



Feminist Lefebvre? Understanding Urbanization Through the Global Intimate

Claudia Fonseca Alfaro

Institute for Urban Research
Malmö University
claudia.fonseca@mau.se

Abstract

This article follows the life story of Lety, an ex-maquiladora worker from the village of El Refugio in Yucatán, the south of Mexico, from the 1980s until the present in a “global intimate” account. Against the background of two cycles of capital accumulation (i.e., henequen fiber production and a maquiladora chapter), the cross-scalar and historical examination I offer here relies on discourse analysis of governmental reports and state development plans as well as ethnographic research. Operationalizing a feminist-Lefebvrian toolkit, I reflect on how the concepts of abstract space, everyday life, and differential space are challenged or complemented by the global intimate. Through this, the paper explores how the fabric of capitalist urbanization unfolded in the everyday: how it was created, re-created, and challenged. Three main things are highlighted in this analysis: (1) how the space of capitalism was produced at the intersection of materiality, discourse, and lived experience; (2) the contradictions that arise between abstract space and everyday life; and (3) the potentialities of what I refer to as *intimate spaces of difference*. I conclude with a discussion of how the space of capitalism was challenged by Lety through these intimate spaces of difference, reflecting on the importance of building more theoretical bridges between critical urban theory and feminist scholarship.

Keywords

Everyday life, abstract space, differential space, maquiladoras, Yucatán, global intimate

Introduction

When this factory arrived [maquiladora¹ in Motul], most of my generation, that's where they worked. We thought, gosh, it's good that there are jobs now around here ... I've had all types of jobs, I've worked everywhere. I've worked in a *tortillería*², I've cleaned houses in Mérida, I've been a seamstress, I then had the opportunity to work with the municipality ... I've known what it is to help out at home since I was 11 years old.

—Lety, former maquiladora worker

At thirty-eight years of age, Lety's resourcefulness had never failed in her twenty-seven years of working life that began after dropping out from school at the age of eleven. In periods of unemployment, Lety proudly explained, she was never idle and knew how to make money from home—the *comisaría*³ El Refugio⁴ located in the municipality of Motul, the old heart of the *henequen*⁵ region in the state of Yucatán, the south of Mexico—selling hand-made purses, backpacks or tablecloths. Sitting a few blocks away from Motul's main square in a corner of Plaza Oasis on a February afternoon in 2016 (as people dropped by the cinema or one of the stores in the city's only shopping center), what had prompted her description was a general question, *tell me the story of your comisaría*. Lety had responded by weaving her personal life into an account of how her village was founded and grew from guano palm-thatched huts to brick houses—all through hurricanes and drastic changes in people's livelihoods. Later on, as I listened to our recorded interview and began to put together fragments of conversations from the nine weeks that I had known Lety, it dawned on me that she had witnessed and participated in all the major economic periods that had impacted her region. Lety had been a *tortillería* worker in her hometown, the *comisaría* El Refugio; a harvester and packer at the old cannery in Motul, the municipal seat; a domestic worker in the capital, Mérida; and seamstress in three different maquiladoras, all located in the old henequen heartland. Now working for the municipal administration in Motul, her present was nevertheless anchored in the *bygone eras of the henequen period and the state's maquiladora boom-to-bust chapter*. Both cycles of capital accumulation were key in the state's economic history. Referred to as “green gold,” henequen was Yucatán's main export from the nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century and continued to have an important economic role until the collapse of this “agroindustry” in the 1990s (Baños Ramírez, 2010). Promoted as an alternative to fill the economic void henequen was leaving behind, maquiladoras arrived to the state first as a hesitant wave and then as a tsunami, changing the Yucatecan employment landscape in little more than a decade. To give an idea of the boom, between 1990 and 2001, the number of new factories expanded 1007% (Fonseca Alfaro, 2018). This phenomenon transformed Yucatán from being considered “one of the states with the highest levels of social backwardness” (Gobierno del Estado, 2000, 49) to being hailed as the New Frontier⁶ of the maquiladora industry in Mexico (Castilla Ramos and García Quintanilla, 2006) and recognized as one of the fastest growing regions among countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

¹ Within the Mexican context, a type of Export Processing Zone.

² A place where tortillas are made and sold.

³ A settlement that belongs to a municipality's jurisdiction but that it is not the seat of the local government.

⁴ Name has been changed.

⁵ A succulent plant from the agave genus that is harvested because of its fiber.

⁶ In contrast to the north of Mexico, the traditional site of maquiladoras (along the border with the United States), which could be considered the Old Frontier.

Development (OECD, 2007). After the boom, an unexpected decline in the number of factories—from 131 at its peak in 2001 to 55 in 2019 (INEGI, 2019; Fonseca Alfaro, 2018)—brought layoffs and a state of uncertainty (Castilla Ramos and Torres Góngora, 2010). Recent state administrations have now, in turn, tried to fill the economic gap left by the shrinking maquiladora landscape (cf. COESPY, 2013).

Following what Müller (2012, 325) would describe as empirically “rich”—in the sense that it offers “particularly in-depth descriptions of patterns and processes present in many other interviews”—this article looks at Lety’s life story to explore the fabric of urbanization as it unfolds, intertwines, and is produced in the everyday.⁷ Using a mix of feminist geography, feminist political economy, and Lefebvorean spatial theory, Lety’s life becomes a conduit to carry out a cross-scalar analysis that highlights the interconnectedness between her lived experience and global processes, in this case, maquiladoras—factories that are vital to the global supply chain. The scope of this paper is the infrastructure that was built by the Yucatecan state to support the maquiladora project. While Lety’s life story could have easily been analyzed through the lens of Marion Werner’s (2016) “capitalist development” or Joel Wainwright’s (2008) “capitalism qua development”—and both doubtlessly frame the theoretical understanding of this case—I instead tease out the connections to urbanization to understand another aspect of capitalism and the expansion of circuits of capital through infrastructure. To grasp the local manifestation of urbanization, from the feminist toolkit, I revisit Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner’s “the global and the intimate” (“global intimate” from now on), and from the Lefebvorean side, I use the production of space. Methodologically, the paper draws on discourse analysis of governmental reports as well as thirteen weeks of ethnographic research.⁸ Looking at the past and emphasizing the present, this approach helps to fight what Loftus (2015) describes as the power of “violent geographical abstraction” in order to instead highlight the transformations at the level of everyday life.

My aim is to demonstrate how, despite tensions, Lefebvorean theory and feminist scholarship strengthen one another, opening the doors to deeper insights. As I will expand later on, I argue that a *Lefebvorean global intimate* analysis can equip us not only with tools to understand the constitutive link between global capitalism and urbanization, but can also highlight different trajectories of urbanization (e.g., not sanctioned by the state) and ignored intimate practices that can challenge capitalism. I construct my argument by exploring how abstract space, everyday life, and differential space might look from a global intimate perspective. The proposed approach answers the call for critical urban theory to do justice to feminist and anti-colonial concerns (cf. Roy, 2016). It also contributes to feminist urban theory and feminist political economy by exploring the complexities of daily life and increasing our understanding of the link between social difference and “emancipatory social change” (Werner et al., 2017). Critical urban theory in the form of Lefebvre can be what Peake (2016) refers to as a “feminist ally” in knowledge production.

The structure of the paper is as follows: I first introduce my Lefebvorean-feminist toolkit and elaborate how abstract space, everyday life, and differential space are challenged or complemented by the global intimate.⁹ Making sure to underscore the contradictions that arise between abstract space and

⁷ Lety’s story was also chosen because she was a key informant.

⁸ Fieldwork was spread across 2014, 2015, and 2016, with participant observation mainly in Mérida and Motul. Forty-one semi-structured interviews were carried out. Research participants included maquiladora workers and ex-workers, a maquiladora manager, residents in Motul, government officials at the municipal and state level, and academics from *Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán* (UADY). The governmental reports in question are the state development plans and annual reports from the state governor, spanning 1982 until the present.

⁹ Throughout the paper I use “social difference” when referring to diversity and “differential space” or “difference” when referring to the Lefebvorean understanding. This will be expanded later on in the text.

lived experience, I then analyze snapshots of Lety's life experiences from the 1980s until the present in a decade-by-decade global intimate examination of the infrastructure built to support the maquiladora economy that takes into consideration broader political and economic regional changes. In the section after that, I suggest how, in a context of marginality and informality, Lety manages to create what I refer to as *intimate spaces of difference*. I conclude with a summary and a reflection on the importance of building more theoretical bridges.

Lefebvre Meets the Global Intimate

First introduced in a special issue of *Women's Studies Quarterly* (Pratt and Rosner, 2006) and then developed in an edited volume (Pratt and Rosner, 2012a), the global intimate allows us to study the "entanglements" of the global and the local "rooted in the everyday" (Mountz and Hyndman, 2006, 447). While helpful to eschew hierarchical understandings of space and scale, the concept does more than this. According to Pratt and Rosner (2012b), the use of "global" challenges the assumption that *the intimate must be local and personal*, and the choice of "intimate" disrupts the binary global/local. Although the intimate, of course, resides in the private sphere, its manifestations spill over to the political, social, and economic realms—in short, to the practices of place-making.¹⁰ Invoking "the intimate" also does something else: it helps to flesh out emotion (e.g., as a driver of political action), affect (e.g., the relationship between emotion, labor, and the body), and attachment (e.g., to others or to objects). The global intimate helps to understand how embodied and personal factors shape (and are shaped) by global processes, challenging, for example, gendered understandings of globalization, and allowing us to present the lives of people (particularly women in the global South) in more nuanced ways. For Wright (2008), the pairing of the global and the intimate is a clear example of Cindi Katz's call to create counter-geographies. In other words, coming up with "counter-intuitive" connections that, in turn, allow us to see global capitalism with new analytical eyes.

While the global intimate easily allows theoretical conversations across disciplines,¹¹ the usefulness of an exchange with Lefebvrian spatial theory is not immediately clear. The first obvious concern is compatibility. Lefebvrian theory, with Marxist roots after all, has been criticized for failing to address patriarchy and gender (Blum and Nast, 1996), colonialism and Eurocentrism (Kipfer et al., 2012; Coronil, 2000), and social difference (Fenster, 2005). The second concern is redundancy. Both the global intimate and Lefebvrian spatial theory offer strong theoretical tools to explore the relationship between the global and the everyday; independent of each other. However, I argue that precisely because of their tensions, a conversation between them becomes an example of a "counter-intuitive" connection that can help us challenge dominant forms of knowledge production. This is possible as long as we focus on the openings already there and deal with the shortcomings. Let me expand what I mean. For example, in its pursuit of transdisciplinarity and cross-scalar analyses (Schmid, 2014), Lefebvre's production of space matches the theoretical aims of the global intimate—emphasis on the local, an attempt to dismantle binary understandings of local/global, and a fluid understanding of scale. This is an opening we can work with. Now, thinking about limitations, both approaches can benefit from each other. Wilson (2016) has, for example, used the global intimate to develop a queer understanding of infrastructure, but the framework, in general, does not offer a tool to think about urbanization. Lefebvre provides tools to explore how urbanization is produced and reproduced at the level of everyday life (cf. Goonewardena et al., 2008) and, through his conceptualization of the "urban fabric" (Lefebvre, 2003), has provided fertile

¹⁰ Or in this case, following a Lefebvrian nomenclature, space-making.

¹¹The global intimate has been used in a number of analyses from "questions of transnational relations, economic development, global feminist mobilization, and intercultural exchange" (Pratt and Rosner, 2012b, 19) to discussions of "intimacy-geopolitics and violence" (Pain and Staeheli, 2014).

ground for neo-Lefebvorean scholars to further develop our understanding of the role that infrastructure plays in the process of urbanization.¹² Turning to look at the weaknesses found in Lefebvorean literature, scholars have argued that despite the theoretical potential, previous operationalizations of the production of space have ignored everyday life and failed to take into account the importance of difference (Schmid et al., 2014). Other critique includes what Fenster (2005) describes as a shortsighted division between the “private” and the “public” inherent in Lefebvre’s work. The global intimate can help address these shortcomings.

It is important to note that we are not in uncharted territory. Relevant examples that have bridged the Lefebvorean-feminist divide to explore the limits and potentialities of social difference and differential space include Buckley and Strauss (2016)—who probe the importance of residual forms of difference to resist the oppressive forces of capitalism—and Jepson (2005) who highlights the importance of “domestic” places in the production of differential space and argues these sites incorporate not only resistance but also the opportunity of restoring dignity (that which is denied in the “public” realm). Against this background, I build my *Lefebvorean global intimate framework* around the concepts abstract space, everyday life, and differential space. I rely on three strands of literature: the global intimate (e.g., Wilson, 2016), Lefebvorean empirical examples that have given prominence to everyday life and difference (e.g., Simone, 2004; Goonewardena and Kipfer, 2005), and what I refer to as feminist-Lefebvorean mediators (e.g., Buckley and Strauss, 2016; Jepson, 2005).

Abstract Space or What Has Urbanization Got to Do with Capitalism?

Lefebvre’s (1991) theorization of space as a social product coined in the famous concept “production of space” is a dialectical—and therefore historical and context-specific—approach that seeks to analyze the conflicting and constitutive interactions between materiality, discursive practices, and everyday life. Through a Marxist theoretical underpinning (thinking about commodity fetishism and abstract labor), Lefebvre suggests space becomes fetishized when its exchange value takes precedence over its use value and calls this *abstract space*. As the dominant form of space under capitalism, abstract space is articulated¹³ by the hegemony to shape reality according to its logic, and through this movement, reduce obstacles to capital (Wilson, 2013). However, even if abstract space has the power to homogenize, Lefebvre (1991, 342) considers it to be “fragmented” because in addition to being *abstract* (existing because of its exchange value), it is also *concrete* in the sense that is “socially real and as such localized.” (Cracks can appear because of its fragmentation, as I make evident below).

As described in the introduction, I focus my analysis on the infrastructure¹⁴ that was built by the Yucatecan state to support its maquiladora project. Infrastructure might strike like an odd choice to analyze urbanization, but through Lefebvre’s urban fabric we come to see that the urban cannot be simply be understood as population growth and agglomeration centers (Lefebvre, 2003).¹⁵ Infrastructure is an

¹² This will be further developed in the next section.

¹³ It is important to emphasize the word “articulated” since abstract space (and space in general for that matter), has not power in itself.

¹⁴ Following Larkin’s (2013, 328-329) ethnographic viewpoint, I understand infrastructure as “built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space.” As material manifestations (e.g., roads, ports, power plants, pipelines, cell phone towers, sewers, treatment plants), they shape the physical characteristics of a network (e.g., speed and direction), but as objects embedded with desire, promises of modernity, aesthetics, and symbolism, they also exist beyond their engineering. The sociopolitical qualities of infrastructure allow it to generate “the ambient environment of everyday life” (*ibid*). Larkin’s general definition is complemented later on with the work of Simone (2004) and Wilson (2016).

¹⁵ Other examples that have approached the study of infrastructure in relationship to urbanization or the urban condition include Lisa Björkman’s *Piped Politics, Contested Waters*; Stephen Graham and Colin McFarlane’s *Infrastructural Lives*:

instrument of power (yielded, for example, by the state through abstract space) and should be perceived as an expression and constitutive element of urbanization, and thus, capitalism. Examples that have taken this approach (i.e., examining the link between infrastructure and the urban fabric) is the neo-Lefebvrian work on “productive territories” (Topalovic, 2015) or “extended urbanization” (cf. Arboleda, 2016; Monte-Mór, 2005; Kipfer, 2018; Brenner and Schmid, 2015). Topalovic's (2015, 21) approach is of particular importance since it asks us to look at the “infrastructures that are dedicated almost exclusively to production and trade, not to consumption.” Beyond a narrow focus on industrialization, a Lefebvrian conceptualization of capitalism allows us to understand the roles that urbanization and the everyday play in the accumulation and reproduction of capital. In opening the doors to understanding capitalism beyond industrialization, the study of how capitalism is produced and reproduced gains a powerful tool by asking us to give more importance to sociospatial relations and the scale of the everyday. Through a Lefebvrian understanding, the urban comes to be the realm where the “distances between human aspirations and inhuman forces” are probed and confronted (Buckley and Strauss, 2016, 628). In other words, where abstractions are challenged.

Abstract space can be global-intimate-in-spirit in the sense that it allows a reflection that capitalist urbanization is *articulated and produced* by the social relations present in a local context. Despite the fact that abstract space is articulated by the hegemony, it can be a conceptual tool, for example, to contest seeing the local as essentialized and challenge the idea that global forces, such as globalization, are inescapable—“hypermasculine” in force, prevailing, and ready to penetrate the local (Mountz and Hyndman, 2006). However, feminist concerns also allow us to see that abstract space has major shortcomings. Abstract space, for example, fails to see its own role in reproducing patriarchy and Eurocentrism (Kipfer, 2002; Fonseca Alfaro, 2018).

Everyday Life or What Has Urbanization Got to Do with the Intimate?

Global capitalism is projected at the level of the urban, which, in turn, acts as a mediator between the global and everyday life, argues Lefebvre (2003). In this framework, everyday life is of the utmost importance and represents the true Marxist project since nothing is more important than the way “real life is lived” (Lefebvre 2002 [1961] in Goonewardena, 2008, 124). However, everyday life is always in danger of becoming alienated by the forces and effects of the production of abstract space (Lefebvre, 1991). When this occurs, the everyday ends up being defined by the rationality of capital instead of being shaped by lived experience (Wilson, 2013). Yet, there is an intrinsic contradiction and unrealized promise in everyday life; it is not only the ground where alienation unfolds but also the “soil” from which things come—paradoxically, both alienation *and* the potential for difference. In order to understand this, it is important to grasp that Lefebvre drew a distinction between *everyday life*, *everyday*, and *daily life*. According to Kipfer (2008, 199), “everyday life is where dominated, accumulative sectors (everyday, everydayness) meet undominated, non-accumulative sectors (daily life).” So, while everyday life is where capitalism is actually produced and reproduced—where abstractions make the power of capital seem self-evident and inevitable—it is also the scale where domination can be fought.

While the global intimate sees the everyday as paramount and the scholarship provides multiple accounts of everyday lives and their struggles against, for example, the background of globalization, it lacks the theoretical tools to nuance the *generative* relationship between everyday life and capitalism. However, Wilson's (2016) “infrastructure of intimacy” presents an opening. Emphasizing that intimacy is the domain where we can see how the “microphysics of power” materialize, Wilson (*ibid*, 4) looks at examples of infrastructure to tease out how these objects shape and are shaped by intimate relations. In

other words, Wilson sees embedded power, ideology, and discourse in the materiality of infrastructure, but, through a queer conceptualization, also sees potentialities. The author argues actors “repurpose” infrastructural structures of power that originally were meant to control, discipline, colonize, modernize or develop them. (For example, the use of public bathrooms for illicit sex male-male activity in the context of a normative vision of gendered restrooms.) With a discussion of how infrastructure is linked to understandings of modernity and the workings of globalization and neoliberalism, Wilson (*ibid*) sketches how a political economy of intimacy can come to be developed. A Lefebvrian global intimate helps to further develop the link to urbanization, and in return, Wilson helps to conceptualize the question: what would the repurposing of abstract space look like? I will return to this point in the next section, but before moving on, there is another point that needs to be highlighted. A Lefebvrian global intimate also prevents us from automatically connecting the everyday to an analysis of capitalism. According to Buckley and Strauss (2016, 627), a focus on the everyday should not automatically imply a connection to political economy, since there might be “other ‘contexts-of-contexts’ which, while entangled in capitalist relations, are in no way explained fully or adequately through capitalocentric epistemologies.” The possibility of resistance or political action can exist beyond struggles related to class, citizenship, identity, and instead be triggered by attachment or emotion (Pratt and Rosner, 2012b).

Differential Space or What Has Urbanization Got to Do with Difference?

Feminist political economy has long argued that global capitalism draws upon difference—for example, gender, race/ethnicity, citizenship status, age, religion, and sexuality—to operate (Werner et al., 2017). However, it is important to draw a distinction between *social difference* and the concept of difference as understood by Lefebvre. From a Lefebvrian perspective, difference—also explained as “the right to the city” or “differential space” (Kipfer, 2008)—is producing space in a way where its use value takes precedence over its exchange value (Lefebvre, 1991). In other words, difference from the Lefebvrian sense does not refer to diversity per se but is about “enabling the right to resist, contest and dismantle [... the] homogenizing forces of capitalism and urban modernity imposed on urban residents” (Buckley and Strauss, 2016, 628). Lefebvrian difference needs to be understood in relationship to abstract space and the concept of production (Wilson, 2013). As I explained before—despite itself and because of its intrinsic contradictions—abstract space has fissures from where differential space can be created collectively (Lefebvre, 1991). Furthermore, abstract space might be the hegemonic form of space but does not represent *the only form* of space. The emancipatory and revolutionary potential for non-capitalist space is latent in lived experience (Buckley and Strauss, 2016). In other words, everyday life is where “the political use of space” can be carried out in order to *produce* difference (Lefebvre, 1991). An important question becomes: what counts as “political”?

Here I find it is necessary to unpack Lefebvrian differential space even more in order to tease out my “global intimate” interpretation. While acknowledging the operationalization of difference (in its social sense) plays a role in the production of abstract space, Lefebvre makes a distinction between what he calls “minimal” and “maximal” differences (Kipfer, 2008). While minimal differences could be described as social difference and exist and are dictated by the “lived experience of capitalism” (Goonewardena and Kipfer, 2005, 675), maximal differences are *produced* difference—differential space—that challenges abstract space and the system (Kipfer, 2008). Buckley and Strauss (2016) and Goonewardena and Kipfer (2005) agree that minimal differences can be transformed into maximal ones; they reflect on how it is precisely these “minimal” differences (in the sense of social difference) that produce varied forms of lived experience that in turn embed possibilities for change. In other words, minimal difference is a necessary starting point for any project of transformation towards a post-capitalist society. However, Goonewardena and Kipfer (2005, 676) remind us that, from a Lefebvrian lens, the production of differential space “begins with minimal difference and ends with maximal difference.”

Buckley and Strauss (2016) on the other hand, see more potential in minimal differences and problematize its conceptualization as a *mere precursor* on the way to producing maximal difference.

I also see possibilities in minimal difference. The challenging of abstract space within the system, is, after all, a reflection of the very contradictions embedded in everyday life (i.e., the site where domination is felt, reproduced, but also where it can be fought). Two authors are helpful to develop the “global intimate” aspect of differential space. As previously mentioned, Jepson (2005) sees the possibility of producing *domestic* differential space which is a type of resistance because it restores dignity. Simone's (2004) “people as infrastructure” is also illustrative. Building on Lefebvre’s production of space and Michel de Certeau’s concept of “tactics,” Simone (*ibid*, 409), argues “it is always possible to do something different in and with the city than is specified by these domains of power while, at the same time, acting as if one remains operative inevitably only within them.” I interpret this as a method of resistance or contestation within the constraints of capitalism. Let me unpack. Analyzing the inner city of Johannesburg—a setting of marginality, informality, and illicit activities—Simone (*ibid*, 407-408) sees its residents as part of a “highly urbanized social infrastructure” where their daily activities become a “platform for providing for and reproducing life in the city.” While Simone’s argument could be read as a reformulation of Lefebvre’s production of space (i.e., space is social product), there is something distinctive to this formulation emerging from the global South. “People as infrastructure” highlights how residents enable the precarious city to function through a constant state of readiness, the capacity to make the best out of the situation, and the ability to “deflect constraints” (*ibid*, 423). In this sense, the actions of residents sustain and reproduce the capitalist city, while also ‘providing for’ life in the city. I propose the concept of *intimate spaces of difference*—the operationalization or repurposing of abstract space to sustain daily life—to understand tactics of survival in precarious and informal contexts. This conceptualization opens the door to reflecting on the importance of actions guided by emotion, attachment, and the desire for dignity that, while not directly dismantling capitalism, nevertheless challenge or resist the capitalist city.¹⁶

Living and Knowing Capitalist Urbanization

1980s: In the Shadows of the Henequen

María Leticia (Lety) Dzul Dzul¹⁷ was born in 1977 in the land of the fading green gold (also known as Yucatán), to a poor, Maya-speaking family¹⁸ headed by a henequen *campesino*.¹⁹ Francisco Luna Kan was state governor, and the henequen fiber economy—the engine that had sustained the region since the nineteenth century fueled by its capability to supply a large chunk of the global demand for twine and ropes—was facing its most severe crisis despite upturns during the Second World War and later on, the Korean War (Quintal Palomo, 2010; Canto Sáenz, 2001; Evans, 2007). The creation of a state-owned company, Cordemex S.A. de C.V., in 1961 (only sixteen years earlier), had not prevented a sharp decline in henequen yield levels and production. Despite government subsidies, investment in modern machinery, and promises that the quality of life of *campesinos* would improve, the only actors that seemed to have profited from the creation of Cordemex were the old henequen lords who sold their companies to the state. As they traveled throughout the Mexican industrial heartlands, their greatest

¹⁶ Without forgetting, of course, that the eventual goal is to produce post-capitalist space.

¹⁷ Name has been changed.

¹⁸ Lety never referred to herself as Mayan during our conversations. She understands the language but does not speak it.

¹⁹ “A peasant farmer” (Oxford Dictionary of English).

problem was being unable to decide in what or where to invest the 300 million pesos²⁰ they had collectively received from the government in payment and compensation in 1964 (Canto Sáenz, 2001). In contrast, Yucatán had become one of the poorest states in the country by the 1970s even though it had been one of the richest ones at the beginning of the twentieth century (Moseley and Delpar, 2008). In the north of Mexico, the maquiladora industry was in its twelfth year of existence, and the federal government had appointed a commission to promote the model beyond the border states (Carrillo and Zárate, 2009).

Despite the Yucatecan government's attempts of the 1960s and 1970s to revive the economy, by the 1980s it had become obvious that the henequen economy could no longer sustain the state (Canto Sáenz, 2001). Lety was seven years old in 1984 when the Henequen Restructuring Program and Comprehensive Development of Yucatán was launched. Ambitious, the plan was meant to be a blueprint for the diversification of the Yucatecan economy away from its monoculture dependency and towards an eventual industrialized future. Among the many suggestions (e.g., tourism, pig farming), there was also a proposal to promote maquiladoras (*ibid*). But there was a hurdle before this could be realized. Even though henequen production and distribution had relied on ingenious machinery installed in *haciendas* (e.g., decorticating machines developed locally), an extensive railroad network, and strategically located ports (Andrews et al., 2012), there was a need to not only expand the useful infrastructural networks that already existed, but also construct new types if the Restructuring vision was to become reality. The state thus decided to prioritize electricity generation and the development of industrial parks. The upgrade of two power plants (Mérida II and Nachi Cocom) and the construction of a third one (Valladolid), received an investment of 6 billion pesos²¹ (Cervera Pacheco, 1987). Industrial City²²—Yucatán's first industrial park, inaugurated in the 1970s—was upgraded at a cost of 118 million pesos²³ (Canto Sáenz, 2001; Cervera Pacheco, 1987). There was also the construction of the Park for Non-Polluting Industries²⁴ in 1985 which boasted a radio system via satellite installed in its premises (modern for its time) and that had a total cost of 273 million pesos²⁵ (SEFOE, 2010; Cervera Pacheco, 1987).

In the middle of it all, was Lety, with other concerns in mind. For kids like her, school desertion and child labor were common stories—school was a “luxury.” For example, Lety's father had only studied to second grade (walking back and forth to Hacienda Dzununcán because there had been no schools in El Refugio), because “you either studied or worked, it was not possible [to do both].” When it came to Lety, her parents had tried to keep her in the school that now existed in their village, providing, within their means, what she needed. But by the time Lety reached fifth grade—tired of the hard time kids gave her because she carried a plastic bag instead of a backpack and had one single pencil that was meant to last the whole school year—she was adamant to drop out. “Now that I come to think of it,” Lety said to me when she shared her story, “just like you see on TV and the news, I suffered from *bullying*,” using the English term. As a *campesino*, Lety's dad only received payment when he harvested and sold his henequen. So, even though the plot of land around their house provided pumpkins, cucumbers, corn, and oranges; and they had space for hens—securing them food on the table—her family had little access

²⁰ It is unclear if this value is as of 1964 or 2001. Nevertheless, Canto Sáenz (2001) explains the amount was substantial vis-à-vis the size of the Yucatecan economy in 1964.

²¹ 2.6 billion USD, exchange rate from 1988 (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System).

²² *Ciudad Industrial*.

²³ 51.9 million USD, exchange rate from 1988 (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System).

²⁴ *Parque de Industrias No Contaminantes*, now known as *Parque Industrial Yucatán*.

²⁵ 120 million USD, exchange rate from 1988 (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System).

to cash. These were the reasons that pushed Lety to accept a job offer. One of Lety's older cousins was a live-in domestic worker in Mérida and one day asked if she was interested in taking care of the employer's baby. Lety's cousin was already in charge of cleaning so an extra hand was needed. It seemed like a straightforward matter to everybody. Lety, eleven years old, would travel together with her cousin from their *comisaría* to the capital—to be housed and fed from Monday to Friday—and return home during the weekends. "I felt like a millionaire," Lety described, after she received her first wage.

Lety's actions are an example of how—despite the intergenerational improvement in access to education—work that children carried out (either in the henequen fields or with an employer) continued to be an important addition to the overall household income. Lety's family had coped with conditions that were created by a global supply and demand of henequen but nevertheless articulated on the ground by the state, guided by capitalist priorities. At her young age, Lety navigated this scenario through intimate relationships of work and care. A clear example is the paid domestic work that she carried in Mérida (i.e., babysitting), which, as she proudly explained to me, had allowed her younger brother to finish school thanks to her monetary contributions. Lety's "ugly feelings" (Ngai in Pratt and Rosner, 2012b) that she had experienced in school became a conduit through which she expressed love for her brother. This point is not to minimize school desertion and child labor, but to emphasize Lety's agency and flesh out her emotions.²⁶ Now, as the state attempted to delink Yucatán from the old global commodity chain of henequen and link itself to a new global supply chain, that of maquiladoras, a new wave of abstract space was being produced. While several regions in Yucatán lacked access to piped water or a telephone network (cf. Gobierno del Estado, 1983; Cervera Pacheco, 1987), the Park for Non-Polluting Industries had a satellite radio system. The potential exchange value that was seen could be capitalized from the investment in industrial parks was enough incentive for the local elite to prioritize those projects—fueled by the government's belief in a positive maquiladora trend. The first maquiladora had arrived in 1981 and, even though by 1987 there were only 11 maquiladoras operating in the state, the government claimed in its yearly report that 43 factories would be operating in "a short time" (Cervera Pacheco, 1987).²⁷

1990s: Looking for New Horizons

By the time the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was signed in 1994 and the winds of neoliberalism accelerated the expansion of maquiladoras across Mexico, Lety, at seventeen, was a teenager with already six years of work experience. During this decade, the last remains of the state-led henequen economy collapsed when parts of Cordemex were privatized while the rest was dismantled at great economic loss (Baños Ramírez, 2010). As a live-in domestic worker, Lety was introduced to the lives of two families in Mérida, first in 1988 and then between 1991 and 1996. The living standards that were normal for those families sharply contrasted with Lety's own living conditions and made a big impact on her psyche. Lety's house in El Refugio had a thatched roof (the use of guano palm or grass were common), which leaked when it rained. On one of these rainy occasions during her childhood, Lety remembers sitting in a hammock cuddled next to her little brother. Their mother had placed a sheet of plastic around them making sure their heads were completely covered before sitting across from them on another hammock. As the rain continued, Lety's mom stayed vigilant, making sure her kids remained dry. A guano-palm thatched home with walls made of wood or stacked stones held

²⁶ In contrast to flattening descriptions. For example, according to the State Development Plan from 1996, people like Lety—not only from a "rural area" but also from a Maya-speaking family—dropped out from primary school because of undernourishment, and psychological and behavioral problems (Gobierno del Estado, 1996).

²⁷ In 1973, two maquiladoras began operations in Mérida but closed a year later (Canto Sáenz, 2001). Perhaps this is the reason that the factory from 1981 is considered year 0 in Yucatán's maquiladora chronology (cf. Canché Escamilla, 1998).

together with mud and grass suddenly seemed to Lety worlds apart from a house made from bricks and cement. She asked herself, “Why is God so unfair that they have these things, live like this and we don’t?” Upgrading her home became a dream and a priority. Worried about how little her father earned, Lety urged him to leave the henequen behind to try out his luck as bricklayer.

Lety describes how El Refugio “opened up” in her generation as people began to leave the *comisaría* looking for other jobs, transitioning into other means of livelihood. In her point of view, “the grandparents” were the only ones who remained working in the henequen fields since the generation of her parents transitioned from *campesinos* to bricklayers, and her own generation “grew up” being domestic workers in Mérida and, later on, as maquiladora workers in the vicinity. It is important to highlight that the expansion of maquiladoras came slowly at first—the 43 factories that the government promised in 1987 never materialized in the 1980s. Despite advertising and state support in the form of investment in infrastructure, by 1990, Yucatán could only timidly celebrate the existence of 13 maquiladoras (Fonseca Alfaro, 2018). In the meantime, the state attempted different strategies to substitute the vacuum left by henequen. The goal was not to develop a particular type of economy or industry but to provide *abundant, permanent, and well-paid jobs* to the people of Yucatán (cf. Gobierno del Estado, 1996). The cannery in Motul where Lety worked in the early 1990s (in operation for only four years) is an example of the government’s trial-and-error strategy before maquiladoras became central to the economy of the state. Even when Motul Industrial Park was created in 1993—paving the way for the arrival of Montgomery Industries and Mayan Palace²⁸, the two maquiladoras where Lety worked later on—the government’s strategy seemed to be a sort of throwing darts in the dark and waiting to see which one would hit the mark.

The scenario had changed by the mid-1990s. As the arrival of maquiladoras began to accelerate, the state government intensified its investment in infrastructure that would pave the way for more factories. The 1995-2001 administration introduced the concept of “development detonators”—infrastructure projects labeled as “essential”—which were seen as instruments that would “re-activate” the regional economy by “smashing the bottlenecks” slowing down the state’s development (Gobierno del Estado, 2000, 46). Forecasting more industrial and maquiladora growth, the list of “essential” projects is long: (a) the state’s capacity to generate electricity was increased, (b) the network of roads was expanded and modernized at locations that were perceived as strategic, (c) the airport in the capital, Mérida, was upgraded so that it could accommodate larger airplanes, (d) a new airport, Kaua, was built in the eastern part of the state as a third alternative to the two other airports that already existed in the region, and (e) the seaport in Progreso was expanded. The administration reported that, between 1995 and 2001, close to 1.4 billion pesos²⁹ were spent in road, airport, and telecommunications infrastructure (Gobierno del Estado, 2000).

Following the trend of the 1980s on an even bigger scale, the infrastructure that was believed would detonate development was prioritized by the government despite the significant monetary investment that was needed in a region suffering from poverty and inequality. Judging by the State Development Plan from 1996, the government was fully aware of the uneven access to basic infrastructure, health services, and education that people found themselves in throughout the state, particularly the Maya³⁰ (Gobierno del Estado, 1996). *Comisarías* like El Refugio were described as rural

²⁸ The company names are pseudonyms.

²⁹ 147 million USD, exchange rate from 2000 (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System).

³⁰ The only indigenous group in Yucatán. Indigenous peoples in Mexico have historically suffered discrimination; high rates of poverty; and unequal access to education, health care, housing, and basic services (e.g., sanitation and piped water) (cf. SEDATU, 2014).

areas where people were victims of marginalization and extreme poverty, the report explained. However, the logic of abstract space articulated by the state created two understandings of infrastructure: there was the infrastructure for capital (that was considered *essential* despite its high costs), and there was the infrastructure for other things (e.g., drinking water, health care) that had lower priority (cf. Gobierno del Estado, 2000; Pérez Medina, 2011). The struggles at the level of lived experience were obscured by abstract space's definition of what *essential entailed*. In other words, the state's capitalist understanding of development enabled the construction of more infrastructure for the flow of capital, giving less importance to any service that did not directly contribute to it. Wilson (2016) explains infrastructure, one of the favorite tools of development, is understood through a differentiation of the public and the private (e.g., infrastructure that facilitates economic activity is counted as "public goods"). This differentiation is extremely important—political and ideological in nature—since the effects of infrastructure are felt at an intimate level. Infrastructural networks (or lack of) produce "the consequential material dimensions of inequality: where you can go, how you can reach people, where you can have sex, how you can wash up" (*ibid*, 26-27). Via Lefebvre, infrastructure is also a constitutive element of urbanization. The urbanization in Yucatán that was being prioritized—in the form of industrial parks, roads, gas pipelines, and airports—showed no interest in lived experience and its infrastructure (e.g., sanitation and piped water).

2000s: A Hurricane and an Unexpected Bonanza

After getting married in 1999, Lety's son, her only child, was born in 2001. Wishing to avoid the commute to Mérida and have a job closer to home, Lety worked for a year in a maquiladora in Dzemul (around eighteen kilometers from her *comisaría*), before starting at Montgomery Industries in Motul (only six kilometers away), where she stayed for two years. Lety explains she left Montgomery after her four-year old one day begged, "mommy, I want *you* to take me to school." After consulting with her husband regarding their economic situation, she left her job with a heavy heart, feeling "suffocated" by not having her own income anymore. Once her son had left the toddler years behind, in 2008 Lety returned to her old job as a domestic worker in Mérida—negotiating with her employer working hours that would suit her. In the meantime, living conditions began to improve by chance in El Refugio because of a hurricane. In 2002, hurricane Isidore hit the Yucatán peninsula with devastating consequences (Alpuche Escalante, 2017). The peninsula has a yearly hurricane season but Isidore made an impact in recent, local memory because of its intensity and aftermath—it meandered for thirty-five hours over Yucatán (CONAGUA, 2002). According to one of Lety's cousins, Adela, after a hurricane, previous administrations used to distribute asphalt-coated corrugated fiberboard sheets as part of disaster-relief resources. However, after Isidore, as federal emergency money poured in, people got "little houses ... everybody that lived in a little cardboard house got a little room," explained Adela. The federal government provided bricks, cement, and even paid for the labor costs of construction.

Around the same time, the maquiladora industry had unexpectedly boomed. After the sluggish growth of the 1980s and early 1990s, it seemed like the industry was finally making leaps. The 32 maquiladoras operating in the state in 1995 had become 109 by the year 2000, and 131 in 2001 (Fonseca Alfaro, 2018). Unaware that 2001 was to be the peak of the industry, the governor's annual report from the year 2000 offers insights into the mood that reigned in government. In a thirty-six-paged triumphalist introduction, the second-time governor Víctor Cervera Pacheco celebrated, "we are no longer in the desperate situation of 1995" (Gobierno del Estado, 2000, 30). The following two extracts exemplify the tone of the document:

The accomplished achievements in matters of employment are palpable and impressive. After having appeared, *for years*, as one of the states with the *highest levels of social*

backwardness, Yucatan currently exhibits one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country. (Gobierno del Estado, 2000, 49, my emphasis)

What Yucatán is experiencing is not sudden and fleeting growth. *It is real development*. (Gobierno del Estado, 2000, 64, my emphasis)

As the maquiladora boom unfolded, national and international actors began to take notice. In a Territorial Review, the OECD (2007, 11) described Yucatán as a “lagging but dynamic region” in the process of “catching-up,” explaining that “undoubtedly robust growth rates that made of (*sic*) Yucatán one of the fastest regional economies in the OECD resided in [Foreign Direct Investment] FDI and maquiladora activities” (*ibid*, 88). Some foreign investors and academics began to refer to Yucatán as the New Frontier of the maquiladora industry in Mexico (cf. Gravel, 2006; Castilla Ramos and García Quintanilla, 2006). Disappointingly, by 2010, the number of maquiladoras had shrunk to 82 (Fonseca Alfaro, 2018). Local scholars attempted to analyze what had happened. Castilla Ramos and Torres Góngora (2010) argued the maquiladora “collapse” occurred as a result of the great infrastructural damage caused by hurricane Isidoro in combination with changes in international markets and the 2008 financial crisis. In contrast, Canto Sáenz and Cruz Pacheco (2004), assessed (when a downward tendency had begun to appear), that Yucatán simply lacked the appropriate business attitude and culture.

Evidence of the sharp decline in maquiladoras and a sign that the infrastructural projects that the state had invested in were over-dimensioned, by the late 2000s Yucatán’s “development detonators” were starting to become white elephants (Fonseca Alfaro, 2018). For example, in 2007 the seaport in Progreso was being used to only 25% of its capacity (COESPY, 2013). The same year, a fourth power station came into operation providing Yucatán with the capacity to produce more than 2.4 times the electricity it actually consumed (Gobierno del Estado, 2007). The new airport in the municipality of Kaua had problems attracting traffic from the time of its inauguration in the year 2000. Originally a public-private partnership, by 2008, the government had decided to bail out the private investors and attempted to re-launch the project in an expensive ceremony where the tenor Plácido Domingo was invited to perform (Boffil Gómez, 2008).

Through its heavy investment in export-friendly infrastructure, the state paved the way for more capitalism under the banner of development.³¹ In this vision of “real development,” the state of Yucatán could boast a world-class desolate port, abundant megawatts of electricity to offer empty industrial parks, and a redundant airport that even Plácido Domingo could not revive. In contrast, in places like El Refugio, cardboard houses were substituted by little brick houses—but only after Isidore had wiped them out. It is revealing that an emergency in the form of a hurricane was needed to trigger a strong and swift reaction to the known deprived living conditions of Yucatecans. A state vision shaped by the priorities of capitalism established that everyday life conditions were not urgent enough to elicit a reaction before the disaster.³² This is an example of how lived experience is diminished by power’s conceived representations of space where exchange value has priority over use value and the level of priority given to infrastructure is directly related to the potential it has in improving the means of production (but not social reproduction).

³¹ In a movement that Werner (2016) would describe as “capitalist development” or Wainwright (2008) as “capitalism qua development.”

³² This brings to mind Klinenberg’s (1999) work of “denaturalizing” natural disasters. The victims of a disaster actually reflect the social fault lines present in a society and not the *naturalness* of a disaster.

The Present: 60% Dreaming Potential

Lety's son will begin secondary school soon and wants to study "something to do with computers." Greatly shaped by her childhood experiences of extreme poverty, Lety has a strong conviction that the past should not be repeated and aspires to improve the welfare and living conditions of her family by working hard and attempting to leave a "legacy" to her son: an education. Reminded of a phrase that Lety had said during one of our first conversations—"studying was a luxury back then"—I asked if for example studying at Motul Tech³³ would still be considered a luxury. She responded that times had changed and studying was no longer a luxury but a necessity. Her view was pragmatic and linked to the ability to get a job: before you needed your primary school certificate to work, then it was the secondary school certificate, then high school, and now, she added, "sometimes if you don't have a degree, you have nothing." Despite improvements in accessibility—Lety emphasizes there are more school opportunities in her *comisaría*—she still sees obstacles. In addition to elementary school, El Refugio now offers a distance learning middle school program and soon a high school option will launch (following the same model). When I asked if she thought her son's generation has more opportunities to dream, she responded they do not have 100% but more like a 60%. Monetary limitations continue to be an issue. Aware that the school-related costs are higher in Motul than in her *comisaría*, she hopes that the costs will continue to be lower in El Refugio once the high school program starts running.

While some things have improved, Lety's reflection represents the cloud of uncertainty and the undeniable pressure of reality that maquiladora workers and ex-workers face. It is as if their dreams were squeezed within that reality; the 60% dream potential they can realistically have. However, the unleashed dreams of a profession for their children (for example, being a teacher or a doctor) represents leaving poverty behind and working in an office under shade, away from the merciless sun in the henequen fields. Expanding Lety's reflection, Montgomery Industries has also brought a 60% dreaming potential to the people of Motul. There was a feeling among other research participants that in the city there was a "before and after" the maquiladora and that life standards have in general gotten better. The economy in the municipality has improved if one judges by the regional retail chains (e.g., Dunosusa), nation-wide supermarkets, department stores, banks, and pharmacies (e.g., Soriana, Aurrera, Coppel, Elektra, and Farmacias del Ahorro) that have opened branches in the city. There are also new restaurants or food stands that sell "modern" food such as pizza and hamburgers. The horse-drawn carriages used as "taxis" around the city, especially on Sundays, were replaced by *bicitaxis* and *mototaxis*. Motul continues to be a regional center (like it was in the time of the henequen), but has increased its features of Yucatecan urbanity, decreasing the need for people to travel to the capital, Mérida.

The reflection of a 60% dreaming potential can also be used when thinking about infrastructure. Against the backdrop of the state's development detonators, the investment in the expansion of the state's road network brought to Motul in the early 2000s a four-lane federal highway that halved the travel time to Mérida. This had a positive effect on workers, such as Lety, who needed to commute between Motul and the capital. However, drawing on Wilson's (2016) queer understandings of infrastructure, this is a repurposing of abstract space. It is important to remember that the investment in roads mainly came to places perceived by the state as *economically* strategic. Motul was on the state's "development" map because Montgomery Industries, the most important maquiladora in the state was (and is) located there. Lety's *comisaría*, El Refugio, was fortunate because of its close geographical proximity to Motul. The six kilometers that separate the two places can be realistically traveled by motorcycle (as Lety's husband does), by bicycle (as Lety travels) or by foot (as Lety used to do in her childhood). The logic of abstract

³³ *Instituto Tecnológico Superior de Motul*, or *Tec de Motul* in its short form. Before its construction in the year 2000, high school graduates from Motul and its *comisarias* that wished to obtain a bachelor's degree had to travel to Mérida, the state capital, around forty kilometers away.

space articulated by the state, created a landscape where, in contrast, places like San Pedro Chacabal, another *comisaría*, is cut-off from Motul (and therefore Mérida), regardless of the fact that it is only sixteen kilometers away. This is a network of roads created for the sake of capital after all. Any positive effects on everyday lives were secondary effects in a context where exchange value mattered more.

Intimate Spaces of Difference

The landscape surrounding Lety's everyday life activities are dotted with material reminders of the state's discourse of development, modernity, and industrialization—in short, produced Yucatecan urbanization that can also be detected throughout the region in hotspots of urbanity, abandoned infrastructure or the 55 maquiladoras that were still operating in 2019 (INEGI, 2019). Every day on her way to work, Lety cycles by the abandoned cannery, now almost an industrial ruin. When she needs to travel to Mérida, the *colectivo*³⁴ passes Motul Industrial Park where Montgomery Industries and the old Mayan Palace building (which closed after Isidore), are located. Symbols of the maquiladora dreams of the recent past, they merge with the older remnants of the henequen period and together become a reminder of the cyclical nature of capitalist production and its material secretions.

In contrast, in the small *comisaría* of El Refugio, Lety's house stands out not only because the façade is smooth and painted in a bright color, but because it has more than one built room. Lety and her husband, a bricklayer, have been constructing their house for years now—little by little as money becomes available—and are proud of their progress. The house is small but has a living room, two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a toilet. Work remains to cover the dirt surface in one of the bedrooms and the kitchen, but the rest already has cement floor. The beneficiary of kindness, Lety has been able to furnish sections of her house with second-hand items inherited from a member of the family that employed her in Mérida. As Lety gave me a tour of her home, she proudly presented the gifts that had been part of the inheritance: a bedside lamp, a wooden wardrobe, a sewing machine, a bed, and tiles to cover her kitchen walls. In a context of low salaries and lax labor laws (Fonseca Alfaro, 2018), where any sort of work-related benefit or bonus is based on goodwill and personal relations—what Wilson (2012) would describe as “intimate economies”—Lety's gratitude to her old employer was evident.³⁵

Lety's love for her own family and determination to improve her home is one of the ways in which she exercises her agency and operationalizes the power that is available to her. For example, through her work in the municipality, she has helped her cousin Adela negotiate the distribution of toilets and the pavement of roads in El Refugio by tapping into the system of clientelism that is in place in Motul.³⁶ Thinking through Simone (2004), this exemplifies the clear schism in Yucatán between the normative trajectories of urbanization vs. how people actually live. In other words, in a context of an immense gap between abstractions and a decent everyday life, people take matters into their own hands. The normative state-sanctioned trajectories of urbanization are not the only ones. Lety's and Adela's actions are a contestation of abstract space that, while undoubtedly happening within the space of (global) capitalism and even animated by capitalist modernity, is a challenge to power, a fight for survival and dignity even within a capital-oriented system that refuses to give importance to lived experience. Lety's efforts to construct her house little by little is not only intimate and reminiscent of Simone (2004), it is also an example of what Teresa Caldeira (2017) refers to as “peripheral urbanization” which is carried

³⁴ Vans used as public transport.

³⁵ Of course, if Mexican labor law was followed and fair wages were paid, there would not be a need to rely on goodwill and personal relations. However, it is important to highlight the social relations and exchanges outside monetary transactions that sustain capitalism.

³⁶ The candidate who wins the municipal election for mayor gives jobs in the administration to people that supported and worked for the campaign. Lety and Adela obtained jobs through this system twice during the 2010s.

out by “agents of urbanization” (my emphasis). This type of urbanization can be peripheral in location, but what the author emphasizes is the agency of residents in the global South to build their own homes “in long-term processes of incompleteness and continuous improvement” despite “indisputable precariousness and persisting poverty” (*ibid*, 3-4). As an “agent of urbanization,” or intimate producer of infrastructure, Lety produces her own space where use value, and not exchange value has precedence. Jepson (2005) would interpret these actions as an example of restoring dignity through domesticity, and thus an act of resistance.

This is not an attempt to glorify or trivialize poverty and marginalization. Werner (2016, 7), in her study of Free Trade Zones in the Caribbean, argues workers “forge their livelihood possibilities under conditions not of their own choosing.” The maquiladora and ex-maquiladora workers in Motul face similar conditions. However, through her life story, we have seen that Lety re-asserts her room to maneuver under the tough conditions she faces in order to contest abstract space through intimate spaces of difference—the repurposing of abstract space to sustain daily life instead of global capitalism. These are actions that, while exhibiting minimal difference in the sense that they are guided by Lety’s lived experience of capitalism, they are not triggered by class or identity struggles, but by emotion (e.g., love for her family), attachment (e.g., to her village), and the desire for dignity (e.g., in her home). Lety’s intimate spaces of difference embed contradictions. They are produced within the established structures of capitalism and in helping to ‘provide for life’ by deflecting some of its crushing impacts, continue to reproduce capitalism. Intimate spaces of difference might not create maximal difference per se (i.e., in the sense that they dismantle capitalism), but, nevertheless, represent a challenge to the oppressive nature of abstract space and are a hope for resistance. In creating a space that shelters daily life in precarious and informal contexts, Lety plants the seeds of a differential space that might one day bloom.

Conclusion

Theoretically framed within feminist geography and Lefebvrian spatial theory, this paper has explored the fabric of capitalist urbanization as it unfolds in the everyday through snapshots of the life of one ex-maquiladora worker—Lety—as she experienced firsthand the decline of the henequen agro-industry and the boom-to-bust maquiladora chapter in Yucatán. Relying on a *Lefebvrian global intimate* framework—an operationalization of the concepts abstract space, everyday life, and differential space infused with a “global intimate” approach—a decade-by-decade analysis of the infrastructure that was built by the state to support the maquiladora project has shown the interconnectedness between Lety’s lived experience and broader political and economic regional changes from the 1980s to the present. Through a discussion of the interplay between urbanization and capitalism, the paper has highlighted why it is also important to discuss the expansion of circuits of capital through infrastructure. This framework has given us an understanding of how a global process such as capitalism—mediated in this case by a henequen commodity chain or a maquiladora supply chain—unfolds at an intimate level, with glimpses into the local. In short, the aim has been three-fold: (1) to understand the production of capitalist urbanization at the intersection between materiality, discourse, and lived experience; (2) to unpack how abstraction operates by showing the contradictions between abstract space—the space of capitalism—and lived experience; and (3) to illustrate the theoretical potential of what I refer to as *intimate spaces of difference*.

Contesting abstractions and flat descriptions, the snapshots of Lety’s life story have helped to highlight the dimensions of living, re-creating, and challenging global capitalism, expanding our understanding of capitalist urbanization. The analysis uncovered examples of the oppressive nature of abstract space. In Yucatán, abstract space was articulated by the state through a vision where capitalism was understood as synonymous with development. Prioritizing the needs of capital, the state failed to address the struggles that people faced in their everyday day lives. For example, in the 1980s, while

several regions in Yucatán lacked access to piped water or a telephone network, one of the first industrial parks in the state was equipped with an exorbitant satellite radio system. The investment in infrastructure that would facilitate the flow of capital continued in the 1990s as the state defined as “essential,” projects (e.g., road, airport, and telecommunications infrastructure) that, despite their high costs, were perceived would contribute to the means of production. Infrastructure as drinking water networks or healthcare facilities were given less importance. By the 2000s, against a background of over-dimensioned and empty infrastructure and a continuation of the same state policy, lived experience only achieved prominence because of a natural disaster. Throughout all this, Lety’s life story is not one of passivity despite, in her own words, her dreams being limited to a “60% dreaming potential.” Lety’s agency and strategies for coping are a challenge to the oppressive qualities of capitalism. These are guided by love for her family, attachment to her village, and the desire to live with dignity. Lety adapts, navigates, and negotiates continuous threats or changes to her livelihood: henequen collapse, hurricanes, maternity leave, childcare, political changes, and factory closures. Lety manages to create intimate spaces of difference through the repurposing of abstract space (e.g., the construction of her house or the lobbying activities to supply her village with government help in the form of toilets or the pavement of roads). From this perspective she contributes to a trajectory of urbanization that is not the normative state-sanctioned one. This movement is not without contradictions though. Her actions to ‘provide for life’ within abstract space brings dignity but also makes capitalism bearable, allowing for its reproduction. However, this is precisely the contradiction embedded in everyday life: the everyday is where we re-create and register the oppression of capitalism, but it is also where we attempt to fight it. From this perspective, even if Lety’s actions still occur within, and are even guided, by capitalist modernity, the intimate spaces of difference that she creates might not dismantle capitalism (and thus cannot be considered maximal difference) but still create potential for differential space. Her production of space nevertheless shelters daily life in a precarious and informal context.

From a theoretical perspective, I have attempted to demonstrate how a *Lefebvorean global intimate* toolkit is not only possible, but also helpful. Seeing Lefebvre as what Peake (2016) refers to as a “feminist ally” to the scholarship of the global intimate, can help us nuance the link between capitalism, urbanization, and everyday life vis-à-vis emotion, attachment, and domesticity to answer the question: What has urbanization got to do with capitalism, the intimate, and difference? Working through the tensions of putting both approaches in conversation highlights their limitations and strengths, allowing for deeper theoretical insights. The emerging, but productive, literature that has already taken the first steps to reconceptualize and take Lefebvre beyond himself in order to, for example, address feminist and anti-colonial concerns are good examples of the potential to bridge gaps between critical urban theory and scholarship such as feminist urban theory or feminist political economy. More allies are needed to create the counter-topographies that challenge the oppressive forces of capitalist urbanization and with this, render the invisible visible in terms of abstraction, location, and potentialities.

Acknowledgments

This article builds on empirical material included in my doctoral dissertation *The Land of the Magical Maya: Colonial Legacies, Urbanization, and the Unfolding of Global Capitalism*, Malmö University, 2018. Part of the research was supported financially by the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography (SSAG). I am grateful to Aparna Parikh and Rachel Goffe for their guidance, and three anonymous reviewers who provided helpful feedback.

References

- Alpuche Escalante, Luis Iván. 2017. Huracán “Isidoro”, catástrofe en Yucatán hace 15 años . Diario de Yucatán. <http://yucatan.com.mx/multimedia/galerias/huracan-isidoro-catastrofe-yucatan-15-anos>.

- Andrews, Anthony P, Rafael Burgos Villanueva, and Luis Millet Cámara. 2012. The Henequen Ports of Yucatan's Gilded Age . *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 16, 25–46.
- Arboleda, Martín. 2016. Spaces of Extraction, Metropolitan Explosions: Planetary Urbanization and the Commodity Boom in Latin America . *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40(1), 96–112.
- Baños Ramírez, Othón. 2010. The Decline and Collapse of Yucatán's Henequen Agro-Industry. Neoliberalism Reconsidered. In Edward D. Terry, Ben W. Fallaw, Gilbert M. Joseph, & Edward H. Moseley (eds.) , *Peripheral Visions: Politics, Society, and the Challenges of Modernity in Yucatan*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, pp. 144–69.
- Blum, Virginia, and Heidi Nast. 1996. Where's the difference? The heterosexualization of alterity in Henri Lefebvre and Jacques Lacan . *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14(5), 559–80.
- Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. Table B–110. Foreign exchange rates, 1988–2009. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/ERP-2010/pdf/ERP-2010-table110.pdf>.
- Boffil Gómez, Luis A. 2008. El aeropuerto de Chichén Itzá, un elefante blanco; buscan rescatarlo . *La Jornada*. <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/09/29/index.php?section=estados&article=038n1est>.
- Brenner, Neil, and Christian Schmid. 2015. Towards a new epistemology of the urban? . *City* 19(2–3), 151–82.
- Buckley, Michelle, and Kendra Strauss. 2016. With, against and beyond Lefebvre: Planetary urbanization and epistemic plurality . *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34(4), 617–36.
- Caldeira, TP. 2017. Peripheral urbanization: Autoconstruction, transversal logics, and politics in cities of the global south . *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35(1), 3–20.
- Canché Escamilla, Jorge Luis. 1998. La industria maquiladora de exportación en Yucatán, México . *Comercio Exterior* 48(4), 324–27.
- Canto Sáenz, Rodolfo. 2001. *Del henequén a las maquiladoras. La política industrial en Yucatán 1984-2001*. México D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Administración Pública, A.C. / Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán.
- Canto Sáenz, Rodolfo, and Eraclio Cruz Pacheco. 2004. Las maquiladoras en Yucatán y el Plan Puebla-Panamá . *Comercio Exterior* 54(4), 328–34.
- Carrillo, Jorge, and Robert Zárate. 2009. The evolution of maquiladora best practices: 1965-2008 . *Journal of Business Ethics* 88(SUPPL. 2), 335–48.
- Castilla Ramos, Beatriz, and Alejandra García Quintanilla. 2006. La industria maquiladora de exportación de Yucatán y su especialización en la rama de la confección . *El Cotidiano*(136), 29–38.
- Castilla Ramos, Beatriz, and Beatriz Torres Góngora. 2010. Crisis sobre crisis en la industria maquiladora de exportación y sus consecuencias en la ocupación. El caso de Yucatán . *El Cotidiano*(162), 43–56.
- Cervera Pacheco, Víctor M. 1987. *Sexto Informe de Gobierno*. Mérida.
- COESPY. 2013. *Plan Estatal de Desarrollo 2012-2018. Yucatán*. Mérida, Yucatán.

- CONAGUA. 2002. Reseña del Huracán “Isidore” del Océano Atlántico . Coordinación del Servicio Meteorológico Nacional.
<http://smn1.conagua.gob.mx/ciclones/tempo2002/atlantico/isidore/isidore.html>.
- Coronil, Fernando. 2000. Towards a Critique of Globalcentrism: Speculations on Capitalism’s Nature . *Public Culture* 12(2), 351–74.
- Evans, Sterling. 2007. *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-Wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.
- Fenster, Tovi. 2005. The Right to the Gendered City: Different Formations of Belonging in Everyday Life . *Journal of Gender Studies* 14(3), 217–31.
- Fonseca Alfaro, Claudia. 2018. *The Land of the Magical Maya: Colonial Legacies, Urbanization, and the Unfolding of Global Capitalism*. Malmö University.
- Gobierno del Estado. 2007. *Plan Estatal de Desarrollo 2007 - 2012*.
- Gobierno del Estado, Yucatán. 1983. *Plan de Desarrollo Estatal 83-88*.
- . 1996. *Plan Estatal de Desarrollo 1995 - 2001*. Mérida, Yucatán.
- . 2000. *Quinto Informe de Gobierno. Yucatán. 1995-2001*. Mérida, Yucatán.
- Goonewardena, Kanishka. 2008. Marxism and Everyday Life. On Henri Lefebvre, Guy Debord, and some others. In Kanishka Goonewardena, S. Kipfer, Richard Milgrom, & Christian Schmid (eds.) , *Space, Difference, Everyday Life. Reading Henri Lefebvre*. New York: Routledge, pp. 117–33.
- Goonewardena, Kanishka, and Stefan Kipfer. 2005. Spaces of difference: Reflections from Toronto on multiculturalism, bourgeois urbanism and the possibility of radical urban politics . *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29(3), 670–78.
- Goonewardena, Kanishka, Stefan Kipfer, Richard Milgrom, and Christian Schmid. 2008. *Space, Difference, Everyday Life. Reading Henri Lefebvre*. New York: Routledge.
- Gravel, Nathalie. 2006. Los factores de retención de la maquila: lección de Yucatán (1995-2005) . *Desacatos. Revista de Antropología Social* 21(mayo-agosto), 51–66.
- INEGI. 2019. *Manufacturas por entidad federativa y municipios seleccionados . Estadística Manufacturera y Maquiladora de Exportación*.
<https://www.inegi.org.mx/temas/manufacturasesp/default.html#Tabulados>.
- Jepson, Wendy. 2005. Spaces of labor activism, Mexican-American women and the farm worker movement in South Texas since 1966 . *Antipode* 37(4), 679–702.
- Kipfer, Stefan. 2002. Urbanization, Everyday Life and the Survival of Capitalism: Lefebvre, Gramsci and the Problematic of Hegemony . *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 13(2), 117–49.
- . 2008. How Lefebvre Urbanized Gramsci. Hegemony, everyday life, and difference. In Kanishka Goonewardena, Stefan Kipfer, Richard Milgrom, & Christian Schmid (eds.) , *Space, Difference, Everyday Life. Reading Henri Lefebvre*. New York: Routledge, pp. 193–211.
- . 2018. Pushing the limits of urban research: Urbanization, pipelines and counter-colonial politics . *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 36(3), 474–93.
- Kipfer, Stefan, P Saberi, and T Wieditz. 2012. Henri Lefebvre: Debates and controversies . *Progress in Human Geography* 37(1), 115–34.

- Klinenberg, Erick. 1999. Denaturalizing disaster: A social autopsy of the 1995 Chicago heat wave . *Theory and Society* 28(2), 239–95.
- Larkin, Brian. 2013. The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure . *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, 327–43.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- . 2003. *The Urban Revolution*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Loftus, Alex. 2015. Violent geographical abstractions . *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33(2), 366–81.
- Monte-Mór, Roberto Luís. 2005. What is the urban in the contemporary world? . *Cadernos de Saúde Pública* 21(3), 942–48.
- Moseley, Edward H, and H Delpar. 2008. Yucatán’s Prelude to Globalization. In Eric N. Baklanoff & Edward H. Moseley (eds.) , *Yucatán in an Era of Globalization*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, pp. 20–41.
- Mountz, Alison, and Jennifer Hyndman. 2006. Feminist Approaches to the Global Intimate . *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 34(1/2), 446–63.
- Müller, Markus-Michael. 2012. Addressing an Ambivalent Relationship: Policing and the Urban Poor in Mexico City . *Journal of Latin American Studies* 44(02), 319–45.
- OECD. 2007. *OECD Territorial Reviews, Yucatan, Mexico*.
- Pain, Rachel, and Lynn Staeheli. 2014. Introduction: intimacy-geopolitics and violence . *Area* 46(4), 344–47.
- Peake, Linda. 2016. On feminism and feminist allies in knowledge production in urban geography . *Urban Geography* 37(6), 830–38.
- Pérez Medina, Susana. 2011. Políticas públicas de combate a la pobreza en Yucatán, 1990-2006 . *Gestion y Politica Publicas* XX(2), 291–329.
- Pratt, Geraldine, and Victoria Rosner. 2006. Introduction: The Global & the Intimate . *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 34(1/2), 13–24.
- . 2012a. *The Global and the Intimate: Feminism in Our Time*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 2012b. Introduction. The Global and the Intimate. In Geraldine Pratt & Victoria Rosner (eds.) , *The Global and the Intimate: Feminism in Our Time*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 1–27.
- Quintal Palomo, Alberto. 2010. *Política económica y desarrollo industrial en Yucatán. El caso de la industria manufacturera*. Mérida, Yucatán: Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán.
- Roy, Ananya. 2016. What is urban about critical urban theory? . *Urban Geography* 37(6), 810–23.
- Schmid, Christian. 2014. The Trouble with Henri: Urban Research and the Theory of the Production of Space. In Lukasz Stanek, Christian Schmid, & Ákos Moravánszky (eds.) , *Urban Revolution Now. Henri Lefebvre in Social Research and Architecture*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, pp. 27–48.
- Schmid, Christian, Lukasz Stanek, and Ákos Moravánszky. 2014. Introduction: Theory, Not Method - Thinking with Lefebvre. In Lukasz Stanek, Christian Schmid, & Ákos Moravánszky (eds.) , *Urban*

- Revolution Now. Henri Lefebvre in Social Research and Architecture. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- SEDATU. 2014. *Programa Regional de Desarrollo del Sur-Sureste. 2014-2018*. México D.F.
- SEFOE. 2010. *Guía del inversionista. Yucatán 2010*.
- Simone, AbdouMalik. 2004. People as Infrastructure . *Public Culture* 16(3), 407–29.
- Topalovic, Milica. 2015. *Beyond the Limits of the City: Research and Design of Urbanising Territories*. ETH Zurich D-ARCH.
- Wainwright, Joel. 2008. *Decolonizing Development. Colonial Power and the Maya*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Werner, Marion. 2016. *Global Displacements. The Making of Uneven Development in the Caribbean*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.
- Werner, Marion, Kendra Strauss, Brenda Parker, Reecia Orzeck, Kate Derickson, and Anne Bonds. 2017. Feminist political economy in geography: Why now, what is different, and what for? . *Geoforum* 79, 1–4.
- Wilson, Ara. 2012. Intimacy: A Useful Category of Transnational Analysis. In Geraldine Pratt & Victoria Rosner (eds.) , *The Global and the Intimate: Feminism in Our Time*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 31–56.
- . 2016. The Infrastructure of Intimacy . *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41(2), 247–80.
- Wilson, Japhy. 2013. “The Devastating Conquest of the Lived by the Conceived”: The Concept of Abstract Space in the Work of Henri Lefebvre . *Space and Culture* 16(3), 364–80.
- Wright, Melissa W. 2008. Gender and geography: knowledge and activism across the intimately global. *Progress in Human Geography* 33(3), 379–86.