# Understanding history: following digital networks

**Talia Velez**

## Abstract

*Sometimes a research project will change drastically, and it will be up to the researcher to redefine its scope or aim. This is not unheard of in cultural analysis or ethnography. However, that is when our toolset can be most useful, allowing us to think on our feet and adapt to the ever-changing challenges of research even in a different cultural context. One of the many tools which researchers can make use of is netnography.*

*This paper aims to demonstrate a case study of how netnography was used to understand a collective assembly in Mexico City to bridge the gap between academia and the world outside of it. In other words, it is an examination on how netnography was used to understand a group of people in order to redefine a project and create new pathways forward.*

**Keywords:** netnography, cyber ethnography, cultural analysis, civil struggle, Mexico

## Introduction

As most researchers know, even the best laid out projects are prone to change. This can be due to cuts in funding, an inability to access the field of research, or radical institutional changes; the list of reasons for research gone awry could fill an encyclopaedia or two. Therefore, researchers need to have access to an array of tools to be ready to tackle the problems at hand and successfully complete their project – even if this means changing its initial aim.

This was the case for a project in Mexico City that was led by the National Laboratory of Diversities (LND due to its initials in Spanish) in 2019. Because of budget cuts that resulted in the closing and complete restructuring of the laboratory, the project that aimed at providing aid to the General Assembly of Peoples, Neighbourhoods, Towns, and Pedregales of Coyoacán—henceforth known as the General Assembly—had to be scrapped from LND's agenda. Yet, all academics of the Autonomous University of Mexico City (UNAM) that initially supported the initiative, chose to move forward with helping the community. They made this choice knowing that the General Assembly might be reticent to re-initiate contact after the initial project had been discarded. This reticence was understandable given the historical tensions between marginalized groups and academics in Mexico (Damián & Jaiven, 2011). Because of the lack of manpower, the loss of contact with the General Assembly, and the Mexican sociocultural dynamics between academia and disadvantaged peoples, I was brought in to help redefine the project.

This paper is about two different but interrelated topics. First, it is about the story of an assemblage (Latour 2005) of peoples who have been in an ongoing struggle for survival since the 1970s. While this paper will focus on the most recent fight against displacement, the historical nature of the General Assembly is a necessary context for the reader to understand its current struggle. Second, building on this example, this paper is about netnography and its possibilities to help academics bridge the gap between academia and subjugated groups. As such, using the General Assembly as a case study, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate how researchers can use netnography to produce and access the field of research while acknowledging the need to create the possibilities for connections and solidarities between academia and those in need.

The paper focuses on the first month of research for this project. This timeframe is ample enough to contextualize, highlight, and discuss the aforementioned topics, but short enough to ensure clarity for any researchers looking to try different tools in their studies. Furthermore, introducing findings and dynamics that emerged in the later parts of my research requires more than the space available here to properly untangle.

The paper is divided in three sections. The first section is a brief look into netnography as a general practice. This allows me to underscore the pros and cons of this research method and set the initial context of my research. It also helps me discuss netnography within the context of my research – leading me to my second section. In this section, I demonstrate my netnographic findings. Here, I lay out the historical context of the General Assembly and their struggle. Lastly, the third section deals with my direct contact with the General Assembly and how this was facilitated by netnography. This section ends with a brief discussion of the conclusion of my research.

## Netnography in practice

A portmanteau of the words Internet, network, and ethnography, netnography was originally developed by marketing professor Robert Kozinets in 1995 (Dalal 2019) to research online interactions between Internet users. Since then, however, its research uses have extended to the fields of humanities and social sciences. This breadth of uses stems from the globality of the Internet. It is also further substantiated by the ways in which the Internet helps us express ourselves, connect with others, and better understand our globalised world (Blank 2013).

In the case of social movements, one can find netnographic research about the cyberactivism during the Arab Spring as well as about the Occupy Movement in the US (Al-Hasan, Yim and Lucas 2019; Arafa and Armstrong 2016; Penney and Dadas 2014; Tremayne 2014). Scholars have also done netnographic research about the Black Lives Matter movement on social media (Wilkins, Livingstone and Levine 2019), and the use of Facebook in Chilean student protests (Cabalin 2014), to name a few examples. However, there have been few netnographic studies performed on the different communitarian assemblies (Mezzadra and

Gago, 2017) in Mexico, unless they form part of the Zapatista movement. Netnography has proven valuable in previous studies about human interactions. It is interesting use netnography within the hetero-temporal and social context of a popular assembly in Mexico City because of the country's status as both postcolonial and developing and the historical centrality of the nation's capital. That is, because of the cultural centrality of Mexico City, which often mirrors the landscape of Mexico as a whole (Rojas, 2009), and the prevalence of digital connections that cannot always be found in other parts of Mexico, we can discern interactions which can otherwise remain invisible to researchers. In addition, the use of netnographic research about to Mexican social movement organizations remains rare in Anglophone publications.

It is important to keep in mind two aspects of netnography when researching groups in need. First, netnography is akin to Frida Hastrup's "analogue analysis" (2014). Hastrup reminds us that the innovative nature of ethnographic work lies in it being "constituted by selective combinations of different features and experiences rather than summation" (Hastrup 2014, 49). This resonates with the character of a netnographic study because of the vast amount of information which can be found on the web. Much like Hastrup's analogue analysis, it requires an inventive approach in which the researcher, willingly or not, becomes part of the story being told.

This approach breaks away from old forms of viewing ethnography in which researchers have a god's eye view (Haraway, 1988) of their field of research and maintain an objective distance from what they observe. Instead, we see an ethnography that is akin to a conversation between different actants, features, and modes of research that the ethnographer is part of (Hastrup 2014). Thus, our choices of what voices to listen to and where to look for information will dictate the story we tell. This allows us to map a "vast array of entities swarming toward" (Latour 2005, 46) a dynamic goal. That is, it helps the researcher disentangle and understand the actions of different entities around a differed, but interconnected objective. While there are volumes written on whether researchers should attempt to remain objective or accept their subjectivity (Haraway, 1988), I believe that it is in accepting our situatedness that we can make better use of ethnographic tools. Therefore, it is through understanding if and how our research participants use the Internet *as well as* our own relation to digital spaces that we can discern whether netnography is a valuable research tool or not.

This leads me to my second point: it is important to keep in mind that while the Internet is an everyday tool in the Global North, this is not necessarily the case in the Global South. Indeed, in Mexico, only 65.8% of the population has access to Internet (Islas 2019), and those who do not are usually people with little economic resources, most often in rural areas. While it is true that the mobile internet has helped offset some of this lack of connectivity, there is still an accessibility gap between the Global North and Global South (ITU, 2020). Further, this lack of access tends to affect women disproportionately, even in urban areas. In addition, in some countries Internet use is heavily monitored,

leading people to not post their views online for fear of reprisal (Freedom House, 2021). Therefore, researchers that partially or solely rely on netnography might in some instances encounter difficulties in understanding the voices of subjugated peoples.

When I found the General Assembly's Facebook page, I realised that this was, luckily, not the case for the case study central to this article. I later learnt that not everyone in the community has Internet access. Yet, enough people in the community had a smartphone for the General Assembly to use it as a form of information dissemination. It also proved to be an efficient way to communicate among assembly members and set up plans for demonstrations and other political acts.

Still, having direct access to information about the subject of one's research comes with its own set of problems. In my case, I found that even within the General Assembly's Facebook page, there was an excess of information to sort through, an issue which I will now address.

## Too much information, too little time

The rising accessibility of the Internet leads to vast amounts of information online. Thus, one can move from having almost no information about a particular topic to having an excess of it. In such cases, researchers must choose a strategy to figure out what information is valuable to their research. In this case, they must ask themselves who they will listen to, why they will listen to them, and how they will listen – whether it will through forums, social media posts, videos, articles, podcasts, or a combination thereof.

In my own research, I found little mention of the General Assembly in the records of mainstream media outlets. However, there was a fair number of alternative media sites, social media posts, Internet radio shows, web-based newspapers, and YouTube videos covering the plight of the General Assembly and their case. Additionally, the General Assembly created a lot of information about itself and its members on a regular basis.

Because of the excess of information, I decided to make use of actor-network-theory (ANT) based on the General Assembly's Facebook page to conduct an analogue analysis (Hastrup 2014). ANT is useful because of its ability to help researchers point towards the "specific ways phenomena come into place" (Vikkelsø 2007, 304). That is, as Latour has pointed out, ANT can help us understand how networks work because it aids us in defining the "tracing of new associations and … the designing of their assemblages" (Latour 2005, 7). In other words, by way of the theoretical and methodological motions of tracing a network that includes non-human beings, we can see the breadth of a network through their actants and their interactions.

Still, I did not want to veer too far off from the actions of the human actants and the story they were trying to communicate. While actants such as the aquifer, modernity ideals, or local laws affect the General Assembly, I was focused on

trying to understand if the General Assembly was still active, in which ways, and why. Here, I am referring to actants in the Latourian sense as beings which influence or modify other actors through their actions. This view allows for a non-anthropocentric framework where humans are only a part of a network of interactions. This is central to my research given that at least one non-human actant, the aquifer, was viewed by the General Assembly as a living part of the community. In a sense, then, I was dissecting the world making of an assemblage of multiple—not necessarily human—individuals with a range of identities and social practices. Therefore, enacting an analogue analysis of my findings as I traced the networks of which the General Assembly is a part of, would allow me to capture and understand the "selective combinations of different features and experiences" (Hastrup 2014, 49) of this assemblage. This way, I would have the needed overview to answer my questions and create a research plan to move forward.

## ANT meets netnography

In theory, netnography allows us to intensively conduct "fieldwork across multiple sites" (Davies 2008, 159) and, as such, would allow me to collect information on the different issues faced by the General Assembly. However, some ethnographers argue that netnography should not be the sole source of research because the "disembodied nature of internet interactions" (Davies 2008, 169). I found this to not necessarily be true for several reasons. One, while digital technologies can decentre the expected human experience due to a perceived loss of embodiment, the experiences we have in these digital spaces are as real as those we experience outside of it. Indeed, phenomenology "suggests that the status of being is not an absolute condition" (Bukatman 1993, 118). This means that the human experience is framed by a lack (Derrida, 2006) which we constantly try to overcome. In this case, the lack of in-person interaction is simply solved by technological means.

Thus, the stories told by the people from the General Assembly through their Facebook page are not less real than the ones I was later able to gain through interviews. While it is true that social media experiences are curated to elicit certain emotions, the same can be said of stories told among peers as they are the subjective and remembered experiences of a person interacting with others. This does not mean that our memories are wrong, unreal, or faulty. Instead, subjective as they may be, they are part of us, our history, and our community. In other words, the way a person's experience is curated by their mind is not that dissimilar to the curated experiences we find in social media spaces. Both serve to create our persona and the ways in which we interact with the world. Nevertheless, claiming that digital interactions lack bodily expressions (Davies 2008) would completely ignore digital media such as online videos – which is what I ultimately decided to focus on for my research.

The choice of focusing on videos was a logical option in this case. After having read a couple of news pieces online, I had a better picture of the actants involved

– information which I outline in the second section of this article. Further, after narrowing down my research to the General Assembly's Facebook page to listen to their voice (Spivak, 2010) rather than that of others talking about the General Assembly, and as I briefly mentioned, I found that I still had an excess of data.

The General Assembly has a prolific video library on their Facebook page[1] with over 150 videos in 2019 alone. These videos not only depict the struggles of the communities involved, but also the ways in which their own struggle is interlaced with those of many other assemblies, groups, and individuals in Mexico. Thus, through these videos I found a large network of people involved in several social movements. They were active agents using their own experiences of struggle as a community in order to connect with like-minded individuals and groups who, like the General Assembly, viewed their homes and histories as a vital and living part of their communities.

To facilitate my understanding of the General Assembly, and at the same time be able to adhere to time constraints, I chose to only analyse one video or event per month – starting with the first video uploaded on June 5th, 2015. Additionally, I focused on videos that focussed on the historic circumstances of the communities that led them to participate in popular movements. This sometimes led me to watch two or more videos posted in the same day to get a clearer picture of the information given. Yet, this choice was important for my research because I needed to understand why people were fighting; I needed to understand their struggles in their sociocultural context and why they were important to them as a community. As such, like with other research methods, the researcher needs to define their needs at any given point of the project (Davies, 2008). These needs change as the project progresses and as such, one needs to keep revisiting them throughout the research.

Trying to understand why the General Assembly existed, I found that focusing on its re-telling of struggle allowed me to gather enough information to prepare a preliminary report for the academics I was working with. This report helped me demonstrate that the General Assembly remained active. It also showed the ongoing struggle and briefly touched upon the advancements made by the real-estate developer and the communities. It was clear to me that I needed more information to better understand the historicity that the General Assembly was engaging with.

In short, I found out that the General Assembly was fighting to protect a shallow aquifer that was being threatened by real-estate developers. These developers were working on a housing complex in Aztecas Avenue #215. The aquifer had been perforated during the creation of an underground parking lot that would house 683 cars, even though the developer lacked the necessary construction permits for the complex (Gilet 2019). Further, to cover up the perforation of the aquifer, the developer had chosen to dispose of several millions of litres of water

[1] https://www.facebook.com/Asamblea-General-de-los-Pueblos-Barrios-Colonias-y-Pedregales-de-Coyoac%C3%A1n-1580258772267776/.

(Castro 2019) by throwing them into the sewage system. Yet, the developer faced no major legal repercussions.

Despite being forced to halt construction several times, the construction of the housing complex remained underway. This seemed odd given the severity of current water crisis in Mexico City (Moreno 2019) which has led the authorities to create extensive laws that prohibit the waste of water. Breaking these laws can lead to economic sanctions or jail time when a citizen or entity is found to be wilfully wasting water (SACMEX 2010).

This initial report proved satisfactory to my team, and I was able to gain access to a database of videos to further my research. This database had been initially gathered by the LND in conjunction with some people from the General Assembly. It holds many videos which, although not taken by the people living in the Pedregales, outline their struggle in great depth, presenting a vast picture of the history of the Pedregales. As such, my analysis is an amalgamation of both sets of videos. The story told within them through the myriad of differing points of view allowed me to better understand the people from the Pedregales, their struggles, and, ultimately, opened the doors for the creation of a new project.

## The General Assembly

Having established my reasons for using netnography and how I approached it, I now move on to discuss the work of the General Assembly. This section outlines the history of the Pedregales of Coyoacán as I learnt it through the videos I analysed. I begin by outlining the history of the Pedregales as I learnt it through netnography. Then, I move onto the conflict that the General Assembly was dealing with at the time of this study and the different actors involved. Lastly, I talk about the academics involved in this ongoing struggle.

### Becoming through practice

The actors involved in the case of Aztecas 215 are what Latour would call composite assemblages that are constantly interacting with one-another (2005). That is to say, assemblages largely made out of human actants with the same goal. The first of these assemblages, and the one which is the focus of my research, is the General Assembly. The history and struggle of this assemblage is told throughout several videos of which I will now provide a composite analysis.

Through the video analysis I noticed that the General Assembly was composed of smaller neighbourhood groups. While all these groups had a long history in the area, some were comprised of what are called *pueblos originarios* (original peoples[2]). That is, Indigenous people who had lived in the area and within a

[2] In many Latin-American countries, Pueblos Originarios generally refers to Indigenous Peoples. However, in Mexico it specifically refers to the Indigenous peoples who have lived in and around Mexico City since the conquest.

specific hierarchical system with its own rites and customs since the time of the conquest. However, I found this group to have dwindling numbers as many of them had moved because of the growing gentrification of the area. Another, and larger, set of groups was made up of what has been historically called "the invaders" (Agencia SubVersiones 2015) by the original inhabitants. The term invader in this case is a term that was used between 1960 and 1980 when referring to groups of internal migrants moving from outside Mexico City to the Pedregales of Coyoacán. Thus, although it is now a self-given name by many of the current residents of the area, it was initially used by the locals to portray their outsider status. Regardless, these people migrated to the Pedregales in search of a better life and arrived with little to no financial resources to an area that had been largely ignored by the original settlers.

The invaders arrived to pre-existing huts largely made of volcanic rock (Interruptus Radio 2016). Then, they began to build roads and set up a sewage and electricity system for the area (ZODES No Coyoacán 2015). It is then that university students from the neighbouring UNAM helped them to plan what needed to be done. However, it was the inhabitants, locals and invaders, who "broke their backs working" (Enciso and Poblador@s y Fundador@s 2002, 19) without any help from the government, until it was time to build schools. As such, the Pedregales became more than just a place where people lived because they did not have enough opportunities back home. Instead, the territory itself became an inherent part of their history and being. While they brought their own traditions, stories, and customs with them, the Pedregales became an integral part in the performance of these – a place where they had to learn to be bricklayers, blacksmiths, plumbers, and electricians in concert with each other.

*Still of a video showing the flooded construction site.*

Still, it was because of the *pueblos originarios* in the area that the people migrating to it could adapt to the living conditions. While the original inhabitants had several limitations in terms of basic services, they were the reason other people learnt to live in an area categorised as inhabitable. Moreover, they taught the newcomers where to get water and how best to carry it, which herbs to use to treat different ailments, where to buy food, and how to take care against poisonous insects and animals, among other things (Agencia SubVersiones 2015). In other words, the original people taught the people migrating to the Pedregales of Coyoacán how to live in this area. The newcomers were taught how to become someone from the Pedregales. They were taught how to interact with the new environment around them. This shows that there is no a priori on how "to be" from the area. Instead, one can become part of the Pedregales through interactions with neighbours and by being willing to give a hand in the (re)creation of community. Therefore, while people will proclaim to be either invaders or originals, they both see themselves and each other as equally

deserving a space within this community. Further, this intermingling of peoples created customs and rituals inherent to the area which include patron saint's festivals (Hernández 2012), the building of the Emiliano Zapata school (yabasta padova, 2015) that promotes art crafts and sports for the local youth, and the willingness to fight for the preservation and improvement of the community (zayabita, 2008). People from different communities outside of Mexico City brought with them specific forms of living, such as the celebration of a saint or the performance of free communal labour, commonly referred to as *tequio* in Indigenous communities (Asamblea de Migrantes Indígenas de la Ciudad de México, 2011). These practices were integrated in the creation of the Pedregales. Furthermore, as these practices did not displace the performances of the original peoples of the area, this resulted in the intermingling of local uses and customs that originated from outside the community, together constituting a new way of living in the area.

*Picture of a neighbour lifting a hose going from the building site to the sewer.*

Consequently, according to the people of the General Assembly, one needs to perform in a specific manner in order to belong to the Pedregales. To be clear, one needs to be willing to become a part of the community through communal efforts (Agencia SubVersiones 2015) in which the territory is itself part of the community rather than a place where the community resides. This communal becoming is what Hastrup would call "a non-dualistic register of sustained interrelation" (Hastrup 2014, 49) that can only be broken by refusing to take part in the community. That is, the community does not adhere to classic insider/outsider boundaries but is instead in a state of constant reification through communal practices.

## Breaking with history

Besides the communities of Pedregales, there were other groups of actants involved in the Aztecas 215 project. Namely, the real-estate developer *Quiero Casa*, several government agencies, and a group of UNAM academics. These actants need to be addressed to give a full account of my findings so that the reader can have a better understanding of the (re)actions of the General Assembly.

The first two videos uploaded by the General Assembly to their Facebook page introduce us to *Quiero Casa* (Asamblea General de los Pueblos, Barrios, Colonias y Pedregales de Coyoacán 2016a, 2016b). Both videos portray the developer as an ecocidal and capitalist real-estate developer that has been wilfully wasting an untold amount of water by pumping it through hoses into the drain. The videos give us clear shots of these hoses, together with claims

from the community that the water has been spilling for several months – soon after *Quiero Casa* took over the property and began the construction of residential apartment buildings. In the video, it is also mentioned that there have already been demonstrations against the developer and the waste of clean water: the same water that the people in the area had used for generations to survive. The second video shows the developer's attempt at hiding the spillage of water, which proved impossible due to the amount of water spilled as well as the watchful eyes of neighbours (Asamblea General de los Pueblos, Barrios, Colonias y Pedregales de Coyoacán 2016a, 2016b). At the end, the video provides a view of the building site from the inside. It is obvious that it is flooded with water from the aquifer. The water looks mostly clean and solely spoiled by the debree from the building site itself.

Thus, the introduction to the developer pointedly and simultaneously marks *Quiero Casa* as uncaring of the harm they are causing, and deceitful as they attempt to conceal this harm. This introduction to the real-estate developer also mingles with communal ideas of an ongoing governmental presence.

In the video addressing Patricia Mercado, then secretariat of the Mexico City government, we can begin to see direct mentions of governmental officials. Mercado had claimed that the water that was being disposed of by the developer was composed of sewage spills instead of the clean water shown in the videos taken by the General Assembly. Here, assertions of co-conspiracy between government authorities and real-estate developers become manifest. Nevertheless, these allegations are understandable, given the rapid growth of some real-estate developers and the high level of corruption that has been part of the Mexican government for centuries (Rodríguez 2013). Furthermore, the claims of co-conspiracy are rooted in the belief that specific real-state companies can break the law without repercussions, while government officials will take steps to aid them. This implies that government officials are active rather than passive in their corruption – they help break the law instead of ignoring it.

As such, the General Assembly begins its introduction to the public not only by presenting the developer and government officials, but also by speaking to a certain audience. This is the audience of the Mexican people; it is an act of plural performativity addressing the plural performativity of the people. This is important not only because it provides a mutual cultural understanding, but also because, as Judith Butler posited regarding these type of pluralities, it has two main effects:

> one is articulating a voice of the people from the singularity of the story and the obduracy of the body, a voice at once individual and social; another is the reproduction of community or sociality itself as bodies congregate and "live together" on the street (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 173).

*Still of the videos taken during the international forum.*

This means that the General Assembly identifies itself and the people as one. This does not mean that, unbeknownst to them, the Mexican people are all part of the General Assembly. Rather, it means that the General Assembly as a performative plurality in itself is also a part of the people. It identifies the struggle of the General Assembly against *Quiero Casa* as a struggle of the people. Further, it identifies the enemies of the General Assembly, whether corrupt authorities or real-state developers, as enemies of the people.

These identifications keep recurring in several videos that the General Assembly presents. Therefore, while the General Assembly is a unit in itself, it communicates its openness to the struggles of other pluralities. For example, this unity with the people becomes evident in a video showing members of the General Assembly as guests at the memoralisation of the 43 normalistas of Ayotzinapa (Asamblea General de los Pueblos, Barrios, Colonias y Pedregales de Coyoacán 2019a). The 43 normalistas were students who were persecuted, attacked, and kidnapped in 2014 by the municipal police of Iguala Guerrero, Mexico, for allegedly taking illegal possession of a central bus terminal. However, this unity goes beyond national or regional identification. This becomes clear in their videos on the international forum "Water is Life y la Vida se Defiende." Here, a representative of The International Indigenous Youth Council fighting against the Dakota pipeline speaks via Skype and is welcomed as one of the people by those present (Asamblea General de los Pueblos, Barrios, Colonias y Pedregales de Coyoacán 2017a, 2017b). This forum was held at the General Assembly's *plantón*, an encampment which serves as a form of protest.

Their *plantón* was located for several months outside of *Quiero Casa´*s building site in Aztecas Avenue #215, until the demonstrators were removed by shock police. Shock police, also known as riot police or riot control agents (RCAs), are police agents trained in riot and crowd control to maintain public order. In Mexico, they are well-known as the suppression arm of political powers, and have a history of violence which includes the disappearance and murder of student protesters and supporters in Mexico City during the 1968 student protests (Carey, 2005). Thus, to employ shock police in Mexico serves either as a warning for further violence and supression, or an open call for violence. In the case of the General Assembly, they were merely used as a warning – a fact that members of the General Assembly underlined, but which did not stop their efforts.

I also analysed the representations of the housing project given by *Quiero Casa*, and later appropriated by the General Assembly (Agencia SubVersiones 2016). The focus of the developer is on modernity and future possibilities. They present the viewers with images of new apartments and modern buildings that are completely devoid of people. As such, the people from the communities surrounding the apartment complex are erased. We can see a space that is open and waiting but that does not offer a denouement which could decentre capital. Instead, history is either erased or displaced, and the future is only alluded to. This results in the erasure of the history of the area and the people already living in nearby communities because they do not have sufficient economic power to buy the apartments created by *Quiero Casa*. Therefore, rather than having history or people at the core of the project, it is modernity and capital that are its *raison d'etre*.


*Still of the video released by the government of Mexico City.*

This is also evident in another video found on YouTube where we can see a subversion of the governmental project of Economic and Social Development Zones (ZODES). This project, of which the development by *Quiero Casa* is a part, is shown to focus on modernity, progress, economic development, and the future (Vega 2016). Indeed, at minute 4:51 of the video, the viewer is presented with a larger claim by the government of Mexico City. This claim, spoken by a disembodied voice, is that ZODES transforms decayed zones into vocational zones that give life to the space. This time, the claims are followed by images of would-be residents in public spaces, yet they are all similar looking silhouettes only differentiated by colours. As such, a further erasure is performed in the video because the subject is vaguely presented and is given life only through its work. Furthermore, the space this subject occupies can only come to life through this economy-based modernity, which is cemented as truth through lack of embodiment. That is, because these claims cannot be attached to a person or organisation, they are presented as objective truths in favour of Mexican progress.

Yet, because the General Assembly appropriated the video, these images are juxtaposed with those of current residents. This forces the viewer to ask whose future the government is referring to. As the video goes on, we are presented with the image of Miguel Ángel Mancera, then-governor of Mexico City, speaking about the 5 to 6 thousand jobs being generated by ZODES. This makes the viewer ask whose jobs these are, as we see the same people being dispossessed of their land not having any of these opportunities to rely on. All images appear in stark contrast with the expressed desire of the communities embodied in the people asking where they would go if gentrification took place. These are the communities who established their lives in the area when no one

else wanted those lands. However, this is not solely about the past for them, as an older resident explains by minute 11:06 of the video: "I fight … I don't worry about myself anymore, but what about our youth? If we don't do something, what will become of them?" (Vega 2016). Thus, while the communities have strong links to their past, they do not forget about their future. However, unlike the images shown by the government, this is not a faceless future. It is a future where coming generations of the people will take centre stage along with the territory they must protect.

Therefore, while we can locate the different actants of local governmental agencies, they are often shown by the General Assembly to be on the side of real-estate developers, and fighting for a future that is not for the people. Instead, they are envisioned as fighting for capital and modernity. This image is reinforced in other videos by the General Assembly that feature government functionaries such as the live video from October 24th, 2019. In this video functionaries from Water Systems of Mexico City (SACMEX) are shown while they give reasons why it still looks like *Quiero Casa* is throwing away clean water (Asamblea General de los Pueblos, Barrios, Colonias y Pedregales de Coyoacán 2019b). When pressed for more information, these functionaries seem to be either unsure of how to answer or accepting that they have not fulfilled specific requirements as per an investigation of environmental impact given by the Attorney General's Office of Environment and Territorial Order of Mexico City (PAOT). This lack of action leads the viewer to either believe in the aforementioned claims of co-conspiracy or to view the functionaries as inefficient and irresponsible.

## The past is written in water and stone

Regardless, the investigation of environmental impact by PAOT has been a cornerstone of the fight between the General Assembly and *Quiero Casa*. This study was possible thanks to UNAM academics – the last group of actants to be mentioned in this paper and who at the time of the project this paper refers to, were not part of the academic efforts to help the General Assembly.

While the academics that I worked with were not able to fulfil their initial project, several others have been part of the struggle in Aztecas 215. From philosophy professors writing pieces for online publications (de la Escalera 2019), to international law professors giving talks at the *plantón* (Asamblea General de los Pueblos 2016) – there are countless academics who have actively supported the struggle. However, few have been as salient as Dr Oscar Escolero, Dr Luis Zambrano, and the student Selene Olea from the Institute of Geology and Marcelo Canteiro from the Institute of Biology. They performed an exhaustive study of the water in the area and mapped two different aquifers that went onto other parts of the city.

The results of this study countered those of a previous study done by SACMEX in that the water was drinkable. Instead of coming from runoffs of rain water mixed with sewage pillage (Roa 2016), as the SACMEX study had claimed, the

water came from a shallow aquifer which ended in the deeper aquifer that provides water for the whole city (PAOTmx 2016). This means that for reasons that remain unexplained, SACMEX's tests were erroneous. Further, affecting the aquifer in Aztecas avenue would mean not only affecting nearby residents but the whole city as the aquifer feeds water to the larger acquifer which the whole city relies on. An aquifer that specialists expect will run out of water within the next 40 years (Moreno 2019). In theory, this should make the addressal of the problem much more prescient, especially since, as Dr Escolero asserts in minute 34:50 of the video, this is water that is also used by several houses in the area and two water treatment plants. Thus, it is "in no way acceptable that the water of this shallow aquifer is taken and thrown away to the sewage" (PAOTmx 2016, 37:22). Doing so strongly affects both the environment and the inhabitants of Mexico City.

The very existence of an aquifer had been loudly proclaimed by the inhabitants of the area. They were aware of this possibility because of their knowledge of the territory's history, which is inscribed in its name: Pedregales. In short, the term *Pedregal* comes from the type of rocky soil which can be found after the explosion of a volcano. Specifically, this type of soil is found in the area because of the explosion of the *Xitle* volcano many years ago, which created a layer of volcanic rock (Interruptus Radio 2016). Additionally, the area used to be known as *Hueytlilatl* which is Nahuatl for 'between springs.' This means that the network of springs in the area was covered with a layer of volcanic rock because of *Xitle*'s explosion. However, the water remains close to the surface. Thus, any digging in the zone can easily damage the urban infrastructure built around the aquifers or the ecosystem itself.

*Picture of the march through Coyoacán.*

The area's history was not unknown before *Quiero Casa* damaged the aquifer through digging. This is pointed out in one of the first press releases by the General Assembly, in which they refer to the 169 ILO Agreement signed by the Mexican government in favour of the protection of indigenous and original peoples (Agencia SubVersiones 2016). This agreement states that any work which directly affects the peoples in the area needs to be agreed upon by a community assembly. In their press release, the General Assembly further states that a meeting with the communities was initially agreed upon, but later ignored, by both the developer and the government. I should also point out that the development of the apartment complex required the logging of 180 trees, some of them which were protected species such as white cedar (La Coperacha 2016). Consequently, it is easy to understand the frustration that the members of the General Assembly have felt through the years fighting against a real-estate development that has greatly affected them and their ecosystem.

Gaining an understanding of the history and current plight of the General Assembly was only part of my assignment. I still needed to find a way to contact them. Thus, it is time to move on to the third section of this paper where I lay out the steps I took to contact the General Assembly, and the result of this renewed contact between them and UNAM academics.

## First and last words

Thus far in this paper, I have touched upon the use of netnography as a research tool, and the insights I gained during my research. In practice, this process led me from being an unknowing outsider to someone who had knowledge and cared about the people of the Pedregales in Coyoacán. As I learnt about the General Assembly and its history, I started to develop a connection to the people that form part of it. It is in the process of becoming through knowledge that we reach self-poiesis. Athena Athanasiou makes an excellent remark about this process: "self-poietics [the process of bringing the self into existence] … is a possibility whereby the self is dispossessed of its sovereign position through opening a relation to alterity" (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, pp. 67-68). In other words, it is because we recognise the self in the eyes of the other that we open to the other.

I make this remark for two reasons. First, because as a researcher, it is my ethical duty to mention when my objectivity, as situated and constructed as it might be, is challenged. Second, because the becoming of self-poiesis underlines the existence of the researcher's voice in their research. The self is not a self-contained individual but one that is part of the world and its (re)creation. Therefore, research is a sort of analogue analysis where the voice of the researcher is inevitably enmeshed with their research (Hastrup, 2014). This is particularly present when, in a Levinasian sense, we must open ourselves to knowing the other. Moreover, this connection is important because in opening ourselves to the other, we create opportunities for the other to open to us as well, which was part of my goal in this project.

Having elucidated on the creation of ethical openings and emotions, I now turn to the steps I followed to contact the General Assembly, and the result thereof. Therefore, I will now talk about my initial contact with the General Assembly before moving to the conclusion of this paper. However, first, I must state that I will not give my contacts' names and have chosen to not use pseudonyms because the members of the General Assembly repeatedly stated to me that they prefer to refer themselves as members of the General Assembly rather than use their names. This choice acts to give them some safety from punitive actions by government officials or Quiero Casa, as well as centres their plight and their community rather than them as individuals (Velez, 2020).

## First contact

After I collected all the information I could pertaining the General Assembly, I proceeded to contact its members. This was facilitated by a professor who was external to the project I was a part of. While he was initially reticent to provide me with his contacts, as he was afraid of letting the people from the General Assembly down since he could not help with the project, the amount of information I provided him with eased his mind. As such, he gave me two contacts of active General Assembly members and informed them beforehand about my existence within the project.

With the help of my team, I contacted two members of the General Assembly. In my first message, I gave a brief outline of who I was and why I was contacting them. I quickly received a reply asking me for a project brief where they could read more about my background as a researcher and my reasons for wanting to talk to the General Assembly. This brief, they explained, would be voted on during their next meeting. I was also invited to a march they would have with other groups in a few days.

I wrote the brief they requested, stating some of the things I had learnt through my research into their plight and history. Additionally, because there was not a clear goal in the project at this point, I simply underlined that I wanted to learn more about them. I also decided to attend the march so that they could have the opportunity to get to know me in person and ask any additional questions they could have.

## Meeting people

The march that I was invited to, began from two different areas. The plan was to have the two groups meet at a halfway point and proceed together before the march culminated in a meeting. Because I was not well-acquainted with the area, I went to the point that was easier to get to by taxi. At my arrival, I introduced myself to the people gathered and explained why I was there.

The people were welcoming even though none of them were part of the General Assembly. To them, it was good enough that I showed interest and had been personally invited by one of the General Assembly members. They gave me a small flag to carry, and after discussing the layout the group should have, we set out. I chose to stay towards the end of the march. This way I could be a part of it without being central in any way. It also gave me the chance to take a few pictures with permission from the group.

We walked for a while and met up with the group at the slated meeting point. Here, while the groups were reorganising, I took the chance to introduce myself to the person who had invited me. He welcomed me, thanked me for the brief, and

*Picture of a meeting between academics and the General Assembly.*

explained what would happen next. This is when I learnt that they wanted me to introduce myself during the meeting. This way, my contact explained, more members of the General Assembly would have the chance to understand why I was there. I agreed and thanked him for the opportunity.

The march moved on and this gave way to the meeting which was broadcasted via internet. Several representatives from each group spoke – from people trying to save their local Indigenous school to a professor well-acquainted with civil rights fights. At last, it was my turn. Briefly, I explained why I was there and the research I had done so far. I tried to underline the importance of listening to their stories and that I was there to learn about them.

My speech was well received, as was my brief, and I was invited to a meeting with members of the General Assembly at one of their houses. I will not delve into the details of this meeting, but it suffices to say that the members of the General Assembly were eager to talk about their experience. The success of this interaction also led to a handful of personal interviews, to a tour of the area, and to more marches. However, what is clear to me about my interaction is that it was my willingness to listen and learn from them that led to the General Assembly welcoming me. Furthermore, the knowledge I had gained through my netnographic research allowed them to pre-emptively know that I was interested in them as people rather than study subjects – something that they underlined during our first meeting. By this I mean that my knowledge allowed me to simultaneously show interest in their plight and connect with them through shared experiences of struggle.

## Final words

The knowledge I gained through netnography also helped to gain the trust of my academic peers. That is because I was able to extensively provide details about the actions and the history of the General Assembly before talking with them directly, the UNAM academics that I was working with trusted my abilities. The knowledge I shared with my team also gave my colleagues the opportunity to come up with new ideas for the project. Keeping in mind the lack of resources for the legal work or artistic presentations that had been part of the original project, my team settled for the idea of co-creating a book with the General Assembly.

Thus, with the trust of both my team and the General Assembly, I was able to set up a meeting to discuss the creation of a book. This was the first time that both groups met since more than a year. Yet, the time passed was not felt because I was able to provide both groups with the information they needed about each other. For the General Assembly, this meant that they understood that the academics had not lost interest in working with them, despite changes in the project. For the academics, this meant having up to date information regarding the General Assembly. Both groups, however, needed someone to bridge this gap of knowledge for them to meet again. This bridging is where netnography was a successful tool.

Netnography might not be a replacement for human interaction (Davies, 2008). Nevertheless, the knowledge that we gain using this tool opens new avenues for moving forward. This is what makes netnography a useful tool in social movement research. That is, netnography allows researchers to gain insight in the struggles of social movements. It allows us to map out the reasons for the struggle, the forms this struggle takes and interactions with other movements and local authorities. It also opens possibilities for further research and better mutual understanding between researchers and the groups that are part of their research. This can, in turn, help social movement activists create stronger links with academics through an understanding of the context that social movements take place in. However, it is important to keep in mind that because netnography is a tool that underlines to researcher's capacity to listen and learn, it is up to the researcher to create new openings to move forward with the knowledge learnt.

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## About the author

Originally from Mexico City, Talia Velez has been living in Sweden for several years. Here, she has pursued studies on literature, culture, and gender. Her fields of interest are the effects of postcolonialism and neocolonialism, the feminisation of the Other, and subaltern means of expression.

The author can be contacted at ims15tgo at student.lu.se.