007: 11). I draw on the concept proposed by Serres because it does not merely highlight the capacity of parasites to occasionally block and interrupt channels but points to the steady reactions and adjustments to this parasite. As I will show, extortion as a form of a parasitical action engages with the circulation of commodities and sparks a series of coping practices, such as payment, precarious security systems, and denouncement.

This article is divided into four sections. In the first, I dialogue with the literature dealing with urban violence and infrastructure and present the methods used to gather the presented data. In the second, I aim to characterize Ciudad Blanca, my site of research, embedding it in the wider context of a city marked by violence and inequalities but also political mobilization and resistance. The third part shows how violence determines the reproduction of urban life in this port city. To this end, I thoroughly describe everyday life amid violence, in particular the coping mechanisms deployed by the shopkeepers to deal with extortion. Finally, I question these sociomaterial practices as forms of resistance as a 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary,' as put by Asef Bayat (1997: 57). I conclude by showing how these (violent) interferences in the circulation of commodities constitute interferences and how they resonate with the selective abandonment of the state.

1. THEORETICAL EMBEDDING AND METHODS

Recent anthropological literature on urban infrastructures explores the ways in which material assemblages are mediated and appropriated at local levels through forms of adulteration (Degani 2015), tampering (von Schnitzler, 2016) and pressure (Anand 2011). Further, by shifting the scope to novel understudied groups of actors who engage with urban materialities and infrastructures, scholarship has pointed to the 'influential role of organized crime in urban planning and organization' (Müller & Weegels 2021). Here, I focus on the circulation of commodities as the given conditions for domestic infrastructural systems to exist. In the face of the precarious provision of water infrastructure by the state and the need of parallel constructions, the access to certain commodities becomes a crucial feature of these sociomaterial assemblages.

Scholars have coined the term 'infrastructural violence' to denote ways in which vulnerable and marginalized populations are disconnected, expelled, and even attacked through the built environment (Anand 2012; Anand et al. 2018; Appel 2012; O'Neill et al. 2012; Uribe 2019). In their seminal work, Auyero and Burbano de Lara (2012) examine harm at Buenos Aires's urban margins by looking at the 'dearth of basic infrastructure and the profusion of various forms of violence' that 'are now jointly defining daily life in the poor neighborhoods of Argentina' (552). Although the authors underline the concomitancy of these two phenomena as ways of quotidian harm, their precise relation is not fully articulated. Through the lens of 'extortion,' I seek to bring these two phenomena—violence and infrastructure—into a novel sort of dialogue.[3] I argue that violent urban environments can constrain and alter the possibilities to build vital infrastructures at a domestic level in spaces of precarity (Larkin 2013; Simone 2006). Therefore, I will interrogate how organized crime *interferes* with the material and infrastructural practices of everyday life and how violence, therefore, constitutes a key feature in the infrastructure of the city.

3 In a forthcoming article, anthropologist Tania Bakic Hayden brilliantly shows how perceptions of insecurity and violence in the Mexican food system shape and transform infrastructural arrangements key to the everyday mobilities of people and products. In doing so, Bakic Hayden address the relation between infrastructure and violence by looking at rumors and subjective experiences of the affected actors (forthcoming).

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This paper builds on six months of participant observation in the neighborhood of Ciudad Blanca in the port city of Buenaventura, Colombia, particularly in and around Claudia's hardware store. Due to Buenaventura's strategic position for drug trafficking, a growing and expanding port economy, devastating poverty and unemployment rates, and a partial (and intended) absence of the state, most of the neighborhoods of the city are struck by violence, as several reports show (CNMH 2015; HRW 2014; NACLA 2011). Recently, scholars have demonstrated how violence is deeply intertwined not only with the surrounding illicit economies but also with the port and the state-led development agenda itself (Avez & Ravindran 2020; Jenss 2020; Jenss 2021; Lombard et al. 2021; Zeiderman 2018). Several actors produce and coproduce violence in the city, including the state, the private sector, and neo-paramilitary groups. In this article, I contribute to research on urban violence in Buenaventura by taking a bottom-up perspective on this phenomenon (Taussig 2003). Thus, I ethnographically address the everyday life of violence that seems 'confusing and inconclusive,' especially by focusing on the 'creativity of people coping under duress' (Nordstrom & Robben 1996: 4). During my stay, incidents of extortion, robbery, and even murder occurred, all of which take place on a more or less regular basis in this part of the city. Moreover, stories of crime, what John and Jean Comaroff (2016) call 'crime talk,' constantly circulated through informal conversation, the radio, and the yellow press. In all, violence (in its callous, spectral, immanent forms) plays a constitutive role in the everyday life of Ciudad Blanca, shaping the possibilities for mobility, the circulation of commodities, and the opportunities for survival.

During my fieldwork, I was hosted by Claudia and her husband, Iván, in their small (but growing) house. As compensation for their hospitality, I worked for a few hours a day in their shop. My main interests were the deficient infrastructure of the water supply system and the coping mechanisms used by a population facing scarcity and infrastructural breakdown. I carried out several interviews with local dwellers regarding the construction of small water storage systems as well as their repair and maintenance. This way, I learned about the way people improvise with small infrastructural devices (pipes, hoses, tanks) to build and stabilize these infrastructures at a domestic level. At the same time, I witnessed how trust and credit played a vital role in the maintenance of productive relations between the shopkeepers and the population. Thus, the circulation of these commodities is not merely defined by market pricing and conditions but by what Julia Elyachar calls 'phatic labor,' a 'labor that produces communicative channels that can potentially transmit not only language but also all kinds of semiotic meaning and economic value' (2010: 453). Claudia told me several times that there were people she trusted plenty because 'you see their faces, hear their voices, how they treat you, and you know they are good people.' Moreover, the periodicity with which people attended the shop was decisive to build the relations of trust: 'They come very often to the shop, so I trust them and give them credits.' The lower and inconsistent incomes of the people and the compelling necessity of building and maintaining small infrastructural systems to ensure access to public resources make these credits an immediate solution to this ubiquitous uncertainty (Simone 2013).

A focus on phatic labor in Ciudad Blanca helped me to understand the different everyday practices that enable the circulation of commodities in the city. Extortion and violence appeared then as an opposite of sorts to phatic labor, interrupting and blocking communicative channels and circulation. Although extortion also produces communicative channels while creating semiotic meaning (fear, terror)—and increasing economic value too (commodities get more expensive)—these practices appeared to generate a blockade or counterflow in the circuit of commerce. The 'trustful people' to whom Claudia conceded informal credits in the hardware shop were then harmed by the increase of prices, the irregular availability of certain commodities, and the uncertainty of the future of the shop.

In what follows, I describe the dynamics of extortion in Ciudad Blanca from bottom to top. In doing so, I build on the experiences and semiotic articulations of local dwellers, especially those of Claudia, the shopkeeper. By privileging the everyday experiences of violence, I do not seek to obscure or delegitimate other scholarly accounts on violence in the port city, nor do I pretend to define violence as something chaotic and spontaneous without structures supporting it. Rather, I seek to show how opaqueness and obscurity inform the ways through which this particular form of violence operates to dominate and oppress marginal dwellers (Taussig 1988). My focus on extortion as part of 'ordinary violence' represents a vantage point to understand how material resources (public and private) are unevenly distributed at the urban margins of Colombia (Poole & Das 2004).

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Throughout my research stay in Ciudad Blanca, I noted that people avoided openly talking about their own experiences with violence. Several times, interlocutors referred to the 'situation in the city' by using common tropes and denied having been directly affected by any experience of violence. It seemed to be something happening 'out there.' However, after some weeks, Claudia, her family, and the employees at the hardware shop began telling me about their experiences with crime in piecemeal fashion, oftentimes quieting their voices. After having built a trustful relationship, I was able to hold conversations with them about this sensible topic. These conversations, which I am reproducing here, were, for ethical and safety reasons, not recorded. Instead, I kept a field diary in which I wrote down every conversation, with my interlocutors' consent. In some cases, they asked me to change some formulations or omit identifiable details. To protect their threatened lives, or at least their identities, all names of places and persons haven been pseudonymized.

2. CIUDAD BLANCA

Buenaventura is one of the cities in Colombia with the highest index of poverty and unemployment. With around 320,000 inhabitants, Buenaventura is the largest city in the region known as the Colombian Pacific and hosts the biggest port in the country (Buenaventura como vamos 2020). While harbor infrastructures have grown extensively, public infrastructures are highly precarious: the water, electrical, and sewage systems are not sufficient for an adequate delivery of public services. This is due to the political agenda of urban development and privatization designed and implemented in Colombia in the second half of the 20th century in which Buenaventura's infrastructural system for the delivery of public goods to a marginalized and racialized population was not prioritized (Acevedo 2021; Acevedo et al. 2016). At the same time, the irregular urbanization processes rapidly increased due to migration and forced displacement from rural areas (Arboleda 2004; Oslender 2008). As for the whole of Colombia's Pacific, the majority of the population of Buenaventura is Afrodescendant and thus a locus of racialization and segregation (Avez & Ravindran 2020; Leal 2018; Zeiderman 2018). In the last decade, several political mobilizations have taken place in the city. A wide range of civil rights groups claimed better access to public services such as water infrastructure and medical care. The protests were also a response to the ongoing violence suffered by the population. In May 2017, a general strike took place in the city, and protestors blocked the port for 22 days. Negotiations between the strike committee and the government led to an accord between the two parts (Jaramillo et al. 2020; Jenss 2021; Manos Visibles 2017). Notwithstanding, the promises made by the state (such as a better water supply system) remain unfulfilled to date.

Ciudad Blanca, located in Buenaventura's *zona continental* (mainland), was built in the 1990s as part of a state-led social housing project. It was built next to the *via alterna*, the second main road of Buenaventura, which leads to the port and was constructed to facilitate the circulation of trucks and commodities and to prevent a threatening bottleneck of the principal road (Melly 2017). During the construction works of via alterna (1999–2002), conflicts over inhabited territories emerged, leading to selective assassinations and an increase of violent events (Lombard et al. 2021). Due to this proximity, the social life of Ciudad Blanca is highly influenced by the 'economies of the road': namely restaurants, hotels, car workshops, and parking areas (Harvey et al. 2015). Most of the inhabitants of the neighborhood are informally employed in the transportation sector, a central part of the port economy. While men are mostly integrated into the informal economies of the road, most women are dedicated to housework. Young people, like Yeison and Alexander, the two assistants at Claudia's hardware shop and my main informants, work for daily wages. There are few people with formal employment contracts. In general, the wages are low, and informal employment is high.

Although the houses of Ciudad Blanca rely on a unique design and are made of stone and concrete, people undertake expansions to build new floors and security systems. Due to constant construction and maintenance and repair works in the neighborhood, such as road and house building, most men are technically skilled and familiar with construction materials. On almost every corner of Ciudad Blanca, you can see mounds of gravel, shovels, bricks, and sand as well as water storage systems in the houses, consisting of water tanks, pipelines, and tubes. From time to time, and due to the weather conditions of Buenaventura (high levels of humidity and extreme heat) and the uneven pressure levels of the pipelines, these water storage

systems need to be repaired. Therefore, Claudia's hardware store represents a nodal point of the social and material life of Ciudad Blanca, being one of the most important sites of trade and consultation. As such, it is a 'critical site' where societies 'learn and learn to reproduce,' as Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift assert, while at the same time producing forms of 'adaptation and improvisation' (2007: 5). Even though there are some persons more skilled than others, dwellers of Ciudad Blanca usually do construction and maintenance work themselves. As I witnessed several times in the hardware shop, people ask others who are more experienced and skilled for advice.

Usually, sectors are supplied with water every two days. A water schedule stipulates which days of the week neighborhoods have access to the public service. Therefore, and in order to have constant access to water, people construct improvised systems in their houses to store water for the 'dry days.' The system consists of a hose leading from the public pipe to a water tank installed in the rooftop of the house that redistributes the water to the dwelling by means of gravity.

The designs for these infrastructural systems at a domestic level depend on a variety of factors. The most important one is the design of the house itself. As mentioned, the height of the houses in Ciudad Blanca varies depending on how many floors were constructed and whether expansions were built. Another factor is the location of the public pipes. Some of them are in front or on the side of the house, while others are located on the streets, several meters away from the dwellings. In such cases, people are forced to make bigger efforts and place prolonged hoses or pipes. Another challenge is posed by the uneven pressure of water. On some days, the high-level pressures damage the connections of the pipes and hoses, which then need to be repaired. Low incomes constrain the possibilities of more durable construction. Water tanks of 1,000-liter capacity made of PVC are very rare in Ciudad Blanca due to their high cost (US$30). Others, with a capacity of 250 liters, cost half the price. Some people cannot afford these tanks and instead buy metal cylinders or old refrigerators recycled from the port to store water. If systems break down, people have to buy water from their neighbors or the hardware shop. Hence, material instability marks the everyday life of public service supply in Ciudad Blanca. This example clarifies why the circulation of commodities is pivotal to residents for accessing a vital public service such as water.

Interestingly, while the overwhelming majority of inhabitants in Buenaventura are Afrodescendant, shopkeepers, merchants, and entrepreneurs tend to be from the interior of the country, locally known as *paisas*. As a *mestizo*, I was also recognized as a *paisa* during my fieldwork in Ciudad Blanca and was directly related to Claudia and her family. The *paisas* working in commerce hold a tight relationship to big vendors in the main cities of the country's interior, get larger credits in banks, and are generally seen to have inherited a 'culture of commerce.' While this perpetuates particular racialized inequalities, it also facilitates the circulation and commercialization of commodities to and within the neighborhoods of Buenaventura along particular channels, where shopkeepers face and are forced to cope with violence, informality, and unpredictability.

Claudia moved to Buenaventura with her brother Luis in the early 2000s. Born into a family of peasants, she followed the steps of her brother as an entrepreneur. At the beginning, after working as an assistant in her brother's shop, she ran a hotel and a hardware shop with her husband and their daughters. After they divorced, she kept the shop, and it performed successfully for years despite the constant hazards the shop was exposed to. Claudia's recent biography, her migration to Buenaventura, and the key role she played in the neighborhood as a shopkeeper can be framed in the new social and economic patterns of the city. Due to waves of urbanization in the 1990s and the 2000s, commerce gained an enormous relevance for the reproduction of life in Buenaventura. At the same time, market liberalization enhanced the importation and circulation of commodities. Small grocery and hardware shops popped up throughout the city. Yet, these were also the years in which violence and drug trafficking began to rapidly expand in the region (CNMH 2015; McGee 2017).

3. LA VIOLENCIA

'Since I arrived in Buenaventura in 2001,' Claudia tells me while opening the shop on a Friday morning in 2019, 'violence has been everywhere in town. You never know who is acting in

whose behalf. There are guerrillas, paramilitaries, the organized crime, thugs, but you never know.' In fact, since the 1990s, violence rates have rapidly increased in Buenaventura. At the time, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrilla group had expanded its zone of influence to the Pacific region. Local and commercial elites were intimidated by way of kidnapping and extortion. As a response, military and right-wing paramilitary groups of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) forayed into the territory, committing several massacres in Buenaventura and its surroundings (Oslender 2008). By the beginning of the century, these groups had gained broad control over the city. After the official 'demobilization' of the AUC in 2004 in the context of a peace agreement, emergent criminal groups called *bacrim* (bandas criminals) established themselves in the territory with the purpose of controlling security, drug trafficking, and part of the commerce. New organized groups such as *La Empresa* and *Los Urbaneños* fought for control over large parts of the port city. This led to an increase of violence, which reached a peak in 2012, when mass graves and even torture centers were reported in Buenaventura (HRW 2014). Moreover, local and regional politicians, militaries, and businessmen have been accused of having connections with organized crime—prioritizing the functioning and the rhythms of the port, the state has broadly failed in the provision of adequate security for the inhabitants of Buenaventura (Jenss 2021).

Even though I found interesting descriptions of the development of violence in the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports, which helped me to further understand what had been taking place in the city since the 2000s, I did not find them useful to understand Ciudad Blanca's everyday experiences of violence. 'The *bacrim* doesn't play a crucial role anymore,' Yeison, one of the assistants of the shop told me. 'Criminals act on their own. They invoke a chief who doesn't exist. But to be honest, *you can never know*,' he added.

> I wondered, astonished, 'So you don't think there are bigger structures of the organized crime here?'
>
> 'They might be some structures, of course, but there are *loosen* structures. People say there is *one* single big boss in Buenaventura. He may live abroad, somewhere in the United States. This is fairy tale. Can you believe that?' He laughed and continued, 'Violence is everywhere, on every single corner of the city, so you just only need to be hooded and say you are a member of a criminal gang, and everybody is confused. Sometimes you don't even need a gun.'

Anthropologist Michael Taussig, who has been working in Colombia for many decades, was struck by and curious about a sentence he heard many times when people referred to violence: *¡En Colombia nunca se sabe!* (In Colombia, you never know) (2003: 18). Taussig's seminal work on terror in southwestern Colombia aims to grasp the effects and experiences of the everyday violence people are exposed to. Storytelling depicts the opacity and murkiness behind everyday kidnappings, extortions, and assassinations, he argues. In Ciudad Blanca, confusion, gossip, and rumor likewise make sense of what people constantly experience. In fact, maps and statistics are useless when things have gotten *caliente*.

Claudia told me several times that she is constantly improving the shop's security system. For instance, new fences were built a couple of months before I arrived in Buenaventura. At the same time, she uses different places, such as her own house, to store part of the shop's stock. Her cash is also hidden in different parts of the shop. She tells me, laughing, 'The bad guys don't know how valuable things are, nor where my money is. There have been several attempts of robbery in the shop, but they always fail.'

These attempts never take place during the day when the shop is open, people are walking by, and clients are chatting with Claudia. It always happens during the night. 'I know them. I know the guys who have tried to rob the shop several times,' she adds. 'They are *pinticas, delincuentes*.'

> 'Aren't they the same who ask for the *vacuna*?' I ask, surprised, while carrying heavy concrete lumps from the shop to the old pickup truck she uses for deliveries.
>
> 'No, no, the ones of the *vacuna* are better connected to the organized crime; these ones are only *rateritos*.' A little while later, as I'm resting—exhausted from work I am

not used to—and drinking a Coke from the grocery shop next door, Claudia asserts, 'They might commit crimes on their own, but they always claim to be part of wider structures.'

I am confused. I also thought the ones asking for the vacunas might be pinticas acting on their own. 'Yes, they are,' Claudia continues, after being interrupted by a client complaining about the low pressure of the water system. She lowers her voice so as not be heard by neighbors walking by. 'But the pinticas of the vacuna are more dangerous than the others. They carry heavy weapons. And even if they are not part of bigger structures, they are at least connected to them.' Contrary to these pinticas, when the extortionists come to ask for money, she is frightened.

Violence shapes language and understanding, including double meanings. In Colombia, there are many words to refer to killing, to all kinds of felony, and to the corpses and for distinguishing between different categories of illicit actors. Also, the bosses of organized crime and the drug trafficking organizations have several nicknames. *Pinticas*, *delincuentes*, and *rateritos* point to a criminal stereotype: young, nonrelevant 'thugs' expelled by society, unemployed and impoverished (Taussig 2003: 9). They are often victims of the so-called *limpieza social* ('social cleansing'), a brutal necropolitical method carried out covertly by paramilitaries and police officers to impose 'social order.' Just like this 'cleansing,' the *vacuna* is something everyone throughout the country knows. People talk openly about it. In some violence-affected areas of the country, it has become normal.

Claudia's brother Don Luis, who also runs a grocery shop and a hotel in Santa Catalina, an even more dangerous neighborhood of Buenaventura, tells me, while offering a chocolate bar in the shop, 'I have been paying the *vacuna* for almost 20 years now; for me, it is a kind of taxation. Sometimes I have to pay it twice a month.'

On the way back to Ciudad Blanca in Claudia's pickup, passing by the walled-off port, I want to know more about extortion. It had grown dark as we entered Ciudad Blanca through its shadowy and dusty streets—at that time of night, the city seems even more dangerous. 'I don't have a big issue with the *vacuna*,' Claudia says. 'It is a kind of taxation, and since I evade some taxes charged by the state, it's fine. The problem is that you never know when they come. At the beginning they were visiting me every three months. Then they came once a month. And now, you cannot tell when they are coming. It's a surprise.'

I was shocked, but she laughed loudly.

Interestingly, another coping mechanism deployed by Claudia was denouncement. One rainy morning, while we were having breakfast in the shop, she showed me a WhatsApp chat with a policeman. There was a blurry picture of a young person and a message right under the picture: '¡*Este es uno!* (This is one of them).' The policeman reacted with a thumbs-up emoticon. The guy covertly photographed by Claudia was a *pintica*, a thug. She hoped that he would get arrested or killed, as she told me. Allegedly, he was not part of a bigger or wider criminal organization.

'How do you know that he is one of them?' I asked, while trying to suppress my gut reaction against violence.

'Because everybody knows who they are,' she answered, grinning.

Remarkably, then, the truth about violence in Buenaventura seems to fluctuate between secrecy (*you can never know*) and truism (*everybody knows*).

Indeed, a motorcycle with two policemen patrolled the neighborhood from time to time. They always stopped at the shop to chat with Claudia and sometimes with Ramiro, the owner of the grocery shop next door. They gave drinks and snacks to the policemen. The conversations were mostly quite banal, revolving around family, the weather, and their jobs. They also jointly complained about the security situation. 'The military will come soon,' a policeman once promised. Even though she did not fully trust the police (or the state), Claudia claimed that the 'social cleansing' actions led by the police would at least free her from the thugs that don't belong to wider organizations and are still bothering her.[4]

4 Claudia was careful whom she denounced to the police to avoid repercussions. She claimed that the guys she denounced were mainly 'rateros, pinticas' and not 'real' criminals.

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A week after the last visit of the policemen, things became very *caliente*. It was January 2020, and not far from the shop, a man was killed. A van of the Technical Investigation Team (CTI) of the attorney general's office arrived. That day, another three people were killed in Ciudad Blanca. I was frightened. 'This is all about *ajuste de cuentas* (settling of scores),' Yeison told me, making the violence logical and legible. In the late evening, some *pinticas* instated an illegal toll for motorcycles, asking residents for money and forcing Claudia to pay the *vacuna* once again. I locked myself in my room.

The next day, the neighborhood was militarized. Soldiers from the Colombian National Navy were stationed in front of Claudia's shop, heavily armed, eating snacks and joking (Figure 1). People went about everyday business as usual, seemingly ignoring the military presence. Nobody wanted to act suspiciously while the military 'hunted' for the 'thugs.' The soldiers stopped every young Black guy driving a motorcycle or walking by. They were frisked, insulted, and intimidated. At one point, the soldiers went around patrolling, and some shots were heard. 'They arrested more than five people,' Yeison tells me the day after.

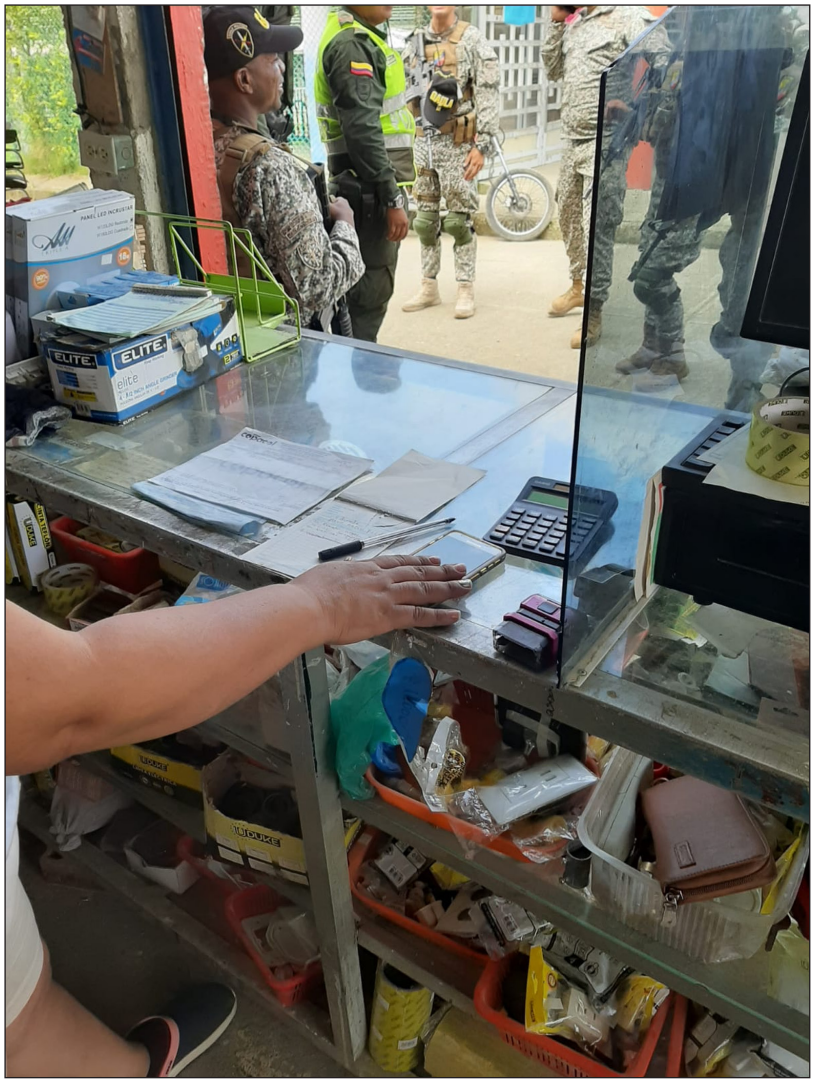

Figure 1 Soldiers outside a shop in Buenaventura. Photo by the author, 2019.

With this ethnographic account, I have sought to capture part of the convoluted temporality and spatiality of violence in Buenaventura, elucidating the sense people try to make out of everyday violence and fear by engaging with illicit actors and those who claim to bring order. The sentence '*Nunca se sabe*!' (You can never know) grasps the states of uncertainty people are exposed to as they allude to the *potentiality* of illicit actors' organized connections and capacity for violence. Furthermore, it stands for the opacity through which violence operates.

This resonates with Ben Penglase's study on Rio's favelas security (2009). Here, he argues, criminal organizations create disorder, insecurity, and ambiguity through a 'permanent state of emergence' and 'joint disorganization' as forms of (collaborative) domination. The unpredictable irruptions of violence amplify the fear and confusion of dwellers (*nunca se sabe*). At the same

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time, people attempt to make sense of violence through 'public secrecy' to maintain the 'fiction of predictability' (Penglase 2009: 59).

Claudia's coping mechanisms as a shopkeeper both enable the continued circulation of commodities and are shaped by the irregular rhythms of the violent actors she is confronted with. Coping with extortion (the parasitic actor) demands constant adjustments. For Serres, parasites not only interfere with the signal in the channel, 'they also create hybrids that transgress conventional domains' (Degani 2015: 23). Thus, extortion does not merely punctually block the system; it produces different coping mechanisms (hybrids) that broadly alter the sociomaterial relations in Ciudad Blanca (increase of prices, shortage of certain products, improvised security systems, denounce). Another characteristic of the parasite is its unpredictability, much like noises and interferences in communication channels. The spectral and irregular presence of state actors such as the police and the military do not stifle the parasite but rather indirectly contribute to its adaptation and expansion.

Claudia does not know with certainty *when* the guys will come for the *vacuna*, but she knows they *will*. She does not know whether police or the military can protect her. Thus, she has to be able to respond quickly, deploying precarious resources to develop coping mechanisms under constantly mutating conditions. However, the system remains unstable and threatens to collapse. 'I don't know how long I can deal with this,' she tells me after that *caliente* day. 'I think I am leaving this city soon.' Without the hardware shop and its commodities, things could get very hard for residents in Ciudad Blanca. If new shopkeepers come, trust has to be built from scratch.

What does it mean to resist this 'collapse'? Is there such thing as 'politics' in the coping mechanisms to deal with extortion? In the following and last section, I turn to the political dimension of the coping mechanisms described above and address the everyday negotiations as a form of resistance.

4. INTERFERENCE AND RESISTANCE

Urbanist Abdou Maliq Simone asserts that 'piracy' represents a key feature of urban life in the Global South due to the fact that 'production possibilities are limited.' Hence, poor dwellers appropriate existent materials of all kinds—'Sometimes through theft and looting; sometimes through "heretical" uses made of infrastructures, languages, objects and spaces; sometimes through social practices that ensure that available materials pass through many hands' (2006: 358). Moreover, they aim to 'multiply the uses that can be made of documents, technologies, houses, infrastructure, whatever, and this means the ability to put together different kinds of combinations of people with different skills, perspectives, linkages, identities and aspirations' (Simone 2006: 358). This phenomenon points to the capability (and necessity) of improvisation of the urban poor due to the limited resources available, public and private. Michael Degani coined the term 'adulteration' to describe the same phenomenon in the Global South, where 'adulteration makes a certain kind of otherwise insufficient city run. This is a "para-industrial" city in which "production possibilities are limited" [Simone 2006: 358] and structural underemployment is the norm' (2015, 15). However, 'production possibilities' are limited, and the circulation of technologies, infrastructures, and commodities are enabled and negotiated in different ways and at different scales.

I argue that, alongside the social and infrastructural arrangements that might help to produce and reproduce life through improvisation, poor dwellers in Buenaventura also have to cope with interferences in the circulation of commodities, as the practice of extortion illustrates. Although these interferences also produce practices of improvisation (as I have shown in the case of Claudia's hardware store), these are rather associated with conservation than adulteration. Thus, the aim to 'protect' the commodities from robbery and extortion—thereby enabling their further circulation—is a coping mechanism not aiming to 'multiply the uses' of particular objects and materials but rather to allow their very circulation and availability.

But is this a form of resistance? In her seminal work on prepaid meters in South Africa, Antina von Schnitzler (2016) shows how devices can become a political terrain of contestation and negotiation. By examining the sociomaterial practices deployed by users, such as tampering and destruction, she points to the 'political formations below the threshold of visibility of

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normative conceptions of political action' (von Schnitzler 2016: 6). In the face of biopolitical control through these devices, poor dwellers develop coping mechanisms to access public services.

In the same vein, Austin Zeiderman coined the term 'submergent politics' to describe forms of political mobilization in Buenaventura, looking 'beyond familiar frames of reference for other conceptual tools that can help us understand forms of cultural and political practice' (2016: 825). In his work, he focuses on the 'intertidal zone' of the city located at the edges of land and sea, which is particularly fragile in the face of legal and illegal capital expansion. Violence rates in these neighborhoods are the highest in Buenaventura. Due to the fact that 'politics in its various normative guises is impeded or prohibited by regimes of lawlessness and terror' in Buenaventura (Zeiderman 2016: 825), political mobilization takes place in different registers and at different scales. Zeiderman defines this as 'submergent politics,' meaning mobilization in 'contexts of protracted precarity,' where activists are 'forced to descend below the surface, to cover oneself or be covered over, to remain obscure and invisible' (Zeiderman 2016: 825).

Although I do not focus on political activism and mobilization here, I believe the coping mechanisms dealing with everyday violence, infrastructural violence, and abandonment in Ciudad Blanca can be understood as a form of submergent politics too. According to Jenss (2020), coping mechanisms in Buenaventura, such as mapping safe spaces, are common among dwellers and social activists. Storing and surveilling commodities and denouncing extortion are, as I have shown, coping mechanisms deployed by shopkeepers in the face of extortion. I argue that they represent a 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary,' as put by Bayat, 'a salient, patient, protracted, and pervasive advancement of ordinary people [...] to survive hardship and better their lives' (1997: 57). While other scholars have focused on strategies employed by social activists (Jenss 2020; Lombard et al. 2021; Zeiderman 2016), I focus here on dwellers who do not articulate a political discourse in a legible register.

Bayat's term 'politics of the informal people' points to changes people aim to afford in their everyday lives without necessarily aiming to undermine political authority or having articulated a political discourse. One of the main goals of this silent politics is to ensure the distribution of social goods and opportunities, such as land, shelter, piped water, electricity, etc. (Bayat 1997). The context of hardship in Buenaventura (violence, poverty, uncertainty, and structural unemployment) leads to the development of forms of resistance that oscillate between 'submergent politics' and the 'politics of the informal people.' The diverse coping mechanisms deployed by Claudia to protect the shop respond then, in a wider sense, to an everyday strategy to ensure the circulation of commodities and the distribution of material goods in the face of illicit encroachment.

CONCLUSION

I left Buenaventura in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A general and very strict lockdown was then announced by President Iván Duque. Afterward, and during the lockdown, I kept in contact with Claudia via WhatsApp. She heavily complained about the measures of the government and told me that people could not survive without the hardware shop. 'A lot of police are patrolling the neighborhood, they are controlling every single corner, but I still open the shop for some clients,' she texted me once. At the same time, a wide range of commodities became unavailable. This general shutdown of the city threatened life even more than the virus itself. In a way, COVID politics became another form of parasitical interference, perhaps even more dangerous than extortion. 'There is no *vacuna* for this virus that I can pay,' Claudia texted me with an ironic laughing emoticon. The fragility of materials, bodies, and life trajectories in Buenaventura makes urban dwellers extra vulnerable to parasitic interference—from viruses and extortionists alike.

In this paper, I addressed how extortion appears both as a form of violence and a form of parasitic practice, interfering in the circulation of commodities. Taking the example of Claudia's hardware shop in the neighborhood of Ciudad Blanca, I explored the ways shopkeepers cope with extortion through payment, precarious security systems, and denouncement. Ciudad Blanca is a neighborhood constantly under construction (Mains 2019). Therefore, the dwellers of Ciudad Blanca rely on the availability of commodities supplied by the hardware shop.

Extortion, as a form of 'parasite' (Serres 2007) in the channeling of commodities, blocks and threatens the circulation of these commodities and the reproduction of life in the city.

Carolin Melly's work on urban Senegal addresses the traffic bottlenecks caused by the construction of infrastructural megaprojects. While the flow and channeling of capital into the city provokes material and spatial transformations, the bottlenecks (its semantical and material experience) 'have produced very particular ways of seeing and inhabiting the city, while foreclosing others' (2017: 15). In Ciudad Blanca, violence—particularly the economic violence of extortion—can also be seen as a form of bottleneck for urban dwellers.

The coping mechanisms I have studied in this paper respond to the desire to unblock the channels to counteract the opening of other illicit channels. As shopkeepers at the urban margins articulate with illicit actors by paying the *vacuna* and with state actors in the hopes of unblocking the channels by denouncing illicit actors, they also foster and legitimatize repression, implicating themselves in the reproduction of other forms of violence. Yet, in a circular fashion, the state's selective and 'organized abandonment' also facilitates the presence of criminal organizations, and the subsequent proliferation of violence leads to continuous blocking and interfering of social 'channeling' efforts, which further exacerbates racialized social and economic inequalities in an already fragmented city. Life with the 'parasite' is thus complex and unpredictable.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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