

Running Water and Porous stones: Relational Thinking in Urban Ethnography through Creative Practice

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Abstract

This visual essay explores the public laundrettes of Quito's historical centre as **threshold spaces**—sites of daily negotiation between infrastructure, care, and community. Often overlooked in architectural and urban studies dominated by heritage discourse, the laundrettes are reapproached here through **relational thinking** and **creative ethnography**. The author engages with these sites not merely as utilitarian or heritage spaces, but as living, sensorial territories shaped through affect, memory, and embodied labour.

Drawing from non-representational theory and visual anthropology, the essay uses **photography and sound** to explore multisensory and affective dimensions of place-making. The creative process foregrounds the relational aspects of design, whereby bodies, materials, and elements (like water and soap) compose a shared space of rhythm, movement, and coexistence. In this situated ethnography, space is not pre-given but continuously produced through gestures, repetition, and sensory traces—offering a compelling challenge to static or object-oriented architectural epistemologies. By attending to texture, temperature, sound, and rhythm, the work foregrounds the **more-than-human** qualities of spatial production, echoing the everyday cosmologies embedded in acts of care, maintenance, and reciprocity. In doing so, it invites reflection on how peripheral or liminal urban practices can generate **alternative design imaginaries** rooted in lived experience, relational agency, and affective materiality.

Keywords: Urban ethnography, creative practice, photography, affect, senses, Quito, laundrettes

I disembark at the bus terminal Marin, on the east side of the historical city centre of Quito. After crossing the big Pichincha Avenue, I reach the bottom of Chile street. I walk up this street, usually filled with people going shopping. Different salespeople along the road delay my hurried pace. Many people scream about what they are selling followed by how much the items cost: three, five, one, half a dollar. Some offer tattoos and piercings; others provide food and drinks – sausage and chips, cookies, peanuts, broad beans, tangerines, and coconut juice. Some stores have their loudspeakers facing the street with different radio stations on. A Street artist

plays the guitar and sings Clandestino by Manu Chao. Hair brushes, pillowcases, ankle braces, sandals and cell phone cases are offered to me as I walk.

After four blocks, I reach Plaza de la Independencia, the central Plaza of the historical centre. The elderly usually occupy the benches while sunbathing, playing cards and drinking. A Christian evangelical preaches through his loudspeaker at the steps of the Cathedral. In front of the presidential palace, a woman shares her thoughts about a conspiracy between the reptilians and the Ecuadorian government with a megaphone. Upwards

Chile Street I encounter the church Merced. The number of people selling and buying food and miscellaneous goods increases. I feel overwhelmed by the screams, loudspeakers and quantity of people. A couple of blogs further West, I encounter the Savings Shopping Malls known as Ipiales. Among the noise and high traffic of people and cars, I am more aware of where my belongings are. I put my backpack in front of me. I turn left towards Imbabura street. A big group of children in uniform are coming out of San Andrés School. The tiny and packed sidewalks make me cross the street to avoid agglomeration.

The screams of the salespeople and loud music dim as I turn to the quieter part of Bolivar street. Among hardware stores, I hear the radio playing Kichwa music. I pass the candy store where the traditional Colaciones are made and get a whiff of peanuts. The Bolivar street becomes steep and my heart accelerates. I can hear myself panting. A woman is sitting with her daughter at the doorstep. She has a big sack of tangerines and is accommodating five tangerines in a plastic mesh to sell them to pedestrians. A grinding machine cuts through pieces of metal at the doorstep of a house. Sparks fly off the sidewalk. Busses and cars pass and hoop as I continue. I finally reach the metallic door of Quiroga Laundrette.

Through a hole in the door I reach the metal hasp at the other side and slide it open. As I enter a water valve hisses on one wall between grass and red flowers. I go up the stairs and nine dogs become aware of my presence. The dogs start to bark. Some come down and meet me. While I greet the people, the radio plays the merengue version of Si Me Dejas no Vale in the background. Conversation, barks, open faucets and the sound of brushes against various fabrics replace the noise of the streets. The air packed with smog from the buses gives way to the smell of water and soap. I can rest a bit while introducing myself to the laundrette's warden and the people washing clothes. The hectic atmosphere of the everyday hustle and bustle of the streets is slowly replaced by a fresh and more intimate atmosphere where I feel at ease. I keep recording the soundscape of the laundrette while I take my camera out to search for the various layers of this curious place.

Walking to Quiroga Laundrette, 12 August 2021



Image 1







During my twelve-month ethnographic fieldwork, I followed and conducted various walks through the historical city centre of Quito. Some were touristic and history-inclined, and others were organised by neighbourhood collectives wishing to recover the social memory of their neighbourhood and improve how the broader public perceives their area. After knowing my way around the centre, I also decided to plan and conduct walks independently. Instead of walking with a particular person, I would let the city guide my way based on valuable landmarks or routes mentioned by the city centre's inhabitants. The public launderettes were among the various interesting places I encountered during these last walks.

The launderettes became interesting places to research for different reasons. Most launderettes have rows of washings stones, a zone for hanging clothes to dry, and a small playground or green space. They are owned by City Hall, which offers a place for people to wash their clothes for free. People only have to bring their soap and keep an eye on their clothes. The Quiroga and Yavirak launderettes have wardens living with their families and managing the space. The launderettes are unique since they linger between public and private spaces. They become 'loose spaces' (Franck and Stevens 2007) because of their threshold quality. For Quentin Stevens (2007) liminal spaces invite playful social behaviour, converge different social groups and deviate from structured and instrumental areas. In this line of thought the launderettes are not only places for washing clothes. Its wardens and users appropriate the space through their daily activities, interaction and conversation. Some launderettes organise mingas to maintain and clean the space collectively and organise festivities for the launderette's Patron Saint. Besides neighbouring residents, women from different parts of the city go to the launderettes because it is a space they can use free of charge. For some women the launderettes are their working space since they wash clothes as a means of income. Migrants also use the launderettes and indigenous people who stay in Quito intermittently to sell their agricultural products of the countryside in the centre's markets. Through shared care and work a variety of people gradually appropriate space and become

neighbours. Such spaces are challenging to find in a city centre that is increasingly policed and securitised (Kingman Garcés 2012; Silva 2006).

On a personal level, being in a place where use and function are not entirely instrumental nor defined allowed me to step outside my role as a researcher and experiment outside structured or conventional forms of fieldwork. I was fascinated by the launderettes. However, I could not verbalise or pinpoint what was so alluring about them. The threshold quality of the launderettes allowed me to indulge in reverie and moved me to explore my aesthetic experience of space through photography and sound. Simply being in space, observing attentively and getting bored can provoke a state of flow while conducting tactile activities that tend to induce relaxation and reverie (Crowther 2019). Being somewhat removed from conventional research responsibilities, this state of flow allowed me to engage in creative practice by playing around with the technical possibilities of an analogue and digital camera and the subject of the photographs and the audio recordings. Therefore, I decided to use photography and sound to inquire about my embodied and affective experience of four launderettes: Quiroga, Chilena, Hermita and Yavirak.

After visiting the launderettes various times, speaking to their wardens and users and exploring space with the sound recorder and cameras, I realised that the senses of touch and smell defined my experience of these places. The exercise of documenting the space allowed me to become aware of how my body interacted with the different materials and stimuli of the launderettes.

The way water behaves in the daily use of the launderettes provokes excitement because of its inadvertent nature. Drops of water startle me as they fall on my skin from the hanging clothes. I am caught off guard when buckets of water are poured on the stones and I get splashed. The surprise of getting in contact with cold liquid makes me smile when sprinkles of water from the scrubbing of clothes reach me. I can feel how water evaporates as I walk between sheets of fabric. The combination of the smell of the blue bar soap and the thrill of getting in contact with water brought me back to the nineties when most households in Quito had a washing stone, clothes were hung to dry and few brands of soap were available. Unlike visual and verbal memories, odour memory is more closely linked to intense emotions and olfactory stimuli can prompt involuntary memories (Daniels and Vermetten 2016). In particular, the odour of the blue soap immediately brought me back to the washing stone of my childhood home where I regularly played.

The sound of open faucets, buckets of water being purred on clothes and stone, the stream of water along the gutter, the constant brushing against the fabric and the eventual banging of a wooden paddle against the clothes compose a soundscape I have not heard since I was a child. I then relate this washing soundscape to the thrill of playing in and around the washing stone, expecting to get splashed, running, hiding and being followed. The barks and gasps of the dogs remind me of childhood companions that would follow me around and when wet, I would not be able to get rid of their fur on my hands. Then the pungent smell of damp dog fur comes to mind. The overlapping stimuli of space ignite an array of sensations I find difficult to separate from one another. I can only observe the spontaneous flow of thoughts and emotions that surge from attentively

watching my experience of place. I immediately link water with excitement, expectation and joy.

Affect speaks of a world of bodily encounters of varying intensities. Its state of "in-between-ness" (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 3) is inherent to a "body's perpetual becoming" (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 3). Because affect moves between the organic and inorganic and the corporeal and ethereal, it also resides in a threshold. This exercise of paying attention to the senses and affects generates a liminal state that invites playful and unstructured behaviour. This moved me beyond a discursive level and explored the many forms, encounters, sensations and feelings that originated in the launderettes through the camera. A tool I am comfortable with and regularly use as a creative outlet.

During the aesthetic exploration of the laundrettes it became essential to convey the tactile qualities of the space. For this, I had to get physically close to the subjects, play around with lenses and narrow depth of field and hope for the light to hit the right angle to emphasise the different textures I encountered. I listened carefully and searched for the source of particular sounds. This also obliged me to get close to the materiality of the launderettes. I would also isolate specific sounds from the recordings to highlight those that I felt elicited a sensory response from the listener. Instead of figuratively showing the launderettes, the aim of the creative exploration was to engage the audience's senses first. In particular, the sense of touch. Laura Marks (2000) reflects on the haptic quality of the photographic image and proposes using fragments and close-up shots of surfaces to entice the viewers' senses and feelings instead of providing a narrative or the overall scope of a situation. Thera Mjaaland (2013) questions photography's truth claim while acknowledging its affective capacity, which expands the communicative process and allows the audience to complete the piece's meaning through their imagination and memory. Inspired by the ability of photography to affect the viewer beyond a structured narrative, I composed this series of pictures that gain sensory richness when watched as one listens to the launderettes' soundscapes.



Image 5



Image 6



This creative endeavour also prompted me to reflect and enquire about the everyday rhythms of the launderettes. The everyday is elusive. It is “simultaneously the most concrete and most abstract aspect of urban experience” (Latham and McCormack 2009, 254). Latham and McCormack (2009) suggest getting involved in the “processuality of the urban” (2009, 254) by paying particular attention to the encountered materiality. Inspired by George Perec’s *Species of Spaces and other Pieces* (1997), Latham and McCormack (2009) propose to pay attention to the more-than-ordinary dimension of the everyday by making lists and descriptions. Such inventories can be produced not only in written form. In this case, I put together a list of sounds and things with the camera and the audio recorder. Early in the morning the sound of people chatting and washing invades space until late morning when the sound of water and brushes gradually gets displaced by the radio and the continuous barking. The high intervals of barking indicate the coming of people into the laundries or movement outside them. Silence gradually settles down at midday. The recordings of the launderettes’ background sound unveil the different rhythms of use and socialisation throughout the day.

The movement of water and the gestures and bodily movements while washing also marked everyday rhythms. Therefore, I experimented with long exposure shots to capture the motion blur of water and bodies. The flow of water in the form of drops or as a stream can be sharp, gradual, steady, or explosive. The repetitive task of brushing and scrubbing fabric draws the pattern that smoothes the porous stone. The rinsing of clothes in buckets and tubs marks how water moves through the fabrics when submerged and drained, making the clumps of material heavier or lighter. The camera captures the trajectory of splashes of water and soap around people washing. The photographs show the trails of movement and the pauses, thereby unveiling the rhythms of washing. Other images attest to the calm and immobile surface of puddles and containers that let the water rest.

This aesthetic exercise shows how creative practice thrives in different levels of liminality. The launderettes have a threshold quality at a physical and urban level because they lie between public and private space due to their various uses. At a personal and intangible level, the realm of affect also occupies an indefinite space between bodies and spaces, inside and outside the person’s body and mind. Such liminal sites provoke playful attitudes and unstructured thinking, which allows the researcher to approach theoretical and methodological questions from a different perspective. This visual essay reflects on the potential of integrating creative practice into ethnographic fieldwork to inquire about and show the sensitive dimension of urban spaces. By making explicit the creative process, this essay attempts to demystify artistic engagements with everyday life and contribute to the area of urban ethnography focused on the embodied experience of everyday urbanism (Amin and Thrift 2002; Imilan and Marquez 2019). Finally, as part of more extensive ethnographic research, this creative exploration of the launderettes adds to the discussion regarding the integration of visual research methods in the field of visual anthropology. Approaching the fieldwork and data recollection with an aesthetic concern and prioritising the creation process over the outcome or potential content brought me closer to the arts. Such creative exercises allow the researcher to step in-between areas of knowledge and present the outcome as open-ended and emergent by instigating the audience to complete the meaning of the photographs and audios with their experience and tools.

Image 8



Note: All images and audios are of the authorship of the author of this visual essay.

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