

# Estoy llenita de agua:

## Caring for Infrastructural Belonging in Cartagena

Silke Oldenburg and María Buelvas

*Getting up with bare feet and touching the soil. Playing in the soil. Picking something up from the soil. Sweeping and mopping the soil. Falling down on the soil. But, what soil? In Playa Blanca, a sector of the Olaya Herrera neighborhood, the soil is bare. A world out of balance. Who takes care of this place? Women take care of the house, i.e. the soil. They clean it, they make sure that it does not fill up with water and they take care of the family that 'grows' on it. Women are the soil. "I am full of water" (estoy llenita de agua) remarks Nora, to say that her house is full of water.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Introductory reflection  
by María Buelvas.

Nora, an Afro-descendant woman in her thirties, faces regular urban floods during the increasingly irregular rhythms of the Caribbean's rainy season. "I am full of water" she states, referring both to her flooded self-built home but also to herself, embodying water as infrastructure. Nora lives with her six children beside the Ciénaga de la Virgen, Cartagena's biggest urban wetland. Olaya Herrera is one of the vast and populous neighborhoods around the Ciénaga de la Virgen, which is dominated by a mangrove ecosystem that represents a valuable refuge for wildlife while also being an important source of community livelihoods. In the Ciénaga, the watery edge of the city also constitutes the slippery margins of urban infrastructure and citizenship. As urban wetland, the Ciénaga is mainly inhabited by people who have been displaced by gentrification, by the dynamics of Colombia's protracted conflict and, most recently, the arrival of people fleeing Venezuela's dire living conditions – as did Nora four years ago in 2019.

*Houses constructed in the swamp, not yet 'filled up' with debris (see below), in the midst of a flood event.*  
Photo: Maria Buevas, Olaya, 2021.



Largely inhabited by an Afro-Colombian population, entanglements of race, ecology, citizenship and socio-spatial inequalities impact strongly on everyday life in Olaya. Indeed, eking out a living close to the mangrove forest brings many challenges that inscribe processes of colonial continuities into both the built environment and the social fabric of the neighborhood (Sultana 2022).

For this essay, we will zoom into a part of Olaya called Playa Blanca, where Nora navigates the tides and flows between dry and rainy seasons, the latter with its deleterious and regular urban flooding. We argue that Nora's story is a window onto how Playa Blanca's

women engage in everyday practices of care that constitute gendered infrastructures. As Truelove and Ruszczyk (2022: 8) write, these gendered practices are “unseen yet critical infrastructures” making the neighborhood and the city work while creating a sense of belonging.

### Between Mangroves and Marginalization

The coastal city of Cartagena is full of contrasts. Cartagena’s urbanization process has been deeply shaped by racial logics in the context of tourism and ‘patrimonialization’<sup>2</sup> of the colonial city center (Deavila 2015). As the city expands, certain socio-economic phenomena like precarious housing or street vendors are discouraged by the local government and as a result the low-income population is being displaced to the urban fringes (Abello and Flórez 2015). Here the new arrivals try to make a life by reclaiming plots of land from the water. This practice is called ‘filling up’ or *rellenar*, in Spanish (Oldenburg and Neville 2021: 9). It ironically connects the two Cartagenas – the beautiful one in the touristic center, where buildings are being demolished in order to construct bigger, more modern ones – and places in the other Cartagena, like Playa Blanca, where rubble is resuscitated as construction material for ‘filling up’ houses in anticipation of urban flooding.

<sup>2</sup> *Patrimonialización*, in Spanish, indicates here the appropriation of Cartagena’s UNESCO World Heritage status (*patrimonio*) for touristic purposes.



**Bare ground in Playa Blanca. These houses are near one of the canals leading to the swamp.**  
Photo: Maria Buelvas, 2021.

As the seasonal rhythm shifts due to the climate crisis, the lifeworlds of women in the Ciénaga change as well. Nora states:

*“During summer, activities are easier but in the winter or rainy seasons, things are getting complicated due to mud, flooding and material loss. It is stressful if you don’t know if the water is going to rise and if we need to leave our homes because of the floodings.” (July 2021)*

As in many fringe contexts, women work in the domestic sphere and engage in informal sales of different sorts of items to make money. Besides in/formal economic activities, women take care of their children, their family and the household, often also collaborating with neighbors in building up or repairing their makeshift homes, therewith creating a sense of belonging to an unfamiliar place through material and social bonds.

### Entangled Rhythms of Socio-Environmental Neglect and Care

As in many urban contexts of the Global South, social, political and economic infrastructures are embodied through women in the form of what we call caring infrastructures. Playa Blanca can be described a space of social abjection and neglect, both from the city and the state (Anand 2017), as one of “infrastructural violence” (Rodgers and O’Neill 2012) or, as Truelove and Ruszczyk (2022) specify, of “slow infrastructural violence,” hinting at the entanglements of gender, race and class in this urban wetland. As much as Cartagena’s uneven urbanization process has heightened infrastructural inequalities between ‘center’ and ‘periphery’, it has also shaped the micropolitics around water and soil, where social practices and relations pertaining to access to and distribution of these resources enable negotiations of urban citizenship and of making space (Truelove 2021: 1014).

At Playa Blanca, access to adequate public infrastructure like transport to the city center but also to the sewage system, water, housing and electricity is not distributed equally. While it is mostly men who, for example, bring the rubble into the neighbourhood or tap the water pipes of formalized areas, it is women’s bodies and social practices that improvise and substitute for the non-existent public infrastructure (Simone 2004). In the process, they reveal new terrains of potentiality and alternative forms of belonging to a city which is one of the most unequal in Colombia. In particular, practices of ‘filling up’ illustrate female care as a gendered practice and its importance for infrastructural belonging.



**House in Playa Blanca.**  
**The clothes are washed**  
**with purchased water.**  
Photo: Silke Oldenburg,  
2021.

### Filling Up the Urban Wetland

To avoid the seasonal floods, Nora ‘fills up’ the water in her makeshift home, adding layers and layers of rubble, mud and debris in order to build her house a little higher than the upper water level. Men do most of the labor of bringing debris to the houses, while women take care of the landfill and convert the waste into new ground, new soil on which life and family can subsist. Nora explains: “Women take care that when the rains come the soil is still soil and not just another part of the swamp.” They also ensure that the landfill is not too sharp so that children will not cut themselves while playing on the ground. But more importantly, they add more rubble to avoid the drowning of toddlers, as flood water will frequently come through the porous huts, reaching knee or even waist level. Similarly, during heatwaves, women water the improvised ground around their huts to cool down the hot air surrounding their homes, helping each other out and cooperating in this daily task. As the Ciénaga is a place of relocation and refuge for many, the unfamiliar context is made familiar through these practices of care and place-making.

*Concrete debris serving as the initial backfill for the foundations of a house in Playa Blanca.*

Photo: Silke Oldenburg, 2021.



This social practice of *rellenar* illustrates the specific intersection of socio-material, ecological and political forces in an urban wetland and the need for women to make up for absent housing infrastructure by constantly maintaining and rebuilding the soil. Nora’s practice of taking care of the soil as embodied infrastructure could be viewed as her claiming a right to the city (Lefebvre 1968). In remarking that she is “full

of water” while referring to her makeshift home, her body morphs into infrastructure itself and evokes a sense of infrastructural belonging to the larger social ecosystem – the neighbourhood and her family. Embodying infrastructure means both the constant need to juggle and substitute absent or failing public services but also the role of the women’s bodies in enacting practices of care in the larger socio-economic context.

*Paradox of the two  
Cartagenas: a poster of  
the city center’s iconic  
clock tower used as  
construction material.*  
Photo: María Buelvas,  
2021.



### Caring for the Soil, Making the Soil, Being the Soil

Reflecting on Nora's and other women's practices of care in relation to water and soil during times of urban flooding, we understand the gendered body as a site of lived experience, revealing how environmental and infrastructural crisis contributes to wider patterns of urban and social differentiation in the coastal city of Cartagena. In the face of state absence, women in an urban wetland deal with everyday uncertainties and create opportunities between mangroves and marginalization. By caring for her home, her children and her neighborhood, Nora articulates a sense of belonging to this liminal space by navigating the seasonal challenges of floods, rising sea level and the socio-material consequences of economic precarity – thus a specific kind of infrastructural belonging to the city is achieved. In portraying Nora's gendered take on everyday infrastructures of care, we hope to open discussions that go beyond the technological side of infrastructure but rather bring to the fore the different ways that gendered infrastructures anchor urban life through practices of belonging in times of environmental crisis and rapid socio-economic transformation.

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