



Gabriela Quintana Vigiola

Place, Catholicism and Violence

The Construction of Place
in Caracas' Barrios

 Springer

Place, Catholicism and Violence

Gabriela Quintana Vigiola

Place, Catholicism and Violence

The Construction of Place in Caracas' Barrios

 Springer

Gabriela Quintana Vigiola
University of Technology Sydney
Sydney, NSW, Australia

ISBN 978-981-99-4688-4 ISBN 978-981-99-4689-1 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-4689-1>

© Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd. 2024

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover Image Courtesy: Gabriela Quintana Vigiola

This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.
The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #21-01/04 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

Paper in this product is recyclable.

Preface

I never thought I would write a book, even less one discussing *place*, *Catholicism and violence*. Even though I am Catholic by culture, out of these three topics, *place* is the one closest to my heart, and violence was the theme I wanted to depart the most. This has been my journey since I started my life as an academic.

The gestation of the book spans two continents and two languages. The challenges of straddling these have enabled this book to evolve. I have written it from my base at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), basing it on my Ph.D. studies which I concluded in 2018. The journey of this book reaches back to 2007 in Venezuela, when I decided to start my doctorate studies. That year, I focused only on deciding what I wanted to investigate. I knew two things for sure: (1) I did not want to research anything that could relate in any way to criminality or criminal violence (which, in the end, I realised was unavoidable), and (2) I wanted to engage in people-focused research. Looking into the things I was passionate about at the time (and still am passionate about), I started asking myself a simple question: why do people practise yoga in urban spaces that are not meant for this discipline? This first question led to much thinking about urban spaces and spirituality in general, and, as can be seen from the title of this book, I eventually studied something rather different.

Fundamentally, the topic emerged from a lifetime process of evaluating the activities in which people engage in cities. As I reflected on these processes, I found that people-centred approaches were helpful in assessing how spaces are planned and designed by people or professionals and understanding how lay people use or disregard these spaces. Thus, this reflection is based on what makes a city dynamic and alive, which ultimately is its residents. People construct the city and its places daily through their cultural backgrounds and traditions. Hence, from that first macro theme, the process of tuning the research led to a narrower focus: understanding Holy Week Catholic processions in the urban space of Venezuelan barrios.

That process involved attending different religiosity and theology courses to better understand this disciplinary field, meeting the priest who later became a key participant in my research, and selecting the barrio on which my study was going to focus. As I became more involved in the study and got to know the complexities of the context, I formally started the data collection in 2008. Once the data collection was

complete and the analysis was about to start, I migrated to Australia in February 2012 and took up an academic post at UTS shortly after.

This move changed both my life in general and my Ph.D. studies. I put my Ph.D. temporarily on hold, aiming to get back to it once I had settled, and still intending to finish it remotely through my Venezuelan university. However, due to Venezuela's complex political and economic environment at the time, which deeply affected universities, I decided to transfer my topic in 2013/2014 to the university where I worked.

As if migrating was not challenging enough, transferring my Ph.D. was even more so. This process involved translating everything I had already written from Spanish to English and, most importantly, looking at the general Venezuelan context, barrios, culture, Catholicism and overall complexities from a very different perspective—the one from an outsider. The process of overcoming these challenges made this book possible. Through all the explaining I had to engage in, I became aware of matters I previously took for granted or had not realised existed. Through this process, I grew as a researcher and person. Looking back and looking at this book, transferring my Ph.D. was the best decision I could have taken.

Through the research informing this book, I aimed to understand the relationship between religiosity and urban spaces. Thus, I studied the role of Catholic processions as one of the most important cultural activities in which residents engage in the urban space of Venezuelan barrios. In this process, criminal activities and violence arose as critical phenomena interacting with the procession and the space.

I submitted my thesis in 2017, and in 2018 I started thinking about writing a book from it—the one you are currently reading. When I started this book, I thought it was about place-making through religiosity as culture. In the process, I realised it was indeed about *place*, and how places are constructed, but it was not entirely about culture. It was a book that discussed two complex and diverse topics: Catholicism and criminal violence.

I was happy with the Catholic focus, and at the same time, I was—until recently—in denial that one of this book's focuses was on violence. The reflective process that involved writing and re-writing this book let me acknowledge and fully embrace that the topics of place, Catholicism and violence are the centre of my research line and have been since my career as a researcher began.

Sydney, Australia

Gabriela Quintana Vigiola

Acknowledgements and Dedication

I have been able to develop this book about the construction of place in Caracas' barrios, thanks to the support of several people. I would like to acknowledge and express my gratitude to all who contributed to this marvelous journey:

- *The barrio residents*, whose experiences and voices enabled me to understand the concept of place and what constructing place really means.
- *Father Jesús León*, who introduced me to all the other participants and supported me throughout the development of the research.
- *José Antonio*, thank you very much for being my guide and bodyguard and for providing such rich information about La Dolorita and Holy Week processions.
- *Heather MacDonald*, whose profound insights and critical perspective enriched the research that underpins this book beyond my imagination.
- *Frank Marcano Requena*, who encouraged me to engage in my doctorate studies and guided me in tuning the research topic and the initial years of the study.
- *Enrique González Ordosgoitti*, thank you for enhancing my knowledge about Venezuelan culture and religiosity and helping me link urban studies and Catholicism from an academic perspective.
- *Esther Wiesenfeld*, whose teachings about qualitative methodology, environmental and community psychology, and sense of place and meaning from a psychosocial perspective opened my architectural-designer eyes to the importance of understanding people's psychosocial processes. I would also like to thank Esther for her love and support throughout the years.
- *Ondrej Bures, Ishmael Adams, Gillian Cornish and Luis Lozano Paredes*, thank you for helping me as research assistants in searching for relevant and current literature that supported the theoretical and academic foundation of this book.
- *The blind reviewers of this book*, whose valuable feedback helped me improve the initial version into this final output.
- *My family and friends*, who have supported and borne with me, my research and book writing for several years.

Finally, and most importantly, I dedicate this to *my grandmothers*, who always believed in and supported me and with whom I would have loved to share this achievement.

Contents

1 Introduction	1
1.1 An Overview of the Venezuelan Context	2
1.2 About the Research: The Foundation for this Book	7
1.3 Book Structure	16
2 Place, Catholicism, and Criminal Violence—A Literature Review	19
2.1 Place and Informal Settlements	19
2.1.1 Urban Informal Settlements and Place-Making	26
2.2 Religiosity, Catholicism, and Processions	33
2.2.1 Catholic Practices in the Urban Space	36
2.3 Criminal Violence	41
2.3.1 Criminal Violence in Venezuela	45
2.4 Conclusion	48
3 Barrios in Caracas and the Three Case Studies	51
3.1 Origin and Evolution of Barrios in Caracas	51
3.2 Julián Blanco, El Nazareno and La Dolorita	60
3.2.1 El Nazareno	65
3.2.2 Julián Blanco	66
3.2.3 La Dolorita	67
3.3 Conclusion	69
4 Barrios Urban Space and the Everyday	71
4.1 The Private Realm of El Nazareno, Julián Blanco and La Dolorita	71
4.2 The Public Realm of El Nazareno, Julián Blanco and La Dolorita	79
4.3 Conclusion: Barrio Space as a Relational Space	102

5 Criminal Violence in the Barrio Urban Space 105

5.1 Criminal Activities (and Activities of Criminals) in the Barrio Space 105

5.2 Criminal Gangs as Part of the Barrio Community 111

5.3 Other Effects of Criminal Violence on the Community 115

5.4 Re-shaping the Urban Space Through Criminal Violence 116

6 Catholic Processions in the Barrio Urban Space 119

6.1 Holy Week Processions in El Nazareno, Julián Blanco and La Dolorita 120

6.2 Processions’ Community and Spatial Dynamics 137

6.3 Meaning of Religiosity and Processions 159

6.4 Re-shaping the Urban Space Through Catholicism 164

7 Conclusion: Institutions, Relationships and Meaning of Place 167

7.1 Institutions, Power and Displacement Stories Shaping Place 168

7.2 Public–Private Flexible Relationship and Relational Spaces 172

7.3 Meaning of Place 174

7.4 Final Reflection 177

References 181

List of Figures

Fig. 1.1	Barrio built form: fine-grained, compact pattern overlaid on topography in Petare, Caracas—2010. <i>Source</i> Author’s photograph	9
Fig. 1.2	Me before one procession in which I participated as one of ‘the people’ in 2010	11
Fig. 3.1	Caracas foundational core and other towns in 1895. <i>Source</i> Author’s drawing based on maps by Irma De-Sola (1969)	52
Fig. 3.2	Barrios in the periphery of Caracas (Petare in cyan and other periphery barrios in yellow). <i>Source</i> Author based on Google maps image	54
Fig. 3.3	Location of Petare and La Dolorita in Caracas. <i>Source</i> Author based on Google Maps satellite image	60
Fig. 3.4	El Nazareno, Julián Blanco and La Dolorita. <i>Source</i> Author’s drawing based on base map from the Institute of Urbanism—UCV database	61
Fig. 3.5	Petare’s urban fabric. <i>Source</i> Google Maps satellite image—2022	61
Fig. 3.6	Boundaries of civic parishes—(1) Petare, (2) Santa Rosalía de Palermo, (3) La Dolorita, (4) Caucagüita, (5) Filas de Mariche. <i>Source</i> Author based on base Google Maps satellite image from 2020	62
Fig. 3.7	Boundaries of ecclesiastic parishes until 2018 (numbering detail below within text). <i>Source</i> Author based on base Google Maps satellite image from 2020	63
Fig. 3.8	Urban form and topography in El Nazareno, Julián Blanco and La Dolorita. <i>Source</i> Author’s drawing based on base map from the Institute of Urbanism—UCV database	65
Fig. 3.9	North Petare and context. <i>Source</i> Author based on Google Maps satellite image	68
Fig. 4.1	El Nazareno view from a participant’s house (2010). <i>Source</i> Author’s photograph	76

Fig. 4.2 Different development stages in Julián Blanco (2011).
Source Author’s photograph 77

Fig. 4.3 Pedestrian and vehicular traffic in La Dolorita (2009).
Source Author’s photograph 81

Fig. 4.4 Semi-public staircase in La Dolorita (2009). *Source*
 Author’s photograph 82

Fig. 4.5 Illustration of semi-public space configuration (same
 staircase as Fig. 4.4). *Source* Author based on base map
 from the Institute of Urbanism–UCV database 84

Fig. 4.6 La Dolorita multi-sport field (2010). *Source* Author’s
 photograph 87

Fig. 4.7 El Morro in El Nazareno in the distance (2010). *Source*
 Author’s photograph 88

Fig. 4.8 Julián Blanco’s Arch (2011). *Source* Author’s photograph 89

Fig. 4.9 The Obelisk in El Nazareno (2010). *Source* Author’s
 photograph 89

Fig. 4.10 Julián Blanco Roundabout (2011). *Source* Author’s
 photograph 90

Fig. 4.11 Basketball court in Julián Blanco (2010). *Source* Author’s
 photograph 91

Fig. 4.12 El Nazareno community centre in Julián Blanco (2011).
Source Author’s photograph 96

Fig. 6.1 Palm Sunday procession in La Dolorita in 2009. *Source*
 Author’s photograph 121

Fig. 6.2 People holding their palms. A palm shaped as a cross is
 found in the centre-front of the picture (2009). *Source*
 Author’s photograph 122

Fig. 6.3 Julián Blanco’s Nazarene with community leaders; Mrs.
 Maria to the left (2011). *Source* Author’s photograph 124

Fig. 6.4 The Nazarene procession in La Dolorita (2009). *Source*
 Author’s photograph 126

Fig. 6.5 The encounter of the Nazarene and Our Lady of Sorrows
 in El Nazareno (2010). *Source* Author’s photograph 127

Fig. 6.6 The Holy Sepulchre in La Dolorita (2009). *Source*
 Author’s photograph 128

Fig. 6.7 Children in Julián Blanco performing the Way of the Cross
 on Good Friday (2011). *Source* Author’s photograph 129

Fig. 6.8 The Way of the Cross in Julián Blanco including
 the children, the Nazarenes and Our Lady of Sorrows
 (2011). *Source* Author’s photograph 130

Fig. 6.9 Different communities brought together despite the rain
 in the Way of the Cross in Julián Blanco (2011). *Source*
 Author’s photograph 131

Fig. 6.10 Start of the Way of the Cross enactment at the Church
 in La Dolorita (2009). *Source* Author’s photograph 132

Fig. 6.11	Procession leaving the Church in La Dolorita (2009). <i>Source</i> Author's photograph	132
Fig. 6.12	The Way of the Cross in La Dolorita (2009). <i>Source</i> Author's photograph	133
Fig. 6.13	A station of the Way of the Cross in La Dolorita (2009). <i>Source</i> Author's photograph	133
Fig. 6.14	Jesus' trial—station 1 of the Way of the Cross in El Nazareno (2010). <i>Source</i> Author's photograph	134
Fig. 6.15	Maria Magdalene—station 1 of the Way of the Cross in El Nazareno (2010). <i>Source</i> Author's photograph	135
Fig. 6.16	The Way of the Cross in El Nazareno (2010). <i>Source</i> Author's photograph	135
Fig. 6.17	The crucifixion—the Way of the Cross in El Nazareno (2010). <i>Source</i> Author's photograph	136
Fig. 6.18	People gathered to see the enactment of Jesus' crucifixion—the Way of the Cross in El Nazareno (2010). <i>Source</i> Author's photograph	136
Fig. 6.19	Different generations at the Nazarene procession in La Dolorita (2009). <i>Source</i> Author's photograph	142
Fig. 6.20	Way of the Cross station at street opening in La Dolorita (2009). <i>Source</i> Author's photograph	142
Fig. 6.21	Church in the sector El Carpintero close to El Nazareno	143
Fig. 6.22	Church Nuestra Señora de Fátima in El Nazareno on Palm Sunday (outside)	144
Fig. 6.23	El Morro	145
Fig. 6.24	Church Nuestra Señora de Fátima in El Nazareno on Palm Sunday (inside)	145
Fig. 6.25	Entrance to Public School Fé y Alegría in Julián Blanco on Palm Sunday	146
Fig. 6.26	The Nazarene procession ending at the Arch of Julián Blanco	146
Fig. 6.27	El Parquecito (basketball court)	147
Fig. 6.28	Palm Sunday mass in a classroom inside the Public School Fé y Alegría in Julián Blanco	147
Fig. 6.29	Entrance to basketball court linked to the school U.E. Jermán Ubaldo Lira in La Dolorita on Palm Sunday	148
Fig. 6.30	Church San Francisco de Sales in La Dolorita	148
Fig. 6.31	Polideportivo in La Dolorita	149
Fig. 6.32	End of The Nazarene procession at Church San Francisco de Sales in La Dolorita	149
Fig. 6.33	Altar at a house in Julián Blanco (2011). <i>Source</i> Author's photograph	150
Fig. 6.34	Palm Sunday Procession through narrow street in Julián Blanco (2011). <i>Source</i> Author's photograph	151

Fig. 6.35	The Nazarene Procession through narrow street in Julián Blanco (2011). <i>Source</i> Author's photograph	151
Fig. 6.36	Obstacles on Palm Sunday procession path in La Dolorita (2009). <i>Source</i> Author's photograph	152
Fig. 6.37	Penitents and lady with a pram inside the human chain (seen to the right holding hands) in El Nazareno (2010). <i>Source</i> Author's photograph	153
Fig. 6.38	Participants in the Way of the Cross procession on Good Friday in El Nazareno (2010). <i>Source</i> Author's photograph	155
Fig. 6.39	Family opening up their house for the procession to come inside in El Nazareno (2010). <i>Source</i> Author's photograph	156
Fig. 6.40	Sketch of violence-driven changes to the San Judas Tadeo procession path	157
Fig. 7.1	Power relationships in/over the urban space of barrios	168
Fig. 7.2	Community in El Parquecito on Good Friday (2011). <i>Source</i> Author's photograph	177

List of Tables

Table 1.1 Summary of data collection stages around each procession 14

Table 2.1 Holy week structure 39

Table 3.1 Caracas and its barrios in numbers. *Source* Author; elaborated based on Silva et al. (2016) 57

Table 6.1 End spaces of Holy Week processions in El Nazareno, Julián Blanco and La Dolorita. Images were taken between 2009 and 2011 by the author 143

Chapter 1

Introduction



Place, Catholicism and violence seem to be unconnected themes at first glance. We tend to associate the concept of place with a physical space potentially being a neutral concept; Catholicism with holy and Godly, a positive construct for several of us; and violence with force and damage, embedding a negative connotation. These potential conceptions, among many others we may have, may be correct or wrong; however, regardless of what we think, we do not tend to identify a direct link between them. This book discusses the link between these three concepts by focusing on the *construction of place* in informal settlements in Caracas, Venezuela.

Several terms and conceptions exist when discussing how places came to be and what that process is called: construction of place, production of place, and place-making, among others. These usually come from different disciplinary perspectives, such as human geography, environmental psychology, and urban design. There is an agreement among them that this process of creating places goes beyond the physical space itself. However, as Chap. 2 depicts, each emphasises different aspects of this process: the physical space, the activities that activate it, or the people who use it. This leads to an understanding that places are physical spaces to which people assign meanings through activities.

This book departs from those isolated approaches by not adopting any specific emphasis and embraces an analytical perspective that acknowledges that these three aspects are equally important and embedded in political, economic and social contexts that drive and are interwoven in the process of constructing places. Additionally, it departs from the theoretical stances by focusing on and giving a voice to the people who were and are involved in constructing their place, residents of the informal settlements. In that vein, these residents discuss their physical space and the activities they and others engage in these spaces, leading to the discussion of Catholicism and violence. These accounts are accompanied by images and interpretations that aim to provide an understanding of how places are constructed and the different layers linked to that process.

Therefore, this book addresses these three themes of place, Catholicism and violence in informal settlements by acknowledging that the construction of place

embeds three main elements: (1) the urban space and its physical form, (2) the activities in which people engage in that space, such as catholic processions and criminal violence, and (3) the psychosocial meanings people associate to those spaces and activities. Therefore, this study contributes to our understanding of the multiple layers underpinning the barrio urban space and the activities and social constructions that shape its meaning and thereby turn spaces into places.

Throughout the book, I also build the argument that the construction of place is a process in which institutions and people have vital roles. The construction of place is developed through dynamic family and community relationships, processes of displacement and rootedness, and most importantly, the creation of meanings towards the community, religiosity, violence, and the urban space. It is important to highlight at this point that this book refers to *community* as ‘a group of people sharing common characteristics and interests that live within a larger society, from which those features distinguish it’ (García et al., 1999, p. 728).

By drawing from the barrio residents’ accounts –and not what I believe as an academic–, this book provides an understanding from the inside of the multiple layers embedded in this urban-social process in its relationship to other phenomena, such as displacement due to government evictions, among others. This book highlights how meaningful places relate to the experiences we have in a space and how that space/place defines essential things about our social context. Meaningful urban spaces are embedded with emotions, memories, relationships, experiences and meanings, which turn them into places. This book tells the stories about barrios’ meaningful places and how they were created and developed over time.

Finally, this book provides insights that are relatable and applicable in different places. Despite the focus on Caracas, Venezuela, the phenomena of *place*, *Catholicism* and *violence* are experienced individually and interrelatedly worldwide, especially in other Latin American countries. Therefore, the complexities, tensions and lessons drawn from the experiences of residents of Caracas’ informal settlements can inform other contexts.

1.1 An Overview of the Venezuelan Context

More than half the world’s population now resides in urban areas (Negrón, 2004; The World Bank, 2020; United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2005). In Latin America, the percentage of urban dwellers is substantially higher, reaching 81%, and in Venezuela, 88% of the population (a bit over 25 million people) resides in cities (The World Bank, 2020). Around 12% of Venezuelan urban dwellers inhabit Caracas, the capital city, (United Nations Statistics Division, 2022), and 50% of those residents live in informal settlements (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2013). In Venezuela, informal settlements are commonly known as *barrios* (Dovey & Kamalipour, 2018), which are the focus of this book, and therefore, this later term will be used consequently to refer to these urban areas in the Caracas context. These emerged in parallel to the *formal* city—planned and designed by authorities—through people’s

informal (non-official) interventions to provide housing for themselves and their families. *Barrios* and informal settlements are often interchangeable constructs and can be understood as consolidated slums, where robust houses and some services and infrastructure can be found (Quintana Vigiola, 2021).

Barrios host a wide range of activities, including those activities of a religious and criminal nature. In Venezuela, popular Catholicism can be considered the most important cultural aspect of the population (Marzal, 2002; Trigo, 2008). Worldwide, 88% of the population hold religious beliefs; 32% claim to be Christians (Maoz & Henderson, 2013; Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, 2015; Pew Research Centre, 2021). Christianity is the largest religion globally, and 55% of those Christians are Catholic. In Venezuela, over 80% of the population claims to be Catholic (Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, 2015; Pollak-Eltz, 1992, 2006), which is an extraordinarily high percentage in comparison to the 68% affiliation in Latin America (Association of Religion Data Archives, 2016). It is worth noting that not all people who claim to be Catholic (or to be affiliated to other religions) are practicers. The second-largest religious group is Evangelists (also self-assigned as “Christians”) with an affiliation of 8–15% of the population, then no affiliation with around 5%, followed by Afro-American and other indigenous cults comprising about 1.3%, and all other religions consisting of the rest minimal minority (Association of Religion Data Archives, 2016; Latinobarómetro, 2020).

Catholicism in Latin America is considered a cultural phenomenon (García García, 1989; Idígoras, 1991). In this book, *culture* is understood as a system of beliefs, customs, traditions, and ways transmitted through generations that provide a particular perspective in understanding the world and how people can approach and deal with their everyday lives. This concept builds on the works of the sociologist Hervieu-Léger (2017), the anthropologists Geertz (1973) and Marzal (2002) -also a Latin American priest- and the Spanish-Venezuelan philosopher and theologian Trigo (2008). They highlight the inherent nature of culture as a transmittable system of meanings that perpetuate knowledge and values. The latter authors also emphasise the role of religiosity, and most importantly, Catholicism, in the Latin American and Venezuelan cultures. A fundamental aspect of the argument of this book is that culture is an inherent part of communities, their meanings and emotional resonance; thus, understanding culture becomes essential to developing studies of communities and place (Kral et al., 2011; O’Donnell & Tharp, 2012; Reyes Cruz & Sonn, 2011).

Religiosity relates to religious feelings (Bowker, 1999). Religiosity is how people experience their religion individually and as a community (Duch, 2004; Estrada, 1986; Idígoras, 1991; Mandianes Castro, 1989; Zamora, 1989), whereas religion is the relationship between human and a superhuman reality or power in which they believe and worship, and to which they are somehow linked (Bowker, 1999; Urdaneta, 2005). According to Olson (2011). Religion is a cultural construction essential to constructing social identity, with political significance in today’s world. “Religions are organised systems which hold people together” (Bowker, 2003, n.p.).

There are different activities and representations through which believers express their religiosity in Catholicism as in other religions. In Venezuela (as in many other

Catholic countries), Catholic processions are a significant cultural expression of religiosity. This book focuses only on the Venezuelan Catholic majority. It is important to acknowledge that, consistently to the statistics shown above, not all barrio residents are Catholic, and that other religious minority groups can be found and co-exist in these areas. However, they are not included in this study.¹

Alongside Catholicism, criminal violence is dominant in Venezuela and Caracas. According to the World Population Review (2021), Venezuela is the third most dangerous country in the world, with a rate of 56.33 deaths per 100,000 people. Since 2004 neither the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* (National Institute of Statistics), the official governmental organisation that manages statistical data such as the census, nor any other governmental institution has released criminality, murder or violent-death rates to the general public (Moreno, 2011b). However, the *Observatorio Nacional de la Violencia* (National Observatory of Violence), a non-governmental organization, has been established to assess and publish statistical data regarding violence and criminality in Venezuela. They define lethal violence as “homicides, resistance to authority, and investigations of deaths and missing people” (Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia, 2021, p. 2—translation by author) and reported a still high 40.9 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants in 2021, making Venezuela one of the most violent countries in Latin America along with Honduras (Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia, 2021). This is a much-decreased rate from the one they reported in 2016 of 91.8 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants (Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia, 2016), and even lower than 60.3 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants reported in 2019. When the main data collection that informed this book took place, the murder rate in Venezuela was between 46 and 67 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants.

A similar decrease has been seen in Caracas, which still has the highest violent deaths rates in the country. The Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia (2021) reported that the Venezuelan capital had a murder rate of 77.9 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants in 2021, lower than the 140 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2016 (Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia, 2016), but slightly higher than the 72 violent deaths per 100,000 inhabitants in 2019 (Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia, 2019). These rates are an average of the different parishes² in the city, with Coche being the most dangerous with 188 deaths per 100,000 people. Petare, the parish where the case studies are located, had a rate of 98.5. When the main data collection that informed this book took place, the murder rate in Caracas was between 100 and 110 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants.

The overall decrease in rates in the country and Caracas is not because of an improvement in Venezuela’s security system and social conditions but due to the acute crisis the country is enduring and the deterioration of human rights (Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia, 2019, 2021). The exodus of young people between 15 and 29 has also contributed to these declining violent death rates. That age group is

¹ Considering the included population in this book, I am focusing on the Catholic majority when mentioning the residents or barrio people.

² Parish is the Venezuelan political-administrative boundary equivalent to a district comprising several suburbs within a municipality.

“exactly the same age group most involved in violence” (Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia, 2021, p. 3—translation by author).

The context of violence results from a complex political environment developing in the country since the mid-80 s. Venezuela has historically been a populist state funded by the significant resources and revenue from its oil reserves (Davila, 2000; Rodríguez Rojas, 2010). On the 27th of February 1989, a civic uprising broke out in Venezuela. People from the barrios came down to the city, driven by the deep economic crisis triggered by the government’s neoliberal policies (Faria, 2008; García-Guadilla, 2005; Rodríguez Rojas, 2010). Most experts regard this day as a turning point in Venezuelan political history.

After two failed coup attempts in 1992 and several years of discontent, Venezuelans voted in 1998 for Hugo Chávez, who positioned himself as the advocate for the radical change for which Venezuelans yearned (Davila, 2000; Parker, 2005; Rodríguez Rojas, 2010). Chávez’s anti-capitalist stand was based on bringing to an end a long period of corruption and bad economic policies, the underlying causes of poverty (Faria, 2008). Chávez’s charismatic approach was to engage with *el pueblo* (the people), building rapport as a leader and leading people to identify with him.

As Brading (2014) discussed,

Chávez’s victory in the December 1998 presidential elections would not have been possible without the support of social, political, and economic sectors that also wanted change in Venezuela’s deeply fragmented society. (Brading, 2014, p. 53).

However, Chávez started radicalising his revolution straight after his election, and divisions emerged among his supporters. In late 1999, a change in the constitution was approved via referendum, deepening and radicalising the political shift Venezuela was experiencing. These changes involved the extension of the presidential term, the option of presidential re-election, transforming the legislative power from a bi-chamber congress to a unicameral National Assembly, adding the electoral and citizen powers to the traditional legislative, executive and judiciary, strengthening the military and the presidents’ control over it, and the increased presidential powers to dissolve the National Assembly and abolish laws (Wilpert, 2003). As Brewer-Carías (2010) stated: “the new constitution, despite its advanced civil and political rights regulations, was an instrument framed to develop an authoritarian regime.” (p. 505).

After a coup attempt in 2002 and an oil strike in 2003, the Chávez government took a more radical anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist stance (Chávez, 2011; Rodríguez Rojas, 2010). Since then, Venezuela has had a radical left-wing government initiated by Chávez and continued by Maduro, promoting the idea of the ‘21st Century Socialism’ (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, 2022). From its beginning, ‘21st Century Socialism’ in Venezuela has been based on a confusing ideological-doctrinal base (Rodríguez Rojas, 2010). According to Chávez (2011), and translating his terminology from Spanish, this socialism involved the creation of a socialist economic and productive model, with social property and new ways of social production and distribution. This model included a new political-administrative-territorial approach whereby the *comunas* (communes) were the basis for his *socialist revolution*. Consequently, Venezuela has two parallel operating structures, the traditional and the