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Childhood, refuge and the democratic game: notes from the field[1]

*Rosana Kohl Bines, Carolina Moulin, Liana Biar, Mariana F. Braga Santos**

Abstract: This paper discusses a number of strategies of playfulness performed by Venezuelan children in shelters for asylum seekers in Brazil. We contend that games and play may disrupt the surveillance-based humanitarian grammar enforced within border spaces, thereby inaugurating unexpected loci of vigorous political (re)imagination and democratic experimentation. We also argue that children's play, in addition to sidestepping the predictable and tedious daily life of the camp, ascribes a range of new meanings to compulsory routines and timetables, potentially altering what Jacques Rancière termed the "landscape of the sensible". The investigation is conducted by an interdisciplinary team of researchers associated with the Sérgio Vieira de Mello Academic Chair, a center of studies on refuge and human rights. The study employs an ethnographically inspired methodology centered on participant and qualitative research with asylum-seeking Venezuelan children in Brazil.

Key words: childhood; games and play; shelters; Venezuelan refugees; democracy.

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* Carolina Moulin is Professor of International Relations at the School of Economics, Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG). She is Executive Secretary of the Brazilian Association of International Relations and Associate Editor of Review of International Studies. She is a CNPq Research Productivity Fellow (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development, Brazil). She works on refugee and migration issues, and its intersections with critical international relations. cmoulin@cedeplar.ufmg.br; Rosana Kohl Bines is Professor at the Linguistics and Literature Department at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro and member of the Chair Sergio Vieira de Mello on Refugee Studies (UNHCR/ PUC-Rio). She is a CNPq Research Productivity Fellow (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development, Brazil). Her current research and writing focus on childhood studies; children's literature; narratives of refuge and displacement. She can be reached at rkbines@gmail.com; Liana de Andrade Biar is Professor at the Linguistics and Literature Department at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro and member of the Chair Sergio Vieira de Mello on Refugee Studies (UNHCR/ PUC-Rio). She is a CNPq Research Productivity Fellow (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development, Brazil). Her work deals with narrative analysis and social interaction applied to stigmatized groups. She can be reached at lianabiar@gmail.com; Mariana F. Braga Santos is a Master's student at the International Relations Institute at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio). Her research interests include refugee and migration studies and the use of categories to differentiate those on the move. She can be reached at marifbraga@hotmail.com

Prologue

February 21, 2019. Boa Vista, capital of the state of Roraima. São Vicente Shelter.

CSVM PUC-Rio Archives. São Vicente Shelter, Boa Vista, Roraima, Brazil, 2019.

A Venezuelan boy hides himself inside a cardboard box. The text reads:
Ministry of Defense
Roraima's Humanitarian Logistic Workforce

The box also sports the logo of the Klabin Company—Brazil's major producer of cellulose and cardboard packing. On one side of the receptacle, an open rectangle—a smaller-scale simulation of the box itself—frames the words "Way more than just packing". The self-referring message seems to celebrate the humanitarian efforts put in by governmental agents and their supporters, whose names stamp and claim the box's symbolic capital. Beyond mere packing, a spirit of solidarity and generosity affectively tinges the box with a compassionate appreciation of the actors involved in *Operação Acolhida* (Operation Shelter or, alternatively, Operation Welcome). The operation, which began in Brazil in March 2018, was launched to manage the flux of Venezuelans crossing into the country through the northern frontier in ever-increasing numbers as a result of the so-called "humanitarian crisis in Venezuela". In truth, there is a powerful discursive ordering imprinted in the box which, as it highlights humanitarian efforts put in by Operação Acolhida, strategically and violently erases what should never be kept out of sight.

Way beyond the packing, there is the boy. He is more than a nameless shadow, a piece of data, an object of intervention, a justification for the colossal investments which are the cornerstone of the humanitarian industry. As he smiles at the camera, he is a

singular, unavoidable presence, full of grace and irony. He defies the impertinence of our intrusive, classifying stare as we look at him from above, unveiling him, casting light upon his hideaway. It seems a bit of a paradox that, as he faces the camera, the boy also unveils the researchers, revealing them in their insatiable desire to see[2]. We are thus confronted with the dangers and intricacies of sight, and research itself is interpellated. Must we learn to look elsewhere, to step back, to cultivate distraction? In order to play differently, to join the game, must we slow down the eye?

CSVM PUC-Rio Archives. São Vicente Shelter, Boa Vista, Roraima, Brazil, 2019.

The unspoken agreement seems to work. As we look away, the very boy the camera had frozen in space storms ahead and disappears. He emerges once again amid the barracks where 355 Venezuelans—among them, 156 children and teenagers—live in an overcrowded shelter[3]. How did the box 'walk' so far and so fast? The ground is covered by hot, sharp little stones[4] which often limit children's movements and prevent them from running barefoot. The boy's bold, agile movements inside the humanitarian box playfully—and maybe only for a second—challenge an entire system of control, restriction and management which is currently enforced within shelters. As he teasingly

[2]For a more in-depth analysis of the ambivalences of photographing in ethnographic research, see Alejandra Josiowicz' (2016) essay on the photographs of children taken by Mario de Andrade in his trips to the Amazon and the Brazilian Northeastern regions in 1927, 1928 and 1929.

[3] As of February 2019. Over time, numbers may vary according to the development of reception, reallocation and interiorization processes.

[4] In shelters for Venezuelan refugees in the city of Boa Vista, Roraima, the ground is covered with little stones. This is done on purpose to minimize the effects of flooding, given the region's proclivity for intense downpours.

jolts back and forth in a box which metonymically evokes the whole camp as a place of confinement, the boy, in his game of hide and seek, echoes a broader question voiced by sociologist Michel Agier in his study of the everyday dimensions of camps. Agier, dwelling on the way pragmatic lives daily and resiliently reinvent themselves amid adversity, asks: "Might this pragmatics of daily life turn places of confinement into places of mobility, rendering them gradually more inhabitable and open until every wall has been knocked down by force of scratching, every door pierced, every necessary pair of stairs put into place?"[5] (Agier 2014, 26).

1. Introduction

The investigation outlined in this text is part of a transdisciplinary research project conducted by the Sérgio Vieira de Mello Academic Chair[6], an initiative devoted to qualitatively observing the presence and circulation of Venezuelan refugees and asylum seekers in Brazil. This markedly hybrid project, which intertwines fields as diverse as Law, Linguistics, Social Service, International Relations, Psychology and Literature, aims to underscore the work of the actors involved in the reception of such groups, as well as to illuminate the tensions inherent to the dynamics of displacement and sheltering. To attain such goals, it resorts to a diversified array of methodologies and sub-projects, all hinging upon collective fieldwork developed in the thirteen shelters set up by Operação Acolhida and located in Roraima, a small Brazilian border state lately catapulted into the spotlight on account of its protagonism in the context of the migratory flux.

Between September 2018 and the production of this paper, this transdisciplinary team engaged in a total of three field entries which, in turn, generated a substantial amount of data: field notes, questionnaires, photographs, as well as in-depth interviews with the asylum-seeking Venezuelan community and with other actors involved in the reception—government officials at the municipal, state and national levels; army and federal police officers; members of civil society organizations; and volunteers.

The preliminary arguments advanced by this paper lie at the heart of one of the aforementioned sub-projects. Our overarching goal is to reflect on the connections between childhood and refuge. More specifically, and in accordance with Agier's (2014) previously quoted remarks, we wish to debate to what extent it would be possible for Venezuelan children to re-signify practices of playfulness within the confinement of Roraima's shelters—and, by doing so, to defy locally enforced regimes of control and eschew stigmas of vulnerability. To word it differently: within such spaces, could childish performances, materialized as games and play, become instruments of agency and political resistance for refugee children?

In an attempt to tackle such questions, the authors of this paper conducted fieldwork in February 2019. This was the second of three incursions led by the Sérgio Vieira de Mello Academic Chair thus far, and it focused on three of the shelters run by Operação Acolhida:

[5] "Cette pragmatique de la vie quotidienne peut-elle transformer les lieux de confinement em lieux de la mobilité, jusqu´à les rendre vivables et ouverts, jusqu´au enfaire tomber les murs en les grattant, en y perçant des portes et en y posant des échelles?" (Agier 2014, 26).

[6] The Sérgio Vieira de Mello Academic Chair (CSVM) was implemented in 2003 as the result of a partnership between the UNHCR, Brazilian universities, and the National Committee for Refugees (CONARE). The Brazilian universities which integrate the project (there are 23, as of July 2020) are tasked with establishing initiatives in the fields of education, research and extension. The Academic Chair prioritizes the qualification of professionals working on issues of refuge, and is also responsible for conducting community projects which directly impact refugees. Additional information can be found at https://www.acnur.org/portugues/catedra-sergio-vieira-de-mello/

Jardim Floresta, São Vicente and Pintolândia, all of which currently house a population of children[7]. Ours was a twofold undertaking: we visited the shelters in order to assist local teams in the implementation of pedagogical projects based on children's literature, recreational activities and storytelling; however, we simultaneously engaged in instances of ethnographically inspired observation centered on the games and forms of play which emerged in the shelters' collective zones. The data generated across a week of participant observation includes field notes, pictures of areas of recreation, and audiotaped qualitative interviews with children, teenagers and members of the shelters' team of educators[8].

The forthcoming sections contain both fragments of that material and more general remarks on childhood, refuge and politics. The paper is organized as follows: section 2 briefly contextualizes Venezuelans' displacement and crossing into Brazil. It also introduces the Brazilian operation in charge of border reception. Section 3 presents ethnographic notes and preliminary theoretical considerations on the camp and on children's playful movements. It offers a more detailed discussion of three ethnographic scenes in which children's engagement seems to resist and repel the tropes of victimization and passivity often associated with life-in-shelter. Finally, section 4 interweaves all such observations and consubstantiates our argument in favor of the interconnectedness of play, games and the (re)politization of humanitarian spaces.

2. Operação Acolhida

Operação Acolhida (translated as Operation Shelter or Operation Welcome) is the official denomination of a taskforce created to oversee the institutional management of what has quickly become one of humankind's largest flows of forced migration: the massive displacement of Venezuelans, driven away from their country by a mounting political and economic crisis. Set up in 2018, this large-scale operation—a pioneering humanitarian mission in Brazilian territory—strives to provide emergency assistance to the vulnerable Venezuelan population. It relies on the services of over 100 different national and international actors: among them, the Brazilian armed forces; the federal, state, and municipal government; non-governmental organizations; churches; and the civil society. The mission operates on three main fronts: border control, supervision of sheltering procedures, and transference of refugees to other Brazilian states.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), by the end of July 2019, around 4.3 million people had already fled Venezuela[9]. In 2018 alone, an average of 5,000 people left the country on a daily basis[10], most headed for neighboring South-American countries. Colombia and Peru rank as the most frequent destinations. In

[7] The São Vicente Shelter is run by the Association of Volunteers for International Service (AVSI), whereas the Jardim Floresta Shelter is managed by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). Finally, the Pintolândia Shelter is overseen by the Fraternity – International Humanitarian Foundation, which, at the time of our research, besides superintending this and two more shelters, conducted an educational project aimed at teenagers in other nine shelters, including São Vicente and Jardim Floresta. The project, based on pedagogical activities and extracurricular classes, was instrumental to the insertion of hundreds of Venezuelan children and teenagers into Roraima's education system in 2019.

[8] In accordance with Brazilian regulations, the investigation was previously approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the [removed for blind review], and all participants and legal guardians authorized the research by signing informed consent forms.

[9] UNHCR, "Response for Venezuela", 2019, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/platform

[10] In 2018, an average of 5,000 people left Venezuela on a daily basis. Additional information can be found at: Katy Watson, 'Venezuela: The country that has lost three million people', *BBC News*, December 30, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-46524248

Brazil[11], where it is estimated that 180,000 Venezuelans have asked for refuge or temporary regularization, this ongoing phenomenon has already produced both the country's primary migratory flux and its main group of asylum seekers. For instance, between January and April 2019, despite closed borders on Venezuela's side[12], there was a daily crossing of approximately 428 people[13] into the city of Pacaraima, located in the border state of Roraima.

Brazilian responses to the incoming flux of Venezuelans have been worryingly belated. While migration levels first began to soar in 2015, only in 2018 did Brazil launch the emergency humanitarian initiative known as Operação Acolhida, and only in June 2019 did the National Committee for Refugees (CONARE) decide to recognize Venezuelans as refugees. The measure was introduced in alignment with Law 9.474/49, Article 1, item III —the Law of Refuge—, which admits the grave and generalized violation of human rights as reasonable grounds for the request and attribution of asylum.

At present, thirteen shelters have been set up in the state of Roraima: eleven in the capital, Boa Vista, and two others in the border city of Paracaima. According to data provided by the Operation, while there is a current population of 6,500 sheltered individuals, 3,500 displaced people continue to live on the streets or to occupy derelict public and private buildings in the capital[14]. Sheltering was conceived as a general response to the agglomeration of Venezuelans in public spaces and, in particular, to the challenges posed by the heavy raining and flooding in the region. Given the urban landscape of the cities in question, it can also be said that most shelters operate as areas of isolation and containment, segregating their populations from local Roraima inhabitants.

Within such spaces, the enforcement of security by the Armed Forces subscribes the Brazilian operation to a worldwide trend which entangles securitarian and humanitarian discourses. Shelters are converted into highly ordered areas governed by stringent rules for permanence, entry and exit, as well as by clear-cut meal times and curfews. Other measures include the controlled circulation of alcoholic beverages and the introduction of immunization campaigns.

Finally, management is superintended by the UNHCR, which designates partners for the everyday maintenance of such spaces. Non-governmental organizations, such as the Association of Volunteers for International Service (AVSI), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the Fraternity – International Humanitarian Federation, manage most shelters and provide assistance and protection in collaboration with other organizations, churches, and with the Army.

3. Childhood and refuge

Let us consider the regulation of 'common life' in shelters a bit more at length. We have already stated that there are pre-established hours for entry and exit and for each of the three daily meals. There are also specific rules regarding areas of common use, such as

[11] UNHCR, "Response for Venezuela", 2019, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/platform

[12] Between February 21 and May 5, 2019, the border between Venezuela and Brazil was closed on Venezuela's side. More information at 'Venezuela crisis: Maduro closes border with Brazil', *BBC News*, February 22, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-47325201

[13] The data was obtained in a research interview with a military officer participating in Operação Acolhida in June 2019.

[14] On the topic of unsheltered Venezuelans, and also regarding the occupation of private and public buildings in Boa Vista, see, in Portuguese, Emily Costa, 'Ocupações crescem e mais de 1,3 mil venezuelanos vivem em prédios abandonados em Roraima', *G1 RR*, June 28, 2019, https://g1.globo.com/rr/roraima/noticia/2019/06/28/ocupacoes-crescem-e-mais-de-13-mil-venezuelanos-vivem-em-predios-abandonados-em-roraima.ghtml.

bathrooms and cloth-washing sinks. The activities promoted by the numerous locally operating NGOs are strictly timed, and can only take place on previously defined days.

Even children's recreation is scheduled: a few times a week, volunteers from humanitarian NGOs visit the shelter with the purpose of setting up what they call an '*espacio amigable'* (a friendly space). Assisted by children, they place small tables and colorful plastic chairs within a fenced area. Children and teenagers are then handed board games, crosswords, bingo cards, checkers and chess boards. Once playtime is over, the games are carefully stored away in large Tupperware boxes, and tables and chairs are locked within a container. The now empty space is quickly refurnished, and it becomes a setting for new activities. During our visit to the São Vicente Shelter, for instance, once play zones were cleared, larger plastic chairs were lined up to accommodate people who wished to make a free, five-minute phone call to Venezuela or to any other country. In times of need, spaces must become adaptable.

An intriguing example of flexibility is that of a wooden platform which occupies the center of the shelter. Of fairly substantial dimensions, the platform, which hosts weekly 'balltherapy' sessions, also serves as a site for heated assembly meetings between Venezuelans and shelter managers in which solutions for everyday problems are sought. It also works as a lane for the only tricycle in the shelter: a timeworn, precarious little vehicle which surprisingly supports the weight of multiple children, who gather to use the toy all at once. Typically, two children share the front seat, one on the other's lap, while a third one pushes the tricycle and a fourth child pulls it forward with a piece of string. Several other children congregate around the toy, loudly commanding their friends to move faster as they wait for their own turn.

The uproariousness suggested by the latter example pervades and galvanizes a number of other activities. It is seen, for instance, in the football games boisterously played amid barracks, with a deflated ball, even after lights are off—as complainingly reported to us by those who wished to sleep at the authority-appointed time. As we contemplate such scenes and notice the ways in which children playfully, and oftentimes quite noisily, associate and compete, we wonder if (or how) such practices may disturb the regimes which split and organize common life: the tacit codes of corporeal, functional, spatial and temporal management. In other words, we are prompted to investigate to what extent children's unexpected, expansive and undisciplined joy, irradiated in scenes like these, may alter what Rancière (2005) calls the "distribution of the sensible".

To phrase it differently: how does children's zest redefine expectations, reassign positions and reimagine visibility within that specific group? Which demands for the occupation of space and for freedom of movement do children propagate as they play? Might unpredictable, 'unlawful' gestures establish new imaginaries of collective life in sheltered contexts? To evoke Rancière's (1999) vocabulary yet again, which forms of pressure and dissent can be generated by children's playful movements in these spaces of enforced co-existence between strangers-turned-neighbors?

Michel Agier views refugee camps as places in which governments deposit the undesirable human surplus ("*ce qui est en trop*"), which (still) cannot be integrated into the "sheltering" country's national territory, and which must therefore remain confined and on hold, in the form of human residue, organic or industrial waste (Ager, 2014, 11)[15]. It comes

[15] "La solution du camp sous toutes ses formes (ou ce que l´on désinge ici l´"encampement") apparait dorénavant commme la plus répandue pour tenir à l´écart ce qui dérange, pour contenir ou rejeter ce qui, humain, matière organique ou déchet industriel, *est en trop*. L´encampement du monde se presente ainsi comme l´une des formes du gouvernement du monde, une manière de gérer l´indésirable" (Agier 2014, 11).

as no surprise that the shelters hold a striking resemblance to the building sites described by Walter Benjamin in a famous passage from *One Way Street* in which its author, gazing at the debris, deems it an ideal site for children's recreational and insurgent action:

> For children are particularly fond of haunting any site where things are being visibly worked on. They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building […] In waste products they recognize the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things, they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one.
> (Benjamin 1979, 52-53)

Inspired by Benjamin's remark, in our close observation of children's forms of play at the Roraima shelter, we tried to apprehend, in Marielle Macé's phrase, "the possible they bring about". In Macé's words,

> [...] there is a pressing need to recognize the lives which live and have lived here; and, within the same movement, an urgent need to not always, or perhaps not at first, view people solely through the lenses of their suffering, but also in the light of their heroism, their achievements, their 'measureless hope', their joy, if any remains; and a need to acknowledge what has been constructed and inhabited—not within a territory of naked indignity, but, once again, of ideas.
> (Macé 2017, 46)

In terms of our research methodology, exercising diligence towards the life-movements enacted by children meant observing and describing their enjoyment; listening to their own versions and renditions of it; enabling situations of co-presence; 'coming together' by telling stories, singing, and playing both Brazilian and Venezuelan games. In each interactional episode—as well as through every photograph, account, and recording—our explicit goal was to recognize what was being done and invented. We also considered how such experiences may 'un-enclose' our own ways of conceiving the material conditions of refugees in sheltering spaces, as persistently defined as they are by the sorrowful tropes of humanitarian sentimentality (Lanette, 2017).

Lannete (2017)'s analysis suggests that the Western imagination is strongly influenced by the visual representations of refugees and asylum-seekers produced in institutional contexts, where these groups tend to be associated with ideas of precariousness, suffering, and lack of agency. In a way, as we first stepped into the field, our own expectations were informed by the meanings evoked by such campaigns and journalistic images. However, as we interacted with the children, adults and educators who lived and worked in the shelters, it occurred to us that the basic problem with these depictions and expectations is not that they are unreal, but that they are incomplete and one-dimensional. As will become clear over the next pages, our preconceived notions of how children's performances would unfold were repeatedly and decisively called into question.

While such discourses habitually invite our compassion by evoking meanings of misery, urgency and immobility, it is our interest to cultivate the opposite: to invigorate our sensibility towards these children by laying emphasis on their concrete practices and products.

Of course, sheltering is a violent form of de-territorialization which creates entire landscapes of extreme social vulnerability, and we do not wish to promote an exceedingly

optimistic view of it. However, in the ethnographic effort of "looking over the shoulders"[16] (Geertz 1989) of such social actors, of observing their social worlds and their "webs of significance" (idem), we could not help being taken aback by certain forms of life which, as a rule, we would not expect to arise at such times and places. In a word, we were frankly astonished by the emergence of an array of possibilities of being which systematically call stereotypes and standardizations into question.

Our analysis is firmly grounded on a performative understanding of childhood. In the post-structuralist spirit, we regard childhood not as a previously available, objectively defined reality-condition, but as a label whose putative solidity is an effect of many actions performed within certain regulatory sociocultural frames. During our fieldwork, we were surprised by the way in which shelters, despite their role as 'waiting sites' for such populations, become settings for—and perhaps agents of—childhood performances.

Before we discuss specific examples, here are a few general observations collectively made during our fieldwork. The phenomena described below directed our attention to how tropes of passivity and suffering were being actively and continuously subverted.

- First and foremost: given the sheer scarcity of manufactured toys, which had either been left in Venezuela or sold by the families along the way in an effort to finance their crossing into Brazilian territory and to secure some kind of emergency fund, sheltered children rely on the minutest elements to create zones and moments of play. Their unexpected, uproarious, undisciplined joy radiates over territories of bleakness and suspension.
- In our interviews, we saw the humanitarian crisis and the harrowing stories of crossing reconstructed as tales of adventure and bravery. Similarly, children narratively constructed themselves as half-hero-half-survivor figures and often expressed a sense of accomplishment at having made it through the arduous journey;
- The lack of privacy experienced in shelters as a result of ongoing co-presence can at times be experienced—as reported by Flávia Castro (2013) in a somewhat different context, i.e., during her exile in the military dictatorship—as "the pleasant feeling of being a child among other children with similar backgrounds" who keep one another company in shared spaces.
- The possibilities of performing childhood were not restricted to children: 15- and 16-year-old teenagers, deprived of any childhood-performing possibilities in their final years in Venezuela, now agreed to be made children of during our storytelling and game-based practices. The same happened to grown-ups—parents, in particular—, who, when survival-related demands were momentarily suspended, often surprised us with their eagerness.

In that regard, the following images capture the way in which children, teenagers, family members and educators enthusiastically engaged in the playful activities we proposed:

[16] We are aware of the impossibility of apprehending the so-called 'native viewpoint' in research interactions. Our epistemological framework regards all such efforts as necessarily partial, situated and subjective interpretive exercises (Becker 2009).


FORA DA ESCOLA
FORA DA ESCOLA


"Educar é impregnar de sentido o que fazemos a cada instante!"
1
Um
3
Três
4
Quatro


CSVM PUC-Rio Archives. São Vicente Shelter, Boa Vista, Roraima, Brazil, 2019.

Let us now turn to three specific scenes in which children's 'subversive' movements and gestures point to the possibility of re-imagining, projecting and fostering new collective life imaginaries in contexts of sheltering.

3.1. The seesaw

At the back of the São Vicente shelter, a man uses a handsaw to cut a piece of wood. He is standing behind two boys. One edge of the board rests against the ground; the other has been fitted against the back of a high chair, forming a transversal. The father saws the board's higher extremity, while his son, still wearing nappies, sits with open legs on its lower-hanging side. The handsaw is then cast aside for a moment and the father, using the weight of his body, pushes the board down, creating a makeshift seesaw. Delighted, I ask him: "Are you making your son a toy?" "I'm making a bed," he corrects me, as if pointing out that practical needs must take precedence in a place like this. But the child, sitting open-legged on that bed-to-be, *wants* a seesaw. The father seems to understand the tacit, secret wish and, before long, decides to fulfill it once again. The game is resumed: work is brought to a halt as father and son jointly step into the intermittent temporality of play. First a bed, then a seesaw. First a seesaw, then a bed. The leisurely cadence of play induces a time of alteration in the father-son dynamics. While the father cuts the wood, the boy remains seated, on hold. One works; the other waits. As the father puts the chainsaw away, a micro-moment of intense life is created[17]. Father and son are reconnected within a

[17] On July 30, 2019, three pink seesaws were installed near the fence separating the United States from Mexico, next to the city of Ciudad Juárez, by the team of architect Ronald Rael and designer Virginia San Fratello. The event, which lasted 40 minutes, brought together children and adults from both sides of the fence, and pictures and videos of the occasion quickly went viral. Words from Ronald Rael, who spearheaded the process, echo our observations regarding the political potency of play: "We like the idea of a seesaw: when we do certain things on one side, they directly impact the other—just like in relationships with our neighbors. This is play reflecting and speaking of political actions. It allows people to feel these interactions" (our translation). More information available, in Portuguese, at

"wasted" timeframe. As they play together, they "waste time", and nothing material or concrete is born from their experience. The game does not produce anything because it does not employ time as a productive unit: instead, it opens up new arrangements, and offers additional time, for the collective experiences of children and caretakers.

Walter Benjamin believed that children's forms of recreation could creatively and violently interrupt the predictable chronology of events[18]. Far from treating playfulness as puerile and harmless—recall the offhanded, patronizing phrase "child's play"—, the German thinker underlined the dangerous and peremptory dimensions of play, based as it is on drastic time-shifts and on the creation of an intensive form of *now-ness* conducive to the flow of affects among participants. In the makeshift seesaw, another time of alteration emerges: that of the wooden object itself, which forsakes its own hardness for a swaying, plastic playfulness.

3.2. Dental floss

How many toys can one make with dental floss? Children rejoice in wasting this 'essential good', to be found in the hygienic kits distributed in the shelters, as they piece together quaint playful artifacts. A small stone is collected; so is a plastic market bag. A long line of floss is tied to the stone, on one side, and to the bag's linked handles on the other. After a few movements, the kite is ready to fly.

https://g1.globo.com/mundo/noticia/2019/07/31/muito-comovente-diz-arquiteto-que-montou-gangorra-na-fronteira-entre-mexico-e-eua.ghtml.

[18] For a more in-depth discussion of the relationships between childhood, time and play in Walter Benjamin's work, see George Didi-Huberman (2015)

CSVM PUC-Rio Archives. São Vicente Shelter, Boa Vista, Roraima, Brazil, 2019.

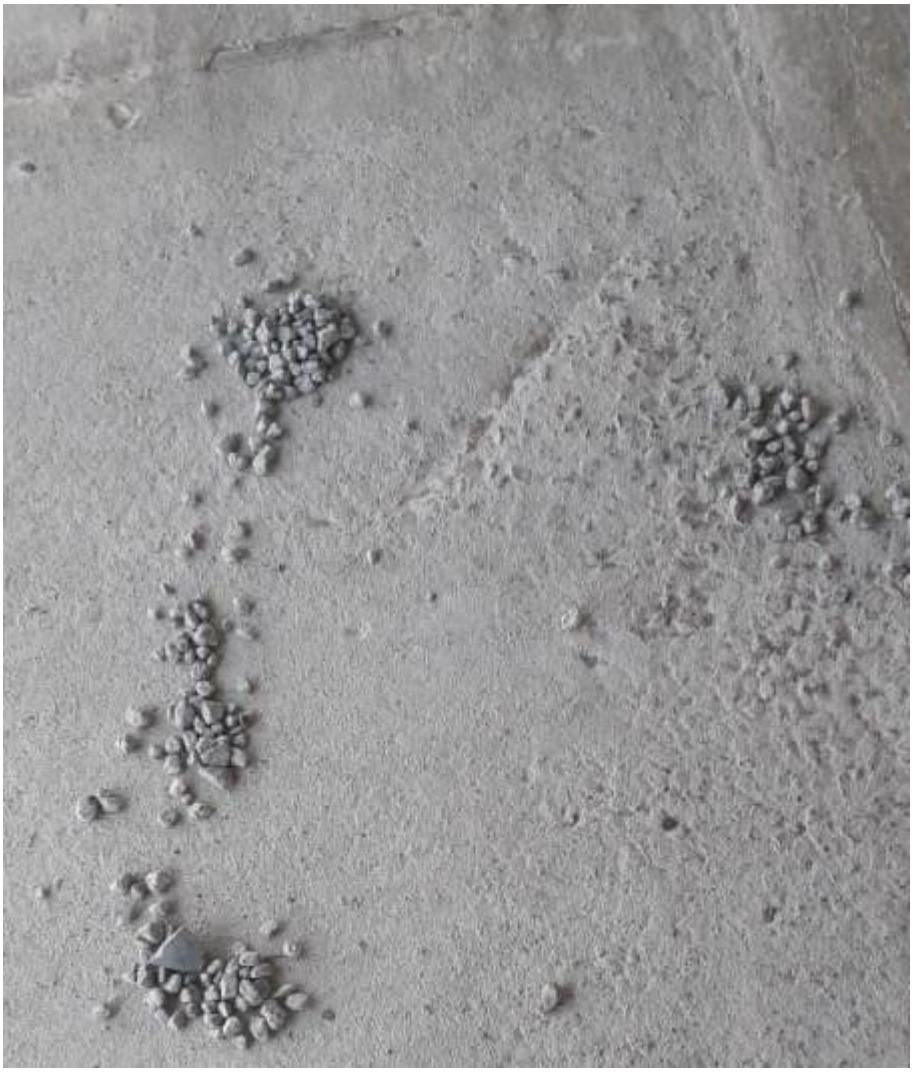
Floss also helps children give shape to a makeshift "piñata"—this one without the candies Venezuelan children say they miss so much, since daily meals at the camp do not include dessert. The procedure is quite straightforward: two small stones are attached to each of the extremities of a long line of floss. One of the stones is then thrown up into a tree, where it will hopefully get stuck over a branch. One child holds the other extremity, which allows him or her to control the toy: to lift it, to lower it, to 'entice' the other children, who stand underneath the tree and jump as high as they can to try and reach the stone. Victory is granted to whoever can grab the beguiling object. The prize: being the one to control the piñata's height in the next round.

Such experiments, in which children play with almost nothing, paradoxically enlarge the scope of the game: in truth, any object can be turned into any other. Perhaps more than any other, spaces of scarcity seem to foster what critic Jaqueline Held once, and in a different context, called an "irreversible creative dynamic"[19]. The political potential of this creative dynamic which turns material poverty into an amplified field of improvisation

[19] "There are novels which unlock the imaginary, which implode fixed, stereotypical structures, which revamp the everyday universe, which forge a past, a present, future, as well as an irreversible creative dynamic." (Held 1980, 18, our translation.)

is perhaps best illustrated in Walter Benjamin's formulations about peasants' precarious houses in Ibiza, as noted by Jeanne-Marie Gagnebin (2012). In such sparsely furnished residences, where a chair can just as easily become a clothes hanger and where a carpet can be turned into a duvet, all the objects in the house "come together and are ready, as the need arises, to change places and form new combinations a hundred times a day […] And the secret of their value is the sobriety, the austerity, of the living space they inhabit. It means that they do not simply occupy, visibly, the spot they belong in, but have enough space to take possession of whatever new positions they are called upon to fill" (Benjamin 1999, 589). Alternatively, in many passages of *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, Benjamin accurately and ironically remarks that, in the typical bourgeois house with its countless knickknacks, there is no room for free play (*Spielraum*), for there is no empty intermediate space in which objects can swap places and functions.

3.3. Small stones



CSVM PUC-Rio Archives. Pintolândia Shelter, Boa Vista, Roraima, Brazil, 2019.

The Pintolândia Shelter houses indigenous Venezuelans from the Warao and E'ñepá ethnic groups. Photographing children was strictly forbidden, since they often amble around with no clothes on. In a cemented area crisscrossed by erected posts and hung-up

hammocks, we found ourselves looking at small assemblages of stones employed by children to form drawings and tell stories in languages we do not understand. These uncanny, architectural stony creations reminded us of the photographic series "West Bank" (WB, 2005), developed by the French artist Sophie Ristelhueber[20], discussed by Rancière in his well-known essay *The intolerable image* (2009). One of Ristelhueber's photographs shows a pile of stones—a vestige, perhaps, of a crumbled building. As described by Rancière, the stones, which are set against an idyllic backdrop of hills covered with olive trees, are in fact an Israeli roadblock on a Palestinian road.

Instead of depicting the great separation wall built in West Bank, the photographer chooses to zoom in on the small barriers which hinder local inhabitants' comings and goings. Rather than the monumentality of war, we are shown a series of small-scale drawings imprinted on the territory by a ceaseless conflict. Ristelhueber thus performs what Rancière terms the "displacement" of a grandiloquent form of affect towards a more discreet one, "of indeterminate effect" (Rancière 2009, 104), inviting viewers to come closer and exercise a form of minute, unruffled, patient attention.

Rancière also tells us that the act of looking at a picture engages a range of bodily dispositions—among them, an urge to approach what we cannot promptly categorize: "[…] the eye does not know in advance what it sees and thought does not know what it should make of it. Their tension also points towards a different politics of the sensible—a politics based on the variation of distance, the resistance of the visible and the uncertainty of effects" (Rancière 2009, 105). We could add that, in the face of the images, narratives and experiences produced in our interactions with children in Roraima, another disposition of the body is imposed—one which surpasses the mere effort of keeping a close eye over something which demands attentive consideration[21]. There is a wish to take the physical body to that place once again; to visit them once more; to spend more time with those of whom we did not want to lose sight, and whom we genuinely miss. Simultaneously, in friction with this image of a body which can not only choose to move and wander but, in effect, is free to present such yearnings to an academic audience—in stark contrast with our urges are the bodies whose movement is inspected, controlled and impeded by the "politics of protection". Their wish to return to Venezuela, to remain in Roraima or to be transferred to other regions in Brazil remains barely audible. It has little to no bearing upon the implementation of policies allegedly designed "in their favor".

4. Games, play and democracy

Games and play constitute the performative foundation of childhood. Along with the free expression of childish ways of life, they are fundamental rights recognized by international declarations on the well-being of children and teenagers. If Venezuela's political and economic circumstances and the painstaking search for refuge produce structural inequality and constrain the possibilities of exercising childhood, shelters, in their longstanding state of wait, become agents of and instruments for the leisurely and continual performance of childhood.

[20] The series of photographs taken by Sophie Ristelhueber in West Bank and titled WB (2005) can be found at http://www.sophie-ristelhueber.fr/

[21] Here, it is useful to recollect Marielle Macé's definition of the word 'consider', which relates to a methodological posture vis-à-vis the experiences of migration of refuge: "It [the word 'consider'] designates this disposition which conflates the gaze (the eye- or thought-based inspection) with respect, with scruple, with the serious reception of that which we should strive to keep in plain sight" (Macé 2018, 30, our translation).

In addition, shelters can be said to represent aporetic spaces not only for Venezuelans themselves, but also for the broader ideas of refuge and democratic politics. Their specific temporal-spatial configuration causes a logic of protection and freedom (for shelters represent escape towards and reception within 'another' political community) to be conflated with a grammar of surveillance and control. Shelters create a kind of 'humanitarian space' in which the preservation of human rights becomes re-territorialized and re-signified through a host of legal categories and institutional modulations.

On the one hand, shelters secure the existence of a territory in which humanitarian workers can access vulnerable populations, thereby ensuring "the integrity and the effectiveness" (Yamashita, 2017, 5) of the suffering-alleviation policies which are the cornerstone of humanitarian action. On the other hand, their architecture renders lives and movements not only legible, but apprehendable by the structures of diffuse and often transnational authorities, which regulate and control such spaces. The shelter, like the refugee camp, "in its spatial organization and segregation, shapes the social routines and income-earning strategies of refugees" (Hyndman 2000, 100).

As permanence in border spaces finds itself increasingly dilated, shelters are gradually turned into areas of communal living, creativity and performance. Boundaries dictating the possibilities of a given community, however fragile it is, undergo continuous actualization. Through the conflicts inherent to the management of necessarily divergent lives and expectations, as well as through the rediscovery of the self and of the provisory world-around, children and their families enable the emergence of ephemeral forms of agency. Play constitutes a collection of fundamental practices and experiences which configure new possibilities of being in the world—a world, incidentally, mostly designed and regulated in oblivion of refugees' own desires.

It is not only about recognizing the importance of childhood and of playfulness in the process of sheltering asylum-seeking families and children. Rather, our endeavors involve acknowledging the epistemic centrality of the imagination stirred up by such practices for the very reconfiguration of who these subjects are and of how they interact with other actors and objects. Ultimately, this effort may lead us to a creative redefinition of dichotomous political topologies such as national/international, citizen/refugee, humanitarianism and politics.

Playing is an act of appropriation which allows for the innovative attribution of meanings and functions to everyday objects. Moreover, it forcefully provokes the inversion of life's conventional temporalities (such as separations between children and adults, or between guardians and dependents) and the redistribution of enunciative affordances in the realm of refuge and humanitarian protection—which has historically viewed refugees' bodies as objects of intervention. Scheel (2017, 398) turns to the notion of appropriation to highlight the "intricate interwovenness of migrants' practices with the devices, methods and logics of control which migrants try to recode into means allowing for the appropriation of mobility". In other words, migrants actively participate in the processes which regulate and enable their own circulation. They fill in forms and answer questionnaires; they follow orders and adhere to scripts. Yet, as they engage with such bureaucratic proceedings, they also defy their expectations and renegotiate underlying meanings, subjectively reimagining the limitations of their own, aprioristically defined roles.

On that same note, playing is a practice which tenses up the boundaries of the democratic game, especially in extraordinary or border spaces. For it is through the creative performativity of play that Venezuelan adults and children claim a kind of protagonism shared with other subjects and established in dialogue with the very materiality which makes shelters inhabitable. Through games and recreation, asylum-seeking individuals

appropriate the meanings of routines and objects, previously defined by a securitarian-humanitarian grammar, and forge escape routes: new narratives of exile, new affective devices, and new prompts for the here-and-now redistribution of the sensible.

Rancière (1999) writes that, in contemporary times, politics has been converted into police. The quest for democratic consensus and the often violent imposition of places determined by a logic of representation have impoverished political discourse and severely jeopardized the sense of active communal participation. Balibar (2006), in turn, argues that the political crisis outlined by Rancière is perhaps at its rawest form to be found in border spaces. It would thus be necessary to recreate politics as the ongoing development of practices of dissent, disagreement and disruption.

Throughout this text, we have sought to consolidate an understanding of game and play in border spaces as unexpected and privileged loci of political imagination. The ubiquitous sense of performative disagreement vis-à-vis both everyday objects (the cardboard box, the dental floss, the piece of wood, the small stones) and social roles (the victimized refugee, the breadwinning father, the teenager who needs to rationalize the losses of exile) points to the existence of fractures which allow for the re-politization of humanitarian spaces. The imagined and the playful are turned into strategies of sociopolitical intervention, with far-from-negligible impacts upon the structures which dictate and ascribe meanings to the different subjects inhabiting these institutional landscapes.

Playing alters shelters' framework of intelligibility, recasting social roles and overturning the interactional grammar. The objects of intervention—the child, the refugee, the sheltered individual—take center stage, assuming control over the game's rules and narratives. As the rational, calculated gaze of humanitarian logic—which, as we have shown, is often predicated on prearranged and rigidly controlled norms and categories—is steered towards the playful, the creative and the symbolic, windows are opened into other possible worlds. Through playing, a political space defined by smothering, top-down expectations and power dynamics is infused with life and spontaneity.

It is our understanding that shelters can be viewed as part of a government and as a humanitarian infrastructure (Moulin and Magalhães, 2020), here defined as "a complex assemblage, comprising 'particular forms of humanitarian reason, specific forms of authority', as well as technologies of government, like 'mechanisms for raising funds and training volunteers, administering aid and shelter, documenting injustice, and publicizing abuse.'" (Walters 2011, 142). Through the material, symbolic and subjective appropriation of daily life's available scripts and uses, the logic of surveillance finds itself oversaturated.

In that regard, games and play produce alternative understandings of who Venezuelans are and of what they can do within such zones of confinement, where they are alternately identified as objects of humanitarian assistance and as personified 'labeled' categories (asylum seekers, temporary residents, refugees, migrants). If democracy happens when those who have no part take part, then play provides an 'other', uniquely productive scenery for the enactment of what shelters are and can be. It does not follow that structures of inequality and surveillance apparatuses are thoroughly dismantled by play, but rather that playful practices favor the redirection of our gaze towards new ways of being in the world—new scripts, designed and experimented by refugees themselves.

Postscript:

The day before our return trip, we organized a farewell activity. The Venezuelan children at the São Vicente shelter were invited to produce messages and drawings which, they were informed, would later be sent to children in Rio de Janeiro. This proposal, far

from constituting a well-thought-out research strategy, emerged spontaneously in response to the lively effervescence we witnessed and experienced during our stay. In inaugurating pathways and conversations between the groups of children, our main motivation was to catapult this vivacity beyond the walls of the shelter, broadening its scope and bolstering its expansive force.

The messages and drawings were placed inside a cardboard box—one which, unlike the hiding spot mentioned in the Prologue, did not sport the official logo of *Operação Acolhida*. This new box, covered with countless childish fingerprints, was wrapped and decorated by the children's own ink-stained hands.

CSVM PUC-Rio Archives. São Vicente shelter, Boa Vista, Roraima, Brazil, 2019.

A small twist was thus introduced into the humanitarian circuit. This time, the Venezuelan children, instead of waiting for incoming donations, dispatched tokens of their own experiences in the shelters to the Brazilian children who live "on the other side" of the fence. At present, students from a number of public and private schools in Rio de Janeiro are interacting with these narrative bits and pieces as the box makes its way around the city[22].

[22] We must thank all the people who have helped us to circulate the box around several schools in Rio de Janeiro. We are indebted to Maria da Glória Almeida, director of the Benjamin Constant Institute, a specialized center dedicated to educating visually impaired students, for sending dozens of messages in Braille which the children from the São Vicente shelter could subsequently explore with their fingers. We are thankful to Joana Passi, a Ph.D. student at PUC-Rio's Graduate Program in Literature, Culture and Contemporaneity, for initiating a fruitful cooperation with Rio de Janeiro's Escola Parque, and to the teachers who enthusiastically embraced the idea. Finally, we owe a debt of gratitude to Jacqueline Teixeira, a Ph.D. student at PUC-Rio's Graduate Program in Language Studies, for her work alongside students from Escola Parque, CEAT and Colégio Pedro II, which culminated in the production of a wealthy multitude of notes, drawings, origami pieces, and video messages.

CSVM PUC-Rio Archives. São Vicente shelter, Boa Vista, Roraima, Brazil, 2019.

Our investigation, which had previously been centered on the shelves, found itself amplified as children, teenagers and their teachers inventively and autonomously crafted their own boxes and filled them with questions, desires, and affects. The boxes were wrapped and mailed back to the São Vicente shelter, thereby starting a long-distance "conversation" which, modest though it may be, constitutes an attempt to "turn places of confinement into places of mobility, rendering them gradually more inhabitable and open until every wall has been knocked down by force of scratching, every door pierced, every necessary pair of stairs put into place"—to evoke Michel Agier's inspirational words one more time (Agier, 2014, p. 26).

CSVM PUC-Rio Archives. São Vicente shelter, Boa Vista, Roraima, Brazil, 2019.

We were later sent pictures and videos which showed children from the São Vicente shelter eagerly and joyfully opening the boxes. We also heard teachers' and students' accounts of their experiences composing messages. All in all, such developments have prompted us to consider how small, playful gestures can irradiate over, and substantially transform, the research scene. In particular, we were led to examine how this playful-performative dimension has affected us as researchers—after all, the study itself was put on "game mode" as children's contagious forms of play caused us to rethink our own ways of conducting and experiencing the investigation.

For a moment, our fieldwork strategies surrendered to openness and indeterminacy. Roger Callois states that risk is the bedrock of playing, adding that "a previously known itinerary, immune to errors or surprises, unmistakably leading to a distinctive result, is incompatible with the very nature of playing" (p. 38). If that is the case, then research itself was exposed to the risk of circumstances.

When we first entered the shelters, we could not have imagined that our interactions with the children would culminate in our joining their playful practices or in the eventual creation of the box of messages. Even afterwards, we had no way of knowing that the study would give rise to a series of pedagogical activities in schools across the city of Rio de

Janeiro, or that the investigation would be enriched by a great many new hands and perspectives.

This productively "dispersive" effect diluted any kind of control: according to the children's own actions, each segment of the study acquired specific contours and produced particular outcomes. In the end, we were not only allowed to observe and generate data on how children play in the shelters; we also witnessed the unexpected emergence of playful exchanges conducted by the children themselves. The experience illustrated and magnified the expansive, insurgent potential which, as we have argued, is constitutive of all forms of play.

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