

DESPLAZAMIENTO

Losing & Remaking Home

Conflict & Displacement in Colombia

Luis Eduardo Perez Murcia

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The University of Manchester
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Cover picture:

Displacement (Desplazamiento). Tapestry made by displaced women from Mampuján, Maria la Baja, Montes de María, Bolívar, Colombia. The tapestry recreates the flight of 245 families who were forced to leave their community on 11 March 2001, following conflict and persecution.

Fundación Puntos de Encuentro. Taken at the Memorial Museum of Medellin.

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1. Introduction

The interplay between conflict-induced displacement and the idea of 'home' has been overlooked in displacement research. Rather than exploring how the loss of home transforms people's material and non-material worlds or how those who have lost their home attempt to remake a new one, displacement studies have tended to emphasise the economic and productive impacts of losing material assets (Cernea, 2000; Muggah, 2000; Justino, 2006) or simply assume that the displaced remain at 'home' because their movement is within national borders.

Moreover, by rooting the displaced's home in the place left behind, scholarly research has tended to assume that return is both a process of 'homecoming' and the end of a person's precarity (Stein 1981, Kibreab, 1999). Such an understanding of home, as Malkki (1995a and 1995b) and Bakewell (1999) have observed, largely assumes that home is an unproblematic and static entity to which displaced people within and across national borders are simply able to return to following a ceasefire.

This type of analysis limits our understanding of what and where is home for those who fled within national borders, and obscures the reasons some displaced people remake home on the move while others remain without a sense of home after long-term displacement.

Drawing on the personal narratives of 72 internally displaced people in Colombia, gathered between December 2013 and August 2014 for a PhD research project at the Global Development Institute at The University of Manchester, this booklet describes how human rights abuses and displacement shape people's ideas of home.

The selected narratives illustrate the experiences of losing home after conflict and displacement, the material and emotional impacts of living without a place called home, and the process of remaking home following conflict and displacement. Participants are quoted using pseudonyms. Their sex, age, and year of displacement are included in brackets.

2. Experiences of Fleeing from Home to ‘Nowhere’

In conflicts where armed forces no longer differentiate between combatants and civilians, displacement becomes the last resort for people trying to secure their safety.

In the context of Colombia, decades of conflict amongst left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitary groups and state army forces have seen an estimated 5.7 million people forced to move within national borders between 1985 and 2014 (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2014).

The narratives quoted in this section describe both the reasons for displacement and how civil conflict intervenes in people’s sense of home.

Drawing on the narratives of displaced people, it is argued that displacement results in the loss of a sense of home.

As Arendt (1966) suggests, what is distinctive about the experiences of displaced people is the loss of a sense of home and their struggle to remake it away from their communities.

Michelle, female, 37, displaced in 2001

When regular army forces arrived in the town, civilians became trapped in a crossfire. Everyone was trying to protect their family from the indiscriminate gun attacks. Thus, we just picked some clothes up and fled. After waiting endless hours in the rough road for transportation, we struggled to find a place in the bus. It was a time of anxiety and desperation. Sorrow and silence were present during the entire journey.

Cesar, male, 35, displaced in 1991

I became a displaced person as an 11 year-old boy. Paramilitary groups arrived to my family home, searching for my older brothers to recruit. As soon as they arrived they put every member of my family face down. Because I cried all the time one man told me “shut up, otherwise, I will kill you”.

I remember they put their boots on our heads to be sure we could neither move nor escape. My brothers, then aged 17 and 18, were tied with a strong rope and put into a van. It was the last time we saw our siblings, alive or dead.

Since then, we lost our siblings, our land and our most valuable belongings. Members of the armed group ordered my mother to leave our place in less than a weeks time and we had no other option than to flee. Since then, we have been living in a continuous uneasiness. Because of violence we lost everything.



Memory graffiti by street artists in Bogotá

People are reluctant to abandon their communities. Large numbers of civilians fled only after experiencing multiple human rights abuses.

**Maria Esperanza, female, 57,
displaced in 1998**

I lived 12 years in the midst of a real battlefield. We lived with bloody combats between the state army, the antinarcotic police forces and rebel groups. Civilians became trapped in the crossfire.

On August 7th 1995, war destroyed our town. Civilian's houses were burnt. All our belongings, including our source of income, a butchery and our animals, were burnt. We lost absolutely everything, everything - even our savings.

That day we experienced a massive aerial bombardment. In spite of such a massive destruction of our house we decided to stay put. It was our land, our home and we loved our way of life.

When guerrillas started to take reprisals against civilians, because we did not support them during the combat with the state army forces, things became considerably worse.

They started to take children from their homes but, again, we stayed put because we loved our place.

Then, I was kidnapped by the guerrillas for eight months for being an alleged informant of the enemy. When they finally confirmed I was not a spy, they let me go. Only then I said to myself it is too much. I took my children and fled.

To be displaced is like dying. You lose your home. How can I explain it? To understand my point you need to imagine a fruitful tree. It brings about not only flowers and fruits but natural flavourings.

Suddenly, a bulldozer driven by a man takes the tree and pulls it out. With all the brutal force and power that this machine is able to emanate, the tree is ripped out.

But this is not the end of the history. When the tree is suspended in the air, it is brutally shaken. We, the fruits, fall down. Some unfortunately die but others are able to survive. Those who survive experiencing a new beginning. It is what the loss of home is about.

Murder of relatives, torture, forced recruitment into illegal armed groups, and rape, specifically of women, are common experiences amongst the displaced.



Research participant, Cartagena

Piedad, female, 20, displaced in 1996

I had been stigmatised as a member of the guerrillas since I was five, raped and then sold by gangs for 5,000 Colombian pesos [approximately £1] to paramilitary groups.

They raped me as long they wanted to. While those men were taking my innocence I used to close my eyes and think of the murder of my parents.

I lost everything. My family and my home. My childhood was suddenly

interrupted; I lost my childhood innocence. Everything has gone.

My life has gone. Violence has destroyed my source of life and aspirations. I could not even study. My life was cut short completely.

I have not been able to reconstruct my life after rape, the murder of my parents and displacement. To me the idea of reconstructing life is so ambitious. It is so difficult to rebuild my life after such multiple acts of violence. The only thing I think when I wake up every morning is to live for the day.

The loss of home emerged as a common feature in narratives of displaced people.

Mau, female, 47, displaced in 2004

I have experienced several forms of violence. Displacement, however, is perhaps the most devastating one.

After displacement, I experienced a sense of being completely naked, exposed, helpless, and vulnerable.

It is hard to explain it. There are some things that you are able to see and describe in words, but the experience of displacement is largely inside you.

Nobody can see how displacement has transformed your life. But, if you ask me, displacement is like the experience of being dead while you know you are alive.

Your social world is suddenly collapsed. It is like a long-lasting agony in which you have lost everything: your home, your place, your way of life, your source of income, and part of your cultural attachments.

Besides, you become someone who is often perceived with mistrust by hosts. People murmur about the reasons why you become a displaced person. People associate displacement with doing something wrong.



Graffiti by street artists in Bogotá

3. What does Home mean for the Displaced?

This section illustrates the ways in which, in the aftermath of civil war and human rights abuses, forcibly displaced people reflect ideas of home and its loss.

Life stories of displaced people reveal that the displaced often use home as a 'device' for explaining their material and non-material well-being. Home is not only a physical shelter or a place left behind, but a multi-dimensional, relational, and dynamic space closely related to ideas of family, community, cultural identity and belonging.



Mural made by street artists in Cartagena

Home is a material space

Sandra, female, 34, displaced in 2008

Home means to have a job, to have your own house or income for paying rent. To be at home means to live with dignity, to have the basic resources to feed your children and give them education and clothes. I do believe it is what every human being deserves and requires to go further. Is not it?

Maria Esperanza, female, 57, displaced in 1998

In my hometown I used to harvest my own food. We used to cultivate cassava, maize and plantain. We also had hens, chickens, eggs, cows, milk, and so forth. In Bogotá, I wandered on the streets for nearly a year trying to find a place to live and experienced difficulties buying even an egg.

The struggle for home and food is a painful experience. There, we had abundant food, here we found ourselves fighting even for a slice of plantain.



Mural made by street artists in Cartagena

Piedad, female, 20, displaced in 1996

I yearn for my family [Piedad's parents were murdered]. I know there are countless single mothers everywhere but when I go out in Bogotá I see families sharing together. Then, I realise I am alone, I feel like what I am; a displaced person. I feel like a foreigner in this city. A sense of having a family is priceless. You can overcome material losses but not the sense of losing a family.

Home is a social world

Home is a place in which individuals are socially and culturally immersed. Thus, the loss of home is experienced as a loss of a sense of community, identity, and cultural belonging.

Michelle, female, 37, displaced in 2001

Displacement is a painful experience. You are taken from your roots. It is like when a leafy and flowery tree is suddenly taken from the land and put in a different place. It becomes withered for a long time. It can be rooted again but its strength and fruitfulness would never be the same.

That is what happens when you are compelled to move from your home. Your roots and source of happiness are taken from you. The displaced thus become completely uprooted. That is the reason why displacement is such a painful experience.

Liliana, female, 32, displaced in 2009

The loss of home is the loss of cultural traditions and one's way of life.

In Bogotá, I have lost all my roots, all my traditions. I have lost even the way I used to cook and dance.



Traditional dances of Wounaan community
Photo shared by Shakpiere [male, 65]

The loss of one's home was also experienced as the loss of a relational space in which both kin relationships and historically-bounded social connections within and across communities were recreated through everyday social practices. The loss of that space often leads to experiences of discrimination and a sense of being out of place.



A picture of the home left behind by a research participant in Cartagena

Luzmar, female, 37, displaced in 1998

We escaped from a dangerous animal called violence but arriving here we realised we have to deal with perhaps a more ferocious animal called discrimination.

I do not know what kind of violence is more devastating. The violence committed by illegal armed groups in our territories or the violence we experience daily here for having a different skin pigmentation.

Marissa, female, 35, displaced in 2009

When I go out with other black, displaced people, people in the streets say things such as “hey, there go the blacks, it is becoming dark.”

Home is a familiar landscape

Diana, female, 33, displaced in 2006

Home is a territory in which the individual emerges as individual. In our territory, the sea, rivers, nature and animals are the main characters of our idea of home. In Bogotá, we are only surrounded by cars, motorbikes, bicycles, and avenues. That is the reason why the sense of uprootedness is massive.



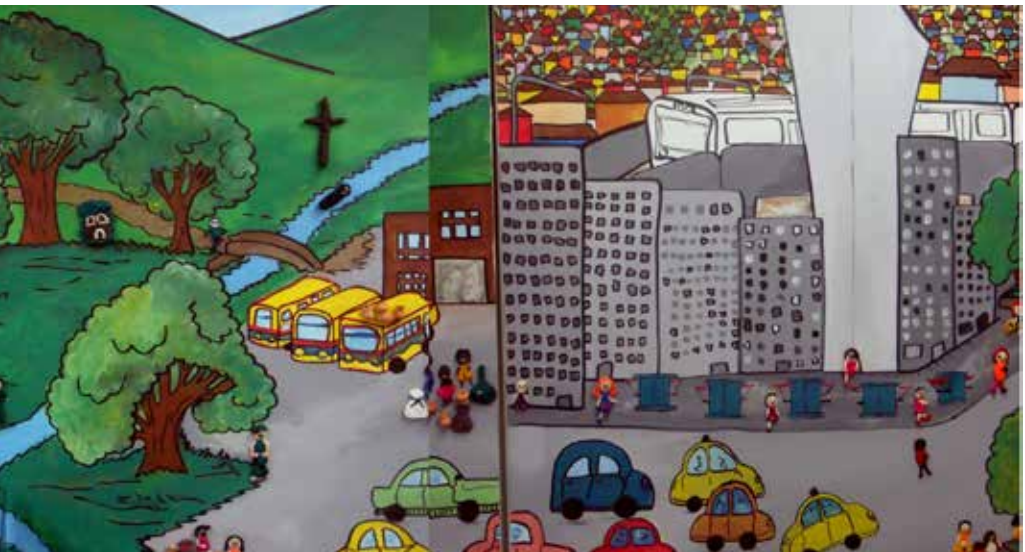
Michael, male, 26, displaced in 2010

It is hard to live in a place you know neither people or a single street. When I went out in my city acquaintances and friends used to ask me how I was. There, I was part of something. Walking on the streets of my hometown was something lovely. We knew each other very well.

Home is an existential space

Home is a place in which individuals experience a sense of being emotionally and existentially immersed. The loss of this existential home is repeatedly interpreted by the displaced as the loss of a place in which they learnt the cultural and moral codes that make them human.

A representation of the displacement journey by displaced people in Medellin



Marina, female, 60, displaced in 2004

Home is everything. The place I was born, the place I grew up, the place I learnt social values and moral codes. It is also the place where I made friends, I created a family, where my roots are. Home to me is everything, everything, and everything.

Chelsea, female, 45, displaced in 2004

Home is a personal and familiar world. Home is your universe. Home comprises your past, your present, and your plans and ambitions for the future.



'Life is a journey'
Graffiti by
street artists in
Medellin

Yovana, female, 38, displaced in 1999

Home to me is like a table. To be exact, it is the surface of the table which is sustained by four legs: dialogue, trust, harmony and happiness. If you have not dialogue with your family, the table still works with three legs. It is however something you should worry about. If you have neither dialogue or trust within your family the table becomes very unstable but still stands. Lack of dialogue and trust lead to a lack of harmony. Without dialogue, trust and harmony you cannot experience happiness. Therefore, you no longer have a home.

4. Where is Home for the Displaced?

Home is not always a fixed place that those who are uprooted unequivocally want to return to. The displaced conceptualise home as a contested, multidimensional and dynamic space in which ideas of identity, belonging, and well-being interact over time and space.

The issue of where home is for the displaced, therefore, rarely finds a straightforward answer. Whilst some locate home 'there', in the abandoned place, where they locate cultural roots and identity, or 'here', in their current settlements, an overwhelming majority struggle to see where home is. Rather than 'here' or 'there', home for many is located in the intersection between those places or nowhere.

Home is either 'here' or 'there'

Violeta, female, 36, displaced in 1992

Home is here, in this borough. It is the place I inhabit and share with my relatives. It is the place I attach the memories of those I love but who have been taken from me by violence. We have a rose garden in our patio. My partner used to water the garden. Even the roses wait for him. Thus, this place is both my house and my home.

Monkuine, male, 51, displaced in 2003

My place in the world is there. I have to do my best to return there. It is not possible to reconstruct a sense of home away from your community. Displacement brings about an abrupt rupture with everything that used to give you a sense of home. Such a rupture prevents you making a new home elsewhere.

Camilo, male, 28, displaced in 2001

We have a circular way of life. If you abandon the place you were born for any reason you have to return there. My umbilical cord is buried in my community. I also have a tree which represents my roots and a strong connection with the black collective territory. All, my umbilical cord, my tree and my community wait for me.

Ambivalent homes: home is a tension between ‘here’ and ‘there’

When the displaced reflect on the multiple dimensions of home and the challenges and opportunities available in both the place left behind and the current settlement, home frequently becomes a contested entity located in the interplay between ‘here’ and ‘there’.

Bernabela, female, 62, displaced in 2003

I see this place as my temporal home. This is the place I inhabit, I work and I share with my grandchildren. Here they have found academic opportunities.

My [permanent] home, however, is there, in the place left behind. There are my cultural roots, my parents, my siblings, and my friends. There are the people who know who I am and give me credit for my commitment with the community. This home needs me and my home there waits for me. I have to look after my grandchildren and help them to achieve their academic and sport aspirations that are greater here. My parents, siblings, friends and my community in Galeras wait for me.



Home is 'nowhere'

While some displaced people retain a sense of home on the move, whether in the place left behind, the current settlement or in the intersection between those places, others said that because of their experiences of violence and uprootedness they feel at home nowhere.

Ruby, female, 52, displaced in 1984

After displacement I experienced a sense of living without a place called home. I become an uprooted human being. I feel I am floating and wandering all the time. I am physically alive but I often experience a sense I no longer exist as a human being.

After over 30 years of displacement I dream about a house but I am conscious I will never experience a sense of home again. My territory, my house, the social and political context in which I used to be immersed, family and friends no longer exist.

My life project was completely frustrated by violence and displacement. I feel I had never got what I planned to achieve in my life. My life is only a draft of the life I planned to live. I have to accept my life will never be complete, a melancholy sigh will be always with me. I did my best to create new roots here but when my husband was killed and my daughter condemned to live in exile, my hopes were gone.

Living without a place called home evokes a sense of being dead while alive. I breathe, but struggle to find sense in life. Nobody cares if I am dead or alive. Nobody waits for me when I arrive at my place. Even the dog I loved has gone.

Now I find myself alone in a kind of limbo.

There is no home to return to

For some of the displaced, return is a never-ending aspiration which gives meaning to their lives. This is particularly true for the black or indigenous people who have strong cultural attachments to the places left behind. However, most of the displaced who took part in this research no longer see return as a way to recover home.

Chelsea, female, 45, displaced in 2004

Return is not an option for us. Aguazul was our home, our universe. We do not want, however, to go back there. Unhappy memories and ongoing violence prevent us returning.

Violeta, female, 36, displaced in 1992

I was forcibly recruited and raped there. I cannot see that place as home. That place only evokes sadness, anguish, sorrow, kidnapping, and prison. I hope never to go back there.



Building a new home in Bogotá

5. Remaking Home after Conflict and Displacement

The experience of losing home and living without a place called home for lengthy periods of time are, for many, materially and emotionally devastating. This does not imply, however, that the displaced are unable to remake home on the move. The narratives quoted in this section illustrate the meanings of remaking home following conflict and displacement, and the connections between remaking home and overcoming the negative impacts of displacement.

Remaking the material home

The process of remaking the material home entails finding a place to live and a way to generate income that provides the financial resources to feed a family and satisfy basic needs.

Jasbleidy, female, 39, displaced in 2005

What is more challenging in the process of making a new home away from your hometown is how to begin. When I arrived here, I had nobody who supported me. Thus, I asked for government support as a displaced person. I was granted humanitarian aid for three months. Then, I met a woman who gave me sweets to sell on streets. From this income, I used to pay a daily rent of 5,000 Colombian pesos [around £1]. It was a very small and humble room. My children slept on the only bed we had while I slept on a mattress on the floor. Afterwards, I met another woman who worked for a social organisation which supports people in need. She helped me to enrol my children in to school, thus, I was able to work more time on the streets selling sweets. Around five years later, I found support from a church who helped me with the education of my children. At that time, I started to move forward. I was able to pay for a better room and then for a flat in a shared house. Now, [after 10 years of displacement], we live in a three-bedroom flat. We pay a monthly rent of COL\$350,000 [around £74]. I feel at home in my current place. After spending the whole day selling sweets in the streets I am happy to go home. My children wait for me. They ask me for a blessing and ask me how my day was. Then, we cook together and happily share the food we have been working for.

Mateo, male, 47, displaced in 1987

To make a home is a continuing goal for human beings. However, there are some milestones in that process. To make a shelter is a very important one. I arrived to Medellin alone but after a short period of time I got engaged to a displaced woman.

At the beginning we tried to keep our rural way of life, farming the piece of land we occupied. It was not, however, sufficient to feed our family. Thus, with another displaced man I started to collect rubbish from the streets of Medellin and sold it on daily basis. The first days we collected only paper and were able to buy potatoes. Then, we learnt that other materials were also worth recycling and we obtained more income.

At this point, we started to have money not only for food but to make a shelter. After a year and a half we were able to buy a piece of land. It was a real need because we did not have a place to go. We were living in a stubble field. Then, we made a shelter from disposable materials. We built the roof using cardboard and plastics and covered the soil floor with rugs we found in the bin. With four stakes and plantain leaves we build our first bed. Our first pot was a gift from a homeless person.

With the money we were able to save selling the materials we recycled, we bought pigs and raised them for self-consumption and business. We also opened a small grocery store in which we sell products to our neighbours.

In short, we have progressed making a living from rubbish in this city. In other words, making a home is like running a company. You have to move step by step. First, feed your family and yourself. Then, finding a source of income, a place and making a shelter. Day by day you have to work to make your place more comfortable. You also have to look after your neighbour and community. You cannot be happy if those who surround you have a sad face. We have recovered a sense of home collecting things people do not value. Rubbish is priceless for us. I feel this place is my home. I live here with my wife and my three children who are my reason to live. Here, I am what I want to be and I do what I want to do.

Remaking a social world

The process of remaking a social world is related to both the regaining of a sense of family and of community.

Mateo, male, 47, displaced in 1987

Yarumal [the place left behind] was my world, my home. There, I used to share everyday activities with my family such as having dinner together. Those activities gave me not only joy but a sense of having someone to trust. We lost our home. We lost everything that is essential for human life. We lost our reason to live. For many years I did not see home when I arrived to my place in Medellin. I used to see only sadness. I was always longing for my hometown. I experienced a sense of being in a foreign land, in the wrong place.

I, however, worked hard to create my own environment, to reconstruct my life. We lost our world in Yarumal but we were able to create a new one in Medellin. Medellin is our new world. I have new ideas and questions here. It is like a new beginning. I feel in my world again, in my space. We are a strong family which has been able to build a new home from nothing.



Praying for a place called home.
St. Francis church, Bogotá

Remaking a sense of place

Transforming an unfamiliar place into a home requires not only transforming one's physical shelter into a familiar and personal space but also making the inhabited geographical area into a familiar space (Hammond, 2004).



Memories
of home.
Cartagena

Mau, female, 47, displaced in 2004

The interior decoration of my place evokes my home. I have a picture which recreates the main sights of Cartagena and its people. I feel this picture connects me with Cartagena [the place left behind]. I also have some of the traditional stuff with which people in Cartagena decorate their houses and we keep some traditional recipes. The music my daughters listen to also evokes my home left behind. All this stuff connects me with Cartagena, keeps my desire to go back there alive and gives me inspiration to keep going.

Remaking the existential home

The reconstruction of the existential home requires leaving past experiences of violence and displacement behind, and refashioning one's life project on the move.

Piedad, female, 20, displaced in 1996

I want to feel at home again. In doing so, I should leave the past behind. I need to see my life from a different perspective. I can neither move time back nor change my history. What I need to do is to accept what happened. I must learn how to live a different life and how to plan for a better future.



Remaking home in Bogotá

Mateo, male, 47, displaced in 1987

Displacement is a source of pain and anger. I have, however, worked on healing my soul. I have transformed this source of pain and sadness into my source of strength. If we stay anchored to the past, we see the future nowhere. It is the case of most of the displaced I have met. They are trapped in the past. I decided to live in the present, to focus my mind on what I can achieve today. What displacement has taught me is that the world never stops. It continues on its course. Therefore, we [the displaced] have to fight to go further. Human beings are still human beings after displacement. I am simply a human being.

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Luis Eduardo Perez Murcia is a PhD student at the Global Development Institute at The University of Manchester. Comments and questions are welcome at luis.perezmurcia@manchester.ac.uk and lepm50@gmail.com.



'Nobody Wins'

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