Sage Journals

Planning Theory

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Abstract

This article argues that the role of storytelling in planning needs to be rethought learning from the decolonial turn in social sciences. I ask how to decolonise storytelling in planning theory and practice. The aim is to explore how key notions from Latin American decolonial thinking, such as pluriverse, epistemological disobedience, border thinking and sentipensar, can help us to reframe storytelling in planning. This reframing can contribute to finding different avenues to build ontological relationality in a framework of epistemological justice and healing to bring about new imaginations for shaping urban planning otherwise.

Introduction

Once upon a time there was a special, lonely and magical place - a mountain that feels - in the northeast side of Medellin. Little by little this little piece of heaven on earth was attracting families flying away from poverty, violence… We had to escape to take care of our life and our families, we had to face the inequalities and indifference of a city that didn't belong to us. We were seen as strange people. We came here because one thought we could find better opportunities, but the reality was different… One always remembers the struggles and all we did to live and remain alive. Among all we built the neighbourhood… we organised convites for community work to solve the different problems we had… the water, the paths…as poor people we had faith that all would improve if it were done among all of us… I was one of the first mums of Moravia, I had to deal a lot with people's pain. Seeing other kids helpless and hungry, I started to help them and give a hand to the mums

as well. We had episodes of violence and narco-traffic and the fear overtook us. That is why, to be a woman in Moravia means pain for the loss of family, sons, husbands… but the pain turns into love. I created a space to take care of kids… Once the upgrading macroproject was under negotiation and given we had a big land tax debt, we lost our house… and kept renting after decades… We have had a long struggle to stay put here. Nonetheless, we dreamt of having a beautiful place where young and old can learn, dream, and make their wishes reality. And now we can enjoy our community cultural centre - the house of everyone.

Maria Lucila Perez, aka Mama Chila, Centro de Desarrollo Cultural de Moravia, 2019.

Where does Mama Chila's story sit when understanding city making and the planner's role? Mama Chila is a senior community leader that has championed children's care over 50 years in the long process of self-building her neighbourhood – Moravia in Medellin, Colombia. Like her, many inhabitants – particularly women – in global south cities are cornerstones in the city-making processes, yet their voices are unheard for understanding urban change, the nature of their struggles and belonging. Mama Chila's story not only illustrates the trade-offs of neighbourhood upgrading interventions but also gestures towards how collective affection impacted the vision of the communal facilities built. Importantly, it also highlights how a long-term commitment to care became also a beacon of hope and protection of life in times of deep crisis as the one we live now.

In turbulent times, we ought to recalibrate the framing of the discipline and question its limitations. It is imperative to root our reflection and practice in political relevance and in solidarity with those mobilising for radical social change. In that line, the decolonisation of planning and the enactment of southern theory are intertwined projects that aim at questioning the hegemony and pitfalls of Western urban planning. The cannon for knowledge production in planning reproduces Western thought and with it, also white supremacy. Cultural studies, critical geography, critical development studies and urban planning are concerned with questioning the impacts of coloniality in city-making practices. In this line, I propose to build on recent efforts to decolonise the discipline using storytelling as an entry point to leverage how storytellers such as Mama Chila can find a place in the reframing of planning and its tools. I acknowledge that my space of enunciation is as a migrant mestiza from Colombia located in an Ivy League University in the belly of the once British Empire. I am speaking from the privilege of this place and disembodied from the collectives that are in the front lines of anti-colonial practices exposing their lives ir

quest. Nonetheless, my close work with communities in self-built neighbourhoods and urban practitioners in 'global south' cities has nurtured my scholarship and informs what I present here.

Storytelling is a cornerstone of planning theory, practice and pedagogy. Storytelling in planning gained some traction in theoretical debates in late 1990s and early 2000s when Hoch (1994), Thorgmonton (1996) and Sandercock (2003) brought to light the central role it takes in the field. The literature in the field frames planning itself as performative persuasive storytelling. For planning scholars, storytelling is an everyday practice that presents as a coherent whole that is necessarily selective and purposefully tightly connected to emotions that not only helps make sense of the past, but also prepares for the future. Storytelling is understood as a critical skill for planners because it helps to sharpen critical judgement and to shape new imaginations of alternatives that take place in all kinds of formal and informal social interactions that find their way into plans. Though we have learned about the power and capaciousness of using storytelling to shape the planning field, still few efforts have explicitly acknowledged the linkages between storytelling with coloniality, the epistemic violence it entails and the healing power of stories.

Few scholars have used storytelling to raise an anti-colonial critique of planning (Sandercock, 2004; Sweet and Chakars, 2010; Oldfield, 2020). Current accounts around storytelling in planning remains a Western-centric functional tool embedded in practice and its links to epistemic and restorative justice underscored. I contend that the current understandings of what storytelling is and does in planning is limited at least in four ways: (a) centres on individual accounts of professional planners in northern cities that deepens their epistemic privilege; (b) supports the underpinning extractives logics of urban development; (c) perpetuates a dualist approach between emotion–reason and people–place; and (d) re___ silent about the epistemic violence and the de-sacralisation of the world that planning ___ planners have been complicit in city-making practices.

The decolonial turn calls for a practice of imagining and acknowledging alternative ways of knowing, sensing and being. This perspective is not monolithic but rather the decolonial and postcolonial critique to planning has multiple intellectual genealogies according to imperial powers involved in the territorial control of cities. The increasing decolonial planning efforts have focussed on individual ethics and indigenous rights (Ugarte, 2014) and the necessary ethical accountability of the discipline (Watson, 2003; Roy, 2008; Rankin, 2010) to include other ways of knowing to leverage the epistemic privilege of the planner. The legacies of this rich corpus of decolonial and postcolonial critique have been in a fertile dialogue ir

of several urban scholars across regions. However, planning theory has given less attention to the contributions from the Latin American 'decolonial turn' and what it can offer to the field.

This paper aims to continue weaving debates on storytelling in planning and the decolonial turn in social science that emerged from Latin-American thinkers. Inspired by the 2001 Porto Alegre's World Social Forum, the modernity/coloniality research programme sought 'to craft another space for the production of knowledge – another way of thinking, *un paradigma otro*, the very possibility of talking about "worlds and knowledges otherwise"' ([Escobar, 2007](#): 1179). I ask in this paper, what is the role of storytelling in planning? What role can storytelling play in the project of decolonising planning? What does the decolonial turn offer to critique the framing of storytelling in planning? And, how to frame storytelling otherwise? I argue that thinking about storytelling otherwise could expand the repertoires for decolonising urban planning by bringing attention towards existing relational onto-epistemologies, epistemological justice and healing to bring about new imaginations for shaping the field.

The objective of this paper is twofold: to explore the possibilities of storytelling through decolonial lenses in planning, and to bring new vocabularies to expand southern theories. It is necessary to point at the Western privilege shaping what constitutes authoritative knowledge and the institutions that sustain it; but that is no longer sufficient. We need to deconstruct the 'master narrative' ([Montesinos, 1995](#)) of urban Western thought and the infrastructures that reproduce it. Inasmuch as urban Western theory became the story the West tells itself about itself ([Roy, 2015](#)), what if we see theory generation as a counter-storytelling project, and discuss how this project can bring about a new configuration of the myriad territorial inscriptions of urban stories? To walk this path, we could bring some vocabulary that Latin American decolonial thinkers offer to enact other narratives of the urban. Since narratives frame subjectivities, thinking through new vocabularies can contribute to delinking from Western thought and to finding avenues to involve new idioms against 'universal grammars' ([Mbembe, 2001](#)).

This article is structured into five parts. The first seeks to revisit the debate around storytelling in planning. It illustrates the roles that storytelling has played in shaping planning practice, theory and pedagogy. The second section aims at placing the role of storytelling in decolonising planning theory. The third section explains what the decolonial turn offers to critique the framing of storytelling in planning. The fourth explains how storytelling otherwise responds to the four limitations identified above. It proposes that storyt

otherwise needs to be understood simultaneously as epistemological disobedience (Mignolo, 2009), as pluriversal imagination (Escobar, 2011, 2019, 2020), as sentipensante threads (Fals-Borda, 2009) and as border thinking for communal healing (Anzaldúa, 1999). The final section summarises the contribution of this paper on expanding the repertoires for decolonising planning through storytelling and to support shifting the Western 'master narrative' of planning through decolonial vocabularies.

What is the role of storytelling in planning?

Storytelling framing

What storytelling is and does in the planning field are drawn from a long-standing understanding of storytelling in social sciences and humanities. Stories generate emotional connections that are essential for triggering social change. In Sandercock's seminal work 'Out of the Closet: The Importance of Stories and Storytelling in Planning Practice' (2003), she explains that planning itself operates as performed story in its myriad processes. In this context, storytelling has been conceptualised as a coherent narrative that makes sense of the past and shapes meanings by inspirational example, and partly by shaping a new imagination of alternatives to prepare us for the future (Sandercock, 2003; Throgmorton, 2003; Van Hulst, 2012). As Sandercock (2003) puts it:

> A 'story' conveys a range of meanings, from anecdote, to exemplar, to something that is invented rather than 'true', in the sense of strictly adhering to widely agreed-on facts. […] stories have certain key properties […]. First, there is a temporal or sequential framework, […] Second, there is an element of explanation or coherence […] Third, there is some potential for generalizability, for seeing the universal in the particular […] Fourth, there is the presence of recognized, generic conventions that relate to an expected framework. […] Fifth, moral tension is essential to a good story. (13)

Having this sense of the attributes of storytelling, planning scholars have framed storytelling as a pedagogical tool (Baum, 2017; Forester, 1999, 2009, 2013; Hoch, 1994; Sandercock, 2003), as an approach to trans-local urban learning (Ortiz and Millan, 2019), as a strategy to gauge power narratives and ideology (Zanotto, 2020; Shepherd et al. 2020; Davoudi et al. 2019), as a strategy of persuasion (Throgmorton, 1996, 2000, 2003; Mäntysalo et al

a mode of encounter ([Cook, 2019](#)) and a way to envision the future ([Van Hulst, 2012](#)) to inspire collective action. Storytelling is understood as a method and tool for revealing how formal planning practices operate and for the co-construction of stories to expand democratic spaces. Thus, storytelling is seen as a political act inasmuch as can play important roles in legitimising and rationalising singular investments and visions of the city. In this way, storytelling is part of broader political process in which various stories compete for attention given that hegemonic power shapes which stories get told or amplified.

Storytelling use

Storytelling has been used as a part of planners' education processes mainly in the U.S. For instance, [Hoch (1994)](#) used interviews of planning practitioners to illustrate 'what planners do' to respond to political and moral conflicts. [Forester (1989](#), [1999](#), [2012)](#) championed the use of practitioners' stories as a pedagogical tool to articulate actor-focussed questions to uncover responses to challenges and practical opportunities using how and why questions to convey moral exemplars. In this line, [Baum (2017)](#) considers planning as a form of story-writing and advocates for teaching how to read and write stories as part of effective training on a humanistic approach to planning. More recently, [Knaap (2018)](#) has proposed undergrad students' race and place stories as critical autobiography to foster anti-racism in planning education. These examples show the interest in using storytelling as key vehicle for self-reflection on how professional planners perform and question students' backgrounds shape their preconception and assumptions about others and urban change. In doing so, the pedagogical use of storytelling allows to engage with the ranges of human experience, the use of ordinary vocabularies, the respect of difference and mutual learning.

Planners have used storytelling as a research tool. Storytelling as a research method contributes to capturing the polyphony of different voices in the planning processes. Moreover, the use of stories in planning research uncovers the mechanisms to promote ideologies. For example, [Olesen (2017)](#) discusses the conceptual understandings of strategic spatial planning as persuasive storytelling, and how those spatial visions and their supportive storylines can play important roles in legitimising and rationalising infrastructural investments. [Bulkens, Minca and Muzaini (2015)](#) use stories for revealing not only the ways in which individual positionalities are constructed, but also how spatial planning is experienced particularly by affected individuals in the Netherlands. For [Davoudi, Galland and Stead (2019)](#), the forms of rhetorical persuasion contained in stories are pivotal for understanding how change is legitimised. Particularly, the rhetorical appeals that invocate

logic, character, emotions and building identity are efficient to make ideology stick. In contrast, using an ethnographic approach, Sweet and Chakars (2010) document the stories of indigenous insurgent planning to resist and negotiate postmodern imperialism in Russia. This case illustrates what Miraftab (2009) signals as the nexus between insurgent planning and (de)colonisation of planning theory. In sum, storytelling in planning research is understood as a bridge with the knowledge it produces about the city and the many ways of acting in it.

Storytelling has been used as a way to frame planning practice. Planners emphasise practitioners' critical judgement and the persuasion of stakeholders. It operates as a prescriptive or descriptive model for planning practice (Mager and Matthey, 2015). Persuasive storytelling implies that the meaning(s) of the planners' texts depend(s) on their contexts; that is, their meanings depend on the story or stories of which they are a part, and how it is contested and negotiated between the author and its many audiences (Throgmorton, 2003). Planning processes contain elements of political games and rational calculation, mixed with emotions, imagination and improvisation; therefore, it is important to ask for more than a single story, and regarding the dominant one: 'who wants this story to be true or come true, and why?' (Van Hulst, 2012). Critical judgement is always necessary in deciding what weight to give to different stories as well as to what stories are appropriate under what circumstances (Sandercock, 2003). Storytelling has been framed as a model of planning – the way planning is done – and storytelling as a model for planning – the way planning could or should be done (Van Hulst, 2012). The first refers to storytelling as an important, everyday activity that takes place in all kinds of formal and informal social interactions that slowly but steadily finds its way into plans. In the second, storytelling is used as a 'tool', as a co-construction of stories as a democratic, inclusive activity that of space to a variety of actors, all with their own lived experiences and emotions. These e actors to share understandings of what their situation is and what can be done. Also, it allows for new options they had not thought of before.

Limitations on storytelling use

Several caveats remain around involving storytelling in planning. Sandercock (2003) advocates for examining the planners' positionality by urging that 'we still need to question the truth of our own and others' stories. We need to be attentive to how power shapes which stories get told, get heard, and carry weight' (12). At the same time, even in the most coherent and consistent narrative, there always remains a set of untold or unheard stories.

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hidden stories that could have become important but instead are ignored. That is why storytelling cannot be romanticised as Van Hulst (2012) suggests:

> Much of the literature on storytelling in the social sciences starts from a positive attitude towards storytelling, intending, for instance, to (re)claim its value compared to other forms of knowing (cf. Bruner, 1986). But that does not mean that storytelling in planning, as it takes place all the time (in boardrooms, in meetings of civil servants, in meetings of citizens, etc.) always contributes to an inclusive, community-focused planning practice. It is only a particular kind of storytelling which is likely to have this characteristic; one in which many actors with different backgrounds, perspectives, values and interests come together and respectfully engage one another in the search for a way to deal with differences or even to live together in harmony. (304-305)

When storytelling remains implicit, it is necessary to examine '1) the way in which storytelling is part of a political process in which various stories compete for attention and that most of the time has winners and losers, and 2) the way in which storytelling relates to other activities that do political work' (Van Hulst, 2012: 305). In sum, like planning, storytelling has the potential for becoming oppressive or emancipatory. Storytelling could bring strategies for translating multiple knowledges into action, but also can be used as a strategy of domination.

What role can storytelling play in the project of decolonising planning?

Storytelling offers a potent avenue to unlearn historically embedded patterns of domin_____ that the project of decolonising planning challenges. Decolonisation is 'the process of unlearning historically determined habits of privilege and privation, of ruling and dependency' (Mohanty, 1996: 108 quoted in Ugarte, 2014: 406). This resonates with Porter's (2010) invitation to unlearn the colonial cultures of planning. Inspired by Spivak (1988), she calls for unlearning the privilege of the planner embedded in the colonial genealogy of the profession and engaging with the management of the sacred in indigenous territories. The proposed unlearning 'is a mode of practice rather than a reduction of practice to language…is about historicising the ideological formations of planning, its silences and formative productions, its practices, expressions and rationalities' (Porter, 2010: 155-156). In

this line, some authors have explicitly or tacitly acknowledged the linkages of storytelling with coloniality and the epistemic violence it entails (Sandercock, 2004; Miraftab, 2009; Sweet, 2018; Huq, 2020).

Decolonisation is about changing the way we think, act and inhabit the world. In this sense, planning plays a crucial role in the history of the 'colonial matrix of power' (Quijano, 2000). Planning itself has been considered a new chapter of an 'extractive neocolonialism' (Escobar, 1997: 136). More recently, Gunder (2010) has argued that planning becomes the ideology that underpins the generation of neoliberal urbanisms and in doing so not only advances extractivist agendas but also animates the erasure gestures of other ways of knowing. One of the main critiques of hegemonic Western theories from the north is the reading of the world from the 'centre' under a pretension of universality producing a gesture of erasure of 'other experiences' (Connell, 2007; 2014). That is why decoloniality seeks to embrace 'the pluri-versal, as opposed to uni-versal, knowledge claims while remaining cautions of tendencies to romanticise endogenous knowledges' (Abu-Lughod, 1990 in Winkler, 2018: 590). Decolonisation aims at undoing the 'colonial matrix of power' understood as the 'oppressive and imperial bent of modern European ideals projected to, and enacted in, the non-European world' (Mignolo, 2009: 39). Thus, decolonisation entails fostering a horizontal coexistence of non-dominant forms of knowledge and life inasmuch as the domination of a Western epistemology has led to the extermination of alternative forms of both (Sousa Santos, 2014).

Decolonising planning efforts have flourished in the past years. The legacies of this rich corpus of decolonial and postcolonial critique have been in a fertile dialogue in the work of urban scholars around planning in Africa (Oldfield, 2020; Parnell et al., 2009; Watson, 2009; Winkler, 2018), India (Bahn, 2019), the Arab region (Laurie and Philo, 2020), Latin Ameri (Ramirez and Pradilla, 2013; Vainer, 2014; Rolnik, 2017), Canada (Sandercock, 1998), Au (Porter, 2010), or the cross-context cities framings (Robinson, 2016), etc. Most recently, an interesting work has emerged around planning in Settler colonial cities (Porter and Yiftachel, 2019) and framing US cities as part of the post colony (Barry and Agyeman, 2020; Sweet, 2021). They have drawn from multiple intellectual genealogies according to imperial powers involved in the territorial control[1]. The authors have demonstrated that 'planning has an undeniable responsibility, both in unsettling assumptions and finding ways to decolonize the discipline and its practices, and within a broader decolonizing process' (Ugarte, 2014: 405). These efforts have focussed on individual ethics and indigenous rights (Ugarte, 2014) and

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the necessary ethical accountability of the discipline ([Watson, 2003](#); [Roy, 2008](#); [Rankin, 2010](#)) to include other ways of knowing to leverage the epistemic privilege of the planner.

Planners can reimagine storytelling in planning as a decolonial practice. If storytelling is the cornerstone of planning education, urban belonging, political negotiation, ideology dissemination in city-making processes, then it is paramount to rethink its potential for a more emancipatory practice. This emancipatory approach may follow narratives that are not contemplated in the dominant framework of a Western epistemology ([Sousa Santos, 2014](#)). Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui explains that 'words have a peculiar function in colonialism: they conceal rather than designate… words became a fictional record, plagued with euphemisms that veiled reality instead of revealing it… In this way, public discourse becomes a form of not saying' ([2012](#): 12-13). In contrast, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, when describing storytelling as a pivotal decolonial method and meaning, asserts that 'the story and the storyteller both serve to connect the past with the future, one generation with another, the land with the people and the people with the story' ([2021](#): 166). For decolonisation efforts in planning land and stories are inextricably linked.

Debates on addressing decolonisation in planning co-evolve with broader decolonisation efforts. Several planning scholars advocate for a (de)colonisation of planning theory by 'decolonizing the mind' and illustrate an insurgent planning practice that aims at overcoming a mindset of 'inferiority of the colonized and superiority of the colonizer' ([Miraftab, 2009](#): 44). Other responses have focused on the framings of property and repatriation of indigenous land in settler colonial states – land back – and warned us that decolonisation is not a metaphor ([Tully, 2000](#); [Tuck and Yang, 2012](#); [Jojola, 2013](#); [Porter and Barry, 2016](#)). Both strands have at their core a 'politicized historical memory' ([Miraftab, 2009](#): 45) where storytelling can play a substantial role. Currently, we are in a decolonial hype and planning theory has given less attention to the contributions that the Latin American has made to the so-called 'decolonial turn' and the ways in which this turn has to offer to the field, particularly to through the lenses of storytelling, on how to recalibrate theorising in the field.

What does the decolonial turn offer to critique the framing of storytelling in planning?

Unsettling times require also unsettling planning theory ([Barry et al., 2018](#)). A decolonial approach to storytelling in planning can deepen the unsettlement of planning theory. Planners need to respond to a change of epoch ([Mignolo, 2020](#)) and a window for

civilisational transitions (Escobar, 2020). Escobar reminds us that 'the current crisis is a crisis of the heteropatriarchal, colonial, and capitalist occidental modes of dwelling that have eroded the systemic mode of living based on radical interdependence' (2019: 133). It is evident that we live under an unprecedented bundle of crises where the pandemic became the extension and amplification of existing structural inequalities even in the terrain of planning theory making. As Gloria Anzaldúa (2009) puts it: 'what passes for theory these days is forbidden territory for us, it is vital that we occupy theorizing space, that we do not allow white men and women solely to occupy it. By bringing in our own approaches and methodologies, we transform that theorizing space… if we have been gagged and disempowered by theories, we can also be loosened and empowered by theories' (xxv–xxvi). For planning, we ought to reimagine the grounds of theory and practice rooted in social relevance and in solidarity with those mobilising for radical social change and the most severely hit, as Mama Chila exemplifies.

The 'decolonial turn' offers tools to critique the current approach to storytelling in planning. The notion of 'decolonial turn' was brought about by the Puerto Rican Fanonian philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2006) asserting that coloniality survives colonialism. The precursors of the decolonial turn in cultural studies emerged from the modernity/coloniality research programme championed by Latin American scholars such as Arturo Escobar, Enrique Dussel, Walter Mignolo, Ramon Gosofunquel and their critique from feminist mestizo scholars such as Gloria Lugones, Gloria Anzaldúa and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. The decolonial turn asks 'questions about the effect of colonisation in modern subjectivities and forms of life' (Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 343) and aims at 'unmasking the Eurocentric values and rendering them without their universal significance' (Escobar, 2007: 180). This turn calls for epistemic justice as it refers to counteracting practices of silencing or devaluing alternative forms of knowing and living that do not conform with assumptions about the 'authority' of the Western urban cannon. In this context, the work of epistemologies of the South (Sousa Santos, 2014) highlights the expansion of the political imagination contained in the alternative ways of seeking cognitive global justice. In so doing, a renewed attention to the ethics of production, recognition and validation of knowledge embedded in storytelling is an imperative.

I contend that the current understandings of what storytelling is and does in planning are limited in at least four ways.

Centres on individual accounts of professional planners deepening their epistemic privilege

Storytelling in planning mainly relies on a planner-centric approach to persuade and deliver critical judgments to feed the status quo of spatial planning. The current approach of the use of storytelling in planning begs the question 'who's stories are mobilised?' As I reported above, most of the literature on planning pedagogy and practice centre around the professional planner storytelling power. For example, [Throgmorton (2003)](#) explains that stories must be inspired by a normative vision and that 'planners should tell these stories on their own authority, but the only way they can gain their diverse readers' trust, the only way the planners' stories can be considered legitimate, is by making space for their readers' diverse understandings and contextualizations' (p. 145). Even though, this approach is relevant for professional planners, the focus on professional planners overlooks two important aspects of city making. First, in the case of the US, African American/Black and Hispanic/Latin/o/a/x planners are extremely underrepresented and are very unlikely to be part of the authoritative practitioners in the field ([Garcia, et. al., 2021](#)). However, epistemic privilege cannot be reduced to identity essentialism but as a result of a situated political consciousness ([Huq, 2020](#)). It is well documented that 'planners are bound up in the reproduction of racialized exclusion' ([Knaap, 2018](#): 2) and the use of their stories if not informed by an anti-racist purpose can perpetuate epistemic injustices. Moreover, the insistence on anthropocentric individuality perpetuates the 'most deleterious fiction in Western modernity' ([Escobar, 2018](#): 84) that underpins the cultural regime of market-based individuals that have eroded existing communal ways of living.

Second, agents of urban change do not hold necessarily a professional planner title. Assuming that professional planners are the main force for acting upon urban change ~~leaves~~ out city makers such as Mama Chila or the multifarious collectives that also plan urban change. Particularly in global south cities are dwellers themselves that underpin the main force for self-construction of neighbourhoods. Decolonial planning debates building on southern theory and a postcolonial critique have largely addressed this fact. Southern urbanisms focus on understanding the conditions of possibility of the urban majority subjected to multidimensional vulnerabilities ([Simone and Pietersen, 2017](#); [Parnell, Pieterse and Watson, 2009](#)) where the clashing rationalities embedded in seeing from the south coexist ([Watson, 2003](#), [2012](#), [2016](#); [Connell, 2007](#), [2014](#)). Southern urbanism also calls for recalibrating the geographies of authoritative knowledge ([Roy, 2009](#)) and questioning the

assumptions of planning theory where informality operates as the epistemology of planning ([Roy, 2005](#)) and where the prevailing city making practices are those of repair, squat and maintenance ([Bahn, 2019](#)). Thus, bringing to planning theory stories of the collectives engaged in the latter practices is an imperative.

Supports the underpinning extractives logics of urban development

The relevance of storytelling relies on its power of persuasion and the legitimation of city-making initiatives. Storytelling has been framed as an instrumental means for naming and framing ideas for mobilising policy streams and gaining political traction in the public agenda. The potential impact stories can have on decision-making processes refers to a selective retelling of political communication ([Salmon, 2007](#)). [Mager and Matthey (2015)](#) argue that 'storytelling applied to the field of urban production may have led to an increasing preoccupation with staging and showmanship in projects to the detriment of their real inclusion in political debate' (p. 1). In their special issue on 'Tales of the City. Storytelling as a contemporary tool of urban planning and design', they bring together contributions that highlight how the use of storytelling in planning has promoted material and symbolic structures under a promotional narrativisation of the metropolis. In this issue, [Vannuchi and Van Criekingen (2015)](#) explain how storytelling in planning has underpinned 'models of entrepreneurial urban governance, of large-scale gentrifying urban projects, growth coalitions, or policies of symbolism and of regional brand image' (xx). In this way, mainstream planning operates as a mechanism to reproduce the epistemic privilege of professionals complicit with oppressive and extractivist agendas. To counteract this perspective, planning theorists have begun to 'critically re-examine the role of mainstream western planning in excluding, oppressing, and marginalizing certain groups and communities' ([Ugarte, 2014](#): 404). In fact, radical planning practices have relied on the agency and epistemic privilege of oppressed social groups ([Huq, 2020](#)).

Perpetuates a dualist approach between emotion–reason and people–place

Storytelling has not only been conceptualised as a means for emotional intersubjective processes, but also to foster a vision of places. Place-based stories are key for planning practice. [Childs (2008)](#) suggests that 'buildings and landscapes serve as settings for the narrative landscape of everyday tales, fictive stories of place, and place names' (p. 175). The stories that are told about cities in general are locally anchored in specific urban places, and once locally grounded in specific places, common urban narratives contain their ow

details and community stories (Throgmorton, 2003). Despite the recognition of the potential of storytelling to open spaces to working through of emotions in planning practice (Hoch, 1994; Forester, 1999; Sandercock, 2000; Throgmorton, 2003; van Hulst, 2012), the Enlightenment culture discourages planners to understanding emotional experiences as they focus on the 'rational' side of the practice (Baum, 2017). Osborne and Grant-Smith (2015) have posed that beyond the framing and telling of stories it is equally relevant to pay attention to the socio-political construction of emotion. Emotions in their view can reveal the 'factors shaping the way they are experienced and expressed, the implications of power, privilege and marginality and what they suggest about the social and spatial landscape to which they relate' (p. 67). These critiques are valuable as it helps to reflect more nuanced aspects of the politics of emotion imbued in storytelling. However, the current understanding of the relationship between stories and places and reason and emotion is based on an ontological dualism derived from the dominant Euro-modernity. This underpinning assumption operates based on the divide of culture/nature, body/mind and by extension on the division of reason and emotion and place and people overlooking the relationships of interdependence and collective affections.

Logocentrism and dualism are ingrained in the subjectivities on coloniality. Following Cartesian tradition, a separation of the body and the outside world has permeated our understanding of knowledge generation based on a logocentric perspective and a dualistic ontology (Varela, 1999). Ontologies are enacted through practices and the narratives of worldviews. Theory making, then, can capture other worldviews and locate multiple ontologies in dialogue. Latin American decolonial scholars have discussed the notion of 'relational ontologies' (Escobar, 2014) to engage with the links to the human, non-human and spiritual worlds to address the de-sacralisation of territorial relations of meaning making. This approach is grounded in interculturality and defines that any single entity cannot [exist] to the relations that constituted it in a type of 'grammar of the surroundings' that go beyond the cognitive understanding of spatial relations (Restrepo, 1996). In this line, along with black feminist scholars, the very idea is that 'knowing is a bodily political practice' (Rivera Qusicanqui, 2020) and that 'onto-epistemologies' (Silva, 2014) capture how epistemology and ontology are intertwined in ways that shape the conditions of knowledge and existence.

Remains silent about the epistemic violence and the de-sacralisation of the world

Colonial legacies permeate planning theory debates around storytelling. In Porter's (2010) seminal book 'Unlearning the colonial cultures of Planning', she outlines the key role of modern planning in the implementation of colonial practices and its 'spatial cultures' shaped by settlers' rationalities and sensibilities. She makes apparent the epistemic violence in a planning culture that perpetuates a particular power and domination. Epistemic violence is at the core of coloniality. The identification of 'the domination of others outside the European core is a necessary dimension of modernity, with the concomitant subalternization of the knowledge and cultures of these other groups' (Escobar, 2007: 180). Spivak (1988, 1999) explained how a remotely orchestrated effort to constitute the colonial subject as the Other endangers violence exerted through knowledge. That is how Western thought has established what is considered as the authority of the canon, undermining the work produced by non-Western cultures and defining all those who do not belong to the locus of enunciation (Mignolo, 2005; Khandwala, 2019). This erasure of difference threatens cultural and social autonomy, privileging settler [non-Indigenous] understandings of place and space (Patrick, 2017). This by-product of epistemic violence of the cognitive empire has been identified as 'epistemicide' (Sousa Santos, 2014) and has shaped a 'political landscape disfigured by non-stop epistemic violence' (Nagar and Shirazi, 2019: 238). In this context, Rankin (2010) calls for planning deeper engagement with 'the structures of imperialism, agency and resistance among the "beneficiaries" of planning action, the subjectivity of planners and the conditions of collective action' (181).

The performed story of planning has played a key role on the erasure of sacred knowledges and places. As Porter indicates, 'indigenous claims for the presence of sacredness in particular places, usually because those places have become threatened in some way, brings to the fore differently constructed (Indigenous) spatial rationalities and practices' (2010 The threat or erasure of the sacred in settler territories and the processes of 'otherness have created a 'colonial wound'. Mignolo describes the 'Colonial Wound' (2005 [1995]) as the damage done by 'the fact that regions and people around the world have been classified as underdeveloped economically and mentally' (3). The cumulative intergenerational effect of the operating logics of coloniality has produced an embodied trauma and has shaped our subjectivity (Anzaldúa, 1990; Mignolo, 1995; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012). That is why planners need an 'ethics of accountability that recognizes the conditions of postcoloniality' (Rankin, 2010: 181) and question the normative ethics of planning theories (Winkler and Duminy, 2016). Yet, the links of storytelling in planning to epistemic and restorative justice have been

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underscored or overlooked. I contend that storytelling can play an active role in reconstituting what counts as theory and who can enunciate such theory.

How to frame storytelling otherwise?

Thinking storytelling otherwise expands the repertoires for decolonising urban planning. The 'otherwise' draws from the modernity/coloniality research programme that aims 'to craft another space for the production of knowledge – another way of thinking, un paradigma otro, the very possibility of talking about "worlds and knowledges otherwise"' ([Escobar, 2007](): 1179). Invoking the otherwise calls for a practice of imagining and acknowledging alternative ways of knowing, sensing and being. Thinking otherwise requires delinking from the master narrative of the West by finding avenues to shape new idioms against the 'universal grammars' ([Mbembe, 2001]()) of colonial based planning practices. I propose not only thinking about storytelling otherwise but, in doing so, shifting the 'master narrative' through decolonial vocabularies. Decolonial vocabularies bring about relational onto-epistemologies. In this line, Tanja [Winkler (2018)]() offered a powerful idea to decolonise planning practice, proposing that before any anti-colonial intervention we should see and learn from 'resistant texts' understood as 'endogenous systems of knowledge production' (589). Winkler explains that 'resistant texts resist dominant narratives in ways that are unfamiliar, or entirely foreign, to the untrained eye…they resemble a form of epistemic disobedience that produces an uncomfortable and oft-unacknowledged incompetence' ([2018](): 589). I argue that storytelling could play a significant role in identifying, tracing and learning from 'resistant texts' as they are an integral part of multiple urban actors' ways of knowing, being and acting in city-making practices. I posit storytelling otherwise is a key practice of planning – not reduced to 'language' – that has the potential to catalyse the unlearning of coloniality if grounded in ontological relationalities and onto-epistemologies that question the epistemic privilege of the planner.

Storytelling otherwise weaves four decolonial concepts to respond to the limitations of the current framing of storytelling in planning as outlined above.

Storytelling otherwise as epistemological disobedience

Epistemological disobedience is paramount for decolonisation processes. Epistemic disobedience questions the hegemonic assumptions about authoritative knowledge and reaffirms the relevance of endogenous knowledges ([Winkler, 2018]()) cultivating an emphasis on the experiences of the knower (enunciation) rather than the known (enunciated

relationship between the two. This approach responds to overreliance of planning theory about storytelling on the individual accounts of professional planners deepening their epistemic privilege. Mama Chila expressed:

> One always remembers the struggles and all we did to live and remain alive. Among all, we built the neighbourhood… we organised convites for community work to solve the different problematics we had… the water, the paths…as poor people we had faith that all would improve if it were done among all of us….

She implies not only that professionally trained planners are mostly absent in the city-making practices of the urban majority but also that collective stories of endurance and improvisation are essential. In this line, storytelling otherwise pleads for delinking from the hegemonic narratives through the creation and visibility of stories from the margins. Epistemic disobedience rejects the 'hubris of the zero-point epistemology of the West' (Castro-Gomez, 2005) and aims to cultivate epistemic justice when thinking about how cities are produced and can be imagined otherwise. Castro-Gomez (2005) explains that the 'zero point' operates through a knowledge construction from the perspective of an observer who observes without being observed or being represented. The master narrative of the West is based on the ideology of racism. The underpinning of this narrative is white supremacy. The disobedience lies in the explicit contestation of the assumption that the West is the cultural reference point for the rest of the world and that the interpretation of the world goes beyond the Eurocentric interpretation of itself (Sousa Santos, 2014; Mignolo, 2000).

Storytelling otherwise as pluriversal imagination

Western-centric views are underpinned by universality claims. These views crystalise or reading from the central 'metropoles' of one possible rationality, the one of developme and domination. The role of storytelling in mainstream planning has supported the extractives logics of entrepreneurial urban development. That is why, for overcoming this approach, the notion of *pluriverse* helps to deconstruct the notion of development itself as a central narrative of modernity/coloniality. In this line, critical development studies have documented myriad practices that seek to coexist with dignity and peace (Kothari et al., 2019). This approach aims to overcome the narrow definition of progress based on an anthropocentric vision of growth. The impact of extractive development is exemplified by the experience of Mama Chila when she says:

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Once the upgrading macroproject was under negotiation and given we had a big land tax debt, we lost our house… and keep renting after decades… We have had a long struggle to stay put here.

The notion of pluriverse, instead of universality, derives from the ethno-territorial and ontological struggles in the context of violent extractivist logics (Escobar, 2012; 2014). It advocates for the multiplicity of worldviews and counter-capitalist projects coming from black and indigenous communities in the Colombian Pacific Coast and the Zapatista project (Escobar, 2020). Pluriverse captures the political aspirations of many of these groups that seek 'a world where many worlds fit'. In this way, pluriversal imagination refers to a praxis and thought where modernity has been provincialised and displaced as the centre of imagination and history, and where colonial epistemological and ontological domination has been suspended (Escobar, 2010). It still is not enough to ask ourselves what other worldviews are forgotten in the explanations and proposals to tackle the extractivist materialities of the urban. Expanding the storytelling role to all urban actors – particularly in the margins – allows us to connect with the 'discourse of desire and possibility that builds on subaltern practices of difference for the construction of alternative socio-natural worlds . . .' (Escobar, 2004: 220) as well as 'the defence of place by social movements might be constituted as a rallying point for both theory construction and political action' (Escobar, 2001: 141). As Mama Chila puts it:

We dreamt to have a beautiful place where young and old can learn, dream, and make reality their wishes. And now we can enjoy our community cultural centre - the house of everyone.

In framing all urban actors as storytellers, we can promote pluriversal imaginations to mobilise stories of transformative planning, initiatives grounded in alternative worldviews. Storytelling otherwise requires us to centre stories of transformative experiences of various genealogies prefaced on autonomy and conviviality such as degrowth, buen vivir, ubuntu, eco-feminism and so on. The leading actors of such initiatives can be considered pluriversal storytellers, and by learning from their stories, there is a way to also celebrate the multiplicity of worlds of possibilities.

Storytelling otherwise as sentipensante threads

A decolonial approach to storytelling requires engagement with the territorial inscriptions of stories. In doing so, we need to address the linkages with the body, territory as sentient being and emotions to overcome the individualistic, dualistic, logocentric and anthropocentric approaches of storytelling in planning. Decolonial thinking emphasises an integrated understanding of territories given that these philosophical concepts are often separated for analytical purposes in Western scientific endeavours (Ugarte, 2014: 593). That is why the notion of sentipensante is fruitful in overcoming these limitations. The notion of sentipensante can be understood to think and feel with the territory using ancestral knowledges, collective affection and people's economies. Sentipensar as a verb can be translated into English as feeling-thinking or sensing-thinking, and sentipensante as a noun can be translated as the one who feels while thinking. Sentipensar is a notion currently used mainly in decolonial debates, post development studies and political ecology.

This concept comes from Afro descendants living in/from the rivers and marshes of the Colombian Caribbean coast. As Patricia Botero explains: 'Sentipensar is a word that Afro-descendant people and fishermen enunciate in many river communities in Colombia. "Sentipensar means acting with the heart using the heart", as a fisherman from the San Jorge River in the Colombian Caribbean expressed to the sociologist, Orlando Fals-Borda in the mid-1980s' (Botero, 2019: 302). The challenge for storytelling otherwise is to trace and galvanise the threads of stories of collective affection of/from urban territories. When Mama Chila said:

> Once upon a time there was a special, lonely, and magical place - a mountain that feels - in the northeast side of Medellin… We had episodes of violence and narco-traffic and the fear overtook us. That is why, to be a woman in Moravia means pain for the loss of family, sons, husbands… but the pain turned into love, and I created a space to take care of kids.

She illustrates the gendered role of collective affection not only among community members but in relationship with the landscape. This perspective challenges the dualist approach between emotion–reason and people–place. Framing storytelling otherwise as sentipensate threads encapsulates the rhythms of place, territorial struggles, celebration, truth-telling, popular resistance and collective affections. This approach weaves the deep ontological relationalities enacted in the habitation of territories, including the territory of the body, and collective affection among humans and sentient beings.

Storytelling otherwise as border thinking for communal healing

Bringing about a storytelling otherwise perspective calls for centring the communal healing power of stories as a response to the silence about the epistemic violence and the de-sacralisation of the world. The cumulative effect of coloniality harnesses collective traumas that are embodied and persist across generations. As Anzaldúa expresses: 'Because our bodies have been stolen, brutalized, or numbed, it is difficult to speak from/through then. No hables de esas cosas, de eso no se habla. No hables, no hables. Callate! Estate quieta' (2009: 132). Through the notion of border thinking, Anzaldúa refers to an embodied consciousness of chicano/an experience of inhabiting in the threshold (la frontera) of hegemonic and alternative systems of knowledge production and voicing the domestic subjectivities of (undocumented) immigrants, migrants, refugees, etc. As exemplified by Mama Chila, when she says:

> Little by little this little piece of heaven on earth was attracting families flying away from poverty, violence… We had to escape to take care of our life and our families, we had to face the inequalities and indifference of a city that didn't belong to us. I was one of the first mums of Moravia, I had to deal a lot with people's pain.

The communal healing potential of stories focus on the body and collective traumas. Stories help to voice subjectivities in navigating simultaneously hegemonic and alternative systems of knowledge. Walters et al. (2011) explain that 'bodies don't just tell stories, they tell histories' (p. 179) since historically traumatic events become embodied and affect health across generations when referring to native populations. That is why it is imperative to 'understanding the body as the primary territory of defence in the healing, re-imagining (re)building process of new relationships of doing and being' (Ventura Alfaro, 2022: 240). In this fashion, Aftab Erfan (2017) has advocated for a therapeutic orientation to planning that prioritises healing of collective traumas. She used meetings as 'healing circles' and conversations as interweaved collective stories. Two key premises inform this approach: it 'is a belief that a group has, within itself, the knowledge, creativity, sensitivity, and power it needs to solve its own problems' (2016: 5) and that in healing 'there is no destination to be reached; even those who have been traveling the path for years often struggle with their next step. In short, healing is an ongoing process of self-transformation' (Waldram, 2008: 7 quoted in Erfan, 2017: 6). This resonates with the idea that decolonisation is not a

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destination or a mere metaphor, it entails an elusive and constant recalibration of reflection and anti-colonial collective action.

Communal healing aims at reparation and reconciliation with a commitment to enact closure on a violent history and a new beginning based on trust and healing ([Borneman, 2002](#)). In this way, '… [h]Healing narratives serve not just for self-nurturing "therapy", but actually change reality...We are all wounded, but we can connect through the wound that's alienated us from others. When the wound forms a cicatriz, the scar can become a bridge linking people who have been split apart' ([Anzaldúa, 2009](#): 313). In a sense, healing stories have the potential to challenge collective emotional issues inscribed in territories and the epistemological violence of the master narratives of urban change.

Conclusions

Storytelling otherwise is the linchpin for decolonising planning. In this article, I have argued that it can become part of a broader repertoire of planning tools for emancipatory and transformational practice, theory and pedagogy. Since oftentimes planning theory not only ignores or dismisses voices of southern thinkers but also the 'tacit' knowledge of inhabitants contained in storytelling, bringing the notion of storytelling otherwise based on the contributions of Latin American thinkers and giving centrality to stories such as the one of Mama Chila is a strategy to fight the existing colonial epistemological and ontological domination. Building on previous decolonial planning efforts and the Latin American 'decolonial turn', this paper aimed at expanding the vocabularies and strategies to overcome the Western-centric use of storytelling in mainstream planning. I have proposed that to address the limitations of current understandings of the role and framing of storytelling in planning, we can think of storytelling otherwise for shifting the 'master narrative' throu four intertwined strategies involving key 'decolonial vocabularies'. I have argued that storytelling otherwise can be understood as a multifaceted approach that propels epistemological disobedience, pluriversal imagination, sentipensante threads and border thinking for communal healing.

Storytelling otherwise is present and yet to be unravelled. It unsettles Western mindsets/power and activates the political agency for transformative change. Storytelling otherwise is territorial and relational. It amplifies subjectivities that are often silenced. It links emotions and reason and emanates from collective bodies and landscapes. As a practice, it brings together other ways of knowing, being and acting by honouring the sacred and

ancestral while leveraging the spatial imagination for shaping pluriversal politics. Storytelling otherwise simultaneously deepens the ancestral sacrality of stories and triggers alternative imaginations for the future. Storytelling otherwise aspires to generate opportunities for self-enunciation of spatial-political subjectivities across dissipate contexts, a spatial redistribution of epistemic privilege and a recasting of collective healing. Storytelling otherwise expands the repertoire of methods for the imperative that the radical unlearning of the decolonial projects envisions. By using storytelling otherwise, planners can reimagine how to decolonise planning by challenging the Western cannon with reparative stories that can help us to reach more just cities.

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Footnote

1. For instance, the regional intellectual influences from an African trajectory with key thinkers such as Franz Fanon and Achille Mbembe; an Indian trajectory with the seminal work from Dipesh Chacrabarty and Gayatri Spivak; from the Caribbean diaspora with figures such as Sylvia Wynter and Aimé Césaire; from Palestine the pivotal work from Edward S and from the Americas Gloria Anzaldua, Milton Santos, Anibal Quijano, Maria Lugones so on.

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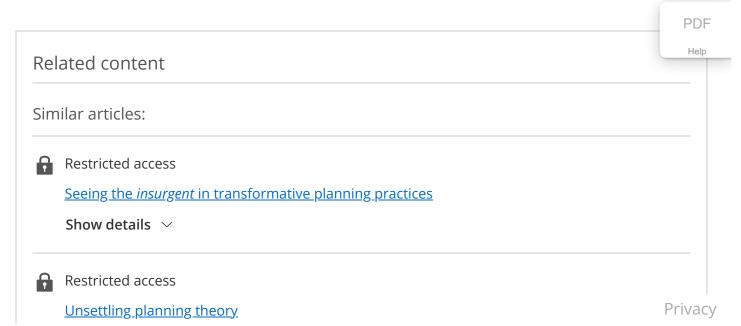<div style="border:1px solid #1a7a7a; text-align:center; padding:1em;">

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Catalina Ortiz is a Colombian urbanist. She holds a PhD in Urban Planning and Policy from the University of Illinois at Chicago. She works as Associate Professor and Programme Leader of the MSc Building and Urban Design in Development at University College London. She uses decolonial and critical urban theory through knowledge co-production methodologies to study the politics of space production to foster more just cities and the recognition of multiple urban knowledges. She seeks to unravel the relationship between informality, living heritage, and urban learning, which is key to shaping the potentials of a negotiated co-production of urban space.

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