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Transformative Political Spaces? *Asambleas Populares*, Identity, Alliances and
Belonging in Buenos Aires

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Abstract

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This dissertation presents a feminist and postcolonial analysis of spaces of encounter and alliance across social difference by paying attention to *asambleas populares* [popular assemblies] in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina. My work draws on scholarship related to space and identity, poverty politics and alliances, and citizenship to investigate the potential of these *asambleas* to challenge poverty and inequality both in their hegemonic discursive constructions as well as in their materiality. In my research, I pay close attention to the spatiality of the relationships in *asambleas* and investigate the ways their members negotiate coming in close proximity with difference - in terms of class, gender, and race - and with what effects. I argue that the socioeconomic and political crisis of 2001-02 represented a moment of rupture in the political imagination, creating a propitious context to overcome barriers to progressive politics for some sectors. The geohistorical context in which the *asambleas* emerged engendered the creation of spaces with potential for the disruption of middle-class class identities and political subjectivities. These changes happen through engagement over extended periods of time, and they require much work. They entail a profound critique of one's values and

stereotypes about 'poor others.' They also spark increasing recognition of one's privilege and the workings of power structures that produce and re-produce poverty. At the same time, the characteristics of the *asambleas* in terms of organizing their work and building social relationships facilitate the practice of empathy, which I argue is a fundamental tool for the construction and maintenance of alliances across difference. Relationships of affections entangled with the work in the *asambleas* are deeply political, because they imply the recognition of difference in non-oppressive ways as well as self-awareness/critique in ways that contribute to re-subjectification and engagement with social change. Lastly, I argue that the non-hegemonic ways of organizing in these spaces as well as the work across difference disrupt normalized liberal understandings of citizenship, community and belonging, as much as they question the very foundations upon which the social order has been built in Argentina.

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Chapter 1: Introduction



Figure 1: End of the year festival, Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo, December 2013

I met Marta on a hot summer afternoon in the *Asamblea Popular de Flores* [Popular Assembly of Flores]¹ situated in a middle-class neighborhood of de City of Buenos Aires. Marta is a white, middle-age and middle class woman. She is a housewife married to an engineer and has two children. We sat on one of the patios of the building on the way to the former clinic that today functions as a housing cooperative, and, as we talked, people kept passing by and greeting Marta. We got interrupted several times by some of the kids who live in the cooperative and kept coming to get some of the snacks that Marta had brought to our meeting.

¹ I will use '*asambleas*' with lower case 'a' when referring to the popular assemblies in general, leaving the use of 'A' for the cases in which I discuss one specific organization.

Marta had to abandon school when she was a teenager due to family problems. After she married she tried several times to resume her studies in a school for adults but she had not succeeded at finding a place where she felt at ease. One day she saw a flyer of the *Bachi* - short and friendly name for *Bachillerato Popular* (People's School) - posted in a bus stop and decided to give it a chance. She went to the *Asamblea* to register for the *Bachi* but when she arrived to the *Asamblea*, she was shocked. Marta felt uncomfortable, out of place. The *Asamblea* functions in a building the organization occupied many years ago - so does the *Bachi* - and Marta thought the place stood outside her expectations for a school environment,

It was really hard for me to understand the meaning of this place [...] My father was a bank clerk and my mother a teacher [...] so it was really hard for me to understand the idea of *occupying* this space, and I asked to myself “what am I doing between occupiers”? (Interview with Marta, 12/17/13)

'Occupying' a house or any other building became a common practice in Buenos Aires in the last thirty years in the face of the lack of affordable houses for low income populations (Cravino, Fernández Wagner, and Varela 2002). Overall, the middle class has reacted defensively to this phenomenon putting in motion a rhetorical strategy that first, sees the poor as being out-of-place in 'modern' Buenos Aires, and later, identifies the usually dark-skinned poor as an illegal immigrant from a neighboring country - which works to deprive the poor of their right to inhabit urban space (Guano 2004). This partially explains Marta's initial discomfort when encountering this occupied space and the people in it. The rejection, in part, draws on a series of values and norms about the 'self-made (white) middle class' that are ingrained in Argentinian society. Marta comments that she was initially skeptical of the occupied space of the *Asamblea* because,

... from where I am in terms of the life I have, [poverty] it's not visible! [...] it is not visible because of this predicament that "I work my ass off to have a roof over my head, a house, so others should do the same! No social security, no nothing!" You see? There is no such a thing as a right [to a house]. You make your own rights! (Interview with Marta, 12/17/13)

In spite of Marta's initial reaction - and rejection - of this space, she stayed, completed her high-school diploma, and after graduating she decided to stay in the *Bachillerato* as a teacher. Marta does not participate in other activities that take place in the *Asamblea* but yet, she feels very close to the people, the space and the principles the organization stands for. I chose to begin with Marta's example because it captures some of the most intriguing questions I had when I went to the field. That is, what is the role of space in the constitution and reworking of class identities and political subjectivities? And what are the dynamics underpinning alliances across difference and political change when embodied differences encounter in space?

The organizations I researched emerged in a time of huge socioeconomic and political crisis, therefore, my work looks at how dynamics of identity formation and alliances change in such critical times. My work shows that the disruption in the political imagination that took place during the mobilizations of 2001-03² in Argentina created a very particular context to overcome barriers to progressive politics for some sectors of society. I argue that the very nature of the origins of these spaces hold the potential to build solidarity and alliances across difference in ways that are intrinsically - even if not explicitly - critical of common understandings of citizenship, community and belonging. I study these issues by reflecting on the experience of work across difference in *asambleas*

² In 2001 Argentina underwent a major socioeconomic and political crisis that resulted in a popular rebellion in the night of December 19th that caused the resignation of the President and initiate a time with high levels of social mobilization. I expand on this in the following paragraphs.

populares in the city of Buenos Aires where I conducted ethnographic work during 2013-2014.³

At the root of the concerns that drive my dissertation is the socioeconomic and political crisis experienced by Argentina during 2001 and 2002, which gave birth to a variety of social organizations that cut across class, race and gender. Growing poverty and inequality characterized the period previous to the uprising of 2001 affecting harshly the already poor and also polarizing and ‘fragmenting’ the middle class. Unemployment's rate came close to 20% and the Gini index was over 0.5. Regardless of the impact of the economic situation - urban poverty had reached 50% (Rapoport et al. 2006) -, most of the mobilizations were carried out by the unemployed working class (Adamovsky 2010). Even though some sectors of the impoverished middle class manifested awareness of the structural problems that affected themselves as well as the poor and showed solidarity towards those in worse situations, many also relocated to fancy new gated communities or isolated themselves in their struggle to keep up with their life-style (Minujín and Anguita 2004).

Hence the novelty and significance of the emergence of these organizations that bridged across social differences. They were epitomized in the slogan '*piquete y cacerola, la lucha es una sola*' [picket and pots, the fight is one alone],⁴ denoting the alliance of the working class - in many cases unemployed - and middle class at a moment of huge

³ While I conducted participant observation in two *asambleas* and several interviews with former members of several other *asambleas*, in this dissertation I draw mostly on one of them. This will be further explained in chapter 2.

⁴ The '*piquete*', the act of blocking a road preventing people and cars from crossing is associated with forms of protest carried out by the poorest sectors. Beating a '*cacerola*' [pot] with a spoon or stick, has become a form of showing disapproval and discontent, and is a way of protesting mostly identified with the middle class.

socioeconomic and political change and the disruption of symbolic as well as material social boundaries (Dinerstein 2003; Grimson 2008; Fernández 2006).

Asambleas Populares

Asambleas populares emerged in Argentina in the context of a deep economic crisis and political turmoil in the summer of 2001/2002 and multiplied like mushrooms during the first half of 2002 (Bielsa 2002; Rossi 2005a; López Levy 2004). After half a year of economic recession on the night of December 19th, 2001, thousands of people took to the streets of Buenos Aires and other cities in Argentina. On December 20th President De La Rúa resigned while the protests continued and the people unceasingly chanted '*¡que se vayan todos!*' [they all must go!]. Almost immediately *asambleas populares* spread all over the city of Buenos Aires occupying open and public spaces. With less of 10% of the total population of the country, by March 2002 Buenos Aires hosted 41% of all the existing *asambleas*, the majority of which took place in middle and high-middle class neighborhoods ("Nacieron 272 asambleas luego de los cacerolazos," 2002).

Asambleas populares explicitly emerged as autonomous political spaces and from the very beginning actively sought to bring difference - in terms of class, gender, race, socioeconomic background, etc. - together in a moment in which the huge economic crisis seemed to erase class and socioeconomic differences (Sitrin 2006; Svampa and Corral 2006). *Asambleas*⁵ started for many participants as a cathartic moment in which to share common experiences of economic downturn (Pousadela 2011). They quickly developed

⁵ *Asambleas* received different denominations according to the way their members understood their purpose and according to their political interpretation of the crisis (Pousadela 2011; Rossi 2005b). Thus, there were *Asambleas 'Barriales'* or '*Vecinales'* (Neighborhood Assemblies) and *Asambleas 'Populares'* (Popular Assemblies). The latter represents the more radical sector of the *asambleas* that read the events of the moment as both a crisis of the capitalist system and that of the representative democracy (Rossi 2005b).

into a territorially organized form of political participation whose locus was the neighborhood (Dinerstein 2003) something, however, that did not prevent them from establishing alliances across the city. In some cases *asambleas* occupied abandoned buildings and in most of the cases engaged in solidarity actions with other groups like those of students, unemployed, *piqueteros* and *cartoneros*⁶ (Rossi 2005a).

Even though the *asambleas* mostly included middle class people, their composition was not homogeneous, varying within the *asamblea* and also among the different neighborhoods where they developed. Some of the differences were their class position, level of education and previous political experiences (Svampa and Corral 2006). Other differences between *asambleas* were given by the kind of topics addressed which were in close relation to the socioeconomic condition of the neighborhood (López Levy 2004) and the links they established with different organizations (Kanai 2010). Whatever the case, stepping out of the house and gathering in public meant that people from different backgrounds came together and shared their experiences, something that allowed the recognition of common problems such as unemployment, increasing marginalization of the poor, corruption among the political class, lack of transparency in the judicial system, outdated infrastructure and poorly maintained public spaces, etc. It also meant that people could share expectations of a more inclusive society and increasing voice and participation in municipal decision-making processes. If up to the popular rebellion of 2001 many lived

⁶ The term *piquetero* refers to a person who participates in the *piquetero* movement. This movement began in the 1990s when former employees of state's companies laid off when the companies were privatized, decided to block main roads to make their protest visible and somehow force the government to address their situation. *Cartoneros* refers to people without jobs that during the night walk the city searching in the garbage for cardboard and other recyclable material to later sell it. Even if there has always been people who worked gathering recyclable material (mostly tin and paper), *cartoneros* are indicative of the extent of the socioeconomic crisis. Suddenly, there were hundreds in middle-class and upper-class neighborhoods, sometimes, complete families going through the trash and searching in dumpsters.

the downturns of the economy in isolation in the privacy of their homes or close family circles, the multiple and repeated encounters in a re-appropriated public space made widespread poverty and regressive politics visible in an undeniable way. In the streets and parks were people met to protest they learnt that others were facing the same troubles and that their situation could not be accounted as the result of 'reckless' or 'mistaken' individual choices. The recognition of shared misfortunes contributed to build collective alternatives to impoverishment and to what was perceived as a defunct political system (González Bombal and Luzzi 2006).

For a time, *asambleas*' presence in the city of Buenos Aires was strongly felt in both material and symbolic ways. Some of them had an important role in the neighborhoods where they functioned in terms of attending the daily needs of many people such as food, work, and even emotional support. Symbolically, they were important because they offered a different and new way of doing politics at a time in which traditional party politics was seen as outdated and obsolete. They instilled hope of a more democratic and equal society in people who had not previously seen a way out of the sordid political scenario of the 1990s. Importantly, they provided a space for many to be initiated in active political life while for others they represented an opportunity to recuperate their numbed political subjectivities.⁷

In a broad sense, *asambleas populares* can be located within the vast range of collective mobilizations that took place around the world since the late 1960s. Those mobilizations represented a shift from 'old' forms of social movements such as labor

⁷ Many of the interviews told me that during the 1990s they took distance from politics, specially those who had been participating in the *Partido Justicialista* (the party in power at the moment) due to strong ideological disagreements with the party. The 1990s are seen for many as a period of banalization of politics, with politicians and civil servants taking part in frivolous TV shows next to figures of the show business.

organizations and political parties because they took place outside traditional institutional channels and formal political spaces. These new social mobilizations also differed from the old in their strategies, claims and in the subjects that carry them out (Svampa 2010; Dinerstein 2003; Seoane 2002; Sitrin 2006). Whether looking from a U.S. based 'political opportunity structure' approach (Tilly 2004) or a European 'new social movement' framework (Melucci 1988), social mobilizations in the last few decades in Latin America have emphasized the concept of 'identity' and 'culture' around which the movement and its politics are built (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998; Escobar 1992). 'Identity' in these cases refer to identities - other than class - that have been historically denied as bearers of certain and particular rights that are now mobilized as strategies of resistance by certain collectives. According to Warren (2012), the extended periods of military regimes in Latin America facilitated the emergence of movements congregated around less 'threatening' characteristics, such as gender and ethnicity. However, Latin American scholars argue that 'new social movements' in Latin America are characterized by the intersectionality of identities. Thus, cultural politics reflect class-concerns, and claims are both about gaining recognition and addressing inequality (Davis 1999; Warren 2012; Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998).

During the first few years of the 2000s, scholars, the media, and social activists around the world, as well as local politicians, followed closely the work done by the organizations that emerged out of the crisis, particularly during 2002 and part of 2003 when the level of social mobilization was extremely high. Argentina was seen as an observatory for potential revolutionary social change led by a civil society organized around factory recuperations, *asambleas populares*, community kitchens, organizations of the

unemployed, and barter clubs among others. All of these organizations offered critiques of the effects of the neoliberal policies that had been put in place in Argentina since the 1970s, and deepened during the 1990s. Thus, witnesses of that time involved in progressive politics looked at the Argentinean case with anxiety and hope that these oppositional movements would offer viable discursive as well as material alternatives to neoliberalism (North and Huber 2004; North 2008; Dinerstein 2002; Holloway 2002).

Most of the scholarly work has focused on the organizations' transformations and - in many cases - eventual dissolution as the political and economic scenarios were gradually stabilized. Today, most of the scholars concerned with social movements and anti-capitalist struggles agree that the power with which these organizations erupted during the crisis was not enough to counterbalance the many obstacles they encountered that hindered the creation of a broader coalition strong enough as to overhaul the whole sociopolitical and economic system (Rossi 2005a; Pousadela 2011; Barbetta and Bidaseca 2002). Some attention has been paid to the difficulties of *asambleas populares* in particular to sustain their initial alliances with working-class organizations. Echoing Marx and Engels' assertion that the lower middle classes are reactionary because they "try to roll back the wheel of history" once they defeat those who constrain them (2004, 72), some scholars have implied that it was the 'natural' tendency of the middle class to close back its ranks once the crisis was averted posing limits to building and sustaining strong alliances between the middle class and the poorer sectors (North and Huber 2004).

Regardless of the expectations that people placed in the *asambleas* and the assessments that deemed them 'effective' or not in relation to those expectations, *asambleas* did not just vanish once the political and economic situation resumed certain

stability. Effectively, the election of Néstor Kirchner in 2003 signaled a turning point for many social movements. The government changed its strategy in relation to grassroots organizations and adopted a politics that comprised the cooptation of some of them while stigmatizing those more belligerent and opposed to the government (Svampa 2007). At the same time, Kirchner's government addressed many of the claims of the social movements - something that some *asambleístas* (members of the *asambleas*) interpreted as a sign that it was time to go back home - and later on, Cristina Fernández' two periods expanded the safety net and social security services. These and other reasons - including the intrinsic limits of the new organizations - resulted in the decline of much of the mobilization and the level of contestation that had challenged the socioeconomic and political system in the early 2000s.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assert that *asambleas* did not transcend beyond the re-organization of the national economic and political scenario from 2003 onwards when they started losing visibility. Not only did some *asambleas* continue working as such, but also those which did not preserve the original format gave way to - or facilitated the emergence of - organizations such as cultural centers and non-profit for the protection of green spaces in the city. Furthermore, in the cases in which *asambleas* did not metamorphose into any kind of organization, they did have a substantive impact on those who participated in them, affecting their lives and their future political decisions.

Such impact should not be underestimated. Some of their former members took their learning of horizontal and solidarity organizing to their new spaces influencing the way they functioned, something that resonates with Michael Watts' assertion that the apparent defeated insurrections of 1968 have impacted institutions and changed

contemporary politics (Watts 2001). One of the participants in my research joked about how even homeowners' meetings have adopted an *asamblearia* form, giving an idea of the extent to which horizontal ways of organizing had struck deep in people's conceptualizations of political organizing.

Furthermore, even in cases in which people 'went back home' and did not engage with any other political activity, it is worth noting that - as one of the interviewees put it to me - they have remained in a 'state of alert' and aware of the political life in a way that empowered them as autonomous political actors. They were changed by their experiences in the *asambleas*, which restored - or provided for the first time - a sense of political agency. Alma - a middle-class and middle-age woman member of the *Asamblea de Floresta* - was only one of the many participants who told me that for her, participating in the *asamblea* was like gaining back her activist identity after years of feeling frustrated, alone and isolated during President Menem's mandates, a moment of significant depoliticization.

Many *asambleas* did not last long, while others lived for a few years. A small number managed to establish solid roots in their neighborhoods and continue with their work until today. Contrary to what could be inferred from some scholarly titles and from the drop in the number of publications about *asambleas*, the decline in the *asambleas* as a movement does not mean that all of them are gone.⁸ Paying attention to the *asambleas* that still function today and assessing the legacy of the *asambleas* in general is a way of

⁸ For example: The Disappearance of the Neighborhood Assembly Movement in Buenos Aires, Argentina 2001-2004: A Phase of Demobilization? (Thompson 2010); Aparición, auge y declinación de un movimiento social: Las asambleas vecinales y populares de Buenos Aires, 2001-2003 (Rossi 2005a). Regarding the number of publications, I run a search in WorldCat database using terms such as 'popular assemblies Argentina' or 'neighborhood assemblies Argentina' both in English and Castilian and the number of publications dropped between 80% and 90% if I restrained the search to the last 5 years.

reexamining and restoring the political relevance that many observers claimed they had during 2002 and 2003 - before dismissing them for their apparent limits to create a unique movement that would radically change the whole socioeconomic and political system.

My work is concerned foremost with exploring political actions that challenge poverty, both in its hegemonic discursive construction and in its materiality, and it does so by considering the relationships across difference that emerge from and shape the space of the *asambleas*. I focus on the kind of encounters that take place in the *asambleas* to look at one way in which space and identity are brought together and generate possibilities for political change. I also look at the kind of alliances built and at how politics is conceptualized in *asambleas*. I pay attention to what role their members consider to have as political subjects, and to the kind of actions they consider necessary for the politics they envision. Lastly, I am concerned with the implications that the work of the *asambleas* has for conceptualizations of citizenship and belonging in times in which the deepening of an urban logic governed by economic imperatives implicitly establishes a system of 'differentiated citizenship' with very negative material effects for the poor and their relationship to the urban space (Holston 2009).

These questions and concerns were initially inspired by the literature on so-called 'geographies of encounter' from which I draw, but also critique and expand. Scholarship on 'encounter' pays attention to the spatiality of the encounter and reflects on how we might live with difference in the context of increasing multicultural cities (Amin 2012; Amin 2006; Wilson 2014). Some authors have specifically called attention to the need to consider not only the material context of the encounter - the street, the square, the school, etc. - and the contextual specificities, but also established configurations of power underpinned by -

sometimes - unspoken class and racial hierarchies. These configurations of power could be manifested in multiple ways - through recriminatory or patronizing/condescending discourses, material exclusions, or governmentalizing practices - affecting and shaping the encounter (Leitner 2012; Matejskova and Leitner 2011; Lawson and Elwood 2014).

Encounters with difference are spatially mediated because both spaces and bodies are charged with values that differently affect each other depending on the dynamics triggered by the broader structures and the specificities of the encounter (Valentine 2008; Lawson and Elwood 2014). Certain bodies might be seen as 'out of place' by virtue of their race, social condition or behavior, something that greatly affects the kind of encounter taking place and could potentially lead to anxieties, discrimination and even physical harm (Puwar 2004; Cresswell 1996). At the same time, some spaces are valued differently depending on the bodies that occupy them, value that sometimes is regulated by 'removing' those bodies through actions that involve, in one way or another, some kind of violence (Puwar 2004; Wright 2004).

In my research I pay close attention to the spatiality of the relationships in *asambleas* and investigate the way the members of the *asambleas* negotiate the encounters with difference and their position in these spaces. I investigate the intersections of identities as they play out in the material and symbolic space of the *asambleas* to trace changes in *asambleistas'* political subjectivities. I argue that these long-term encounters facilitate awareness of one's privilege and that this awareness changes the subject in ways that enables the emergence of new relational subjectivities. I also resort to the concept of 'empathy' as a key driver for political alliances and change, while I put it in conversation with broader socioeconomic and political structures that constrain, shape and/or enable

political action.

The relevance of considering the spatiality of encounters between difference resides in the fact that both identities and poverty are relational, contextual and spatially defined events that are deeply interconnected. Both identity formation and poverty (re)production create spaces that are marked with hierarchies, inclusions and exclusions that in turn allow for certain kind of interactions and relationships between difference. In this work, and through the case of *asambleas populares* - focusing particularly in one - I seek to understand the connections between identities, space and poverty politics contributing to discussions about the nature of and the possibilities for political change.

The Middle-Class and Asambleas Populares

Why focus on the middle class in this dissertation? There are several reasons that drew me to pay attention to middle-class' political actions. First, I am interested in spaces where cross-class relations occur and in how, and to what extent, the middle class can and effectively build alliances across difference with potential for progressive politics. Second, dominant discourses frame the middle class as an homogeneous aspirational class in opposition to 'the poor' and against which the image of the poor is built (Lawson et. al. 2012). This is a gross generalization that does not take into account the heterogeneity within the category of middle class, not only in terms of income, but also ideologies, political inclinations, political subjectivities and class awareness. Third, and closely related to the last point, those who identify as middle class have played important roles in both advancing progressive social reforms in Argentina and pushing back against them (de Riz 2011). Making a generalization about the middle-class politics is not only unsound but also

unwise.

Lastly, the majority of the population of Buenos Aires is categorized as ‘middle-class’ and yet, dichotomist imaginaries of the city are put forward by self-identified members of the middle class. This last observation in itself constitutes an intriguing and fascinating entry point to study the constitution of (middle)class identities and political subjectivities in their relation to the city and to the hegemonic project of neoliberal Buenos Aires (see Hall 1987). When different sectors of the middle class vote and act in the city, they produce and reproduce particular discourses about how the city should look like, who has or should have the right to it and who should be excluded. At the same time, they contribute to shaping the contours of the public sphere through their organizations. They occupy administrative and political positions in the local and national governments, they are professors in universities, teachers in schools, doctors in hospitals, and they have - at least to a large extent - the social, cultural and economic capital to make their claims heard and to navigate the city in a way that benefits their interests (Kanai 2011; Auyero 2012). In sum, in this research I pay particular attention to the middle class because it takes part in the creation and maintenance of symbolic and material borders that produce or challenge multiple layers of exclusion.

"The time is now"

Asambleas are part of a series of movements of resistance and opposition to systems of domination - the economic and political powers of capital, the implicit and explicit violence of patriarchy, racism in all of its forms -, but also of (re)creation of social, economic and political relations at the antipodes. For that reason, I argue that the case of

asambleas populares as discussed in this work can complicate current debates about the nature of political change and what needs to be done to bring it about. Studying the processes that underpin the work in the spaces of the *asambleas* can help understand how social alliances across difference are built and sustained and what political work these coalitions can do.

For instance, the banking crisis of 2007 and its economic repercussions all around the world have spurred the rise of radical movements - from Tunisia to Egypt, from Spain to Greece, from Libya to the U.S. - to confront austerity measures, deteriorating living conditions and the concentration of wealth in the few hands that could buy political power (Sitrin and Azzellini 2014; Amar and Prashad 2013). The connections between these movements and mobilizations and those in Argentina at the turn of the century are not only apparent. Reflecting on Occupy Wall Street (OWS), Sparke (2013) wonders how instances like this - moments of dialectical relationship between protests fixed in space and their openness to plurality and participation - might signal to the transnational work needed to build a global alliance of progressive politics. Every single contestation of this agenda, spurs further hopes of social change. In 2012 Harvey claimed that “the time [to fight for the right to decide how the system should be reconstructed] is now” (Harvey 2012, 164), because the system was responding to the crisis with no other than further dispossession and repression. Harvey suggests that in order to succeed, the movement - he was referring particularly to OWS but it might as well apply to all radical movements - needs to reach out to 'the 99%', particularly “the alienated, the dissatisfied, and the discontented - all those who recognize and feel in their gut that there is something profoundly wrong” (162).

Regardless of widespread activism and contestation, in most scenarios neoliberal

rationales have successfully survived the crises accruing further support for its economic policies and governmental practices (Massey 2010) with backlashes of the kind that we recently witnessed by the Troika over Greece, upon which more of the same neoliberal remedies have been imposed. Hall, Massey and Rustin (2013) suggest that - at least in the UK - the absence of a crisis of ideas that paralleled the economic crisis⁹ is the consequence of an ongoing investment in securing consent coupled with the inability of the left to generate an alternative vision, a new 'political frontier'. Not to mention the ebb of the so-called 'pink tide' in Latin America or the entrenchment of nationalistic discourses that place the blame for the economic downturns on immigrants and refugees. The lingering question is how do we bring about political change? What are the steps to follow for those who pursue the right to live in a world where everyone has the possibility of flourishing and living with dignity? Particularly in relation to urban spaces, if as Harvey claims, the city functions “as an important site of political action and revolt” (2012, 117-8), what constitutes a radical urban politics and how can it be built in a way that enables the articulation of broader political responses?

The *asambleas* I have worked with enact in their practices an awareness of the interconnections that exists between neighborhoods and citizens in terms of wealth and opportunity. Regardless of the geographical scope of their actions, these practices are always decided in conversation with local and national political agendas and the tensions between them, overcoming then I argue, the limits of what Harvey identifies as ‘militant particularism’ (2001). I contend they hold a lot of potential to tie apparent localized actions to a broader narrative of a more just organization of social, political and economic life.

⁹ They specifically refer to the 2007-08 financial crisis.

Furthermore, when *asambleas* resort to the neighborhood for help - whether that would be donations for the soup kitchen or support in the defense of a housing cooperative - what their constituencies are doing is not only trying to engage the neighbors in solidarity actions, but they are foremost highlighting the relational nature of poverty and the responsibilities associated with that.

Asambleas are certainly not the only spaces that question the structures of power that exclude both discursively and materially. There are plenty of examples in Buenos Aires to draw from - the *Colectivo de Hombres Antipatriarcales* [Anti-Patriarchy Men's Collective], the *Encuentro Nacional de Mujeres* [Women's National Encounter] that has been taking place for thirty years now, and cooperatives like *La Poderosa* that in its magazine *La Garganta Poderosa* [The Powerful Throat] gives a non/anti-hegemonic account of life in precarious settlements. However, the importance of understanding how and why *asambleas* mobilize certain types of discourses about belonging and poverty and 'the poor', resides in the fact that *asambleas* have traditionally brought together excluded and included, marginal sectors and middle class in a way that, I argue, offers potential for rethinking what it means to live/build with difference. In the remaining of the introduction I provide an overview of the scholarly fields which my work has drawn on, and lay out the contributions I bring with this research.

Theoretical Framework

Space and Identity

This dissertation contributes to debates about the role of space in the construction of identities, alliances across difference and urban politics. It engages with broader and ongoing debates within social sciences about the nature of politics and political change and

it asks, what happens when political spaces are created with a different logic to the prevailing one in the broader context in which they emerge - that is, hierarchical, unequal, fragmented and marked by class, race and gender boundaries? What possibilities are there for subverting established identities in ways that disrupt prejudices and preconceptions about others that advance broader and more inclusive alliances across difference? In sum, what kind of political work do these spaces enable? I assert that the space of *asambleas* is potentially disruptive of people's identities and stereotypes about 'others' and that in turn the space of the *asamblea* is transformed by the kind of social relationships built by the subjects that inhabit it.

The relationship between space and identity has been a concern of social scientists for a long time (cf. Tuan 1977; Relph 1976) but it was not until the 1990s when contributions of feminist, post-colonial and post-structuralist accounts re-focused the attention on 'difference' as a key concept to understand the relationship between space and identity (Sibley 1995; Fraser 2000; McDowell 2006; Domosh and Seager 2001). Identity and space co-constitute each other in processes of boundary making where spaces are charged with meanings, values and expectations about what can and cannot be done in them and who can inhabit them or, instead, be banished (Cresswell 1996, Puwar 2004). At the same time, identities are produced in relation to an 'other', where 'who' or 'what' constitutes an 'other' depends on the location at which people meet - both in the sense of socially produced space as well as in the situatedness of those who are interacting (Sharp 2009).

The contingency of identity then is shaped by intersecting social categories within specific spatial contexts and at specific times as much as it is by the changes in functions

and values with which spaces are invested (cf. Valentine 2007). Concomitantly, these values and functions are subject to struggles between groups with different interests, needs, and ideas of what is to be done with that space in particular and with the spatial organization of social relations in general (Amin 2012). Urban spaces are to a large extent the result of class struggles that determine which kind of city it should be, and who can live in it. However, class struggles are never in their pure form since they intersect with simultaneous and co-constituting processes of race, gender, sexuality, religion - among other social 'dimensions of being' (McDowell 2008) - identity formation around which the urban space is discursively and materially organized as well as contested (Fernandes 2004; Secor 2002).

According to Hall, identities are constructed within discourse in specific historical and institutional sites where identities are never completed but always 'in process' of formation and always in need of an 'other' that returns with their gaze the 'self', because identity is "always within representation" (Hall 1997, 49). Identities then are like a 'meeting point' - the 'point of suture' - that it is constantly threatened by what they leave out when they close over themselves, which means they have to be constantly reasserted through the repetition of daily acts and mundane gestures to secure its borders (Sharp 2009). Thus, the performative nature of identities leaves room for subversion and change in a process that is very much situated in place and within historical and institutional contexts. In this regard, identities can be dislocated and re-articulated in new ways producing new subjects (Hall 1997).

Accompanying the multiple identities that people perform in the same day as they move across different scenarios, the way people see and experience their different selves changes through time and space making the process of subject formation an ongoing

project (Butler 1993). People might have different perceptions of the self in different places - understood as both the actual physical space and the relationships between people and things - that can potentially trigger new ways of being in the world (Cameron and Gibson 2005).

Furthermore, emotions and feelings help to construct, sustain and challenge boundary-making processes - both in their material and social expressions - that are implicated in processes of identity construction (Davidson, Bondi, and Smith 2005). Emotions are not only an important part of what prompt us to question our reality and our role in the production and re-production of that reality (Lawson 2007), but also, these moments of awareness of responsibilities, privilege and/or vulnerabilities can have important roles in driving political mobilization (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polleta 2001).

In this sense, *asambleas populares* are an important lens through which to look into space, identity, political subjectivities and political action. Animated by the emergence of new forms of collective action that overlap with, but also depart from, what has been known as the 'new social movements' of the 1960s and 1970s (Melucci 1988; Touraine 1981), scholars, policy makers and activists have tried to shed light on the complex and sometimes contradictory relationships between hegemonic political and economic forces and non-hegemonic/alternative/oppositional movements and organizations. Importantly for my work, scholars have highlighted the emergence of new political subjects that create and are created by these movements that are constituted outside traditional identities and who no longer see - or expect - the working class to be the only subject of revolutionary change (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998; Escobar and Alvarez 1992; Delamata and Armesto 2005). Instead, any individual or group allied around other politics, could potentially enact

small 'every day revolutions' here and now (Sitrin 2012).¹⁰

This work pays attention to what *asambleas populares* can tell us about the role of space in the constitution and constant reworking of class identities. It furthers our understanding of how new political subjectivities emerge in close relation to the space in which people act and relate to others for extended periods of time. At the same time, it looks at the kind of space that a particular articulation of identities brings into existence by mobilizing certain claims and expectations in a context of increasing inequality and discourses that criminalize poverty in neoliberal Buenos Aires.

Poverty Politics

In order to tease out how *asambleas* break and/or (re)make boundaries, we need to think about the relational production of poverty as a multivalent process of co-constituting variables where identities - of race, class, gender -, technologies of governance and actual material dispossession intervene. Relational poverty research pays attention to the power relations that mediate between marginalized groups and larger social, political and economic systems that shape the dimensions of chronic poverty. Ongoing rounds of dispossession are required in order to solve the internal contradictions of capital accumulation and secure its constant reproduction. These 'spatial fix(s)' range from the enclosure of the commons and the privatization of social and public services, to military interventions and the crushing of labor forms of organizing (Harvey 1982; 2003). Thus, a relational approach to poverty looks at processes of adverse incorporation into labor and commodity free-markets, as well as the subordinate position of some groups in their socio-

¹⁰ I refer to the alter-globalization and anti-neoliberal movements that have sprung around the world in the last thirty/forty years that have questioned the legitimacy of the social, economic and political neoliberal agenda (cf. Harvey 2012; Holloway 2002; Sitrin 2006; Zibechi and Ryan 2012; Escobar 1992 among others).

cultural environments and the institutional arrangements that constrain access to political participation and representation (Hickey and Du Toit 2007). A relational approach to poverty also adopts an anti-essentialist approach to place and pays attention to the spatial division of labor and consumption and the connections and interdependencies of processes and events between places (Massey 1994b; Massey 2007; Lawson et. al. 2012).

Relational poverty scholarship understands poverty as the outcome of the exclusionary effects of capitalist transformation coupled with its discursive and material reproduction and perpetuation by dominant social categorizations that include or exclude, value or de-value certain subjects through discourses and policies (Lawson, Jarosz, and Bonds 2008; Mosse 2010; Hickey 2009). Thus, a relational approach to poverty stands opposite to those that see poverty as the effect of individuals' 'poor choices' and 'deviant behaviors' or as simply the lack of some attribute such as education, resources or 'opportunities'.¹¹ If poverty is conceived as the result of social and economic relations where power is unequally distributed, responsibility for it cannot be located in one person - 'the poor' - or group of people. Instead it must be placed on those who contribute - to different extents - to reproduce exploitative conditions of labor and benefit from them. Therefore, relational poverty research pays attention to the role of the non-poor in the production, reproduction and/or alleviation of poverty (Lawson et. al. 2012).

My research draws from and extends the literature on relational poverty and inequality (Mosse 2010; Green and Hulme 2005; Hickey and Du Toit 2007; Elwood, Lawson, and Sheppard 2016) and puts in conversation with scholarship that looks at how

¹¹ For a thorough account and analysis of the history of poverty as the object of scientific research and intervention in the U.S. refer to O'Connor's *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press (2001).

difference comes together to shed light on how identity and space-making produce, reproduce or alleviate poverty and inequality both discursively and materially. It does so by looking at the negotiations of difference in the political space of the *asambleas* and the way they disrupt/produce/shape processes of identity/political subjectivities formation and alliance *in* difference (Jakobsen 1998).

Scholars in the social sciences have long been fascinated by the effects resulting from the coming together of embodied differences in space (Simmel 1950; Allport 1954; Harvey 1973; Amin 2002; Valentine 2008). Cities in particular have received attention not only from scholars but also from writers, artists and film-makers inspired by their complex social realities. For a long time, this scholarship focused on the adverse effects that such differences had on the unfolding of cities' quotidian lives, always altered by tensions, frictions and fractures along lines of class, race, culture, nationality, sexuality and gender among other social categories.

From the initial writings of Georg Simmel to Marxian critiques of differential capital accumulation in the 1970s and urban cultural studies from the 1980s onwards, including the work of the Chicago School of Sociology in the 1920s and 1930s and Gordon Allport's studies on contact and prejudice between different groups, scholars have been concerned with how difference is negotiated when it comes together in close proximity, and have studied how people live with, challenge or reinforce class, race, culture and gender differences as they go about their daily business in the city (Simmel 1950; Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1967; Burgess 1926; Allport 1954; Harvey 1973; Castells 1977; Caldeira 2000; Sibley 1995).

Scholars and policy makers have tried to understand how members of different

collectives relate to each other, what kind of relationships are established and how are they reflected in the daily relationships of conviviality, antagonism, fear, surveillance, etc. in the city (Matejskova and Leitner 2011; Valentine and McDonald 2004; Amin 2002; Amin 2006; Valentine 2008; Laurier and Philo 2006). Attention has been paid to how interacting with others can transform identities and subjectivities at the intersection of local daily social relations on the one hand, and national, regional and global economic structures and systems of governance and regulation on the other (McDowell 2008; Lawson and Elwood 2014; Pratt 1998). This scholarship has also focused on the effects of these 'encounters with difference' for the governing of urban life (Amin 2002; L'Aoustet 2002; Allen and Cars 2001).

Lately there has been a turn towards recovering the positive - albeit sometimes contradictory - effects of living within a diverse urban population in order to shed light onto how to improve the conviviality in the city and reduce conflict. For example, how interactions engender a better understanding and acceptance of other communities' beliefs, behaviors and culture, helping to overcome prejudice (Wilson 2014; Andersson, Sadgrove, and Valentine 2012; Schuermans 2013; Askins and Pain 2011). Concern has also been paid to developing a research agenda that would tackle the mechanisms by which those positive effects for the community can be scaled up through directed actions and policies (Askins and Pain 2011).

My dissertation extends this debate by paying attention to how encounters with difference play out in processes of identity formation and political subjectivity change in the *asambleas*. It also looks at how encounters with difference influence the construction of alliances that are concerned with poverty and inequality in these organizations. I argue

that some of the literature about the coming together of difference in the same space provides overly celebratory accounts of convivial interactions in sites of diversity whereas my work shows that certain spaces are more enabling of identity change and alliance building than others, and that 'positive' effects of encounters take much - and conscious - work.

This dissertation is foremost concerned with political change and provides important insights into the political transformation of actual people who act materially in the world, potentially, in a way that matters to issues of inequality, poverty and injustice reduction and amelioration. It looks at the daily practices, interactions and collective work enacted in and through these political spaces to see how the tacit or implicit rules associated with it play out in the consolidation or destabilization of identities. It asks what knowledges circulate about poverty and inequality and how they might be re-produced or challenged, in turn, furthering the invisibilization or privilege or bringing it to the fore instead. I look at the relationship between the 'non-conventional' ways in which *asambleas* organize socially, politically and economically - not only in the space of the *asamblea* but also in relation to the neighborhood - and the kind of political subjectivities emerging in them. This dissertation pays attention to the ways in which people in the *asambleas* continue to negotiate the differences in terms of class, race and gender after fifteen years of their inception.

One recurrent issue that emerged during the interviews was the action of putting on someone else's shoes, a subjective displacement enabled by the physical proximity of people in worse or at least different situations than themselves.¹² 'Empathy', acts as a

¹² Physical proximity could also trigger very different kind of emotions, such as rejection, fear or hate (Ahmed 2004).

catalyzer of actions of solidarity and recognition, but also it seems to have worked - for some - as a mirror of themselves and their relatively privileged situation. In this sense, I argue that 'empathy' induces critical self-reflection on people's situation in relation to others and holds much potential for political action (cf. Gruen 2015). I study the role of emotions in people's awareness of privilege and commitment to political change, as an engine with the capacity to create "new political frontier[s]" (Massey 2010). And I pay attention to if and how relationships taking place in these political spaces disrupt borders, contributing to our knowledge about the interlocked process of othering and identity-building.

Citizenship and Belonging

My work also contributes to debates about 'belonging' to the city by looking at the way in which *asambleas*' actions and discourses question the bases on which the social contract has been built in Argentina. This research also reflects on the extent to which *asambleas* have the potential to destabilize Western/liberal conceptualizations of citizenship in its racialized and exclusionary form. I take the idea of citizenship as a flexible and malleable concept that is contingent upon specific relationships between civil society and the state and between the state and capital to argue that organizations such as the *asambleas* play with the flexibility of the concept in order to challenge the exclusionary effects of the law. I resort to conceptualizations of knowledge, power and difference coming from coloniality/modernity studies (cf. Castro-Gómez 2009; Mignolo 2002) to evaluate *asambleas*' potential to question the legitimacy of liberal citizenship while seemingly working within it.

According to coloniality/modernity scholarship, the processes of colonization initiated in the 15th century created a repertory of colonial legacies that continue to shape knowledges, subjectivities and institutions in former colonized places. In this sense, nation-states like Argentina were created as some hybridized form of the European ideal in an attempt to mimic its culture and institutions (Taylor 2013). I engage with this literature to reflect on 'exclusion' as a key component of liberal citizenship in Argentina and reflect on the potential that spaces such as the *asamblea* have to disrupt, to 'delink' (Mignolo 2007), from racialized and exclusionary national ideas of belonging. In doing so, I argue that layers of complexity can be added to conceptualizing the range of citizenship subjects emerging and the political projects being advanced.

The modern meaning of 'citizenship' reflects the shift in the scale of ascription of individuals from local to national communities, and positions the individual as a political actor with rights guaranteed by the state and duties towards the rest of the members of the community with whom he/she supposedly shares a common history and common values (Holston 2009; Kofman 2003). According to Marshall (1964), in Western societies, citizenship and the state evolved in tandem with the capitalist system, expanding the incorporation of different sectors of society into the citizenry in ordered chronological stages. Thus, political rights followed the establishment of civil rights at the end of the 19th century, and subsequently social rights followed the former in the 20th century. Marshall argued that the expansion of citizenship acted as a counterbalance of class difference because it implied - to some extent - the "subordination of market price to social justice, the replacement of the free bargain by the declaration of rights" (40).

Despite the relevance of Marshall's work for shedding light on the relationship between the expansion of modern citizenship by the state and the reduction of social inequalities and divisions between classes, his work has been critiqued for two reasons in particular. The first one is the absence of gender and race in his analysis of the state's role (Fraser and Gordon 1994). Feminist understandings of citizenship oppose the gendered division of space between political and apolitical because such division erases women's agency - along other subjects 'not fully fit' for political life such as children, racial minorities, disabled, etc. - to achieve political change in specific locales of everyday life (Marston and Staeheli 1994). A second critique concerns the frailty of a linear reading of citizenship as if this concept was an ever widening and encompassing attribute. Marston and Mitchell argue that instead, citizenship must be seen as at times expanding and times contracting, accompanying shifts in the position of the state in the global economy and changes in the relations of power within the state (2004).

The meanings of Western/liberal citizenship has been challenged through the actions of social movements and organized civil society that call into question the universalist claim of the concept by putting forward specific needs (Hall and Held 1989). Since 1970s and 1980s contestations to universal citizenship that correspond equality with sameness have advanced 'differentiated citizenships' that fight for 'inclusion' in attendance to groups' particularities (Young 1989). Thus, groups have organized around identities other than the national one to which liberal citizenship is attached - gender, ethnicity, sexuality, language, etc. While these movements and groups' demands have been originally confined within the limits of the nation-state, increasingly - in part due to the extension of

global interconnections - organizations have sought beyond the national borders for recognition and redistribution of resources (Fraser 2005).

Much of the literature on citizenship in Latin America has paid attention to the third-wave of democratization in the region and the transition from authoritarian regimes to democracies, its consolidation and that of its institutions, and the improvement of the accountability of governments to their citizenry. Scholarship that included the study of civil society and its role in democratization processes acquired some momentum during the late 1980s and early 1990s but did not follow through, and the study of citizenship was relegated until its seeming resurrection in the early 2000s (Tulchin and Ruthenburg 2007). In the last couple of decades, increasing social mobilization and political unrest have renewed attention to the different forms of exclusion in Latin America and the role of the citizenry in processes of democratization, asking questions about the definitions of citizenship, who qualifies as a citizen and how citizenship is experienced/managed in the region (Yashar 2007).

The variety of actions of civil society that defy normalized - Western and liberal - understandings of citizenship and rights around the world has given birth to the concept of 'insurgent citizenship' that refers to discourses, practices and alternatives that challenge existing laws and institutions (Holston and Appadurai 1996; Leitner and Strunk 2014). The literature on insurgent or 'from below' citizenships in Latin America has focused much on the actions of social movements and their interactions with public institutions (Petras and Veltmeyer 2006; Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998; Escobar 1992). This literature has pointed out that in some cases people organize around very localized rights claims that eventually, once they have been acknowledged, can be scaled up pushing the limits of

national citizenship in its exclusionary and inegalitarian way - as shown by Holston in the case of city periphery dwellers in Sao Paulo (Holston 2009). In other cases, the scope is more modest and people's actions limit to expand the rights of a particular group resorting to paralegal arrangements that press the boundaries of the law - see Chatterjee's research on illegal street market vendors in Calcutta (Chatterjee 2006).

'Citizenship' expresses the geohistorical specificity of the relationship between the people and the state, and as such it is always in the process of construction, negotiation and change in its interplay with social, economic and cultural processes (Taylor 2013). This is particularly true during times of major structural change when the meaning and scope of citizenship is specially fraught with struggles over the allocation of rights (Marston and Mitchell 2004; Jelin 2003). Contributing to feminist critiques of liberal conceptualizations of citizenship closely tied to the market, Marston and Mitchell put forward the concept of 'citizenship formation' which intends to better capture the complexity of the concept of citizenship. 'Citizenship formation' refers to citizenship as “a non-static, non-linear social, political, cultural economic and legal construction” that is context-shaped. Citizenship then, becomes an elastic concept that more than having a stable relationship with the state, it is contingent upon the position of the state in relation to the global economy and the relations of power within it (Marston and Mitchell 2004, 95).

'Citizenship formation' denotes the flexible, complex and conjunctural nature of citizenship. It is not a surprise then that new challenges for the study of citizenship have arisen in the last decades with the consolidation of the neoliberal state around the world, which shifted dramatically the conditions of ascription to national citizenship and rights in relation to the previous welfarist version (Mitchell and Beckett 2008; Harvey 2006; Hall

and Held 1989a). In the new sociopolitical arrangement, the emphasis on personal freedom and responsibility transfers success or failure from society and its regulatory frameworks to individuals (Hall, Massey, and Rustin 2013). Coupled with increasing globalization, and with a strong connection between states and international markets, it changes the whole meaning of rights and duties within a given citizenry producing new inclusions and exclusions (Marston and Mitchell 2004; Sparke 2006).

Even in societies where citizenship has been historically tied to the market, that is, societies where voting rights were contingent upon property ownership as in the case of Argentina until 1912, or where citizens are the target of exclusions within paradigms of 'propertied citizenship' (Roy 2003), 'market-mediated citizenships' have acquired a whole new scalar extent as a result of both economic and geopolitical dimensions brought about by entrenched neoliberalism (Sparke 2006). At the same time, the idea of 'community' is also being re-scaled by the intensification of globalization and the 'transnationalization' of citizens. For instance, the 'need' to quickly adjust to fast changes within national-global economies has strong effects on educative institutions in Western countries where curricula geared to promote multicultural subjects capable of living with difference in the national community is adjusted to one that can fashion 'strategically cosmopolitan subjects' (Mitchell 2003).

I have mentioned already how *asambleas* expose the relational nature of poverty and deploy a geography of responsibilities that highlights the interdependencies that bind humans together and underscores a commitment to acting upon the conditions that reproduce these exclusions (Massey 2004). I claim that by doing so they are taking advantage of the plasticity of citizenship and pushing its borders to make in ways that

trouble some of its historical dimensions. This move involves questioning the social organization that resulted from the historical subordination of the country to the global economy and global powers, subordination that reproduced within the national borders the 'otherness' that characterized the global order. I argue that *asambleas* open up space for a common language and framework with which to start imagining broader coalitions across space that are based on the rejection of entrenched implicit national hierarchies and the reformulation of community and belonging.

Organization of the Dissertation

In the following chapter I provide an explanation of the methodology and the methods used as well as a more detailed account of the context of the study. Chapter 2 is followed by three empirical chapters that draw primarily on one case-study - but that is complemented by observations and interviews from a second case-study as well as interviews with members of other *asambleas* - to illustrate the issues addressed while expanding the literature and debates that frame my work. The different theoretical debates cannot be circumscribed to one chapter and therefore there is much overlap between the theoretical discussions in all of them. In chapter 3 I reflect on the *asambleas* as political spaces of identity and political subjectivity formation particularly focusing on middle-class activists and the interactions that lead to their awareness of privilege and the constitutions of what I call 'relational political subjects'. In chapter 4 I look at the alliances across difference that emerge in the *asambleas* from a critical perspective that shows the tensions and contradictions in the emergent relationships. I use the concepts of *politica afectiva* [roughly translated as 'affective politics'] and 'empathy' as tools to investigate and explain

the complex process of recognizing, learning, and acting together. Chapter 5 looks at citizenship and urban politics and pays attention to the potential effects of the localized, contextual and relational conceptualization of citizenship that the *asambleas* mobilize. In the Conclusion I summarize the main findings of my research and I discuss some of the limits that my work encounters. I close with some comments about future directions.

Chapter 2: Methodology



Figure 2: Cooking utensils in the Olla, Asamblea

Here I lay out the conceptual rationale underlying the process of construction and analysis of data in my research. I first reflect on my positionality as a woman from the Southern Hemisphere studying in the U.S. and conducting research in her hometown. I briefly sketch some of the benefits and disadvantages - or I should rather say ‘complexities’ - it bears on the research process. Then I describe the specific methods used, drawing attention to questions about relations of power implicated in the field and I recount how I dealt with them. In this section I also outline the specific and concrete aspects of the research before explaining why I chose to conduct my study on *asambleas*.¹³ Lastly, I

¹³ This includes both people who are currently working in *asambleas* and people who no longer belong to one.

briefly comment on the broader socioeconomic and political scenario in the city of Buenos Aires in order to contextualize the trajectories of the researched sites and also provide some specific information about each of them.

In-betweenness, mobility and privilege

I never wished to live permanently anywhere else but in Argentina. Of course I always fantasized about traveling - which I was fortunate enough to do plenty when younger and keep doing now due to my work. For reasons that would be too long to explain I ended up in the U.S. in the furthest location possible from Argentina - excluding Alaska and Hawaii. I ended up in the North West, in Seattle, from where to get home it takes two flights and a twenty-five hours' journey door-to-door.

If our mobilities - the embodied practice of moving - are central to how we experience the world, creating spaces and stories (Cresswell and Merriman 2011), then how do I make sense of the very particular kind of in-betweenness, border crossing and ambiguity that I experience? (Anzaldúa 1987). How has having been in constant motion in between places, cultures, languages changed me? What to make of the ceaseless return home without having fully left it? Is the binomial 'outsider-insider' relevant to who I am and the work I do, and if so, in which ways? How has the constant crossing of borders - physical, cultural, social, linguistic, etc. - impacted my stay in the field and my relationship with the participants in the research in my own city? And how is it shaping my writing as I type these words?

Ultimately, all these questions reflect on broader debates about how we know and what is the nature of knowledge. I draw on the work of feminist scholars on identity,

relationality, positionality and reflexivity in order to think through these issues. I agree with them about the claim that the research process is structured by both the researcher and the participants, but I also believe that “the research, researched, *and* researcher might be transformed by the fieldwork experience” (England 1994. Highlighted in the original).

In relation to the feeling of ‘in-betweenness’ that has marked my years in Graduate School, there is the legal status to begin with. I am neither a tourist nor a resident in the U.S. There are constraints to what I can do while in Graduate School and how long I can stay once I graduate. I cannot work outside campus and there are limits to the kind of grants and scholarships I can apply for as a non-U.S. citizen. However, undeniably, I am a privileged person who is studying in one of the top Geography Departments in the world and who can travel within and outside the U.S. with certain regularity. At the same time, due to the visa I hold my residence is still based in Buenos Aires, which means that neither I can vote in the U.S. nor I am allowed to register to vote here for Argentinean elections. Privileged in many ways, I am technically being denied the right to exert my political rights through voting, something that leaves me in an ambivalent and ethereal-like position, at least, liberal citizenship-wise.

Then there is the fact that I did not migrate. Neither did I change my legal residency nor did I come to the U.S. with the intention of settling permanently, even if the possibility remains open. Moreover, if my displacement to the U.S. to pursue a Ph.D. technically constitutes ‘migrating’, that is certainly far from how I feel about this journey. Therefore, the alternated sense of connection and disconnection with home and with where I live now situates me in an ambivalent position with respect to who I am, what I am entitled to do and say, and importantly, *where* I am entitled to do and say it. I have experienced a sense

of in-betweenness, of being always on the move, neither here nor there - and when here and there, not sure for how long - that has shaped my negotiation of and actions on the field.

On the one hand this sense of in-betweenness allows me to navigate and bridge both worlds as an 'insider/outsider'. Katz suggests that at the end of the 20th century, ethnography still had strong associations with colonial enterprises to exotic lands and male-conducted research (Katz 1996). The image of travel and unknown places and cultures reverberates with this method, even though today ethnographic work is conducted in a myriad of groups of belonging not necessarily distant - in physical and/or symbolic ways - from the researcher, as a quick look to the indexes of journals on social sciences would show. In my case, I did not have to ponder on the possibility of going 'native' since I already was. Nor did I have to learn the language, or immerse myself in the values of the society in which I was going to conduct the research. Having the 'background knowledge' (Herbert 2000), being familiar with the cultural codes and history, being able to relate to places and people in the city, and even understanding references to jokes or sayings, not only helped me to build rapport with the participants (Dowling 2000), but it also allowed me to strategically adjust my actions and questions in real time, both during interviews and in the field site.

Notwithstanding the 'insider' insights I entered the field with, "[w]e have overlapping racial, socio-economic, gender, ethnic and other characteristics" (Dowling 2000, 33) that blur the borders between the role of 'insider' and 'outsider'. Furthermore, those borders are also challenged when racial, socioeconomic status, and even ideology differences position the researcher 'outside' the group, even if she is working at 'home'

(Gilbert 1994). There are not such a clear-cut differences between roles, and most of the time I felt I was a bit of both.

Also, the in-betweenness I referred to above - the ambiguity of being both in and out - at times situated me at arm's length of some of the participants in the research. Argentina has a long academic and also popular tradition of opposing and critiquing the U.S. for its imperialist and interventionist practices south of the Río Grande since the occupation of Mexican territory in the 19th century, and more recently for its role in influencing financial and trade international institutions' policies that harshly affect the region's effective economic and political independence (cf. Fals Borda 2009; Dussel 2003; Palermo 2005). Frequently, grassroots organizations in Argentina adopt an overt oppositional stance towards U.S. international and economic politics, and so it is the case of the organizations I work with. Jokes about me being an undercover C.I.A. agent were not infrequent and even a few times in which I wanted to express an opinion or make a claim, someone would try to 'ruffle my feathers' shouting at me '*Yanqui, go home!*', even if he/she said it while hugging me in a sign of affection.

Even if my sense is that most of the participants trusted my credentials as a trained student and the honesty of my research, these kinds of jokes added to the distance I, sometimes, put between my 'insider' part and the field. On several occasions I approached the field and the participants with an overwhelming feeling of being out of place that paralyzed me. I felt a lack of entitlement to do the research, to make a claim about the organizations' work that I believe to be rooted in the guilt of not 'being in the trenches', but instead, being in my removed life in the first world. And yet at the same time, the

distance seems so short. Don't I get the *mate*¹⁴ ready as soon as I get up in the morning and I talk to my family or friends every day when I am in Seattle? Don't I read the Argentinean newspaper before I read anything else and listen to Argentinean news radio stations all day long?

To some extent, this dilemma resonates with those of researchers crossing international and cultural borders in their fieldwork, posing questions about power, positionality and representation - particularly when it comes to Western researchers working in the 'third world' (Rose 1997; Nagar 2015; Katz 1992). In my case, I could claim a shared culture, nationality, and sometimes class and gender in all the different situations in the field, and yet sometimes, I did not fit in. The distance created by my institutional belonging and the specificities of my work were part of the reason - ultimately, at the end of the fieldwork, I would just pack my things and go back to the U.S. But neither my institutional affiliation nor the fact that I had spent four years in the U.S. are sufficient explanations as to why sometimes I felt out of place or as a foreigner in my own country. In my case, as in the rest of the people doing ethnographic work, the things that researcher/participants share might be undercut by other differences in a situation where the relationship between the two - researcher and participant - is constantly being made, re-made and negotiated (Valentine 2002). There is no a pure 'insider' condition, but degrees of distance to those who we study.

I was - and I am as I write these words - concerned with questions about the politics of knowledge production and the responsibilities of academics towards the groups we research and might or might not be part of. But without giving up on the task of constantly

¹⁴ *Mate* is a drink typical of the southern cone of the American Continent.

reflecting on my positionality, I accept the faults, weaknesses and contradictions of my research and acknowledge the limits for knowing the landscape of power in a way in which researched and researcher are fully transparent (Rose 1997). Feminist scholars recognize that the research process is made and co-constituted by both the researcher and the rest of the agents involved (Katz 1996), something I had the chance to realize as both *asambleas* took me in different directions in relation to my own role.

Furthermore, Kobayashi (1994) draws attention to the irony of doing feminist research that attempts to shift the balance of power by beginning from a position of differential power, something scholars try to counterbalance by making these differences visible and constantly reflecting over it (Rose 1997). I was reluctant to spend too much time mulling over whether my identity as an ‘insider/outsider’ granted me the right to say something about the organizations I work with or not, and I was decided not to adopt a penitent attitude to make up for my privilege and contradictory positionalities. As Kobayashi succinctly puts it, acknowledging power differentials “establishes a starting point to analyzing the politics of involvement and representation, at which we might ask not whether our position of power and authority denies us the right to conduct research but, rather, how we use our privilege to social ends” (Kobayashi 1994, 76).

Thus, I believed it would be more useful to let the field guide me as opposed to locking myself up in a pre-decided role. My role in the two sites I conducted the research was at points significantly different. While in one *asamblea* I conducted participant observation, always feeling more like an outsider constantly asking for permission to be there - although not with every one and not all the time - in the other *asamblea* I quickly

transitioned from participant observation to what some call ‘scholar activism’ (The Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010). I will expand on this in the next section.

Ethnography

I conducted the fieldwork during 2013 and 2014. I used a combination of qualitative methods because they stem from an ontological position that emphasizes the importance of more grounded, contextual understandings of social-economic processes as opposed to abstract models that can be tested in order to prove law-like theories (Babbie 1995). Qualitative methods allow for the study of the not-so-often evident meanings, values and emotions that conform our daily lives (Clifford, French, and Valentine 2003) and for that reason they were well suited for my research.

Particularly, feminist, postcolonial and post-structuralist perspectives have critiqued the impossibility of exhaustive knowledge of a certain event. Instead, they have called attention to the need to take into account grounded and contextual data, data that should be read against the backdrop, and as part of broader socioeconomic and political processes (Nagar et al. 2002; Moss 2002). Qualitative methods are also suitable for deconstructing what seems to be self-explanatory in order to uncover power relations within the site and between the site and its broader context (Clifford and Valentine 2003). In particular within qualitative methods, ethnography is of use when it comes to researching micro sites - whether those would be institutions, grassroots organizations, neighborhoods or other sites of human interaction - and the ways in which people at micro scales respond to/negotiate with the broader structures taking part in the construction of these spaces (Rodgers 2007; Auyero 2012).

Before I continue, there is need for clarification on the scope of the concept ‘ethnography’. According to Herbert, ethnography and interviews are not the same (2000). Herbert argues that even though open-ended interviews might come close to ethnography, which is “generally recognized to rest upon *participant observation*, a methodology whereby the researcher spends considerable time observing and interacting with a social group” (551. Highlighted in the original), “they [interviews] still do not enable a comparison between what respondents say and what they do” (565, footnote 2). Divergently, Elwood and Martin (2000) consider the interview as an opportunity to do participant observation because they provide the chance to observe people’s dynamics in relation to each other - in the case there is more than one participant present - and in relation to the space that could provide extra material of analysis. Given my own experience with the interview process, especially in the cases in which the research participant chose to have the interview in the space of their organizations - something that allowed me to observe the interactions between the interviewee and other members of the *asambleas* as well as with the space of research itself - I concur with the latter understanding of ethnography.

In the light of the concerns of my research with political spaces of interaction across difference and their implications in terms of political subjectivities and political alliances, I consider ethnography to best fit with my project. Specifically, I resorted to semi-structured interviews - that in many cases turned out to be life-stories - and participant observation that I put in conversation with one another. Semi-structured interviews provided the chance to dig into questions that arose during the observations that subsequently helped me to refocus the attention in the site. While I went to the interviews

with a series of questions divided into broader themes - context at the time of joining the *asamblea*, structure of the *asamblea*, main topics discussed/addressed, relationship with other collectives, activities in the *asamblea* and their relevance for the work of the organization as a whole, etc. - there was room for the participant to depart from the specificity of my questions into other topics. Sometimes I tried pulling the interview back into the original question without forcing it. In many cases, the conversation continued in unexpected ways, which led to new concerns and to a deeper understanding of the emotional baggage that comes with talking about certain issues.

I conducted forty-five semi-structured interviews with forty-three participants over the course of thirteen months between July 2013 and August 2014. In one case wife and husband were interviewed together; in three cases I split the interview in two due to the duration of it and in one case I interviewed two people together one of whom I had interviewed alone already. The original questions I had when I went to the field changed through the course of the research and so did the questions asked in the interviews. Also, the questions asked varied depending on whether the person interviewed was active in an *asamblea* or not, and if she, in which one.¹⁵

The questions I sought to answer when I was designing the research were 1) what are the key differences – in terms of socio-economic composition, political objectives and strategies– between *asambleas* that faded away and those that endured beyond 2005?; 2) to what extent has the participation in an *asamblea* changed how middle-actors think about poverty and the poor and how has it shifted their own positionality as middle-class actors?; and 3) and to what degree have *asambleas* populares engaged with municipal political

¹⁵ I have included the Castilian template of one interview in the Appendix.

institutions and how have *asambleas* populares reshaped political practices, outcomes and challenged exclusionary urban citizenships? As my research unfolded, I entirely ruled out the first question because this concern was not relevant or interesting to me anymore. Not only some of the most important key differences became pretty obvious right at the beginning - such as having or not a physical space of their own and having or not a key activity around which the rest of the activities and people congregate -, but also I started to become skeptical of views that measured the scope or relevance of these organizations by the span of their life. The other two questions had to be redefined although not in a substantive way.

I contacted the participants through snowball sampling. Two of my friends in Buenos Aires - one of them had participated in *asambleas* until 2006 - provided me with three contacts with which I started building a network of potential interviewees. 37% of the interviewees were no longer active in *asambleas* whether that was because their *asambleas* dissolved or because they decided to leave the organization. The rest of the interviewees were still active in the two *asambleas* - *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* and *Asamblea de Flores* - that also became the sites of research, except for one person who participated in a different one. The total number of *asambleas* represented in interviews - whether existent or not - was thirteen. In terms of gender, 44% of the interviewees were men and 56% were women. The ages varied from mid-twenties to over sixty years old with no particular cohort of age being over or under-represented.

Only a small number of the people I contacted did not participate. Some never responded to my emails or, they did but failed to follow through. Only one person openly confessed not to be interested in meeting because she felt she could not contribute with

much to my research. Then there were cases in which I asked the interviewee to put me in contact with former members of her *asamblea* but regardless of my insistence, they never did and I do not know the reasons why. My own understanding is that they forgot or were too busy to take care of that since all of them showed genuine interest in my research and also willingness to help with it. Of the people I failed to interview, I particularly regret not having met with a number of middle-age middle-class women who, according to one of the interviewees, had their first experience of activism in the *asamblea* to which he belonged and they were the ones who tried the hardest to keep the *asamblea* alive. Their testimonies would have been a very useful contribution particularly to chapter 3.

All the interviews were audio-recorded except one in which the interviewee preferred not to. In all the cases I took notes while conducting the interview that later added to the ‘context’ part of each interview and help me nuance the sometimes rigidity of the transcription. Two hired students did most of the transcriptions. I later revised them while listening to the audio to correct errors, add emphasis and include comments extracted from my notes. The interviews lasted an average of an hour, but some of them were only forty minutes long while others substantially exceeded sixty minutes. The interviews were in Castilian and all translations are mine. While I did not change the name of the *asambleas*, I used pseudonyms for the interviewees. In the transcriptions of the interviews, I used italics when the words were pronounced with emphasis. Between brackets I indicate particular gestures - such as smiles or sobbing - that signal the tone the interviewee is giving to her words, as well as the presence of prolonged silences.

I tried to mitigate differential power in the interview process by letting the participant choose the site and time of the interview (Elwood and Martin 2000), and in

some cases, the duration of it. With this I mean that after an hour or so, I would try to bring the interview to a close, but it was the interviewee who would insist on keep talking. In those cases, I continued and let the participant to take the lead on themes covered. Close to one third of the participants who are still members of the organizations asked me to be interviewed in the *asamblea*, although one third of them live in the housing cooperative that is part of one of them. A similar number - a third of the total number of participants who are still active in the *asambleas* - met with me in the organization but we later moved to a café nearby. Only four met with me somewhere far from the organization. Three, due to their work schedules, asked me to meet them close to work, and one met with me nearby friends who were giving him shelter that night since he is homeless. Among those who no longer participate in *asambleas*, about half of them choose to be interviewed in their homes and half in cafés.

It is not a minor detail the fact that I met with at least two thirds of the active members of *asambleas*, *in the asambleas*. In many of those cases, I was reminded of the accomplishments of the organization *in situ*, when the participant pointed out to me - literally - to something the *Asamblea* had built or achieved. In many of the cases in which I interviewed people in their homes, they suggested it in case I wanted to look at some of the documents they kept with pride and fondness. In any case, whether we met in the *asambleas* or in their houses, almost all of the times the excuse was to "*así tomamos unos mates*" [that way we can have *mate*],¹⁶ a sign of openness and willingness to be part of the research that helped to break the ice in both directions.

¹⁶ *Mate* is made up by a gore filled up to two thirds with dry grounded yerba mate leaves. Then hot water is poured in the gore and drunk out of a metal straw, a step that is repeated over and over until the yerba mate's flavor washes away. It can be drunk by one or by several people. In the latter case the *mate* is drunk alternately by different people and there are some rules to follow that indicate from the order in which the *mate* should

A second strategy I employed to counterbalance the power-laden experience of the interview was making myself vulnerable to the participants by sharing my own experiences, in some cases, personal stories that related to theirs. This was obviously easily done with women, particularly with women close my age than with older men. Still, it was not impossible to do it even with the latter with whom I managed to find points of connection on issues such as political activism, interest in music or domestic animals, or family histories of migration. In all the cases, I tried not to unintentionally elicit the sharing of information that the participant might not have felt inclined to tell me if I had not tried so hard to be trustworthy (Kirsch 1999).

In some cases, although not many, I felt the hierarchical dynamic of the interview had been turned upside down, and that it was I the one being less powerful and somehow vulnerable, even if the participant was not consciously trying to control the course of the interview or to intimidate me in anyway. For example, at least in two occasions when I was interviewing male activists with a long history of political participation, it became almost impossible to direct the conversation to the level of personal changes, or to how their participation in the *asambleas* had impacted their political subjectivities and identities. Not only it was hard for me to find the right moment to ask those kinds of questions but also, when I did, the conversation quickly diverted towards broader narratives about political goals, expectations and results. There were also situations in which I did not feel comfortable asking certain things for fear I would be taken as silly or naïve. For instance,

circulate, to how to let the one in charge of pouring the water (*cebador*) that someone does not want to keep drinking. In places like Argentina, Uruguay, south of Brazil and Paraguay, it is considered to be a social drink, something people share, over which friends tell their secrets, family members gather in the afternoon, and people show affection. The common phrase in Argentina *un mate no se le niega a nadie* [no one should be denied a *mate*] expresses the fondness people feel for the drink and its meaning.

questions related to emotions and feelings were harder to ask when I was interviewing men and women older than me, particularly if they hold a college degree. If the participants manifested to have a lot of political experience, particularly if they were marked by their experiences in the revolutionary left in the 1970s, I feared my questions about affect would be taken as trifle in the big scheme of thing.

These situations acted as a reminder that even though I was the one making the key decisions about the direction of the research, that did not mean that I had complete control over the fieldwork, but that instead, “the fieldwork is a dialogical process which is structured by the researcher and the participants” (England 1994, 80). In her work about elite women, England (2002) reflects on what happens when the participants are not marginalized people but instead, people who are used to hold power. England points to how in these cases to adopt a ‘shameless eclectic’ and opportunistic approach is not only necessary but desirable in order to “make the best of what you get” (212). I was far from feeling assigned the role of the ‘supplicant’. Certainly none of my interviewees made me feel - or maybe I did not perceive they were trying to - I had to actively acknowledged they knew more, or that they were more entitled to emit assessments or opinions over the issues we were discussing. However, the situations in which I felt intimidated by power dynamics in the interview made me realize that in most of the cases power, constantly - although not always with the same intensity - shifts back and forth between the researcher and the participants and shapes what we can ‘learn’ and ‘know’ about our object of study. Of course, the way that happens varies much according to the interview location and the identities being performed by both the researcher and the participant (Elwood and Martin 2000).

The situations described above also reminded me of the need to approach the field knowing that it might not turn out to be as expected, but that I needed to be constantly critical about the perceptions I had about what I was experiencing. A telling example is my experience with Rodrigo, a middle-class college educated man in his late twenties. During the interview it was very hard to get past the first questions even though we talked for over an hour. These questions were mostly related to the history of the *Asamblea* and its current activities and organization. Every time something interesting in his narrative came out that I wanted to know more, he would say a few words, pause, and then utter a categorical “as I was saying” just before going back to his narrative. He might have made his own selection of what was relevant to say, assuming I was not to be trusted on my judgment of what was relevant to ask or know. Or he might have based his account on previous experiences of interviews of which he had plenty in the past, both from local as well as international scholars. In any case I left the interview without answers for most of the questions I had on my list, and even though we agreed on a second interview to talk about more personal kind of questions, the experience discouraged me to do so.

To my surprise, towards the end of the fieldwork, we met after I finished interviewing another member of his *Asamblea* and in a confident and contrite tone Rodrigo told me,

I have to apologize to you. Truth is that, the first time we met I did not bet on you. Back then there were some other three students swarming around and I said to myself, "not even crazy I give this girl an afternoon. I'll meet with her briefly in the morning". But, truth to be told, you are the only one who did not disappear, that kept on coming and that joined this space (Based on fieldwork notes).

I was aware of the exhaustion of the members of *asambleas* from having to cope with huge numbers of researchers over the years, and I knew that was something I had to take into account if I wanted the participants to take me seriously and to have their trust and collaboration. I showed my commitment doing precisely what Rodrigo said I did. Not only I ‘showed up’ for the mandatory observations but also tried to collaborate and help the organization when possible, and of course, I let them know during the meeting in which I obtained approval for my work, that my intention was to ‘give back’ or ‘reciprocate’ (Bosco and Herman 2010) for the time and energy devoted to my research.

I conducted participant observation in two *asambleas*, *Flores* and *Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo*. I originally had in mind a different one instead of the latter, but I later on discarded it because it was not suitable for my research.¹⁷ I approached the *Asamblea de Flores* through a friend of mine who put me in touch with someone working there. In the case of the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo*, it was one of the first participants I interviewed who made the connection. It took me quite a bit of time to get a concrete response to my request of attending one of their meetings to ask for permission to conduct my research. My times were not those of the organizations. They were both dealing with legal issues that were fundamental for the survival of the organization. The members of the *Asamblea de Flores* were trying to close the legal case that would grant them the deed of the space they have been occupying since 2002 that included the former medical clinic that hosted the housing cooperative. They ended up losing the clinic but they secured the

¹⁷ I was interested in *asambleas* doing political work outside party politics and this *asamblea* had in recent years taken a decisive turn towards openly supporting - as an organization - the national party in power for which it conducted some activities such as supervising elections. I remained in touch with their members anyway, some of whom I interviewed.

adjacent property where they are planning to build new housing premises. In the case of the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo*, people were busy lobbying to get a law passed in the City's Legislature that was going to confer them the use of the space where they built its premises for twenty years.

The dynamics and organization of both *asambleas* varies in important ways and the relationships I established with each of those spaces as well as the way I conducted the observation acquired very different forms and dimensions. As a feminist geographer I abide to the principle that academic work entails theory and praxis, whereas understanding the world is a prerequisite to change it (Staeheli and Lawson 1995). I did not have a clear idea of how much I should and wanted to get involved at a personal level with the organizations, but definitely I never believed - or wanted to be - in the type of academic that keeps her research, politics and activism as separated - and even opposed - spheres. As pointed out by Zusman (2004) the particularities of the sociopolitical context in Latin America - namely, the democratic transition in the 1980s - has markedly shaped the career path taken by many scholars. I was formed in the 1990s in a public university that was highly politicized and where students' participation in political activities within and outside the university was not unusual - particularly in the Arts and Sciences college.¹⁸ The topics I

¹⁸ It is worth noting that the University Reform Movement initiated by the students of the University of Córdoba, Argentina in 1918 established the 'co-government' of the of Buenos Aires, which means that it is ruled by a collegial body conformed by representatives of the three main actors of the academic community: faculty, graduates and undergraduate students. Students create their own organizations - in relation or not with formal political parties - and run for elections. The Reform has had a huge impact on the university's character, not only in Argentina but in all Latin America. It was an attempt to dismantle its post-independence elitist nature and it propelled its democratization as well as the affirmation of the social purpose of the institution. All of this has resulted in a marked politicization of the student body and the firm belief that the university is not an isolated island but part of the society to which it owes a commitment to social justice. The numerous programs that many colleges have called of '*extensión*' [extension, spreading] involving territorial work testify to it. The history of what is called today 'activist research', 'militant research' and 'participatory action research' goes back to the sixties and seventies when Latin American scholars were inspired by educator and philosopher Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and political theorist Antonio Gramsci's concept of the 'organic intellectual' (Fals Borda 1978; Rahman and Fals Borda 1989)

have chosen to research in my relatively short life as a scholar have been shaped by my ideology and ethics, stitching together the intellectual, the personal and the political in order to work towards what I consider to be progressive change. To do research on - and with - the *asambleas* then, consisted of engaging in critical scholarship that was attentive to collaboration - a politics of material engagement - and to a relational ethics that embraced responsibilities towards the 'researched' as well as to action (Routledge 2003b).

I conducted participant observations in the plenary meetings of the *Asamblea de Flores* - they usually take place once a month - and in other activities such as celebrations, presentations, meetings with other organizations, and other organizational activities. In general, I felt quite intimidated by the number of people (a plenary meeting could have some sixty participants) and the number of activities taking place. The housing cooperative hosts around thirty-five families so a large number of people circulate daily. On the other hand, the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* is smaller both in terms of the membership and in the size of the actual physical space. They also have several activities, one of which is a soup kitchen run every Sunday¹⁹ by *asambleístas* as well as by some of the homeless that come to eat. In this *asamblea* I conducted observations for a couple of weeks before transitioning into a more active role. The weekly meetings take place on Thursdays and last for about two or three hours. The first Thursday of every month at least one member of the different collectives that use the space of the *Asamblea* is supposed to attend so decisions comprising the totality of the space can be made. I also participated in art festivals, commemorations, meetings with other collectives, talks, and I became part of one of the three teams that run the soup-kitchen and that rotate every Sunday.

¹⁹ Except in January since 2014.

The relationship with the people in this latter *asamblea* became a much closer one. Being a smaller group, it was easier to become acquainted with everyone. The first time I talked was in the second meeting that I attended. People were trying to collect pictures of a former member of the *Asamblea* who had recently passed away because so they could create a slide-show for his upcoming commemoration. I timidly offered myself to set up a Dropbox folder so people could upload their pictures, and the offer was well-received. One week later there was a discussion about the organization of the end of the year party which usually happens in the street. This festival was particularly important because they wanted to celebrate the passing of the law that granted the use of the space for twenty years. Someone mentioned the need to spread the news about the party and I asked if they had tried with alternative media such as *Agencia Rodolfo Walsh* - which I use to read.

Paula intervened, said something I can't remember, and suddenly, I was in charge of spreading the news to alternative media once XX finished drafting the flier. Smiling she asked "didn't you want to collaborate?", mischievously referring back to the comment about 'giving back' I made the day I introduced myself to the *Asamblea* (Based on fieldwork notes).

It was around this time that I started receiving the emails of the operative list of the *Asamblea*. The *Asamblea* has two mail-lists, one is a general one that includes all the people who ever manifested interest in it and wants to keep updated on its news. The other one is called '*operativa*' [operating], includes the more or less permanent members and its used to make decisions, circulate information and coordinate actions. While in the *Asamblea de Flores* I never managed to be included in its mail list, even though sometimes Rodrigo mentioned I could be added, in this *asamblea* I did not even ask to be included. It was decided in a meeting that it would be a good thing so I could be in the loop of all the things the organization was doing. Retrospectively I think that it had to do with a matter of

convenience. That way I did not need to nag any one about coming activities or no one would have to be attentive to whether or not I was notified. Why I was never included in the mailing list of the *Asamblea de Flores*, is also subjected to speculation. Maybe the request was forgotten in the rush of the moment with most of the energy being poured into negotiating the deed of the space. Maybe there was no agreement about whether or not I should have access to it and I was not informed about it. But to me, at the moment, the fact that the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* willingly gave me access to one of the tools they use to make decisions meant a huge sign of trust. And I felt that I needed to do much more than eventually ‘giving back’ to ‘compensate’ for their time and willingness.

My participation in the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* ended up being as intense as that of the rest of the participants in terms of the amount of hours dedicated. I took on responsibilities and let myself get involved without much questioning about where the limit between my research and my activism laid. I focused instead on what Nagar and Geiger (2007) call ‘speaking-with’ and ‘situated solidarities’ - so that the questions on positionality did not uselessly constrain my identity - and on how the processes and structures affected the unfolding of the fieldwork. In the process I embarked - almost without noticing - in a journey of alliance and openness that resulted imperative to counter/trouble the way I knew, of which participating in the *Asamblea* was both the start and end point (Nagar 2015).

Regardless of the fact that both *asambleas* - *Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* and *Flores* - are distinct in several aspects and dynamics, those differences do not really matter for the scope of this dissertation.²⁰ My research focuses primarily in the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-*

²⁰ For instance, while the *Asamblea de Flores* runs a soup kitchen that is *institucionalizada* (institutionalized, that is, they are part of the web of soup kitchens of the City receiving public funding and abiding to the

San Telmo and its soup kitchen and it is supplemented with observations and interviews conducted in the *Asamblea de Flores* as well as with interviews with members of other *asambleas* where I did not conduct observations because - except in one case - they do not longer exist.

“Why *Asambleas*? Their time is gone!”

During the fieldwork in Buenos Aires I encountered some people, including friends who are also academics, who would ask me why was I researching *asambleas* when there was 'so much more going on' in the political scenario? They meant well. It was not their intention to belittle the relevance of the *asambleas* as political actors in the 21st century or to dismiss the importance of the few *asambleas* still working in the city. Overall, most of them acknowledged the key role they had in inspiring new forms of organizing at the grassroots level, and the emergence of many *asambleas* opposing extractive activities that had a negative impact on the environment.²¹ Some of the things that were ‘going on’ that merited attention according to the people I talked to were the advancements in terms of social policy brought about by the national government since 2003, the Kirchnerismo’s contradictions, and the apparent strengthening of a right-wing neoliberal coalition the head of which was the Mayor of the capital city, Mauricio Macri - today the president of Argentina.

I decided to conduct Ph.D. fieldwork in *asambleas populares* because I was curious

regulations imposed by the government, the soup kitchen of the *Asamblea de Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* is only run with donations and the people in the *Asamblea* refuse to be *institucionalizada*. This difference would be of relevance if I was interested in looking at how both organizations strategically use public resources and their connections to city officials.

²¹ The case of the *Asamblea Ciudadana Ambiental de Gualeguaychú* is one example (cf. Pousadela 2011).

about why some had such a long life while others had quickly vanished. I was surprised at the lack of recent literature on *asambleas populares* given the fact that so much was written during the early 2000s, and I was also dismayed at the widespread assumption that the *asambleas* had disappeared altogether and that the remaining few did not merit attention - that is not certainly how people in these organizations felt. I knew of some *asambleas* that were still working because I saw them on my daily trips in the city and also because I had friends who had friends who participated in them. Ultimately, I focused on *asambleas* because they were, and are, spaces of political innovation, encounter and alliance across difference focused on poverty and inequality.

Originally, I was curious about whether or not the ability to negotiate difference had something to do in the ‘success’ and long-life of the organizations. I wondered what was special about these *asambleas* that contributed to their strength and resilience and whether or not they were still important actors in the current political scenario. At first, I struggled with answering the question of why *asambleas*. I remember thinking "did I chose the right research object?", "have I lost touch with local politics in my years in the U.S. to the point that I cannot recognize any more what’s relevant from what it’s not?". It is true that the number of *asambleas* in the city decreased dramatically just a short time after their inception (Pousadela 2011), but, was that enough to dismiss them as a case study?

As I moved forward in the field I realized that the answer to this latter question necessarily had to wrestle with other inquires related to the nature of political change, and to what needs to be done to make it happen. I asked, was there anything about the *asambleas* that can shed light on these matters? I also started to question the idea of ‘success’, which seemed to me to respond to a very normative conceptualization of ‘the

political'. I had initially assumed that 'success' meant 'long-lived' and thus, 'still working' *asambleas* could be evidence to support the claim that their actions had a direct impact on political institutions and policies. I discarded altogether the concept of 'success' for it was tied to a narrow conceptualization of politics that did not fit with feminist and postcolonial approaches that show how power is woven through everyday actions by the interplay of subjects and spaces left out by hegemonic accounts (Sharp 2007; Hyndman 2004; Freire 2000; Chatterjee 2006; Kofman and Peake 1990). The political effects of the *asambleas* - as well as of other organizations - may extend far beyond the organization itself to encompass political subjectivities, claims on governments and localized political agendas as I will show in this dissertation.

Asambleas are relevant for those concerned with the spatiality of political change and social alliances across difference. Through them, we can look at spatial processes of identity formation, particularly relevant to me, in relation to poverty politics. Their study remains pertinent today when just a few months ago a right-wing neoliberal coalition won the presidency of Argentina. In its short period in power, the new government has already undertaken a regressive democratic agenda under a halo of republicanism and anti-corruption. Interestingly, it uses an entrepreneurial esoteric rhetoric that veils the complete disgust for any genuine redistributive measure and for politics in itself, since every single political action is talked about using terms proper of young businessmen: *success*, *happiness*, *team-work* and the like.

Shortly after taking power, the new government has faced increased opposition from unions, neighborhood associations, social movements, LGBTQ groups, and human rights associations. Its attacks on labor, the common good, and the increased levels of

repression even prompted attempts to unify the Labor General Confederation after years of divisions (La Nación, 02/26/16). Thus, far from being ‘defunct’, *asambleas populares* not only are not gone but they can also shed much light onto what is possible to do with such an array of organizations and collectives that, within a general opposition to the government, hold very divergent interests and put forward different claims.

Buenos Aires, the Business-City

The general tendency of economic stagnation in Latin America since the 1970s was accompanied by the impoverishment of huge sectors of the population in Argentina. During that decade, the growth of the economy that had been continuous up to then, halted and reversed. At the same time income inequality took off in unprecedented ways giving birth to a new social category - ‘the new poor’ - to account for all of those who had not been poor before but that in the course of a few years ‘went down the hill’ (Minujín and Kessler 1995; Minujín and UNICEF Argentina 1993). The situation worsened throughout the so-called ‘lost decade’ and Argentina went from having 235,000 unemployed in 1980 to having 772,000 in 1992 (Gutiérrez 2007). It did not get any better along the 1990s due to the implementation of structural adjustment policies first by President Menem and later by De la Rúa that resulted in the growth of the public debt and social exclusion (Levitsky and Murillo 2003). The socioeconomic crisis of 2001 uncovered the profound weaknesses of the Argentinean economy as well as a deep crisis in public trust in politicians and political institutions. 25% of unemployment, more than 50% of the population under the poverty line, and the image of people scavenging in trash bins in a country that used to be known

as ‘the grain barn of the world’ crushed to the ground the illusion that Argentina had entered the ‘first world’ during the 1990s.

Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and Cristina Fernández’s (2007-2011 and 2011-2015) administrations implemented a package of redistributive measures - including cash transfer programs such as the Universal Child Benefit - that drastically reduced poverty rates. However, the local administration had been since 2007 in the hands of PRO. In June 2007 Mauricio Macri won the elections for Mayor of the capital city of Buenos Aires succeeding a government that responded to the party in the national executive. He then renewed his term in July 2011. Macri landed in the city with a business-oriented political agenda that deepened an ongoing process of transformation dating back to the 1990s (Sternberg 2013). Under President Carlos Menem, the downward and outward re-scaling of governmental functions resulted in an unprecedented socio-spatial restructuring in the city characterized by entrepreneurial redevelopment (Kanai 2011). Segregation was not only marked by the proliferation of gated residential areas but also by the privatization of public spaces - parks, riversides, etc. (Guano 2002). Since the 1990s, Buenos Aires has developed into a dual city in which change follows the demands of the most privileged (Ciccolella and Mignaqui 2002) by means of the ‘reassessment’ of the uses of urban space (Girola, Yacovino, and Laborde 2011).

Macri’s terms built on this trend, but not just as continuation or even deepening of the business-city model. Murillo (2013) asserts that his administration profited from discourses about *inseguridad*, that is, the feeling of constantly being under threat of random physical harm.²² Murillo argues that the term *inseguridad* has longer and deeper roots that

²² Auyero and Berti (2013) notice how even though the poor are disproportionately affected by urban violence, the non-poor assumed ownership of these discourses fueled largely by the media that fuse poverty with crime.

connect the reactionary attitudes some of the middle class and their claims for a tougher response to *inseguridad* to the terror instilled in the Argentinean society during the last dictatorship (Murillo 2004). It is upon this generalized terror of ‘the other’ embodied in the criminal, the poor, the marginal, that the government builds consensus that naturalizes inequality and legitimizes responses *à la* Rudolph Giuliani. Both *asambleas* I work with - *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* and *Asamblea de Flores* - have been very critical of Macri’s administration since the beginning.

There is extensive scholarship that thoroughly records the nuts-and-bolts of Macri’s administrations,²³ but suffices to say here that even though the housing problem - something that directly affects much of the population working in *asambleas* and for whom *asambleas* work - is not new in Buenos Aires, it was aggravated during Macri’s administration due to the government’s mercantile approach consisting in leaving the production of urban space in the hands of the private sector (Rodríguez et al. 2015).

For instance, between 2007 and 2012 the budget allocated to the City Housing Institute - in charge of the housing policies of the city particularly geared to provide long term solutions for vulnerable populations - was deliberately not used in its totality while the level of evictions increased sharply (Marín 2013) and public work directed to building housing for the popular sectors came to a halt (Mutuberría Lazarini et al. 2013). Not to mention the growth in the number of *desalojos exprés* [express evictions], euphemism that conceals the violation of the presumption of innocence since it makes the eviction effective before proving there has been an illegal occupation of the property (Sánchez 2013). As a

²³ For those interested, I strongly recommend the reading of the collection of works edited by Javier Marín and published by the *Centro Cultural de la Cooperación* in Buenos Aires: *La Ciudad Empresa. Espacios, ciudadanos y derechos bajo lógica de mercado* (2013).

result, the number of homeless people in the city increased from 15.253 in 2009 to 16.353 in 2013 (Médicos Del Mundo Argentina 2016).²⁴

As already mentioned in the introduction, at the beginning of 2003 and during the government of Kirchner the level of mobilization that characterized the year of 2002 diminished at the same time that the general economic and political scenario seemed to return to some sort of ‘normality’ (Svampa 2007). However, in the context described above, the *asambleas* I worked with manifested an increase in the level of activity and mobilization. In fact, they both experienced a revitalization in their membership the moment Macri won the local elections in 2007 in part, due to the return of members who had left the organizations, marking a key moment for the re-organization of these *asambleas*.

Research Sites

At least 40% of all the *asambleas* that emerged in 2002 were located in the city of Buenos Aires. In the early stages of these organizations most of them functioned in public and open spaces and mostly discussed - to different extents - the socioeconomic and political conjuncture of the country and the ways of addressing the immediate and concrete needs of the neighborhood. This latter task was done by dividing the membership in 'commissions' that took care of particular issues such as unemployment, press, soup kitchen, micro-enterprises, health, etc.²⁵ By 2003 those *asambleas* that continued working

²⁴ It is worth pointing out that there are no official statistics about the number of people homeless in the city. The information I manage - besides the one produced by *Médicos del Mundo en Argentina* (World Doctors in Argentina) is provided through informal channels of grassroots organizations who manifest increases up to 25% of the people attending soup kitchens.

²⁵ For a succinct but complete account of the chronology of the *asambleas* for the year 2002 refer to Svampa, Maristella, and Damián Corral. 2006. “Political Mobilization in Neighborhood Assemblies: The Cases of

had mostly withdrawn to the neighborhood and had centered their work around concrete activities such as micro-enterprises, soup kitchens, the protection of the environment, etc., specially in the case of those who had a physical space of their own. I chose the *Asamblea de Flores* and the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* because of their long trajectory and presence in their respective neighborhoods. They both had moments with higher and lower participation but they have managed to sustain their respective main activities - a housing cooperative in the case of the former, a soup-kitchen in the case of the latter. Also, they have kept some of the most important *asambleas'* characteristics such as horizontal processes of decision-making and autonomy, something I will develop further in chapter 4. This point was particularly important because I was interested in the organization's ability to negotiate difference, which I presumed it was a skill that depended much on the way the spaces were organized. Finally, my dissertation relies mostly on the work conducted in the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* for reasons I laid out earlier in this chapter. Namely, my presence as a participant observant was quickly acknowledged and even welcomed; they rapidly provided me with access to lines of information that could greatly facilitate my work; and I felt very strongly about 'giving back' as openly as they offered their collaboration in my work, something that I actually found easy - and rewarding - to do. One last aspect that serves as a justification for focusing on one case more than in the other, is because it was never my intention to make a comparative study between *asambleas*, and as I have already mentioned, the differences between the two cases

Villa Crespo and Palermo.” In *Broken Promises? The Argentine Crisis and Argentine Democracy*, edited by Edward Epstein and David Pion-Berlin, 117–39. Lanham: Lexington Books.

are not relevant for the concerns of this research, therefore the *Asamblea de Flores* complements nicely the case of the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo*.

The *Asamblea de Flores* is located in the neighborhood of *Flores* in the center of the city of Buenos Aires. It emerged at the beginning of 2002 in a park at the time called after Pedro Eugenio Aramburu, leader of the coup that overthrew Juan Domingo Perón in 1955 in Avellaneda Ave. and Donato Alvarez. Later that year the *asambleístas* occupied an abandoned medical clinic and an adjacent property in Avellaneda Ave. and Gavilán (see Photos 3, 4 and 5 below).

The *asambleístas* organized a soup kitchen and attempted to create a health clinic for the workers of reclaimed factories. By the end of 2003 it was clear that this later project could not be accomplished, so the *Asamblea* decided instead to use the former clinic for families in need of housing - with families occupying one former patients' room each. The *Asamblea* has been very active not only organizing activities such as the housing cooperative, a day care center, a gender group, a popular high-school and a community center for arts among other things, but also working alongside labor unions and other territorial organizations.

As all the *asambleas* that emerged in the summer of 2001/2, the number of people participating quickly declined in the *Asamblea de Flores*. By 2004/5 the number had declined dramatically but they continued occupying the space and kept the soup kitchen running. The few people left as active members of the *Asamblea* decided to come close to the *Central de Trabajadores Argentinos* (CTA- Argentinean Workers Federation) and at the same time a formal housing cooperative was created in an attempt to give the space more structure. According to some of the interviewees, these two decisions considerably

strengthened the *Asamblea* and prompted new relationships with other organizations that were also concerned with housing problems in the city.

In 2009 the *Asamblea* received an order to abandon the place but people organized quickly and gathered support of many organizations and unions and managed to delay the eviction. In the meantime, many former members returned to the organization, and activities such as the people's school were organized in order to give more visibility and legitimacy to the space.²⁶ Since then, the number of members has not declined. By the time I conducted fieldwork, a plenary meeting could have up to sixty people although many more participate in the different activities in the space - there are some one hundred students in the people's school and about thirty-five families living in the housing cooperative.



Figure 3: One of the entrances to the Asamblea de Flores (downloaded from the Asamblea's Facebook page)

²⁶ According to some of the people I talked to, the legalization of the occupation of the space was bound to happen because: 1) the clinic was in fact a mutual society, hence it was very complicated to get to the auction stage because of a law that protects the integrity of social economy's projects. In these cases, before treating the building as private property there are a series of bureaucratic steps that have to be followed, something that gave the *Asamblea* time to organize and resist the eviction; 2) along the years the activities of the *Asamblea* had acquired legal status (such as the people's school and the soup kitchen that run within the soup kitchen program of the local government), and therefore it would have been at the most contradictory to evict them from the space.



Figure 4: Main entrance to the Asamblea de Flores on Avellaneda Ave.



Figure 5: Patio that connects the former health clinic and the house, Asamblea de Flores

The *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* met for a time in the Dorrego Park in the neighborhood of San Telmo - east of the city of Buenos Aires - congregating more than two hundred people at the beginning. In 2002 the *Asamblea* occupied an empty plot in San Juan Ave. for which it obtained a temporary permit of use from the local government.²⁷ With the help of donations of NGOs and private citizens managed to build a two-story building of 240 square meters. Then the soup kitchen that the *Asamblea* had since the beginning moved to the building functioning different days with different intensity depending on the circumstances and the work-capacity of the organization. The *Asamblea* renewed the precarious permit to use the space a couple of times before being granted its use for a period of twenty years in December 2013.

Just as in the case of the *Asamblea de Flores*, the number of participants in *Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* also declined after the massive meetings in the park and by 2007 the *Asamblea* was mostly sustained by the work of the soup kitchen. The election of Mauricio Macri as the Mayor of the City of Buenos Aires also marked a turning point for the organization. According to some of the *asambleístas*, it was a moment when people felt the need to get together again to discuss the political turn that was accompanied with increasing levels of repression. Then, some members who had left returned to the space and the *Asamblea* strengthened its work with other organizations with which it shared similar concerns. At the time of the fieldwork a weekly meeting could go from eight to fifteen people while a plenary meeting - taking place once a month - could have up to twenty/twenty-five people. However, it is worth noting that when the *Asamblea* calls for

²⁷ According to one of its members, the chaotic situation of the moment allowed for this kind of sloppy decisions from the part of the government. The turmoil was such and the mobilizations were so strong that the government limited to 'put off fires' by agreeing to much of what the organizations – or even groups of people without any affiliation – asked for.

participation and collaboration in particular activities - such as the annual march around the neighborhood to commemorate the anniversary of the last coup or when it organizes *peñas* - ²⁸ the number of activists increases notably thanks to the participations of former members, or members who do not participate regularly (see Photos 6, 7 and 8 below).

The number of activities undertaken by this *Asamblea* is quite big. There is the *olla popular* (popular or soup kitchen) in which approximately 120 people eat - mostly homeless but also people who do not live on the streets but whose housing situation is very precarious nonetheless.²⁹ It also provides advice on the social programs funded by the local government and the way to access them. The *Asamblea* participates in the *Mesa de Trabajo y Concenso* of the former clandestine detention center in the neighborhood³⁰, supports other organizations' activities and claims, and it hosts a number of cultural and educative activities organized by other collectives.³¹

²⁸ *Peñas* are gatherings with performances of folk music and dances. People usually seat at tables and eat traditional food such as *empanadas* o *locro*. The audience usually ends up dancing to the music. The *Asamblea* organizes a few *peñas* a year, among other things, as a means for collecting money to finance its activities.

²⁹ I have received information that these days (May 2016) the number of people attending the soup kitchen goes up to 150 some Sundays.

³⁰ These are spaces of collaborative work between the state, civil society and the academic community that coordinate the work of former Clandestine Centers of Detention, Torture and Extermination.

³¹ Some of these groups are: a popular education collective that promotes reading and writing through art; learning to program games with computers to generate processes of self-worth and integration; a collective that uses art as a tool for participation and social transformation, among other activities.



Figure 6: Preparations for the *Marcha de Antorchas*, Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo (by Mónica Fariás)



Figure 7: *Marcha de Antorchas*, Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo (by Mónica Fariás)



Figure 8: Peña at the Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo (by Mónica Farías)

Chapter 3: The politics of encounter and privilege in *Asambleas Populares*³²



Figure 9: *The Olla* (by Mónica Fariás)

Introduction

Leo: We didn't want to provide only a plate of food. It was never, never, our goal ... Sundays' *Olla*³³ anyway. It was before. Before it was about giving food and that's it, there were no ... It was a much more limited thing, more...what's the word? ... like social assistance ...

Mónica: What changed? How did the *Asamblea* change its approach to the *Olla*?

Leo: We had to change first. Then we changed the *Asamblea*. We thought we had to change the political stand of the *Olla*, we believed that the plate of food was not enough ... it was enough just to fulfill the calorie intake of part of that day, but it wasn't enough for us.

Mónica: Where does this different approach come from?

³² Parts of this chapter have been published in Fariás, M. (2016). Working Across Class Difference in Popular Assemblies in Buenos Aires. In H. Wilson & J. Darling (Eds.), *Encountering the City: Urban Encounters from Accra to New York*. Farnham: Routledge.

³³ *Olla* means pot. Soup-kitchen translates as *Olla Popular* in Castilian. 'Olla' is the familiar way people in the refer to it.

Leo: It comes from discussing, discussing among ourselves. It comes from the incorporation of new *compañeros*³⁴ to the *Olla* who were living in the streets (Interview with Leo, 03/06/14)

The '*Olla*' as the people in the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* fondly refer to its soup kitchen is as old as the *Asamblea* itself. Back in 2002 and for a few months the *Olla* functioned in different streets intersections according to where it was strategically relevant - one of the interviewees defined it as *ollas de combate* [combat soup kitchens]. For instance, the *Olla* was once placed close to a building that was about to be evicted as a way of showing support to its inhabitants, and other times functioned in the intersection of two streets along which the *cartoneros*³⁵ passed on their way home. The *compañeros* of the *Asamblea* cooked the food in their houses and brought it to the place where a table of easels and a thick plank was set.

The above quote from an interview with Leo, a middle-class middle-age member of the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo*, succinctly illustrates one of the main concerns of this dissertation, the spatiality of identities and alliances across difference that take place through encounters in the *asambleas* and the relationships between those spatialities and the role they play when it comes to producing, reproducing or alleviating poverty. It also reveals one of the key points I make, namely, that interacting with people who are different from 'us' in significant ways - class, sexuality, race, age, politics, etc. - is many times a prerequisite to promote meaningful change in peoples' identities, *but* for the encounter to

³⁴ The literal translation for the word '*compañero*' is 'mate'. However, 'mate' does not reflect the actual meaning of the term. 'Compañero' was the way former President Juan Domingo Perón referred to the members of the Justicialista Party (or Peronist Party), just as the members of the UCR call themselves '*correligionarios*'. However, this term acquired a particular meaning after the overthrow of Perón and the proscription of the Justicialista Party. The term was imbued with a sense of loyalty to the leader in exile as well as to the rest of the *compañeros* who organized to resist and fight back the illegal regime putting their lives at risk. More recently, movements not necessarily related to the Peronist ideology adopted the word to refer to the members of the collective or to other activists with whom they share a common cause.

³⁵ See footnote 6 in chapter 1 for an explanation of who the *cartoneros* are and what they do.

really transcend its own temporality and bring about meaningful change there has to be sustained work over time. By 'sustained work' I mean both process of self-reflection and introspection and the actual physical, intellectual and political work that takes place in the *asambleas*.

'Meaningful change' expands Gill Valentine's notion of 'meaningful contact' (Valentine 2008). That is, "contact that actually changes values and translates beyond the specifics of the individual moment into a more general positive respect for - rather than merely tolerance of - others" (325). In this chapter I argue that respect that goes beyond the encounter towards those who are different is a *must* to meaningful change, but it does not suffice in itself to bring about a deep questioning of values, prejudices and misconceptions underlying entrenched stereotypes about others. 'Encountering' others does not necessarily lead to challenging one's privilege, nor does it necessarily spark off political action. I will first discuss the literature on urban encounters in order to situate my work before moving into the daily materialities of political encounters.

Urban Encounters

I draw on the literature on so-called 'geographies of encounter' to investigate the processes that underpin the coming together of difference in the space of the *asambleas* and the potential they have to open up opportunities to produce progressive political change. What I mean with 'progressive political change' is change that is materially and discursively enacted in order to include the excluded or to (re)create a scenario that is

sustained by political, economic and social relationships different from those that create the exclusion in the first place.³⁶

The literature concerned with the physical (dis)encounter with an ‘other’ has developed in the social sciences particularly during the 20th century and it describes the characteristics of the social fabric in urban spaces, highlighting the negative effects or/and the positive consequences resulting from embodied differences cohabiting in proximity in the urban space. There is a long tradition of this kind of work among sociologists, and also psychologists (cf. Simmel 1950; Burgess 1926; Allport 1954) but arguably the first compelling description and analysis of the urban space in its diversity and contrast is Friedrich Engels’s *The condition of the working class in England* (Engels 2009).

What Engels so brilliantly captures in his masterpiece are processes of both physical and emotional boundary making in English cities. He describes the horrendous conditions in which the working classes lived “in hidden alleys close to the palaces of the rich” but built in a “separate territory [...] removed from the sight of the happier classes” (Engels 2009, 39) as a result of the economic imperatives of industrial capitalism. The poor and ‘undesirable’ lived within sight, but out of view from the bourgeoisie. They did not meet at all, even though they shared the same bounded space in close proximity. According to Engels, the same cause was at the root of the indifference with which “hundreds of thousands of all classes and ranks crowding past each other” (37). He saw the isolation in

³⁶ Relational poverty scholars have questioned the use of the pairing ‘inclusion/exclusion’ because it does not accurately reflect the multiplicity and dynamism of chronic poverty. They argue that even ‘inclusion’ into broader socioeconomic networks could generate poverty. That is why they prefer to use terms such as ‘adverse’ or ‘differential incorporation’ instead (Bracking 2003; Mosse 2010; Du Toit 2004). The focus on ‘inclusion’ results in a poverty trap that does not address the multiple structural causes that produce, reproduce and sustain situations of poverty.

which the inhabitants of the city lived as the result of the “dissolution of mankind” and self-profit seeking imperatives (37).

Against the backdrop of a positivist Geography that explained the configuration of urban space in terms of rational economic decisions up to the 1970s, David Harvey’s *Social Justice and the City* (1973) spearheaded the birth of Marxist geography. Inspired by the changes taking place in the cities in the U.S. parallel to the restructuring of the economy and feeding into Engel’s work, Harvey rethought the political economy of urbanization and its “social unrest and impoverishment” to show that conflicting interests and clashes are undergirded by differential processes of capital accumulation (Harvey 2002, 169).

Since then, much of the scholarship dealing with cities’ diversity has been concerned with insecurity, conflict and the differential appropriation of public space and the commons. From a Marxist perspective, these events are understood as being the result of the structural violence of the current socioeconomic arrangement that prioritizes capital production and accumulation rather than social reproduction (Smith 2002; Mitchell 2003). Focus on social exclusion, informality and violence is particularly true for cities in the South, for which the promises of ‘development’ and ‘trickle down’ growth have shattered into pieces with the advent of neoliberalism and in some cases, post-independence political instability frequently coupled with armed conflict (Davis 2006; Koonings and Kruijt 2007).

The proximity of the demographic milestone achieved in 2007 when the world's population went from most-rural to most-urban, and the intensification and extension of transnational flows of people have sparked much discussion about conviviality and conflict in multiethnic/multicultural cities, particularly in Europe in the last few years among some urban scholars giving birth to the field of 'geographies of encounter'. Cities are considered

to be prime sites to investigate ‘the politics of living together’ since differences in gender, ethnicity, race, and other social categories are placed in such close physical proximity (Amin 2006). Scholars have repeatedly asked the question of what does it take to build a ‘good city’, a city represented as “an expanded habit of solidarity and as a practical but unsettled achievement, constantly building on experiments through which difference and multiplicity can be mobilized for common gain and against harm and want” (Amin 2006, 1020-1).

This literature has developed mostly among academics in the northern hemisphere, who have particularly focused on multicultural cities in parts of such hal of the hearth (some exceptions are Ballard 2010 and Schuermans 2013 whose work is conducted in South Africa). The increase in ethnic/cultural/religious conflicts - ranging from the civil unrest in England in 2001 (Amin 2002) and the riots in France in 2005 (Mitchell 2011) to the rise of anti-immigrant sentiments in the last decades of the 20th century (Semyonov, Rajjman, and Gorodzeisky 2006) - have driven scholars and policy makers to look at ‘contact spaces’ - playgrounds, parks, schools, housing estates, community centers, sports associations, etc. - in search for ‘imaginative urban policies’ that will promote a ‘politics of local cultural interchange’ (Amin 2012; Amin 2002).

There are overall two strands to the literature on geographies of encounter. Broadly speaking there is a line of research that celebrates urban diversity positioning itself against accounts of cities as sites of alienation and incivility that focuses on the micro-sites of contact, places of short and casual mixing. In this case the literature pays attention to what happens when people engage in ‘low-level sociability’ with strangers on a daily bases in places such as cafés, parks, buses and playgrounds (Laurier and Philo 2006; Wilson 2011;

Brown 2012). This line of work provides insights into how people react and act upon close physical proximity of an ‘other’ in a café or during the time of a bus ride, disclosing feelings of rejection, solidarity or sympathy in their gestures and words. For instance, it can reveal how people move beyond the mere conviviality when interacting with strangers to enact gestures of responsibility towards the momentarily shared space - for example, by fetching napkins to dry water spilled by the child to a mother in a café - (Laurier and Philo 2006). It can also show how these brief encounters - for example encounters that imply the negotiation of personal space in a bus ride - can prove wrong people’s ideas of difference, sparking a flitting moment of critique to rooted preconceptions, miss-conceptions and prejudices (Wilson 2011).

Notwithstanding the usefulness of these appreciations for a better understanding of how individuals deal with the unexpected encounter with strangers, the conviviality focus tends to be over celebratory of the effects of the encounter and struggles to show “what more there is to gesturing amongst the unacquainted in the public space of a café” (Laurier and Philo 2006, 196). Contact between different social groups does not necessarily produce respect for others, in fact spatial proximity might actually trigger processes of closure of identities and defensiveness (Valentine 2008).

Spatial encounters are crossed by emotions and personal values but they are also shaped by specific geohistorical structures of power (Leitner 2012; Matejskova and Leitner 2011). Not paying attention to the structural factors that influence people’s interaction choices hinders the possibility of a more solid and informed understanding of what are the causes and the effects of those particular interactions (Askins and Pain 2011). For instance, cafés or buses or public offices are micro-sites where people can relate to others without

furthering their relationship with them. People may show attention and kindness and even some form of solidarity for example when they hold a door open or make room for a pram (Laurier and Philo 2006), but interacting in a café is not the same as interacting on a bus, or a train station, or in the waiting line of a public service office.

In the latter cases the encounter could be truly spontaneous and random. People might share the bus to go to work in the same area, but still come from very different social backgrounds - while some passengers might hold administrative jobs, others will be the ones cleaning the offices where the former work. Furthermore, their residences could be far apart and they might only coincide in the same public transport for a segment of their respective journeys.³⁷ On the other hand, cafés are semi-public spaces with their own logics of exclusion (Sibley 1995). In the first place, not everyone can enter a café. As Laurier and Philo correctly point to “[w]hen we buy a (non take-away) cup of coffee (in a café), we are well aware that we are also buying rights to a seat at a table to drink it” (2006, 198). People buy “some rights to privacy in public” (199) making the café - to some extent - a quasi-extension of home, a highly territorial place in which people do not come uninvited (Sibley 1995). These aspects place certain expectations about who can and cannot *be* there, and therefore there is a sort of ‘pre-selection’ in place of the people who can actually ‘encounter’ in the café, making it a far less diverse place than a bus to name just one example.

³⁷ For instance, Ellis et al (2004) have pointed out that for the case of Los Angeles, U.S., racial segregation is lower by work track than by residential track and that this racial spatial pattern poses expectations on inter-race marriages that will eventually have an effect on residential patterns. Importantly, the mix-race children of these couples can “further expose the fictions of fixed racial categories and stereotypes” (Houston et al. 2005, 702).

Going back to the question of what more there is to gesturing amongst the unacquainted in the public space, Wilson (2011) argues that the effect of the temporary encounter in a bus ride could inform wider process of differentiation and exclusion, suggesting that change in peoples' subjectivities could be incremental. While I do not disagree with this argument, I find strong limits to what can actually be changed in that brief encounter. In a research conducted in London, the West Midlands and the southwest Valentine (2008) observed that positive views of a member of a minority group are not necessarily extended to the whole group. She contends that cordial behavior in front of those who are identified as different does not equate to respect for *that* difference. In fact, Valentine finds that there is often a gap between values and attitudes and that people actually force their behavior in order to comply with expectations of urban etiquette and political correctness, or even to respond to 'anxiety of privilege'.

Furthermore, for all the middle-class rhetoric about the benefits of living and engaging with people from different backgrounds and in spite of an apparent embracing of diversity, much of the time the acceptance of difference does not go beyond mere tolerance. In fact, 'difference' - I am mostly referring to race and ethnic difference in multicultural cities in the North - ends up being commodified as the 21st century way of living in cosmopolitan cities, which strips away the political charge of 'difference'. While living in a culturally diverse place might be felt as an asset and as a sign of progressiveness and openness, too much difference too close may be in fact intolerable (Elwood, Lawson, and Nowak 2015). Literature that shows too much optimism about apparent acceptance and willingness to coexist with difference does a poor job explaining how difference is constructed in the first place, and reproduced through relations of political, economic and

cultural domination and oppression based on privilege. The result of this is that ‘difference’ is divested from its geohistorical origins and taken as a given.

Micropublics have also been under the scrutiny of celebratory accounts of contact with difference. These are sites of compulsory negotiation of the everyday encounter where encounters are mediated by interdependence and frequent engagement producing ‘cultural displacement’ (Amin 2002) - sports associations, colleges, child-care facilities, communal gardens, day centers, and schools. The type of encounter in these cases is argued to be different from the ones taking place in micro-sites of fleeting contact because one key aspect of the micropublic, is that people are encouraged to step out of their daily practices and engage with people from different backgrounds in a common activity. In these places, “the transformational element of interaction needs to be made explicit and worked at in efforts to make them intercultural spaces” (Amin 2002, 970). This literature is more aware of the characteristics of each site and the local circumstances in which the encounter takes place, and it is to some extent less naïve about the possibilities of extending or scaling up positive change. For instance, Hemming (2011) conducted research in two faith schools in England and realized that regardless of the positive effects of the techniques used to promote meaningful encounters and social cohesion, these micro-interventions posed some important limitations. He noticed a mismatch between children’s discourses and understandings with their behavior and conflicts arising due to a gap between the values taught in school and those inculcated at home. Hemming thought of these discrepancies as indicative of the limits of attempts to build cohesive communities without addressing wider structures of power and inequality.

Integration projects are another micropublic where interaction - or at least contact - is managed to particular purposes, such as avoiding the concentration of low-income houses and its dispersal instead in a mixed-income neighborhood. Another goal of integration projects is to limit racial segregation and discrimination (Kontokosta 2014). However, Elwood, Lawson and Nowak (2015) show how for the case of mixed-income/mixed-race neighborhoods in which public spaces and activities are touted as producing interactions across difference, place-making - through the beautification of the landscape and/or the 'teaching' of the non-middle-class neighbors to be 'clean and orderly' - these spaces intensely reproduce white middle-class normativities. Thus, mixed-income/mixed-race neighborhoods rather than destabilizing middle-class identities and stereotypes of 'others' often end up invisibilizing white middle-class privilege and leaving prejudice unchallenged. In these cases, differences are not acknowledged so that they can be incorporated into the negotiation of place-making. Rather, identifying them is necessary in order to erase them in an attempt to homogenize the neighborhood according to normative views of what constitutes a good neighborhood and a good citizen. Thus, 'difference' becomes a commodity that is consumed by middle-class actors to build a 'tolerable' diverse neighborhood. As mentioned above, differences are taken out of context and celebrated in a very depoliticized way, while at the same time they are arranged according to a fixed hierarchy.

Likewise, Matejskova and Leitner (2011) have found that integration projects for immigrant and local populations such as community centers do not always motivate meaningful interactions with 'others'. In a research conducted in the east of Berlin, they found that instead, these micro-managed interventions could end up reinforcing the

isolation of migrant communities and the ‘consumption’ of foreign culture by the local population. These are just some examples that show that sites of compulsory negotiation of the everyday encounter do not necessarily produce ‘cultural displacement’ because encounters are not produced in a vacuum, in a place out of history and material conditions (Valentine 2008).

A second strand in the literature of geographies of encounters acknowledges this latter point and tries to look beyond - into the future and also the past - the temporality of the encounter itself. Far from rejecting the importance of looking at the ‘convivial spaces’ and the prosaic encounters as insights into how people live together in the city, this line of work to which I adhere and contribute, concentrates on where and how ‘meaningful’ encounters happen, bringing to light - or at least calling attention to - the broader structural conditions that shape the encounter (Valentine 2008; Andersson, Sadgrove, and Valentine 2012; Leitner 2012; Matejskova and Leitner 2011; Askins and Pain 2011; Lawson and Elwood 2014; Mitchell 2011). In fact, Valentine (2008) warns us about the dangers of uncritically celebrating the everyday encounter without paying attention to inequalities in place. She asserts that people’s prejudices are in close relationship to the way communities have become antagonized around competition for resources and conflicting rights and with their associated perceived or real economic and social injustices. Similarly Leitner’s research in rural Minnesota (U.S.) and Lawson, Jarosz and Bonds’ (2008) work in rural Northwest (U.S.) suggest that intersecting processes of political-economic restructuring are closely related to crisis in place-identity, loss of an entrenched and naturalized ‘way of life’ and the identification of ‘the other’ - the racialized immigrant, the refugee, the outsider - as a threat that endangers the community.

I build on this line of research because I am interested in the political substance and potential of the spatial encounter with difference. Following feminist scholarship that questions hegemonic constructions of space and politics, my view of the political includes and exceeds ‘formal politics’ and understands it as the way people or groups of people exercise power in certain places and across scales (Peake 1999; Kofman 2005). While I am not denying the value of consecutive micro encounters that could potentially have a positive effect in the long run, I argue that looking solely at the convivial interactions through words and bodily gestures in micro-sites of encounter like cafés, it cannot really reveal the extent of the change - if any at all. Secondly, it says little about the work of the numerous variables that intersect in the constitution of identities and stereotypes of others. Lastly, as my work shows, breaking down stereotypes about others in ways that might produce political change takes hard and constant work that involves the recognition of the interplay of systems of oppression, and even when that happens, it does not guarantee a sincere acknowledgment of one's own privilege.

A useful concept to analyze processes of encounter is that of 'contact zone' used by language scholar Mary Louise Pratt to refer to “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power”, in particular under conditions of colonialism (Pratt 1991, 34). She is interested in these ‘contact zones’ and the cultural products of the encounter - such as autoethnographies and transculturation - inasmuch as it questions the belief of communities of culture and language as bounded and stable. This concept has been taken up by postcolonial scholars to make sense of the negotiation of difference in case of transnational migration and to

question representations of past societies as more stable and fixed and less interconnected than the present world (Morrissey 2005; Yeoh and Willis 2005).

Geographers Askin and Pain (2011) use the concept of ‘contact zone’ to evaluate the relevance of participatory action research as a transformative social interaction. That is, they use participatory action research as theory and method to foster contact and engagements across racial and national differences through participatory art with young people. In their research they show how the materiality of the art project had a strong impact on how the participants engaged with one another, where the ‘messy materialities’ of sharing tools and learning techniques from each implied interactions and negotiations that eventually led to positive attitudes even beyond the space of the project.

Lawson and Elwood (2014) also engage with the concept of ‘contact’ in their work about the effects of spatial encounters with 'poor others' on middle-class people's understandings of poverty and politicized constructions of ‘the poor’. They argue that because identities are spatially constructed, interactions within the same space can trigger divergent but sometimes overlapped spatial processes of ‘(self)-government’ and ‘contact’. While in the first case hegemonic scripts about ‘the poor’ are reinscribed and reproduced, in the second one dominant understandings of class identities are reworked and hegemonic views of poverty questioned. For these authors, contact zones are interactions “across difference to reach new insights about one’s own class/race positions, as well as troubling widely held assumptions about poverty, class, race and place” (214). Thus, contact zones are spaces/moments that can materialize in different settings, depending on both the characteristics of the space and the actors involved in the encounter (Lawson and Elwood 2014). Which means that encounters happen in unique geohistorical contexts and that each

of them is shaped and constrained by the material conditions, the history of the place and the actors involved, the power relations at work and the identities put forward (Leitner 2012; Valentine 2008).

Encounters hold hold potential to trouble the power dynamics in place at the initial moment of the encounter, and might facilitate shifting positionalities for actors involved, disrupting values and stereotypes and even eroding the moral boundaries that code and shape the space (cf. Sibley 1995). Yet, I argue that not all of these spaces can engender substantive change in people's identities and political subjectivities with potential for political engagement that disrupts power dynamics. In this chapter I expand the literature within geography about urban encounters and provide empirical examples of the hard work that goes into the transformation of identities and the becoming of what I call, 'relational political subjects'. That is, subjects that are, to some extent, aware of privilege - their own or others' - and of the workings of economic, social and political structures that produce and perpetuate situations of poverty.

Asambleas are neither casual encounters, nor are they engineered by local governments or social services providers to reduce tensions and prejudice in a multicultural context. There was some element of spontaneity and chance at play at the very beginning,³⁸ but it was coupled with the decision to step into the public to protest and march. Importantly *asambleas* are not fleeting encounters but organizations where people engage in long-term political work and have to constantly negotiate difference. For these reasons, they offer a unique opportunity to look at contact as the possibility for exchange in a way that fleeting and micro-managed encounters would not provide to let us more accurately evaluate the

³⁸ In the summer of 2001/2002 people went to the streets and protested and mixed with neighbors with whom they might have not talked before without previous apparent coordination.

extent to which coming across difference holds a transformative potential. Additionally, *asambleas* are notable sites to look at how people interact and relate while dealing with the messiness of daily life, the very concrete, material and bodily but also the emotions and expectations that are part of the maintenance - the social reproduction - of the space (Katz 2001).³⁹

Messy Materialities of Political Encounters

It is 8.45 on a Sunday morning when I arrive at the *Asamblea* to participate in the *Olla*. Carlos, Verónica and Germán are already waiting in a park across the street for Leo and Carolina to open the door. While we wait, we make jokes and chat about what we did the night before. Carlos and Verónica used to live on the streets but both of them have managed to get a subsidy from the city's government to move into a cheap hostel room. Germán, however, still lives on the streets. When the others arrive and we go into the *Asamblea* everyone knows exactly what to do. Leo fills the huge pot where the vegetables will be boiled with water. The others grab knives and cutting boards and slice potatoes, carrots, pumpkins and onions for the next hour or so. In the meantime, someone fires the mate and puts some music on. A bit later, someone shows up in the window of the kitchen that faces the street and asks to come in to help. Walter is homeless and new in the *Olla*. This is the first time he has helped out. At one point, the noise of so many knives chopping vegetables is such that someone comments, "this sounds more like a metallurgical factory than a kitchen!" We all laugh at the idea and carry on with the work. As the morning goes by people start queuing outside the *Asamblea*. Some come with their belongings in plastic bags, some come with children, others come alone. There are people of all ages. Every now and then someone sticks their head through the window and asks us to fill a plastic bottle with water. The movement inside the *Asamblea* is frantic. Now there are ten people working, some of whom are setting-up the table - some easels with thick planks on top surrounded by plastic chairs. There are no tablecloths or plates, just some plastic trays and cutlery that will also serve to facilitate 'take away' once lunch is over. Others

³⁹ As I mentioned in chapter 2, my work focuses primarily in the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* and its soup kitchen, however, in this chapter I draw on the interviews and observations conducted also in the *Asamblea de Flores*.

run back and forth between the kitchen and the pantry, clean the toilets, check that the mincemeat does not burn in the pan, set up the small pots in which the food will be transported to the tables and make sure everything is ready. At 12.45, the doors open and nearly one hundred people come in and sit around the tables, while others approach the counter of the kitchen and leave the containers in which they will take extra food once all those who are present have eaten, sometimes, twice (Based on fieldwork notes).

In 2002 the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo*⁴⁰ obtained a permit to use an empty plot in a sidewalk of San Juan Avenue granted by the *Centro de Gestión y Participación*, CGP (Administration and Participation Center).⁴¹ There were several plots that were left unused after the enlargement of this avenue in the late 1970s and that were classified as public land. Some members of the *Asamblea* had already obtained a permit to use a nearby piece of land to build a community garden, which encouraged the *Asamblea* to ask for the lot where they are currently based.⁴²

In the Spring of 2002 the *asambleístas* started the construction of a building with donations from local people as well as from organizations overseas. Then the *Olla* moved

⁴⁰ While I am aware that an organization is not exactly an actor, sometimes I refer to the actions, decisions and opinions of members of the *Olla* and the *Asamblea* (their majority or totality) as being performed, decided and hold by the *Olla* and the *Asamblea*. I do this for two reasons. The first reason is that I approach the *Asamblea*, and the *Olla* (in the case of the *Asamblea* de Flores, the housing cooperative) as spaces, and as such, their nature is not that of a mere container of social life but that resulting from the stretching-out of social relations (Massey 1994). As such, and foremost in these cases as I will argue in the second reason, the *Olla* and the *Asamblea* cannot be understood outside the relationships between the people who comprise the space. The second reason responds to the way people in these spaces actually talk about them, the way they name it. Sometimes ‘*asamblea*’ means the building (‘let’s meet at the *asamblea*’) although it is never only the building. Sometimes it means only the people participating in it (‘almost all the *asamblea* participates in the *Olla*’), sometimes it refers to the actual weekly meeting (‘let’s talk about it in the next *asamblea*’), and sometimes it means the relationships, the values and the power struggles that constitute and are constituted in through the space (‘the *asamblea* supports a politics pro-human rights’ or ‘the *asamblea* does not tell people what to do’).

⁴¹ The CGPs were later on replaced by *Comunas*.

⁴² In the opinion of Daniel, the urgency to “put off fires”, the weakness of the political authorities of the moment, and even the good will to respond to the demands of a battered population allowed for these kinds of “irregularities” from which the *asamblea* benefited (Interview with Daniel 02/14/14). According to the Constitution of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, it is prerogative of the legislature to approve any license or permit of use (Art. 82). However, this did not happen in the case of the *Asamblea*.

inside and started functioning twice a week until it ended up working only on Sundays. During the time of my fieldwork around 100 to 120 people ate there every Sunday. All of them are homeless or living in very precarious situations. Some of them receive some welfare support - either from the local or the national government - to pay for a room in a tenement. While there are several soup kitchens currently in the city run with subsidies from the government, the *Asamblea* decided not to accept any help from it - either in the form of produce or cash. The *Olla* works with donations from the people in the neighborhood, and with what the *Asamblea* can buy from the money it raises through personal contributions or through the organization of events.

One key aspect that distinguishes this soup kitchen from others is that in the *Olla*, the people who come to eat are also the ones who cook and help setting up the dining room - which is the multiple-use room of the *Asamblea*. There are usually three teams of people who rotate every Sunday. In each team there are always two to three - or more - permanent members of the *Asamblea*, plus those who intermittently come to help. I call 'permanent members of the *Asamblea*' to those who either participate in the meetings on Thursdays and some other activities (but not the *Olla*), in the *Olla* or in both. In general, all of them manifest a strong sense of belonging and identification with the *Asamblea* independently of the time they have been involved with it. There are also many 'acquaintances' to the *Asamblea*, some of whom had a strong presence in the past but who do not come regularly anymore but with who the *Asamblea* can count in case of need - such as the organization of *peñas*,⁴³ the writing of a document, etc.

⁴³ See footnote 28 in chapter 2.

Except two of the people I interviewed from this *Asamblea* - activer or not - all of them self-identify as ‘middle class’, even if they are just "getting by" as Guadalupe put it in her interview. The spectrum is nonetheless very diverse. There are people with college degrees and even doctoral degrees in their late twenties and thirties; there are older people who had a history of activism in the 1970s; teachers; public employees and artists. Some are homeowners, most of them are not, some rent a room in a tenement and some - a minority - are homeless.

However, as I said before, all of the people who come to eat at the *Olla* are homeless. They either live on the streets or manage to rent a room in a tenement with the help of some subsidy from the government. Most of the people who come to the *Olla* every Sunday come, eat, and leave. Some come earlier or stay a bit longer to ask for counsel on programs or social services provided by the local government to people in vulnerable situations - shelters, food stamps, cash transfers, disability certificate, etc. During the first couple of years the people who attended the *Olla* were mostly highly impoverished middle-class people. Some of them were professionals who could not make it to the end of the month because they had lost their jobs or because they had to choose between paying the rent or buying food, or doing a bit of both. In the last few years however, the demographics of the *Olla* shifted to be represented mostly by the most marginal sectors, the “excess of the capitalist society” as Paula described it to me during an interview. They live in situations of high vulnerability with high incidence of substance abuse and subjected to institutional violence, including police harassment.

I borrow the term ‘messy materialities’ from Askins and Pain (2011) - the bodily engagement with tools and the interactions generated between those bodies when

participating in an art project - to refer to the multiple, daily and extended interactions that take place in the space of the *Asamblea*, particularly around the *Olla* and its associated activities. These materialities encompass a huge amount of different organizational and decisional activities carried out between different people in ways that try to minimize the establishment of hierarchies and the rise of leaderships that might affect the horizontal nature of the space - from distributing activities to discussing different issues in the weekly meetings.

These necessary activities for the life of the *Asamblea* are also the “fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life” (Katz 2001, 711) through which the membership of the *Asamblea* and their practices actively construct the political space of the *Asamblea* and the encounters that take place in it in a dialectical relation of co-constitution. In the previous section I argued that interacting briefly in a café is not the same that interacting in a train station or in a public service office, because of the different logics of exclusion that play out in each of those spaces. Likewise, interacting in the *asambleas* poses different kinds of challenges to those raised in integration projects or schools even though the encounters in these latter spaces are also sustained over time - people get together most of the time more than once a week for years to collective work in a setting where there is room for discussion.

Negotiating activities, the uses of the space and relationships is never an easy task in any space. Not everyone is likely to approach an *asamblea*, and not everyone who does necessarily stays. However, the *asambleas* present opportunities for politically radical interactions in ways that others spaces do not because their highly diverse composition - in terms of socioeconomic position, race, gender and age - is articulated in a space that has

political intentionality. In the next section I will reflect on what ‘difference’ means for the *asambleas* in the context of working for, and with people who struggle under socioeconomic marginalization. I will show how difference is politically charged in ways that facilitate opportunities for a ‘living with difference’ that has teeth to it.

The meanings of ‘difference’

As mentioned in the introduction, since their inception *asambleas* have tried to build ties with the most disenfranchised sectors (Svampa and Corral 2006). Many of their initial activities were set up with the intention of bringing attention to the immediate needs of the neighborhood. For instance, more than half of the *asambleas* that I interviewed people from, had at some point - usually at the very beginning - a soup kitchen, and at least half of them took actions towards building relationships with *cartoneros* [waste pickers].⁴⁴

One of the original intentions of the *asambleas* was to show solidarity with those who had been hit the hardest by the violent effects of the economic meltdown. However, the evidence I gathered in my research shows that there has been a progressive valorization of the diversity of the space. Diversity refers to age, race, culture, sexuality, nationality, gender, and class. It also refers to points of view and political beliefs - although there is a general alignment against neoliberalism, conservatism and imperialism, and in support of pro-human rights and social justice politics that unquestionably exclude certain political identities - which should be negotiated through horizontal and collective practices. Accordingly, diversity and the coexistence with difference are seen as assets and as a source of strength for the organizations.

⁴⁴ As I said in the chapter 2, I interviewed people from thirteen *asambleas*, but conducted observations only in two.

Valorization of difference does not happen as the ‘natural outcome’ of differences coming together in the same space. As I will show in what follows, the valorization of difference in the *asambleas* is in ongoing process that results from the combination of long-term interactions accompanied by certain politico-ideological motivations that direct the work they do in those spaces with a clear intention.

My first example refers to Pedro, a Bolivian member of the *Asamblea de Flores* who lives in the housing cooperative. In Argentina nationals of neighboring countries are usually associated within conservative/right-wing discourses with crime, petty theft and drugs (Domenech 2012) in spite of not solid statistical evidence whatsoever. In fact, the percentage of population from neighboring countries has remained steady for over a hundred years while the unemployment rate has continually increased (Grimson 2006). Yet, immigrants have become the scapegoat for the lack of jobs and the critical economic situation - and its associated social crises - particularly during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Grimson 2001; Guano 2003). If the presence of those identified as foreigners⁴⁵ generates anxiety and fear in places assumed to be the domain of the middle class (Guano 2004), in the *Asamblea de Flores* and its housing cooperative - difference in terms of nationality, ethnicity and culture has the potential of enriching the space and creating opportunities for learning from others, as Pedro’s quote illustrates,

Pedro: Here we Bolivians live, we Argentineans live, Peruvians ... mmm ... there is a mix, but that assorted mix, it's better!

Mónica: Do you think that that diversity makes the *Asamblea* a rich space?

Pedro: Yes. We have, each ... country has its culture, so we too...we get to understand each other, we understand each other, for instance, we understand the culture of Peru and so they too, understand us who are from

⁴⁵ Interestingly, the Argentinean population living in border zones has much more in common in terms of race, ethnicity and culture with those living on the other side of the political border than with fellow Argentineans in the opposite side of the national territory.

Bolivia. That's why, we have folk dances here from Bolivia ... it goes very well, people really like it when we perform in the street, all that is really good (Interview with Pedro, 08/31/13)

Pedro was a miner in Potosi, Bolivia, where he acquired some experience in labor organizing. He moved to Argentina leaving his family behind during the 1980s and lived and worked in different places of the province and the city of Buenos Aires until he found himself without a job and without housing around the time of the crisis of 2001. He started attending the *Asamblea* after being invited by his sister in law who had been attending the soup kitchen. Prior to the above quote Pedro was recounting the story of how it was when they occupied the space and transformed it into a housing for poor people in the middle-class neighborhood of Flores. He remembered people being suspicious of the place - an occupied place - and its inhabitants because of their foreign origins that were associated with crime and drug use. Then one day, Pedro, who is handy at construction work, plumbing and electricity, offered an elderly woman who could not afford a repair man to fix something for her. He recounted,

Pedro: She needed something, but so did we since we were here, [we needed] they trusted us, that [they knew] we are not bad people, that we are the same as they are but sometimes people think, without knowing, they think people is an anybody, some one bad, or good, I don't know, right?

Mónica: So you felt that because you are from another country some people thought you were a thief?

Pedro: There were many people who would criticize us, there always are, in the world, not just here in this neighborhood, in the world, that happens because of what people know. But once they knew us, then we started to get along, for instance this neighbor [points to the side], he's ok (Interview with Pedro, 08/31/13).

It is hard to tell the extent to which Pedro's negative experience of racial and national discrimination predisposes him to see national and racial diversity in the housing cooperative and the *Asamblea* as something positive. Or whether instead was the reparatory

acknowledgement from the part of the neighbors that led him to reflect on the possibilities that lie within getting to know better people who are different from us. Ultimately, his reasoning is only potentially disruptive of normative understandings of social categories because he can connect his own personal experience of discrimination to the diversity of the space in where he lives, works and creates community.

Likewise, the quote at the beginning of this chapter shows another example of the value given to being amongst ‘differents’ that is possible due to the particularities of this space. In this case, the valorization of difference is related to the possibility of changing and bettering oneself and subsequently positively impacting the organization. Leo, described to me the many changes the *Olla* had gone through, partially, in order to accommodate the changing needs of the neighborhood. But Leo also told me that the *Olla* had evolved with the incorporation of new people with different perspectives and experiences. For instance, in the past the *Asamblea* used to run the *Olla* both on Saturdays and Sundays. But the dynamics on both days were very different and Saturday’s *Olla* eventually closed and the people who ran it left. At the center of this fallout there were disagreements about the purpose and meaning of the *Olla*. For example, the environment seemed to be more tense in the *Olla* run on Saturdays. There were high levels of violence - fights and alcoholism -, something that one of the interviewees explained to me as the result of the very dynamic of the *Olla* and the people who run it who imposed a stricter regime that was ‘stigmatizing and controlling’. Contrary to the *Olla* on Sundays, the Saturday *Olla* never had meetings and also never shared the table at the end of the working day as people on Sundays do.

As Leo commented in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, they did not want to act as a social assistance office only providing a plate of food. Instead, for them “food is an excuse for people to have a space of belonging” (Interview with Paula, 02/04/14), “a window to the neighborhood” (Interview with Daniel, 02/14/14) through which the *Asamblea* can do political work with, and for those who are in very marginal situations. Thus, for the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo*, the arrival of new *compañeros* who bring their own experiences, knowledges, values and expectations is valued because it transforms the space by disrupting prevalent assumptions, ways of doing and relations between the members of the *Asamblea* and those who come to the *Olla* to eat (Conradson 2003).

The example of Antonio referred to me by Leo is particularly telling. Antonio used to live on the streets and joined the *Asamblea* as a result of his participation in the *Olla*. His contribution to changing the character of the *Olla* is acknowledged by everyone I spoke with. Leo recalls a couple of uncomfortable moments in the *Olla*, including when the people who ran it decided to stop serving breakfast to only focus on providing lunch. Part of the reason had to do with the difficulties of keeping nearly one hundred people in the *Asamblea* from nine in the morning until six in the afternoon in a closed space. The other reason was the exhaustion of the *compañeros* who had been sustaining the *Olla* for years. Regardless of the reason, Antonio did not like the decision and argued that breakfast should continue to be served. Another incident happened during the epidemic of influenza, at which time, the *Olla* closed its doors and only served food through the window to avoid high concentrations of people in a confined space. Antonio disagreed with this decision too because he believed that people must sit down at a table to eat. There were intense

conversations and Antonio temporarily abandoned the *Asamblea*. While it is debatable whether or not the *Asamblea* made a good decision when limiting the *Olla* to serving lunch and to closing the doors during a flu epidemic, and whether or not Antonio showed an intransigent position in the face of these decisions, his insistence on serving breakfast and keeping the *Asamblea* open pointed to something else besides the physical need to eat. Serving the food through the window in plastic trays that people would eat in a park, or under the highway or sat at a doorstep was not enough to fulfill those other needs that people bring with them when they come to the *Olla*: sharing a table, enjoying a meal in a place protected from the rain, sitting at an actual table to eat.

Today the *Olla* actively refuses to serve food through the window. If someone passing by requests a tray, he/she always encounter the same response: “come inside, there is room at the tables”. Sometimes they have their carts with their few belongings or several dogs they don’t want to leave unattended. The suggestion is the same “come inside, we will give you a container with food, we’ll look after your things”.⁴⁶ I asked Leo if these fundamental changes in the *Olla*, in the way the *Olla* conceives a plate of food, the act of eating, had much to do with the incorporation of new people, particularly homeless people,

Leo: Obviously! That’s why we try to incorporate people, that’s what we’ve always wanted [...] it has helped us a lot, it has opened our heads in too many ways, like in how we treat, the approach we have on problems, a variety of things that had to do with their daily lives in the streets, that we want [the knowledge] to include it on our Sundays.

Mónica: Can you give me an example?

Pedro: Like the approach we used, a number of things that had to do with their daily experience in the streets during the week that wanted to incorporate to the Sundays.

⁴⁶ In other cases, people do not want to eat in the *Olla* because of tensions and quarrels with other people who come to eat, or because they just want to eat alone, or with their families in a less crowded space. In those cases, they can bring containers in which they can take food once everyone who is in the *Asamblea* has eaten.

Mónica: You mean, somehow understand where is the other person standing?

Pedro: Of course! Something that for us was, not impossible, but it was really hard to get, really hard to learn (Interview with Leo, 03/06/14).

Incorporating people, working for and with those who live in very different material conditions but who also hold different values, knowledges and appreciations of the world enriches the discussions and adds deeper layers of complexity to the understanding of problems and actions to be taken. And that is seen as an asset to the members of the *Asamblea*.

Writing about a drop-in center for asylum seekers in England, Darling points to how the center is contingent upon “multiple narratives, practices and notions of acceptable generosity coming into continuous contact and negotiation” creating moments of transgression that question the positionalities of the actors involved (Darling 2011). Similarly, Lawson and Elwood (2014) argue that in community development organizations, people from different race and class positions come together to collectively find ways to better the neighborhood. For this reason, people are not ‘pre-coded’ within a hierarchy and therefore the space holds potential for a critical engagement with others that might trouble one’s position.

I argue that the potential for disruption in the *asambleas* is in fact much deeper, something that enables a more profound destabilization of one’s values, preconceptions and political subjectivities - with limitations, as I will lay out in the final section of this chapter. This is the case because in these spaces multiple and divergent narratives are very rarely seen as a source of conflict and instead they are appreciated as an opportunity for growth. This is true even more if we consider that the *asambleas*’ historical stand has been

to recognize structural disadvantages that exclude and silence certain bodies and voices. Thus, the work they do is more permeable to disruptions and interventions that can push the borders of hegemonic narratives. This is something that was clear in Antonio's example. Differences in expectations and assumptions about the meaning and purpose of the *Olla* led to Antonio's temporary abandonment of the space, something that was deeply regretted by other members of the *Asamblea*. Nonetheless, the event forced the activists at the *Olla* to reconsider their own praxis and values in the light of Antonio's concerns, what finally led to the concrete and identifiable changes in the way the *Olla* operates.

In the next section I expand on what it means to learn from difference and the political change associated with it by reflecting on how the recognition of difference as an opportunity for growth rests partially upon the acknowledgement of privilege, or at best, the recognition of a system that clearly marks some people as unworthy.

Relational Political Subjects and the Elusiveness of Privilege

Scholars have shown how privilege - even though identifiable in multiple situations in daily life - is something that is not evident or self-explanatory to the ones who benefit from it (McIntosh 2003). In fact, not seeing one's privilege - not being aware of it - is *per se* a characteristic of privilege (Johnson 2001). Whether it is due to class, race or gender, privilege is an elusive matter that even when recognized it is hard to talk about (McIntosh 2003). Furthermore, identifying groups of underprivileged and oppressed without simultaneously referring to the privileged and oppressors, renders awareness of group inequality a 'half-blinded' approach to privilege that implicitly assumes that dominance or privilege is 'normal' (Pratto and Stewart 2012).

The recognition of structural injustices, poverty and exclusion of certain groups is something members of the *asambleas* grapple with. People's approach to disadvantaged groups and to the processes that lead to situations of destitution and impoverishment - of others as much as of their own - varies depending on people's previous experiences of activism, work and education at the moment of joining the collective. In fact, the act of 'seeing', of being able 'to see' something maybe for the first time, is something that came up repeatedly in conversations with members of the *asambleas*. In all the cases they explained it as the result of having engaged with people they most likely would not have come in sustained contact with if they had not been participating in the *asambleas*.

For instance, in the case of Marta of whom I talked at the beginning of the Introduction, 'seeing' is an ongoing process of negotiating the meaning of the space they inhabit along with the way they relate to each other. Marta had approached the *Bachillerato Popular* (Bachi) in the *Asamblea de Flores* with a series of assumptions of what a school should look like and how it should function. She also arrived to the place with some deep-rooted classist understandings of entitlements, as in the case of access to housing,

It was really hard to understand, it wasn't that they ... mmmmm ... the feeling of the 'occupied house', of 'usurpation', right? But when I was told that all this had been the result of an intentional bankruptcy, that the owner had fucked all the employees, that the employees took over the clinic so it could work again as such, it was, another vision of what has happened throughout the years, that this place was a day care, a *merendero*,⁴⁷ that fed people in the neighborhood ... so I say, it has to do with a different culture, I mean, I am coming from a culture where ... families worked their ass off but that have also had a different economic situation, right? I mean, families with a different affluence of money because they were professionals maybe, so they could have a better salary and more money, right? (Interview with Marta, 12/17/13)

⁴⁷ 'Merendero' is the name given to a soup kitchen when it provides the afternoon snack.

In this quote Marta provides a brief account of structural violence, poverty and class privilege, even if she would not use these words. Her own assumptions of ‘property’ were challenged over time as she engaged more and more with the work of the *Bachi* and with the people in it. Her view and judgment of the space gradually changed as she realized that whereas her family had the chance to access a property with the fruit of their labor - and that was the way Marta understood the right to access housing - the people living in the housing cooperative in the *Asamblea* had been at disadvantage in a system where not everybody has the same opportunities to access to education, jobs and services based on their class position. Marta even ventured a bit further on her new critical approach to recognize the many ‘privileges’ that she has had and that continues to have: a comfortable apartment of her own, a good medical insurance, a family in a stable economic situation.

‘Seeing’ and learning from others’ experiences and lives also prompts critical reflection about people’s own identities and histories, enhancing the possibility for inhabiting the same space and creating affective bonds with people whom they might not have acknowledged in the past (Wilson 2014). For instance, Sandra, a middle-class housewife in her late thirties and a student at the *Bachi*, started frequenting the *Asamblea* when a friend of hers invited her to participate in the *Grupo de Género* [gender group]. She then decided to complete her high-school studies and gradually became more involved with the *Asamblea*. According to her, participating in this space helped her,

to see beyond what you can see ... in the sense that ... we are always worried about one self, looking at our own belly, worried by our small immediate surroundings and ... you realize there are other things [...] but here is like things get to you more ... mmmh ... I don’t know how to explain it. All the situations, all the people [get to you] as they are, right? For

instance, in the classroom, all the people who are completely different, all the different personalities that there are ... (Interview with Sandra 12/17/13)

An example of these ‘other things’ she could see was reflected in an article she had to write for a magazine edited in the *Asamblea* about living in juvenile detention centers, a reality that some of her peers in the *Bachillerato* had experienced. Telling me about that event, she commented,

...maybe in a different situation, you’d look at them [the kids who come to the Bachi who had the experience of being in a juvenile detention center] and think “I better cross the street”, you follow me? But here you learn to realize, here...to realize they are children who are ... totally unprotected ... unprotected! And I tell you again, this place ... I believe it gives them a hug [...]. (Interview with Sandra 12/17/13)

This adjustment in people’s views about the situation of others but also the perception of themselves and of their own situation is also true for those members of the *asambleas* who might have already had some political involvement and a more critical view of social reality before joining the organization. That is the case of Cecilia, a member of the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* who had participated in another social organization before and who had just started participating in the *Olla* as well at the time of the interview. I asked Cecilia about the reasons for participating in both the *Asamblea* and the *Olla*, specifically in the *Olla*, an activity that implies waking up early on Sundays and doing quite hard physical work for many hours. She answered that in her case she had a *consciencia social* [social awareness] that prevents her from staying comfortable at home doing nothing, the same awareness that had her participating in grassroots organizations for quite a while. And yet, in spite of her political experience and commitment to social justice, after a few Sundays of participating in the *Olla* her *consciencia* was further

challenged in a sort of 'epiphany moment' of comparing the stark differences between her situation and that of the people who come to the *Olla*,

Last Sunday I got home and I told my boyfriend, 'I finish at the *Olla*, I come home, I take a bath, lay down, eat something ... and these people keep going around on the streets' ... I mean [...] it was early, Sunday 2 pm and they all went with their belongings to walk around ... and that's the case not one day or one week, it's for ... you don't even know when it's gonna have a solution ... these things leave you thinking, and it forces you to put yourself in that person's shoes, in the place of that person that finished eating and leaves to just walk around (Interview with Cecilia, 02/12/14)

What Daniela recounts seems to be a quite obvious observation, particularly for someone who has been working on social organizations for a while. However, during my interviews there were countless examples of people who, due to their participation in the *asambleas* had widened their views about socioeconomic injustices, even if they already had a critical view of the causes of poverty and the role of poor and non-poor actors in it. For instance, one time I participated in the *Olla*'s organizational meeting and made the following observations,

Verónica and César [both homeless members of the *Asamblea*] weren't there. Ana [a long time member of the *Asamblea* and part of one of the three teams that rotate every Sunday in the *Olla*] told us that they brought up the idea of making a magazine for the *Olla*. Vero and César want to make a magazine mirroring those tourist guides, but in this case, for homeless people. They thought about including a 'where to eat' and 'where to sleep' sections, and also 'where to go' and 'what to do' segments with information about free or affordable cultural activities, including where to practice sports. Ana seemed gladly surprised. She commented "crazy, eh? Interesting to see from where they are looking at it [the project of the magazine] and from where I am looking at it!" (Based on fieldwork notes).

It had not occurred to Ana that that kind of information could go in the magazine, but later in the interview, she brought up the magazine's project and pointed out how she realized

that what César and Verónica were doing was reclaiming their right to leisure, to have fun and to enjoy public space. Again, as in the case of Cecilia, it is hard to believe that things like this would come as a surprise to someone who has extended experience of doing grassroots work. And yet, the obviousness of the human need to have fun, to do creative activities, to have free time, was only visible to Ana once César and Verónica made it explicit.

Interestingly, most of the participants/interviewees had very strong opinions about the inequalities of the socioeconomic system and went as far as openly critiquing the current class structure. Some also acknowledged - not without a bit of shame - that maybe one of the reasons for looking for a place where to do sociopolitical work was to assuage their middle-class guilt. Other participants also recognized the structural difference between their position and that of the poor or homeless and acknowledged it as a limit for them to really understand the situation and therefore have a right to make a claim. In relation to this later point, Guadalupe told me that before coming to the *Asamblea* she tried to participate in one of the *Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados* [Unemployed Workers Movement].⁴⁸ After attending only a few meetings she quit because - according to her - she could not relate to the discussions taking place. Guadalupe's middle-class background and the fact that she *did* have employment - working with her father - made her feel self-conscious and out of place. Maybe it was her discomfort what prevailed when deciding to stop attending, but in any case, it shows that there is a recognition of a class structure that poses very different challenges - and political goals - depending on where people is situated.

⁴⁸ These organizations emerged in the 1990s when workers who had been laid off by the state owned national oil company - YPF - started to block roads all over the country.

Similarly, Lucía, a member of the *Asamblea de Flores* and teacher in the *Bachillerato* who recognizes herself as a middle-class person, talked to me about how she struggled in order to put together her identity with the political work in grassroots organizations,

Guido [another member of the *Asamblea*] made me understand, with a few words he completely destroyed my middle-class complex. A revolutionary's goal is not to become poor. A revolutionary's goal is to fight so the poor stop being poor. [...] There is a larger complexity, it cannot be that we have to live all the time with the guilt of having a good life, it can't be that our destiny! Ultimately, we need to work so that the poor stop being poor, that's what we have to do (Interview with Lucía, 02/07/14).

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, for the middle-class members of the *asambleas*, coming together with those who come from different social backgrounds, with different values and knowledges contributes to a more complex understanding of social processes. In the case of well-meaning people like Rodrigo, he approached the *Bachillerato*, as he said, as he could have approached a Boy Scouts group. He wanted to,

contribute with my little grain of sand, but don't ask me to fight with any one, "I'm all love" (Interview with Rodrigo, 08/01/13).

These quotes show that for all the awareness about class differences and structural injustices these active members of the *asambleas* manifest - and activists from other grassroots organizations for the matter -, it is quite different to understand people's 'adverse incorporation' (Du Toit 2004) into the economic and social order on the one hand, and wholeheartedly embracing one's class, gender and race privilege on the other. In fact, what Marta recognizes as 'privilege' in the quote above are actually 'advantages' that come from her privileged position as a white middle-class woman. As a matter of fact, the word 'privilege' did not come up frequently in interviews and observations. Even more telling

is the fact that if class differences surfaced in conversations and debates, 'race' was barely mentioned, and when it was, it was not problematized.

Allusions to race were brought up in ways that conflated it with class, particularly in comments that were meant to highlight denigratory views and perceptions from people outside spaces such as the *asambleas*' towards poor people. For instance, when Cristian was giving me his appreciation of the middle classes who participated in the popular rebellion of December of 2001 he contended that they fought together with the organizations of unemployed until they got their frozen savings back.⁴⁹ The moment they got access to their money he said,

they realized those blocking the roads were some *negros de mierda* [...] a *negro de mierda* who lives out of welfare⁵⁰ (Interview with Cristian, 07/07/14).

Cristian was obviously critiquing what he perceived to be an opportunistic and discriminatory attitude from the middle classes but he was not directly referring to the race/color of skin of the people blocking the roads but to their class belonging.

It is common knowledge that the Argentinean society claims to not be racist (Joseph 2000) and to be a quite homogeneous white European-descendant country (Garguin 2009). I will discuss more on detail the racial formation of Argentina in the last chapter of this dissertation, but suffices to say that not only this is not true. Argentina is a racist society

⁴⁹ In December of 2001 bank savings were frozen in an attempt to prevent a run on capital from the bank system. Except for those who by virtue of their connections and power had the chance to withdraw their money on time and send it offshore, most people had no access to their life-long savings. This measure was known as *corralito* (playpen).

⁵⁰ '*Negro de mierda*' translates roughly as 'fucking black'. However, it is necessary to make clear that the meaning and uses of 'negro/black' is not the same in Argentina than it is in the United States. For once, 'negro' does not mean having a Black-African appearance. Rather it refers to people with dark skin (*mestizo*) something the functions as a proof of not having an European background (Adamovsky 2013). Also, '*negro*' is both used as an insult (something that signals backwardness and ignorance) and as a sign of affection. Therefore, 'negro/a' does not necessarily refer so straightforwardly to the actual color of the skin, neither when used as an insult nor when showing affection.

with a very diverse population including afro-descendants, indigenous, whites and various combinations of all of those. Also the whitening processes underwent for those marked ethnically - basically all who were not strictly white - and processes of invisibilization of the population ultimately found their limits during the 1940s with the advent of Juan Domingo Perón to power, when race, not only was made visible in a stark way but it was also politicized. Briefly put, the working class became the backbone of the Peronist movement from 1945 onwards (Campo 1983). Those opposed to Perón identified the movement as the ‘anti-people’ and its followers as ‘not real Argentineans’. Adding to the ‘foreignization’ of the political opposition the actual darker color of the skin of many workers who came from the interior of the country, the result is the correspondence between working/poor class, race, and Peronism that has been so pervasive in the last seventy years.

During the 20th century references to race became progressively a sign of class position even if the skin color or the phenotype of the person alluded did not match the ‘characteristics’ of the referred race (Adamovsky 2013). Thus, even if terms such *cabecita negra* [little black head] alludes to an international racial hierarchy wherein black people are situated at the bottom of it, race is to some extent subsumed to class because it refers to the socioeconomic status of a person as well as their ‘plebeian culture’ (Adamovsky 2013). This is not to say that race does not matter in the construction of social hierarchies in Argentina, but to show how class and race intersect in a very specific way that depends on Argentina's history of colonization, the way the new nation embraced the modern project of the 19th century, and the construction of political parties and political alliances along the 20th century.

The racial marker of class (Adamovsky 2013) is evident in Marta's comment about her brother. After discussing the situation of the people in the *Asamblea* and the housing cooperative, we moved on to talk about her family's social mobility from being working class to a middle-class family. She suddenly mentioned her father had forgotten his working-class origins once he got a white-collar job. Without me bringing up race or discrimination, she said both her younger brother and her father were racists. She actually used that word and then she went on to tell that,

My brother is disgusting, he is disgusting and even if you don't accept or agree with that stance, it's like you are all the time experiencing it anyway because [he goes] "these *negros de mierda!*" (Interview with Marta, 12/18/13)

According to Marta's words, for her father and brother, moving up the ladder put some distance between their middle-classness and those '*negros de mierda*' who were poor. In her account Marta acknowledged her privilege as a middle-class person in terms of access to material goods, but at any point she did acknowledge her own position in a hierarchy of races that adds to her privilege in comparison to others - like the people living in the housing cooperative. Even in the clearly racially marked term '*negro*', race is veiled in Marta's comments, showing how categorizations around race and class as well as their differential valorization are co-constituted in Argentina in a way that 'invisibilizes' race and prevents discussions about it. References to class surface in more direct ways than those to race, where cultural traits are constructed as associated with different class positions.

Cristian provides another example of the discursive subordination of race to class. During the interview he talked about how both his mother and sister teach in a school in a slum and yet - despite the close and continuous proximity to people in very disadvantaged

situations - he repeatedly heard his sister complaining about kids' lack of attention and participation in the classroom. I commented that when I was a high-school teacher I heard many times complains about how kids do not pay attention because they suffer from attention deficit disorder due to the excessive use of technology such as smart phones, to which Cristian ironically observed, as if he was impersonating his sister,

They [the kids I used to teach might] have an excess of stimulation but the other ones [the kids living in the slum], *no!* They don't pay attention because they are *negros* ... (Interview with Cristian, 07/07/14)

To be privileged exempts people from being racially marked as non-white and singled out in ways that are detrimental for their ability to thrive by means of attaching cultural and moral traits that deem them inferior (Johnson 2001). Cristian's comments go as far as connecting the advantages of those other kids who do not live in slums to the oppression that the children in the slum experience for being on the losing end of a system of privilege. And yet, his own position in that system where class and race are so closely-knit together seems to be neither self-evident nor easy to talk about. The invisibilization of race in this established system of privilege is somehow understandable because, ultimately, the 'classification' of race is the result of the establishment of social order that deemed the non-white not completely 'modern', not completely 'civilized'. However, is less clear why talking about structural injustices and a system that confers advantages to some and nor to others is as far as people with so much political experience can go. To some extent 'privilege' remains a slippery concept that comes to awareness in waves, at moments within reach and in sight, but completely falling out of view at others.

In the next chapter I will look at some of the characteristics that facilitate alliances across difference that take place in the space of *asambleas* in order to flesh out more in

depth the daily material practices that contribute to relational understandings of poverty and the acknowledgment of a system that puts at disadvantage certain people, including the role of 'empathy' in alliance building. I will also show none of this comes easy or free from tension and contradictions. There is much more to the acceptance of difference, its embracement and learning from it than the mere accidental accumulation of differences in the same space (Wilson 2011, Laurier and Philo 2006, etc.) or the workings of supervised projects of neighborhood/communities governance (Matejskova and Leitner 2011).

Chapter 4: Working Across Difference in *Asambleas Populares*



Figure 10: *Marcha de Antorchas/Torches' March, December 2015 (by Mónica Farías)*

Introduction

When I left (whispering) there was nobody. It was a low time [...] there were people with a lot of good will, people that to my liking contributed much to dismantling [the *Asamblea*] with their good will. They were people who ... they had nothing to do, they spent the whole day there ... mmh ... they had very assistentialist logics. We were a few ... and many were these people with this way of working, with this logic. Mmh...so, what happens? ... You try to expand, to open up the space, to build trust, to build with the other and, I don't know, here it comes someone who does you the favor of giving you something because "I love you, because you are nice, because you spend a lot of time here". They don't do it from a political patronage stand, because there was no political benefit on that, but they do it from a place of nothing, of good will and good will is rubbish when it comes to building politically. To me is rubbish (Interview with Natalia, 07/31/14, former member of the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo*)

Natalia was among the original and most active members of the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo*, working in the unemployed commission and the *Olla* for years. She

told me she left around 2007 out of exhaustion for all the energy poured into the organization and she never went back to the *Asamblea* as an activist, although she remains close to the space and the people. There are a few important issues that Natalia's comment raises. First, participation in the *Asamblea* does not guarantee a definite change in people's approach to poverty or a modification of their political subjectivities. It does not happen 'naturally' that people come together and learn from difference in a way that powerfully impacts their identities, challenges privilege and builds alliances. Doing all these things demands hard - and conscious - work. Secondly, middle-class good-will works against true engagement across social borders and becomes an impediment to build a political space of openness and collective projects. The desire to 'do good', to contribute with "a tiny grain of sand" as Rodrigo put it, has two related effects that also connect to the apparent acceptance of difference that I referred to in the previous chapter. One effect is that middle-classes trying to 'do good' might end up reproducing middle-class normativities to which they strive to bring 'others' up to. The second effect is that it deprives the intention of 'doing good' of its political meaning. 'Helping' others is in and of itself a privilege that does not necessarily changes the conditions that produce the need to 'be helped' in the first place (Roy 2010). The third issue that the quote above brings up is that people in the *asambleas* tend to understand their work as inherently political, regardless of the scope of their actions - number of people involved, geographical reach, etc.

In this chapter I describe and analyze the processes that underpin the building of alliances in *asambleas*. I argue that border-crossing and encounters across difference analyzed in the previous chapter are a necessary, although insufficient, part of alliance building. The emergence of affective ties and empathy - as a conscious decision to

understand and share the feelings/experience of another - along with concrete characteristics of the organization of the *asambleas* that are intentionally preserved and encouraged are a fundamental tool with which relational political subjects collectively build alliances.

I explained in the previous chapter that the encounters that take place in the *asambleas* are not random. First, because back in the Summer of 2001/2 people consciously went out to the streets to protest and joined the groups that gave birth to these organizations.

Alma, a member of the *Asamblea de Floresta* remembers,

We had organized a barbeque at home with the idea of sharing the moment and discuss what had been going on with friends, family ... but there was like a climate ... of something that was already announced ... a sense that something was going to happen. So well ... we listened to the speech⁵¹, we felt outraged, we started to listen some mild sounds and then suddenly, when we went out to Juan B. Justo Ave. The neighborhood was transformed [...] we met some neighbors, we always went to a bar called *El Estañó*, one block away from my place, I remember we met the owner of *El Estañó* and with the people that were at my place we decided to walk to the *Plaza de Mayo* (Interview with Alma, 09/10/13)

Alma did not just step out and joined ‘the mob’. She and her friends and family took a series of steps before they ended up in *Plaza de Mayo*: they got together to discuss the current situation, they decided to meet at a reference point for them - the bar -, and then they together decided to march to ‘*La Plaza*’.

Secondly, encounters in *asambleas* are not random because once the *asambleas* were established, people who joined them - even if the reasons to do it were very different - agreed to the political goals of the organizations and decided to stay. For example, Consuelo, a member of the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* started to participate in

⁵¹ President De La Rúa’s speech announcing the state of siege on December 19th 2001.

the *Asamblea* in order to work in some of the different micro-enterprises that took place during the first few years - particularly in the production of bread. At one point in her story she inadvertently mentioned something that indicated she had assumed her belonging to the *Asamblea*, so I asked her whether it had been like a conscious moment or not and what it meant to 'be part'. She said,

Well, it's the commitment one feels from deep inside, it's not something intellectual, it's about feelings, right? [...] I felt I had a place here ... trying to defend people's rights, all the injustices [...] That came with selling bread because I started with that activity as a micro-enterprise to make some money, and that was the idea of every one who worked on it, but going out to the street, going from one place to another, people start to know you and [...] that brought me close to people, sometimes they looked for me and [...] I told them "come to the *Asamblea* so we can talk and, well, we can see how we can work it out" (Interview with Consuelo, 11/03/14).

Even if the initial intention of Consuelo was to find some quick fix to her problem of unemployment and to find a place where to feel accompanied, she later decided to stay not only for her own well-being but also to work 'side by side next to the people' in that particular political space.

Another key aspect to consider in order to understand processes of alliance building in the *asambleas* is the fact that it is constitutive of these organizations to be receptive to difference and diversity. From the beginning *asambleas* intentionally sought to connect with other groups whose social composition, goals and strategies were different to theirs. *Asambleas* sought to reach out and build bonds with groups from the lower classes to offer their support as well as to find ways of organizing together. Some established relationships with *cartoneros*, or *piqueteros*, workers from recovered factories and enterprises and with groups of retired people. The media (Calvo 2002; Vales 2002) and the protagonists of these events described them as "an encounter between the middle class and the poor" (*Asamblea*

del Cid 2002). These cross-class encounters explained partially as the result of a blurring and erosion of symbolic and physical borders between classes (Adamovsky 2010; Grimson 2008), remain a priority in the daily work of the *asambleas* even though if the general networks of relationships might have changed over time.

Currently, the *asambleas* in my research continue to be diverse spaces in terms class, race, gender, culture, and nationality, as I mentioned in chapter 3. People who participate in these spaces are affected by impoverishment, oppression and marginalization even when they might not suffer from that directly. In this context, negotiating difference is not free from tension, contradictions and limits. Relations and practices are always evolving and changing through both processes of learning from difference - that might or might not be intentional - and also through a conscious praxis of enacting the change people want to see happening (Graeber 2002; Routledge 2003a; Pickerill and Chatterton 2006).

I argue that we need to be attentive to context-specific geographies of the *asambleas* and take into account the political relevance of these spaces *because* of their localized and specific nature, in order to trouble, critique, and broaden our knowledge about what constitutes 'the political' and what are its potentialities (Sparke 2007). Looking into the specificity of these sites as a non-reducible phenomena contributes to our knowledge of the 'complex unity' which they are part of, while at the same time allows us to engage in a dialogue across space and sociohistorical realities that can avert the risk of falling into totalizing solutions to seemingly generalizable situations (Hall 1980; Massey 1992). The political space of the *asambleas* and the political subjects that constitute them are time/space specific and they are built at the intersection of multiple social relations and material social practices, and therefore their case sheds a unique light onto current debates

on urban politics (Massey 1994a). Before focusing on political alliances, I will comment on how political change, in particularly in urban settings has been conceptualized and how can these conceptualizations be expanded through my work.

Where is urban politics?

A crucial debate within the social sciences that I echo here revolves around what needs to be done to effectively generate progressive political change (see Harvey 2012; Rustin et al. 2015; Zibechi and Ryan 2012; Massey 2010; Leitner, Peck, and Sheppard 2007 among others). This debate seems to be all the more pressing in the context of ongoing free-market capitalism and the advance of ever more creative rounds of dispossession that subsume every aspect of life to a commodified transaction in much of the world (Harvey 2010; Sparke 2013). Stirred up by the growing of so-called anti-capitalist and alter-globalization movements, scholars and activists debate the roles that social movements and grassroots organizations should - or can - have at this particular conjuncture and ask how does political change happen? (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013; Pickerill and Chatterton 2006; Holloway 2010; Routledge 2009). Does it depend on changing institutions through the work of representative politics or should it rest upon the work of localized organizations throughout what Appadurai calls 'grassroots globalization' (2000)? Or is it instead a combination of both articulated in specific ways depending on the socioeconomic and political arrangements where the negotiations take place?

My work is concerned with these questions and debates inasmuch as it is also of concern of the participants in my research. For instance, some members of the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* worry about the apparent lack of reach in the neighborhood. The

seeming invisibility of the political work the *asamblea* does was discussed extensively many times during the Thursday's meetings. However, some other member never talked in terms of quantifiable work, but focused instead in the actual and concrete work the organization does and in the constructions of localized networks of progressive politics that they see as positive and valuable whatever its territorial extent.

In this research I show that regardless of the size, organizations such as the *asambleas* have an important role to play in the articulation of localized politics with wider political agendas. The disruption in the political imaginations that took place during the mobilizations of 2001-03 in Argentina created a very particular context to overcome barriers to progressive politics for some sectors of society that implied, as I showed in chapter 3, processes of re-subjectification. In this chapter I argue that we need to shift attention from trying to find the ideal format - size, shape, etc. - for political change to focusing on how alliances are built, to what ends and with which outcomes.

Even though critical social scientists overall agree the current hegemonic socioeconomic, ideological and political arrangement has pernicious effects on livelihoods, the common good and social justice, agreement on how to counter recent rounds of capital accumulation seems to be more difficult to achieve. Political options that oppose neoliberal globalization engulf a wide range of options from proponents of the need to have an overarching articulating force among all the different oppositional movements (Harvey 2010; Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2012), to those who believe the articulation is already happening in the form of global justice networks integrated by place-based resistance (Featherstone 2003; Routledge 2009). These different perspectives imply different 'bracketings' of urban politics that encompass not only different appreciations of the

characteristics of the movements and events taking place, but also disparate understandings of where power resides and what constitutes the field where the struggle takes - or should take - place (Davidson and Martin 2014). In sum, different views of urban politics present divergent definition of urban space and politics.

According to Harvey, all politics have their origins in specific places where particular people put forward a certain vision of how things should be (Harvey 2001). In some cases, these localized politics might develop into something broader that transcends local barriers, regardless of ideological inclinations. In any case, local forms of solidarity entail the construction of a community that in order to avoid the “deadening effect of becoming for ‘itself’” (Harvey 2001, 193) must overcome its localism and embrace “a more broadly-based politics that challenges the status quo in some way or other” (192). Otherwise, Harvey argues, these forms of ‘militant particularism’ run the risk of becoming weaker and prone to political manipulation, cooptation and institutionalization by the government, or even turn into a closed and exclusionary form of politics that reproduces the order of things (Harvey 2012; Piven and Cloward 1977).

Similarly Brenner, Peck, and Theodore (2010) point to the limits of alternative local and regional politics that, regardless of their progressiveness, are limited by the constraints of systems of policy transfer and institutional frameworks that, in 'variegated' ways, shape the contexts in which they take place. According to these authors, counter-neoliberalizing projects fail to pose a realistic global alternative either because they act in disarticulated ways when it comes to confront neoliberal agendas set through global networks of regulation, or because they lack the power to influence global regulatory practices in meaningful ways. To some extent, this 'size-oriented' reading of politics rests upon an

understanding that effective and long-lasting political change is to be achieved within formal political institutions where in order to produce social change social movements of parties have to 'seize' state power.

Another perspective about how to counter current hegemonic socioeconomic and political arrangements stands almost on the opposite side of the one just described. This perspective argues that taking over the state is not necessarily the way to go about pursuing political change because the state is just one of the many nodes that constitute the web of power relations (Holloway 2002). This view instead, advocates for the ability of people to organize and create structures to govern themselves, to change within a collective in specific localities and also at different geographical scales simultaneously to the existence of capitalist/state-run institutions (Sitrin and Azzellini 2014). According to the advocates of 'everyday revolutions' - as opposed to 'the revolution' with its alleged popular uprising and complete overturn of the social order -, change happens as more and more join a 'movement of refusal and (re)creation' in their own localities outside - although not necessarily disconnected from - local institutions (Holloway 2002; Holloway 2010; Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013).

These perspectives on political change are much more focused on changing political subjectivities. That is, subjects that protest and refuse while building something different at the same time, even if small and apparently insignificant, something that could be described as “a multiplicity of interstitial movements running from the particular” to change the world (Holloway 2010, 11). Along those lines, Gibson-Graham (2006) not only believe that everyone is an actor that can make a change, but they also firmly argue that this kind of change is happening. They assert that the creation of a new political imaginary

is already underway, and that in fact, so much is going on that events have overtaken scholars who now need to adjust their theoretical frameworks to make sense of these processes (Gibson-Graham 2006). Therefore, even though institutional engagement is not necessarily discouraged, autonomy from established institutional frameworks remains the motor for change (Chatterton 2005).

Both approaches though, recognize the need for the construction of alliances that extend across space. Thus, Harvey suggests that in order to envision viable proposals for social change, we need to understand “how local solidarities and political cohesions are or can be constructed” in an articulation of localized practices with a broader frame of politics (2001, 191). Harvey argues that grassroots organizations have a key role to play when it comes to advancing alternatives to development by negotiating and influencing those institutions that mediate between particularity and universality to avoid their ossification (Harvey 2001). Here it seems Harvey comes closer to what Argentinean liberation theologian Rubén Dri calls *construcción del poder popular* [the building of popular power] (Dri 2002). For Dri, to build popular power means to create new social and new political relationships. He recognizes that power is fluid, that it circulates and changes, but that “it needs moments of rest, of settling. This is the moment of the famous structures, without which all power evaporates” (n/p). In this regard, Harvey’s idea that “high level of local activism often signal strong barriers to progressive and more just forms of social change” could be at least questioned (2001, 191).⁵²

⁵² Although he also recognizes that there are exceptions to this such as the Paris Commune. According to Doreen Massey, this reading of politics rests upon a particular understanding of place as static and tied to the past (Massey 1994a). Massey argues that the vision of places as “inevitably ‘reactionary’” (111) confuses “*place-based* with *place-bound*” (112. In italics in the original).

Partially due to the size and resources of the organizations and in part because *asambleas* were born as political spaces rooted in their neighborhoods, the work they do is very localized and specific. In particular, in the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo*, the number of permanent members is quite small - around twenty - although it becomes much bigger if we consider all the different collectives that carry out their activities in its space. Concerns about the scope of the *Asamblea's* actions were particularly clear during one of the two plenary meetings that took place in mid 2014. The participants were divided into three groups in which they had to identify positive aspects of the work of the *Asamblea* in the last year and also things that needed to be deepened. Two of the groups identified the 'work in the neighborhood' as one of the things that needed more attention. For instance, some of the issues the groups mentioned were "we participate a lot in many conflicts in the neighborhood but we don't have a systematic line of work", and "we need to have more presence in the neighborhood, there are sectors (of people, of problems) we cannot reach".

The perception - or the actual reality - of the lack of territorial reach in and of itself is not necessarily a negative thing. It is actually relevant in the sense that within the organization there might be people who are not completely satisfied with its work, although during my observations and interviews I have heard many times members expressing pride of the extent of the work they are doing being such a small organization. If something, these concerns re-actualize the question of how political change is achieved and what does it takes to build a more inclusive society?

In the next section I highlight the characteristics of the *asambleas* that I consider to be enabling and foundational for the construction and continuation of alliances across difference. I argue that these characteristics are closely connected to the specificities of the

conjuncture in which *asambleas* emerged back in the Summer of 2001/2, and I contend they inform urban politics in more important ways than they are given credit for.

Horizontality, Power and Autonomy

In the mid 1990s, popular protest in Argentina gradually started to come out of the anesthetized political climate predominant during President Menem's two consecutive presidencies. During this period, protest began to take place outside traditional political channels - labor unions and federations - in order to defend already acquired rights under threat by the advance of neoliberal policies (Giarraca 2002). The events that took place at the end of 2001 - 'the crisis' - are at the end of this cycle of protest and constitute the manifestation of both an ongoing economic and political crisis as well as a crisis within the class in power (Bonnet 2011). At that point, organizations and collectives had gained experience in forms of organizing that diverged greatly from top-down hierarchical traditional ways. When the crisis condensed at the end of 2001, the conditions were given for the spread and growth of these kind of relationships among the newborn organizations.

The crisis acted as an opening for the re-arrangement of forces and the creation of a new political terrain (Hall 1987). *Asambleas populares* emerged at this historical conjuncture that was also marked by the (re)politicization of big sectors of the middle classes (Svampa and Corral 2006). Thus, from the very beginning *asambleas* were spaces of innovation in terms of building social relationships and political organizing. Both aspects are necessarily related in as much the form given to a certain political organization depends on the conceptualization of power at stake, the same power that dictates - or at least shapes - the social structure of such group. As many other organizations that emerged

out of the crisis of 2001, the *asambleas* rejected power in its negative definition (Sitrin 2006), that is, power as the ability to control people's actions or situations through - either or both - coercion and consent (Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith 1972).

In doing so, *asambleas* also rejected the power of the state as the driving force for social life and its inevitable condensation in institutions and in the ruling political class. Scholars affirm that this was in part the consequence of the generalized mistrust - manifested sometimes as direct opposition - in the political class and in the ability of traditional forms of doing politics and political institutions to deliver the population's most pressing needs at the time of the popular rebellion (cf. Dri 2006). The rejection of the state among grassroots organizations is less evident now than it was before, and in the case of the *asambleas* I worked with, today, most of the members accept that party politics is an important part of political life. However, what I want to highlight is the fact that for the *asambleístas*, power is understood as multi-situated - in the neighborhood, in each individual, in local organizations, etc. - and not residing solely on the state apparatus.

Thus, many of the organizations that emerged during that time were constituted as autonomous from political parties and institutions. *Autonomía* [autonomy] meant the self-management of the organization, the setting of their own agenda, and the ability to work and be outside institutionalized channels (Sitrin 2012). Importantly, it also meant to exert a form of emancipatory power where people are free and able to do, and have the ability to create and transform themselves (Castoriadis 1991). In the *asambleas* power was understood in its positive sense, as the power to build, to do collective work transforming social relations in order to collectively build realities that are not oppressive (Sitrin 2006). In this sense, power is seen as enabling and underpinning the construction of alliances.

Back in 2002 and 2003, some people and organizations argued that if change was going to happen it could not be expected from what they considered to be an old and obsolete political system riddled with corruption, clientelism and disengagement from the needs of the majority of the population, as the following quotes from two former members of an extinct *asamblea* attest to,

We were thinking about the famous *asamblea constituyente* (constituent assembly), that Correa did it anyway, Chávez did it, so many did it. Evo⁵³ did it, but here it was impossible, that was the solution to end with ... with the political parties that had betrayed everything (Interview with Rita, 09/02/13, former member of the *Asamblea de Córdoba y Anchorena*).

Parallel to the harsh economic situation, there was a lack of belief in political parties and in politics. I always remember *La Versuit*, do you remember it? Do you remember the song *El Señor Cobranza*?⁵⁴ Well, I think that was *absolutely* symbolic of a big ... of perceptions that *politics was trash*, that ... I don't know, that was much reflected in *asambleas* (Interview with María, 08/07/13, former member of the *Asamblea de Córdoba y Anchorena*)

These quotes reflect a generalized sense of mistrust and resentment towards the political class, political parties and their associated forms of doing politics. There was a strong association between politicians, representative democracy and corruption that fueled the desire for participation and acting as an agent of change. At the same time, the quotes also signal towards an urgency for something new, a sentiment that grew alongside with feelings of empowerment as events unfolded - the resignation of the Minister of Finances first and of the President later, the massive numbers of people in the streets opposing together police repression, etc. In fact, one of the common slogans of 2002 that could be

⁵³ Rafael Correa, President of Ecuador since 2007; Hugo Chávez, President of Venezuela from 2002 to 2013; Evo Morales, President of Bolivia since 2006.

⁵⁴ *Versuit Vergarabat* is an Argentinean rock band well known for its politically charged lyrics. *El Señor Cobranza* is about corruption in politics, poverty and repression.

read in many walls in the city was *que venga lo que nunca ha sido* [may what never was come to be - see Photo 11 below], something that a former *asambleísta* explained to me as the necessary corollary of *¡que se vayan todos!* [they all must go!]. Mario, a member of the dissolved *Asamblea de Colegiales* told me that for him, *que venga lo que nunca ha sido* was,

the challenge to figure out how we would make it be, how we could invent both in theory and praxis, the things that had not been [happened/existed] yet (Interview with Mario, 08/04/14)

This sentiment echoes some of the spirit of the students' movement of 1968 with its "be realistic, demand the impossible" and "the future will only contain what we put into it now", something that should be of no surprise given the fact that many of the participants in the events of 2001 were teenagers or young adults in the late 1960s and were politically engaged at that time. However, the allusions to taking matters in one's hands to make happen the future people foresee, is more proximate - both in time and space - to the *Movimiento Zapatista*, one of the key referents of the new organizations (Zibeche 2004).



Figure 11: "May what never was come to be" (by Isabel Garín)

The Zapatistas have advocated for alternatives other than taking state power, alternatives that implied building political processes based on horizontal and autonomous ways of organizing and being (Mora 2008). Holloway refers to attempts to remake the world without taking state power as 'anti-power', whereby people increasingly manifest discontent with state institutions and organize in collective projects of 'radical otherness' (Holloway 2002). 'Radical otherness' implies to create new social relationships, to build different ways of being in the world and relationships with others, something Holloway calls exercising 'power-with' as opposed to 'power-over' (Holloway 2010). It is about building power 'from below', the 'power-to do' with others, and recognizing others' worth (Sitrin 2012). Today relationships in *asambleas* continue to reflect much of this way of seeing power although, as I have already mentioned, they do not necessarily reject the importance of pursuing change through state institutions any more. Importantly, relationships strive to be horizontal and based on trust and solidarity.

Horizontalidad [horizontality] entails the practice of direct democracy in the organization, but it also involves a constant attempt to disrupt power hierarchies based on gender, class and race in order to create horizontal ways of relating to each other where every one's opinion is equally important and in which each individual has the power - and is recognized as having the ability - to act autonomously but always as part of a collective (Sitrin 2006).⁵⁵ This understanding of power as the power to act, to make decisions, to

⁵⁵ The horizontal practices of *asambleas*, particularly for the difficulties that posed when *asambleas* were made of a couple of hundred people, were critiqued for utopic and naïve and for posing limits to the development of the organization. Even some of my interviewees complained about the 'horizontalists at any cost' that confused 'delegation' with 'representation' (Interview with María, 08/07/13, former member of the *Asamblea de Córdoba y Anchorena*). According to Dri (2006), the reluctance to any representation was explained by the fact that the appointed representatives in the delegative democratic system, were seen as tending to represent anyone but themselves.

organize has been a decisive factor in the recuperation of people's political agency (Fernández 2006), and I claim it provides the grounds on which to build stronger and durable alliances.

Besides these non-hegemonic ways of organizing the relationships between the members and the activities of the organizations, there is also another important characteristic that distinguishes the *asambleas* from other organizations that I have already mentioned. That is, the fact that from the start *asambleas* conformed spaces of diversity and difference. In the previous chapter I referred to the valorization of difference in these spaces where difference is seen as something that enriches people's own views on social problems and that is therefore politically important for the organizations. Even though in general the *asambleas* were the preferred type of organization for the middle class, the diversity within the *asambleas* was and is remarkable. At first, it was in part a reflection of the many different situations comprised in the category 'middle class'. In the same *asamblea* there were professionals with a job but whose salary had deteriorated significantly, alongside merchants who struggled to keep the store open, or a retired who owned the house where they lived but whose pension were barely enough to get by and had to accept help from their children to make ends meet (Svampa and Corral 2006). Today, the two *asambleas* where I conducted my research continue to be diverse in terms of social backgrounds, as well as in terms of gender, age, race, political ideas and experience, and nationalities.

Also, unlike other political organizations that presuppose compliance to hierarchies and power differentials demanding a general agreement on political ideas and values, *asambleas* populares did not have and do not have any requirements to be part of the

organization. There are no explicit established limits to who can be a member, although that could be subjected to debate. One member of the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* told me in relation to the openness of the organization,

well, there are ‘*differents*’ and ‘*differents*’, I mean ... [...] we call for difference or for other spaces and so on but in that range of openness neither PRO nor Mariano Grondona⁵⁶ participate. That’s what I mean, there are ‘*differents*’ and ‘*differents*’ (Interview with Cristian, 07/07/14).

Regardless of the fact that *asambleas* are independent from political parties and as such open to host people from different ideological backgrounds, they do have a more or less anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberal stand. Therefore, the diversity they hold up to is contemplated within a political project of economic and social justice, that if at the beginning resembled Proudhonian visions of society, later became closer to welfarist models of redistribution. In any case, *asambleas* remain a very diverse space where differences are valued and must be always negotiated in order to sustain the alliance work.

Feminist scholarship has contributed much to deepening our knowledge of how people conform alliances, how people come and work together in order to make the world a better place. One key aspect to take into account when we study processes of alliance building is the fact that we all inhabit multiple identities (Albrecht and Brewer 1990). These multiple identities are the result of the particular ways in which our race, gender, age, class, etc. intersect as we move throughout space crossing symbolic boundaries that are subjected to cultural norms and regulations (McDowell and Sharp 1999). But also, the identities we carry and deploy result from the unbalanced overlapping of privilege and oppression we

⁵⁶ *Propuesta Republicana* (PRO) is a conservative pro-market coalition led by Mauricio Macri current president of Argentina. Mariano Grondona is a conservative right-wing journalist with strong connections to the last military junta.

experience in our daily lives (Carrillo Rowe 2008). Thus, to consider our multiple-selves is to be aware of the differential processes of politicization people experience by virtue of their race, class, gender, age, location, etc. and of the way people see themselves and their potential allies within larger power structures (Pulido 2006).

Feminist, anti-racist and post-colonial scholars focus on issues of creation and change where alliances do not necessarily occur among a group sharing some commonality, but where alliances are constructed among difference. According to Jakobsen (1998), the point of concern should be how to build alliances across difference, the creation of a new and ever changing 'we', that avoid the naturalization of the new arrangement that would preclude possibilities for further change and growth. The new 'we' is somehow an attempt to create connections across difference to collectively change power relations keeping the alliance open to potential new inclusions (Carrillo Rowe 2008). Jakobsen argues that in order to move away from modernist understandings of difference that seek to contain diversity rather than work with it, the identities created in alliance should be constantly challenged and their borders pushed (Jakobsen 1998). These understandings of alliances are deeply rooted in the acknowledgment of human beings and their actions as intrinsically relational, where when acting politically, nobody does it on her own, provided the fact that the space of appearance - in Arendt's sense, the space of political action - is only possible in the space that lays between bodies (Butler 2011).

Writing about the way the U.S. responded to the attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001, Butler reflects on the possibilities that grief offers to theorize interdependency and political life (Butler 2004). Butler acknowledges that vulnerability to pain and loss is an inevitable fact of life to which we are all exposed. It is also something that connects us in

our differences, not only because we share it, but because life might depend on someone who we do not know. Then, she wonders whether vulnerability and exposure to violence - the precarity of life itself - that we might suffer it in our bodies or be complicit with it, might become the basis for the construction of a global political community (Butler 2004). It follows that in alliances people might unite around a shared enemy/barrier/concern - e.g. processes of economic and social neoliberalization and the retrenchment of the state from its role in social reproduction, even if at the same time different components of the collective might hold more specific interests and might be fighting against different manifestations of oppression - e.g. workers fighting for family wages and students resisting budget cuts in the public university. In the case of Argentina and the movements that emerged out of the crisis of 2001, alliances were - among other things - mediated by what Sitrin calls *política afectiva* [translated as 'affective politics' by Sitrin]⁵⁷ (Sitrin 2012), a concept she took from activists themselves when conducting research in Argentina. In the next sections I pay attention to the possibilities and limits of the alliances in *asambleas*. First, I discuss the relevance of *política afectiva* and in particular the importance of 'empathy' for the work of *asambleas*. Then I comment on some of the limits for building and sustaining alliances across difference.

Política Afectiva and the Politics of Empathy

We got together at the intersection of Corrientes and Medrano, that's why we took that name, and, actually, I went out to the streets like everyone else when De La Rúa declared the *estado de sitio*⁵⁸, that was the moment to go

⁵⁷ A more accurate translation to me would be 'politics of affection/fondness'.

⁵⁸ The state of siege had not been used since 1990s when former President Menem declared it for a day. Before that President Alfonsín resorted to it for 74 days in two occasions. Prior to that the illegitimate and de facto government of the military junta had it in place for as long as they were in power (over seven years).

out and head to the closest busy corner...Corrientes and Medrano, I used to live one block from there. Then, I started to see people I had never seen before but we were all there for the same reason, so we started talking about the consequences of the *estado de sitio*, of how unbearable it was, and actually, against the facts, we were all together on the street, even if it was forbidden. Eh ... that was a very shocking moment for everyone, I think that meeting your neighbor whom you had never seen before, and listening to the things that she was going through and you telling someone else and well, it was like a web of people that suddenly ... it was there ... and we had so much in common ... and we hadn't seen it before, right? And maybe your neighbor had passed next to you, and you didn't see her. It was very shocking. And then, well, we head towards ... towards *Plaza de Mayo*⁵⁹ ... and also, in every corner and in the streets people got together and people join other and people who came from Chacarita and everybody when a new column of people joined, it was welcomed with applauses [...]. During those days, people went to the *Plaza de Mayo* almost every day [...] every day there was a call, a pot was banged in a balcony and suddenly more were heard and then people went out to the street and in the corner of Corrientes and Medrano people started to talk to each other, and then we had to start raising our hands because we all wanted to hear what X and Y had to say (Interview with Olga, 09/19/13)

I heard accounts like the one in the quote above several times, not only during my interviews but also among informal conversations with friends and other acquaintances. People refer back to the beginnings of the *asambleas* with chronicles charged with feelings and emotions, as something that left an indelible mark in their lives. Furthermore, many of the people I interviewed highlighted the fact that affection and sentiments of friendship were an important driver for their participation in these spaces even as the organizations

After almost twenty years of uninterrupted democracy, the declaration of the state of siege by De La Rúa was experienced as an insult and disregard to liberty and democracy and provoked people's outrage.

⁵⁹ Political center of the capital city, surrounded by the House of Government, the National Cathedral and the *Cabildo*, the old colonial town council turned into a museum. The Plaza de Mayo witnessed - among other political important events - the massive gatherings during President Perón's speeches delivered from the the House of Government's famous balcony. It was also the park where a small group of women started to gather to claim for their disappeared children back in 1977, becoming later the Madres de Plaza de Mayo. Therefore, marching to the Plaza de Mayo has significant political charge.

were dying out. In this section I discuss the role that emotions and feelings - particularly empathy - have had for the birth of radical political alliances, and continue to have in their daily work. I argue that affect and emotions are important components of the encounters and work alongside others in non-hierarchical ways - others who experience contrasting realities - becoming key drivers of people's political actions and strongholds of alliance building.

Only a few months after the popular uprising of December 2001/2 there were over two hundred *asambleas* all over the major cities of Argentina (*La Nación* 2002) all of them born out of the kind of encounters described by Olga and the need to have spaces where to discuss the current situation (Monge Vega 2008). People learned about the *asambleas* in their neighborhoods by mouth, or by walking by when they were meeting, or by flyers that the *asambleístas* posted on poles or windows in the local stores (see photo 12 below). The numbers of participants at the beginning were significant. Some *asambleas* had over two hundred members making discussions and decision-making process complicated and somehow chaotic. Eventually, over the course of 2002, the size of the *asambleas* shrunk leaving only a few dozens of people in some cases.

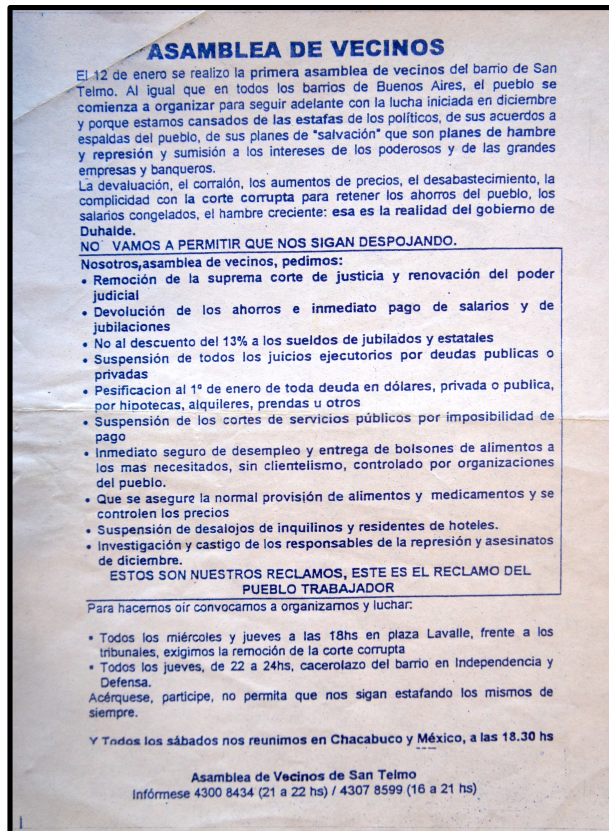


Figure 12: Flyer calling to participate in the newly created *Asamblea de Vecinos de San Telmo* (Argentinean Leftist Culture Documentation and Research Center - CeDinCi archive, folder 3121-2161)

It is hard to make a general statement about the *movimiento asambleario* [*asambleas* movement] as a whole because the trajectories and experiences vary greatly from *asamblea* to *asamblea*. There are some general facts that we can think about though. First, they did not crystalize in a broader political movement within institutionalized channels as the failed attempt to create an electoral coalition *Asambleas del Pueblo* testifies to.⁶⁰ Second, although I do not have a precise number about the existent *asambleas* in Buenos Aires, they do not even amount to 30% of the original quantity. Third, most of the *asambleas* disintegrated during the course of 2002 but some were active even until

⁶⁰ *Asambleas del Pueblo* was a coalition of several *asambleas* and other grassroots organizations that got together to run for national as well as local legislators. It received less than 0.2% of the votes. However, it is important to note that not all *asambleas* agreed to and participated in this project.

2004/2005. In any case, none of this suffices to dismiss the relevance they had and have in the political scenario of Buenos Aires as my work argues.

Between spontaneity and conscious desire to act - or rather a mixture of both - “neighbors, unemployed, housewives, teachers, psychologists, plumbers, professors ‘find each other’ in a city where nobody ‘found each other’, where everyone was for themselves and nobody for everyone” (Dri 2006, 25. My translation). These encounters in the open in a moment of great vulnerability for much of the population contributed to the creation of conditions for alliance, although over time, differences and boundaries of class, race and gender were discursively reinforced by the media and politicians posing some important limits to them (Adamovsky 2010; Fariás 2015). In any case, feelings and relationships of affection were a key component in these emergent movements and organizations during 2001 and 2002 in a way that connects them to other experiences of collective work in Argentina and that provide - to a great extent - the substance for the politicization of people and the translation of such politicization into collective action.

Feminists scholars argue that alliance work involves a very intimate process that questions the affective connections we have with our site of belonging. A ‘politics of relation’ means that experience, the interpretation of what we experience, and agency are collective processes in which the subject is transformed by those who she chooses to ‘long with’ (Carrillo Rowe 2008). The political charge of affects and emotions has been a recurrent topic for feminist scholars. For instance, Oberti (2014) has shown how Argentinean activists in the 1970s enacted an emotional politics that constantly bridged the spheres of private and political life involving the transformation of personal relationships and the self as part of the revolutionary struggle. She argues that the ultimate manifestation

of that emotional politics is the upbringing of their children as ‘new men and women’, revolutionary subjects whose names sometimes were chosen among those of the *compañeros* who had fallen in the revolutionary struggle. Another example that shows the relation between politicization and affect and emotions - probably the most archetypical case - is the activism of the *Madres* and *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* - amongst the most important human rights movement around the world - who after the disappearance/death of their children, transformed grief into political action and extended the love for their kin to a generalized love and care for all those who suffered injustices and oppression (Arditti 1999).⁶¹

Política afectiva refers to the entanglement of feelings and political action as understood by the movements themselves (Sitrin 2012). *Política afectiva*/affective politics as used here shall not be confused with ‘practical affective politics’, that is “an affirmative micro-politics of productivity which attempts to inject more kindness and compassion into everyday interaction” where kindness is “a social and aesthetic technology of *belonging to a situation*, rather than as an organic emotion” (Thrift 2005, 144). Affective politics in the case of the *asambleas* instead, refers to “a politics of social relationships and love” that is fundamental for sustaining the organization (Sitrin 2006, vii). It is not - only - about *kindness* and certainly not about *compassion*, an unequal relation between sufferers and those who witness the suffering that does not really bear any critical reflection or responsibility. *Política afectiva* is a politics and a political project that can only be built on respect and trust, and on the acknowledgment that every life is deserving and that every

⁶¹ In several occasions, members of these organizations highlighted the deep connection between the love to their children and their politicization. They have expressed admiration for their children political and social justice commitment until the point of disappearance/death and they have acknowledged how they felt the need and obligation to take upon their fight.

person holds knowledges and experiences that are valuable for the life of the collective.

In several occasions during my observations and interviewees, I have heard people complaining about the decisions or attitudes of one particular person - who might or might no longer be participating in the *asambleas* - but always within a context of deep respect because she/he was a *compañero* who *le puso el cuerpo a la asamblea* [put her body on the *asamblea*]. ‘*Poner el cuerpo*’ is a common expression that literally means ‘to put the body’ with references to ‘put the body in the front line’ or ‘being in the trenches’. It means to be committed and fully active assuming bodily risks as well as taking upon responsible work (Sutton 2010). These expressions manifest deep respect and trust for those who share - or have shared - the toll of keeping the organization afloat, regardless of subsequent discrepancies.⁶²

The entanglement of feelings and politics is obviously not new. It was even acknowledged more than fifty years ago by an undisputed tough politician as Ernesto 'Che' Guevara in his famous phrase “[A]t risk of sounding ridiculous, the true revolutionary is guided for profound feelings of love. It is impossible to think about an authentic revolutionary without this quality” (Guevara 1965, n/p. My translation). Some thirty years before the Che, Gramsci, talking about the causes of crisis - the rupture of the forces of equilibrium in a given society - said that they exceeded those of economic origin and that even “class prestige” and the “inflammation of sentiments of independence, autonomy and power” (Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith 1972, 184) could also lead to situations of

⁶² For example, in one conversation Delia, a member of the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* was telling me about some legal issues she was dealing with and the steps her lawyer was taking. Regardless of having legal assistance she brought the issue to the *Asamblea* to hear the opinion of the other members of the organization because she knew she could trust them and that they would only advice the best out of any personal interest since they were *compañeros*.

radical change. However, it seems to me the kind of ‘affective politics’ that these feelings refer to are quite distant from the range of emotions that encountering others - people and situations - put us through as we go about in our daily lives. The *politica afectiva* that I consider here is one that includes not only changes in peoples’ selves such as a greater awareness of the workings of privilege or the recognition of structural inequalities, but also praxes that are consequential with those changes and geared to build different realities.⁶³

Specifically about *asambleas*, Falleti (2008) resorts to the concept of ‘cultural trauma’ to explain the connection between these organizations, politics and affects. ‘Cultural trauma’ “happens when the members of a collective feel they have been part of something *horrible* that left indelible marks in the collective conscious” (381. My translation). She argues that process of impoverishment during the 1990s, the infringement of long-established rights such as access to education and health care of quality and the representative void by political institutions, generated among the middle class a ‘traumatic event’ that the *asambleas* overcame by 'restoring' dignity through exercising reflection and deliberation. That is, participation in *asambleas* had - and has as I show with the cases I study - an important role in breaking the political isolation in which many people were prior to their participation in these organizations and in rebuilding a collective sense of politics (Falleti 2008).

Furthermore, in the *asambleas* the division between the public and private spheres, between home and work, is also blurred. Many participants recounted to spend - or have spent at some point - more time in the organization than in any other place because of the

⁶³ Contrary to much of the work on alternatives to capitalism I prefer not to use that adjective. Using the word ‘alternative’ to refer to the kind of social, political and economic organizations we would like to build and live in, positions the current hegemonic system as the *de facto* and natural reality.

way their political work and affective relationships were woven in that space. These scenarios witness how social practices traditionally thought to belong to different spaces become enmeshed and produce, to a certain extent, an ideological reimagining of the political space (Bondi and Domosh 1998). Far from being ‘self-help groups’ as some people would define them (cf. Pousadela 2011), relationships of affections entangled with the work of the *asambleas* can empower people in ways that contributes to (re)build their sense of worth and their ability to act in alliance with those who are different. For instance, Marta feels a strong emotional attachment to the *Asamblea de Flores* and its *Bachillerato Popular*. She does not see their members as just members of an organization doing political work to which she also contributes. Neither are they only her friends. She recounts,

What happened to me here is that ... first, I started feeling like a person again ... I started feeling the relevance of being able to ... *express myself*... right? Among everything ... because, I am married to a man who is ... a massive *ninguneador* [slang for someone who constantly ignores those with whom he/she interact] [...] I’ve become stronger, I am more secure. I have a disabled kid and for a long time I’ve been ‘X’s mother’ and ‘Y’s wife’, right? [...] *Today I am Marta María Monardi*. The *Bachi* gave me that. It gave me identity. It gave me identity [sobbing] (Interview with Marta, 12/17/13).

The example of Marta illustrates how in the *asambleas*, to distinguish the private from the public becomes at least hard, if not impossible, where the political quickly becomes personal and the personal political. Talking about H.I.J.O.S.⁶⁴ Benegas argues that,

‘H.I.J.O.S. is an affective-political organization’, a member of H.I.J.O.S. Cordoba told me in 2002. I would learn later that it was a much-discussed issue: the ‘affective’ component has a central, crucial place ... For example,

⁶⁴ *Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio* [Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice against Oblivion and Silence] is a human rights organization integrated primarily by the children of the disappeared and murdered by the last dictatorship in Argentina.

providing emotional support for its members can be an original and powerful political intervention, for, in order to change global structures of economy and politics, it is imperative to start building new subjectivities – which implies changing affective structures (quoted in Sitrin 2012)

Ahmed argues that “[e]motions don’t make the world go round. But they do in some sense go round” (Ahmed 2015, 10) and while they travel, they produce material effects that are relevant to the political work of the collective. In the case of Marta mentioned above, there seems to be two levels at which emotions operate. On the one hand, the bonds of friendship she had created were a key reason to stay and work as a teacher after graduating from the *Bachillerato*. The sense of self-worth and empowerment of being among those who valued her translated into trust and commitment to the organization's political project. On the other hand, there is in Marta a new self that, as Benegas argues, it comes with the ‘affective component’ of an organization. A novel political subjectivity that manifested in a new appreciation of her own privilege and understanding of poverty as shown in the previous chapter.

In my work one important aspect related to emotions and feelings that emerged was the ability to feel empathy. I remember going into the field with the certainty that ‘solidarity’ was what bounded people together in collective work, so I remember well the first time I thought about ‘empathy’ as a relevant motor for political change. During the interview with Sandra we were talking about solidarity, among the *compañeros* in the *Asamblea* as well as among the different groups that function in its space. When we were discussing the reasons why she joined the gender group. She intervened saying,

[the place] teaches you to see beyond what you can see in front of you ... in the sense that ... we are always worried about one-self, looking at our own belly, worried by our small immediate surroundings and ... you realize there are other things (Interview with Sandra, 10/02/13)

Sandra's reaction indicates that for her, the mutual support within the group was not separate from learning something about a situation - or about someone - that forces people to displace their subjectivities, to question one's identities and values. According to Clohesy, empathy gives us the chance to have a sense of other ways of being in the world:

This lived experience of difference is ethically significant because it allows us to see how we have denied the singularity of those we now recognize and it allows us to see how we have committed violence to them in order to sustain the unity of our own identities and in order to resist the spectre of finitude that haunts us (Clohesy 2013, 3).

This is something that came out in several interviews as a key component of the collective work deployed in the *asambleas*. Talking about working in the *Olla*, Sunday after Sunday over years Leo says,

Actually, doing this is insane. If we cannot put ourselves on the other side, it is impossible to continue with this craziness (Interview with Leo, 03/06/14).

Sustaining the *Olla* requires a lot of physical and emotional work as the following excerpt of my fieldwork notes shows,

Once food is ready, the doors open, people come in and the real work begins. In general, one big pot is placed in the center of each table and one person at that table is in charge of serving everyone. In the meantime, the people in the kitchen have to make sure that all requests are attended (like refilling the bread trays, assuring people there will be a second round of food, or explaining to the ones that got there late that they should wait until there is an empty place to eat). Most important, people have to be attentive to small gestures and tensions. Paula told me once they are well trained on sensing when something can go wrong and they quickly act to avoid any conflict. Fights have been known to break out and, on one occasion, someone was stabbed. After everyone has eaten twice and left, it remains to put back the heavy thick planks against the wall, clean the floor, wash the huge pots and pans, clean the toilets, and make the grocery list for next week. Then all of those who participated in the cooking seat down and eat.

It is around 3.30 when the team is ready to go home (Based on fieldwork notes).

On a normal Sunday, the cooking process begins at 9 am and it does not end until 3 or even 4 pm at which point, everyone is physically exhausted and emotionally drained. The number of people collaborating changes every Sunday depending on how many homeless show up to collaborate besides the 'regulars'. In the past, the *Olla* opened all year round and served breakfast and then lunch, and every member of the *Olla* participated every Sunday. Back in July 2013 after continued moments of tension, fights, and disorganization, the *Olla* closed for three weeks even though it was the middle of the winter when the demands is at its height. The time off allowed for discussions of future directions and people decided to serve only lunch and to close the *Olla* in January as a way of 'decompressing' from the accumulated tensions and exhaustion. For Paula, all this physical and emotional endeavor could not be possible unless people was ready and able to exercise empathy,

It burns you out, because it is exhausting, there is too much tension [...]. If I don't try to identify myself with, try to see, putting in the other's place for one second, right? ... *imagining myself in some else's place, I couldn't be doing what I am doing.* None of us could, you see? (Interview with Paula, 02/04/14)

Paula has years of experience working with homeless, even before she joined the *Asamblea* six years ago she belonged to an organization advocating for homeless' rights. But putting on someone's shoes is a learning process, even for those who joined the *Asamblea* being already moved by concerns of social justice. Like, Cecilia whom I mentioned in chapter 3 and who had just started collaborating with the *Olla* at the time of the interview. As soon as Cecilia started participating in the *Asamblea*, she met Verónica

who has been in a very unstable housing situation for a long time and works a variety of low-paid jobs. Verónica has two kids. The eldest is living with a friend of hers a couple of hours away from the city. The youngest, a one-year-old boy has been taken away by the Council for the Rights of Girls, Boys and Teenagers of the city of Buenos Aires. When that happened Verónica, who had been collaborating with the *Olla*, asked the organization for help. Because Cecilia is a lawyer, she accompanied Verónica through the whole tortuous legal process. In the meantime, Verónica fluctuated from being very proactive following the judge's mandates, and then disappearing for weeks, during which time she did not visit her kid, something that would have helped her win her case. Cecilia told me that the first few months were a bit awkward because she could not understand why Verónica was not really invested in regaining custody of her child - or so she thought - and instead showed a lot of concern about working out her relationship with a new girlfriend. However, months later as Cecilia became more and more engaged with the *Olla* and Verónica with the *Asamblea*, she came to see that Verónica was coming from a situation that had nothing to do with hers, with different needs, possibilities, urgencies and expectations. Cecilia saw that the solution she was offering to Verónica was right for her, for Cecilia, but probably not for Verónica. At that point Cecilia could put herself in Verónica's shoes and be critical of something that good-hearted middle class people do a lot: 'doing something *for* another', which usually results in interventions that are shaped by their own positionality and that depoliticize poverty. In those situations, what is meant to be a gesture of generosity and care gets entangled in relations of power and privilege resulting in a patronizing gesture (Darling 2011). Cecilia became aware of this and could stop projecting onto the 'other' assumptions that stemmed from her own middle class background, as Paula says,

If you look at the exact definition of not having a job, or a home...of being...I mean, who guarantees you will never suffer something like that? Well, that's in the abstract, right? *Because then there are differences in terms of the symbolic and cultural capital that make that if I am unemployed and cannot pay the rent, well, there is my partner or I can go to my mom's, and that's what homeless cannot do* (Interview with Paula, 02/04/14.)

While for some people 'empathy' is something they have already developed when they join the *Asamblea*, for others it is a process that takes time and that is facilitated by their engagement in collective work with people in very different situations. Although 'being' on the other's situation is intrinsically impossible - some would define it as an 'intellectual imposture' (Rodríguez Genovés) - since 'we are not the other', what these examples show is that some version of empathy is at work in the *asambleas*. That is, people are moved to enact a conscious displacement of subjectivity, by which if they cannot feel and see for the other, at least they move themselves from the comfort of the known places we inhabit.

Contrary to empathy - or rather sympathy - as an affective technology used to mobilize people within networks of aid and charity, I argue that to be 'empathetic' and to act with empathy is deeply political. First, the displacement that necessarily occurs so we can switch our point of view to that of another rests upon the acknowledgment that we remain different beings although in relation to each other, and by doing so, we are acting in direct opposition to actions that tend to obscure and silence other voices (Gruen 2015). Secondly, it is political because it implies self-awareness and potentially self-critique in ways that contribute to resubjectification and engagement with social change and justice (Pedwell 2014).

Following Butler's work (2009; 2004), Gillespie and Lopez argue that grief "is both a political act against, and a way of making political, the suffering and oppression of others" (Lopez and Gillespie 2015, 10). Grieving might also expose the violence that generates pain, death and erasure. It is in this sense that I argue that 'empathy' is not only enabling of personal change and awareness but also, and fundamentally, of the construction of political spaces of alliance where actions are directed to challenge systems of inequality and marginalization. In the next section I continue to argue that there is much more than the coming together of difference for encounters to be politically meaningful and enabling of alliances before moving onto the last chapter where I will discuss the potential *asambleas* have to disrupt hegemonic ideas about citizenship and belonging.

Limit or resilience?

In this chapter I showed how the non-hierarchical characteristics of the *asambleas* facilitate the transition of self-reflective political subjects aware of the relationship between structural inequalities and poverty into sustained political action alongside others. In this last section I reflect on what might be a potential limit to the construction and maintenance of the political work enacted by the organizations. This potential limit is not present in the same way all the time, nor is it - as I will claim at the end of this section - a fixed or unsurmountable one. Yet, it should be carefully considered in order to strengthen alliances that can work *in* difference in ways that deal constructively with its complexities (Carrillo Rowe 2008).

Scholars have studied tensions and contradictions between sectors with different agendas and ideologies in the *asambleas* (North and Huber 2004). For instance, there has

been an important amount of research done on the disintegrative effects of the presence of activists of leftist political parties who attempted to recruit the organization for their respective parties (Rossi 2005a). Another aspect to take into account when it comes to considering the continuity of these organizations is the arrival of Néstor Kirchner to the presidency of Argentina in 2003, an event that presented a new political conjuncture for grassroots organizations, causing some of them to dissolve and integrate the new political spaces offered by the *Kirchnerismo* (Svampa 2008). In other cases, the new political scenario divided the membership of the *asambleas* between those in support of an intransigent autonomism and those with an inclination to go back to 'politics as usual' (Thompson 2010).

Some of the aforementioned cases affected to different extents the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-SanTelmo*. In relation to this later point, Natalia said,

I think that there are certain things that no everyone can sustain ... not everyone has the ability to sustain ... I don't know. It wore me out. It wore me out. It wasn't the *Olla* that did, it was the fights within the *Asamblea*. I didn't leave because of the *Olla*. I still have the desire to participate, but I don't want the arguments ... (Interview with Natalia, 07/31/14, former member of the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo*).

Natalia participated intensively in the *Asamblea* for several years. She had previously conducted research on squatting in the neighborhood and she joined the *Asamblea* out of curiosity and interest on what, for her, seemed to be an awakening of the middle class to the severe problems of huge sectors of the population in the neighborhood.

Natalia slowly increased her participation and soon enough she spent most of her days in the *Asamblea* taking care of several different activities. I asked about the discussions and debates at that time and she quickly pointed to what she thought to be a

generational divide that made interactions tense. According to her, it was hard to reach an agreement between the older generation - the former activists in the 1970s - that hold a view of politics more attuned to vertical party politics, and the younger, the ones who were in their mid-twenties who, instead, were invested in horizontal political constructions.

The coming to power of Kirchner in 2003 marked a moment of fracture in the *Asamblea* along a line that divided those members who expected the organization to naturally ally with the party in power from those who remained loyal to the principles advocated by the *Asamblea* since its inception - namely autonomy. Discussions ensued and many people left, even though some remain in the periphery of the organization and show up to some activities and events. For instance, Carlos, a former member of the *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo*, was convinced that the political scenario presented by the new government was a turning point in the balance of political power at the national level. His reading of the *asambleas* at the time was that they could not 'transcend the assembly stage' and adjust to the political imperatives of the moment - or did not know how to do it.

Likewise, Beto, also a former member of the *Asamblea*, explains the estrangement of some of these older activists to the change in the national political scenario and the emergence of a national project legitimized by the popular vote,⁶⁵

When national concerns start to take a different path, and the *Asamblea* remains a local reality, it was hard to re-adjust the meaning of the organization and its practice, its project. It was no longer to resist the attacks of the right ... in fact, the two first years were easy! It was "we have to beat the neoliberalism that is killing us and we have to prevent the right to take

⁶⁵ Néstor Kirchner won the elections when the other candidate (Carlos Menem) dropped the electoral contest right before the ballotage place. Kirchner had obtained 21.79% of the votes and Menem 23,98%. The National Constitution determinates that 45% of the votes - or 40% with an advantage of 10 points on the second candidate - are required to be elected, to technically, Kirchner's legitimacy was somehow questionable, at least at the beginning of his mandate. However, support to his administration quickly rose to 80%.

over the political space" [...] Every situation was a life-death situation. We were *exhausted*. [...] When Kirchner arrived, we could not take it any longer! (Interview with Beto, 08/28/14).

These quotes indicate the divergent and numerous sentiments that *asambleas* awake which are deeply connected to the readings people have about the crisis that gave birth to these organizations and about the way political change should be accomplished, replicating to some extent the debates I exposed in the second section of this chapter. For some people, the *asambleas* had served their purpose and it was time to let the new government to take over the task of resisting the backlash from the right. In other cases, it was the impossibility to move forward - whether that was due to lack of agreement among members or due to a problem of scale - what prompted distance with the organization.

It seems the *Asamblea* has never been quite able to overcome the tensions that continue to emerge around concerns on how to build political work collectively and what is to be done in a changing political context. While independence from political parties and the preservation of autonomy of the organization is something unquestionable, concerns about how to negotiate the political conjuncture - in the context of a national government with ample popular support and a strong structure of organizations responding to it at the time of the fieldwork - surfaced in almost every meeting. In this sense, there must be some truth to Harvey's claims about the limits of local forms of solidarity (Harvey 2001), although I contend that the limits are far from being the inability of organizations to embrace a more broadly-based politics beyond the constraints of being a community 'for itself'.

The political conjuncture has radically changed in the last few months in Argentina with *Alianza Cambiemos* and Mauricio Macri in power since December 2015. I mentioned

in chapter 2 how in the first couple of months in office, Macri's government has faced strong opposition, including that of grassroots organizations. I also mentioned how both *asambleas* had experienced some revitalization in their membership and activities when Macri won the elections for Mayor of the City of Buenos Aires in 2007. Maybe what so far have seemed to be limits to the growth of the political work of the *asambleas* would now become an asset, a strength in the new political conjuncture, as *asambleas* may become again sites for the articulation of discontent and opposition to neoliberal policies and the rejection of a government for the few.

Chapter 5: Reimagining Community and Belonging in *Asambleas Populares*



Figure 13: *Ganándole Horas al Día* - *Olla's Magazine* N.3 cover

Introduction

Vero had invited me to the meeting of the *Olla's* magazine [...] When I got there, Martín, Vero and Ana were already working. Ramón was supposed to go, Vero and him are kind of the pillars of the magazine, but he didn't show up. They were having toasts with butter and mate and I joined them. Ana had brought the electric toaster and Martín was in charge of making the toasts. Ana also brought the computer to take a look at the previous (two) issues of the magazine and also to take notes. The meeting was quite informal and we mixed work with chatting [...]. Vero is going to write an article about a *compañero* who used to come to the *Olla* and who died recently (his body was kept in the morgue for a while because no one knew his family and nobody could claim the body). Someone from the slum where

he lived came a week or two ago to the *Olla* to let us know because he knew he used to go often to the *Asamblea*. Vero said she did not know him much, but that she did not want his death to go unnoticed. Another day, talking about the same issue, Vero associated this death with the bodies of the disappeared; she did not want this to be yet another death that no one will know about. Page 3 will be dedicated to heritage and Ramón will write it. The idea is to write the histories of the buildings in the neighborhood not from an architectural perspective but from a social one. Tenements houses, occupied houses. The intention is to rescue the stories of people who lived there (Based on fieldwork notes).

For some time, the *Olla* published a magazine called *Ganándole horas al día* (roughly translated as 'Beating the passing of time'). The project of making a magazine of the *Olla* came up in one of the *Malabardeando*'s meetings. *Malabardeando* is one of the activities hosted by the *Asamblea*. It began back in 2013 and first took place on Thursdays, then on Saturdays, and finally in 2015 was moved to Sundays. This day actually fits best because *Malabardeando* is an activity organized by and with some of the homeless people who come to the *Olla*, and Sundays is the day the *Olla* opens its doors to over one hundred people to eat lunch. The intention of this activity is to create *un grupo de escucha*, 'a group that listens', a space to talk, be heard and hear others talking. Usually *Malabardeando* meets around 11 am and functions until the food is ready about 12.30 or 1 pm. Depending on the activities taking place on each particular Sunday, people either gather on the first floor, where people eat or on the second floor where there is more privacy but it is less visible. Mate circulates and there is always some bread or cookies to share. One or two permanent members of the *Asamblea* coordinate the activity that may include writing a paragraph or two following a prompt or a questions - such as 'what are you afraid of?' - or something, drawing an idea, performing a feeling, and sharing. Mostly sharing (see photos 14 and 15 below).



Figure 14: Malabardeano meeting (by Mónica Farías)

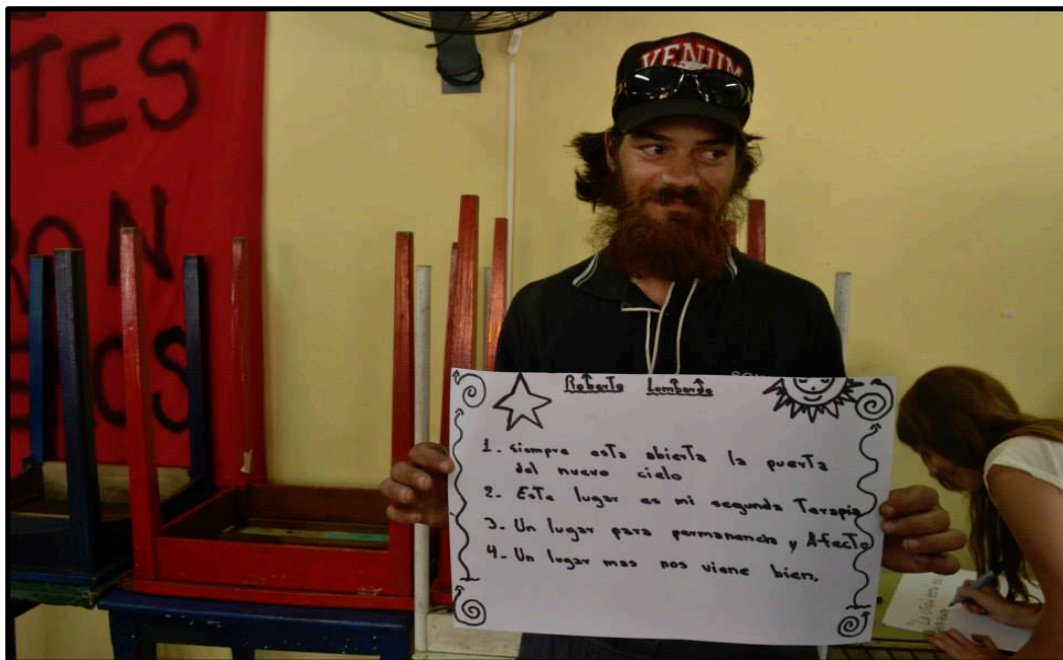


Figure 15: Activity in Malabardeando. The sign says "Roberto Lombardo. 1. The door of the new heaven is always open. 2. This place is my second Therapy. 3. A place to remain and Affect. 4. An extra place is good for us." (by Mónica Farías)

The excerpt from my fieldwork notes above transpires the intention from the part of the members of the *Asamblea* - homeless or not - to make visible, to be seen. A desire to rescue people's stories, to go beyond the facade of a magnificent early 20th century building - deteriorated or already recovered for the real-estate market and put to profit - to tell the lives of those who inhabited them, as renters or as occupiers. This person who died and had no family to claim the body was someone who used to go to the *Asamblea*. He was identified as such by those who let the people in the *Asamblea* know and also by Verónica who claimed him as 'one of us', one who belongs.

In this chapter I engage with exclusion to look at how the particularities of the *Asamblea* - the non-hegemonic ways of organizing and the fact that since the beginning *asambleas* have brought together 'included' and 'excluded' in encounters that created possibilities for new relationships, subjectivities and alliances - can and effectively do disrupt normalized ideas about citizenship, community and belonging. As I have shown in chapter 3, processes of encounter, border crossing and alliance building in these spaces of non-hegemonic political practices encompass the re-subjectification of the people involved, the interruption of the practices that constitute the subjects and the creation of new ones (Cahill 2007; Sitrin 2006).

This re-subjectification has the potential to disrupt normative understandings of citizenship through actions and discourses that counter marginalization and exclusion. At the same time that the meaning of belonging is unsettled, the re-subjectification also disrupts the very foundations upon which the social contract has been built in Argentina. I argue that non-hegemonic ways of organizing as manifested in the *asambleas* - non-hegemonic ways of relating to others, of building social and economic relations - have the

potential to disrupt normative assumptions of the social order, citizenship and belonging. By 'normative' I mean social parameters and regulations established during the construction of the 'modern' nation-state in Argentina during the late 19th century based on Western social models.

I refer to this other way of thinking and envisioning citizenship, community and belonging as an attempt to 'decolonize citizenship', something that I argue, can add to conversations about 'insurgent citizenships' (Holston 2009) and citizenship 'from below' (Dagnino 2003). Through the case of the *asambleas* I show how geohistorical specificities of that site and the contingencies of the present moment influence the extent to which alternative forms of organizing enable the production of non-hegemonic/modern accounts of 'the social'. I contend that by enacting a relational understanding of poverty through alliances across difference, spaces as the *asambleas* hold the potential to advance a shared language with which to speak back to the current social order while at the same time speak up for a different understanding of community and inclusion.

I will begin by reflecting on the process of citizenship-making in contemporary Argentina through the lens of modernity/coloniality scholarship to trace back the form in which the social structure in Argentina has been sustained through the reproduction of difference and exclusion. Then I show how daily interactions in the *asamblea* facilitate awareness about the pervasive mechanisms that produce and re-produce poverty to later reflect on the possibilities for reconceptualizing citizenship and belonging.

Western Citizenship and the making of 'modern' Argentina

Citizenship in its most widely accepted meaning is directly associated with the emergence of modern nation-states in Europe in the 17th century and the exercise of their

sovereign power over a certain territory and its population (Mignolo 2006) and it refers to membership to a political association to which people is bounded by contractual ties of rights and duties (Marshall 1964). Thus, community, territory and belonging became fused into the category of 'citizen'. Modern citizenship was born with an allegedly universal spirit, although it posed very important limits to what could be included under the umbrella of 'universality'. Thus, in general property and literacy qualifications were necessary to be eligible for citizenship until early 20th century, in systems were women, indigenous and disable people were nonetheless already non-eligible - something that extended until not so long ago in parts of the world (Isin and Turner 2002).

In fact, exclusion is essential to the constitution of citizenship since it presupposes the constitution of bounded national communities distinct from other communities who identified with another specific territory under the rule of another sovereign nation-state - in a move that presupposes the subordination and adaptation of culture to a 'given' political unit (Jackson and Penrose 1993). Whether the principle of *jus sanguinis* or *jus solis* is applied, the effects are restrictive because it differentiates who is 'in' and who is 'out' of the national community (Yashar 2007). Furthermore, in times of increasing globalization as well as the expansion of neoliberal policies that affect systems of governance, new exclusions - as well as inclusions - are produced as illustrated in the case of the special Business Immigration Program established in the 1980s in Canada that 'commercializes' citizenship making it accessible to those who could pay for it (Marston and Mitchell 2004) or in the promotion of 'transnational citizens' with wider mobility rights across borders that contrasts highly with the diametrically opposed immobility of others - or their transnational mobility in the form of 'carceral cosmopolitanism' (Sparke, 2006).

Importantly, inclusion into the universal liberal political community presupposes the violent reproduction of exclusions that are constitutive of the law that legitimizes belonging to such community. The conditions of inclusion into the political community are not only "culturally inscribed and reflect[ing] the pre-existing socio-economic relations of power in any given context", but thanks to an ontological displacement intrinsic to the unfurling of western modernity, they are also subjected to natural constructions of races, genders and sexualities (Mitchell 2006, 97. See also Mitchell 2016). Thus, exclusions are not just something that falls beyond a supposedly coherent and complete entity. They are in fact functional and necessary for the internal coherence of dominant projects - colonialism, (neo)liberalism, modernity, etc. -as feminist and postcolonial work has shown (Mitchell, Marston, and Katz 2004; Gregory 2006; Mitchell 2006).

Exclusion is at the root of what Holston calls 'inclusive inegalitarian citizenship' in the case of Brazil; a system of differentiated citizenship that guarantees universal inclusion in theory but that establishes tangible limits upon who can fully access it. Exclusion is also the result of 'paradigms of propertied citizenship' in the U.S. in which the relationship between the state and the national subjects is mediated by property ownership (Roy 2003). The corollary of this is that being homeless - not owning property - signals to some form of deviance from the norm, a 'deviance' that justifies state interventions that could represent an attack towards the integrity of the citizen - an example of which are the ordinances that prohibit sleeping in public spaces (Enhrenreich 2011). Finally, exclusion also lays at the heart of processes of citizenship formation in Buenos Aires as some middle classes feel threatened their assumed legitimate access to certain resources and spaces (Guano 2004). *Porteñas* middle classes resort to a racist and chauvinist rhetoric that

provides a legal/institutional justification to the exclusion/denial of rights to certain people when they discursively collapse into the figure of the foreigner - who is usually also accused of being an undocumented migrant - crime, drug use, and squatting.

In this chapter I rely on the work of the modernity/coloniality group originated in the 1990s in - from - Latin America that looks at modernity, capitalism and globalization from the standpoint of the 'coloniality of power' (Quijano 1999) to think through the exclusions that mark citizenship formation and belonging in Argentina, particularly in Buenos Aires through the case of the *Asamblea*. 'Coloniality of power' refers to the colonial matrix of power imposed over colonized populations since the 16th century, of which the inscription of difference and hierarchies of race are some of the most important characteristics (Quijano 1999). According to theorists of modernity/coloniality, coloniality is not just the result of the violence imposed by colonization, but a constitutive part of modernity, what Walter Mignolo calls 'the darker side of modernity' (Mignolo 2011).

The concept of coloniality of power is accompanied with the 'coloniality of knowledge' that refers to the denial of the role of the colonial encounter in the production of Western knowledge and the imposition of that knowledge as universal (Castro-Gómez 2009). According to Lander (2000), the naturalization of the liberal society as the universal and 'normal' way of organizing has its correlation in the acceptance of the legitimacy of social sciences and the knowledges they produced; knowledges that in turn, legitimize the matrix of colonial and liberal power. Thus, these scholars propose an epistemic de-colonial shift where 'to de-colonize' implies undoing the way we know and at the same time enacting an 'epistemological reconstitution' founded on the acknowledgment of the heterogeneity and diversity of reality devoid of hierarchies that mark social inferiority/domination

(Mignolo 2007a; Quijano 2007). It follows from this, that 'decolonizing citizenship' is part of the task of questioning the givens in our societies - such as the necessity of the state and the existence of national citizens - and implies to study how the coloniality of power has permeated this concept and what purposes it serves (Taylor 2013).

The Republic of Argentina as we know it is relatively new. Its territory was part of the Spanish Empire from the 16th to the early 19th century when the processes that led to the independence of most of the American continent from Spain and Portugal finally erupted in the former capital of the Viceroyalty of the *Río de la Plata*. Pro-independence movements quickly spread along the continent ending in the declaration of independence and subsequent formation of over a dozen countries in the course of only twenty years (Halperín Donghi 1993). In spite of the democratic and egalitarian expectations that independence might have inspired, the creole elites that took over the Spanish ruling class did not encourage substantive changes in the political order. At the same time they promoted integrationist policies that would, at least nominally, end the colonial division between whites and Indians (Horna 2011).

After several dozens of years of civil war between federalist and unionist forces, 'Argentina' achieved territorial and political unity and transitioned to a liberal regime under the successive presidencies of Bartolomé Mitre, Domingo F. Sarmiento and Nicolás Avellaneda (Halperín Donghi 1993). But it was not until the presidency of General Julio Roca (1880-1886) that the Argentinean territory acquired more or less the form that it has today. Prior to becoming president, Roca led the so-called 'conquest of the desert', the pinnacle of military campaigns and other related measures taken in order to put an end to the 'indigenous problem'; an euphemism used at the time to refer to the extermination -

physically and culturally - of the indigenous population who had been resisting Spanish and Argentinean domination. According to the perspective of the political elites in the newly consolidated nation, the 'indigenous problem' represented an obstacle to achieve the modernization of the country understood in terms of Western ideals of 'civilization and progress' (Zusman 2000). The presence of indigenous people in large areas of what today is Argentina prevented the expansion of agriculture for export and cattle rising at a time of increasing demand for these products in Europe.

'Unifying' the territory claimed by the elite to rightfully belong to Argentina according to the principle of *uti possidetis*, was one of the pillars of the process of homogenization of the diversity within the not-yet-secured national borders. 'Inventing' and 'building' the territory implied both settling disputes with other national projects,⁶⁶ and effectively occupying what was considered to be 'empty' land (Zusman 2000). Concurrently, the 'unification' of the territory under the same political, military and cultural power implied the identification of a national body tied together by bounds other than faith or submission to a monarchy; bounds that could constitute a horizontal fraternal community regardless of the "the actual inequality and exploitation that might prevail" in it (Anderson 1991, 7). For that, the elite in power in Argentina had to organize the many heterogeneous elements present in the society into a *ser nacional* [national being] that not only identified with the same territory, but who also spoke the official language, celebrated national holidays and conducted her/his life according to the precepts of the National Constitution. Fundamentally, it meant the emergence of a national being who would

⁶⁶ Those of the elite of what today constitute neighboring countries: Uruguay, Brazil, Paraguay, Bolivia and Chile.

gradually become - racially and culturally - European-like through both miscegenation and education (Botana 1977; Svampa 2006; Romero and Privitellio 2004).

In Argentina - as well as in the rest of Latin America - the modern state and therefore its citizenry was built upon the racial hierarchy that had been in place since the beginning of the Spanish and Portuguese occupations in the 16th century (Sanjinés 2007). This racial hierarchy emerged alongside the foundation of modernity, placing human beings in a gradient of degrees of humanity. Local elites set themselves to ‘modernize’ Argentina according to this racial hierarchy at the top of which were European men. In fact, at the end of the 19th century, the idea of citizenship was closely tied to that of the nation, to ideas of love and loyalty to the homeland. Imaginaries of the nation as a community with a shared race, language and tradition gained further purchase in the face of huge waves of immigration among which there were numerous sympathizers of socialist and anarchist ideas. To be a true citizen implied complete loyalty to the nation and the adoption of the language, the values and cultural traditions, something that meant a displacement from the legal aspects of citizenship to an act of adhesion to a spiritual and transcendent nation (Bertoni 2003). Interestingly, during that time and until the sanction of the Law 8.871 that universalized the vote for men in 1912, the vote was qualified and restricted to those who owned property.

The introduction of the Ley of Universal Vote in 191- used for the first time in presidential elections in 1916 - intended to award a stronger legitimacy to governments discredited by elections tainted with fraud. However, the expansion of the political citizenship to property-less men did not modify the underlying racial hierarchy that shaped the ideal society and the ideal Argentinean. The quintessential citizen for the Argentinean

nation continued to be (white)European descendant, and increasingly along the first half of the 20th century, also middle class (Adamovsky 2013; Adamovsky 2010).

The myth of Argentina being a *crisol de razas* [a melting-pot] underpinned processes of whitening that obscured settler colonial origins and denied the existence of - or at least concealed it - the indigenous and afro members of society. It accepted a creole type that could eventually whiten her/himself by learning and acting according to hegemonic norms (Briones 2002). Therefore, 'conquering the desert' not only implied the incorporation of new land to the capitalist international division of labor, but it also entailed the homogenization of the population through the control of 'exogenous alterities' (Veracini 2014) by means of the discursive incorporation of territory and people into the civilizing project. The indigenous population, the slave descendants, the *mestizos* and the newly arrived European immigrants had to become 'Argentinean'.

Building an Argentinean citizenry implies an extension of the coloniality of power into subjects that are shaped by particular lived experiences inscribed in language (Maldonado-Torres 2007), something that resonates much with Fanon's arguments on the alienation and the internalization - 'epidermalization' - of inferiority in the black population of the Antilles (Fanon 2008). It involved the homogenization of the diverse population suppressing cultural differences, languages and colors and the creation of an ideal type of national subject. Erasing, concealing 'the other', the one who proved to be unruly and non-conformist to dominant norms of behavior, was achieved by several different means: physical extermination - it was not by accident that the main casualties of civil wars were indigenous people and descendants; miscegenation - the elite of the 1880s promoted the immigration of white Europeans in the hope that their intermixing with natives and

mestizos would whiten the population; and also by excluding them from official narratives of state formation and economic progress. Simultaneously, they were (re)created as new subjects through the work of institutions such as the military service and the public education system (Romero and Privitellio 2004).

The exercise of erasing non-conformist subjects reappears in a particularly perverse way in 1966 during the dictatorship of General Juan Carlos Onganía when the practice of disappearing - literally speaking - political opponents replaced the use of political assassination. The *poder desaparecedor* [disappearing power] (Calveiro 1998) of the state was 'refined' and exerted with particular brutality and systematicity during the so-called 'Process of National Re-organization' [National Reorganization Process] during 1976-1983. The process of *desaparecimiento* [to make disappear] started at the moment of kidnap and transport to the clandestine detention center. It continued with the replacement of the name of the kidnapped with a number, and it ended with the death and disappearance of the body.⁶⁷ It is not a coincidence that one common way of referring to those who have been hit the hardest by the ups and downs of the economy since the 1980s onwards is by calling them *los desaparecidos del sistema* [the disappeared of the system], an 'other' that does not count in the national economy, an invisibilized body who not only suffers from economic and material deprivation but who is also subjected to cultural rules that deny them the right to have rights (Dagnino 2003).

Going back to the expert from my field notes above, Verónica, Ramón and the rest of the people participating in the magazine of the *Olla* are consciously 'making visible'.

⁶⁷ Although, the ultimate and more depraved practice of erasure was the appropriation of babies born in captivity (or kidnapped with their parents) and given to adoptive families, many of which were military and who raised the children as their own, with no knowledge of their real identities.

They are embarked in a collective effort to narrate what does not occupy a clear place in mainstream accounts of the social. They are simultaneously trying to make visible those whose bodies cannot be claimed, rescuing from the shadows those who remain unknown, and threading them into a narrative that builds community as much as it challenges who has the right to belong. By doing so, they challenge an ordering of things, a categorization of society based on binary terms - the worth it and the non-worth it. Also, maybe inadvertently, they are countering the disappearing power of hierarchical social scaffolding and delinking from - *decolonizing* - hegemonic narratives of the social order in Argentina.

As I showed in chapter 3 there has been an incremental valorization of the diversity of the space of the *Asambleas*. Difference has increasingly been seen as a positive characteristic, as a valuable resource that makes the work of the *asambleas* stronger. Interacting closely and for an extended period of time with people who might live in very different material conditions, who might have different values, knowledges and views of the world not only enriches the discussions and the actions taken in these spaces. People, particularly the middle-class members of the *asamblea*, acknowledge their limitations when it comes to understanding certain problems and thinking about responses, as we saw in the case of the *Olla* and Antonio in chapter 3. These interactions that are sustained over time and usually revolve around some common project, also have the potential to promote meaningful changes in the middle-class members of the *asambleas* who become more aware of their privilege and their responsibilities towards the reproduction of poverty.

In the next section I pay attention to the connections between working with difference, enacting a relational understanding of poverty and processes of re-subjectification that have the potential to re-conceptualize citizenship and belonging in

ways that 'delink' (Mignolo 2007a) from current normative conceptualizations of who belongs and who does not.

Seeing Poverty as Relational

Cristian is a member of the *Asamblea* and the soup kitchen. He is in his mid-thirties, holds a PhD in engineering and has some history of participating in political spaces. At the time, he was also collaborating in one of the three groups that take turns every Sunday in the *Olla*. We were talking about his political experience, the trajectories that brought him to the *Asamblea* and he drifted into talking about the limits of the organization that he understood to be a problem of scale, of having a small membership. He even said he believed that *asambleas* today are a bit outdated because there are other political organizations with more resources and capacity for mobilization that are more appealing to the youth. Cristian also believed that after the enthusiasm of 2002 when people went out to the streets shouting 'enough', the solidarity between the middle class and the poor lasted until the government lifted the limits to withdrawing money from bank accounts.⁶⁸

[in 2001] people were in a mess, you were in trouble so you hug whoever, that's one thing, now... the thing is when you are not in trouble any more but the other person is. I think that changes the whole 'pickets and pots' speech.⁶⁹ In 2001 we were all 'the same' because we were all in the same mess, the difference now is that we are not, you see? (Interview with Cristian, 07/07/14)

This is something that people frequently refer to in Argentina. As I mentioned in chapter 2, the crisis of 2001-2002 was a moment of political openness that triggered

⁶⁸ See footnote 46 in chapter 3 for an explanation of this measure.

⁶⁹ The picket, the act of blocking a road preventing people and cars from crossing is associated with forms of protest by the poorest sectors. Pots, on the contrary, became the symbol of the middle class beating them as a way of showing their disapproval for the government during the socioeconomic crisis of 2001-2002.

massive mobilizations and the emergence of numerous forms of activism across different social backgrounds. For many people, the apparent subsequent demobilization was the consequence of the middle class' intrinsic reactionary character by which if alliances with poorer sectors were necessary in order to achieve their goals, once that happened, they tried to "roll back the wheel of history" (Engels and Marx 2004). I was surprised to hear a similar explanation from someone who was actually middle class and who was highly invested in the work of the *Asamblea* and the *Olla*. Not only it would be unwise to affirm that every middle class person is reactionary, but also, Cristian joined the *Asamblea* long after the *asambleas* had passed their most visible and active moment. I pointed to this and I asked him what about the *Asamblea* kept him going, to which he responded that, unlike other organizations, the *Asamblea* creates room to discuss those common sense knowledges that circulate 'outside' of this political space, in particular in relation to poverty and 'the poor'. At the same time, these discussions help the members to elaborate different opinions.

Cristian: I think that the systematic thing of coming every Thursday [to the weekly meetings], every Thursday listening to people who come from different places, have other histories, with other knowledges, I think that it gives you ... ideas, it helps you to structure [...] it gives you clues about where to look, what to look, how to build [...] And then you have Sundays [the day the soup kitchen is run] I think Sundays are like ... I think the main difference is how people talk about 'the poor and poverty' ... as if they were outside.

Mónica: You mean in the *Olla*?

Cristian: No, in places other than the *Olla*. Is like ...saying... 'everybody in the slum are lazy' ... and the woman who cleans your house, where the hell does she live? And the construction worker that built your house, where does he live? [...] Because...[...] 'we like Puerto Madero and we need to remove the slum', without getting that *it's the same society that generates both Puerto Madero and the slum* [...] it all comes in the same package,⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Puerto Madero is the newest neighborhood in the city of Buenos Aires. It was built in the 1990s over the old port that has been almost inoperative since Puerto Nuevo began operating in the 1930s. The area gradually declined and in the 1990s this public land (some 170 ha) with a strategic location (just a few blocks away

if you don't like part of it, we need to take apart the whole package [...] The craziness that people on the streets have are the same, I mean, lack of purpose, lack of...I don't know, lack of relationships with others, or opportunities and spaces of belonging. But obviously, it is not the same to be upset and go for a cigarette than being upset and do *paco* (cocaine paste) or go completely wasted and sleeping until 2 pm, being completely fucked and being on the streets under the rain, obviously the consequences are not the same, but, I mean, with exception of some particularities, there are a bunch of things that are the same (Interview with Cristian, 07/07/14).

In this quote Cristian expresses awareness of the relationship between privilege and dispossession that plays out even in close spatial proximity and only a few blocks away from the *Asamblea*. Cristian also highlights how the discussions, the exposure to other knowledges and experiences 'gives you clues' that might help people re-orient their understandings and elaborate new perspectives. Far from being over celebratory of the potential for subjective change of the *Asamblea*, he makes clear that class differences can be blurred only if people are willing 'to see' things from a different perspective and to take other people's experiences as valuable. To him, 'seeing' does not come naturally when one is in close proximity with others. He illustrated by telling me about his sister who is a teacher in a slum and spends so much time with kids of poor backgrounds and yet - as mentioned in chapter 3 - she cannot break down 'poor' families' stereotypes and have a different 'view' - understanding - of the structures that condition those kids' performance in school. Cristian conceives the unwillingness to see and be open as the result of the underlying desire that borders of difference remain in place, something he might have challenged before approaching the *Asamblea* with a desire to do 'social work'. And yet,

from the House of Government and a next to the historic quarter of the city) was sold to private developers who recycled the old port infrastructure for offices, restaurants and even private colleges as well as built luxurious apartment towers. According to website specialized in real state (Reporte Inmobiliario 2016), the price of the square meter in this neighborhood is the highest in all Buenos Aires, even exceeding that of traditional aristocratic neighborhoods such as Recoleta with prices that range from US\$4,200 to 7,000.

what he takes from his experience is "the qualitative difference" that marks the gap between 'feeling outraged' at the sight of children scavenge in the garbage and *que se te revuelvan las tripas* [feeling sick in your stomach, feeling outraged] and,

having some understanding of the causes and, at least, doing something so on Sunday night that kid is not looking for food in the garbage (Interview with Cristian, 07/07/14).

Cristian links his awareness and change, with the daily interactions that take place in the *Asamblea*, something that has come up in other interviews. For instance, Guadalupe is also middle class and has a BA in Sociology. She is in her early thirties and she has been working in the soup kitchen for several years. I asked her why the *Asamblea* refuses to take money from the government to run the *Olla* and she responded that among other things it had to do with,

[...] assuming ownership [of the problems], what I think is that whatever we cannot resolve our own, we should figure it out collectively. I mean, if one guy cannot get food, okay, then we all have to cook, but it is not just "let's cook together" [as in the soup-kitchen], it's "hey, the neighborhood also should assume responsibility for the people who live in it or in the city who do not have enough to eat! And it should contribute to it! (Interview with Guadalupe, 11/30/13)

As I mentioned in chapter 3, the *Olla* is actually run with donations from neighbors and shopkeepers, some of whom have been contributing for as long as the soup kitchen has existed. In this comment, Guadalupe further politicizes the awareness expressed by Cristian by pointing to the shared responsibilities for the existence of poverty. Both quotes defy dominant approaches to poverty that obscure the historical inequalities in the distribution of power, wealth and opportunity (O'Connor 2001). Similarly, a poster made by the *Asamblea* in 2013 assessing the right's protection system in the city of Buenos Aires said about it that,

How is the city of Buenos Aires taking care of those in situations of social vulnerability? Today we have a state that: It's far removed from the people. That silences voices. That intervenes violating rights. That dehumanizes, blames and criminalizes. To sum up, we have a state that belongs to them (Poster about the Rights' Protection System in the city of Buenos Aires - see photo 16 below)

We see, again, an insistence on exposing those who are not visible or heard, an insistence on calling attention to the dehumanization that comes with this invisibility and with the responsabilization of 'the poor' for their poverty. However, the critique that the state criminalizes poverty would not be entirely sound and radical unless it was enmeshed in the context of the social relations in which poverty happens. A subsequent document that circulated by email also asserted that the city of Buenos Aires stigmatizes,

the survival strategies and practices of the popular sectors and ignores and does not problematize the actions of the middle and higher sectors (personal communication, 12/09/13)



Figure 16: Poster about the Rights' Protection System in the city of Buenos Aires

When I first read this assertion I understood it in terms of the state uncritically accepting the behaviors and the actions of the upper sectors by virtue of their class and the values they supposedly embody. Later readings of it, as I moved on with the research sparked a complementary interpretation. 'Ignoring' the practices of the upper sectors of society - all of those who do not fall under the category of 'poor' - could also mean not taking into account the role - active or passive - they have in the production and reproduction of poverty.

As the latter point indicates, 'seeing', being able to make more sense of the determinants of poverty and refusing stereotypes about 'the poor', is not limited to 'giving voice' or providing the space for people usually marginalized to be heard. 'Seeing' has also the potential to 'delink' from hegemonic knowledges about (poor)others and (poor)places (Grosfoguel 2007). As I have shown in chapter 3, being in close contact, working alongside people who come from very different backgrounds has the potential to elicit critical consideration of people's own lives and identities, something that can lead not only to a deeper understanding to the structural causes of poverty but also to the acknowledgment of privilege. Also, in chapter 4 I explained how some of the main characteristics of the *asambleas* - namely horizontality and openness to difference - facilitate alliances in which the relational political subjects emerging in these organizations move from critical self-reflection to acting upon it in order to build change. These are all part of the process of 'unlearning' (Spivak 1999), processes that imply to 'decolonize the self' from knowledges and judgments that have been taught as valid and logical. For instance, when Cecilia realized she was trying to 'help' Verónica in a way that was far disconnected from the way Verónica understood her own problems (see chapter 4) and stopped being frustrated at

Verónica's apparent lack of investment on 'putting herself together' in order to get her kid back, she also became aware that she was looking at the situation from her privileged position. Later on, Cecilia shared Verónica's situation at her place or work, but she warned her colleagues "don't think it from the place you are", in the assumption that their class position would trigger judgment as it did with her.

It would be hard to quantify how much of this awareness and radical views about poverty comes solely from the interactions in the *Asamblea*, but as I have shown in chapter 3 in the *asambleas* I worked with, there has been an incremental valorization of difference and a recognition of the importance of working with and for those who are different - in terms of social class, gender, nationality, age, etc. Ultimately, these quotes put back poverty and 'the poor' within social relations of class, gender, race, and they defy the 'economic imaginary' that categorizes the poor as different from the social norm and poverty as the result of individuals' deficiencies (Lawson et. al. 2012).

Furthermore, when Guadalupe reflects on what it means to be 'assuming ownership' she points to a relational understanding of poverty that is embedded in an awareness of the spatiality of power relations. The unequal spatial distribution of wealth, services and infrastructure within a city, as well as the unequal distribution of the regulatory apparatuses of the state is the result of differential power among city dwellers. People in the city, individually as well as collectively, do not have the same economic, cultural, social and political resources. Neither do they have the same possibility of mobilizing those resources in order to shape the urban space towards their needs and preferences as the work of Auyero (2001; 2012) and Auyero and Swistu (2009) on Argentina has shown. For Guadalupe - and for the rest of the people in the *Asamblea* - all social actors are involved, to different

extents, in the production and reproduction of poverty and so they should be in its alleviation.

Therefore, Guadalupe's comment above is also a call for action. When she suggests that the neighborhood should donate food and contribute to the soup kitchen, she is not only asking for material help. She is actually highlighting the responsibilities associated with assuming ownership of the social problems. This call for assuming responsibility and acting upon it resonates with Gibson-Graham's 'politics of the subject' that refers to the reciprocal relationship between changing ourselves and changing the reality around us. Following Butler (1997), Gibson-Graham proposes the possibility for the emergence of new subjects out of dominant discourses, "'made' and as 'making themselves' in and through discourse and practices of governmentality" (23). The materiality of subjection that has to be acted and re-enacted finds its openings in the interruption of ritualized practices that constitute the subject (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 24). These interruptions sometimes come in the form of economic crisis. In Argentina, the crisis resulted in the emergence of the *asambleas* and in the construction of new interactions across boundaries of class, race, gender, nationalities and cultures.

People in *asambleas* used the opening provided by the economic meltdown of 2001 to seek for alternatives to what was no longer possible (Sitrin 2006; Holloway 2002). In spite of the 'normalization' of the economic and political situation in less than two years and the dissolution of many of the *asambleas*, some remained and continued performing a politics of prefiguration that implies enacting in the present - the way people relate to others, the way they work together - the changes that they want to see in the future (Melucci 1988; Pickerill and Chatterton 2006).

One of the *Asamblea*'s original intentions was to build non-state public spaces where people could collectively counter exclusion and inequality. As I explained in the previous chapter, *asambleas* - as well as many other organizations and movements - organized the relationships and activities horizontally. I asked Paula 'why?' the soup kitchen in the *Asamblea* when there are many other spaces that provide food for homeless or people in need. She responded that the *Asamblea* has a different way of building power that is,

participatory, horizontal, where every voice has a say, it has limits, but every opinion is possible and no one says how things should be, and, it's about acknowledging the power the other has, even if he is the most scavenger among the scavengers [...] (Interview with Paula, 04/02/14)

This is the reason why she would not participate in a soup kitchen that functioned in a church or in a NGO. In this *asamblea*, homeless people who come to eat are also the ones who cook the food, set up the place, and clean up afterwards along with the more permanent members of the *Asamblea*. After everyone is gone and the kitchen has been cleaned, all of the people who collaborated sit around one table and share the food they have just cooked.

In relation to the work of the *Olla* Paula comments,

When I tell the scavenger who is all filthy "go and wash your hands and chop these potatoes", right? [when people say] the stew is so tasty! they are telling you, you get it? Because you made it, because then it is not that you are a disposable human being of this society that produces disposable people (Interview with Paula, 04/02/14)

It's the adjective 'disposable' - the human being that does not count in the national economy or in national narratives, the body that can be invisibilized and even make disappear - that serves as a link between a relational understanding of poverty, a politics of the subject and a decolonizing turn of citizenship in Argentina. In the next section I call attention to the close and necessary relationship between imagining and enacting

alternative ways of relating across difference and the reconceptualization of those who are deemed 'excess' to the capitalist economy as subjects with rights, although these efforts are made in contradictory ways.

Decolonizing citizenship

According to Walter Dignolo (Dignolo 2006), when the idea of citizenship emerged in parallel to the formation of the nation-state in Europe, imperial and colonial differences were already in place. Even today, “[t]he conditions for citizenship are still tied to a racialized hierarchy of human beings that depends on universal categories of thought created and enacted from the identitarian perspectives of European Christianity and by white males” (313). As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, ‘modern’ Argentina was built upon this racial hierarchy established under Spanish and Portuguese rule in the American Continent since the 16th century where that the consolidation of an ideal type of citizen implied the erasure of an 'other', that is, the constitution of differences against which the ideal type of national subject could be opposed only to make them materially and discursively disappear later.

The process of identification and subsequent concealment of the racialized/undisciplined 'other' during the construction of modern Argentina, I argue, has its correlation in processes of economic exclusion along much of the 20th century.⁷¹

⁷¹ Probably with exception of the first to presidencies of Juan Domingo Perón (1956-1955). The Peronist government's one of its three pillars was the concept of *justicia social* [social justice]. The other two were political sovereignty and economic independence. *Justicia social* was built upon principles of universality, integration and redistribution of wealth in favor of the popular sectors. This not only implied the extension of voting rights to women, but also the incorporation of the popular sectors into politics - by means of having workers' representatives in the government and also by promoting the participation of workers in different branches of the Peronist Party as well as in public manifestations (Giuliani 2008). It also meant to expand middle-class patterns of consumption to the working classes (Pite 2013).

Mechanisms of invisibilization and erasure acted upon those who suffered to a greater extent the fluctuations of the economy and 'fell off the system', the 'excess' of the capitalist society as Paula implied above and the 'disappeared of the system', the ones who do not count and who are constantly being excluded.

In the *Asamblea*, middle class actors work for and with this 'excess' in an attempt to make visible, to restore the humanity of those apparently deemed not worth it of engaging in the dominant political conversations. Continuing with her comments about why the soup kitchen functions in the *Asamblea* and not in a church or somewhere else, Paula told me she believed providing food was not even the main goal of the *Olla*. In fact, there are several places people could go for food in the neighborhood - churches, other organizations, NGOs, etc. Paula said that the *Asamblea* resorts to food as a way of caring about,

[people] feeling [they are] *sujetos de derecho* [subjects of rights] [...] that they know they can choose where to go to eat, because if you don't get treated well in one place, go to another one! (Interview with Paula, 04/02/14)

Being a *sujeto de derecho* as Paula enunciates it is some how different from being a 'bearer of rights', and it is more than advancing a meaning of citizenship opposed to the (neo)liberal assertion that citizenship equates with participation in the market economy (Sparke 2004). Being a *sujeto de derecho* before asserting the right to have rights acknowledges the 'being' itself, the very act of existing. Sitting at a table to eat, helping in the preparation of food to be shared, eating food that tastes like food as Verónica - whom I mentioned in chapter 4 - told me, and being in a place where she has 'a lot to say' because others are listening.

These efforts represent an attempt to restore the humanity that has been taken away by a social ordering that produces ‘excess’, disposable people as Paula put it.⁷² It is interesting that in the interview with Daniel he was commenting on what he thinks are handicaps of the *Asamblea* in order to become a political organization in a more traditional sense, something that according to him would allow it to grow beyond the neighborhood. Despite his critiques, he remarked and praised the ability of the *Asamblea* to build - *construir* -, to intervene in some conflicts in the neighborhood such as the eviction of the PADELAI,⁷³ something he relates to the history of activism of the members,

Not only we have a belief, but we also have activism, we have a *clear* activism in favor of social rights, we don’t have a soup kitchen to give people ... a small plate of food and nothing else, what we do has a integrative nature (Interview with Daniel, 02/14/14)

Daniel reads to have social rights - partially - as being 'integrated', to belong somewhere, to be part of something. In the next section I will discuss some of the limits of attempts to 'integrate' those who are effectively and/or considered to be excluded, but I want to stress now the fact that the right to belong is put on the same level as the right to have a education, housing and access to health. If citizenship represents an enforced community of birth that by virtue of color or socioeconomic status erases and even makes disappear - some times literally - certain subjects, then these subjects who not fully qualify as citizens not only ‘are not’, as in ‘they cannot exist’, but also they do not belong. This point - having

⁷² The participation of the workers in the national income reached a peak during Perón's first and second presidencies (51%) and then again during his third period (48%) in the mid 1970s. Between those periods and after the overthrow of María Estela Martínez de Perón (successor of Perón after his death) in 1976 the participation dropped to levels as low as 23% in 1982 (Basualdo 2010).

⁷³ The *Patronato de la Infancia* (PADELAI) was an orphanage center located in the neighborhood of San Telmo. In the late 1970s it moved to its new premises and the building - a 5800 m2 edifice - was occupied in 1984 by 108 families. The building has been at the center of disputes about the public space involving the production of the historic center of Buenos Aires (Yacovino 2015). In 2003 the Government of the City of Buenos Aires proceeded to violently evict it.

a *pertenencia* [belonging] - came up several times during interviews and observations. In fact, one of the things that impacted me the most in the interview with Verónica was her constant reference to not feeling an outsider in the *Asamblea*. She highlighted several times that she sees the *Asamblea* as a place where she can bring projects of her own and speak up her mind. A place where she can *be* and *belong* to.

One telling experience was key for Verónica in this regard. Verónica is in her late twenties and since she moved to Buenos Aires from her hometown at the age of twenty three she has been in a very unstable housing situation and working a variety of low-paid jobs. I mentioned in chapter 4 she has two kids; the eldest is living with a friend of hers and the youngest, a one-year-old boy at the time of the interview who had been taken away by the Council for the Rights of Girls, Boys and Teenagers of the city of Buenos Aires. When that happened Verónica, who had been attending the *Olla* for a while, asked the organization for help. Particularly two members of the organization - a lawyer and a psychologist - assumed the responsibility of accompanying Verónica to court and other legal instances. But in fact, when Verónica recounts the story, she describes it as a collective enterprise,

I think that since the problem with my boy, it's like it unified the forces of the *Asamblea*, I can't find another word ... it's like if they were all united behind this ... (Interview with Verónica, 07/17/14).

This traumatic moment might have helped solidify relationships across all the members of the *Asamblea*, but without a doubt, the experience had the effect of bringing Verónica closer to the organization. In fact, by the time I left the field, she was a very active member of the *Olla*, the *Malabardeando* group and the *Asamblea* in general. When in 2014 the *Asamblea* organized two plenary meetings with the purpose of evaluating the work of

the organization, Verónica participated in them. They both lasted several hours and everyone who attended had several chances to express their opinions. In relation to this meeting Verónica mentioned,

Verónica: That was the first plenary meeting in which ... I could participate, I mean, actively participate and talk and being in a group talking. The same happened to Ramón, it was like ...

Mónica: Was that something that surprised you?

Verónica: It was ... let's see, I have my ...my prejudices ...I am not sure they are prejudices ...but ... "how am I going to go? What am I going to say?". I really like listening, like when they get all ... that's why I don't talk ... because I like listening to people when, those people who know, who are activists from their hearts, like Paula and Leo [...] and I felt very included that day and I think Ramón did too and that, I don't know ... the inclusion that meant we could participate (Interview with Verónica, 07/17/14)

Verónica, as other homeless participants in the *Asamblea*, developed over time a sense of entitlement over the space, something that is praised, hoped and expected by the middle-class members of the organization. One time Leo pointed out to me what he considers to be a clear sign of belonging, or feeling at ease and secure in the *Asamblea*: the fact that people before or after eating on Sundays at the *Olla* fall asleep at the table by crossing their arms and resting the head on them. For people who live in the streets exposed not only to being robbed or attacked by random burglars with little means to protect themselves and their belongings, but also to harassment and blunt abuse by the police something that forces them to sleep in turns - or as Leo put it, "to sleep with an eye open" - to fall asleep in the *Asamblea* could be read as indicative to the degree to which they feel safe and contained and the extent to which people experience the space as theirs. Belonging to a group - a community, a state - not only provides a sense of security, of being in a familiar terrain, but it also provides a sense of identity. A sense of self that is crisscrossed

by our multiple belongings (Carrillo Rowe 2008) and that can empower and politicize people, as the following example of 'making visible' shows.

In a section of the magazine *Ganándole Horas al Día* published by the *Olla* and the group *Malabardeando* titled *La Contra guía* [The Counter-Guide] implying to be in opposition to a traditional tourist guide, Verónica suggested to include a list of free museums, cinemas and places to play sports to let other homeless and people without economic resources know where they could go for leisure. Most of the museums in the city of Buenos Aires are free - there are at least ten museums nearby the *Asamblea* - and there are two nearby INCAA cinemas⁷⁴ with tickets for less than a dollar compared to the average of four dollars that a ticket costs in any other regular cinemas. But yet, spaces of bourgeois culture are usually tacitly forbidden for people without material capital and perceived lack of cultural capital as certain cultural practices - and spaces - are considered to be exclusive of the middle and higher classes (Wortman 2003). In a later meeting that I attended, Verónica laid out the suggestion of coming up with this list of activities as a way of,

showing people that we [homeless people] also have a right to take a stroll around the neighborhood, because it is not that if you are poor, if you live in a park, if you don't have food to eat, "how come you go to museums?" (Based on fieldwork notes).

Verónica and her fellow editors of the magazine were asserting their right to leisure, pushing back against patronizing assumptions among the non-poor that assume that 'poor' people should take care of their most pressing needs - namely food and shelter - first before devoting time and energy to pleasurable activities. They were also laying claim to strolling

⁷⁴ INCAA (National Institute for Cinema and Audiovisual Arts) is a public entity under the sphere of the National Culture Ministry whose goal is to promote the diffusion of national cinematographic production. Hence its affordability.

carelessly around the city in the open - under the same sky where they sleep at night - without a feeling of being out of place or the fear of infringing some unstated law about the uses of public space.

The city of Buenos Aires has a long history of not wanting to confront poverty - or the 'poor' for the matter.⁷⁵ In fact, on December 10th, 2015 Mauricio Macri became the President of Argentina after defeating the candidate of the *Frente Para la Victoria*, Daniel Scioli, in the ballotage of November 22nd by less than three points. A little over 50% of the *porteño* electorate voted for Mauricio Macri in the first round⁷⁶ to be the president of the country even though he had already deployed anti-poor measures as the Mayor of the City of Buenos Aires in the prior eight years. In this context, acts of visibility and actions that reassert rights from which people are excluded on account of their socioeconomic status, represent a defiance to a system that since its inception functioned by building otherness and subsequently erasing - disappearing - it. I argue that decolonizing citizenship requires to unmake the dominant script - and the logic that underpins it - about who belongs and who does not, who gets to be visible and who is pushed to the edges of a hierarchical social grid. At the same time, it requires to perform an epistemological reconstitution based on the need for an 'other' but where "differences are not necessarily the basis for domination" (Quijano 2007, 177). An epistemological reconstitution that could also be used - maybe it implies - to re-write the script and to re-interpret events.

⁷⁵ Just to mention a few hallmarks: in the 1940s, the phrase 'aluvión zoológico' (zoological flood) was popularized as a way of describing the arrival of immigrants of dark skin from the interior of the country (Quirós 2014); violent evictions of numerous precarious settlements during the last dictatorship (Guber 2004); lastly, during the 1990s, some impoverished middle class feeling threatened by their social proximity to the poor, resorted to an openly discriminatory and reactionary rhetoric that blamed the poor, the immigrant, the dark-skinned for disturbing the harmony that supposedly characterized 'the Paris of South America' (Guano 2004)

⁷⁶ In the ballotage Macri obtained 64.78% of the votes.

Back in 2014 the *Asamblea* participated in an event organized by a public school in the neighborhood attended by kids and teenagers living and working in the streets. The school was under threat of being moved because of the construction of a bus-only new line right in front of the school. Besides being cautious about the promises the local government made if the school community agreed to leave the building, the reason why they wanted to stay where they were was based on the strong attachment and identification students feel for the school in the neighborhood where they also work, panhandle and have their social networks. The *Asamblea* decided to be present by giving a speech in support of the school and also by congregating as many as possible to carry body-shape cardboard figures in allusion to those disappeared during the last dictatorship (see photo 17 below). These cardboard figures are a symbol of the *Asamblea* that are displayed in its annual commemorative walk in the neighborhood by the houses where people was kidnapped - *Marcha de Antorchas* (see photos 6, 7 and 10 for this commemoration). Bringing the figures to the school protest not only was a way of drawing connections and points of continuity between, on the one hand, the dictatorship and the violence it used to implement financial restructuring, and Macri's neoliberal administration and its 'disappeared of the system' on the other. The figures and the connections they established represented also a re-writing of the eviction of the school by highlighting the economic imperatives behind the government's decision. It was also a re-interpretation of the narratives about priorities in the city, a reinterpretation that pointed out that the decision-making powers were leaving out the school's community's most pressing concerns. Lastly, the figures also made visible the school's marginal, stigmatized and often invisibilized population.



Figure 17: Cardboard figures representing the disappeared during the last dictatorship being hang by students (by Mónica Fariás)

One important aspect of this public display is that members of the *Asamblea* invited people who attended the event to paint these same figures on the pavement with spray paint and to collaborate by hanging the cardboard figures from the fence that surrounds the former detention center adjacent to the school - known as *El Atlético*. The way I read the gesture is as an invitation to re-write together, to enact a collective 'reconstitution' that stands in direct opposition to the totalizing and homogenizing nature of modern ways of knowing that obscures - makes disappear - realities, experiences and even bodies.

Before moving to the conclusion of this research, in the next section I reflect on what it means to use a language of rights in the context of a collective that through its actions is trying to push against their very epistemological framework.

Strategic Rights Claiming

Thursday December 5, 2013. Meeting at the Asa. I went to the *Marcha de la Resistencia*⁷⁷ for a while and I met Leo there. We walked together back to the *Asamblea*. There were around twenty people and we discuss the *pintada*⁷⁸ for the 7th. Cecilia suggests to do something in relation to the demandability of rights, including issues around gender violence. The draft suggested last week stays. The idea is to use an actual rope as if it was a cloth line where to 'hang' phrases that would be painted on the wall. The rope would also serve for people passing by to hang pieces of paper with their own slogans. Cecilia says that in the new activity that takes place on Saturday mornings [Malabardeando] people spend much time discussing what concerns demandability of rights. Consuelo indicates that in the *pintada* we should highlight all rights and denounce institutional violence as well. Cecilia adds that it is not about asking for new laws because the laws already exist. It's about thinking how to make sure the law is implemented. Consuelo emphatically articulates 'we need to stop being objects of right to being subjects of rights!' (Based on fieldwork notes - see photos 18 and 19 below).

⁷⁷ The *Marcha de la Resistencia* is an annual march around the Pyramid of *Plaza de Mayo* that has been taking place on first Wednesday of December since 1981 and it last 24 hours. The *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* initiated the ritual of walking around the Plaza de Mayo in 1977 every Thursday as a way of bringing attention to their children's disappearances.

⁷⁸ A *pintada* is basically the act to paint some phrases and draws on a wall. In the *Asamblea* is usually a festive day in which people gather and work while sharing *mate*. People who are close to the *Asamblea* are invited to participate and at the end there is usually some food to share. Importantly, a *pintada* is seen as a powerful political statement because of the visibility that both the mural and the act itself give to the organization but also because it brings memories of other *pintadas* done in times of censorship when people risked their lives to do them not so long ago.



Figure 18: Pintada at the Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo (by Mónica Farías)



Figure 19: Pintada at the Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo.

At the beginning of this chapter I argued that *asambleas* hold the potential to 'decolonize', to challenge liberal definitions of citizenship and the normative assumptions upon which the established social order has been built. And yet, many of the debates and

discussions in the *asambleas* I worked with were about issues of access to rights. In fact, the four founding principles of the *Asamblea de Flores* are the right to culture, work, housing and education, and in the case of *Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo*, in almost every communication the *Asamblea* makes explicit its support to social and human rights. The activities organized are usually in the name of rights considered to be infringed - or not protected - by the state.

What is then the point on talking about 'decolonizing citizenship' when referring to the work of these organizations that are basing their claims and working on granting the accessibility of marginal sectors of the population to liberal rights? Furthermore, much of the language used by members of the *Asamblea* deals with issues of 'integration' and 'inclusion',⁷⁹ a condition - the inclusion - that I see as having two dimensions. One of them refers to the struggles against the exclusion - or to put it more accurately, adverse incorporation - of huge sectors of the population from what are considered to be universal rights, in which case, it makes sense to talk about 'inclusion'. The second dimension is the one Daniel was talking about in the quote in page 177, that is, integrating the homeless - the population that goes to the *Olla* - to a space where they can belong. But, if in the former case we hit the obstacle we are trying to surpass by resorting to the idea of decolonizing - remaining constrained within the walls of the liberal scaffolding the very actions of the *asambleas* are defying - in the latter the contradiction is not less evident. We ought to ask who marks the borders that determine when someone is in or out, and who sets the terms of that inclusion to the space? What is what that those 'disposable human beings' are being

⁷⁹ See Daniel quote in page 177 and Verónica's in page 179.

incorporated into and who has the power to shape the space and its norms and codes of behavior?

At first sight, if the concept of citizenship is intrinsic to the liberal project built upon a racial hierarchy that suppresses differences, resorting to the language of rights in order to counter the social system's exclusionary effects might seem rather contradictory. When *asambleas* enunciate people's right to housing, to education, to earn a living wage, etc. they are asking the state for the inclusion of the people who do not enjoy these rights into the deserving polity whose contours have been established leaving out, precisely, these subjects' values, needs and expectations. Likewise, when - mostly - middle-class members of the *asambleas* talk about 'including' or 'integrating' the homeless to the organization, a similar condescending-like process seems to take place. That is, instead of a renegotiation of that to which people has or can be incorporated, the excluded are presented with an already fully structured space - or polity for the matter. 'Incorporating' then, risks homogenizing and blending those who the organizations are trying to make visible in the first place according to parameters that mirror other than the excluded. This latter point might be tempered by something I have argued all along the dissertation though. Namely, that *asambleas* welcome and value difference and diversity because they see it as an asset with which to enrich knowledges, relationships and with which to contribute to change the organizations in radical ways - as we saw it in the example of Antonio and the *Olla* in chapter 3. But yet, the limits of resorting to a language of 'inclusion' remains.

In fact, what I see is a tension in the way the *asambleas* use 'rights' and seemingly liberal language in order to advance their objectives. On the one hand they want to 'include', to 'incorporate', to bring back the excluded, to claim the 'right to have rights' in compliance

with binary categorizations proper of modernist projects (Taylor 2013). But on the other hand, there is an implicit intention to restore - provide room to regain - the humanity of those who have been stripped-away of their dignity. There is a chance then, that the use of the language of rights may be a strategy to defend and keep the minimum base of goods, services and entitlements, that the *asambleas* make visible those who have been neglected and obscured by placing claims on liberal rights in an attempt to keep losing. That might be an effective first step in order to call attention to the injustices that lay at the heart of the socioeconomic and political system. That step, I argue, necessarily has to be followed by moves that attempt to debunk the terms of inclusion, the very conditions of exclusion under which the system is reproduced.

Chapter 6: Conclusion



Figure 20: Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo's banner in front of the Cabildo

In this dissertation I have looked to the cases of *asambleas populares* in Buenos Aires to think through the broader question of how political change happens. My work was guided by a specific interest in how people work along difference to engage in projects of radical political possibility that challenge common knowledges about poverty and 'the poor.' I chose to study *asambleas populares* because they are political spaces of diversity that had and have an important role in urban politics in Buenos Aires. Their case can provide insights not only into what needs to be done to bring about political change, but also into the nature of political change itself. In times of the apparent strengthening of conservative and right-wing political agendas around the world, and specifically in Argentina and Latin America, I argue that looking at the processes of working through and with difference in the *asambleas* can shed light onto how oppositional and creative alliances can be built.

I became interested in *asambleas* because they are spaces of political innovation, encounter across difference, where alliances across class - and also race and gender - seemed to have consolidated, leading to progressive political work. These organizations, then, were fit to respond the main questions I was interested in: what happens when social difference comes together in space?; what are the dynamics underpinning alliances across difference and political change?; what are the key aspects of the *asambleas* that might facilitate that?; what are the potentials and the lessons of these spaces for broader political alliances?; and in which way can they contribute to theorizing political change?

I paid particular attention to the middle class, because I am interested in how, and to what extent, this class - that plays important roles in the creation and maintenance of symbolic and material borders that produce or challenge multiple layers of exclusion - can build and effectively build alliances across difference. I consider the middle class to be a complex category that is discursively and materially produced; it is not a coherent stable ontological object. Therefore, its politics in relation to poverty are neither homogeneous, nor predictable.

I have paid attention to what I consider to be three important aspects of the *asambleas* to investigate the political relevance of these organizations. First, these are political spaces where differences in terms of class, race, gender, nationality, culture, are encountered and re-encountered on a daily bases and for a long period of time. This has important consequences for both the re-subjectification of the people involved and for the dynamics of the organization. Scholarship that focuses on the fleeting encounter with difference in cafés or playgrounds tends to be over celebratory of the positive effects of low-level sociability on conviviality (Amin 2002, 2006, 2012; Laurier and Philo 2006,

Wilson 2011, 2014). Even in cases of repeated encounters such as in school settings, where incremental change in people's subjectivities might be possible, the radicalism of the effect of the encounter is, at best, limited (Hemming 2011). At the same time, coming together in close proximity with difference is a prerequisite to achieve change that goes beyond mere respect and tolerance, but it does not suffice to bring about a profound questioning of values and prejudices (Valentine 2008). My work shows that embracement of difference and the break-down of stereotypes through encounters takes time and hard work, involving constant negotiations and reassessments of one's values and beliefs, even in the cases where - as in the *asambleas* - people come together willingly to do social justice work.

I showed how the crisis and post-crisis context in which the organizations emerged, and also previous experiences of activism against neoliberalism, provided the medium to blur boundaries of class, gender and race, something that *asambleas* welcomed and encouraged. The progressive valorization of differences within the organization is not something that happens naturally or free from tensions, but it is made possible and enhanced by the ongoing exchange of ideas, values, and experiences that happen through long-term and repeated interactions during the work and activities in the *asambleas*. Because of that, these spaces are potentially disruptive of middle-class identities and stereotypes about 'poor others,' and enabling of 'relational political subjects' aware of the oppressions and disadvantages produced by a classist, masculinist, and racist socioeconomic arrangement. Even if the relationship between the oppression experienced by others and their own class, race, and gender privilege are difficult to make or easy to talk about, class privilege - more than race or gender - is something that people come to reflect on.

Second, I have argued that border-crossing and encounters across difference are a necessary, although insufficient, part of alliance building. Non-hierarchical ways of organizing - of which *politica afectiva* is an important part - facilitates the transition from self-reflective political subjects aware of the relationship between structural inequalities and poverty into sustained political action alongside others. *Asambleas'* main characteristics - horizontality, autonomy, and diversity - are in part the result of the disruptions in the political imagination during the immediate post-crisis period in 2002-2003, as well as of an accumulation of experiences of activism which occurred outside hierarchical traditional political channels during the 1990s.

Thus, the deep socioeconomic and political crisis represented a moment of dislodging of the political terrain that opened up space for other forms of organizing and conceiving power. Horizontality and autonomy, I argue, are important drivers for the valorization of difference, because they are based on the belief that every life is deserving and that people carry knowledges and experiences that are valuable for the life of the organization. Also, as I have argued, the very conjuncture in which the *asambleas* emerged predisposed the organizations to be receptive to difference due to the momentary erosion of symbolic and physical socioeconomic borders that facilitated encounters in the public space. Over time, negotiating with difference became a practice that has come to be recognized as a contributor to personal change as well as to the improvement of the organization, by adding layers of complexity to the way it understands and acts upon particular problems.

Encountering others and engaging with difference does not always lead to processes of self-critique and self-reflection, and even when that happens, it does not always translate

into political action. Alliances are constructions *in* difference that presuppose the relationality/interdependency of human beings and their actions (Jakobsen 1999; Carrillo Rowe 2008; Butler 2011). The term *politica afectiva* (Sitrin 2012) captures this latter point because a politics of love, trust, and respect can only be sustained on the acceptance and embracement of the value of every life and of people's experiences and knowledges that enrich the collective. In this regard, I have argued that empathy - as an affective component of the *asambleas* - becomes an important political tool that can contribute to creating and reinforcing alliances precisely because it facilitates the recognition of other situations and other peoples' singularities., This leads to people's self-critique, and can potentially trigger people's engagement with radical political work.

Lastly, I looked at the possibility that the political project of the *asambleas* could question systems of exclusion and potentially provide a language with which to build coalitions across space that reject hierarchical and oppressive systems of categorization. I engaged with the concept of 'citizenship,' because the *asambleas* deploy a language of liberal rights in their claims. However, *asambleas'* struggles to make visible those made marginal - and disposable - to the socioeconomic and political system are not only fights for social inclusion into the *polis* but, I argue, a possibility for disrupting hegemonic understandings of citizenship that perpetuate poverty and normative knowledges about it.

What I called 'decolonizing citizenship' is the result of the co-constitutive work of relational political subjects - who are critical of normative knowledges about poverty and 'the poor' - in alliances across difference that emerge and function in *asambleas*. Such alliances aim to create other ways of being in the world, relating to others, and building power. Non-hierarchical and non-hegemonic ways of organizing entail, in this context, the

capacity to push back against a social order that has been built upon systems of dispossession and exclusion along the history of modern Argentina.

Relational political subjects in alliance strive to make visible the excluded, but also 'to see' and uncover the stereotypes and assumptions that depoliticize poverty and the mechanisms that (re)produce it through actions that counter marginalization. These are acts of defiance to the 'disappearing' imperatives of the social order, and as such, represent a 'delinking' from hegemonic knowledges about citizenship and community. Eventually this act of 'epistemological disobedience' (Mignolo 2009) could engender a broader dialogue that is attentive to different forms of oppression and structural violence in a wide range of settings across space.

The socioeconomic and political crisis of 2001-02 not only was a moment of rupture from traditional ways of understanding politics, but it was also a moment of realignment of forces where older experiences of mobilization and organizing condensed into a new political scenario with new actors, new conceptualizations of power and of what constitutes the political. The crisis was also a moment of rupture in the sense of interruption of the practices and their geographies through which subjects are produced, something that created the conditions for new materialities and relationships, enabling different ways of being. The realignment of social relationships took place in ways that facilitated encounters and the emergence of new political subjectivities aware of class differences and structural disadvantages. These subjects were capable of moving from critical self-reflection to acting upon it in order to build change.

Far from being 'gone', as some may say, I contend that *asambleas* remain a relevant actor in current urban politics in Buenos Aires, whose localized actions are informed by

the relational nature of poverty and the spatiality of power relations--both which emphasize the responsibilities of those at the winning end of an exploitative economic system. The *asambleas* I researched continue to show much potential for the transformation of identities and political subjectivities that become radicalized, bridging differences in order to act politically. That, in and of itself, regardless of the size or the number of the membership, makes these kinds of organizations relevant actors in the urban political scenario to which we should pay more attention when thinking through the question, 'what needs to be done?'

These organizations are also a window into the role of the middle class in bringing about, or precluding, progressive political change - at least in the context of Argentina. I contend that this is particularly relevant given the critical political moment Argentina is going through, with a right-wing neoliberal coalition in power. If we take into account that back in 2002, the electorate of Buenos Aires said '*¡que se vayan todos!*', 'no more of the same politicians and politics', the election of a conservative and right-wing government becomes a pressing issue to study, especially in the context of what seems to be a comeback of anti-populist administrations in Latin America. I claim that it is no less of a pressing issue to understand *why* some other sectors chose different and even opposite political options. We ought to make sense of why, in this context, some sectors of the middle class continue to build political spaces of alliance, solidarity, and progressive politics against exclusionary measures. I argue this is relevant in order to capture the middle class in its complexity and in order to re-evaluate the course of the current political scenario and its potentials. Focusing on *asambleas* can provide a fruitful case for studying spaces of political change as it relates to poverty and the framing of 'the poor.'

In this dissertation, I have argued that *asambleas* are a significant lens through which to study how, where, and when political change happens. Through the study of these organizations, my work contributes to grounded, historical, contextual, and relational studies sensitive to the heterogeneity of urban experiences emerging from specific historical trajectories. I have engaged with approaches to poverty, identity and political change produced mostly in North Atlantic academia. I have tried to challenge their assumptions by measuring them against the case of grassroots organizations in one city in the Southern Cone. I argue that we should not underestimate cases such as the *asambleas* for their apparent localized nature. Careful attention should be paid to the geohistorical context in which these forms of political manifestation are materially grounded, in order to capture the unique ways in which they inform urban politics.

Appendix

Interview with Paula, *Asamblea Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo*.

Contexto

1. ¿Cuándo te acercaste a la *asamblea* de San Telmo? ¿Qué te motivó a hacerlo?
 - 1.1. ¿Dónde estabas vos en ese momento? – laboralmente, en relación a las cosas que pasaban en el país...

Estructura

2. Contame un poco cómo estaba integrada la *asamblea*. Quiénes participaban.
 - 2.1. ¿Gente grande, estudiantes? ¿Gente del barrio?
 - 2.2. ¿Podrías contarme un poco acerca de la extracción social de sus miembros?
3. A tus ojos, ¿era un grupo heterogéneo o no?
 - 3.1. ¿Fue cambiando con el tiempo? ¿Cómo?
4. ¿Quién es hoy en día la *Asamblea* y eso fue cambiando en el tiempo?
 - 4.1. ¿cómo fue cambiando la estructura de funcionamiento? (Yami)

Temas

5. ¿Cuáles eran las discusiones que se daban en la *asamblea*?
 - 5.1. ¿Cuáles eran los temas que se priorizaban?
 - 5.2. ¿Qué actividades se llevaban a cabo?
 - 5.3. ¿Fueron cambiando con el tiempo?

Espacio

6. ¿Cómo era el espacio y cómo fue cambiando?
 - 6.1. ¿Cómo te sentís vos al respecto de este espacio? (casa de los papás, siempre podés volver)
7. ¿Qué lugar le cabe a la olla en este espacio (físico y simbólico)?
 - 7.1. ¿cuál es el rol de la olla?

Relación con otros grupos/diversidad

8. ¿Cómo era/es la relación de la *asamblea* con otros grupos de gente movilizada?
9. ¿Dirías que desde la *asamblea* se ha promovido la diversidad, la inclusión de la diferencia?
 - 9.1. Lo mismo con respecto a la relación de la *asamblea* con otros grupos.

Historia Personal

10. ¿Desde qué lugar llegaste a la *asamblea*?
 - 10.1. ¿Trabajabas?
 - 10.2. ¿Te sentías de clase media/clase media estafada/pobre?
 - 10.3. ¿culpa de clase media?

11. ¿Cuál fue tu primera impresión/reacción al llegar a la *asamblea*?
11.1. ¿Cómo te sentiste?

Actividades/Pobreza

12. ¿Qué te parecían las actividades que realizaban fuera del espacio de la *asamblea*?
12.1. ¿Había discusiones específicas sobre la pobreza y sobre el incremento de la desigualdad?
12.2. ¿Qué pensabas vos de eso? ¿Qué pensabas acerca de las causas de la pobreza?
12.3. ¿Qué sentías y pensabas cuando veías un cartonero por ejemplo?
12.4. Aunque te parezca obvia la pregunta: ¿Considerás que lo que consigue en términos materiales e intelectuales es pura y exclusivamente fruto de tu trabajo?
13. ¿Dirías que tu participación en la *asamblea* modificó la forma en que vos entendías la pobreza y la desigualdad?
13.1. ¿te fue cambiando el nivel de compromiso en la *Asamblea*? ¿Cómo, por qué?
14. ¿Pensás que hay sectores en la sociedad que le deben algo a los pobres? ¿Por qué?
14.1. ¿Y a los sectores más damnificados de la clase media?

Relación con Comunas e instituciones

15. ¿Cuál ha sido la relación de la *Asamblea* con las Comunas históricamente?
15.1. ¿Se han visto envueltas en actividades con ella, de qué tipo?
16. ¿Qué pensás de la nueva ley de comunas y del trabajo de los comuneros?
16.1. ¿la *Asamblea* tiene una postura tomada con respecto a eso?
17. ¿Cuál es la relación de la *Asamblea* con las instituciones en general?
17.1. ¿Cuáles son los ámbitos en los cuales se le exige al estado?
17.2. ¿Cuál es la mirada que tienen de las instituciones?
17.3. ¿Varía según se trate de la Ciudad o Nación?

18. ¿Pertenecieron alguna vez ustedes al Partido de *Asambleas*?
18.1. ¿Cómo fue la experiencia, cuándo y por qué se abrieron?

Varios

19. ¿Cómo piensan garantizar la continuidad de la *asamblea*?
19.1. ¿Ha perdido gente la *asamblea*? ¿Por qué?
19.2. ¿Pensás que hay un componente generacional importante?
20. ¿Sabés cuál es la diferencia entre un Bachi popular y el PAEByT? ¿Por qué eligieron este último?

21. ¿Qué son las mediaciones? (algo con lo que mandan a la gente a los zonales). ¿En qué consisten los informes que hace la *Asamblea* para la gente en calle?

22. Contame un poco del proceso que lleva a la sanción de la ley por los 20 años.

22.1. ¿Qué apoyos recibieron?

Continuidad y rol

23. ¿Por qué pensás que esta *asamblea* subsistió?

23.1. ¿Cuáles fueron las coyunturas clave en su vida?

23.2. ¿Cuál es el proyecto de la *Asamblea*?

24. ¿Cuál es el rol que tiene la *Asamblea* –o las *asambleas*- hoy en Buenos Aires?

Empatía -Emociones

25. ¿Qué entedés por ‘empatía’?

25.1. ¿Creés que la empatía es necesaria para el funcionamiento de la *asamblea*?

¿Por qué?

25.2. ¿creés que las emociones juegan un rol importante en la continuidad?

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