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Configurations of Risk and Protection in the Urban Cemetery

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– SAFEGUARDING THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD: Configurations of Risk and Protection in the Urban Cemetery

CHRISTIEN KLAUFUS

Abstract

In Lima's pueblos jóvenes—the vast informal settlements that surround the city—migrants who settled there also founded graveyards. Cemeteries are a natural socio-spatial extension of the settlements and houses that urbanites constructed with their own hands. Lima's peripheral cemeteries are permeable spaces which are often regarded as zones of risk and insecurity. Visitors, vendors and taxi drivers fear theft or assault. Grave looting and trafficking of burial land are common occurrences. Moreover, as a breeding ground for mosquitos, cemeteries are potential hotbeds of lethal diseases. Adding to such 'measurable' risks are the intangible risks and risk aversion connected with spiritual activities. This essay grapples with the conceptualizations of insecurity and risk in areas where the houses of the living and the dead converge, taking Lima's municipal district of Villa María del Triunfo and its Virgen de Lourdes cemetery as a case study. This intervention hence proposes a spatially inclusive conceptualization of security which embraces deathscapes as part of the inhabited urban space. Furthermore, based on the diverse 'threats' and 'risks' encountered in the cemetery space, I propose an intersectional approach sensitive to tangible and intangible insecurities and to the responses to avert these. With this approach I aim to unravel the various dimensions of (im)materiality in the security debate.

Introduction

In July 2016 the Virgen de Lourdes cemetery was the site of an unsettling story. Mayor Carlos Palomino of the municipality of Villa María del Triunfo (VMT) in southern Lima buried his 38-year-old brother there. Local media stated that the brother was killed by a hitman in a dispute over illicit land trafficking (*El Comercio*, 2016). Just a few weeks earlier, together with my team, I finished fieldwork in that same place on the position of the cemetery as an urban common in Lima South.[1] Mayor Palomino's brother was accused of being part of a land mafia. Land traffickers sell 'unused' land to people in need of a plot to build a shelter; in this case, the Mayor's brother supposedly trafficked burial plots in another cemetery. Thus the irony of this particular case is that the man who supposedly sold burial land illicitly ended up in a cemetery himself; a cemetery that falls under the authority of his brother, Mayor Palomino. The incident shows that corruption and violence relate to the spaces of death in several ways.

This essay discusses the material and immaterial components of the ways in which people perceive and respond to risk and (in)security in inner-city cemeteries in the Latin American metropolis. Urban scholarship has largely neglected urban deathscapes either as spaces in need of security or as protective spaces. This neglect is surprising, as deathscapes in the global South tend to be socio-spatially connected to the communities they serve, and many of these spaces show similar logics of protection

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1 This Intervention is based on the analysis of academic and grey literature and news items and on fieldwork data from Lima (2016 assisted by Martina Morbidini and Werner Jungbluth; 2017 assisted by Erwin Jansen), Bogotá and Medellín (2014 and 2015), Quetzaltenango, Guatemala (2018) and Buenos Aires (2019).

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(see also De Boeck, 2010). Both settlements and cemeteries are shaped by security practices aimed at warding off threatening influences from inside and outside. Both are culturally re-produced through protective material objects and security discourses. And yet, while death tolls from homicides tend to be measured in the literature (Moser and McIlwaine, 2004; Koonings and Kruijt, 2015), the spaces of death and the dead seem to play a minor role in political economic debates on insecurity (e.g. Goldstein, 2004; Jones and Rodgers, 2009; Zeiderman, 2016). And while studies in anthropology and religion stress the embeddedness of popular religious and funerary practices in the contemporary urban space (e.g. De Boeck, 2010; Zulu and Wilhelm-Solomon, 2015; Hüwelmeier, 2016), most anthropological studies do not address the mundane challenges of cemeteries––such as the risk of pests. This essay claims that the intersectionality of the security question as a set of intertwined risks and shared responsibilities needs to be addressed more explicitly. The essay navigates the various dimensions of (perceived) risk and insecurity at their spatial intersections, focusing on Lima's immense graveyard in a settlement in the municipal district of Villa María del Triunfo.

I argue, first, that an in-depth understanding of insecurity in the places which 'house' the dead in articulation with urban settlements deepens our knowledge of security perceptions and their mundane consequences in cities. Second, I scrutinize the intertwining of various material and immaterial dimensions of risk, threat and security, such as disease, crime and magic. I explore actors' beliefs and their activities to ward off such threats. I address the coalescing or competing roles of public officials, authorities, residents and other cemetery users to understand the configuration of risk and protection in an entangled way. The key metaphor that articulates the spaces of the living with those of the dead is 'the house'. A house can physically and symbolically protect its residents; it 'houses' human bodies and souls; it is a material and financial asset; and it creates a sense of belonging through personal life stories and relations with ancestors (Klaufus and Ouweneel, 2015). When the house of the dead collapses, new threats appear. The entangled spaces of the living and the dead in southern Lima underline the need to support a more spatially and disciplinary entwined discussion of risk and security.

Disease

Risks to personal and public health have always been prevalent in cemeteries due to the chemical processes that develop when bodies start to decompose, and also due to rotting processes in the organic 'waste' left by visitors, such as fresh flowers, funeral wreaths, or food consumed or offered at the grave. Micro-organisms in dead bodies can affect the quality of the soil and air, while pests develop in still water and waste (Santarsiero *et al*., 2000). In eighteenth-century Europe people already acknowledged the 'murderous vapours' escaping from rotting bodies (Etlin, 1984: 16). Today, similar claims circulate, but 'murderous vapours' are now also associated with newer disposal techniques. When black smoke and ash emissions from an inner-city crematorium in Bogotá were associated with a rise in respiratory problems, the neighbours complained that 'the dead are killing the living' (Klaufus, 2016). Pests are also a common problem in most cemeteries and a risk factor for epidemics. In turn, epidemics which result in high death tolls stimulate the construction of new cemeteries, as is shown by the harsh reality of the COVID-19 pandemic that forces authorities to rapidly create new burial spaces.[2]

The 2015 spread of the Zika virus in Brazil and other Latin American countries is a case in point. The virus is transmitted by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito which also spreads dengue and malaria. The larvae of mosquitos develop in still water. High densities of this mosquito type have been detected in urban cemeteries in the region, turning cemeteries into focal points to banish Zika. This was particularly notable in

2 The high death toll from yellow fever epidemics in the nineteenth century and the Spanish flu epidemic in the early twentieth century resulted in the construction of many new cemeteries in Latin American cities (Carballo *et al*., 2006; Gandolfo, 2009).

the Virgen de Lourdes cemetery. In 2016, the Peruvian Ministry of Health and the VMT municipality declared a state of *sanitary emergency* for this cemetery. State employees closed the cemetery for days (that is, as far as that was possible since the cemetery has no fences) to fumigate the mosquito larvae. People were ordered to stop bringing fresh flowers and flower vendors had to treat the water in the flower containers. Nevertheless, fresh flowers continued to be used in ceremonies, as custom proved stronger than sanitation policies or state regulations.

Although it is a municipal cemetery, Virgen de Lourdes is self-built and mainly self-governed.[3] The self-governed quality of the cemetery brings with it particular risks and responsibilities. First, in contrast to fully regulated cemeteries, most graves do not comply with the burial regulations (e.g. a minimum depth and maximum humidity to support the controlled decomposition of cadavers) as people are responsible for grave digging and tomb construction themselves. Consequently, many graves are (too) shallow. The presence of vultures testifies to the presence of human remains above ground and such remains can become a source of infection. Second, due to a lack of plot delineation, new graves are frequently dug too close to or on top of existing ones and often very close to housing. Third, notwithstanding the official regulations stating that persons dying of an infectious disease should be cremated instead of buried (Ley General de Salud, Art. 112), these rules are not observed in Virgen de Lourdes. In an attempt to increase state control over public health and compliance with sanitation regulations, the local administration issued a 2016 ruling which obliged grave owners to register their burial property (niches, mausoleums or earth graves). The aim was to get a clear view of the number of bodies and grave structures in this unbounded area, but as could be expected, most grave owners were reluctant to register. Besides, the lack of compliance with sanitation rules is not confined to the cemetery alone. An adjacent area is dotted with unregulated pig farms where decaying cadavers, stench and pests are definitely problematic. The municipality is not capable of enforcing the law, and citizens and small entrepreneurs in Lima South have become oblivious to the ubiquitous health risks. Decay has become part of everyday settlement life, as have rats, pigeons, stray dogs, mosquitos, flies and vultures.

Crime

Throughout history crime has been part and parcel of cemeteries in many ways. Cemeteries are desolate spaces at night and therefore prone to be visited by exactly those groups of people who do not wish to be observed. Cemeteries are a common meeting place for illicit drug trading. Moreover, grave looting and the trafficking of corpses was, and still is, quite common in cemeteries in Latin America, as used to be the case in other regions too. In ancient Europe, for example: 'Relatives of the deceased, and even government officials, occasionally turned to grave-robbing as a convenient means of raising capital during times of economic hardship' (Lafferty, 2014: 268). Burial gifts, grave construction materials, bodies, burial niches or tracts of burial land are all illicitly traded, often to settlement residents who cannot afford to buy a plot of land, a grave or even a funeral wreath in the formal marketplace. To be sure, such activities do not develop in spatial isolation: networks of sellers and buyers stretch out between the cemetery and the surrounding city. The illicit offering of burial niches, for example, tends to be advertised in workshops at the cemetery entrance.

In Lima, as in other Latin American cities, delinquency is high and 75% of the population perceive crime as the city's main problem (Lima Cómo Vamos, 2017). In line with this trend, delinquency is perceived as the main problem for people working in Virgen de Lourdes cemetery. Street vendors complain about (the risk of) assault. Some female vendors fear sexual harassment. Drivers of *moto taxis* who take visitors

3 The Virgen de Lourdes cemetery was established by settlers in the early 1960s. It was formalized in the late 1960s when the newly established Municipality of Villa María del Triunfo (VMT) became the governing entity. With over 60 hectares the cemetery is one of the largest in Latin America.

to the more distant graves mention the frequent robberies of (parts of) motor bikes. Some workers fear the presence of *fumadores*, drug addicts who smoke their (hard) drugs in designated places in the cemetery hillsides where they meet after dark. Since the premises are not fully closed off, anyone can enter the cemetery on foot. Material evidence of drug use includes the cigarette boxes and aluminium foil which litter the ground in these spots. The vast terrain with its permeable boundaries enables traffickers and users to meet and hang around relatively unnoticed. Vendors respond to the different threats by spreading the word and teaming up, knowing that filing a formal complaint is useless. This is similar in other Latin American urban cemeteries. In Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, the cemetery manager himself warns people attending funerals about a gang of youngsters living in the abandoned mausoleums in a corner of the graveyard, as they frequently rob visitors. The authorities in Lima and other Latin American cities acknowledge that crime in public cemeteries is a pressing governance problem, but (severe) budget deficits and a generally low political priority for state cemeteries hampers the implementation of efficient surveillance and prevention measures.

In Lima, the police enter the cemetery only at night. During daytime crime prevention is outsourced to the local *Serenazgo* unit—official neighbourhood vigilantes who drive through the cemetery a few times a day unarmed and with no authorization to intervene (Koven and McClintock, 2018).[4] The only two formally employed security officers in the cemetery have to cover the hilly terrain of more than 60 hectares and are barely visible. In response to the inability of the cemetery manager and the unarmed surveillance teams to avert insecurity, local authorities reverted to material protection measures. Three guarded gates at the entrance roads and a fourth under construction have been built to monitor all visitors entering by car.[5] Taxi drivers, funeral cars and visitors who enter by car all pay a small fee and have to register their licence plate 'for security reasons'. With the construction of the fourth gate the municipality aims to prevent criminals from entering, at least symbolically. For pedestrians, however, access to the cemetery through the kilometres long, blurry, unfenced boundary remains unchallenged.

In addition to unwanted regular visitors, some groups of funeral visitors are also feared by cemetery authorities, neighbours and grave diggers alike. In Latin America, victims of violent death who have been brought to the morgue are buried in public cemeteries. The funerals for the burial of such victims are considered to be 'high-risk' events, also known as *servicios calientes*. These can either be emotionally tense funerals, on the verge of escalating into violence between mourners and employees in an attempt by outraged relatives to prevent the corpse from being placed in the grave, or the funerals of gang members or hooligans whose fellow group members fire guns as part of their farewell rituals (Klaufus, 2018). The stray bullets are more than just a threat: they pose a real risk to cemetery workers, visitors and neighbours alike. Funerals can thus become an aspect of (in)security negotiations and securitized spaces in many ways. This is particularly true in public cemeteries because these cater to the most vulnerable and powerless citizens (Scheper-Hughes, 1993; Carballo *et al.*, 2006).

Another threat to public order is posed by land trafficking—a common practice in Latin American cities. In Lima, land trafficking has been (and still is) a motor for urban growth (Calderón Cockburn, 1999). Between my visits in June 2016 and May 2017 the western fringe of the cemetery was invaded by a dozen new homes built next to the graves. Cemetery land is not just sold for housing but also for the construction of new graves. The trafficking of state land often involves the implicit approval or complicity of high-ranking functionaries and insiders. In the 1980s and 1990s three-term mayor

4 The *Serenazgo* municipal patrols were established in the 1980s (when the police force was involved in insurgencies in the conflict with Shining Path) as a model for community policing to prevent crime.

5 Apart from the four entrance gates on the roads, the rest of the more than 60 hectares remains unfenced. Boundaries between the settlement and the cemetery are unclear. Houses and mausoleums stand in close proximity to each other.

Washington Ipenza, who 'owned' a considerable amount of terrain in the cemetery, sold plots to locals, with cemetery personnel acting as brokers (Villanueva *et al.*, 2009). The story of Mayor Palomino's brother, who was accused of being part of a land mafia, was followed by new incidences of misbehaviour by the authorities. Palomino himself was convicted for nepotism and removed from office in late 2016. His substitute, Ángel Chilingano, was sentenced and sent to jail a few months later for his participation in a gang of municipal functionaries headed by his brother. Again, cemetery users were oppressed by this gang: they extorted grave owners by closing off burial niches only to open them after the owners payed 2,500 Peruvian soles (approximately 625 euros) (*El Comercio*, 2017a; 2017b). The inability or unwillingness of municipal authorities to prevent criminal activities reinforces the ubiquitous stories of an unreliable or even violent state. These threats and insecurities in the cemetery cannot be understood in isolation from an understanding of the settlement dynamics and ruling powers within the municipality.

Magic

Latin America is rich in death cults (Lomnitz, 2005; Graziano, 2007), as are other regions of the global South (e.g. Zulu and Wilhelm-Solomon, 2015; Hüwelmeier, 2016). These cults involve a strong belief in the power of the souls of the dead. They relate to ontological systems that connect life and the afterlife in cyclical ways, in which ancestral spirits remain co-present in space and time, feeding folk beliefs in miracles and sorcery (Abercrombie, 1998; Ossio, 1999). Spirits are said to live in a different realm—the Roman-Catholic notion of Purgatory is understood as a kind of waiting room for Heaven—where they continue to communicate with the living and engage in mutual relationships, with obligations and pleasures on both sides (Ossio, 1999; Garrard-Burnett, 2015; Klaufus, 2019). In Lima, many headstones carry the text 'I am not dead, I am sleeping; I will die on the day that you stop visiting me'; a text that stresses the obligations within the mutual relationship. The souls of the dead are believed to travel to Heaven only when they prove worthy of going there. That is why the living can negotiate favours and ask for protection against the evils of life, not just from their own dead relatives but from unrelated figures too.[6]

In Latin American cemeteries, cults to honour saints and spirits have been on the rise since the 1990s. Folk saints are believed to intervene in positive ways by improving one's luck in life. A number of scholars explain this increase in folk saint cults as arising from a growing sense of uncertainty, insecurity or violence in cities (Losonczy, 2001; Graziano, 2007; Vignolo, 2013; Kristensen, 2015; Klaufus, 2018; 2019). The other side of the coin is a belief in black magic, in which spiritual powers are invoked to inflict harm on others (Vignolo, 2013). The belief in the beneficial powers and protective forces of spirits and souls as well as in their harmful potential materializes in the houses of the dead in the cemetery. Visitors bring offerings and oral and written requests to the graves of folk saints and so-called 'lost souls'. The large number of gratitude plaques on the graves of folk saints bears witness to their successful mediation in life (Graziano, 2007). Lost souls are the spirits of anonymous or forgotten dead that swarm around Purgatory because they are not remembered. The more deteriorated a grave or burial niche, the more desolate the soul is considered to be and hence the greater the chance that one can negotiate favours. Therefore, deteriorated graves are popular sites for magical rites, as are the burial places of people who committed suicide.

However, the magical forces of spirits are also used in black magic to threaten others. Jealous husbands accusing their wives of adultery might ask a wandering soul

6 In Latin American metropolises, ancestor rituals are probably less present than in other cities of the global South. People visiting cemeteries tend either to have known the deceased personally or they are visiting unrelated folk saints and spirits that are said to have special powers. I have not seen people perform any ancestor rituals myself.

to punish her. They make such requests by hiding objects (for example notes, dolls or the wife's underwear) in a deteriorated grave. One news item from southern Lima reported that a man was found dead in an informal cemetery. At first, the police thought it was an 'ordinary' act of retaliation related to criminal activities. Then they detected objects of sorcery, such as dolls and black candles, and the crime was categorized as the outcome of a satanic rite (*América Noticias*, 2013). Stories about witchcraft also circulate in the Virgen de Lourdes cemetery. Many public functionaries share the belief in the power of spirits, which is why some of them fear working in the cemetery at night. Both the performances oriented towards beneficiary spirits and those involving black magic can be understood as forms of risk aversion for the performers, even if their acts impose new risks on others. The cemetery management and the municipality usually assess these acts in legal terms only, labelling them as the profanation of graves or as a transgression of the rules that prohibit the use of perishable products in the cemetery. The rules formalize and rationalize any 'risk' emanating from the city of the dead. Yet intangible threats shape security assemblages just as much as tangible ones. A dilapidated grave provokes the fear of black magic. This might encourage grave owners, the cemetery management and police officers to cooperate in order to prevent such physical deterioration in the first place.

Crime and disease revisited

A more mundane explanation for the profanation of deteriorated graves is the widespread rumour that bodies are looted as study material for students of medicine. Since the 1990s, when new private universities sprouted up everywhere in Peru, a high demand for study material in medicine was paralleled by an increase in accounts of profanation in Lima's informal cemeteries (Roxana Lazo, 3 July 2016, personal communication). A lack of surveillance and the cheap brickwork that self-builders use in grave construction, which is easy to break, make informal cemeteries vulnerable to looting. The Peruvian media reported several cases of profanation in which the involvement of students of medicine or odontology was suspected. When north of Lima over 40 cadavers were reported missing in 2015, a newspaper wrote: 'It is assumed that the cadavers were sold to students of medicine from the universities of Lambayeque. Students were even reported as being the tomb raiders. Healers and witches from the zone were also accused' (*Peru21*, 2016).[7] The previous sentence shows how both tomb raiders and sorcerers are equally threatening, as both are interested in removing corpses. A news item about body snatching in Ventanilla north of Lima recounts that stolen human remains were dumped in a corner of the cemetery, the discovery of which made the neighbours extremely fearful about the spread of infectious diseases (*El Comercio*, 2015). Such experiences demonstrate that actual risks and perceived insecurity from crime, sorcery and disease in the cemetery intersect. Hence, analysis needs to focus on these intersections.

Discussion

Cemeteries that were created in tandem with informal settlements replicate the threats, insecurities and risk aversion strategies of low-income neighbourhoods. Cemeteries foster an extra dimension of threat as well as redemption, which is the dimension of magic attributed to the power of the souls and spirits of the dead people buried there. The settlement and the cemetery are spatially connected as both can house the shrines of folk saints—the Santa Muerte shrines in *barrio* Tepito in Mexico City are an example (Kristensen, 2015). Yet the forces of magic are said to dwell primarily

7 'Se presume que los cadáveres eran vendidos a estudiantes de medicina de las universidades de Lambayeque. Incluso, señalaban a los alumnos como los profanadores de las tumbas. También se sospechaba de los curanderos y brujos de la zona' (*Peru21*, 2016).

in the place where the dead are buried: the cemetery. The tools to steer these powers in the desired direction—whether for self-protection or to harm others—materialize in the offerings and talismans on tombs and graves. This is where various dimensions of insecurity intersect. Health risks appear when the offerings contain organic material such as food and fluids. These are the potential hotbeds of pests and lethal diseases. However, the most significant forms of insecurity are criminal activities and the illicit trade in valuable goods like cadavers, grave objects, drugs and land or burial space. Objective data about such incidents are lacking, but the stories in themselves are powerful enough to bestow fear on visitors and grave owners alike.

The protective measures co-produced in the Virgen de Lourdes cemetery mirror those deployed in low-income settlements. Grave owners protect the house of the dead as they would protect their own house: by putting up cast-iron bars, fences and barbed wire or by attempting to ward off intruders through the protection of talismans. The municipality protects the cemetery by putting up walls, fences, gates and prohibition signs. Public health entities ‘protect’ visitors against epidemics through banners that emphasize visitors’ and flower sellers’ own responsibility (*cf*. Zeiderman, 2016). The creation of state registers to identify grave owners, buried corpses and visitors places almost every living and dead *body* under surveillance (Stepputat, 2018). In addition to (and in contradiction of) state responsibility, security officers and vigilantes perform security tasks autonomously. And yet, the most persistent security threats are perhaps the illegal and arbitrary activities of powerful state employees themselves. The vicious circle of corruption and crime has resulted in acts of violence and murder which have materialized in the cemetery as yet another body to be buried. Different from the luxurious private cemeteries that cater to the city’s upper-middle class, staffed with security officers and protected by sturdy walls, gates and cameras, the municipal and self-governed cemeteries rely on the co-responsibility of different actors, each with their own agenda. In Virgen de Lourdes, the symbolic act of building another gate is complemented by a more effective self-help warning system of ambulant vendors spreading the word when a risk is perceived.

Various dimensions of risk and (self-)protection join up in inner-urban cemeteries, and they also join cemeteries with the surrounding settlements. This underlines my point that a geographically inclusive vision of security politics needs to include deathscapes. While the multiple insecurities that define life in low-income settlements also define settlement cemeteries, some cemeteries simultaneously function as spaces where people find spiritual safety nets. By sharing experiences as folk saint devotees, vulnerable and marginalized groups find strength. The combined experiences of hope and fear foster and soothe people’s daily uncertainties in metropolises such as Lima and Bogotá, where crime and disease are ever present. The intricate connections between sanitation risks, crime and magic, and between risk and risk aversion, reinforce my argument that a more entwined conceptualization of insecurity—one which elicits the co-responsibilities of cemetery managers, authorities and death space users—will strengthen security studies traditionally oriented towards the city of the living.

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