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### Chapter 3: “Stopping in Buenos Aires: In and Out of the *Villas*”

#### 1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on the Toba’s experience on the villas, shantytowns in Buenos Aires city, before the barrio Toba where they now live was created. This chapter argues that the Tobas relation to the shantytowns is not just an accident or a negative consequence of their marginality, as the main discourse about the arrival to Buenos Aires stresses. Rather I will follow the trajectories of several women and men who had a constitutive relation with the shantytowns: they were part of their formation, and in turn had their urban experience shaped by this location. Instead of taking for granted that the "Tobas were not made to live in the shantytowns", as I heard several times during my fieldwork, I will show the multiple connections they had in that place and ask why they had to leave.

Theoretically it discusses the specific **racialization** of Toba’s bodies upon arrival to the city. A racialization that shifted the specific identification as indigenous the are attributed in the Chaco region and merges them in a collective of dark skinned people. This racialization also takes place spatially, the only place where they can live are the *villas* shantytowns where dark skinned people live. It discusses the limits of an analysis base on the idea of **strategic essentialism** and the notion of **performance** as shaping social position in the city, even when some aspects of the Tobas escape out of the villas is enlightened by these concepts.

Arriving and staying in the villas implied a displacement of what people had expected about coming to Buenos Aires. Most people were expecting to live in “the city” upon arrival. For example Lorenzo a man who arrived in the mid 1960 to Buenos Aires (the first person to arrive in the barrio I worked with) told me about his arrival:

I took a taxi from the train station because I was too lost, all the big buildings everyone moving so fast. The taxi crossed downtown, and then took a bridge and we arrived in the address I had. When we got there I saw the place .... It is a villa!!!

Lorenzo, as most Tobas and porteños in general makes a distinction between the city and the villas, he makes clear he was not expecting to arrive in a villa. People who arrived in Buenos Aires before the late 1990 soon found out that there was no other place for them than the villas. This was the place where other Toba people and relatives were living it was also the place where men with no connections at all found a room for rent.

Arriving in the villas was a big impact for all the people who got there: they mention the lack of space, the lack of outdoor and open spaces to hang out, the noise and fear of the gangs. In addition several families lived in very bad conditions upon arrival to the villas, with no running water and no bathroom. However after some time in the villas most people started to have a better time, they made friends, afforded to rent and even buy apartments. Most people encountered that the big diversity of people in the villas was enriching, the talk about Italians being good with money, a bolivian man helping one of them find a job, just to mention some interactions. Some of them got involved in collective claims for better living conditions in the villa and fight against resettlement. Finally some of the children who grew up there decided to stay there rather than move to the barrio Toba. Thus the relation with the villas is not just one of separation, exteriority or estrangement, as the dominant account of the creation of the barrio presented, but rather it was also a place for new connections.

If the reason to move was not so much the infrastructure and security, and linking these experiences with the descriptions unfolded in Chapter 1 I argue that the creation of the barrio was a movement of some people to regain identification as Tobas by the broader community. It was a move away their becoming villeros and negros a process that was going on as they involved in the villas.

In the following sections I describe the arrival and different moments in the villa that are linked with broader transformations in the place. I base my ethnographic account in the trajectory of four families that lived in *Fuerte Apache*, two of them still have apartments in the villa. I will make a few references about another family living in *Ciudad Oculta* another villa where some of the families were. I do not intend their experiences to be representatives of the whole of the Tobas, but they shed light on important social dynamics going on. As a note I found that most people did not want to talk much about their life in villas, and when they did it was mostly to mention negative aspects. After having recorded the history of the barrio, and while doing life histories more positive aspects emerged. It was after a year that one of the men agreed to take me in a visit one of his daughters who lives in the villa with her family.

## **2. From Chaco to the Villas**

As I mentioned in the last chapter there were two periods of migration to Buenos Aires, which also implied different contexts of arrival in the city. Drawing on both the literature and my ethnographic work there are three dimensions to highlight: a) the employment situation, b) access to housing, c) how immigrants were regarded by legislation - broader society.

a. During the 1960-70 there was almost full employment in the city. People arriving could expect to immediately find a job and could move from one job to the next. The period between the mid 1980s and until the end of the 1990 is defined by growing unemployment rates, and a growth of the informal sector as a job source for migrants. The employment situation is also linked, politically in the first period to peronism and the *villero* movement; it is also linked to the

prosecution of peronism during the military dictatorships and especially with the attempts to "erase" the villas during the 1976 dictatorship (Blaunstein). In the second period, the escalation of unemployment ends in both the emergence of movement of unemployed and a growing involvement of youth with no prospect in gangs and criminal activities (Aларcon, Míguez). In both cases the villas are a central point. First the villas are the focus of political militancy and the centre of efforts to improve the conditions of the people by peronist government. Then the villas are a central point in the organization of unemployed and also regarded as the source of criminality.

If we remember Lorenzo's and Carlo's trajectories, while for Lorenzo moving to Buenos Aires implied an immediate access to work in the port, Carlos migrated in the 1990s in a context of high unemployment rates, for him work was limited to the construction sector. As part of the economic strategies Carlos quickly unfolded his indigenous identity as a source of work, he engaged in the production of handicrafts, and the development of school workshops. This was an activity that Lorenzo started doing only when he retired from his formal job in the port in the 1980s.

b. In regards to the living situation during the 1960-1970 the villas were regarded a temporary place. During that time villas were located in illegal settlements, composed of houses built with left over material and no state services. Most people arriving there had the expectation of moving out to a formal barrio as soon as they could save a little money. This expectation was a possibility for many of them. However in the 1970s the villas started to become a more stable location for people who found they could not move out as expected. Families who had lived there for some years, started to build brick houses and concrete floors (see Verbinsky?). The layout also changed as they started to be the focus of government urbanizing projects attempting to provide some basic services (Blaunstein).

During the 1990s the access to legal rent in Buenos Aires was restricted to people who could provide another property as warranty, and there were almost no state policy for building affordable housing for the working classes. The villas as illegal settlements and self-made constructions grew bigger and became the major residential area for working classes (Crovara, Blaunstein). Thus the moment of arrival of Carlos was one in which the villas had become a permanent place of residence for most people, even when people still expect to move out. Asking for land and housing was a possibility that Carlos could access to as indigenous and that was not available for the rest of the millions of people living in the villas. This stable situation creates a more fixed categorization of people in the villa as "villero", both defended as positive and also stigmatized as source of moral corruption (citar libro Medios y su discurso sobre lo villero).

In the time of Lorenzo arrived he could still fulfill the expectation of owning a house and he saw many people move out the villas to a working-class neighbourhood. Lorenzo explained after one year of work he could afford to buy a house in the villa. In addition Lorenzo narrated how people in the villas during the 1960 were moving to their own houses outside the villas after one or two

years. He claimed that "Italians were really good with money, they understood money and earning and so after two years they had bought a plot of land out of the villa and were building their own house. I was never as good, I never understood money, none told me how to save." Contrary to the Carlos had to take over an abandon place in the villa to have a place,, later he got an apartment, but he was not able to buy it.

3. In regards to the rural migrants situation we can also roughly divide two periods. From 1950 to 1970s the arrival of rural migrants who would become workers in the factories is regarded as a problem by elites and the constituting white middle classes who characterize the arrival as "zoological alluvium" and generate a class and racial closure by the middle class who distinguish themselves from the "cabecitas negras" (Ratier). However this is also the period of flourishing of peronism and the constitution of the idea of "pueblo" that includes the working classes and sectors of the middle classes defined in nationalist terms against elites and "international capital". By capturing the previous anti-elitists and anti-capital movements (for example the anarchist struggles) peronism defines its people as workers, physically strong, *Argentinean*, and *negros*. The racialization of peronists as *negros* creates a category that homogenizes the experience of rural migrants, afro-american descent, the urban poor and even European origin working classes it includes in its interpellation the Tobas who arrived in the city in a way they were not interpellated before (Ko Chapter 3, James). In the Chaco provinces where indigenous were incorporated to politics as indigenous and only in the 1980s (Gordillo, Carrasco, Inyigo Carrera V.). The Toba's position in regards to this inclusion is not explicit, yet they show an ambiguous relation in several moments. While on the one hand rejecting the category as they name others villeros, in other moments they recognize as *negros* and refer to the adherence to aspects of peronism.

Finally if the first period was mostly characterized by an internal migration to the city, the growing number of migrants from neighboring countries defines the second period. During the 1980 and 1990 the urban middle classes and the government started defining the migrants as a problem and attributed the unemployment to the migrants "taking away jobs". As a result in the 1990s a set of policies made it harder for migrants to obtain citizenship, access to state services and allowed authorities to deport unwanted immigrants (Canelo, Gavazzo). The target of these policies was mostly Bolivian immigrants (the most numerous), but also Paraguayan and Peruvian. A general anxiety grew around the villas as the location of this immigrant population, a site described as being outside the law because of the assumed status of illegality of immigrants, and because of the criminal activities associated with this place (Svampa?). In this period thus to be dark-skinned was added with the stigma of being an illegal immigrant.

If the Tobas did not have to experience the fear of deportation and the negative impact of policies against unwanted immigrants, they did share the problem of being the focus of negative stereotypes and general anxiety about being part of this "black" immigrants population. In addition as a result of the difficult access Tobas in the chaco have to national IDs they shared the

experience of being undocumented in the city (see Gordillo ID) something that increased the suspicion at state institutions of them being illegal immigrants.

This two distinct context of arrival thus generated different experiences among the families arriving in Buenos Aires. While the people arriving in the first period overall had a better time in regards to employment and housing the ones arriving in the 1990s had harder experiences. It was mostly people from this second group who motorized the claim for the creation of the barrio. In the next sections I will describe some of the distinct experiences of becoming villeros among people arriving in the first and second period. But before I do that I will point to some of the common experiences that emerge in the accounts.

### **3. Moving Around**

The narratives about the initial time in the villas share some common experiences: getting lost in the city, being overwhelmed by amount of people and the speed, being stopped by the police.

#### **Getting lost**

Men and women highlighted how they used to get lost, and some still do so, in Buenos Aires. Most of them had anecdotes about how they missed to take the correct bud and ended up somewhere totally strange. A woman explained to me how initially she saw all the city as the same, all the streets and houses and buildings. Slowly she started to pay attention to the details to remember where to turn and how far to walk. Women mostly relied on the train and many of them created their own circuits around the train stations to avoid getting lost and sell handicrafts.

A man in his sixties explained how relying on written addresses was something totally new for him. In the towns and cities in the Chaco where he lived he just remembered where he had to go or asked as he walked how to get to a place. But in Buenos Aires he had to rely in the name of the street, the number of the building and the apartment. He remembers how once he went to an address but he got to the wrong district, it had taken him a whole morning to get there and when he got to phone the people who had invited him and tell them where he was he got very sad to hear he was so far and he had missed the festival he was invited to. Other woman remembers having an address written in a piece of paper and losing it on her way and thus being unable to get to the place. The question of keeping addresses and loosing them was a recurrent theme and preoccupation. A man explained to me he used to have a notebook with all the addresses of people who had invited him to sell handicrafts but then he lost them and thus lost all the contacts with those people he had met during years.

A group of men also remember how on one of the first times they were invited to a night festival to play as they out of the place they found out the bus they needed to take back was not running

any more. They tried to get a taxi but none wanted to take them saying they did not know them and they may be thieves. They thus had to sit in the bus stop for five hours until the bus came.

**Missing the open spaces.** Most narratives stress how one of the things that shocked people upon arrival was the lack of space in the villas. The fact that so many people lived in the same place, and so many people in each house appeared in most narratives. In particular men and women described they missed the open spaces of the Chaco, including the forest and the possibility to be outside. A man who came in the first period narrated how when he was in the first villa he could not find a moment of peace, everywhere he went there was someone around and he felt people were watching him all the time. A woman told me she missed doing laundry outside, having her plants and drinking mate by the fire, she felt trapped inside the apartment she was living at.

**Rhythm.** When Lorenzo arrived in Buenos Aires the first thing that caught his attention is the speed of everyone's movement. He could not understand why everyone was moving so fast and none stopped to say hi or chat, everyone was in a hurry like something bad was going on. After a long time in the city he got used to seeing other people run but he still liked to take his time when he had to go anywhere.

**Being stopped by the police.** Related to the speed of movement Victor had an experience other men also had, when he arrived in the city and was living in the villa he had to learn to walk in a different way in the city centre (outside the villas). Initially he would walk and sometimes get interested by a tree or something and stop to look. But he soon got in trouble with the police. They approached him several times saying if he was about to get in trouble, implying he was planning a house robbery. They told him "you look suspicious do you come from the villa?" When he replied he did policemen asked for his id and made him many questions. Eventually he learnt that he could not stop in the city, he just had to keep on walking with no rest. He looked too suspicious to rest in the city space.

In this case even when raciality is not openly discussed, the man's account makes evident that his appearance added to the fact he lived in the villa, transformed him immediately into a dark skinned person who was suspect of crime. This is a new kind of stigma Toba people found in Buenos Aires. If in the Chaco being an Indian is stereotypically seen as being lazy, unintelligent, poor, among others, they are not seen as "dangerous", violence is not a structuring discourse of the urban life in the region. In Buenos Aires the men soon learnt that they looked like the type of person people would look as responsible for violence.

#### **4. Becoming villeros I (1960-1970)**

**a) 1960s Lorenzo's arrival, and his adventures with *Peronismo***

**b) Lorenzo and "villero" claims .**

**5. Becoming villeros II (1980 s and 1990s).**

**a) History of the Fuerte Apache**

**b) Silvia and the history of the name**

**c) The fort today. Visit to the fort and generational challenge to the barrio Toba.**

**d) Raul and his possibility of becoming a drug dealer.**

Other aspect of the experience in the villas that emerged as I did long life histories with several men and women was that they encountered a big diversity of people and found this enriching. Several of the families living in the abandoned shop premises latter were able to rent an apartment and some families even bought one. The kids started going to school, women and men made friends with their neighbors. Thus they did not only spend their time in isolation, and living in the worst part of the villa.

The man who arrived in the 1960s was part of the leading figures in the 1970s resisting eviction from the first villa where he lived at (*Dock Sud*). The movement was strong enough to confront a military government and put together a successful housing project. We can link his experience with the *villero* movement emerging during the late peronism. A woman who arrived as a kid to Fuerte Apache decided to stay there when her parents moved to the barrio Toba. She said she had friends, was going to school and thus she stayed with an older sister who was married and living there. She now owns an apartment and is married with two children. She explained to me that she considers the barrio Toba is a more dangerous place than there, because the only time she got robbed was there.

With this accounts I started to question why the families had moved out. If it was not so much a question of having a bad infrastructure, or lacking state services, or moving to a less violence, I asked what it was about. It was at this point that I went back to the anecdotes about the new stereotypes the Toba had immediately gained when they had arrived in the city.

To confirm the experience of the men another event added. I was walking in the city centre with two men who were running errands when a policeman approached us and asked if I was ok if the men were not threatening me. I had to clarify I was with tem. Just other moment in which the darkness of the Toba men, which was an evident and immediate mark of the Tobas bodies in the city centre, was read as a sign of danger to (in this case my) whiteness. Being marked as dark skinned in a supposedly white city, immediately connected them to a generic subaltern *negro*: poor, unsophisticated, uneducated, and specifically for men a potential criminal and dangerous

person. This stigma was confirmed and emphasized when Toba said they lived in the villa. In their time in the villas the families have become *negros* and *villeros*.

#### a) **History of the Fort**

The history of the fort was told several times in the media, as part of accounts that sought to explain the origin of the most dangerous place in Argentina. Matching Toba's accounts the neighborhood was a result of military governments attempts to "eradicate" the shantytowns. The first buildings end of 1960 during a Onganía dictatorship, however it is more certain that it received relocated shanty town dwellers in 1973<sup>1</sup>. After that there was an intermediate democratic period when the neighbors renamed it "barrio Padre Mugica" (after a recently killed third world priest). Before the 1978 world cup played in Argentina and in the period of the last and most violent military dictatorship new period of building apartments was undertaken to "eradicate" shanty towns that would be visible for tourists and international press and the plan was to relocate families in that area.

This history of being a place built to relocate shanty towns is probably one of the reasons why the Fuerte and the Monoblocks themselves are considered "villa" in an ambiguous extension of a place name, that seems to refer more to a population than to an architecture, the land ownership and availability or not of services. In any case it shows that in spite the supposed intention of the government was to end the existence of such marginal places in fact it recreated more of such places. It also shows that for the people living in the villas the stigma of villero is not something easy to remove. Having a job and moving from a single room house made of cardboard and plastics to an apartment with running water and electricity in a 10 story building would not warranty them to get away from the stigma of being "villeros".

In the 1980s a big group of Toba from the Chaco arrived to the Fuerte and contacted Lorenzo to ask if he thought they could take some empty shops. Lorenzo instructed that they had to act wisely, "they had to act all together, otherwise if it was only a single family they would get evicted, they had to occupy at night and stay in there for many days until the police would accept their presence." he explained to me. The group of 4 families, among which Carlos Family was did as Lorenzo instructed and lived in the shops for a couple of years until they were able to move to apartments. Raul and others living in the shops explained that soon neighbors started to recognize the area as the place of the "indians" and in spite of their small number they got some fame in and outside the Fuerte.

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<sup>1</sup> clarin 31.10 2000 <http://edant.clarin.com/diario/2000/10/31/s-03101.htm>



## 6. The way out of the villa

I do not want to argue this was the only conditioning force in the making of a barrio Toba. However I consider that an active engagement in shaping a different shade of darkness was a central factor. I do not consider that an active reshaping of Tobas bodies as indigenous is something done as a rationalized strategic essentialism move. Rather experiences as the following probably started to present becoming indigenous as an alternative for escaping stigma and also generate work.

A Toba man who is now around 60 years old, explained that he was working in construction, yet when employers asked him where he lived, as most villeros do, he avoided saying it was a villa and more generally said the name of the city district. But once he decided to tell he was Toba and indigenous. As a response people were skeptical, "no way you are indigenous", they would tell him. But once people believed him he got attention, his mates were interested in how his life in the Chaco was, how he hunted, his friends respected him for knowing how to use a gun.

This man was thus recognized as someone from a working class environment, but he avoided the connection with the villas, he also learnt that being an "Indian" was not such a bad thing in Buenos Aires as it was in the Chaco. He specifically avoided being *villero* and chose to be an *Indio*.

Upon arrival to the city and tired of looking for construction work a man decided to do what Tobas around urban barrio do and start making handicrafts, as he started to sell them he found not only that this could generate an income but also that he was making lots of friends. Other artisans started to invite him to several fairs, in the fairs people got really interested of his work, and eventually he got an invitation to deliver a talk in a school. Other men also had experiences similar to this. With the help of a church related NGO, a group of Toba men and women in the shantytown created a cooperative of artisans who also started to organize talks and workshops in school.

It was this group who through a catholic school got connected with a bishop and by emphasizing that they were indigenous, and stressing the negative dimensions of their life in the villas they asked for a place to create a "community". They argued in terms of cultural specificity and the need to maintain their language, and cultural habit. However to do this they also bracketed their involvement in the villas, the fact that some youth were choosing to stay there, and the fact that they were not a cohesive group, but families arriving from different areas in the Chaco. The bishop parceled the lands of a school in the suburbs and donated it to the families. Doing handicrafts and school workshops in one of the main occupations and source of income of families in the present.

## 6. Conclusion : a different shade of dark

3. One day I found Gimena a young woman I knew who was doing laundry in the front yard. She is the partner of a young toba man who lives there with his father and other brothers. When her in law arrived he mentioned how she was behind with doing laundry because it had rained all the previous days. "In the villa you never do laundry on rainy days, but you can, if you have some space under a roof to hang the clothes" she laughed, he looked at me and asked "do you know she is a villera?" "But you also lived in the villa" I replied. "We are from the Chaco, we are all *Indios*"

In this case I saw that the being recognized as a villero was not only an issue in the past This man who at times misses the villa and says there he was closer to the city centre, had more work opportunities was still active in distinguishing his daughter in law as villera from themselves as indios. We can link this distinction with the fact that Toba people I met classify ethnic affiliation in regards to practice and habit rather than blood, however in this case, as he himself lived in the villas the distinction is only in the quantity of time spent there. This active disengagement from the villa ongoing in the present pointed to the fact that shaping themselves and the barrio and themselves as Tobas was a constant endeavor. People from the outside needed to be reminded that they are a different kind of people living in the suburbs, they are tobas and not villeros.

With this account I want to stress the fact that Tobas even when they have always recognized as such in Buenos Aires, had a winding path into becoming Tobas in this city. Their initial time in the villas, was not only a negative experience, yet it was a moment in which they were becoming part of a collective of villeros, and groped as dark skinned in a city of whiteness. To be recognized as Tobas they also are marked as dark skinned and non white but this shade of dark offers a form of cultural capital as some parts of the *porteño* middle class gets interested in relating to "indigenous brothers" even when they are not interested in relating to *villeros*. Specifically becoming Tobas and living in a barrio Toba rather than a villa allowed to live from the commercialization of their indigenous identity by doing workshops in schools and making handicrafts. Again, this was an alternative they were not getting as *negros villeros*.

By becoming indigenous a new relation to the city space emerges with new possibilities of moving around the city centre. Now they can access the city space as indigenous artisans in a fair, as responsables of a school workshop and as musicians in their way to a performance. Contrasting the experience of the men being stopped by the police a young musician once told me how he had spent several nights sleeping in the park when he had to perform at night in the city centre and it got too late to catch the last train. I asked concerned if he had no trouble with the police that generally kick people out of the parks. I had my guitar with me, I had no problem. He told me this before one performance at night in a cultural centre in the city centre. He was wearing an Andean best and was selling handicrafts. I asked if he had a place to stay in the city that night. "Oh yes, I have lots of friends in the centre now, only initially I had to sleep in the park."