



***“Moral Ecologies of Wetland and Forest Ecosystems at the La Plata River, Argentina.
Conflict, Social Movements, Nature, and Love. 2008-2018.”***

Inaugural dissertation
to complete the doctorate from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities
of the University of Cologne
in the subject human-environment relations
presented by

MSc. Vanina Paola Santy
born on 31.10.1974
in Buenos Aires, Argentina

Cologne, 24th February 2025

Board of Examiners

Primary supervisor: Dr. Franz Krause. MESH, Faculty of Philosophy. University of Cologne, Germany.

Second supervisor: Prof. Dr. Barbara Potthast. Historical Institute, Iberian and Latin American Department. University of Cologne, Germany.

External examiner: Dr. Ulrich Oslender. Associate Professor of Geography; Florida International University, USA.

Chairperson: Prof. Dr. Michaela Pelican. Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology. Faculty of Arts and Humanities. Rector's Representative for International Affairs. Speaker of the Global South Studies Centre (GSSC).

Defensio: 29.10.2024

Submission of dissertation 28.08.2024

***“Moral Ecologies of Wetland and Forest Ecosystems at the La Plata River, Argentina.
Conflict, Social Movements, Nature, and Love. 2008-2018.”***

Abstract:

In the context of a *socio-environmental conflict*, the present ethnography examines the relationship of a *social movement* with a legally protected space made up of wetlands and native forests on the verge of disappearing. The main objective is to unravel how a moral and emotional bond that arose and consolidated against a waterfront revitalisation project in the southern La Plata River, Districts of Avellaneda and Quilmes. Put forward by Techint, the most powerful steel company in Argentina, this project, called Nueva Costa del Plata (NCP), made clear the asymmetric power relations in the management of ecologically important spaces, and hence how hegemonic territorial control over those spaces is reproduced over time.

The reconstruction of the first ten years of conflict (2008-2018) is intended to depict the antagonistic human-nature exchanges proposed for the riverside by the “promoters” of NCP (Techint, municipal and provincial authorities) and the resistance to these by a sector of the local population gathered in local assemblies as “neighbours” (“*vecinos*” in Spanish).

Between claims of “good” and “evil”, “right” and “wrong”, “virtue” and “filth”, new *moral ecologies* emerged around the riverside ecosystem, one aiming for real-estate development, and the other for nature conservation. The *love of nature* fits into the latter position and is expressed by neighbourhood organisations through ecological practices, environmental values and an ethical way of behaving towards life. Built up and cared for at different times during the conflict, this love intermingles identity, spatial, and cultural dimensions that will be looked into in order to understand how the *moral ecology* of those who resist came to be.

The gradual analysis of this relationship contributes to a different approach to socio-environmental conflicts in shedding light on collective behaviour and on the ways in which the role of emotions like love is key to this. I hope that someday it will give hints on how to rebuild a destructive relationship with nature if we are to survive as a species.

At the same time, a transdisciplinary integration between political ecology (constructivism, ontological approach), critical geography and anthropology also discusses questions of what constitutes the moral, and what love of nature represents in connection with it.

The research work, conducted intermittently between 2011 and 2023, was qualitative and was intended to attend to the multiple factors (and actors) involved for the making of an ethnography of socio-environmental conflicts that includes the complexities of a political fieldwork.

The conflict over NCP is not just any conflict, but exposes the suffering of ordinary people in their everyday struggle in today’s cities with respect to nature. Beyond the different forms of appropriation and representation involved in a controversial process of waterfront revitalisation, morality and love have turned out to be key elements of analysis. Contrary to what might be thought, these are not romantic clichés or obvious behaviours, but the last resources of the powerless when engaging in a struggle for their own survival.

Key words: Conflict, social movements, riverside ecosystems, moral ecology, love.

Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract	4
Acronyms	8
Figures	9
Notes	10
Acknowledgements	11
PREFACE: THE SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT OVER WETLANDS AND FORESTS AT THE LA PLATA RIVER	14
Mapping actors in conflict	14
The controversies	16
Place in contestation	18
Complex natural connections	19
INTRODUCTION	21
Problem statement: general aims and scope	22
State of the art	26
Main nodal terms	29
Research objectives	36
Research questions and structure of thesis	37
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	41
FIRST PART	50
CHAPTER 1: Southern Banks of the La Plata River: An Historically Contested Place	51
Introduction	51
Riverside lands for the elite	53
Recent forms of land occupation by the poor	56
The creation of an environmental sacrifice zone	63
Conclusions: Same lands, same actors, same problems	68
CHAPTER 2: Governing the Destruction of Nature	71
Introduction	71
How to forge a power alliance	72
The law and politics as problems for wetlands and forests	75
The role of local power	77
The aftermath of development	81
Conflict distribution around the La Plata River	84
Conclusions: No other option but to live with disaster	89
CHAPTER 3: The “Colonisation” of Wetlands and Forests at the La Plata River	90
Introduction	90

Nueva Costa del Plata	92
Towards the territorial conquest	100
To destroy in order to create	110
Conclusions: Deconstructing a developmental ideal	113
Cartography of a social movement	115
CHAPTER 4: The “Neighbours”. Networks, Solidarity & Place.	121
Introduction	121
Giving rise to a neighbourhood movement	125
Collective action in the suburbs	127
We have the same problems	132
Reasons for joining an assembly	135
David against Goliath	138
(Pure) common people	141
Together as geese	143
Conclusions: Working with others for change	146
CHAPTER 5: A Place-Based Collective Identity	148
Introduction	148
The “neighbours”	151
The “ants”	154
<i>“We are the Galochas”</i>	159
Nature lovers	165
Conclusions: Identity linking people and the riverside	170
SECOND PART	172
THE CONFLICT BREAKS OUT (2008-2011)	173
CHAPTER 6: Yearning for the River. Memory and Nostalgia	176
Introduction	176
<i>“Nueva Costa del Plata? What is that?”</i>	178
Memory amidst controversies	180
Nostalgia: the place we used to love	183
Moral shock and the past	187
Back to the riverside	188
A new moral ecology (or ecologies) at the riverside	194
Conclusions: Ecological relations & moral aspirations	195
THE CONFLICT ESCALATES (2012-2014)	197
CHAPTER 7: In-Place Resistance. The Reinvention of the Riverside	199
Introduction	199
Taking possession	202

Sensory explosion	212
A space of life	215
Moral ecologies at the river	221
Conclusions: Place-making through resistance	223
THE CONFLICT: LAWS PROTECTING FORESTS CHANGE TO FAVOUR DEVELOPMENT (2014-2018)	226
CHAPTER 8: The Transcendence: Territory, Patrimony & Entrenchment	228
Introduction	228
The territory	230
Our heritage, our legacy	233
The entrenchment	242
Moral ecology of “neighbours” under threat	248
Conclusions: Mobilising what belongs to everyone	249
THE CONFLICT: NUEVA COSTA DEL PLATA IS BACK AGAIN (2016-2018)	251
CHAPTER 9: Love of Nature. Engagement, Morals and Politics	254
Introduction	254
Making sense of love	256
Aspects of a collective love	257
Loving actions	261
A stance regarding the love of nature: Sandra	268
Conclusions: Love and morals for nature protection	273
FINAL REFLECTIONS	276
BIBLIOGRAPHY	285
<u>ANNEX</u>	295
MAPS	296
EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS IN THEIR ORIGINAL LANGUAGE	298
ETHNOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUES & TOOLS	317
“NEIGHBOURS” STORIES	320

Acronyms:

Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires	AMBA
Assembly No to the Hand Over of the Coast (Asamblea No a La Entrega de la Costa Quilmes-Avellaneda)	NHOC or Asamblea
Ecological Corridor Metropolitan Area State Society (Cinturón Ecológico Área Metropolitana Sociedad del Estado)	CEAMSE
Federal Environment Council (Consejo Federal de Medio Ambiente)	COFEMA
New social movement	NSM
Nueva Costa del Plata	NCP
Provincial Agency for Sustainable Development (currently the Ministry of Environment, Province of Buenos Aires)	OPDS
Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River, Health and the Environment	Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River
Sanitation and Urbanisation Limited (Saneamiento y Urbanización Sociedad Anónima)	SyUSA

Figures:

	Page
Figure 1: Location of the southern La Plata banks	13
Figure 2: Actors in dispute	15
Figure 3: Land uses in NCP's area of influence	19
Figure 4: The contested territory. NCP and its location on protected ecological areas	20
Figure 5: Keep out, this is a private area!	49
Figure 6: Traditional family fishing in Bernal	59
Figure 7: Osvaldo Paissan bottling wine from his vineyards in Sarandí	61
Figure 8: Garbage liquids sprouting everywhere next to the reserve	70
Figure 9: Environmental conflicts along the la Plata River	85
Figure 10: Master plan of Nueva Costa del Plata	92
Figure 11: Location of NCP at the riverside	93
Figure 12: "Neighbours" in protest	114
Figure 13: The neighbourhood movement in defence of the southern la Plata River	116
Figure 14: Lecture "Native species" by biologist Ricardo Barbetti for environmental education	133
Figure 15: Flyer addressed to teachers and educators of Quilmes	134
Figure 16: The "ants" coming out of the "anthill"	156
Figure 17: Guardians of nature	169
Figure 18: Family and friends on a typical picnic by the river	186
Figure 19: Walk in the nature reserve of Avellaneda and Quilmes	190
Figure 20: Terrain of resistance	201
Figure 21: Collective construction of the dry toilet	204
Figure 22: Environmental map of Avellaneda and Quilmes' coast	211
Figure 23: Patrimony of riverside in Avellaneda and Quilmes	225
Figure 24: La Tapera, historical patrimony	235
Figure 25: Popular celebration of "World Wetlands Day"	241
Figure 26: Nature in recovery, do not deforest	244
Figure 27: The "trench"	246
Figure 28: <i>Muraleando</i> : "Nature reserve under struggle"	264
Figure 29: Placing the old ceibo tree in its place after the clearing	275

ANNEX	Page
Map of Avellaneda	296
Map of Quilmes	296
Places mentioned in chapter 6	297
Places mentioned in chapter 7	297
Ethnographic exercise with the Assembly NHOC: "La Plata Biological Corridor/ The Native Forest and its Ecosystem the Wetland"	317

Notes:

The sections in which the chapters divide are indicated in bold and underlined.

The subsections in which the sections divide are in bold.

Additional sections will be indicated by underlining only.

THE PARTS WHOSE TITLES ARE INDICATED IN CAPITAL LETTERS AND A DIFFERENT TYPOGRAPHY THAN THE MAIN TEXT ARE ETHNOGRAPHIC VIGNETTES. THEY CONTAIN OR SUMMARISE IMPORTANT INFORMATION IN CONNECTION TO WHAT IS BEING ANALYSED.

[...] My aggregates in extracts of interviews, dialogues or citations.

[...] *The narrative of the informant or interviewee does not begin or end here but is part of a larger dialogue or interview excerpt.*

My own highlights in interview extracts are intended to draw the reader's attention to a point that I am trying to make or to make sense of what I am saying.

The translations from Spanish to English have been done by me. The original stories can be found in the appendices of each chapter.

The dates follow the pattern in Spanish: day/month/year as it got confusing for me to write or check information after a certain period of time.

The annex to each chapter contains the original Spanish versions of the interviews and material used in my research.

A special clarification in the political context of the conflict has to do with the names of those participating in the neighbourhood assemblies and local or regional organisations. Most of the names have been changed at the request of the “neighbours” who took part in the investigation, because their statements may have an effect on the riverside, their collective cause or their personal lives. Others have stated no preference about this fact, so their real names are cited.

Acknowledgements:

First, I would like to thank my husband, Andrés, who since 1997 has supported me in my projects and the search for new life and professional experiences. Together with him, we set ourselves a family goal many years ago which we were able to achieve in Germany after so many years of struggle. Thank you for putting up with me, for accompanying me, for giving me a different look at things to make me feel better and for having been with me when I needed him the most.

Second, to Nieves, my interlocutor and my friend, with whom I had the honour of co-creating a collective project that resulted in the book *Bosque Nativo*. She is irreplaceable and has been my connection to a different world, which I learned about through her determination and humour.

I am immensely grateful to the Assembly No to the Hand Over of the Coast (Asamblea No a la Entrega de la Costa Quilmes-Avellaneda) and the various people and organisations that have encompassed the neighbourhood movement. They shared their thoughts, feelings and knowledge to help me to understand a harsh reality and why nature is worth fighting for.

Third, to Dr. Franz Krause for his respect towards my research, for having listened to me and for his patience. At all times his input has helped me to conceive my work with self-confidence, allowing me to develop my ideas in an innovative way.

Fourth, to Barbara Potthast, who agreed to work with me wholeheartedly and gave me the opportunity to share my research with colleagues also working on Latin America. Her knowledge of Argentina and her research experience provided me with a historical perspective that was fundamental for the methodological reconception of my work.

Fifth, to the University of Cologne for admitting me to the PhD Programme and providing me with the necessary material resources to complete my dissertation.

Sixth, to Célia, Catherine, Bea, Guille, Paula, Jara, Itka, Lena, Simona, Paula, Solenne, Sofia, Cesare, Pietro, Antonio, Martina, Joelle, and many more people I lived with for five years, who were like my family and with whom I had the time of my life.

Also, to Patricia Pintos, an Argentine geographer, who for years has taken interest in my work and has oriented me generously.

Very special thanks to my brother, Maximiliano, who welcomed me far away from home, and to my niece Martina and my nephew Gaël who made me happy during all those years I stayed in Brussels, Belgium. The effort was not only mine but also my family's as it has been a doctorate not funded by any Argentine or European institution.

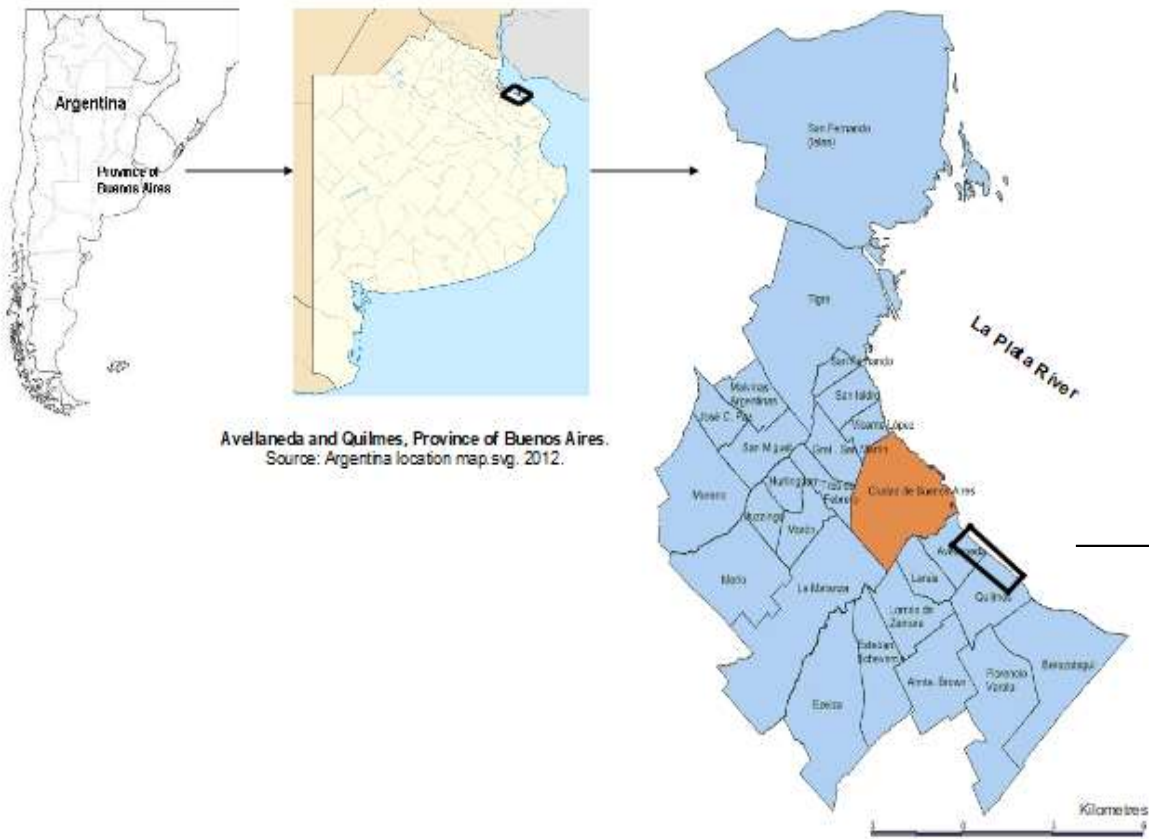
As a preliminary statement introducing the background and scope of this dissertation, I would like to say that this ethnography is the result of a research work initiated in the framework of the Université libre de Bruxelles doctoral programme, Belgium, in 2015. The decision not to submit my dissertation at that academic institution was due to two main reasons.

The first was in relation to my academic and personal experience there and the effects that it had on my health, which prevented me from continuing. The second reason had to do with my moving to Cologne, Germany, at the end of 2019 with my family. It represented an opportunity to generate a new network of contacts for my growth as a researcher and for my future working prospects. I was already aware of the excellent reputation of the University of Cologne, but as soon as I got there, I was able to learn through some colleagues about the academic interest in Latin America. The Centre for Global South Studies (GSSC) is an example of this, thanks to which I was able to connect with researchers specialised in similar research topics and areas of study.

Initially, my thesis work plan focused on a Lefebvrian perspective on the neighbourhood movement and its relationship with the riverside with respect to the spatial practices, the representations of space and the spaces of representation displayed there. However, I was not able to advance to embrace a more current conceptual and theoretical understanding of what I was observing in my fieldwork.

When I started working with Dr. Franz Krause and I got to know his work and that of his research team in the DELTA Project, I found a different way of working towards scientific production, one more collaborative and inquisitive. My research material and ideas reached another analytic stage in a very short time, incorporating notions and case studies that helped me to rethink what I had been working on. Between 2021 and 2023, I was able to take new emotional, sensorial and cultural elements from my empirical data in order to bring other aspects to the foreground that led to the present manuscript – almost a second dissertation, unlike what I had been working on before 2019.

During this time, I also wrote book chapters in Argentina and Mexico, and I was able to realise a collective writing project with the Assembly No to the Hand Over of the Coast, NHOC, which gave shape to the book “Native Forest”, published in 2022. This book, supported by Dr. Krause and funded by the GSSC, enabled us to delve into previously unaddressed aspects of the coastal space that made it truly a natural, historical and cultural heritage for its conservation. The scientific journey towards knowledge production has been a wonderful adventure despite the setbacks, the best way I could end it is this way, feeling proud of what I have achieved and grateful to those who helped me.



Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires. National Institute of Statistics and Censuses, INDEC. 2003.



Figure 1: **Location of the southern La Plata banks.** Author: Vanina Santy. 2018.

Photo of wetlands landscape in brochure "Nueva Costa del Plata. The new waterfront of Buenos Aires". Techint. 2009.

PREFACE: THE SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT OVER WETLANDS AND FORESTS AT THE LA PLATA RIVER

Nueva Costa del Plata (NCP) is a large-scale waterfront revitalisation project proposed by a multinational company for the riverside of Avellaneda and Quilmes Districts almost fifteen years ago. -See figure 1 for the location of the districts and place in conflict-. It is a luxury real-estate project powered by private investment with a geographical, economic and social scope never seen before in the metropolitan region of Buenos Aires.

The conflict over NCP remains unresolved until this day, showing the interrelations between culture, nature, power and politics (Blaser & Escobar, 2016) that determine the fate of the “last” wetlands and forests of those coastal cities¹. This is noticeable in that the development has not been built yet, but the land has been transformed in many ways in speculative anticipation of it, which has caused the project to be suspended by court decision since 2013. Furthermore, it does not have provincial environmental approval, and at a municipal legislative level it has not yet been debated in Quilmes due to the opposing views of councillors on the proposed construction works.

In brief, the conflict also exposes how a process of dispossession of nature over time takes place, involving the relegation of those who have a different viewpoint on the place’s conservation and the regime that “naturalises” dispossession and marginalisation (Le Billon, 2015: 606). The dimensions of the conflict under analysis could be defined, from the perspective of political ecology, as an imbalance of power (therefore the relevance of identifying the context of the social, economic and political changes); as the construction of a new understanding of what is happening in relation to nature (one of the main outcomes to observe); and as the incorporation of spatiality and time dimensions of analysis (at a local, regional or even global level as well as past, present and future temporality) (García Frapolli et al., 2018).

And like in any dispute, there are those in favour of the urban development of wetlands and forests along the La Plata River, and also part of the population who want to see an improvement in their quality of life. Among them there are also the corporate and governmental actors articulated in a private-public partnership as the self-declared “promoters” of the project. They encounter resistance from other inhabitants of the districts self-organised in neighbourhood assemblies that have come to form a social movement as “neighbours” (“*vecinos*”) for the conservation of the place.

Mapping actors in conflict

Drawing on Bruno Latour’ s cartography of differences (Actor-Network Theory, ANT), I propose an initial visualisation of the protagonists of the conflict and the reasons for the differences between them. (Figure 2). This is not intended to delve deeper into the socio-environmental and technical debates around NCP but to show the connections between actors and their positioning in the conflict.

I begin with Techint, the most powerful company in Argentina, with a global scope of action extending through 6 companies in more than 25 countries and employing 55,000 people.

For over 75 years, the company has been engaged in other industrial fields apart from steelmaking, including the building of complex infrastructures, the design and construction of industrial plants and machinery, the development of technology for the mining sector, and oil and gas exploration.

¹ Both districts and their capital cities bear the same names, Avellaneda and Quilmes. The map of these districts (location of main localities and neighbourhoods of specific places) can be consulted in maps in the Annex.

With strong links to the Argentine State, Techint has been awarded large-scale works, especially during the military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983 when a process of capital accumulation in the steel and oil sectors took place.



Figure 2: **Actors in dispute.** Author: Vanina Santy. 2016.

During this period, and specifically in Avellaneda and Quilmes, the steel company stepped into the urban waste-management sphere through the creation of SyUSA (Sanitation and Urbanization Limited Company) – it was part of Techint so I will continue referring to SyUSA as Techint throughout the chapters to avoid misunderstandings.

Its expertise in engineering and construction are renowned, as is its capacity to carry out public works; however, Techint had rarely been previously engaged in urban development, and the running of the dump proved to be unsuccessful.

After the provincial government handed over to the company natural lands not used for the burying of garbage in the landfill (232 hectares in 1999) as a means of payment, and with the risk of losing them due to the original clauses in the contract with the Argentine state, Techint proposed to the municipalities of Avellaneda and Quilmes the construction of a neighbourhood that came to be known as Nueva Costa de la Plata.

An urban development company, Oficina Urbana, would oversee the development of the master plan, not as investors but as part of a consortium with Techint and the municipalities of Avellaneda and Quilmes, possibly incorporating national and provincial agencies for infrastructure plans. This consortium would be in charge of building the city (like Corporación Puerto Madero did in the homonymous luxury neighbourhood of Buenos Aires City) generating the necessary public and private conditions so that the new urban centre can be developed. The management instruments of the consortium would include an Urban Environmental Observatory to monitor the environmental impact of the project.

The founders of Oficina Urbana, the architects Roberto Converti and Fabio Di Marco, have been surrounded by polemic due to the tensions that resulted from the revitalisation of the port area of Buenos Aires that they led in the 90s, which has impacted on the conflict over NCP. They headed public agencies linked to the strategic planning of the city, hence also strategically important to the authorisation of large-scale projects.

According to the accounts of older inhabitants of Avellaneda and Quilmes, Converti and Di Marco would have used privileged information and benefited from official contacts and resolutions to move on sometime later to the private sector, developing Puerto Madero (a major change in the urban configuration of the city).

The mayors of the municipalities of Avellaneda and Quilmes accepted Techint's NCP proposal and made it officially known as a fact without much room for discussion, and they communicated this to their deliberative councils for approval in 2008. The highest provincial authorities have supported the mayors for its realisation through public presentations together with Techint. A public hearing was organised by local authorities during that same year, as well as debates and informative activities at the riverside. To this day all the mayors who have succeeded each other in power (in both districts) have refused to establish dialogue with the "neighbours" and continue to promote the project for the urban development of the La Plata River's wetlands and forests.

The riverside inhabitants are divided between their acceptance of NCP and their rejection of it, not having played a significant role in the unfolding of the conflict. Most of them have shown support to the neighbourhood assemblies, though not without differences and conflict, which has resulted in the current lack of dialogue between these parties.

The controversies

The reconstruction of this conflict is limited to a ten-year period from 2008, when the NCP project was officially announced, and 2018, when the company behind the transformation of these spaces achieved the legal downgrading of forests' ecological value to allow for their economic development. The differences between the "promoters" and the "neighbours" over those years can be classified into the following categories, which I will develop later throughout the chapters:

- Legal and environment aspects: NCP was publicly accused of violating existing national, provincial, and municipal regulations in three areas: 1) the legal status of lands created as areas of nature reserve, 2) the management of environmental liabilities in the place caused by the "promoters", and 3) the minimum standards for the protection of native forests. For this reason, neighbourhood associations and local groups demanded answers on two matters related to the functioning of that low-lying and flood-prone area.

First, what would the method of soil filling be for the elevation of the coast (more than five metres above its normal level) to prevent NCP from flooding? The first explanations of experts in a place with such a particular water environment revealed the possibility of submerging nearby areas of NCP by displacing water from sites to be built upon to sites of lesser significance. Such an initiative by Techint would impact on the riverside inhabitants in a way that could not be calculated completely and therefore preventively minimised in any way, also with respect to wetlands and native forests. Second, this artificial handling of the river did not foresee the historical hydrodynamics of the surface-water system and the coastal sector over a period of 100 years, so the technical studies provided by Techint evidenced deficiencies in the calculation of hydrological risks for the area. This could have an effect on drainage times and water levels, with higher levels of flooding, according to formal denunciations that a group of assemblies and organisations constituted before the Ombudsman of Quilmes, which has continued at a legal level in courts of justice through the years.

- Procedural: One of the first social claims has been the lack of information on NCP, particularly about the environmental impact assessment, which has not been yet submitted by the multinational company behind the proposal, Techint, as required by national and provincial regulations.

Additionally, the preliminary version of a final report elaborated by the National Technological University (UTN), as an external expert party hired by Techint, established the impossibility of defining environmental aspects due to the “very scarce factual data of the project and none of the development activities” (2008: 308).² The UTN also admitted that key indicators about the works to be carried out and territorial or environmental processes involved were “not available in the project documentation and the master plan available to date” (2008: 309).

- Social: The executive summary on the analysis of NCP’s impact indicated the absence of an “anthropic environment” or of riverside dwellers in the future place of construction.³ In other words, it suggested that the riverside lands of Avellaneda and Quilmes were “vacant” and that any population had “abandoned the place” due to previous territorial changes. For such reasons, the technical studies provided by Techint at an environmental and hydrological level were deemed to be incomplete or false by the “neighbours” and expert environmental organisations.

- Riverside lands ownership: The population of Avellaneda and Quilmes questioned the 232 hectares that Techint claimed to be theirs and where it planned to start the construction works for NCP. The company and authorities had signed a contract in 1978 for the management of a sanitary landfill by the river in Avellaneda in charge of Techint.

In 1999, after a change in the clauses of this contract, unfilled lands were assigned as a means of economic compensation (allegedly for the running of the site though it is uncertain) through a non-transparent process of public lands allocation. Local organisations had already demonstrated irregularities in this land handling even before NCP was known, prompting them to initiate legal actions to denounce Techint, though these never were resolved. Since the beginning of the conflict over NCP, the “neighbours” have demanded the return of these lands for the use of the population, and for many years this was one of the main reasons for people to reject urban development.

- Practices and mechanisms carried out by the “promoters” to materialise the project: The current lack of approval of NCP in the City Council of Quilmes (this was achieved in Avellaneda way earlier in 2008) as well as the legal obstacles imposed by the “neighbours” led the company and municipal authorities to make controversial public decisions, some of them breaking the law. Most of the legal and administrative mechanisms implemented by the “promoters” during the conflict have been accused of having a corrupt nature. Since these events continued over time, they only increased tensions and brought the confrontation to a head in a “war” scenario by 2016 between the parties with public denunciations by the “neighbours” that increased the tensions around NCP.

This conflict continues to be locally emblematic in environmental, legal, and political contexts, and has become a reference for the popular defence of wetlands and native forests in the metropolitan region of Buenos Aires.

² A report titled “Preliminary Version of the Final Report of Baseline Studies, Impact Study and Environmental Management Plan”.

³ As indicated in the “Summary and emerging conclusions of the environmental impact study and the environmental management plan” (October 2008).

The cutback on the particularities of the conflict for this dissertation has been substantial, since controversies have occurred steadily and endlessly over the ten years under analysis.

Specific information regarding the conflict is presented from chapter 6 onwards to provide a context for what is being analysed based on the proposed research objectives that I will describe in the introduction.

The reader may choose to skip this detail, which includes legal, political and technical aspects delineating the context of the arguments presented.

Place in contestation

The contested territory is a five-kilometre-long strip of flood-prone lands that goes from the Santo Domingo Canal (in Avellaneda) to Espora Street (Quilmes) and from unaffected areas by the landfill to the La Plata River. -Figures 3 and 4-

On both sides, the Deliberative Councils of each district have created municipal reserves in recognition of the high ecological value that prevails in the place. Among them, there is the Marginal Forest Municipal Reserve (Selva Marginal Quilmeña Reserva Municipal, ordinance N° 9.348/02 and its amendment N° 9.508/03) and Los Sauces Municipal Nature Reserve on Bernal's waterfront (municipal ordinance N° 8.255/98) that represent the most important biodiversity of Quilmes. This is the "neighbours' reserve", which together with adjoining protected lands of Avellaneda forms part of a biological corridor that connects similar natural areas along the river and is under dispute.

The banks of Avellaneda were a legally protected area before NCP, then it changed its status to favour urban expansion in 2008. The remaining protected areas in Avellaneda are the Municipal Ecological Reserve Laguna La Saladita (municipal ordinances N° 9.676/94 and N° 13.703/99) and the Coastal Municipal Nature Reserve of Avellaneda (ordinance N° 26.864/15).

According to the master plan of NCP, Techint's development would be located along the entire length of the riverbanks, including lands of a former sanitary landfill, to be used for natural parks (still in environmental recovery after its closure in 2004) and illegal *tosqueras* for the garbage burial that remain open after thirty years (digs twenty-five metres deep).

The large-scale project would also affect the surrounding areas near as well as further away from the coast that the developers call the "area of direct influence", which currently feature multiple land uses, from gated communities to shanty towns and green spaces with industrial areas. -See figure 3-

The conformation of these districts, with a lack of strategic planning in the territory, has already impacted negatively on the riverside, which is why the future environmental effects of the revitalisation are questioned.

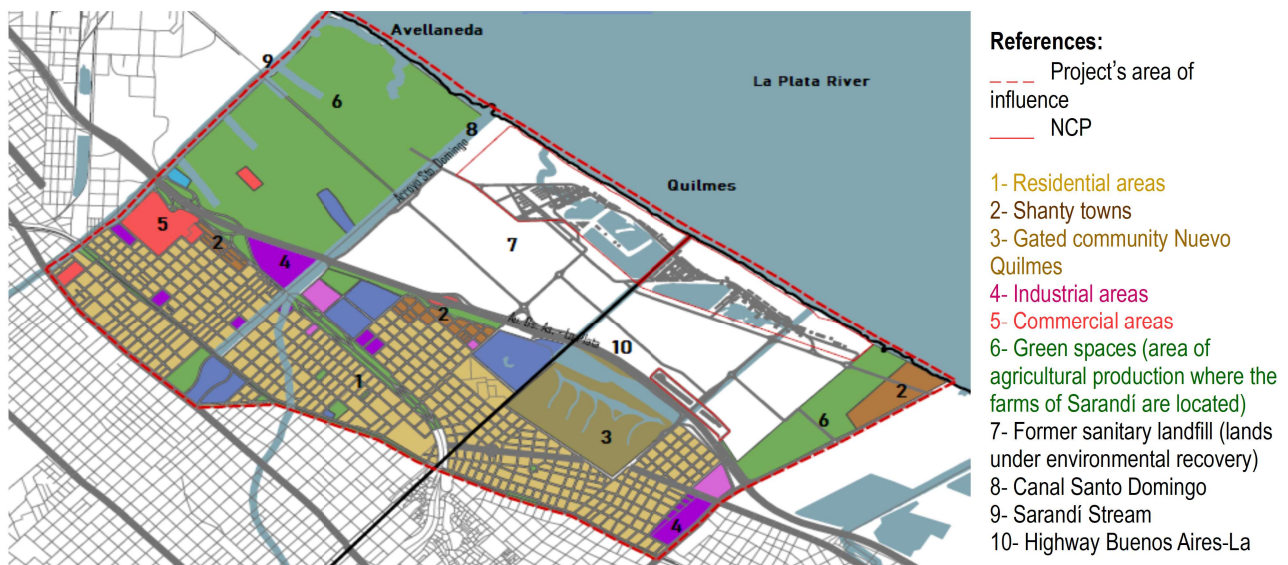


Figure 3 : Land uses in NCP's area of influence. Source: TRCC Consultants (commissioned by Techint to conduct technical studies). 2008.

Complex natural connections

The banks of Quilmes and Avellaneda correspond to the Pampa Oriental phytogeographic region, which ranges from the south of Santa Fé Province and the north of the Province of Buenos Aires. It continues throughout the centre and east up to a foothills system known as Tandilia, and to the southeast, it reaches the coasts of the Argentine Sea and the Atlantic Ocean.

The distribution of characteristic plants in this large area makes up a mosaic of grasslands (*flechillares*) and plant formations that marginally develop in the form of “coastal forests”, “gallery jungles”, and “montes de tala” (Cabrera, 1971 and 1976; Morrone, 2001). Therefore, the forest formations are associated with other natural and artificial environments like the wetlands throughout the coastline of the La Plata River.

The wetlands in this context are areas of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, including areas of marine water.⁴ The meadows that developed on lands of the closed sanitary landfill are formed by a large proportion of species typical of the Pampas ecoregion, and there can be observed the advance of native and exotic trees whose area of origin is the associated native forest and wetlands.

Concurrently, the coastal space is within a biogeographical dispersal route formed by different patches of natural areas that are legally protected. In the southern metropolitan area, there is the Integral Nature Reserve of Punta Lara, the Hudson Nature Preserve, the Provincial Park Pereyra Iraola, the Ecological Reserve La Saladita Sur, and the Southern Costanera Ecological Reserve. Going north there can be found the Northern Riverside Natural Educational Refuge, the Ecological Reserve of Vicente López, the Integral Natural Reserve Delta in Formation, the Paraná Delta Biosphere Reserve, and the Otamendi Nature Reserve in Campana, among others.

The entire area also belongs to the Delta ecoregion and islands of the Paraná and Uruguay Rivers, an ecoregion of recent and current fluvial modelling composed of a set of wetland macro ecosystems (Cabanillas et al, 2016: 99).

⁴ Defined like this by Argentine biologists and geographers in most biological reports following the criteria of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands in its article 1. The Ramsar Convention provides the framework for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands: <https://www.ramsar.org/> Last accessed: 8/01/2023.

Regarding the animal communities that can be found there, scientific studies account for the great diversity of animal species in the place (Godoy et al., 2012; Guerrero et al., 2012; Guerrero, 2014) as well as environmentalists and frequent visitors who love to wander around through this natural riverside environment. The animals take advantage of food resources and protection provided by each community (forest, grassland, wetlands, natural lagoons) at various times of the year, and before exceptional hydrological or climate events. Of the 300 bird species registered in the province of Buenos Aires, 124 are found in Avellaneda and Quilmes, and of these, more than 3% have been listed as “rare” at a provincial level, with one species (*Nycticryphes semicollaris*) being unique or only to be found there (Godoy et al., 2012). The presence of migratory birds evidences that it is not only the plant communities that are connected, but also the animal ones which depend on these life forms to survive.

Amphibians use the water sources to breed and live in the forests as adults, using the lagoons only in the reproductive season, one example being *Leptodactylus latrans*, a frog abundant in the coastal forest whose tadpoles are common in marshes and canals.

Connectivity, then, does not only exist between neighbouring natural communities but also, on a larger scale, with other distant communities that together with the studied area provide the necessary conditions and resources to complete riverside life cycles. In this process, the river water constitutes a fundamental element in the dispersion of sediments and seeds and the migration of species among these ecosystem areas.



References:

— NCP

Avellaneda:

- 1- Municipal Nature Reserve of Avellaneda
- 2- Former protected riverside area, suitable for urban development since 2008

Quilmes:

- 3- Marginal Forest Municipal Reserve of Quilmes
- 4- Los Sauces Nature Reserve
- 5- Metropolitan Biopark (on lands of former landfill, created in 2017 by municipal ordinance though still not open for public use)

Figure 4: The contested territory. NCP and its location on protected ecological areas. Autor: Vanina Santy. 2021.

INTRODUCTION

The wetlands and native forests involved in the socio-environmental conflict that I analyse here are located in the southern La Plata River, Argentina, as I anticipated in the Preface.

The site constitutes the drainage area of the La Plata Basin, one of the most important in the world by both, its geographical extension throughout South America and the flow of great rivers such as the Paraná (which is born in Brazil and Paraguay) and the Uruguay (it originates from Brazil and Uruguay)⁵.

Located only ten minutes from the capital city of Buenos Aires, the La Plata River becomes here part of the lower Matanza-Riachuelo basin, the most environmentally and socially degraded body of water in the country. Renowned as one of the ten most polluted places in the world along with Chernobyl in Ukraine, the Riachuelo runs through seventeen districts and is home to five million people (95% of whom live in unhealthy and vulnerable socio-economic conditions)⁶.

Also at the lower Riachuelo, next to Avellaneda, there is the largest petrochemical district, Dock Sud, with oil companies such as Shell operating there since 1930. In that same location there is a neighbourhood known as Villa Inflamable where over 100,000 people live a toxic life, breathing and smelling contamination and moving through it on a daily basis.

South of here are Avellaneda and Quilmes, two densely populated districts of AMBA, with 6,231 inhabitants per km² and a total population of 342,677 for the former, and 4,664 inhabitants per km² making a total of 582,943 people for the latter⁷. Moreover, Avellaneda and Quilmes encompass (along with other 40 districts of the metropolitan area) the poorest region of Argentina where 47.5% of people or almost 6,000,000 inhabitants⁸ do not have the means to meet their basic material needs. The environmental outlook and the location of what I have just described above can be verified in the same map released in 2015 by the neighbourhood movement to warn about the risks present in NCP's area of influence; see figure 22.

In this precarious and impoverished environment of two industrial districts, the large-scale project Nueva Costa del Plata (NCP) is devised by Techint, owner of 232 hectares at the La Plata River and the former manager of a sanitary landfill for 25 years that resulted in an ecological crisis that continues to this day.

⁵ La Plata Basin. Official website of the Argentine State. <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/ambiente/agua/cuencas/delplata>. Last accessed: 22/01/2024.

⁶ Basin Matanza-Riachuelo. Encyclopaedia of Science and Technology in Argentina (ECYT-AR). https://cyt-ar.com.ar/cytar/index.php/Cuenca_Matanza_-_Riachuelo Last accessed: 22/01/2024.

⁷ Professional Council of Architecture and Urbanism. Metropolitan Observatory. <https://observatorioamba.org/> Last accessed: 26/02/2024.

⁸ National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INDEC). "Incidence of poverty and indigence in 31 urban agglomerations". https://www.indec.gob.ar/uploads/informesdeprensa/eph_pobreza_01_200703093514.pdf Last accessed: 26/02/2024.

These districts, and specifically the banks of the La Plata River where I conducted my research, could be defined by what Anna Tsing calls “third nature”, or what survives despite the transformations of the environment (2015). Like the Matsutake mushroom that grows in human-disturbed forests of the northern hemisphere and which Tsing studies, the place where NCP would be constructed is where nature carries on despite human action and where survival becomes a resilient struggle. But something even more interesting is observed, among the remains of what once was a pristine natural space and a happy life for the population by the river.

Between conflict and the fear of losing what constitutes a traditional way of living in those coastal districts, the love of a group of people arose, bringing new life to the riverside. What began as an urban planning proposal by Techint to improve the environmental and social conditions of the riverside ended up in a battle for the last ecosystem in the region, and it is through the popular resistance of these “children of pollution and death” that the love of nature happened.

This love is collective, mainly among “neighbours” (“*vecinos*”) of the Assembly No to the Hand Over of the Coast (Asamblea No a la Entrega de la Costa) and a few other local assemblies, and shows how the relationship with a place can become transformative not only for the wetlands and forests, but for the lives of people themselves. This affective dimension of political resistance against NCP is inscribed in the *moral ecologies* that arise in the place of contestation, evidencing how ethics intersects with love and becomes a powerful element for people to change reality.

The personal stories of people participating in local assemblies can be found in the Annex to give an intimate and autobiographical account of why these people behave this way. Some of these stories are similar, some are very different, but all of them are intertwined by the respect for what is correct, a similar perception of nature, and notions of morality.

Problem statement: general aims and scope

Why do some people care more about *nature* than others? Why do they actively protect it while others accept its disappearance as part of their inescapable circumstances or even feel indifferent to its destruction (Milton, 2002)? Are there religious motivations behind the beliefs and values expressed by people in the conflict under analysis that facilitate the commitment to a natural environment (Rigby, 2023)? or in any case, are those who get involved in *socio-environmental conflicts* necessarily linked to that place in conflict in terms of “dwelling” because it contains their life activities or constitutes their environment (Ingold, 2000)?

These are the main questions that have oriented my research and through which I have aimed to scrutinise a social movement’s bond with a riverside space endangered by modernity.

As for my last research question, what additionally intrigued me, and remains in the background throughout the dissertation but will come to make sense through the subsequent chapters, is why people who neither inhabit the place nor depend economically on it or its natural resources get politically involved with it. And becoming so involved, how does their bond with nature in the riverside turn into *love* to the point that they are willing to defend it with their own lives? (Santy & Vitenberg, 2022). The riverside they love is the place they belong, their home, and that love is felt in their bodies, their skin, and for some, their hearts are there, just as “neighbours” describe it.

Said differently, this dissertation is about a journey, following the way of love as a significant aspect of people organised in local assemblies against the logic of Techint, the most influential company in Argentina. It is, in the end, a love story that, like all such stories, has taken time to develop, and many things have happened in the process of its becoming over the years. Yet it is not a love born of beauty or admiration alone but of what is valued as virtuous despite filth and death.

I build on the notion of *moral ecology* developed by Martínez-Reyes to account for the different dimensions in such connection with the wetlands and forests of Avellaneda and Quilmes, which could be defined as “profound, historical human-nature exchanges and the spiritual dimensions in which people engage” (2021: 21)⁹. Within the descriptive framework of Martínez-Reyes’ notion, I will explore how moral ideals end up influencing that love as an alternative to modern neoliberal urban production on protected areas through a different exchange with nature.

I also draw on Caterina Scaramelli’s work on moral ecology as the “aspirations of justice and ethical subjectivity born on relations between people, plants, animals, fungi, water, and other organisms” (2021: 10), which give rise to ecological practices and thinking with respect to wetlands. Scaramelli speaks in the plural of these ecologies around “aquatic places” in Turkey, as I will also do, in the sense that there are *moral ecologies* as the product of politics by those taking part in a conflict. She contemplates the emotional commitment in these ecological relationships, unlike Martínez-Reyes who refers to a daily profound exchange, so I will try to explain how this happens in an unlikely scenario in which to talk about a loving predisposition.

⁹ Martínez-Reyes based his work on the ideas of anthropologists Michael Dove (2011) and Kristin Norget (2012); the former refers to deep relations over time that are encompassing at a spatial level, while the latter situates her concepts in a context of environmental conservation with an emphasis on a sacred dimension and embodied moralities connected to the landscape.

- Dove, M. (2011). Rubber Kills the Land and Saves the Community: An Undisciplined Commodity. Pp. 91–119. In: *Beyond the Sacred Forest: Complicating Conservation in Southeast Asia*, edited by Michael R. Dove, Percy E. Sajise, and Amity A. Doolittle, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Norget, K. (2012). Surviving Conservation: La Madre Tierra and Indigenous Moral Ecologies in Oaxaca, Mexico. Pp. 85–106. In: *Nature, Science and Religion: Intersections Shaping Society and the Environment* (edited by Catherine M. Tucker). Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press.

I am not referring to *moral economy* or *moral urbanities* to approach the proposed collective bond because in the first case, the concept aims to explain direct-action protests in relation to processes like the rise of the laissez-faire global market economy or land tenure in peasant societies.¹⁰

My intention is to show a popular reaction against an “immoral” capitalism represented by private urban development, emphasizing the environmental dimension. The conservation of nature at the La Plata River represents a direct collective action on what is considered morally good; though it cannot be circumscribed to a class struggle or to the demands of “the poor” since the composition of the social movement is very heterogeneous.

Second, what I analyse could also be framed as moral urbanities that emerge in the cities because of public policies that intersperse with processes of inclusion and exclusion in everyday urban life with respect to gender, race, class and religion (Duplan et al., 2021). I prefer to focus more on the cultural, political and spatial factors connected with the emergence of controversies and how they influence subjectivities and determine political positions.

Understanding that love is part of the moral ecology of those resisting NCP will allow me to examine the role of this emotion in the political ecology of riverine ecosystems. Literature in this area (which I will deal with in the next section) focuses on emotions considered negative, such as grief and anger, usually also associated with social movements. However, it is necessary to take the interpretation of nature to another level to understand the complexity behind what is voiced as “love of nature”, which is not as easy to understand as it seems.

So, my research is inscribed in social anthropology to account for particular social groups (encompassing a social movement led by neighbourhood assemblies) and the new culture (values, practices, beliefs, and knowledge) developed by the “neighbours” over the La Plata River’s ecosystem. Moreover, and inspired by critical geography, it aims to understand how place-based knowledge practices are put into action together with “environmental imaginaries making it a site of contestation and how a social movement is constituted through the particularities of that place” (Oslender, 2016: 4). My work can be also helpful for spatial anthropology to understand how social movements locate themselves physically and symbolically, configuring a spatiality (of resistance, in this case) that impacts on people’s dispositions and experiences beyond the group itself (Roberts, 2020: 30).

¹⁰ Moral economy is a theoretical construct introduced by E.P Thompson (1968, 1991) and later approached by James Scott (2016) and anthropologists Michael Dove (2011) & Kristin Norget (2012). The latter accounted for the “environmental dimensions of food production and environmental conservation not contemplated back then” by Thompson (Martínez-Reyes, 2016: 20).

The emotional aspect described can be framed within the anthropology of emotions to understand how *love* manifests and in relation to what it is constructed within the assemblies to transform the conditions of the place under dispute (Beatty, 2019: 81). With respect to environmental psychology, my findings provide clues to explain some specific interactions between people and their natural environment linked to attachment and political identity (Lalli, 1992).

My contribution to the theory on social movements is linked primarily to spatiality under a collective political organisation and power/knowledge relations in which resistance is inscribed. Regarding the identity that develops under these circumstances, I show how a place-bound identity manifests and what elements influence its formation on the basis of difference and similarities as interpreted by people engaged in the struggle.

Overall, I strive to understand the different elements comprised in a socio-environmental conflict over the loss of nature in today's cities, and I hope my work can offer a different perspective when analysing conflict over nature.

In connection with, the socio-environmental conflict that I examine is representative of what is happening in Argentina, especially in riverside areas. The environmental problems derived from the loss of natural and public spaces have reached levels never seen before, and as a result, tensions have been on the rise in the last two decades. Such context has undoubtedly impacted on the controversies around NCP and on how people reacted.

In 2020 alone, 350,000 hectares of wetlands were destroyed as a result of intentional fires (for agricultural, livestock farming and real-estate purposes) affecting more than 1 million hectares in the country, especially in the islands of the Paraná Delta, but also along the La Plata River with urban protected areas annihilated overnight (Rullo, 2021). For its part, the loss of native forests between 1998 and 2018 in Argentina was around 6.5 million hectares due to the forestry industry and the expansion of productive frontiers (Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, 2020).¹¹ Civil society has been fighting for years for the sanction of a national law to protect these ecosystems; however, no progress has been made, even after protests and negotiation attempts with deputies and senators at a national, provincial and local levels.

It seems that the only thing that is left for people to do is to enter into conflict, which places high demands on the population with consequences for their way of life and even their health. This type of disputes, at least in Argentina, cause a lot of suffering in people, hence the importance of morality over the waterfront revitalisation project.

¹¹ Causes and impacts of deforestation of native forests in Argentina and alternative development proposals. (27/7/2020). Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development. Official portal of the Argentine State. https://www.argentina.gob.ar/sites/default/files/desmotes_y_alternativas-julio27.pdf Last accessed: 28/03/2023.

State of the art

Recent works have shown the relationship between social movements and nature, and consequently moral ecology and love (or the emotional question) through different approaches also mediated by conflict:

1- In the frame of emotional political ecologies, some emotions (anger, sorrow, pain) are directly related to the politics of environmental conflicts through processes of subjectivity formation that are mediated by power (González Hidalgo, 2017: 18).

2- Following the same field, the emotional political ecology as defined by Sultana (2015) advocates for the relevance of emotions in nature-society relations. Aiming to expand the boundaries of political ecology, the author addresses the role of everyday emotions in how scarce resources are accessed and fought over with a special role of space in this as well.

3- Suzanne Dallman et al. (2013) alluded to the political ecology of emotion associated with sacred sites with ancestral landscapes and struggles against hegemonic visions of their resources. Their depart from anthropological works to refer to places integral to Indians' way of life regarding the continuation of their existence, how they shape cultural identities and originate from ancient traditions and stories.

4- Leah Horowitz (2013) also argued for the role of emotion (empathy and concern as well as anger and contempt) in moral reasoning in a dispute in suburban New Jersey over urban wetland governance. The author shows how emotions influence understandings of what is being threatened or what causes risk to constitute what is regarded (or not) as moral.

In the first case, González Hidalgo (2017) focuses on “the emotional” as a space of power facilitating the re-articulation of relationships within and outside a social movement. I do not consider that the connection of people with their negative emotions is sufficient to generate a political reaction, or that they can be “healed” as the author suggests. Rather, there are other emotional, political, and cultural elements to which emotions are connected and have to do with individuals and the groups they are part of.

In the second case, although I resort to women's narratives in entire chapters such as the one on the formation and functioning of the neighbourhood movement by Nieves Baldaccini, a historical activist from Quilmes, I do not consider that gender relations or feminism have a central role in a conflict (Sultana, 2015) or not at least in the locality where I conducted my research.

In the analysis of Dallman et al. (2013), also linked to water, the emotional (spiritual and intellectual) interactions with certain spaces show the intimate links between emotion, memory, and identity.

Consequently, the authors show multi-dimensional connections and emotional experiences that reinforce an identity and seek to maintain cultural traits and ancestral memories in protecting what they regard as their sacred places.

Horowitz (2013) underlines the need to accept that emotions have a role in moral reasoning, which in a dispute evidences how certain things should or should not happen backed by emotional appeals. In her analysis she connects controversies with the presence or lack of empathy, and therefore sympathy or rejection, which cause controversies.

In Argentina, the emotional question in relation to social movements has not been much scrutinised except for by Bosco (2006) and Astelarra (2016). The first one studied the crucial role of emotions in the embeddedness of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo (Madres de Plaza de Mayo, a community of women devoted to human rights) beyond physical geographic proximity. From their strategic place of power display, the Plaza de Mayo,¹² they have managed to anchor a political influence creating and maintaining territorially dispersed social networks since 1977.

Astelarra worked with island families of the Paraná Delta in the north of Buenos Aires who constitute relationships with nature linked to ways of life and affective perceptions of the places they inhabit. In this case, the sociologist acknowledges the affective aspect in relation to the delta's way of life, although she does not place more emphasis on this aspect.

With regard to the analysis of socio-environmental conflicts there is an abundance of studies in Argentina, though most of them have a homogenising view of environmental conflicts from a social-science perspective. Such conflicts are defined as “focal points of dispute of a political nature that generate tensions in the forms of appropriation, production, distribution and management of natural resources” (Merlinsky, 2013: 40). For most cases, there are four elements that characterise them:

- a) the inscription of environmental issues as a “public matter”,
- b) the involvement of collective action,
- c) the formation of counter-expert knowledge at a socio-technical level,
- d) changes at a legal level as a predominant effect in the production of a conflict.

¹² Foundational site of Buenos Aires and seat of the national executive power.

To this can be added the “languages of valorisation” about the environmental question, giving rise to the production and assignment of ecological and livelihood values, meanings, and justifications (Martinez Alier, 2009: 8). These “languages” tend to be used as general classifications with no conceptual distinctions between their component parts or depth in terms of different approaches to these variables.

Consequently, there is a way of conceiving conflicts as an analytical pattern that applies to all sorts of conflicts irrespective of their location, object of dispute (forests, garbage, mining, water, etc.) or whether they are approached by sociology or anthropology, for example.

In Latin America, the accelerated destruction of natural ecosystems has been studied from a historical and critical perspective to understand how changes have occurred in them (Perafán Cabrera & Caro, 2017), or environmental disputes are invariably explained by neoliberalism, for which the territories are a field of dispute due to the intensive exploitation of nature by capital (Dagnino Contini et al, 2021).

This last approach is frequently known as *extractivism*, a category term with a denouncing character and mobilising power that speaks of an asymmetry in power relations in relation to natural resources (Svampa, 2019). I agree with Riofrancos’ statement that extractivism is a capacious and political concept that needs to continue to be refined at an epistemological and theoretical level because extractivism enables a generalist interpretation in which everything can be “extracted”, from natural resources to labour, data, culture and the urban ground (Riofrancos, 2020).

I think that the approach from the point of view extractivism leads to a study that becomes descriptive, without inquiring into how the interactions take place and what emerges from them.

For the reasons stated above, I resort to the concept of *moral ecology* because it has allowed me to understand conflict in relation to two factors. First, the organisation over time of the different variables observed in the tensions unfolding in Avellaneda and Quilmes – in other words, their significance and how they are enacted as years go by; and second, how those variables operate and interconnect for morality to emerge in this contentious context.

Finally, the love of nature expressed by the “neighbours” aligns with the *ecology of emotion* proposed by Kay Milton (2002: 4), as “emotions operate primarily (though not exclusively) in ecological relations rather than social relations”. This means that we as humans interact with other beings but also with objects other than ourselves, hence the relevance of a particular environment for people. When the terms of a dispute relate to the destruction of what is familiar, or of some place to which people are attached, emotions come to play a crucial role in how people engage with that environment.

However, love is described and acted out differently by people struggling to defend the riverside, creating forms of knowledge and experiences of the place. Here a *cultural diversity* within the group's emotionality becomes evident, as Milton (2002) also points out in relation to nature and how people behave towards it, so I will show how these differences articulate an affective morality in order to protect nature.

Main nodal terms

In this section, I will specify key terms that I have worked with and which I consider it appropriate to outline and associate with each other for a better delimitation of the research problem.

They are part of my arguments and will be developed further in each chapter, so I understand that outlining them here will allow the reader to understand what I am trying to address. As with *nature*, it has multiple meanings, contains different perspectives and has been examined through a number of disciplines, but I will circumscribe it in relation to the conflict. Also, different spatialities intersect as disagreements develop throughout the ten years of analysis marking distinctive spatial formations and relations. The geographic *space* of the riverside is the site of contention politics (Nicholls et al, 2013: 35) while *place* shapes the political orientation of people (Nicholls, 2013: 9) and *territory* is linked to a social construction (Nicholls et al, 2013: 12). I will use these concepts interchangeably except where the actors participating in the conflict make specific reference to them.

The nodal terms I will refer to are not in any specific order; none are necessarily more important than others. Conversely, I will address them as they arise in the dissertation, adding my own interpretation of them:

Riverside ecosystems (amid widespread ecological crisis)

The pandemic recently experienced at a global level has been attributed, among other causes, to the destruction of natural habitats in that human impingement on previously untouched ecosystems brought about virus spillover to happen (Johnson et al., 2020). In contemporary cities, ecosystems have a vital role in the ecological balance and are represented by riverside areas, natural parks, or ecological reserves (areas of high ecological value protected by law), public parklands, woodlands, and semi-rural areas associated with agricultural activities.

They are the “nearby nature” offering people regular access to natural areas to enjoy spaces with high environmental quality that meet the needs of the population (Natural England, 2010).

In many cases these are the “last green spaces” in the urban context allowing contact with forests, wetlands, or rivers in the face of a strategic planning that incorporates them for development on a massive scale.

The threats to nature as well as the disputes over it grow in number and intensity not only in Argentina but also in Latin America, revealing the tensions related to the loss of biodiversity or places considered to be ecologically critical and irreplaceable.

In Colombia, the Tunjuelo watershed that connects rural areas and urban consolidation in southern Bogotá has seen a proliferation of social mobilisations for habitat improvement in the face of urban growth and socio-spatial segregation (Quimbayo Ruiz and Francisco Rodríguez, 2016).

Similarly, in the archipelago of forests and jungles of the Capital Region of the State of Veracruz, in Mexico, a multifunctional biological corridor has incorporated agricultural activities and urban growth that are countered by communal forms of life claiming for a mutually dependent relationship with nature (Salazar Martínez et al., 2020).

These examples show the need to reconsider the role of nature in contemporary cities and who can decide about it or to whom the costs of their urban development are transferred. In short, what is an urban ecosystem, what is its importance, and what kind of exchanges to have with it beyond strategic planning?

Waterfront revitalisation

The urban sprawl has included the global phenomenon called *waterfront revitalisation* for decades through real-estate ventures in ecologically fragile areas such as low-lying and flood-prone areas of river basins as well as seafronts. In Asia and Europe (in Notre-Dames de Landes, France, for example) and in Africa and North America, this sort of development imposes a model of urban planning based on two major precepts.

First, the cities are the centres of capital accumulation through flows of capital and information (Harvey, 2012; Sassen, 1991; Arantes et al, 2000) in such a way that they have turned into:

- 1) Commodities offered for sale in a market where other cities are also for sale, hence the importance of urban marketing and the need to create a particular image of a particular kind of city as cosmopolitan, green, or safe.
- 2) Economic agents acting in the context of a market where land, services and cultural products produce rent. On this point, the public-private partnership gains relevance, for it is the way to ensure that market interests are present and represented in the planning process.

Second, the cities incorporate elements interesting to capital investors that encompass a “formula” for economic production thought and reproduced as “the only possible scenario to implement urban planning”: revitalisation, degraded areas, new uses, politicians, and big capital. This strategy spread in Europe since the late 1980s and became the unique form of development to follow, including in Latin America (Arantes, 2000: 54).

The role of water plays a fundamental role in these renovations for the reconstruction of “healthy cities” (Ryan, 2010) and the implementation of planning processes for (hydropower) development like the banks of the Kemi River, Finnish Province of Lapland (Krause, 2014).

Water also enables a fluid dynamic for thinking about the cities and the protection of this resource in the framework of contemporary urban planning schemes.

A paradigmatic case is the redevelopment of the Anacostia River in Washington, D.C., United States. For over 20 years, this once polluted river has been the pillar of an extensive regeneration project conducted through the Anacostia Waterfront Initiative (AWI) that ended up generating injustices instead of addressing them (Avni and Fischler, 2020).

Also, nature is the protagonist in this transformative context, for it becomes the object of disputes over the setting of restrictions regarding how it may be accessed and giving rise to different forms of appropriation. This is often referred to as the *commodification of nature* to integrate it to the market economies (Greenberg, 1998), while it is also seen as the transformation of nature for *urban metabolic processes* (Swyngedouw, 2004). In both cases, nature is organised in and through power, creating various forms of access to and exclusion from it in the process; I will therefore outline next what is meant by the term “nature”.

Nature

The question of what nature has prompted me to look more attentively at the different “natures” that come into play when Techint proposes a “new social relationship with the river” through the waterfront revitalisation:

a) The “Hermetic”/ “Gnostic”¹³ image of nature by the project’s “promoters” (Techint, municipal authorities and Oficina Urbana) that understands the dominance of humans over the natural world (Capanna, 2016: 48) and which I will analyse in chapter 3.

¹³ In his study of the history of nature, the philosopher Pablo Capanna states that over time humans have been represented in different ways. The current century sees a transition from Hermeticism (the contempt for matter) to a Gnostic matrix which is at the root of the current planetary crisis (denying the real existence of the physical world) (Capanna: 2016: 16). Modern science (in the Renaissance) saw nature as an artefact that could be deciphered by human reason or intervened in by technical knowledge, leading the way to what is next for humans; it is the scientific instead of the philosophical or religious fields from which renovation of nature should be expected (ibid: 200).

b) The ecosystemic vision of inhabitants gathered in the neighbourhood assemblies understanding that human beings are part of complex interactions in a mutual coexistence with nature. The wetlands and forests make up the natural ecosystem of the La Plata River so they represent two major issues in the conflict for the “neighbours”.

First, nature is a collective of humans (their disciplines and tensions) and non-humans (along with its different vegetal and animal communities) together in a complex functioning system (Latour, 2004). Nature and society, then, are mutually constituted through the associations between them, mediated by different forms of knowledge and politics.

Second, nature as places that constitute humans’ environments or surroundings where non-human beings and processes (cognitive, cultural, religious, and relational) can be found (Milton, 2002). The identification with nature is emotional, and this ecologically sensitive way of living can have a moralistic aspect as well as a sense of commonality in identification with what exists.

My own understanding of nature anticipates a *political ecology* approach because nature exists in relation to other economic, social, and political factors that affect it. It is embedded in a culture; it is the object of power relations and it is through political conflict that it is established how it will be controlled or used.

However, this idea of nature has changed since I started my research back in 2011 for my master’s thesis. I also went from indifference to it to an awareness and appreciation of the connections between the ways of life found by the river and how they are linked with my personal life.

Territory

This is how the “neighbours” refer to the riverside during the last years of conflict. Generally speaking, these *hydro-social territories* can be defined as “spatial configurations of people, institutions, water flows, hydraulic technology and the biophysical environment that revolve around the control of water” (Boelens et al., 2016). They are prone to (re)configuration processes, in which a multiplicity of actors competes to establish agreements regarding what that territory is and contains. Consequently, such territories are never fully or forever consolidated, but are constantly renegotiated and challenged (Salamanca et al., 2020). They are characterised by constantly evolving changes, trajectories, and practices, so the development of hydro-social relations occurs in connection not only with the river but also its environment (Krause, 2017).

But beyond the uncertainty of its conditions or the dynamism it contains, the term *territory* itself constitutes a fundamental aspect to understand how people live the changes in their environs.

With focus on Latin America, Betancourt Santiago refers to the “territorial turn” that took place in the last 30 years to explain conflicts where social, peasant or indigenous movements confront hegemonic and homogenising visions and reformulate political and epistemic debates (2017: 313).¹⁴ While territory as a concept is not a new one, as Stuart Elden (2013) has proved in *The Birth of Territory*, it has become a total social concept among social movements in Argentina and the rest of the region. In this respect, Svampa states, that territory is a way of representing the collective frame of action in relation to nature in the in a context of conflict (2019: 41).

So endowed with a political imprint, the territory can be interpreted as a concept of dispute among those who recognise themselves as part of it. As a result of this, other questions appear associated with territory, such as the case of (*collective*) *identity* or the appropriation processes that constitute that identity. This is also the case with *networks*, another form of spatiality according to Nicholls et al (2013: 13), which contribute to the flow of information, ideas and emotions between activists in different locations.

Social movements

The social movement is neighbourhood-based although it contains other pluralities (from other localities and fields of activity) actively resisting the proposal of Techint. It could be defined as a non-homogeneous group based on political solidarity in the face of problems perceived as common, and therefore bringing them together.

The literature on collective action is extensive so I am going to situate the neighbourhood movement in relation to resistance. Geographers like Ulrich Oslander (2016: 12-13) and Paul Routledge (1996: 6-7) make particularly good reviews of this by re-examining the contemporary theoretical debates in which this topic is inscribed. In general terms, they can be defined as the favourable context for action by a social movement (political process model), the means which support that collective action (resource mobilisation theory), and how people find points in common to thrive in their struggle (identity-oriented perspectives).

I will deal in this dissertation with the last two of these. In the first case, the resource mobilisation is for neighbourhood assemblies about generating resources and seizing opportunities to make up for the lack of organisational structure, leadership and external financial support.

¹⁴ Betancourt Santiago refers to the territorial turn as a qualitative leap after the Lefebvrian “spatial turn” born in the 1970s in the context of political ecology. The “territorial turn” is an expansion of the existing epistemological, theoretical and political aspects in the context of struggles linked to a territory. The collective demands have been constituted around concepts linked to a territory in dispute – for example, autonomy, dignity and good living or *buen vivir* (2017: 313). To this can be added an identity construction of otherness, according to Betancourt Santiago, rooted in their geographies that social movements strive to defend.

The “neighbours” turn this material scarcity and the difficulty of agreeing on long-term strategies around through shared learning, knowledge production and alliances as ways of generating resources. The capitalisation of the political trajectory of some “neighbours” and the use of creativity at a discursive and practical level are also very distinctive of these local groups.

For this reason, in the second part of the dissertation, I will describe their repertoire of contention to establish how they manage to overcome material restrictions and still build up power. In doing so, the “moral resources” stand out for the generation of forms of supply, support, and help within and outside the movement. I understand these kinds of resources, also included in resource mobilisation theory, as creating political possibilities rather than pursuing a more mature political formation (Wolford, 2010: 22). Subaltern groups (fighting for access to land in the Wolford case) or marginalised from politics as in the NCP conflict must draw on common sense (popular tradition, folklore) and memory to counter hegemonic narratives and achieve a better life.

The second theory refers to an identity-based contentious politics that may originate in an environmental conflict or in relation to a place (Oslender, 2016: 13, 25)¹⁵. The relevance of identity has become part of the study of *new social movements* (NSM), as these groups are often called, for example, because they have ecological concerns. In other words, the collective action that they represent is no longer based on a class issue, but on a shared identity from which they introduce “cultural changes in meanings (often emerging from intra-group discourses) that foster new collective claims through extra- and anti-institutional modes” (Wickham-Crowley and Eckstein, 2017: 72). However, whether the neighbourhood movement is a NSM will be questioned later in relation to some of the issues that arise throughout the conflict, making identity a relevant aspect in the neighbourhood movement but not their main cause of mobilisation.

The sociologists Rossi and von Bülow (2015) take up these two perspectives in the Latin American context to bring them to current discussions involving social movements such as strategy making and the mobilisation of resources –including the organisation of networks–. I will come back to these in chapters 4 and 5, by situating actors in social and power relations (Routledge, 1996: 515) to account for the setting up of means based on new ethical priorities, and the construction of a multifaceted identity that people defend in relation to the place in conflict.

¹⁵ Oslender alludes to the work of Escobar and Alvarez (1992), *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America*, on the relationship between culture and politics; Laclau and Mouffe (1985), *Hegemony & Social Strategy*, on the articulation and interpretation of meanings in a terrain of domination and resistance); Melucci 1989, *Nomads of the Present*, on social movements as not fixed, homogeneous or coherent; and Touraine 1988, *The Return of the Actor*, on the creation of a cultural project by social movements and the control of the historicity that cannot be separated from the cultural.

Spatiality of resistance

These neighbourhood assemblies have worked on a shared sense of struggle by physically locating themselves in the place of conflict. The articulation between this form of resistance and place took me to consider the spatiality of resistance as a way of understanding the development of the moral ecology around wetlands and forests.

It is the riverside that brings them together, constituting social processes and building relations aiming to change reality; they are not from this place, nor did they originally emerge here, but this is where their convictions and principles of behaviour are shaped.

Seen in a similar light, the notion *terrain of resistance* manifests a scheme of unequal power, of symbolic meanings and discourses in dispute and a place where politics unfolds and action can be physically expressed – for example, through signalling and the construction of trenches (Routledge: 1996: 516). People identify with such terrain and try to protect it or embody the construction of power in a place where solidarities emerge, bonds deepen and political identities are shaped (Nicholls et al, 2013: 20).

Not only it provides a group disposition towards resistance, but it is also an emotionally charged place, it becomes their refuge, their cultural reference, the centre of their organisation and what they want to bequeath to the next generations. And when tensions heighten, their spatiality is imbued with love, recognising others with whom they interact as equals and with whom they establish close, almost familiar bonds, in a territory that they consider as “their own” and must protect.

According to Oslender, the interaction between spatiality and resistance has to do with “imagining the construction of an alternative life project in this place” (2016: 27), so the riverside becomes a significant element in how the neighbourhood movement conceives their political cause.

In short, it is a physical place, which people appropriate beyond its materiality to turn it into a place of reference and belonging.

Love of nature

I left this last notion for the end so that it could be interpreted just before the research objectives, as it is also a fundamental part of what is being examined in this ethnography.

From the psychological theories or cognitive sciences in relation to environmental issues, the human experience regarding place is mediated by affect and can be defined as *place attachment*.

This type of affective attachment can be linked to past (places of childhood) or present experiences and sometimes also to the future as the place where people would like to live, stay, or return to (Giuliani, 2003: 137). For the anthropology of emotion, the emotions differ from place to place, constituting what makes those places (Beatty, 2019).

That is, they have a cultural matrix that speaks of something shared and a sense of belonging that can come to function as a barometer of social change.

Also, from the perspective of environmental anthropology and as indicated by Milton (2002), love could be defined regarding the following features. First, an experience in relation to place that turns out to be the impact of a given environment generating a particular *knowledge* of the world which, in turn, is incorporated and transmitted at the level of social relations.¹⁶

For this to happen, knowledge is linked to a form of *perception* indicating what has been learned (basically information that has been collected but also processed in a certain way) when being in that place. Perception, at the same time, is based on *discovery, curiosity, or a sense of search* generating an awareness that enables new knowledge, ideas and even values that influence the place and end up affecting people.

Second, there is an enjoyment of nature¹⁷ which is linked to an identification with what there is in that place – that is, nature – and how events unfold there.

So, enjoyment is related to the *direct contact with nature*, and with what people think and feel (even at a sensory level), especially when they are exposed to it.

Third, I accept the concept of identification with nature mentioned above, to emphasise a sensitive way of living through contact with nature that makes people want to protect it. This benevolent action is linked to this commitment to care from a more primal identification that makes people want to engage with nature: this is where morality resides, and not in mandatory actions.

Neera Singh (2013) links this sense of commitment to the conservation of forests in India, for example, reclaiming the role of the affective in the care of nature; I will return to her later in chapter 9 to decipher the role of “forest caretakers” assumed by the assemblies through loving ecological practices they carry out together.

Research objectives

The general research objectives are as follows:

- 1- Analyse the relationship that a neighbourhood movement established with the wetlands and forests they defend in the context of a socio-environmental conflict between 2008 and 2018.
- 2- Explore to what extent the concept of *moral ecologies* fit with what has been observed in the field and determine the elements that comprise it.

¹⁶ In chapter 3, on knowing nature through experience, Kay Milton refers to: Brewer, B. (1998) Experience and reason in perception. In: O’Hear, A. (ed.) *Current issues in philosophy of mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁷ Milton explores the meaning of enjoyment through the term “biophilia”, or the love of life or living things (2002: 60). However, this does not fully explain what happens when this love of nature is expressed and materialised. She bases her idea on: Soulé, M. E. (1993). Biophilia unanswered questions. In: Kellert, S.R. & Wilson, E. (eds.) *The biophilia hypothesis*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

3- Explore the relation between the love that the “neighbours” manifest in the conflict and the moral ecology over wetlands and native forests that they claim.

More specific objectives have also been established which allow the reader to anticipate the content of the chapters that make up this dissertation:

- a- Trace the history (environmental, social, territorial) of the riverside in Avellaneda and Quilmes, especially from the seventies onwards, when major changes took place paving the way to NCP.
- b- Provide an overview of the public management model implemented in these territories and to establish comparisons with similar areas also in conflict.
- c- Introduce the “promoters” and “neighbours” by virtue of the formation of alliances, their characteristics, and the interactions between these actors over time that led to the conflict.

In this regard, to depict the origins of the neighbourhood movement and forms of collaboration developed by the assemblies.

- d- Describe the logic of “territorial colonisation” proposed by the developers for the site in principle from NCP to extend the real-estate development to the whole of the La Plata River.
- e- Describe the variables that are part of the moral ecologies on the riverside and establish connections among them: identity, memory, nostalgia, sense of place, transcendence (territory, patrimony and entrenchment) and love.
- f- Define what love of nature is, or what the “neighbours” refer to as love, and what role it plays in the dispute.

Research questions and structure of thesis

The overarching questions raised at the beginning of the introduction point to the relationship between the neighbourhood movement and the southern riverside of the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires over a ten-year period. It is the “neighbours” who bring regional and local collective forms and organisations to the riverside, promoting conservation of the place, laying new material, moral, and emotional grounds to redefine the human exchange with it. This can be called the *moral ecology* of the “neighbours”, which aims to sustain a vision different from that of NCP.

It seems logical that those who have ancestral rights or a sacred relationship with a territory and even an economic dependence like peasants strive to defend it. But in the urban context under analysis, it is appropriate to ask the reasons why a group of people engage in the defence of a place they do not inhabit or own. This issue will remain out of the spotlight, although it prompts me to wonder why such a political commitment has arisen and how it has turned into love.

It can be assumed that people act that way because they inhabit coastal districts and that they all should love nature for that matter, but it is not like that. Even the riverside dwellers and a large part of the population have decided to stay out of the conflict, due to what many locals define as “social indifference”.

In order to lay the groundwork to describe the unfolding of the conflict, the first two chapters will focus on examining the historically contentious organisation of the southern banks of the La Plata River. In the first part of the dissertation, chapter 1 explores how certain changes produced in the territory, forms of land occupation, and “solutions” to long-awaited environmental and social problems have impacted on people and generated tensions over the place. As I will show, this has been happening since the very foundation of the districts, always generating tensions and perpetuating power relations over the territory.

The second chapter will show the powers at work driving such tensions on a more recent basis, and how some political and economic actors have contributed to the making of the place through contention.

Having examined this will lead to understanding later why urban development is described in terms of territorial “colonisation” by the “promoters”, and what this implies.

The elaboration of these chapters led me to delve into the historical past of the conflicted territory in order to show how it has led to an environmental crisis since the 1970s. This will help me to establish in chapter 3 why NCP as a development project proposing to address unresolved urban, environmental and sanitary problems has led to such a long-term confrontation.

Said differently, this will allow me to reveal how the territorial colonisation of the “promoters” (expecting to bring progress to protected areas from Avellaneda to Ensenada over fifty kilometres of coastline) shook the local grounds and generated public controversies.

My hypothesis is that Techint’s project is the culmination of a process of environmental destruction initiated decades ago by the same actors taking part in the conflict over NCP, among them Techint and the municipal and provincial levels of government, towards an urban territorial transformation.

Chapter 4 examines the neighbourhood movement against NCP, its composition and the particularities of what they do together to resist the destruction of protected areas of the districts. Looking closely at the assemblies, their most active parts, will also help me to describe how the “neighbours” (“*vecinos*”) developed a way of working in collaboration with other groups and forms of association while seeking “purity” with these others and also nature.

In relation to this, in chapter 5, I aim to know more about the place-based collective identity that “neighbours” manifested during the conflict.

That is, the sort of attachment and belonging they developed with the place through different identity expressions that distinguish themselves from other neighbourhood assemblies. My main argument revolves around the idea that their political identity emerges from a local cultural context in relation to the river and the interactions among the “neighbours” that gives sense to the purpose of the group.

From chapter 6 onwards (second part of the dissertation) I look at the emergence of a *moral ecology* around the riverside ecosystems of the La Plata River sustained by the “promoters” as well as the “neighbours”, so this is the second part of the dissertation.

In chapter 6 in particular I look at the first dimensions of the moral ecology formulated by the “neighbours” during the early days of the conflict: memory and nostalgia, which beyond their emotional component mark a narrative of the past to look at the present and future of the communities threatened by the urban transformation of their beloved river.

The second dimension of moral ecology proposed by the assemblies, and supported by the rest of the neighbourhood movement, has to do with the physical and symbolic appropriation of the riverside which resulted in the reinvention of the place. Therefore, in chapter 7, I describe the practices and narratives that made the wetlands and forests visible again and how the production of knowledge and a more direct experience of nature produced a new sense of place.

Chapter 8 gives an account of the last four years of the conflict (2014–2018) with the creation of a *transcendence*, as I call a process of giving the riverside a condition of commonality, a place of (legal, moral, ecological) uniqueness that makes it out of reach for the “promoters”.

I analyse how this takes place and what moral and material resources the “neighbours” resort to build up that transcendent condition of the place. With the senses exploring the wetlands and forests, with knowledge circulating among the assemblies, the quest to generate the possibility of change and feeling weariness and frustration for the conflict, love begins to express itself among the “neighbours” of NHOC.

In chapter 9 I propose to understand what this love is about at a collective level, in connection with nature and amidst conflict. Why invoke love to account for the link to the place they protect? What is this love about and what can it reveal, especially when it is put into action? Much can be said about love, but in concrete terms, what does it involve for these people?

The analysis of this last chapter shows how the love of nature is supported by the good behaviour of the “neighbours” and the need to take care of this place, thus shaping the moral ecology that I focus on in this work.

I will describe next the Research Methodology implemented for the purposes of this dissertation. It follows the Introduction to my work to outline the type of research approach I opted for, the techniques carried out (additional information in the Annex) and the circumstances of the socio-environmental conflict in which I conducted my fieldwork.

I describe the pressure imposed by the actors involved in the conflict, the doubts and contradictions experienced in my role as a researcher, and how I decided to confront these issues. For example, in dealing with a multiplicity of actors, I ended up extending my stay in the field beyond what I had originally planned, but I believe that their beliefs and values provide a glimpse into the drama of this type of socio-environmental conflict.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I will describe in these pages the research method implemented for the proposed time period (2008-2018). I will do it through some field difficulties I have dealt with, many of them stemming from a complex political context, which have also led me to develop my own research tools, which I will explain subsequently.

I initially worked on a research protocol that included two short-term field visits (of three months each in 2016 and 2017) whose findings were added to field data collected for my master's thesis (2011-2013). The qualitative techniques designed and used are described below, based on an ethnographic and multi-actor approach to achieve long-term collaboration with those involved in the conflict and to embrace the different competing perspectives.

The following table should also include the countless phone calls and exchanges of messages with the “neighbours” which have allowed me to stay in contact with them and to follow the circumstances of the conflict. In retrospect, this latter form of information has at times been overwhelming to manage, although it has given me a better understanding of the riverside culture of Avellaneda and Quilmes.

Non-directed interviews	20
Structured/semi-structured interviews (including historical oral sources)	38
Off-the-record talks with officials at municipal and provincial level, environmental/legal experts and researchers	15
Participant observation (festivals, walks, assembly meetings, regional meetings)	From 2011 to 2013 (more than ten occasions for my master's thesis) and between 2016 and 2018 during two field visits (participation in at least six activities)
Documentation collection (technical, historical, legal), classification and analysis	Material provided by all actors involved in conflict plus historical or legal sources
Gathering, systematisation and analysis of photos, videos, press releases and communications	Material provided by all actors involved in conflict
Monitoring of the conflict and issues involved through local, regional and national media	Between 2011 and 2018 (some specific issues have been reviewed more recently)
Consultation of social networks (latest events, opinions from other users, chronology of events) and blogs of neighbourhood assemblies and organisations (looking for interpretation of studies, for example) taking part in the social movement against NCP	From 2011 to 2023, especially in the reconstruction of first years of conflict and in recent years as many ideas and discourses by “neighbours” have consolidated in a clearer way

Problems in the field

The complexity of the field can be defined in the need to deal with unexpected or intricate issues that emerged as I conducted my research. Some of them represented the opportunity to identify the lack of legal, technical or scientific foundation to what was being said, or what is the same, to find evidence for arguments that were being raised as “truth”.

Similarly, with the physical limitations of reaching and accessing that geography along the La Plata River and the fears not only from inhabitants of this area, but also from my family, friends and neighbours from my home city about the southern metropolitan area.

But most importantly, the main barrier to research was the climate of mistrust towards my role as a researcher because at some point this distrust turned into manipulation to defend a position or to get information from what someone else might know.

“Do not go there, you might get killed!”

The public access to the riparian areas along the La Plata River, as well as to other basins of the Metropolitan Region of Buenos Aires, is often restricted due to municipal decision, the privatisation of their lands for commercial purposes, or their exuberant vegetation which makes it difficult to transit through them. Until I started my research I had never been to the riverside of Avellaneda and Quilmes, so when I first heard about a socio-environmental conflict with Techint I was also surprised, like many others, to learn that there were legally protected lands or even wetlands there.

In addition to this, the southern districts are known for their high levels of urban crime and violence so every time I went there, I was told by people that I had to take precautions to avoid being robbed or attacked. I dressed so as not to attract much attention and used an old mobile phone many times to take photos, since the “neighbours” had told me not to take my camera out of my pocket.

The arrival of any visitor like me at the riverside was mediated by the assemblies who assumed the triple role of providing security (the neighbourhood La Ribera Bernal could get dangerous sometimes), orienting new visitors in the place and providing information.

The help I was given to enter the place and move around the riverside neighbourhood without distress made it easier for me to focus on the assembling of a network of interlocutors between assemblies and inhabitants to get to know the place and to learn about the latest actions by the “promoters” in the conflict. Especially with people from the *Asamblea* NHOC, managing the in-place social relations since the announcement of Techint’s project, I was also able to reach out to other organisations in the region as well as researchers and social leaders that NHOC was connected to.

I worked with them in reciprocity for the improvement of the place, contributing with tasks involving weeding and cleaning, participating in protests, and supporting their position in public hearings using my scientific knowledge. I think it was a form of personal survival as well as a way of being able to complete my research work; in fact, the fear never really went away but it was an element that at the end ended up becoming an opportunity while in the field.

A friend/foe logic

Since the beginning of my research for my master's thesis, or since 2011, I found myself in not only a conflictive but also a hostile field as a researcher between the municipal authorities, Techint and the neighbourhood assemblies. They did not know me, so I was an "enemy" until I proved that I was not there to get information that could be of interest to the other party.

The municipal authorities did not want to be part of an investigation, in order to prevent the conflict from escalating, so they put all kinds of obstacles in the way of the meetings with them or their staff.

Techint in particular deployed a seduction game enabling me to access those involved in the project NCP at the company, expecting that I would play favourably with regard to the acceptance of the urban development due to my being in contact with the assemblies, or that I would favour the company's position, as Ernesto Rona, the former spokesperson of NCP, suggested to me many times (though I refused).

Rona once offered to take me to Campana, a district where the steel plant Tenaris is located¹⁸ an hour's drive from Buenos Aires City. I met staff from the social responsibility department because Rona wanted to show me the company's model of successful intervention in a community.

"We are the hand that gives", explained one of the interviewees about the economic and cultural importance of Tenaris on the local life which could be replicated in Avellaneda and Quilmes.

A similar situation arose among the "neighbours", who "scrutinised" me for years until they realised that I did not represent a threat to them. Knowing that I was in contact with the company made them cautious at first but then they thought they could benefit from "first-hand" information about what Techint was planning to do. I also declined this possibility.

I rather worked on building up trust without playing any role in the confrontation, and on maintaining neutrality as a researcher on both sides of the conflict. I developed a familiarity especially with the neighbourhood movement that I focused on because I found their ideas and values interesting to show for these kinds of disputes.

18

Tenaris is a multinational metallurgical subsidiary of Techint Group and a leading manufacturer of pipes and related services for the world's energy industry and other industrial applications. <https://www.tenaris.com/es> Last accessed: 9/11/2022.

And even though they started to consider me as part of the assembly movement, I conveyed clear research objectives and maintained a transparent communication with them as well as with Techint, which allowed me to relate to them all, respecting the position of each. My goal has always been to deepen into their arguments and ideas, and not to transform myself into something that could be manipulated by either party.

Although it was difficult to maintain a certain neutrality with NHOC, for the affinity I felt with them, it was not until I finished the research in 2018 that I began to generate closer ties with some of them for projects that we developed together like the book *Bosque Nativo* (published in 2022). However, carrying out other projects with them has been almost impossible since then, as the distrust of NHOC towards the rest of the group we were part of has made it difficult again to work on a practical and reliable basis.

Unravelling the “*negociados*”

The case study I approach with NCP shows a model of management of wetland and native forest spaces in the metropolitan region, and how political and economic powers articulate to achieve urban development in those areas. However, I realised that it was not as simple as it seemed, in the sense that there was a place transformation proposal that generated controversy and needed to be discussed to reach a final public decision between the actors involved.

At first, I observed that many government practices and decisions went against what was legally established or that the population demanded, as far as I understood (without me fully knowing the economic, real estate or political interests involved). As soon as NCP showed up in the public scene, the municipal authorities signed administrative resolutions and changed the legal status of lands (in Avellaneda, not yet in Quilmes) to foster construction works without reaching a social consensus. I did not understand the contradictions between what was officially said and done.

The initial interviews with municipal and provincial authorities also ended up leaving me with more doubts than clarifications as to what was going to be done or how its environmental effects would be mitigated.

As I looked into this sort of urban and environmental management that by law required the citizens' participation, the connections between politicians and construction companies seemed to characterise these processes.

A provincial senator in 2011 as well as environmental specialists and the “neighbours” made reference throughout the research to the “*negociados*” to account for this situation. That meant the illicit or corrupt deals involving the allocation, concession or sale of legally protected lands to private hands or mutually beneficial business between the corporate and municipal powers, which

was almost impossible for me to verify.

I worked on disentangling how this public-private alliance worked in relation to revitalisation projects or the private urban developments in northern districts of Buenos Aires. Like the “neighbours”, it was hard to understand the causes and effects of public lands speculation in the region with their grabbing, the income expectations of financial capital, and how urban land gained economic value.

The limited accessibility to provincial and municipal public information has contributed to further confusion in the public debate over NCP and the continuing formation of controversies. In my role as a researcher this process took maybe too much time until I was able to put together all the documents provided by the actors once I was able to access them.

My own construction of empirical data

The “fieldwork” is not just a physical location or something that happens or where a researcher goes to gather information. From my experience it is ever-shifting, unpredictable, and requires an innovative approach because it must be built during the research process I was also part of.

At first, I pondered how I could get to the bottom of the positions established in the dispute, only to then realise that I should go back in time to the 1970s in order to identify actors and reconstruct the history of the riverside. So I needed to talk to all the protagonists, the alleged “enemies”, according to whom I spoke to, by reaching the actors involved. I wanted to get to know everyone involved in what was shaping up to be a problematic new territorial organisation. The number of actors in both districts involved in the debate of the first years of conflict led me to distinguish between “promoters” and “neighbours” in order to unify positions and interests.

However, the way some actors acted, rarely stayed confined to the space in dispute led me to incorporate “several levels of socio-political [and geographical] articulation”, as Little argues (2007), especially in relation to the neighbourhood movement. I understood that their work involved networks and connections across space in which solidarity guided interactions irrespective of where they were geographically situated.

In order to identify the organisations and political or trade-union groups that participated in the conflict beyond the local groups, their relationship with the riverside as well as the frequency and type of interaction, I developed a table which enabled me to identify intense moments of confrontation and the corresponding forms of collaboration among people to get to the following:

- a) The type and number of groups that joined forces as soon as the conflict arose.
- b) Their political trajectory in the southern metropolitan area.
- c) Which organisations remained active in the dispute over time, which participated temporarily, and which supported some actions and did not show a more permanent support.

- d) When and how those joint initiatives gathered local, regional, provincial and even national actors around the claims of the residents of Avellaneda and Quilmes; and
- e) How those alliances did or did not prosper throughout the conflict, who no longer took part in the conflict, and who stood up for the defence of the riverbank during those ten years.

Similarly, there was a rich diversity of opinions about what the riverside represented among the “neighbours” from being a “nice place” to the feeling of being “home” or symbolising the “last bastion” of social struggle. Thus, in December 2017, I proposed an ethnocartographic exercise to the Assembly NHOC to work on what the coastal space meant to people, why it was important and how they could depict it on paper.

Although I provided the guidelines for the making of a map, in fact it was more about mobilising their collective imagination and an instance of reflection and problematization of the place, by exchanging experiences and knowledge. The resulting map that can be seen in the Annex allowed me as a researcher to get to know the territory better, especially from the perspective of these “neighbours”. The activity was organised at the resistance space of NHOC in Bernal’ riverside with a group of fifteen people. Some remained seated around a makeshift table with an old door placed on a large piece of rubble on the side of the dry toilet. Others pretended to be cleaning and assembling a grill on the ground in order to participate from afar, while others preferred not to intervene.

The first geographic points of reference were drawn as if they were placed at the La Plata River, from where they demarcated the territory in conflict and then in different colours the dangers (in red), the footpaths (in brown), the streams in Avellaneda and Quilmes pouring into the river (in blue), and the nature reserve and the farming area (in green). To this were added phrases or answers from the participants who wrote them down on paper who also added observations to the drawing. The full interview for this exercise includes more than 30 pages but the initial questions to trigger people’s reactions are transcribed in the Annex.

Finally, I would like to refer to the identification and definition of love, which is often associated with a personal and subjective kind of feeling, but which I will look at from a collective perspective. During the first years of the contention, the discourse of the neighbourhood movement focused on emotions linked to anger and indignation because the riverside space was once again being threatened. At halfway of tensions, and without fully replacing that initial emotional state, love was voiced through personal accounts and as a collective form, respectively.

The Assembly NHOC showed through specific actions what they perceived and how they felt about it while they were there.

This was evident in the individual interviews when referring to this natural space as mediating a new form of affective awareness, turning later to a shared feeling in material they produced together (writings, audio-visual material) through a poetic description of the place.

As I mentioned before, this type of feeling and acting with respect to nature was also adopted by other local and regional organisations over time, generating a new political culture and morality in the resistance to private projects. That is the reason why I can emphasise the importance of what has happened around the conflict over NCP and its consequences, such as this affective surge in relation to a place, which can serve in the future to better explain the details of a socio-environmental conflict or to pose new research challenges.

For an ethnography of socio-environmental conflicts

My understanding of ethnography, what it means and its scope, is similar to that of the anthropologist Rosana Guber (2001: 11-14) in that it is a form of approach, method, and writing. First, ethnography is a conception and practice of knowledge that seeks to understand social phenomena from the perspective of their protagonists. Second, as an open-ended method of research it enables a prolonged period of contact with the subjects of study, even at a geographical distance. Third, an ethnography, as a text, represents a dense description of an interpretation problematised by the researcher as a process (Smartt Gullion, 2016: 105).

Ethnography from the perspective of political ecology provided me with the methodological and conceptual tools to analyse the dispute over NCP. Drawing on the work of Little (2007), this meant the definition of variables to delimit the problem being observed (culture, power, politics and nature), the incorporation of local groups left behind in negotiations over the place (as part of my multi-actor approach), and the dealing with spatial and temporal scales of analysis over time.

In the study of the factors as well as actors and interactions that make a conflict, I managed to cross the divide between nature and culture by understanding how a collective relationship develops in relation to a riverside ecosystem and how their survival is mutually dependent.

I therefore advocate for an ethnography that contemplates this reciprocal influence, which can tell us a lot about controversies beyond biology or culture in terms of conflicting opinions, although I think that the alleged divide has been settled over the years.

Within this proposed framework, I have always prioritised my relationship with people and my own form of interaction with a place I got to know well. I practised attentive and active listening to their concerns and problems, respecting their ideas and the way they expressed themselves.

In this way I learned from them, and also learned about nature in the place, as I mentioned before, changing my ideas about how nature in general should be protected or taken care of.

In a conflict it is easy to take a political position as a researcher, through militant involvement as the background of an environmental problem. This is even more evident in Argentina when I read scientific articles or books where ideas are based on ideology rather than evidence. As a result, those who have problems are no longer listened to, researchers fall into the same epistemological trap and reality is shaped by very good and very bad parties.

Not only must methodological issues be reviewed when doing research, but ethical issues are also of paramount importance when dealing with so many actors at the same time and often working with confidential information. Critical reflection in this regard is also important, as the researcher must construct his or her own idea of things, avoiding influences or manipulations.

Transdisciplinary work together with other experts, and in the integration of knowledge, as shown in this dissertation, can also help to avoid bias or confusion in the multiple spheres of action being analysed (legal, environmental, moral, emotional, spatial). In this respect, anthropology and (critical and environmental) geography have been fundamental to account for matters that were being observed in the field.



Figure 5: **Keep out, this is a private area!** Author: Vanina Santy. 2016.

FIRST PART

CHAPTER 1: Southern Banks of the La Plata River: An Historically Contested Place

“[...] the subject is so abysmal that it exceeds the frameworks in which the dramas unfold [...] understanding the scale of this drama and the ecology of the silence that surrounds it, that is the challenge.” (At the riverside of Avellaneda and Quilmes).
Francisco de Amorrortu, specialist in wetlands. 5/05/2019¹⁹.

The objective of this chapter is to provide an overview of the historical political ecology of wetlands and native forests in Avellaneda and Quilmes. What have the human interactions been with this space over time? What have they involved, and why has conflict become a lasting condition? I will look at the urban, economic, and socio-environmental processes that have been taking place over the years, especially in the last five decades, when this area changed from a natural public area – known for its ecological food production, cutting-edge technology and infrastructure for recreational and tourist purposes– to an *environmental sacrifice zone* (Lerner & Brown, 2010).

I claim that the urban development of the southern banks of the La Plata River that NCP embodies has been in preparation since the end of 1970 with the arrival of the sanitary landfill in Avellaneda. In fact, the place has been exploited specifically with that purpose in mind by interests other than demographic, social or even sanitary ones, which has allowed the privatisation of lands and an exclusionary utilisation of the riverside by private players. Therefore, I will first show the different forms of land occupation that come from colonial times (Argentina was a Viceroyalty of the Spanish Crown for almost three hundred years) because I consider it essential to understand the current appropriations in dispute with regard to NCP, most of them having been generated at that time.

Second, I will describe the powerful actors that have been behind these processes which since the late 1970s have been led by international capital, national private sectors linked to real-estate investment and industries seeking to settle in the area. Third, I will look at the ways in which this territory has been continually subjected to permanent environmental damage in the name of a never-ending development that has caused more harm than benefit to the population.

¹⁹ During e-mail correspondence on the problems affecting the riverside in Avellaneda and Quilmes, so Francisco de Amorrortu advised me on how to measure the scale of conflict that exists there while I was in contact with him for almost a year. Pablo Nisenson, a film director, produced a documentary about him: “The Gaze of the Hummingbird” (2017) since he devoted his life to the protection of wetlands ecosystems. Francisco is an example of a person engaged in environmental struggle, and a reference for the “neighbours” in the metropolitan region of Buenos Aires

These changes have not occurred without conflict, turning the banks of Avellaneda and Quilmes into the most problematic place in the region because it has always reproduced a similar pattern of controversies as time has passed – that is, through the creation of new and controversial land standards and regulations at the riverside by the powerful actors (represented by the alliance between Techint and the public sector), which those who have lost access to the river have attempted to resist.

My second claim is that these low and flood-prone lands are *contested spaces* because multiple actors and their practices converge in a clashing manner (particularly since NCP came about). The conflict has been a fundamental element of social-space production, as over the years tensions have not disappeared but have been renewed, always leading to the same public debates. For this reason, the emerging conflicts have functioned as a catalyst for less visible disagreements as the place has concentrated social and urban problems that have long affected the population across the districts.

However, the notion of contested space is not entirely defined by a dispute of some sort or a struggle between opponents; it goes beyond this to reveal a scheme of actors occupying differential positions with regard to the control of and access to power (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003: 18) – in this context, in relation to nature. On a symbolic level, it also evidences the meanings invested in a space which also led to a confrontation over their interpretation (Mc Donough, 2003).

Contention, from an anthropological perspective, can be defined as deriving from the capacity of the riverside to evidence how the search for “cleanliness” and development have affected people’s lives in the long term.

At this point I would like to make a clarification: I understand that the concept of contention admits no real difference with the idea of conflict for the purposes of this dissertation, as both show signs of historical discord among the actors that can be found there.

To show how this became a reality and to make it easy for me to explain, I propose a chronological approach to examine the different tensions that have been taking place over these lands. The time range might seem exceptionally long, extending from the 1600s up to the present, with conflict taking on a more accelerated pace since 1978 (start of landfill operations) and 2008 (when NCP went public). I have used historical sources like official documents, chronicles of historians, and narratives of riverside inhabitants as well as “neighbours” (“*vecinos*”) and experts with a vast knowledge of the place. This will allow me to depict an uninterrupted model of territorial public management, and at the same time to give a background to the old “solutions” that Techint’s revitalisation seeks to provide again for the area.

Riverside lands for the elite

Already in 1580 with the second foundation of Buenos Aires City, the lands by the La Plata River were allocated to Spanish *conquistadores*²⁰ through the creation of *estancias* (large estates or cattle ranches). Situated from the Matanza-Riachuelo Basin to the vicinity of Magdalena in the south of the province, more than one hundred kilometres of coastline were handed over for their colonising mission (Craviotto and Nicholson, 1945). However, the area was not completely vacant, according to the historical review by the Municipality of Quilmes, as there exist chronicles of a Guaraní aboriginal settlement in Don Bosco, Avellaneda.²¹

The heirs of the three new landowners, Pedro de Xeres, Pedro de Quirós, and Pedro de Izarra, would have continued to possess the plots (or part of them) in 1600 and even in the first decades of the 1700s. By then, the riverside in Quilmes had become the centre of smuggling activities in which the slave trade stood out. Manufactured products introduced by European ships were exchanged for agricultural livestock products. The raising of cattle and horses (introduced by the Spanish conquest in the early 1500s) progressed to a more consolidated economic activity distinctive of the country.

In 1666, the Kilmes peoples (the district owes its name to them) arrived in Quilmes as exiles after 100 years of confrontation with the Spaniards who wanted to get to the Pacific Ocean. They had been expelled to a ravine in front of the La Plata River more than 1,000 kilometres away from their original territories in the north-west of Argentina.²² Two hundred families were assigned to the Reduction of the Holy Cross of the Kilmes Indians (Reducción de la Santa Cruz de los Indios Kilmes) which along with the *encomienda* and the *maloca*, among others, acted as institutional devices of domination and territorial control in the colonial society of that time.

The objective was to dismantle rebellious aboriginal groups that rejected the new socio-political and territorial organisation to create other forms of tribute to the Spanish crown and to supply labour for the city of Buenos Aires and its surroundings (Carlón, 2007). The spatial organisation characteristic of this reduction was described as follows: “Around the original chapel there were huts made of mud and straw. The territorial influence of the chapel extended to other towns and contrary to the rules established for the reduction’s administration, other non-indigenous settlers entered to reside permanently there [...]” (Municipality of Quilmes, 2021).

²⁰ Any of the leaders in the Spanish conquest of America, especially of Mexico and Peru, in the 1500s. This is how they are referred to by: Craviotto, J. and Barrera Nicholson, C. (1945). Contributions to Local History: The First Settlers and Owners of Quilmes. This article was published on 26/02/2018 as “Unpublished work of Craviotto and Nicholson brought out by Chalo Agnelli”. *Perspectiva Sur*: <http://www.perspectivasur.com/3/70268-los-primeros-pobladores-y-propietarios-de-quilmes> Last accessed: 16/03/2021.

²¹ Municipality of Quilmes. Our History. <https://quilmes.gov.ar/quilmes/historia.php>. Last accessed: 16/03/2021.

²² They were originally from what today is known as the Province of Tucumán, Argentina.

In fact, the historical records of the 18th century focused on the changes that this reduction underwent with its shrinking population, disease and lack of work, as the irremediable organisation of the district was laid out (Craviotto, 1966).

The historical significance of the *Quilmeña* coast is because it was the main scene of confrontations between the British Empire and the Viceroyalty of La Plata River belonging to the Spanish Crown. It was considered a weak entry point due to the easy accessibility of the coast and its proximity to Buenos Aires, which English troops wanted to reach.

In 1806, approximately 1,600 men disembarked in Quilmes and occupied the ravines in preparation to fight against the militia led by Pedro Arze.²³ All the inhabitants, both free and slaves, were summoned by Santiago de Liniers, military commander, to prevent the English push towards Buenos Aires, but the strategy failed.

A year later, a second invasion brought foreign forces to Ensenada (40 kilometres south of Quilmes) to regain power over Buenos Aires after the expulsion of English representatives. They advanced across the wetlands to get to a first camp located in what is known today as La Plata City. From there they moved, crossing a number of streams until reaching the Kilmes' settlement willing to cross the Riachuelo River in what ended up being a 50-kilometre journey on foot. They encountered local subversion while the Creole (*Criollo*) battalion, for their part, waited on the other side of the Riachuelo to fight for their territory. It was an almost unprecedented event in Quilmes, with multiple forces united against the English soldiers, including merchants, monopolists and smugglers, and finally the general population, to defend an illegitimately occupied territory that was considered their own (Barela, 2006).

By declaring the reduction extinct, the district of Quilmes was officially created in 1812 as well as other localities in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires. This enabled authorities to give away and sell lands at an incredibly low price to different personalities of Buenos Aires, many of them setting up their weekend homes by the river. In addition, the Creoles and Spaniards were attracted to the area, giving rise to the establishment of new *estancias* that promoted its economic development. Since the 16th century, people settled on the coast of the Riachuelo basin, where small farms were established as a means of subsistence.

Linares asserts that one of the precedents for the settlement in the coastal area of Avellaneda had to do with the establishment of the first *vaquería* (cattle-raising establishment) there.

²³ The battle was known as the "Combat of Quilmes" and took place on 26 June 1806.

Following a similar pattern of land distribution to the rest of the southern riverside, the *adelantado*²⁴ Juan Torre de Vera y Aragón received an area that matched the present limits of Avellaneda District (52.48 km²).²⁵ It was later subdivided into smaller parcels that originated the present localities.

When talking about the form of occupation of this territory in Avellaneda there is a widespread version of the story that involves further, later occurrences also characterised by displacement and struggle.

For many riverside inhabitants, it was Italians, mainly Genoan (from the coastal city of Genoa), Piedmontese (north) and Calabrian (south) who pioneered the new occupation of the riverbanks.

When they arrived, their grandchildren and great-grandchildren remember, they noticed that the landscape resembled that of their home areas, and since most of them were peasants, they decided to work together to make those lands productive.²⁶ They took plots in Sarandí, by the end of 1900s initiating an agricultural transformation; they turned the hydric properties of the territory to their advantage with the organisation of a sophisticated and original system of canals for irrigation and navigation. The canals for irrigation enabled the settling of a key area of small peri-urban peasant farms that for decades were one of the main sources of horticultural supply for the city of Buenos Aires (Rabey, 2005). Furthermore, an important artisan wine-growing activity emerged to give the area an identity mark for the quality of their products. Immigrants had to adjust their techniques and knowledge to a humid climate, so they made grafts of European vines that resulted in a small red-black grape called *chinche*. Plum and pear trees were also part of the new fruit crops.

The canals, according to Rabey, were also used for navigation in small sailing boats with oars which carried people and goods between the farms and the port in La Boca. This use was completely abandoned by the 1950s with the development of terrestrial means of transport.

The riverside in Sarandí has particularly owed its improvement to the influence of Italian culture – a point that local inhabitants continue to repeat to this day.²⁷ Genoan teachers created a rural school that remains open and set paths for students to get to the place.

The value of arduous work is part of their inheritance and even today it generates local identification with a way of working and living.

²⁴ A military title held by some Spanish *conquistadores*.

²⁵ Atlas del Conurbano Bonaerense. Urban Studies Programme. University of Avellaneda, Buenos Aires, Argentina. <https://www.atlasconurbano.info/pagina.php?id=179> Last accessed: 16/03/2023.

²⁶ Field notes from 2016, 2017, and 2018.

²⁷ “The farmers of the coast”. (March 2011). Documentary produced within the Project for the realisation and production of audiovisual resources at the Institute of Non-Formal Education, National Technological University of Avellaneda. Teachers, farmers, and “neighbours” of the area riverside of Sarandí and Villa Domínico participated in it. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLQXNzMBzLE> Last accessed: 8/2/2021.

Another practice developed in the area was fishing, especially on the southern bank of the Sarandí canal, where a small fishing village was located, and nearby, around 1868, a fish oil factory was installed.

Since 1815, Avellaneda (as well as Quilmes) has consolidated as an industrial area and according to the Industrial Union of this district, its development has been due to the factories that were established in it. The first *saladeros* (meat-curing plants) settled with the manufacturing boost promoted by authorities of the city of Buenos Aires in the south of the Riachuelo Basin.

With flourishing commerce and the expansion of industries related to cattle ranch, the growth of the town continued with tanneries and grease shops to produce fuel oil, candles, and soap.²⁸

This brought in migrants from other Argentine provinces who created new neighbourhoods in Avellaneda, though many times without adequate basic services for this incipient working class to lead a respectable existence. With them also come new ways of settling at the riverside which have been characterised by poverty and harsh living conditions in both districts.

Recent forms of land occupation by the poor

The current riverside dwellers have also faced all kinds of problems in trying to subsist by the river, finding in squatting a way to continue living there. Entire groups of families have done so by occupying lands unlawfully or forcefully and making those places their own, without governmental intervention.

This section then presents those who have inhabited the riverside in the last 150 years and have had a relevant role in its history, therefore contributing to the traditional culture of the districts. They call themselves “coastal people” and have developed distinctive practices for ecological interaction with this natural space. There is no economic, physical or symbolic reason that explains why Avellaneda turned into a productive area while in Quilmes social vulnerability has prevailed, even though they share the same aquatic environment. Even when the same question is asked to the historical inhabitants, they do not know why families in Avellaneda dedicated themselves to self-sustainability while in Quilmes the living conditions were shaped by marginality.

Notably, these people in both districts share the same vision of the city: “*up there*” is the urban area, one inhabitant of Bernal explained to me in 2017, right on the other side of the Highway Buenos Aires-La Plata.²⁹

²⁸ Industrial Union of Avellaneda. “Avellaneda: A Purely Industrial City”. <http://www.uiavellaneda.com.ar/institucional>. Last accessed: 8/2/2021.

²⁹ Its official name since 2004 is Doctor Ricardo Balbín, but it is commonly known as Buenos Aires-La Plata. It links the Highway 25 de Mayo in the city of Buenos Aires with the provincial route 11, in the vicinity of the city of La Plata, capital of the province of Buenos Aires. It has an extension of 50 kilometres.

That is where they stock up, get medical attention, and where their children attend school. Acting as a physical and cultural frontier, the highway divides people into “*us and them*”, or two different realities: “*here and there*” (Bustamante, 2017). This reflects the fact that despite the urban policies implemented, the riverside areas have remained outside the general planning policies for the districts, making their inhabitants and their problems “invisible”.

I will show below what their lives are like and how they interact with the riverside, beginning with riverside inhabitants in Quilmes, and then those in Avellaneda.

The “forgotten” ones in Quilmes

In 2010, the Municipality of Quilmes conducted a census³⁰ in the district to identify households in a situation of social vulnerability.³¹ Looking comprehensively at various indicators like educational situation, employment, income, health, and housing, the goal was to establish the poverty state of the general population in 30 neighbourhoods.

Among them was La Ribera (The Riverside), situated between Espora Street and Ezpeleta District, with 1,027 households (approximately four family members per house) and a total of 4,148 people. A second settlement, known as La Ribera Bernal, on the northern side of Espora Street, was not included in the statistics despite the impoverished living conditions of the riverside inhabitants.³²

To discern the existing problems in the coastal area and the lack of official information about the latter inhabitants, a socio-environmental report by IDEAL³³ aimed to make this riverside reality publicly known (2016). Some 66 households and 219 residents were surveyed in Bernal and surroundings, showing the precarious conditions in which the native population was living in this settlement.

That report revealed that along the coastline in Quilmes there is a deficient level of access to public services (sewers, water, garbage collection, street lighting) and the houses are built with precarious materials.

For these reasons, and the characteristics of the place they are settled in, they are regarded as being exposed to adverse climatic events (like easterly winds, flooding, seasonal rains) or being more prone to risk situations.

³⁰ Together with the Secretariat of Social Development, the National Ministry of Social Development, and the National Council of Social Policies through the Information, Monitoring and Evaluation of Social Programs, and the System of Identification and Selection of Beneficiary Families for Social Programs (SIEMPRO-SISFAM). <http://quilmessocial.org/censo-social-cuadernillos-de-trabajo.php> Last accessed: April 2021.

³¹ It is a “social condition of risk, of difficulty, that impacts social groups, immediately or in the future, on the satisfaction of their well-being (as subsistence and quality of life) in a socio-historical and culturally determined context. Source: National Ministry of Social Development in: IDEAL Quilmes. February 2017. “Quilmes: map of social vulnerability”. <http://www.idealquilmes.com.ar> Last accessed: April 2021.

³² This neighbourhood would border with the project Nueva Costa del Plata. Others say that the area is included in the master plan so there would be an indirect gentrification with the advancement of works.

³³ IDEAL. Institute of Study and Local Administration. (March 2016). “Socio-environmental report on the riverside in Bernal”. <http://www.idealquilmes.com.ar/spip.php?article82> Last accessed: 4/4/2022.

Due to prevailing informal mechanisms for taking over land, many people have been living there for over 50 years – the old residents – while many others are moving in – the new ones.

This means that anyone can claim a piece of land for him/herself or subdivide it and sell smaller plots to others for personal gain. Sometimes the buyer has a certificate attesting that there had been a purchase, though it does not officially or legally allocate property. The situation is known to local authorities, but they do not interfere as sometimes political party representatives (*punteros políticos*) instigate the process for their own personal benefit.

These *punteros* give people lands as a payoff for their support and consequently, those who enter into this agreement have no rights to address demands or to resort to legal advice in the face of eviction and, in many cases, violence was used to displace them. In Bernal, many have been in legally protected lands in the nature reserve Los Sauces (The Willows). Others have built their houses on stilts by the river, while the new families place their houses beyond the towpath (around 150 metres away from the coastline).

All of them must face the same two everyday hassles: first, the lack of material means of support, and second, the hydrological/ seasonal conditions of the riverside space that leads them to lose everything when the river rises.

THE STORY OF ELVIRA IN BERNAL

Elvira provides a harsh account of her riverside life that relates to these aspects I have just mentioned in the last paragraph. She was 39 years old at the time of the interview (December 2017) and she had been living there since 1993 with her husband and two children. In 2011, she founded a neighbourhood association that has been pushing forward local demands at the municipality with respect to the supply of water and electricity.

When we met, she told me that she had worked as a housemaid without a fixed-term job contract – employment conditions that made her representative of many people living in the neighbourhood in this regard. While many people depended on social assistance from the state, others were self-employed (gardeners, bricklayers) or had temporary jobs in sales or as factory workers. Underpayment, informality, and lack of social security also posed problems relating to accessing housing opportunities and health insurance, for this reason, Elvira and her husband had no choice but to take land illegally for their family. Elvira's family managed to get hooked up to a previous electrical power installation in the area but those were violent times because members of law-enforcement forces used to cut the electric power connections to force people to leave the place.

In 1978, the sanitary landfill was located right next to their neighbourhood, impacting on people's health for years. Until the late 1990s, Elvira did not know that there was a waste site metres away from their house and inhabitants had never been consulted nor informed by local authorities about its existence. Their bodies felt the effects of the pollution but, unaware of the landfill existence, they attributed sickness and death to other factors.

She says that she has seen countless times how leachate from garbage decomposition forming lagoons in all sizes was extracted by employees from all over the landfill site to be poured into the La Plata River without previous treatment.

Unfortunately, the dangers that threaten them have increased in number and kind. From high-voltage overhead cables causing skin problems, through the rupture of oil pipelines adjacent to the shoreline, to intentionally setting fires in the nature reserve in recent years. Even so, it is flooding that affects her family and the social dynamics the most, as people must organise together to survive. She knows that it is not easy for anybody, but they are used to it. Nobody leaves; even if houses tremble and waves destroy their walls they stay, locking themselves in their homes and waiting.

Once a neighbour warned her about the rising water pouring into the houses “*it’s reached almost 2.8 metres*” he said. She did not believe him: how was it possible that water rose so fast? “*I reflected on this and yes, the problem was that new squatters were filling water streams and making brick houses on wetland areas, affecting the flow of water for everybody else*”. On another occasion, there was an invasion of hyacinth (*camalotes*) due to flooding coming down from the Uruguay River. The coast turned green and hundreds of animal species – spiders, otters, lizards, snakes – that came with them entered the houses causing all sorts of trouble to people.

She talks about the lack of control in the management of environmental remediation by provincial and municipal agencies in those lands: “*this is a no man’s land*”.



Figure 6: **Traditional family fishing in Bernal.** Author: Hernán Vitenberg. 2022.

The “evicted” farmers of Avellaneda

On Avellaneda’s banks, the “*quinteros*” (farmers) identify themselves as descendants of European immigrants who developed a local economic activity based around agriculture, fruit growing, and viticulture. In the early 1900s there were over 30 farms in Sarandí and the place was a garden as far as the eye could see.

One farm could produce 300,000 litres of wine by 1940 in comparison to the 3,000 litres delivered today and part of the coastal population lived on these farm products exclusively.

The area was the second-largest producer of fruits and vegetables in the metropolitan region and the third-largest producer of coastal wine (*vino de la costa*) in the Province of Buenos Aires. Most of the *quinteros* were born on the very coast of Villa Domínico and they recall better days, but also remember when the decline began with the prohibition of bathing in the river in 1960.

Ten years later they were already surrounded by the sanitary landfill and the Petrochemical District in Dock Sud, two highly polluting sites. The contamination of aquifer layers and streams left them without a basic resource for consumption and production: water. The nauseating odours coming from the trash burial and Dock Sud, together with skin allergies and respiratory problems, contributed to the exodus. When the quality of the river water worsened – it was used for crops irrigation – it was the turn of young people to move to the city as they saw no future under those conditions.

Land ownership was another dilemma faced by the *quinteros*, for many of them did not own the plots they cultivated and lived on. In fact, they worked to pay for those plots, and did so many times over the years. Whenever a new government was appointed, the authorities pressed on them to pay a *canon* (as they called it) – a charge for taxation purposes. It was not until 1983 (with the return of democracy after the military dictatorship) that those who stayed were awarded proprietorship, after 70 or 80 years of waiting. These families gained great recognition for what they produced.

They (and their farms) were regarded by the Municipality of Avellaneda in 2005 as part of the cultural and ecological heritage of the district³⁴, however, they have always lived poorly and unsafely. As there aren't any hospitals in the area, those who are unwell and need to get out cannot do so or have to find alternative ways to get to the other side of the highway.

The general state of the streets – mostly made of dirt – and the topography of the place makes it exceedingly difficult to move, especially during severe weather conditions. At night there is no lighting and during the day garbage accumulates everywhere as there is no municipal collection.

By 1960 there were 1,500 residents, while today only 200 people live there. Some of them have continued with food production and sell their vegetables, wine, and farm animals or products to the public or in local markets. The farms are still a crucial point of cultural and agricultural reference in the southern metropolitan region. They resist the idea of leaving the place, though it is very difficult to stay unless there is a shift in public policies aiming to improve the infrastructure of the place.

³⁴ Secretary of Production, Undersecretary of Environment and Natural Resources of the Municipality of Avellaneda. (July 2005). "Ecological Reserve Areas". Published through the Ministry of Culture, Education and Promotion of the Arts – Cities and towns of Avellaneda. <http://www.culteducaavellaneda.com.ar/noticias/wmprint.php?ArtID=120> Last accessed: 2014.

Like the riverside inhabitants in Quilmes, “farmers” also share the belief that they are living in a place neglected by local authorities:

“I saw advances, setbacks, I saw different politicians promising improvements for the place and they only remained that... promises. Always my feeling was and is the same. We are the “forgotten” of Avellaneda. It is not just a sensation, it is what really happens.” (Viviana, transcript of public hearing for Nueva Costa del Plata, 2008).

The political promises are contradicted by evictions and a change in the legal status of areas that puts a huge pressure on the riverside. Industrial claims for access to these lands are due to the government’s historical decision to locate factories in river basins, whereas the real-estate urge is due to the present lack of urban land available to expand the city.



Figure 7: **Osvaldo Paissan bottling wine from his vineyards in Sarandí.** Author: Alejandro Tumanoff. 2019.

THE VIEW OF AN HISTORICAL INHABITANT OF THE RIVERSIDE: JUAN CARLOS

The following story is part of an interview that took place in May 2022 with Juan Carlos, a historical inhabitant who grew up between Avellaneda and Quilmes. He is 80 years old and worked as an accountant, having fought for environmental causes in Quilmes from a young age, which his son continues to do today as part of NHOC.

As the coordinator of the book “Native Forest” (Santy & Vitenberg, 2022) in which I included his testimony, I needed to reconstruct the economic geography of the place, so the neighbourhood assemblies told me to talk to Juan Carlos to find out what kind of productive activities had characterised the coast before the landfill arrived.

Having a father who had a house by the river, and knowing the place like no one else, this is what he remembers:

“[...] here there is an Italian family that I did not know and I met while changing a tire here in Wilde [Avellaneda]. I had just finished participating in a neighbourhood assembly that we had had on a very busy Sunday and I discovered that my car had a tire in bad condition. It was Sunday, I said, where am I going to find a tire shop?”

And I went to a place in Wilde on Ramón Franco Street and there was a man alone and we started talking as he changed my tire. I told him that I was part of an assembly that defended the coast and he looked at me, he got upset and said, ‘yes, don’t talk to me about the coast, we had a farm in Villa Domingo’, and he told me everything they produced and he felt very happy; you should have seen the face of that old farmer, stained with all that rubber and liquid. His hands were very dirty and he was very tired and working on a Sunday afternoon. He told me that the family had had that farm for many years; they were Italian people, and one day they found out that the CEAMSE was going to take everything from them, even their land.

He and his family were very much revolutionaries – ‘no, nobody is going to take us out of here’ – and obviously they stayed and the CEAMSE advanced and they were a little isolated because the CEAMSE was occupying lands little by little; it was not that they threw garbage away completely but they were taking areas and filling them, and some areas were being left and one of those that remained belonged to his family. So, the CEAMSE thought of doing something else.

They began to throw tannery waste next to their field, and the smell, the atmosphere was unbearable and they had to leave because they could not stand it any longer, so that man, all stained with dark dye, that gomero [person who changes the tires] had been a farmer and the CEAMSE had to get him out by throwing toxic waste near him so that he would go away somehow”.

Between place ecology and the “fear” of being there

In short, it can be said that the way people live on the southern banks of the La Plata River entails a particular relationship with their environs, and comprises two aspects. First of all, these people love living in nature so much that they would never leave the river to live in the city, although in any case their economic situation would not allow them to do so. Second, they have interacted with the place in such a way as to be able to reside in it and to make it productive in a sustainable way.

Based on a respect for the natural conditions and in an attempt to minimise human interference in their functioning, they have developed a territorial knowledge of the river habitat.

They have learned how the meteorological phenomena bring alterations in water cycles, with tides and flooding, and how they can accommodate themselves to these changes.

Under these circumstances, the means to ensure survival is collective effort, which is connected to the fact that the inhabitants regard themselves as being on their own, without the presence of the local government. They look out for each other: women give birth in their houses with the help of neighbours, and people find refuge in nearby houses during crises, or stand by someone’s side in times of illness.

Among the “coastal people” prevails a sensation of leading outcast lives in a place on the edge of the cities. The growing informal settlement in Bernal adjacent to the riverside neighbourhood, as described above, has encouraged prejudice from the outside regarding urban security (murders, robberies, and rapes).

This has contributed to the distancing of the general population from the coastal areas, as in the social imagery there exists the idea that terrible things might happen to those who go there. This was reinforced by the fact that between 1976 and 1983 the military government murdered people by the river, which has made the place invisible, or official representations have associated it with negative connotations.

The creation of an environmental sacrifice zone

Every territory has its own complexities because there are always geographical, political, environmental or productive factors that make it intricate and, therefore, unique.

In the configuration of the riverside, a series of natural, historical and urban factors have coexisted with simultaneous processes so the result is a space with disconnected parts that oppose or cancel the properties of one another.

The permanent socio-environmental changes started with the establishment of a sanitary landfill in 1978, and continued with the entry into play of the project NCP in 2008, accelerating the transformation of the riverside. From then on, what once were areas of high ecological value protected by law became zones of special management for urbanisation,³⁵ while the reverse also happened.

Specific coastal sectors were declared nature-reserve areas at the same time that the territory was undergoing such destruction that it prompted the authorities to protect the wetlands and native forest.

This is a territory of human intervention, for it has been impacted or modified by a number of activities that even today continue to be controversial or have not reversed their conditions. So, is it that a given site is complex and therefore difficult to manage, which leads the public servants to make bad social and environmental decisions? Or are there places liable to be subjected to permanent environmental damage for purposes that do not match the interests of the general population?

³⁵ In Avellaneda: municipal ordinance N° 21.332/08 (enactment decree 4.528/08); municipal ordinance from May 2017 changing the legal status of lands in the area of farms (Sarandi) for industrial use. In Quilmes: municipal ordinance N° 10.337/06 reduces the extension of the nature reserve in Bernal, municipal ordinance N° 9.508/03 modifies the limits of the nature reserve in Avellaneda and Quilmes (ordinance N° 9.348/02) to the detriment of wetlands that reached up to Berazategui.

The answer is affirmative in the second case due to a *sacrificial logic* (Reinert, 2018) that has characterised the riverside space production in Avellaneda and Quilmes and might explain how those changes have been brought about.

Reinert analyses the relationship between the mayor of a municipality and a mining company in relation to copper mining on the bank of a Norwegian fjord, a situation similar to the scheme of power in relation to NCP.

Reinert reflects on what sacrifice is about and what an environmental sacrifice zone means – questions that I also take up in the following subsections. For the time being, I can say that this is a reasoning that consists of the manipulation of nature as a way of doing politics, and it is made possible due to a lack of investment or actions necessary to reverse the damaging effects.

I will address the three major transformations that have impacted the Avellaneda and Quilmes riverside area as well as its population through mechanisms that reinforce the environmental sacrifice and explain the forms of occupation described above: 1) the installation of a sanitary landfill, 2) the urban development that has been sought at the site since the creation of the highway in 1995, and 3) the filling of wetlands over the last fourteen years to meet the needs of urban development. Embodying ideals of modernity, these proposals have generated problems of such magnitude that experts say they will take hundreds of years to straighten out, taking, for example, the environmental liabilities of the landfill into account.

For the end of unhealthy lands (1978-2004)

Since the 1970s, concerns related to environmental contamination, the growing volume of household and industrial waste, and the absence of green spaces prompted municipal and provincial authorities to find answers. In March 1979, Techint issued a quarterly newsletter communicating to its stakeholders that the company would take part in unprecedented public works in a new business field: management of solid waste (originating in the metropolitan region and Buenos Aires City).

The project was named Cinturón Ecológico (Ecological Corridor) for which the municipality of Buenos Aires and the respective province created CEAMSE,³⁶ a state-owned enterprise that would locate four sanitary landfills in the northern, western, and southern metropolitan areas.

Techint was the outsourced administrator chosen in an international tender for the landfill located in Villa Domínico, Avellaneda, for which the firm Sanitation and Urbanization Incorporated (SyUSA S.A.) was founded. The contract between SyUSA and CEAMSE consisted in burying tons of garbage in exchange for a fee per truckload of garbage.

³⁶ Ecological Corridor Metropolitan Area State Society, created by decree N° 2.038/77 within the scheme of law N° 20.705 that regulates state-owned companies.

This meant that the more waste was buried, the more the company charged, which gave rise to the current problem of waste management as the companies that manage the landfills prohibit the recycling and treatment of waste by the population in order to increase their profits.

Through this contract, SyUSA could also be paid by the provincial government (for the administration of the site in Villa Domínico) with natural riverside lands not included in the operation of the site. As part of the company's obligations, and after twenty years, SyUSA had to deliver a road infrastructure with community services, and sports facilities destined for public use including a 1,500-hectare forested area.

By 1993, some modifications were made to the original contract, allowing for "vertical expansion", or the disposal of trash in mountains over thirty metres high because there was no more room to continue filling the land in that area.

Such a situation favoured the abandonment of the original sanitising objectives stipulated by the provincial and municipal authorities. First, SyUSA only limited its activity to the disposal of garbage in embankments, without any previous treatment to facilitate its decomposition process, or any official control. Second, the envisaged urban infrastructure was never handed over to the municipalities; the company was not sanctioned for this failure to comply with the original contract agreement. Third, CEAMSE ended up transferring to SyUSA around 232 hectares of unfilled lands at the riverside, a quantity higher than what was legally established for such forms of privatisation.

Accordingly, a real estate-oriented phase began, replacing the ecological objectives. In fact, this was already foreseen in the statute of 1977 as land management was one of the main attributes of CEAMSE within the urban planning regulations, including being able to transfer lands to individuals for their development.

Though SyUSA claims to have applied state-of-the-art technology in the processing of waste and to have fulfilled the contract binding it to the landfill management, in 1998 a dozen children and inhabitants of Wilde Towers (next to the dump site) began to fall ill.

Some of them were displaying skin and breathing problems, while others got cancer leading to a popular mobilisation for the closure of the place in 2004.

The environmental remediation of the landfill continues to this day, and is being conducted by CEAMSE, although riverside inhabitants accuse it of not taking the treatment of pollution seriously. Currently, the inhabitants are still unable to bathe in the river or to drink water from wells in the area, and they still face health problems attributable to the site.

The myth of urban development (1990-2008)

In Avellaneda, some inhabitants still recall the plan to create a municipal ecological reserve announced in 2005 for better access to the coast and the protection of riverside nature, or the Paseo Ribereño del Sudeste (Riverwalk of the Southeast) that in 2006 promised people a return to the river and the environmental care of wetlands.

In fact, the Municipality of Avellaneda asked Techint to return the lands in 2007 for other municipal plans. The former Mayor, Baldomero Alvarez de Olivera, wanted to create an open space for the community but it could not involve any kind of private construction.

The same happened in Quilmes with the proposal Palmar Quilmeño (1987-1991) which the municipality promoted as a tourism initiative to recover the splendour characteristic of the place in the early 20th century.

It was never finished, but from this project on, other similar projects were announced without being materialised.

By the mid-1990s, the waterfront promenade was in a state of total abandonment due to the deterioration of the original wooden structures so the municipality transferred it to the Pejerrey Club, a traditional organisation that had had a relevant role in the area since 1938.

Marinas del Sur (1999) was an urban development put forward by Techint, the new owner of this land, for the redefinition of residential, commercial, and recreational uses in the coast of Avellaneda and Quilmes. Fernando Geronés (2000-2003) and Sergio Villordo (2003-2007), former mayors, also tried different urban plans for the area that never came to fruition.

Francisco Gutiérrez appointed a work team in 2008 to analyse the environmental, social, and physical situation of the riverside for its revitalisation in Quilmes. It is unknown whether it was created before NCP or after it, but it seemed a genuine contribution to improve the place's situation. It was never known how this department worked or what it was able to accomplish but as Techint's project became part of the public debate, comparisons with Marinas del Sur emerged.

NCP was in fact, according to experts, the modified proposal for Marinas del Sur, which had already been rejected by the population for its riverside location next to the sanitary landfill.

Like Avellaneda, the authorities in Quilmes ceded the strategic planning of the riverside territory to Techint over time with more than one real-estate project presented by the company to invest in the riverside.

Over the last ten years it has been Techint's priorities (particularly around NCP) that have driven legal and physical changes at the site.

The idea of development as a "myth" has to do precisely with a lasting political aspiration on the part of the authorities that has ended up acquiring a fictional status.

It has been used as a campaign promise for a given candidate to win elections, for the approval of an ordinance or to promote questionable public works for the districts, but so far it has not been backed up by concrete facts.

The pursuit of development has historically been associated with the riverside by reaching an epic scale in terms of narrative, in all cases for the economic growth and progress of the communities.

Wetland filling and deforestation (2008-2018)

In the last decade, the coastal space from Avellaneda to Berazategui (south of Quilmes) has been the object of systematic wetland filling, with container companies carrying debris and garbage which is dumped in natural areas. Some of these vehicles are privately owned; others belong to individuals who stop there to throw away all sorts of things like old furniture and household waste.

It is also a favourite place for thieves, who steal cars somewhere else and abandon them there so that they are never found.

And just by standing at the entrance of the nature reserve anyone can observe municipal trucks carrying branches from the seasonal pruning in the districts, or horse-drawn carts carrying rubbish.

This has been changing the properties of the soil and the function of water drainage and surface water accumulation.

In an equivalent way, deforestation has advanced alarmingly in areas with medium to high conservation value (according to law N° 26.331). The protagonists are private firms as well as the municipalities that prepare lands for concession or the creation of new waste dumps to discard urban trash. One of the reasons for this situation is economic: instead of transferring tons of daily waste and paying the corresponding *canon* (charge) that CEAMSE has fixed for every ton, plus the workers' salaries and logistic expenditures, the local governments have simply taken garbage from one side of the district to the other.

The only explanation that riverside inhabitants and “neighbours” assemblies find for both practices, which they regard as leading to a “*desperate situation*” (field note, 2018), is the need of developers to artificially elevate lowlands for the projected construction works as part of Nueva Costa del Plata. In fact, the master plan indicated that the increase in the coastline height could prevent the flooding of that area without specifying where the river water would be diverted to.

The work of Calefato (2018) on environmental transformation and spatial injustice in Avellaneda and Quilmes shows the increase in number and extension of areas that undergo illegal wetland filling and waste accumulation.

If compared with the master plan of Nueva Costa del Plata it is observable how deforestation coincides with the creation of paths for the circulation of trucks that would remove soil from the riverbanks.

Looking at recent riverside reorganisation, it can be found that the former site of the landfill corresponds to a bio-park created by CEAMSE (the landowner) in 2017 at the request of the urban developers of NCP. Also, the native forests have shrunk by a provincial law enacted some years ago to enlarge lower conservation zones to enable Techint to build on wetlands, as construction work on former rubbish dump lands is prohibited.

Conclusions: Same lands, same actors, same problems

At the beginning of the chapter, I proposed to look at the riverbank of Avellaneda and Quilmes as a *contested space*, for there conflict has predominated as a state of being, as a condition or a particular mode of place-making. Or, to define it better, it is a contested space because it has the particularity of carrying the potential for controversy with almost anything going on there that generates problems.

In order to explain this, an historical reconstruction of the territory from the perspective of political ecology has allowed me to identify patterns regarding the use of public lands by the river as well as key socio-environmental and urban changes that took place there.

Since the corporate and political actors intervening at the riverside have been the same since the 1970s, it has also been possible to trace a trajectory for those who have been driving the territorial transformation.

Therefore, contention has always been linked to the local problems that have arisen there, producing and reproducing a pattern of territorial control that has only benefited the powerful – in this case represented by Techint and the mayors. Contrary to this, the population suffered eviction, disease and death as well as the loss of their typical livelihoods, turning them into the losers in the distribution of natural lands and their resources.

A *sacrificial reasoning* on the part of authorities and private interests, which I will elaborate on in the next chapter, has contributed to the creation of winners (who keep the lands and their benefits) and losers (who continue to lose out over time). The linchpin in this logic of giving up something for the sake of something else has been based precisely on the accounted land handling and, in direct relation to this, on access to nature.

The solutions proposed by the public-private alliance to tackle some of the effects of such logic since the 1970s have aggravated the situation of the population and the riverside place itself.

People have had to surrender something of value as a means of gaining something allegedly more desirable or as a way of preventing evil, as the “promoters” put it (referring to land squatting, poverty, and pollution). I think that the quest for development led people to bet on something that has never materialised, so social expectations and needs have been manipulated through the myth embodied by great projects. This is one of the many reasons that opened the way for a representation crisis between citizens and politicians, which has become another cause of tensions over NCP regarding official practices carried out to further the legitimation of the project.

So, this chapter showed a controversial and unchanging way of dealing with wetlands and forests that has slowly evolved over time, not only in Avellaneda and Quilmes but also in other wetland areas of the metropolitan area.

Having seen who has taken what actions, and the consequences thereof, will help me to show some more specific issues linked to the political and territorial power in these natural places. The “best” solution regarding NCP, as I will examine in chapter 3, and as proposed by the “promoters”, takes the form of “colonisation” to maintain power over the place through the same factors and practices that have already led to disaster and, therefore, to conflict. Many of these issues come into play in the struggle of “neighbours” who seek to say “no more!” to these private-public actions and narratives.



Figure 8: **Garbage liquids sprouting everywhere next to the reserve.** Author: Hernán Vitenberg. 2021

CHAPTER 2: Governing the Destruction of Nature

“The machinery is very well oiled; they [public and private actors driving urban planning in AMBA] know sooner rather than later that it ends up being resolved somehow and what ends up prevailing is ‘an urban planning policy of fait accompli’. They act first and then they take care of the technical and legal issues, the paperwork [...]”

Patricia Pintos. Director of Research Projects at the IDIHCS/ CONICET. National University of La Plata. Former Director of Urban and Territorial Planning (2005-2008). OPDS. Interview, 15/06/2016.

The aim of this second chapter is to describe the particularities of the public management of protected areas in which NCP is inscribed. This is relevant to explain here – before getting into the core of the conflict– because the waterfront revitalisation corresponds to a manner of making urban public policy from which private interests are not dissociated.

Looking back over the last fifty years, the chief period of reordering of the place under contention, I will focus on how governmental, institutional or regulatory bodies (and their consequent proposals and actions) have given form to the riverside area of Avellaneda and Quilmes.

In this model of land-use zoning and strategic planning, one thing that stands out is how they have managed to retain “limited accountability and forms of democratic control” (Swyngedouw et al, 2002). This means that far-reaching governmental decisions in the districts regarding territorial changes have involved the manipulation and cancellation of public processes aimed at involving inhabitants in their right to express their opinions and rejections. To circumscribe this, I will refer to three forms of public participation legally regulated and usually carried out by the authorities involved in such a scheme.

First, the relevant municipal or provincial institutions and bodies carry out legally established public consultations, but either with restricted access to information for the population, or by setting conditions for this process that people cannot refuse if they want to have a say (e.g. by stipulating that they can only express complaints or disagreements in writing, without debate or disagreement with other parties).

Second, there are institutional spaces to involve citizens in impactful projects such as NCP, for they may be affected or have a particular or general interest, however, it is not mandatory to incorporate their opinion in governmental decisions as they are not binding (*no vinculantes*, not able to be enforced by law). Thus, these democratic procedures discourage public participation as people are not taken into account and consultations are carried out as a mere formality.

Third, people can express their opinion through agreed mechanisms and conditions but then the authorities do not provide information on what will be done even when they are obliged to do so.

Hence, on many occasions, keeping matters of general interest away from social awareness has been the rule, especially when transferring public lands to companies or changing the legal status of protected areas for private use.

The environmental problems derived from this governability have only come to be known by people years after – for example, when pollution has become impossible to deal with – without any legal consequences for those responsible for those acts. It does not mean that there are no regulations or controls by the state but that they are not complied with in time and form, which is equivalent to not complying with the law; this is how companies and politicians end up benefiting in the long run.

I assert that the alliance between the authorities and Techint since 1978 stems from these issues, and that from then on, and behaving in this way, they have also developed joint means for achieving common objectives related to the new organisation of the riverside. To the forms of democratic control and the lack of sanctions I will add more recent ways of doing politics through territoriality (social and physical control of a space by a few), notably at a municipal level.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the alliance between the public and private sectors is linked to public land speculation, and is characteristic not only of Avellaneda and Quilmes but of the whole AMBA. This is the reason why I will also show how this is replicated in similar natural areas, although the particularity of an extended and intense conflict is typical of the districts under analysis.

In short, I will portray the public policies regarding wetlands and forests at the La Plata River, and show how power and authority are exercised over them in a way that has caused the destruction of natural habitats and ecosystems. In this context, such destruction not only means rendering something physically unusable, or causing something to cease to exist; for the “promoters” such harmful practices are synonymous with cheaper lands, real-estate business, and less legal and moral obligation to be held accountable for they are encouraged from the pinnacle of power.

What I describe below has been compiled over more than ten years (since 2011) and includes current legislation, documents provided by the participants in the conflict, the consultation of bibliography and, above all, the opinion of experts in urban planning, nature conservation and legal specialists in the kind of socio-environmental conflicts that I analyse.

How to forge a power alliance

The ways in which the public-private partnership played out with regard to the lands of the La Plata River involves political, territorial, and regulatory factors for the setting of urban development interests happening after a long period of time.

I would like to start with some issues that have arisen since the dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983) at the level of infrastructure and urban planning which have laid the foundations for what was expressed in the introduction to this chapter.

“The military process was key; without the military process there would not have been land expropriation”, mentioned a “neighbour” from NHOC during an interview in 2017.

Part of this massive land grabbing in the 1970s corresponded to a plan for urban highways (*Plan de Autopistas Urbanas*), a project in which a network of toll highways would be built to connect the city of Buenos Aires with the metropolitan region. In order to complete these works, the construction of the Highway Buenos Aires-La Plata was put out to tender by 1980. Its construction had an adverse impact on the irrigation of low-lying and floodplain lands of the districts, the river was now hidden behind the highway and in addition inaccessible for most people.

This is when the relationship with the river begins to break down for the inhabitants of Avellaneda and Quilmes, once the centre of their social life. In addition, the *de facto* authorities decided to exclude people from the area to prevent them from gathering or participating in demonstrations against the *coup d'état*.

Before then, regulations on land use³⁷ from 1958 (plan, zoning and sectoral proposals for urban expansion) had also had an impact on the shaping of metropolitan territories as they foresaw southern riverside areas for residential use. In fact, the urban motorway plan I described above was based on these guidelines, making them one of the main justifications for the “promoters” (along with provincial law N° 8.912/77, which I will describe below) when proposing a project like NCP.

In 1990 a series of political-organisational, economic and social changes impacted on the handling of urban territories. Neo-liberal state reform processes and the restructuring of the economy opened the door to “decision-making structures in spatial planning and management activities (Pintos & Narodowski, 2012: 18).

For example, as established in Argentine law, urban strategic planning is a public function that places urban policies and the devices for management and control under their implementation (Pugliese und Sgroi, 2012: 124-126)³⁸. In the case of large works that have to undergo environmental impact assessment, different scales of institutional action intervene if they are likely to produce any alteration to the environment and/or constituent elements. The municipalities are the ones that carry out the environmental evaluation of, say, new neighbourhoods or the expansion of existing ones.

³⁷ Territorial Planning Law N° 8.912/87.

³⁸ Pugliese, L. & Sgroi, A. (2012). Chapter 5: The role of public administration in the approval of urbanizations. Pp 123-163. In: *Sacrilegious Privatopia. Effects of Private Urbanism in Wetlands of the Lower Basin of the Lujan River*. Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi.

But for proposals like NCP or the construction of a new hazardous waste treatment and final disposal plants or the management of urban and suburban sewage,³⁹ the environmental evaluation is the responsibility of the provincial environmental authority OPDS.

In the last 30 years, such state functions have decentralised providing opportunities for private actors to break through in matters related to those types of urban decisions⁴⁰, which means that at the provincial level no evaluations are carried out and at the municipal level data is falsified in order to benefit construction companies (and not depend on provincial agencies).

By exercising their lobbying capacity, investors, finance capital, and urban developers also succeeded in asserting their interests in tampering with key laws and procedures (Pintos and Narodowski, 2012: 13-20). Or, I would add, in avoiding steps at a provincial level so that everything is resolved in the municipalities through the personal and political contacts of companies and investors.

In a context of good environmental regulations⁴¹ but with minimal legal requirements for private developments, these actors have managed to secure a change in land status, the transference of public lands, and the legislative approval of some projects. This was made possible by a loophole in the law N° 8.912/77⁴² (sanctioned by the military dictatorship for territorial ordering) which states the principle of “exceptionality”. It indicates that when public interest demands it, the Governor of the Province of Buenos Aires can authorise, by decree, projects referring to particular situations or specific zones or districts, even if those projects are not in accordance with the precautions or indicators established in that same law.

As a consequence, private companies fail to comply with the law by not submitting environmental studies so the government grants authorisation in most cases without the companies meeting the corresponding conditions. Faced with this widespread practice in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, the former Ombudsman of Avellaneda District got to say the following:

“Well, I think it has to do with collective rights and the commitments that each one can assume... those alternative projects... to tell you the truth, there are lots of regulations, provisions, there is a well-known law for the protection of forests which is number 23 [he actually meant law N° 23.661 for the protection of native forests in the province]...”

³⁹ A full description of such public works is established in Annex II of Law N° 11.723/95.

⁴⁰ This was verified in relation to the abandonment of the benefactor role by the state (Pintos & Narodowski, 2012:18), the transformations in the sphere of production and technology in the face of a paradigm shift in development strategies and the globalisation process for production relations that resulted in fictitious reproduction of capital (Cicolella, 2016, during Seminar on Urban Extractivism organised by Fundación Rosa de Luxemburg, Buenos Aires, 2016). In this colloquium, experts spoke on urban and environmental consequences of extractivism in cities and their peripheries. They emphasised that there was a loss of control of territorial macro-tendencies on the part of the State at all levels, and a lack of urban land management.

⁴¹ National: General Environmental Law N° 25.675; Native Forests Law N° 26.331; International Convention on Wetlands (approved by Law 23.919/91). Provincial: Ordering of Native Forests in Buenos Aires Law N° 14.888/17; Environment and Natural Resources Protection Law N° 11.723/95; Regime of Nature Reserves Law N° 10.907/90.

⁴² Article N° 102 approved by decree N° 10.128/83.

*I don't know... that would prevent any sort of development in this area, **until there is an exception** I would tell you, because we will all agree to the circumstance that requires it, if the spirit of that law was certainly not to sustain a polluted coast, but for something else. Beyond the discussions about the law, we should discuss what is the development that we want to give this city as a state policy?"* (Sebastián Vinagre, interview, 21/9/2011).

When talking about this form of articulation between political and real-estate spheres, Roberto Converti from Oficina Urbana mentioned the common search for “*paths of feasibility*”⁴³ with public servants in the municipalities and at a provincial level. He alluded to finding ways to advance a certain project by merging interests or priorities when the project is stagnating or behind schedule. These paths, he inferred, were part of an agreement that was not necessarily exposed in a public way but included corporate influence in local matters and long-term relations with key players such as the mayors. This has been especially true for Techint, which began to be awarded large-scale projects throughout the country and has maintained strong political ties since the dictatorship, even today with strong criticism for its role.

The law and politics as problems for wetlands and forests

In addition to what has been said, there are other aspects to be considered regarding the trajectories of Techint and the successive provincial and municipal authorities acting in the territory under dispute.

At a legal level, the Argentine Constitution and national environmental regulations determine the right to a healthy environment as well as minimum standards for the achievement of sustainability.

In the province of Buenos Aires, the constitution and the law that regulates the environment (N° 11.723/95) indicate that activities that degrade the environment must be avoided and that the authorities are obliged to take all precautions to prevent this.

Therefore, the municipalities and the highest provincial authority for the environment (represented until 2019) by the Provincial Sustainable Development Agency (OPDS)⁴⁴ have the responsibility to implement an environmental remediation plan if damage has been caused.

The local authorities also have a regulatory scheme for environmental issues and urban planning that includes legally protected areas like the ones on the Avellaneda and Quilmes riverside.⁴⁵

⁴³ One of the founders of Oficina Urbana, developers of Nueva Costa del Plata, during an interview in December 2017.

⁴⁴ Changes occurred with the assumption of the new government after national elections in 2019.

⁴⁵ In Avellaneda: ordinance N° 11.451/97 for the creation of the Natural Reserve of Avellaneda; Municipal Coastal Reserve of the city of Avellaneda (ordinance N°26.964/15) and La Saladita Ecological Reserve (ordinance N° 9676/94 for Laguna Sur or Southern Lagoon and N° 13.703/99 for Laguna Norte or Northern Lagoon). In Quilmes: Los Sauces Natural Reserve on the waterfront of Bernal (ordinance N° 8.255/98) plus the Natural Park and Municipal Ecological Reserve Marginal Forest of Quilmes (ordinance N° 9.348/02).

But why are these laws a problem? It is not that there is currently a lack of a framework to regulate the environment or that there are not enough laws to protect natural resources, but that the law is not complied with or enforced by the authorities in charge. Moreover, it is the municipalities that minimise institutional controls to ensure that urban development or infrastructure works are done.

This can be seen in the District of Tigre, in the north of Buenos Aires City, which has allowed the construction of gated communities across half of its surface area (over 100 km² out of 368 km²) through projects that have been in conflict with the population as in the case of Remeros Beach.⁴⁶

The reasons for this could be explained by the cultural and sociological matrix of Argentina that tends to ignore or promote the non-compliance with the law, regardless of consequences, social class or even affecting people a great deal. This is a customary condition that people in general are aware of as being caused by the breakdown of standards and values in the way that society works though it can also be explained by the corrupt political structures in the country.

Jorge Trevín, a forest engineer and director of the Civil Association Southern Environment mentioned something like this about the origin of socio-environmental conflicts in Argentina:

“[...] unlike the developed world where environmental conflicts originate in different perspectives or are based on issues that are not legally debatable, here in Argentina environmental conflicts are normally linked to illegality because although our laws are not perfect and might have problems, in general, there are basic issues regulated by law. Although when there is an environmental conflict, there is basic legislation that is being broken [...]” (Interview, 15/6/2011).

For this reason, there is a public perception on certain public decisions or acts of governance as being dishonest or at least non-transparent in the public management of natural areas. This is what the neighbourhood assemblies will refer to in what could be defined as “dirt-avoidance”, as Douglas (2002) puts it, which makes this kind of governability incompatible with the law, the respect for nature, and life in general.⁴⁷ I will look into this and how it has had an influence on the emergence of a moral ecology by the La Plata River.

Such background then, in addition to the lack of public information and questionable consultation processes, allows for high-level decision-making that citizens generally ignore.

⁴⁶ In June 2016, I attended the public hearing organised by the Municipality of Tigre to discuss this real-estate development. In order to intimidate inhabitants of neighbourhoods near the project's location, a construction union mob (some mentioned that its members were hired either by the municipality or by the company that designed the project) violently intimidated those who expressed their opposition. The experts accused the project of being illegal because it had been approved by the municipality when the OPDS should have acted. The legal and technical reports presented by neighbourhood assemblies and academics revealed the irregularities in what the construction company was planning to do. The real-estate boom in Tigre, on the Paraná River, has been made possible by this municipal interference in the legal course drawn up to evaluate the environmental impact and, therefore, the legislative treatment of this type of project.

⁴⁷ Douglas (2002: 8).

I made this connection when the Director of Territorial Planning at the Municipality of Quilmes told me in 2016 (in an off-the-record conversation) that urban and environmental resolutions were made exclusively at a higher level. Lower levels of public administration did not participate in decision-making processes so they were limited to signing or approving what they were told to by the executive. It was the mayor who negotiated directly with urban developers or personally agreed on conditions that enabled the transfer of public lands for real-estate development or the realisation of construction or infrastructure works.

All this can be observed in relation to the NCP, especially at the municipal level, so I will analyse in the next section the aspects that characterize the political power in Avellaneda and Quilmes and make this complex situation possible.

The role of local power

From a political point of view, it can be said that there are three aspects that characterise power in this form of public management of riverside areas: 1) autocratic leadership as a way of making territories, 2) urban entrepreneurship as the way to turn state powers into businesses, and 3) the public lands at the centre of these processes.

1) Autocratic leadership

The exercise of power in a large number of municipalities of the metropolitan region is in the hands of *caudillos*⁴⁸ who assume partisan and political control in the territory. They often emerge out of a context of weak institutions and as part of an economic and electoral machinery that concentrates public funds and voters in the most populated areas of Argentina. Mostly of Peronist origins (popular political party that emerged in the 1940s with former President Juan Domingo Perón), it is a way of conceiving power through an interdependent relationship between leadership, a majority political party, and governmental functioning.

Thus, these *caudillos* not only occupy high positions in the local governments, but are also leaders of the political parties they represent (Ollier, 2007). This is, from another perspective, a system of social and political domination based on a clientelist system that operates by regulating the granting of social-security benefits and state resources in exchange for votes or political militancy in a given neighbourhood or district.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Also known as “feudal lords” or “barons of the suburbs” by the media.

⁴⁹ More on client-patron relations in Argentina can be found in:

- Weitz-Shapiro, R. (2014). *Curbing Clientelism in Argentina: Politics, Poverty, and Social Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9781139683579.

- O'Donnell, M. (2005). *El aparato. Los intendentes del Conurbano y las cajas negras de la política*. Buenos Aires: Aguilar.

- Auyero, J. (2001). *Poor people's politics: Peronist Survival Networks and the Legacy of Evita*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Such forms of mutual interweaving between politics, power and economics in the state (Evers, 2003: 133)⁵⁰ show other derivations that distinguish *caudillos* with a further peculiarity.

Despite being populist figures and claiming their fight against poverty and social injustice, they are millionaire landlords who have been under federal investigation for not being able to justify undeclared properties or for abusing entrusted power for private gain.

In southern districts there are paradigmatic cases like that of Baldomero Álvarez de Olivera, former mayor of Avellaneda during four periods (1991-1995, 1995-1999, 2003-2007 and 2007-2009)⁵¹ and Jorge Ferraresi, who has been in charge of the same municipality since 2009⁵² and has been denounced for unlawful enrichment in the past. In Quilmes, Francisco Gutiérrez was the mayor for almost ten years. After being succeeded by Martiniano Molina (from Republican Proposal), the governance came back to the Peronist Party, which has retained power in the district since 1983.

In Berazategui, a district bordering Quilmes to the south, Juan José Mussi was five times elected as mayor and he was replaced by his son, Juan Patricio Mussi who's been heading the municipality since 2019. The latter is the leader of the political movement Los Oktubres, made up of Kirchneristas mayors (centre-left political movement with Peronist orientation that emerged in 2003 after Néstor Kirchner⁵³).

A former councilman⁵⁴ from Berazategui, Ernesto Salgado (his story is in the Annex), who was on duty from 1999 to 2003, described to me how he felt about this sort of local political context:

“The Mussis have always managed things vertically, in a totalitarian way [...] perhaps here with some peculiarities because these guys gained absolute control of the municipality through the control of all the institutions”. (Interview, 4/06/2016).

This has led to a context of weak social and political activity insufficient to counteract official political decisions: there are clubs, local organisations, and retirees' associations, but all of them were funded by the Mussis. Also, the judiciary is said to have been co-opted by the local executive so the legal claims are often inconducive.

⁵⁰ This author contributes to a theory of the state and the theory of underdevelopment in the context of peripheral capitalism as can be found in Latin America. Evers defines the state as the entire complex of functions and institutions of a central government and its subdivisions, which exceeds the bureaucracy alone and includes political parties, unions, associations and the media. Under this autocratic form of government, institutional instability and forms of domination are common phenomena in which clientelism or paternalism are a form of (power) domination and coercion.

⁵¹ The political mandates in Argentina are for a period of four years.

⁵² He quit in 2020 because he was appointed Minister of Territorial Development and Habitat at the national level. He left his wife in charge of municipal affairs as Chief of Staff.

⁵³ Argentine President between 2003 and 2007, Governor of the Province of Santa Cruz between 1991 and 2003 and Deputy for the Province of Buenos Aires from 2009 until his death in 2010.

⁵⁴ Founder of the Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River.

Salgado thought of the Deliberative Council as “*an impossible place*” as none of the bill projects that non-Peronist parties present were dealt with in the corresponding commissions. And if so, the legislative processes were very controversial as they usually took place “between roosters and midnight”. This refers to deliberations that might be secretly made or without making them public and which are even arranged at inappropriate hours so that inhabitants cannot resist them.

2) Urban entrepreneurialism

Although part of the population and the news media accuse these *caudillos* of incompatibility between public responsibilities and personal business connected to land interests, the truth is that their actions are at least non-public or unverifiable in this context when referring to the management of riverside areas. The need to attract investment and increase tax revenues for the municipalities found, in urban development, the best model for the improvement of metropolitan districts.

Berazategui was the first district in the southern La Plata River to make room for the installation of walled communities for high-income groups. The Mussi family has long adopted an entrepreneurialism attitude (or *empresarialismo*) focused on the coast with real estate as a core productive activity. By establishing links with the private sector, they have promoted the coastal area and downtown Berazategui for the implementation of new forms of commercial use and construction growth. The creation of job opportunities and the revaluation of nearby areas and properties are expected outcomes of such endeavours, but the results have been uncertain and temporary as they are conditioned by that venture. Once it is finished, people end up unemployed or go to another district to find a new job, which conditions the creation of employment because there is no labour force.

The alliance between the private and public sectors tends to be business-oriented; however, the latter assumes the risks while the former usually obtains the benefits. This means that the municipalities provide the state-owned lands and since the construction firms embark on unpredictable long investments, they need the logistical or economic assistance of the government for example, for laying roads or the building of walls to contain the river.

This type of urban planning has focused on the political economy of certain areas of cities without paying attention to the improvement of environmental conditions and the demographic or housing needs of the population. In 2019 there were seven real-estate enterprises under way managed by construction and urban-development companies only in Berazategui. The first real-estate project took place in Hudson in 1996/97 with Puerto Trinidad (Port Trinity) which has been involved in social controversy for not conducting studies of environmental impact in areas of conservation value.

Despite the lack of provincial authorisation and other legal irregularities, in the last 33 years over 30 walled communities were built in this district.

The search for urban expansion led to a lack of local investment in other areas – for example, the improvement of drinking water quality – which resulted in a fatal streptococcus outbreak in 2016 due to the treatment plant not having been renewed. It is also important to understand the resulting configuration of metropolitan territories from this form of entrepreneurialism.

As districts started competing for investment and mayors made real-estate development a trademark associated with their own personal attributes, more protected lands were massively incorporated into a form of urban space production that became the only form possible.

3) Public lands at the core of urban development

Public lands are fundamental for urban development, whether that takes the form of a walled community or a waterfront revitalisation. Their low sale value and transference or cession is generated by processes of depreciation in which private and public articulation is key.

In this sense, there are three vectors that act in a synchronised fashion to facilitate such land occupation and grabbing in the periphery of Buenos Aires City. First, there is a pauperisation of public spaces through the development of urban infrastructure like power plants, bridges, dams, power- and water-distribution networks, waste-management sites, railways and highways.

In any case, what is developed in these spaces impacts on the urban organisation so land progressively enters a vicious circle in and out of the market depending on how those public works are administered.

Second, there are no sanitation policies actively concerned with environmental liability; for this reason, polluted lands also leave the market due to contamination. In Avellaneda both of these issues are present: a landfill stopped functioning but the land was not returned to public use, leaving out of use areas at the riverside that will remain contaminated for a long time.

Third, there is real-estate speculation, which is the worst element of all because it benefits from the other two. Municipalities do not produce urban land for housing development, so the more land that is destroyed by governmental action or inaction, the more land is available for real-estate investors who benefit from this situation. Nowadays, the business is not about building houses; it is indeed to appropriate the money from investors in the developmental stage of lands.

They are induced to enter the business for reasons that are initially distorted because they are told that they are going to take part in a profitable business, the process then works like this.

Urban developers, construction firms, and private companies look for degraded or unoccupied land areas and price them with a value higher than the nominal one, then they add a “premium label” to the construction project.

When this project does not start immediately, the landowners sit on the economic valuation of the land areas in question, which translates into even higher margins the longer they keep them. This is what has happened to Techint since it was awarded the riverside lands in 1998, which have since gained economic value due to the mere presentation of NCP.

The aftermath of development

I would like to present now the consequences of this form of public management which has had a major impact on people's lives, shaping a form of survival (barely) that is predominant at the La Plata River. Among these consequences are the environmental suffering and the chaos in the riverside area as a result of municipal neglect. This shows that the transformation of areas protected by law or nature is not gratuitous; lives have been lost, many have been displaced and many continue to be affected by public decisions in the area.

Environmental suffering

It is the experience of living in danger and “under unrelenting toxic assault” (Auyero and Swistun, 2011) that leaves marks on the minds and bodies of people. These afflictions are suffered in relation to pollution and environmental liability sites that can be pinned down near the riverside, but also involve heavy industries (chemical, petrochemical, oil and gas, paper mill, paint manufacturing) situated in a larger context of the cities.

Auyero and Swistun argue that a reality like this is socially and politically produced, in a scheme of unequal relations that pollutes water, air, and soil with life-threatening effects. The coastal area in Avellaneda and Quilmes turns out to be a *sacrifice zone* (Lerner & Brown, 2010), as I mentioned before, where marginality is constructed spatially and burdened with risks.

Inhabitants have no other space to live in, so they accept living under those conditions as pollution enables them to have their own place. These externalities exhibit not only environmental, but also housing problems that leave the riverbank areas to lower-income groups who cannot access housing. As this situation directly impacts only a small number of people, the municipalities deem the situation unimportant or peripheral in relation to other problems in the districts.

This kind of suffering arises in relation to garbage management, water resource policies (streams, basins, and the La Plata River), and urban planning. Inhabitants and visitors live and circulate alongside leachate lagoons from the former sanitary landfill, garbage dumps, the burning of urban solid waste, illegal digs where youngsters drown, and the installation of impound lots that pollute underground water.

Dwellers of the neighbourhood La Ribera Bernal know that children living under high-voltage cables can experience skin problems like pimples, and when this happens, they need medical attention in the city. In summertime, if they want to refresh themselves, they dive into illegal digs into which garbage juices leak. When they get tangled up with the vegetation at their bottom of these digs, the leeches in the water are always a nuisance as they get stuck to their bodies.

They touch the tip of a lighted cigar onto the leech's skin, which then allows them to use knives to remove them, leaving scars on their bodies.

The sacrifice of living in this contaminated area is, then, revealed in the ways people have found to cope with the issues they face and who they consider responsible for their situation. Dangers are part of their daily lives, so sacrifice is accepted because it allows them to live as they wish in nature. They do not consider themselves victims of these natural issues but victims of politics that, for example, denies them the services they need to live or the solutions to the problems that the same municipalities caused.

Chaos

This complexity is well depicted by the conversation between “*vecinos*” in the extract below. The conversation took place and was recorded as part of an ethnocartography exercise carried out together for the graphic representation of the territory in 2017⁵⁵.

The interlocutors described a dynamic place in a constant state of change: what exists today may not be found tomorrow or might turn to something else.

As I mentioned before, many sorts of places coexist for different actors, for which there are also different conceptions. Nature is pristine as well as filthy for both Techint and the neighbours; there is sickness, but at the same this place offers a space in which to live for its inhabitants; it triggers political engagement for assemblies, while eliciting social indifference from the rest of the population. While these classifying notions are in relation to the same place, they cannot be reduced to it; they have to be put into perspective with the structure of classifications also influenced by symbols of cleanliness and dirtiness (Douglas, 2002).

Rubén: *Filth, pollution, yes, chaos, it seems like chaos...*

Vanina Santy [researcher]: *Shall we write it down here [on the map]?*

Rubén: *Abandonment by the authorities.*

Nieves: *The problem is not the coast, nor our perception of a problem on the coast.*

Rubén: *But where do I write it?*

Vanina: *Wherever you want.*

Leo: *No because it does not go there.*

Rubén: *It does not go there? I cannot read it. This is about a mess at a general level because when*

⁵⁵ It was carried out in December 2017 in Bernal with members of the Assembly No to the Hand Over of the Coast. I will come back to this ethnocartographic activity throughout the dissertation to highlight findings with respect to the inhabitants' spatial experience of the riverside.

people come to the riverside they say “this is...[dirty]” and today it’s clean because there are times when you come here and there are plastic bags hanging from the trees... People who came recently to inhabit the place are neat because you see they cut the grass but if not, it depends on who comes, or who occupies the place, the neighbour... It is a mess because it is a mess on purpose...

Vanina: How would that be?

Nieves: Because there is an intentional lack of control and at this moment the phrase that says “troubled waters, fishermen’s gain” becomes appropriate, yes, because of what a neighbour always says: they turn our boat around...

Vanina: Write down what you said.

Nieves: ... It is induced, uncontrolled... a disaster area on purpose.

Rubén: Same, it is like....

Nieves: A mess....

Alex: I do not know how to put it... [a place of] surviving nature.

Leo: A natural filter.

Alex: No, yes, natural filter, green lung but it is like nature as it is...

Leo: It does not admit urban development

Alex: ... Natural filter, it is nature that is being....

Nieves: It is an induced and organised chaos [...]

Leo: I would add chaos by the state, sorry, right?

Nieves: By the governments.

Leo: Yes, no, but the problem is that there is a previous problem that enabled the penetration of business interests in the functioning of the state; that is, a neoliberal business management which says “I do everything I can for my company”: public servants became entrepreneurs to do business so the municipalities are directly run as companies, the mayor is the big boss, then it is no longer a public function, it is one more of company and if that does not change from the bottom we will always make bad decisions because decisions are always made with a closed eye on a certain sector of the population or a certain sector of the economy, right? [...]

Alex: An uncontrolled urban development can also be... the riverside [...]

Nieves: No, it is not written on paper as an operation of the state.

Leo: Ok, I say that we were saying that there is an abandonment which is 50% the fault of the state and the chaos is 50% caused by the state.

Nieves: No, the chaos in this place is induced and organised by whom? There you have a lot of actors acting because it is extraordinarily complex

Leo: yes, it is extraordinarily complex [...]. (Riverside of Bernal, 31/12/2017).

The state of the riverbank contains elements of impurity in relation to pollution, but also to a morality about the public policies implemented by the municipalities and the lack of care of the place by the new inhabitants who have been settling there. The chaos not only reflected the disorder that these situations generated, but also the fact that in the face of certain public decisions by local authorities, these conditions were encouraged rather than solved.

The number of different, contradictory representations meant that it took the “neighbours” time to agree as they discussed and shouted over each other. It was even difficult for them to draw or to note things down because at some point they were indicating a denial of what had just been stated.

Through ethnocartography all that assumed a certain order, and it was useful to know what elements were representative to these interlocutors; chaos proved to be an intrinsic characteristic not only of the place but also of the group itself.

The notion of dirtiness has to do with the pollution present in the place, but also with the sort of administration of these places, as I will show below. It represents the unwanted, or that which is done in a non-transparent way, and also refers to deliberate processes intended to cause damage instigated by those who represent the interests of the communities. Overall, these representations are also ways of understanding what is good and what is bad and who is part of that, including the “neighbours” themselves.

“LATIN AMERICA’S BIGGEST ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER”

When I arrived at the fieldwork site in 2011 the landfill had been closed for seven years but even so, I had heard in national media about the environmental disaster there. It was the largest and most controversial dump in Argentina, which many neighbourhood assemblies and local organisations referred to that way. There, 65,000 kilos of waste per day were received, to be disposed of in land cells distributed over an area of more than 400 hectares.

A disaster can be defined as an occurrence that causes widespread destruction and distress; a catastrophe, in other words, caused by the human activity conducted there by the river. A representative of one of these local organisations told me in an interview in June 2011: *“here in Argentina all the great disasters have been made by engineers and technicians, like the novel by John le Carré, The Spy Who Came in from the Cold, which says that the world is not going to be destroyed by any madman, if it is going to be destroyed it will be destroyed by experts, so here all these great disasters caused by CEAMSE have been made with professional expertise and approval; that’s why people are so suspicious of experts too, right?”* Unlike a natural disaster, risks can be prevented, as they are known or can be estimated in advance by implementing an environmental impact assessment.

Some of the effects not addressed by SyUSA (Techint’s subsidiary company in charge of the landfill) and the municipal and provincial authorities in time exposed the population of nearby neighbourhoods to external agents and over a dozen deaths among children. Today, the CEAMSE, Ecological Coordination Metropolitan Area State Society (changed its name over the years), seeks to be associated with an “ecology in action” through integrated waste management, although it continues to generate conflicts wherever it operates.

Conflict distribution around the La Plata River

I will describe and locate the disputes that have taken place in recent years around the La Plata River between companies, municipal or provincial authorities, and assemblies or environmental and political groups. – Figure 9– . They represent how these areas have become endangered by private and real-estate interests and how inhabitants have reacted accordingly.

In all cases it is socially perceived as a “power struggle”, as a member of NHOC mentioned during a walk in Bernal around 2011, in which capital acts against how people want to live in those places.

They are represented in the following map, although I will only describe those disputes closest or most significant to the “neighbours” in Avellaneda and Quilmes, either geographically or by solidarity relations between assemblies or the forms of political and ecological knowledge-sharing that people have established. The reader will appreciate that in these conflicts many of the elements described above are linked in a way that allows for an understanding of a much more widespread society-nature relationship in the metropolitan region.

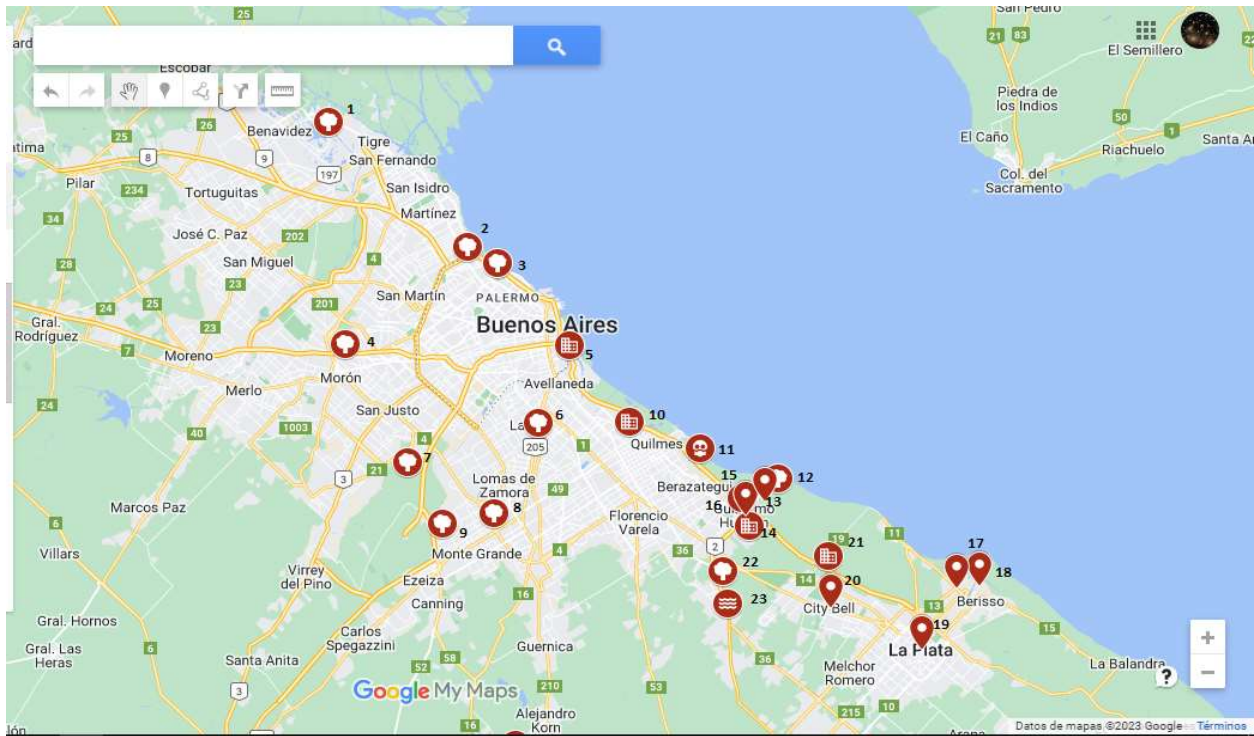


Figure 9: **Environmental conflicts along the La Plata River.** Author: Vanina Santy. 2022. Main causes of social mobilisation in the area and their corresponding icons located in map:

- 
 Wetlands/forest
- 
 Real-estate development
- 
 Water
- 
 Pollution
- 
 Controversial infrastructure and private projects

Reference numbers (in bold the conflicts described next in this chapter):

1) Walled community Colony Park, District of Tigre, 2) Vial Costero in Vicente López District, 3) Velatropa eco-village, 4) Nature reserve Isla Verde (Green Island) over an airport expansion in a protected area, 5) Project Costa Urbana in La Boca, 6) Environmental plan by the inhabitants over urban problems, 7) Nature reserve in Evita City over land speculation, 8) Nature reserve Santa Catalina in Lomas de Zamora and privatisation of lands, 9) Laguna de Rocha and an industrial reconversion project for the area, 10) private construction Nuevo Quilmes, 11) Illegal digs, 12) Deforestation in the riverside of Hudson, Berazategui, **13) Walled community Pueblos del Plata in Berazategui, 14) Country club Greenville deforesting a protected forest area, 15) Coastal road construction project in Hudson, 16) Private urban developments, 17) TecPlata- in Ensenada-Berisso, infrastructure project for container port, 18) Modification of the road structure of Ensenada District by the La Plata River, 19) Property boom in central and historical areas of La Plata, 20) Growing concern in the Town of City Bell over real-estate projects in flood-prone areas, **21) Private urban development in protected wetlands, Berazategui, 22) Pereyra Iraola Park and threat of land expropriation by the provincial government, 23) Sewage treatment plant whose construction has been incomplete for decades, Berazategui.****

Many of these conflicts emerged in a remarkably similar way to NCP in its public-private alliance and its effects across AMBA, although they also show some differences that I will remark upon. I will begin my description with the northern metropolitan area to the City of Buenos Aires, finally ending with southern localities near the conflict in Avellaneda and Quilmes, to finally arrive at matters that influence tensions over NCP.

The Vial Costero in Vicente López

The dispute over the waterfront of Vicente López, a district located in the northern La Plata River, emerged in 2004 when the local authorities modified the municipal regulations to allow the construction of buildings at the riverside (until then prohibited by the Urban Planning Code).

This new territorial ordering firstly enabled the commencement of works for an avenue that would follow the coastline known as the Vial Costero. But what generated most social opposition was the real-estate proposal *Al Río* (At the River) that pointed to a municipal strategy for riverside transformation. It included a shopping mall, corporate offices, and five housing towers for a high-end consumer segment with 27 floors each, whose planned height exceeded standards established by local regulations. From the moment that “*Al Río*” was given governmental recognition as a development of “general interest”, other private investments were added to the original project.

The works were turning into a development similar to Puerto Madero (in Buenos Aires City) combining recreational, residential, commercial, and business uses, just like NCP also expected to achieve.

The Assembly United by the River Bernal (*Asamblea Unidos por el Río Bernal*) was born when the Vial Costero got started. It reunited people from different walks of life and, to a considerable extent, involved young students, environmentalists, and activists, most with middle-class backgrounds and originating from a richer, more northerly district than Avellaneda. They developed a non-hierarchical dynamic prone to horizontal practices and intended to promote the participation of all members in the group’s decisions.

Their claims focused on the access to and control of natural assets at the riverside territory, confronting urban developers and construction companies.

This gathering of inhabitants struggled for years over the conservation of that green and public space made up of wetlands and native forest, which was also culturally significant to the population. “*Yes to green, no to cement*” was one of their slogans valorising nature against the expansion of the city in a place that would take away public access to and views of the river.

Wertheimer argued that the repertoire of action headed by *Unidos por el Río* aimed at a relationship with nature based on Ingold’s (2012) concept of *dwelling*.

She alluded to the concept “*habitar*” as a specific relational context through the practical involvement of people with their external environment (2022). An engagement like this resulted in the “juridification” of nature, or the process by which collective knowledge generated in that environmental sphere, shaping legal arguments for the protection of the territory.

Velatropa in Buenos Aires

The Velatropa eco-village is a natural park and an interdisciplinary experimental centre founded in 2007 on the campus of the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) by students, academics, researchers, and environmentalists. Located by the La Plata River in the outer edge of the Costanera Norte Ecological Reserve, it was declared an eco-village in 2015 after a lengthy process of collective organisation and dialogue with other institutional and political actors. Velatropa has worked on the care of wetlands and remains of a riverside forest through the creation of agro-ecological gardens in a process of environmental restoration implementing what they refer to as permaculture techniques. The greatest dispute (there were others) took place in 2015 over a piece of land, and involved a private security company, the Municipality of Buenos Aires and the university. The group of eco-villagers had agreed with the UBA on the village’s conservation as the construction of a new parking lot was threatening it. With controversial beginnings through the illegal seizure of land after the dictatorship (in 1983) for the construction of houses, the abandonment of the state and the environmental and social deterioration of the place gave rise to a new territorial conception more linked to its protection.

A social commitment in the construction of this natural space, to which can be added a process of identity development in relation to it, has constituted an active defence of these lands to prevent its looting and enclosure (Fiore, 2019).

The achievement of this community project has been, according to Fiore, the questioning of urban processes which are not conceived as the result of a historical evolution but as the imposition of something detached from people’s history.

The recovery of the wetland ecosystem represented, for these people, an example of collective organisation and political contestation in relation to nature. Velatropa for the people in the southern La Plata River also represented what fighting against the powerful means, and involved a concrete environmental management plan for wetlands that includes public participation.

It was also through this group that the “neighbours” in Avellaneda and Quilmes approached permaculture, where the lives of human beings are combined in a respectful way through practices with those of non-human species regarding a given environment as an ecosystem (field note, 2018). This principle changed the philosophical conception of the practices of the assemblies giving meaning to actions that had been conducted since the beginning of the conflict.

The privatisation of the riverbanks in Berazategui

In June 2020, the Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River and the Assembly in Defence of the Hudson Wetlands (HOCO) publicly denounced the fact that for the second time in recent years, the construction works for the walled community Puerto Trinidad were clearing a considerable area of native forests near the river.

Already in 1996/97 when Beccar Varela Desarrollos, a private developer, began with this real-estate enterprise, the “*vecinos*” denounced flooding and forest destruction that had been caused in the place. The claims of local organisations suspended all the works for years, which allowed the forest to recover. Since then, the riverside lands for the expansion of this project and the inclusion of new developments in the area have not ceased, keeping the population on alert to changes observed in the protected areas of wetlands and forests.

This reality has mobilised inhabitants of the district regarding the riverside ecosystem of Hudson, a town in Berazategui, demanding the creation of a nature reserve for the entire coastal territory of Berazategui. The construction of a wall (or *murallón* of one kilometre long by two metres high) supported by a metal structure buried about 3 metres below the coastline was a major cause of social conflict, having caused damage to the natural water drainage and regulation. Impacting on protected wetlands, it was built to keep the walled communities safe from the eventual flooding of the La Plata River.

In environmental matters, the “neighbours” in Berazategui state that “the future is today” for these natural areas are essential for biodiversity, defined by them as the variety of living beings that exist on the planet and the relationships that are established between them and the environment that benefit or endanger human life. This ecosystem vision has influenced the perception of nature and what happens there, leading them to call for the conservation of these territories.

Interaction in terms of shared knowledge has been closest between these organisations in terms of geographical distance and connection, since many of them have been part of assemblies in Avellaneda and Quilmes at the same time. This is where the greatest collaboration has happened in terms of common causes and shared enemies for the same riverside.

Other disputes that work as political and environmental sources of knowledge for the assemblies in Avellaneda and Quilmes involve wetland areas or nature reserves protected by law in the other districts to the south and west. These include real-estate projects in low-lying and flood-prone lands in the La Plata basin such as City Bell and Berazategui or La Plata City, the destruction of protected areas in Ciudad Vita in western Buenos Aires, the Laguna de Rocha (Rocha Lagoon) in Esteban Echeverría District with the privatisation of land, and the Santa Catalina Reserve in Lomas de Zamora, where half of its surface area has been sold to a company for commercial purposes.

Conclusions: No other option but to live with disaster

The governing of ecologically important areas involves the administering of what is public or, to put it another way, the exercising of authority over a matter of general interest or control.

It involves restraining or determining an influence on something, and as far as urban development in those areas is concerned, the direction or control over what happens there has become blurred with the intervention of private interests that associate with governmental decision-making at all levels.

In this scheme, there are also other elements that have an influence on urban and environmental public policies. The first has to do with an autocratic political organisation that depends on territorial control as a means for building power. The second has to do with a way of using that power to do business aimed at personal enrichment. Thirdly, the use of state resources such as public lands for the exercise of political power as described before by privatising, selling or giving away areas of ecological value represented as “underdeveloped”.

As a result of these political, administrative and regulatory matters, the southern banks of La Plata River turn out to be the product of a “logic of sacrifice” established by an historical alliance between the public and private sectors. The achievement of this partnership has been to keep control over those lands over time for purposes beyond urban needs or social demands.

The benefits – for the “promoters” – of this form of management include land speculation, the municipal approval of works of great interest to the business sector, and the lack of actions demanded for the prevention of environmental impact.

Destruction has been the major effect of the proposals that have arisen between these parties, and in this case can be interpreted as a set of actions intended to impoverish the conditions of riverside territories that cannot fully recover environmentally, hence the large-scale dilemmas that this management has been creating by the La Plata River, mostly since the 1970s.

The process of destroying is essential for private and corporate interests to do business and is fostered by legal flexibilities provided by the municipalities or provincial agencies themselves.

The consequent suffering caused by pollution, neglect and the chaotic situation involving wetlands and forests, also happening in similar areas, are in relation to these actors and how they arrange certain territories together. The sacrifice of living in these places is partly fuelled by the impunity of these actors with regard to actions that are not punished but are promoted by the municipalities themselves in Avellaneda and Quilmes, hence the moral claims that bring people together when they perceive a potential danger or threat.

CHAPTER 3: The “Colonisation” of Wetlands and Forests at the La Plata River

“People [the communities of Avellaneda and Quilmes] will be what we [Techint] make of them from a project like NCP [...].”
(Geraldine Marino, Head of Institutional Relations of Techint. Interview, 13/6/2011).

After providing the political-ecology background of wetlands and forests of the La Plata River as well as the management model for their urban development, in this chapter I will scrutinise the waterfront revitalisation proposal known as Nueva Costa del Plata (NCP).

Here are the first-person voices of the “promoters” as they strive for a riverside land rearrangement through a public-private partnership that includes the corresponding municipalities, the multinational company Techint and the urban developers Oficina Urbana. The process they envision together was defined by Oficina Urbana as a “colonisation”, a socio-economic and territorial model that bets on the real-estate development of legally protected areas of the southern La Plata River.

I propose to examine the ideas and values that sustain those changes planned by these “promoters” with NCP. I claim that this large-scale project represents a bid for power between different physical and symbolic appropriations of the coast, represented on one side by the “colonisation” and on the other by the resistance of “neighbours” to this way of producing the city.

My second argument is that NCP comprehends two processes, *deterritorialisation* and *reterritorialisation*, for the creation of a luxury city between the Buenos Aires-La Plata Highway and the river which will be replicated as far as Ensenada District. From an urban-planning perspective, these are processes through which “social and spatial boundaries and identities are inscribed and erased” (Dovey, 2005, 2010) for the making of something new.

In order to achieve this, the deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation have a simultaneous character because what is deterritorialised is recombined into different assemblages through reterritorialisation that in NCP takes the form of waterfront revitalisation.

My third argument is in connection with the importance of such processes, for they contain the possibilities of spaces in formation through conscious and deliberate attempts to imprint a distinctive *sense of place* (Dovey, 2010) which conflicts with the sense of place that many members of the population carry. This point is interesting because it connects with the chapters that follow on the reinvention of the place in which the “neighbours” have also worked on their own construction of the riverside as a vital space, critical for the survival of its inhabitants.

Both the “neighbours” and “promoters” propose new senses of place through distinct territorial conceptions such as those described by Kim Dovey⁵⁶ to give another meaning to the place’s existence or adapt it for a different use.

⁵⁶ Professor of Architecture and Urban Design and Director of the Informal Urbanism Research Hub: InfUr– at the University of Melbourne, Australia.

NCP is a representative case of the global phenomenon of waterfront revitalisation by large corporations in two ways. First, it is about the international transfer of a homogeneous, replicable model of urban planning in river basins and sea fronts generating localised experiences of place (Brownill, 2013: 45; Maricato et al, 2000).

Second, and as I stated in the introduction, there are diverse types of natures at work in the conflict, one of them embodied by NCP; so “nature”, in this case, is the way in which the “promoters” refer to material characteristics favourable for the project. The conception of nature turns out to be ambiguous, since it is represented as a resource for real-estate business if developed properly, but as worthless in its current state, or at least beautiful.

After its public announcement by the municipalities in 2008, NCP was promoted as “*the most important urban development in Latin America*” (Techint, 2009)⁵⁷ to gain social approval, publicise it in the media and attract private investment. Because of its environmental and urban innovation and the spatial and cultural changes it would bring, the project promised to benefit the entire metropolitan region in the long term with a “new habitat” never seen before.

The opinions of specialists, civil servants and academics on Techint’s master plan will reveal another dimension on what the “promoters” mean to do. The grandiloquence, without much information offered about NCP, could fall within the mythical narrative of the development characteristic of the riverside. I consider that it is vital to understand what occurs in the confrontation over NCP, and why such a proposal is at the heart of a 15-year-old socio-environmental conflict that is still unresolved.

In relation to the methodological aspects for this chapter, I interviewed executives from different departments and business units of Techint, and not only in its headquarters in Buenos Aires. The company’s spokesperson, Ernesto Rona, took me in his own car in 2011 to Campana, where Tenaris, one of its largest factories, is located, to speak with the social-responsibility team and thus, learn what Techint does for the community where it operates.

Establishing contact with municipal and provincial officials proved more difficult, and often did not materialise, especially in Avellaneda, when I contextualised the meetings on the basis of NCP.

Both Oficina Urbana and Techint provided me with all kinds of material on the project (Powerpoint presentations, NCP executive summary, technical studies carried out, as well as other documents).

The project plan itself was provided by Techint – see Figure 10 – in which I translate verbatim the new land uses to be created at the site, which has been maintained through the years in this same form.

⁵⁷ Techint Group. (2009). “Nueva Costa del Plata. El waterfront de Buenos Aires”. Brochure with information on the urban development produced and distributed by the same company.

The list of those interviewed as “promoters” can be found in the annex to chapter 3; none of them asked for anonymity although in some cases I was not allowed to record the interviews.



Figure 10: Master plan of Nueva Costa del Plata. Source: Techint. 2009.

References: 1) La Plata River, 2) residential area, 3) commercial area, 4) water park, 5) environmental park, 6) riparian environmental park, 7) recreational, sports and educational parks, 8) National University of Avellaneda campus, 9) shopping centre and corporate headquarters, 10) vehicular accesses, 11) Highway Buenos Aires-La Plata.

Nueva Costa del Plata

NCP was introduced to the inhabitants of Avellaneda and Quilmes as an opportunity for the long-awaited integration of the riverside into the densely populated and complex urban fabric of the districts. The place as it was, polluted and abandoned, was the result of 25 years of intensive use of the riverside lands for the burial of waste, and the symbol of the exclusion of the population from the river. It was the antithesis of the city; nothing could be found there, and its wild nature (or what was left of it) was the remnant of something uncivilised where there were also dangers there to be avoided (Tuan, 2007: 150). The banks of the La Plata River were the image of man-made desolation turned by the effects of the landfill into an “environmental sacrifice zone” for its conditions made it practically off-limits. Or as the authors Lerner & Brown put it (2010), this was a place subject to such an environmental degradation that behind the pollution were hidden profound inequalities, especially socio-environmental ones that authorities did not want to make visible either.



Figure 11: **Location of NCP at the riverside.** Source: Techint. 2009.

The waterfront revitalisation, hence, would bring sanitation and development to the territory, encouraging “*the city to look again at the river*”, as the mayor Baldomero Álvarez de Olivera described NCP (transcript of public audience, 2008). Even today, at a regional and even national level, NCP continues to be a one-of-a-kind proposal.

The construction of gated or walled communities had been the distinctive form of urban development in low and flood-prone lands of the metropolitan region until the public appearance of Techint’s project. These other private residential settlements shared similar characteristics with residential housing developed in Florida in the United States, including closed perimeters with fences and private surveillance that was intended to generate an image of security.

Particularly in the northern suburbs of Buenos Aires, on the Reconquista and Luján basins, such developments had been based on the incorporation of vast amounts of land, the artificial elevation of ground levels with respect to the coast, and the creation of areas where public access was restricted. By generating “new geographies” for over 20 years, these urban centres (country clubs, *barrios cerrados o privados*) had caused a territorial fragmentation, the alteration of the hydrological functioning of wetland areas, environmental pollution and, from a more social point of view, the splitting of reality and local history, among other contradictions like socio-economic and spatial differences between social groups (Ríos, 2012).

All of these private construction models, including NCP, shared the capacity to provide high-income families and individuals with the opportunity to be in nature and to organise life around it (sports, outdoor activities, infrastructure with parks and protected areas of exclusive access).

This way of producing urban space has consolidated in the northern metropolitan area and has had difficulties when being replicated in southern districts due to their general environmental situation. In order to avoid the public questioning and conflict surrounding this urban strategy, and expecting to gain social and political legitimacy, NCP was envisioned by Techint and Oficina Urbana as an “open city”. It would encompass private as well as public uses for a wide range of stakeholders, not just the residents, with an open structure without access restrictions of any kind.

The developers indicated in the interview conducted in 2017 that they had always worked within this paradigm (and not with gated communities) because they thought more about the positive impact that this type of venture might bring at a social, economic, cultural, and spatial level.

However, this is how inconsistencies began to arise around NCP from my perspective as a researcher. Some 95% (Techint’s sources indicated 75%) of the total surface would be destined to remain public, though those areas were part of residual spaces on the former landfill.⁵⁸ Hence it was not clear to experts how that might work in a city where the “public” use was relegated to lands undergoing an environmental remediation that might continue for decades.

It was also not made clear where exactly the city would be built according to these circumstances; what was said, broadly speaking, is that NCP would be located along 5 kilometres following the coastline of the La Plata River⁵⁹ covering an area of 232 hectares (property of Techint, 102 hectares in Avellaneda and 130 hectares in Quilmes).

⁵⁸ Approximately 450 hectares, integrated into a total green area (surrounding the project) of 620 hectare, which could be compared to Central Park in New York, United States, (340 hectares) and the Forest of Chapultepec in Mexico (650 hectares). Source: Techint Group. (2009). “Nueva Costa del Plata. El waterfront de Buenos Aires”. Brochure with information on the urban development produced and distributed by the same company.

⁵⁹ Compared to other coastal fronts in Argentina such as *Costanera Norte* in the City of Buenos Aires or the Vicente López waterfront, NCP would be the longest one (these three extending for 4,000, 2,200, and 5,000 metres, respectively). In relation to Brazil, *Ipanema + Leblon* has a length of 3,600 metres while *Copacabana* is 3,400 metres long – both of these being in Brazil – while Valparaíso, in Chile, would extend for 1,000 metres. Source: Techint Group. (2009). “Nueva Costa del Plata. El waterfront de Buenos Aires”. Brochure with information on the urban development produced and distributed by the same company.

It was part of an indirect catchment area of 2,000,000 people in the region who would benefit from increased environmental quality and the mobility of productive factors such as employment, investment and capital.

In a more direct manner, the new city would bring new cultural, financial and corporate services in addition to residential, educational, corporate, and commercial equipment to over 400,000 inhabitants in the districts.

The total surface for construction would include more than 1,500,000 m² according to a 4.8 indicator of total occupancy (FOT) established in the executive summary of the project. This coefficient determined the maximum area in square metres that could be built up, giving indications of high-rise buildings with towers that would exceed 40 storeys in height. This aspect was even questioned by provincial officials for exceeding the established legal maximum.

Another principal element which made NCP stand out from other private constructions in the metropolitan area was its character as a future international and cosmopolitan city, as an alternative to Buenos Aires as the seat of government. Aligned with Helsinki (Finland, with its new framework of logistics zones and new city extension to balance industrial operations), Bilbao (Spain, with its conversion of the riverfront into an area of environmental progress, including public spaces, and the transformation of declining areas into tourist places), and Hamburg (Germany, with its incorporation of an urban habitat into logistics and service strategies) the urban developers attempted to respond to contemporary values in urban planning.

In the Latin America context, NCP was compared to Guayaquil (Ecuador, which transformed the riverfront into an important and central area of the city), Valparaíso (Chile, with a project for a new urban scale) and Río de Janeiro (Brazil, establishing a new city-river relationship for the Olympics) to account for an ongoing change in these areas towards the future.

In general terms, Techint's proposal was intended to generate a favourable impact on the comprehensive urban system, the social reactivation of the place, the improvement and expansion of residential quality and recreational services, and new standards of environmental care.

Roles in the partnership

Although the strategy as well as the design of the layout was controlled by Oficina Urbana and Techint, the project has been conceived as a form of articulation that would include municipal interests. This would be done through a tripartite consortium for the administration of public spaces, the generation and maintenance of works in the future. The consortium for the development of the city would bring together: 1) Techint, through its own investment or financial funding by third parties, 2) representatives of the municipalities, and 3) provincial or national governmental agencies for the realisation of public works (infrastructure, roads and streets, and public services).

This public-private alliance would then work for:

“[...] a new organisation of the territory to shape the expectations of citizens when addressing the dilemma of intervening in industrial, port, logistics, service areas, spaces that yesterday were periphery, outside of the city, and today are included in it to produce transformations” (Roberto Converti, 2010)⁶⁰.

Regarding the company’s role in NCP, the spokesperson for the project said during an interview in 2011 that they would certainly be part of the construction, *“but not all of it because it is a city; this has to be shared, and at some point we will sell macro-lots for others to build their buildings, but always respecting what has been approved by the municipalities”* (Ernesto Rona, Techint).

Such statements, which gained public attention in the media, revealed that the company’s business was not in construction or development, but in the revenues originated in the selling of riverside lands originally received for free and valued in hectares.

The Paulo Freire Centre for Environmental, Pedagogical and Social Studies determined in 2011 that if the change from the current legal lands’ classification in Quilmes to an urban zoning materialised, business would ensure Techint revenues of over USD 100,000,000.⁶¹

The “premium” attribute of the revitalisation is strategic to attract investment and, therefore, make the partnership work successfully. The “premium” labelling aimed at attracting ABC1 social groups⁶² (over 20,000 new inhabitants) to high-end residential spaces that would also include five-stars hotels, golf fields and docking facilities for small boats, shopping malls, exhibition centres, and recreational areas for 80,000 visitors (per weekend) and 30,000 workers. In this regard, the Mayor of Avellaneda, Jorge Ferraresi, expressed in 2011 that NCP would be *“a source of resources that, due to spillage, will benefit the most neglected”*,⁶³ meaning that it would generate a more equitable distribution of income for the population.

⁶⁰ First construction exhibition “UniCONS” in Quilmes organised by the Construction Union in which the project NCP was presented to the construction industry by Roberto Converti, *Oficina Urbana*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yePuePOPK0&ab_channel=quilmestvpublica Last accessed: 30/5/2022.

⁶¹ Alfieri, M. (22/5/2011). The project of Techint that threatens the “neighbours” of Quilmes and Avellaneda. *Tiempo Argentino*. Research. Year 2, N°368. No longer available on the site of the newspaper, but reposted by assemblies from Mar del Plata in a movement known as La corriente avanza. Last accessed: 2/6/2022. <https://www.lacorrienteavanza.com.ar/web/index.php/noticias/4168-el-proyecto-de-techint-que-amenaza-a-vecinos-de-quilmes-y-avellaneda>

⁶² One of the three higher social and economic groups making up the upper-middle class – that is, people who have more education and better-paid jobs than those in middle- or lower-class groups. Source: Cambridge Dictionary. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/abc1> Last accessed: 11/01/2023.

The tip of the socio-economic pyramid in Argentina is equivalent to 4.9% of the population (on a national average) while that proportion rises to 12.1% in Buenos Aires City and decreases in the metropolitan area to 2.9%. ABC1 consumers “buy expensive cars and houses, live in rich areas, use credit cards, and send their children to private schools”, according to marketing specialists. Source: SIAMO, Argentine Society of Marketing and Opinion Researchers. (14/12/2020). “ABC1 level in its minimum expression: only 4.9% of the population is at the socio-economic top used by marketers. *Infonegocios*.” <https://infonegocios.info/nota-principal/el-nivel-abc1-en-su-minima-expresion-solo-4-9-de-la-poblacion-esta-en-tope-del-nse-que-usan-los-marketineros> Last accessed: 11/01/2023.

⁶³ No author. (19/1/2011). Three dimensions. The new suburban coast. Section Cities. *Clarín*. https://www.clarin.com/ciudades/nueva-costa-conurbano_0_ryhk5PpPml.html Last accessed: 27/5/2022.

Urban marketing thus focused on the need to create products that could be used as part of a cultural offer or that would provide multiple service opportunities in a “quiet” and “attractive” city.

This would be assured by the insularity of the riverside, in a certain way, because it is separated from the big cities of Avellaneda and Quilmes, and by the security conditions provided by the Prefecture (maritime police authority). It would embody an “oasis” for urban life in the face of the historically high numbers of robberies and homicides that plague the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires.

Therefore, on the basis of these major characteristics of NCP, it can be said that it aims to integrate three pillars through this alliance following the current conception of strategic planning of the cities, as stated by Arantes et al. (2000): 1) the project acquires commodity-like characteristics to be put for sale in a market where other cities compete for investment; 2) the city in itself becomes a generator of business opportunities through NCP and would be administered as such; and 3) NCP would become a brand to generate identification and loyalty among its users at living in and using it. So Techint’s project was designed reproducing international standards and top-of-the-range urban principles that were conceived as the only possible scenario for the development of riverside areas, as shown in the previous chapter under the form also established therein.

What urban development? Is there even a project?

Without knowing about the “colonisation” conceptualisation of urban developers that was underway, expert voices strongly questioned NCP some years after its public announcement. The lack of existing information about NCP, I later understood, had to do with a project that would function as the key to legally unlock access to these lands for private interests.

Throughout 2011, the Metropolitan Foundation (MF) invited planning experts, architects and officials (some of them involved in the conflict over NCP) to express their opinion in support or against the waterfront transformation.⁶⁴ This was done at the request of Techint, because the tensions around the project had been delaying its realisation more than expected.

The first article was written by the editorial board of MF⁶⁵ and it pointed out that NCP evidenced the lack of state capacity to plan on land use since undeveloped areas in the metropolitan region were a scarce asset that was not being dealt with. The production of large residential spaces was also questioned due to the fact that Oficina Urbana had based the project on urban plans from the 1950s that responded to the economic, social and spatial demands of that time.

⁶⁴ Fundación Metropolitana is an organisation devoted to influencing public policies related to territorial planning in Greater Buenos Aires. Its objective consists in “achieving greater equity, social inclusion, and sustainable development, by facilitating participatory planning processes and inter-jurisdictional coordination”. The opinions I analyse here were published in the newsletter Metropolitan Digital Report (Informe Digital Metropolitano) edited by the same foundation. <https://www.linkedin.com/company/fundacion-metropolitana/>

⁶⁵ The staff of the organisation was encompassed by renowned engineers, architects, consultants, and specialists in urban planning. May 2011, Metropolitan Digital Report (IdM) N° 84.

According to the specialists of the foundation, during 2005 and 2007 the province had actually released a document on “strategic guidelines for the metropolitan region” that even without legislative status constituted an important reference in territorial ordering.

The emphasis for such large-scale construction should be put instead on the planning mechanisms employed by the state, the relationship between private development and environment or the management of water resources, and the forms of public participation available.

Furthermore, the board of MF questioned what was understood as the generation of income (*renta*), one of the promoters’ arguments usually attributed to urban development but led in this case by a corporation.

In June 2011, the architect Jaime Sorín, former Dean of the Faculty of Architecture, Design, and Urbanism of the University of Buenos Aires reflected on the representations of space used by Techint and the urban developers.⁶⁶ He said that urban development did not make up a city and to suppose that a city could be imagined outside of history and beyond cultural traditions was closer to “*real-estate imprudence*”.

The role model for NCP, *Puerto Madero* in Buenos Aires, was the negative example of what happened when an urban project was structured according to ideas of social homogeneity and exclusion. His idea was probably related to Donzelot’s definition of *urbanism of those alike* (*urbanismo de similares*) in the sense that “elective, selective and exclusionary relationships” prevented others from being able to choose to share that space.⁶⁷

In addition, the construction of multipurpose public spaces and the reappropriation of the river by the communities was “*hardly seen*” by Sorín in the master plan of Techint, meaning that what the promoters said was not true. Conversely, he continued, the graphic representations and crafts of the project exhibited in public events showed a spatial anomie (disorganisation) and a landscape that seemed to adjust to a sales pitch.

Sorín questioned the role of the state in preventing real-estate speculation, particularly this sort of investment that only pointed to land revaluation through marketing operations. Whatever euphemism was used to name this project (open city, waterfront revitalisation or urban development) it did not represent any benefits for the inhabitants, he asserted.

Months later, the architect Luciano Pugliese, member of the administrative board of MF, opened the debate on the available information about NCP: “*What do we really know about it?*”

⁶⁶ Metropolitan Digital Report N° 85. (June 2011). *Metropolitan Foundation*. Last accessed: 2014. Not available online at the moment.

⁶⁷ The new urban problem, for Donzelot, had to do with the political capacity of the city to include those occupying marginal areas who did not contribute to the construction of a similar, and therefore an exclusionary, way of living in society (1999).

He reflected on the existence of “visions” (NCP as a new luxury residential area), “ideals” (the integration of the city and the river), and environmental or technical studies that did not provide factual data on what was going to be done.

As for the environment, Pugliese questioned: *“how is it possible that there is a comprehensive national and provincial management regime, with a national law on public access to information, and provincial regulations that require the publication of environmental evaluations, but none of the extensive studies that Oficina Urbana assigns to NCP are really public?”*

Jorge Trevín, representative of the Association Ambiente Sur⁶⁸, was also summoned to give his professional perspective as an engineer, as were Roberto Converti (from Oficina Urbana)⁶⁹ and the architect Carlos Augusto Rodríguez, Undersecretary of Urban Planning and Housing in the Province of Buenos Aires⁷⁰.

The former spoke of privatisation, when the municipalities allow private interests to get involved in urban planning and the business of public lands, in clear opposition to NCP.

Converti made a comparison with similar developments elsewhere in the world, highlighting the importance of building an area of “prestige” for the districts. As a provincial authority, Rodríguez defended the existing municipal and provincial mechanisms put into action for strategic urban planning. He believed that contrary to what was stated about the scarcity of non-developed soil, the real problem was the poorly developed neighbourhoods of the region in relation to public services and infrastructure. Rodríguez ended up stating that the projects like NCP would always be supported by provincial agencies.

The idea of a new city planning basically put together by the sheer “invocation of images” emerged from the critical positions of Sorín, Trevín and Pugliese to refer to a development project in which concepts and visual representations had taken over before other urban values associated with social demands. To sum up, NCP represented for most experts a financial investment vehicle (because those who would buy are financiers before residents or users), the occupation of the riverside territory by international capital, and the extinction of a local identity more than an opportunity for economic progress.

⁶⁸ Metropolitan Digital Report N° 87. (August 2011). *Metropolitan Foundation*. Last accessed: 2014. Not available online at the moment.

⁶⁹ Metropolitan Digital Report. (June 2011). *Metropolitan Foundation*. Last accessed: 2014. Not available online at the moment.

⁷⁰ Metropolitan Digital Report N° 87. (August 2011). *Metropolitan Foundation*. Last accessed: 2014. Not available online at the moment.

Towards the territorial conquest

In the meetings I held with the “promoters” of NCP, especially with those from Techint and Oficina Urbana, I encountered a positive disposition on the part of the interviewees, who invested hours to share their expectations, explain certain issues, and go through paperwork on the project.

This notwithstanding, in some instances I found them a bit intimidating for they followed a friend-enemy attitude providing information gradually after I passed “tests” the corporate executives or architects had imposed on me.

When I met the Institutional Relations team together with the spokesperson for NCP at that time, Ernesto Rona, two people sitting in front of me took notes on everything I said, staring at me – I assumed as a form of intimidation. Moreover, I was not allowed to record the interview.

With the urban developers, another form of examination (of which I was unaware) was set in motion. Fabio Di Marco said as soon as we introduced each other that he was only available for 25 minutes. While we were talking, a second person was constantly passing behind us listening to our conversation; when he finally approached and introduced himself, it was Roberto Converti – with whom, they informed me, the interview would continue. He had approved of my neutral attitude and was fond of my opinions on NCP, he told me later.

Both the executives from Techint and the urban developers considered me to be “*people like them*” (*gente como uno*) which in Spanish means that they regarded me somehow as one of them, as a member of their socio-economic class, or at least someone they could trust.

I think that adopting a non-directed approach to interviewing and maintaining a non-judgmental position regarding their opinions led to an openness linked to aspects of the project as well as their understanding of urban growth for the metropolitan area. In this respect, the developers started by explaining to me that NCP was regarded as an essential part of a new territorial place for the southern districts:

*“Where it is located [NCP], that is why it is important that we want to break through this space, which one sees today as empty: it is the future growth in the entire metropolitan area. Buenos Aires will unite with La Plata City in a very short time, we think that in 2040, in 2050 this **entire metropolitan axis that will reach Rosario City** [in the Province of Santa Fé, 400 kilometres north] **will be a single urban mass and there is a kind of continuity**; there we are then: **in this environmental, economic, socio-cultural axis that is the edge of the La Plata River** and this other axis that you see here, and for us it is the axis of the Matanza-Riachuelo Basin. In some way, this project is going to be on this new axis.*

We think that the axis of the metropolitan area is going to be the Riachuelo, to the north and to the south... Once again... for us the future growth of the City of Buenos Aires in the metropolitan area goes to the south, so this is going to be the axis that is going to balance. The north does not have much more possibilities of locating human activities, so we are making a proposal that goes to the south [...] (Fabio De Marco, 13/12/ 2017).

From their knowledge and vision of urban development, the La Plata and Matanza-Riachuelo river basins represented the new axes for the southward growth of the city of Buenos Aires.

When I asked what the economic value of these lands in southern districts was for such a development, some geographical, economic, and environmental factors were brought up, among which were: a) the proximity to the capital city of Buenos Aires, b) the fact that most of the territory was a natural area and had not been used for garbage burial so construction could be carried out there, c) its connection to the metropolitan highway network that would enable future residents to get to the northern or western districts in 2030.

Techint's project, the developers continued, would be the first urban development "*colonising the entire riverside area that goes from Ensenada and La Plata [to the east and south of the province for over 60 kilometres] to Buenos Aires*". They framed this idea within the promulgation of the new ordering of native forests in the province of Buenos Aires in January 2017 (sectors of native forest would be subject to the possibility of investment and productive activities), in addition to the provincial law of land occupation (N° 8912/77), and the official master plan for territorial planning from 1958 that envisaged urban development there.⁷¹

Later in the same interview, Roberto Converti introduced another explanation of what "colonisation" meant when stating that "*the great challenge that the project has is to occupy the territory, because we believe in the occupation of the territory*".

When I asked him about the meaning of "occupation", he alluded to France as an urban planning trendsetter in Europe that Oficina Urbana identified with for the development of their proposals. Converti alluded to the fact that in France, places have a previous culture of landscape, of care, so that this aspect is part of the creation of a space that wants to be transformed.

Such a place could be released to a non-intervention, culturally speaking and irrespective of its private or public management, in such a way that people know how to behave in it, and this condition would make others behave the same way. In an uncared-for space, as the riverside in Avellaneda and Quilmes was, Converti considered it necessary to establish rules that defined what could and could not be done, and how. For this reason, the occupation Converti made reference to was based on two factors.

First, "colonisation" involved rules that would set a new cultural basis in terms of values and practices because the main threat to the territory was people themselves (including the riverside inhabitants) and their lack of respect for the law.

Second, it expected to turn the area into a "liveable" place because in its current state it had neither destiny nor social owners; no one knew about it and no one felt a sense of belonging to it.

⁷¹ The plan would organise the metropolitan area and adjacent districts from La Plata City to Zárate in the north of Buenos Aires. It was devised by the Office of the Regulatory Plan of the City of Buenos Aires, dependent on the Municipality of Buenos Aires. <https://observatorioamba.org/planes-y-proyectos/caba/planes/1958-plan-director/ficha> Last accessed: 27/5/2022.

The “occupation”, or taking control of a territory, was in relation to a form of appropriation, *Converti* understood, in the face of different perceptions and forms of appropriation happening in the same place. In the appropriation represented by NCP, the idea of “the public” played a fundamental role because in Argentina it was synonymous with anonymity (lacking or not showing private use) so anyone could claim ownership or do whatever they want in such places.

He made reference to the public character of squares, parks, nature reserves, or riverside spaces, for example, which has historically entitled some people (homeless families, political groups or clientelist driven interests) to take them for themselves, invoking housing needs, human rights or a fairer access to urban lands.

Thus, if “public” was the maximum expression of urbanity and naturally hosted a multiplicity of perspectives that were put into play with a reciprocity sustained by limited and shared responsibility (Marrero Guillamón, 2008), in practice, this concept had been distorted for some time implying for *Converti* that it was not possible or at least could not occur by itself.

For this reason, NCP would give the site an identity and *raison d’être* that the riverside of Avellaneda and Quilmes did not have or had long lost. The construction of that place as public, with that designation applying to 95% of its total surface area, depended therefore to a large extent on laying the groundwork that guided and disciplined what happened there. To “colonise” a place as public meant that a place with no relevant social, environmental or historical references could be shaped according to the developers and that people would act accordingly.

DISCIPLINE THROUGH PLACE

Here I briefly dwell on “discipline” in relation to “territorial colonisation” as it emerges as a way of controlling the territory and what happens in it, which I understand as a means of colonisation. The urban developers did not conceptualise it in this way, and they did not even mention discipline as a means of enforcing rules, but I think that it is interesting to open it up for deeper analysis. Based on Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (2002) I would like to continue with that official logic to bring some questions to the territorial occupation that the urban developers envision with NCP.

First there is the archetypal figure of a place user, the one who takes care of the place in such a way that this caretaking behaviour can be attributed to the rules governing that place so the user knows these rules, respects them, and acts in a right way.

Second, to this user a corporeality can be attributed, because such behaviour becomes visible and recognisable (by others) through the body: “[...] *I go barefoot to this place if this is how I have to go, they [French people, representing that sort of user] do not leave their things lying around; they do everything it says there on a sign hanging from a tree, something that was written one day; so people arrive, and do what they have to do... Why? Because they just do it; on the other hand, our society is a society of resistance to the rules, am I right? [...]*”. (Converti, 2017).

Unlike this European properness in public spaces, the users of public spaces in Argentina do not abide by the law or behave in a non-desirable way so their behaviour “must be ordered”: “We [as developers] *have discussed many times how to set up a management plan for the whole riverside area; in fact, we implemented a project in Neuquén [province in La Patagonia] for the whole coastal territory of Neuquén creating an urban observatory, a management plan [...] to always work it on the basis of “rules”, so after lots of discussions and under certain criteria, after a long time, we have achieved it [occupation of the area].* (Converti, 2017).

Third, and in relation to space, the discipline is first and foremost about the distribution of individuals in that space, and in order to do this it is essential to “specify” one (Foucault, 2002: 130) or, as Oficina Urbana mentioned earlier, to give it a destination by means of urban development.

The role of nature in Techint’s urban development

And what place does nature (wetlands, native forest and the river) have in this promoters’ logic of “colonisation”? Following the definition of Oficina Urbana, nature is where things exist in a reality out there, a space with a specific geographic location.

It is characterised by a temporality that determines successive forms of existence having, additionally, a materiality or capacity to be shaped that enables one to act in it:

“[the space of nature] is a previous geography in which one intervenes, and therefore one adapts to it [...] an adaptation to the successive pre-existences, both to the artificial ones created for the sanitary landfill and to that nature that was putting up and enclosing that kind of big factory [growing around the landfill site] that was built for the movement of the soil together with the construction of... of the sanitation site, which was, moreover, a completely legal fact..”. (Converti, interview, 2017).

So, change can be generated in nature, but nature is also, simultaneously, an environment that does not depend on man for it has its own rules and can grow or adjust to anthropic activity.

What sort of nature was there at the riverside, then? Converti replied later in the interview about this when we talked about the conflict around NCP – which, he stated, he had not been aware of for some time – and the fact that for him there were no “pure” natural conditions there as the neighbourhood movement claimed.

“This is an urban territory; it is not a rural territory: when they say to me “forest”, no, how come a forest here?”, I reproduce the rest of our dialogue below:

“Vanina Santy (researcher): So for you it is not an ecosystem, it does not have any natural properties.

Converti: It is an urban ecosystem; it is part of the urban system.

Researcher: Ok.

Converti: It is part of an urban system, of high virtue, different, it is a natural fact, natural with exceptional qualities, natural.

Researcher: But for you it is already integrated into “the urban” structure.

Converti: Of course, it cannot be 7 km from the edge of Buenos Aires, from the central area of Buenos Aires, which also, within those 7 km there is the Riachuelo, also has the Petrochemical District, it also has this! And it turns out that it is the Garden of Eden, noo! It is affected by the same conditions [as those the city] so it must be remediated [environmentally]; the Riachuelo must be remediated, the

Petrochemical District must be remediated, that conflict [with the neighbours] must be dismantled; I think there the conflict around the Riachuelo has to be solved [due to its pollution and lack of sanitation by the government], the Petrochemical District has to be solved [also due to environmental suffering caused to inhabitants of the area] and you have to dismantle the CEAMSE [landfill] and dismantle everything that... encompasses that now. You have to live it as a systemic territory, so my encouragement is precisely that by integrating it [into the rest of the urban fabric] those are “virtuous acts” [...].” (Converti, interview, 2017).

So, due to the fact of having a history and proximity to the city, riverside nature was thought of as something “not natural” for him; it was in fact part of an urban problem rather than an environmental one.

Or in any case, the idea of nature was assimilated into the city, regarding whatever happens there as a normal state of affairs characteristic of this context that does not withstand problematization.

This approach was better explained by Converti at an exhibition for the construction industry in Quilmes during 2010. The riverside in Avellaneda and Quilmes was a place with a degraded environmental quality that needed to be “*seen differently*” in compliance with existing regulations and the circumstances of the districts.

A place that had been part of a past territorial planning demanded the creation of other conditions and values through urban strategy. The urban geographer Edward Soja might describe this representation of space as the conceptualization of experts (planners, bureaucrats, technocrats) that results in a dominant space that replaces another.

This is possible through the “control over knowledge, signs, and codes: over the means of deciphering spatial practice and hence over the production of spatial knowledge” (1996: 67).

This is what the social movement contests: that the riverside space is redefined under the promoters’ terms making specific uses of and symbolic attributions to the natural objects found there such as, say, the forest.

Keeping this official position in mind and reading the material about NCP other disparities came up. Converti denied the existence of “purity” by the river, or properties of an untouched nature, but despite this, the promoters also alluded to a “luxuriant vegetation and native fauna” as part of the unique features offered by NCP to new dwellers and visitors (2009: 3).⁷²

Another benefit of nature in relation to urban development was the existence of “wildlife” that people would have access to through outdoor and sports activities – a description that was part of NCP’s arguments to justify the new city there because it was an undomesticated and even hostile place, but with development it would offer a better quality of life.

⁷² Techint Group. (2009). “Nueva Costa del Plata. El waterfront de Buenos Aires”. Brochure with information on the urban development produced and distributed by the same company.

In a brochure elaborated by Techint, the reestablishment of the relation with the river, in this place of remarkable beauty, would be facilitated by the “investment in the place” that this natural environment would attract (Techint, 2009: 13). The La Plata River, for the urban developers, was also part of this ecology, but as a “*facade*” or “*frame*” that added a differentiating element from other developments with “*open and permanent views, favourable for a habitat with a high quality of life*”.⁷³ But it was not just any river; it was “*a mythical river with conditions of strategic value, capable of belonging to high-ranking urban policies, and cities that belong to this environmental, geographic, and urban structure*” (Converti, 2010).⁷⁴

Its incorporation into urban planning was based on the strategic value that the river brought to a development project such as NCP, not only economically but also aesthetically. A legendary river that was a compulsory reference of historical and geographical importance for the promoters.

How to colonise a territory

The “colonisation”, as a way of thinking about a riverside territory and consequently acting in it, would entail these practices:

1) By erasing other possibilities of social production of space as well as social groups and once typical forms of economic activity (Svampa, 2019: 21-31) through: land grabbing (Techint already owns 232 hectares, transferred by the provincial government in the 1990s through irregular procedures), an intensive use of the territory (with the construction of over 1,000,000 m² of floor space in an area of 11 hectares), and the destruction of nature (the construction works are legally prohibited on lands of the landfill, so the wetland area is where the new city would settle).

The whole coastal space, from Avellaneda to Ensenada, is re-arranged around a “centre of order” (Guattari & Deleuze, 1987: 311) represented by the private construction from which boundaries are set around and from which new elements venture out not that far from this project.

This has been the case since NCP was made public as the lands distribution and prioritisation of uses by the municipalities has revolved around urban development rather than the conservation of protected areas or the investment to keep afloat the productive activities once traditional to the area.

2) Establishing contradictions as regards the natural properties of the place, in the sense that these properties are denied at the same time that they are used to market and sell the project. Here I return to what I described in a previous chapter about the ways in which Oficina Urbana and Techint have self-adjudicated knowledge on the wetlands and forests.

⁷³ Ibid 91, page 16.

⁷⁴ First construction exhibition “UniCONS” in Quilmes organised by the Construction Union in which the project NCP was presented to the construction industry by Roberto Converti, Oficina Urbana. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yePuePOPk0&ab_channel=quilmestvpublica Last accessed: 30/5/2022.

Their “expert” position has generated confusion among those who have opposed the project and debate among experts, which leads me to reflect on the manipulation of nature for the realisation of such large-scale projects.

Nature is not only a malleable physical thing, but also a concept that can be adjusted to suit audiences and circumstances in a political arena. It is not relevant to know the truth about it in the context of NCP or the technical aspects of future environmental impacts; what matters is to impose a vision of things to be able to act in a given territory.

3) A reordering of history is launched with the proposed colonisation by which “the order of a solidified historical imagination” is altered by reinterpreting events, assigning new past priorities or changing the meaning of events experienced by the communities (Segato, 2021: 44).

This was the case with the environmental disaster caused by the sanitary landfill during more than 20 years. According to the “promoters”, the burial of garbage improved the natural conditions by the river, generating a new biodiversity with tree and animal species not known before. What Techint caused was seen as a “virtuous” process that NCP could capitalise on to restore and regenerate the natural properties that might be lost in that space.

4) Alluding to an economic, social and environmental progress has been the emblem of Techint’s proposal. The neighbourhood assemblies criticised the neoliberal formulation of what best for the communities, to which Ernesto Rona, the former spokesperson of Techint, responded in what he felt was an attack on the project.: “*the environmentalist sectors see progress as being against nature [...]*” (2011)⁷⁵. In relation to NCP, progress is linked to a hegemonic gaze with respect to a territory that demands and justifies its rearrangement to adjust it to the present times. In the framework of territorial conflicts, progress (or modernity) and colonisation are “mutually constitutive processes in the formation of global capitalism” because capital needs to expand over other territorialities, according to Betancourt Santiago (2017: 335).

The devices for territorial occupation⁷⁶

Nueva Costa del Plata consists of a spatial conception for the riverside in the context of colonisation. The new emplacement could be thought of as a “colony”, my own interpretation, for it provides the means to “regulate activities, separate populations, and establish a comprehensive order, on both an aesthetic and political level” (Rabinow, 2003: 353).

⁷⁵ Eleisegui, P. (28/3/2011). Techint breaks ground and begins construction of its US\$1.7 billion premium city. Business Section. *Iprofesional*. <https://www.iprofesional.com/notas/112611-techint---Techint-pone-primera-e-inicia-la-construccion-de-su-ciudad-premium-valuada-en-us1700-millones> Last accessed: 13/01/2023.

⁷⁶ This section is part of a book chapter on urban extractivism (to be published in 2023 by the National University of La Plata and the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina) in collaboration with the neighbourhood assembly NHOC.

It would be an area with its own infrastructure and public services, its own environmental standards, a security strictly monitored by special police forces, and subject to a public-private body of control. Not to mention that this is where new social groups would be located which would comply with the new territorial conditions.

With this idea in mind, the “colonisation” pursued in Avellaneda and Quilmes demands legal, material and administrative mechanisms similar (and different) to those used in the northern metropolitan region for the construction of walled communities.

They could be classified, then, into two major types: 1) formal: those established by national, provincial or municipal regulations on environmental management and urban planning, and 2) informal: the practices carried out between the “promoters” through negotiations and agreements restricted to public knowledge.

The first relates to the compliance of urban developers and real-estate companies with urban and environmental regulations and administrative conditions through the submission of a master plan and technical studies at the request of local and provincial authorities and according to the scale of the project to be developed.

Although the infrastructure and baseline studies, impact and environmental management plan were submitted and also made available to the inhabitants through the Ombudsman’s Office of Avellaneda, it was not until ten years later that the company would have submitted the technical documentation at the OPDS in accordance with what the law indicates to obtain an Environmental Impact Statement.⁷⁷

This has been the cornerstone of controversies, since during that time it was not fully known how the company would carry out works of such proportions and what it would entail in the long term (according to the plans it was expected to take more than twenty years to complete).

⁷⁷ The documentation provided by Techint to the municipalities included the infrastructure of basic services, the hydraulic modelling of the La Plata River, the drainage of external basins, and topography studies, among others.

The information was analysed by the National Technological University (UTN, Avellaneda) at the request of the company to release an official report. In a preliminary report from 2008, the UTN established that “the definition of the activities and processes causing environmental claims and the status of the region of influence of NCP were based on: (i) inferences and appreciations of the environmental team derived from their experience, (ii) the appreciation of the project outlines periodically provided by the urban developers, and (iii) very little factual data of the project and none of the development activities involved” (page 308).

Though this lack of information on the project could be attributed to an early stage of definition, the Secretary for the Environment, Urban Hygiene and Tourism of the Municipality of Quilmes, Claudio Olivares, granted an Environmental Impact Statement (DIA) in 2010 to accelerate the legislative treatment of NCP. This was done despite the doubts that still persisted regarding NCP, since the municipality did not know about the modality of soil filling to be carried out or the simulation of the hydraulic behaviour of the area in the face of climatic events.

The next stage of project approval is in 2018 with the evaluation of the Environmental Impact Study within the framework of the territorial planning of native forests (in accordance with law N° 14.888 and its regulatory decree N° 366/17) by OPDS. This provincial environmental agency summoned interested parties for a participatory instance prior to the granting of the corresponding DIA. For this reason, NCP studies and reports could be accessed again according to laws N°11.723/95 and 14.888/17, which were partly similar to those submitted in 2008.

OPDS is currently assessing the project, suspended since 2013 by the Federal Court of Appeals of La Plata, for a deforestation carried out in 2012 in Avellaneda.

Despite this, the Deliberative Council of Avellaneda changed the legal status of riverside lands from “nature reserve” to “special management zone” (ordinance No. 21.332/08) for urban development. This happened only months after the official presentation of the project without looking for a consensus with larger sectors of the community.

In Quilmes, NCP has not yet been approved by the Deliberative Council, since the Mayors Francisco Gutiérrez (2007-2015) and Martiniano Molina (2015-2019) have not been able to secure the necessary quorum among non-partisan councillors.

The law, partially complied with by corporate interests or posing minimum standards for urban expansion by the government, has been a key tool for real-estate development in riverside areas.

Without violating the law, the lobby made by construction companies and developers has allowed the reclassification of lands for their commercialisation through the assignment of new uses by local legislation.

Going further back in time, this legal manipulation is what has enabled planners to conceive a project such as NCP. With the change of contractual conditions in 1998 regarding the management of the Villa Domingo landfill by SyUSA, some natural areas (not included in the filling plans of the landfill) were used as a means of payment by the provincial authorities. This also happened throughout the La Plata River (including Buenos Aires with Puerto Madero) and northern basins favouring companies with an interest in developing those territories.

Thus, five kilometres of coastline were awarded to Techint in the 1990s for the completion of a private and luxury neighbourhood called Marinas del Sur (1999).⁷⁸ After some opposition from local sectors, legislative approval was finally not obtained for Marinas del Sur.

Recently, the enactment of provincial law N° 14888/16 (within the framework of national law N° 26.331 for the organisation of native forests in Buenos Aires) further changed the spatial and environmental scheme of the La Plata River. In compliance with this regulation put forward by the OPDS, the prohibition of clearing was established for 80% of a total area of 969,000 hectares in the province. The remaining 20% would be subject to forest exploitation, but even so, the municipalities would have the right to intervene in places of ecological value with infrastructure works or to enable real-estate investment and agricultural production (articles 12 and 14).

⁷⁸ Little is known about this private neighbourhood project of SyUSA (or Techint), so I reproduce below a chronicle of that time found on the local blog barrameda.com.ar:

“Next to the sanitary landfill, on a 210-hectare coastal strip, a private neighbourhood is planned with nautical houses with moorings, golf clubs, a lake and a lot of green. The project was named Marinas del Sur and will be in charge of SyUSA. This firm is a CEAMSE contractor, in charge of the operational part of waste processing. [...] For now, the private neighbourhood, ‘as it is’ does not have much support. *‘I am not going to zone those lands without involving the neighbours’*, the Mayor Laborde of Avellaneda [from 1999-2003] warns. *‘We cannot approve a project for the enjoyment of a few’*, he stresses. For Laborde, Avellaneda must recover the access to the river. *‘For us, that garbage dump was a tragedy that lasted many years: it cut off our path to the coast and filled the city with gases and odours’*, he justifies”. Avellaneda: A plan to recover the coast and the river. (2003). *Local blog*: <https://www.barrameda.com.ar/articulo/avella01.htm> Last accessed: 7/6/2022.

Consequently, between 2011 and 2014, a period of public debate for the legislative treatment of the aforementioned law, a significant percentage of 1,000 hectares in Avellaneda and Quilmes lost their characteristics of high ecological conservation value, allowing certain areas to be considered suitable for urban expansion.

Such loss of natural areas was attributed by “neighbours” as well as government sources (off the record) to corporate pressure⁷⁹ to make this type of public decision.

The second type of public-private device used for “colonisation” stands out due to its informality, as Pintos and Narodowski have already identified in the lower basin of the Luján River (2012).

Basically, they are tactics that have not been included in public participatory processes and tend to remain far from the scrutiny of inhabitants or people being affected by urban development policies.

This means that they do not circulate in the established institutional, administrative or legislative spheres, but instead they aim to achieve progress in the management of lands.

These mechanisms have defined a relationship of cooperation between the local municipalities and Techint and have been linked to finding optional ways for the acceleration of public decisions.

Such was the case of the bio park – a green space with community access – created in 2017, which was based on a proposal made by Oficina Urbana to the CEAMSE for the reconversion of the riverside area of Santo Domingo previously assigned to the landfill. Approximately 500 hectares took the form of public spaces, foreseen by the master plan of NCP as environmental and water parks. This achievement by the urban developers demonstrated how private actors have an influence on urban planning and decision-makers:

“It finally happened through the recent contest [of ideas at the national level for the bio park] that we proposed many times to the CEAMSE; finally the CEAMSE created it, but what the CEAMSE has done is what we insisted for to the four different administrations that managed our project [...]” (Roberto Converti, December 2017).

The former provincial senator Daniel Expósito (2007-2011, Coalición Cívica⁸⁰) had expressed in an interview in 2011 that some events could only be explained by the corruption that usually surrounds this type of real-estate proposal (i.e. like NCP). Similarly, the former provincial deputy Mónica López (2009-2017, Frente Renovador⁸¹) referred to the existence of “*political complicity*” with Techint for the construction of a new city in environmentally affected areas.⁸²

⁷⁹ In an interview with staff from the Provincial Directorate of Natural Resources at the OPDS in 2016. They did not allow me to record the conversation but in my field notes they made reference to “*productive and real-estate pressure in areas with talaes* [the main forest community in the province of Buenos Aires]”.

⁸⁰ A left-liberal political party in Argentina.

⁸¹ Argentine political party with a Peronist, Kirchnerist, syncretist and transversalist orientation.

⁸² Author is not indicated. (2/10/2012). Mega real-estate venture in Quilmes under questioning. *Letra P*. Political Journalism. <https://www.lettrap.com.ar/nota/2012-2-10-cuestionan-mega-emprendimiento-inmobiliario-en-quilmes> Last accessed: 10/01/2022.

Beyond these types of suspicions, I understand that the “colonisation” already began with NCP since it has laid the foundations for the transformation of the entire southern riverside; this has implied an interrelation of space and power in a complex interplay (Rabinow: 2003: 356) by engaging the mechanisms I have just described.

The emergence of new private proposals that expressly align with NCP, such as Praderas del Plata (Silver Meadows, a private real-estate development), have powered the occupation of wetlands and forests areas previously protected by law in Avellaneda and Quilmes.⁸³

To destroy in order to create

Returning to the description of NCP as a new territorial, social, environmental and cultural enclave, as proposed by the “promoters” in the early years of the conflict, I would like to focus on one aspect of Dovey’s work on the transformation of the waterfront in Melbourne, Australia. It has to do with a series of actions and changes that can be compared and generalised to understand what waterfront revitalisation is and what it involves in Avellaneda and Quilmes.

In a confluence of global and local elements that make up a *fluidity* of capital, knowledge, design imagery, and planning, there are two vital processes. First, there is a *detritorialisation* by which liberation is produced, as in something that is set free from confinement or control, for there was a form of stabilisation in terms of space, cultural traits, and meanings which could acquire a different form (Dovey, 2005: 22).⁸⁴ Something that has been in a static condition for a long time, condensed by tradition, habit or customary practices, aligns with another state of affairs which, in turn, also contains the capacity to change:

“This area that has this environment, this landscape, this flora and fauna and this coastal perspective needs to be understood in another way [...]” (Converti, 2010).

“Today, in a context where the global reality shows us that most scenarios seem to be collapsing, we propose to move forward, to build and grow with this project [NCP]” (Héctor Masoero, General Manager of Services, Techint. Transcript of public audience, 2008).

⁸³ While writing this chapter in 2022, the Assembly NHOC learned about Praderas del Plata, a project that would be located on riverside lands once planned for the Metropolitan Bio park created in 2017 but discarded some years later. This development, with a rezoning approved by ordinance N° 11.812/11 at the Deliberative Council of Quilmes and provincial authorisation by former Governor Daniel Scioli (by decree N° 660/2015) is “part of NCP”, the construction company publicised. In correspondence with the creation of new urban centres (article 83 of law N° 8.912/77), it would be developed in an area adjacent to the former Villa Domingo landfill. “Neighbours” learned of this legislative and administrative decision almost 10 years later, without having the opportunity to stop the development.

⁸⁴ Kim Dovey bases his analysis on the work of Appadurai in *Modernity at Large* (1996) about global flows that he defines as “scapes”, for example, ethnoscares (or flows of tourists, refugees, and migrants), technoscares (flows of technology) and ideoscares (flows of ideas, values, and ideologies). Dovey also draws upon Deleuze’s concepts of flows of desire and deterritorialisation that enable, according to Dovey, new ways of thinking about the city (2005: 21). The works of Deleuze he refers to are *The Fold* (1993) and *What is Philosophy?* (1994) as well as in his book with Guattari known as *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), where they work on the idea of space as something that is not stable and that contains the possibility of “becoming” something else through desire.

Second, a movement (over a previous spatial formation or condensation) enables a *reterritorialisation* for the creation of new boundaries, rules, identities, and culture. Capital plays a fundamental role since it stimulates liberation, deregulating markets to give rise to *flows of desire* of modernity, life quality, profit, and connection with the world for waterfront living (Dovey, 2005: 2).

“[...] a new habitat” (Brochure, “The new waterfront of Buenos Aires”, 2009).

So for this to happen, the planning process disregards previous desires or expectations to produce new ones which are in connection with the requirements of capital to ensure that consumption rules the experience of place and revenues are secured.

In the deterritorialisation–reterritorialisation lies a material surplus value in the production and use of the waterfront by which the investors seek returns on their investments, the landowner has income from the sale of lots, and the municipalities collect more taxes. But this surplus can also be symbolic in terms of an “area of prestige” for the new residents and other users of the riverside for a new “access to the river” or a better “life in society” (Techint, 2009).

Some salient reasonings of how this process of destruction-creation (*deterritorialisation/territorialisation*) could take place were formulated by the “promoters” as follows. They support the logic not only of the project NCP but also of the urban expansion in protected areas of the southern metropolitan area:

- Development stops decline: Almost 20 years after the closure of the landfill, it was necessary to give visibility to the riverside territory so that it could gain a new economic and environmental value. The way to achieve this is to make it suitable for living (because it has not been so for a long time) by creating the necessary conditions for urban life. Therefore, “vacant” land should be made part of the expansion of the cities, creating a high population density and consolidating the urban areas into a single mass linking Avellaneda and Quilmes with more developed areas:

“The area contemplated in the project has to be densified, it has to have a population for that to exist, you need square metres; so that the square metres do not touch the ground environmentally with such potential, what we do is raise in height. We believe, when they say but architect, what do you think about what are called residential towers [of over 40 floors] [...] in this place it seems to me that it is good, to densify the city and the towers allows to have a good amount of population to make good use of the infrastructures without stepping on the natural ground” (De Marco, Oficina Urbana. 2017).

- The public replaced by the private: Since the announcement of NCP, the use of natural spaces open to the population raised criticism from the “promoters” as to what was public and who constituted the public. Given that the riverside had no previous spatial or cultural references and therefore no “*social owners*”, as stated by Oficina Urbana, only ideology prevailed at the site. Not everyone should be allowed to exercise their rights in a place by occupying it without it being theirs or without someone being entitled to act in it.

In any case, this ideology had become obsolete and required intervention to prevent the real estate market from continuing to lose valuable lands.

“I always remember as a very unique fact, maybe you remember it or you have it as data... once the entire Indo-American Park [a green and public space for recreational and social use located in the south of Buenos Aires] was squatted [people settled there illegally claiming property] and when journalists asked those who had squatted the place [...] the squatter responded with two words that for me... in our terms, it was fantastic, fantastic... ‘What park?’ The guy did not see a park; the guy saw land, and he explained himself in terms of the place that he needed, he transformed it into an exchange value in his cultural vision, precisely in cultural terms; he transformed it into an exchange value, not having a use value: it was a privatisation in action... no one uses this; it’s mine [...]” (Converti, Oficina Urbana, 2017).

- Nature blossoms from pollution: The riverside nature that has remained unused, forgotten behind the highway, must be made accessible to people for a different relationship between the city and the river. But in doing so, the “promoters” describe a natural place that denies the existing contamination, nor do they say how it will be environmentally recovered.

Whether it is urban marketing or simply a way to attract capital, the illegal digs with unsafe water turn into “*lagoons for water sports*”, the landfill lands in the process of environmental remediation take the form of “*biological parks*”, and the mountains of rubbish are “*green meadows*”, becoming part of the master plan of the project under these terms.

“Today there is no smell, no discomfort, there are little green fields where trees are planted, so that a green lung is created in the former landfill area, what are these places called? Where they plant... a nursery, which has the former landfill and from that nursery the trees are transplanted in different places. Since this was closed, there was no chance of opening it to the community, and they weren’t in much of a hurry [municipal and provincial authorities], but now that this project is underway, they will surely speed up those things, they will install a golf course, a tennis court that can be built on a sanitary landfill, [...] today this is a place that I would tell you, it is a beautiful place [...] today this is not a Chernobyl, but it could be something else” (Rona, interview, 2011).

- Progress against underdevelopment: The lack of economic development in the southern metropolitan area has been a stigma for years for the population and authorities in comparison to northern localities with more investment and infrastructure. NCP would be an opportunity, as the promoters announced it, for new financial, real estate and tourist opportunities to become more like those wealthy cities finally. The riverbank is “empty” according to developers, but the place contains the capacity to generate the long-awaited progress:

“The southern area has had a backwardness in its development due to the lack of governmental promotion of large investments [...] 20, 30 years ago a highway was built because you had to get to Mar del Plata [in the seaside] and today it is bringing development, but the areas further west continue to be postponed only because of prejudice; but a great project [...] if they do it in the western, northern areas, that’s progress; and us, in the southern area, it is an “environmental disaster”. If you ask me if this is progress [urban development], I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know...” (Claudio Olivares, former Secretary of Environment in Quilmes. Interview, 2011).

Deterritorialisation and *reterritorialisation* are inscribed in a liminal attribute often assigned to riverside spaces for being in a state of transition towards something else.

The fixed elements of these spaces can change through a convergence into which relations, capital and knowledge, among other elements, flow to participate in the transformation.

The waterfront revitalisation involves such complex processes for a new configuration that, according to the history of the riverside territory in Avellaneda and Quilmes, might pose new problems to people if the environmental impact of works was not addressed properly.

Conclusions: Deconstructing a colonisation ideal

As part of a global strategic plan for waterfront areas, the revitalisation proposal of Techint plans a new kind of land organisation, a new kind of environmental sustainability, and a new kind of life in society by the La Plata River. NCP also expects to implement an original form of wetlands and forest management based on a partnership with the public sector represented by the government at all levels.

The “promoters” put these changes in terms of “colonisation” to turn the coastline into a billionaire real-estate development hub. Thus, the new urban settlements that will settle on protected lands will stimulate NCP to complete the territorial control regarding: a new relationship with the river based on an imposed “progress” (mainly, the generation of income); the occupation of lands (imprinting the ordering of social behaviour through new rules regarding new uses); the improvement of nature (as something that can be shaped according to specific prerogatives).

Deterritorialisation and *reterritorialisation* as processes involved in this mega construction endeavour enabled me to look at the way certain conditions are generated so that a territory which remained underdeveloped (or stagnant) can change to another state of affairs by leaving behind obsolete conditions. This way of producing territory through investment of international capital is confronted by the resistance of those who refuse to be replaced, displaced or forgotten.

More importantly, this is the *sense of place* advocated by the “promoters”, through which the new representation of the riverside includes the idea of better social groups (with regard to income and behaviour), modern interactions with the riverside, and a culture associated with an order that incorporates new standards.

The “colonisation”, therefore, is fostered by actors with the capacity to establish a new means of power over the riverside – that is, by setting the possibilities of further conquest of natural and public spaces on behalf of development.

Through the contradictions and controversies raised by this revitalisation model, it is worth reflecting on how private interests imbue themselves with the authority to value something as empty and prone to reconstruction. Or, in any case, what role do the elected authorities (who represent citizens and their interests) assume in the face of pressure from the business sectors?

NCP is loaded with moral assumptions, or in any case its “promoters” make such assumptions, about the people who live there and/or use the place as well as what happens there and the causes for the area’s social and environmental decline. The project is undoubtedly part of the *moral ecology* of the “promoters”, with expectations for what the place could be, a different version of the environmental trajectory of the place and a new worth assigned to nature. Above all, the urban developers, Oficina Urbana, believe in private construction as the future of the metropolitan region because it would connect cities, solving housing problems as a way of dealing with moral problems: poverty, land squatting and the destruction that inhabitants cause to these areas.

I will examine next the characteristics of the social movement against the “colonisation” I have just described, what associative forms are part of it and how people organised this way manage to work together to reject NCP.



Figure 12: “Neighbours” in protest. Author: NHOC. 2012

Cartography of a social movement

Before starting chapter 4, I would like to introduce the collective forms that have been active between 2008 and 2018 making up the neighbourhood movement against Nueva Costa del Plata (NCP); I refer to those taking part in these collective activities as “neighbours” (“*vecinos*”). I consider that bringing these organisations and their characteristics to the forefront will be fundamental to understanding what I will explain ahead.

The concept of *cartography* is key in these pages, to understand where these organisations are in Avellaneda and Quilmes and their political influence by generating alliances with respect to something that affects them all. The map in figure 13, then, shows: a) the geographical location in terms of their proximity or not to the riverside, and b) what brings people together or the main issues of concern for collective action (represented by icons as described below).

I have already used a similar approach with cartography in the ethnocartographic exercise I carried out with “neighbours” (described in the section on Ethnographic Techniques & Tools, Annex) which I use here for the realisation of the territorial map with neighbourhood assemblies in order to graph their view on the place.

Those who are represented in the map below have maintained their collaborations, albeit with comings and goings, over the years, recurrently coming back together according to the unfolding of tensions. Many other organisations have also worked together, but only temporarily or over a particular initiative, and thus they have not been included.

Overall, what is shown here indicates the diversity of the movement and how despite their ideological, political, and thematic differences they share the same goal: the conservation of wetlands and forests of the La Plata River.

Most of them are non-profit organisations so they do not intend to make a profit but work for a social or political purpose or to provide services and solutions that people in general or social groups in particular need. They encompass the “civil society” in relation to decision-making in the public sphere outside of governmental structures, political parties, business or economic powers, and religious institutions.

The sources used to compile the data were the websites and blogs of the respective organisations, institutional information provided on social networks such as Facebook, and interviews and data collected during my fieldwork – especially the field notes taken during plenaries or general meetings in which the aforementioned associations participated.

This movement is organised and acts together based on the call of the Assembly NHOC (Asamblea No a la Entrega de la Costa), from which initiatives and discourses originate and are (or not) supported by the rest of the group. There is no protocol of action to which everyone subscribes, nor are there decisions that are reached between all parts of the movement, although there is general consensus that is manifested through the construction of social networks from personal relationships.

It is the shared political trajectories, the activist struggles, the mutual knowledge from the same neighbourhood or having participated in the same protests that reunite people multiplying interactions.

Some organisations I list are not part of the movement per se and have publicly validated NCP, but it is relevant to situate them among the rest of the groups in opposition to Techint’s project.

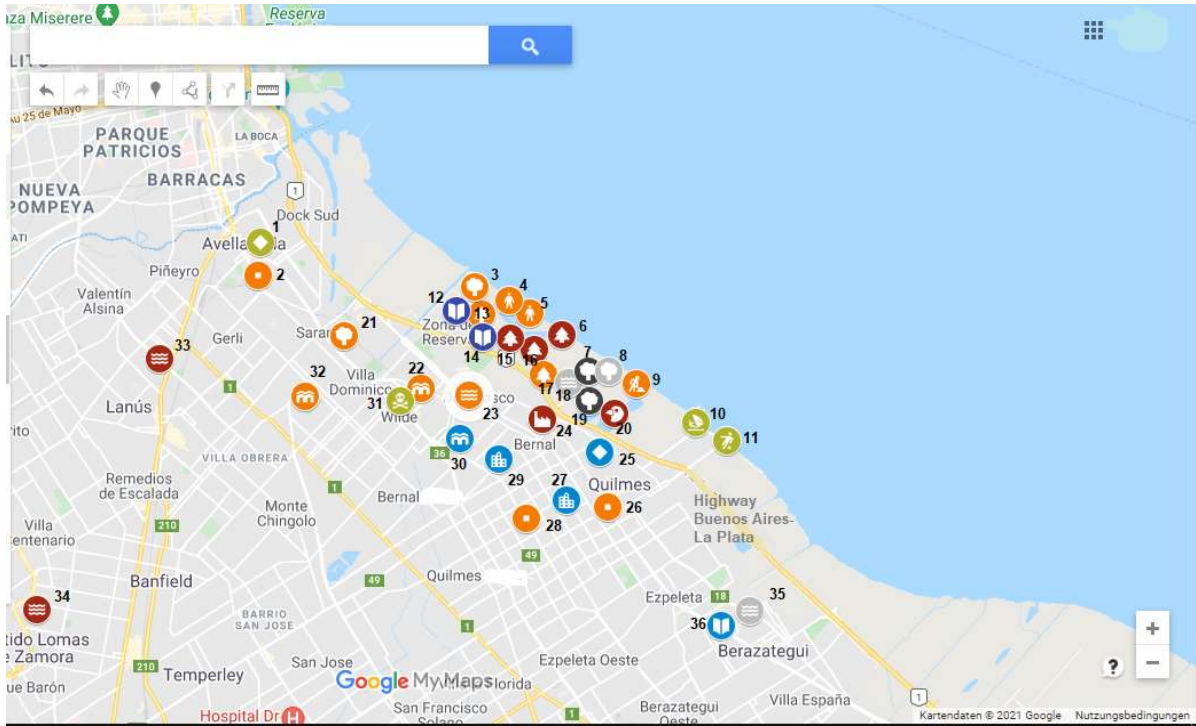
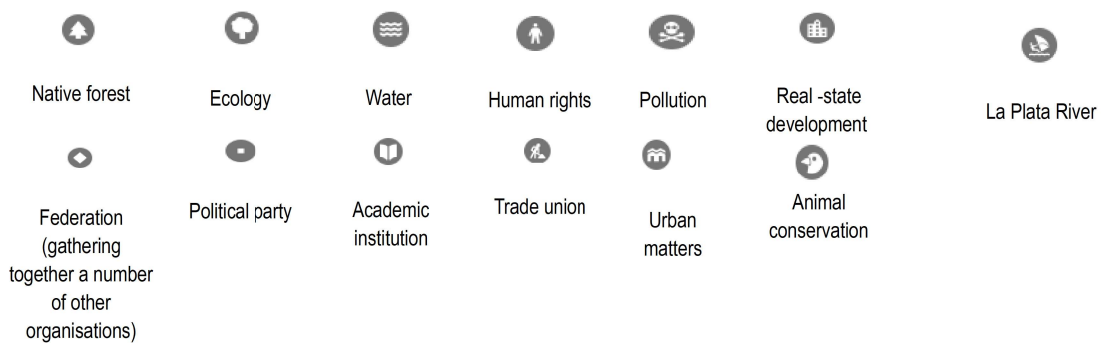


Figure 13: The neighbourhood movement in defence of the southern La Plata River. Author: Vanina Santy. 2021

For pragmatic reasons, each assembly (*asamblea*) has been located according to the neighbourhood, city or location from which they say they exert their influence; the numbering does not follow a particular pattern.

The icons show the work theme of each assembly and the colours indicate the degree of participation in the conflict. The red and orange icons are for the most active organisations in the conflict based on cross-referenced data systematised in a table I developed, which is defined in the section Research Methodology after the Introduction. The blue/green icons indicate lesser involvement, while the black ones are helpful to identify national or international forms of association. The grey icons signify those regional organisations acting in the periphery of the City of Buenos Aires:



The neighbourhood movement is encompassed by the following associative forms according to what has been stated above:

1- Federation of Local Organisations of Avellaneda (Federación Única de Sociedades de Fomento de Avellaneda, FUSFA).

The federation congregates other local organisations for the development of the district of Avellaneda. It works along with the Municipality of Avellaneda to solve local problems and is representative of the *fomentismo* (the promotion of inhabitants' participation for the "common good").

2- Popular Front Darío Santillán (Frente Popular Darío Santillán).

A social and political leftist movement founded in 2004 from the confluence of different organisations, mostly *piqueteras* (their action centres on the appropriation of public space) and also students, workers, peasants, and intellectuals.

It took its name from the militant Darío Santillán, murdered by the police in 2002 next to his companion Maximiliano Kosteki, in what it was known as the “Massacre of Avellaneda” during a protest.

3- Space Oikos (Espacio Oikos).

A non-governmental organisation made up of a group of volunteers whose main focus is on social and environmental problems at the Basin Matanza-Riachuelo and other southern districts. They work on environmental education and the promotion of native plants.

4- Mothers of Plaza de Mayo Founding Line (Madres de Plaza de Mayo Línea Fundadora).

An association of Argentine mothers whose children were imprisoned, tortured, and murdered during the state terrorism of the military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983. They are the most significant symbol in Argentina in the fight for human rights. Nora Cortiñas and Elia Espen have accompanied the struggle of the Assembly NHOC since 2012.

5- Adolfo Pérez Esquivel. Nobel Peace Prize, 1980.

He has been a renowned human rights activist in Argentina and Latin America for over 40 years. He was president of the Honorary Council of the Latin American Peace and Justice Service (SERPAJ), among other positions in international institutions and organisations, and is a current member of the Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal. He has accompanied the demands of the neighbourhood movement against Techint, especially the Assembly NHOC through public letters standing against “international economic groups” and regarding deforestation as a “crime against humanity”.

6- Multi-sector Front for the Protection of the Nature Reserve and Ecological Park in Quilmes (Frente Multisectorial para la Protección de la Reserva Natural y Parque Ecológico de Quilmes).

The following groups and organisations promoted the protection of the coastal natural areas of Avellaneda and Quilmes with the Assembly NHOC by 2012: Assembly of Wilde; Student Group Unconscious Collective (University of Quilmes); Pampero Cultural Centre.

Other political organisations collaborating with NHOC were: Student Centre (EMBA); COMPA (Coordinator of Popular Organisations and Movements of Argentina); Workers Party; Socialist Workers Party; Neighbours for Ezpeleta wetlands.

7- Union of Citizens’ Assemblies (Unión de Asambleas Ciudadanas, UAC).

The Union of Citizens’ Assemblies is a national association for exchange, discussion and action made up of self-gathered neighbours, non-partisan groups, and autonomous organisations not linked to the state apparatus. They struggle for the defence of common property, health and the self-determination of peoples seriously threatened by looting and pollution.

8- Socio-Environmental Regional Network (Red Socio-Ambiental Regional).

This network acted for the protection of the southern riverside of La Plata River against destruction, floods, an urban planning influenced by real-estate business, open dumps, the loss of historical heritage, and the privatisation of public spaces.

9- Central Union of Argentine Workers (Central de Trabajadores Argentinos, CTA).

This national association of Argentine workers was born from the division of a group of unions encompassing the Labour General Confederation, CGT, in 1992, in disagreement with the position adopted by the government of former President Carlos Menem. It is led by a social-Christian /Peronist majority, with an important Trotskyite and Communist minority.

10- Yacht Club Quilmes (Club Náutico Quilmes).

This was founded in 1921 during the tourist heyday of the riverside which attracted the upper classes of the City of Buenos Aires. Since then, the organisation promotes nautical activities and complementary sport activities such as tennis, summer pool, football, and rowing. This organisation has participated in the conflict by taking part in favour of NCP hosting public visits to scale models of the project.

11- Pejerrey Club (Club del Pejerrey).

This was created in 1938. It is a club open to the community where members and non-members can make use of sport and recreational facilities by the river, mainly to practise fishing. It was declared an asset of historical interest in 2014 by the national government.

This organisation has participated in the conflict by taking part in favour of NCP through public pronouncements.

12- University of Buenos Aires (Universidad de Buenos Aires, UBA).

Within the framework of the UBANEX Project “Young environmental promoters” 2014-2015 – Gino Germani Institute, Faculty of Social Sciences – the university collaborated with neighbourhood assemblies that organised walks in the nature reserve (together with students from secondary schools) to raise environmental awareness.

13- Workers’ Union Solidarity Cooperative (Cooperativa Unión Solidaria de Trabajadores, UST).

This cooperative carries out its activities in an area covering 450 hectares which are part of the former sanitary landfill in Villa Domínico, Avellaneda (active from 1978 to 2003). Since its closure, the workers of the UST Cooperative have been in charge of the post-closure maintenance of the landfill, in the form of a cooperative. They are in charge of the maintenance and remediation of the waste “modules” (areas for waste burial), the maintenance of operational roads and their storm drains, forestation, phytosanitary control and irrigation of tree species.

14- National University of La Plata (Universidad Nacional de La Plata).

Researchers and scholars of this academic institution conducted research and catalogued the fauna and flora of native of the coast in Avellaneda and Quilmes for the first time in 2013. The Centre for Environmental Research of the Faculty of Exact Sciences carried out the only study of the state of water, air and soil for Nueva Costa del Plata in 2009, confirming the presence of pollution in the area.

15- Assembly Members for the River Bernal (Asambleístas por el Río Bernal) – Avellaneda and Quilmes.

Established between 2008 and 2009, they work for a healthy environment, in defence of the last green lungs of the region with a relevant political reach in the southern zone.

16- Assembly No to the Hand Over of the Coast Quilmes-Avellaneda, NHOC (Asamblea No a la Entrega de la Costa Quilmes- Avellaneda).

Established between 2008 and 2009. This is a gathering of neighbours and organisations that fight for the riverside forests and wetlands of the southern La Plata River. It has led the resistance to the destruction of the riverside by summoning other collective forms, trade unions, political parties, and associations to join its cause.

It has been active since the presentation of Techint’s NCP project and has established itself as a referential political figure on environmental issues.

17- Assemblies Delta and La Plata River (Asamblea Delta y Río de La Plata).

An environmental form of collaboration between neighbours from the north and south basins of the metropolitan region sharing the same problems.

18- Interbasins (Intercuencas).

Representatives of more than 120 organisations and independent neighbours under the motto “Buenos Aires embraces life” created this organisation in 2007. It aimed at a joint form of collaboration over the problems found in the rivers Riachuelo (south-west of Buenos Aires), Reconquista (north) and La Plata (south). It is a space that has oriented itself towards the definitive constitution of a popular representation for the problematic of these three basins. Intercuencas is made of diverse environmental organisations, water forums, development associations, and local assemblies who act against environmental pollution and a more participative management of water and regional rivers.

19- Friends of the Earth Argentina (Amigos de la Tierra).

This is an international ecologist organisation created in the 1990s and located in the city of Buenos Aires that promotes a local and global change towards a society that is respectful, fair, and caring toward the environment. Its main fields of action are forests, water, food sovereignty, economic justice, and climate change. It works to promote the participation of different sectors of society and encourage networking for common actions towards change at a national scale.

20- Bird Watchers Club Bernal (Club de Observadores de Aves) -Avellaneda and Quilmes-.

It is a small organisation born in 2016 made up of a group of neighbours from the south of the metropolitan region. They share an interest in birds and nature, particularly on the La Plata River coast in Avellaneda and Quilmes. They promote conservation and the development of actions for environmental education and scientific research.

21- Association Southern Environment (Asociación Ambiente Sur) – Avellaneda.

The association has worked since 2004 for the defence of the coast in Avellaneda and on other environmental issues. Its members are experts in forest management and also have a legal background. It has been essential in helping local people deal with matters linked to legal denunciation and matters in the administrative and legislative sphere. It works at a district level.

22- Assembly of Wilde (Asamblea de Wilde) – Avellaneda.

This assembly in the Wilde neighbourhood was created in 2001 from the belief that a new way of doing politics could be possible. They share the ideal of changing things despite so much neglect and corruption. At first they were more worried about the sanitary landfill; presently they work on other urban and environmental issues. Place of action: Avellaneda and Quilmes, with regional reach in the southern zone.

23- Assembly of Don Bosco (Asamblea de Don Bosco) -Avellaneda-

The members of the assembly, inhabitants of the Don Bosco neighbourhood, initially mobilised to address the contamination of the stream Sarandí, then they joined other groups and environmental forums for other local or regional problems. The assembly works at a neighbourhood level.

24- Neighbours against Smurfit Kappa (Vecinos de Smurfit Kappa) -Quilmes-

This is a group of neighbours affected by the closeness and the irregular functioning of the Irish paper mill Smurfit Kappa. They put demands forward to the local and provincial government, denouncing spills, smells and gases. Their actions extend to the coast because the effluents from paper processing are discharged into the La Plata River.

25- Federation of Development Entities and Free Organisations of Quilmes (Federación de Entidades de Fomento y Organizaciones Libres del Pueblo de Quilmes).

The association concentrated around 224 associations in the district by 2010. It developed activities for the benefit of the local community in what is known as *sociedades de fomento*. Its actions have weakened since then, and more specifically after the death of its President a couple of years ago.

26- South Project (Proyecto Sur).

This is a political, social, and cultural movement of Argentina. It has a national reach and a political centre-left bias, progressive and related to the political ecology. Its ideological leader was the filmmaker Pino Solanas, renowned for his environmental activism.

27- Forum of Assemblies for a Urban Environmental Plan (Foro de Asambleas por un Plan Urbano Ambiental) – Quilmes.

This was created in 2007. Neighbours were invited to participate in the making of a map representing different sectors/ neighbourhoods of Quilmes and its problems. They put forward an urban and environmental plan for the district shortly afterwards; however, the proposal did not find much support after some time.

28- Unemployed Workers Movement (Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados, MTD).

It is a social movement that arose in the 1990s in Argentina, bringing together political and social groups under the slogan “work, dignity and social change”. The roadblock, *piquete*, as a method of collective action was a fundamental characteristic of the MTD as a stage on which it has presented its demands.

29- Bernal Open Town Hall (Cabildo Abierto de Bernal).

This was established in December 2001. It worked to resist the growing expansion of real-estate in the city of Quilmes.

30- Assembly United by the River Bernal (Asamblea Unidos por el Río Bernal) – Quilmes.

The assembly emerged in 2005. It deals with urban and environmental issues of the neighbourhood: groundwater, flooding, garbage dumping, etc. It works at a district level.

31- Mothers of Wilde Towers (Madres de las Torres de Wilde) – Avellaneda.

The mothers worked from 1999 to 2005 for the closure of the sanitary landfill in Villa Domínico. Since 2004, they have collaborated with provincial and municipal authorities for the environmental recovery of the riverside. They have played an important role in local and political action in the southern district and at a metropolitan level, interacting with neighbourhood assemblies. This organisation has participated in the conflict by taking part in favour of NCP. It is not part of the movement per se, but it is relevant to situate it among the rest of the groups in opposition to Techint's project.

32- Association “Neighbours of Villa Corina for a Better Future” (Vecinos de Villa Corina por un Futuro Mejor) – Avellaneda.

This is a local form of organisation with an interest in neighbourhood and district issues, the environment, and culture. It was established in 2009. Nowadays, it carries out cultural and recreational activities in Villa Corina.

33- Water Forum from Lanús (Foro Hídrico Lanús) – Lanús District.

This is a neighbourhood association for the right to health and a healthy environment. They lead claims on sewage infrastructure, the cleaning of water streams, the defence of green spaces, and the pollution of the Basin Matanza-Riachuelo. They support national environmental causes though in general they work on local issues.

34- Water Forum of Lomas de Zamora (Foro Hídrico de Lomas de Zamora) – Lomas de Zamora District.

This consists of a network of neighbours' organisations articulated for demands related to the management of water and for the prevention of floods originating in the Basin Matanza-Riachuelo and La Plata River. They work at a district level on management control, making demands to the state for the advancement of works, identifying problems as the works advance, and trying to find solutions.

35- Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River, Health, and the Environment (Foro Regional en Defensa del Río de La Plata, la Salud y el Medio Ambiente) – Berazategui District.

An organisation interested in environmental matters through the realisation of on-site surveys of contaminated sites, the study of given problems in consultation with specialists or bibliographically, and also proposing viable, non-harmful solutions for the habitat. The forum was born in April 2000, responding to the concerns of social, neighbour, cultural, and political groups; today it has a regional influence.

36- Popular Library Manuel Belgrano (Biblioteca Popular Manuel Belgrano) – Berazategui.

This civil association was founded in 1924 to offer services and spaces for consultation, expression and development of cultural, reading and library extension activities in a broad, free and pluralistic way. Popular libraries, in general, are directed and supported mainly by their members catering for the needs of the community or neighbourhood in which they operate.

CHAPTER 4: The “Neighbours”. Solidarity Networks, Scarcity & Place

*“Officials [elected by popular vote] who do not work.
What the municipality does NOT do, it is done by the “vecinos”.
Come and heal the forest (bring shovels, ropes, gloves and water).”*
Assembly NHOC. Press release on native forest and wetland restoration days, 27/7/2016.

The official announcement of the large-scale revitalisation by Techint gave rise to the self-organisation of a neighbourhood movement whose main constituent element is the local assemblies. Political parties, small groups representing larger social movements at a national level, trade unions, cultural associations, and environmental organisations from all over the southern districts converged to support the popular resistance led by NHOC (See figure 13).

The solidarity manifested among them was physical (participating in protests, public information campaigns or motorway blockades) as well as political (through the ratification and circulation in their own networks of pronouncements and denunciations promoted by assemblies) and discursive (ascribing to public pronouncements, mottos or statements in the media). These *networks* constitute spaces for interacting, sharing information, learning, and generating actions while strengthening bonds of mutual collaboration over time. In relation to NCP, people gathered this way have a socio-environmental purpose because there is an understanding of the direct correspondence between the environmental and social dimensions of life affecting them.

I propose to circumscribe this movement by getting to know who they are and how they come to do things together. To begin with, a social movement can be regarded as a massive social organisation on a national scale like the Landless Workers’ Movement in Brazil, MST, a historical subaltern actor that pushes for agrarian reform⁸⁵ (Wolford, 2010). So are the residents gathered as NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) against large urban infrastructure projects in their local areas (Krause, 2022).

In Argentina, the idea of social movement has been linked in the last 30 years to the *piqueteros’ movement* – unemployed workers⁸⁶ who have developed a way of operating in relation to urban space .

⁸⁵ The MST has demanded that the government – since its emergence – distribute lands among rural workers (Northeast) and small-scale farmers (Southern Brazil) with the necessary resources and conditions so that they are able to make them productive without institutional or political interference. Their claims for access to land have included the expropriation of foreign companies and the occupation of unproductive land (Wolford, 2010).

⁸⁶ This was established after the downsizing in the workforce of the country after neoliberal reforms of the 1990s through the privatisation of state companies and public services (water, telecommunications, electricity) which led to de-industrialization and unemployment throughout Argentina.

It was named *piqueteros* after social uprisings in the province of Neuquén led by workers of the Treasury Petroleum Fields (YPF), the main national energy company, who protested to get their jobs back (Rossi, 2015: 18-21). It has its origins in the *puebladas*, which have historically been heterogeneous and large forms of popular uprising in the inner country. According to Pintos, the movement was made up of a number of elementary organisations with big groups coordinating at a regional and national level, among which were: the National Piquetero Bloc (Bloque Nacional Piquetero), the Classist and Combative Current (Corriente Clasista y Combativa), the Land and Housing Federation (Federación Tierra y Vivienda), the Neighbourhood Movement (Movimiento Barrios de a Pie), and Unemployed Workers Movement Aníbal Verón, among others (2003: 46).

Their repertoire of action has included public actions directed at the state, among which the most renowned are the roadblocks (*piquetes*), encampments or protests which aim to put pressure on governmental agencies to get something (jobs, unemployment subsidies) (Rossi, 2015: 20).

Whether in the peasant or urban context, new perspectives on social movement dynamics in Latin America refer to two relevant aspects for the analysis of any neighbourhood movement that I would like to reassess here. First, the strategy-making for action with allies against common enemies (Rossi, 2015: 22) and second, the mobilisation of resources at different scales, including the creation of networks (Spalding, 2015: 181). Though they have incorporated spatial tactics and have a far-reaching scale of action beyond their neighbourhoods and the districts themselves, the “neighbours” do not have a solid plan with distinct targets in order to achieve things. They do not push for a political structural reform; nor do they have strategic leadership, formal organisation or partisan interests; their relationship with the municipalities or provincial agencies only takes place in specific circumstances with public servants they already know.

This means that they do not act with institutional support (national or international), or through joint work with government bodies. Among the neighbourhood assemblies, some people even reject the idea of being considered part of a social movement, viewing such a movement as something massive with a homogeneous way of thinking that cancels out differences among people.

The assemblies are, in fact, group forms characterised by heterogeneity, dissent, and a disorganised way of functioning with no pre-established strategies. Their political abilities revolve around the generation of alliances with a focus on the construction of solidarity networks as a means of achieving results.

They have similarities with other assemblies participating in other environmental conflicts in which people also resist as “neighbours” in defence of the nature reserve Santa Catalina in District of Lomas de Zamora⁸⁷ or against the Coastal Road project (Vial Costero) in Vicente López⁸⁸.

⁸⁷ People assembled as Vecinos Autoconvocados en Defensa de la Reserva Santa Catalina, or Self-Convened Neighbours for the Defence of Santa Catalina Nature Reserve, located only 20 kilometres south-west of Bernal, Quilmes. In the southern AMBA, Santa Catalina is the “green lung” of Lomas de Zamora District. In 2008, the National University of La Plata (UNLP) sold 300 hectares to the company Covelvia where a lagoon and wetlands are located. The objective of the private investment was to set up a solid-waste collection centre for the municipality in a real-estate operation that is under legal investigation. The lands of Santa Catalina were the site of a farming colony of Scottish immigrants who, led by Parrish Robertson, settled there in 1825, and many denounced them, accusing them of intentionally setting fires.

Source: No author. (15/7/2022). Lomas de Zamora: Call for a march in defence of the Santa Catalina reserve. *Inforegion*. <https://www.inforegion.com.ar/2022/07/15/lomas-de-zamora-convocan-a-marchar-en-defensa-de-la-reserva-de-santa-catalina/> Last accessed: 29/9/2022.

⁸⁸ Regarding the Vial Costero, a group of “neighbours” mobilised to oppose the construction of a motorway on the northern La Plata River; the project would cost 54 million Argentine Pesos and would include Vicente López and San Isidro Districts. The conflict lasted for several years and included clashes with the police and later tensions over the urban development of Al Río located on the same riverside lands. More information on chapter 1.

Source: No author. (16/3/2011). Incidents in Vicente López over the Coastal Highway. *La Política Online*. <https://www.lapoliticaonline.com/nota/nota-71999/> Last accessed: 29/9/2022.

The search for means of protecting nature and seeking environmental justice regarding wetlands and forests is shared by many people in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires; however, people in Avellaneda and Quilmes stand out in terms of the sort of loving connection they have developed with the riverside over the years. Another characteristic is the moral definition of the assemblies as “*pure neighbours*” (“*vecinos puros*”) in search of differentiation from others acting at the riverside. “Pure neighbours” as a version of themselves, is a political posture, and the petition for another relationship with nature that will be looked into in the next chapter, but it is important to mention in the analysis of the movement.

To describe the movement’s organisation and functioning, I will focus on the activist trajectory of Nieves Baldaccini in the local political scene to show, in her own words, how the social mobilisation existed before NCP through personal relationships due to pre-existing tensions.

Some of the “neighbours” were not new to the conflict caused by the waterfront revitalisation, as old relations have remained latent due to personal knowledge as well reciprocal interaction: this is my first claim. They have a shared genealogy, they live in the same localities or have similar values and interests; however, the way in which they have kept their alliances has depended on the context of contention in the districts and even on the economic and political situation of the country.

Here it is also pertinent to reflect on whether this is a *new social movement (NSM)*. The local assemblies are the result of the integration of groups that were politically active in the past, but they also make moral demands and generate collective resources that have never been seen before in the local scenario of environmental conflict.

In terms of identity-based politics, as a new social movement could be depicted, Melucci looks into collective action through the process of building, adapting and maintaining a collective identity. The assemblies have made efforts towards the “production of common cognitive structures, the generation of definitions that emerge from their interactions, and an emotional recognition that helps people identify with each other” (Melucci, 1999: 31). This could also be a differentiating element from the workers’ or class struggle that characterised the popular mobilisation a few decades ago, however, their identity as “neighbours” is not unprecedented; there is a historical recognition in Argentina of people engaged in political action as such.

Other authors assert that in the consideration of a movement as new, the symbolic element turns out to be a notable factor (de Sousa Santos, 2001; Routledge, 1996). If the symbolic refers to the sum of subjectivities in relation to the riverside, they have been relevant but do not explain everything that happened in terms of collective action since the conflict came out. I propose to look through this matter in order to determine whether the neighbourhood movement is a NSM or what kind of NSM might it be.

The second claim is in relation to a group condition linked to *chaos* as something unstructured, disordered, yet also spontaneous that also characterises the place under dispute. The assemblies, as social spaces, contain an intense dynamic based on the confusing or unpredictable circumstances that are presented to them and that they must also face in whatever way they can.

Without material resources, legal rights linked to ownership of the riverside or funding, they act with what they find at hand or can get through others in what I call the “*management of scarcity*” as a way of overcoming obstacles and staying together. Thus, the place itself that is in conflict becomes a key factor in making (*in-place*) *resistance* because it allows to deploy practices and to contain senses of struggle. Place becomes their main resource of struggle without which they would have no identity either, to which they have managed to add new cultural meanings and moral means and practices based on their ethical stand in the conflict.

I would like the reader to keep in mind that neighbourhood assemblies, a collective phenomenon of the 2000s in Argentina, no longer attract popular participation because the reality of the country has also changed. However, assemblies such as NHOC continue to capitalise on knowledge and reinforce action networks thanks to the practices and moral imperatives inherited from those original assemblies. Since its emergence, the neighbourhood groups have not had a decisive political influence on the governmental agenda at a municipal or provincial level; however, the “neighbours” have managed to keep the judicial suspension of NCP since 2013.

The ethnographic approach to embrace such diversity consisted of interacting with different associative forms in the southern metropolitan area as well as meeting similar assemblies in northern districts in order to have references and make comparisons in the context of conflict.

The rest of the techniques implemented to learn from them have been described above in the cartography of the movement and also in the section Research Methodology at the beginning of the dissertation.

WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?

The composition of the movement has changed over the years since its creation fifteen years ago. In the festivals and riverside walks that the assemblies organised between 2011 and 2014 it was observed a wide range of age among participants. There were children and teenagers who lived in La Ribera Bernal (the riverside neighbourhood) and were interested in music, art workshops, and playful activities organised by the river. Also, young people and adults coming from nearby towns and neighbourhoods, not only from Avellaneda and Quilmes, but also other southern cities. When talking to the latter, they would introduce themselves as members of “historical neighbourhood groups” like the Assembly of Wilde or the Regional Forum for the Defence of the La Plata River.

Their professions have also been varied, including teachers, retirees, biologists, university students, temporary workers (masonry, labourers), architects, and unemployed.

Their educational backgrounds have included people with post-high school and graduate diplomas, others who completed their specialisations abroad, and those who never finished their formal education.

As the movement grew, the founding and long-established assemblies gave rise to another generation of participants. From 2010 onwards, young researchers, university professors, filmmakers, artists, and experts on environmental sciences and law noticeably joined the Assembly NHOC leading the resistance to NCP.

With them, a more creative side was incorporated through skills for managing social networks, the production of audio-visual material (videos, short films, documentaries, and songs), and taking grievances into public forms associated with popular culture (carnivals, posters, and artistic representations, etc.).

Their socio-economic origins are also very diverse, although some distinctions can be made. Those belonging to the Assembly of Wilde in Avellaneda would say that it is a grassroots form of association with working people, unlike those from Bernal, in Quilmes, who are bourgeois. Bernal has been judged by assemblies from poorer neighbourhoods as being encompassed by a conservative and upper-middle class that has been in favour of bringing private construction to the coast. In the Assembly of Don Bosco, also from Avellaneda, those from Bernal are professionals while the rest of the groups in the same district were made up of working people.

The Regional Forum for the Defence of the La Plata River and Interbasins are even more miscellaneous though their members identify with the working class. The founders of the former live in Berazategui and have experience in environmental conflicts, whereas in the latter there are people who have worked in the municipalities or have been involved in political parties.

As for ideology, there are those who struggle to uphold values such as social justice and political sovereignty through political work or partisan involvement. Some “vecinos” who were involved in assemblies since the late 1990s and early 2000s came from the Communist Party (since its creation it followed the political line of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union; its orientation is Marxist-Leninist) and the Workers Party (leftist position with Trotskyist ideas). Most of the “neighbours”, however, do not identify with any of these beliefs and practices. A majority group within the movement could be considered, as I identify them, as anti-system for questioning the dominant system in relation to the current logic of consumption, the pharmaceutical industry or neoliberalist urban practices.

Giving rise to a neighbourhood movement

In this section, I will address the most important characteristics of the neighbourhood movement by focusing on Nieves from the *Asamblea* NHOC as the main narrator, though I will add other relevant voices so that hers is not the only perspective. It is not a feminist approach per se, it is only that these particular women in the movement have offered to speak in this way in the frame of my research.

Nieves was a teacher of fine arts at a municipal school and a set designer who became politically involved in order to bring about changes at social, environmental and urban levels. She started in Bernal, where she lived, later ending up participating simultaneously in collective causes and organisations all over the metropolitan area including the City of Buenos Aires.

Her story is rich in details, dates, names and processes of interaction between organisations, constituting a current legacy in the history of collective action in Avellaneda and Quilmes after her death in 2022.

Nieves' experience was similar to that of many others who have worked to improve their neighbourhoods and life conditions over the years through difficult historical moments nationally and locally.

She was regarded as the *alma mater* of the popular mobilisation over the riverside for how she worked to create and maintain ties of solidarity inside and outside the assemblies' movement. She rejected this representation because she did not want to stand out to the detriment of others or be seen as a natural leader. For others struggling by her side, Nieves was “the origin of everything” because of the way she educated people whether they belonged to the movement or not to initiate them into activism and love for the river, wetlands and native forests.

The beginning of her personal struggle, like that of the assemblies themselves, was a slow and laborious process that could only take place in relation to others. Her memory, as well as that of other “neighbours”, has been key in the organisation of the movement through the commemoration of the desire to change the present for a better future.

In order to articulate her account with the particularities of the neighbourhood movement relevant to the objectives of this chapter, I will divide her story into sections. The first of these takes form in relation to both the *fomentismo*⁸⁹ and the neighbourhood assemblies' phenomenon of 2001 as the sources from which derive the present social movement around nature conservation.

The second examines what brought people together under the form of local assemblies and how certain problems have become a public matter of concern to them, while the third investigates what motivated the “neighbours” to participate in the assemblies for the defence of the riverside.

In the fourth one, I will describe the conflicts and hurdles found within the movement when coordinating efforts to balance the power of other actors acting in the riverside; then in the fifth, their identity as “pure neighbours”, and this term's definition, implications for the dynamics of the group and their relations with other forces in the collective spectrum will be considered.

Finally, I will deal with an imaginative aspect of the Assembly NHOC in this case that has led people to develop metaphors of animal ecology to account for the relations in the group and how they act collectively.

⁸⁹ This is a phenomenon of peripheral areas in Argentina that revolves around the social, cultural, and material demands of residents for the consolidation of neighbourhoods or urban areas. It took place between 1920 and 1940 though its origins can be traced back to the 19th century. Basconzuelo, C. (2004). Organisations of Civil Society and Local Peronism. Cooptation or Autonomy? The Case of the Neighbourhood Associations of Río Cuarto at the Time of the First Peronism. *Annual Review, School of Virtual History*. Year 5– N° 6 – pp. 109-129. <https://revistas.unc.edu.ar/index.php/anuariohistoria>

It is important to point out that Nieves' account of the political trajectory of the assemblies and organisations was part of an interview also conducted with Carmen in Wilde (a participant of the homonymous assembly) about eight years ago –her story can be found in the Annex to this chapter. The text has been adjusted to present a more easily readable storytelling form. It was transcribed in first person, as originally expressed by Nieves, and respects the original temporal sequence and remarks made by her.

The use of parentheses [...] indicates that some lines were not included for reasons of space, or because our conversation turned to another topic, or because she made personal allusions that she did not want to be disclosed publicly. The accompanying commentary below that is not in italics is mine and is intended to provide additional information to what is being said.

1) Collective action in the suburbs

The assembly (*asamblea*) as a form of collective organisation finds its collaborative, cultural, and political lineages in: a) the neighbourhood associations of the 20th century, which were born around local problems; and b) the social mobilisation that arose at a national scale during the Argentine socio-economic and political crisis of 2001. In both cases, they were forms of grassroots participation founded on a community identity and solidarity practices among residents.

The earliest manifestations encompassed the *fomentismo* as a doctrine and a way of proceeding employed by neighbourhood committees and community councils that led to the *sociedades de fomento* as representative organisations (Massone, 2020).

The *fomentismo* was based on the provision of support and help to “neighbours” through the very residents that became *fomentistas*, if they were interested in the general well-being of others and assumed the compromise of working for people on an everyday basis.⁹⁰

It emerged with the industrialisation process in the early 1900s, which led people to settle down in areas around factories that flourished with new means of transportation, the creation of roads, and the availability of vacant lands (Ouvina, 2002). With the gradual growth of political participation and the expansion of the cities, the popular libraries and neighbourhood clubs or associations⁹¹ were also fostered by inhabitants to cater for the recreational, educational, and social needs in the new urban centres.

The *sociedades de fomento* used to have a hierarchical organisational structure with an executive directorate generally chosen by its members. They had a representative role before the municipal, provincial, or national government in order to get things done.

⁹⁰ Editorial Group “La Verdad”. (5/12/2020). A *fomentista* is not born, but made. *Journal La Verdad*. <https://laverdadonline.com/fomentista-se-hace/>

⁹¹ Sometimes they depended on the *sociedades de fomento* that already counted on a structural organisation and funds.

These organisations presently have a lesser influence due to the lack of resources and the social interest that turned to other associations that emerged in successive decades.

In the 1970s, the *sociedades* ended up being co-opted or discouraged by the military government at the same time that other associations developed under the tutelage of the Church of the Poor and the Third-World Priests Movement.

They focused on the self-organisation of local communities and the construction of solidarity bonds in marginal neighbourhoods and poor settlements in the periphery of Buenos Aires (Prévôt-Schapira, 1993: 783).

The 1990s witnessed an increase in social protests against new rules imposed with the privatisation of public services such as rate changes, and against non-compliance with contractual obligations by the new companies providing those services.

These protesters were different from those of *sociedades de fomento* and other local organisations because they broke into the public space through new practices like the occupation of empty buildings, for example, so as to be able to count on a place for their political displays. This was, according to Ouviaña, a watershed moment, since there was “a growing opening of decision-making and self-management processes in the social sphere” through collective action (2002).

In 1997, another form of protest was introduced, involving the blockading of routes and main access roads, in an attempt to prompt the government to find solutions to social problems faced in a context of increasing unemployment and the withdrawal of the state from key areas such as health and education. The *piqueteros* were former workers leading the riots, which originated in Patagonia with the privatisation of the state-owned petrol company.

This modality of protest was adopted in 2005 on the occasion of an international environmental conflict between Argentina and Uruguay over the installation of pulp mills on the Uruguay River.⁹²

It included the blockage of the Libertador General San Martín bridge, which connects both countries, for an indefinite period of time, affecting transport, trade and migration.

The neighbourhood assemblies emerged in this context between 2001 and 2003, incorporating long-range forms of political action, inherited from the *piqueteros*, by blocking streets in their neighbourhoods or specific places in the districts.

⁹² This was an environmental conflict over Spanish and Finnish pulp mills that settled on the coast of the Uruguay River in the neighbouring country. It gave rise to the organisation of a transnational movement encompassed by Argentine and Uruguayan environmentalists, who opposed it for environmental reasons. These social forces concentrated in Gualeguaychú, an agricultural and tourist town in the Province of Entre Ríos.

It became a state issue with the national government's recognition of the importance of the environment. It symbolised a new instance of massive outcry around these issues. Another important predecessor of neighbourhood assemblies was the conflict over mining activity in Esquel, in the Province of Chubut. Between 2002 and 2003, a group of self-convened neighbourhood assemblies (*vecinos autoconvocados*) resisted the exploitation of a gold mine by an American company.

According to Merlinsky (2013), the movement implemented the lawsuit as a collective resource to open the way for institutional claims. It has been relevant in similar conflicts that developed in other provinces, and played a prominent role in the development of networks at a national level.

People facing social discontent in a period of great economic, social and political instability organised horizontally without leadership through democratic forms of decision-making to solve their own problems. They were essentially constituted by people from the middle classes, although there were social actors from other economic, cultural, and ideological origins (Svampa, 2002).

This situation presented an alternative to political parties for the political participation of the people and the expression of a crisis of representation with the ruling class and the political parties. The assemblies, therefore, brought people together around their everyday living conditions in connection to their locality as a means of a non-institutional political action for the vindication of collective rights.

With the assemblies, consensual mechanisms have been experimented with in order to guarantee the participation of all their members. The creation of commissions or work groups, the implementation of instances of debate, and decision-making by general agreement have been some of them.

Furthermore, they have practised forms of solidarity that have supplied their material, communicational and legal needs for political action, which have led to new alliances that strengthened a networked dynamic. Some of these networks have been articulated by regional associations through which they could extend their scale of action and influence.

Among the obstacles that people have encountered in consolidating these large groups is how to promote the political construction of the movement and organise its operation.

In this instance, the role of the unions has more involved supporting new forms of mobilisation rather than taking a leadership role when addressing social claims. Although before the 1990s they represented wage and labour demands, with the strike as a classic form of protest, they lost representation and credibility with the deindustrialisation of the country and their failed role as promoters of job creation.

Nieves:

In 1998, there was plenty of work in the set design field so I worked a lot to pay for things and taxes when one day...an invoice from Aguas Argentinas [or Argentine Waters, a state-owned company that supplied the public with running water and sewer services⁹³] arrived. The company was going to install a meter [a measuring instrument⁹⁴] to calculate water consumption. You could choose whether you wanted to pay a fixed fee for water or use the meter. If you wanted fixed fees, you did not have to answer, and if you wanted the meter you had to say yes, that you accepted the meter, but they would not charge you.

⁹³ Today it is known as Argentine Water and Sanitation, AySA. One of its water treatment plants is located in Bernal, Quilmes.

⁹⁴ This was part of the privatisation process that started during that decade.

I did not want the meter because we were paying very little, 40 Argentine Pesos or so. Months went by when a letter came saying that the company had decided to put in the meter anyway and that they would charge me for it [...]

When the company began the control over water consumption, the tariff went from 45 Argentine Pesos to 37 but the meter would cost 250 USD in instalments.⁹⁵

Four months later, a debt letter arrived saying: “you register a pending payment”, so I would be charged 183 Argentine Pesos per month from then on. I went to a regulatory entity in Quilmes where they told me, “ah! Wait until the retroactive comes, you’ll see how much you will have to pay!”

Well, when the invoice arrived I went to the regulatory body in Buenos Aires. When I got there they told me, “why don’t you want to pay the bill?”. “I want to pay the bill but it’s a lot of money; instead of robbing me with a revolver every month they send me a bill”, and they replied, “do you pay a municipal tax?” and I said “what is it, a municipal contribution?”. They said to me: “If you want to know, write a note; what you are asking me now, put it on a piece of paper”. After 15 days I returned there and oh... surprise! They gave me the concession contract [of services, between the state and the service company], which I didn’t know existed and didn’t understand. My sister-in-law who was a lawyer told me that the governmental agencies did not give the contract to anyone, that it was just for specialists; but no, then I found out that public companies had to make their contract available for the general public even if they were privatised.

When I read the entire contract, I still did not understand why they wanted me to pay that amount of money. The employee told me, “look, if you don’t pay the bill, the company has the right to auction off your property”, and I said, “why?”. I am working, I pay taxes to pay the salary of politicians who should watch over the safety of the general population, who should make laws that ensure our safety, but they do things the other way around: they sanction laws for the benefit of companies [...].

Then I started looking for... you did not know who to talk to about this, the economic and social situation in the country was distressing. I used to go here and there, I attended “neighbours” meetings. I live in the southern metropolitan area, but I used to attend meetings in Ramos Mejía City [in the western metropolitan area or 45 kilometres away from Bernal]; everywhere there were water meetings I was there, and you did not know who you were talking to, if he was a friend or an enemy, and then one day, well, a group of neighbours began to self-organise. I went to the Ombudsman of Quilmes, José María Salustio [later he then became a city councillor], I went with the bill and his secretary said “no, nothing can be done”.

I went out and a man came into the building with a water bill, so I went back in and I said, let’s see what she says to this guy. He was part of a sociedad de fomento, and when he was leaving he told me, “write down my phone number”; it was Tondino, the one who was part of the Sociedad de Fomento 14th August.

⁹⁵ The Austral Convertibility Law N° 23.928 from 27 March 1991 – during the government of Carlos Menem – established a fixed exchange rate between the national currency and the one in the United States. Under this law, one USD was equal to one Argentine Peso. Foreign firms began to run state-owned companies so the tariffs were equated to international values at the same time that the Argentine Peso lost monetary value.

He was also part of the Federation of Development Entities (Federación de Entidades de Fomento) so we started to be in contact about some issues. The anguish people felt... because if you went to the Chamber of Deputies they would tell you, “the contract is like this, you can’t do anything”, and when you went to the Ombudsman’s Office, the first assistant to the Ombudsman, I don’t remember his name, said “don’t you have somewhere else to go or something else to do? [...].

Now we [“neighbours”] are getting to know who to go to but at that moment the situation of a ‘common neighbour’ like us who never participated in anything [related to politics]. We got together with “neighbours” in Castelar [a locality near Ramos Mejía in the west of Buenos Aires], some people came from Buenos Aires and we formed a group, AIBA or the Interurban Action of Neighbours and Associations.⁹⁶ At first people had worked together with the CTA, Argentine Workers’ Central Union,⁹⁷ in Buenos Aires on Belgrano Street and we were thirty, forty people and then less and less until we were seven but we kept the name, AIBA.

We went to the Ombudsman’s Office in Buenos Aires because we were told that someone would help us. It was Nana, Nana Bevilacqua, [...] she listened to everything “neighbours” told her; her face when we told her about the watersheds, the aquifers, she did not understand anything; however, she told us “well, the only thing I can tell you is that the Ombudsman is at your disposal, whenever you need to make phone calls, come and call here, if you need to make copies the same”. We did not understand anything; everybody else in governmental agencies would throw us out, but she was the only one who told us that.

[...] It was a strange thing, everything that had happened and what we were learning and well, with her we made good progress on the watersheds (napas) problem existing in southern districts.

She passed our claims to Eduardo Mondino because she recognised that the watersheds were a matter worthy of the national Ombudsman’s appraisal, though he said, “I am not interested in that!”. [...]

One day I went to a meeting in Berazategui due to the problems I had with water and I became part of the Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River. In the following years we struggled to see what we could do with the company Aguas Argentinas and the many problems it was causing.

In the end, by 2005 the Argentine government cancelled the contract with Suez Lyonnaise des Eaux, the foreign company running Aguas Argentinas; we kicked it out.

It was due to the mobilisation of “neighbours”. We organised escraches,⁹⁸ walks; we made formal complaints and requests for information; we were in touch with journalists [...]. (Nieves, interview, 2016).

⁹⁶ Acción Interurbana de Vecinos y Asociaciones.

⁹⁷ Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina.

⁹⁸ A sort of demonstration in which a group of activists go to the home of a politician or workplace like a company’s headquarters to publicly denounce (through the mass media) what they do or to make their actions known to the rest of the population. It is a controversial form of protest.

2) We have the same problems

The creation of the Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River is paradigmatic of the way in which people have grouped around problems that they have interpreted as being shared. It was first born in April 2000 in the District of Berazategui, and three years later underwent a reorganisation as it did not fully reflect the matters “neighbours” were concerned about.⁹⁹

The earliest focus of action revolved around the La Plata River, for it was connected to urban issues like the water distribution system in the area.

This district had grown up very fast in terms of population density and urban expansion, but 30% of the houses still did not have sewers and 40% of the population lacked access to drinking water, according to Ernesto Salgado, its founder (interview, 2016).

The pollution of the river was also a matter of general concern as the treatment plant processing its water only carried out one of the three steps necessary for its safe consumption. The mechanical phase separated large objects that circulated through the sewer, while the chemical and physical treatments had not yet been implemented.¹⁰⁰

A general meeting preceded the creation of the forum, in which more than 100 people participated, reuniting a dozen groups of different size and scale of action. There were neighbourhood associations of Berisso,¹⁰¹ institutions for the defence of users/consumers from Avellaneda and Quilmes, and small industrial chambers of the southern area, among others.

Their intention was to gather people around similar worries rather than gaining collective strength through the role of some organisations. In their experience, the renowned ones used to impose their will on the smaller ones, according to one of its founders, so people ended up caught in a fight over power without finding any answers to their problems.

The forum used to say to the organisations working together: “*we have a very large entrance door and a larger exit door*”, to allude to the changes that the forum had gone through giving a higher priority to social claims that did not have an organisation or resources backing them up.

In the search for links with others the forum has interacted with groups and “neighbours” from different geographical places so by carrying out joint activities, people used to find out that they were going through the same things. There was a consequent need to bring together efforts that were being made separately in order to build a platform of struggle through *common frames of interpretation* that enabled them to identify shared forms of solution.

⁹⁹ This led to the present denomination Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River, Health, and the Environment (Foro Regional en Defensa del Río de La Plata, la Salud y el Medio Ambiente). For more information on this organisation, please access: <https://www.fororiodelaplata.com.ar/>

¹⁰⁰ According to members of the forum in 2016 – when I interviewed Ernesto, one of the founders. “Neighbours” of NHOC still emphasise to this day the fact that the water processing there is far from being complete. This would explain the outbreaks of gastroenteritis that frequently affect the population and which five years ago caused two deaths.

¹⁰¹ Berisso is the head town of Berisso District in the Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. It is part of the Greater La Plata urban area and is located 40 km away (to the south) from Berazategui.

Merlinsky refers to those frames as an articulation of cognitive aspects and interests that organise people (2013: 41) while Goffman regards them a means of organising experience to make sense of events (1974).

In any case it proved to be an intentional process for people to generate and maintain an approach that led them to see themselves as being affected by specific problems. This problem definition they put forward also requires a public dimension for their enunciation and public visibility.

The idea of making their problems known to the rest of the population is aimed at finding and meeting others going through a similar situation.

The use of the Internet, social networks, and the local media has been of great importance in stating what happens to them. Like denunciation actions in places accessible to the population such as train stations, busy streets in the cities, squares, government buildings, and the riverside have been essential to the delivery of printed material (flyers, brochures, pamphlets) to pedestrians and passengers.

In addition, the organisation of open activities for informative or educational purposes and the incorporation of art in protests have acted as awareness-raising mechanisms (*dispositifs de sensibilisation*)¹⁰² through which the activists have helped others to learn about the reality of their situation. –See examples in figures below–. Many have become part of the assemblies precisely through this type of actions as they have achieved in provoking reactions that predisposed them to commit to or sustain a cause (Traïni, 2010).



Figure 14: Lecture “Native species” by biologist Ricardo Barbetti for environmental education. National University of Avellaneda. Organised by Assemblies NHOC and United by the River Bernal on 27/7/2012.

¹⁰² For Traïni, these are tangible mechanisms that result from a collective production. They include more or less codified forms of expression (linguistic or semiological) that challenge the other and seek to persuade and mobilise those who share a problem or might feel identified with it.



Figure 15: **Flyer second call for teachers and educators of Quilmes.** Author: Assembly NHOC. Sent by email to the neighbours' activist network on 6/01/2017.¹⁰³

The next extract from the interview with Nieves shows how people have connected each other around certain matters and how they have dealt with them by sharing information, convening other organisations and carrying out joint actions outwards and generating some sort of “organisation” within the assemblies:

I remember that I was lining up at the bank when people were banging on the doors outside as a means of protest because their savings had been stolen away by the banks with the corralito,¹⁰⁴ when a girl told me: “here on Tuesdays people gather in assemblies right in the corner; on Thursdays at 8pm they get together at the Mariano Moreno Library”.

And there I began to participate in the Bernal Open Council, which was created in December 2001, but I was already a member of the Forum in Defence of the La Plata River:

In the latter is where my head exploded due to everything I was learning about water services, including how the effluent treatment plant worked.

I found out that they were making demands before the municipality of Berazategui for the construction of a water treatment plant and I said... “a treatment plant?”; they said at the forum, “yes, there is no treatment plant”, but how come there isn't? I could not get it.

¹⁰³ The rest of the text in the flyer reads: “Have you thought about your proposal for environmental education? Come and reflect with us on the environmental problems of Quilmes and Avellaneda (landfill, pollution, wetlands, reserves, streams, waste, floods, flora, fauna, native forest, biological corridor). Where? Pampero Cultural Centre. NHOC.”

¹⁰⁴ A popular name given to an economic measure by the National Minister of Economy in 2001 by which people with a bank account (*ahorristas*) could not withdraw their money. Savings were frozen by governmental decision and the only way to get back those funds was by filing a legal case. Some people lost their life savings, and it took others at least 5 years to get their money back. The *ahorristas* played an important role in the popular demonstrations that were taking place all over the country against the government.

“Where do the sewage effluents go?” “To the La Plata River”, they answered, but if they withdraw the water for human use from the same river!! I could not believe it. [...]

The Lomas¹⁰⁵ Water Forum was born in 2000 and the Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River was also created in that year. The truth is that they didn't know each other but they were carrying out similar actions in different places. The Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River was created because there were “neighbours” who fought against the Petrochemical District there in Sarandí [Avellaneda].

People living near the sanitary landfill in Villa Domínico fought for its closure and the residents of Berazategui wanted the construction of the water treatment plant, and I was concerned about a water problem. [...] The point is that you start getting involved in all this and you see, you say ... and how? Me? They [the state institutions, the municipal authorities] lie to me; they actually tell me one thing and it is a lie, how everything works and well... and then the Bernal Open Town Hall was born in 2001; that was like a breeze of fresh air to me. I could see that society was beginning to organise to change things. [...]

So many things happened, the neighbourhood assemblies between 2001 and 2007 kept gathering; until 2004 the assembly system continued functioning, and it was wonderful. Some assemblies worked on different themes [...] I don't remember how many of us there were, the assemblies had thematic commissions. For example, the Bernal Open Town Hall was devoted to public management, we had the sanitary landfill, then others were about communication, each assembly had different commissions and then we would get together with other assemblies.

The treatment of urban waste was an important issue because it was the people from the Assemblies of Bernal and Don Bosco who lived near the landfill.

We had different topics; each one proposed whatever they wanted and one day a neighbour came and said to me, “the problem is that we need to be led by someone”, and I said, “no, here they have to come and propose what is the topic that interests them and they have to work to promote it”.

I replied to this person, “at some point they will gain interest but it will come at a certain time according to the interest that each one has; if it's so, the issue will impose itself and everyone else will help to carry it forward” [...]. The scale that things reached, it was the neighbourhood or a minor issue, you didn't realise but it suddenly grew up to interest people to turn to action.

Each assembly had a topic; there were those on solidarity economy and they were rotated and once a month we held a plenary and it was also rotative according to the assembly, if it had had a conflict or needed help with something”. (Nieves, 2016).

3) Reasons for joining an assembly

I had already come across Carla in festivals and demonstrations organised by the Assembly NHOC between 2011 and 2014. By December 2017, when I interviewed her, she was nearing her thirties and had been recently appointed as the legal representative of a kindergarten school.

¹⁰⁵ Lomas de Zamora, a southern district located to the west of Avellaneda.

She had been one of the most active members in the defence of the nature reserve since the beginning of the conflict.

Carla would usually speak at assembly meetings, take a leading voice in interviews conducted by the media, and share her thoughts in social media through poetry as a personal tool of resistance.

However, her participation in the *Asamblea* was not due to political or professional interests; she said: *“my heart is in the riverside”*, which hinted to me that there was another side to her assembly experience. As she progressed through her story it was clear that the conflict over NCP had been her first approach to activism.

In the summer of 2009, she had moved out to a little house in Quilmes that her father lent her. Her friends told her that there were *“vecinos”* organising a picnic in the wetlands of Bernal and asked her if she wanted to go to the riverside.

Here, as a side note, I want to point out how those who participated in the assemblies were already recognised as political subjects by the inhabitants of the districts only a year after the emergence of the conflict.

“Bernal? The river in Bernal? What is that? The river in Bernal does not exist”, she answered to them. For her, it was a *“no man’s land, a black hole where there are spiders and they can rob you and rape you as well”*. They finally attended the picnic and from then on, they began *“to protest passionately”* feeling that something had changed forever. As a professional dancer, Carla had not had much of a social life because her profession was very demanding so she spent her days inside a dance hall. Unexpectedly, by the river, *“the shell was broken”* and she was able to see *“a world apart”*.

With those *“neighbours”* she found a space where anyone could go on to achieve their goals, share their ideas and expectations, whatever they thought was fair to do for others or simply *“for the joy of being there, to stand for how one wants to live, saying: ‘I am going to choose how I live’”*.

Carla became aware of the fact that *“there was something that was not my private life or about me, which was a space that could be named ‘common good’ and that ‘common good’ was a space that supposedly takes time out of my life”*.

That possibility provided by the place and the Assembly NHOC in particular drove her to *“want to do things, to be there, to occupy that space, to have a life that has to do with moments of green colour in the sense of being outdoors, your concern for the world is not only your work and your home, but it is also about a larger space”*.

At first she was surprised because she thought that the assemblies were some kind of a compact group as they had the same background or acted the same, but then she understood that it wasn’t like that at all.

Hers was a personal transformation that incorporated working with others with whom she found she had something in common by embracing a diversity that was socially and culturally new to her.

Much has been written in social movement theory about the reasons why an individual joins political action through a group – or, in a more pejorative way, a crowd, traditionally associated with impulsive behaviour. From psychologists to sociologists and behavioural experts, political mobilisation has been dominated by assumptions linked to irrationality.

The subjects of these writings were also permeated by exhaustion, perceptions of injustice, and moral shock (Trañi, 2010)¹⁰⁶ as a social experience powered by unexpected events. Emotions prompted people to judge the circumstances that deviated from the values they upheld, thereby generating feelings of anger and a wish to take action. On the other hand, there was a calculating view of those who protested because they probably did so for reasons that benefited them in the end in some way or another. I will be back to this aspect later on the emotionality of the local groups.

Other factors that have influenced people toward collective action is the notion of threat in the sense of negative conditions, as may be apparent in the case of environmental destruction (Almeida, 2015: 105). More recent studies propose a spatial approach to collective mobilisation (Sebastien, 2016) which stands out in Carla's story. This not only manifests not only as an affinity with a place developed over time, but also has a social aspect in which shared cultural features can lay the foundations for political action. The testimony of Nieves reinforces this idea, in which space is critical for physical as well as symbolic resistance, as the “neighbours” got to learn during the conflict:

Nieves again:

“I liked the Bernal Open Council because it had a broader policy, it was not only about urban matters... we worked with the cartoneros¹⁰⁷ from the shanty town Itatí in Quilmes.

When their job diminished because in the capital city the municipal authorities would not let them work due to discrimination and the intention of changing this methodology, we printed flyers and would go around the neighbourhood so that “neighbours” could separate the waste and the cartoneros could get it.

But I did not continue in this assembly; what was the click inside of me?

Because even though there were four of us, we were not convinced about what we were doing. When the assembly [she did not specify which one] emerged in 2005, the “neighbours” grouped on Thursdays at the Mariano Moreno Library in Bernal. I joined them for the only thing that was important for the Bernal Open Town Hall: the construction of new buildings that challenged urban regulations.

¹⁰⁶ Based on the notion of *moral shock* by James Jasper (2011), the author analyses the place of emotion in the activist cause for animal protection.

¹⁰⁷ People who collect discarded waste such as cardboard to reuse it or resell it to third parties or recycling companies. They travel daily from the periphery of Buenos Aires to the capital city carrying trailers to transport the waste. It is an activity linked to extreme poverty that has enabled people to survive on an autonomous basis.

The Assembly of Wilde was made up of young people, lots of them, and the Assembly of Don Bosco – both in Avellaneda – were absorbed in problems related to the sanitary landfill, but the Assembly of Don Bosco was well accepted and worked well and the meetings were held in the sociedades de fomento or in Wilde. [...]

In 2004 the landfill closed and people loosened up a bit; they said, “ahh, that’s it”, the pressure dropped; therefore, in the period 2004/2005 we used to meet once a week, every Thursday at 8pm. Quilmes United was born in Quilmes also because of the high rate of building construction and yes, it was another socio-economic situation in the country; the “neighbours” started to work and to gain back their financial well-being.

Everyone went home and the assemblies faded away. Quilmes United, United by the River Bernal, Ezpeleta United [were still active] and when they [the Municipality of Quilmes] wanted to set up a factory there in Ezpeleta because of some containers business, some Chinese who were going to pack honey, I do not know what... then people got together and did not leave neighbours [from Ezpeleta] alone.

In 2007 the Forum of Assemblies for an Urban Environmental Plan was created which is when Francisco “el Barba” Gutiérrez took office as the Mayor of Quilmes. He came to the birthday parties of assemblies’ neighbours, I did not agree with that, as nice as he was and all.

Gutiérrez told everyone that it was an open-door municipality, so we said, “let’s ask him for a place, the House of Culture” for “neighbours” to meet when there were no institutional activities going on.

We invited neighbours from other neighbourhoods and localities of Quilmes and began working on a map to identify the problems of Quilmes, which were flooding, real-estate in traditional areas or historical ones in the cities. We invited the Secretary of Public Works and questioned him about the municipal budget, that it would not be enough in the coming four years if they didn’t solve the superficial water problem [...]. (2016).

4) David against Goliath

Among members of the Assembly NHOC jokes have constantly circulated about who they are and what they do together. Some of those jokes generated more identification than others and were used when they wanted to account for their actions:

“We are the HLQP, We Do What We Can (Hacemos Lo que Podemos)”

“They are armed with missiles while we hold toothpicks”

“We are David fighting Goliath. In this fight we feel encouraged to know what the end of the story is... even when Goliath was a giant”¹⁰⁸

These quotes meant that they perceived that they were in an unequal struggle with respect to Techint and government authorities, who could count not only on economic means and expert knowledge, but also on the institutional structure of the state. Natalia Salvatico, the Executive Director of Friends of the Earth, explained it to me – her story in the Annex–.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Field notes from 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2019 at the time of conducting participatory observation or carrying out interviews.

¹⁰⁹ In an interview held on 18 July 2016 at the headquarters of the organisation in Buenos Aires City. Her story is

“While we are organised “neighbours” trying to stop something and devoting time from our lives and resources that we did not have, the public servants and councillors receive a salary for making plans without asking the society, so it is very absurd. We have a never-ending agenda of problems and issues to be treated in the legislative chambers, to be dealt with in the municipalities, with mayors and other authorities; ‘chasing’ is the word, because you have to ‘chase’ them so that they give you a piece of information, [...] they are professionals in this and we are not, so either there are many of us and we share the task, which does not happen so much, or we kill each other because sometimes it is really killing ourselves. I see colleagues, more than me, when they make their best efforts to talk to these people because it takes you a lot of time to do that. So my opinion is that they go at a high speed and they devote full time to whatever they want to do, and we are amateurs... and while we struggle to organise ourselves, we give them time [that they take advantage of]”. (Interview, 2016).

The differences between the protesters and the “promoters” were perceived at a material level, as the former has struggled over the years to attain or make things accessible for their political resistance. For example, when travelling to judicial entities or governmental agencies (usually in La Plata, almost 50 kilometres away from Avellaneda and Quilmes) to verify the status of a legal process, when making copies or printing flyers, or when organising informative activities like festivals, “neighbours” have always organised themselves by collecting money out of their own pockets. Similarly, the tools they have used to weed the nature reserve were the shovels and scythes that they brought from home or that had been found in the trash, or that were donations that they had all agreed to accept beforehand.

Their cluelessness regarding how to develop a self-sustaining capacity and their disinterest in money in general could be defined in terms of “management of scarcity” as a characteristic that sets them apart from the institutions and political parties they reject. Therefore, their repertoire of action has been oriented toward social awareness, knowledge production, environmental education, and information campaigns. The Internet has been a turning point in their lives for it has changed their form of activism, enabling them to share information, organise people around urgent matters, and access other assemblies with whom they can work together, not relying so much on the need of funds.

At the beginning of the conflict they had inherited forms from popular mobilisations of the 1990s and 2000s like protests and *escraches* including graffiti (on the walls of Techint’s headquarters or municipal authorities’ homes), though they later developed more creative forms of mobilisation including moral statements. The judicialisation of the conflict, as I will show later, has been their final resource to address their claims when facing the indifference of the political sector and the absence of dialogue with the legislative bodies.

On the whole, the neighbourhood assemblies are aware that they act under a “*disorganised organisation*” and use unsophisticated tactics that sometimes take them to the brink of chaos.

described in the corresponding Annex to this chapter.

Another aspect that contributes to slowing down their decision-making or getting the resources they need is the very heterogeneity found within the movement. “*This is a bag of cats*”, a *vecino* said to me, referring to the lack of consensus among them and how this was detrimental to their position in the conflict.¹¹⁰ They have resorted to a simple philosophy about how to do things by using whatever they have at hand in their favour. For this reason, they have also relied on connections with experts like lawyers, biologists, engineers or architects to present appeals for protection, to draft bills, and to start administrative actions.

They also thought that *personalismo* acted as another impediment to the assemblies’ dynamics, for it was the manifestation of selfishness and the search for leadership on the part of some members.

“*Everyone wants to be a chief, no one gives in, everybody talks about everything and some seek their own benefit*”, pointed out Ernesto Salgado from the Regional Forum for the Defence of the La Plata River, in a regional encounter with other organisations.¹¹¹ “Neighbours” understood that the handling of differences inside and out of the movement was a competence to be mastered if the assemblies were to endure over time.

So described Nieves on the difficulties that the “neighbours” faced and how they took advantage of contacts and information to catch up with the promoters’ strategies.

Vanina Santy [researcher]: *Nieves, how do you handle differences [in opposing NCP]?*

Nieves: *How do we handle the differences? Hahaha, with patience; I have lately felt like sending everything to hell. I was already sick of this situation because it’s not fighting against the enemy but having the enemy within us, you see? There are struggles among us [...] if things don’t happen we have to make them happen; we are not a company; it’s ok, we are not a company.*

These guys, we are the “crocodiles that fall asleep and end up being a wallet” [on how they did not react on time in relation to a deforestation of 2012], this happens to us. Look today how Techint dismantled everything; today we should have submitted a note; tomorrow we will take the note to the municipality, at the OPDS and in the Ombudsman’s Office, everywhere, and we already know administratively, we know that we have to exhaust the administrative route before the legal route.

This exercise that the Assembly NHOC activates today is successful because we already have experience [...] but the one who helped us was Néstor Najera, the other person who helped us was Nana Bevilacqua – not the ombudsman, nor the deputies; people without power helped us, that’s how we found people who were valuable to us and who we learned from. So what we want is that whoever joins us, instead of having to go through 16 years, we give a crash course on conflict, but this is what it is, you see? That they join in... all the information to socialise it so that they can have it and move forward in a different way. (2016).

¹¹⁰ Field note, 2011.

¹¹¹ During the XXXIII meeting of Intercuencas organised on 5/28/2016 at the National University of Lanús.

5) (Pure) common people

I would like to focus on the collective representation of assemblies' members as "neighbours" first, which reveals itself as a source of meaning and experience as well as a process of self-construction (Castells, 1999: 6-7).¹¹² It says who they are, what their place is in the scheme of power over the riverside, and what their resistance is about.

One major fact is that when talking about these "neighbours", people tend to think that they live in the same neighbourhood or locality, though that is not the general case. On the contrary, they come from all over the districts and none of them live at the riverside. It is this place, in fact, where they recognise each other as belonging to a place that makes them equal and brings them closer.

Svampa et al. (2002: 18-19) had already identified this point in their analysis of what they understood as "new social movements" with respect to the popular mobilisation that arose in Argentina around 2001. People got together under this same common denomination because it implied that they did not have any partisan or professional affiliation. From a sociological interpretation, it was a "levelling" mechanism that was intended to avoid preconceived opinions that might have had a negative influence on the performance of assemblies usually associated with combative approaches (that of political groups or *militantes* in Spanish).

Being a "neighbour" became central, even if it appeared as an invocation to a collective form that no one cared to define at that time.

But above its non-specificity during the early days, the figure of "neighbour" was extremely functional when it came to establishing limits, especially in front of what could be regarded as 'partial' identities¹¹³ (Svampa et al., 2002: 18-19).

As I understand them, these identities were linked to interests that do not correspond to those manifested by the people in Avellaneda and Quilmes.

The novelty that arose some years later with the latter consisted in connecting this collective representation with ideas of *purity*. Nieves, for example, speaks from this perspective, she was a woman who had never been involved in politics and worked hard to pay taxes and earn her living, separately from other forms of social or political participation.

¹¹² By meaning, the author refers to "the symbolic identification by a social actor of the purpose of her/his action".

¹¹³ The professional or expert knowledge was regarded as a negative element among the first assemblies in Buenos Aires City, generally assigned to those at the top of the social pyramid, so the authors stated. In my research with groups in the southern districts the expertise of some expert neighbours has been an important asset to the functioning of the movement.

The authors also asserted that "neighbours" as a political construction made way for an identity linked to the assemblies, to distance it from the standard category of neighbours as residents of the same neighbourhood or city. Those taking part in assemblies had a differentiated identity from other neighbourhood residents, through emphasising their committed work. I did not observe such a distinction among the people I worked with in Avellaneda and Quilmes. It is important to bear in mind that at the time when Svampa et al. were doing their work mentioned above the neighbourhood movement was just emerging, so many assumptions linked to it were either reaffirmed or discarded.

Therefore, she was a normal or common person that remained uncontaminated by practices associated with political parties, for example. I will reproduce a dialogue about this that Nieves held with Carmen (neighbour of the Assembly of Wilde) during the interview I conducted with both of them. For more than 3 hours they fought and Carmen did not let Nieves speak, but both agreed on the definitions I present next:

Nieves: [...] *Now put it this way: we get to know each other and we know who to be with but at that moment the situation of a “common neighbour” who never participated in anything... [...]*

Actually what we see is that at the beginning in the forum [the Regional Forum for the Defence of the La Plata River], when we met in the Manuel Belgrano Library, me, a “common neighbour”, while the others came from political parties because they had left the Communist Party... Mónica Colman, I don't know if she was from the Civic Coalition ARI [a centre-right party] and me, as a “common neighbour”...

Stella: *she was a “pure neighbour”.*

Nieves: *I saw people passing by with musical instruments and I shouted... What do they do? Nooo, they play the sax, why don't we tell them to come with us to the riverside? Because that guy who plays the sax also has the same problems that we have [...]. (Interview, 2016).*

In the last sentence she refers to people carrying instruments, which was the way she and others called on “ordinary people” who were met randomly and invited to participate in what the assemblies were doing.

Purity, for NHOC, denoted an idea of separation from other forms of association with which they believed they had no correlation.

For example, political groups or movements, corporations, and organisations like Wildlife Foundation (Fundación Vida Silvestre)¹¹⁴ reinforcing what had already been stated by Svampa et al. (2002).

They belonged to an unclean category, and in the case of *Vida Silvestre* and other environmental associations, they were particularly unethical for maintaining a status quo in order to receive money. As some “neighbours” explained to me, these environmental associations were privately funded or depended on state funds, which meant they ended up getting side-tracked from their environmental objectives so that they ended up supporting policies and law projects that went against people's rights.

As self-created social spaces, the assemblies protected themselves from anything that might endanger their cause including the sort of alliances that they established. This turned the relationship with “others” into a sensitive matter as they did not want to associate with those who could run over their work, and thus their founding principles.

¹¹⁴ The “Fundación Vida Silvestre Argentina” works for the implementation of solutions that help to take care of the natural world and contribute to changing the way people live. They work with other partners building practical solutions to sustain the planet. Source: https://www.vidasilvestre.org.ar/nuestro_trabajo/que_hacemos/nuestra_solucion/

In fact, they worked with political parties, leftist groups, social movements, and even trade unions, but this was seen as temporary or action-oriented and as taking place according to very specific criteria set by the assemblies' neighbours – or accompanied by a distrust that did not allow them to renew collaborations.

“Here we are “neighbours”, “neighbours”, “neighbours”, do you understand me? The assembly itself is made up of people who do not participate in any other organisation or political party [...]”, Carla told me, trying to defend this idea.¹¹⁵

The pursuit of an uncontaminated state found its roots in a crisis of representation originating in the deterioration of traditional political parties and other institutions vis-à-vis the electorate that Argentina had dragged along since the late 80s (Novaro, 1994). On a local scale, the lack of transparency in high-impact decision-making plus their negative effects on the health of the population led to a social climate of distrust. It condensed in the image of the *negociado* (or shady deal) to indicate the possible dishonest trait in the relation between the state and economic interests. This is unverifiable but denotes the way people have perceived the political class after a long time. One of the main concerns of the “*vecinos*” has been “contamination” on a relational level, so another dimension of this group subjectivity exists in relation to the place where this identity developed: the riverside.

As Mary Douglas (2002) posited regarding the experience of pollution, the ideas of neighbours about sublimating, in the sense of making something purer or nobler and demarcating, might have aimed at producing a semblance of order not only at the riverside but also within the movement.

Pollution is linked to morals, as Douglas asserted, since it signals a disapproved-of behaviour for themselves and others. Such behaviour has had to do with dangers that people feared among them through the *personalismo* or self-interest and of extraneous provenance like corruption.

The consequence has been the isolation of other environmental and political organisations with whom they could have generated more decisive action in relation to NCP or the categorisation of “neighbours” (especially those who make up the local assemblies) as “difficult”.

6) Together like geese

The artistic background of the Assembly NHOC, having been in the majority among “neighbours” at some point in the contention, has been connected to their education, their professional careers or their hobbies. This enabled them to put their skills and imagination at the service of collective resistance through poetry, photography, dance or sculpture, especially in the public scene when taking part in protests, for example.

¹¹⁵ On occasion of the interview in December 2017.

A symbolic aspect like this has been vital to influence the conflict since this group capacity has enabled them to create meaningful new forms of expression and spatial representation in a visually appealing manner with an emphasis on their political arguments and demands. The source of the “neighbours” inspiration has been nature, the river, and the contradictions resulting from what happens at the riverside; and they pass this on to others as well.

For example, Solentina, a composer from Berazategui created a song about the riverside after visiting the place many times and staying in touch with the “neighbours” for some time. She claims that music is a way of denouncing reality, so in addition to what she observed at an aesthetic level and regarded as “beautiful”, the social dimension of the place also emerged in her lyrics as an “unplanned, precarious, chaotic” issue of concern:

“[...] the people who live there do not count on the most minimal or basic resources; they are still owed to them [...] it is a very typical expression of inequality in the metropolitan area, with a reality that is unfair in every sense. That’s why it’s hard for me to think only about the nature reserve or the environmental-ecological aspect without considering the social aspect.” (Interview, 18/4/2022)¹¹⁶.

Her artistic point of view was deliberately critical because the territory has not been an unoccupied place, but rather, *“it is inhabited and this occupation must be considered when thinking about an adequate public policy, which takes up the environmental and social aspects in an integral way”* (Interview, 18/4/2022).

Solentina accepts that the place is flawed, with complexities difficult to understand, about which she sings, but she is also angry about the social and environmental situation that exists in this sort of territory. The duty of any artist is not only to narrate, to make visible and embellish, but to be reflective and vindictive by asking questions and provoking, she reflected:

“In these cases and in these struggles, even more so. The way that I found was with this song. Re-claiming a territory that is part of my identity and talking about its contradictions. But in all this we artists are an excuse, a window through which to understand something.” (Interview, 18/4/2022).

This vision of things through a creative prism has characterised the originality of NHOC in the way they think about themselves. The metaphors linked to animal ecology refer to this to show how they function as a group or in any case, to give an account of a form of interaction between them.

These metaphors will appear throughout the chapters, especially in relation to their collective identity, but for the purposes of this particularity what I would like to point out is the correspondence they trace between their human work and the attributes of some animal groups near or known to them in the space under dispute. This creative aspect also differentiates them from other neighbourhood assemblies in the metropolitan region.

¹¹⁶ This interview was conducted within the framework of the book “Native forest. Riverside ecosystems at the La Plata River. Avellaneda and Quilmes” published in December 2022. Her testimony is part of the chapter on creative, political and affective bonds that people develop in relation to the riverside.

I would particularly like to highlight a metaphor that makes them compare themselves with geese (*gansos* in Spanish), especially with the way they fly together. This is how Nieves described it to me in an email she wrote denying her leading role in the neighbourhood movement due to something I had written in relation to her work:

“I am part of a collective, I am not the head. Although I am one of the oldest, I don’t consider myself a leader. The success of the assembly is the participation of everyone and that no one is above the other. That is the real achievement and the fact that we have been in existence for almost ten years. We are geeZe!” (29/12/2017).

She purposely used geeze with z to represent the “neighbours” as a bit crazy, innocent and sometimes silly people. To which she added:

“Science has discovered that geese fly in a V-shape because each bird flaps its wings producing a motion in the air that helps the goose left behind. By flying in a V, the entire flock increases its flying power [...]. Each time a goose leaves the formation, it feels the resistance of the air and realises the difficulty of flying alone. Therefore, it immediately joins the line to benefit from the power of the partner flying ahead.

When the goose in the lead gets tired, it moves to one of the positions behind and another goose takes its place. The geese behind produce a sound of their own to stimulate those in front to maintain speed.

When a goose becomes sick or injured, two of its companions leave the formation and follow it to help or provide protection. They stay with it until that goose is fit to fly again or until it dies.

Only then do the companions return to the band or join another group.

It seems that when we share a common direction and have a sense of community, together we can get wherever we want going easier and faster. This is the benefit of mutual support, that’s how we work together”.(29/12/2017).

Why geese, if there are other birds like ducks and swans or pelicans that fly following this arrangement? What more can be said about NHOC in relation to how a flock of geese organises itself?

Geese are aquatic animals that, although migratory, also tend to settle in coastal areas or forests to feed, and geese are one of the species with the highest degree of companionship among its individuals.

The use of geese as a figure does not say much by itself, but in relation to the conflict over NCP shows a comparative role of animals (or non-humans) and humans in the pondering of complex situations through a metaphoric projection (White & Candea, 2018).

Their conception of “flight” is also significant since geese spend much of their time flying, which may be a semblance of what their “neighbours” have also ended up doing on a day-to-day level: resisting corporate practices and government policies in natural protected areas. The manner in which they do so is how they practise politics, realising that the assemblies are more than the sum of their members (Nading & Fisher, 2018: 1010). Assemblies, then, are social spaces, and without “the other” or a mutual cooperation they would not fulfil their function.

I would like to close this analysis by emphasising the contradictions in this neighbourhood movement, in particular those that have to do with the perception of “neighbours” regarding what keeps them together or separates them from others who are also fighting for environmental issues or social justice. The first question that arises is how a neighbourhood movement could be composed with political forces on the basis of the mistrust and representations of impurity that assemblies usually link to them. Or why would unions, political parties and some social or environmental organisations support assemblies’ claims?

This is one of the most difficult aspects of collective action to manage, according to NHOC and other organisations like the Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River. Solidarity between these grassroots groups bridges differences since they all work to produce real-world effects in one way or another. It functions by generating alliances with those with whom a common interest can be maintained over time, thus making them more relatable.

The implementation of distrust and strict activist codes has allowed alliances to be ruled out and has promoted action with other organisations. However, the Assembly NHOC has highlighted that the rigidity of these principles is such that it has come to prevent collective action in certain circumstances, making it very difficult to achieve results in their resistance.

Conclusions: Working with others for change

The neighbourhood movement that rejects the colonisation plans of the “promoters” is made up of a multiplicity of associative forms, among which local assemblies are distinctive. People taking part in this movement gather mainly as “*vecinos*”, bringing together knowledge, experience and moral ideas in the context of urban and socio-environmental problems they experience in their everyday lives.

The assemblies, emerging from every neighbourhood in the southern metropolitan area, have played a key role in recent history consolidating a social mobilisation through bottom-up political spaces. And although this associative form has been losing political strength, it is still a democratic, horizontal practice among ordinary citizens, with no institutional or governmental ties.

Other organisational and political actors (introduced in the cartography of the movement at the beginning of this chapter) engage with the assemblies in the defence of the riverside because they have a similar geographic location, because they share a history of political involvement on issues of public interest, because people know each other (personal ties), or because they are motivated by the same reasons.

I understand that they hold new and old urban or even socio-environmental demands, so what is their newness about as a social movement? The assemblies emerged as a political phenomenon in 2001, long before the conflict over NCP; nor are the “neighbours” identified as an ecological movement to which the literature on NSM attributed novelty. In fact, the “neighbours” have rejected to be labelled as “movement” at all for it implies that they all see things alike. Despite this, they definitely differ from previous movements in their composition, now integrating unions and representatives of historical class struggles in Argentina.

And most importantly, they have found ways to generate new meanings to promote new claims, including purity or the way of conceiving collective action, under multiple identity forms. I think that the new moral ecology over the wetlands and forests of the La Plata River is part of this.

Notably, the assemblies (and among them NHOC) also differ from those that arose in the last decades due to their spatiality and, as I will show later, to the identity expressions related to it.

During the Argentine economic crisis, the assemblies gathered in their respective localities (neighbourhoods, squares, municipalities) and other organisations deployed their action in factories or symbolic places like the Plaza de Mayo (foundational site of Buenos Aires City and centre of governmental functions). In the conflict over NCP, the assemblies develop in-place resistance, moving on to a different geography than their original one in order to build power through territorial control. This is the interesting thing that can be identified in this movement: it is place-based, and constituted in a territory where the “neighbours” display their resistance practices and discourses.

The environment, as a focal issue around which people congregate, meets the inhabitants of the districts as “common people” who want to decide on how to live their lives regardless of their neighbourhood, political position or social class. In a scheme of unequal power, these people recognise themselves as “neighbours” (or equals in contentious political action), “*uncontaminated*” by traditional institutions and political practices and with a similar identification with nature.

Thus, they accept chaos and their limitations, implementing a way of doing things together that resembles, metaphorically, that of other animal groups such as geese (*gansos*). They support each other and establish collaborations with others under certain circumstances or conditions in the name of solidarity as a way of preserving assemblies as political actors.

This is a social movement that relies on their large number and capacity of being manifold, which causes as many solutions as problems, on collaborative work and a common project. Does it constitute a majority with respect to the rest of the population in the districts in terms of a massive gathering of people? No. Do the other associations, unions and groups share the same values as those of the neighbourhood assemblies, especially NHOC? No.

However, their conception of what is right (as put forward by NHOC) has contributed to generating a new moral ecology that redefined the sense of struggle of others who want the conservation of nature.

CHAPTER 5: A Place-Based Collective Identity

“Intercuencias [*Interbasins*] is made up of self-convened neighbourhood groups: water and health forums, neighbourhood assemblies, various environmental organisations, non-governmental organisations, sociedades de fomento, people who act against environmental pollution and for the defence and promotion of a comprehensive management of water and regional basins.

We function as a pluralistic network for the exchange of information, solidarity, support, and mobilisation. Our work methodology is democratic, horizontal;
in plenary sessions we set the guidelines and work for action [...]

The space is autonomous from the state, companies, and political parties.

We privilege the work with and from the “neighbours”, involving each other in the actions to follow and in the elaboration of alternative solutions to our problems [...].”

(Self-introduction of the regional organisation Intercuencias during meeting N° XXIV. March 2012).

The *collective identity* of the neighbourhood movement can be described as a shared awareness among diverse associative forms that present themselves predominantly as “neighbours” (“*vecinos*”). Through this subjectivity, people gathered in all sorts of groups to take action in a political sphere by counteracting the “promoters”, who also acknowledge them under this denomination.

It is particularly the Assembly NHOC, carrying forward the social demands in opposition to NCP, that at a discursive level manifests different versions of this collective identity, that I would like to investigate. Such senses of self relate to the natural environment of the La Plata River, and consequently with its conflictive condition, and do not seem to articulate with each other directly.

Another characteristic is that they do not exist through the full consensus of all participants of the assemblies (*asambleas*); rather, they are the result of negotiations and reciprocal questioning, which means that identity is processual, and implies a constructivist view of collective action (Melucci, 1995: 43).

In this respect, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) developed the idea of “subject positions” that make up people’s identities at particular times. The diverse subject positions are manifestations of a single position, so “the plurality of differences is either reduced or rejected as contingent; the sense of the present is revealed through its location in an a priori succession of stages” (1985: 21).

This is something intrinsic to the movement, the quest to maintain the alliance, which operates as their principle of unification, so the *identity expressions*, as I regard them, seek to recreate a correspondence among people over time according to what they experience together.

What is interesting about this collective process led by NHOC is how by constituting an unlikely bunch (heterogeneous and incongruous) and despite their ideals of “purity” and scepticism towards other political forms of organisation, they have managed to create a common identity that gives meaning to the group.

In this manner, they have generated all forms of attachment to the contested place for each identity expression not only for themselves but for others who also relate to those conditions of being there together.

The quote with which I open this chapter, for example, is the group definition of a network that unites collective forms, including neighbourhood assemblies from Avellaneda and Quilmes, for the environmental management of regional river basins. It alludes to a form of solidary and democratic work from below among people who identify with each other as pursuing the same goals.

It does not mean that they have a similar understanding of what happens, but it makes reference to multiple views encompassing a “shared” composition to make a difference. Therefore, a common identity like this seems to follow some general orientations: those relating to the ends of the actions (the sense that action has for the collective forms), those related to the means (the possibilities and the limits of the action), and finally those related to the relationships with the environment (Melucci, 1995: 44).

I will go from a general analytical perspective involving the movement as “neighbours” to a more particular one for the Assembly NHOC, which congregates other organisations around two distinctive elements: *dissent* and *conflict*. The former refers to the construction of consent based on the different opinions or ideas expressed by the “neighbours”, while the latter is a state of antagonism between the positions put forward to enhance the functioning of the assemblies. If conflict occurs, it is because everyone who takes part in the assemblies can do so without being conditioned in any way by the rest. Concerning this, authors like Laclau (1996) and Mouffe (1993) have alluded to the fact that a collective constitution can be problematic and that unfixedness might become the rule because such a constitution is relational or influenced by others.

So, how did the Assembly NHOC develop identity expressions through the tensions within and outside the movement in a context of conflict? I claim that *difference* has played a major role in the development of a joint ground for expectations and action in the midst of struggle.

For the purpose of this chapter, I thus define collective identity as “an articulation of difference” (Escobar, 2008: 203) for it involves the production of nodal spaces where diversity can achieve a common ground. To counteract the logic of domination and dispossession of nature, the assemblies followed a logic of *similarity* and *differentiation* to give sense to their identity.

Furthermore, I argue that each of the four *expressions of identity* that make this this assembly stand out correspond to various moments of the conflict (which I will explain in the next chapters), if it were possible to pin down a distinctive period for their manifestation.

These expressions have shown a progressive development, with the members of the collective starting out as referring to themselves as “neighbours” (“*vecinos*”) in 2008 (as soon as the conflict emerged) and then as “ants” (“*hormigas*”) when Techint carried out deforestation in Avellaneda by 2012.

In addition, they have compared themselves to the Galochas to express a resemblance with a fictional tribe without a territory, and simultaneously, they have discovered a love of nature that they share and which has reunited them as “*nature lovers*”.

“Neighbours”, as I have outlined, has been an appellation associated with equality among all members for the functioning of the movement. It has constituted a referential form previously used for social mobilisation, even before NCP, in the face of other conflicts with an epicentre on the riverside. It has been used as their main identity statement as political subjects during protests and mobilisations, and when making public pronouncements, but most importantly, this is how they potentiate their associative capacity through space and time.

As “ants”, they physically and symbolically took over the place under contention as a political statement. The Assembly NHOC resorted to an animal metaphor to account for their form of organisation by using “a material and semiotic entanglement of human labour organisation and animal ecology” (Nading & Fisher, 2017). In relation to this, the “anthill” (“*hormiguero*” in Spanish) alluded to the place that they had built on their own, representing the assembly’s spatiality of resistance from which “neighbours” fought the outside “invasion” of intruders like Techint.

From 2012 to 2014, “*the Galochas*” represented an identification with the homonymous literary work, which gave them a sense of togetherness, hence reinforcing their belonging to the *asambleas*. They saw themselves as sharing the same ancestry and other aspects of a great family due to the type of ties they had developed together over an extended period.

Finally, their understanding of themselves as “nature lovers” deserves special consideration; this way of referring to themselves also manifested from 2014 to 2018, but it has not been part of a common definition of who they are. Rather, it can be seen as an imperative that one should be a “nature lover” in order to be part of the group, in the sense that “neighbours” engage people in moralistic concerns regarding the riverside nature. This includes a sense of activism as well as a love of plants and animal life, or simply the ethical orientation to more ecological practices.

These expressions have been used on manifold occasions throughout the ten years of conflict under analysis among which are public audiences, movement’s pronouncements, mottos protests, press releases, and social networks postings as well as assembly meetings or as ways to address each other within the assemblies.

I would like to mention a key aspect associated with the construction of such a particular form of identity: the local cultural context, which has enabled the emergence of an identification linked to the riverside territory. This is even more noticeable when the “neighbours” call themselves *Avellanedenses* and *Quilmeños*, which, beyond indicating where they live, tends to denote a place affiliation that has been constantly manifested throughout my research as a “distinctive factor” if one had been born there. The “neighbours” from the Assembly NHOC have stated it clearly to account for their territorial belonging: “*we understand ourselves as being part of the [riverside] territory*” (2013)¹¹⁷.

In brief, the denominations “neighbours”, “ants”, “*los Galochas*”, and “nature lovers” have been the way in which they have continued to accentuate their own “virtues” when comparing themselves with those whom they face (in the sense of what they represent) in connection with the coastal space. I learned from them throughout my research, whether in interviews, reading social media statements or written pronouncements and on any occasion in which they referred to themselves. I will now go on to examine each dimension of group identity linked to the riverside to find out what it is about and what its political, cultural and environmental implications were in the context of the conflict. These should be seen as stages in the evolution of a learning process and an accumulation of knowledge, which developed in the face of the increasing possibility of people losing their natural habitat.

The “neighbours”

From this appellation, the neighbourhood assemblies and also the rest of the organisations together as a social movement have voiced their disapproval of NCP, showing their political position in the conflict. This has persisted over time (since the beginning of the conflict) entitling people to make their complaints and legal presentations as they will be affected by the future urban development. Irrespective of their socio-economic origins, their professions, age or experience, the “neighbours” have stood as such before the media, the municipalities or courts of law sharing the same rights. In other words, they regard each other as having similar characteristics that enable them to claim their concerns about something. Such was the case of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo (Madres de Plaza de Mayo) who lost their children due to state terrorism in the late 1970s and struggled to find them, and who collectively designated themselves “mothers”; a similar common appellation was adopted.

Also the Mothers of the Towers of Wilde (Madres de las Torres de Wilde) initiated the social mobilisation for the closure of the landfill in 1999 because of their children’s illnesses.

¹¹⁷ Television programme “Nación Zonámbula” (or Sleepwalking Nation), episode number 13 of the 8th season. (7/4/2013). Broadcasted on channel 7 (the state-owned television station) with national scope. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2tCvcmgEw&t=318s&ab_channel=RiberaQa Last accessed: 16/5/2022.

This association gained political strength and also brought together fathers and other inhabitants of the neighbourhood who worked with them from a place of identification with their problem. The sanitary landfill was, after all, a danger for everyone and their children were the most vulnerable when exposed to it.

However, “neighbours” (“*vecinos*”) is not a recent form of self-designation; nor was it born with NCP. It has been a way of encompassing those leading popular mobilisations in relation to social, political, and especially environmental demands in Argentina for at least 30 years.

When conflicts arose around natural resources that were being damaged due to mining in Esquel (Province of Chubut, Patagonia), some people got together as “self-convened or self-organised neighbours”, which represented a precedent for the construction of a common “collective action framework” accentuating a political autonomy (Merlinsky, 2013: 22).

Today, the “neighbours” that make up the neighbourhood assemblies in Avellaneda and Quilmes describe themselves as people who pay their taxes and want a normal life for themselves and their children. The name groups them together based on how they agree that a change can be socially generated for people and from those very people.

On the one hand, the “neighbours” do things for others like themselves as a basic form of solidarity between them, whether they live in the same neighbourhood or not. These people acting together did what no one else has done for them – not even state agencies, lawmakers or municipal authorities. They saw themselves as the only ones capable of making things work as they needed to. Another important factor about being “neighbours” is that they have been recognised in those terms by the municipalities and other governmental levels with whom they interacted, and this is in fact the only form of recognition that project “promoters” have acknowledged of those resisting NCP.

The authorities in particular know that behind this identification there is a neighbourhood claim, a need to be satisfied, or a public problem to be solved that speaks to them directly and might become massive or gain strength throughout the districts.

Despite this, the official indifference to some groups or the forms of co-optation put into action towards them has reinforced the controversies in the conflict. The “neighbours” from different organisations and assemblies have mentioned a dozen times during my research the ways in which the municipalities, party representatives (*punteros políticos*) and Techint have tried to make them dismiss their demands.

This has manifested through the offering of money, the participation of assemblies in the management of municipal environmental programmes and also job positions in the company. In Berazategui, a neighbour from the Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River told me how the municipality (in particular during the successive mandates of the Mussi family) had managed to demobilise the “neighbours” politically active in the district.

The authorities “set them up” by making them believe in an articulation between civil society and the state to solve their problems:

“They [the neighbours] believed that there was a more democratic openness and that this was possible through dialogue, without popular mobilisation, to solve certain issues [...] this was disappointing...nothing was achieved, on the contrary, what the authorities achieved was to demobilise you [...]” (Interview, 2016).

ON SOLIDARITY AND PURITY

Without answers at the political or institutional level, people resort to solidarity among them defenceless in the face of state actions. I continue here with the interview from the previous chapter with Nieves and Carmen (July 2016) for a better understanding of the values that unite these people as “neighbours”.

I see *solidarity*, as expressed by the “neighbours”, as a unity of purpose and a search for the common good as well as a last resource to find solutions. Let me show how Nieves and Carmen expressed it:

Nieves: ... In 1945 my grandparents went to live there, and why did they get water from the aguatero [water seller]? Because my grandfather made a well 25 metres deep and couldn't find any water and they lived here in front ...My grandparents...

Carmen: What a coincidence!

Nieves: Stop it Carmen, let me talk! You are mixing everything up! My grandparents came from Italy with no money; they went to Banfield [a district in the southern metropolitan area] because they did not have a penny, they ended up in a henhouse [a very poor house] and... what is it called? And then I do not know; my grandfather worked in the state-owned train company then and he bought a house here in Wilde [Avellaneda] and they were near the stream, they were always flooded, the water reached them halfway, then... and the question of the solidarity of the neighbours, did you see?

Because one would get sick, there was a problem of tuberculosis, then all the neighbours would get together and wash the houses with bleach because most of them were shacks, or they would get flooded so they would clean the house of each neighbour together... you see? And they didn't have cesspools; my grandfather would come back from working at the factory and he would make cesspools for other neighbours so that everyone would have cesspools; a crazy man, a beautiful crazy man... and then there in Bernal [in Quilmes District], when they bought they knew they were selling five lots and he went to see. But all this from a worker perspective, it was not that... he was a worker, and later he worked at the factory, and he paid attention to the fact that the area had a good drainage to avoid flooding and because here he already had a lot of neighbours, his house was always full of neighbours, you see?

When he went to live there, he bought the land and all the neighbours went there, so he was surrounded by the neighbours here and well. They didn't have water; they went to look for the aguatero and what they did, later they got tired of the aguatero not passing by when they needed the water, and one day the neighbours agreed to bring water from Zapiola Street. They were 300, 400 metres away from the water infrastructure so they set all the water pipes to have running water; everything that was done was an achievement of people for the neighbourhood. The same was with the electricity, the streets...

Carmen: We also, when we came from Comodoro Rivadavia [a city in a Patagonian province], later in the neighbourhood where I lived in La Plata, six families came from Comodoro, everyone was around, we got together.

Nieves: And well, and that used to happen to me and I said, “come on, how could it be? Before the neighbours used to get together”.

Carmen: Oh, yes!

Nieves: They helped each other.

Vanina: That was lost.

Carmen: At night they used to get together under the lime trees in La Plata City; we had lime trees.

Nieves: Or to drink mate sitting out in the street.

Carmen: On the sidewalk the benches were taken out and the neighbours used to sit; they even came from the corner, did you see? The old people sat there; I was not going to sit there.

Nieves: They were not old.

Carmen: I don't want to say old, but I mean our parents.

Vanina Santy [researcher]: *I never lived that kind of solidarity... If in my block we got flooded, the people from the other block would say "well, not my problem, that does not happen to me", so nobody wants to get into trouble, to get involved [...]*

Nieves: *In my house I have keys from the neighbours; the other day Esther fell and the granddaughter came and told me, "don't you have the keys?" and "what do I know? your father took the keys" and I... I grabbed the ladder, I had to put the ladder, jump over the wall, but in the neighbourhood there is still that sense of helping each other, and now a girl who used to live in the neighbourhood is back. She had been living in Brazil for some time; she came back with her children and they have that. In Brazil people are more supportive, so it makes you happy because it is like a resurgence of that solidarity... [...].*

Solidarity, therefore, exists among "neighbours" shaping networks and fostering forms of collaboration in a way not so much found among other collective forms.

As I will show below, the "ants" and the "Galochas" continue to deepen the differentiation set by the "neighbours" between themselves and more traditional institutions like political parties and trade unions or other organisations with whom alliances can be created. And as "pure neighbours" they reaffirm their identity as a form of self-preservation so as not to fall into a moral condition they reject.

Falling into an impure state would affect the very definition of who they are and why they do what they do, so this ideal of purity could be seen as a form of reparation to a non-functioning system through a positive contribution to it, as suggested by Douglas (2002:3). This is somewhat paradoxical since the promotion of difference that the assemblies promote results in "contamination" via the very exposition between them as also does the solidarity they promote which violates the very collective ideal of remaining intact.

As "neighbours", for example, their "purity" allows them to engage with this space differently from the public policies that have degraded it to the point of turning it into unusable land. The term "pure neighbours" is not expressed politically in this way, nor do they present themselves as such when confronting the "promoters", but its usage is part of a critical questioning of how people live in relation to nature in the urban context.

Perhaps another approach to this identity as equal people in solidarity is the idea of a place of "*origin*"¹¹⁸ that many give to the riverside. The riverside is somewhere they feel they share an identity, a struggle and a way of doing things that put them on the same level – a place where things come into existence, even themselves; it is "their place" and they belong to it as "neighbours".

The "ants"

Here the ants have arrived
we are conquering enemy lands
invisible, silent, and simultaneous
the whole invasion is underground [...]

[...] we are many brothers [...]
the family is big because we reproduce,
we move the cowboy from his office
because we work full time

¹¹⁸ Expressed in interviews as well as in conversations via telephone calls registered in field notes during my research.

[..] Do you want war?
the ants prevail against any giant
[...] though you have boots and hat
there are many ants and few cowboys
The humble have eaten up the noble ones [...]
We've got to share the *piñata* candy
[...]As a team we resolve any setback
when we bite you, we bite at the same time
about our unity there should no question
in the face of danger, the ants die together[...]

I'm not afraid of confrontations
because I grew up with invasions
and like ants if I'm unlucky
I defend my anthill until death

Do you want war?
We are going to measure ourselves to see who is braver!

Song “The Anthill” by Calle 13. It was used by the local assemblies for the video “Let’s defend the natural reserve together”, produced and released by themselves on YouTube. (06/3/2014). The original lyrics have been shortened due to space constraints. Translation into English: Vanina Santy. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iayKiIXU1ps&list=PLfcBENhAugXGkv0DuOmQzHhwmPR2l-Dad&index=2&ab_channel=RiberaQa Last accessed: 9/01/2023.

By the end of January 2012, hundreds of “neighbours” and representatives of local and regional organisations gathered at the riverside to march on the Buenos Aires–La Plata Highway as a means of protest against a clearing going on in Avellaneda. In a video recorded by the Assembly NHOC it can be seen how people grouped together in the midst of devastation, holding signs and setting flags over the dead trees while singing against the destruction of the native forest.¹¹⁹ See figure 16.

“*We were like hormigas coming out of the anthill [hormiguero], in great numbers, together*” was a description commonly used to manifest how moved they still feel when they remember what happened on that day (field note, 2017). This was a “historic moment in their struggle” due to the massive amount of people involved and how they got to resist to stop Techint, as executor of such action, and the Municipality of Avellaneda as the company’s facilitator. The images below show them walking along the Santo Domingo Channel in a line formation that moves away from the river.

¹¹⁹ “Day in defence of the coast of Avellaneda and Quilmes”. (28/12/2022). Posted by Ribera Qa. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iayKiIXU1ps&list=PLfcBENhAugXGkv0DuOmQzHhwmPR2l-Dad&index=2&ab_channel=RiberaQa Last accessed: 17/5/2022.



Figure 16: **The “ants” coming out of the “anthill”**. Author: NHOC. 2012.

Once on the highway, and facing the oncoming traffic after blocking a lane, they put their banners up to expose the deforestation, shouting through a megaphone so that drivers knew what was happening by the river. There were no leaders coordinating the group; it was just people doing the same thing by means of collaborative work and a group objective: to prevent the company from continuing with the destruction.

The *“fight song”*, as the “neighbours” called it, with which I opened this section helps to draw a parallel with “ants” as the form of identity embodied by people during this conflictive period.

First, the “wartime” atmosphere that the clearing triggered at a social level confronted people with Techint and the municipal authorities representing them as “cowboys”, or irresponsible or unscrupulous operators in the public management of that riverside sector. However, the company said that it deforested its own lands, while the assemblies accused them of carrying the deforestation in an area next to protected lands.

In any case, the “cowboys” embodied the establishment, or those holding most of the power and influence in the government or society capable of inflicting harm to others.¹²⁰

And, as the song states, the usual place where they could be found was in their corporate “offices”, from which they conducted business. In an asymmetric scheme of relations as I have been describing so far – even one of unequal size, because cowboys are much bigger than ants – the strength of the latter is based on their number and unity which enabled them to challenge economic and political decisions.

¹²⁰ This is a representation made by NHOC from the aforementioned song, which coincides with what they think of corporate power. It is not used publicly to refer to the company but circulates among neighbours as an ideological posture that they share.

Second, these “cowboys” were equated by the “ants” (or those taking part in the neighbourhood assemblies) with some sort of nobility for holding a historical privilege derived from the possession of lands by the La Plata River. In their collective understanding, such rights should be equally distributed among the inhabitants of the districts who were the real “owners” of this public place. That also denoted a perceived inequity in the access to and use of the riverside as opposed to the benefits that private owners, other than Techint, have also had in the arrangement of such territory. Third, the “ants” have seen themselves as part of an ensemble for action that has survived other “invasions”, metaphorically alluding to other conflicts that some of them have participated in over the last five decades. It is perhaps an expression of spatiality that is complemented by the “anthill” as the collective representation of the space where they set a nest or refuge to counter the “cowboys”. Here it is interesting to note how the category “neighbours” described in the first section constitutes a group without a place of its own. In this phase of conflict, during which they identified themselves with ants, the assemblies appropriated the riverside to act on it and create their spatiality of resistance to organise collective action.

In short, the name “ants” refers to a political way of acting in the context of urban development in wetland and native forest areas, making a division according to how they behave towards this place from an ecological perspective. The “neighbours” were “insects” playing a crucial role in nature as part of its defence, while the cowboys were a non-native and invasive species that generated a spatial, cultural, and environmental imbalance. The “neighbours”’ identification with the *hormigas*’ logic of action might be characterised, therefore, by the following:

1) The number and arrangement of people who came together against the destruction of nature in Avellaneda was like that of an ant colony. Some “neighbours” placed themselves on the front line of conflict, while others scattered beyond the riverside territory back to their neighbourhoods staying on alert, watchful in case the “soldiers” needed backup.

That was the most basic distinction among assemblies’ members – whether to be active and non-active, in order not to exhaust people and to keep their resources ready for struggle.

Similar to an anthill (*hormiguero*), those who were at the riverside were more noticeable than the others who remained out of the public eye, down “in the anthill”, underground, but functional for whatever was happening in the confrontation with the cowboys.

2) As has happened with the “neighbours” throughout the conflict (as also will happen next with the “Galochas”), the term “ants” appealed to a condition of equality among individuals. There were no distinctions among them; no one had authority or priority over others, and the group did not depend on anyone in particular, but on all of them together.

This has led to clashes between them, shaking the motivations for the existence of the group, so for practical purposes they established an articulating tactic in its disorderly dynamics to stay together. For example, there were those who knew something and those who did not, so they sought to share information, turning knowledge into a key element for collective work. The same happened with communication, because everyone should know everything to facilitate a democratic way of functioning, necessitating open access to information.

3) The division of labour within the movement has not required compliance with any conditions imposed by the group. The tasks have been guided by the level of commitment assumed by each individual or the will to get involved. Each person could choose to contribute personally to the group by, for example, planting trees, painting posters, building a dry toilet, collaborating with lawyers or researchers, or updating social networks, or engaging in any other activity helpful to the cause.

Despite personal preference, individual “neighbours” professions or trades have been influential in deciding how to engage in collaboration, due to their artistic experience, musical vocation, their scientific, engineering or teaching backgrounds, or simply their love for being outdoors in nature, although ultimately in times of crisis and loss of participants in the movement everyone has ended up doing something, irrespective of what they used to do.

4) “Ant work” is the way they have defined how they do things regarding the conflict over NCP (field note, 2016). Tireless workers who work closely, thoroughly, and cooperatively with others when problems intensify, and when the level of hostility decreases they enlist resources to get ready for the next challenge as the conflict over the riverside never ceases.

Cooperation allows them to share knowledge, overcome difficulties, gather forces, and generate unity against cowboys more successfully. The “neighbours” depend on interactions with “similar” others who share the same difficulties, and combine forces with “other species”, different from themselves, like trade unions or political parties, in order to get results.

5) The “neighbours” say that they are “annoying” like ants (field note, 2017) because they are everywhere, both at the riverside and elsewhere; they sneak into legislative sessions at the local council, they protest at government offices, they occupy the public space to gain visibility; they file complaints, talk to the media, and pursue legal prosecution for their claims.

They talk to the media, sneak into local festivities, interrupt the traffic, and mobilise riverside inhabitants. They are difficult to get rid of and they know it, so this form of mobilisation works in their favour since others, like the promoters, perceive them as being troublesome.

This usually drives urban developers to become irritated, as was expressed in an interview conducted in 2017 about the suspension of the project due to the “neighbours” legal strategy to stop deforestation: *“It’s what they miss, it’s what we want to do and they won’t let us do... to live this way [when describing the plans for the future city]”* (Roberto Converti, Oficina Urbana).

“We are the Galochas”

*“[...] we are an ensemble.
You can see that when there is a lot of wind in that place [the riverside]...
And there the popular saying can be verified:
“God raises them and the wind piles them up”
[this means something similar to “birds of a feather flock together”]
One day, there was a lot of wind, very strong, and it threw us there, by the river,
and from that day on we started walking and working together”.*

(Email from a member of the Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River, 2017).

Between 2014 and 2018, the Assembly NHOC associated the group’s particularities with *Los Galochas* (2013), the leading characters of an Argentine graphic novel created by the writer Juan Sasturain.¹²¹ By then, the tensions with the promoters of NCP had intensified due to the legal recategorization of native forests to be debated at a legislative level in the province.

In their struggle to keep the high conservation status for forest areas in Avellaneda and Quilmes, they perceived themselves as a “tribe” due to their shared histories of political activism, cultural traits, and sense of territorial belonging in a place portrayed as their natural and cultural heritage.

Furthermore, and similarly to the Galochas, they regarded themselves as being exaggerated people, always taking issues to their ultimate conclusions and incapable of destroying nature. In their relationship with space, both the Galochas and the “neighbours” were curious, eager for knowledge and interested in exploring other places and ways of life.

Like the “neighbours”, they had no common homeland, so they moved from one place to another by choice because they had decided not to own a territory, but to make it together. In a way, their ideal was like that of the “ants” – to have a place of their own – but as nature and the river belonged to no one, they did not want to own something of which they were themselves only a part.

The first contact with this self-representation occurred when I was talking over the phone with a neighbour from NHOC: *“Have you ever read the book *The Galochas*? It’s us!”* (Mariana, 2016). At that time I did not pay attention to her reference and I did not know the story until Juan, an actor and also member of NHOC, said out loud during an assembly meeting: *“That’s because we are the Galochas!”* (Field note, 2017).¹²²

¹²¹ *Los Galochas* is a humorous ethnography of an unknown group, often considered extinct, with a great respect for nature. Each chapter is about a characteristic of this group with a narrative on their lifestyle, political organisation, beliefs, and cosmology in relation to the territory, knowledge, other tribes, power and education, among other issues.

¹²² Juan’s story can be found in the Annex.

I finally found the book when I went back to Argentina a year later, and after reading it I wondered why they recognised in themselves features resembling the titular characters in this literary work. They chose *Los Galochas* and not another book or form of artistic or cultural expression, so I thought that it was important to look at their reasons why. As usual for them, they had run into the Galochas by chance, when one of the neighbours found a copy in the library of a local school.

The “neighbours” incorporated the Galochas to the group’s cultural features, I ponder now, due to the cartoonish style with which the author described the Galochas. It enabled them to convey a humorous and spontaneous side of the group when dealing with setbacks or the lack of understanding from others regarding their environmental activism.

Probably recent events had changed this renovated sense of themselves. The management of the public consultations by OPDS for the ordering of native forests (between 2011 and 2014) had created a state of environmental confusion and debate among biologists. The governmental agency made it difficult for experts, and much more so for common people, to determine the real scope of the rearrangement officially proposed by the provincial authorities for natural areas in Buenos Aires.

The Assembly NHOC decided to survey the existing wooded areas with the development of maps and new knowledge tools which they had not implemented before. Working in a small group, they collated measurements, made calculations, delved into military topographical techniques by talking to experts, and graphed the information, comparing it with existing data held by other organisations and governmental agencies.

This innovative though exhausting group work was undertaken at the same time as new conflicts emerged at the riverside due to the illegal filling of wetlands and new deforestation, which shook the assembly’s sense of being together.

Facing a decreasing number of active people prompted them to duplicate their efforts to protect the coastal space, which might have led them to generate new sources of meaning to avoid a group crisis.

From here on I will attempt a correspondence between extracts from the Galochas and the way in which this identity expression manifested in the Assembly NHOC. Each attribute or characteristic of this assembly relating to the Galochas will be distinguished by asterisks (***) so what follows after this is my analysis of how that attribute replicated in a collective identification that became part of their identity:

What weird people, I thought. I read the whole story, I laughed when I imagined them and I immediately forgot about them [...] Bah, I thought I had forgotten, because another characteristic of the Galochas – I knew it then – is that they are unforgettable. They stick to you; they are even contagious [...] (Sasturain, 2013: 10).

When I asked questions regarding their identity and its relation to the riverside place in 2016, some members of NHOC explained to me that their first form of identification with the Galochas was based on the fact that this tribe was “different” and “unusual”, just like them.

“If you are crazy, come join us; if you are rejected everywhere, come join us; if you do not find your place in society, come to the assembly; if you do not know what to do, come here! We are some sort of social outcasts; nobody understands us, so we gather together!” said one of the oldest members of NHOC when we were on our way to the train station in Bernal after spending time at the riverside.¹²³ *“They are a bunch of special people, unique”*, a local homoeopathic doctor, Carlos Vilas, told me when talking to people about the collaborative writing project I was carrying out with NHOC. For years he has had some of the “neighbours” as his patients, and he himself advocates for the conservation of the nature reserve:

“I know that they are against NCP and that they want to protect the nature reserve; they are like that and they accomplish things. The fact that they have been struggling for so long, I like them because they are crazy enough to do things that nobody else does.” (Vilas, February 2022).

Hence, reunited as “neighbours” in order to distinguish themselves from other political actors and behaving as “ants”, the fact of being “rare” contributed to their construction of difference. They did not in fact struggle against it; they strove to achieve this marginal condition to show that things can be changed. This relates in part to the “pure” character described above: the rarer they are, the more uncontaminated they remain.

Labelled as “rowdy” by Techint, municipal authorities and urban developers in mass media and public occasions pointed, conversely, to associate them with forms of deviance (Becker, 1963).

“The environmentalists [assemblies’ members] are a little group of people who like to make a mess”,¹²⁴ stated the spokesperson of NCP after the unfolding of the conflict. They implied that those people did not abide by the rules or that their actions were not part of what was normally accepted when urban development was under public debate. In other words, they were “outsiders” who could not be trusted to accord with principles of progress and order that the promoters expected to set up at the riverside:

“[...] they label you like this or that way when in reality, when they call us ‘environmentalists’, yes, we are environmentalists; we work for the environment, but we are something deeper; it is about life [...] it’s not that you’re an environmentalist because you have nothing else to do [...]” (Interview, “neighbour” from Assembly NHOC, 2018).

¹²³ In 2016, during my second fieldwork trip after being away from Argentina for two years.

¹²⁴ In a public statement of Ernesto 89 to the radio station “Termómetro” on 11/5/2010. <http://eltermometroradio.blogspot.com/2010/05/techint-los-ambientalistas-son-un.html> Last accessed: 16/3/2022.

Being different from other organisations accepting urban development, but at the same time refusing to be judged by the project promoters' values, the social movement accentuated the “drawing of boundaries, the selective incorporation of some elements, and the marginalisation or exclusion of others” (Escobar, 2008: 203).

Having such a “deviant” idiosyncrasy generated unity within the group and affinity with other assemblies struggling in similar conflicts, but it also provided Techint with arguments that downplayed the reasons for collective mobilisation against NCP. What the “neighbours” regret the most about this characterisation is the social indifference (on the part of the rest of the local population) to their demands and to be seen as people against the established order.

***- But where were they from?

- That is wrongly said: one should have to ask where were they to...

- How?

- For the Galochas, one is not from where one came, but from where one was going....

- And where were they going?

- It depends. Once they realised that it was not worth spending their whole lives in the same place [...]. Thus, as they were not going to break into the place of others and as they did not have any money to buy, they rented.

- They rented?

- Of course: they rented a space and they went to live there*** (Sasturain, 2013: 12-13).

The “neighbours” of NHOC consider that local people have been gentrified from the coast by municipal and provincial decisions, so the territorial belonging that the assemblies have developed is based on two aspects. First, they feel part of the riverside; they are intimately connected to it; and second, they project this sense of place with others who might feel the same way.

Unlike the riverside inhabitants, they do not dwell in the place, but they have striven to find ways – as we shall see in the following pages – to reclaim the coastal space as theirs and everybody else's.

This sense of place exists among those who live in the districts, but there has not been a generalised political claim based on such a communal conception made by the “neighbours”.

“When you learn the sense of belonging, there is something that belongs to everyone; it belongs to everyone; it is not mine nor for myself”, said Sandra, a gardener and employed worker at an ecological agricultural cooperative when I interviewed her in November 2017.

It could be said that the “neighbours” have a shared “sense of ownership” (Strang, 2003: 110) which has historically been disputed, especially in recent years with the promoters. In this context, they learned “to be of” a certain place. And for doing so, it was necessary at some point an interpretation of what the riverside was and what they were in it. If the “neighbours” were not reclaiming the territory for themselves, which is what the promoters accused them of, then what was the nature of their political action?

Similarly to the Galochas, the assemblies were “renters” because they chose not to occupy a space on a permanent basis or to stay there to claim property. The terrain they counted on was a small piece of ground that already had a proprietor: the Boy Scouts, a local organisation in Quilmes that loaned them the space. No payment was made on a regular basis to the owner of the plot; it was more of a symbolic agreement for the right to use the terrain as long as the conflict remained ongoing. In return, the “neighbours” would maintain the site by cutting the grass, removing the rubbish, and preventing squatting by strangers.

“Resistance emerges when people are removed from their territory; with exclusion people lose their sense of belonging”, was the view of another member of the Assembly NHOC (field note, 2018).

The fact of having been moved away from the river or having been forced to move by the dictatorship years ago might have shaped their relationship with the riverside, but also it has impacted on their activism. If resistance entailed a defiance or refusal to forget about the place, together they devised ways of taking back the riverside. In this regard, it would be interesting to consider whether in the context of environmental conflicts this feeling of loss motivates people to gather around a natural space and represent themselves as being situated in it from a material and subjective perspective. The exclusion of these historic public and recreational areas did occur, but it is how the “neighbours” (or *“the Galochas”*) have interpreted what happened there that made the difference in the cultural and environmental resignification of the place amidst conflict.

Among the Galochas, education was always very important. All those who have observed their customs, including Professor Mercapide, discovered with surprise the taste for study that this unique people developed (page 65).

Learning has been a basic principle in the interactions between “neighbours”, a transmission from those who knew the most to those who knew the least in order to counter the promoters’ argument and hold a place in the conflict. All “neighbours”, regardless of their background or experience, should share something that others were not aware about; and if someone refused, the group’s mechanisms of distrust were activated, although such refusals did not imply their removal from the group or a sanction. Rather, it was understood that everyone should be keen to make an individual contribution for the functioning and subsistence of the group itself.

Sometimes following a methodology with experts, or in more individual or exploratory ways, the collective learning has also resorted to scientific knowledge, but has ended up acquiring a playful aspect over time, with which the “neighbours” have identified.

Generating knowledge was always key to the actions of the assemblies, but also to the way in which they learned together:

“Yesterday some people asked us, ‘What are you? Are you agronomists, forestry engineers?’ No, each one and what is given, we told you so [...] knowledge happens while walking and in repetition, once, twice, not remembering the names [of plants and trees], making the effort [to recall] what the plant was called, looking for a way to associate words or with things or objects to remember certain plants, each one of us used a different strategy to be able to tell, and well, sometimes one says things one way, others another, but that is how each one reassembles their way of telling things [to others]”(Interview, “neighbour” from Assembly NHOC, 2018).

This knowledge dynamic, whether it involved the scientific name of a native species, the medicinal properties of a plant or its role in the ecosystem, has been in motion since the very organisation of neighbourhood assemblies. The purpose has been to become acquainted with specialised or technical knowledge in a way that is easy to remember with the purpose of making it circulate (*circular*). The information is socialised, it becomes dynamic leaving the local sphere to return enlarged and strengthened after being shared with other assemblies who collaborate with their own knowledge.

I remember taking part in a walk at the riverside in Bernal during my third fieldwork trip in 2017.

As soon as we started getting into the nature reserve, Nieves described what we were seeing.

In that place there were thousands of caterpillars, since December is the time when the butterflies reproduce; some of them fell onto our heads while we got hooked on the threads that they had made between the plants, forming a kind of cobweb not suitable for impressionable people.

She couldn't recall the caterpillar's specific name so she decided to call it *“punk caterpillar”*, for she was sure that everybody would remember what it looked like with this reference: the white hairs sticking out of their heads made them seem amusing and impossible to forget.

“Neighbours” have also worked on the making of associations between, say, the scientific denomination of a reed known as *Arundo Donax* and its origins. Since it was very difficult to pronounce, they decided to use a more common way to refer to it: *Caña de Castilla*, alluding to their origin since they came from Spain or the Mediterranean Region.¹²⁵ Introducing a historical context and resorting to memory, someone mentioned that the Spanish ships might have transported it to Argentina when it was still a colony.

Such forms of learning have represented a reinforcement of social ties and a shared consent regarding how things were and what they meant to them; however, knowledge doesn't mean the same thing for everybody, since some have developed different ways of learning:

¹²⁵ This is an invasive species that makes other native plants recede in wetlands environments. Though it is indigenous to Asia, it can also be found all over the world, including the Mediterranean region. Its relation to *Castilla* (a region in Spain) as its original habitat helped neighbours to share what they knew (Field notes, 2017).

“I know the coastal landscape and now I can give it a lot of technical names because those who studied biology taught me, but before knowing the technical terms one already has affection for a natural landscape situation, you see?” (Interview, “neighbour” NHOC, December 2017).

The special connection with the place that some described was based on data or facts that they had collected, but there were others who evidenced a more sentimental way of incorporating what they were exposed to in this place.

This was related to something that couldn’t really be taught or learned, but that some simply felt and put out there to be experienced with others.

Nature lovers

“Many neighbours were born and lived in Quilmes, Bernal, Wilde, Don Bosco, Ezpeleta, Villa Domínico; in short, the entire coastal territory. They know the riverside, its landscape, its native flora, and fauna. They see the space as a place of local identity.

*Also that it brings us closer to nature, without having to travel great distances [it is within reach] [...] Others are **nature lovers who have come from nearby districts (in the basin); they are “upstream”, so to speak.**”*

(Collective declaration of NHOC on their relationship with the riverside¹²⁶, 2021).

What makes love of nature an element of collective identity? Why does this feeling of affection prompt people to become actively concerned about nature, to take care of it as if they were its “guardians”? As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, being *nature lovers* is not part of the group’s self-definition and from where they make their collective demands.

By breaking this “love” down, I intend to understand what kind(s) of bonds can be found with respect to the riverside nature; most of them have an emotional basis and are shared by most of the “neighbours” in NHOC. Being “nature lovers” is basically an essential characteristic to engage with the defence of wetlands and native forest, though not as in a group imposition, but rather as a tacit form of identification that expects to set a common trait, a point of departure and understanding of the objective of their struggle.

If people do not have an affinity with nature, if they do not share the same need to protect it, whatever else motivates people to join the assemblies, especially if it is for partisan reasons or they have clientelist interests, is not accepted by the “neighbours”. Of course, this is not the only way of bonding with the place, but it is a basic predisposition to be found among people in the assemblies.

¹²⁶ For the writing of a chapter on the study case Nueva Costa del Plata with the Assembly NHOC and me as co-authors, the “neighbours” wrote this statement on who they are. The book on urban extractivism has been coordinated by the National University of La Plata and the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina. To be published in May 2023.

So this love means to be part of a way of imagining nature and acting towards it that leads them to a harmonious way of relating to it as human beings. Perhaps it can be understood as a moral interpellation towards NCP's promoters, although it is not an aspect that they have strategically considered as such.

How or when did it start I can't really say, but over the last seven years this love has manifested more profusely through different practices linked to the riverside so it is no longer limited to the discursive realm. To better investigate this, I ask the reader to come back to the quote from this section where the assembly describes itself in relation to love.

In this form of acknowledgement, the "neighbours" distinguish themselves into two forms of classification depending on some features that they have put together. First, those who were born and grew up in the riverside territory regard this place as being connected to the development of a local identity. Second, those who live in neighbouring districts (far away from the river) have discovered the place and a riverside culture associated with it. In both cases, they are brought together to this space and become engaged with it in a loving way or focus on love to account for what binds them with the territory.

As for this and talking on the phone with Carla – a dancer and poet I mentioned before– about the plans of Techint for the southern bank of the La Plata River, she said that "*choosing the river we want is choosing a culture*" (field note, 2018). The Assembly NHOC that she was part of had made a conscious decision, not only to choose this sort of space, but to choose a way of relating to it.

The culture she alluded to was the joint work, the interactions among them from which beliefs, emotions and political practices combined for the conservation of the riverside.

In a similar fashion, when I interviewed Carlos, a resident of Ezpeleta District and sailor about to retire, on what NHOC did to increase the awareness in the population, he mentioned that the ideas they invoked, the values they shared, and what they carried out together was part of a riverside culture they wanted others to learn about:

"it is part of a whole culture that we also want to make people aware of, because it is unbelievable that we continue to live the way we do, not consuming so much water, so this dry toilet is to show that you can also live without wasting so much water because every time you go to the bathroom you throw away 15 litres of water; this is a way of helping nature [...]." (2017).

Contrary to this is the logic of the current consumerist paradigm that impacts on the environment; the "neighbours" express indignation and disgust at what those practices imply in a context of ecological crisis in the metropolitan area. This is part of a judgement on their part related to a consciousness that people should have or change that would make life in general better.

This love for nature manifests changes from one person to another, producing ideological or conceptual differences within NHOC as well as other aforementioned identity aspects of the group.

As an example of this, I will examine the view of Debora, a neighbour of the Assembly NHOC.¹²⁷ In the defence of the riverside space, Debora rejects the possibility of a political discourse on the social movement linked to the love of nature to stop NCP. In fact, she avoids using it because she considers such a collective argument anachronistic.

As a university lecturer in philosophy at the National University of La Plata, Debora advocates for the protection of nature through other means, as the “love of nature” is ultimately used when people do not have the tools or resources to say why a place should be protected.

She has known the place since she was a child, and learned everything from her father, who taught her about the natural processes taking place there and how the city relates with the riverside through the dumping of urban waste. For this reason, she also prefers to speak of a “biosphere” (or a sphere in which life exists) since it is a term that was criticised in the 20th century but is more appropriate to use nowadays instead of “nature”. To counter the idea that wild spaces must serve us humans in some way and to demand the incorporation of other scientific elements into a dispute.

However, her perception of what nature is or should be called did not stop her from being part of the assemblies’ political cause. Nearing the end of the conversation, she asserted: *“I love the riverside, I love the place, I have my history there, we used to go there with my father and my brother, but there are other ways of approaching it”*.

While Debora has shown herself reticent to use love as a form of resistance, together with her brother they created the Bird Watchers Club in Bernal (COAS), active since 2012.¹²⁸ The “love of nature” was included in its mission statement, distinguishing the group among similar organisations. However, after discussing this aspect with her some months ago and returning to her website while writing these pages, I noticed that the word “love” had disappeared from their mission statement as a common characteristic of those who carried out this practice.

COAS now defines itself as “people interested in sharing an interest in birds and nature” and they invite others to go to the riverside to learn about the benefits that the native forest and wetlands provide to the population.

I will now show other examples of what “neighbours” talk about when they talk about love or what there is in the coastal space that might suggest such a connection. There is the case of Curupí (a nickname given to one man by the “neighbours” that refers to a native tree in the La Plata River).

He is 35 years old, was born in Quilmes and works as an electronic technician. – His story is in the Annex– .

¹²⁷ Debora’s testimony was registered during a telephone conversation in April 2022. Although not included within the proposed period of analysis, or between 2008 and 2018, this perspective contributes to the chapter’s argument.

¹²⁸ A member organisation of the Argentine Birds/Ornithological Association of the La Plata River, a regional environmental non-profit. <https://coabernal.wixsite.com/coa-bernal> Last accessed: April 2022.

He and his father, Juan Carlos, have been amongst the most active “neighbours” taking part in NHOC, and the latter is considered a “historical inhabitant” of the riverside for he has lived there for some time (his testimony is part of chapter 1).

The story goes that Juan Carlos’ father had bought a small house on stilts on a piece of land that belonged to the National Gendarmerie (a national police force). The terrain was non-transferable; no one could own it, but it could still be used for at least 50 years once the property was acquired.

Juan Carlos grew up there until a flood swept away that small neighbourhood leaving no trace of it, so Curupí reconstructs his past in relation to these events in the following way:

“For me the coast is like part of my neighbourhood, let’s say, of my culture, part of the experiences that one has, let’s say, with the neighbourhood of going for walks on the coast, seeing the river; let’s say, it has a very emotional meaning, let’s say, talking about one who comes from a family where my grandfather once had a little house near the river.

It has a very close meaning, very close to my skin, in addition to all the beauty and later, when I grew up, having understood the meaning that it has, which is not simply the beauty but a functional environmental fact that the coast has with the wetlands, the marginal forest and all that, how it works; it gave another value to the coast, let’s say [...]. (Curupí, 2018).

The intensity of an emotional response like this towards a space is given by Curupí carrying it in his “skin”, a most sensitive part in the human body that is exposed to external stimuli like the river and nature. This space condenses what is close and loved by Curupí through their family, becoming part of his own history: *“I was always connected to the coast”*.

Although the love of nature incorporates variations in what it is and how it should be put into practice, the love of nature has constituted an “articulating node”, as Escobar puts it (2008).

Not only did it unite “neighbours” despite their diverse points of view, but it also generated forms of collaboration within the assemblies and between other collective forms. For example, it has allowed them to develop a collective project for nature conservation at the riverside.

The way in which the differences and similarities were handled was a matter not just of uniting with those others who also loved nature, but also of overcoming differences to build possible similarities with respect to the love of nature, as Curupí explained in the interview:

“We value the differences more [in comparison with collective or political parties], not the fact that we are the same and we value it in the sense of the importance of being different, let’s say, if we are different we have different knowledge like a big jigsaw puzzle”.(2018).

Looking at themselves as “guardians” of nature is part of an equally shared experience of place, incorporating the image of themselves as embodying a protective and vigilant symbolic figure.

In this role, given by that particular bond with nature, the members of the assemblies hold on to their (heroic) quest to stop its destruction, which implies a total commitment to the place by becoming the “*protective shield*” to counter speculative interests (Iparraguirre, 2020)¹²⁹.



Figure 17: **Guardians of nature.** Drawing by an anonymous author illustrating the call for a neighbourhood assembly to prevent the riverside deforestation in Avellaneda. Source: *Asambleístas por el Río Bernal*. 2012.

The Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River portrayed this collective role under these terms: “*They continue to raise their voices, warning of the danger that looms over the forest and the life it shelters. It may be a chimera, as the neighbours think of it. But they are used to putting their bodies on the line for it*”¹³⁰.

The local authorities and the company do not accuse the “neighbours” of being emotional to confront them, although they do regard “neighbours” as having a strict adherence to certain ideas or principles that makes them irrational. Without wishing to oppose this reasoning with affection, it is important to point out that “neighbours” love does not constitute part of the controversies.

In the case analysed here, love of nature could be defined as a bond that connects people with a place while nature accepts different definitions. The “love or enjoyment of nature”, Kay Milton says, “defines a boundary [...] establishing an emotionally united community” (2002: 57). Thus “nature lovers” are those “whose interest in nature has been sustained or revived by enjoyable experiences and memories” (Milton, 2002: 72), although in the case of the “neighbours” I would also add to these other types of experiences and emotions more linked to their resistance.

In closing this chapter, I would like to emphasise some matters related to the collective identity of this neighbourhood movement, and in particular, of the identity expressions of assemblies discussed in these pages.

¹²⁹ As it is defined in: Iparraguirre, S. (5/10/2020). “Swamp guardians”. *Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River*. <https://www.fororiodelaplata.com.ar/guardianes-del-pantano/> Last accessed: 9/8/2022.

¹³⁰ Ibid 15.

If those were understood in terms of *identity politics*, then they probably aim at ensuring the political manifestation of a minority group (within the broader context) or marginal demands (in the acceptance of NCP by those included in the official negotiations).

This is often how they feel and are represented by the “promoters”, hence, NHOC “asserts or reclaims ways of understanding its distinctiveness that challenges dominant characterizations with the goal of greater self-determination” (Heyes, 2020). As a consequence, people identified as “neighbours” as a first outcome of the solidarity they proclaim but the rest of the identity expressions were formed in their interactions for the defence of nature at the La Plata River. Before NCP they did not occupy the riverside space like “ants”, but by acting in that space they saw themselves in that way; similarly, until they acted in that space they were not Galochas looking for a territory to settle in or “nature lovers” looking for a place to display their affection. Moreover, these versions have existed simultaneously: at no time did any of them replace any of the others; rather, they were identified in this or that way according to the circumstances.

As for solidarity as a constitutive element of neighbourhood assemblies that allowed people to go beyond differences, it could be said that this has been influenced by an element that “neighbours” do not want to mingle with but which is part of them: contamination.

For Tsing, contamination is a way of creating something new – like the aforementioned identities– allowing different encounters among people but also observable in the complex relations of nature (2015: 29-30).

In this respect, the identity expressions of NHOC have been linked to a public and natural territory that loses some of these characteristics every day (in comparison to how it was before, and to the conditions that contamination has generated there). But beyond this, as I argued at the beginning of this chapter, those who resist have managed to constitute themselves as a functional and political group to be able to act in the conflict.

Conclusions: Identity linking people and the riverside space

The “subject positions” analysed in the frame of the collective identity of the neighbourhood movement (and more precisely at the Assembly NHOC) could be defined as a “way of treating differences which could not be assimilated” otherwise, following Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 20).

To do so, they must abandon their “purity” in order to contaminate and mix with others, establish collaborations and generate alliances. The experience of diversity and the indeterminacy of the relationships they try to maintain has led the “neighbours” to find new ways of interacting together and continuing to give meaning to resistance.

As Escobar (2008) does, I also see identity as a way of articulating difference in order to generate a shared basis for what they represent as “similar”, which brings them to act in the conflict both within the group and externally when confronting political and economic power.

Their identity is a common resource to keep them together, to overcome scarcity, and to set differences with others involved in the conflict; it is linked to the place in contention and not all its elements are the same (nor does it remain unchanging over time). It fulfils the role of integrating all sorts of positions and experiences through *identity expressions* that also displaying a particular form of connection with nature at a given point in the conflict.

Those expressions are put out there manifesting views and emotions of a moral ecology in the making around place. I myself have observed in my fieldwork how they narrated their experiences referring to themselves as “neighbours”, “*hormigas*” or “Galochas” depending on whether they were referring to the riverside, Techint or the problems between the members of the *Asamblea*.

Although these identities have a discursive correlation, they have often remained just that, without a strategic function in the conflict over NCP, but what is more significant is that they have also manifested empirically. This can be seen in the construction of their space with the *hormiguero* or the way they take care of the place through the mobilisation of resources for reforestation or distribution of seeds to expand the forest.

The metaphors of animal ecology, notably that of “geese” (“*gansos*”), have an emotional side which has to do with respect for the other and the recognition of “neighbours” as part of something they all make up, such as a flock. Additionally, the “neighbours”, “los Galochas”, the “ants” and “nature lovers” correspond to different instances in the group’s self-learning and the need to generate a way of positioning themselves powerfully in the conflict, especially as “neighbours”.

Overall, the identity of the Assembly NHOC, as well as some others that subscribe to their world view, can be described as a collective will and the result of the political-ideological-emotional articulation of fragmented issues (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 67). In relation to the territory, it is a way of identifying their own virtues in relation to it, defining their belonging to it as a homeland, recovering the place after having been deterritorialised, and loving it for that matter.

SECOND PART

THE CONFLICT BREAKS OUT (2008-2011)

When the conflict emerged, the riverbank was in a state of environmental remediation after the closure of the landfill in 2004. Here I briefly account for the experiences and sufferings of the population despite this closure and how garbage management has continued to be a public problem in the districts. As I will show, some previous tensions around the riverbank, before the announcement of Nueva costa del Plata, prepared the ground for the rejection of this project from 2008 on (or since the official launch of NCP).

CEAMSE¹³¹ is death

The phase following the closure of the sanitary landfill in Villa Domínico, Avellaneda, was named the “post-CEAMSE” phase by provincial and municipal authorities, as a way to dissipate the social discontent linked to the site. The same authorities and SyUSA, the outsource company created by Techint to administrate the dump, had also made that decision due to the lack of space to continue dumping waste, as it had already accumulated vertically in mountains over 30 metres in height.

The contractual terms established among the province of Buenos Aires, the municipalities and the company since 1978 had found a physical limit for burial so the place was considered to have exhausted the land’s capacity to continue operating beyond February 2004.

The inhabitants of Avellaneda and Quilmes, grouped in a network of organisations known as “Self-summoned neighbours affected by the CEAMSE¹³²”, took credit for the closure as a popular victory. They had been demanding the dismantling of the site since 1999, for they suspected a link between cancer cases (especially among children) living near the landfill and the burial technology used by SyUSA. Moreover, the sanitary situation was spreading rapidly around the riverside so people in other localities started to experience first-hand the effects of garbage with the deteriorated quality of air they were breathing. The Mothers of Wilde Towers (*Madres de las Torres de Wilde*), the *sociedad de fomento* Don Bosco, and the Assembly of Wilde stood out in the organisation of social mobilisation and pressed on for the environmental recovery of the place.

The Dutch company Van Der Wiel Stortgas BV was initially in charge of the adverse risks concerning gaseous emissions from garbage decomposition, but later CEAMSE took over. A second aspect of this company’s restoration included the treatment of leachates, which were the liquids that had percolated through solid waste and dissolved out some of its constituents.¹³³ If not controlled properly, they could pollute soil and water as they moved from the surface to groundwater. “*We asked for the leachate plant because until 2000 it did not exist, we asked for it and they [provincial agencies] made the leachate plant, we asked for the degassing of leachates, and the change in the way they implemented the treatment; we also asked for the torches [to burn gaseous emissions] and they installed them*”, the Mothers of Wilde Towers asserted on their role in the administration of environmental liability during an interview in 2011.

¹³¹ That is how the landfill was also popularly known, because CEAMSE (Cinturón Ecológico Área Metropolitana Sociedad del Estado or Ecological Belt Metropolitan Area State Society) was the name of the state-owned company created in the late 1970s. It was made up by municipal and provincial authorities to manage the urban waste of the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires. After so many controversies today it still remains operational as Ecological Coordination Metropolitan Area State Society with an emphasis on a comprehensive management of garbage and the development and conservation of green areas. Source: <https://www.ceamse.gov.ar/> Last accessed: 1/3/2023.

¹³² Vecinos Auto-convocados por el CEAMSE.

¹³³ As described in: “Responsibilities of CEAMSE” on transference (transitory storage and/or conditioning of waste for transport), transportation, treatment, and final disposal of household waste. Last accessed: March 2020.

The garbage disposal in charge of SyUSA had *“had irregularities at the time they were being done; well, it seems that no one warned about them at that time, until people found out about it”*, the mothers continued.

They recalled those years as *“a period of protests, a tough period, local demonstrations, a period of anger, anger, of aggressive situations; when I speak of aggressiveness I speak of the energy you put into something to achieve something, I don’ t mean violence, though... violence was also experienced; they [executives of CEAMSE at that moment] greeted us with gunshots [when they visited the riverside to verify the environmental effects], showing us weapons in the middle of the highway; they used to follow us home and show us their weapons”*.

With the renewal of provincial authorities in 2002, the board of CEAMSE also changed and opened up to the community. The new management of CEAMSE incorporated social participation for the creation of commissions that oversaw research studies and took part in public decisions. However, urban waste continued to be a problem. The 5,000 tons per day of garbage generated by the City of Buenos Aires and other localities were transferred from Villa Domingo to other landfills that remained active, namely the North III located near the Highway Buen Ayre, in the district of San Martín (northern metropolitan area); the sites in González Catán, in the western district of La Matanza; and Ensenada, in the southeast of Quilmes.¹³⁴

The social mobilisation in Avellaneda and Quilmes had not solved the garbage problem either in the districts or for the long term, since the waste continued to increase its volume and the disposal was displaced in other landfills of the metropolitan area. As the health of the inhabitants near those sites began to suffer as a consequence of the waste, the social protests also became commonplace in those locations. For the communities of Avellaneda and Quilmes in general, a period of uncertainty regarding the sanitary landfill seemed to unwind. As for exclusion, there was also relief for those in the neighbourhood La Ribera Bernal, for example, which had been evicted on and off during those 26 years. The farm people in Avellaneda, still without being able to take formal possession of the lands, complained that they had been subjected to investigation by CEAMSE as possible threats to national security during the dictatorship.

The objective was to force them to leave, and in this regard, there are countless stories about how the corpses of those politically persecuted were dumped in the wetlands or how their houses were torn down by the police. Others remember hearing the gunshot sounds of those executed by military or police forces in the riverside, which also contributed to discouraging people from living there due to fear.

The “sacrifice” in this place was not only environmental, for many families have felt themselves to be victims of a political and social situation of violence caused by the state itself.

Frictions before Techint’s proposal

Between the cessation of land-filling activities and the presentation of NCP four years later, other disagreements arose near the riverside owing to some municipal decisions. These did not lead to a long-term confrontation (although that doesn’t mean that they were resolved) and they did not escalate as the socio-environmental conflict over the urban development did.

¹³⁴ No author. (3/2/2004). The most controversial dump in the suburbs closed, in Villa Domingo. Society Section. *Diario La Nación*. <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/sociedad/cerro-el-basurero-mas-polemico-del-conurbano-en-villa-dominico-nid569776> Last accessed: 1/03/2023.

For instance, as of 2006, the Deliberative Council in Quilmes sanctioned the rezoning of some sectors in the district after three decades of not incorporating changes in the territorial planning.¹³⁵ A group of inhabitants rejected the reduction in the limits of legally protected areas which would allow prospective infrastructure or urban expansion works from then on. And so it happened with the arrival of the gated community Nuevo Quilmes (New Quilmes) that was located on 100 hectares right in front of the landfill in Villa Domingo surrounded by residential areas, though on the other side of the Highway Buenos Aires-La Plata. The lands had been property of ENTEL, a state-owned telecommunications company, and they were transferred to the European corporations Telefónica (Spain) and Telecom (Italy and France) during the national privatisation of public services in the 1990s.

As those lands had a public character and could not be commercialised, these lands were categorised by the Municipality of Quilmes as “property by *accession*”¹³⁶ in a legal though irregular practices (publicly questioned by some local sectors) to sell them to private investors. And as the place was “vacant”, the municipality gave a green light to the proposal in order to avoid the settlement of slums there.

The first problems with the residents of neighbourhoods in the vicinity arose due to the lack of approval by provincial governmental agencies, and environmental problems that potentially might be caused by construction works. For this reason, an alliance of local assemblies and associations organised a public campaign to express the community's disapproval. At the same time, and as the social rejection of Nuevo Quilmes grew, some local groups and organisations also opposed an agreement with the president of the Chinese company Wang Lu for the creation of an industrial park in Ezpeleta (limiting with Quilmes). In an adjacent coastal area of Ezpeleta, near this investment, Techint had proposed the construction of a closed community, as had already happened in Avellaneda in 1999 with Marinas del Sur, a project similar to NCP. In other words, Techint had planned an urban expansion to both the north and south of Quilmes for the construction of luxury residential settlements. Both were rejected by the population due to the lack of information and their proximity to the former landfill.

The waterfront revitalisation NCP had been brewing for almost two years since the Mayor of Avellaneda, Baldomero Álvarez de Olivera, asked Techint in 2006 to return the lands transferred to the company by CEAMSE in 1998. Techint had not fulfilled the legal commitment to provide a public-service infrastructure, so the municipality expected to recover that space to open a public park by the river. The steel company answered that a revitalisation scheme for the economic development of the districts would be devised, asking the municipality for time to do this.

In 2007, the first drafts of NCP incorporated conditions demanded by both municipalities in Avellaneda and Quilmes for the public use of those lands. First, it had to be an open space with free access to the La Plata River; second, the wetlands and native forest had to be preserved, so construction should not exceed 30% of the area. Third, the rest of the riverside territory should be devoted to natural and recreational spaces. In order to do so, Techint hired the urban developers, Oficina Urbana, to design the master plan and appointed consultancy firms to carry out the first technical studies to be submitted for governmental consideration.

¹³⁵ By municipal ordinance N° 10.337/06.

¹³⁶ *Accession* is one of the many ways of selling and acquiring property, according to the Argentine Civil Code. The owner of a thing also becomes the owner of what this thing produces, so accession is a way of buying a good at the same time that the productive means or activities it is attached or incorporated to – for example, land and the plans for urban development there.

CHAPTER 6: Yearning for the River. Memory and Nostalgia

“I went to the river, and I felt it close to me, in front of me. The branches had voices that did not get to me. The current said things I did not understand. It almost distressed me. I wanted to understand, feel what the vague and pale sky said in the river with the first elongated syllables of it, but I could not [...] I was there again but, ‘was I the one coming back?’”
Juan Laurentino Ortiz (1896-1978), Argentine poet. “I went to the river”.

Having looked at how the riverside of Avellaneda and Quilmes became a place historically in contention and why the more recent public management of legally protected areas has also been surrounded by controversy, with NCP being an example of this, I will now move on to a more ethnographic analysis.¹³⁷ I will show from here onwards how the moral ecology of a neighbourhood movement (whose identity is linked to the place under dispute) emerged, and what the main dimensions constituting it are – among them being the love of nature, considered to be a ‘virtuous’ form of interaction with nature against a logic of urban development that expects to “colonise” the La Plata River.

I will start with *memory*, which has been a significant element in the relationship of local assemblies with the place since the conflict arose, influencing the development of ethical ecological practices over the years. Those resisting NCP have always claimed that memory was like a fire that can slowly go out, giving way to oblivion in such a way that people might end up believing that something, like the riverside, does not exist. Far from thinking that something like this is impossible, and after reconstructing past facts around the conflict in previous chapters, I could say that it has already happened since the shutdown of the landfill. The coastal area was made invisible by the municipalities and provincial agencies to the point that many inhabitants of the districts do not even know that there are natural and public areas to which they are entitled.

Nostalgia has been an inescapable aspect derived from processes of territorial transformation initiated in the 1970s and in relation to memory, a second element in the *moral ecology* of the “neighbours”. Nostalgia turned into a wistful or sentimental longing for the river, into a desire to come back to it and to the relationships and conditions that belonged to a more joyful and “pure” past (without today’s problems or pollution). However, it was not something exclusive to the local assemblies; remarkably, it was sustained by all actors taking part in the conflict. The “neighbours” in particular, faced with public obliviousness with regard to what had happened there causing death and destruction, anchored nostalgia in the place of dispute so that others were able to remember.

¹³⁷ The places mentioned in this chapter can be found on a map in the Annex to this chapter for the reader’s better geographical location.

If memories and images from some time ago were activated among the population and if this was done conveying a shared emotionality, then the assemblies could claim a narrative to counter NCP.

I assert that both memory and nostalgia are intimately related in the production of place by triggering unprecedented distinctions between right and wrong, what was legitimate or not, and the sorts of environmental changes that should be instigated at the river.

Memory and nostalgia are elastic, reappearing at other times of the conflict in new and significant forms, especially for the “neighbours”, since memory and nostalgia give them reasons to reject the large-scale project. For this reason, what they recall together and how that impacts emotionally on them helps them build up a political position and thus to get to influence the conflict from their various identity expressions. As “nature lovers” they commemorate when their love for the place arose, while as “ants” they reflect on what brought them back to the river.

These first three years of conflict were also characterised by my absence from the fieldwork because I only arrived there by mid-2011. Therefore, to understand the background to the conflict as well as the onset of controversies and how the multiple actors acted accordingly, I relied on the memory of my informants. There were different ways of invoking the past – some did so by going back to their childhoods, others by distorting reality and even denying certain past events – as well as reasons to look back either to preserve the place or to prevent some things from continuing to happen.

Many memories were imbued with affection, others only talked about nostalgia and many learned from others to make certain connections between past events in order to learn about the place when they engaged with its defence.

Undoubtedly, memory and nostalgia are embedded in a web of power relations for the control of the coastal territory, so they have also played an important role in the confrontation over NCP. This led me to go back in time myself once I met all the positions in the conflict because beyond what was being invoked, I had to cross-reference what they said to understand the existing differences: why these past facts? Recalled by whom? Since memory is important for everyone, why were there different stories being told about what happened at the riverside?

If some spaces reveal “an intimate link between memory, nostalgia and identity” (Dallman, 2013: 34) with emotional effects, then it will be important to know how the memory of “neighbours” and “promoters” was shaped and what moral aspects are derived from this. This is what I will try to do by continuing with the timeline set out at the beginning of this work by exploring ways of thinking and understanding or explaining their reality through memory and nostalgia.

“Nueva Costa del Plata? What is that?”

Rumours of a new city spread among the inhabitants of the districts in early 2008. “*Where are they going to do it? At the riverside? But where? In the CEAMSE [where the former landfill was]?*”

The local inhabitants already gathered in the Forum of Assemblies for an Urban-Environmental Plan in Quilmes¹³⁸ wondered if it would be good or bad for them. What would happen if such a large-scale project would be located in such a complex territory surrounded by pollution and poverty? All they knew was that the construction works were due to start in fifteen days, as it was being made public by the Mayors of Avellaneda and Quilmes. A *vecino* from the Assembly of Wilde, Ernesto, volunteered to go to the riverside; he came back bearing bad news.

It would certainly be emplaced at the riverside between the river and the CEAMSE by Techint, though the only place left for the project was the nature reserve. Those who had been involved in the protests against the landfill (between 1998 and 2004) knew that construction would not happen in lands under environmental remediation – a fact that was part of what they had learned after the social mobilisation over the landfill.

Collective organisation was crucial to find out what was behind the hearsay and how they could put together the different pieces of information that comprised the puzzle, for they did not have all the necessary information. Neighbourhood associations, sport clubs, political parties like the Workers’ Party (Partido Obrero), cultural centres, trade unions with the State Workers’ Association (ATE, Asociación de Trabajadores del Estado), and people gathered in assemblies set a general meeting:

“Techint was back, did you see? and we already knew Techint [...] and we didn’t even know that there was a nature reserve there, when we got back together what we asked ourselves was: how is Techint going to get back?... Where? And [...] there was an architect who did all the hydraulic projection of the project because we said well... we are going to go out and protest against NCP and say what? Why is all this generated? If it is about a real-estate project in that area, it will impact on the water flow [of the la Plata River] and well ... that is what began to mobilise us [...]” (Interview, Assembly NHOC, 2016).

Such heterogeneity sought to generate a common front that would discourage NCP’s promoters by giving a sense of massive social rejection. By then, the neighbourhood movement did not make distinctions between these collective forms as the popular mobilisation reorganised amid other tensions taking place at the riverside.

The first discussions among those who gathered around NCP were depicted by the Director of the international organisation Friends of the Earth (Amigos de la Tierra) as a way of understanding what was going on.

¹³⁸ The Foro de Asambleas por el Plan Urbano Ambiental en Quilmes was active between 2007 and 2009, and then it vanished from the local political scene.

By making reference to a previous conflict that her organisation had been involved in,¹³⁹ she explained how they put their knowledge into action to identify those responsible, and the possible connections between the different processes encompassing territorial planning:

*“[...] there, we started to interact and one day we said well, but we **are not really talking about the wetlands, we are talking about private construction** and how it is carried out because at first it was just the pristine wetland, we began to see that, and well, if we talk about urban development let’s talk about the city [...] there are certain urban dynamics that we have to pay attention to: land grabbing, real-estate speculation and all this is decanting, many colleagues from Friends of the Earth are also working on this. [...].*

*In August 2016, a campaign by many organisations adhering to “the right to the city” is going to be launched, which is to start working on some concepts like David Harvey’s and [those of] several geographers and what happens in the cities, for example, with housing [...]. And **the environment in the cities is not only the trees, it goes much further** and the urban development is an issue that also has links with things that happen, as **everything is related to everything**, with things that happen in the countryside, then the soybean income is dumped here by the companies producing it, so we cannot say that in the urban area there are no problems. Well, first of all that is undeniable, right? And that they have nothing to do with other problems? They have a lot to do with it! Because the soy income destroys the ecosystem in rural areas, if you will, leaves us without land, without a future in that sense, on top of that they dump it here, they speculate with real estate, destroy wetlands, gentrify neighbourhoods, so it’s like everything is linked and it’s impossible not to see it; is it a lot?*

***Yes, it’s a lot; that’s why sometimes we can’t cope, but I think that today it is our obligation as environmentalists to see those ties, things are not so simple [...]**” (Natalia Salvatico, July 2016).*

Understanding together (discussing, exchanging and remembering) on why the wetlands had gained economic value and why a real-estate development would be built there led to an accelerated learning process among people.

The wetlands, regarded as being far from urban centres, were somehow connected to the expansion of the city and people became more aware of that. However, it took them time to understand the processes behind the territorial planning to develop legally protected areas. The collective discussion in Avellaneda and Quilmes gained more relevance because those wetlands were located within densely populated districts and next to important urban centres.

On the analysis of spatial production in contentious politics, and additionally to the interpretation frames described in previous chapters (Merlinsky, 2013; Goffman, 1974), Martin (2013: 101) offers clues to look into what people do together in these instances.

¹³⁹ Friends of the Earth worked alongside collective forms in the northern AMBA to denounce the risks of creating gated communities on swampy areas in the periphery of Buenos Aires, especially since Nordelta started its construction in 2000. Inspired by European standards, it is an urban development inhabited by over 40,000 high-income residents that due to the importance of its investment was declared an official district years later. It is made up of nine luxury neighbourhoods located on an artificial surface created to control the hydrological conditions of the area. Environmentalists accuse the corporations behind these modifications of eradicating native animal and plant species, and of causing flooding and socio-economic and spatial differences that benefit the rich to the detriment of the poor. Source: Public hearing that took place in July 2016 for the approval of Remeros Beach, a residential and private complex in the northern district of Tigre

She uses the term “framing” to refer to how social movements organise certain events and assign meaning to them by integrating values, beliefs and knowledge (memory, I would add) to shape objectives in relation to a place.

The author analyses three elements in the development of these collective *place frames* (2013: 105). First, the diagnosis or the description of the problem defining possible causes or assigning blame in relation to what a place should be like, or what had violated that ideal. In my understanding this involves a moral reading from the moment that the solutions, according to Martin, are also proposed by the same people judging the situation.

Second, there is hence a prognosis for which people identify actions that “ought to be undertaken”, and which in the case of NCP relate to stopping Techint, as they had done with similar real-estate projects in the past. Third, the exhortation to action that motivates and, at the same time, defines a group or form of activism. In this respect, a collective identity as “neighbours” (or common people who got involved in their local reality to change things) enabled them to investigate the reality together and reconstruct the past from a place of equality.

Memory amidst controversies

The differences between a sector of the population gathered in local assemblies as “neighbours” and the “promoters” of the waterfront transformation were captured in a public hearing held in November 2008 at the Roma Theater in Avellaneda.¹⁴⁰ This hearing was an institutional procedure proposed by the former Ombudsman of Avellaneda, Sebastian Vinagre, to give common people a place in the discussions of the project, as the confrontation was polarised between the municipalities on one side, and professional environmental organisations such as Greenpeace.

In accord with local, provincial and national regulations, the Ombudsman demanded that Techint make the existing project plans available to the general public; this sort of event had never previously been organised by the authorities.

The representatives of local assemblies complained –before, during and after the hearing – that the amount of information (over 3,000 pages of technical studies) presented by Techint could not be analysed just a few days in advance by people who were not specialists on those matters. Others criticised the fact that there was information missing that was critical for the general assessment of NCP’s environmental impact in the long-term.

¹⁴⁰ In addition to the official presentation of NCP there was a public debate on 24/11/2008 organised by authorities of Quilmes at the Bernal Athletic Club. There was little participation from inhabitants, and a majority presence of municipal employees. The same municipality set up an exhibition of the project in the Secretary of the Environment for some time. The most controversial move by the “promoters” was a trip to the United States in 2008, financed by Techint, which included councillors, politicians and representatives of organisations. It was intended to demonstrate the benefits of transforming a landfill in Fresh Hills for public use. Between 2008 and 2010 informative meetings were organised by the Municipality in Quilmes.

The preliminary version of a final report elaborated by the National Technological University (UTN), as an external party, established the impossibility of defining environmental aspects due to the “very scarce factual data of the project and none of the development activities” (2008: 308).¹⁴¹

Furthermore, the UTN admitted that key indicators about the works to be carried out and territorial or environmental processes involved were “not available in the project documentation and the master plan available to date” (2008: 309). And as this happened, Ambiente Sur made another finding as its members went through the documentation, the executive summary of the project on the analysis of NCP’s impact indicated the absence of an “anthropic environment”.¹⁴² In other words, it suggested that the riverside inhabitants in La Ribera, Bernal, did not exist and that any previous population had abandoned the place due to the landfill.

For such reasons, these studies were deemed by some local associations to be only a simulation of an environmental impact assessment, because although it complied with legal requirements and included technical references, it did not fulfil their evaluative function to predict and mitigate potential effects. Despite this lack of crucial information, the audience was still held but some assemblies accused the organisers of siding with Techint and Oficina Urbana.

During the meeting, the “promoters” spoke without time restrictions while the rest of the participants were only allowed five minutes to make each statement. People also indicated that the Mayor of Avellaneda had given his official approval to the project while they were waiting to enter the theatre, without the population even being present.

In addition to the public servants and councillors from Avellaneda (no representation of Quilmes indicated in public records of the meeting) there were present the Head of the National Department for the Environment and staff from the National Ombudsman’s Office. The mayor, Álvarez de Olivera, was the first official to address the audience, which included over 50 associations and a crowd that crammed the place (with an official capacity of 500 people).

He pleaded for a more livable city for everyone, something he claimed was only attainable through urban development. The same argumentative line was followed by the next speaker, the General Director of Services from Techint, Héctor Masoero, who was then followed by Roberto Converti, architect of Oficina Urbana. The former stated that the project would add value to a space currently forbidden to people due to the environmental conditions.

The future “open city”, unlike walled communities in the northern metropolitan area, would offer all the uses and services necessary for the population.

¹⁴¹ A report titled “Preliminary Version of the Final Report of Baseline Studies, Impact Study and Environmental Management Plan”.

¹⁴² As indicated in the “Summary and emerging conclusions of the environmental impact study and the environmental management plan” (October 2008).

He promised to fulfil the dream of many people by providing access to the river and enabling them to share a public space with their families.

Converti explained extensively the future environmental, economic, spatial, and cultural benefits of the development in the context of environmental restoration of critical areas in coastal regions.

He mentioned the need to go beyond a state of difficulty marked by pollution and abandonment to one of “urban virtue”, as had been happening elsewhere in the world. By invoking a “*civic pride*”, he expected to bring out a place identification with a riverside that people had no relationship with anymore, according to the promoters, view, and which consequently did not have a social use:

“It is precisely in these representative images that the public space always appears transcending the issues of public concern: the marginal jungle [one of the scientific denominations of the ecosystem there], the coastal slope, the riverbanks, the river, the recovery of dugs transformed into water mirrors, in places of community, in places that maintain their characteristics, in places that can allow social encounters, that are even a place of dream [...]” (Transcript of public hearing, 2008).

What followed were various positions stating both in favour of and against the project, with a majority of advocates in support of NCP. In this respect, the former Ombudsman of Avellaneda, Sebastián Vinagre, reflected – in an interview that I conducted in September 2011 – on how that social approval could have been “*manipulated or not*” due to the political link between the municipalities and many local associations that depended on estate funds.

Even those opinions in support of NCP questioned some aspects of the construction and proposed changes for better access to the coast and the improvement of already deficient public services (water and sewers) in the area. Among these voices two stood out: that of the Mothers of Wilde Towers, and that of the President of the Industrial Union of Avellaneda, Nélide Brovida, regarding environmental costs of Techint’s real-estate endeavour.

Both, regarded as fundamental organisations to the environmental and industrial life of the districts, claimed that attention should be directed to the sanitary landfill.

The former attributed responsibility to Techint for the pollution while the Industrial Union of Avellaneda wondered if there was going to be environmental liability (or potential environmental costs) in those lands, and argued that if not, after legislative discussions, those lands should be recovered “*for neighbours*” (she meant the inhabitants of the districts).

“*Do not lose the memory of everything that happened there*”, the Mothers of Wilde Towers cautioned, as they made it clear that despite the good dialogue with the company and authorities, they did not want to forget what they and many others had experienced.

Significantly, the “mothers” were against other organisations that refused to accept the project, since these organisations had not been engaged in the remediation of the place after the relocation of the landfill:

“There is still a long way to go; we are convinced that this is the way to work, by actively participating it is easy for some to express their opinion and protest against it when they know absolutely nothing about the work that has been done, they have not walked once on the landfill; they have not contributed with a single idea to improve the situation. Instead, we mothers, who were really harmed, have not stopped for a single minute to find a solution [...]”. (Interview, 7/07/2011).

However, these organisations remembered the opposite, how much they had also fought for the closure of the landfill, which revealed the differences between the collective forms that had collaborated together against the waste burial in Avellaneda and those that had not.

At the time of the audience, old and new alliances among local groups with political history in the districts were being developed in relation to a project that counted on municipal approval both in Avellaneda and Quilmes. With tensions among them on how to move forward, some chose to continue working on the environmental remediation while others decided to bring NCP to a halt.

As this unfolded, many became aware (and others brought to mind) that there were lands surrounding the former garbage site that had been legally protected since 2002, and this became a basis for additional reasons to oppose the development project.

The first assemblies and organisations to express their opposition to NCP demanded that Techint give back the riverside lands expropriated in its favour in the 1990s since they had found irregularities in 2004 concerning their ownership. This led to a criminal accusation against CEAMSE that never made it through the courts. There were some who claimed that the privatisation was a closed matter after so many years and that the land transfer should be forgotten. Primarily based on the interpretation of technical studies carried out by Techint, the controversies between “promoters” and “neighbours” at some point were also supported by memory during the conflict.

Whether it was about the method of soil filling for the elevation of the coast (more than five metres above its current level) to prevent NCP from flooding, or the calculation of hydrological risks for the basin, the memory of historical inhabitants who had already suffered flooding in the past acted as a warning for the “neighbours” against NCP. Neighbourhood associations spread the word, as in many cases they too had lost their homes or belongings due to the rise of the river, making memory a decisive factor when considering the waterfront revitalisation project.

Nostalgia: the place we used to love

Beyond the multiple opinions expressed during the public hearing, a feeling of *nostalgia* sneaked between the arguments, whether they accepted or rejected the land transformation. A longing for the past was expressed from different perspectives at a corporate, governmental and social level over a common object: the La Plata River.

This nostalgia made reference to what had happened in that place and what life was like before the big territorial interventions that caused permanent changes for the population such as the Highway Buenos Aires-La Plata, for example, when an artificial barrier stood between people and the river. Talking from his personal experience, the Mayor Baldomero Álvarez de Olivera resorted to this kind of evocation, setting an emotional tone among the participants in the audience to justify, in some way, the changes to the riverbank:

“To recover a coast that for many decades the neighbours of Avellaneda have not enjoyed [...].

I grew up on the coast, in Sarandí and Villa Domingo; I was raised on the coast of Domingo. I was twelve, fourteen years old, when I walked down Juan B. Justo Street heading for the beach resort of Racing [a local soccer club] that we all enjoyed.

Well, Racing was just the club name because the supporters of Independiente [a rival soccer team] could also participate, and it was a party every weekend with thousands and thousands of neighbours coming from every corner of Greater Buenos Aires, not just from Avellaneda.

People came from Lanús, from Lomas de Zamora and Almirante Brown [districts in the southern metropolitan region], also from the capital city because at that time people from Buenos Aires would not enjoy the river anymore and we were lucky to enjoy the river. Between the end of the sixties and the mid-seventies, unfortunately the course of events was beyond our control.

It was alien to our own decision; it caused that little by little the river did not belong to people anymore, that we could no longer enjoy the river that we wanted so much.

I remember we used to go fishing; we caught dorados, surubies, lisas [different species of native fish], on the coast of Sarandí. The almost centenary presence of the Petrochemical District in Dock Sud was somehow moving away the possibilities of our participation. In the seventies the presence of the CEAMSE, which was not wanted by us, not consulted with neighbours, it caused people to flee the southern coast of La Plata River and it turned us into a city with a river, but a city turning its back to the river: we became a city with a beautiful riverside but we stopped being part of it; we did not go there any longer and started to live ignoring the river. Time went by and the CEAMSE closed.

It is not there anymore so the area has had a really wonderful recovery. Ten years ago no one could have ever thought of doing something there, so time, nature and effort kept that area away from people's access, perhaps away from the hand of God, to recover, and today it is a worthy place but still people are turning their back to the river. It requires investment for people to go back to the river again [...].”
(Transcript of public hearing, 26/11/2008).

Although he alluded to facts that exceeded his responsibility in the creation of the landfill, his administration had been partly responsible for the managing of the environmental and social effects derived from such use of riverside lands.

He had been the Mayor of Avellaneda between 1991 and 1999, when the conflict over the closure of the site began and also between 2003 and 2009 when the sanitary crisis escalated in such a way that the only solution was to dismantle the site and to keep people away from those lands.

Here it is interesting to note that Álvarez de Olivera depicted as “neighbours” not only the people of Avellaneda but also those who came from other districts to enjoy the riverside. The term was both a generalisation that identified citizens in general, and also a collective label with political influence that was already widespread due to previous conflicts that exceeded the local scene.

SyUSA, represented by Héctor Masoero, was another key protagonist in the events reported by the mayor with whom the Municipality of Avellaneda was legally bound until the closure of the landfill. Aware of the hostile social environment he would find at the theatre, because the conflict had begun to emerge, Masoero mentioned the accessibility that Techint would offer to a place “forbidden” by municipal ordinances since the late 1960s.

He promised, seeking to legitimise Techint, that the company would “*fulfil the dream of many people*” who had a strong desire to return to La Plata River. His idea of “*looking back at the river*” was expected to influence the cravings and memory of those who had had a previous connection with the place as in something that could be recovered; a *vecino* from Avellaneda expressed it in such terms almost at the end of the hearing:

*“I am the sixth generation of Avellanedenses, and unfortunately neither my son nor I know the coast. It is something that never... it is unthinkable, sometimes when friends from abroad visit us or when we talk to other people, it is **unthinkable that we are a riverside city and today we do not have access to or a view [of the river] from our coast.** We cannot invite people to visit us to walk along our coast because, **practically, it does not exist; there are no conditions to visit it [...].**”* (Sociedad de Fomento Villa María, transcript of public audience, 26/11/2008).

Similarly, others identified as “coastal people” at the time of their statements made reference to personal memories in the riverside as the primal place of their childhood; it was the place where they had grown up and a geographical reference for their family activities.

They even placed emphasis on some elements in that landscape that they used to find but which aren’t there anymore:

*“My grandmother on my father’s side and my father were born on the coast, and my mother, when she migrated from Italy, she settled down on the coast so that when they left the place between 1950 and 1960, my cousins remained, then the family would go on Sundays to the coast; we used to visit all these people who lived where the CEAMSE is now, to recover that space. **I remember that there were gardens there... [...]**”* (Neighbour from Avellaneda, transcript of public hearing, 26/11/2008).

The experience of place and the place itself also proved to encompass their personal identities, and for that reason, nostalgia was expressed in terms of features situated in a past that defined them as individuals.



Figure 18: Family and friends on a typical picnic at the river

In this image can be observed the wild vegetation and the clean beaches in what was regarded as a tourist destination. People still bathed in the river in the late 1960s, though were forbidden to do so from then on by municipal decision.

Blog País de los Quilmes (Country of Quilmes Peoples). 2011.

On one side there were the coastal people who had long lived at the riverside, and on the other those who had grown up by the river or visited the place over a long period of time.

Most people introduced themselves during the public audience as *Avellanedenses* and *Quilmeños*, expressing that there was a special relationship with the territory due to the mere fact that they were natives, even if they were living somewhere else. So if a person had not been born there, they would not understand such a bond, as I was told many times during my research.

On the other side, there were also participants of the hearing who were not originally from the southern metropolitan area but who still regarded themselves as being close to the coast. In their account, the satisfaction and the frustration of living there mixed with the fact that this place was different from anywhere else, even within the same district:

*“Well, I am a history teacher. I live in Avellaneda but not in any neighbourhood of Avellaneda; I live in one that you are alluding to today, but surely without ever having been there. However, I was **born in the City of Buenos Aires**; I lived there until my youth and for twenty-six years I have lived in Sarandí in the farms area. **I learned a lot about that place where my husband and his family have lived and live today.** Pioneers in that area since the late 1800s, no less. **The truth is that I feel as coastal as anyone who was born there.** All the years that I have been living in that place I have seen different projects. I saw advances, setbacks, I saw different politicians promising improvements for the place; they only remained that: promises [...]”.* (Viviana Fernández, transcript of public hearing, 26/11/2008).

Their relatives or friends had had a previous bond with the riverside which passed on through oral tradition over the years. There were the stories of those who first settled down there, their original forms of subsistence and what they did to turn the place into a flourishing productive zone.

These evocations of a common place were shared by many in the neighbourhood assemblies, exhibiting a link that would end up encompassing a common understanding of who they were in the dispute.

Moral shock & the past

The proposal for waterfront revitalisation was an event that generated a *moral shock*¹⁴³ in the population due to the possibility of change that entered into the scene in a sudden or unforeseen way (Traïni, 2010: 14). NCP generated a social experience which, as Traïni states, was based on: 1) an urgent need for reaction, 2) a judgement on the way in which reality seemed to deviate from the values to which some people adhered, and 3) mixed feelings (fear, anger, injustice) that led people to rethink how things were. What people lived with the project of Techint as soon as they learned about it was directly linked to memories, which conditioned this moral shock because they had been experienced in a traumatic way.

Hence, *memory* (as object and action) showed that it did not exist as a separate entity from feelings like *nostalgia* or other ones associated with the process of remembering, just as nostalgia could not exist without recall. If the history of the riverside had always been a story of suffering and sacrifice, why should NCP be any different? Initially, what “neighbours” opposing NCP brought from the past enabled them to reconstruct the history of the coast by giving prominence to facts that they placed in a chronological manner in their arguments. According to a common account, these facts included the arrival of Italian immigrants who settled in the 19th century along the La Plata River; the pollution of the La Plata River in the late 1960s; the CEAMSE, as they called the landfill (1978-2004); and the construction of the Highway Buenos Aires-La Plata (1988-2002).

More recently, memory became a form of knowledge for future subsistence (in the current context of climate change also worrying “neighbours”) initially held by the native inhabitants and later shared with the assemblies: how to build the houses by the river, how to access water, where to farm or fish, and why wetlands should not be filled. This knowledge was in turn disseminated by the social movement to those who participated in activities open to the communities such as guided walks, festivals or any other educational or informational initiative.

Oral transmission was also key in the process of connecting past and present between the different generations participating in the defence of the riverside. It was done through personal and family histories at the site or practices that became ritualistic because of the way they were performed or their frequency or the way they were transmitted. An example of this is fishing or the organisation of picnics between families or groups of neighbours. At this point, memory not only constituted a particular form of learning but also contributed to reaffirming a local connection with the riverside. “Memories can be forged in words”, noted Tim Ingold, for “the objects of memory [are] represented and passed on in oral tradition” saying how a life is lived in a given place or how things can actually be remembered as *trails* (2000: 148).

¹⁴³ The author relies on James Jasper’s definition of this concept: Jasper, J. (1997). *The Art of Moral Protest. Culture, Biography and Creativity in Social Movements*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

In relation to how words shape a past, I would like to go back to Juan Carlos (already introduced in chapter 1) who is regarded by the neighbourhood movement as an historical riverside inhabitant.

I interviewed him in May 2022 within the framework of a collaborative writing project with NHOC to recreate the economic geography of the southern La Plata River in the 20th century. He decided to place himself temporarily in the mid-1950s and geographically on the coast of Bernal and Villa Domínico to describe how people lived and what productive activities were there.

His memories were a window into that past, showing not only mental images or providing evidence to the assemblies' arguments, but also "*a sensibility of the world, ideology, class feelings and subjective experiences [...].*" (Meyer, 2000) with respect to the riverside. His testimony gave "routes to remembrance and knowledge" as Ingold put it (2000: 147) giving collective resistance a resource to learn about this place and to remember it.

On the ability to recall, Saracho, a filmmaker and neighbour of NHOC, also asserted that it was not just a matter of retaining something in one's mind, but rather, that memory is built because people always evoke it in a different way (whether alone or as part of a group).¹⁴⁴

Inspired by Chris Marker, a French filmmaker, documentarian and photographer, he quoted the following phrase during the interview: "*how to remember thirst?*" (Interview, 13/2/2022).¹⁴⁵ He highlighted the fact that things are never remembered in the same way and that memories take form through people living moments with intensity, as happened during the conflict.

Back to the riverside

As protests in the city hall or the deliberative councils and the organisation of informative public actions took place between 2008 and 2011, some "neighbours" wondered why they continued talking about a space from which they remained physically distant.

With the urgency to react to an imminent rezoning of the nature reserve in Quilmes, the need to go back to the riverside started to settle among them. It was something unplanned, as were many of the decisions that would distinguish the work of neighbourhood assemblies.

"*Did you suddenly remember that there was a riverside because of NCP?*" I asked a member of the Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River years later in regard to this phase and how they found themselves returning there. "*Somehow it was like that; we concentrated our efforts there although we were also alert about other problems in the districts*", she answered (field note, 2016).

¹⁴⁴ More about his story in the Annex.

¹⁴⁵ This interview was conducted in the framework of the book *Bosque Nativo* which I coordinated and was published in Argentina in December 2022.

Taking advantage of the lack of municipal controls to get into the nature reserve and counting on some people who already knew the place, they set foot in the territory under dispute:

“It has always been there [the river] if we are defending the river and we never go there well... when the Assembly NHOC was born and we carried out activities in the street, what do I know but, ah, and in August 2008 we ran into Fabián, who had been fighting in the Assembly United by the River Bernal because of Smurfit Kappa [a polluting paper mill located in a residential area of Quilmes].

He always went to the riverside to walk his dog so we told him one day, ‘Che, let’s walk with the dog, bah, take us for a walk’, because we didn’t know the riverside area very well, and from then on we started organising some walks, we started summoning more and more people, and it was so nice, bah, it’s so nice to walk through that place and it was the relationship we had... you know, it was fear because everyone said not to go because it was dangerous and it is not dangerous at all and there, we were back to the river again [...]” (Neighbour of NHOC, interview, 2016).

The exclusion from restricted areas was replaced by walks at first and those who lived far away from the coast joined the assemblies for the recognition of the place. Such a material as well as symbolic step in the conflict meant, for the older ones, to re-enter somewhere they had never forgotten, yet did not know anymore because it had changed so much.

For many others, especially the younger ones, it was their first time in a natural riverside environment so fascination combined with the fear of what they knew about the place.

They all did not know much about what they were observing in terms of flora and fauna and how to be there in a non-invasive manner regarding nature as they knew that it was a fragile space. They were basically driven by what very few of them remembered so, initially, they paid a biologist by organising a fundraising among “neighbours”. The scientist led walks describing the native plants and ecological properties to be found there until a neighbour of a northern *asamblea* from Tigre was invited. Members of the assemblies also collected money for the bus, the train, and a sandwich for his lunch in appreciation for his three-hour trip to get to Bernal.

He explained to people in Avellaneda and Quilmes what a wetland was, how to take care of such areas, and what were the environmental benefits it provided. These spaces, he taught them, were critical as they acted like the “*kidneys*” of the cities.

Figure 19: Walk in the nature reserve of Avellaneda and Quilmes. On this occasion, park rangers, environmental guides coming from other similar areas, students, researchers and the general public participated. The experts explained to people what would happen if wetlands were replaced for the expansion of the cities. At present, the participants in the walks since 2008 are calculated in thousands by the assemblies.



Published by the Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River. 2012.

As their presence at the riverside became more frequent through engagement in all sorts of activities, the “neighbours” realised that they had no connection with the riverside inhabitants of La Ribera Bernal so their presence was regarded as invasive. The Assembly NHOC talked to some of these inhabitants, who reacted angrily by questioning their stay there, because the residents had been living by the river for many years and the “neighbours” had not.

As a consequence, NHOC decided that in order to be in-place they had to get close to these native people and improve their communication to get across the significance of their struggle.

In other words, they had to make it clear that they were not just passing by or trying to cause the residents any harm, but instead were trying to warn them about the impacts that NCP would have on them, like eviction and the transfer of excess water to the neighbourhood due to the construction works. Consequently, two general assemblies were held with the inhabitants in a square named “La Amistad” (Friendship) resulting in the agreement of a reciprocal cooperation. The terms of agreement were that “neighbours” would help to improve the residents’ living conditions, demanding that the municipality brings drinking water to the place, while the latter would pose no hurdles to the assemblies’ actions at the riverside.

Appropriating the past

By 2010, Nieves and Luisa from the Assembly NHOC set up a workshop addressed to children in La Ribera Bernal, the riverside neighbourhood. They loaded a truck and brought chairs, easels, some wood to set up a table, and painting materials to the public space that the square “La Amistad” represented.

Some “neighbours” would remember years later that this was the way they had found to coexist with the inhabitants.

An appropriation of the place through art and ludic activities with the kids to resemble past interactions that took place there:

“And well, how did we appropriate the place? Because of the children, when we got here, we didn’t know how, and we started doing workshops. If you want, I can send you photos of the work we did with the children, and the first contact that we had here were the children, and the trust was born by working with the children” (Assembly NHOC, ethnocartography exercise with local assemblies, 30/12/2017).

Sometime later, a little field property of AySA,¹⁴⁶ situated right in front of the neighbourhood across Espora Street, where the square was located, was restored and recovered by the assemblies for more activities with youngsters and people interested in finding out about the nature reserve.

NHOC arranged football championships to integrate people from the neighbourhood and those “from outside” like themselves, and there were also movie nights at which to enjoy the place in a friendly way. As there wasn’t a screen available, “neighbours” wrapped the goal frame – used for the sports matches – with a large canvas. By doing this, assemblies sought to evoke typical activities in the *Quilmeña* riverside that in 1917 led to the inauguration of the first open-air sound cinema in Argentina. When the company AySA found out what they were doing, it proceeded to ban access to this sector by fencing it off: *“they took away that place of direct encounter with the neighbourhood”* said the “neighbours”, regretfully (ethnocartography exercise with assemblies, 30/12/2017).

As the conflict escalated, neighbourhood groups noticed that the walks at the riverside attracted large numbers of people – some estimated over 100 people per weekend – so they asked riverside inhabitants and other assemblies if they were aware of a space that they could settle in to organise other activities. *“Where then? What place is there for us, in Bernal?”* some asked Martín, a resident, who answered, *“Check out the lot that belongs to the Boy Scouts; talk to them, they do not use it anymore”*. The brother of one of the assemblies’ members talked to the Boy Scouts, *“yes, use it”* they answered, so they established the resistance at the riverside in that terrain.

Until then, they had also worked near there with a wheelbarrow and a shovel filling holes that had formed in the ground as a consequence of being close to lands filled with garbage. Since the ground was still decomposing, new cavities appeared overnight and people got hurt, another way, I interpret to intervene in the place. Furthermore, and in front of the terrain, the assemblies painted their first 50-metre-long flag with the slogan “No to the Hand Over of the Coast Quilmes-Avellaneda”.

This banner was an element of identification in protests and collective actions they participated in, and it was originally placed on a bridge over the highway to Buenos Aires so that everyone could see it.

¹⁴⁶ Aguas y Saneamientos Argentinos or Argentine Water and Sanitation, a state-owned company supplying drinking water and sewer services with a water plant in Bernal, Quilmes.

The assemblies' meetings were officially inaugurated at the riverside in March 2011, though before then other places were used to get organised. Sometimes they would gather at the Félix Bernal square where the lower tracks of the Roca branch train passed by.

The reason for this location was that those who did not have a car or a bicycle with which to travel down Espora Street had to walk more than two kilometres from the train station to the river. They gathered there every fortnight so that “neighbours” who could not get to the terrain by the river were part of the collective decisions.

The original intention for the terrain was to create an evacuation centre due to the characteristics of the low and flood-prone lands in the basin that affected coastal people and neighbouring areas. It would operate as an information centre to channel the queries and necessities of those impacted by the overflowing of the river at the same time that it would act to mitigate the flood effects.

The initiative did not thrive for many reasons, among which was the unfolding of the conflict over NCP. From this project on, the slogans of the assemblies multiplied at a public level in street events, and the local media also denounced the handing over of the coast to private companies. There was also the need to generate awareness so that more people could join them: *“The riverside belongs to the neighbours. NO to Techint’s project”* (field note, 2011).

We do not forget

With an incipient network of alliances and collaborations that reached a regional level, the Assembly NHOC became independent from its founding organisations (the Assembly of Wilde and the Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River) to advance in the formation of its own collective identity. From 2010, the movement led by NHOC grew, reaching a peak of activity and social mobilisation with the incorporation of new members who were interested in either the place or the movement’s cause.

With a stronger front of resistance, the repertory of actions in-place was complemented by a series of festivals throughout and a new activity called “night walks” to motivate people to take part in a new form of territorial discovery. As the number of participants grew every weekend, they created walks during working days to *“listen to nature with the moonlight”* (press release by NHOC and United by the River Bernal, 9/11/2011). Those who participated reached the La Plata River after going through the wetlands taking pictures, singing, and playing instruments, in a more artistic way of getting to know the riverside nature.

The first festival took place in February 2011 under the slogan *“Techint do not erase the coast. The neighbourhood organises!”* with the participation of local percussion groups like The Not Silent Drums (Los Tambores que No Callan). The second festival, in April the same year, emphasised the need for a healthy environment and the protection of natural areas in the cities.

The third event took place in November in the square “La Amistad”, in which “neighbours” and riverside inhabitants stated, “*yes to life and no to the privatisation of the riverside*”.

The objective was to create awareness through maps and public talks by assemblies. Artistic activities like theatre representations aimed at attracting the attention of the attendees about the problems in that place. In the image above, for example, the fish represented the river complaining about municipal policies. Some blackboards arranged in the place also showed images of key riverside facts and old photos with families at the beach mixed with protests against CEAMSE in the 2000s where posters against Techint could be read. These photos demonstrated that nostalgia could be a powerful aspect for change as a political tool since they showed not only what the place had been like, but also how it had been destroyed in recent decades.

This practice, which they continued to carry out, also allowed them to explain the past through historical events for the communities, many of them with Techint as a protagonist.

In this way the “neighbours” invoked a collective memory in remembrance of the bond that the inhabitants had had with the place in the past, themselves acting there as links between distant and more recent times.

In the meantime, NCP’s promoters continued to assert that Techint had applied, according to them, state-of-the-art technology in the treatment of garbage. The assemblies made use of the past to counter this dominant version of the territory’s environmental history. To do so, they challenged the municipalities through public pronouncements such as the following from the beginning of the conflict:

*“We say No to Techint and its corrupt business that seeks to develop the last green areas of the Avellaneda and Quilmes coast, because the so-called Costa del Plata Project represents approving the appropriation of our coastal lands by a corporation. **Techint contaminated and made the people of Avellaneda and Quilmes sick by operating the largest garbage dump in South America** [...] in the same way we prevented CEAMSE and Techint from continuing to bury garbage; we are going to defend the riverside and demand the recovery of the lands for their true owners: the neighbours of Avellaneda and Quilmes [...]. (Blog Quilmes United, 7/12/2008)¹⁴⁷.*

What happens when one does not remember things anymore, and hence forgets? This is something that the “neighbours” have asked themselves. There is a danger, they also say, that certain things will happen again, and that must be avoided at all costs; if the communities forget, then the powerful, like Techint, would have the opportunity to go back to the place and continue to do what they had already done: cause the destruction of nature and create conflict.

¹⁴⁷ Collective statement sent to Agencia Suburbana, a news media, by regional assemblies and organisations: Ambiente Sur, Assembly of Wilde, United by the River Bernal, Open Town Hall of Bernal, Confederation of Development Organisations and Neighbourhood Councils of the Buenos Aires Province, Federation of Development Entities and Free Organisations of the People of Quilmes, Health and Environment Forum of Avellaneda, Self-Convened Residents of Don Bosco Oeste, Neighbours of Smurfit-Kappa, Communist Workers’ Party (PCT), among others. Posted by the blog of the Assembly Quilmes United: <https://quilmesunido.blogspot.com/search?q=decimos+no+a+Techint> Last accessed: 9/03/2023.

The collective identity developed in their protection of the riverbank, and in close relationship with this place, will turn out to be linked to historical aspects of the disputed territory. With the deforestation of 2012 the “neighbours” will feel like “ants” making a nest to prevent things from happening again, and as Galochas they laugh about themselves to dramatically portray other actors like Techint with a long trajectory in the place.

A new moral ecology (or ecologies) at the riverside

In these first years of conflict, the “neighbours” made sense of reality by finding shared elements, resources and experiences that they had in common in order to build resistance – among them, *memory* – in order to make sense of reality at the riverside. This also enabled, ultimately, the telling of two opposing stories relating to the same place, the same facts and the same protagonists.

The fact that Techint was coming back to the territory since 2004 led the “promoters” to assemble a narrative of past events in such a way as to state that the company, with its plans for NCP, was the “saviour” of the place. For the neighbourhood movement, Techint was returning again to finish what it had started decades ago: to make profit with those lands. Here stood out, then, modes of historical production or understanding of the place and what happened there in terms of power.

In relation to *nostalgia*, this has also acted differently for “promoters” of NCP and “neighbours”, and it has been a common resource present in their arguments both for and against development.

For the public-private partnership, nostalgia took the form of a longing with which they sought to generate an emotionality because there was an unfulfilled desire in the population. For the “neighbours”, nostalgia acted as a catalyst for action, mobilising it on a discursive and practical level to summon others to return to the river and to get it back.

In this context, *solastalgia* was another element that emerged among the “neighbours” as a renewed form of “distress produced by environmental change impacting on people” (Albrecht et al, 2007). The “neighbours” expressed a sense of loss in relation to what might happen to wetlands and the river with NCP. The riverside, as they know it, corresponds to a traditional sense of place in connection to nature, culture, family and history already being negatively affected, as they put it, by the “promoters”.

These elements, memory and nostalgia, characteristic of this period gave rise to *moral ecologies* originating in the context of the conflict by the actors at odds with each other. There are features of a mutual constitution between the priorities, claims and notions of the two sides, establishing the riverside of Avellaneda and Quilmes as a site of moral ecology (Scaramelli, 2021: 50). This can be understood as what is put into action in the conflict by the “neighbours” (on which I will concentrate) and “promoters”:

- 1) Assessments in terms of what was good or bad, what was virtuous or pure, and what was contaminated or dirty to define practices and justify territorial processes.
- 2) Obligations regarding how things should be done and by whom.
- 3) The adherence (or not) to conventionally accepted standards of conduct that defined roles for the participants in the conflict either as “guardians” (the “neighbours”) or “invaders” (Techint).

Another final moral aspect of the latter is the creation of “*good neighbours*” as users and consumers of the new waterfront by the “promoters”, regarding which narratives associated with memory and nostalgia were key. With a new belonging linked to a territory now through a concrete destination with NCP, the project aimed to draw parallels with what the place once was, and the consequent satisfaction that people would feel about it. The promoters’ “good” neighbours would support the project and contribute to transforming the place as a way of recovering the past, unlike those “pure” people who were against progress.

Moral ecologies can then be defined at this point as ways of evaluating circumstances or facts, of generating ethical responsibilities and new values in relation to the riverside. As I will analyse later, these moral ecologies will continue to develop through the addition of other elements, as will become evident in the subsequent chapters, which will generate practices and rituals linked to these moral premises.

Conclusions: Ecological relations & moral aspirations

Both *memory* and *nostalgia* have played a major role in the way that part of the population reassessed its relationship with the southern banks of the La Plata River. As soon as NCP was officially announced, and with a socio-environmental conflict on the rise, memory was at the heart of the shaping of controversies. It was not just a recollection of something; memory constituted a living and powerful element in people's lives to connect the past (to understand reality) with what they want to happen (in the future) or what I referred to as *place framing* (Martin, 2013).

The practice of remembering collectively allowed the “neighbours” to describe a problem, mobilise action and motivate others, defining memory as the only way for something to continue to exist. Whether it is a place, a way of life or the very history of the communities, if the past is erased or if it is taken away from people, they do not know where they come from or where they are going to.

Nostalgia stemmed from the socio-environmental and territorial changes that began decades ago and still continue to affect the districts. It proved to be a persistent emotional condition that most actors in the conflict have associated with the space they dispute. The yearning for the river combined with desire resulting, after all, in the recovery of history and the reclamation of a local culture against capital.

Another aspect of nostalgia, inseparable from memory in the making of the conflict, was the idea of *legacy*, which I will look at in coming chapters. Legacy, as I see it in relation to memory, arose among “neighbours” as a moral mandate to tell the new generations what has happened by the river and who has been responsible for that. One way of doing this was the activation of oral tradition by telling others (mostly young people) about the riverside events and those responsible for the environmental degradation.

It was the “neighbours” in particular who became committed to resisting NCP from the appropriation of the past and the need to develop another kind of exchange with a territory that had been through so much. By using memory and nostalgia they attempted to preserve values, to address moral claims and to propose notions of legality and legitimacy about the ecology of the place. Certain behaviours (beneficial or harmful) were put forward to be discussed, the existing legal standards were questioned and prospective environmental effects were assessed.

Thus, the relationship with nature began to be redefined through memory and nostalgia at the same time that these aspects started to be connected with other elements to end up establishing a good bond with the river.

The riverbank thus becomes a site of moral ecology because it is there that new questions about this place come into play. The moral ecologies emerge as ways of thinking and assessing the territory, one of which is oriented towards urban development, while the other expects to generate a new environmental awareness in connection to wetlands and forests. From now on, the good and the bad generate obligations, the pure and the dirty define standards and roles that will consolidate the positions of the “promoters” and “neighbours” throughout the conflict.

THE CONFLICT ESCALATES (2012-2014)

A second stage in the conflict over NCP is the result of deforestation practices in legally protected areas of Avellaneda by Techint. It did not comply with existing law, and counted on municipal approval for the future construction works supposedly of a university campus promised by the company to the National Technological University (which had been in charge of technical reports for the project). The local authorities also hid this from the population, so when the “neighbours” became aware of the level of destruction caused there, it turned into a point of no return in the confrontation.

“An atrocious deforestation”¹⁴⁸

The “neighbours” used to organise open meetings at the Cinematographic Art Institute of Avellaneda so that more people came into contact with their collective cause. One day, two teachers they did not know showed up saying that they worked at the riverside school situated between the Santo Domingo and Sarandí streams. They said to the assemblies present there that they had just passed by this area when they noticed the destruction of a large area in the forest.

At the beginning, the “neighbours” reacted suspiciously: why had these people gone there? It seemed weird to them that the so-called teachers knew the territory so well because people could not usually go through the contaminated lands, for they were closed to the public. “*How did you get inside the CEAMSE [former sanitary landfill]?*”, the teachers replied that they had a special clearance to get into the area. By observing the riverside on Google Maps and sharing references over what each one remembered about that zone from recent walks, the “neighbours” realised that there was no way that the damage could be seen from outside the site’s perimeter. They had to get in there to check it out, and the workers of the cooperative UST in charge of the environmental liability collaborated with them to let them inside the place.

In January 2012, the “neighbours” assemblies publicly exposed the deforestation, revealing who was responsible for it and where exactly it had taken place on Avellaneda’s bank. Once they were able to get to the cleared forest, they found a workshop beside Lobos Street and bulldozers with signs indicating that they were the property of Techint.

The neighbourhood movement, regrouping again as in 2008, accused the company of not respecting regulations to protect native forests. “*They do not have a social licence to do so [to clear the forest]; we have already said enough and we are not going to give up*” (press release, 24/1/2012). In another public pronouncement, they portrayed the situation as an “*encroachment on nature*” because it was being done in a context of growing environmental problems in the province: “*it was about restoring and rehabilitating lost or deteriorated wetlands and their value and their functions, not to attack them*” (NHOC, February 2012).

The assemblies’ claims were based on national laws N° 26.331 (minimum standards of environmental protection of native forests) and N° 25.675 (obligation to denounce environmental damage) to maintain that the province had still not carried out the territorial ordering of native forests. Hence, Techint was not authorised to introduce changes in that forest sector. The company’s explanation for the deforestation was based on the need to start off the construction of a building for the National Technological University (Campus Avellaneda).

¹⁴⁸ Title of a press release from January 2012 by the neighbourhood movement publicly denouncing the deforestation put into practice by Techint in Avellaneda.

This had been promised by the company to the municipality in times of political negotiations for the rezoning of the land and was already indicated in the master plan and approved by the deliberative council.

Some neighbourhood assemblies demanded that the OPDS intervene immediately. An inspection was sent out in February 2012 by a technical team from the Natural Resources Department of OPDS verifying the destruction of seven and a half hectares, however, the works were not suspended, nor was Techint sanctioned in any way.

The absence of an official municipal or provincial response resulted in a greater concentration of forces to stop the devastation as time went by. About 250 people from the social movement headed for the Municipality of Avellaneda a month after the deforestation to protest. After being informed that the mayor was “on holidays”, the Secretary of Security offered them the possibility to meet the Secretary of Production and Environment since the movement was keeping a major avenue of the district partially closed to traffic. The offer was rejected, which led to the full blocking of that main road. Once again, some assemblies organised an *escrache* (a public demonstration to expose someone or something) at the headquarters of Techint. They demanded to speak with the president of the company, Paolo Rocca, while some of the “neighbours” painted the walls and access door to the building with slogans against the company.

By the end of 2012, the articulation of a multi-sector platform for the protection of the natural reserve in Quilmes was also announced. The Mayor, Francisco Gutiérrez, had signed an agreement with Techint some weeks previously, guaranteeing the majority of votes in the deliberative council to approve the rezoning of lands by the La Plata River.

In return, Techint announced the construction of a highly complex pediatric hospital which was not part of the original project.

This period also stood out by internal changes within the movement, evidencing a boom in the number of regional, provincial and national organisations supporting the defence of the riverside in Avellaneda and Quilmes led by NHOC.

In this regard, new protagonists linked to human rights showed up in Avellaneda and Quilmes. Among them was Nora Cortiñas, co-founder of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo Línea Fundadora (Mothers of Plaza de Mayo Founding Line) and renowned social leader of Argentina. She vindicated the movement’s claims in what she considered to be a “*just cause*”. A few months later, Elia Espen, also a member of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo Founding Line and Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1980, backed the “neighbours”.

During this period some assemblies rehearsed new forms of protest with the blocking of lanes in the Buenos Aires-La Plata Highway located by the riverside. The first such rehearsal was on 18th January 2012 due to the clearing in Avellaneda and the second one in December when the Mayor of Quilmes tried to approve the riverside rezoning in the deliberative council during the last session of the year. They met on a bridge located over Espora Street carrying a flag over their heads and walked on the highway stopping cars to talk to drivers as they handed out flyers.

Despite the popular manifestations, the conditions of the conflict worsened leading to a judicial process.

NHOC and The Association for the Protection of the Environment and Ecological Education 18th October formally requested to stop the deforestation by legal means. The Federal Court of Appeals in La Plata ordered Techint to stop the deforestation one year later. Initially, Techint’s construction works in Avellaneda would be suspended for 30 extendable days, but the judges have continued to renew the suspension until today. A final verdict hasn’t been announced yet.

CHAPTER 7: In-Place Resistance. The Reinvention of the Riverside

“[...] a *terrain of resistance* is not just a physical place but also a physical expression (e.g. the construction of barricades and trenches), which not only reflects a movement’s tactical ingenuity, but also endows space with an amalgam of meanings – be they symbolic, spiritual, ideological, cultural or political.

A terrain of resistance is thus both metaphoric and literal.

It constitutes the geographical ground upon which conflict takes place, and is a representational space with which to understand and interpret collective action.” (1996: 517).

Paul Routledge, *Critical Geopolitics and Terrains of Resistance*.

This chapter is about the *rootedness* of neighbourhood assemblies by the river, or how they merge with the place through the making and maintaining things for its creation (Tuan, 1980: 6). A closeness is produced between the selves of the individuals – through their use of words and the way they do things– so that the place is moulded as a home, or people adapt to it by feeling this way. Such in-place involvement could be examined through the concept of *terrain of resistance* (Routledge, 1996) or a constitutive spatiality of the “neighbours” in their political struggle to defend the riverside nature.

A terrain of resistance is based on two salient points in the case under analysis; first, as multiplicities, the social movements are localised (they refer to a place) although the terrain of resistance is not limited to the physical – though physicality might kick-start resistance.

Second, the social movements are part of a contested web of power/knowledge relations with respect to a location. Those resisting devote themselves to endowing the place with different meanings than those that were associated with it before, articulating other memories and imaginations, desires and contradictions, and carrying out innovative cultural practices shaping a collective action that from then on is place-specific (Routledge, 1996: 516).

I argue, then, that there are distinctive aspects of this conflict period that differ from the previous chapter despite the increasing tensions, namely the collective physical and symbolic appropriation deployed by the “neighbours” – first, through a new understanding of the place carrying out different forms of geographical exploration which will result in the mapping (graphic representation) and the signalling of unknown natural sectors and their plant species.

Second, the prolonged presence there of some assemblies generated the development of a sensorial discovery that constituted an original way of comprehending nature. The riverside was “sensed” (as something that is felt or perceived by a stimulus) and understood differently by people defending the place in an inseparable fashion.

This had an impact on the *moral ecologies* under development by permeating the engagement of actors with this place through new ways of connecting with it. The knowledge acquired in that location as the result of their resistance also contributed to the consolidation of what they assessed or valued together resulting in new moral notions and resources leading their behaviour.

These physical, sensorial, epistemological and moral aspects ended up “reinventing” the riverside with a new *sense of place* by which the place begins to be appreciated in a different way. Pollution gives rise to collective beach cleaning, unawareness of the place to scientific knowledge and oblivion to the return of public festivals by the river.

The official associations of the riverside with “emptiness” and “underdevelopment” are left behind, and the new place is claimed by the “neighbours” according to new priorities and expectations. They strove to make that space known like this, as vital (life-sustaining) linked to nature, with environmental benefits and dynamic interconnections (between its life forms) that existed for the benefit of the population.

Already placed at the riverside then, and under this conception, the subject positions (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) began to be deployed at a spatial level. The “ants” built an “anthill” (an *hormiguero* as their own space for resistance) in Bernal where they imbued the place with their political orientations, as Routledge puts it above. It might also be called a *counter-space* from which to build an alternative project, a differential space produced in opposition to the abstract space of capitalism in which economic rationale takes to the commodification of social life (Oslender, 2016: 30) and, moreover, of nature.

These are also years in which the assemblies in particular work on the building up of *networks*; with this term I refer to the efforts made to activate other people or organisations and resources “to gain leverage over the action of more powerful actors” (Keck, 2015: 217) in order to gain support for both their new sense of place and in-place expectations.

Between 2011 and 2013 my incursions into the field became more frequent and my stays with the “neighbours” included longer periods of time. I can bear witness to their efforts (without material resources, only by word of mouth or networking with other groups and organisations) to reinvent a natural space accessible and open to others. This time allowed me to make contacts and connections with the “neighbours” that in some cases turned into friendships and led to joint work that continues to this day.

It was at that time when my sense of place also changed, because the riverbank was no longer an inhospitable place, but it allowed me to get to know what solidarity is about in the interactions that exist there between people.

I would finally like to note that the places mentioned in this chapter can be found on a map in the Annex to this chapter.



Figure 20: **Terrain of resistance.** Author: Nieves Baldaccini. December 2021.

CONTEMPORARY FORMS OF RIVERSIDE APPROPRIATION

It was in Bernal, Quilmes District, where the first attempts at territorial protection took place by long-time dwellers of the riverside (or “coastal people” as they call themselves) as well as former workers at the landfill. They were daily forms of resistance to avoid gentrification and to keep the jobs they had had for more than twenty years, respectively.

With the already constituted neighbourhood by the river La Ribera and at least a hundred people living there, a priest created a chapel in the 1980s to prevent CEAMSE from dispossessing them from their lands. Among them there were poor families who did not have the resources to access other forms of housing, so they settled illegally in the neighbourhood, while others were descendants of the first settlers of the 19th century.

Some of them had told Father Roberto one day after Mass that they were being attacked by strangers to force their relocation, so the priest, who was part of the Movement Priests for the Third World, answered: *“well, if I go there every Saturday and I celebrate Mass with people who live in the neighbourhood, there is a chapel, and people go to the chapel, so the riverside neighbourhood exists [...] He registered the chapel at the Vatican so that they could never do that again to people”* (Member of Assembly NHOC, field note, 31/12/2017). From then on, the inhabitants were under the institutional protection of the Catholic Church, although aggression against them continued.

In July 2003, some 140 employees who had been contracted by SyUSA took over a workshop in the landfill site so as not to lose their source of livelihood. With the closing of the complex they would be laid off, so they created a self-managed workers’ enterprise to continue working there.

Constituted as the Cooperative Solidarity Union of Workers they offered their services to CEAMSE, but another company known as ETRANS¹⁴⁹ was hired to be in charge of lands’ maintenance.

¹⁴⁹ A transitory union of companies (UTE) between Transportation 9 July, an Argentine firm, and ESTRE, a Brazilian firm.

After a legal process between CEAMSE, SyUSA, and the National Ministry of Labor, some of the workers were recruited by ETRANS (34 people) while 76 employees continued working for CEAMSE. The rest accepted a voluntary retreat and during these negotiations with the company and authorities, the Internal Workers' Commission obtained some benefits. As part of an economic compensation, SyUSA donated a canteen (former restaurant for employees) in an area where *recreos*, or former tourist and recreational facilities, were run, along with some working vehicles and monetary aid for productive projects of their choice like plant nurseries or agro ecology. The legal conflict among the parties continued for some time with strikes and squatting in the landfill site, with the support of the employees' families and local organisations. In the end, CEAMSE hired the cooperative to carry out the post-closure operation so since then, they have established themselves in those lands with a vision of territorial and social development which they have articulated through *sociedades de fomento* and neighbourhood assemblies.

Taking possession

Techint and Oficina Urbana had already organised visits to the future construction site between 2008 and 2012 to explain the waterfront revitalisation to municipal, provincial authorities and the local media. They were shown the main highlights of the master plan and the prospective locations of the water parks and recreational spaces as well as the limits of the city while they toured the area with the forest as a natural backdrop.

Unlike the rest of the population, the “promoters” had access to the lands where NCP would be located which still remained restricted, similarly to the lands where the landfill had worked.

By that time, the Assembly NHOC invited municipal councillors of Quilmes to also get to know the riverside by walking it around, but in this case to inform them of the risks of Techint's proposal. The “neighbours” also wanted to participate in the public debate over NCP taking authorities and political representatives to the riverside in order to find out what they thought, and eventually, if they would vote in favour of the urban development.

Entering through the former public street Las Flores, regarded by the assemblies as “usurped” by Techint and CEAMSE in the 1980s (*usurpado* in Spanish, meaning to take possession of another's property or rights, generally using violent means), and returning via Olmos Street, two different worldings were deployed. The urban development (for the “promoters”) and nature conservation (for the “neighbours”) continued to clash with each other as intended uses for the place.

This was also my time of arrival at the riverside coming from La Matanza, the poorest and most densely populated district of Argentina, almost 40 kilometres away from Avellaneda and Quilmes.

In the western metropolitan region, and especially in my hometown, San Justo, the natural and public spaces were practically non-existent, with the exception of a nature reserve in Laferrere,¹⁵⁰ a neighbourhood located twenty minutes away. The southern La Plata River appealed to me as an unknown environment, and offered a different cultural and social setting with respect to what I knew – almost an estrangement. I had not been in such direct contact with a river before, and I knew little about a protected territory behind the highway to La Plata City. The only nearby river for swimming and fishing for my family had been the Paraná, and it was more than 400 kilometres away in the Province of Santa Fe.

My first sensation there was that of fear, for I had heard on the news about cars and buses being attacked with stones on the Buenos Aires-La Plata Highway by criminals from shanty towns surrounding the coast. They would force the buses to stop, and then rob the passengers or kill them. I got there after walking about 600 metres from the highway down Espora Street, from where I could see the river. Some people were playing football and drinking mate on the beach while others listened to music inside their cars, looking out at the landscape. A group of friends set up a fire by a tree for a barbecue, and as I passed by some houses I could see that there were chickens, pigs and even horses inside.

When I finally met the “neighbours”, representing an otherness at the time because I did not know about environmental conflicts and had not been in contact with activists before, they were waiting for me at the riverside in Bernal; as they showed me the place around they explained why they did what they did and why that place was important to them. It was “*unlike the city*”, they stressed; however, it was impossible not to make correlations with what was observable in other urban areas. The piles of thrown-away waste, next to Espora Street, filled the landscape, interrupting the circulation towards a grassland zone. Small ranch houses and plastic bags hanging from tree branches mixed with barefoot children playing next to stagnant water.

Being there, in that “natural” space could best be described by contradiction. The wetlands coexisted with yellow industrial effluents, and the sight of the City of Buenos Aires from the beach with the fire of torches rising high from deposits of oil companies located in the Petrochemical District of Dock Sud only five minutes away from Quilmes. It was a surrealist sensation to be there, but the “neighbours” kept me entertained by telling me things almost to make me forget about the surroundings: “*don't worry, keep on walking, we are with you*” (field note, 2011).

And this kept happening until 2012, a year after frequenting the nature reserve with them, when I got to know “their” place which they fiercely protected from outsiders like me.

¹⁵⁰ This natural area was entangled in an environmental conflict between “neighbours” and the municipal government over the loss of its public spaces apropos of private ventures reducing its size. I learned about these years after I started my research in Avellaneda and Quilmes. This issue was not published by the local media, and the reserve, as in the southern area, also remained hidden from public knowledge.

“*This is our resistance space*”, Nieves (a member of NHOC) said as she showed me the area; there was a half-completed structure, covered in mud, right by the entrance. While trying to find a shape for it, they said, “*that’s our dry toilet!*” and proudly went on to explain why and how it had been built. By using natural materials and a discharge system that saved water, the *Asamblea* was trying to make a political statement about a new relationship with nature by means of sustainability. They could not formally intervene in the existing public policies on sewage and water infrastructure, but they could counter how things were being done by governmental spheres. Despite their intentions, they were overtaken by reality, even when they were trying to do good. The water the “neighbours” used, which was mixed with dirt and grass, still had to be brought there from a tap 500 metres away because the water sources located near the riverside neighbourhood La Ribera Bernal delivered contaminated water. They could not use the river water either (only 150 metres away) because sewage effluents were dumped there, so the water was also bad. In this politics and imagery of sewage, they understood that it was part of an urban system that caused problems linked to uncleanliness instead of improving the life conditions of the population. With the increase in groundwater (*napas*) after changing the water intakes structures from the river instead of aquifers¹⁵¹ and with the discharge of feces into watercourses, the dry toilet seemed to be a solution within everyone’s reach.



Figure 21: **Collective construction of the dry toilet**, with the participation of the assemblies and the neighbourhood’s children. Author: Villa Corina Civil association. August 2011.

¹⁵¹ This change in public policy at the end of the 1990s led to the flooding of neighbourhoods and the destruction of houses in southern districts. A group of inhabitants filed a lawsuit against the state, which they won after fourteen years.

The toilet took some weeks to complete and the “neighbours” placed it on high ground to contribute to its discharge and proper functioning. Located across the street from “La Amistad”, a public square in the neighbourhood, it was intended for the use of the riverside inhabitants and the participants of public festivals that the assemblies organised there. A few years later, for local or regional meetings of neighbourhood assemblies in conflict, they would make a mobile version of an ecological toilet that they would transport for the use of the attendees.

This collective initiative was acknowledged by the National Institute of Industrial Technology, INTI, in a publication on this sort of device in 2015.¹⁵² Surviving rains, the decay of the *adobe* (clay or mud used for construction), and eventual vandalism by teenagers from the neighbourhood, they defined the toilet as “*a form of taking the place on our own*” (Assembly NHOC, field note, 2012).

This meant for them to assume some sort of ownership or custody over the riverside and their terrain, shaping both in a particular way, according to their own vision, and executing it for themselves. When inquiring a while later about what this meant, another “neighbour” offered a shared view that somehow they had regained the control of the riverside by doing this:

“[...] Appropriation is to say why? As Nieves [NHOC] or my father also says, before we all went to swim in the river, to enjoy nature without having to pay a fortune and you could bathe in it. In Velatropa [in the northern area of Buenos Aires City where a group of young people struggled to defend a nature reserve] a girl said: ‘I lived in Campana, in San Pedro [coastal cities on the margins of the Paraná River].

Yes, and I got into the river and now I can’t get into the river, it’s all polluted; why did they do that to me? [politicians]. Do you understand? she can’t understand that, and now he lives in Lugano [a poor neighbourhood in the periphery of Buenos Aires] and well, and so ... it outrages you...”. (Sandra, NHOC. Interview, 2017).

The appropriation was a way of questioning the encroaching of polluters, “invaders” (illegal occupants of lands, squatters) and destructive forces (private companies and the municipalities) acting on these natural territories. This was the neighbourhood assemblies’ way of setting a limit to what might happen there with the coming of new uses, social groups and culture. “*It is like there is no other choice, or we sit idly with our arms crossed and go on holidays and continue working exploited; we try to recover the little green spaces that remain standing*” (Assembly NHOC, interview, 2017).

It was also a manifestation of self-determination in claiming their rights to choose their own future.

“*For me, the riverside means to say ‘enough, man! Do not lie to me anymore, I am sick of you, go somewhere else to sell your lies’*” (NHOC, interview, 2017), said Lucas, describing how he felt about Techint holding on to those lands.

¹⁵² Dabbah, F. [et al]. (2015). Dry sanitation systems with urine separation (dry toilet). Sustainable Technologies Program. Management of Special Projects. Ministry of Production. *National Institute of Industrial Technology*. <https://www.inti.gob.ar/publicaciones/descargac/505>

Every community had their own way of organising their space, “neighbours” understood together, so when a new spatial arrangement was imposed to people they had the right and the moral obligation to say no. In short, they challenged a scheme of power that sought to increase its territorial domain at the river by deciding on the uses of current natural and public areas created by law.

I interpret that what “neighbours” embarked on through appropriation was grounded on the carrying out of three practices headed by the Assembly NHOC at the disputed riverside:

- 1) Exploration in the sense of systematically investigating the riverside, looking at it closely or walking it around to discover it.
- 2) Signalling, or the design and installation of educational and information devices for the purpose of communicating something.
- 3) The making of maps, visually representing the territory in a way that had not been done before at an environmental, legal and geographic level.

Without municipal permission or the consent of private owners like Techint, the “neighbours” deployed a repertory of actions such as this, entering areas forbidden to the general public, reaching sectors only accessible by boat, and sometimes resorting to their childhood memory to get to places they had last visited many years previously. It is interesting to see how the riverbank was always there but was unknown to most people in Avellaneda and Quilmes, and how even those who had been to the river or its beaches did not know it completely or had a different idea about it.

The forms of signalling and the maps had one attribute in common: they integrated knowledge, perceptions and memories that they had all incorporated before individually or because of the conflict. What they did not know they investigated together, passing the information among themselves or inventing new forms of learning together. I will show below what this spatial appropriation was about and how they took root there.

1) The explorers

The reconnaissance of the territory became a serious matter, leaving aside individual expeditions and curiosity. They marked the roads they ran into on their own maps and found out that there some were pre-existing paths because the paper mill Smurfit Kappa, located in Bernal, had set up a recreational place for employees at the riverside decades ago. Some dirt streets had also been part of a route that garbage trucks followed to and through the landfill for the unloading of waste. – See map before chapter 8.

The former workers of SyUSA, gathered in the cooperative Workers' Union Solidarity Cooperative (UST Cooperativa Unión Solidaria de Trabajadores) knew them well, so they became an important source of information about the place for the assemblies.

Some of those trails were renamed by the neighbourhood assemblies using nature as their reference. The “path of the lagarto overo” (Salvator merianae, a medium-sized native reptile) originated after one specimen was found dead there. This spot turned into a meeting point for visitors who participated in the walks and enabled the “neighbours” to explain the animal diversity of the riverside by telling the anecdote.

When one young man learned about this during a walk, he began to cry. He felt overwhelmed because he remembered that when he was little, his grandfather took him to hunt in the wetlands. They had encountered by chance a family of that species in a cave under a native tree known as *tala*. His grandfather established only one condition if they were to kill them: they had to be eaten; he wouldn't kill for the mere fact of taking a life. The young man told the “neighbours” that years ago his grandfather had also killed a *biguá*, a water bird, and had taken it home. He made the boy eat it: “*it was black and hard meat; I don't want to hunt anything again*”, he said.

For people from the city (as the “neighbours” were but I allude here to those who were not involved in the conflict and who visited the riverside occasionally) those existing paths enabled them to see the place individually or in a group without getting lost. In terms of the arrangement of the place, what those paths also evidenced was the difficulty involved in reaching or circulating in the area.

The paths were hidden in the wetlands, only known to a few, and surrounded by restricted areas of the former sanitary landfill (guarded by private security hostile to visitors) and other sectors that had been transferred to private use.¹⁵³

On the walks with people from the communities departing from Bernal (generally Espora Street and Avenue Caseros), the “neighbours” toured the place explaining what they were seeing, how these paths or areas connected to those on Avellaneda's side, and how to access the nature reserve to get to the wetlands area. Later, they discovered how to reach the La Plata River, as there were officially only three trails for doing this. One of them went down Espora Street, another followed Avenue Otamendi (both in Quilmes), and the third was in Santo Domingo (Avellaneda).

The assemblies ended up creating a few other trails that were later lost due to lack of use, changes in the river movements and the growth of plants (they are not fully disclosed here as well as their location for political reasons).

¹⁵³ Like the Don Bosco Rugby Club, which had moved or was about to move its practices to a new training centre on the riverside at that time.

“Traveller, there is no path. The path is made by walking”,¹⁵⁴ they used to say, regarding how they got to know the riverside. As the “neighbours” knew the place, they generated photographic records and took notes that they studied and shared with the “experts” that they invited to study the riverside.

My own unawareness of the riverbank, even after years of walking around the place, led me to do an ethnocartographic exercise with the Assembly NHOC in 2017. It allowed me to know how they located themselves in the riverside territory, their perspective from the river or the city, and the forms of exploration used so far. I could observe how the dialogue was established between them when referring to the place and how they reached decisions as to what to draw on the paper.

It took us five hours to complete the map, and even then I was left thinking about everything I still did not know about the particularities of the territory or understood everything they were saying.– See map elaborated by the “neighbours” in *Ethnographic Techniques & Tools*, Annex.

2) Ey, there is a nature reserve here!

The riverside of Avellaneda and Quilmes has remained hidden for at least 30 years since the closure of the sanitary landfill site, whether through social disengagement or municipal policies that had been happening for decades. However, it was always back there, behind the Buenos Aires-La Plata Highway, though as an alienated place, lacking sufficient elements to be considered part of the districts.

This was very much how the “promoters” of NCP used to represent this area even before the sanitary landfill, but especially since the ending of operations, and more recently with NCP.

For the first time since its creation as a protected area and ecological park in 2002, its existence was publicly invoked by the “neighbours” assemblies, who started to make reference to the municipal regulations that protected it. In different points of entry to the wetlands in Bernal and even on both sides of the highway the place was finally being brought to the population’s awareness through posters (or billboards). They were built on wooden plaques, some of them were hand-painted while others included a map setting the limits of the wetlands and the location of specific spots like the illegal digs to warn people that they could drown there.

One poster included brief texts defining the characteristics of nature, and especially its public character, to which all the inhabitants of the districts were entitled.

But also described the environmental, health and hydrological benefits provided by the area, making known the fact that the whole riverside was connected with other similar ecosystems to the north (reaching the Paraná Delta) and to the south (with wetlands up to the San Borombón Bay).

¹⁵⁴ Field note, 2012. They were probably evoking the proverb “Walker, there is no path” of the Spanish poet Antonio Machado (1912), who situated the path of life in the present by remembering that past, but implying that neither it nor the future condition someone’s destiny.

“It is a space for environmental recovery, whose protection is essential to stop the degradation existing in the surroundings”, concluded the inscription, based upon something they had learned from biologists.

The inclusion of a map of the riverside – also designed by the assemblies – indicated how much they had progressed in charting the territory.

It aimed to guide others in the knowledge of the place, inhospitable as it was in some cases.

Sometime later, smaller signs could also be observed bearing the names of the plants and trees throughout the nature reserve. This enabled the assemblies to teach visitors during the walks about what plants or trees were there by exhibiting their names and what roles they played in the ecosystem, almost like a guided tour around a botanical garden.

Many showed the newly planted native species, which were usually cultivated by some “neighbours” elsewhere and were included on ecological tours carried out precisely by the assemblies to identify and learn from those species.

Some trees, such as individual examples of *ceibos* and *talas*, were over 100 years old, which allowed the “neighbours” or visitors to recall some events from the past in that place or what they remembered about those trees when they had visited those places in their childhood. The nature reserve was no longer somewhere forsaken; it was made known and proclaimed as the public space it was – no more, no less.

In a more recent slogan the Assembly NHOC created, *“what is not signalled does not exist”*, “neighbours” pointed out the existence of the place because it is real, it is within the population’s reach, and it is alive, contrary to the representation of space that NCP came to establish.

But the signalling process was not limited to writing posters and deciding where to put them; it was a cause for conflict within the assemblies due to the different kinds of knowledge and beliefs or values they displayed. This is how Nieves told me about it in a January 2018 during an interview:

“Saracho [the filmmaker from Avellaneda and neighbour of NHOC], well that’s what maybe we argued about, we got angry; the other day with Juan [from NHOC too] we got into a fight over some stones because I told him, ‘hey, we could put some cement on the stones so the posters don’t fall down’. ‘Cement! Why do you want to put cement there if it is a bioconstruction?’ ‘Look, don’t talk to me about bioconstruction because the boss of all the bosses of bio-construction [people expert on construction] puts cement on the stones at the bases and I...’ ‘Why did you put cement on the posters?’ he said. ‘Because when we put up the posters we put tamped stones and a little bit of cement’, I replied. ‘You took the cement to do that’, and I said, ‘I took the cement?’ ‘You brought the cement’ so we fight all the time and it’s like a family...”. (Nieves, interview, 2018).

Such practices also challenged how things were being done so far for there was an internal moral questioning too about how they should be carried out; imposing debates and reflections among the “neighbours” on how to best deal with differences.

By 2018 there had been so much deforestation in both Avellaneda and Quilmes that a large poster began to show dates of execution and those responsible along with another poster including the days of reforestation that they themselves had realised to recover the place.

Underneath the latter it says: “*To be continued...*” showing others that despite the destruction they would work to improve the place, showing, in short, their commitment to it.

3) Mapping to resist

By the time these educational and informative actions were being carried out, the Assembly NHOC had released an environmental map that they had made on their own. Based on an aerial view of the coast in Avellaneda and Quilmes, they had drawn the future location of NCP and the environmental risks in its area of influence so that people would be made aware of the dangers of private construction there.¹⁵⁵ This was the first graphic representation of the territory and was intended to show the problems of the place focusing on pollution – in other words, to show visually where the origins of “impurity” were, and their proximity to each other and to urban areas. For example, there was an illegal discharge of effluents (Smurfit Kappa, a paper mill located in Bernal) and the emission of poisonous gases at the former landfill, and companies which had been incinerating pathological waste that polluted the air.

Among those pollution sources was the contaminated La Plata River, one of the geographical limits of NCP and the main means of access to the future residents’ yachts in connection to the “lagoons” for water sports. NHOC set out to show that the construction represented a “double trap” for inhabitants of the districts and new dwellers of NCP. While the former have been affected by detrimental life conditions in the last 60 years, the latter, attracted by the river and a natural setting, would settle in a territory surrounded by lands still going through environmental remediation.

The “neighbours” also identified the Petrochemical District in Dock Sud (to the north) that had poisoned the inhabitants of that locality in Avellaneda and caused other health-related problems in the district and surrounding areas. To the west, there were countless pollutants like Smurfit Kappa, the Nuevo Quilmes gated community for the alteration of soil conditions for construction works. Other problems identified by the *Asamblea* were flooding as well as the deforestation being executed by the water treatment plant AySA, Aguas y Saneamientos Argentinos, in the south.

¹⁵⁵ They used the web mapping platform Google Maps.



Figure 22: **Environmental map of Avellaneda and Quilmes' coast.** Author: Assembly NHOC Assembly. 2011.

References: 1) sewage waste plant pumping into the La Plata River, 2) Buenos Aires-La Plata Highway, 3) high tension cables, 4) garbage filling area, 5) ACUBA, tannery waste plant, 6) Trieco, medical waste burning plant, 7) high pressure gas pipeline, 8) high contamination area Petrochemical District Dock Sud, 9) high tension aerial cables, 10) rubbish juice treatment plant, 11) marginal forest with wetlands that Techint wants to destroy, 12) digs flooded with superficial water, 13) Van del Wield, rubbish gas burning plant, 14) wells with rubbish juice or leachates, 15) contamination of La Plata River, 16) dumps from the Smurfit Kappa pulp mill, 17) drinking water intakes, 18) waste landfill, 19) AySA, water plant, 20) Smurfit Kappa paper mill, 21) wetlands destroyed by COSUGAS company, 22) Nuevo Quilmes gated community, 23) former Villa Domingo landfill.

“Have you been there? In the limit between the nature reserve and the landfill?” a “neighbour” of NHOC asked me when he was telling me what he knew about the leachate (garbage juice) pools. *“No, I haven’t”*, I answered. *“You better bring boots when you go there because the lixivados [leachates] pour out of the ground when you step on those lands and it’s horribly toxic”* (Field note, 2017).

All in all, this map was a major construction (and a great achievement) on their part resulting in a different comprehension of the place that they were struggling for.

On the collaborative research and graphics that NHOC was embarked on, some people participating in the assembly mentioned their identification with the work that an Argentine social laboratory known as Iconoclastas¹⁵⁶ had developed in this regard.

¹⁵⁶ For additional information on Iconoclastas: <https://iconoclastas.net/>

We were working on the ethnocartographic exercise when Juan mentioned the importance of critical mapping for social movements or a given community, since it represents an exchange for the elaboration of narratives and representations that could challenge a hegemonic vision.

The maps by the municipalities, Techint and the urban developers were part of that dominant vision of the riverside territory. They had focused on the drawing of territorial references, new organisation of lands, the road network for mobility, and distances or important adjacent areas to NCP. None of the dangers present in the area and worrying the local assemblies and riverside inhabitants had been pointed out, almost as if pollution or other environmental problems did not exist.

To counter these “official” maps, the “neighbours” also worked on the public release of simple images situating the sanitary landfill, the nature reserve, and the project itself, its limits and extension. This initially helped them to understand the implications of what was proposed by Techint since they had been away from the river for a long time. In the coming years they will continue with other spatial representations that will enable the movement to make comparisons and show the changes in the organisation of the place over the last five decades.

Sensory explosion

In this phase of physical positioning and symbolic appropriation of the river, a new practice was born among the “neighbours”, oriented toward mobilising the human senses by using odours, visual images, colours, and sounds to provoke a different experience in nature.

The assemblies sought to generate new perceptions of the place through sensitive forms of awareness about it with the intention that people would feel moved while being there. *“To pass things through the body, what the place evokes, or how to explain the rotten smell? Or how do you describe the changes of nature with the seasons?”* a *vecino* from NHOC said in 2017 (field note).

The visitors joining them on walks around the riverside were encouraged to discover an affinity with the river and forest, plants and animals, or to recover “lost sensations” to connect with the essence of being human.

“To open the chakras of the feet”, someone else from NHOC explained to me (field note, 2018) when stepping on a wetland to feel the spongy soil and how the water, not otherwise readily perceived by the eye, emerged, covering the ankles. Néstor told me something similar in 2022 when I interviewed him for my book *Bosque Nativo*, published in that same year. He said that he did not get hooked by the place until one day he felt his feet digging into the wetland as the warm water rose up to his ankles. The sensation was so powerful that led him to engage with the local assemblies in the defence of the riverside.

Their sensorial experience of the wetlands and forests started the process of development and their collective adoption of the identity expression “nature lovers”. For Anna Tsing (2005) it was the members of student outdoor clubs who joined global networks that embodied the nature lovers.

People “became” environmentalists when caring about nature and learning about it as they faced its destruction. Tsing attributed love towards nature to the *lineages of knowledge and desire* that made up a cultural and specific representation of nature.

The nature that influenced the feelings of the cosmopolitan groups that Tsing described was “not the fields and forests of ordinary, parochial, rural lives” (2005: 122), but places like the mountains where they could enjoy freedom. For the neighbourhood assemblies their inclination towards nature was in relation to somewhere that embraced contradictions on an aesthetic, moral and environmental level. It was a space that they knew and were prone to like, but one they also perceived as dirty and chaotic. They were aware of this complexity, but regardless of it, they valued the riverside as it was.

Poetic and even romantic manifestations arose from the resistance speech of the Assembly NHOC as of 2012 to convey a sensory way of feeling the place so as to interest or persuade others. Prior to that point, the neighbours’ press releases had been denunciative and rather informative.

I transcribe here part of the description of a night walk, co-written by a group of “neighbours” to look further into this issue:

[...] On a pleasant night, illuminated by the light of the moon, the “neighbours” [they use a third-person plural figure to refer to themselves and others sharing the same moon walk] began the activity, getting across the highway, seeing the stream polluted by the paper mill Smurfit Kappa and then walking down the trails among wetlands. The appearance of light bugs surprised the older ones and the children. A father used to tell his little children that in their childhood they gathered little bugs that had two little lights; we [the “neighbours”] took a couple of steps and found several specimens.

These night walks managed to recover the emotion and total happiness that exist in the simplest things; like seeing the light bugs fly in the dark, feeling the perfume of the grass at night, hearing the night sounds, getting used to the sight and walking under the moonlight. A way to discover value and defend among all Quilmeños the hidden treasures that we have in our district. The walk ended with a sound intervention by the Group Contempo Creative Cooperative. They reproduced nocturnal sounds. A symphony of crickets and frogs was set against the deafening noise of honking horns and the continuous passing of vehicles on the highway [...] (Assemblies NHOC and United by the River Bernal, press release, 2012).

A fondness of the place, a way of being together and an articulation of sensations provided an account of a happiness that could be felt in spite of the pollution. Such imagery was also replicated in the walks addressed to students that the “neighbours” organised with schools in Avellaneda and Quilmes.

What the “neighbours” did at the riverside, in educational terms, attracted the attention of local teachers who considered there to be a need to create awareness about a natural environment so close to the population. The disappointment experienced by some children had to do with knowing that they would be in a nature reserve. They expected it to be beautiful, to find rare animals, but instead they found old tires, fallen trees, and destruction.

“*This is rubbish*” they replied back to the Assembly NHOC leading the tour at the riverside, and instead of focusing on the wetlands they took pictures of the mountains of waste and the yellow streams. A small group of “neighbours” took the opportunity to explain how the river’s water moved and how garbage accumulated at the riverside: “*people throw trash into the river, so if you do it, the river returns it back because it doesn’t belong there*” (field note, 2016). There was a morality also being conveyed as they made distinctions on how people should behave in a natural place by not littering and respecting nature.

Regarding the fact that some plants looked “*ugly*”, the “neighbours” also explained that there were native and exotic plants growing up together as an ecosystem. A second moral centred on transmitting how acceptance worked in nature and how we humans should replicate it.

“*If someone is different you should not reject or belittle them; by accepting difference we enrich ourselves and learn from each other as plants do to survive*” (Field note, 2016).

When the “neighbours” told me about this, they also complained about the way nature is socially constructed nowadays, thinking that the grass is green and cut, the flowers grow like in a garden and there are no dangers. What NHOC was trying to do, I now ponder on the basis of Kay Milton’s work, was to generate “interest” as the first form of emotion involved in knowledge, and thus, in the emergence of a love for nature (2002: 64) because, in this case, love was not just a feeling but the result of a joint process they carried out by the river.

POLLUTION IN THE PERCEPTION OF NATURE

During a field incursion with NHOC in 2017, we sat one day at the limit of the nature reserve to rest while we discussed the weeding and planting tasks to be done. After a few minutes a dreadful smell reached us becoming unbearable, at least for me because the “neighbours” remained in their place without moving away. It was the middle of summer and that was the only area nearby to protect ourselves from the heat. When we approached the origin of that odour with Sandra we saw a 50-kilo bag full of rotten cow hearts that someone had thrown there.

It was difficult for me to make sentimental associations or to imagine how beautiful that place had been sixty years previously. There was something special about the riverside, no doubt, it was history, its natural environment, but I attributed it instead to the social dynamics of encounter and companionship that I perceived among the “neighbours”.

After some years of research I felt that, at least, I had accomplished something important in the understanding of what the people felt or thought.

The unpleasant impressions were those of being in a sacrifice zone, I reflected; however, those place characteristics masked a beauty and knowledge that the “neighbours” strove to communicate even to me.

The pollution played a vital role in the sensory making of the riverside enabling the assemblies to demonstrate the effects of industrial activities and garbage management in natural areas. What better way to understand it than by feeling what others, like the coastal people, suffered day-after-day.

The odours in relation to the existing pollution, I got to understand, played a central role as they were associated with sickness and death. With the large number of open-air garbage dumps in the corners of most neighbourhoods in the districts, people had learned that something bad is going on in their environs due to the presence of bad smells.

In fact, the nauseating odour of gases from the landfill was the first signal that allowed them to identify its existence in 1998 and continues to be so. When an unusual smell invades residential areas, people trace the source of the emission (generally a pollutant) just in case there is a new danger posed to their houses or their health. The lack of sanitary conditions (the provision of which is officially the responsibility of the municipalities) had become the norm, so the inhabitants worked together in their neighbourhoods to generate practices of cleanliness by separating and sorting rubbish, burning or removing waste to prevent and avoid disease.

At the riverside, those odours (pleasant and unpleasant) contributed to the construction of their sense of place encompassed by both the love of nature (an evocation about the place) and the taboos that marked the territory as “forbidden”. The native inhabitants also have taken precautions against strange odours, although they do not have the economic or material means to “clean” them or dispose of them.

A space of life

What makes a space life-linked? Is it simply because it is a place where nature dominates? Or in any case, what is assigned to that place by people that makes it crucial for human existence?

The geographer Ulrich Oslender defined *sense of place* as “the ways human experience and imagination appropriate the physical characteristics and qualities of a geographical location” (2016: 35).

It is, therefore, through the active action of the “neighbours” at the riverside and the way that they use mental images and creativity, including spatial creations like the “anthill”, that have ended up developing in them a form of attachment to the riverside.

In my experience of what I observed at the place in conflict, the sense of place is a way of doing things in a given place, because what “neighbours” became aware of at the riverside does not happen anywhere else or in this same way.

The sense of place is connected to moral ecologies then, as I see it, in relation to the subjective, ethical or emotional factors that trigger collective action in this way, continuing with a similar distinction to Oslender’s.

The “neighbours” did not designate the site as a vital site as soon as the controversies arose but referred to the river based on what they remembered about it at the time.

On the contrary, it was people in the assemblies who gave the riverside this new sense based on what they had learned about the territory until then.

Beyond the number of species it harbours or the relation with other similar ecosystems, they came to know that the riverside is a living place that offers the continuation of everything that exists:

“Here it is basic; if they continue to pollute your water, if they are taking away all the trees, if they are taking away the natural filters that filter the water they are polluting, how are we going to live? It’s life, it’s something more visceral; it’s life itself that is moving you and well, and the other thing is how you start to pay attention to things that you didn’t even notice because you didn’t know about them and the beauty of all this, the magic, is the knowledge that you acquire [...]” (NHOC, ethnocartography, 2017).

What will be interesting is how neighbourhood assemblies, unlike other collective forms in the movement, will articulate different forms of knowledge to arrive at this conception. There is memory as a form of knowledge, as mentioned earlier, the territorial knowledge of riverside inhabitants and former CEAMSE workers, what the experts taught them, what they explored and discovered by themselves and what they produced from systematic practices associated with science.

This sense of place is then built up on the “experiential and expressive ways places are known, imagined, yearned for, held, remembered, voiced, lived, contested, and struggled over; and the multiple ways places are metonymically and metaphorically tied to identities” (Feld & Basso, 1996). A way of understanding the riverside like this is important because it is from these years onwards that the conflict is definitively defined in these terms. But to better explain this, I will show that the “reinvention” of the coastal space was founded on three pillars:

- 1) the production of knowledge through guidelines and tools designed by the “neighbours” themselves or with the help of scientists,
- 2) the development of practices linked to nature on the basis of this new territorial relationship,
- 3) the involvement in festive rituals significant to the local culture in order to change the existing assumptions about the riverside.

The production of knowledge

Getting to understand the relationship between animals, vegetation, and water led the “neighbours” to apprehend the reasons why the soil was silty, how the forest expanded on its own and in what ways it depended on the propagation of species from distant regions to survive.

In short, why it was an ecosystem and how it worked. “*It was like rediscovering the coast*”, I said when trying to interpret what someone had just explained about how much he had learned since joining the Assembly NHOC. “*No, it was about getting to know it; I knew a part of it, but I came to know places there that I did not even know existed in Argentina*”, he corrected me (interview, 2018).

Biologists, botanists and zoologists came to the river for research and study, which they were able to conduct through the support and experience of the assemblies in the place, not the other way around. This relationship was and continues to be a link for reciprocal learning. Some scientists might have wanted to learn more about the mosses there, others the lichens or invertebrates, but the direct way in which they came to know where they were or how they related to other forms of life there was influenced by the “neighbours” knowledge of the riverside.

In parallel, the movement regarded scientists as a pillar to accelerate social change because of their expertise, fundamental to strengthening their resistance against NCP. A categorisation of species slowly began in 2011 with field work carried out by the “neighbours” (systematising information, identifying species, their location and the composition of forest communities) that resulted two years later in a more extensive survey conducted also by NHOC during a three-month period.

Pablo Cabanillas and Nicolás Chimento, biologists from the National University of La Plata, coordinated the research issuing a preliminary report on the categorisation and conservation value of a forest area in Bernal using the data collected by the “neighbours”. The results of this study were replicated in subsequent scientific publications that constituted the first resources by which the assemblies were able to demonstrate their cognition of the place. And at the same time, got credit for the scientific work done by other scientists and universities in the region, local organisations, and assemblies in the metropolitan area.

This changed what people knew since it was not just a beautiful landscape or a natural area that worked in a certain way but it existed in association to other similar natural habitats that were necessary for people to survive.

It was more evident as time passed by, I could see that every time we walked in the natural reserve, participants of the Assembly NHOC would identify trees and herbs by using their popular or scientific names, but also that if they did not remember them, they invented them. Learning had become something precious on the social and affective level of the “neighbours” resulting in a didactic game among them.

They associated some of them with certain forms of natural benefits: “*what’s the name of this one? Hierba de chancho [Hypochoeris acaulis]?*” a “neighbour” who worked as a gardener asked someone with more experience in the area. “*No, I cannot remember, but it’s not that one*”, the other replied (field note, 2017).

As I was weeding once next to Sandra, the gardener mentioned in the previous dialogue, she asked me if I knew the difference between two kinds of unwanted plants growing wild.

I replied that I did not, so she explained to me how to distinguish them: “*this one is uglier, but a colleague of mine at the course on botany that we attend together at the university mentioned that it is good for digestion; the other one is purposeless, so remove it.*”

You can take it out; be careful though because it irritates your skin with its thorns; you should be wearing a different pair of pants” (Field note, 2017).

As “neighbours” immersed themselves in this shared practice they made another watershed discovery for the place in conflict and themselves: the existence of medicinal properties in plants at the riverside. I asked Sandra how she had learned about it and she answered that she had done so by looking for information and sharing her findings with others, or “*circulating*” what they knew with others across the movement. Below is a conversation between two “neighbours” in Bernal showing how they used to exchange what they knew:

Sandra: *That is also good that many youngsters who are studying biology, for example, Marisol, she was fascinated the other day after the walk and now she wants to come to do a biotic study.*

Nieves: *ahh, the things, what are they called? Parielta, parietal of mosses?*

Sandra: *no, what are they called?*

Nieves: *Bryophylls, I think Hepaticophytas are something else.*

Sandra: *Bryophytes?*

Nieves: *Bryophytes are mosses.*

Sandra: *and the Hepaticophytas I said that are there all over the coast? It’s full of them.*

X: *I don’t know.*

L: *It is not the same as mosses.*

Sandra: *That’s why she is studying mosses; she studies botany in La Plata, biology with botanical orientation, and is now doing an internship at the Darwinian Institute of Mosses and well, these places are unique to do this type of survey. In the institute they told her that when she did so, that when she classified them, that she should take two samples to the Darwinian Institute because there was no previous survey of this area, in the La Plata River. In this area, mosses are super powerful. I don’t know, they die even if they are dry and they have some, I don’t know, some kind of medicine that could be found; everything is studied... lichens are the indicators of pollution [...] there are so many things to investigate that ... that there is life in a little bit of space like that...” (NHOC, field note, 2017).*

The “neighbours” first learned to recognise plants by their external characteristics, then they tried to guess their uses, and whether they were native or exotic species. They also had other informal ways to learn about the potential of plants; they did research on the Internet or read up on herbalism.

The healing properties that NHOC found out about were not invoked in their political speech as a strategy to protect the area.

Maybe this can also be attributed to an amateur way of handling knowledge or because they have not yet systematised it in an orderly fashion so as to safeguard it for the future.

As they gained more knowledge about this therapeutic dimension, they felt more connected with the riverside, stating that nature provides humans with all they need.

Many of them went to the wetlands and forests to look for plants to heal themselves or help others, turning the latter into a form of responsible behaviour.

Planting in the forest

After the cutting down of trees in early 2012, the neighbourhood movement gathered by the Assembly NHOC worked on the environmental restoration of the native forest in Avellaneda, that is, not only did the assemblies work on the riverbank, but many more organisations and environmental, political or cultural groups joined.

Since then, the “neighbours” have carried out regular explorations of the riverside to detect areas where nature could also have been destroyed by deforestation.

This led them to consider alternatives to remedy the loss of biodiversity, like reforestation of native species, and weeding if some plants were invading or encroaching upon others. According to the level of destruction they found, they would also try to save uprooted trees by returning them to their original locations.

During my second and third field trips (2016 and 2017), I also participated in the restocking of species (*jornadas de reforestación*) in Bernal. The “neighbours” invited friends, acquaintances, colleagues, family members, and the communities via the assemblies’ mailing list and social media. I knew about these encounters because Nieves told me over the phone that they would be working at the riverside. She warned me to bring a hat, insect repellent, sunscreen, and water.

We met after midday at the corner of Espora Street (in front of the Smurfit Kappa paper mill), almost 1.5 km from the La Plata River. We were approximately twenty people, among which were new “neighbours” who had recently heard about the nature reserve and the socio-environmental conflict.

The most experienced ones showed up carrying the assemblies’ flag, shovels, rusty tools, and small trees in plastic containers.

We crossed the Buenos Aires-La Plata Highway over the pedestrian bridge and walked into the nature reserve. Before planting the new trees – a task left for the most skilled – we spent five hours pulling up unwanted species under the hot sun. I could not distinguish one plant from another so those with more knowledge would tell me how to better identify them.

If a plant was over 1.50 m high and had thorns of 3 cm or more it had to be removed by using a blunt scythe, knives or one’s bare hands. While we were at it, some “neighbours” brought water from the wetlands to sprinkle onto the seedlings.

Those who were at the riverside for the first time asked questions and became interested in what the assemblies did, so some short informal walks took place.

I ended the day with blisters on my hands and cuts on my legs from the big, sharp spines. With rest shifts that included drinks and some pastries, I learned about the latest events in the conflict with Techint and the progress in the court process that had suspended NCP.

Suddenly, someone decided to head for the wetlands to check on some previously planted species. The landscape changed from where we were before; suddenly I saw water birds close to us, and it was like walking on a big sponge. With the “neighbours” surrounding me, listening to their jokes and their plans for the following weekend, I felt an affinity with this place for the first time.

The festive rituals

Part of the collective reinvention of the riverside has included new forms of cultural appropriation of festivities that take place in the urban context and in which the communities participate. The “neighbours” have sought to reflect the social reality by exposing the environmental problems affecting the districts by taking advantage of popular celebrations. Of religious origins, the one I will refer to, comprises rites and symbols as well as a set of actions conducted routinely in the same manner for over 50 years.

I refer to the “Fogones of Bernal” (The bonfires of Bernal), an occasion for feasting and social encounter that has been taking place in Quilmes since 1967 and was more recently organised in relation to the “Bernal Week” (Semana de Bernal) to commemorate the city’s day on August 29.

Every September thousands of people participate in the events coordinated by the municipality to honour Nuestra Señora de la Guardia, patron saint of the district. Some stages and gastronomic stalls are usually set up in the centre of Quilmes City, and while visitors walk among them eating or buying local products, musical shows invite people to join in dancing.

The *fogones* begin with a mass in the Nuestra Señora de la Guardia parish, and then the religious community take the image of the Virgin to the atrium. The Mayor of Quilmes together with municipal and provincial authorities usually walk in the crowd to get in touch with the people afterwards:

*“It is exciting to see how **tradition and values are passed down from generation to generation.** I used to come with my parents and now I do it with my children. The ‘Fogones of Bernal’ are also an important space for the local entrepreneur to show and market what he does without commercial intermediaries [...]”* (Martiniانو Molina, former Mayor of Quilmes, 2019).

Some interesting aspects about it are worth describing in order to explain why the election of this festivity for political action.

First, this festivity was acknowledged as part of the local idiosyncrasy, though some roots with similar celebrations in Europe could be traced, as some historians indicate.¹⁵⁷ With people reuniting around the parish, over the years it has incorporated its own features significant to the history of Quilmes.

¹⁵⁷ Private School Bernal (second year, Humanities and Social Sciences) in collaboration with Professor Susana Brunettin. (2003). “The bonfires of Bernal: festivity and history”. In: *El Quilmero Blog*, <https://elquilmero.blogspot.com/2019/09/los-fogones-de-bernal-colaboracion-prof.html>

For example, the parish was the final destination of pilgrimages by Genoese people settled at the riverside who marched from that location accompanied by a band and numerous flags representing Argentina, Italy, and their corresponding regions of origin.

As years went by, another use of the public space in the city was proposed, so the realisation of floats allusive to specific themes was carried out.

Since 2012, NHOC has occasionally been part of this celebration, without having been invited by the municipality although one occasion is especially remembered by the “neighbours”.

NHOC and other assemblies showed up once through an artistic intervention, they borrowed a giant puppet used by another group that was protesting against transnational mining in Northern provinces of Argentina.

They fixed it, made the character a new suit, and put a band on it bearing a new name – “Mister Techint” – to draw the attention of the population to the company as an icon of contamination and devastation in the riverside space. In a long-established way of doing things, NHOC sought to give an ecological sense to the traditional celebration, and by interacting with the audience they meant to make public what was happening at the riverside.

In this case, as in the second one that I will tell below, the association between Techint and death dates back to the 90s when people died in neighbourhoods near the river. Already then, the residents of the districts participated in protests carrying signs identifying Techint with the environmental disaster they were going through.

This means that the “fogones” is historically linked to the coast and is therefore related to a traditional identity that once arose there. The deployment of resistance in the city, leaving their collective terrain by the river, can be explained by the visibility that neighbourhood demands can attain during the celebration.

There is also an affective factor; many “neighbours” of NHOC are descendants of those Italian immigrants through whom they learned to value the cultural and local ties.

Moral ecologies at the river

The moral ecologies deployed in the territory by “neighbours” and “promoters” focus at this stage of the conflict over pollution and nostalgia, bringing together the concerns of both parties.

The architect Fabio De Marco, from Oficina Urbana, explained to me in the interview of 2017 what his idea of pollution was in relation to the waterfront revitalisation.¹⁵⁸

He said that as urban developers, they (he and his partner Roberto Converti) had bet on this urban condition to make the national and provincial government take a specific look at this type of territory.

¹⁵⁸ I return to this interview although it is not synchronous with the facts analysed because it is on this occasion that I have had the opportunity to better discuss topics involved in the design of NCP with the urban developers.

A proposal such as NCP meant that investments could be made for the benefit of an entire area that was “unhealthy” and in a state of neglect by the municipalities:

“[...] If today there are no sewage systems, then we need to have them; if today the water plant needs to be expanded, then it should be expanded; in this public-private investment it should happen that this development and the impulse that the area has makes the state... also make the proposal that you rightly say [to deal with the territorial difficulties], what happens with the streams? What about the infrastructure? What happens to the companies that should be located elsewhere with a new way of inhabiting the land and solving industrial issues?” (De Marco, interview, 2017).

Pollution was regarded as an opportunity for development and on behalf of it, the construction could generate infrastructure and services or products that could restore the riverside; in other words, materiality acted as moral ecology. Lands with no economic interest would gain value thanks to Techint’s real-estate project and this could only be possible due to the knowledge of Oficina Urbana and long experience of Techint in the area after managing the sanitary landfill. The waterfront revitalisation was really aimed at “attacking” a contaminated place and not the wetlands and forests as people was seeing it:

“For over a year, studies were being carried out with international advisors, local universities, on the previous impact of the project, on land, water and air, all the indicators were absolutely normal, they were exposed, they were counted even in public hearings, they have been registered in the documents submitted for public scrutiny presented inclusive [...].

Today we could say the figure of the...[...] the allegations [by the “neighbours”] changed and became no longer a contaminated place, attacked by, or a project attacking a contaminated place, but rather the project attacking a green lung [...].” (Converti, Oficina Urbana, 2017).

The position of the “neighbours” regarding pollution was quite different, as I have shown before, however, both views become mutually dependent in the manner in which they are formulated, at least discursively in the conflict.

If the pollution was referred to as harmful by the assemblies, Techint and local authorities highlighted its benefits, and if it was good for the “neighbours” because it showed the degree of damage that human intervention has been done to the place, the “promoters” questioned which part of the riverbank was nature, and what the “neighbours” were actually protesting about.

This has been one of the most difficult issues to determine as a researcher in terms of truth and falsehood as certain moral assumptions changed according to the circumstances surrounding the conflict, especially among the “promoters”.

Another element that was also mobilised between 2012 and 2014 is linked to nostalgia, but in this case could be called *eco-nostalgia*, referring to the ecological destruction that triggers forms of attachment to endangered or vanished environments (Angé & Berliner, 2020).

What was examined before as *solastalgia*, an anticipatory affliction, worry or nostalgia for something that has not yet happened (Albrecht et al, 2007) like NCP, in this period was replaced with eco-nostalgia as the fears about the deforestation and consequent destruction of nature came true.

Additionally in this period, the first manifestations of *love* are also observed encompassing the moral ecology of people, which will acquire a new meaning from 2014 onwards. This is what Cecilia, a student of environmental sciences, said regarding what nature represented to her under these terms:

“A connection with nature, yes, happiness [...] that nature is so different to what is built [not natural]; it is great that it exists even if it gives us nothing, what is remarkable is that it provides us with knowledge as well as spiritual things” (NHOC, interview, 8/01/2018).

By spiritual she meant an experience, a sensation, a feeling beyond the materiality of the modern world. The identification with natural things contributes to generating a sense of identity (Milton, 2002: 105) in which Cecilia’s narration is representative of others in the *Asamblea*. And just like this perception there are others based on a personal reunion with nature; this is how they will strengthen their ties under a common way of connecting with nature.

This is what moral ecologies entail in connection with an original sense of place led by the neighbourhood assemblies, who become increasingly concerned about life, or what they consider to be at stake. If they had not learned what they learned or had not known the place as they did, they would not have been able to define spatial, sensorial and cognitive issues linked to the place. As this knowledge and these practices evolve during the conflict, they will also continue to incorporate moral values linked to this vital space that must be protected at all costs.

Conclusions: Place-making through resistance

Drawing on the works of Oslender (2016) and Routledge (1996), the *terrain of resistance* shows how their political action acquires a spatial dimension from which other forms of perception of the place depart. It is not only a space that contains an alternative to what happens through identity politics, or the place from which they interpellate and confront the “promoters”. What emerges from this chapter is the creation of a place of their own containing a set of relationships and values associated with the vision of nature that assemblies developed from their experience of being there.

This begins with the *appropriation* of the riverside, by taking it back and recovering its traditional use as a public and recreational place at the same time as implemented new practices and ways of learning, giving it new meanings. The epitome of this process is the “*hormiguero*” of those rejecting NCP, who self-represent as “ants”. In this *terrain*, a piece of land lent by an organisation by the river in Bernal in solidarity, they become aware of their impact as a collective and assemble networks of solidarity.

With these networks and from that place they explore, map, signal the environment and explore new ways of sensing nature. And when tensions rise, they find refuge in their “anthill”, monitoring everything that happens, especially when other “invasive” species move in to fill wetlands, occupy land or clear the forest. In the network of power and knowledge in which the “neighbours” are immersed, being at the riverside allows them to continue reactivating the local memory and giving rise to a new environmental culture. Here the joint production of knowledge becomes a fundamental element in the resistance resulting in a new *sense of place* shared by the neighbourhood assemblies and allies. Such new understanding of the coastal space, of acting in it, begins to be mediated by what could be described as “epistemologies” that define specific spatial and temporal relations with an environment (Oslender, 2016: 48).

In this context of the contention, they connect to profound ways of knowing the place that the assemblies encouraged from a sensorial point of view, and also, as I preliminarily present, connect to the place through love.

Through this exchange with wetlands and forests proposed by the “neighbours”, the official representations of “emptiness” linked to the coastal space begins to be called into question.

This *sense of place* gives rise to the representation of somewhere full of life by the river; it harbours multiple animal and plant forms and connects with other natural environments equally necessary for subsistence for this reason. From the perspective of *moral ecology*, the everyday life of the “neighbours” in resistance begins to be permeated by the place (Martínez-Reyes, 2021: 19). The moral imperatives and calls for justice for the protection of wetlands and native forests fit the new ontological conception of the riverside. This is supported by the activation of memory, which continues to play an important role as a political and moral resource making sense of reality, especially at the time of learning together or putting their knowledge into action



Figure 23: **Patrimony of the riverside in Avellaneda and Quilmes.** Author: Assembly NHOC. March 2023.
References: 1) Camino de los Papeleros (Path of the paper workers, rediscovered by the “neighbours” and former recreation area (*recreos*)), 2) Camino del Lagarto Overo (created by the assemblies), 3) Recreo La Tapera where the historic building is located, 4) nature reserve, 5) the “trench” at the entrance of the nature reserve, 6) farms area in Avellaneda.

THE CONFLICT: LAWS PROTECTING FORESTS CHANGE TO FAVOUR DEVELOPMENT (2014-2018)

“The forest is not for sale; it is to be defended!”¹⁵⁹

The last part of the conflict, for the purpose of this dissertation, began by 2014 with the second hearing carried out by OPDS for the ordering of native forests (the first one took place in 2011), based on the national law N° 26.331 for the management of those areas. In its article number 6, it established that within a maximum period of one year (since its sanction in 2007), and through a participatory process, each province in Argentina should carry out their legal and productive reclassification of native forests. Key issues on this matter were part of the public discussion; first and foremost, the very definition of what a native forest entailed was at stake since the official project A-1/15-16 removed the word “*predominantly*” from the original definition established in law N° 26.331 (article 2).

If project A-1/15-16 were approved, the classification of a forest as such would mean that “all” species encompassed in a given area had to be native, which was an extremely difficult circumstance to find in the reality of any ecosystem. If there was “no forest”, then there would be no environmental protection from state agencies, nor were they compelled to react to social demands.

In compliance with sustainability criteria defined by the Federal Environment Council (COFEMA), there would be new conservation categories to be applied in the provincial management of those forests. In relation to environmental properties and the benefits that these territories provided, the state decisions would be based on the ordering of sectors: a) of very high conservation value that should not be transformed, the preservation of which was merited (category I/red) due to their locations, their connectivity value, the presence of outstanding biological values and/or their protection of watersheds; b) of medium conservation value (category II/yellow) which might be degraded but following remediation actions could reacquire a high conservation value only for sustainable production, tourism and scientific research; c) of low conservation value that could be partially or totally transformed, although within the limits set by legal criteria (category III/green).

The rising of tensions around this scheme that involved millions of hectares throughout the country, of which only 4% remained standing in Buenos Aires, took two sides: OPDS and the provincial government on one side, and various forms of collective, among which were the neighbourhood assemblies. Despite differences and a prospective conflict about to explode, in August 2015 the Senate preliminarily approved the OPDS’ proposal known as A1-15/16 for the reclassification of native forests (later the Deputies Chamber’s approval would be needed for its enactment).

The official proposal contemplated a reduction of 50% in legally protected areas (with very high and medium conservation standards, categories I and II) enabling productive activities and land transfer to private companies.

All over the province, inhabitants and experts predicted “*catastrophic consequences for the populations that inhabit those regions*”¹⁶⁰ thus generating a climate of war which, if lost, would be the beginning of a stage from which there would be no return.

By publicly claiming that the national law N° 26.331/07 already established the minimum principles for environmental protection and that these could not be regressive in their formulation, a collective campaign was devised for the first time by a historical number of organisations.

¹⁵⁹ Slogan developed by neighbourhood organisations for a public campaign from 2016 in defence of native forests in Buenos Aires.

¹⁶⁰ Posted by Espacio Intercuencas on 7/10/2015 along with the information about the collective campaign. <http://espaciointercuencas.blogspot.com/>

The Espacio Intercuencas (which brought together “neighbours” from various riverside or delta locations in the metropolitan area), the Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River, water associations from Lanús and Lomas de Zamora, local assemblies, and the Regional Socio-Environmental Network, among others, addressed the provincial deputies unsuccessfully.

“We cannot take it anymore”

I would like to picture here the emotional burden that “neighbours” were going through as the environmental problems grew in quantity and intensity at the same time that people were losing their motivation to continue fighting.

On 28 May 2016, I attended the monthly meeting N° XXXIII organised by Interbasins (Intercuencas) at the National University of Lanús, a southern district bordering Avellaneda and Quilmes. It aimed at assessing the situation in the three main river basins of the metropolitan area: Riachuelo, La Plata, and Reconquista – charted in a map at the beginning of the dissertation. As usual, people exchanged experiences, looked for alternatives, and worked on a comprehensive understanding of similar problems caused by a “neoliberal context”, they repeated constantly.

There were about forty people present, plus others visiting the corridors like me, and special guests such as people from La Plata City affected by historical floods in 2013 that caused 250 deaths.

“Neighbours” from organisations like Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River, Friends of the Earth Argentina, Water Forum of Lomas de Zamora, and others talked to each other, hugged and shared *mates* [an Argentine infusion]. The first speaker alluded to the situation at the Lujan River, a tributary of La Plata River, drawing attention to the tensions between “neighbours” and the difficulty of reconciling them. A few proposed to think about new ways of approaching this sort of conflict among “common people”, while someone emphasised the great individual and collective efforts carried out to preserve the natural spaces in their localities: “*we cannot do everything at the same time*”. They were “*always behind things*” and nothing could ever be planned; they were being inefficient in how they were working together.

A person from Berazategui said that “*there were issues that exceeded them; every two steps we take they [politicians and private interests] take five ahead of us*” to express that after years of work their exhaustion had also become part of their struggle. They asked themselves how to generate the support of society to alleviate the weight of their resistance. “*Part of society wants to be informed; we have that in our favour*”, others replied. Feelings of oppression originated by the State itself conveyed the idea that at some point they could not win.

With the forthcoming legislative treatment of project A1-15/16 (recategorisation of native forests) at the Deputies’ Chamber of Buenos Aires, the new spokesman for NCP, Eduardo Russo, made reference to the “neighbours” as “Talibans” in an interview I conducted in May 2016. The assemblies defended their reasons for opposing urban development with a strict perspective on the conservation of nature, giving room to no other form of development. The criminalisation -accusations of squatting- was also used by municipal authorities in order to curb the action of assemblies at the riverside.

CHAPTER 8: The Transcendence: Territory, Patrimony & Entrenchment

“We should be called the HLI [Hacemos lo Imposible], because we ‘Do the Impossible!’”
(“Neighbour” of Assembly NHOC. Field notes, 2016).

In the previous chapter, I showed the *reinvention* of the riverside in Avellaneda and Quilmes by the social movement, especially among the neighbourhood assemblies guided by NHOC.

Such “reinvention”, as I call it, entailed the collective creation of a different place, unlike the one the population used to know until Nueva Costa del Plata. The process consisted in a physical as well as symbolic *appropriation* rooted in people’s resistance, taking the place for their political action and laying the foundations for a new spatiality. Thus, a *new sense of place* linked to the natural environment was born by capturing practices, discourse and imaginaries that aimed at boosting life there. I say this because the “neighbours” (“*vecinos*”) were also part of the life that animated the riverside, which they worked to expand to include the knowledge and affection of others.

By this time, I emphasise the idea of *moral ecologies* because the proposed sense of place reinvented by the “neighbours” continued to counter the “righteousness” assigned by the “promoters” to NCP. Expecting to achieve what was “best for people”, corporations and private interests lobbied for the legal change of forest areas in the province, plunging the population into a dispossession of areas of great importance for human life.

In this context, the present chapter approaches the last four years of the conflict with the struggle of assemblies centred on the making of *transcendence* in order to create preminent conditions for the riverside as somewhere outstanding in relation to other spaces in the districts, portraying a distinction or holding a goodness beyond its natural attributes.

After six years of struggle, the various organisations supporting NHOC felt that their knowledge and experience of the place was not enough to stop its destruction, not so much now in relation to NCP, but to other facts unfolding since the project came out. For example, a) increased deforestation by private companies and the municipalities in protected areas, b) the loss of protected spaces due to changes in existing regulations, c) the illegal occupation by violent squatters who threatened the historical inhabitants at gunpoint, and d) the destruction of wetlands being filled by garbage companies without governmental control. Tensions grew between these actors, and between them and the “neighbours”, to the point of people seeing themselves as “doing the impossible” (at the limit of their physical strength, as quoted at the beginning of this page) as the destruction and occupation of lands advanced.

They realised that they could not make things change as they were expecting, but their children and grandchildren could, and their current effort would make things “*possible*” for others in the future (field note, 2016).

Searching for *transcendence*, in order to create a new status for the place and consequently symbolic and moral resources for others, I assert that three in-place practices are developed, almost overlapping, at some point without being able to define when one or the other began or whether one is more relevant than the other. All three contain the search for matters beyond the ordinary range of perception or valorisation; they aim to highlight the existence of the place, and therefore its worth. The sense of place of previous years is enlarged to incorporate a purposeful action aimed at defending life and, if possible, perpetuating it.

First, there was an original conceptual appropriation derived from a philosophical analysis among the assemblies or imagery that was expressed in relation to the riverside as a *territory* (Porto-Gonçalves, 2002: 230). The riverside was not just any old place, and their terrain of resistance itself was not just somewhere from where they resisted; NHOC in particular stressed the social dimension of making a place, meaning that it is the product of human interaction. It was not a way to demand land ownership or some sort of self-assigned possession that led them to take wetlands and forests for the “neighbours” use. The assemblies reframe the political and epistemic debate on these types of ecosystem territories that they feel part of and contain their collective forms of identity (Betancourt Santiago, 2017: 314).

Second, the value of the riverside is enhanced among them, not only as a natural but social and historical *patrimony* so they start working to make a legacy out of it to be transmitted and continued by new generations to come (Prats, 1997). They identify and signal forgotten places by the river; they share the native knowledge of its inhabitants based on a respectful link to nature and make these people’s legends known. This symbolic collective recognition of the riverside as a patrimony (Lacarrière, 2013: 82) also incorporates legal and symbolic elements that turn the place into a “*commons*”. This means that what they inherited must be left to others because it is not for the exclusive use of certain groups, and for this to happen laws must be respected. Hence, it is off-limits (to deter corporate and economic interests) and has universal value (for the use of all human beings).

Third, there is the construction of *trenches* as the most significant physical expression of the spatiality of their resistance. During this period, the territory becomes a “battlefield” as the environmental situation in the districts seems to be on the brink of disaster (Keucheyan, 2014), hence the need to build ditches and place stones for its protection.

I will focus from here onwards on the analysis of *territory*, *patrimony* and *entrenchment* as ways for people to include space in the interpellation of power. I suggest that these practices contain each other because thinking of place as a product of group action is linked to something of one’s own that needs to be defended to have a future.

The relationship with the river then evolves progressively towards an increasingly close relationship for the “neighbours”, underpinned by a reinforced morality.

As Galochas, they are people without a territory, and as “nature lovers” they are responsible for wetlands and forests and act as their “guardians”. As I will examine in the next chapter, love of nature becomes part of this transcendent goal of making the riverbank preeminent as the ultimate moral manifestation for this case.

The research methodology for this chapter was an ethnography from a distance, and therefore the construction of a new way of sharing information with my sources in Argentina and building trust with them. The use of social networks to learn about the state of the conflict as well as the monitoring of the media was fundamental to give an account of the facts. Some “neighbours” always kept me updated by phoning me or sending me data on new land clearings or the legislative treatment of some laws.

The “neighbours” of the Assembly NHOC shared this information with me on one condition: that what they know and experience does not sit on a library shelf, but that others learn from them; and they express it not as a request but as the right thing for me as a researcher to do.

The territory

A creative way of thinking about the contested space emerged among people in the Assembly NHOC showing that the collective appropriation initiated some time ago (with the dry toilet and the creation of ties with riverside residents) had progressed a step further. In their *place framing*, or their shared understanding of the place they acted in (Martin, 2013), or from the perspective of *sense of place*, understood as the subjective orientations derived from a place (Oslender, 2016: 35), the riverside gained a more conceptual or even ideological density.

This meant that the *territory* was gaining greater political importance among “neighbours” as they claimed commonality due to it being socially constructed, or the product of interactions there, not only theirs but also those included in the conflict. The “neighbours” situated in this shared making, reinforcing a belonging or the idea that the riverside was “theirs” although this conception was already in currency among them, as I analysed in previous chapters.

However, NHOC did not reclaim the territory; also, the socio-environmental conflict was not turning into a territorial one in terms of autonomy or sovereignty over the riverside.

In fact, the assembly did not make use of territory in their arguments or political speech but rather it became part of the group’s narrative through a reaffirmation of what they were doing together.

This kind of non-political use of what they achieved together in the conflict probably sounds ridiculous at this stage, or unlike the behaviour of any other group with political interests in a place.

Perhaps it can be seen as a way to strengthen relations between the “neighbours” or to position themselves in the face of such an aggressive context over wetlands and forests.

According to the geographer Milson Betancourt Santiago, the “territory” was born as the result of indigenous and peasant struggles in Latin America. It has been linked to life or philosophical principles like good living (*buen vivir*) and the worldview of native peoples “which denoted an identity construction of an otherness rooted in their geographies” (2017: 313).

Without knowing myself the origin of the territory among “neighbours” in NHOC, probably as a result of alliances with other assemblies or interactions with activists elsewhere, I interpret that it could be part of how current socio-environmental struggles are thought of and represented by people. Although their struggle was born at a neighbourhood level, they also looked at other conflicts, learning from them as they made connections with other environmental issues taking place in Latin America through social networks or the media. To better look into this, I will briefly describe how I as a researcher came across this group concept, because the “neighbours” had not been referring to the riverside as a “territory” before.

I had agreed to meet with some “neighbours” after midday at the terrain of resistance in Bernal for weeding and cleaning in the nature reserve located near there so it was going to be a long day.¹⁶¹ While I was standing in front of the square “La Amistad” waiting for people, I saw some of them walking outside of the plot and re-entering it; they looked worried, and some were arguing with each other; I rushed to meet them.

The place I had visited many times before seemed abandoned; there were tall plants, old tools scattered on the floor, and an unfinished orchard project that reflected the general state of the riverside (or the lack of participation of people in the assemblies on those days).

When I asked them what had happened, they answered: “*we’ve been attacked*”. The dry toilet had been wrecked by someone who had trespassed on the place without permission. The walls and roof had been impacted by a sledgehammer and, to make things worse, some tools had been stolen.

They were explaining this to me when out of the corner of their eyes they observed that some branches of a big tree adjacent to the terrain had been plucked. Immediately they began to look for the branches, to later discover that they had been used to build a little house in a tree not far away.

Their frustration in relation to the riverside inhabitants and “neighbours” of their space of resistance seemed to be total.

A few of them decided to talk to some families they knew, for they were sure that someone had seen something. I did not know whether to get involved, but I decided to join Nieves and Sandra in their visit to some houses nearby.

¹⁶¹ On 25th November 2017.

Aunts and grandmothers denied everything and accused each other, so blaming anyone, especially a group of children who used to vandalise the neighbourhood, was pointless.

Nobody from the riverside neighbourhood would take care of the repairs or return the missing tools and if they knew something they would pretend they did not. Gathered in a group, the “neighbours” started discussing what to do: *“let’s rebuild the dry toilet first”*, they decided. Some minutes later there was mud and water to get the *adobe* ready (a building material made from those materials). While I was learning about the *adobe*, someone else wanted to paint a sign to warn others that the place belonged to the assembly, and therefore that it could not be intruded upon. Another pair went weeding while five others started to set things in order by inspecting the terrain.

The feeling was that of solidarity and freedom while each person was absorbed in a specific task of their choice. I felt part of that group and of what they were doing, and I even regretted that it might be my last time there before finishing my field work. I felt an anticipatory nostalgia, wondering when I would get to see them again and when I would be able to return. With my emotions running high I started talking to Sandra and Nieves about their differences with others within the assembly. It was very hard to agree on things, so sometimes their arguments would often get out of control like it had just happened with the toilet. While placing the *adobe* on the walls, Nieves mentioned how they felt about what they were doing in the riverside despite the disagreements between them:

“[...] the territory is a social construction at a spatial level, from where we organise the struggle and at a level of relationships, the work we do together generates belonging to this territory because each one does it, and among all, and for none in particular, or to tell you the truth, for all, we do it for everybody [...]” (Interview, 2017).

That was the first time I had heard them making such a statement after only a year of my last field incursion. And when Sandra nodded in agreement with Nieves’ idea, and then Verónica (a young film student and documentarian) joined us and agreed on the significance of the “territory”, I realised that it was beyond individual ideas. At first I thought that this could be associated with their collective identity since they found themselves in a reinvigorated form of self-definition as Los Galochas, a tribe that had created its own space. It was evident that there was a relationship between place and identity in that the two were mutually interdependent and that they articulated in the context of dispossession and displacement (Strang, 2003: 126). Having worked on territorial conflicts (agrarian confrontations, environmental or land disputes) in the context of coloniality, Betancourt Santiago examined the implications of territory and what is displayed in it:

“there is no territory that has not been constituted by processes of territorialisation (social appropriation of nature that implies power relations in combined economic, social, political and cultural spheres), being processes in which social subjects give meaning to themselves and their habitats, and in this way they build identities [...] shaping ways of being, feeling, and living the territory” (2017: 315).

This means that all territories are appropriated in one way or another through mechanisms that enable the assignment of meaning and are related to an identity that groups people according to a shared view. The territory became significant for “neighbours” because they depended on it at a material level now (the geography of their resistance) but above all because of what the riverside place symbolically provided for them:

“I believe in the territory; I do understand that sometimes there are issues that need to be discussed or that a physical space is needed to get organised with electricity and a computer and other issues and sometimes the rain, the cold... Sometimes we have endured winters here; it gets heavy, but for me it is super important to do it here, in the river or in the forest clearing, to put up a sign, to work there, to appropriate it ourselves. It belongs to everyone; it belongs to us. The politicians don’t do it; let’s do it ourselves. We’re going to do it, defend, us, there it seems to me like that, that, that way. I feel stronger, more comfortable in that sense; not that way – you see, I’m not cut out for bureaucratic issues, I ... eh... But yes, being in this place is like... I feel like that it’s not like that, but I feel stronger, like I’m doing something; I have a sense of fulfilment [...]” (Sandra, interview, 2017).

Betancourt distinguishes this subjective dimension of a territory to go beyond a utilitarian vision of control, or as a source, of resources. This refers to the intensity with which a community or social movement takes possession of a territory in a way that each person contributes to creating a bond, an attachment which can be summarised in the phrase: “to lose their territory is to disappear with it” (*perder seu territorio é desaparecer*) (2017: 318).¹⁶²

Therefore, the idea of “neighbours” about the territory cannot be analysed separately from their identity (there they constituted themselves in different ways defining a position in the conflict) and the communities’ way of being (an identification or the bearing of attributes of being from there). The territory seems to contain all this and at the same time allows them to express the way they see reality with respect to the conflict.

Our heritage, our legacy

Giving the riverside a heritage connotation showed how the Assembly NHOC was directing its efforts towards a historical and cultural resignification of the place that could involve others. More recently, and outside of the time frame being analysed here,¹⁶³ one fact confirmed my earlier observations on this ongoing collective initiative. I received a message from Nieves in 2021 saying that a “neighbour” from NHOC had found an article about Bernal’s riverside in a local blog (she always did so, sometimes almost daily and each time we spoke for two hours on the phone).

¹⁶²Betancourt alluded to a quote by Bonnemaïson and Cambézy (not cited in bibliography) in Haesbaert (2002: 49) about territorialisation and the belonging to a territory:

Haesbaert, R. (2002). Concepções de território para entender desterritorialização. En: Santos, Milton, Becker, Bertha et al. *Território, territórios: ensaios sobre o ordenamento territorial* (Niterói: PPGeo/UFF).

¹⁶³ This connects with what I mentioned in the introduction of the dissertation about the maturation of some matters within the movement. Both the “neighbours” and I needed time to understand what their ideas were heading for and why certain things were being done the way they did for the defence of the place. Over time some dots were finally connected to shape what I present in this dissertation.

The original tape, from 1907, of the world's first commercial pornographic footage had been recorded there, and it was guarded by the Film Archive of the Kinsley Institute at the Indiana University, United States. *"In the riverside of Quilmes there were brothels; there were boys taken by family or friends for their first sexual experience; there was also prostitution in the area"*, she told me during that conversation.

The movie was available on the Internet, so together with some "neighbours" they watched it because they wanted to find similarities between the wetlands landscape from 100 years ago and the same place today. It served somehow as a window into the past in order to understand its deteriorated state in the present.

That was a time when the words "pollution", "nature destruction" or "environmental suffering" were unknown to the people, when they did not have to worry about being there and when bathing in the river was a normal thing to do.

"There are the casuarinas [a native tree] further away; you can see the little house [La Tapera] that inhabitants say was already there before the first great flood of 1914 [...] Do you know where that place is located? No? Look! That's the path of the paper mill's workers! Still surrounded by trees [...]" Nieves went on sending me photos of what they were re-exploring while walking in a small group and observing the area as in a new form of landscape exploration.

Historians passionate about Quilmes echoed the news as a "great discovery" for the popular identity and the local culture.

The national newspaper Clarín wrote an article about this, titled "Porn cinema is an Argentine creation like the *dulce de leche*",¹⁶⁴ meaning that both the movie and the traditional milk cream consumed in the country were part of the national inventory.

In it, Fernando San Martín, a renowned photographer in Quilmes, provided information on those early days of the 20th century, facts also referred to by older "neighbours" and riverside inhabitants. The women acting in the film were prostitutes working on Maciel Island (Isla Maciel) located at a short distance from Bernal, he explained. By then, there was a lot of activity by the river as it was more accessible and there were recreational areas such as the "Casilla de Cuitiño". It was a small hut where people could have a barbecue, be in nature or spend the night near the beach at some shacks run by riverside inhabitants.

"What will the assembly do with this information?" I asked Nieves. *"We are going to declare the area as a cultural historical heritage; maybe we'll put up some signs about it so that people learn this about the riverside"*, she said. I do not know whether they put up those signs, but since then they have invoked these historical facts as part of the riverside traditions, in what they tell to people during the walks expecting that they will tell others.

¹⁶⁴ Firpo, H. (12/6/2021). Finding: porn cinema is an Argentine invention like *dulce de leche*. Section: Shows/Cinema. Clarín. https://www.clarin.com/espectaculos/cine/hallazgo-cine-porno-invento-argentino-dulce-leche_0_DUf9Etko3.html

In an article written collectively by the Assembly NHOC in 2015, the “neighbours” had already tried to bring the readers’ attention to those huts or similar structures which have turned into an historical, cultural, and geographical spot by the river. They mentioned La Tapera, a typical house built 100 years ago which seems to have survived time:

“[...] A meeting place with the other neighbours, friends, and acquaintances was the ‘House in Ruins Recreation, where it rains and doesn’t leak’ [*la Tapera Recreación, donde llueve y no gotea*’]. It was a sheet metal box built on stilts back in 1914, which **resisted floods and east winds and endures till today**. There, some *bailongos* (popular dances) were organised, and while the parents danced to the rhythm of an orchestra playing in the place, the children played, had fun, bathing and splashing in the river. [...].

On the last weekend we signalled the reserve (in 2012 the first posters were installed indicating its existence) and a sign was placed indicating La Tapera as a **site as historical cultural heritage** (*patrimonio histórico cultural*) [...]” (Assembly NHOC, April 2015).

The collective proclamation of this place as “heritage” when looking at the photograph may raise doubts about why a place like this could mean so much to people. For this reason, I would like to examine why this might happen among people participating in the Assembly NHOC.



Figure 24: **La Tapera**. Photo by Assembly NHOC. 2015.

First, the symbolic attribute of a place¹⁶⁵ (or that of any other object that can be made patrimonial) is given by its ability to express people's ideas and values in relation to a popular identity. For this to happen one of two things is necessary: a) the cultural legitimization of certain historical or symbolic references, or b) the call for a sensibility given by a romanticism through reasons associated with history (legendary deeds or facts embodying good and bad, for example) (Prats, 1997: 22-23).

Second, the imminence of an "extinction" (which had motivated the love of the "neighbours" for the place as examined in the previous chapter) could also be regarded as a factor precipitating the patrimonialisation process. This refers not to the fact of this place becoming extinct, but rather to what people regard as happening. Prats puts it in the following terms by saying that obsolescence and scarcity could be "heritage activators", which refers to those criteria prompting people's selection of "what is to be valorised" (1997:28).

Third, heritage as a political resource expects to counter the territorial representations trying to impose a project that is not the communities' because NCP actually represents an ending of the possibilities of continuation of that place.

By doing this not only might the place become lost and forgotten, but also a cultural identification with it could be washed away as I said before: "*actually, they made it invisible in order to make us believe that there are people with special powers who can make it come into view again* [referring to Techint, after promising that it would make the riverside accessible to people]" (NHOC, 2015).

Until today, NHOC or any other *asamblea* have not requested the municipal or provincial recognition of the riverside as such through the existing institutional and legal channels. The "neighbours" only did some signalling and released some public pronouncements through the media mentioning that the riverside was a patrimony. Patrimony has "circulated" mainly within the neighbourhood movement as a form of knowledge or something that could be done, generating in any case the possibility of representing nature as a legacy.

Historically, the place was the setting of the English invasions in the 19th century and the settlement of the Kilmes people as its first dwellers but the Municipality of Quilmes has not formally answered my requests regarding whether these facts have promoted a patrimonial form of recognition or protection for the riverside.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Prats bases his idea of "symbolic efficacy" on the work of Clifford Geertz (*The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1987) who developed the concept from a perspective of religion as a system of symbols. Geertz established a relationship between a vision of the world and the *ethos* from which that vision comes from that is involved in how something becomes patrimonial. In substitution of religion for patrimonial representation, Prats set elements to account for that: "a) systems of symbols, b) that those symbols act arousing powerful and lasting dispositions among the members of a community, c) by formulating identity conceptions belonging to that community, and d) giving those conceptions an input of reality" (Prats, 1997:29-32). He mentions a fifth element ("that their motivations and dispositions seem to emanate from the strictest reality") that I consider redundant here.

¹⁶⁶ I contacted the House of Culture of Quilmes, dependent on the municipality, that deals with cultural and heritage issues during April 2022.

A traditional sports association such as the Pejerrey Club (founded in 1938) was distinguished as a historical monument by the National Commission of Museums and Historical Monuments and Places, dependent on the National Ministry of Culture. The “neighbours” currently assert that despite this patrimonial decision, it is currently in a state of abandonment by the municipality, hence the club’s support of NCP in order to regain institutional recognition.

In Avellaneda, the relevance of the farms in Sarandí as a patrimony had been claimed in 2005 by the Secretary of Culture, Education, and Promotion of Arts at the Municipality of Avellaneda.¹⁶⁷

The idea of this specific place as heritage still continues in the social imaginary, although it would never have received official acknowledgement as such – which cannot be verified because this municipality did not answer my questions in 2022 either.

I assert that the concept of patrimony manifested by NHOC has been limited so far to the identification and appraisal of what might turn it into a heritage. This might be explained in that some “neighbours” had manifested their fear that the “promoters” would want to take advantage of the ruinous or marginal representation attributed to the riverside to advance on its “civilisation”.

THE HISTORICAL MEMORY IN TERRITORY AND PATRIMONY

From 2014 to 2018, the “neighbours” embarked on the rescue of places, landscapes, and tales linked to the riverside as *lieux de mémoire* (Roberts, 2020: 29) which had fallen into social and governmental oblivion.

Their efforts around them aimed at making it so that “memories could cluster and nostalgia was able to flourish” (Roberts, 2020: 141), mobilising the past and not letting it die. In a territory reinvented, repossessed and reimagined after years of mapping, signalling and reconnaissance, people were able to identify other elements that would help them to commemorate not only a local identification, but also what they as “neighbours” had in common.

The same happened with the past experiences of people that are transformed into stories and made known so that the past is not just a memory.

On April 2015, the Assembly NHOC uploaded an article collectively written on the website of the Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River aimed at using “*memory to change our reality*”¹⁶⁸ by linking this to their idea of legacy:

“Many times we hear stories from our elders about picnics outdoors and weekends spent by the river. Distant stories, recalling pleasant moments of enjoyment and sharing with others. ‘La Peti’, a neighbour of Bernal, says that her father was a coal seller and on the weekends they used to go to the river.

The ceremony began with the preparation of what was necessary for spending time there: benches, cutlery, plates; the father saddled the horse and loaded the grill to make the fire for the barbecue; the mother brought the vegetables for the salad, and the children took care of the tennis rackets. And the ball to play with on the beach.

¹⁶⁷ Secretariat of Production. Undersecretary of the Environment and Natural Resources. (2005). “Ecological reserve area. Cultural heritage” released by *the Ministry of Culture, Education and Promotion of the Arts. Cities and localities of Avellaneda. Municipality of Avellaneda.*

<http://www.culteducaavellaneda.com.ar/noticias/wmprint.php?ArtID=120> Last accessed: April 2011.

¹⁶⁸ The translation into English was made by me in June 2021. To access the narrative in its original language, click here: <https://www.fororiodelaplata.com.ar/recuperando-nuestra-historia-memoria-para-cambiar-nuestra-realidad/?fbclid=IwAR1yLYPIBQuHeMdJGJsyHk2ZKyf22R0r5hleP0EB1IAdYPoB5mEdin0EzZM>

Having put these things inside of their car, they would leave for the river down Avellaneda Street, their only official stop being the bakery located in front of the Bernal Sanatorium. People used to buy bread and pastry there before going to the riverside. Once they reached their destination, the second stage began, finding a place and unhitching the horse from the cart, unloading things, building a fire, heating the water for the mate, and starting the weekend at the riverside [...].” (Assembly NHOC, 14/4/2015).

The use of the past to cause something to become different today or simply a different perspective is demonstrated with the use of legends and other sorts of local stories as I will show next. The memory of a community or any social group affects the construction of something as common, for example a given place or the ideas around it, and helps to tell new generations the stories that might shape a legacy.

Riverside stories

The “Evil of the Willow Tree” (*Mal del Sauce*) is a story widely known among the “coastal people” that NHOC brought back to the knowledge of the population in the districts. This legend, as it is presently known, has a double meaning: first, it appeals to something that has always happened to people at the riverside, and second, it speaks of an infatuation, of a spell that nobody can escape because it will haunt forever those who get to know the place (Morelli, 2008). Recalled by the “neighbours” on the occasion of guided walks, it was taken by them as an indisputable part of the riverside culture with imaginary elements only given in that location.

I have heard about this legend a dozen times from “neighbours” or from the inhabitants of the riverbanks themselves although it is Elvira who tells it best (I tell her story in the first chapters).

As a historical inhabitant of La Ribera Bernal she often tells others the following about the legend, as it was registered in a research journal article:

“[...] the south-eastern breeze and the attractiveness of the waters that bathe the shore **hypnotise strangers and force them to return. The scent of plants, the sounds of nature, boat rides, sunset walks. The sensations they experience do not allow them to think about anything else** and, faced with this impediment to return, **nostalgia becomes an inescapable constant in their lives**. This is how many ended up settling in the neighbourhood.

‘The infamous *Mal del Sauce!*’ Elvira exclaims, containing her laughter, when she reveals the mystery.

Her words spurt out of her mouth: ‘It’s that **romantic feeling felt by those who come that make you never leave again.**’ Elvira mentions that she once was about to leave, when she broke up with her husband, but later she regretted it. Turning her head from side to side, she assures that she could not live outside of La Ribera Bernal and that the tranquillity that she and her children feel when the sun rises could not be found anywhere else. ‘Outdoors, running, playing in the street. Here the boys are free, happy’. **She, better than anyone, understands what the Evil of the Willow is all about. She has had it for 21 years [...].**” (Bustamante, 2017).

Having been passed down orally, it reflected local beliefs, sensations and feelings and represented an integrated part of the communities’ folklore. Juan, a “neighbour” of the Assembly NHOC, explained to me how he felt about the “Evil of the Willow Tree” and how it was useful for their political resistance:

“It’s good when you find out about a legend that you identify with; it’s good; it’s then when you’re in those spaces that you always need to come back to at some point [...]” (Interview, 2017).

In addition, memories of events experienced by the communities as local shared tragedies have also been brought into the present in order to underline “their” version of history linked to the riverside territory. Two floods are still alive in people’s stories, especially among those over 50 years old who were born or grew up by the La Plata River. One of those events was from 1951, when the water washed away a neighbourhood of which nothing remains except what people recall of it. The other took place in 1958 and is described by neighbours when making reference to the environmental history of the territory:

“It was on a Saturday, 26th July 1958, shortly before midnight. The unexpected advancement of water alerted the Prefecture, the Volunteer Firefighters, the police, and the municipal authorities. In a few hours it reached a height of 3.5 metres, producing scenes that were quite dramatic and heroic.

The families that were able to escape in time went up Otamendi Street with few belongings. About 500 people found refuge in the fire station on Garibaldi Street. Those who had survived the flood of 1940 perceived a similar drama. Like then, all the governmental agencies were vigilant [...]. In Bernal, the river reached Caseros Avenue [three kilometres away from the river heading west]. The firefighters rescued from the waters about 1,500 people, who received first-aid assistance at the barracks of 9 de Julio Street [...].

At dawn, the Provincial Chief of Police, Inspector General Parotti, began to tour the affected areas with a helicopter and Navy boats in order to detect possible victims. But the strong currents driven by the roar of the wind made their work difficult” (Blog El Quilmero, July 2010).¹⁶⁹

Tales from the “*vecinos*” have included water, but also fire, both elements that people have lived with in connection with the riverside. Their memories of this helped neighbours to talk about the dangers of industrial and chemical activities in Avellaneda and Quilmes and how they have affected the population:

“There were times when things were happening, in ‘98, but what I mean to say is the collective unconscious, imagine... In 1998 the Mothers of Wilde Towers organised around a specific event: a fire in the sanitary landfill [in Villa Domínico, Avellaneda], right? The garbage raises temperature, generates gases, and that made it raise more temperature than normal and it caught fire, and I don’t remember when exactly, but the fire lasted 15 days and they couldn’t put it out; that was when people said, there is a sanitary landfill active there! Then, the fact that in 1998 the Perito Moreno [a 15,000-ton ship that carried out fuel unloading manoeuvres at Dock Sud] also caught fire at the Petrochemical District, residents told the firemen, ‘che, put out the fire!’ ‘No’, they replied back, ‘we have this order...’, and they did not tell people that the order they were given was to cool the oil tanks [of the ship, instead of extinguishing the fire] because there could be a chain reaction and everything [in its vicinity] would blow up if they didn’t do so [...]” (Nieves, Assembly NHOC, 2016).

¹⁶⁹ Research and publication by Chalo Agnelli, historian. Blog *El Quilmero*: <https://elquilmero.blogspot.com/2010/07/las-aguas-del-plata.html>

Despite these efforts to remember and to make people remember, it can be said that the stories remained confined to the interactions among local groups or in any case, were part of press releases in a few cases. Some of these stories were compiled in the book *Bosque Nativo* (2022) that as a collective project expected to generate some written record about them and thus, prevent them from being lost.

The commons

Mostly influenced by assemblies that were already involved in the defence of wetlands in coastal areas like Vicente López and Hudson in Berazategui, there was another noticeable turn in the “neighbours” counter-discourse during this period. The Assembly NHOC, still leading the local struggle to protect native forests, adopted the notion of *commons* or *bienes comunes*. In addition to their conception of *territory* as a social construction, people highlighted the place’s attribute of being somewhere where they had engaged in such a making together, as something shared equally. Such change could also be attributed to the exchange with activist academics who had been working with the neighbourhood groups and expressed a leftist view of corporate and governmental practices that affected people. The problems of the urban context and the making of contemporary cities as well as conflicts were explained by these specialists as being powered by neoliberalism.

The “neighbours” idea of *commons* translated as “*the water, the air, the energy of the sun and the moon, the soil, the Earth as a planet, which should not be understood as exchange goods or mercantile resources for individual use, but as essential goods for the development of Life*”¹⁷⁰ (2021). Please note the use of the capital letter by the “neighbours” to emphasise what they treasure the most: life. By invoking the *bienes comunes* they made denunciations as an assembly, or as part of a larger collective, to oppose everything that went against life in natural and public places such as the banks of the La Plata River. It did not matter if it was an urban development project, the construction of a new highway or the settling of another landfill; the wetlands and forests were untouchable.

Over time, the *commons* were linked by the “neighbours” to specific views on how nature was being treated not only in Argentina but also in Latin America. First, the commodification of nature was in fact part of “*an activism [but on the part of corporations and international capital or business interests] to the detriment of Life*” as argued by NHOC in 2021.

¹⁷⁰ This idea was manifested by members of the Assembly NHOC in a collective writing carried out in 2021 with me for a book chapter on urban extractivism coordinated by Patricia Pintos (National University of La Plata) and Sofia Astelarra (University of Buenos Aires). Before deciding on the contents of the chapter we worked on the main ideas that represented the case for NCP in relation to the “colonisation” of the riverside proposed by the promoters. Our understanding of urban extractivism was examined through two categories – “territorial occupation” and “conflict” – in order to establish an epistemological and conceptual approach to the subject.

Second, nature was part of dispossession logic by “big capital” through the intensive occupation of territories and the displacement of forms of production as well as populations in the cities (Svampa, 2019).

I repeat the assertion that *commons* and NHOC’s notion of “territory” are connected in relation to the significance that spaces like the riverside achieve for people based on forms of social cooperation and community use that take place in them (Svampa, 2019: 56). Against land grabbing and overexploitation of nature, the “neighbours” asserted their right to say no in this way, also revealing the asymmetries that had been aggravated in the conflict.

Seen from a more empirical perspective, in the midst of tensions over the reorganisation of native forests in the Province of Buenos Aires, the Assembly NHOC together with other organisations denounced the fact that the recently approved law N° 14.888/17 reduced the ecological value of forest areas so as to turn them into land available for real-estate business.

On World Wetlands day, these “neighbours” released a press release calling for a protest at the Ministry of Environment of the City of Buenos Aires. They urged that these areas now referred to as commons should “*not be handed over to economic power*”:



Figure 25: **Popular celebration of “World Wetlands Day”.**
“Come and defend the native forest. More forests, less flood”.

Coordinating Committee for the Native Forests of Buenos Aires. Source: NHOC. 1/2/2017.

“*Why defend them?*” they asked out loud. They answered for themselves: “Because they offer ecological benefits, they regulate the temperature of the environment, function as a reservoir of diversity; they are the ecosystems that produce the most biomass”. They also clarified that in the province of Buenos Aires, most wetlands are closely related to native forests, so wetlands could not be protected without protecting forests.

Right towards the end of the flyer they asked “do not hand over *our common goods!*”, which became a motto when signing their public statements.

The entrenchment

This is the most physical aspect of the riverside’s spatialisation that NHOC carried out between 2014 and 2018, after the “anthill” (“*hormiguero*”). The *entrenchment* is how I define a tangible and intangible action in a context of “war”, as voiced during interviews carried out between 2016 and 2018 by participants of the Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River, the Assembly of Wilde, United by the River Bernal, but especially NHOC. It refers to: 1) a particular type of construction that the “neighbours” carried out by themselves at the riverside, and also, 2) the places where these trenches or ditches were built and represent a refuge or a fortification of the territory in conflict.

The trenches have to do, in my understanding, with a more prolonged stay of a group of people in the terrain of resistance and a more intense political activity at the riverside, which affected “the ways that people related to each other as well as influencing social power relations in everyday life” (Sultana, 2015: 639).

Some “neighbours” were dedicated full-time to defending the place because they had precarious jobs, but some also quit their jobs because they decided to dedicate themselves to resistance.

I was in Avellaneda on my way to interview two “neighbours”¹⁷¹ from the Assembly NHOC and a local group from Wilde, respectively, when the first of them arrived. Nieves was worried, furious because she had just learned from people staying at the riverside that 4,000m² of forest had been cleared at Bernal’s riverside.

“*What happened? Who did this? What is the level of destruction?*” her phone kept ringing. She was trying to coordinate what to do with other assemblies while she explained to me that hundred-year-old trees had been uprooted, including *talas* (*Celtis ehrenbergiana*), *ceibos* (*Erythrina crista-galli*) and *curupíes* (*Sapium haematospermum*) in an area protected by national laws.¹⁷²

The “neighbours” also regretted that the destroyed area was part of the usual trail they used for their walks as it was part of the entrance to the wetlands through reed lands. They finally found out that it had been dismantled by the Municipality of Quilmes to carry out cleaning works that would allow the circulation of machinery for the unblocking of drainage channels.¹⁷³ The Undersecretary of the Environment, Alberto Chaia, assured people in the local media that the area was in fact not included in the categories for native forests’ protection being debated by the legislators.

¹⁷¹ Interview with Nieves and Carmen in July 2016.

¹⁷² The National law of minimum standards for the environmental protection of native forests.

¹⁷³ Assembly NHOC. Press release of 3/8/2016 under the title “*We keep waiting...*”.

What the municipality had done, he explained, was justified by the lack of such clearing in the previous fifteen years.¹⁷⁴

The neighbourhood assemblies summoned by NHOC demanded of the local authorities: 1) the environmental remediation of the place, 2) an integral management of urban solid waste so that the riverside ceased to be the district's garbage-disposal area, and 3) the resignation of the Secretary of Public Services, Oscar García, whom they accused of being directly responsible for what had happened.

At that time I was finishing my field work and leaving Argentina, but when I came back to Bernal in November 2017, the “neighbours” were still hands-on with the rebuilding of the area destroyed the year before: “[...] *We are showing that there is a workforce, will, and conviction supporting and accompanying the nature reserve, the wetlands and native forest!*” (NHOC, 2017).¹⁷⁵

Back at the riverside, I noticed that there was an unusual number of cars heading down the street that led to the protected area in Bernal. That is when the “neighbours” told me that the Don Bosco Rugby Club had cleared another forest area to build a parking lot and facilities for sports practice. The assembly had noticed a strange movement of people, whom they followed, thereby discovering another instance of deforestation. Simultaneously, rumours began to come in from riverside inhabitants about the Municipality of Quilmes' plan to eradicate wetland areas at the end of Italia Avenue, next to the water treatment plant, which finally happened sometime later.

So more recently, trying to get to the river during the walks organised at the riverside involved moving through a desolate landscape amidst physical and environmental changes observing how the natural surroundings had been razed to the ground.

But I also noticed that the “neighbours” had planted lots of native trees and that they had put up new signs indicating that it was a protected area: “*Native species. Quilmes-Avellaneda Nature Reserve. Protected by National Forest Law No. 26.331. Littering prohibited*”.

Another sign was addressed to deforesters to stop the destruction of a place where natural processes were taking place, as they knew from the biologists they worked with: “*Electric trimmers refrain. Wildlife refuge. Spontaneous vegetation recovers the soil*”.

¹⁷⁴ No author indicated. (25/7/2016). They ask for the resignation of a local secretary for the clearing of a forest. *La Política Online*. <https://www.lapoliticaonline.com/nota/99164-piden-la-renuncia-de-un-secretario-de-martiniano-por-el-desmonte-de-un-bosque/>

¹⁷⁵ The assembly used the following heading for the communication: “*Collective workday to continue recovering the native forest!*” (November 2017).



Figure 26: **Nature in recovery, do not deforest.** Photo by Vanina Santy. 2017.

A “neighbour” of NHOC went on telling me that they had removed mountains of garbage and rubble that they had found there, so by planting trees they meant to say to the municipalities that it was not a place for littering. In some of those signs, they also resorted more than ever to legal references to avoid the loss of those tree species that they continued to plant, at the same time that they enacted warnings not to touch nature.

Unfortunately, the intended deterrence failed to achieve the assemblies’ objectives where the posters had been put up, including the cleared area.

“It does not matter, nature recovers by itself; we are the ones who will not survive as a species”, someone in the group asserted (field note, 2017).

When I walked towards people who were getting there by bicycle, Sandra prevented me from stepping onto the “trench”. I looked down at a 7-metre-long row of large stones (probably construction debris dumped on the riverbank). Later, another “neighbour” would also refer to a “trench” when pointing to the piling-up of some wood or old doors between the place where we had left our belongings and tools and the new planted trees. With a stick in her hands, Sandra made jokes about no one daring to set foot there again from then on.

I asked myself why they would call this stone formation a “trench” and what did it mean located at the entrance of the nature reserve. Maybe it was built in relation to their new representation of the riverside as a *territory, patrimony* (or *commons*), taking the battle directly into their own hands.

It seemed to be a defensive line established to mark a boundary and a difference with others (figure 27). There were those who struggled for nature protection on one side, and on the other those who were destroying it. I first thought of the “trench” as a space between destruction and protection, constructed at a time when they felt tired by all that was happening there, so maybe it was a “last resource”.

From a moral perspective, it also constituted a “there” in which urban problems such as waste management and the disappearance of public spaces continued to worsen like in the city, and a “here” holding the possibilities of building something different through good practices in relation to nature – for example, the dry toilet and sustainable care of the nature reserve.

The trench transformed the riverside into a “shelter” in which they protected themselves from the “enemies” that Techint and the municipalities represented. Hence, the invaders or destroyers were not being allowed to get in that place, and if they did, they would take action. They were being warned by the signs and messages written on them as soon as anyone entered the riverside.



Figure 27: The “trench”. Photo by Vanina Santy. 2018.

The “trench” as well as the “anthill” were indeed places articulating differences and similarities for the assemblies. Both of them offered refuge and constituted self-made spaces that gave them a sense of work organisation from below as well as a collective identity reflecting these territorial processes. The resistance was groundwork because they did not identify themselves with how things worked and because others regarded them as being marginal groups, as I have mentioned before. In those spaces limiting with the nature reserve (trench), or the terrain where the assemblies grouped (anthill or *hormiguero*), the “neighbours” defined their space of struggle and put politics into practice.

While collective cooperation was being organised like this, a growing discord was setting a confrontational tone between the “neighbours” of NHOC and other actors with whom tensions arose. Such was the case with the riverside inhabitants who observed the trucks transporting garbage to be littered there, but who avoided getting involved.

The “neighbours” fought in a hostile context and needed all the help they could get but they could not force the riverside dwellers to do what they did not want to do, for this reason, many of those who collaborated with the assembly began to be seen as “enemies”:

Juan: *They [the company and local authorities] said that NCP attempted to de-privatise the coast.*

Carlos: *Yes.*

Juan: *That was unacceptable for us so four or five people reacted [in a public event organised by the “promoters”], yelling at them, me included, because they were lying to our faces, because no, no, no... Do not play dumb with that, let’s say, an enemy who comes, eeehh... is preferable.*

Carlos: *Head-on!*

Juan: ***An enemy who comes head-on to conquer you and that’s it; that is, we’ll see how we will solve it to defend ourselves but don’t come at me and say something like that expecting me to say “thank you” back [...].*** (Juan and Carlos, December 2017).

The possibility of opening up spaces for dialogue with the authorities of Quilmes had been rendered ineffective after the deforestation of 2016. In addition, the provincial project A-1/15-16 proposed by OPDS, which the rest of the assemblies opposed, did nothing more than feed the idea of “institutional violence” by a state indifferent to popular claims.¹⁷⁶

How to react to that as common people when the state, which should take care of people, does not do so? “*We are not giving up, we are going to continue fighting in this battle*”,¹⁷⁷ affirmed NHOC at the end of 2016, when deputies and senators of the Province of Buenos Aires promulgated the law that reordered native forests according to new governmental standards.

¹⁷⁶ The idea of “institutional violence” corresponds to field notes carried out during some interviews in the course of investigation. It gained greater emphasis in the unfolding of the conflict during these years.

¹⁷⁷ Email from a “neighbour” on 22/12/2016 when I asked how the assemblies would react to law N ° 14.888/17, which had just been approved.

Moral ecology of “neighbours” under threat

One significant aspect of the practices described is the morality behind them, especially in relation to their identity expressions as “*vecinos*” and “nature lovers” in the sense of good behaviour. Their *moral ecology* takes on a materiality that reflects categorically how their priorities, emotions, and ideas address the growing immorality they witness in the place, so:

- a) the *territory* is a way of social interaction in relation to a place through certain forms, it is their doing and it gains value because it was accomplished by them,
- b) the *patrimony* is related to leaving something essential to others because it is the right thing to do and, moreover, it is the way nature should be treated,
- c) the *trench* represents leaving physical marks on the territory indicating where good and evil stand, distinctions also marked by an emotional aspect that people share (indignation, frustration and fear).

By this I do not mean that the “neighbours” became moralists but that in the chaotic scenario in which they lived, the exchange involving the banks of the La Plata River adhered much more to a way of honouring life (hence nature).

Although it was already considered a space of life during the reinvention of the place between 2012 and 2014, now life was redefined in connection with:

- a) the values and meanings held, brought or raised by them in the territory to protect the ecosystem,
- b) the conception of a commonality as a place they inherited and has to be defended for others that possess it too,
- c) the limits to speculation and destruction demand a more belligerent action as setting a first front line (the part of an army for example that is closest to the enemy).

This meant opening up their cultural system as a group to new practices and also to deepening feelings or sensations that they had previously expressed, such as love. Thus, the legacy, for example, was fostered by an emotional attachment of the “nature lovers” to the natural site, while the entrenchment came to protect this attachment by acting as their “guardians”.

Love is slowly incorporated into the moral ecology of the place through an intense form of affection and concern. It is the ultimate moral boundary that arises between “neighbours” because something cannot be loved without a commitment to it and in truth, nature can be destroyed today because people lost any form of connection with it.

This is what came up for me when I interviewed Carla in December 2017 when she told me about her love for the place understood as the need to risk her life to protect the place, not from a romantic position, from a stance more linked to a politics in action:

Carla: *No matter how busy I am with the garden [in her house], if I find out that tomorrow that they [the promoters of NCP] are thinking of using bulldozers, I lower the volume of my whole life and I settle in the nature reserve and they will have to take me out with hydrant trucks, like...*

I am willing to give everything I have to give so that it is understood that we are not in agreement because if up to now they have not been able to make a public consultation or to tell the truth because the municipality has never told the truth; they never say what they have to say and the last thing they did was an enormous clearing in the area in July last year; it is like, well, they are not listening to us and they will not listen to us, they do not want to listen to us, let's say, and we are going to continue saying what we have to say [...].

Vanina Santy (researcher): *What does the coast, the native forest, the river, the wetlands represent for you?*

Carla: [...] ***What is the connection? Why is my heart still beating even though I am not “activating”?*** ***And what I think is to me it is linked in general to the feeling of common good [...].*** (NHOC, 2017).

The practices linked to this love, as I will show in the next and last chapter, are carried out by these “nature lovers” engaging more than ever with the place. Their actions protect and set boundaries between actors and their practices and their motivations, but also contribute to the continuation of the riverside.

Conclusions: Mobilising what belongs to everyone

In these pages I examined what can be summarised as the consolidation of a spatiality observed at the riverside in connection with collective resistance. This space, as the result of assemblies' in-place struggle, recognises “a shape-shifting and pluridimensional form” (Roberts, 2020: 5) through the incorporation of conceptual, immaterial, and physical facets to create its *transcendence*.

The *transcendence* is a process through which the “neighbours” shape that socially produced space by reconceiving it, reinventing it and questioning its forms and mechanisms of organisation to make it unique and off-limits to “enemies”. That is, by physically keeping private interests, the municipalities and squatters away through demarcations and trenches and subjectively appropriating interpretations of the place, they protect something to be bequeathed to others.

As I see it, this is a search for transcendence for the “neighbours” themselves too, so that their struggle will endure and what they do will have a significant impact in the future.

The *territory*, *patrimony* and *entrenchment* are part of the imaginaries and knowledge with which NHOC creates an all-encompassing value for the place. When the protests do not work, and when land occupation and deforestation continue, the only resource left is to activate what is already there: a way of making it and of transmitting it to others.

These three elements are interconnected in their temporality (they correspond to this moment in this specific form of conflict), in their materiality (they have a physical aspect), and in their way of containing versions of a collective identity that does not happen anywhere else.

The *moral ecology* of the “neighbours” continues to resort to *memory* by identifying common references (places, objects, legends) that belong to the communities as a way of confronting an advancing destruction. There is also an emotional state of people that led to an affective connection with the wetlands and forests, primarily love, but also anger and frustration about this situation.

The *commons*, very much connected with resistance and the collective idea of patrimony, comes to fulfil a moral rather than a legal role (it was not defined as such in the law until then) and a subjective rather than a practical one. The relationship with nature, from the perspective of the *moral ecology* that assemblies have now, shows that nature is not an object or something “out there”, but a human condition that is inalienable and that includes everybody and should, therefore, be cared for as such.

THE CONFLICT: NUEVA COSTA DEL PLATA IS BACK AGAIN (2016-2018)

These last few years have shown a powerful victory for Techint, or the private sector it embodies, in the environmental legal arena. At the same time, the loss of collective strength contrasts with the first repercussions of what NHOC wants to leave as a legacy, since other assemblies in the region also involved in environmental conflicts have started to reproduce the moral ecology linked to the La Plata River.

“Techint’s law”

With the approval of new sustainability criteria under law N° 14.888/17 by the Provincial Chamber of Deputies (as established in national law N° 26.331/07), environmental organisations that had opposed it between 2014 and 2017 denounced the commodification of native forests to favour sectoral interests and corporations.¹⁷⁸

From now on, the Province of Buenos Aires would rule a ban on deforestation for 80% of 969,000 hectares (total surface of forest areas) while the rest could be subject to economic development. Despite that prohibition, the municipalities still kept their right to intervene in areas of ecological value through infrastructure works or enabling real-estate investment and agricultural production (articles 12 and 14) prior to environmental impact assessment and public consultation.

In the riverside of Avellaneda and Quilmes that translated into the loss of 1,000 hectares, as claimed by the neighbourhood assemblies, due to their change in classification from areas of high ecological value to medium and low conservation ones, making them eligible for development. However, this is difficult to prove without official information from the municipalities.

The Minister of Agroindustry of Buenos Aires, Leonardo Sarquís, announced “the great news” in the media about the conversion of those forests into productive lands so, as a consequence, they would no longer depend on the OPDS or be affected by environmental legislation. The forestry industry would benefit the most because investments and economic activity could be now promoted by the government in places not accessible to capital before.

Leftist media named regulation N° 14.888/17 “Techint’s Law”, alluding to the lobby campaign that the company would have led to get a forestry arrangement that matched the legal and spatial needs of NCP.¹⁷⁹ The Assembly NHOC remarked that it was a new affront from the political power in relation to the environment; it was “violent”, according to them, because people had all the technical, scientific, legal, social arguments on their side, yet they could not protect a public place (field note, 2018). Local organisations from southern districts and regional ones asked the new Governor of the Province of Buenos Aires, María Eugenia Vidal (elected for the mandate 2015-2019) to veto the law. In case they were not heard, they warned that they would file a legal presentation, and so they did. It is currently waiting for a resolution in the Supreme Court of Justice at both federal and provincial levels. The former Deputy Director of the Institute of Environmental Law of the La Plata Bar Association stated that the new forest classification was unconstitutional: biological criteria had not been used to establish what sort of forests would encompass the new ordering and what sort of protection corresponded to each forest area surveyed.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ In January 2017, it aimed to establish the provisions to be used for the interpretation and enforcement of national law N° 26.331 of minimum standards for the protection of native forests.

¹⁷⁹ - Belmonti, D. (28/12/2016). Socio-environmental conflict. Approved scandalous Techint forest law in the province of Buenos Aires. *La Izquierda Diario. PTS (Socialist Workers Party) on the left side*. Society/Ecology an environment. <https://www.laizquierdadiario.com/Aprobada-escandalosa-ley-Techint-de-bosques-en-provincia-de-Buenos-Aires>. Last accessed: 10/3/2022.

- Aranda, D. (22/2/2017). Social organisations in alert for the forest law approved in the province. “More power for the corporate sector”. *Página 12*. <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/19270-mas-poder-para-las-empresas> Last accessed: 10/3/2022.

¹⁸⁰ Sosa, S. (23/2/2017). “The Territorial Planning of Native Forests approved by Law 14.888 is unconstitutional.”

National and international organisations such as Fundación Vida Silvestre Argentina (Argentine Wildlife Foundation) together with Greenpeace and the Environment and Natural Resources Foundation (Fundación Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, FARN) publicly expressed their disagreement with the public consultation process and other irregularities.¹⁸¹

As differences built up on an unprecedented scale, the local newspapers reported on the return of *Nueva Costa del Plata*. “*Techint, what insistent people!*” was the title of a news article on the digital journal *El Suburbano* (The Suburban) in February 2018.¹⁸² Despite a cautionary order that judicially had stopped the clearing in Avellaneda in 2012, municipal and provincial officials resumed the crusade for the approval of Techint’s project.

The sanction of law N° 14.888/17 had allowed the company to request the environmental evaluation of NCP before the OPDS. In the meantime, the municipalities of Avellaneda and Quilmes announced the rezoning of a farms area in Sarandí for a new industrial use (May 2017) and the creation of a biopark in the former sanitary landfill (August 2017) contemplated in the master plan of NCP. The new ordering of forests did not seem to protect the native forests from the growing devastation happening; rather, it seemed to foster it.

As per Techint’s request in the context of this new forest law, the OPDS summoned stakeholders for a public consultation concerning its environmental impact study under the new classification of forest areas.¹⁸³ The observations regarding the technical studies presented by Techint (many of them originally submitted to the municipalities in 2008) had to be sent to the provincial agency in writing, thus disabling the face-to-face discussion.

“7 times no!!” was the answer from the “neighbours” from Avellaneda and Quilmes to the OPDS:

[NO now!] NO! In 2008 when NCP was presented to our communities.

NO! In 2011 during the first audience and participatory workshops for the ordering of native forests.

NO! In 2012 when Techint deforested an area in Avellaneda.

NO! In 2013 and 2014 when the project A-1/15-16 was put forward by OPDS.

NO! In 2016 when the forest classification matched the needs of Techint to move on with NCP.”

Diario DPI. Environmental Journal N° 144. https://dpicuantico.com/area_diario/doctrina-en-dos-paginas-diario-ambiental-nro-144-23-02-2017/ Last accessed: 17/5/2021.

¹⁸¹These three organisations had presented before provincial agencies the document “Forest Law: not a step back” (2013), to which more than 80 organisations, professionals and other social actors agreed that “processes for the conservation of forests should not go backwards, but on the contrary, gradually increase and optimise these processes. Some environmental principles that supported this resolution were those of “international equity”, “progressiveness” and “sustainability” already stipulated in law N° 25.675 (General Environmental Law).

- Argentine Wildlife Foundation. (October 2013). “Forest law: not a step back”. <https://www.vidasilvestre.org.ar/?8463/Ni-un-paso-atrs-en-los-avances-forestales> Last accessed: 10/2/2022.

- Di Pangraccio, A. (2014). “National law of native forests: implementation, implementation, implementation”. Environment and Natural Resources Foundation (FARN). <http://farn.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Ley-Nacional-de-Bosques-Nativos-por-Ana-Di-Pangraccio.pdf> Last accessed: March 2020.

- FARN. (01/2/1013). “Organisations alert about the little progress made in the application of the national forest law”. <https://farn.org.ar/organizaciones-advierten-pocos-avances-en-la-aplicacion-de-la-ley-de-bosques/> Last accessed: March 2020.

¹⁸² No author. (9/2/2018). “Techint, what insistent people!” *El Suburbano. Digital edition.* <http://elsuburbanodigital.com.ar/gente-insistente-esta-de-techint/> Last accessed: 13/2/2018.

¹⁸³ Official Bulletin of the Government of Buenos Aires. (1/11/2018).

<https://www.boletinoficial.gba.gob.ar/secciones/9139/ver#page=28> Last accessed: 16/4/2020.

A group of assemblies sent their arguments to the OPDS following the same argumentative line from 2008. Now and then there were environmental and social reasons to suspect that urban development would cause flooding, reduction of biodiversity, and other negative ecological and hydrological consequences for the population in the region – as well as legal ones, as the project would affect the nature reserve, an area still regarded as having high ecological conservation value. At the time of writing this dissertation, the provincial evaluation of the project as well as its environmental impact has not yet been announced by the OPDS (today the provincial Ministry of Environment).

Saracho, the filmmaker

In 2018, a fatal accident impacted on the neighbourhood assemblies, which led to the pessimism and political inactivity of those who once thought of themselves as “ants”, or Galochas. I reproduce below a brief chronicle of the events as reported by the magazine *La Vaca* published in September of that same year,¹⁸⁴ in order to make known the widespread impact of the accident on the network of assemblies and organisations resisting real-estate advancement:

“That full moon on 3 March, Néstor returned with his son, his mother and a friend of his, Gladys Romano, from a rather strange activity: a moon walk. ‘*Closer than NASA*’, that’s what the Assembly NHOC Quilmes-Avellaneda calls the nocturnal visits they make to the nature reserve in Bernal, which is always threatened by real-estate projects.

It was then that, at around 9.30pm, on Espora Street, the only access to the river but with no pavements or streetlights, a drunk driver ran over Néstor and Gladys, leaving the woman dead. Néstor was first in the intensive care unit of the Municipal Hospital of Quilmes, and then moved to the same ward but in the Cosme Argerich Hospital, in the neighbourhood of La Boca [Buenos Aires City].

As the days went by, the nurses began to receive strange visitors for the patient Saracho. “Strange people”, said one nurse, in a good way. And above all, “*a lot of people*”. Film directors, journalists, editors, former workers from factories, lawyers, unemployed people, researchers, children, and above all, his mother and his girlfriend. “*Wasn’t it that Néstor just filmed short films?*”, other family members asked his mother, but she was also surprised by the diversity of the crowd. In the first encounters at the Hospital de Quilmes in the queue to donate blood, in winter at 7am, the scene repeated itself:

-‘For which patient?’

-‘Néstor Saracho.’

-‘Another one! [...]’”

The question that arose among the “neighbours” of NHOC and Néstor himself was whether it was necessary to give one’s life for an environmental cause, and for that matter, why was it worth fighting for? From this moment on, a loss of sense of struggle on the part of those who were taking part in the neighbourhood assemblies began, as they questioned how to continue to resist NCP.

¹⁸⁴ No author. (16/09/2018). Néstor’s life: a film story. *Revista La Vaca*. <https://lavaca.org/mu127/la-vida-de-nessor-una-historia-de-pelicula/> Last accessed: 4/01/2024.

CHAPTER 9: Love of Nature. Engagement, Morals and Politics

“I once took a picture of myself here [at the riverside in Bernal] and I wrote down on the back ‘my place in the world’, and my wife saw it and said to me: ‘Ahhh, your place in the world? Stay there and do not come back home’ [people laugh]”.
(Carlos, Assembly NHOC. Ethnocartographic exercise, 2018).

So far, I have looked into the *moral ecology of the wetlands and forests ecosystem* at La Plata River through the conflict over NCP. I have examined the intersection of identity, memory (and nostalgia), spatiality, and the search of transcendence for the making of the riverside under a new sense of place. Now it is time to delve into the emotion of that moral ecology with *love* as the last component incorporated into the ethical ideals and ecological practices of the “*vecinos*” for the conservation of nature. Or as Horowitz put it, it is important “to recognise and embrace the role of emotion in moral reasoning” (2013), which leads to love in the case under analysis.

Why do people engage in the way I have shown so far over a natural environment? How do people fall in love with what they struggle so hard to protect? Why are the “neighbours” doing this after all the frustration and hardships that still continue? In retrospect, as I write these pages, I believe that the fascination with the river can be traced back in time but also found in a controversial reality with which many of them engage with the neighbourhood assemblies: their memories from childhood or even the culture linked to the riverside that the “neighbours” share, or from which they learned and produced knowledge together. Many others have simply surrendered to the beauty of the place, hence their identification with the legend of “the Evil of the Willow Tree”, and their desire to preserve the object of their love.

The love of nature has been present in many of the actions and narratives that I have shown, acting as a driving force that brought people together, and was at the same time evident, for me as a researcher, in their bonds. It was also somehow present in the identity expressions that enabled them to handle differences and similarities throughout the years, especially when the “neighbours” identified as “nature lovers” or Galochas by respecting nature at all costs, for “they are absolutely incapable of displaying aggression towards any form of life” (Sasturain, 2013: 33).

The search for transcendence, to build a legacy and to reconstruct its ecological and moral limits, has been a precursor of the kind of love that I will describe here. The predisposition towards love was nurtured over time while struggling to keep up with collective action and imbuing the place with their own presence.

As a matter of fact, love is also lived as something transcendent, for it goes beyond the physical, symbolic or even sensorial experience of the place they had had, making them stand in a different place in the struggle.

Such love, as expressed by the “neighbours” in NHOC particularly, reinforces the moral premises that they had been standing in the shaping of an ontological vision of life as everything that is, and hence must be cared for.

The love they express is not a corny feeling, a cliché foisted on “environmentalists” who hug trees. NHOC, on which I focus my analysis in this chapter, developed an original affective emotionality amid resistance, as a politically committed, rational and purposeful love for those who identify with it.

I assert that it is a collective form of love; however, it is neither uniform nor shared by all equally, because this love means many things for most people. It is the admiration of natural beauty, a state of well-being, even freedom, and a sense of belonging to something greater. It has political, cultural and spiritual roots and it could be described as a polysemous and articulating emotion in connection with moral notions they believe in as a group.

My second claim relates to how this love becomes an element of cohesion within the assembly at the level of interactions between “neighbours”, essential to keep people united. Although they do not recognise each other as friends and do not share time in a personal way beyond their resistance, a comradeship and solidarity circulate among them which binds them to the place but also makes them value each other as part of their shared political cause. I have shown this before, when they call themselves Galochas and “nature lovers”, so they consider themselves “similar” and sharing a rarity that brings them together in a special connection with nature.

Despite all this, love has never been invoked as a confrontational argument against Nueva Costa del Plata or the subjective position of the “neighbours” as “nature lovers” to stop the waterfront revitalisation. I suppose that they could be regarded as romantic, but there is an interesting aspect of their love in that it becomes tangible in the territory: the affection is conscious and constitutes, in my understanding, the last moral limit to guard (and share) what is dearest to them.

Many philosophical and even ontological questions may arise about the relationship between love and morality. Is the love of nature the best way to relate to an ethical stance? What is good and what is bad when one loves (or does not love) something? I say this because this way of loving the place may become, at the same time, immoral for the “promoters” for opposing the progress they advocate. Or maybe for other people the love of nature is not politics at all, but for the “neighbours” it is (in a way that is unique), and could be associated with a certain “purity” with respect to nature. That is why I will limit the analysis of this love to the way it has been put into practice, irrespective of everything that can be said about it.

Such an emotional aspect of the *moral ecology* happening in Avellaneda and Quilmes was acknowledged by me in 2021 while going through field notes to write this dissertation; in fact, it had not been originally planned as a research topic.

For this reason, the reader will notice a back-and-forth to the present as I write this chapter for the reconstruction of the events I examine here.

By reviewing interviews, videos and even photographs taken by the Assembly NHOC I made an association with what I had observed in the field for so many years. The warm-hearted words describing nature during the walks, the gentle hands touching the insects, the amazement at discovering a new plant species, and the “neighbours” joy when entering what they considered to be the most beautiful place in the world (and, for many, their “home”).

This led me to revisit the topic for the writing of my book *Bosque Nativo* in 2022 by talking to some “neighbours” about this affection they shared and how it had evolved in the four years since I had finished my fieldwork. The interview with Sandra, 42 years old, gardener and worker in a horticultural cooperative, which I present in the following pages, gives an account of this love.

What she says is representative of the way many of them conceive and live this love, and she says it in an authentic and moving way. Sandra has always loved the place and did so even more when she joined the NHOC in 2012. Furthermore, her love of nature has been mediated by her relationship with Juan, a founding member of the assembly with whom she fell in love eight years ago.

In 2023 only a handful of people, around 30-50, remained active against the NCP, and most of them were lovingly involved with nature in the way I will describe below.

But before getting into the subject, I would like to make some theoretical/conceptual considerations according to remarks I have received over the last years on the subject; a way also to clarify my own ideas about this love I am about to describe.

Making sense of love

Some fellow researchers, with whom I have shared the reading of this chapter, have pointed to two theoretical issues about *love* that I would like to address here briefly, before giving my own definition of it.

There is a broad field involved in the study of emotions, in which a range of disciplines (psychology, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, gender studies) have affection as an object of inquiry, and speaking a common theoretical language, albeit not without debate.

Affect can be difficult to grasp but in general terms, it exists in relation with a bodily capacity for pleasant and unpleasant perceptions or feelings through, among other objects or institutions, a human interaction with the environment (Beatty, 2019: 206-219).

It seems to be individualistic and not determined by cultural factors so, contrary to this, I emphasise the cultural aspect of collective action. Another aspect for debate has to do with the meaning of *affect*, regarded very much like *emotion* (Beatty, 2019: 210) and *feeling*, which are especially relevant in relation to nature (Milton, 2002: 80).

I take up the emotional road for two reasons; first, because this is the approach used by the anthropologist Kay Milton with respect to the love of nature that I would like to contribute to, and second, because most of the literature on social movements that I have used has focused on the relationship between emotions and political action.

In my research experience, love generates an affective disposition or attitude caused by a shared emotionality that is accounted for by NHOC. The affective, I consider, is what people feel in relation to that love in terms of fond attachment, devotion or admiration. In my opinion, the affect and emotion as concepts do not allow a specific distinction (for this dissertation) but are part of what occurs between people and their environment.

I believe, like Beatty on the anthropology of emotions, in the need to show the ethnographic richness of the situation before continuing a conceptual discussion that cannot be defined in these pages. Thus, the work of Singh (2013) allows me to synthesise what I have just expressed to better explain the role of what the “neighbours” say they feel and how it translates into a conflict scenario. Singh refers to “forest-caregivers” of Odisha, in India, who through this role have led the emergence of new ways of being and relating to the environment that include loving practices. By doing this, the “villagers not only transform natural landscapes but also transform their individual and collective subjectivities” (2013: 189). It is this subjectivity through resistance that I want to show, conveying a common emotional predisposition that prompts people to take action as “guardians”, “caretakers” or under any of their identity expressions.

Aspects of a collective love

The relationship between NHOC and nature has, first, a cultural specificity (Tsing, 2005:123) in relation to a particular kind of nature that people have learned about, with practices, values, and an identification that the inhabitants of the districts have historically had with the riverside. An explanation for this could be that in the *asamblea*'s cultural system of emotions, love has come to occupy a privileged place embodied by nature over the years (Bourdin, 2016: 63).¹⁸⁵

Having the “neighbours” relationship with the riverside a cultural significance, according to Bourdin, or in line with *cultural lineages* or shared desires, fears, and expectations as pointed out by Tsing, love became a meaningful element in their relationship with the territory they defend.

The “neighbours” understand this cultural side of love as a rational and collective decision that has to do with choosing the river and its natural environs instead of indifference or destruction.

¹⁸⁵ Bourdin refers to the cultural study of emotions with the analysis of the works of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson in *Balinese Character* (1942), and by Catherine Lutz and Geoffrey White (1986). Bourdin expands on this anthropological perspective of emotions centring on the fact that in “any social group there is a repertoire of behaviours and feelings appropriate to a situation” based on common factors (Lutz & White, 1986: 405 in Bourdin, 2016: 63).

It all begins with “choosing the river”, as they say, which is to behave in one way and not another, to bond with the place and take care of it based on the morals they have.

Second, love is linked to a collective identity born at the riverside. The “neighbours” self-acknowledgement as “nature lovers” in these years keeps people bonded together. Everyone, in one way or another, loves nature and being in it, generating a bond among them. This is something that characterises the assembly’s “neighbours” but does not constitute a collective identity per se. Being “nature lovers” acts, as I explained in chapter 5, as an articulation node that contributes to the members all maintaining a similar status and rights due to the diversity existing within the group.

These nature lovers also value purity in this love in terms of cleanliness and care (in their practices) as well as in its conception as an emotion that does not possess anything inappropriate.

Third, love does not dominate the emotional state of the “neighbours”, but it is something that became more and more valued in the group functioning over time; however, there have also been other emotions present in their resistance.

When the conflict over NCP arose, the political discourses of those who opposed it included emotions such as anger and fear, and as time went on they manifested frustration, especially at a public level. On the relation between emotions and social movements, James Jasper points to the *moral emotions* like indignation and outrage with respect to approval or disapproval based on moral intuitions or principles including people’s selves and actions (2011: 287). Or perhaps it is, as Jasper himself proposes, these vertiginous emotions after an emotional shock (embodied by NCP) that result when an event or information shows that the world is not what one expected, that lead to a rethinking of the moral principles of a movement (2011: 289).

It is interesting to see, almost ten years after the announcement of NCP, how this particular love became part of the “neighbours” knowledge of how to interact with nature. For this reason, I will go through emotions such as moral indignation (at what turns out to be unacceptable, unexpected) and also joy, which means obtaining pleasure and/or satisfaction from a direct experience of nature, which might have contributed to that.

There is joy among the “neighbours” when they feel closely accompanied by others and people join the walks in the nature reserve, or when they are able to connect with the smallest things, which mean nothing to most people but which for them are essential, like watching trees grow, seeing new species of birds nesting by the river or finding fish spawning in small ponds. Anger has to do with displeasure, with hostility; when something makes people angry they are enraged or feel provoked. This relates to the external circumstances as effects of the conflict or the conflict itself, although it is often linked to the powerlessness of not being able to change things.

I will show how joy and anger account for a collective emotional state from which love emerges as the conflict unfolds – or, said differently, I will describe the role that these emotions play in the politics of the environmental conflict (Gonzalez Hidalgo, 2017: 6) to give way to love.

Moral outrage over environmental destruction

When law N° 14.888 in 2017 enabled Techint to reactivate NCP, those local and regional organisations with a more protectionist vision interpreted the new legal situation of protected areas as a “*social crime*”. Due to the reduction in both quality and number of native forests, the OPDS and the provincial authorities were the ones being made responsible for the irreversible effects in the short and long term. From then on, the population would be left exposed to old environmental problems and prospective new dangers, “neighbours” understood. By bringing back the social memory to the historical floods that had occurred in La Plata in 2013 (with an impact on the city’s infrastructure and over 200 people dead), people wondered why governmental agencies were still granting benefits to real-estate investment that:

“[...]shaped our territories, knowing that the damage is increasingly evident through the usual floods, the collapse of public services, the concentration of land, the loss of native biodiversity, global warming and increasing population overcrowding in the cities [...]” (NHOC, 2014).¹⁸⁶

These tragedies inflicted on the people were first and foremost politically avoidable because the government (at all levels) counted on all the available resources to carry out public works and prevent private constructions from proliferating on wetland areas. An antecedent to this is the idea of “*environmental crime and crime against the citizenship*”, as they had claimed some time previously to the municipality in an open letter from the “neighbours” of Quilmes regarding the deforestation executed by Techint in 2012.

Such actions not only constituted a felony because they did not comply with current regulations, but also represented “*a truly unacceptable whim*” (2012) on the part of the local public servants in their insistence on transforming the riverside according to guidelines established in the master plan of NCP. Shared feelings of irritation permeated these expressions due to the “neighbours” not being able to force the municipalities to respect the law, which generated a hostile climate towards politicians due to the impunity of their practices. These feelings permeated the political discourse of the “neighbours” while trying to engage others through *dispositifs de sensibilisation* (Traïni, 2010) so that those others learned about the “neighbours” outrage.

¹⁸⁶ In a call for popular mobilisation to the OPDS, La Plata City, by a group of local and regional organisations due to the irregularities in the mapping of native forests proposed by that provincial agency. Email sent by the Assembly NHOC from 8/03/2014 (through the assembly’s mailing list of contacts and collaborators).

This is what they said about this, for example, when the filling of wetland areas in Avellaneda and Quilmes became out of control during those years:

“This wetland is part of our usual riverside walks.

We have already denounced and held the Municipality of Quilmes responsible for continuing to allow its filling and modification of land use [...]

OPEN MEETING, fillings are everyone’s business, WE ARE WAITING FOR YOU!

We are outraged... WE DON’T WANT TO GET FLOODED!” (NHOC, press release, 1/11/2016).¹⁸⁷

The anger expressed the need to bring about changes in the management and use of the riverbank and the need not to delay what the inhabitants of the neighbourhoods have been demanding for years against pollution and other socio-environmental problems.

“Let them not take away the joy of enjoying our river”¹⁸⁸

The joy experienced in relation to nature has two readings; first, and as it was stated by the Regional Forum for the Defence of the La Plata River on their 15th anniversary, it had to do with the joy of the collective struggle or the activism itself in defence of nature:

“Our joy is that it has been fifteen years where we have always managed to be side by side with simple people, helping them to find ways to fight, whether they are street protests, administrative claims or court filings [...]” (11/4/2015).¹⁸⁹

This joy was inspired by the achievements that “neighbours” regarded as being the result of their joint action at a regional level, which they had managed to build together in terms of networks and collaborative forms of action.

The second aspect of joy emerged in connection with how people felt when experiencing nature. For some it represented being outdoors or doing something they liked such as cleaning the wetlands or sharing the landscape with others. But some also referred to the loss of the things that they had been able to do and which had made them happy, like bathing in the river or drinking its water, but which people could no longer do because of the environmental destruction of the place:

*“Why did we do this? Why did we let it happen? And why does it have to be like this? Because you look around and you see that this is a paradise, in spite of everything, that the neighbours, I am from Lanús, and I am also feel very affected by the water treatment plant because it is the same water that we are drinking, because **it is not fair that we have a river and we cannot enjoy it.** That is to say, we cannot even get water from what would be something natural that nature gave us, and that we do not understand: why did we get here? This is sad [...]*” (Sandra, interview, 2017).

¹⁸⁷Bold is my emphasis. Capital letters as it is read in the communications of NHOC’s neighbours.

¹⁸⁸Assembly NHOC. (2015). Recovering our history. Memory to change our reality. Posted on the *Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River*” blog. <https://www.fororiodelaplata.com.ar/recuperando-nuestra-historia-memoria-para-cambiar-nuestra-realidad/> Last accessed: 26/8/2022.

¹⁸⁹ “The Forum celebrated 15 years of struggle and commitment to the defence of the environment”. (April 2015). <https://www.fororiodelaplata.com.ar/el-foro-cumplio-15-anos-de-lucha-y-compromiso-con-la-defensa-del-ambiente/> Last accessed: 26/8/2022.

What could be done years ago today prompted the inhabitants to look for other natural and public spaces that allow them to go back to this enjoyment even kilometres away from the districts. With the few remaining wetlands and native forests, the “neighbours” also questioned the “promoters” of NCP about progress, for it would end up taking away the joy that they still found at the riverside:

“Because we keep walking towards the horizon, and even if they want to take away our joy... we won’t take a step backwards [...]” (NHOC, press release, 22/12/2015).

With respect to what it is that they enjoy, and what it is that they do not want to lose in relation to that feeling, Kay Milton attributes the enjoyment of nature to protectionists or those who feel intensely and positively about natural things (2002: 55). However, people do not have to be activists or live in a place under dispute to experience this kind of pleasure or satisfaction which could be defined as joy. I agree with Milton on linking joy with knowledge, since it generates emotions and these emotions trigger new forms of acquiring knowledge and developing new ways to feel nature; this is what has characterised the movement and the assemblies in particular. *Biophilia* or *love of life* could also explain this way of reacting to nature, although it would mean speaking in very generic terms, overlooking the composition within neighbourhood groups with an important cultural and ideological diversity.

Loving actions

Next, I will describe the most relevant practices in the expression of collective love during the conflict entailing a broad creative and symbolic spectrum in their realisation. Through them, the people participating in NHOC hope to demonstrate how true the love they speak of is and in what ways we humans can give back to nature because she gives us so much.

The variety of practices aimed at taking care of and recovering nature and helping it to expand reflects the way in which all positions within the assembly seek to integrate in the resistance. The music and painting have a more artistic character and are either done individually (later agreed on by the group) or collectively with other “neighbours” or organisations. The replanting of native plants has become part of their work as “ants”, so this is a recurrent and repeated form of behaviour while they are in their terrain of resistance.

All such actions are organised open to the public, all are free of charge and take place mostly at the riverside, particularly in the nature reserve, or in some public spaces in the cities. Social media helps to inform and document these ecological practices which are, simultaneously, re-disseminated by other assemblies.

Poetry, music, *murales* and reforestation

A few years ago, on the Facebook profile of the Assembly NHOC, a collective statement written by a group of “neighbours” with a figurative tone was posted. In it, they said who they were and what they were struggling about, seeking to attract others to join their environmental cause. This time, they did so by invoking love, therefore, as something that could be passed on to others, or as a feature that distinguished them in the way they conceived political struggle over the riverside¹⁹⁰

*“We invest our personal time,
we know it’s not a waste of time
but we gain life [...]*
*We know that we walk in a world which is upside down (it’s not new,
where are you? Although we know that it is about going against the current,
although we know that it is not easy,
they know nothing of our cellular raw material, they can’t imitate us,
they cannot parcel out our hearts,
even if they look for us, even if they learn us by heart,
they cannot catch our thoughts; they do not stop us!!*
***We apply all the strength, all the love, perseverance and knowledge we have,
but above all we are going to insist that YOU come closer because if you join in it is better,
and it makes more sense [...]***¹⁹¹

At this point it seems that things are repeating themselves in relation to analysis in previous chapters, but it has to do with a material and discursive coherence of NHOC over the years.

Additionally, it has to do with a reformulation of issues that had already been made explicit in other moments of the conflict but which were being thought about differently now.

Their poetry shows the growth in their activism and their understanding of things, but also reflects the loneliness of their efforts.

Solentina, a singer and composer from Berazategui (a southern district bordering Quilmes), visited the wetlands after making contact with NHOC through the kind of public appeals I just described.

She created the following song after a bicycle ride with her girlfriend, to whom she wanted to show the natural beauties by the river. Having learned from the “neighbours” and through her own experience of this and similar riverside places, her loving view of the riverside included confounding aspects that were found there.

“I go up the grasslands of the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires,
yellow flowers sprout among the garbage dump and the stagnant streams.
And the mud (still fertile) are the streets, you’ll see!
I go along the sequential roads; killer mosquitoes are the great threat.
And the wetland air makes you sweat in a unique and real way.
I contemplate the river; I tantalise myself in the pause of thinking you, pretty.

¹⁹⁰ It was made public between the end of 2016 and beginning of 2017, but it is no longer available online. <https://www.facebook.com/noalaentregadelacostaQA/about>. Last accessed: 02/2/2017

¹⁹¹ The full version in Spanish can be found in the Annex.

And loving you as you are,
it glimpses the shore as if there were coloured breakwaters.
The sun sets slowly and the end of the day is coming.
The end of the day and with it its carnival.
A smoke provokes me to burn the leaves and go backwards.
[...] I saw from afar strong lights of the capital city, the stars were covered,
on the sidewalk of the neighbourhood we are going to disembark.
I contemplate the river, I tempt myself in the pause of thinking you, precious,
and **love you as you are**, glimpses of the riverbank as if there were coloured breakwaters”.

“Subo al pastizal (I go up the grasslands)”. Lyrics and music: Solen Jordan (Solentina). (2016). Álbum “*No quema lo que enciende*”. Produced by Carlos Rosales Rusca. Phonographic Producer: Maria Soledad Jorda. Source: <https://solentina.bandcamp.com/album/no-quema-lo-que-enciende>
The full lyrics can be found in the corresponding Annex.

On an aesthetic level, she observed outstanding characteristics and others that caused her distress instead: the yellow flowers and the garbage dumps, the mud “*still fertile*”, she says, versus stagnant streams where she feels love. And although it seems to refer to someone, she talks about the metropolitan area where what is observed by the La Plata River is often found throughout the periphery of Buenos Aires:

“To me, the Conurbano [metropolitan area of Buenos Aires] seems so ugly that it finally turns around and becomes beautiful, that’s why in the song I say ‘I tempt myself in the pause of thinking you’ because I accept it, I love it, I sing about it and I also get angry and upset.” (Solentina, 18/4/2022)¹⁹².

Poetry, music and murals (as I will now explain) have become part of the “neighbours” moral ecology at an everyday level, with a significant impact on their lives that led many to take up writing, filmmaking or art as a way to earn a living .

The *muraleada* or painting of murals in group (of “neighbours” from different assemblies or between NHOC and other artistic collectives) was another means to convey political messages at a public level. The activity was often organised on Espora Street at the roundabout that overlooks the river, and sometimes they invited the communities to join them by bringing acrylic latex paint and brushes. The mural aimed to make a statement about the conflict and was intended as a means for environmental education, which is why it was so colourful and was placed in a high-traffic area where drivers and pedestrians could see it.

A mural that says, “No to the Hand Over of the Coast” (there were others between 2013 and 2016) – see figure 28– was produced together with artists from the neuropsychiatric hospital Borda, located in the southern part of Buenos Aires City. People under ambulatory treatment used to participate in art works that could contribute to their recovery, but there is an anecdote about this joint form of production with the “neighbours”.

¹⁹² In the context of the book “Native Forest”, which I coordinated and was published in Argentina in 2022 through a collaborative work with NHOC.

Nieves, who was always in contact with many people, told me about their experience about this *muraleada*:

“The comment we got from the coordinators [of the hospital] was that the artists were very happy to do this activity. What they did not know is that we are also in treatment ... A ‘neighbour’ from the Assembly Bernal United who passed by and saw the mural called me and commented on how good it had turned out. I told him that we had painted it with the artists from Borda and he replied that the artists said that they had painted it with some crazy people from Bernal...!! I replied that we were in total agreement with the comment made by the artists [...].” (Email, 12/7/2016).



Figure 28: *Muraleando*: “nature reserve under struggle”.
Painting of murals in areas near the coast by neighbourhood assemblies. NHOC. 2013.

The key to the perception of this type of place and the identification with it that triggers this love could be described by the simplicity of a natural connection for Solentina and an affectionate token in a group towards the riverside. The inspiring place that awakens these forms of love also connected with what was there and the life forms she had learned to discover as it happened with Carla (NHOC). Both Carla and Solentina have artistic professions, the former being a dancer and poet while the latter writes music.

Maybe therein lies the origin of this type of sensible attitude that makes these “neighbours” differentiate from others:

“To rescue an animal from the jungle, that the jungle is no longer here.
That this animal is not me, that jungle is not my home.
One day I found myself, with all the desire and all the strength.
Of all the mistakes, loving me all the shame.
All the shyness, all the boldness the eccentricity
The grace the seriousness
The melancholy the remorse the doubt
The certainties, the complexities, the simplicity.
The flatness of all the asphalt that is in me.

All the forest embracing me when I am a snake,
lizard, insect. multicoloured wings
[...] that day I found myself and said:
I am the animal of my jungle! I am the animal of my city!
If there was a sewer nearby I would not fall down, I would be a sewer animal.”

Untitled poetry by Carla. Published on 8/11/2018. Source: <https://escritosmaqui.blogspot.com/search?q=bosque>

Note here that Carla emphasises that this place is “hers” even though it is not her home, and that she is nature but also city, and between these two worlds she dwells with the difficulties and lack of sophistication that these worlds hold for her. It could be said that these are isolated claims, or in any case that they are non-representative of the neighbourhood assemblies that include multiple forms of interacting with the territory in dispute but they are not.

For this reason, I would like to look closely at a collective manifestation of affection by a large number of people who participated in a reforestation in 2016. They gave testimony for a video recorded in Bernal by one of the assemblies in order to show what moved them to do so and what meaning it had for them.¹⁹³

The Municipality of Quilmes had dismantled an area of native forest days ago, for this reason, the footage starts with the indications of one of the “neighbours” on how they would organise the work and that volunteers should pay attention to it:

“to plant a tala [native tree], we have sixteen talas and now we are going to look for sen del campo [Senna corymbosa] and we make little piles, talas, sen del campo in groups of three people, we can divide ourselves into 16 groups... we are more or less that amount of people...” (2016).

When people were asked about what they were doing, some stated that they were fixing the problems caused by politicians and others said that they were repairing and rebuilding what the machines had knocked down. Some referred to “planting” the oxygen that had been taken from them in an attempt to save the coastal territory. A woman who had gone there for the first time said that she had heard what was happening, so she wanted to help the neighbourhood assemblies.

As the forest had been “attacked”, this group worked on reforesting native trees and “cleaning up the clearing and the mess they [the Municipality of Quilmes] made”, she remarked.

In order to prevent this from happening again, a young woman described how they were “building a barrier here to stop machines from entering the area.” The idea of a “trench” to protect nature, as can be seen, was being used again, triggered by the annihilation they observed.

¹⁹³ “Reforesting the forest” from 24/7/2016 by *Ribera Quilmes-Avellaneda*. As a result of this reforestation, 26 trees were put back in their place (*talas*, *ceibos* and *curupies*), 38 stems of *sen de campo*, *molles* and *talas* were planted and hundreds of square metres in the nature reserve were cleaned after the work of bulldozers. Posted on Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kIEvvUUm6h8&list=PLfcBENhAugXGkv0DuOmQzHhwmPR2l-Dad&index=4&ab_channel=RiberaQa

While not being part of the assemblies or a “neighbour”, she nevertheless alluded to the need for a limit to so much destruction; so here, the “trench” reappears also as a physical way of keeping the site safe.

“We are putting life where they put death” a young person passionately pieced the facts together, conveying an existentialist vision around the meaning of what they did. The trees were not only a representation of life by placing a stem in the ground so that it took root, but an act of love expecting that life would continue there in the form of a forest one day.

Creating life in a devastated area meant putting part of themselves into the process – when organising each other, when working as one group – and building a new memory for the place.

It also emerged in relation to a process of detaching from selfishness in order to serve others, so that the latter might be able to enjoy this place as they do.

In the images that the “neighbours” themselves compiled, muddy and injured hands were shown – *“we hurt ourselves, we cut ourselves”* – while people were making efforts to straighten trees.

In the background, someone asserted, *“we are healing part of what men destroy”*, helping it to become well again and turning the activity into a collective form of sacrificial devotion to the forests. The search for *transcendence* is most clearly noticed here (in relation to love) since what is done has a higher purpose.

Between 2008 and 2022, after a year of confinement due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic downturn in Argentina and the political/institutional crisis generated by the new Peronist government since 2019, only about thirty people remained active in defence of the riverside in Avellaneda and Quilmes. At the same time, other neighbourhood groups and assemblies were being formed for environmental causes, especially in Berazategui in the face of deforestation and the disappearance of wetlands by private real estate developments along the La Plata River.

However, the Assembly NHOC continued with such displays at the site and began to be called upon by other assemblies and groups to give an account of their ecological practices with which people start to generate a strong identification.

Love has definitely become part of the *moral ecology* of a riverside that the “neighbours” value so highly. During the time this happens, NHOC aimed through these caring practices to make the place become “connective” (Scaramelli, 2021: 20) in that it linked nature with people in different ways and through different experiences. They were no longer only opposing the “enemies” but also displaying other significant human-nature connections there that were more fulfilling to them.

The moral ecology of the “neighbours” can be defined like this as a way of joining others, of sharing things with them (but not necessarily thinking and feeling the same way), so it is, above all, a way of life in relation to nature. The ontological principle of life continues to reflect NHOC’s beliefs about place in a bond that provides them with moral direction.

Sowing the seeds of life

The identification, harvesting and exchange of seeds has played a substantial role in the care of the nature reserve throughout the conflict; this is why I examine it in this separate section.

The seeds (of native species) have always been a precious element to be safeguarded as part of the legacy of native forests; they represent life and a way of maintaining the existing biodiversity for the future. Through workshops, fairs or special meetings at their terrain of resistance or “anthill”, the neighbourhood assemblies led by NHOC have introduced other people to the role of seeds in nature and the significance of their preservation and storage (given the advance of the transgenic model, especially in Argentina).

They have defined these activities as cultural and awareness-raising, to help people to know more and act better regarding their relationship with nature. Part of their loving attitude towards the place has undoubtedly been linked to the seeds, to making them accessible to other “nature lovers” for the creation of seedlings or planting trees in areas near the river like stream banks or cleared spaces.

In the latter case, this is an action addressed to restoring the function of the riverine ecosystem as a biological corridor for the connection of similar nature reserves along the river.

Many “neighbours” have told me that they keep pots in their gardens at home with *talas* or *ceibos* (native tree species) after having found seeds during a walk. According to them, those fallen seeds were kindly released by the trees, so that they were “free” seeds, as they were not patented by a company or sprayed with agrottoxins.

In other words, as they said, they were coming from “happy trees”¹⁹⁴ invoking the right to live without contamination and being able to decide what to eat.

Their knowledge about seeds also became part of the *moral ecology* of the place over the years in terms of knowledge. The riverside territories serve as travel corridors, because animals and plants also use rivers as an efficient way to move, for the former, and as a method for dispersing their seeds for the latter, and some types of trees only grow on riverbanks and have specially developed seeds that fall into water and float along for great distances.

If any of these processes are blocked or interrupted, animals, plants and inorganic nutrients are prevented from moving through the forests. So explained Juan in an interview of December 2017, finding the interruption of natural cycles “*amusingly macabre*” since it goes against what should be:

“[...] these interventions in the functioning of the soil coincidentally go completely in contradiction with the biological corridor because contact is needed between everything, between the vegetation and the soil of the entire Buenos Aires area so that seeds and bugs can circulate, right? It is like a corridor of biodiversity, the bugs that fly from one tree to another like this... hundreds of kilometres and nature is reproducing, if we make cuts to that we begin to generate an imbalance [...].” (Assembly NHOC).

¹⁹⁴ Assembly NHOC. 06/5/2015. Seed collection day. Flyer.

This is understood and shared by the rest of the neighbourhood assembly that Juan is part of as a transgression of natural laws or the violation of principles that sustain life. In other words, it is understood as an act of immorality represented by the political and economic powers that take soil intervention as the only way to control those areas.

A stance regarding the love of nature: Sandra

Towards a definition of this love that “neighbours” manifest as I have accounted for, I reproduce Sandra’s personal story and her relationship with this coastal space; the Spanish version can be read in the Annex. Throughout my many years of relationship with her for my research, she is the one who has best defined this type of collective emotion. Besides, I could observe how authentic her love for the place is when for years she was the first to arrive at the meetings, going into the wetlands by herself to open the way for others and sharing what she knew with strangers.

The telephone interview took place on 5th February 2023:

Vanina Santy [researcher]: *That’s why, I don’t know if you can tell me what you want to say, or what idea do you have of what is the love of nature? Or how do you think that this feeling towards the riverside came about?*

Sandra: *Uh (laughs), I don’t really remember what I said (laughs).*

Vanina: *(laughs).*

Sandra: *I remember that you had proposed the book Native Forest to be a kind of story, right? To tell the story of, in the middle of a story that captures, that tries to understand why, right? You know, well, Nieves comes to my mind a lot.*

Vanina: *Yes, just like that.*

Sandra: *It happens to me in particular and it used to happen to me like..., whenever I went somewhere that... When I started to travel, or when I was a child, the first time I travelled and I met, I don’t know, the sea, or when I went on my high school graduation trip to Bariloche [Province of Río Negro in La Patagonia]. **Living in a neighbourhood where in my block there was always cement, the street was asphalted...** And in my house I only had tiles and flowerpots from my grandparents. My grandparents came from Spain after the war and they told me of the pine trees there, of their fields, of their potato crops and about the sea. And in my house there were only flowerpots, did you see? And I was very little and I only knew the flowerpots and the plants, for me that was nature (laughs).*

Vanina: *Yes, of course (laughs).*

Sandra: *And then I would go out to the sidewalk and there were some lizards. For me, the ligustros [native plant] were giants, and I was a forest. I remember that my game as a child was the forest there, right?*

Vanina: *Yes.*

Sandra: *Then there was a neighbour who had a backyard with plum trees, for me it was all gigantic... a plum tree, an olive tree, and he also had a goat...*

Vanina: *How crazy (laughs)!*

Sandra: *No, no, and it was alive (laughs)... It was really nice, for me it was like that (laughs), a temple*

where there were animals and it was a common backyard, it was not a hectare, it was a backyard of twenty metres...

Vanina: *What neighbourhood was it, sorry?*

Sandra: *In Lanús [to the west of Avellaneda], yes, and they were not like “vacant” lots so that was my contact with nature, and I loved to be there...*

Vanina: *Yes, of course.*

Sandra: *She [the neighbour] would leave the grass high... I mean like on the smallest scale (laughs). And when I started to travel, like when I went to Bariloche, to see the mountain was so magnificent, always the nature and I think that everybody feels the same, I felt it as something very extraordinary and very true to say this is what real life is about, isn't it? To want to feel that respect and that emotion.*

Vanina: *Yes.*

Sandra: *And that's what happened to me when I went to Córdoba [northern province], also, when I went to the river, to lie down on a rock and listen to the water flowing beneath. Well, all that sensation that being in nature gives you. Later, when I started to study at the gardening school when I grew up, I began to understand a little more about this, about the life of the plants, the regions, how the forests developed, all that, more in theory, but I got to know the species and that's how my love for nature grew.*

And when, well, we always went with my parents, my father liked to go fishing so we used to go to the lakes and that but I didn't perceive it that way and then when I found out there in Villa Domingo [Avellaneda], when I saw there people with the flag “No to the Hand Over of the Coast”, and I was on this side and I had never visited the La Plata River.

Vanina: *How crazy!*

Sandra: *I had only been to another river a few times. But where the Pejerrey Club is, in that area and at night, you saw and that, no? I always travelled outside, never to the La Plata River or to some streams in Buenos Aires, to some lagoon, or to the sea, like that, the coast was invisible to us, the coast, the river here.*

Vanina: *Yes.*

Sandra: *And well, that's when I knew about the problem, and the first time I participated in one of the walks, which had been one of those long walks because we had crossed a stream and well, then we had walked all along the shore, that is, behind the CEAMSE but along the shore and I could not believe it.*

I could not believe that those trees I had studied before were there. I could not believe what I had been told and then I was seeing with my own eyes, no? Trees that I had read about growing up in Misiones [a province in the north of Argentina], or in the Paraná Delta or about the native trees that we had started right there to...

I was already working at that time with a girl in a tree nursery and we had started with the cultivation of native trees. And the reality is that we had never seen them in their natural environment. So when I started to see them there at the La Plata River, it was like an ah... ah that's why the native forest, this is where it develops, where it comes from, it comes from the river, how it spreads naturally, the birds that you start to see there interacting with that vegetation.

Vanina: *How amazing!*

Sandra: *Well, you start to see the little snakes, then you see, then you start to connect all that and at the same time, you see how it was degraded, all the degradation, you start to think that before all the streams were like that, that the creek was also like that What a paradise it must have been at the time...*

Vanina: *Yes...*

Sandra: *Then you start to know the stories of the people who used to live by the river and well, all that is something that moved me and also made me like, in a certain way feel angry (laughs), about why things are not like they used to be...*

*Why? How far? **What happened? What happened?** That all that happened... And now the same thing because, the same thing, it repeats itself, when we travelled to Catamarca [a province next to Córdoba threatened by mega mining]... That is, seeing the irrigation ditches running through the crops. We went to the house of a man, Raúl, who had a farm with vineyards, plum trees, but you don't know. He is blind, and all the crops he had there and he knew every plant he had quinces, figs, so rich, so rich, and the clear water coming down. And suddenly they went up the mountain to confront the police and of course, it is something basic, you cannot contaminate my water, you cannot burst my tank which is the snowy one, you understand? And my stream, I lived all my life here eating this and growing this to survive and one day someone decides that... And that's it? And no, it changes everything. I don't know, it's really absurd, it's really serious, really sad...[...].*

Vanina: *Yes. And how would you define this, that feeling or that love? Because when you say love, I don't know, it can mean so many things, even within the assembly in interviews I have conducted, especially in 2017, 2018, many people talked about this, about having their hearts in the riverside, that it was their place in the world, that it was the place they loved the most... but well, tell me... How would you define it? And then I will ask you another question.*

Sandra: *(laughs) Love...*

Vanina: *(laughs) What is that love? Besides, you found love at the riverside... (laughs), literally [she fell in love with Juan from NHOC].*

Sandra: *Yes, that's true. Maybe that also led me to commit myself a little more and to want to be more in the place, maybe that could be it. I think that with Juan we also share the love for this, for... Sometimes I think, it is love so that it doesn't change? So that it continues or can the place return to its natural state, or so that it can be preserved? To be able to go there too, right? To feel good, to enjoy it, to share it with the "lovers" too?*

Vanina: *Just like that...*

Sandra: *And it is also true that when we had those assemblies, there was something about feeling good and embracing each other because we all wanted something nice for the place and we were happy... Going there to spend Sundays and that, right? Anybody would say no, you're crazy, what are you going to do there? It is a filthy place, and no. And the truth is that it is for love, because there is no other interest (laughs).*

Vanina: *Yes (laughs), there must be something very big with that place to put up with so much too as you did, right?*

Sandra: *Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. and well, literally there, we have the example of Nieves.*

Vanina: *Yes, just like that*

Sandra: *What love, she gave her life. And well, for me in particular it was also that, to find love there too, such a great love, right? Because we have been together with Juan for about seven years now, and (laughs) sharing. Sharing also that feeling, that many times we have been exhausted and tired with this situation but, but well, when we sit down to write, sometimes, or to write down some publication or in the assemblies, that's what it is, we are partners and it's great. [...].*

Sandra's account helps me to resume some last aspects that although personally considered from her perspective, can also be transposed to apply to the majority of the "neighbours" grouped in the Assembly NHOC: these include the definition of love in terms of the cultural specificity they share in relation to nature, the continuity it brings to the group and the moral background that influences their practices, to which could be added the following:

1- Love is made up of pleasurable things but also includes feelings of suffering and loss, generating discomfort or pain. It is made up of multiple sensations, changing perceptions and attitudes towards what is observed and exchanged. It is embodied when people give their lives for nature, it is transformed into feeling when it is shared, and it is motivating as well as a burden for those in resistance. The more love people feel, the more they get engaged, but also they become much more prone to distress because of that love.

2- Love as a way of doing politics by expecting to generate a change or by questioning why things have to be like they are, taking an active part in developments, especially in relation to the environment, assuming ethical rather than legal or other obligations, motivating and promoting a way of thinking and acting among others.

3- There are moral principles and accepted values of the Assembly NHOC associated with nature in terms of values: to enjoy it in a harmonious way, to experience the good sensations that are found in it and lead people to respect it, and to find beauty in the filth are some of them.

4- There is an idealising aspect of the love of nature, in that it is viewed as something that everyone can feel, or as something that can be fostered by social interaction, which prompts them to continue experimenting with new ways to attract people to the assembly. After all they have done, in this phase of conflict, the lack of support from the population at this stage is evident and those they used to have alliances with were reduced to a small group of local or regional assemblies and organisations towards whom there is great mistrust.

Without activating this love from a discursive point of view for the conflict, even the dialogue with the municipalities is interrupted and this emotionality remains within the group of "neighbours" in NHOC.

5- Having grown up in polluted environments or with a lack of access to nature has led people to develop a special fondness for nature. They have known nature or learned about it with the emergence of the conflict or through others, which generated interactions also mediated by an emotional dimension. Sandra refers to her relationship with nature as being born within the framework of resistance to NCP, and to others like Nieves who acted as her link with the riverside.

6- The sensation that being in contact with nature is what real life is about – the respect that is being felt and the emotions that connect people with something transcendent in that moment. People find that nature evokes an authenticity that they feel they want to live their lives with.

7- Their love of nature leads them to commit themselves more and more to native forests because they want the same for the place; they understand that engagement as a way of dedicating themselves to conservation and also, from a moral point of view, to oblige others to do something.

This love does not fit into what it “should” be, especially at a political level in terms of strategy. It does not correspond, like everything NHOC does, to a plan that will allow them to kick Techint out of the coast, but rather the “neighbours” expect to set an example and to pass on these practices to other assemblies as if this was part of their legacy.

Nieves: a passageway to loving nature

When speaking of love of nature, people from NHOC and other organisations agree on something: Nieves was the person who taught them to value the place in conflict and how to engage in the defence of it. This is the reason why Sandra starts by naming Nieves at the beginning of the interview and ends by talking about how she sacrificed herself for the conservation of the nature reserve.

Sandra sees it as the greatest act of love that a person can display about something, and this made her see the love of nature in a different light. Nieves Baldaccini (I wrote chapter 4 based on her view on the neighbourhood movement due to her long political trajectory in the districts) died in September 2022 while we were working collectively on the book *Native Forest*.

She suffered from breast cancer but refused to receive medical treatment in order to take care of her mother, who was also very ill. The “neighbours” of NHOC, with whom she had shared years of struggle, found out about the irreversibility of her case only two weeks before Nieves’ death; she did not want to trouble them.

But as happens with geese when they fly together and one gets sick, they devoted themselves to taking care of Nieves when she was admitted to the hospital. The outpouring of grief and love throughout the metropolitan region for Nieves’ death was overwhelming, people sent emails to NHOC, I received phone calls from Argentina and some even passed out when they found out. Their mourning was unprecedented, and I shared in it from a distance, but it pushed us to finish the book we had been working on, now as a legacy of her hard work to protect the riverside.

Estrella, a “neighbour” taking part in NHOC and the Birdwatchers’ Club Bernal (a local organisation born from the former) whom I had never managed to interview, wrote a poem that many felt moved by. She talked about the importance of Nieves in her life because after meeting her she decided to become a park ranger and to study biology at the National University of La Plata. She talks about how Nieves shaped her personality and influenced her emotions, bringing her closer to the river. It was thanks to her that she had learned that nature can be loved and cared for, and that we are part of it, Estrella reflected.

Here I reproduce very briefly her words on Nieves’ passing, which demonstrates the importance of this kind of bond between people who are committed to something in common. Nieves’ role as *alma mater* of the group exerted a great influence among the “neighbours” who admired her and professed a similar kind of affection for her:

“[...] The person I am today, a large part of the path I walked and decided I wanted to walk, the ideas I developed, the way of thinking and creating with others, and so many other things are undoubtedly the result of having set foot at the riverside nine years ago, one summer day, in the nature reserve, and having met you. And for having met you, that a lot of things exist in me.

I thank you for being to blame for what I chose to study and to “activate” [politically], for having become so fierce in a struggle; I thank you because you were a pioneer in having introduced me to the collective, the horizontal, the assembly spirit for the day to day (I’m not lying if I say that you are a little bit to blame for my being a damn anarchist, ha!); I thank you because due to you having introduced me to this, for having gone to that reserve, I now have a lot of friends and I even fell in love.

Maybe with you having transformed yourself into the universal forces, I have lost a reference in the history of my life. But how nice to have coincided and shared so much. Thank you for so much struggle, and also for so much transformation”. (Facebook, 8/09/2022. <https://www.facebook.com/estrella.page>).

Conclusions: Love and morals for nature protection

Despite what may be said about the love of nature, it acquires specific characteristics in Avellaneda and Quilmes in relation to the riverside and in the context of the conflict that the “neighbours” are involved in. Basically, it is an emotional issue linked to moral convictions as a way of acting “the correct way” in the context of a socio-environmental conflict. Their love was born and grew through the interactions of those who resist in a shared political commitment to the place that increases as their affinity with nature also increases.

It also contains the conscious reasoning and appraisal that the members of the NHOC Assembly agree upon in their preference for the river, and it is characterised by three factors.

First, it is associated by those who feel this love to a cultural specificity in relation to what people fear and expect, and above all, to how they decide to live in relation to the natural space.

Second, it acts as an articulation node within the *Asamblea* generating a common sense of who they are and what they do together as “nature lovers” or even “neighbours”; anyone who feels this love might be a part of the assembly and engage in its defence.

Third, love is not pristine but is associated with other intense emotions channelling what the “neighbours” see as an ethical responsibility against capitalism and corrupt interests.

The inclusion of love as a fundamental element in the *moral ecology* linked to the riverside nature is hence verified, by capturing the emotions of the group in this last period under analysis.

The affection they profess together includes knowledge, cultural history and values that shape their relationship with nature, while moral ecology contains these aspects in their conception of what matters in terms of life. This love is materialised through concrete practices, enabling the development of group resources and ethics that reinforce their attachment and belonging to the place, and therein lies their political strength, that ordinary people like them learn and change their attitude towards nature.



Figure 29: **Placing the old ceibo tree in its place after the clearing.** Author: NHOC. 2016.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

In closing, I return to the idea of a journey proposed in the introduction to this dissertation to depict the relationship that a group of people establishes with a natural place in the midst of a socio-environmental conflict. Over the first ten years of contention, there is passage or gradual progress from one linkage phase to another, each building on the other to give shape to the close connection that I accounted for throughout the successive chapters.

The journey has been a process that through experiences, spatialities, and moral notions ended up manifesting a *love of nature* shared by those resisting the waterfront revitalisation project. This love is born in a natural place that survives after destruction, with ruins of a development that never was and despite social suffering and environmental complexity.

There, amidst the pits of liquid waste that still sprout from the ground and a particular governance that has affected the lives of the population, this love also resists. As something that they worked on together, love aspires to a purity of behaviour and virtue in terms of moral expectations for nature; it is made up of indignation and joy, and also leads to unpleasant sensations.

The political ecology perspective made it possible to identify the elements that make nature a political issue and reveal why it becomes an object of dispute over the access to/ control of wetlands and native forests. *Moral ecology* enabled me to understand how the contention builds up in terms of what is at stake for actors at an ethical, identitary, cognitive, emotional and spatial level. In fact, it was political ecology that made it possible to analyse these issues in terms of power as well as the influence of the culture in which they emerge – that is, through its link with moral (ecology).

Conflict in this context can be defined as an imbalance of power over a natural environment like the La Plata River's and an attempt to balance that power by those who are left out of such a large-scale transformation. The division between pro and con positions was a way of simplifying the approach to the conflict and made it possible to describe what was observed in terms of the spatiality (scale of tensions) and temporality in which the stakes were played out.

The moral ecology that this love is part of shows how such emotion can be incorporated into the resistance engendered in a conflict. When confronted with the “promoters”, it embodies one of the many forms of knowledge and appropriation at play in relation to NCP that I call *moral ecologies*.

As analysed in chapters 6 through 9, the moral ecology of the “neighbours” can be regarded as a way of interacting with nature that emphasises life, what it is about and why it is important based on right or wrong, what is correct or not. It also stands out through memory as a transversal aspect in the construction of something common, and through nostalgia as a way of appealing to others. Furthermore, it appears in a sense of place that arises from the relationships that take place on the riverside and practices that aim to achieve a transcendence that makes nature untouchable.

To this is added love, as the ultimate ethical limit in the conflict showing how significant the riverside has become for people.

Scaramelli and Martínez-Reyes offer a different approach to the one I proposed here in that they examine a moral ecology that has existed for some time while I report on its very formation and its conflictive nature. In a context of agricultural and environmental transformation, Caterina Scaramelli (2021) focuses on wetlands' historical designations in Turkey to understand how they have transformed environments and their political ecologies – that is, how these designations changed over time as a result of conflict between different groups holding different moral ecologies. Hence, her historical account of the category “wetlands” and a more recent analysis in relation to daily contestations for the remaking of land, water and infrastructure.

José Martínez-Reyes offers an ontological political-ecology approach to the nature industry, focusing on the conflict with Mayans over forest conservation. His moral ecology represents two ways of understanding nature and the place of humans in the natural world, in one of resistance being offered on the basis of ontological conceptions in their connection with these territories, and in the other these territories entailing a sacred aspect of that landscape due to an ancestral belonging to it (2021: 21). In both cases, they analyse a livelihood linked to wetlands and forests, as they are original residents or have a spiritual unity with those places as forms of relationship that are deconstructed by both anthropologists.

What I set out to do in the context of NCP and among people who do not have a direct link to the place, do not live there, and do not depend on its resources, is the reconstruction of a lost link that is recovered by the “neighbours” over time as a moral ecology.

The emotional dimension has not been the focus of Scaramelli and Martínez-Reyes' work, so my research adds to this aspect: how love is the product of resistance as years pass by, and how it is incorporated into the principles and values of the “neighbours” with regard to wetlands and forests in danger.

Consistent with my research findings, I should refer to this as *affective moral ecology*, symbolising how and to what extent their new understanding of place and ethics intersects with the emotional aspect in the demands and expectations of the conflict. In this intersection, affective means that love occupies a predominant space, thus characterising the type of relationship advocated by the “neighbours”. It is only now, as I close this dissertation, that I am able to define this in these terms and I hope to continue to explore this concept in the future, for many questions remain open. How can this be conceived after 2018, the year to which I limited my research? What is important to people today in a conflict that has been raging since 2008 with seemingly endless destruction?

As I said earlier, there is one feature of the neighbourhood movement, notably among people gathered in NHOC, on whom I based my research, with respect to their livelihoods and the place they engage with: they come from all corners of the districts, even from other cities beyond Avellaneda and Quilmes. They are not native, as the riverside inhabitants are, and usually they come from places as polluted as the riverside, for example, the vicinity of the Riachuelo Basin.

This fact enabled me to take a different perspective on why they do what they do without assuming reasons of material need, aboriginal ancestry or religious reasons to examine a relationship with the natural territory that they reclaim as “common” and which has been “inherited”, according to them.

The moral ecology might explain, beyond the usual controversies attributed to this sort of confrontation (over nature or in the urban context) how people can get attached to a riverside space.

In Argentina, a few works have dealt with the relationship of social movements and conflict looking at the emotional and moral side of the issue. For example, Astelarra (2016) only mentions an affective aspect in the defence of the Parana Delta by islanders, making mention to the fact that their subsistence is founded on this aquatic geography. Bosco (2006) analyses in more detail how a social movement is rooted in a place and builds territoriality beyond it through emotional networks, as it is the case of Madres de Plaza de Mayo (among which there are also affective bonds).

Further literature shows the significant role of emotions in the constitution of social movements’ subjectivity in an environmental conflict (González Hidalgo, 2017) as well as how emotions and meanings are attached to resource access and use to make sense of struggles and politics (Sultana, 2015). Additionally, Dallman (2013) analyses the multidimensional connection between emotions and places and how it is linked, for example, with memory and identity; likewise, Horowitz (2013) highlights how emotions influence moral reasoning in an urban dispute over a natural space.

This is also observed in the conflict over NCP as the riverbank is not only a place but also memory, identity and belonging.

González Hidalgo (2017) and Dallman (2013) either focus on negative emotions such as anger and sorrow (attributable to any conflict, in my view) or the emotional grievances and despair of aboriginal communities due to the lack of understanding and acceptance of cultural differences by public agencies. They do not provide further explanation of what the deep connections with a place are about in a context of conflict.

I concentrate on the emotional side of a neighbourhood assembly – with local and regional political influence – and how people resort to love as their last moral resource, from which they stay together to fight. Love is not born romantically or impulsively, rather it is built on a relational and spatial level through tireless efforts on the part of these “neighbours” for the politics of the place.

So the first research questions arose about what makes these people get politically involved in the defence of what survives in that place? How is this love linked to the moral ecology they advocate?

How can it be defined, taking into account the ideological and political diversity that characterises them? Looked at differently, one might ask why in the face of this kind of relationship a large part of the inhabitants of the districts do not have any interest in the place even though they also share the environmental conditioning, or have no access to the river.

Here is another interesting aspect that I did not develop, although it adds to this point that I want to make – the reasons why the “coastal people” (including farmers) do not lead the social and environmental demands in relation to NCP even when their own survival is being threatened. Not everything is about love for the many actors in dispute; evidently there are also interests in the value of illegally occupied lands as well as speculation about being part of the territorial transformation that NCP might drive, even among new riverside inhabitants.

Defining the love of these “nature lovers”, as they have called themselves, leads to many meanings assigned to nature and perceptions about it, though they all agree with this emotion within the group. It is not because they are “environmentalists”, or crazies who love natural things (as they were labelled by the “promoters” to ridicule their way of seeing nature).

It is a love committed to nature through politics and ecological practices (care, replanting, seed exchange) as well as cultural choices and artistic expressions that account for that love.

The love of nature as examined by Kay Milton is linked to conservationists and defined as a motivation and an instrument of power because it leads to action (2002: 24). Nonetheless she says that “the reasons why love of nature and natural things might have evolved are less obvious” than other emotions such as fear (2002: 61). This is what I embarked on, but in order to get to know how the love of “neighbours” impacts on the unfolding of the conflict and the place they care for.

To address this, **Chapter 1** aims to explain the historical political ecology of the riverside from an economic, social and environmental point of view – in other words, how human activity has been practised there through different forms of controversial land occupation (and therefore dispossession of nature). The reality of riverside wetlands and forests does not escape conflict in Argentina or elsewhere in, say, Latin America, so this chapter is key to show how forms of appropriation clash in those ecologically important areas.

How, therefore, does a place turn into a site of contestation? Since the late 1970s, an unequal power scheme in terms of access to and control of the territory has also taken for speculative purposes (between the private and public sector) to maintain dominance over the place. By making up an alliance to drive such transformation, the “promoters” have claimed territorial rights to impose changes while others (gentrified, contaminated and suffering the consequences of their decisions) barely stayed there. Getting to know who these actors are (the same ones since the landfill began operating in Avellaneda fifty years ago), how they have intervened on the southern banks of the La Plata River and what the effects of their actions takes us to **Chapter 2**.

The effects of such territorial processes impacted on the creation of an environmental sacrifice zone, so I proposed to look into the mechanisms and devices by which Techint and government authorities attempt to advance on the last legally protected areas of the region. What has this long-term partnership based on for strategic common objectives in terms of urban development? Could there be a form of governing that purposely aims for the loss of natural conditions of those spaces for other purposes? I analyse how territorial and economic influence has been built on these lands at a legal, legislative and administrative level allowing for a project like NCP to facilitate the removal of existing obstacles for the real-estate “conquest” of over 60 kilometres along the river.

For this to be feasible today, a controversial land use for urban waste management has been implemented for 25 years in order to make the site cheaper and to give it away, leaving the population out of decisions such as these. As I have examined, a partisan style of leadership linked to these non-transparent governmental practices and the lobby for legal flexibilisation of those lands have resulted in a (political, social, environmental) crisis that affects thousands of people.

The distribution of conflicts in low and flood-prone areas aimed to show how this situation is reproduced in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires and how it affects people, thus generating similar tensions and reactions that in the case of the “neighbours” stood out in their configuration of a spatiality (of resistance) in the conflict-ridden riverside.

The suffering of the districts’ population (especially the original dwellers) due to pollution, the disorder caused by the municipalities on the riverside, and the environmental, social and political contradictions of this place are further examined in **Chapter 3**.

The waterfront revitalisation planned by Techint, Nueva Costa del Plata, is the search for a reversal of these processes and conditions (caused by the very “promoters” of NCP) through new uses and social rules to “occupy” the place in terms of “colonisation”. Then, NCP as a “colonising” undertaking expects to incorporate large tracts of land represented by the “promoters” as “empty” and “non-developed” under a renewed form of partnership for the management and construction of the new city. NCP aims to take over lands by the river, to discipline the social behaviour there on the basis of new urban uses, and to impose a conception of nature as something that can be shaped to produce revenue.

“Colonisation” has long been linked to the creation of new settlements through taking possession of a place and replacing the native population, even at the La Plata River. For historical and cultural reasons, and after a dictatorship impacting the organisation of the riverside, the colonising ideal of the “promoters” acquires a new symbolic meaning that goes beyond development.

It attempts to impose a sense of place based on the creation of conditions different from what is known, challenging a traditional way of life by the river through the replacement and creation of something different (deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation).

Many times, the readers of this chapter have believed that what I expressed was a personal critical position, but in fact I have I tried to show the paradoxes used to legitimise NCP on the part of the “promoters”. The reconstruction of what they have said has been difficult because of the prejudiced and classist view expressed during the interviews but after all, I hope to show the inconsistencies in their logic.

In **Chapter 4**, I examined the composition of the social movement (mainly neighbourhood assemblies in collaboration with other associative forms), its geographic influence, the political trajectory of those who are fully active in the conflict and how it works to resist the changes proposed by Techint. As an assemblage of multiplicities, as I define it, their similarities and differences have aimed at building a common and alternative life project. Among its most relevant characteristics are *rootedness* (a collective fusion with the natural space) and the mobilisation of resources other than material ones (moral, symbolic, imaginative), mostly motivated by scarcity (or lack of material means). I consider that the place itself has given rise to this by becoming their main element of struggle, from which they could not have built up their capacity for political contention. This movement stands out for bringing to the conflict ethical values in relation to purity as a collaborative way of relating to others or linking with nature and animal ecology to insert themselves as humans in an overwhelming situation like this.

I take the opportunity to recap on the idea of *moral ecologies* in a similar way to that of Scaramelli, showing during the conflict a mutual constitution of ecologies and a spatial conception derived from those ecologies (2021: 9). For this reason, the local assemblies led by NHOC developed a series of in-place *identity expressions* or *subject positions* (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) showing changing circumstances and consequent positioning in the dispute in **chapter 5**. At this point the closeness to the riverside space as well as the sense of belonging is unquestionable, giving rise to ways of being there.

The self-designation “neighbours” (“*vecinos*”) represented the quest for equality among people resisting NCP and the solidarity ties that were mobilised for that purpose. The “ants” (“*hormigas*”) emerge in the midst of deforestation, a moment in which the spatiality of resistance consolidated with the construction of their *hormiguero*, from which they fought against the “enemies” that came in to take the place.

As the Galochas, they are gathered in a territory that they made their own, which they reinvented and adapted to the group’s need to resist, while seeing themselves as characters in a fiction where everything was possible through the process of collective learning.

The “nature lovers” reflected the moral notions linked to being in nature by reaffirming their motivations and also as a way of bringing together the multiple ways of feeling by the river.

These temporary articulations reflect the movement's identity construction as a collective in resistance, articulating similarities and differences, which is reflected in the different forms of practising the moral ecology they uphold.

In relation to these last two chapters, I argue that the neighbourhood movement is undoubtedly a *new social movement*. There is “a discontinuity with previous movements with regard to social foundations and specific concerns” (Wickham-Crowley and Eckstein, 2017: 72) to which I would add the innovative ways in which people have tried to function as a group.

There are also identity elements that could classify it as such, as well as its plurality (Oslender, 2016: 223). Identity itself contains multiple expressions, as I have shown, from which “neighbours” have expressed their demands in relation to the riverside through the conflict.

The popular reaction against NCP is undoubtedly a renewed expression of demands already experienced in local politics, now on a moral and emotional level, partly because of the indifference of a state that seems to rule against people. This has had a cultural impact, as they promote a new way of relating to the river, which has been incorporated by other assemblies along the La Plata River replicating their ecological discourses and practices among other assemblies.

I do not hope to settle this here nor to be right, but to rethink and bring to the current debate what is understood by new social movement in a country like Argentina and what this concept allows to direct attention to in the analysis of this sort of collective action; even if it is in the superficial way that I put it.

From this chapter onwards, I provide my own interpretation of the resource-mobilisation theory regarding social movements emphasising the political capital of “neighbours”, the generation of networks and other moral resources (non-material, “virtuous”, and elevated ways of getting things). Usual aspects associated with the analysis of social movements like leadership, strategies and structures at the organizational level have been reconsidered to show the specifics of this movement.

As of **Chapter 6** too, I focus on analysing the shaping of the moral ecology around the riverside ecosystem (as they learned to know it by collaborating with scientists and experts).

A first dimension of this moral ecology would in fact be the collective identity, so I showed how other elements are added to it through memory and nostalgia. Both *memory and nostalgia* are incorporated into the production of the riverside through a political use to achieve the conservation of wetlands and native forests. The “colonisation” proposed by NCP would anticipate a way to make people forget the old traditional ways and how things have been historically in the place, so it is necessary to remember how things were and how things are still done there in relation to nature.

As for the past, the “promoters” sought to install new interpretations of Techint’s role in the riverside by re-signifying the facts in order to justify the urban development, however, the “neighbours” also objected to that and countered those official explanations.

Memory and nostalgia come to recount what people share through a version that emerges as counter-historical or that pretends to twist the history of destruction there. Therefore, and in relation to moral ecology, memory allows us to lay the foundations for public discussion and to define what is important for those who confront each other.

In **Chapter 7**, I explained how the “neighbours” gained a foothold at the riverside by physically appropriating the place, and also through the reactivation of more symbolic resources like memory and nostalgia. They aim for the reinvention of the riverside by assigning it a new *sense of place*. This process consisted in the integration of different forms of knowledge and rediscovery of nature through the senses as they travelled through and explored nature.

After some years in conflict, this is a territory now known to people, still linked to pollution, violence and death, but also impregnated with a new conception of life; it is nature, the plants and animals there, and what it does for humans that depend on it. The site already existed but was hidden from public knowledge so it was appropriated through collective exploration, mapping and the production of new knowledge about its biological characteristics.

This sense of existence in that place becomes meaningful in the process of *transcendence* faced by NHOC during the last years of the conflict (**Chapter 8**). Transcendence showed the articulation of new ways of thinking about the place (now seen as a territory) as well as new ways of acting in it for its permanence through patrimonial and material practices (the trenches).

That is to say, a way of understanding their struggle over the place and ways of protecting it by building barriers that could be passed onto others to achieve change in a place at risk.

The pursuit of the (environmental, legal, cultural) pre-eminence of the place led the “neighbours” to resort to *the commons*, questioning moral and symbolic aspects linked to the riverside with respect to belonging and access to the wetlands, forests, and water there.

Chapter 9 delves into the love of nature, already part of the moral ecology of the riverside ecosystem, and how that love can be defined and interpreted in the context of the conflict. Arriving at an understanding of this collective love was partly exploratory on my part as a researcher and during the analysis of my data in order to get to know what it was about and what its connection was to an “ethical behaviour” in relation to nature.

It has spiritual, sensory, and emotional aspects, but above all this love is based on what people have learned from nature, so it is a manifestation of the political engagement they share. It is also a mutual identification with what they do as a way of avoiding the dissolution of the assemblies, and consequently of what the “neighbours” advocate.

They find themselves in this love; they become equals (“nature lovers”), and beyond what they may say about it, they agree to put it into practice in ways that can be also shared and acknowledged by others.

Broadly speaking, those who feel this love (and live away from nature on a daily basis) and have in common an idealisation or moral overload, in these last years of conflict, of what this love should be. Remarkably, love is also an intellectualised feeling because it contains evaluations and beliefs within NHOC, so people end up linking what they do to “virtue” in relation to the defence of life.

This love is political but aspires to influence other “neighbours” and not so much a questionable power that ignores their demands.

I would like to close this dissertation with a personal consideration of the challenge for anthropology or political ecology in addressing socio-environmental conflicts and what they imply.

I ask: if the knowledge we produce as anthropologists does not contribute to social change, then what is it that we are working for as scientists? Maybe it is necessary to encourage a debate within the academic community in order to redefine the social importance of ethnographies or how that knowledge can be incorporated into political decision making.

As the “neighbours” have asked me for years now, I also would not want people with their ideas and knowledge to be forgotten, because what they still do to defend the riverside can motivate others and lead to better public decisions as well as research objectives.

And I hope that this form of relationship can help others to rebuild a link with nature in the not-too-distant future will be key to rethink our place as humans in it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Albrecht G, Sartore GM, Connor L, Higginbotham N, Freeman S, Kelly B, Stain H, Tonna A, Pollard G. (2007). Solastalgia: the distress caused by environmental change. *Australas Psychiatry*;15 Suppl 1:S95-8. doi: 10.1080/10398560701701288. PMID: 18027145. Last accessed: 17/01/2023.
- Almeida, P. (2015). The Role of Threats in Popular Mobilization in Central America. Pp.115-125. In: Rossi, F. and von Bülow, M. (Editors) *Social Movements Dynamics. New Perspectives on Theory and Research from Latin America*. Ashgate
- Angé, O. & Berliner, D. (2021). *Ecological nostalgias: memory affect and creativity in times of ecological upheavals*. Berghahn Books. Retrieved February 1 2023 from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=2387367>.
- Arantes, O., Vainer, C. & Maricato, E. (2000). *A cidade do pensamento único. Desmanchando consensos*. Petrópolis RJ- Brasil: Ed. Vozes, Coleção Zero à Esquerda. 2ª ed.
- Astelarra, S. (2016). Disputas por la reinención del “paraíso deltaico”: de los lugares de la querencia a llegar a una isla y olvidarse de todo. El caso del conflicto “Colony Park” en la primera sección de islas del Delta del Paraná. Pp. 81-110. En: Merlinsky, G. (Compiladora). *Cartografías del conflicto ambiental en Argentina II*. 1a ed. - Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: Fundación CICCUS.
- Auyero, J. and Swiston, D. (2011) *Flammable: Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Avni, N. & Fischler, R. (2020). Social and Environmental Justice in Waterfront Redevelopment: The Anacostia River, Washington, D.C. *Urban Affairs Review*, 56(6), 1779–1810. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087419835968> Last accessed: 10/02/2023.
- Azuela, A. & Mussetta, P. (2009). Algo más que el ambiente: conflictos sociales en tres áreas naturales protegidas de México. *Revista de ciencias sociales*, 1(16), 191-215. Disponible en RIDAA-UNQ Repositorio Institucional Digital de Acceso Abierto de la Universidad Nacional de Quilmes. <http://ridaa.unq.edu.ar/handle/20.500.11807/1277> Last accessed: 16/01/2023.
- Barela, L. (Editorial Coordination). (2006). English Invasions of the La Plata River. 1806-1807. General Directorate of the Historical Institute. Government of the City of Buenos Aires. https://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/sites/gcaba/files/documents/invasiones_inglesas.pdf Last accessed: 2/01/2023.
- Beatty, A. (2019). *Emotional Worlds: Beyond an Anthropology of Emotion* (New Departures in Anthropology). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Becker, H. S. (1963). *Outsiders: Studies in the sociology of deviance*. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe.
- Betancourt Santiago, M. (2017). Colonialidad territorial y conflictividad en Abya Yala/América Latina. (Pp.303-350). En: Alimonda, H., Toro Pérez, C. & Martín, F. (Coordinadores). *Ecología política Latinoamericana: pensamiento crítico, diferencia latinoamericana y rearticulación epistémica*. Volumen 2. 1a ed. Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: CLACSO; México: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana; Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: Ciccus.
- Blaser, M. (2009). Political Ontology. In: *Cultural Studies*. 23/5-6, pp. 873-896. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09502380903208023> Last accessed: 21/10/2022.

- Blaser, M. & Escobar, A. (2016). Political Ecology in: Adamson, J., Gleason, W. and Pellow, D. (Editors). . *Keywords for Environmental Studies*. NYU Press. Web essays: <https://keywords.nyupress.org/environmental-studies/essay/political-ecology/> Last accessed: 20/01/2024.
- Boelens, R., Hoogesteger, J., Swyngedouw, E., Vos, J. & Wester, P. (2016). Hydrosocial territories: a political ecology perspective, *Water International*, 41:1, 1-14, DOI: 10.1080/02508060.2016.1134898 Last accessed: 13/02/2023.
- Bourdin, G. (2016). Antropología de las emociones: conceptos y tendencias. *Cuicuilco Revista de Ciencias Antropológicas*, vol. 23, núm. 67, 2016. Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia. DOI: <https://www.redalyc.org/jatsRepo/5295/529555490004/html/index.html>. Last accessed: March 2022.
- Bosco, F. (2006) The Madres de Plaza de Mayo and Three Decades of Human Rights' Activism: Embeddedness, Emotions, and Social Movements. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 96:2, Pp. 342-365, DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8306.2006.00481.x Last accessed: 9/02/2023.
- Brownill, S. (October 2013). Just Add Water. Pp. 45-55. In: Leary, M. E., & McCarthy, J. (2014). *The Routledge Companion to Urban Regeneration*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Bustamante, C. (2017). The riverside in Bernal. Chronicle of an Invisible Neighbourhood. News Agency. Communication Sciences. National University of Buenos Aires, Argentina. <http://anccom.socials.uba.ar/2017/01/31/cronica-de-un-barrio-invisible/> Last accessed: 24/3/2021.
- Cabanillas, P., Barral, L., Guerrero, E. & Chimento, N. (2016). Categorization and assessment of the conservation status of a section of forest on the banks of Quilmes and Avellaneda (Buenos Aires, Argentina). Natural History Foundation. Azara. Third series. Volume 6 (1). University Maimónides. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324451038_CATEGORIZACION_Y_VALORACION_DEL_ESTADO_DE_CONSERVACION_DE_UNA_SECCION_DE_BOSQUE_DE_LA_RIBERA_DE_QUILMES_Y_AVELLANEDA_BUENOS_AIRES_ARGENTINA Last accessed: 21/7/2022.
- Cabrera, A.L. (1971). Fitogeografía de la República Argentina. *Boletín de la Sociedad Argentina de Botánica*. 14: 1-42.
- (1976). Regiones fitogeográficas argentinas. *Enciclopedia Argentina de Agricultura y Jardinería*. Segunda Edición. Tomo 2, Fascículo 1. Editorial Acme, Buenos Aires, 85 pp.
- Calefato, N. V. (2018). Transformaciones ambientales e (in) justicia espacial. El caso de la ribera de Quilmes y Avellaneda.[Tesis de grado, Facultad de Agronomía, Universidad de Buenos Aires] Repositorio institucional, Facultad de Agronomía, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina.
- Capanna, P. (2016). *Natura. Las derivas históricas*. Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, Argentina.
- Carlón, F. (2007). The reduction of the Holy Cross of the Kilmes Indians: a case of ethnic relocation in the Pampas at the end of XVII. *National University of La Plata. Faculty of Humanities and Education Sciences*. http://www.memoria.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/art_revistas/pr.477/pr.477.pdf Last accessed: 20/03/2021.
- Castells, M. (1999). *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture. Volume II. The Power of Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell. Chicago.

- Craviotto, J. (1966). Booklet format whose realisation was appointed by the Sub-Commission of Ephemeris dependent on the Municipality of Quilmes. In: Agnelli, C. (Compilador). (2013). Historia cronológica de Quilmes, 1666-2012. 347 años de historia. El Quilmero Blog. <https://elquilmero.blogspot.com/2013/01/historia-cronologica-de-quilmes-1666.html> Last accessed: 2/01/2023.
- Dagnino Contini, A., Melón, D. & Torno, C. (2021). *Geografía del conflicto. Resistencias en territorio de Nuestramérica*. Buenos Aires: FaHCE (Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación). Universidad Nacional de La Plata.
- Dallman, S., Ngo, M., Laris, P. & Thien, D. (2013). Political ecology of emotion and sacred space: The Winnemem Wintu struggles with California water policy. *Emotion, Space and Society*, Volume 6, pages 33-43. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2011.10.006>. Last accessed: 9/02/2023.
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus*. London: Athlone.
- Douglas, M. (2002). *Purity and Danger*. Routledge Classics.
- Dove, M. (2011). Rubber Kills the Land and Saves the Community: An Undisciplined Commodity.” In *Beyond the Sacred Forest: Complicating Conservation in Southeast Asia*, edited by Michael R. Dove, Percy E. Sajise, and Amity A. Doolittle, 91–119. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Dovey, K. (2005). *Fluid City: Transforming Melbourne’s Urban Waterfront*. Routledge.
- (2010). *Becoming places: Urbanism/Architecture/Identity/Power*. (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Duplan, K., Lieber, M., & Schmoll, C. (2021). Moral Economies, Urban Subjectivities, and Contested Policies: An Intersectional Perspective on Privileges and Exclusion. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 20(3), 222–230. Retrieved from <https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/2168> Last accessed: 14/02/2024.
- Eitel, K. & Meurer, M. (eds.). (2021). *Ecological Ontologies. Approaching Human–Environmental Engagements*. Berliner Blätter 84. https://www.academia.edu/44654017/Ecological_Ontologies_Approaching_Human_Environmental_Engagements. Last accessed: 5/10/2022.
- Elden, S. (2013). *The Birth of Territory*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Escobar, A. (2017). *Designs for the Pluriverse. Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Durham.
- (2008). *Territories of difference: Place, movements, life, redes*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Evers, T. (1989). *El estado en la periferia capitalista*. México: Siglo Veintiuno.
- Feld S. & Basso K. H. (1996). *Senses of place*. School of American Research Press.
- Fiore, G. (2019). Bienes comunes urbanos en tensión: el caso de la ecoaldea Velatropa, en Argentina. *Letras Verdes. Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios Socioambientales*. N° 25, pp. 119-142. <https://doi.org/10.17141/letrasverdes.25.2019.3727> . Last accessed: 17/08/ 2022.

- Foucault, M. (2002). *Vigilar y castigar. Nacimiento de la prisión*. Buenos Aires: Siglo veintiuno editores Argentina S. A.
- Frapolli, E., Ayala-Orozco, B., Oliva, M. & Smith, R. (2018). Different Approaches Towards the Understanding of Socio-Environmental Conflicts in Protected Areas. *Sustainability*. 10. 2240. 10.3390/su10072240. Last accessed: 21/01/2024.
- Giuliani, M.V. (2003). Theory of Attachment and Place Attachment. Pp. 137-170. In M. Bonnes, T. Lee, and M. Bonaiuto (Eds.), *Psychological theories for environmental issues*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228091197_Theory_of_Attachment_and_Place_Attachment_In_M_Bonnes_T_Lee_and_M_Bonaiuto_Eds_Psychological_theories_for_environmental_issues Last accessed: 18/11/2022.
- Godoy, I., Suazo Lara, F., Guerrero, E., Rivero, P., González, B., Alegre, M., Godoy, A., Kain, C., Sesto, F. y Chimento, N. (2012). Relevamiento biótico de la costa Rioplatense de los Partidos de Quilmes y Avellaneda (Provincia de Buenos Aires, Argentina). Parte II: Aves. *Historia Natural*, tercera Serie, 2(2): 57-94.
- Goffman, E. (1974) *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organisation of Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Cited by: Martin, D. Place frames: analysing practice and production of place in contentious politics. Pp. 101-117. In: Nicholls, W., Miller, B., and Beaumont, J. (Editors). (2013). *Spaces of contention: spatialities and social movements*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- González Hidalgo, M. (2017). *Emotional political ecologies. The role of emotions in the politics of environmental conflicts: two case studies in Chile and Mexico*. Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals, Spain. Doctoral dissertation. <https://www.tdx.cat/handle/10803/457867#page=1> Last accessed: Last accessed: 1/02/2023.
- Greenberg, J. (1998). The Tragedy of Commoditization: Political Ecology of the Colorado River Delta's Destruction. *Research in Economic Anthropology*, Barry L. Isaac, Ed. Vol 19: 133-153. <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/James-Greenberg> Last accessed: 16/10/2022.
- Guber, R. (2001). *La etnografía, método, campo y reflexividad*. Enciclopedia Latinoamericana de Sociocultura y Comunicación. Bogotá: Grupo Editorial Norma.
- Guerrero E. (2014). Nuevos registros de Opiliones (Arachnida) en el este de la provincia de Buenos Aires, Argentina. *Historia Natural* (tercera serie), 4(1): 75-84.
- Guerrero, E., Suazo Lara, F., Chimento, N., Buet Constantino, F. y Simón, P. (2012). Relevamiento biótico de la costa rioplatense de los partidos de Quilmes y Avellaneda (provincia de Buenos Aires, Argentina). Parte I: Aspectos ambientales, botánicos y fauna de Opiliones (Arachnida), Mygalomorphae (Arachnida) y Chilopoda (Myriapoda). *Historia Natural*, tercera serie, 2(2): 31-56.
- Harvey, D. (2012). *Rebel Cities. From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. London: Verso.
- Heyes, C. (Fall 2020 Edition). "Identity Politics". Edward N. Zalta (ed.). The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/identity-politics/> Last accessed: 10/01/2023.
- Horowitz, L. (2013). Toward Empathic Agonism: Conflicting Vulnerabilities in Urban Wetland Governance. *Environment and Planning*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1068/a45591>. Last accessed: 9/02/2023.

- Ingold, T. (2012), *Ambientes para la vida. Conversaciones sobre humanidad, conocimiento y antropología*. Montevideo: Trilce.
- (2000). *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Jasper, J. (2011). Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 37:1, 285-303. Last accessed: 29/9/2022.
- Johnson, C., Hitchens, P., Pandit, P., Rushmore, J., Evans, T., Young, C. and Doyle, M. (April 2020). Global shifts in mammalian population trends reveal key predictors of virus spillover risk. *Proceedings of The Royal Society Biological Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2019.2736> Last accessed: 8/02/2023.
- Jorgensen, B. & Stedman, R. (2006). A Comparative Analysis of Predictors of Sense of Place Dimensions: Attachment to, Dependence on, and Identification with Lakeshore Properties. *Journal of Environmental Management*. 79. 316-27. 10.1016/j.jenvman.2005.08.003. Last accessed: 9/02/2023.
- Keck, M. (2015). Weaving social movements back in. Pp. 215-227. In: Rossi, F., & Von Bülow, M. (editor/s). *Social movement dynamics: new perspectives on theory and research from Latin America*. Ashgate.
- Keucheyan, R. (2014). *La nature est un champ de bataille*. París: Éditions La Découverte.
- Krause, F. (2022). Foreword. In: Santy, V. & Vitenberg, H. (2022). *Bosque nativo. Ecosistemas ribereños del Río de La Plata. Avellaneda y Quilmes*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Hora Mágica.
- (2017). Towards an Amphibious Anthropology of Delta Life. *Human Ecology*. 45. 10.1007/s10745-017-9902-9. Last accessed: 10/02/2023.
- (2014). Making a reservoir: Heterogeneous engineering on the Kemi River in Finnish Lapland, *Geoforum*, Volume 66. Pages 115-125, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.09.002>. Last accessed: 29/03/2023.
- Lacarrieu, M. (2013). Patrimonios de consenso/disenso: de la despolitización a la valoración política de los procesos de patrimonialización. En: *Boletín de Antropología*. Universidad de Antioquía, Medellín, Colombia. Vol. 28, N° 4. Pp. 79-99. DOI: <https://ri.conicet.gov.ar/handle/11336/28662>. Last accessed: 14/3/2022.
- Laclau, E. (1996). *Emancipation(s)*. London: Verso.
- Laclau E. & Mouffe C. (1985). *Hegemony and socialist strategy: towards a radical democratic politics*. Verso.
- Lalli, M. (1992). Urban-related identity: Theory, measurement, and empirical findings. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, Volume 12, Issue 4. Pages 285-303. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944\(05\)80078-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944(05)80078-7). Last accessed: 9/02/2023.
- Latour, B. (2004). *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Le Billon, P. (2015). Environmental Conflict. P. 598-608. In: Perreault, T., Gavin, B., and McCarthy, J. *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Lerner S. & Brown P. (2010). *Sacrifice zones : the front lines of toxic chemical exposure in the United States*. MIT Press.
- Linares, L. No specific date. The History of Avellaneda. *Agenda Sur. The necessary information*. <https://agendadelsur.com/index.php/historia-de-avellaneda/> Last accessed: 2/01/2023.

- Low, S. M., & Lawrence-Zúñiga, D. (2003). *The anthropology of space and place: Locating culture*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub.
- Little, P.E. (2007). Political ecology as ethnography: a theoretical and methodological guide. *Horiz. antropol.* vol.3, Porto Alegre. http://socialsciences.scielo.org/pdf/s_ha/v3nse/scs_a12.pdf Last accessed: 29/11/2022.
- Lutz, C., & White, G. M. (1986). The Anthropology of Emotions. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 15, 405–436. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2155767> Last accessed: 23/03/2023.
- Martin, D. (2013). Place frames: analysing practice and production of place in contentious politics. Pp. 101-117. In: Nicholls, W., Miller, B. and Beaumont, J. (Editors). *Spaces of Contention: Spatialities and Social Movement*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Martínez Alier, J. (2009). Conflictos ecológicos por extracción de recursos y por producción de residuos. *Letras Verdes*, N° 3, ps. 8-10.
- Martínez-Reyes, J. (2021). *Moral Ecology of a Forest. The Nature Industry and Maya Post-Conservation*. Critical Green Engagements. Open-access edition. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press. https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/48457/external_content.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y Last accessed: 1/02/2023.
- Massone, M. (2020). Latin American Dictionary of the Spanish Language. Universidad Tres de Febrero, Argentina.
- McDonough, G. (2003). Myth, Space, and Virtue: Bars, Gender, and Change in Barcelona's Barrio Chino. In: Low, S. M., & Lawrence-Zúñiga, D. *The anthropology of space and place: Locating culture*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub.
- Melucci, A. (1999). Acción colectiva, vida cotidiana y democracia. El Colegio de México.
----- (1995). The Process of Collective Identity. Pp. 41-63. In: Johnston, H., & Klandermans, B. *Social Movements and Culture*. London: UCL Press.
- Merlinsky, G. (2013). *Cartografías del conflicto ambiental en Argentina I*. Ciudad de Buenos Aires: Fundación CICCUS.
- Meyer, E. (2000). Memoria y conciencia histórica. *Historia, Antropología y Fuentes Orales*, núm. 24, 2ª época, Barcelona. Pp. 77-94. En: Pasquali, L. (2014). Más allá de la entrevista. Consideraciones sobre el uso de fuentes orales en la investigación histórica. *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos* [En ligne], Débats, consulté le 06 juillet 2022. DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/nuevomundo>.
- Milton, K. (2002). *Loving Nature: Towards an Ecology of Emotion* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Morelli, M. A. (May 2008) The “Evil of the Willow Tree” (Mal del Sauce). *Agenda Sur* N°92/93. <https://elquilmero.blogspot.com/2011/11/quilmenos-el-mal-del-sauce.html> Last accessed: 23/08/2022.
- Morrone, J.J. (2001). Biogeografía de América Latina y el Caribe. Manuales y Tesis SEA, 3: 1-148 pp.
- Mouffe, C. (1993). *The Return of the Political*. London: Verso.
- Nading, A.M., & Fisher, J. (2018). Zopilotes, Alacranes, y Hormigas (Vultures, Scorpions, and Ants): Animal Metaphors as Organisational Politics in a Nicaraguan Garbage Crisis. *Antipode*. 50. 10.1111/anti.12376. Last accessed: 15/12/2023.

- Narodowski, P. & Pintos, P. (2012). *La privatopía sacrílega*. Ediciones Imago Mundi.
- Natural England. (March 2010). "Nature Nearby. Accessible Natural Greenspace Guidance". Pp 98. http://www.ukmaburbanforum.co.uk/documents/other/nature_nearby.pdf Last accessed: 3/11/2022.
- Nicholls W., Beaumont J. & Miller B. A. (2013). *Spaces of contention: spatialities and social movements*. Ashgate.
- Norget, K. (2012). Surviving Conservation: La Madre Tierra and Indigenous Moral Ecologies in Oaxaca, Mexico." In *Nature, Science and Religion: Intersections Shaping Society and the Environment*, edited by Catherine M. Tucker, 85– 106. Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press.
- Novaro, M. (1994). *Storm Pilots: Crisis of representation and personalization of politics in Argentina. 1989-1993*. Buenos Aires: Buena Letra.
- Ollier, M. (2007). El peronismo bonaerense: inserción nacional y liderazgos. *Revista SAAP. Publicación de Ciencia Política de la Sociedad Argentina de Análisis Político*, vol. 3, pp. 157-184. Buenos Aires, Argentina.
- Oslender, U. (2016). *The geographies of social movements : Afro-Colombian mobilisation and the aquatic space*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Ouviaña, H. (2002). Las Asambleas barriales: apuntes a modo de hipótesis de trabajo. *Theomai: estudios sobre sociedad, naturaleza y desarrollo*, N° 1 (Ejemplar dedicado a: Argentina, crisis qué crisis). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/28059321_Las_Asambleas_barriales_apuntes_a_modo_de_hipotesis_de_trabajo Last accessed: 4/01/2021.
- Perafán Cabrera, A. & Caro, J. (2017). *Conflictos ambientales en ecosistemas estratégicos: América Latina y el Caribe, siglos XIX-XXI*. Cali: Programa Editorial Universidad del Valle, Colombia.
- Pintos, P. (2003). The insurgent space. Portraits of the spatiality of social resistance in contemporary Argentina. Case study: Movement of Unemployed Workers of San Francisco Solano (MTD Solano). Master's thesis. The city: policies, projects and management. University of Barcelona, Spain
- Porto-Goncalves, C. (2002). Da geografia às geo-grafias: um mundo em busca de novas territorialidades. En: Ceceña, A. y Sader, E. (orgs.). *La guerra infinita: hegemonía y terror mundial*. Buenos Aires: CLACSO.
- Prats, L. (1997). *Antropología y patrimonio*. Editorial Ariel Antropología.
- Prévôt-Schapira, M. (1993). Municipal Consolidation in Greater Buenos Aires: Tensions and Ambiguities. *Sociological Studies*, 11(33), 769-798. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40420240> Last accessed: 3/01/2021.
- Quimbayo Ruiz, G. y Vásquez Rodríguez, F. (4/7/2016). Hacia una ecología política de la urbanización en América Latina. *Ecología Política*. <https://www.ecologiapolitica.info/hacia-una-ecologia-politica-de-la-urbanizacion-en-america-latina/> Last accessed: 5/10/2022.
- Rabey, M. (2005). Cultural Landscapes and Local developments in Southern Riverside of Metropolitan Buenos Aires. <http://mariorabeyescritos.blogspot.com/2007/11/proyecto-las-quintas-de-sarand.html> Last accessed: 25/3/2021.
- Rabinow, P. (2012). Ordonnance, Discipline, Regulation: Some Reflections on Urbanism. Pp. 353-362. In: Lawrence-Zúñiga, D., & Low, S. M. *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Reinert, H. (2018). Notes from a Projected Sacrifice Zone. *ACME, International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 17 (2), 597-617. <https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/65636> Last accessed: 2/01/2023.
- Rigby, K. (2023). *Meditations on Creation in an Era of Extinction* (Ecology and Justice). NY: Orbis Books.
- Riofrancos, T. (2020). Extractivism and Extractivismo. *Global South Studies: A Collective Publication with The Global South*. [https://globalsouthstudies.as.virginia.edu/key-concepts/extractivism-and-extractivismo#:~:text=Extractivism%20is%20a%20capacious%20concept.&text=The%20concept%20has%20migrated%20from,\(%E2%80%9Curban%20extractivism%E2%80%9D\)](https://globalsouthstudies.as.virginia.edu/key-concepts/extractivism-and-extractivismo#:~:text=Extractivism%20is%20a%20capacious%20concept.&text=The%20concept%20has%20migrated%20from,(%E2%80%9Curban%20extractivism%E2%80%9D)). Last accessed: 28/10/2022.
- Ríos, D. (Prólogo). En: Narodowski, P. & Pintos, P. (2012). *La privatopía sacrilega*. Ediciones Imago Mundi.
- Roberts L. (2020). *Spatial anthropology : excursions in liminal space*. Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Rossi, F. (2015). Conceptualizing Strategy Making in Historical and Collective Perspective. Pp. 15-41. In: Rossi, F. and von Bülow, M. (Editors) *Social Movements Dynamics. New Perspectives on Theory and Research from Latin America*. Ashgate.
- Routledge, P. (1996). Critical geopolitics and terrains of resistance. *Political Geography*, Volume 15, Issues 6–7, pages 509-531. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/0962629896000297>). Last accessed: October 2022.
- Rullo, Y. (1/09/2021). Some 350,000 hectares of wetlands were lost in 2020 and the bill for their protection is still being held back. Comunidad Planeta, a journalistic project led by Journalists for the Planet (PxP) in Latin America. *DiarioAR*. https://www.eldiarioar.com/sociedad/medio-ambiente/perdieron-350-000-hectareas-humedales-proyecto-ley-proteccion-sigue-frenado_1_8261871.html Last accessed: 28/03/2023.
- Ryan, Z. (2010). *Building with Water: Concepts Typology Design*. Birkhäuser Architecture.
- Salazar Martínez, B., Vázquez Honorato, L. & Zilli García, G, (2020). “Estrategias de transformación espacial en el Corredor Biológico Multifuncional de la Región Capital del Estado de Veracruz”. II Coloquio de Conflictos Urbanos. Organizado por la Red Iberoamericana de investigadores en Políticas, Conflictos y Movimientos Urbanos. España.
- Santy, V. & Vitenberg, H. (2022). *Bosque nativo. Ecosistemas ribereños del Río de La Plata. Avellaneda y Quilmes*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Hora Mágica.
- Sassen, S. (1991). *The global city : New York, London, Tokyo* (2nd ed.). Princeton University Press.
- Sasturain, J. (2013). *Los Galochas*. Buenos Aires: Random House Mondadori S. A.
- Scaramelli, C. (2021). *How to make a wetland: water and moral ecology in Turkey*. Stanford University Press.
- (2019). The Delta is Dead. Moral Ecologies of Infrastructure in Turkey. *Cultural Anthropology*, volume 34, issue 3. <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.14506/ca34.3.04> Last accessed: 23/01/2023.
- Scott, J. (1976). *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

- Sebastien, L. “L’attachement au lieu, vecteur de mobilisation collective ?”, *Norois* [En ligne], 238-239 | 2016, mis en ligne le 17 octobre 2018. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/norois/5846> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/norois.5846> Last accessed: 29/6/2021.
- Segato, R. (2021). *La crítica de la colonialidad en ocho ensayos. Y una antropología por demanda*. Buenos Aires: Prometeo libros.
- Singh, N.M. (2013). The affective labour of growing forests and the becoming of environmental subjects: Rethinking environmentality in Odisha, India. *Geoforum* (2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2013.01.010> Last accessed: 2/02/2023.
- Smartt Gullion, J. (2016). *Writing Ethnography*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Soja, E. W. (1996). *Thirdspace : journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places*. Blackwell.
- Sousa Santos, B. (September 2001). Social Observatory of Latin America, OSAL. http://www.boaventuradesousasantos.pt/media/pdfs/Los_nuevos_movimientos_sociales_OSAL2001.PDF Last accessed: 10/7/2021.
- Strang, V. (2003). Moon shadows: aboriginal and European heroes in an Australian landscape. Pp. 108-135. In: Stewart, P. & Strathern, A. (editors). *Landscape, Memory and History. Anthropological perspectives*. London: Pluto Press.
- Sultana, F. (2015). Emotional Political Ecologies. Pp. 633-645. In: Perreault, T., Bridge, G. and McCarthy, J. (eds.). *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*. Routledge Handbooks.
- Svampa, M. (2019). *Neo-extractivism in Latin America: Socio-environmental Conflicts, the Territorial Turn, and New Political Narratives (Elements in Politics and Society in Latin America)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Doi:10.1017/9781108752589 Last accessed: 18/10/2022.
- Svampa, M., Corral, D. , Barattini, M. & García, M. (2002). Movimientos sociales en la Argentina de hoy. Piquetes y asambleas. Tres estudios de casos. CEDES. <http://www.maristellasvampa.net/archivos/ensayo07.pdf> Last accessed: 6/01/2023.
- Swyngedouw, E. (2004). *Social Power and the Urbanization of Water: Flows of Power*. Oxford University Press.
- Swyngedouw, E., Kaïka, M., & Castro, E. (2002). Urban Water: A Political-Ecology Perspective. *Built Environment* (1978-), 28(2), 124–137. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23288796> Last accessed: 27/02/2024.
- Techint Group. (2009). “Nueva Costa del Plata. El waterfront de Buenos Aires”. Brochure with information on the urban development produced and distributed by the same company.
- Thompson, E. P. (1968). *The Making of the English Working Class*. Rev. ed. London: Penguin.
----- (1991). *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*. London: Merlin.
- Traïni, C. (2010). Des sentiments aux émotions (et vice-versa): Comment devient-on militant de la cause animale ?. *Revue française de science politique*, 2(2), 335-358. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rfsp.602.0335> Dernier accès 29 septembre 2022. Dernier accès juillet 2022.

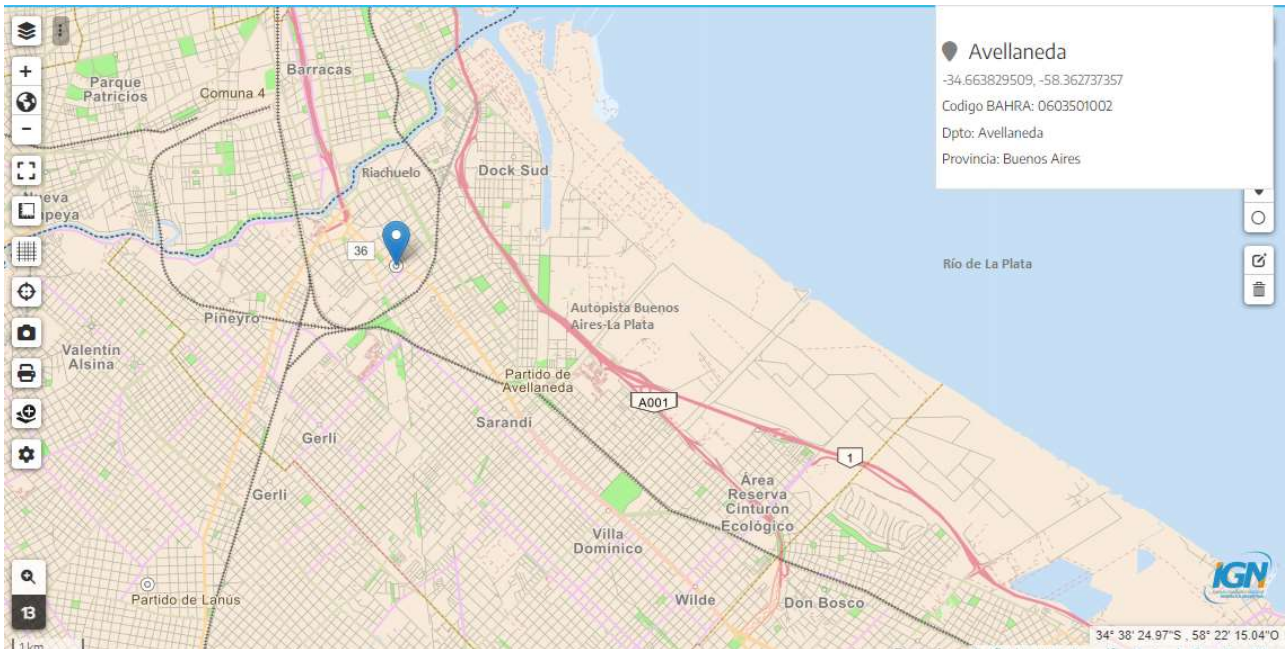
- Tsing, A. (2015). *The mushroom at the end of the world : on the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton University Press.
- (2005). *Friction : an Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, N.J. :Princeton University Press.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. (2007). *Topofilia*. Edición Melusina, España.
- (1980). Rootedness versus sense of place. *Landscape*, 3-8.
- Wertheimer, M. « Conflicto y ambientalización ante procesos de renovación urbana en la ribera de la ciudad de Buenos Aires », *Cahiers des Amériques latines* [En ligne], 97 | 2021, mis en ligne le 01 mars 2022, consulté le 22 juillet 2022. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/cal/13288> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/cal.13288>
- White, T. & Candea, M. (2018). Animals. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. <http://doi.org/10.29164/18animals> Last accessed: 5/01/2023.
- Wickham-Crowley, T. and Eckstein, S. (2017). “Los movimientos sociales latinoamericanos y la ratificación del poder de las teorías estructurales” Pp. 49-82 en: Almeida, P. y Cordero Ulate, A. Eds., *Movimientos Sociales en América Latina: Perspectivas, Tendencias y Casos*. Buenos Aires: CLACSO.
- Wolford, W. (2010). *This Land is Ours Now: Social Mobilization and the Meanings of Land in Brazil*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

ANNEX

MAPS

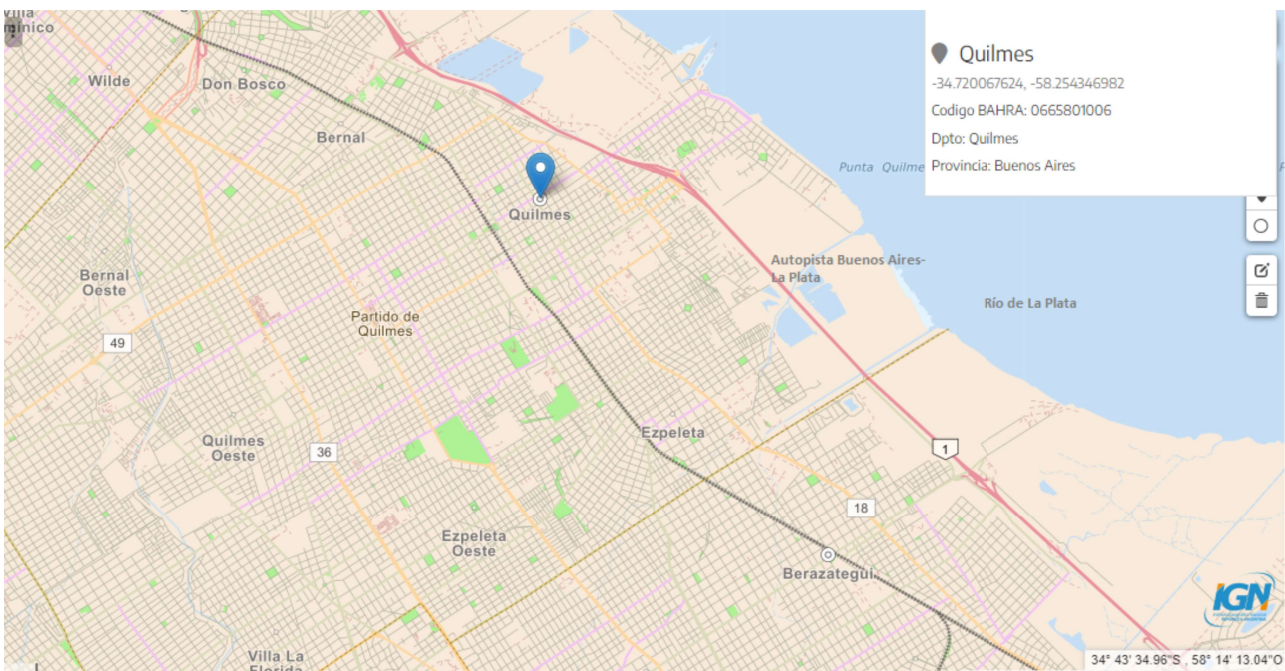
Preface

These are the main localities of Avellaneda and Quilmes frequently mentioned throughout the chapters. The maps also help to know how close they are to each other and their distance from the La Plata River or the proximity to the territory in conflict.



Avellaneda. National Geographical Institute, IGN, Argentina. March 2023.

Notes: La Plata River (Río de La Plata) and Riachuelo River (lower Matanza-Riachuelo Basin). Bordering districts: Lanús (to the west) and Quilmes (south). Main localities: Avellaneda City, Dock Sud, Gerli, Piñeyro, Sarandí, Villa Domínico and Wilde.

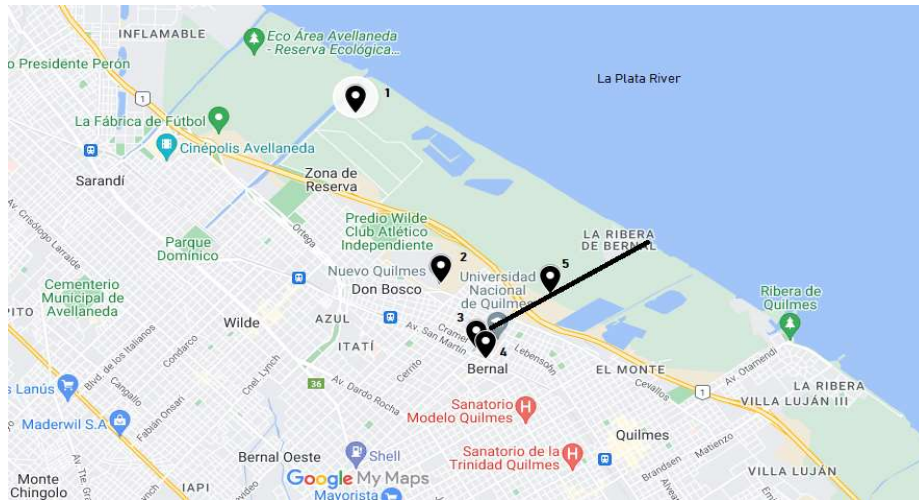


Quilmes. National Geographical Institute, IGN, Argentina. March 2023.

Notes: La Plata River (Río de La Plata). Bordering districts: Berazategui to the south. Localities of the district: Bernal, Don Bosco, Ezpeleta, San Francisco Solano y Villa La Florida.

The following maps contain places mentioned in the chapters for a general idea on where they are located.

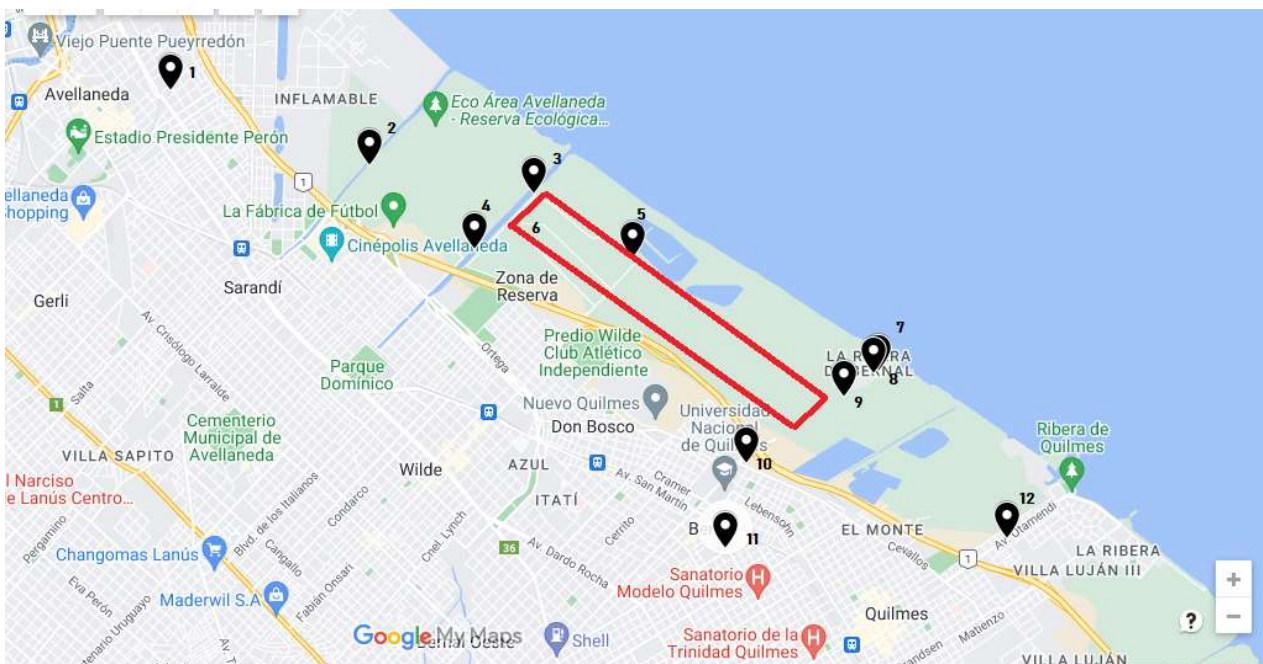
Chapter 6



Author: Vanina Santy: 2023. Google Maps.

References: 1) Marinas del Sur (real-estate project of Techint in the 1990s); 2) walled community Nuevo Quilmes; 3) Félix Square in Bernal, Quilmes; 4) Bernal train station; 5) Espora Street and its route down the ravines to the river.

Chapter 7



Author: Vanina Santy. 2023. Google Maps.

References: 1) Municipal Institute of Cinematographic Art in Avellaneda; 2) Stream Sarandí; 3) Olmos Street, Avellaneda; 4) Channel Santo Domingo; 5) Las Flores Street, 6) area restricted for public access and use; 7) terrain of resistance created by “neighbours”; 8) Square La Amistad; 9) Espora Street; 10) Caseros Avenue and Espora Street; meeting place of assemblies to go the river; 11) Parish of Our Lady of the Guard, Quilmes; 12) Otamendi Avenue.

The only three paths to access the La Plata River are: 4, 9, and 12.

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS IN THEIR ORIGINAL LANGUAGE

I present below the original material in Spanish (with more than five lines or sentences) used in all the previous chapters. This material is raw and remains as it was first transcribed. The translation into English was firstly done by me and then checked by an editor since this is not my first language. The changes between these two versions may differ with the introduction of full stops, commas or quotation marks in order to make them easier to read and understand.

Unlike the material presented so far in English, with its grammatical and stylistic rules, what I will show here follows the uses of Spanish language as stipulated by the Real Academia Española (RAE, Royal Spanish Academy). Thus, please note that in the next pages (for all the chapters) the: 1) Latin inverted commas « » are used to open and close dialogues or to indicate the beginning and end of an interview or text, 2) square brackets [...] are used to denote that the conversation has already begun and continues or to highlight other participations in the narrative, 3) ellipses mark silences, while 4) the use of *Italics* identifies someone's account.

Chapter 1

THE VIEW OF AN HISTORICAL INHABITANT OF THE RIVERSIDE: JUAN CARLOS

Juan Carlos: «claro, claro, hay una familia italiana que no los conocía y los conocí cambiando una cubierta acá en Wilde salía de una asamblea barrial que habíamos tenido un domingo muy atareado y descubro que mi auto tiene una cubierta en mal estado domingo, y digo, ¿dónde voy a ir a una gomería?

Y fui a una gomería que está acá en Wilde en Ramón Franco, todavía está y estaba solo el hombre y nos ponemos a conversar mientras me cambiaba la cubierta y resulta que le cuento que venía de una asamblea que estamos defendiendo la costa que esto y el otro y un poco me mira, se pone mal y me dice si: “no me hablés de la costa, nosotros tuvimos una granja en Villa Domingo” y me contaba todo lo que producían y muy feliz tenía que ver la cara de ese viejo granjero, manchada de todo lo que es una gomería, las manos muy sucias y muy cansado y trabajando un domingo a la tarde. Y me contaba que tuvieron por muchos años esa granja la familia, gente italiana y un día se enteran que el CEAMSE va a venir y que les va a sacar todo, ellos muy revolucionarios “no, de acá no nos saca nadie”, y obviamente se quedaron y empezaron a avanzar con el CEAMSE y ellos se quedaron un poco aislados porque el CEAMSE fue avanzando de a poco. No fue que tiraron basura totalmente sino que iban tomando zonas e iban rellenando y algunas zonas iban quedando y uno de los que quedaban era esta familia y aguantaron y no sabían qué hacer porque tenían que ir con la policía y sacarlos entonces al CEAMSE se le ocurrió hacer otra cosa, empezaron a tirarle al lado del campo de ellos residuos de curtiembre y el olor que había, el ambiente que había era insostenible y se tuvieron que irse porque no aguantaron más entonces ese hombre todo manchado de tinte oscuro, ese gomero, había sido un granjero que tuvieron que sacarlo tirándole residuos malísimos para que se vayan de alguna forma». (“Vecino” de Asamblea de Wilde. Entrevista, mayo 2022).

Chapter 2

«Y bueno, es que tiene que ver creo con los derechos colectivos y los compromisos que puede asumir cada uno, esos proyectos alternativos, la verdad, hay un montón de reglamentaciones, disposiciones hay una ley conocida que es la de protección de bosques que es la 23 no sé cuánto, que impediría cualquier desarrollo en esta zona hasta que haya una excepción te diría, porque todos estaremos de acuerdo a la circunstancia, si el espíritu de esa ley seguro no fue para sostener la costa contaminada, sino para otra cosa. Más allá de las discusiones de la letra de la ley, ¿cuál es el desarrollo que se le quiere dar a esta ciudad como política de Estado? [...]». (Sebastián Vinagre, entrevista, 21/9/2011).

Next, I write the full dialogue with the Assembly NHOC during the ethnocartography carried out in December 2017 for the section “Chaos”:

—Rubén: *mugre, contaminación, sí, caos, parece como caos*

—Vanina Santy [researcher]: *¿lo escribimos?*

—Rubén: *abandono de las autoridades*

—VS: *¿escribís lo que dijiste ?*

—Nieves: *el problema no es la costa, en realidad no es el problema de la sensación de la costa [Rubén: pero, ¿dónde lo escribo?] [Vanina: donde quieras] [Leo: no porque no entra] [Rubén: ¿no entra? No lo puedo leer] qué es lo que pasa que vos, es un desmadre a nivel general porque la gente cuando viene te dice “esto está todo” y hoy está limpio por más que ves, hay veces que vos venís y están todos los plásticos colg...la gente que vino es ordenada, porque vos ves el pasto cortadito pero si no, depende de quienes vienen, o quienes van ocupando los lugares...el vecino*

—VS: *vos decís que es un desmadre cómo funcionan las cosas*

—Nieves: *es un desmadre porque es un desmadre a propósito*

—VS: *¿cómo sería?*

—Nieves: *porque es un descontrol a propósito y en este momento la frase esa a río revuelto ganancia de pescadores, sí, porque lo que siempre dice Juan, nos dan vuelta el bote [Vanina: anotá lo que dijiste] ¿qué cosa? [Vanina: que es un desmadre a propósito] ¿lo ponemos acá? [Vanina: donde quieras] inducido, descontrolado...un desmadre inducido*

—Rubén: *igual, es como...*

—Nieves: *un desmadre*

—Alex: *no sé cómo poner naturaleza... sobreviviente*

—Leo: *un filtro natural*

—Alex: *no, sí, filtro natural, pulmón verde pero es como la naturaleza igual que sea [Leo: no admite urbanización] filtro natural es como la naturaleza que se está*

—Nieves: *es un desmadre inducido y organizado*

—VS: *por el estado*

—Nieves: *claro, a propósito y te dicen...no se puede hoy ponéle cuando hablaba con este Domingo yo le decía, dice, “no, porque se pueden hacer las cosas, fijate todo lo que estoy haciendo”*

—Leo: *yo agregaría por el estado, perdón, ¿no? [Nieves: por los gobiernos] Sí, no, pero el problema es que hay un problema anterior que se dejó penetrar el estado del manejo empresarial o sea, el manejo empresarial neoliberal que es como “yo hago todo lo que puedo para hacer crecer mi empresa” lo cual está bien porque yo soy un emprendedor y quiero que mi empresa crezca y todos mis empleados estén mejor, cada vez, cada año mejor, cada vez cada vez mejor, eso se confundió mucho con la función pública, demasiado se confundió, se fue a la mierda, ya directamente los municipios se manejan como empresas...*

Ya directamente los funcionarios de gobierno tienen al intendente como un jefe, entonces ya no es una función pública, es una empresa más y si eso no cambia desde la base siempre vamos a tomar malas decisiones porque siempre se toman decisiones con la mirada cerrada a un cierto sector de la población o a un cierto sector de la economía, ¿no? No hay una mirada global abierta, el funcionario debería tener una mirada global, abierta, la mirada de región, de consensuar visiones diferentes de buscar las visiones diferentes, el Estado tiene el rol de salir a buscar las visiones diferentes y hacer que la gente hable y se manifieste y después poner todo eso sobre la mesa y hacer un, una, coordinar el debate, esa es la función del estado pero al final el estado termina siendo, hoy vemos el ejemplo más palpable y bizarro que podíamos tener que es que los funcionarios del gobierno son los dueños de las empresas, directamente arreglan la función pública en función de los intereses que ellos mismos tienen entonces no hay manera de escapar porque si el que va a decidir lo que se hace sobre el territorio es el tipo que está, que es él mismo, o su esposa o sus primos o sus qué sé yo son los dueños de las empresas, entonces no tenemos escapatoria, siempre van a decidir ellos.

—Rubén: *es un tema difícil, es como...*

—Darío: *el mejor ejemplo que tenemos fue la ley de bosques*

—Alex: *urbanización descontrolada también puede ser...la ribera*

—Leo: *sí, sí, sí, la ley de bosques y el código civil también y la*

—Darío: *tenemos leyes que son estupendas, porque hay un montón de leyes que son estupendas pero las ves cuando la aplican o no la aplican o la aplican mal directamente...es decir, los mecanismos del estado están, están*

los mecanismos del estado, están las instituciones que... deberían cuidar a la reserva natural, el tema es que no se aplican, a propósito no se aplican, muchas veces con nosotros hubo un Estado de derecho

—Rubén: faltan los puestos de jugo de lixiviado, ¿cómo se llaman? ¿Vos sabés ubicarlos vos?

—Nieves: qué sé yo, por ahí, por todos lados, después le damos a eso

—Leo: claro porque vos ponés desatención del estado o ponés abandono del estado y estás demonizando al estado cuando en realidad el estado está carcomido de antes, ¿entendés? No es que está abandonado por el estado porque el estado no se hace cargo, sino el estado ya está interpenetrado de los intereses empresarios, entonces el que decide en el territorio es un empresario, no es un funcionario, hace 40 ó 50 años atrás los concejales no ganaban la gaita que ganan ahora, no era negocio para una persona ser concejal hoy por hoy se constituyó en toda una carrera o sea, hay un montón de tipos que no se ocupan de estudiar, se ocupan de hacer carrera política entonces son ignorantes al frente de decisiones importantísimas, ¿no? Y que encima se suben los sueldos, ¿no? Y se convierte en un ejercicio empresario el estar en la función pública, entonces para mí es peligroso poner que el desmadre es una operación del Estado

—Nieves: no, no está puesto en el papel como desmadre operación del Estado

—Leo: está bien, digo que estábamos medio diciendo que el abandono es culpa del estado y el desmadre está medio originado por el estado

—Nieves: no, el desmadre es inducido y organizado por quién, ahí tenés un montón de actores porque ahí es complejo [Leo: sí claro, es muy complejo]. (Riverside of Bernal, 31/12/2017).

“[...] a diferencia del primer mundo los conflictos ambientales son de perspectivas distintas o de cuestiones que legalmente no necesariamente son discutibles, acá, normalmente los conflictos ambientales están vinculados a un asunto de ilegalidad porque aunque las leyes no son perfectas y tienen problemas, en general hay cuestiones básicas que están legisladas y cuando hay conflicto ambiental hay una legislación básica que se está rompiendo [...]” (Jorge Trevín, entrevista, 15/6/2011).

Chapter 3

«[Nueva Costa del Plata] es un proyecto que se encuadra en esta perspectiva de nueva organización del territorio para conformar las expectativas de la ciudadanía cuando se aborda el dilema de transformar zonas industriales, portuarias, logísticas, de servicios, espacios que ayer eran periferia, fuera del ámbito de la ciudad, y hoy se encuentran en él para producir transformaciones.” (Roberto Converti, Oficina Urbana. Entrevista, 2010)¹⁹⁵.

«[...] dónde está ubicado [NCP] por eso es importante esto que transmitimos que este espacio, que uno hoy lo ve vacío es el crecimiento futuro en toda el área metropolitana, Buenos Aires que va a unir con La Plata en muy poco tiempo, pensamos que en el 2040, 2050 todo este eje metropolitano que llegará hasta Rosario va a estar unido por una sola masa urbana y hay como una continuidad; ahí estamos entonces en esta pieza ambiental, económica, socio-cultural que es el borde del Río de la Plata y este otro eje que ves acá que estamos cruzando en este sentido y para nosotros es el eje de la Cuenca Matanza-Riachuelo. De alguna forma, este proyecto que se instala acá va a estar en el nuevo eje, nosotros pensamos que el eje del área metropolitana va a ser el Riachuelo, hacia el norte y hacia el sur... una vez más... para nosotros ese espacio que es el crecimiento futuro de la ciudad de Buenos Aires en el área metropolitana va hacia el sur [...]». (Fabio De Marco, 13/12/ 2017).

—Vanina Santy [researcher]: para usted no es un ecosistema, no tiene propiedades

—Roberto Converti: es un ecosistema urbano, forma parte del sistema urbano

—VS: ok

—RC: forma parte del sistema urbano, de alta virtud, distinta, es un hecho natural, natural de cualidades

195

First construction exhibition “UniCONS” in Quilmes organised by the Construction Union in which the project NCP was presented to the construction industry by Roberto Converti, Oficina Urbana. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yePuePOPK0&ab_channel=quilmestvpublica Last accessed: 30/5/2022.

excepcionales, naturales

—VS: *pero para usted ya está integrado a “lo urbano”*

—RC: *claro, no puede estar a siete kilómetros del borde de Buenos Aires, del área central de Buenos Aires que además dentro de esos siete kilómetros cruza nada más que el Riachuelo, que además tiene el Polo Petroquímico, que además tiene esto y resulta que es el jardín del Edén, nooo. Está afectado por las mismas condiciones entonces hay que tratarlo, hay que tratar el Riachuelo, hay que tratar el Polo Petroquímico, hay que desmantelar ese conflicto yo creo que hay que desmantelar el conflicto del Riachuelo, hay que desmantelar el polo petroquímico y hay que desmantelar el CEAMSE y desmantelar todo lo que hace ahora para eso tenés que vivirlo como un territorio sistémico, entonces mi aliento es que justamente al integrarlo son hechos virtuosos [...]». (Roberto Converti, Oficina Urbana. Entrevista, 2017).*

Fabio De Marco: *«si, si, para nosotros este... el área tiene que densificar, tiene que tener población para que eso exista necesitás metros cuadrados, para que los metros cuadrados no pisen suelo ambientalmente con tal potencial lo que hacemos es elevar en altura, ¿no? Nosotros creemos, cuando dicen pero arquitecto, usted qué opina con respecto a lo que es llamadas torres, a mí me parece mal en un barrio como Caballito entre medianeras, en este lugar me parece que está bien, densificar la ciudad y la torre lo que te permite tener una buena cantidad de población para hacer un buen uso de las infraestructuras sin hacer pisada sobre el suelo natural [...]». (Oficina Urbana. 2017).*

«Yo siempre recuerdo como un dato muy singular, recordás a lo mejor o lo tenés como dato, una vez se ocupó todo el Parque Indoamericano y cuando fueron periodistas a preguntarles a los que ocupaban el lugar, le dijeron: ¿por qué están ocupando el parque? Y el tipo le respondió con una palabra, para mí, en términos nuestros, fantástica, fantástica: ¿qué parque? ¿Qué parque? El tipo no veía parque, el tipo veía tierra y él explicó en términos del lugar que yo necesito lo transformó en un cambio dentro de su visión cultural justamente en término cultural pero lo transformó en un valor de cambio, no en un valor de uso, fue bien acción privatizadora; esto no lo usa nadie, es mío [...]». (Roberto Converti, Oficina Urbana. Entrevista, 2017).

Ernesto Rona: *«Hoy en día no hay ningún olor, ninguna molestia, son como campitos verdes que están arbolando, de manera que se va a lograr un pulmón verde...*

Vanina Santy [researcher]: *sobre los rellenos...*

ER: *sobre los rellenos, sí, sí, ¿cómo se llaman estos lugares donde plantan? Un vivero, que tiene el CEAMSE y desde ese vivero se van trasplantando árboles en distintos lugares. Como esto estaba cerrado [carraspea] no había ninguna chance de abrirlo a la comunidad, y no tenían mucho apuro pero ahora que está este proyecto seguramente van a acelerar esas cosas, van a instalar alguna cancha de golf, de tenis que se pueda hacer sobre un relleno sanitario, lo que no se puede es pilotear para construir porque esos pilotes pasarían a través de la base impermeable y permitirían que filtre a las napas el lixiviado residual de ese relleno.*

Se hizo de la mejor forma posible, hoy este es un lugar que yo te diría que es un lindo lugar con lo cual tan mal no lo pensaron porque ahí se dispuso la basura de Buenos Aires y alrededores por mucho tiempo y hoy no es un Chernobyl, sino que es algo, porque podría serlo [...]». (Vocero de NCP, entrevista, 2011).

«[...] la zona sur ha tenido una postergación en su desarrollo por la gran carencia de potenciar las grandes inversiones, siempre se encuentran argumentos. Veinte, treinta años después te puse una autopista porque había que unir a Mar del Plata y hoy en día está trayendo un desarrollo, pero las zonas más del oeste siguen postergadas solamente por prejuicios y cosas que hacen, pero un gran proyecto donde pueda hoy a la tierra la necesidad de levantarla, para eso lo que se hace es se excava la tierra, se generan lagunas y se altera para tener eso, si lo hacen en las zonas del oeste, norte, son progreso y a nosotros, en la zona sur, son desastres ambientales, si vos me decís que si eso es progreso, no sé, no sé, no sé...[...].» (Claudio Olivares, Secretario de Medio Ambiente Quilmes. Interview, 2011).

Chapter 4

I will transcribe next the interview extracts in Spanish used in the chapter based on the interview with Nieves (Assembly NHOC) and Carmen (Assembly of Wilde) conducted in 2016. The text in subsection number 6 is part of an email that Nieves sent me in 2017 which I will also write here.

Nieves' narrative (the main interlocutor) is extensive, and as I mentioned before, it has not been altered although I did omit Carmen's and my own remarks in the chapter to narrow down the story and give it fluidity.

I present below the full version of our conversation:

1) Collective action in the suburbs

—Nieves: *¡no! en el '98 todavía no existía el foro [Río de la Plata], yo empecé a buscar, como se llama, no, yo trabajaba de manera independiente en realización de escenografía y había mucho trabajo y bueno y tenías que pagar cosas, cosas, cosas, y bueno, cuando llega... yo sabía que cuando me levantaba temprano en la mañana y nunca sabías cuándo te acostabas porque había que entregar los trabajos; y un día llega una boleta, una nota porque la empresa Aguas Argentinas iba a poner un medidor. Si querías cuota fija o medidor, si querías cuotas fijas no contestabas, no respondías, si querías el medidor tenías que decir que sí, que aceptabas el medidor, entonces como dijimos mirá, no lo queremos al medidor, total, lo que estábamos pagando eran 40 pesos ó 40 dólares y bueno, y el medidor no lo pusimos.*

Pasan los meses, llega una carta que la empresa decidió poner el medidor y bueno, ¿para qué preguntan? En las casas no te lo cobraban pero en los lugares comerciales si lo pedías, te lo cobraban, y si no lo pedías, también; en las casas era si lo pedías, te lo cobraban y si no lo pedías, ellos te lo ponían y no te lo cobraban. Entonces cuando empieza a controlar el agua medida, de 45 ponéle que pagábamos en el taller pasamos a pagar 37 bueno, mejor y tuvimos que pagar en 10 cuotas los 250 dólares que eran el medidor.

A los 4 meses llega una boleta que decía: "usted registra una deuda pendiente de pago" y digo, ¿de qué? Si no debemos nada y de 2 pesos con 80 de agua medida que teníamos nos cobraban 183 pesos y digo: ¿de qué? Viste, entonces me voy al Ente Regulador de Quilmes y me dice "¡ah! ¡y ahora cuando te venga el retroactivo!" Bueno, cuando me llega la boleta esa, me voy a Capital al Ente Regulador de Capital; cuando llego me dicen, "¿porque no querés pagar la factura?" "Yo quiero pagar la factura pero de 2 pesos con ochenta a 183 pesos" digo, "me parece es mucha plata, en vez de robarme con un revolver todos los meses me mandan una factura", y dice: "¿y ustedes pagan contribución municipal?" "Y digo... "¿Y eso qué es de la contribución municipal?" "Si querés saberlo hace una nota" "¿y cómo hago?" Y me dice, "lo que me estás preguntando, escribílo en un papel" y me dice "escribílo en un papel por duplicado y me lo dejás" y entonces se lo dejo y me dice "en 15 días volvé".

A los 15 días vuelvo y ¡oh sorpresa! me dieron el contrato de concesión, que no sabía, viste, mi cuñada que era abogada me dice: "no, el contrato dice, no se lo dan a..." "Porque yo quería leerlo, no, "no se lo dan a cualquiera, es para especialistas" y no, y después te vas enterando que cuando son empresas públicas por más que sean privatizadas los contratos son públicos, bah, no empresas públicas, empresas que te brindan un servicio público.

—Carmen: *comunitario, de comunidad...*

—Nieves: *por más que sean privadas tienen que dar información, es pública bueno, cuando leo todo el contrato me dice la chica, lo leo y digo, "porque me cobran esto si yo pago los 2 pesos con 80? no entiendo, ¿por qué?" me dice "mira, si no pagas la factura la empresa tiene derecho a rematarte la propiedad" y digo "¿por qué?" "Porque está así", digo, "¿y eso de dónde salió?" y dice "eso lo votaron con las privatizaciones" y era cierto. Entonces es ahí, en Mayo del '98 dónde yo, me salta la térmica y yo, mi relación fue, mientras yo estoy trabajando, pagando impuestos para pagarle el sueldo a personas que velen por nuestra seguridad, para hacer leyes que velen por nuestra seguridad, digo estos hacen todo al revés y hacen todas las leyes para beneficio de las empresas y un día va a ser que van a hacer una ley donde tengo que trabajar 18 horas por día sin cobrar un centavo y lo voy a tener que hacer y ahí es donde yo dije ¡basta! Yo no ganaré plata pero estos de arriba conmigo no se la llevan y ahí empecé a*

buscar y no sabías a quién hablarle, la situación del país re- angustiante porque esto de la solidaridad que decía — Carmen: iba acá, ibas a allá, ibas a una reunión, reuniones, yo vivo en Bernal y me iba a reuniones a Ramos Mejía, a todos lados que habían reuniones de agua, yo me iba, y no sabías con quién hablabas si era amigo o enemigo, y entonces un día, bueno, se empezó a formar un grupo de vecinos, me fui al Defensor del Pueblo de Quilmes que era Salustio, y este personaje Salustio cuando voy, me dice la secretaria...

—Vanina Santy [researcher]: Salustio es el mismo que había estado vinculado al CEAMSE, ¿no?

—Nieves: no, Salustio en ese momento era Defensor del Pueblo, después pasó a ser concejal, después pasó a ser Defensor del Pueblo, pero en esos interines, Salustio tiene una empresa deee... constructora, de reparación así de servicios públicos, bueno y... [Vanina: ahí está, sí, sí]

Cuando entro a la Defensoría con la boleta me dice la secretaria, no, no se puede hacer nada.

Yo salgo y entraba un señor con una boleta de agua, entonces volví a entrar y yo digo, a ver qué le dice a este tipo? y cuando, le dice, bueno, “vamos a ver que esto que lo otro” y yo digo, “por qué a él le decís que sí y a mí me decís que no se puede hacer nada?” y este hombre era de una sociedad de fomento y cuando sale me dice, anota mi número de teléfono, dame tu número o yo no tenía teléfono, no me acuerdo... [Carmen: los teléfonos chiquitos esos no existían] Y quién era? Tondino, el gordo, que era de la Sociedad de Fomento del 14 de agosto, bueno, con él empezamos a..

—Carmen: hay luchadores, sale, se sale...se encuentra...

—Nieves: él participaba de la Federación de Entidades de Fomento, mirá, la historia esa era, y la angustia que te generaba porque que ibas a la Cámara de Diputados y te decían el contrato está así, no se puede hacer nada, ibas a la Defensoría del Pueblo, el primer adjunto de la Defensoría que no me acuerdo cómo se llamaba decía...y ¿por qué? ¿no tienen otro lugar donde ir a joder?

La empresa hace lo que dice el contrato, uno iba a la Defensoría del Pueblo de la Nación y ¿te contestaban eso? ibas el Defensor del Pueblo de Quilmes y te decía no se puede hacer nada! iba a la Cámara de Diputados y el contrato está así... entonces uno...

—Vanina: y con la política que hay del pague primero y quéjese después, no tenías otra opción que pagar...seguir pagando hasta que...

Nieves: ahora ponéle, nosotros vamos conociendo y sabemos con quiénes estar pero en ese momento la situación de un vecino común que nunca participo de nada, que no sabés que

—Carmen: lo del 2001 trajo todo

—Nieves: no, yo estoy hablando de antes, del '98, donde la cabeza de un vecino común que tenés que trabajar para cumplir con las obligaciones, que son los impuestos y bueno, que si te dice un funcionario tiene razón, entonces yo... ¿cómo le vas a ir a discutir a un funcionario?

Nooo, ¿viste? era como palabra santa, después cuando va pasando el tiempo decís, nadie sabía nada o sabían y en vez de velar por los derechos de la sociedad velaban por los intereses de la otra. Y bueno, pero eso lo fuimos aprendiendo ahora venirme a decir algo y somos, parecemos fieras; y cuando nos dicen de vuelta, barrios allá de Castelar, nos juntábamos con los vecinos de allá, de Capital y habíamos formado el grupo AIBA, Acción Interurbana de Vecinos y Asociaciones, que en un principio nos habíamos juntado en la Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina en Capital, en la calle Belgrano y éramos qué sé yo, 30, 40 personas y después cada vez menos, menos, menos, quedamos 7 pero nos quedó el nombre, AIBA, Acción Interurbana de Vecinos y Asociaciones.

Cuando fuimos a la Defensoría del Pueblo de la Nación me dicen “vamos” y digo, “¿para qué vamos a ir digo si ya nos dijeron que la empresa hacía lo que decía el contrato?” “No, porque hay una mujer ahí, dice que nos va a dar bolilla” y era Nana, Nana Bevilacqua. Cuando fuimos, bueno, Nana así bajita y se sentó en el escritorio, con las patitas que no le llegaban al piso y empezó a escuchar a todo lo que le decían los vecinos porque nos habíamos reunido en el Anfiteatro que estaba ahí en la calle Montevideo creo, en la Defensoría del Pueblo, y bue... cada uno le contaba le veías la cara, que parecía que le hablábamos en chino, ¿viste? Las napas, los acuíferos, no entendía nada y dice “bueno, yo lo único que les digo es que la Defensoría está a disposición de ustedes, cuando necesitan llamar vengan a llamar por teléfono acá, necesitan fotocopia sacar”. Nosotros no entendíamos nada, de todos lados nos echaban y ella era la única que nos decía y yo digo “bueno, lo que pasa es que la empresa también cobra la tarifa digo porque si está brindando un servicio”, me dice “¡no! Me dice: “los derechos humanos están por encima de los derechos comerciales, una empresa no puede” y bueno, me quedé, todos nos retaban al revés, y ella nos retó en beneficio de la humanidad y ¿viste?

Era una cosa rara todo lo que pasaba y lo que fuimos aprendiendo y bueno, con ella se hizo el tema de las napas, que Mondino cuando ella hace la demanda de las napas se la da a Mondino para qué, que era el Defensor del Pueblo y dice Eduardo esta es una demanda digna de un Defensor del Pueblo y dice: “¡a mí las napas no me interesan!” Entonces tuvo que buscar otros abogados que eran los abogados que son los que hoy nos están

ayudando, Leandro y Gonzalo, que Leandro recién se recibía, 25 años tenía Leandro, pelado, flaquito, y le dice: “yo les entrego la demanda pero si ustedes lucran con el dolor de las personas, yo misma les saco el título universitario”; y Leandro todo enojado le dice: “Doctora, usted se equivoca con nosotros y muy feo y bueno”, pasaron los años y se equivocó muy feo, y bueno, la demanda se ganó. Se iba dos veces a La Plata, 2 veces por semana a La Plata porque archivaban la causa de las napas, pasaron 14 años y el año pasado falló y tuvimos sentencia favorable, 14 años pasaron bueno, y en todo este proceso fueron pasando un montón de cosas, las asambleas barriales que ahora, después Nana no sabemos dónde está, porque le bajaron el sueldo en la Defensoría como ella, como castigo por haber ayudado [Vanina: por haber cumplido con su trabajo] [Carmen: ¡pero qué contenta estará!] La amenazaron un montón de veces de muerte, “a vos te cruzo”, le decían.

—Vanina: entonces vos arrancaste a involucrarte con estas cosas, estos problemas....

—Nieves: con un servicio público, ahí cuando empecé a participar del Foro en Defensa del Río de La Plata o una reunión que había en Berazategui por agua, me entero que estaban pidiendo vecinos [Carmen: el foro ya existía] en el 2000, yo empiezo en el 98 en el 2000 aparece el foro que eran 2 años que veníamos viendo que hacer con la empresa de miércoles de Aguas Argentinas que al final en el 2005 logramos echarla porque era la Suez y la Lyonnaise des Eaux y la Suez, que la echamos.

No es que el gobierno le rescindió, le rescindió el contrato el gobierno pero fue por la movida de los vecinos, fuimos a escrachar a AySA, síiii, escrache por todos lados, caminatas, hacías denuncias y los pedidos de comunicación, trabajábamos con periodistas [...]. (Interview, 2016).

2) We have the same problems

Nieves: «y un día cuando estaba en la cola del banco [Carmen: nosotros en el 2001] estaban los vecinos golpeando afuera y yo digo “¿ahora salen a golpear porque le tocaron el bolsillo? ¿Hace cuánto que nos están sacando la plata? Y nadie dice nada.” Y digo ahora porque les tocan la plata del banco, “nooo”, me dice una chica, acá los martes se están juntando en la esquina, los mar..., no, los jueves a las 8 de la noche se juntan en la Biblioteca Mariano Moreno.” Y ahí empecé a participar del Cabildo Abierto de Bernal, pero yo ya venía del Foro en Defensa del Río de La Plata, que ahí lo que me hizo explotar la cabeza, en el foro, fue que yo iba por una tarifa de agua y que ellos estaban pidiendo por la planta de tratamiento de efluentes [Carmen: el foro lo inició también un comunista porque él se fue del partido, como me fui yo] Salgado [Carmen: algún lugar encontramos para hacer alguna actividad] Y ahí me entero que ellos pedían la planta de tratamiento y yo digo, “¿cómo una planta de tratamiento?” y me dice “sí, no hay planta de tratamiento”, y yo digo “¿pero cómo no hay? ¿Y a dónde va?” Al río, “pero si del río sacan el agua”, y me dice, “¿y?” No lo podía creer.

El Foro Hídrico de Lomas nace en el 2000, el Foro en Defensa del Río de la Plata nace en el 2000 y la verdad que no se conocían y bueno, es como que en años vos vas viendo años y que van pasando cosas en distintos lugares y haciendo lo mismo sin saberlo y yo digo por ahí es un inconsciente colectivo que existe. Y cuando se crea el Foro en Defensa del Río de La Plata, se crea porque habían vecinos que peleaban por el Polo Petroquímico allá en Sarandí, sí en Sarandí ¿no? Lo del Polo Petroquímico, sí, el doque [Carmen: en el doque, Sarandí no, Avellaneda Puerto].

Después los vecinos del CEAMSE que para que se cerrara, los vecinos de allá de Berazategui exigiendo el cierre, la construcción de la planta de efluentes cloacales y cuando yo voy por un problema de agua [...] La cuestión es que ahí empezás y viste, decís: ¿y cómo? ¿Yo? Me mienten, me dicen en realidad una cosa y es mentira [Vanina: cómo funciona todo] Cómo funciona todo a través de la mentira y bueno y después nace el Cabildo Abierto de Bernal en el 2001 que a mí eso fue como un aire, ¿viste? Que la sociedad se empezara a movilizar y vos decís, ¿y a dónde vamos a parar? [...]

Entre el 2001 y 2007 pasaron tantas cosas [Carmen: apareció en un momento dado, el movimiento asambleario se juntaba] Sí, se siguen juntando [Carmen: las asambleas del Tigre eee, a ver, acordáte vos porque yo la memoria no la tengo, éramos como 40 asambleas] Hasta el 2004, ponéle se mantuvo el sistema asambleario [Carmen: buenísimo, sí] Era una maravilla [...] Las asambleas tenían comisiones temáticas, el Cabildo Abierto de Bernal tenía la comisión de gestión y no me acuerdo qué, nosotros teníamos al CEAMSE, de reflexión que decían y aparte otros que eran de partidos políticos que decían “ay, qué bueno, yo me voy a sentar a reflexionar” después otras eran de comunicación. Cada asamblea tenía distintas comisiones y después nos juntábamos con otras asambleas, ponéle, nosotros lo que tocábamos era. Tomábamos el tema del CEAMSE, la basura, porque era la Asamblea de Bernal y la de Don Bosco y después la de Wilde porque estaban cerca [...] Teníamos temas, distintos cada uno proponía [Carmen: nosotros tomamos el CEAMSE derecho] y un día viene una y dice: “lo que pasa es que el problema acá

es que tiene que venir uno y bajar línea” y le digo “no”, digo “acá [Vanina: justamente] [Carmen: justamente lo que no es una asamblea] tienen que venir y proponer cuál es el tema que le interesa e impulsarlo”, le digo, “en algún momento por ahí no les va a interesar pero va a llegar un momento de acuerdo al interés que tenga cada uno se va a imponer este tema y todos los demás van a ayudar, a llevarlo adelante [...] Cada asamblea tocaba un tema, estaban los de economía solidaria y iban rotando y se hacía una vez por mes plenario y era rotativo de acuerdo a la Asamblea que por ahí tenía algún conflicto o necesitaba ayuda se hacía [...]». (Interview, 2016).

3) Reasons for joining an assembly

Nieves: «Me iba más el Cabildo Abierto de Bernal, tenía una política más amplia no era solamente [Carmen: era más derecho digamos] no, el Cabildo Abierto no, el Cabildo Abierto trabajábamos con los cartoneros de Itatí cuando los dejaron sin trabajo. [Carmen: entonces qué era que después no continuó] Cuando los dejaron sin trabajo a los cartoneros, no los dejaban nosotros habíamos hecho un volante y volanteábamos en todo el barrio para que los vecinos separen los residuos y los cartoneros pudieran pasar [...] pero, ¿por qué no continuó eso? ¿Cuál fue el click? El crack, ¿cómo se le dice? Y bueno, porque en vez de sostener por más que seamos 4 no estaban convencidos de la idea del Cabildo, cuando aparecen los de Bernal Unido en 2005 dicen: “ahh, nosotros nos juntamos los jueves en la Biblioteca Mariano Moreno si quieren pueden venir ahí” y se cambió el Cabildo Abierto de Bernal por Bernal Unido, y Bernal Unido lo único que le importaba eran los edificios que no me hagan esto y nosotros trabajábamos con los chicos con todo [...].

En el 2004 se cierra el CEAMSE ahí es como que aflojan un poco, dicen “ahh, ya está”, baja la presión y aparece esto el 2004/2005 es todo un periodo de un año ahí que se iba a la Asamblea los jueves a las 20 horas. Bernal Unido en Quilmes, ellos empiezan con el tema de los edificios, en la biblioteca ya no nos podíamos juntar más, tenías que ir a pagar un café en el centro que era re caro, después aparece Quilmes Unidos en Quilmes también por el tema de los edificios y sí, era otra situación [...] Yo estoy hablando de las asambleas, las asambleas todos los vecinos cuando empezaron a funcionar económicamente bien se van cada cual para su casa y se disuelven las asambleas el interés que tenían estos era que no le hicieran el edificio pero era una asamblea

Quilmes Unido, Bernal Unido, Ezpeleta Unido, se quiere poner una fábrica allá en Ezpeleta por el tema de unos contenedores, unos chinos que iban a envasar miel, no sé qué, y la gente se junta y no los deja y en el 2007 se crea el Foro de Asambleas por un Plan Urbano Ambiental. Eso es cuando asume el Barba, cuando asume el Barba, el Barba venía a los cumpleaños de los asambleístas, yo no estaba de acuerdo [Carmen: el Barba era de izquierda, estuvo preso] yo no estaba de acuerdo con que él viniera, por más que era simpático y todo, yo nunca fui a un cumpleaños del Barba con los vecinos, era, ¿viste? Estoy con el intendente, la cuestión que dijimos bueno, asume él que era un municipio de puertas abiertas, pidámosle algún lugar, la Casa de la Cultura, que estaba ahí, le preguntamos qué día no funcionaba que no tenían actividades, los lunes después de las 8 no había nadie. Bueno, fuimos ahí, entonces empezamos a invitar vecinos de otras partes de Quilmes y se empezó a armar el mapa de Quilmes cuáles eran las problemáticas que se inundaban, que esto que lo otro, edificio, Nueva Costa del Plata ni existía, la cuestión es que invitamos al secretario de Obras Públicas y le cuestionábamos que no le iba a alcanzar el presupuesto municipal de los 4 años si tenían el problema de las napas [...]». (Interview, 2016).

4) David against Goliath

—Vanina Santy [researcher]: Pero Nieves, ¿cómo manejan las diferencias? Porque evidentemente hay puntos de conflicto.

—Nieves: ¿cómo manejamos las diferencias? Jajaja con una paciencia a mí ponéle, en este último mes me dan ganas de irme a la miércoles. Ya estaba re podrida porque no es pelear contra el enemigo sino que el enemigo está con nosotros mismos, ¿viste? Hay problemas entre nosotros [...] si no vienen las cosas hay que hacerlas, no somos una empresa, está bien, no somos una empresa, los tipos estos “cocodrilo que se duerme termina siendo carterá”, mirá hoy como desmontaron todo, tenés que ir haciendo. Hoy tendríamos que haber presentado la nota, mañana presentamos la nota en el municipio, en el OPDS y en la Defensoría del Pueblo, en todos lados, y ya sabemos administrativamente, la vía administrativa sabemos que hay que agotar la vía administrativa para la parte legal. Ese ejercicio que hoy tiene la Asamblea NHOC exitoso es porque ya venimos de arrastre de agua [...] pero quien nos ayudó fué Nana Bevilacqua, el defensor no, la adjunta, la segunda adjunta fue la que nos ayudó, así fuimos

encontrado gente re que te valiosa que fuimos aprendiendo, entonces nosotros lo que queremos es que el que se sume en vez de que tenga que recorrer 16 años le damos el compilado de moda, pero es esto, ¿viste?

Que se sumen... toda la información socializarla para que la puedan tener y avanzar de otra manera [...]. (Interview, 2016).

«[...] mientras nosotros somos vecinos organizados tratando de parar algo y dedicándole tiempo a nuestras vidas y recursos que no hay, a eso los tipos cobran un sueldo por hacer planes sin preguntarnos, entonces es muy absurdo [Vanina: Con todos los recursos, con toda la información, con todo...] Entonces nos pasa es que tenemos una agenda eterna de perseguir diputados en el Congreso, municipalidades, directores, intendentes, perseguir es la palabra porque tenés que perseguirlos para que te den un dato, ir a audiencia pública que después no le dan bola, etcétera, etcétera, etcétera. Son profesionales en esto y nosotros no, entonces o somos muchos y nos repartimos la tarea, cosa que no ocurre tanto, o nos matamos porque realmente a veces es matarse, yo veo compañeros, más que yo, que se matan para perseguir esta gente porque es como vos decís te hacen estas cosas, te lleva un montón de tiempo eso. Así que mi opinión es esa eso, ellos son profesionales y van a una velocidad y le dedican tiempo full time y nosotros somos amateurs y los perseguimos y le ponemos tiempo [...]». (Natalia Salvatico, Directora Ejecutiva de Amigos de la Tierra. Entrevista, 2016).

In the following part of the interview I joined two paragraphs corresponding to the interview but separated in time as the first one corresponds to the beginning and the second one almost at the end of the interview:

—Nieves: «Ahora ponéle, nosotros vamos conociendo y sabemos con quiénes estar pero en ese momento la situación de un vecino común que nunca participó de nada [...]»

En realidad, lo que nosotros vemos es que al principio en el foro cuando nos juntábamos en la Biblioteca Manuel Belgrano yo, vecina común, los otros venían con una línea política partidaria porque salían del partido Comunista... Mónica Colman, no sé si era del ARI y yo como vecina común

—Carmen: ella era vecina pura

—Nieves: veía que pasaba la gente con los estuches de instrumentos musicales y digo, y estos que hacen? Nooo, estos tocan el saxo y, ¿por qué no le decimos que venga? Eh, ¿y vos qué querés? Que participe, y sí, el que toca el saxo también la caca le llega a la casa [...]». (2016).

5) (Pure) common people

Nieves: «Ahora ponéle, nosotros vamos conociendo y sabemos con quiénes estar pero en ese momento la situación de un vecino común que nunca participo de nada...[...]»

En realidad, lo que nosotros vemos es que al principio en el foro cuando nos juntábamos en la Biblioteca Manuel Belgrano yo, una vecina común, los otros venían con una línea política partidaria porque salían del Partido Comunista... Mónica Colman, no sé si era del ARI y yo como vecina común

Natalia: ella era vecina pura

Nieves: yo veía que pasaba la gente con los estuches de instrumentos musicales y digo... ¿y estos que hacen? Nooo, estos tocan el saxo y, ¿por qué no le decimos que venga? Eh, ¿y vos qué querés? que participe... y sí... el que toca el saxo también la caca le llega a la casa...[...]» (Entrevista, 2016).

6) Together as “gansos” (geese)

«Soy parte de un colectivo, no soy la cabeza. Si bien soy una de las más antiguas no me considero una dirigente. El éxito de la asamblea es la participación de todxs y que ninguno esté por encima del otro. Ese es el verdadero logro y el hecho de seguir existiendo durante estos casi diez años. Es que somos GANZOS!!! Explicamos nuestra teoría aquí abajo y damos prueba de lo dicho.

TRABAJO EN EQUIPO DE LOS GANSOS

La ciencia ha descubierto que los gansos vuelan formando una V porque cada pájaro bate sus alas produciendo un

movimiento en el aire que ayuda al ganso que va detrás de él. Volando en V la bandada completa aumenta por lo menos un 71% más su poder de vuelo, a diferencia de que si cada pájaro volara solo.

Cada vez que el ganso se sale de la formación, siente la resistencia del aire y se da cuenta de la dificultad de volar solo. Por lo anterior, de inmediato se incorpora a la fila para beneficiarse del poder del compañero que va delante.

Cuando el ganso que va en cabeza se cansa, se pasa a uno de los puestos de atrás y otro ganso o gansa toma su lugar. Los gansos que van detrás producen un sonido propio de ellos para estimular a los que van delante para mantener la velocidad.

Cuando una gansa o ganso enferma o queda herida, dos de sus compañeras se salen de la formación y la siguen para ayudarla o protegerla. Se quedan con ella hasta que esté nuevamente en condiciones de volar o hasta que muera. Sólo entonces las dos compañeras vuelven a la banda o se unen a otro grupo.

Parece que cuando compartimos una dirección común y tenemos sentido de comunidad, podemos llegar a donde deseamos más fácilmente y más rápido. Este es el beneficio del mutuo apoyo». (Nieves Baldaccini, email, 29/12/2017).

Chapter 5

«El Espacio InterCuencas está integrado por: grupos de vecinos autoconvocados, Foros Hídricos y de Salud, Comisiones y Asambleas Barriales, diversas organizaciones ambientalistas, Organizaciones no Gubernamentales, Sociedades de Fomento, personas que accionamos en contra de la contaminación ambiental y por la defensa y promoción de una gestión integral del Agua y de las Cuencas Hídricas.

En el Espacio funcionamos como una red pluralista de intercambio de información, solidaridad, apoyo y movilización. Nuestra metodología de trabajo es democrática, horizontal; donde el plenario resuelve los lineamientos y acciones de trabajo y manda a delegados y/o grupos al cumplimiento de las acciones que se aprueben de conjunto. El espacio es autónomo del estado, empresas y de los partidos políticos. Privilegiamos el trabajo con y desde los vecinos, involucrándonos entre todos en las acciones a seguir y en la elaboración de alternativas de solución a nuestros problemas y gestionarlos en base a la movilización». (Intercuencas, Encuentro N° XXIV, March 2012).

—Carmen: *pero era diferente porque el aguatero antes era el agua, ¿qué agua era? No era porque el agua estaba contaminada, estaba pero no sabíamos*

—Vanina Santy [researcher]: *Carmen, retrocedimos casi 80 años atrás*

—Nieves: *en el '45 fueron a vivir ahí y ¿por qué iban a buscar el agua al aguatero? Porque mi abuelo hace un pozo de 25 metros de profundidad y no encuentra para sacar agua y vivían acá enfrente [Vanina: ¿en serio?] [Carmen: ¡mirá qué coincidencia!] Mis abuelos, pará Carmen que se va a mezclar todo, ¡dejáme hablar! Vienen de Italia sin plata, van a Banfield porque no tenían un mango, van a parar a un gallinero y ¿cómo se llama? Y después no sé, trabajaba en Ferrocarriles mi abuelo y compra una casa acá en Wilde y estaban cerca del arroyo, siempre se inundaban, les llegaba el agua a la mitad, entonces. [...] Y la cuestión de la solidaridad de los vecinos, viste? porque se enfermaba uno, el tema de la tuberculosis, entonces todas las vecinas se juntaban y le lavaban las casas con lavandina porque la mayoría eran casillas, o se inundaban entonces entre todos se iban limpiando entre todos la casa así, ¿viste? Y no tenían pozos ciegos mi abuelo volvía de trabajar en la fábrica y hacía el pozo ciego en otros vecinos para que todos tengan pozos, un loco, un loco lindo, y después allá en Bernal, cuando compra sabían que vendían 5 terrenos y se va a ver.... Pero todo esto desde un trabajador, no era que...era un trabajador de Ferrocarriles y después de la fábrica, y lo que se fijó era que tuviera buen drenaje para no inundarse y porque acá ya tenía un montón de vecinos, tenía la casa siempre llena de vecinos, viste? cuándo se va a vivir allá compra el terreno que sé yo y todos los vecinos se fueron para allá así que estaba rodeado de los vecinos de acá y bueno... no tenían el agua, iban a buscar al aguatero y lo que hacían, después se cansaron de que pase el aguatero, se ponían de acuerdo a la tarde los vecinos 4 vecinos eran que terminaban de trabajar y se juntaban a traer, trajeron el agua de Zapiola, son 3 cuadras, 4 cuadras hicieron de agua, instalaron todos los caños de agua para tener agua corriente, cada cosa que se hacía era un logro para bene... o la luz, el asfalto.*

—Carmen: *nosotros también, cuando vinimos de Comodoro después en el barrio donde yo vivía en La Plata, 6 familias se vinieron de Comodoro, todos alrededor estaban, nos juntábamos.*

—Nieves: *y bueno, y a mí me pasaba eso y digo loco, ¿cómo puede ser? Que antes los vecinos se juntaban*

—Carmen: *ay, ¡sí!*

—Nieves: *se ayudaban entre sí*

—Vanina: *eso se perdió*

—Carmen: *a la noche se juntaban debajo de los tilos en La Plata, teníamos tilos*

—Nieves: o a tomar mate en la calle

—Carmen: en la vereda se sacaban los banquitos y los vecinos se sentaban se venían hasta de la esquina, viste? se sentaban ahí los viejos, yo no iba a sentarme

—Nieves: no eran viejos

—Carmen: no quiero decir viejos pero digo nuestros padres

—Vanina: yo por ejemplo nunca viví esa solidaridad, si en mi cuadra nos inundamos, los de la otra cuadra dicen bueno, yo no tengo problema, no me pasa eso, entonces nadie quiere meterse en problemas, involucrarse, no es mucho que se pueda hacer]

—Nieves: en mi casa tengo llaves de los vecinos, el otro día Esther se cayó de vuelta y viene la nieta y me dice ¿no tienes las llaves? ¿Y qué sé yo? Se las llevo tu papá las llaves y digo pará, agarré la escalera, tuve que poner la escalera, saltar la pared, pero en el barrio todavía queda eso de ayudarse y ahora volvió una chica que vivió ahí en el barrio, se había ido a vivir a Brasil volvió con los hijos y tienen eso, en Brasil son más solidarios, entonces te da alegría porque es como un resurgir de esa solidaridad». (Interview, 2016).

«sí, ayer nos preguntaron, ¿ustedes qué son? ¿Son ingenieros agrónomos, ingenieros forestales? No, cada uno y lo que se da, no sé si te lo dijimos a vos, son muchas personas que están que tienen que están relacionados con la parte artística y nosotros les explicamos que no, que el conocimiento se fue dando en caminar y en la repetición, una vez, dos veces, no acordarse los nombres, hacer el esfuerzo de cómo se llamaba la planta, buscar la manera de cómo asociar las palabras o con cosas u objetos para acordarte de determinadas plantas, cada uno usó una estrategia distinta para poder decir, y bueno, a veces uno dice las cosas de una manera, otros de otra pero es cómo rearma cada uno su manera de contar [...]» (Entrevista, vecina de No a la Entrega de la Costa, 2018).

Curupí: «Para mí la costa es como parte de mi barrio, digamos, de mi cultura, parte de las vivencias que uno tiene, digamos, con el barrio de ir a pasear en la costa, ver el río, digamos, tiene como un significado muy emocional, digamos, hablar de uno que viene de parte de la familia donde mi abuelo tenía en su momento una casita ahí cerca del río, tiene todo un significado bastante cercano, muy a piel todo eso, además de toda la belleza y después más de grande haber entendido el significado que tiene que no es simplemente la belleza sino la cuestión funcional que hace la costa con los humedales, la selva marginal y todo eso, cómo funciona le dio otro valor digamos a la costa [...]». (Vecino de NHOC, entrevista, 2018).

Chapter 6

«[...] Pero el objetivo era este: ¿qué era Nueva Costa del Plata? Era de vuelta Techint, ¿viste? Y ya lo conocíamos a Techint [Vanina: ahora, ¿cuándo cobra importancia otra vez para los vecinos el tema de la costa? ¿A partir de que se convierte en una reserva natural? Entonces ustedes tienen más recursos para organizarse...]. Nosotros ni sabíamos que era una reserva natural, cuando nos juntamos de vuelta que decíamos pero como Techint va a agarrar de vuelta esto, ¿dónde? Y empezamos a ver dónde se hace el emprendimiento bla bla bla y había uno que era arquitecto, ¿cómo era? Héctor Casazza que hace toda la proyección hidráulica porque nosotros decíamos bueno, vamos a salir a protestar y ¿a decir qué? ¿Por qué se genera todo esto? Y era esto que si hacen un emprendimiento inmobiliario en esa zona, el caudal de agua no va a estar y bueno, eso es lo que empieza a movilizarnos [...]». (Entrevista "vecino" de NHOC, 2016).

«[...] Ahí empezamos como a vincularnos y un día dijimos bueno, pero no estamos hablando del humedal, estamos hablando de una urbanización y sí porque al principio era sólo el humedal prístino, perfecto, pero empezamos a ver eso y bueno, si hablamos de urbanizaciones hablemos de la ciudad, porque por más que sean countries lejanos a la ciudad hay ciertas dinámicas urbanas que tenemos que atender, hablemos de acaparamiento de tierras, de especulación inmobiliaria y todo esto va decantando, muchos compañeros de Amigos de la Tierra también lo están trabajando cuando hace unos años era impensado, la cuestión urbana está pérdida, ya está. Y ahora, por ejemplo en agosto se va a lanzar una campaña de muchas organizaciones de la carta de derecho a la ciudad que es empezar a trabajar algunos conceptos como los de David Harvey y varios geógrafos y qué sé yo que tienen muy desarrollado la cuestión ésta de qué pasa en las ciudades, por ejemplo el tema de vivienda que nosotros no los tomamos aunque si bien tuvimos algunos intercambios por la ley de hábitat porque tiene que ver con la dignidad humana y el medio ambiente en las ciudades. No es solamente el árbol, va mucho más allá y la cuestión de la urbanización es un tema que también tiene vínculos con cosas que pasan, como todo está relacionado con todo,

con cosas que pasan en el campo entonces la renta sojera se vuelca aquí entonces no podemos decir en lo urbano no hay problemas; bueno, primero que eso es innegable, ¿no? Y que no tienen nada que ver con otros problemas, tiene mucho que ver, porque la renta sojera que destruye el ecosistema en las áreas rurales, si se quiere nos deja sin suelo, sin futuro en ese sentido, encima la vuelcan acá, hacen especulación inmobiliaria, destruyen humedales, gentrifican barrios, entonces es como que todo está enlazado y es imposible no verlo, ¿es mucho? Sí, es muchísimo, por eso a veces no damos abasto pero así creo que ahora hoy en día nuestra obligación como ambientalistas es ver esos lazos, no son las cosas tan simples [...]». (Natalia Salvatico, Amigos de la Tierra. Entrevista, 2016).

«Recuperar una costa que desde hace muchas décadas los vecinos de Avellaneda no la disfrutamos, yo he tenido. [decíle a la gente que está si no quiere, acá hay lugar todavía, y si no podemos hacer un poquito de silencio para que todos podamos hablar después, porque si no, mi opinión importa poco, pero después hay mucha gente que tiene muchas cosas que decir y si hay murmullo seguramente no va a ser escuchada, en teoría los que estamos acá venimos a escuchar, a participar de esto y no a murmurar, si no sería muy simple], decírles que muchos de nosotros han tenido la suerte de haber estado en la costa de Sarandí y de Domínico, yo me crié prácticamente en la costa de Domínico, tenía doce, catorce años íbamos caminando en la calle Juan B. Justo hasta la costa y nos íbamos hasta el famoso balneario de Racing que disfrutábamos todos, bueno de Racing era el nombre nada más porque todos los de Independiente también podíamos participar, y era una fiesta, todos los fines de semana con miles y miles de vecinos, venían de todos lados no solamente de Avellaneda, venía gente de Lanús, de Lomas de Zamora de Almirante Brown venía gente, de la capital porque ya en esa época muchos sectores de la capital no se disfrutaba del río y nosotros si teníamos la suerte de disfrutar del río.

Década de fines del sesenta lo que me toca a mí a mediados del setenta, lamentablemente el curso de los acontecimientos ajeno a nuestra voluntad, ajena a nuestra decisión hizo que poco a poco el río no fuera de la gente que el río no pudiéramos nosotros disfrutar ese río que tanto queríamos. Yo recuerdo que íbamos a pescar salían dorados, surubíes, lisas, en la costa de Sarandí, la presencia ya casi centenaria del Polo Petroquímico de Dock Sud, fue de alguna manera alejando las posibilidades de nuestra participación, en la década del setenta la presencia del CEAMSE no buscado por nosotros, no consultada hacia nosotros los vecinos de la ciudad hizo que terminara por alejarnos definitivamente de la costa del Río de la Plata, y nos convirtió en una ciudad sin río, de espaldas al río, convirtió una ciudad que tiene un hermoso lugar pero donde la mayoría de nosotros dejó de participar dejó de acercarse y empezamos a vivir de espaldas al río. El tiempo pasó, el CEAMSE ya no está, ha habido una recuperación realmente maravillosa en la zona hace diez años atrás uno podría pensar hacer algo en esta zona, no sé si valdría la pena, pensábamos hace diez años, el tiempo, la naturaleza y el esfuerzo, permitió que efectivamente esa zona alejada de la gente, alejada quizás de la mano de Dios, se recuperara, y hoy es un lugar digno pero que sigue con la gente de espaldas al río, se requiere una inversión realmente muy grande muy importante para que la gente vuelva a estar con el río [...]». (Baldomero Álvarez de Olivera, ex Intendente de Avellaneda. Transcripción de audiencia pública, 26/11/2008).

«Bueno yo soy profesora de historia vivo en Avellaneda pero no en cualquier barrio de Avellaneda, vivo en uno de los que ustedes hoy están haciendo referencia pero seguramente sin siquiera haber pasado por allí. Sin embargo, yo que nací en la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, viví allí hasta mi juventud y desde hace veintiséis años vivo en la zona de las quintas. Aprendí mucho sobre esa zona del que hoy es mi esposo y su familia. Pioneros en esa zona desde fines de 1800 nada menos. La verdad que me siento tan costera como cualquiera que nació allí. Todos los años que llevo viviendo en ese lugar ví diferentes proyectos, ví avances retrocesos, ví diferentes políticos prometiendo mejoras para el lugar que solo quedaron en eso, promesas [...]». (Viviana Fernández, transcripción de audiencia pública, 26/11/2008).

«[...] Siempre estuvo [Vanina: por el Río de la Plata, por los residuos] a mí me molestaba mucho era participar del Foro en Defensa del Río en La Plata y no estar en el río, era una cuestión mía pero digo, si estamos defendiendo al río y nunca vamos y bueno, cuando aparece la Asamblea No a la entrega de la Costa hacíamos actividades en la calle, qué sé yo pero, ah, y en el 2008, en agosto del 2008 por Fabián, que venía peleando, que estaba en Bernal Unido que venía peleando por la papelera Smurfit Kappa. Él siempre iba a caminar con el perro y dijimos un día, “che, vamos a caminar con el perro”, bah, “llevános a caminar” porque nosotros no conocíamos, y yo hacía años viste y bueno fuimos y a partir de ese entonces empezamos las caminatas, empezamos a convocar a más gente y era re lindo, bah, es re lindo caminar por ese lugar y era la relación de vuelta, vamos con... que vos conoces, era el

miedo porque todos te dicen no porque es peligroso y no es peligroso para nada y ahí empezamos de vuelta a estar con el río [...]». (“Vecino” NHOC, entrevista, 2016).

«Le decimos No a Techint y a su negociado, que busca urbanizar las últimas áreas verdes de la costa de Avellaneda y Quilmes. Porque el llamado Proyecto Costa del Plata representa sancionar la apropiación ilegítima de nuestras tierras costeras por una corporación, Techint, que contaminó y enfermó a la gente de Avellaneda y Quilmes operando el mayor basural de Sudamérica, instalado por la Dictadura Militar en 1978', sentencia el comunicado de las organizaciones ambientalistas de la región. [...] De la misma manera que el pueblo impidió que CEAMSE y Techint sigan enterrando basura, vamos a defender la costa y exigir la recuperación de las tierras por parte del Estado para sus verdaderos dueños: los vecinos de Avellaneda y Quilmes [...]».

(Pronunciamiento público, Blog Bernal Unido, 7/12/2008).

Chapter 7

«apropiarse es decir ¿por qué? Como dice Nieves o mi viejo también, antes íbamos todos a bañarnos al río, a disfrutar de la naturaleza sin tener que pagar fortuna y podés meterte al río, en Velatropa una chica dijo, dice «yo vivía en Campana, en San Pedro sí y yo me metía al río y ahora no me puedo meter al río, está todo contaminado, ¿por qué me hicieron eso?» ¿Entendés? Ella tampoco no lo puede entender eso y ahora vive en Lugano y bueno, y así... te indigna [...]». (Nieves, entrevista, 2018).

«Jorge, bueno eso es lo que tal vez nosotros nos peleamos, nos enojamos, el otro día con Juan nos agarramos por las piedras porque le dije “che, podríamos poner un poco de cemento en las piedras para que no se caigan”. “¡Cemento! ¿Para qué querés cemento si hay bioconstrucción?” “Mirá, no me hablés de la bioconstrucción que el capo de todos los capos de la bioconstrucción en las bases, a las piedras le pone cemento y yo...” “¿Para qué le pusiste cemento a los carteles?” “¿Viste? Porque los carteles cuando los amuramos le ponemos piedra apisonada y un poco de cemento “vos llevaste el cemento” “¿Yo llevé el cemento?” “Sí, el cemento lo llevabas vos” así que nos peleamos todo el tiempo y es como la familia [...]». (Nieves, entrevista, 2018).

«[...] En una noche amable, iluminados por la luz de la luna, los vecinos dieron inicio a la actividad cruzando la autopista, viendo el arroyo contaminado por la Pastera Smurfit Kappa para luego internarse en los senderos de la Selva Marginal Quilmeña.

La aparición de los bichitos de luz sorprendió a los más grandes y niños. Un papá contaba a sus pequeños hijos que en su infancia juntaban bichitos que tenían dos lucecitas, fue dar un par de pasos y encontrar varios ejemplares. Estas caminatas nocturnas logran recuperar la emoción y felicidad total que existen en las cosas más simples; como el ver volar en la oscuridad a los bichitos de luz, sentir el perfume de la hierba en la noche, oír los sonidos nocturnos, acostumbrar la vista y caminar con la luz de la luna. Una forma de descubrir, valorar y defender entre todos los Quilmeños los tesoros escondidos que tenemos en nuestro distrito.

La Caminata culminó con una intervención sonora realizada por el Grupo Contempo Cooperativa Creativa. Con un sistema de Audio digitalizado reprodujeron los sonidos nocturnos. Una sinfonía de grillos y ranas se contraponían al ruido ensordecedor de bocinazos y pasar continuo de vehículos por la autopista [...]».

(Asambleas NHOC y Bernal Unido, gacettilla prensa, 2012).

The following dialogue is part of a field note I took by hand while listening to the interaction between “neighbours” of the Assembly NHOC. At the beginning, I wrote the names of plant species in phonetic form that were later verified with Nieves. Although her knowledge was important regarding the biodiversity of the riverside in Bernal, if any mistakes, they should be attributed to what I interpreted that day. The initials X and L denote other “neighbours” involved in the conversation and they asked me not to use their real names:

—Sandra: también es bueno que muchos jóvenes que están estudiando biología, por ejemplo, Marisol, quedó fascinada el otro día después del paseo y ahora quiere venir a hacer un estudio biótico.

— Nieves: *ahh, las cosas, ¿cómo se llaman? ¿los musgos parietales?*

— Sandra: *no, ¿cómo se llaman?*

— Nieves: *Briofitas, creo que las Hepatofitas son otra cosa.*

— Sandra: *¿Briófitos?*

— Nieves: *Briofitas son musgos.*

— Sandra: *¿Y las Hepaticófitas que he dicho que hay por toda la costa? Está llena de ellas.*

— X: *no sé.*

— L: *no es lo mismo que los musgos.*

— Sandra: por eso ella está estudiando musgos, estudia botánica en La Plata, biología con orientación botánica, y ahora está haciendo una pasantía en el Instituto Darwiniano de Musgos y bueno, estos lugares son únicos para este tipo de relevamiento. En el instituto le dijeron que cuando lo hiciera, cuando los clasificara, llevara dos muestras al Instituto Darwiniano porque no hay ningún relevamiento previo en esta zona, en el Río de La Plata. En esta zona, los musgos son súper poderosos. No sé, se mueren aunque estén secos y tienen algún, no sé, algún tipo de medicina que se podría encontrar; todo está estudiado... los líquenes son los indicadores de contaminación [...] hay tantas cosas para investigar que... que haya vida en un pedacito de espacio como ese... [...]. (NHOC, nota de campo, 2017).

«[...] Y durante más de un año se estuvieron haciendo estudios con asesores internacionales, universidades locales, sobre el impacto previo del proyecto, sobre tierra, agua y aire, fueron absolutamente normales todos los indicadores, fueron expuestos, fueron contados inclusive en audiencias públicas, están en la cantidad de documentos que se presentaron inclusive, pensá que cuando nosotros presentamos a la municipalidad tanto de Avellaneda como de Quilmes los dos proyectos, la síntesis de gran parte de estas investigaciones o estudios tenían más de 1.500 fojas el expediente bien, lo paradójico del caso es que al poco tiempo, la, podríamos decir... Hoy en día la figura de la...podría tener de Vido, la carátula cambió y pasó a ser según acusaciones ya no un lugar contaminado, agredido por, o un proyecto agredido por un lugar contaminado, sino que el proyecto agredía un pulmón verde [...]». (Roberto Converti, Oficina Urbana. Entrevista, 2017).

Chapter 8

«[...] Yo creo en el territorio, sí entiendo que a veces hay cuestiones que hay que hablarlas o que por ahí se necesita un espacio físico como para organizar con electricidad y la Pc y otras cuestiones y a veces la lluvia, el frío, a veces acá hemos soportado inviernos, se pone heavy, pero para mí es súper importante hacerlo acá, en el río o en el desmonte poner un cartel, trabajar ahí, apropiarnos, es de todos, es de nosotros, no lo hacen los funcionarios hagámoslo nosotros, lo vamos a defender nosotros, ahí sí me parece como que esa, esa, por ahí va, yo me siento más fuerte, más cómoda en ese sentido, por ahí no, viste, soy con el tema burocrático, me pone un poco...eh...pero sí, estar en el lugar es como que, me siento por ahí no es así pero me siento más fuerte, como que estoy haciendo algo, después de una jornada es como que no sé, me siento realizada [...]». (Sandra, entrevista, 2017).

«[...] Un lugar de encuentro con los otros era “El Recreo La Tapera donde llueve y no gotea”. (Una casilla de chapa construida sobre pilotes allá por 1914, que resistió crecientes, sudestadas y sigue hoy en pie). Allí se armaban los bailongos, en tanto los papás bailaban al ritmo de alguna orquesta que se convocaba en el lugar, los niños jugaban, se divertían, chapoteando en el río. [...]

Este fin de semana nuevamente señalizamos la reserva (en el 2012 se instalaron los primeros carteles indicando su existencia) y se colocó un cartel señalizando nuestro patrimonio histórico cultural para que no sea sólo un recuerdo, sino para protegerlo, para que siga existiendo y sea parte de nuestra realidad; para poder contarle a las nuevas generaciones las historias que tenemos, las que construyen nuestra realidad [...]». (Asamblea NHOC, abril 2015).

«Muchas veces escuchamos historias de nuestros mayores sobre las comidas al aire libre y fines de semanas que pasaban en el río. Historias lejanas, rememorando momentos gratos de disfrute, de compartir con otros.

Cuenta “La Peti” vecina de Bernal, que su papá era carbonero y los fines de semana iban al Río. La ceremonia se iniciaba con la preparación de todo lo necesario: banquitos, cubiertos, platos, el papá ensillaba el caballo y cargaba

la parrilla para hacer el fueguito para el asado, la mamá las verduras para la ensalada y los niños se encargaban de las paletas y la pelota para jugar en la playa. Ya todos preparados y arriba del carro partían hacia el río por la calle Avellaneda, siendo parada oficial de todos los que se encaminaban a ese paseo familiar la panadería que se encontraba frente al Sanatorio Bernal. Allí compraban el pan y las facturas para pasar el fin de semana.

Una vez que llegaban a destino comenzaba la segunda etapa, buscar lugar y desenganchar el caballo del carro, descargar las cosas, armar el fueguito, calentar el agua para el mate y dar inicio al fin de semana en la ribera [...].» (NHOC, 14/4/2015).

«[...] La brisa del sudeste y el atractivo de las aguas que bañan la orilla hipnotizan a los desconocidos y los obligan a volver. El aroma de las plantas, los sonidos de la naturaleza, los paseos en lancha, las caminatas al atardecer. Las sensaciones que experimentan no les permiten pensar en otra cosa y, ante ese impedimento de regresar, la nostalgia se vuelve una constante ineludible en sus vidas. Así fue como muchos terminaron instalándose en el barrio.

—¡El famoso “Mal del Sauce”!— exclama Elvira, conteniendo la risa, cuando devela el misterio.

Las palabras salen a borbotones de su boca: “Es ese enamoramiento que sienten los que vienen que hace que no te vayas nunca más”. Elvira menciona que una vez estuvo a punto de irse, cuando se separó, pero que luego se arrepintió. Girando la cabeza de un lado a otro, asegura que no podría vivir fuera de La Ribera y que la tranquilidad que sienten ella y sus hijos cuando amanece no la podría conseguir en otro lado. “El aire libre, correr, jugar en la calle. Acá los chicos son libres, felices”. Ella, mejor que nadie, comprende de qué se trata el Mal del Sauce. Lo padece desde hace 21 años [...].» (Artículo, 2017).

«[...] hay momentos en que fueron pasando cosas, ponéle, en el '98 [Natalia: porque fue la represión en el 2001, ah! 2002 también lo del chico, lo de Darío Santillán eso también fue, lo que cuando mataron a los dos chicos] pero a lo que voy yo al inconsciente colectivo es que ponéle... En el '98 las Madres de las Torres salen por un hecho puntual que se prende fuego el CEAMSE adentro, ¿no? que la basura levanta temperatura, genera gases y eso hizo que se que levante más temperatura de lo normal y se prendió fuego, y no me acuerdo en qué mes, 15 días duró el incendio y no lo podían apagar, eso fue lo que dijeron: “¡hay un CEAMSE activo ahí!” Después, el hecho de que en el '98 también se prende fuego el Perito Moreno, un buque que los vecinos de ahí, del Polo Petroquímico le decían a los bomberos “¡che, pero apaga el fuego del barco!” “No, tenemos esta orden” y no le decían que la orden era que mojaran los tanques de petróleo porque si se prendía uno fuego hacia una reacción en cadena y volaba todo [...].» (Nieves, Asamblea NHOC, 2016).

—Juan: «[...] salieron a decir que el proyecto NCP venía a desprivatizar la costa [Carlos: sí] esa fue la que no se la bancó nadie y le saltaron 4 ó 5 personas a gritarle, yo incluido, a gritarle al chabón porque están mintiendo en nuestra cara porque no, no, no...No te hagas el boludo con eso, digamos, es preferible un enemigo que venga a... a... a...»

—Carlos: de frente

—: que venga de frente a conquistarte y listo, o sea, veremos cómo lo resolveremos para defendernos pero no me vengas encima a pretender que yo te agradezca [...]. (Juan and Carlos, entrevista, 2017).

—Carla: «[...] por más ocupada que esté con el jardín, si yo me entero que mañana están pensando en poner las topadoras le bajó el volumen a toda mi vida y me instalo en la reserva y me sacan con camiones hidrantes, como... Estoy dispuesta a dar todo lo que tenga que dar para que se entienda que nosotros no estamos de acuerdo porque si hasta ahora no fueron capaces de hacer una consulta o de decir la verdad porque desde el municipio nunca se dijo la verdad nunca se dice lo que se tiene que decir y lo último que se hizo es un desmonte enorme en la zona en julio del año pasado es como bueno, listo, no nos están escuchando y no nos van a escuchar, no nos quieren escuchar, digamos, y nosotros vamos a seguir diciendo lo que tengamos de decir [...].»

—Vanina Santy [researcher]: ¿qué representa para vos la costa, el bosque nativo, el río, los humedales?

—Carla: no, para mí, yo me quedé pensando alguna vez algo me tiraste por Facebook que me habías preguntado ¿cuál es la conexión, por qué me late todavía el corazón aunque yo no esté activando? Y yo lo que pienso es a mí me late en general como con la sensación del bien común [...].» (NHOC, 2017).

Chapter 9

«[...] por qué hicimos esto? Por qué lo dejamos que pase? Y por qué tiene que ser así? Porque vos ves alrededor y ves que es un paraíso, a pesar de todo, que los vecinos, yo soy de Lanús, e igualmente me siento como re afectada por la planta potabilizadora porque es el mismo agua que estamos tomando porque no es justo que tenemos un río y no podemos disfrutar de él, o sea, ni abastecemos lo que sería algo natural que nos dió la naturaleza y que no no se entiende: ¿por qué llegamos hasta donde llegamos? Es triste [...]» (Sandra, NHOC. Entrevista, 2017).

This is the full version of the poetry written by the “neighbours” which is no longer available on the Internet. I saved a copy in 2017 which I downloaded from the Facebook account of the Assembly NHOC:

«Nos animamos a saber,
a no quedarnos con una sola campana
ni con dos.
Damos horas de nuestro día,
de nuestros días,
sabemos que no es perder el tiempo,
sino ganas vida.
Si nos ocupamos de ordenar nuestra casa,
de alimentarnos, de tener lo necesario, o más, para ir viviendo
¿por qué no expandir lo necesario?
Nuestros bosques, nuestro aire, nuestra agua
el bien común.
Sabemos que caminamos en un mundo del revés
(no es nuevo).
Nos movemos entre un dolor grande y una fuerza inexplicable.
Muchas veces nos brotan preguntas como lágrimas en los ojos,
como puteadas, aullidos de impotencia.
bajan las ganas al subsuelo.
¿Dónde estás?
Aunque sepamos que se trata de correr contra la corriente,
aunque sepamos que no es fácil.
¿Dónde estás?
También sabemos que se puede,
que vamos pudiendo,
que organizarnos en asamblea,
nos da fuerza,
y podemos decir
que ni los funcionarios de turno, ni las empresas con su marketing verde
pueden con nuestra fuerza.

No nos pueden vender la del buzón,
no nos pueden desmontar el alma,
ni dividir los cuerpos.
No saben nada de nuestra materia prima celular.
No pueden imitarnos.
No pueden parcelar nuestro corazón.
No pueden ni siquiera imaginar.
No pueden correr por los laterales.
No pueden con nosotros,
aunque nos busquen,
aunque nos aprendan de memoria,

aunque nos repriman.
No pueden atrapar nuestros pensamientos.
¡¡A nosotrxs no nos paran!!
Aplicamos toda la fuerza,
amor, perseverancia,
y conocimiento que tenemos.
Pero sobre todo vamos a insistir en que VOS te acerques,
porque si te sumas tiene más sentido
y con tu voz se va a escuchar desde más lejos
todo lo que queramos decir...»

Similarly, I fully transcribe Solentina's song "Subo al pastizal":

«Subo el pastizal del conurbano.
Flores amarillas brotan entre el basural.
Y los arroyos estancados,
y el barro (aún fértil) son las calles, ¡vos verás!

Voy por los caminos secuencieros...
Mosquitos asesinos son la gran amenaza.
Y un aire de humedal,
te hace transpirar de forma única y real.

Contemplo el río.
Me tiento en la pausa de pensarte lindo,
y quererte como sos
Vislumbro la ribera como si hubiera escolleras de color.

Atardece lento y va llegando
el final del día y con él su carnaval.
Y un humo me provoca a quemar las hojas y a volver para atrás.

Bajo el pastizal del conurbano.
Ví de lejos fuerte luces de la capital.
Se taparon las estrellas,
en la vereda del barrio vamos a desembarcar.
Contemplo el río.
Me tiento en la pausa de pensarte lindo,
y quererte como sos
Vislumbro la ribera como si hubiera escolleras de color».

Lyrics and music: Solen Jordan (Solentina). (2016). Álbum "*No quema lo que enciende*". Produced by Carlos Rosales Rusca. Phonographic Producer: Maria Soledad Jorda. Source: <https://solentina.bandcamp.com/album/no-quema-lo-que-enciende>

Next is the poetry of Carla also in its full version:

«Rescatar un animal de la selva
que la selva sea acá no más
que ese animal no sea yo
que esa selva no sea mi casa
un día me encontré
con todo el deseo

toda la fuerza
de todos los errores
queriéndome toda la vergüenza
toda la timidez
todo el atrevimiento la excentricidad
la gracia la seriedad
la melancolía el remordimiento la duda
las certezas las complejidades la sencillez
la llanura de todo el asfalto que hay en mi
todo el bosque
abrazándome cuando soy serpiente
lagarto, insecto. alas multicolor
que no se confunden con el cielo
una vaquita de san antonio
(con suerte o sin, que importa!)
pichón de mamut
ese día me encontré y dije:
¡soy el animal de mi selva!
¡soy el animal de mi ciudad!
si hubiera una alcantarilla cerca no caería
sería un animal de alcantarilla».

Poesía sin título de Carla. Fecha de publicación: 8/11/2018. Fuente: <https://escritosmaqui.blogspot.com/search?q=bosque>

The interview with Sandra conducted in 2023 is fully disclosed here:

—Vanina Santy [researcher]: *por eso, no sé si vos me podés contar qué es lo que quisiste decir o ¿qué idea tienes de lo que es el amor a la naturaleza? O, ¿cómo crees que surgió ese sentimiento hacia la ribera?*

—Sandra: *uh (risas) no me acuerdo bien qué dije (risas).*

—VS: *(risas).*

—Sandra: *Si yo me acuerdo que, como que vos habías propuesto que sea el libro como algo que sea una especie de cuento, ¿no? De contar la historia de, media un relato que atrape, que trate de entender por qué, ¿no? Uno sé. Bueno, se me viene Nieves mucho a la cabeza.*

—VS: *si, tal cual.*

—Sandra: *a mí me pasa particularmente y me pasaba como..., siempre que iba a algún lugar que... Cuando empecé a viajar ponéle, o de chica la primera vez que viajé y me encontré no sé, con el mar, o cuando fui de viaje de egresados a Bariloche. Viviendo en un barrio que en mi cuadra era cemento siempre, la calle asfaltada... Y en mi casa tenía baldosas nomás y macetas de mis abuelos. Ponéle mis abuelos vinieron de España de la guerra y contaban de los pinos, de sus campos, de sus cultivos de papas y del mar. Y en mi casa solo había macetas, ¿viste? Y yo re pequeña solamente flasheaba con las macetas y las plantas... para mí era eso la naturaleza (risas)*

—VS: *sí, claro (risas)*

—Sandra: *y después salía a la vereda y había unos ligustros. Para mí los ligustros eran gigantes, y yo era un bosque. Me acuerdo que mi juego de chica era el bosque, ahí, ¿no?*

—VS: *si*

—Sandra: *después había una vecina que tenía un fondo con unos ciruelos, para mí era todo gigante... un ciruelo, un olivo, y una chiva...*

—VS: *qué loco (risas)*

—Sandra: *no, no y estaba viva (risas)... Re lindo, para mí era como eso (risas), un templo donde había animales y era un fondo común, no era una hectárea, era un fondo de veinte metros.*

—VS: *qué barrio era, ¿perdón?*

—Sandra: *en Lanús, si, y no eran como baldíos, entonces mi contacto con la naturaleza era eso, y a mí me encantaba estar ahí...*

—VS: *sí, claro*

—Sandra: *ella dejaba el pasto alto... Te digo como en la menor escala (risas). Y cuando empecé a viajar, como cuando fui a Bariloche, ver la montaña tan imponente, siempre la naturaleza y creo que a todo el mundo le provoca lo mismo, lo sentía como algo muy extraordinario y muy verdadero de decir esto es la vida real, esto es, ¿no? De querer sentir ese respeto y esa emoción.*

—VS: *sí...*

—Sandra: *y así me pasó bueno cuando fui a Córdoba, también, de cuando me metí al río, acostarme en una piedra y escuchar cómo bajaba el agua, bueno, toda esa sensación que te da estar en la naturaleza. Después cuando empecé a estudiar en la escuela de jardinería de grande, empecé a entender un poco más de esto no?, de, de la vida de las plantas, de las regiones, de cómo se desarrollaban los bosques, de todo eso, más en la teoría pero sí a conocer las especies, y bueno fue ahí como creciendo el amor a la naturaleza. Y cuando bueno, siempre íbamos con mis viejos, a mi papá le gustaba mucho ir a pescar entonces íbamos a las lagunas y eso pero... no lo percibía tan así, y después cuando me enteré ahí en Dominico, cuando ví ahí gente con la bandera "No a la Entrega de la Costa", y yo estaba de este lado, nunca había visitado el Río de La Plata.*

—VS: *¡qué loco!*

—Sandra: *sólo había ido unas veces a otros ríos? Pero dónde está el Club del Pejerrey, por esa zona y de noche, viste y eso ¿no? Siempre de viaje las vacaciones afuera, afuera de lo que es el Río de La Plata o arroyos de Buenos Aires, sí a alguna laguna o sí al mar qué sé yo, pero como eso, siempre teníamos como invisibilizada la costa, o sea, la costa, el río acá.*

—VS: *sí.*

—Sandra: *y bueno ahí me acerqué a la problemática y la primera vez que fui a hacer una de las caminatas, que había sido una de esas caminatas largas porque habíamos cruzado un arroyo y bueno, después habíamos caminado todo por la Ribera, o sea, atrás del CEAMSE pero por la ribera y yo no lo podía creer, no podía creer que esos árboles que había estudiado estaban ahí. Que lo que me contaban y después ví, ¿no? Árboles que por ahí yo había leído que crecían en Misiones, o en el Delta Paraná, o esto de los árboles nativos que nosotros habíamos empezado justo ahí porque yo trabajaba ya en ese momento con una chica en un vivero y habíamos empezado con el cultivo de nativas. Y la realidad es que nunca los habíamos visto mucho así en, en su ambiente natural. Entonces cuando los empecé a ver ahí, fue como un ah, ah por eso el bosque nativo es acá es donde se desarrolla, por donde viene, viene por el río, cómo se distribuye, las aves que uno empieza a ver ahí que interactúan con esa vegetación.*

—VS: *¡qué increíble!*

—Sandra: *bueno empiezas a ver viboritas, después ver (inaudible), después empezar a conectar todo eso y a la vez, ver cómo se fue degradando, toda la degradación, ponerte a pensar que antes todos los arroyos eran así, que el riachuelo también era así.... El paraíso que habrá sido en su momento...*

—VS: *sí...*

—Sandra: *entonces empezás a conocer las historias de vivía por ahí del río y bueno todo eso es algo que a mí me conmovió y también me hizo como en cierto sentido yo vivo como enojada (risas), de por qué las cosas no son como antes...*

—VS: *(risas).*

—Sandra: *¿por qué? ¿Hasta dónde? ¿Qué pasó? ¿Qué sucedió? Que todo eso se... Y ahora lo mismo porque, lo mismo, te repito, cuando viajamos a Catamarca o sea viendo las acequias del agua corriendo por los cultivos. Fuimos a la casa de un señor, Raúl, que tenía en una finca con viñedos, ciruelos, pero vos no sabes, un señor ciego y todo el cultivo que tenía ahí y que conocía cada planta que tenía: de membrillos, de higos, tan rico, tan rico y el agua clara bajando y de repente ellos subiendo a la montaña para hacerle frente a la policía y claro, es algo básico, no podés contaminarme el agua, no podés reventarme el tanque que es el nevado, ¿entendés? Y mi arroyo, viví toda mi vida acá comiendo eso y cultivando esto para subsistir y un buen día alguien decide eso... ¿Y ya está? Y no, cambia todo. Es no sé, re absurdo, es re grave, re triste...*

—VS: *sí. ¿Y vos cómo definirías éste, ese sentimiento o ese amor? Porque viste cuando se dice amor, no sé, puede significar tantas cosas, incluso dentro de la asamblea en entrevistas que yo he hecho, sobre todo en el dos 2017, 2018, mucha gente hablaba de esto, de tener el corazón en la ribera, que ese es mi lugar en el mundo, es el lugar que yo más amo... pero bueno, contáme a ver... cómo lo podrías definir vos y después te hago otra pregunta*

—Sandra: *(risas) el amor...*

—VS: *(risas) ¿qué es ese amor? Además, vos encontraste el amor en la ribera... (risas), literal.*

—Sandra: *sí, es verdad. Por ahí un poco también eso me llevó a quizás comprometerme un poco más y a querer también estar más en el lugar, puede ser eso. Creo que con Juan compartimos también el amor por esto, por... A*

veces pienso, ¿es amor para que eso no cambie? ¿Para que eso siga o pueda volver a su estado natural? O ¿para que pueda ser conservado? Al poder ir también ahí, ¿no? a sentirse uno bien, a disfrutarlo, a compartir con los amores también.

—VS: *tal cual...*

—Sandra: *y también es verdad que cuando nosotros hacíamos esas asambleas, había algo de sentirnos bien y de sentirnos abrazándonos porque, todos como queriendo algo lindo para el lugar y metiéndole alegría... Ir a pasar los domingos y eso, ¿no? Cualquiera persona diría no, estás loco, ¿qué vas a hacer ahí? Es una mugre lo que hay y no. Y la verdad eso eso es por amor, porque no hay otro interés (risas).*

—VS: *si (risas), tiene que haber algo muy grande con ese lugar como para aguantar tanto también, ¿no?*

—Sandra: *sí, sí, sí, sí. Y bueno, literal ahí tenemos el ejemplo de Nieves.*

—VS: *si tal cual.*

—Sandra: *qué amor, dió su vida. Y bueno para mí particularmente fue también eso, encontrar ahí el amor también, un amor tan grande ¿no? Porque ya hace como siete años que estamos juntos con Juan, y (risas) compartir. Compartir también ese sentimiento, que muchas veces nos ha pasado de estar agotados también y cansados con esta situación pero bueno, cuando nos sentamos a escribir, a veces, o a apuntar alguna publicación o en las asambleas, es eso, somos compañeros y está re bueno[...].*

ETHNOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUES & TOOLS

Chapter 3

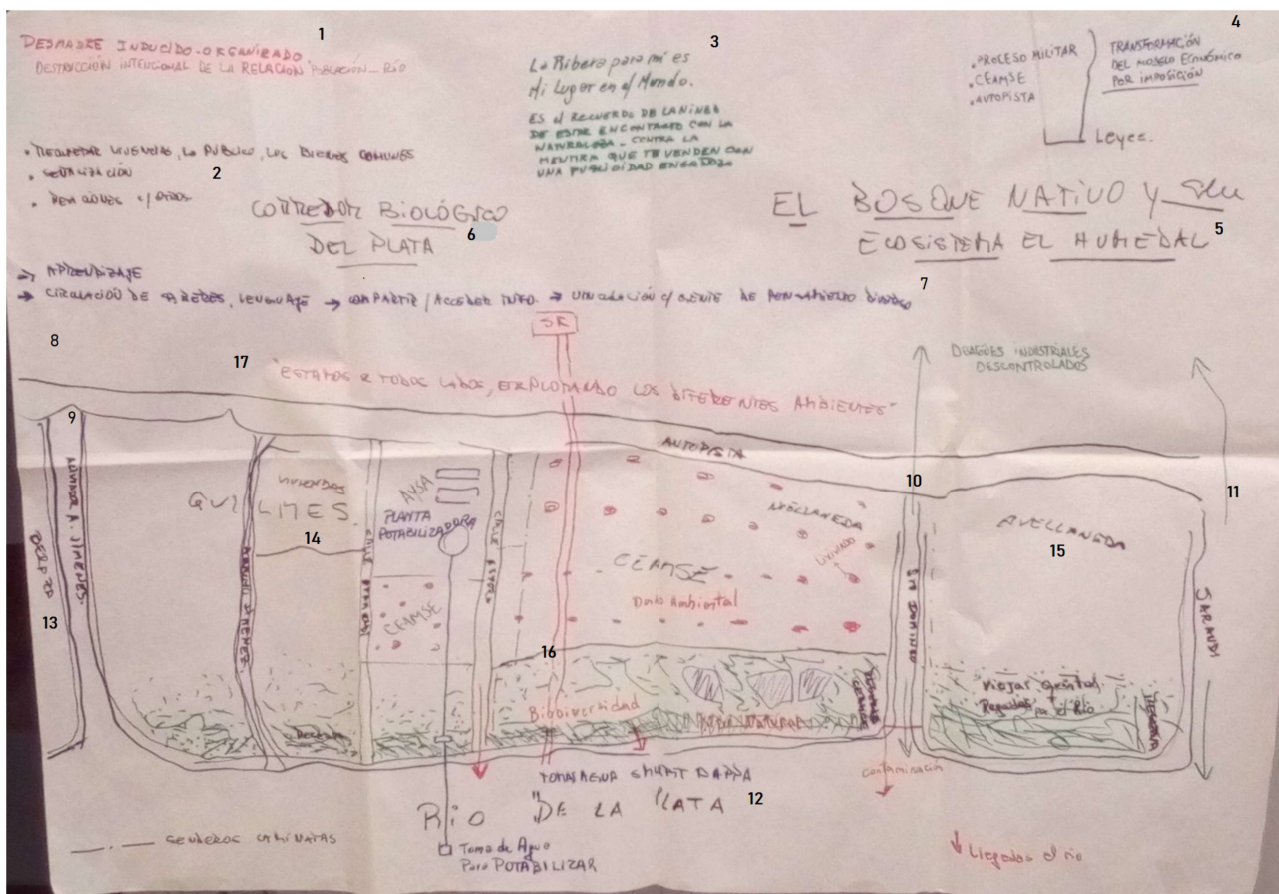
Among the executives interviewed at Techint during 2011: César Papalardo, Social Development Manager; Víctor Barbeito, Giuliana Rho and Valeria Menéndez; Geraldina Marino and Aluminé González Nougues from the Institutional Relations Department; Fabiana Strada Saenz, Real Estate Manager.

At OPDS, I met with Virginia Ricci and staff from the Natural Resources Department (12/21/17); I contacted via email Federico Bordelois, Director of Environmental Impact Assessment (02/17/2012), who answered questions about the environmental evaluation of Nueva Costa del Plata.

In the Municipality of Quilmes I tried to interview the Mayors Francisco Gutiérrez (between 2011 and 2013) and Martiniano Molina (in 2017) as well as Aníbal Drago, Undersecretary of Operational Coordination, also in 2017 although all the attempts were unsuccessful. In the Municipality of Avellaneda I contacted the departments of environment and territorial planning (between 2011 and 2017) as well as councilmen like Hector Villagra in the last field visits but no response was received.

Ethnocartography with the Assembly NHOC

This is the hand-drawn map made by “neighbours” working on the proposed ethnocartography:



“La Plata Biological Corridor/ The Native Forest and its Ecosystem the Wetland” (title of the map by the Assembly NHOC).

December 2017. **References:** 1, 2, 3 and 4) phrases of participants on how they perceive nature there, what does this place mean to them and political/territorial facts that changed the place for ever (analysed throughout the chapters); 5 and 6) map title; 7) what they learned and how they work together; 8) the territory in conflict; 9, 10, and 11) streams; 12) La Plata River, 13) Berazategui District, 14) Quilmes District, 15) Avellaneda District, 16) nature reserve under dispute; 17) where they are physically located with respect to the conflict: “we are everywhere, exploring the different natural environs”. This map resembles the characteristics and priorities of the one described in chapter 7 about the environmental situation of the area, also elaborated by NHOC in 2011.

Next, I will disclose the first part of the interview with NHOC while working on the map. It is in English because I have not used this extract before in the chapters so for me it is important that reader gets acquainted with the dynamics of the exercise rather than its original version in Spanish. Methodologically speaking, a list of key issues to discuss with them was drawn up in advance in order to orient the dialogue; however, a non-directed interview technique was used to encourage interaction between participants and allow them to reach a decision on what to put on the poster.

Vanina Santy [researcher]: [We were already discussing what to talk about during the ethnocartography] *Tell me that again, come on.*

Nieves: *The forest law at first, when the first public hearing was held, you said that the riverbank line was 150 metres of red area, that it was an intangible zone, then when the second public hearing was held, they reduced it to 100 metres because if you started to measure, we measured, we asked, but from where do you count the 150 metres? From the coast to where? Because if it's the reed, then... And in a hump we said, and we're going to come with a sickle and we're going to cut all the reeds so that they measure from the first reed backwards, you see?*

Because each time, and then at the second public hearing they reduced it to 100 because they took... if you measured 150 metres, they would be in the middle of the illegal digs and the project NCP would not work.

Sandra: Is what you said the other day that they had to modify the methodology after the first participatory workshop, or COFEMA [Federal Council of Environment] modified the methodology.

Vanina: Between 2011 and 2014 they modified it precisely to reduce the high conservation areas, the red zones.

Mario: Well, in the case of the assembly here, they were attentive to that, but all the others who were in the first participatory workshop and never went again did nothing.

Vanina: Yes, they did not follow up on the issue, nor did they spread the word that there were new criteria for the forest inventory.

Rubén: Of course, again, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

Vanina: Or they may have informed about it, but...

Mario: No, I don't think so, because at least the people from Punta Indio where the first workshops were held don't know anything about it or how it looked.

Juan: They were surprised, yes.

Rubén: And so? What is this about [the ethnocartography]?

Vanina: So the idea is, I don't know who wants to... or you can all do it, however you want.

Nieves: What uses would be given between Santo Domingo and Sarandí, Santo Domingo [streams] we say that there has to be a reserve zone and a zone that has to be, what is this law called?

Mario: intangible

Nieves: an intangible zone but a protected landscape zone that is the area of the quintas [farms] where you can do sustainable production, on this side, nothing, there is the CEAMSE with all the problems it has with paths that have an exit to the river, full stop; in the areas where you can do sustainable tourism.

Mario: With footbridges.

Nieves: Just walk paths, because you've seen what the La Plata River is like, the next time you come we'll take you on the water, in summer come and see.

Juan: No, she's leaving now.

Nieves: That's why, next time, you can see how the vegetation filters, if not this week... When are you leaving? [I was going back to Belgium].

Vanina: On the 10th

Sandra: Now that the river is high?

Nieves: No, because she has no... Elvira was telling her about the CEAMSE on the other side, that you can't go in here but you can go in there.

Vanina: But the CEAMSE was there.

Sandra: That's another thing, too, the CEAMSE has everything...

Nieves: The whole coast

V: The whole coast?

Mario: Because of a lawsuit, I don't know if they have to remedy that part that is closed and on this side they are not doing anything in terms of environmental repair, what's more, they don't let you in there saying that for security reasons you can't enter and here everyone enters and no one is watching that nothing happens to anyone and there is also leachate juice... leached.

Vanina: There was also the burying of rubbish there [along the coastline in Quilmes].

Nieves: Yes.

Sandra: And yes.

Juan: Of course, yes

Rubén: You go walking and you walk over the leachate like this... there is nothing, there is nobody to tell you anything.

[...]

Nieves: What do you want us to draw [Rubén: emmmm]

Juan: And, I would make an irregular line.

Nieves: We want everything but I don't know how much, it's 4 km everything, all of it is ours!

Rubén: A reference

Nieves: Do you want us to do it? [Vanina: Yes!].

Juan: Can't we do everything? From here, from the Riachuelo to Punta Lara?

Nieves: No, she's talking about here in the area of NCP.

Vanina: What the territory would be in...

Nieves: *From Quilmes, Quilmes Avellaneda...*

Vanina: *In conflict, let's say...*

Nieves: *That would be the whole strip of coast land.*

Juan: *Santo Domingo stream to Espora Street.*

Nieves: *No, from... let's put it from Sarandí Stream because we...*

xxx: *Do you know why also Nieves? Because of the colours...so to say the yellow, green and red part, then to say this part as part of the reserve is inside the city is the yellow part where this conflict with the city and the reserve, which well, was not taken care of and is as it is and suffers like Villa Alcira, Villa Alcira is a neighbourhood that should be inside the reserve and be considered as yellow but there it suffers from flooding of the water table.*

Juan: *The same in this neighbourhood*

xxx: *There you have groundwater flooding and the big difference with us is the groundwater or you don't flood with groundwater, there you have the difference of where you have the reserve and where you don't have it.*

[And so the exchanges continued on what to indicate, how to do it and for what purpose among the "neighbours" of NHOC].

"NEIGHBOURS" STORIES

Chapter 2

The story of Ernesto Salgado. Some "neighbours" leading the defence of the wetlands in the La Plata River regard Ernesto as an honest, serious, and reliable person. They do not doubt his incorruptibility and even laugh because after his mandate as a councillor in Berazategui he became poorer for not accepting bribes.

He created the Regional Forum in Defence of the La Plata River, one of the founding organizations (the other one was the Assembly of Wilde) of the Assembly No to the Hand Over of the Coast.

The forum, gathering collective forms from Berazategui, Avellaneda, and Quilmes, has turned into an environmental reference and historical political actor in the region conducting surveys of contaminated sites, studying specific problems with specialists, and proposing viable and non-harmful solutions for natural habitats. From 2007 to 2012 some of its members surveyed the environmental situation of the coastal territory, registering environmental problems for which the municipalities repeated the same unworkable solutions.

The current laws that protected forest areas were not complied with in Berazategui and Avellaneda, they denounced.

While the National Secretary of the Environment signed agreements in Chaco to implement a system of management and control to stop the clearing of natural areas, in Avellaneda and Berazategui dozens of hectares were disappearing to enable real-estate businesses.

No municipal or provincial agency intervened to stop such disaster whether it was aimed at the construction of gated communities by the La Plata River or the business of "furtive" loggers.

How did they come up with this knowledge? Ernesto replied that people taking part in the forum exchanged knowledge and what one of them learnt was incorporated into the collective knowledge, there has never been pettiness in giving or receiving information.

“How do we face this reality and how do we face something that is much bigger than the local scale today?” he asked aloud in an interview I conducted in 2016. With a militant political past as a member of the Communist Party he thinks that the fight should not be against a company or a politician, but against the corporate interests.

Chapter 4

Natalia Salvatico, Director of Friends of the Earth, says that her commitment to bring about change is lifelong. As responsible for the management of an international organisation she does not receive a salary; these are non-paid roles. Sometimes the organisation generates some projects, for example editing a book or doing a small outreach campaign, to generate income and afford costs. She started volunteering at the age of fifteen in an animal protection institution. She says that she does activism (she sees activism as an ideological attitude of wanting to achieve something, in her case social and environmental justice) not militancy (to which she assigns a partisan connotation).

She started going to the federal capital when she was twenty years old because she was already in college. One day she saw a sign on campus that said “volunteer course in the ecological reserve Costanera Sur” and she took the course. She was studying textile design and at the time of the interview (in 2016) she was studying graphic design and visual communication, that is to say that her work was always a political commitment not linked to her formal education.

Although for her, the environmental issues are no longer an area of closed knowledge, but it is nourished by all professional orientations, people are environmentalist doctors, environmentalist lawyers, and environmentalist designers, thus it is an ideological and political issue nowadays.

Carmen is 85 years old and lives in Wilde. She was imprisoned during the dictatorship for being a member of the Communist Party. Her disappointment with the party led her to withdraw from political participation (according to her own narrative registered in an interview conducted in 2016).

She blames much of what is happening on capitalism and she considers herself to be a person from below, a working person, not a bourgeois.

In 2001, she was on a bus and got off near her house when she saw a bunch of people in Plaza Alsina, in Avellaneda, who had blocked the street.

She went to see what was going on, talked to the people, and they began to gather together worried about the economic situation of the country and the garbage in the neighbourhoods, among other issues. A neighbour told them that he had an abandoned house and that is where they started to meet more regularly.

She believes that what happened with the assemblies in 2001 is because of people's disappointment with political parties for they brought nothing positive to the people. The assemblies, Carmen believes, were a boom at the time and she believed that they were replacing old institutions and political groups, although she was later sad to see that by 2004 they were losing strength eventually dissolving as such.

Chapter 5

The following is the story of Curupí, a “neighbour” of the NHOC Assembly, based on an interview conducted on 2/01/2018. He lives in Quilmes and he is in his thirties. As a boy he used to go to the riverside by bicycle or on foot where he used to get in the sanitary landfill with his friends, so he remembers growing up watching how the trucks coming from Buenos Aires threw garbage in those lands.

He politically engaged in the defence of the coast when the project to build a luxury neighbourhood similar to Puerto Madero (but in the south of the La Plata River) became known. He initially believed that the intention of the company Techint, which he knew from the landfill management, was to “*destroy the entire coast*”, so he began to participate in an assembly in Wilde and then joined the Assembly NHOC by 2009.

Prior to the emergence of NCP, he participated in a community association in his neighbourhood and in several social organisations near Villa Itatí (a shantytown) in Quilmes, collaborating with a soup kitchen run (*comedor*) by Franciscan nuns.

The conflict against Techint became the defence of what he considers a heritage, for the survival of a place unique in the region because the rest of the city has become polluted and densely populated. In NHOC he found neighbours with the same concerns and therefore, support from other people who have the same problems, as well as knowledge and the values of collective work that he did not know.

Curupí would like to keep the riparian zone as a natural reserve valuing its fauna and flora and its usefulness to the urban area. That it functions as a public space cared for complying with the law, with park rangers monitoring the riverside, and academic institutions constantly investigating and improving the area.

Chapter 7

Juan is one of the first neighbours to join the Assembly NHOC after its creation in 2008. He learned about it because of a flyer that someone gave to him in the street, which took him to go to the riverside to look for more information about what was going on.

Then she participated in an activity with “neighbours” and after that, as she was a little bit bored too and unemployed, he thought that what these people were doing was good.

He liked to put more energy there because it was more interesting than looking for formal work.

Hence, he became passionate about the collective struggle on the riverside because it was a team building experience and an “assembly exercise” he was eager to learn more about. He explains the latter by situations in which he has to manage his own susceptibility in order not to screw up the discussion with others or to avoid getting into a personal fight. The assembly exercise, which everyone practices in the group, is a nice work for oneself, to try to perfect one's character.

He is an actor, a former factory worker, he also worked as a factory worker, and most recently has gotten involved in an agricultural cooperative.

He regrets not having a steady job but enjoys participating in social groups and causes, especially those that involve being outdoors in contact with nature. His son, who is presently 23 years old, has won a scholarship to study at NASA, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in the United States, which has made him very proud. He feels that his efforts and convictions have helped his son to have a better life than his.

Foreword to Chapter 9

Néstor Saracho is a filmmaker and a teacher of visual arts at Maciel Island in his forties. He is renowned for his cultural promotion with the creation of film festivals like “Conurdocs” and the “Streamfest” aimed at documenting the pollution in the Sarandí Stream, in Avellaneda. In 2001 he participated in the squatting of factories that were transformed into cooperatives with former employees after the sanction of an expropriation law when the des-industrialization of the country happened and people lost their jobs.

In 2007, he stopped getting involved in that to found the Villa Corina Neighbourhood Civil Association for a Better Future with some friends of his locality. A year later, he came across a poster on the Internet by neighbourhood assemblies that called a meeting to avoid the “handing over of the coast”.

The venue was the Nave Cultural Centre where he went to see what was happening and met Nieves and Carmen from the Assemblies NHOC and Wilde. People gathered in high numbers against NCP in the building of a film school that a group of students had squatted in as a form of protest.

In relation to the coast, he recalls the first time he stepped on a wetland and its rhizome during a walk organized by the assemblies. He confesses that he had never been much involved in environmental matters as he was after NCP, when this new experience in the nature reserve changed him.

After an accident on his way back from a moon walk with NHOC, his life took a 180 degree turn with a strong personal questioning of his life and his participation in the neighbourhood cause. Since then, he moved back to his mother who has assisted him so his dependence on her and a disability insurance paid by the government (after having lost a leg in that accident) led him to fall into depression.

He did not take part in the assembly that much; however, he has devoted to the self-management of his own artistic and work projects by creating the publishing cooperative Muchas Nueces.

In a section on Néstor that I wrote before chapter 9, I mentioned an article that a leftist magazine from the metropolitan area wrote about him. There the publication highlights two relevant attributes that define Néstor, first, that he is a “networker” (*tejedor de redes*) with all kinds of urban collectives that it would be almost impossible to enumerate. Secondly, that despite his disability due to having lost a leg in that accident, Néstor does not stop, he is a kind of rhizome for different people who come together and “build their own little path on the side of the world, doing different things” (La Vaca, 2018).