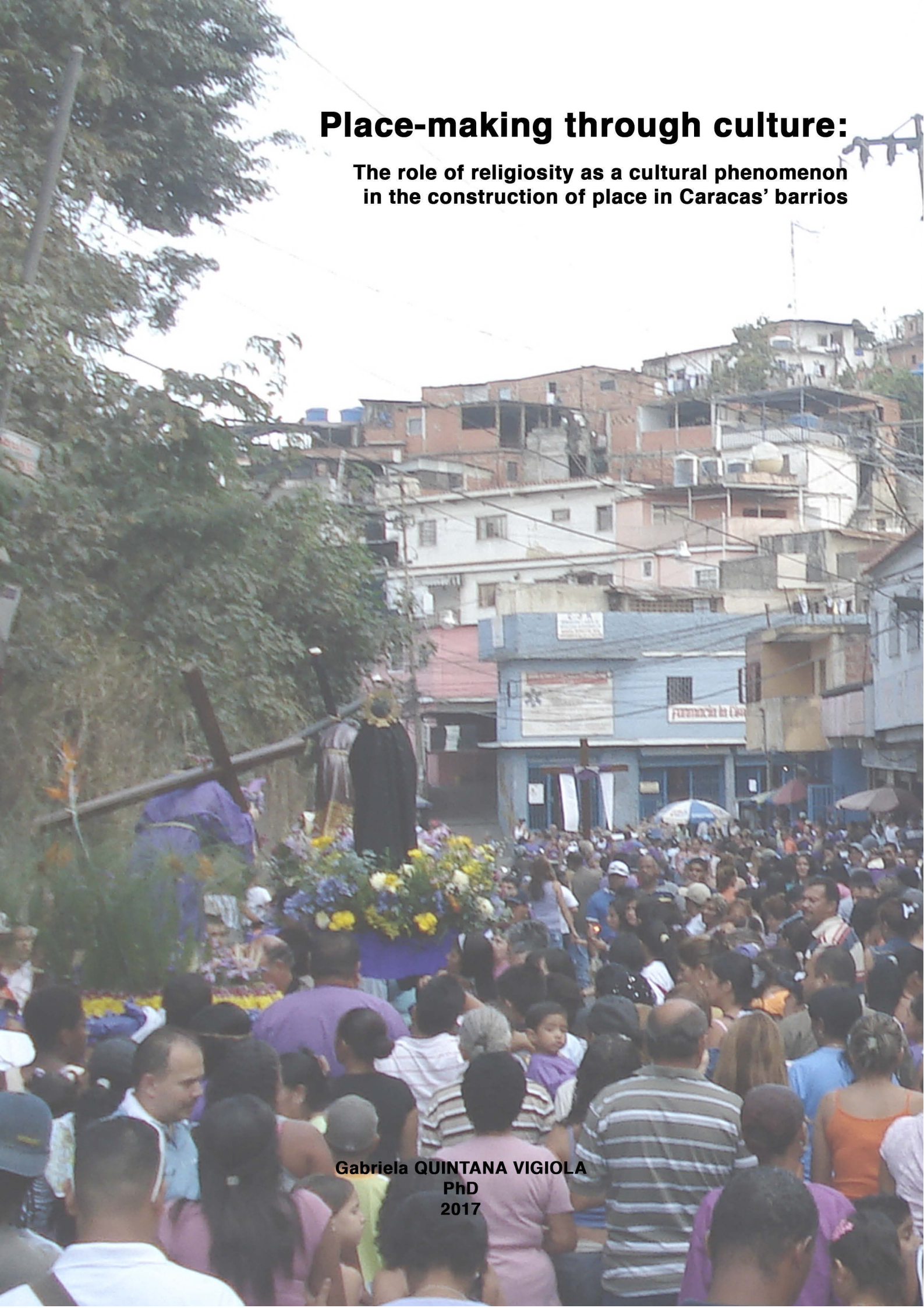
Place-making through culture:

The role of religiosity as a cultural phenomenon in the construction of place in Caracas' barrios



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PhD

2017

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as part of the collaborative doctoral degree and/or fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student:

Date:

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PREFACE

Without really planning, or even actually thinking about it, I decided to start my doctorate studies in Venezuela in 2007. That year I focused only on deciding what I wanted to investigate. I knew two things for certain: (1) I did not want to research anything that could relate in any way to criminality or criminal violence (which in the end I realised was unavoidable), and (2) I wanted to engage in people-focused research. From its start, this study was reflective of an emergent design. Looking into the things I was passionate about at the time (and which I am still passionate about), I started asking myself a simple question: *why do people practise yoga in urban spaces that are not meant for this discipline?* This first question led to a lot of thinking about urban spaces and spirituality in general, which subsequently resulted in me deciding that I wanted to research spiritual manifestations in urban spaces.

As can be seen from the title of this thesis, I eventually studied something rather different. However, from that first macro theme, the process of tuning the research led to a narrower focus: understanding different Catholic processions in the urban space of Venezuelan barrios in general. From that point, and as part of my research process, I attended different religiosity and theology courses because it was paramount to get a better understanding of this disciplinary field, even though I was myself a Catholic, and because my Venezuelan supervisor advised me to.

In one of those courses, I met a priest who later became a key participant in my research. He was also studying a PhD that involved religiosity and the built environment, with a strong focus on religiosity. Based on that affinity, the fact that he was living and working at that time in one of Caracas' largest barrios, and the importance to me of having a community member or someone highly regarded in the community who could make it safe for me to enter the barrio, I decided to select that barrio as one of the places to study.

At that stage, I was still thinking about extending the research into other Caracas barrios. However, as I became more involved in the research and got to

know the complexities of the context, I refined the scope to the research questions, objectives and the three areas of study reflected in this final result. In 2008 I started the data collection in the barrios selected, but still wanted to explore all the Catholic processions that took place in them. However, this pilot showed I needed to focus only on Holy Week, which led me to engage in more data collection over the three years from 2009 to 2011. Once the data collection was complete and the analysis was about to start, I migrated to Australia in 2012.

This move changed both my life in general and my PhD studies. I put my PhD temporarily on hold, aiming to get back to it once I had settled, and still intending to finish it remotely through my Venezuelan university. However, due to Venezuela's complex political and economic environment at the time, which deeply affected universities, I decided to transfer my topic to UTS in 2013/2014.

As if migrating was not challenging enough, transferring my PhD was even more so. This process involved my translating everything I had already written from Spanish to English, and explaining to my new supervisors the general Venezuelan context, barrios, our culture, our religiosity and our complexities.

Looking back and looking at this thesis, transferring my PhD was the best decision I could have taken. The process of overcoming the challenges mentioned above enriched the thesis, the analysis, and the understanding of the context, barrios and place-making. Through all the explaining I had to engage in, I became aware of matters I previously took for granted or had not realised existed. Through this whole process, I grew as a researcher and as a person.

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I present a story about place-making through culture, specifically about the construction of place in Caracas' barrios through Catholic processions. From a trans-disciplinary perspective, I approach the themes of urban space, meaning as a psychosocial construct, and religiosity as culture. This thesis contributes to the understanding of the underlying complexities of turning spaces into places through studying the built form, the activities in and uses of the urban space, and the meanings associated with it.

The main research question that guides this study is: *What is the role of culture (using Catholicism as a lens) in the construction of place in Caracas' barrios?* In addition, three component questions that align to the three fundamental place-making elements guide the three main stories that build this thesis:

1. How do barrio residents conceive and construct the physicality of the private, public and religious spaces?

2. How do residents use the physical spaces of the barrios to express their religious culture?

3. What psychosocial meanings do residents associate with the spaces through which the Catholic processions move?

To answer these questions, I chose a qualitative approach and a case study design. I interacted with and interviewed organisers and key participants, engaged in participant observation around Holy Week processions, and collected audio-visual data. Using qualitative thematic analysis, I explore from the participants' perspectives their understanding of the construction of their place though culture.

The research shows that cultural manifestations in the urban space are not only a way for people to express their culture. They are also a way for people to reclaim their spaces, build relational places, redefine the flexible private-public boundary, and reshape meaning. This study also revealed the different power

relationships in barrios, and how institutions impact on the construction of place in barrios. Through this place-making story, I demonstrate the importance to understand, consider and enable culture.