**“It’s not just about money”: An Ethnography of *Rebusque* Performances
and Life-Stories on Public Transportation Buses in Downtown Bogotá, Colombia**

by

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Abstract

This research focuses on the performances of peddlers, buskers and panhandlers who are said to practice “*rebusque*” on the main transportation system of downtown Bogotá, Colombia. *Rebusque* refers to informal workers who forge self-employment to make a living. Through rebusque performances on the buses, such workers challenge misleading perceptions of their work, offer social critiques, and forge relations of solidarity with bus drivers and riders. This solidarity emerges from Colombians’ shared nationalist and religious beliefs paired with their broad dissatisfaction with their country’s socio-economic order and neoliberal government. Following Ortner’s idea of “serious games,” De Certeau’s notion of “tactics” and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, I examine *rebusque* performers’ “self-reliance” as a form of “social agency” accrued by negotiating earnings through expressions of religious and nationalist critiques and aspirations which inspire collective participation. Thus, “informal workers,” often refugees from Colombia’s rural violence, gain peaceable earnings within Bogotá’s buses.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Venturing out on the buses

On a Friday afternoon during the summer of 2009, I was riding the bus across one of the most congested areas of downtown Bogotá, Colombia,¹ when I was distracted by a peddler who jumped nimbly over the turnstile at the front door of the bus. This peddler, whom I will call Lorenzo,² was carrying a back-pack and a full box of chocolates. Still, he managed to jump over the turnstile of the bus with no apparent difficulty.

This was remarkable considering the usual problems bus riders encounter when passing the turnstile to get on the bus. Turnstiles are located across the front door of each bus and help the drivers control the entrance of each passenger so as to charge them bus fare. In order for bus riders to get through the turnstile one has to push hard, move quickly and hold onto the first support bar one finds because most bus drivers seldom wait for passengers to become settled before the bus starts moving. The fact that Lorenzo even managed to jump over the turnstile with the items he was carrying quickly got my attention. I thought his need to get on the bus in this manner, even putting his own physical safety at risk, must be exceptionally strong. I decided to stay on the bus and observe what Lorenzo would do next.

After Lorenzo jumped over the turnstile and got on the bus, he apologized to the bus driver and asked him permission to let him work on his bus, “Sorry man, could you

¹ Traffic congestion in this area of Bogotá is very common, especially on Friday afternoons when some people finish their work early and drive their cars home or other destinations in the city, as well as others who are traveling from the city to little towns in surrounding areas to spend the weekend.

² The names used to cite participants in this research are entirely created by the researcher and do not correspond to participants’ real names.

allow me to work?” The bus driver nodded to indicate that he would permit Lorenzo to stay on the bus and work. Lorenzo thanked him and started to greet passengers, first apologizing to them for having boarded the bus in a manner which might have disturbed their trip. Riders’ responses varied. Most of them did not reply to his greeting but turned their heads away from him and towards the windows. A few, however, did greet Lorenzo in return and were attentive to what he was about to say. Lorenzo thanked those passengers who responded to his greeting.

What he did next surprised me. He started to recount his life as a displaced person from a town located in one of the most violent regions of Colombia, and said that he had been forced to move to Bogotá with his family in order to protect his loved ones from acts of violence imposed on his hometown. Lorenzo continued by describing the lack of government attention his family had received in response to their plight as displaced persons, and how they were left to overcome various hardships by themselves, especially their current unemployment. They had no work experience in Bogotá to help them gain incomes and stability for the family. He explained how “*rebusque*”³ on the buses presented them with an unusual opportunity to work toward that stability because no skills or employment history were required for him to sell chocolate to bus riders. Thus, *rebusque* on the buses gave him an opportunity to provide for his family in an honest way.

³ The word “rebusque” seems to be part of the local dialect of several Latin American countries. It is used mostly to refer to a wide range of informal economic activities such as, but not limited to, peddling, busking, panhandling and street vending. There is an element of resourcefulness in practices of “rebusque,” but it does not translate directly into English. The Spanish word for resourcefulness is “recursividad.” As far as I am aware, an exact translation of the term “rebusque” into English has not yet been devised.

It so happened that seeing Lorenzo was my first encounter with some of the “informal workers”⁴ who got on the main bus system in search of alternative forms of making a living by singing, selling products and so forth in the city of Bogotá in the summer of 2009.

There are two transportation systems in Bogotá and *rebusque* is found on only one of them. Rebusque practitioners are found in Bogotá’s larger public transport system which consists of independently operated buses. In this system, individual “driver-owners” affiliate their buses with private enterprises that follow state transit regulations in terms of securing minimal public transportation standards (Echeverry et al. 2005: 153). These buses have narrow aisles, long routes, uncoordinated schedules and impromptu bus stops. The other transport system in Bogotá is TransMilenio. This is a “hybrid” transport model that combines private operation in terms of fare collection supply of the bus fleet and service personnel, with public planning, regulation and supervision. In this case, the government assures that private enterprises meet minimal transit standards, licensing, and so forth, as well as maintenance of the system and route infrastructure (Echeverry et al. 2005:152,153; See also TransMilenio S.A. nd.: par. 3,6). TransMilenio is made up of high capacity buses that run on specific transit-ways separated from the other traffic lanes. It maintains regular time schedules and bus stations. According to former local government secretary, Clara López, informal workers are not allowed in TransMilenio as this is a privately operated system of transportation (El Tiempo 2009b: par.6). In other words, because private enterprises own TransMilenio buses, as opposed to the larger bus system where individual bus drivers own their buses

⁴ The term “informal workers” is used in this project to refer to peddlers, buskers and panhandlers who get on the buses to do rebusque.

and can thus decide whom they allow onto their buses, *rebusque* practitioners are prohibited access to TransMilenio. They are allowed only on the main “public system” in which buses are owned by their drivers.

Like Lorenzo, many informal workers within the main public transit system do not limit themselves to selling their products or musical, story-telling and poetic skills, but also offer life accounts which focus on the particular circumstances that led them to engage in their alternative job activities commonly known as “*rebusque*.” These autobiographical discourses are a standard component of *rebusque* in Bogotá’s larger bus system, and are performed either before or after workers show their products or musical performances to bus riders. The term “*rebusque*” is understood broadly as the practice of looking for alternative means to help solve life’s hardships but is mostly used to refer to peoples’ actions of devising alternative employment possibilities in the context of limited opportunities for getting a formal job.⁵

1.2 Context and Social Significance: Research Particularities and Performance Conditions

There were three aspects of his performance that struck me as peculiar in Lorenzo’s *rebusque* activity on the bus. Firstly, the physical risk to just enter the bus. Secondly, the fact that he depended on the bus driver’s willingness to allow him do *rebusque* on his bus and on the bus riders’ attitudes of indifference or concern towards his situation. Thirdly, I found it surprising that Lorenzo provided some details of his life as part of doing *rebusque*. People seeking to get a source of income on the buses through *rebusque* do not necessarily have to give details or further insights into their lives in

⁵ The inclusion of panhandlers as *rebusque* “workers” is somewhat debatable. However, in this thesis I consider panhandlers as practitioners of *rebusque* following this broad understanding of this form of labour.

order to get passengers to give monetary donations. I have witnessed about ten peddlers who have entered buses just to sell their products and I have seen passengers buy them without receiving knowledge of the peddlers' personal lives.

From this contrasting strategy, I realized that Lorenzo's life story performance exceeded monetary motivations to some degree. Above all, it revealed a common understanding of his broader social context as one in which lack of state attention towards displaced populations causes them to experience another kind of violence in the city, namely that of unemployment and the real threats of starvation and lack of housing. Rebusque offers these people a way to sustain their households when the state has failed to assure them protection from unemployment in the cities (after having already, in many cases, failed to protect them from life-threatening violence in their rural homes). In a country where lack of "regular employment" opportunities has pushed many people to participate in the more readily available employment as perpetrators of violence (i.e., in guerrilla and paramilitary groups which provide salaries [INDH 2003: 274]), Lorenzo's decision to face his problem of survival through rebusque clearly deserves some attention and ethnographic exploration, particularly as it represents a determination to seek viable alternatives to the more readily available, but violent, means of gaining a livelihood offered to Colombia's dispossessed.

These observations lead me to ponder the extent to which rebusque practices exceed monetary relations in Colombia's urban social life and provide a window into the country's broader social relations of power, inequality, discrimination, opportunity and solidarity. From what I could observe as a bus rider in the next couple of days, a similar

practice was shared by most informal workers doing rebusque on the buses. They too recounted their autobiographical stories of dislocation and unemployment. In this way, I came to see rebusque as a form of social activity worthy of further examination, and I decided to explore it further through ethnographic fieldwork. Both the autobiographical accounts and the social relations workers established while doing rebusque on the buses became the basis of this M.A. research project.

I was initially concerned only with the life stories spontaneously told by informal workers on the buses. As my fieldwork progressed, however, I realized that through their other performances (which include mostly songs, poetry and fables) some informal workers offered further insights into their lives and social contexts. As a result, I became equally interested in their life accounts and other performances as a way to get some insight into their lives and social domains. I must note here that I am not merely concerned with a semiotic analysis of the narratives contained in rebusque workers' performances (although that could prove a compelling exercise in itself). I am, above all, interested in providing an ethnographic description of these rebusque practitioners' performances and viewpoints in order to situate them more adequately within the literature on Bogotá's "informal economy."

This research is rather pressing because informal economic activities have grown significantly in Colombia during recent years. In 2002, the Colombian Congress introduced The Labour Reform to increase formal employment by 10% within four years (Congreso de Colombia 2002). However, political scientist and economist Amylkar Acosta notes that between August 2004 and September 2005 the creation of jobs

increased but only within the informal sector, and not within the formal sector as anticipated by the 2002 Labour Reform (Acosta 2005: par.1). One does not necessarily have to resort to statistical studies to note the astonishing number of informal workers in Bogotá. This phenomenon became obvious to me when I noticed the number of informal workers who got on the buses to make a living through rebusque. In the summer of 2009, there were between two and four informal workers climbing aboard for each single route lasting around 30-45 minutes. By contrast, in the years 1989-2001, when I frequented buses in this city, the number of rebusque workers climbing aboard was not as alarmingly high.

Although the presence of informal workers on the buses is increasingly pervasive in the everyday life of bus riders of Bogotá city, these people's lives remain highly neglected in existing ethnographic literature where most research has been done on street vending (See Gil 1998; Mendoza 2000; Bromley 1978). In this thesis I suggest that the economic activities of bus informal workers need to be studied separately from informal activities in the streets since rebusque on the buses presents particular characteristics in itself that differ from informal economic activities in the street. Indeed, a comparative analysis of these differences could play a role in understanding bus rebusque. For instance, the spontaneous life story phenomenon by informal workers occurs on the buses and not on the streets. In addition, unlike street vending, there is no state regulation that forbids bus informal workers from doing rebusque on the larger public transportation system in Bogotá where bus drivers are free to let them get on their buses (or deny them access).

Nevertheless, even though they are not persecuted by the local police and so have not had to form unions just to be able to work like the street vendors have had to do (Gil 1998: 66), informal workers on the buses have had to deal with bus riders' frequent rejection of their activities. Rebusque practitioners on the buses have to ask drivers' permission to get on their buses and have often been mistreated by bus drivers when denied access to buses. On the other hand, unlike either workers in the formal sector or informal street vendors, the rebusque workers working on Bogotá's main transit system make an effort to communicate messages of social dissatisfaction and resilience through their life accounts and performances. It is these particularities of rebusque on the buses which provide a means for coming to some understanding of larger and contradictory social relationships of inequality, power, discrimination, solidarity and opportunity within which bus informal workers are immersed, as I will endeavour to render evident in the course of this thesis.

Thus, this thesis examines the complexity and ambiguity of rebusque through the claims and agency of the informal workers themselves. In turn, it contrasts these with state labour policies that regulate both the formal sector and informal street vending. This study seeks insight into bus rebusque practitioners' life circumstances and social contexts from their own understandings of their personal and social predicaments, as well as their reasons for working in a space that was not initially conceived for their rebusque activities.

My project intends to make a contribution to anthropology and to Colombian society by addressing the gap in existing ethnographic literature regarding the informal

economic activities of rebusque practitioners in public transportation in downtown Bogotá. Ethnographic research that sheds light on the performances of bus informal workers is needed because the habitual approaches to Bogotá's workers in the informal economy criminalizes them, with little or no regard to those peoples' actual life circumstances or social backgrounds. This form of "conventional wisdom" in the city has been a means to discriminate against bus informal workers. By attending to the messages communicated through these people's performances which are made available to riders on public buses, my project seeks to offer alternative understandings to conventional approaches toward rebusque and its role as a labour form within the informal economy.

My research also contributes to an ongoing discussion within anthropology regarding the heterogeneity of the informal economy and forms of work because this project shifts discussion from more standard studies done in this field, which tend to focus on informally owned and operated businesses within larger industries (i.e manufacturing, construction etc.), and street vending. By focusing on the buses as a fieldsite, this study introduces new explorations into the ways that informal workers engage in economic activities through busking, peddling and panhandling.

This study is timely. It documents rebusque practices on Bogotá's buses before this labour form is eliminated in March 2011. Then, a new transport system will integrate the main bus system with TransMilenio and both will be officially regulated so as to terminate bus rebusque (see El Espectador 2010:par.12), as will be explained further in section 2.1 and the Conclusions.

1.3 Methodological Approaches and Ethics

The research findings described herein are based on one month of ethnographic fieldwork among informal workers in Bogotá's buses from mid August to mid September 2009. My qualitative research involved participant observation from a bus-rider's viewpoint. Participant observation data emerged from my direct participation and observation in the ordinary everyday practice of city dwellers that is bus riding, and was based solely on information that was publicly available.

For researching public workers or artistic performers about whom information is already made publicly available in the course of their labours, the Tri-council does not require ethical review. The Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, in section 1, Article 1.1 (c) of their "Tri-council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans," have stated that:

Research about a living individual involved in the public arena, or about an artist, based exclusively on publicly available information, documents, records, works, performances, archival materials or third-party interviews, is not required to undergo ethics review. Such research only requires ethics review if the subject is approached directly for interviews or for access to private papers, and then only to ensure that such approaches are conducted according to professional protocols and to Article 2.3 of this Policy (1998: P1.1).

In addition, article 2.3 of the Tri-Council Policy Statement further states:

REB review is normally required for research involving naturalistic observation. However, research involving observation of participants in, for example, political rallies, demonstrations or public meetings, should not require REB review since it can be expected that the participants are seeking public visibility (1998: A.5).

With regards to my project, performances and accounts of their own lives provided by people who work at rebusque on the buses can be considered publicly available information. The stories informal workers tell, as well as their musical

performances while doing rebusque, are available to anyone who uses public transportation and could therefore be construed as being within “public visibility” so that my project would not need to undergo ethics review. Nonetheless, I have had this project reviewed by Carleton University’s ethics committee and received ethics clearance for it in August 2009.

Thus, the procedures that involved each research participant (or informal workers on the buses, and co-represent bus riders and bus drivers) are not different from the activities in which they normally engage when rebusque is practiced on the buses. There were no interviews, questionnaires, tests or personal conversations between participants and me. My only research procedure involved taking bus rides as the sole participant observation researcher. I made four city bus trips for a total of four hours daily on a variety of bus routes across downtown Bogotá.

There are advantages and disadvantages to avoiding interviews in ethnographic research. Among the advantages is that participants’ actions follow their spontaneous ways of dealing with their lives on a quotidian basis, and are less likely to be altered by the presence of the researcher or framed within the researcher’s particular set of questions, as has occurred in some ethnographic research that has resorted to this means of data collection. For instance, in his ethnographic work with Tuhami, a Moroccan tilemaker, anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano observes that, “Not only did my presence, and my questions, prepare him for the text he was to produce, but they produced what I read as a change of consciousness in him” (Crapanzano 1980:11).

However, my methodological choice of not doing interviews also has some disadvantages. I cannot claim to offer an account of informal workers' lives and social contexts in their entirety. Although I complemented their expressed views with data found in newspapers as well as in social science and historical studies on informal workers' testimonies, there were some aspects of their claims that still remain inconclusive and perhaps further enquiry into their particular life circumstances would have provided a more complete picture of their situations. Thus, my research cannot be taken as representative of the entire situation experienced by informal workers in Colombia, or even as a complete portrait of certain rebusque practitioners' lives. Nonetheless, this research is presented with the aim of describing possible ways that informal economic activities on the buses in Bogotá can be understood.

I should also acknowledge that my position as a person born and raised in Colombia undoubtedly influenced my analysis, facilitating or impeding my interpretations at various points of my research. Indeed, due to my familiarity with the Colombian context I could understand most of the underlying cultural beliefs that guide people's daily interactions in this country. However, I may have also taken for granted some behaviors and attitudes which may have led me to overlook certain aspects that could have been relevant to analyzing the information gathered. The way I tried to overcome these drawbacks was through reflexivity, by reminding myself constantly of my position and taking a moment to think upon the different events I was going through during the research process. Ultimately, I hope that any identified biases or oversights on my part will encourage readers to explore further the arguments propounded, and to contribute to the discussion presented in this thesis.

1.4 Ethnographic and Theoretical Background

The concepts of “rebusque” and “informal economy” clearly require discussion about the contested meanings for “work” which they convey. In her study among “cartoneros” (street recyclers) in Argentina, anthropologist Corina Aimmetta notes that the idea of “work” is conventionally understood as “wage labour,” and argues that alternative forms of income and employment in the informal sector challenge such a definition of work (Aimetta 2009: 2, 3; see also Salaman 1980: 21; Durrenberg and Marti 2006: 2; Castree et al 2004; Núñez 2007; Wade 1999).

Based on my evaluation of some of the academic studies consulted for this research, I must note my reservations about the concepts of “work” and “informal economy,” particularly since they cover a wide variety of terms with different meanings. In the case of “work,” for example, “labour,” “job,” “employment,” and “occupation” are used interchangeably by some scholars to refer to “work” in their research (See for example Castree et al. 2004; Mains 2007; Mollona 2009; and Wade 1999). In addition, some of the scholarly attempts to differentiate among these concepts seem to contradict one another. For instance, what some scholars would call “work,” others would define as “labour,” and vice versa. To illustrate this viewpoint, anthropologists John Calagione and Daniel Nugent explain that, “In studying work and workers we sometimes refer now to work, now to ‘labor,’ to signify creative activity on the one hand and economically productive activity on the other”(Calagione and Nugent 1992: 7). By contrast, geographers Noel Castree et al. treat the terms of work and labour interchangeably as opposed to Calagione and Nugent’s definition that differentiates between these two

concepts. Thus, Castree et al. define “labour” as “Both the act of work and the name for people who do that work” (Castree et al. 2004: 257).

Similar contradictions occur when referring to “work” in terms of “employment” and “job.” In fact, while some scholars distinguish between the concepts of employment and work, others use them as synonymous. To give an instance, economist Julio Cesar Neffa affirms that “Not all work is employment; someone can work and yet not have an employment [...] it [employment] is a labour relation that takes place for a period of time, and has a mercantile nature, as it is done in exchange for an individually assigned salary” (Neffa 1999: 135, 137; my translation). On the other hand, in his study among young Ethiopians, anthropologist Daniel Mains approaches the terms of employment and work indistinguishably and does not seem to define employment as related only to wage labour. As Mains puts it, “In Ethiopia, employment is often conceived of not only in terms of labor and wages but also in relation to the social interactions associated with particular occupations [...] To work or not to work was a social decision” (Mains 2007: 660, 663).

Mains’ assertions lead me to consider another concept associated with the notion of “work,” namely “occupations.” Sociologist Graeme Salaman understands occupations as a function of work in terms of the social values attributed to it. Thus, Salaman defines occupations as, “identity-giving work [...] To describe a man’s work as an occupation suggests that his work carries implications for his identity and attitudes, and, possibly, for his choice of friends and associates” (Salaman 1980: 35). Similarly, sociologist Katherine Newman notes that an occupation relates to people’s social expectations and

further links this notion to the idea of “job.” As Newman explains, “occupation is a crucial determinant of social status, because, in addition to money, a job confers prestige and a sense of purpose” (Newman 1988: 23). Meanwhile, anthropologists Ann Kingsolver and Mario Parelman propose a definition of “work” similar to that of “occupations,” but contrary to Newman, these scholars differentiate between the concepts of “work” and “job,” framing the latter one in terms of wage labour. As Kingsolver and Parelman state, “The concept of work is not synonymous with ‘having a job’ but instead needs to be understood in broader terms as part of the construction of the identities of workers” (Kingsolver and Parelman 2007: 11).

Thus, diverse accounts conceptualize work and its associated terms differently. However, there is a consensus among these authors suggesting that there is a need to expand our definition of “work” beyond understandings that frame it within monetary purposes, and consider other kinds of social exchanges and relations established by people’s experiences of their work. Indeed, an extensive literature describes the importance of providing a more inclusive definition of “work” that takes into account people’s conceptualizations and views of what they consider to be their work, and the historical and socio-cultural context in which such definitions of work are constructed (Aimetta 2009: 3, 4; Kingsolver and Parelman 2007: 11; Blau 1993: 19; Wade 1999; Heelas 2002; Mains 2007). By the same token, Kingsolver and Parelman further argue that by focusing on workers’ quotidian experiences we can examine individual as well as larger social issues, and understand that work encompasses “a whole universe of feelings and relationships that acquire significance in the individual and collective experience of the subjects” (Kingsolver and Parelman 2007: 11).

In this way, scholars have challenged traditional utilitarian assumptions that maintain the idea that money is the only incentive for work, and they urge scholars to explore the different reasons that motivates people to work (Wilk 1996: 68; Gamst 1995: xxi; Zielenic 2007: 26; Mollona 663; Aimetta 2009; Ransome 2005: 22; Pardo 2009: 103; Calagione and Nugent 1992: 7). As Gamst explains, “Work has also a dimension of intrinsic rewards [...] People work for a variety of motives that are psychic, sociocultural, and economic” (Gamst 1995: xxi). Subsequent chapters of this thesis will reveal, through the ethnographic example of bus rebusque, how ideas of work vary and are constructed based on complex social relationships in which workers are immersed daily.

Sociologist Cecilia del Pilar Mendoza defines rebusque in Colombia as an individual’s creative ability to find solutions to life adversities and reach family or personal goals. As Mendoza puts it:

“Rebusque” is an expression used broadly by Colombians to describe the way people have to “make it on their own.” It means the repeated action of looking for a way to survive when their survival is uncertain, and get the money needed to sustain themselves daily (as individuals or as a family). It means to find solutions to life crises and be able to act in an uncertain context. In sum, it is the ability to conquer life adversities. It [rebusque] could be defined as an individual’s achievement and his/her capacity to be able to do well in life despite the adverse circumstances of his/her social context, the creative disposition to find solutions to life obstacles, the perseverance to succeed, the determination to reach goals: “el ser echao pa’lante” (2000:57,58; my translation).

However, Mendoza’s perception of rebusque has been highly criticized by sociologist Alvaro Camacho who maintains that such an interpretation (of what he calls the cultural and social dimensions of rebusque) evokes a kind of creativity and ingenuity that promotes attitudes against the state, individualism and delinquency. As he expresses it:

In its social and cultural dimensions *rebusque* is associated with attitudes against the state, and is characterized by a group of practices that reproduce a logic of opportunity in which subjects look for the spaces offered to them on a quotidian basis to solve their individual or family problems of survival. *Rebusque* evokes ingenuity and creativity to evade legal norms and procedures in order to satisfy personal or group goals. It is a practice that tends to promote informality, exceed institutional limits and activate illegality and delinquency. This understanding of *rebusque* sustains an ideology that praises the capacity of a subject to conquer adversity, but masks the fact that this practice promotes individualism and the impoverishment of the social fabric. It has led, indeed, to the assumption that this capacity of individual achievement makes unnecessary state intervention under the belief that the presence of the state castrates private ends (Camacho 2001:133; my translation).

I find Mendoza's and Camacho's understandings of *rebusque* to be quite problematic. First of all, I disagree that *rebusque* should be understood in terms of an individualistic kind of agency to achieve personal or family goals as both scholars somehow assert. Indeed, while Mendoza notes that it is an individual's response to an uncertain social context, I depart from this definition which insists that people who engage in *rebusque* "make it on their own" as individual and isolated agents. My findings reveal a more complex multitude of social relations which informal workers on the buses establish in order to be able to make a living through *rebusque*. For instance, as described above in the case of Lorenzo, *rebusque* workers depend on the good will of bus drivers and also upon forming some sense of solidarity with riders in order to successfully do *rebusque* on the buses. This becomes evident when informal workers have to ask bus drivers to be able to get on their buses or when they express their gratitude to bus drivers for letting them work on the bus and to riders for their collaboration. These acknowledgements are given in narratives performed before or after offering products or performances to bus riders.

On the other hand, I think it is quite striking that Camacho talks about the "social and cultural dimensions" of *rebusque* and condemns it as a practice that promotes individualism and delinquency without considering the social context in which informal

workers live and the reasons they have to engage in rebusque, how they do it and for whom, exactly, they do it (Camacho 2001). Thus, Camacho's concerns are quite ungrounded and oversimplified. I suggest that rebusque does not always promote delinquency or individualism, but quite the opposite, as the following chapters of this thesis will demonstrate.

It should be noted here that this thesis does not seek to offer an apologetic account of rebusque and the informal economy, or ignore the downsides that scholars have found in some activities of the informal economy such as workers' exploitation and lack of social protection in the form of benefits, the low wages informal workers often earn, as well as criminal activities within informal dealings such as sex trafficking and particularly the drug trafficking in Colombia (Camacho 2001; Garay et al. 2009a; Bromley 1978). Rather, this thesis aims at examining the unexplored sides of rebusque, such as the social ties that sustain it as well as the kind of social, economic and political interests rebusque represents, in order to furnish an ethnographic counterpart to these scholars' assertions.

In this vein, it is important to question the extent to which this tendency to equate all activities within the informal economy with criminality obeys conventional perceptions of informality in terms of illegality. Scholars have noted that such perceptions of informality have led some authors to view informal economic activities that do not fit into officially sanctioned economic orders, as "other" (Murphy 1990: 161) or even "deviant" (Halperin and Sturdevant 1990: 324). Indeed, the informal economy is usually related to illegality based on the idea that the activities undertaken within the

informal sector develop outside the law that regulates the official or formal economy (Benton 1990; Long and Richardson 1978; De Soto 1989; Castree et al. 2004). As Long and Richardson explain, “The formal sector -including government activity and the private sector- is officially fostered and regulated by the state” (Long and Richardson 1978: 179). On the other hand, Castree et al. define the informal economy as, “Work (usually paid) undertaken outside the normal rules, regulations and norms of the formal economy” (Castree et al. 2004: 257). By the same token, De Soto argues that the persistence of the informal economy in Peru is a result of the intervention of the state through extreme regulations on the economy that obstruct people’s entrance to the formal economy and therefore informal economic activities have to develop outside the law (De Soto 1989:232). Thus, some scholars seem to agree that one of the causes of informality is formality and the legal system that regulates it. For instance, Fernandez-Kelly affirms that, “Without formal laws defining the relationship between employers and workers, the informal economy cannot exist. Put differently, formality breeds informality” (2006: 3).

Along these lines, De Soto concludes that, “For the sake of simplicity, however, we will assume that informals have no legal status whatsoever and that formals are completely legal [...] The legal system prevents people from being formal” (De Soto 1989: 152, 232). Although there is some truth to De Soto’s argument in the sense that state regulations play a role in limiting people’s access to the formal economy, I find his assertions to be quite generalistic, and questionably based on a conception that separates law from culture. As De Soto puts it, “The legal system so far seems to be the best explanation for the existence of informality [...] We cannot continue to close our eyes to

the fact that not all society's decisions are determined by its cultural characteristics or economic systems" (1989: 185, 186). In this way, De Soto's affirmation overlooks the cultural aspects and complexities of law formulation and implementation widely documented by social scientists.

Indeed, anthropologist Alexander Ervin suggests that laws and policies are not isolated aspects from culture but "emerge out of a much wider and deeper context of social action and cultural expectation" (Ervin 2005: 44). In addition, scholars agree that ideas of illegality, as well as the activities that develop within the informal economy are culture-based, and thus vary across cultures (Bromley 1994; Gaughan and Ferman 1987; Murphy 1990). To give an instance, anthropologist Joseph Gaughan and sociologist Louis Ferman discuss the ambiguity of the informal sector and its relatedness with ideas of illegality arguing that although many activities within the informal economy may be outside the law, not all are totally illegal or criminal across cultures because some informal activities are immersed in a series of relationships of "tolerance" and even "encouragement" and therefore "their status with respect to the law may vary" in different cultures (Gaughan and Ferman 1987: 22).

In addition, Tokman argues that De Soto's widely known work on the informal economy in Peru has ignored the heterogeneity of the informal sector by categorizing all informal activities within the realm of illegality when some informal activities work in a grey arena between "underground and legality" (Tokman 1992: 7; See also Roberts 1990:41; Lanzetta 1989: 104-108). Similarly, in anthropologist Keith Hart's study of the informal economy among the Fafra in Northern Ghana, he notes that it is difficult to

categorize workers as belonging to either sector unambiguously due to the fact that people have multiple sources of income which bridge the informal and formal sectors (Hart 1973 83; See also Garay 2009a: 199; Barber 1992: 203n4). In the same vein, Halperin and Sturdevant argue that, “To define the informal economy as only those activities that are illegal rules out all of the alternative forms that are legal, but non-mainstream” (Halperin and Sturdevant 1990: 330). Therefore, scholars seem to agree that legality is not always a useful conceptual tool for understanding the informal economy.

Nonetheless, social scientists recognize that there are indeed legal barriers and costs to entering the formal sector and “staying legal,” such as registration requirements related to taxes, licenses, safety and labour standards, and the money and time costs to get such registrations in place (Casanovas 1992: 31-43; Lagos 1992: 88-104; Powelson 1998: 12; Long and Richardson 1978). However, Lagos argues that the “institutional and legal obstacle” argument does not totally explain the persistence of the informal sector in Latin America as such costs vary among different countries of this region. For instance, according to Lagos, although Bolivia has less institutional instability and less regulation barriers in terms of time and costs to enter formality, the informal sector is almost as widespread as it is in Guatemala where institutional instability and regulation barriers are stronger (Lagos 1992: 87-89, 97).

One of the reasons, besides legal requirements, that scholars have found for informal workers choosing to remain in the informal sector is related to their income

opportunities. For instance, anthropologist Martin Murphy's work among "lechugeros"⁶ in the streets of Santo Domingo notes that these informal workers chose to remain in the informal sector because they have more income opportunities than they would have in the formal economy (Murphy 1990: 176). Similarly, sociologist Bryan Roberts notes that, "At times, informal sector employment offers higher and more flexible forms of income than could be gained in the formal given age and qualifications" (Roberts 1990: 41). By the same token, scholars Murphy and Hart agree that sometimes informal workers get higher wages in the informal economy and decide to stay in it because of the inadequacy of the minimum wages in the formal sector (Murphy 1990: 171; Hart 1973:66). Thus, one of the conventional reasons that is used to categorize activities in the informal economy, specifically the fact that people receive incomes inferior to the minimum wage (Garay et al. 2009a: 199), is not always applicable to all workers' experiences in the informal economy.

In addition to the fact that sometimes informal workers have better monetary possibilities in the informal sector, another reason for people to choose informality is time. According to Tokman, the costs of legality are not only calculated in terms of money but also in time (Tokman 1992: 8). However, Tokman notes that time concerns are not only related to the time it takes to have all the paperwork to do legitimate business but also in terms of flexible work relations and working hours. As Tokman puts it, "The work process is organized in a different manner in informal units: labor relations are not subject to contracts, working hours and remuneration are flexible" (1992: 13). Similarly, economists David Ochoa and Aura Ordóñez have noted that in Colombia

⁶ Street vendors who sell fruits and vegetables.

some women prefer to be employed in the informal sector because it offers flexible working hours which allows them to contribute to the household income, as well as to fulfill other responsibilities in their homes (Ochoa and Ordóñez 2004: 110). This in turn shows how, as Aimetta discerns, the very idea of work time (or “disciplined” work time as historian E.P. Thompson [1967] would refer to it) seems to disappear in many activities within the informal economy (Aimetta 2009: 4) and informal workers are attracted to this.

Thus, scholars agree that a definition of the informal economy is very ambiguous due to the heterogeneity of the informal economic sector and the variety of reasons people have to resort to it; and this is commonly ignored in conventional understandings of the informal economy (Tokman 1989; Trager 1987; Lulle and Gros 2006).

Anthropologist Lillian Trager, in her analysis of the informal sector in West African cities, notes the heterogeneity of the informal economy in these urban areas and advocates for a definition that encompasses the wide variety of activities that develop within the informal economic sector. In this way, Trager follows Portes and Walton’s approach to the informal economy being understood as “all income-producing activities outside formal sector wages and social security payments” (Portes and Walton as cited in Trager 1987: 239). Trager borrows this definition of the informal economy arguing that it is open to the diversity we may find in the informal sector in different cultural settings. My problem with this definition is that it places all activities within the informal economy as being solely income-driven. Although many of the reasons for people to engage in the informal sector relate to income gains, my research findings suggest that

people also have other types of exchange relationships and conditions for engaging in the informal economy, as will become clear as the discussion develops.

In order to study the heterogeneity of the informal economy, Trager suggests three approaches. The first approach consists of studying informal enterprises; a second approach involves focusing on the workers in terms of their ownership characteristics, and the third approach proposed by Trager requires looking at particular types of informal activities (Trager 1987: 242, 243). Although Trager's suggested approaches to studying the heterogeneity of the informal economy can be useful to guide our studies of it, I focus on informal workers and their rebusque activities on the buses, not in terms of their ownership characteristics, but in terms of their life's circumstances evoked through their rebusque performances. In addition, I would also add to her suggestions that an analysis of the spatial dimensions of rebusque, namely inside buses in the case at hand, influence the ways people engage in it, and that spatial relations also influence our understandings of the heterogeneity we find in the informal sector.

It is important to note that most of the studies on the informal economy described above have been done on activities developed in the streets and within informally owned and operated businesses. Similarly, and as was briefly noted earlier, most of the anthropological work done on rebusque and the informal economy in Colombia also focuses on this activity in the streets. For instance, the most widely known ethnographic study on rebusque in Colombia is the work done by anthropologist Clara Gil on street vendors in downtown Bogotá (1998). Gil's work sheds some light into the social context in which informal workers engage in rebusque by focusing on an

analysis of this activity as it occurs on the streets through the formation of street vendors' unions. In analyzing the persistence of the informal economy in Colombia, Gil provides a historical perspective informed by sociologist and historian Fernando Guillen's theoretical approaches and suggests that a feudalist mentality from colonial times still permeates all levels of Colombian society and forms of social organization. I must note here that the term used by anthropologist Clara Gil to refer to this social logic in Colombia is the "Hacienda" (estate) system. Scholar Vincent Pérez explains that although historians have debated the characterization of the Hacienda institution as being strictly "feudal" due to its hybrid character regarding forms of production, there seems to be an agreement among these scholars that in terms of its social organization (paternalistic in nature) the Hacienda can be understood as "feudal" (Pérez 2006:31-36). In this vein, I am using the term "feudal" to refer to the kind of social relationships of patronage and peonage that Gil describes in relation to the Hacienda model in Colombia.

Indeed, according to Gil, "Relationships of work, property and authority are associated with an integrative model of interpersonal relationships of command, obedience and loyalty that underlies attitudes of respect, subordination, and domination in this society. This has its roots in the integrative structure of the Hacienda model" (Gil 1998:22; my translation). Thus, Gil argues that in the Hacienda system, social relationships are of an "authoritarian" and "paternalistic" model, and this is reflected in all realms of Colombian social organization (Gil 1998:22). Gil asserts that even though industrialism and syndicalism came to Colombia, the state became the new "patron," and this was reflected in its protagonist role in the construction of a society that incorporated the values of the old Hacienda model within a modern clientelism where political

loyalties started to determine access to the “favours of the state” (Gil 1998:24-25), including access to employment in the formal sector. This, Gil suggests, is a form of integration that has somehow promoted the informal economy in Colombia.

Similarly, De Soto analyzes the origins and growth of informality in Peru and notes that it is a response to the broader political and economic system that permeates Peruvian society. However, De Soto argues that the political-economy pervading Peru is basically mercantile, as reflected in the intervention of the state in the economy through extreme regulations that informal workers are not willing to be subjected to due to all the costs that such regulations demanded from workers in order to enter the formal sector (De Soto 1989: 15).

As noted above, the intervention of the state in Colombian society has been explained by scholars in terms of a feudalist model, rather than the mercantilist model applied to Peru (Gil 1998; see also Guillen 1979). Thus, Gil’s understanding of the intervention of the state in Colombia goes beyond the state imposition of extreme rules, such as barriers that obstruct people’s access to the formal economy which De Soto notes as occurring in Peru. For Gil, state intervention in Colombia works mostly as a taken for granted relationship of “command, obedience and loyalty” that has its roots in colonial feudalist modes of integration (Gil 1998:22). An analysis of how historically rooted ideas, such as that of patronage pervading Colombian institutions since colonial times, have contributed to the persistence of Colombia’s informal sector, is by no means irrelevant to the issues at hand. It is, however, beyond the scope of this thesis.

My discussion about how informal economic activities represent alternative means to work outside of the official economic order is informed by the approach of Matos, Halperin and Sturdevant. Anthropologists Rhoda Halperin and Sara Sturdevant, in their analysis of the informal economy in eastern Kentucky, follow Polyani's definition of the formal economy as the "dominant mode of economic integration," (Polyani as cited in Halperin and Sturdevant 1990: 323), and note that studies of the informal economy can be useful to question conventional and officially sanctioned economic orders within the formal economy (Halperin and Sturdevant 1990: 323, 325).

By the same token, Anthropologist José Matos analyzes the different ways Peruvian society, in the context of an institutional crisis, "creatively questions and develops multiple forms of survival and adaptation by challenging and surpassing the established order, the norm, the legal, the official, the formal" (Matos 1984: 15; my translation). He calls these new emergent forms of survival in Peruvian society the "Desborde Popular" (Popular Overflow) (Matos 1984: 15; my translation). For Matos, the informal sector is part of this overflow of new and alternative ways to survive in Peruvian society (Matos 1984: 15, 63).

Unlike Matos, however, Halperin and Sturdevant argue that alternative forms of economic organization within the informal economy do not only reflect peoples' efforts to survive but also their ability to transform established economic orders. As Halperin and Sturdevant put it, "Informal economies are barometers not only of variability, but also of pluralism and change in the organization of economic systems" (1990: 333).

In a sense, I consider rebusque as an example of what Matos calls “Desborde Popular” where people create multiple forms of survival in the context of perceived institutional weaknesses. However, in looking at my data I found that, similar to Halperin and Studervant’s ethnographic observations of the informal economy in eastern Kentucky, rebusque on the buses in Bogotá does not only serve people as a means of survival but also of change. Nonetheless, I will expand Halperin and Studervant’s assertions by suggesting that informal workers in Bogotá’s buses use rebusque as a medium to introduce new ideas and ways of action into the constitution of both economic and social systems. They do so by challenging conventional perceptions that discriminate against informal workers’ rebusque activities, by expressing messages of social dissatisfaction and resilience, and by representing an employment alternative (albeit temporary and partial) to paid violence. Notably, they offer these critiques even while practicing an informal labour alternative to the readily available recourses to Colombian unemployment: thievery, and above all, paid positions as fighters in the military, paramilitary or guerilla forces.

By combining the insights of these three anthropologists, Matos, Halperin and Sturdevant, this thesis will examine how people’s activities within the informal economy, and thereby as part of a “popular overflow,” reflect not only informal workers’ means of survival but also a broader socio-economic transformation.

This leads me to embark also on an analysis of informal workers’ agency. I am basing such an analysis on the broader framework of Sherry Ortner’s idea of “serious games,” De Certeau’s notion of “tactics” and Merleau-Ponty’s approach to

phenomenology. The main question guiding my articulation of these scholars' theoretical perspectives is: How is agency shaped for rebusque workers who experience "being in the world" and orientation through space and time as performers on the buses of Bogotá?

In her analysis of the notion of "serious games," Ortner clarifies that it has nothing to do with game theory which assumes a model for universal rationality (Ortner 2006: 133). Unlike game theory, Ortner explains, serious games refer to "cultural formations" that are culturally variable and serve as a means "to understand the larger forces, formations, and transformations of social life" (2006: 133). In addition, she notes that an analysis of these cultural formations, or serious games, "allows us to bring into focus more complex forms of social relations" (2006:129). By the same token, Ortner notes that her use of the term "games" intends to emphasize the social embeddedness of the concept as games are part of social life and therefore "social, a matter of relationships" (Ortner 1999:23), which allows for a "multiplicity of games [...] played simultaneously" (Ortner 1996:19). In this vein, Ortner concludes that in order to understand the "workings" of serious games it is necessary to consider "these games as games, with their inclusions and exclusions, multiple positions, complex rules, forms of bodily activity, structures of feeling and desire, and stakes of winning, losing or simply playing" (Ortner 1996:19).

Ortner further argues that "Serious games always involve the play of actors seen as 'agents'" (2006: 130). However, and contrary to Mendoza's view of rebusque workers' actions in terms of an individual kind of agency discussed above, Ortner

questions conventional Western understandings of agency as an “autonomous” and “individualistic” force and argues that agency is socially embedded in “webs of relations” of power and solidarity where it is “interactively negotiated”(Ortner 2006: 130, 151). As Ortner puts it:

Thus while all social actors are assumed to “have” agency, the idea of actors as always being engaged with others in the play of serious games is meant to make it virtually impossible to imagine that the agent is free, or is an unfettered individual [...] individuals or persons or subjects are always embedded in webs of relations, whether of affection and solidarity, or of power and rivalry, or frequently of some mixture of the two. Whatever “agency” they seem to “have” as individuals is in reality something that is always interactively negotiated (2006: 130, 151).

Therefore, central to Ortner’s idea of serious games are questions of agency as negotiated within webs of social relations. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty notes that “We are through and through compounded of relationships with the world” through which we experience our sense of “being-in-the-world” (Merleau-Ponty 2003[1945]: xiv). Here, it is important to ask the following question: What does the idea of “being in the world” mean for Merleau-Ponty? The obvious theme underlying Merleau-Ponty’s theoretical assertion is space, namely the space of the world. However, in my reading of Merleau-Ponty the notion of “being in the world” does not only carry a spatial dimension, but also a temporal one as individuals experience the space of the world at a certain moment in time. As Merleau-Ponty describes it, “the space is given to him in the form of the world at this moment” (2003[1945]: 122).

In explaining how individuals are in the world at a point in time Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between positions understood in terms of a “pre-existing being,” and situations defined as “the lay-down of being” (2003[1945]: xx). In this vein, he argues

that people are in the space of the world through their “situations” rather than their “positions,” and situations lead their bodies into action. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

And indeed its spatiality is not, like that of external objects or like that of ‘spatial sensations,’ a *spatiality of position*, but a *spatiality of situation* [...] the world ‘here’ applied to my body does not refer to a determinate position in relation to other positions or to external co-ordinates, but the laying down of the first co-ordinates, the anchoring of the active body in an object, the situation of the body in face of its tasks (2003[1945]: 87,115).

In this vein, Merleau-Ponty explains that situations emerge from peoples’ experience of the world and their cultural values which in turn lead them to act such that, “through their combined values they delimit a certain situation, an open situation moreover, which calls for a certain mode of resolution” (2003[1945]: 122). Along these lines, Merleau-Ponty maintains that people experience and intercommunicate with their world “through the agency of [their] body as the potentiality of this world” (2003 [1945]: 408).

Thus, from my understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s work, agency results from people’s experience of being in the world and through the situations that develop in relation to their social context, all of which leads them to act upon the world corporeally: “My body is wherever there is something to be done” (Merleau-Ponty 2003 [1945]: 291).

The important point here is that agency for Merleau-Ponty emerges *situationally* from people’s experience of “being in the world” spatially, temporally, and above all corporeally. Somewhat similarly, Ortner suggests that agency in “serious games” results from people’s modes of acting upon situations that develop in a determined space and time. As Ortner puts it “human agency,[is] the capacity of social beings to interpret and

morally evaluate their situation and to formulate projects and try to enact them [...] All humans have a capacity for agency, but the specific forms it takes will vary in different times and places” (Ortner 2006: 56,136).

Another point of connection between these two scholars is illustrated by Ortner’s rationalizations of agency and “serious games” as having a corporeal component as well. Indeed, as described earlier, in her discussion of “serious games” Ortner clarifies that in order to elucidate the ways in which these “games” work, and therefore the kinds of agency it allows, it is necessary to understand “these games as games” which also involves considering them as “forms of bodily activity” (Ortner1996:19). This accounts for informal workers’ corporeal practices while getting on the buses, and how they actually perform rebusque, as well as my own capacity to observe it during my fieldwork, as will be illustrated in the next chapters.

The larger context of agency in Ortner’s work is mainly, though not only, situations of power relations from which projects or serious games originate. For, “cultural projects are themselves serious games, the social play of cultural goals organized in and around local relations of power” (Ortner 2006:145). Ortner’s idea of agency in terms of projects or serious games that pursue cultural goals in the context of power relations can be paralleled with De Certeau’s idea of “tactics” (De Certeau 1984: xix). According to De Certeau, tactics are the “actions” or “games” that are possible for marginalized people in situations of power, “We are concerned with battles or games, between the strong and the weak, and with the actions that remain possible for the latter” (De Certeau 1984: 34). It is by being in the situation or context of power relations that marginalized groups establish those tactics, “By an art of being in between, he draws

unexpected results from his situation” (De Certeau 1984: 30). This characterizes the sorts of predicaments in which individuals find themselves when they decide to practice rebusque on the buses of Bogotá.

Interestingly, De Certeau equates the space of tactics with the space of the “other” in the sense that tactics develop within the context of officially sanctioned orders. “The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus, it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power” (De Certeau 1984: 37). This fits within the above discussion of the relationship between informal and formal economies, and how the officially sanctioned order of a formal economy and its regulations prompt economic activities that develop outside it, creating an informal economy that is viewed as “other” (Murphy 1990: 161). Thus, in the case at hand, it can be considered that “the space of the tactic,” is the space of rebusque and the informal economy.

There is also a temporal dimension to the development of De Certeau’s idea of agency through tactics in contexts of power in the sense that tactics depend on “a clever *utilization of time*, of the opportunities it presents and also of the play that it introduces into the foundations of power” (De Certeau 1984: 38, 39). In the case of rebusque workers described here, the general context wherein such power relations and other kinds of social exchange take place, is urban Colombia. Similarly, as subsequent chapters of this thesis will reveal further, I found that rebusque is largely contingent on informal workers’ strategic use, not only of urban space and particularly the social and physical spaces inside the buses, but also of time. Thus, I will consider rebusque as an

example of De Certeau's tactics at various points in this thesis. However, at some stages of the discussion, I will depart from De Certeau's work on "tactics" as being, through their play and challenge of power relations, "outside the reach" of power (De Certeau 1984:95), and I will think of rebusque more as a "serious game" where "the omnipresence of power" (Ortner 2006:131) is evident. In this way, this thesis will explore some of the relationships and actions that exceed monetary rewards but nonetheless take place in rebusque space and time. In other words, it will examine the "multiplicity of games [...] available in that time and space" (Ortner 1996: 19). Thus, the following chapters will discuss the ways in which these theoretical approaches help explain how informal workers' rebusque activities can be considered as pursuing tactics and serious games which emerge situationally from their experience of "being-in-the-world" of larger social forces and relations across time and space. An analysis of this underlying orientation through a web of social relations is revealed by their rebusque performances, which will in turn provide some insights into the ways informal workers' agency is shaped by their experiences of the social world they live in. In other words, their life stories and other performances will demonstrate how they have forged agency through socially embedded responses to their life situations.

1.5 Research Questions:

The questions to explore throughout my research are: What could bus informal workers' life stories and performances tell us about the broader socio-cultural context in which these people live? What other kinds of social relations and conceptions of social life (besides monetary exchanges and criminal perceptions) are established and evoked

by bus informal workers' rebusque performances? Are there different visions concerning how rebusque constitutes a form of work? Do rebusque practitioners' conceptions of rebusque as a form of work conform or conflict with one another? What could an ethnography of such rebusque practitioners add to conventional perceptions of work and the informal economy in current academic literature and state labour policies in Colombia? Could informal economic activities provide not only an alternative means of survival, but also some expression of a popular desire for socio-economic change? What are the social and economic interests represented by informal workers doing rebusque on the buses? How is rebusque performers' agency shaped by their experiences of working within the temporal orientations and spatial conditions of Bogotá's downtown buses?

1.6 Chapter Outline

This thesis is divided into six chapters. As already revealed, Chapter One begins with a brief description of the ethnographic observations that led me to engage in this project in order to familiarize readers with the activity of rebusque as it occurs on the buses of downtown Bogotá. It introduces the themes of inquiry, the significance, and methods of the research. It also explores the concepts of rebusque, work, informal economy and agency as part of the ethnographic and theoretical framework used to interpret ethnographic data collected for this research project.

Chapter Two outlines the first theme of the discussion: the spatio-temporal dimensions of rebusque on the buses that yield different kinds of social relationships established between bus drivers, riders and rebusque workers to be described and discussed throughout this thesis. It starts with an examination of the space of buses in

relation to other broader spatialities within the urban and public space of downtown Bogotá. By contrasting bus rebusque to informal economic activities taking place in the street, the terms of the city's regulations and its forms of organization in public spaces will be revealed. This chapter will then be able to discuss the impacts of these different spatialities on informal workers' decision to do rebusque on the buses. This chapter also explores the ways in which rebusque activities on the buses are time specific by describing rebusque practitioners' strategic use of time during certain hours of the day. For they must gage when traffic congestion favours them, and determine whether they will be able to do rebusque on the buses or not. Along these lines, there will also be an analysis of how informal workers' interactions with drivers and riders develop at different times within the space of the bus: when they pursue it, access it and how they occupy the bus. As part of this, the riders' and drivers' responses of acceptance or discrimination toward the informal workers on the buses is described and discussed. Lastly, this chapter will more explicitly outline the role of the body in forging rebusque workers' agency on the buses.

Chapter Three offers a counterpart to conventional criminalist approaches to rebusque which discriminate against this activity as a form of work. It will describe how informal workers are aware of peoples' widely diffused perceptions of rebusque in terms of criminality, and act upon it by using their rebusque activities as a way to potentially prevent or delay their engagement in violent scenarios, and to promote their own ideas of rebusque as a form of honest work, thus challenging widespread conceptions of their activity. In this way, Chapter Three initiates discussion about the "multiplicity of games" in rebusque by analyzing how rebusque aims for more than monetary gain and expands

toward other kinds of social exchanges and relations. Indeed, it promotes ideas aimed at challenging, and perhaps transforming, the many misleading conventional notions about this social and economic practice.

Chapter Four continues this discussion from Chapter Three by examining broader power relations revealed by bus rebusque workers' critical ideas towards the wider socio-political order in Colombia. Like other informal workers, they generally see their social marginalization as a result of the state's lack of attention to their dire situation. Following this is an analysis of how informal workers' claims of social discontent represent a moral economy whereby the role of the state in socio-economic matters is interpreted. This moral economy is then contrasted to ideas of employability stated in government laws and neoliberal labour policies that currently regulate Colombia's formal economy.

In this vein, Chapter Five analyzes how rebusque performances include expressions of resilience and self-reliance through which they achieve relationships of social solidarity that help minimize people's feelings of discontent towards neoliberal state policies and actions. It examines how the kind of solidarity forged through rebusque workers's self-reliance provides a more explicit insight into the "social embeddedness" of agency noted in Ortner's work on "serious games." It further explores how social relationships of solidarity also emerge from common situations of hardship, as well as from nationalist and religious beliefs shared between bus informal workers and riders. Finally, Chapter Six presents some concluding remarks and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: Spatio-Temporal Dimensions of Rebusque

2.1 The Space of the Bus within Urban and Public Spatialities

To begin a discussion of the impact that the bus space has on the ways informal workers do rebusque, it is important to note that the space of the bus exists within other spatialities, those of urban and public spaces. Urban economists Thakoor Persaud and Alexandra Ortiz define urban areas in Colombia as “those with a population of 5,000 or more” (Persaud and Ortiz 2003:330). However, anthropologist Richard Basham has noted that to conceptualize urban spaces based on population density alone has its downside as the surrounding territories, as well as the socio-economic differences of its inhabitants, also play role in understanding “the urban.” Thus, he concludes that given the variety of existing criteria for defining a city, it is difficult to offer a single definition of it (Basham 1978: 49, 51).

Nonetheless, scholars do seem to agree that the city is not only a physical or material scenario, but also a social one (Borden 2004:91; Chambers 1986: 183; Fox 1977: 10; Holston 1989: 12; Lefevbre 1991:55; Mumford 2004: 29; Romero 2006: 218). As Chambers puts it: “Its elaborate network of streets, housing, public buildings, transport systems, parks and shops is paralleled by a complex of attitudes, habits, customs, expectancies and hopes that reside in us as urban subjects” (Chambers 1986: 183).

In explaining the social dimensions of urban settings, anthropologist Richard Fox discerns that the city is shaped by the values of our society, and at the same time it is the source of society’s values. As Fox explains, cities are “realms of social life inextricably

bound -as either receptor or generator- to the institutions and values of the society in which they are set” (Fox 1977: 10). In this vein, scholars further suggest that urban settings provide a window to understand larger social processes (Lefebvre 1991: 55, 101; Low 1999a:2, 11; Scott 2000; Zieleniec 2007: 51). This is not to say that non-urban settings do not provide important insights into broader social activities. In the context of the informal economy, studies have shown that informal dealings also occur in rural areas, yielding valuable understandings for analyzing wider social contexts (Long and Richardson 1978: 205n1). However, Low notes that although the city is not the only setting where the linkages between larger socio-economic and political processes can be studied, these processes and their outcomes are more concentrated in urban areas (Low 1999a:2). Thus, some scholars agree that due to the fact that cities are the centers where these activities are intensified through dense concentrations of people, information, economic and political activity, social processes such as those of access and exclusion are better understood (Lefebvre 1991: 55, 101; Low 1999a: 2, 11; Scott 2000; Zieleniec 2007: 51).

Indeed, anthropologist Setha Low and geographer Neil Smith imply that among the social processes that urban settings can help us to understand are those of exclusion and access (Low and Smith 2006: 145). It is in their emphasis on issues of urban exclusion and access that these scholars make a connection between urban and public space. As Low and Smith explain, “Public space is almost by definition urban space [...] As cities have redeveloped, public space has become a key battleground [...] Research that has focused on what makes public space public has been animated by questions of access and exclusion, law and custom, power and protest” (2006: 3, 144, 145). By the

same token, geographers Don Mitchell and Lynn Staeheli offer a definition of public space in terms of social practices of exclusion. “Research in geography and other fields has explored the processes of exclusion, -by race, gender, sexuality, age, and disability- by which public space’s “publicness” is defined and contested” (Mitchell and Staeheli 2006: 144).

I do not mean to suggest an understanding of public space that is limited to issues of social access and exclusion. Scholars have noted that public space can be comprehended from a variety of angles (Mitchell and Staeheli 2006: 144; Fraser 1990: 71). For instance, political scientist Nancy Fraser explains that even “‘Publicity,’ for example, can mean 1) state-related; 2) accessible to everyone; 3) of concern to everyone; and 4) pertaining to a common good or shared interest” (Fraser 1990: 71). In this chapter, however, public space will be approached in terms of social conventions for people’s spatial accessibility or exclusion.

Low and Smith further note that an understanding of public space in terms of processes of exclusion and access leads us to pose Henri Lefebvre’s question, “Who has the right to the city?” (Lefebvre as cited in Low and Smith 2006: 144). By the same token, anthropologist Yuri Romero, in her work on urban marginalization and forced displacement in Colombia, takes up the discussion of the “right to the city,” and argues that this civic “right” refers to the right to participate in the city not only in terms of political rights, but also in terms of access to minimal life conditions such as housing, jobs and public services (Romero 2006: 218).

However, peoples' access to minimal life conditions and services as part of their "right to the city" is in conflict with modernist projects of city planning. To illustrate this argument, anthropologist Teresa Caldeira notes that in Brasilia, "Modernist city planning aspired to transform the city into a single homogeneous state-sponsored public domain, to eliminate differences in order to create a universal rationalist city divided into functional sectors such as residential, employment, recreational, transportation, administrative and civic" (Caldeira 1999:96). Caldeira argues, however, that Brasilia turned out to be the opposite of what was planned and it is now one of the most unequal cities in Brazil due to the fact that peoples' social realities, such as those of unemployment and lack of housing, were not entirely taken into account by city planners (Caldeira 1999:96). This example can be related to what geographer and social theorist David Harvey calls "Utopias of spatial form" (Harvey 2000: 179), in the sense that urban planning does not follow the realities of the social processes it intends to control, and that this alters the results it seeks to accomplish. "We now see also that materialized utopias of the social processes have to negotiate with spatiality and the geography of place and in so doing they also lose their ideal character, producing results that are in many instances exactly the opposite of those intended" (Harvey 2000: 179-180).

Thus, urban planning needs to be negotiated with the social processes it seeks to "control," which are by no means "homogeneous." Indeed, as Chambers notes, due to the fact that cities are not only material but also social spaces, there is a social heterogeneity to be considered. "We discover that urban 'reality' is not singular but multiple, that inside the city there is always another city" (Chambers 1986: 183).

In this way, the heterogeneity of urban spaces challenges the utopian idea of the city as a homogenous space that city planners have sought to create. As De Certeau puts it, “The language of power is in itself “urbanizing,” but the city is left prey to contradictory movements that counterbalance and combine themselves outside the reach of panoptic power” (De Certeau 1984:95). To some extent I agree with De Certeau’s latter assertion and find that it can be applied to rebusque in that formal unemployment has led rebusque practitioners to challenge city planners’ organization of urban spaces. I also suggest, however, that rebusque workers’ challenge of urban officials’ plans to organize the city does not necessarily put them “outside” urban planners’ control of city spaces.

Indeed, unemployment in the formal sector can be considered as an example of De Certeau’s “contradictory movements” or social realities that contravene city planners’ expectations of a homogenous urban space. In fact, scholars have noted that high rates of formal unemployment have led people to transform public places into informal workplaces in the city. For instance, in her work in Costa Rica, anthropologist SETHA LOW notes that social exclusion reflected in peoples’ lack of employment in the formal sector has led to the growth of the informal economy which is evident in public spaces of the city such as the Parque Central. As Low explains:

The increase in unemployment that resulted from the decline in the value of agricultural exports has encouraged the growth of an informal economy. This informal economy is very visible in Parque Central. The plaza is used as an urban workplace of exchange and coexistence: shoeshine men control the northeast corner, ambulatory vendors use the sidewalks and pathways, salespeople use the benches as office space (1999b:123).

Peoples’ use of urban public spaces as informal workplaces can be considered as an example of what some scholars explain as spatial solutions to larger social problems

(Mains 2007; See also Low and Smith 2006). As Low and Smith note, “Spatial scales are neither simply a conceptual convenience nor simply given, but rather are socially generated in response to and often as solutions to specific social problems and contradictions” (Low and Smith 2006:7; see also Mains 2007).

Spatial solutions to social difficulties and spatial utopias by city planners are part of a dynamic that is shared in many world areas including Colombia. Indeed, the use of urban public spaces as workplaces by people doing rebusque in the informal economy has been part of people’s solution to the lack of formal employment in Colombia for many years. In an article entitled “Crece el Rebusque”⁷ published in the Colombian political magazine *Cambio*, 3 June 2009, a person is cited as commenting that, “I have seen rebusque in this country ever since I can remember” (Cambio 2009: comment 2; my translation).

In Colombia, urban utopias formulated by city planners have been represented by urban officials in efforts to “clean up” the public space by clearing them of street vendors, and this has resulted in conflicts between ambulant peddlers and city officials (Mendoza 2000; Gil 1998). An example of Bogotá urban planning and its social realities of unemployment is illustrated by events that took place in the city during Enrique Peñalosa’s administration (1998-2000). Bogotá’s former Mayor, Enrique Peñalosa, was determined to free the city’s public space from street vendors doing rebusque. According to Mendoza and Gil, Peñalosa’s administration made official the police persecution of street vendors who occupied the public spaces of the city (Mendoza 2000; Gil 1998). In

⁷ English: “Rebusque grows.”

an article entitled “El rebusque ¡Agresión a la capital!”⁸ published by the *Ministerio de Educación Nacional*,⁹ it is reported that since Peñalosa’s administration, street vendors have been persecuted more than delinquents (Ministerio de Educación Nacional 2006: par. 6). In the same article, Pedro, a street vendor, is quoted as claiming that, “The only excuse for sustaining persecution against ambulant vendors is that it fights against their invasion of public space which seriously effects the aesthetics of the city” (Ministerio de Educación Nacional 2006: par. 3; my translation).

Similarly, in his ethnographic work among informal workers in Cali, Colombia, anthropologist Ray Bromley notes that, “The urban authorities and other representatives of local elites usually consider street traders to be a nuisance, making the city look untidy and ugly by their very presence, causing traffic congestion, dropping litter, molesting passersby” (1978: 1163). Although the public spaces of the city of Bogotá looked less “untidy” after Peñalosa left office in 2000, unemployment rates kept growing and rebusque along with it (Cambio 2009: par 1; El Colombiano 2008; La Otra Popayán 2008: par. 8, 15; Caracol Noticias 2008: par. 3).

Thus, even though street vendors’ use of the streets as workplaces in Bogotá challenged city planners’ aims at controlling urban spaces, these vendors’ spatial strategies were not totally “outside” of official urban planning as De Certeau would argue (De Certeau 1984:95). Street vendors were persecuted and ultimately forced to leave and look for other workplaces different from the streets, namely, in the case at hand, the larger bus system. Indeed, in this context (lack of formal employment and

⁸ English: “Rebusque: Aggression against the Nation’s Capital!”

⁹ English: National Education Ministry

street informal workers' persecution by the police in the urban public space), the main bus system become a less hostile environment than the streets for informal workers looking for alternative employment. This argument is illustrated in the following statement made by Simón, an informal worker I heard on the buses:

Due to this [unemployment] young people and adults see ourselves in the hard task of getting on the buses in order to support our families in an honest manner [...] we do this honestly without harming anyone, without taking anything away from someone else, obviously, and without being persecuted by the police when trying to find a form of employment on the streets.

Indeed, the bus can represent a less vulnerable space for informal workers to do rebusque because, unlike informal economic activities on the streets, there is no state regulation that prohibits informal workers from doing their economic activities. On the larger public transport system, it is only the bus drivers who decide if access is granted for informal workers to do rebusque in their buses, or not. Indeed, in an article entitled “Ambulantes podrán vender en los buses, dice Comandante de la Policía de Bogotá”¹⁰ published in the newspaper *El Tiempo*, 3 June 2009, former local government secretary, Clara López, affirms that, “Bus drivers are free to let whomever they want to get on their buses. In other words, drivers can let aboard people who want to play guitar or sell products” (El Tiempo 2009b: par. 4; my translation). And Juan Pablo Cardona González, informal workers' advocate, adds that, “there is no law that forbids rebusque on the buses. At the same time, there is not any law that punishes bus drivers for letting ambulants get on their buses” (El Tiempo 2009b: par.7; my translation). Lack of regulation or police persecution of rebusque on the main bus system in Bogotá allow

¹⁰ English: “‘Ambulants will be able to sell in the buses,’ said the Metropolitan Police commander of Bogotá.”

informal workers to move more freely through the spaces of the buses which, I suggest, facilitates an environment where rebusque practitioners feel more at ease to spontaneously communicate messages of social dissatisfaction through their life-stories and performances while working at rebusque.

However, rebusque on the buses is a partial and temporary alternative to the hardships informal workers experience in the streets and to the broader problem of unemployment in this city. Indeed, it is a temporary alternative to solve their situation of scarce job opportunities because an element of centralized urban control, or “panoptic power” (De Certeau 1984:95) in Bogotá city will also extend into the spaces of the buses when rebusque is terminated next year through amalgamation of the two bus systems and its universal adoption of regulations prohibiting rebusque. The two transport systems (TransMilenio and the main public buses) in Bogotá will be integrated under a new transport system called “Sistema Integrado de Transporte Público,” SITP (Public Transit Integrated System) starting next March, 2011 (El Espectador 2010: par.12). Under the SITP all buses will have to follow established bus schedules and observe regular bus stops which will be under official supervision (El Espectador 2010: par. 2, 4). Articles 7 and 13 of Decree No. 309 address the integration of both bus systems, and were passed by the *Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá* (Bogotá’s City Hall) on 23 July 2009. The new integrated transport system will combine a public-private scheme in which planning, regulation, and maintenance of the system will be in charge of the public sector, and its operation in terms of transit service and fleet supply will be led by the private sector (Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá 2009: A.7,13). The public sector will deal mostly with regulation in terms of assuring that private enterprises follow transit law requirements

-i.e., proper licensing and minimal transportation standards- to offer the service. In other words, the SITP will pretty much function as TransMilenio in which rebusque is not permitted as this bus system is operated by private enterprises (El Tiempo 2009b: par.6). Indeed, the integrated bus system will undoubtedly affect informal workers' rebusque activities because no drivers will any longer be in charge of their bus routes, stops and the people they allow onto their buses, for they will no longer be driving their own buses, but those belonging to the private enterprises incorporated into the new bus system.

Here, a point can be made in terms of how the termination of rebusque on the buses under the new transport system will be a direct result of the private operation of the SITP, suggesting an area where perhaps state ownership would be better for rebusque. However, this argument can hardly be asserted because the main bus system where informal workers are currently allowed to do rebusque works under a similar public-private model as the SITP where private firms affiliate buses following state transit regulations in terms of standard minimal bus conditions and licensing. The difference is that in the current larger public transit system, drivers retain ownership of the buses they drive and resort to such private enterprises only to affiliate their buses, as described earlier.

Thus, public ownership of Bogotá's transportation system would not necessarily favour rebusque workers because the buses where rebusque practitioners are currently permitted access are owned privately by bus drivers, not the government. Nonetheless, the government does allow these drivers to decide whom they let on their buses. If there

were a completely state owned bus system, rebusque workers would not likely be allowed on it for such a situation would render bus rebusque comparable to street rebusque, which is highly restricted. In addition, as noted above, the introduction of the SITP was promoted and approved by city officials under the Decree 309/2009 following urban planners' aims to organize public transit into a more coherent system.

In this respect, rebusque on the buses can be considered a "serious game." Indeed, although I think of rebusque as an example of De Certeau's "tactics," at some points in this thesis, here I see rebusque more as an example of Ortner's "serious games" since, and contrary to De Certeau's work on tactics, rebusque on the buses is not "outside the reach of" urban centralized power (De Certeau 1984:95) but rather reflects "the omnipresence of power" (Ortner 2006:131) when it will be eventually terminated (and informal workers on the buses will be excluded), as a result of city officials' aims at organizing urban spaces, including Bogotá's transportation system.

In addition, as my ethnographic findings indicate, rebusque on the buses is also a partial alternative to the kinds of discrimination informal workers face in the streets as there are other kinds of hardships these workers have to face while doing rebusque on the larger bus system. Indeed, although they are not persecuted by the local police and have not had to form unions to be able to work as street vendors do (Gil 1998: 66), bus rebusque workers have to deal with the bus riders' possible rejection of their activities. Moreover, informal workers on the buses also have to deal with bus drivers when they have to ask permission to get on their buses and risk being mistreated by bus drivers when they prohibit rebusque on their buses. Such interactions between drivers, riders

and informal workers occur at different times within the bus space, as rebusque practitioners pursue buses, board them, and occupy them in particular ways and at specific times.

2.2 Pursuing and Getting on the Bus: Time and Relations with Bus Drivers

More often than street vendors do, rebusque workers on the buses have to look for the people (bus drivers and bus riders) who would help them make their economic activities possible. This means that they have to pursue different bus routes daily until a bus driver is willing to grant them access. In response to my attempts to provide a more complete picture of informal workers doing rebusque on the buses, it occurred to me to observe them at the moments when they were pursuing the bus before getting aboard. On many occasions, therefore, I witnessed the physical risks informal workers have to face when pursuing the buses as they have to go across the streets in the middle of traffic asking permission from different bus drivers to let them do rebusque on their buses while carrying their products or musical instruments.

A particular case I remember is that of Carlos who had a vision problem and was carrying a guitar. It took him about 25 minutes of walking amongst passing cars and buses to find a bus driver who would let him get onto his bus. I admired Carlos' skill at crossing the streets with his guitar without being hit by a car. At the same time, watching him made me more aware of the desperate situation informal workers like Carlos must be in for them to risk their lives in such a manner.

The striking thing is that informal workers sometimes risk their lives, not only because they constantly receive drivers' denial while pursuing their buses, but also

because they can spend hours on the buses without making enough money to take home. As an informal worker expressed it to bus riders, “It has not been an easy day today. I have gotten off many buses with nothing to take home.” A similar experience was described by Andrés, a peddler, in the following manner: “I have been getting on the buses since 1pm [it was 5pm] and all I have gotten is \$3000 pesos to buy these books and work.” To put into perspective the amount of money that Andrés got during most of the afternoon on the buses, \$3000 pesos in Colombia only allows people to buy one cheap meal. Andrés’ story demonstrates how after spending most of the afternoon trying to make enough money to take home, he only got enough to invest on some books to sell without being able to cover all the expenses at home for the day.

On another occasion, I was sitting in the front part of a bus when I heard another peddler whom I will call Diego, asking permission from the bus driver to get on his bus, and letting him know that he had not gotten enough money for the day (it was 4:30pm). “Brother, help me; the day has been hard.” The bus driver let him get on the bus, and Diego jumped over the turnstile like many others do. Informal workers lose so much time pursuing the buses to board, that sometimes they do not collect the amount of money that they need for the day.

Thus, the ways informal workers get on the buses vary, and I observed that it pretty much depended upon their “clever utilization of time” (De Certeau 1984: 39). For these informal workers had to take advantage of the few opportunities they had to get on a bus, especially when there was traffic congestion, in which moments they approached bus drivers to ask permission to get on their buses, or slipped in behind

passengers through the turnstile at the front door. In this way they got on the bus without the driver's permission, or through the back door when it was open to let out passengers.

Rebusque workers frequently take advantage of the traffic congestion to approach bus drivers and ask permission to get on their buses either by showing their products to the bus drivers from the streets or by addressing them verbally through their open front doors. It is common to hear these informal workers asking permission as a form of collaboration with the bus drivers, "Brother, would you help me?" "Brother, could you allow me to work?"

When bus drivers grant permission to rebusque workers to get aboard their buses, they usually open the back door to prevent them from jumping over the turnstile at the front door and make it easier for rebusque practitioners to enter the bus. I started to wonder the extent to which this action conveys a message of empathy from bus drivers towards informal workers and some consideration for their potential difficulties when jumping over the front door's turnstiles with the items they are carrying to sell or assist their performances. In return, some informal workers recognize bus drivers' support by thanking them or giving them some of their products free of charge.

Relationships with bus drivers, however, do not always go so well. For instance, one afternoon I observed María, a peddler, who was carrying a box of lollypops and asked the bus driver, "could you allow me to work?" The bus driver yelled at her "NO!!," and closed the door in her face. On some such occasions, it seemed as if a timing problem was experienced by the bus driver who did not want to wait for a

rebusque practitioner to get on his bus for fear that it would slow him down and reduce the number of trips and therefore the money he could possibly make during the day.¹¹

It is because informal workers know they will sometimes be denied access to buses that, in their urgency to create an opportunity to work, they decide to climb aboard without permission of the bus driver. I noticed three ways in which informal workers get on the buses without the bus drivers' permission when there is traffic congestion:

- 1) They take advantage of the front door being open to jump over the turnstile as quickly as they can, hoping that the bus driver will not notice and object until it is too late, and he has resumed driving.
- 2) They take advantage of the back door being left open to climb onto the bus while the bus driver is watching regular bus riders get aboard through the turnstile at the front of the bus.
- 3) They hide themselves behind passengers who are getting on the bus through the front door's turnstile.

Rebusque workers' bodily strategies for getting on the buses without the bus drivers' permission more explicitly illustrate Merleau-Ponty's view of the role of our bodies in forging agency (2003 [1945]: 291, 408) and further De Certeau's idea of time and tactics applied to rebusque in this thesis. Indeed, even with the drivers' verbal permission, it is through their corporeal practices while jumping over the front door turnstile, slipping in behind regular passengers, and climbing on the bus through the

¹¹ I am grateful to Dr. Frances Slaney for her contribution in developing this and other insights presented throughout this chapter.

back door as quickly as their bodies allow them that rebusque practitioners can actually make a strategic use of time (De Certeau 1984: 39) and take advantage of the few opportunities they have to get on the buses and make their rebusque activities possible in the first place. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “My body is wherever there is something to be done” (2003 [1945]: 291). Ortner’s discussion of agency and “serious games” also accounts for informal worker’s corporeal practices to get on the buses as these “forms of bodily activity” (Ortner 1996: 19) exemplify one of the processes involved in informal workers’ play of rebusque as a “serious game.”

Nonetheless, although all these strategies are a means for saving time in their search for a bus where they can practice rebusque, their working conditions become more tense when informal workers on the buses have entered without permission from the bus drivers. In this sense, rebusque practitioners often pay for their haste.

For example, one day in the middle of traffic congestion, I saw Alex, a busker, who noticed that the front door of a bus was left open and sought to get on with his guitar and sing. Coincidentally, a friend of his was sitting in the front part of the bus and invited him to get aboard. When the bus driver’s assistant saw him, he yelled at Alex saying, “No! Now no! Another peddler just got off the bus!” (I had been on this bus for 30 minutes, however, and had not seen a peddler or busker doing rebusque on the entire trip so far). Alex insisted on trying to get on the bus. And in response, the bus driver stopped the bus, stood up in front of his seat and yelled at Alex, “NO! Don’t you understand?” Then Alex replied, “I am not getting on the bus for you, or to greet you, but my friend who does want culture not like you, who keep yourself stuck to that

steering wheel.” When Alex subsequently got off the bus, the bus driver said, “Ah! What a problem these people are!” Here we see the bus driver’s perception of informal workers as merely being a nuisance. Alex’s counterpart critique of the bus drivers’ job was a defense of his own work and a challenge to the bus driver’s perception and attitude towards his rebusque activity. In terms of the play of time in relations between rebusque workers and bus drivers, these two opposed positions indicate that whereas the bus driver’s attitude was apparently that rebusque workers were a ‘waste of his time,’ Alex counter-argued that his own work was precisely what would make the bus driver’s own work a more culturally fulfilling and enjoyable way of spending his work time.

However, not all informal workers challenge bus drivers when they feel intimidated by them as Alex did. For instance, Julio, a busker, got on the bus without permission from the bus driver. He simply took advantage of the back door being left open. When the bus driver noticed that Julio had entered the bus, he stopped the vehicle, stood up, and walked towards Julio. At that moment, I thought the bus driver was about to force Julio out of the bus. I noticed that Julio was really afraid because when he saw the bus driver coming towards him Julio pressed his guitar into his chest, moved his head to one side, and closed his eyes. The bus driver must have noticed how terrified Julio was, though, and for some reason desisted from doing whatever he had intended to do with Julio. The bus driver said “ah!” and went back to his seat. In this instance, the driver appeared to be in no rush and Julio managed to hold his ground after having saved himself time by not having requested permission to enter the bus and then get aboard, if permitted, through the front turnstile.

A similar example comes from another informal worker, Gabriel, who got on the bus without permission by slipping in behind regular passengers. The bus driver saw him, though, and got up from his seat; but before he could say anything Gabriel told him, “Brother, let me [get on the bus and do rebusque] please.” The bus driver kept staring at him, went back to his seat, and let him get on the bus.

As a bus rider, I felt the tension between these three informal workers and the bus drivers they had to deal with in order to try to find a workplace. This impressed upon me that the risk situations faced by rebusque performers in the buses were not only physical, but also emotional, and extremely stressful. This stress extends beyond the physical difficulties informal workers face when they have to go between buses and cars or across the streets to pursue the buses; this distress is experienced by bus rebusque practitioners when they are actually confronted by drivers for getting on the bus without permission. Indeed, whereas formal workers feel the constraints of time which is too closely vigilated, these informal workers have a very different problem: they have difficulty securing time on the buses in which to do their work.¹²

Nonetheless, bus drivers do not always respond in a rude manner when rebusque workers get on their buses without permission. For instance, one day I saw Juana, a peddler, who was getting on the bus by hiding herself behind some passengers who were entering the bus, and when she approached the turnstile she jumped over it very quickly. The bus driver noticed her presence when she started to address the bus riders, but did not do or say anything about it. Similarly, on one occasion when another peddler,

¹² I owe this insight to Dr. Frances Slaney.

Nicolás, was getting on the bus behind three passengers, the bus driver saw him but just moved his head to one side as if to say “ah again,” but he did not confront Nicolás or ask him to get off the bus. Joaquín also got onto the bus by taking advantage of the back door being open while the bus was stopped in some congested traffic. The bus driver saw him but did not say anything. These, and other examples, show that although there are some bus drivers who react violently to informal workers getting on their buses, there are others that show tolerance and compassion for rebusque practitioners working on the buses.

Informal workers also have their own strategies to ensure that they are not kicked off the bus once they have gotten on without permission. They apologize once they have jumped over the turnstile or give bus drivers part of their products. Indeed, a busker, Milena, got on the bus behind other passengers and without permission but then she apologized to the driver. “I am sorry Sir,” she said, giving him a sample of the poem she was about to present to the bus riders. Similarly, Catalina, a peddler, got on a bus by hiding herself behind some passengers that were about to get on the bus and then jumping over the turnstile. Once she was on the bus and before the bus driver had noticed her presence, she approached him and said, “I am sorry brother, to get on your bus in this way. Give me just five minutes.” The bus driver nodded his approval.

Similarly, Leonardo got on a bus behind some new passengers, and asked permission from the bus driver once he had already jumped over the turnstile and could offer the bus driver a box of candies. For his part, Mario, a peddler, climbed aboard the bus through the back door and before the bus driver noticed him, he presented some

candies and asked the driver, “Sir. Which one [candy] would you like?” The bus driver chose a candy, and let Mario continue doing rebusque on the bus. The fact that they had to ask permission, or to apologize and give something to the bus drivers to be allowed to do rebusque on the buses confirms, once again, the fact that their rebusque activities on the buses depend greatly on bus drivers’ willingness to accept their presence in that limited space and to ‘give’ them time to perform, if even just for five minutes as Catalina requested.¹³

Some informal workers also use their performances to send a message to the bus driver asking them permission to get on their bus. For instance, an Argentinean storyteller, Jacobo, slipped onto the bus covertly by hiding behind some passengers. Then when he started to tell a fable to the bus riders, he referred to the bus driver as part of his performance by describing the way he got on the bus. “I take advantage of the open door under the shadow of another passenger, I put a foot on the bus [...] I move my head up. That means I am asking permission [...] lack of respect from my part and I do not know how the bus driver tolerates this daily.”¹⁴ I noticed some riders laughed after Jacobo’s description of the way he got on the bus. It was both audaciously timed and corporeally adept. I started to notice that his performance and the humorous tone of it was perhaps a way for him to try to neutralize a possibly negative (or even violent?) response from the bus driver.

All these cases show how rebusque workers on the buses face time constraints when getting on the buses. Not only do they need to minimize the time they take to get

¹³ I owe this observation to Dr. Frances Slaney.

¹⁴ I am grateful to Dr. Claudio Aporta for his contribution in translating a couple of Argentinean expressions contained in Jacobo’s performance.

on the buses, by jumping over turnstiles as quickly as they can before they get caught by bus drivers, but sometimes, as Catalina's case illustrated above, some of them explicitly request an allotment of time from bus drivers.

Similarly, informal workers' relationships with bus riders also depend on their use of time. Indeed, in my study I noticed that rebusque workers usually apologize to bus riders "for taking a moment of their time." Here are a couple of examples:

Simón, a peddler, addressed passengers and apologized to them in the following manner: "Good afternoon, I am sorry to disturb one or two seconds of your pleasant and appreciated time." Similarly, another peddler, Martín, at the moment that he started to pass around the candies he had brought to sell, addressed riders saying, "I am sorry to bother you, and make you uncomfortable and take one or two minutes of your pleasant and valuable time."

Thus, rebusque is an activity that depends on informal workers' relations with both bus drivers and bus riders, and involves negotiations for both space and time. As my ethnographic descriptions illustrate, this phenomena became obvious to me when some informal workers asked permission from bus drivers to get on their buses in terms of time; when they apologized to bus riders for taking some minutes of their time; when rebusque practitioners quickly seized the opportunity to get on the bus when the back door was open in the middle of traffic congestion; and when they jumped over the turnstile at the front door to get on the bus before being caught by the bus driver.

In addition, informal workers seem to know the best times of the day to do rebusque on the buses and to avoid rush hours when engaging in this activity. In this regard, their

temporal awareness can be related to De Certeau's "tactics" in the sense that informal workers doing rebusque on the buses depend on "a clever *utilization of time*, of the opportunities it presents and also of the play that it introduces into the foundations of power" (De Certeau 1984: 38, 39). In this case, it can be inferred that social power resides in the bus drivers and riders who accept or discriminate against rebusque activities; however, rebusque practitioners carefully time their requests so as to gain more favourable consideration. As De Certeau further explains:

A tactic depends on time -it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized [...] It takes advantages of "opportunities" and depends on them [...] This nowhere gives a tactic mobility, to be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offering of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment [...] it can be where it is least expected [...] Tactics are procedures that gain validity in relation to the pertinence they lend to time – to the circumstances which the precise instant of an intervention transforms into a favorable situation, to the rapidity of the movements that change the organization of space, to the relations among successive moments in an action, to the possible intersections of durations and heterogeneous rhythms (1984: xix, 37, 38).

This is true for informal workers on the buses. Not only did they have to search for the best time to do rebusque and get on the buses, but also establish relations with bus drivers and riders which depended on "successive moments in action" and "heterogeneous rhythms" as they took place at different but subsequent times of the activity of rebusque (De Certeau 1984:38). They established relationships with bus drivers especially at the moment of getting on a bus; on the other hand, the relationships with riders took place at moments when informal workers are already inside a bus and performing.

Time regulated at which moments informal workers were going to be able to occupy the space of the bus through their rebusque activities. For instance, rebusque could not take place during rush hours when most people were using the buses to get

home after work, limiting the space and thus the opportunities available for rebusque practitioners to work on the buses. Time also regulated informal workers' relations with bus drivers and riders in two senses: knowing what is the best time to try to get on the bus, and by referring to time while apologizing to drivers and riders' for their very presence and need to work.

By the same token, informal workers' spatio-temporal tactics for using the buses can be related to what some scholars have referred to as using urban public spaces as solutions to larger social problems (Mains 2007; Low and Smith 2006). For instance, in his work in Ethiopia, anthropologist Daniel Mains noted that young people found a "spatial fix" to solve their problems of unemployment rooted in societal perceptions of work in their country. According to Mains, by migrating to a space such as North America, where their work is not assessed in the same terms of social relationships and status, young people in Ethiopia are able to find jobs and meet their aspirations (Mains 2007: 660, 668). Thus, spatial mobility is young workers' "tactic" within the Ethiopian employment system.

Similarly, spatial mobility is a rebusque workers' "tactic" within Bogotá's social geography of unemployment. Indeed, in Bogotá, informal workers on the buses make use of certain routes (usually between the Carrera 10 and Calle 26 in downtown Bogotá) where their rebusque activities are most likely to be successful because of the traffic congestion characteristic of this area which slows buses down and provides them with opportunities to slip aboard. Furthermore, as they have no fixed place of work, they are free to travel along the bus routes, working while they travel. Thus, through spatial

mobility, informal workers exploit the urban order to provide a small and partial solution to the widespread social problem of unemployment. Above all, as the ethnographic examples described earlier illustrate, the spatio-temporal conditions of bus rebusque yield for the different kinds of social relationships of power, discrimination, solidarity and opportunity through which rebusque workers' "agency" and experience of "work" in the "informal economy" are negotiated.

2.3 Relationships Between Bus Riders and Rebusque Workers

When rebusque workers speak to bus riders, they usually greet them and apologize to them if they have gotten on the bus without the permission from the bus driver. Rebusque practitioners usually wait for riders' greeting in return. Most of the time, however, some riders fail to respond, and some even turn their heads away from the rebusque workers and toward the window. Riders' lack of response is taken by these informal workers as a sign of disrespect towards them and as evidence of the prevalence of certain stereotypes about their work and themselves as persons, especially the idea that they are somehow criminals. In fact, this criminalist perception towards rebusque workers was evident to me one day when I was on my way to downtown Bogotá and Juana, a busker, got on the bus and started to greet bus riders with, "Good afternoon, dear passengers." After a long pause while she waited for bus riders to reply and almost no-one answered, I noticed she felt offended by this behavior, and my impressions were proven accurate by what Juana said next:

First of all, with all due respect, I want to say that you don't have to treat me like I am a delinquent, I am just an unemployed person trying to make a living honestly.

Juana's quick interpretation of the riders' unresponsiveness as a sign that they perceived her as a delinquent demonstrates how the criminalist approach is somehow part of the conventional wisdom regarding rebusque in Bogotá and that informal workers are aware of it, and act upon it (as it will be further explained in the next chapter). Anthropologists agree that the informal economy has been highly criminalized (Smith 1989: 316; see also Bromley 1978:1161). For instance, Bromley notes that the informal worker in Colombia is "considered as a parasite and a potential or actual criminal" (Bromley 1978:1161). Low further argues that criminalist stereotypes lead to social exclusion and contribute to the kind of urban violence that several social groups have to face. As Low puts it, "Contemporary urban segregation is complementary to the issue of urban violence [...] the proliferation of everyday talk about crime becomes the context in which residents generate stereotypes as they label different social groups as dangerous and therefore as people to be feared and avoided" (Low 1999b: 102).

Conventional perceptions of criminality among city dwellers are reinforced by some scholars' work that have also promoted criminalist approaches to rebusque. For instance, Colombian sociologist Alvaro Camacho sustains that rebusque evokes a kind of "creativity and ingenuity" that encourages individualism, illegality and delinquency, as mentioned in the Introduction (Camacho 2001: 133). However, Castells and Portes explain that illegality and criminality should not be equated when referring to the informal economy because such economic activities relate to "the unregulated production of otherwise licit goods and services [...] Criminal activities possess, however, distinct characteristics that set them apart from those otherwise termed informal"(Castells and Portes 1989: 15). In this vein, economist Peter Wiles argues that

the term “criminal” refers to not only unregulated, but also dangerous, activities (Wiles 1987: 21).

As noted in my opening discussion, this thesis does not seek to offer an apologetic account of rebusque and overlook the downsides of certain activities it might include. It is important to mention that in Colombia, drug trafficking can be considered an activity within the informal economy and a form of rebusque that is illegal by Colombian law and leads to criminal activities (Camacho 2001). Similarly, bus riders’ perceptions of rebusque on the buses are not totally unfounded. In an article entitled “Las rutas de bus más peligrosas de Bogotá recorrió *El Tiempo* durante un día”¹⁵ published in the newspaper *El Tiempo*, 4 March 2009, it was reported that there have been some cases of robbing on the buses and that the thieves sometimes pretend to be rebusque workers in order to get on the buses and commit this kind of crime. As a result, riders do not feel safe in the public buses of Bogotá, and distrust informal workers who attempt to get on the buses (El Tiempo 2009a: par. 2, 3, 16). These events have undoubtedly encouraged the popular attribution of criminality to rebusque on the buses and reinforced stereotypes against informal workers. During my fieldwork, I also discovered that there is a sense of distrust among bus riders because many people believe that some rebusque practitioners invent their auto-biographical stories, especially ones that involve diseases or physical disabilities, in order to mislead riders into feeling sorry for them and donating more money to them.

¹⁵ English: “*El Tiempo* rode across the most dangerous bus routes of Bogotá.”

For instance, on a Wednesday afternoon I saw Pedro who got on the bus and started telling riders about how his family got sick from the local water and that he did not have money to buy the medications needed to heal them. Pedro showed riders a doctor's note and lifted his shirt up to show them his allergy marks. Some passengers that I could see, turned their heads away from him when he showed those marks, as if expressing some kind of repulsion, and they did not give him any donations. Apparently, bus riders did not believe his story.

A similar case was Dario who got on the bus from the back door without the bus driver's permission. The bus driver did see him, but just turned his head and let him get on the bus. I noted that two passengers beside me grabbed their purses when they realized that he had entered the bus. They held onto their purses as if they feared he would rob them, possibly because of his appearance, for his clothes were dirty. Dario stood at the front of the bus and started speaking to the bus riders:

I am sorry to have gotten on the bus this way and to make you uncomfortable. Good afternoon. I just had enough money to buy these second hand clothes and do not want to make you feel uncomfortable [...] When I was a child I was abandoned at the front door of the Cathedral with a broken arm and leg. I was raised by a street woman [...] one day I was asking people for a chocorrano [a kind of chocolate cake] because I was hungry, and they stabbed me three times. I am tired of living on the streets. My back aches [...] For this reason I want to ask you to help me so that I can pay for a bowl of soup and sleep in a bed. Thanks for your help.

What struck me as peculiar was that despite his physical condition he managed to get on the bus from the back door in a matter of seconds. The back door is left open by bus drivers only when a passenger has disembarked and rebusque workers have to seize this opportunity to get on the bus very quickly. Sometimes the back door is left open for

a long time when there is traffic congestion and the bus drivers forget to close it, but in this case there was no traffic congestion and so Dario had to leap on quickly while some passengers got off.

On two occasions, I saw Laura, another rebusque practitioner who spoke of health problems. The first time, she got on the bus without the bus driver's permission as passengers got on the bus. Laura evaded the front door's turnstile very skillfully considering that she claimed to suffer from epilepsy and that some of her fingers were paralyzed. She showed her fingers to the bus riders, saying, "Since I was a child, doctors did not know what was going on with me, why I had seizures." She said that doctors only diagnosed her disease when she gave birth to her first baby for whom she felt obligated to work on the buses. Laura stressed that she was not lying by saying, "Look dear passengers, I would not play with my health." She said this three times, but I noticed that most passengers did not help her.

I got off at the same street as she did. (It was at Calle 34th, and beyond that street it is not as frequent to find informal workers getting on the buses so I used to get off there and then go back and do the route again). What impressed me once I had left the bus was that she was walking normally, as if she did not have any physical problems like the ones she had shown to passengers on the bus. A few days later, I encountered Laura on the bus again. She told the same story, and this time I was sitting in one of the rear seats. Again, I saw that many people did not donate money to her, and that some passengers even turned their heads away to look out the window when she approached them for donations. I also noticed that she sat in one of the rear seats as if she were a

regular passenger while she counted her cash until she got off the bus. When Laura got off the bus, I overheard a conversation between two passengers who made the following comments in relation to Laura's disease:

Did you see that? Almost no one gave her money. It's a lie! They like to make up stories about diseases and sores when there are none just to get money from people [...] once I caught one of those people [i.e., people who get on the buses talking about their disease to ask for money] putting a piece of raw liver into those sores that they show. One knows that's a lie.

I cannot say that whether this rider's comment was exaggerated or true, but it reveals the sentiment of some passengers towards people whom they perceive as getting on the buses and using their diseases, or sometimes even lying about having a disease or physical disability, to obtain economic benefit. At this point, I could see how passengers distrust some of these people's stories, especially those which discuss their diseases or physical disabilities. In fact, in an informal conversation I had with some friends who are medical doctors, they told me that it is evident to them that some people get on the buses to make some money by pretending to have certain diseases and by telling stories that are not true about their supposed diseases. For instance, when I described to them Pedro's case, my friends told me that it is false that his health insurance would not cover his medications. In the same manner, it sounded strange and almost impossible to them that Laura's disease was not detected until she gave birth to her first child, especially with all the epileptic seizures Laura said she had had when she was little. From their medical perspective, Laura's and Pedro's stories sounded inaccurate. All in all, I believe it is hard to know whether their stories were totally deceitful. What if Pedro did not have health insurance? What if Laura did not have access to a doctor when she was little? In any case, after I had seen Laura getting off the bus and walking about without as much

difficulty as she had showed on the bus, and had also heard the comments from passengers and my friends, it became important to me to be careful about the accuracy of some of the stories told on the buses. However, it is also important to note that such awareness does not necessarily imply that one should adopt a generalized skepticism towards the auto-biographic accounts given by all informal workers on the buses. Thus, the point to make here is that even though there can be some cases where activities within the informal economy can lead to criminality such as drug dealing, or to practicing deception such as falsely claiming to have diseases and disabilities, the informal economy is still very diverse and not all informal economic activities should be covered under the same umbrella of criminality and deceit that leads members of the general public to discriminate against all informal workers.

Chapter 3: Rebusque on the Buses is for More than Monetary Gain: Informal Workers Acting Against Conventional Misperceptions of their Work

“A sign of affection, a kiss, a look, a smile, this beautiful day, this trip that stops that opens, that shelters the hope that I ask of life.” Milena, a bus busker in Bogotá City.

3.1 Challenging the Criminality Perception

This chapter discusses how informal workers on the buses use rebusque for more than monetary purposes by challenging peoples' criminalist perception of their work and establishing other kinds of exchange relations with riders. Rebusque practitioners are aware of the criminalist perception of rebusque and use their performances to show other aspects of their work. The stories these workers tell about their own lives provide insights into other dimensions of the informal economy by showing how these people's realities differ from the conventional perceptions of informal workers as living within the realm of criminality and unconstrained individualism.

In his work on fiddler busking as a kind of informal economic activity considered criminal by the general public, anthropologist Gerald Mars notes that this activity has been deliberately called criminal without consideration of how it is done and the other kinds of exchange relations established through that work form. As Mars put it:

No one questions too closely *how* things are done. Personal relationships are crucial, and this is *why* things are done [...] But this vocabulary is not appropriate or acceptable to those engaged in fiddling. It is not appropriate because it is too heavy and it is not acceptable because it does not tell the truth as the actors see it about exchange relationships on which fiddling is based (Mars 1982: 177).

This is true for informal workers on the buses of Bogotá as well. Indeed, if one pays close attention to the life stories told by informal workers on the buses, and to the way rebusque is done, it becomes evident that most of them engage in rebusque as a way to avoid violence and criminal activities.

For instance, on one occasion I was on the bus and heard Mario, an informal worker, telling the story of his life as a homeless person who used to do drugs and rob people in order to eat and pay for his addiction. He explained how he was able to get beyond his addiction and thievery thanks to a Christian organization that helps people recover from drug addictions. In addition, his story revealed that he was trying to live a different life away from delinquency by working with this Christian organization, selling their products (a set of pencils) to collect money for assisting other people going through similar struggles.

A comparable story was told by Alonso, a peddler, who distributed some cases of threads and needles among riders. He told his story in the following manner:

“Unfortunately, I was a guy from Cartucho Street¹⁶ [...] I was stuck there for twelve years of my life, living in misery [...] people who start badly, end up badly. Today it is going to be 77 days that I have been out of prison [...] I was there two years for stealing and physical aggression.” Alonso continued describing his life-story, letting passengers know how rebusque represents a support for him while he goes through a process of transition from a criminal life to an honest one:

Brothers, thanks for your support, to these little cases of threads and needles [...] I find myself in a process but I am not in a house or organization, I am not part of a foundation [...] Why do I say that I am in a process? Because thanks to your support, to these little cases, nowadays I do not need to cause harm to myself or to anyone else [...] With this I pay for a room daily and a plate of food without having to have a policeman behind me. I am even able to clothe myself [...] You give me the motivation, the support, as each bus driver does when he allows me to get on his bus.

¹⁶ “Cartucho Street” was a small area in downtown Bogotá where a lot of homeless people and drug addicts used to gather. It was also a really dangerous and dirty area of the city until the 1990s.

Catalina, another informal worker on the buses, told the story of her past life in prison and related how she was trying to correct her mistakes and get a different life by getting a job, but that nobody wanted to give her one due to her inexperience and her past. As Catalina described, “I am trying to make up for that time by trying to get a job but no one has given me one because of my past and lack of experience.”

These stories demonstrate how rebusque is not an activity that responds solely to individual or family goals as Camacho (2001) and Mendoza (2000) would have it. Indeed, Catalina’s story shows how her rebusque activity responds to a broader social context wherein social discrimination prevents her from qualifying for, and securing, a formal job. Her case is like Mario’s story which reveals how he engages in rebusque, not solely to make a living for himself, but to support a social cause and an organization that helps other people to survive drug addictions. Alonso’s story also shows to bus riders how rebusque provided support for him to make a transition away from a life of delinquency.

All these workers’ stories revealed social repercussions of informal work on the buses, particularly through the role of this labour form as an opportunity to change one’s life course and social position. These workers all seemed to feel that people needed to know about this reformist role of bus rebusque. This explanation of their motivations for engaging in this activity on the buses was a challenge to the conventional perceptions people had of bus informal workers. From their own standpoint, these workers were not encouraging delinquency while doing rebusque, as Camacho would argue. Indeed, they were trying to stay away from delinquency, precisely by engaging in this activity. In this

sense, rebusque might actually fulfill a social function of reducing criminal activities in the city. This offers some possibility that, contrary to Camacho's assertion, rebusque does not always promote delinquency or respond solely to individualistic or familiar needs; but can actually provide a means for individuals to undergo a transition away from such activities.

In addition to claiming that rebusque is a way to support their transition away from a criminal past and from continuing delinquency, some informal workers state that, despite their continued hardships and struggles for survival, they prefer to do rebusque on the buses and have an honest way of living. This is true, despite pursuing buses for long hours, sometimes without getting anything from the bus riders once they do get onto buses, and suffering humiliations from bus drivers and riders. The following accounts from informal workers are telling descriptions of their dedication to this type of work:

Nicolás: This is not easy -to get your attention, your ovations and collaboration- but I prefer to embarrass myself by asking rather than stealing.

Camilo: I truly hope not to make you uncomfortable. The truth is that it is about honest work more than anything.

Joaquín: I don't get on the bus to make you uncomfortable, much less to steal something [...] unfortunately, I lost my family three years ago, I am practically living on the streets, I have had to strive. It has been difficult. Thanks to my God I am here healthy and alive [...] Some have told me to start stealing from people, that it is easier that way, but I prefer not to take anything from anyone. I prefer to ask you to help me [...] these days I need a room and something to eat.

Diego: From 9am to 5pm I work on the buses. Why do I do this? Because I need to eat and dress myself [...] I'm embarrassed by this job. Despite

that some riders laugh at me, others murmur or avoid me [...] you do not know what it is and I hope you never have to go through this.

Andrés: Good afternoon, I am sorry to disturb you and the bus driver but I really need your help [...] I have been getting on the buses [to do rebusque] since 1pm [it was 5pm] and I only got \$3000 pesos to buy these books and work. They cost me \$300 pesos each, you can give me what you think I should gain [...] I was raised by a woman on Cartucho street in the middle of misery [...] this is not easy. Sometimes people give me a coin to fool me and take it away, and I am embarrassed.

Simón: Due to this [unemployment] young people and adults see ourselves in the sad task of getting on the buses to be able to support our families in an honest manner.

These statements show how these people decided not to get involved in criminal activities even though they cannot find formal employment and they are desperate to find means of survival. As explained at the outset of this thesis, in the Colombian context they could choose to engage in violence to solve their problems of survival by, for example, joining the armed groups where they would receive a steady income to provide for their families. And as Joaquín's story revealed, some people find it easier to provide for their families while engaging in criminal activities. However, they chose not to. This illustrates how rebusque on the buses is a way to minimize or delay engagement in criminal activities and violence. The idea of informal activities serving as a means to avoid violence has been noted by some scholars who see the informal economy as an opportunity, rather than as a problem. When people are frustrated with their society's social organization and structure because minimal living standards cannot be met, this can cause violence. In addition, lack of formal employment experience or opportunities, difficult working conditions and the personal discrimination that people have to face to get a formal job, when available, can also push people toward violence. The informal economy, however, minimizes these effects (De Soto 1989: 233, 234; See also Uribe et

al. 2006: 36). As De Soto notes, people's frustration caused by lack of state protection and access to public services "at best, gives rise to the informal; at worst, to criminality and subversion" (De Soto 1989: 234). Thus, informal workers' promotion of their views of rebusque as a form of honest work offer another perspective in contrast to Camacho's analysis of the "informal economy" and rebusque in Colombia and demonstrates how it is not always linked to "illegality and delinquency" as Camacho claims (2001:133).

3.2 Challenging Widespread Misconceptions of Deceit and Lack of Hygiene in Rebusque

Widespread misconceptions of rebusque are not limited to its association with criminality. Another widespread conception informal workers are aware of, and act upon through their rebusque activities, is that they lack the hygiene required to sell their food products. By asking passengers to hold and check for themselves these products, even though they are not buying them, some rebusque workers challenge this common perception. This is illustrated in the following accounts given by two peddlers:

Manuela: It is about this new and delicious product called [she describes it] like you can observe, this product comes very well packed for a better hygienic presentation and consumption.

Simón: My friends, as you can observe, it is a product of excellent quality, packed hygienically. In the bottom, you will find the date of production and expiry date.

Some informal workers during my fieldwork on the buses also seemed to be aware of other rebusque workers' attempts to mislead people through their stories and products, causing a sense of distrust among riders. Thus, informal workers used their rebusque activities to show that not all rebusque practitioners on the buses seek to mislead riders. For instance, when Mario offered the set of pencils he brought to sell, he

clarified that he did not attempt to “swindle” anyone as other peddlers might do on the buses:

Today I am coming to offer you this set of pencils for one thousand pesos [...] If you don't trust me, open the kit and try the pencils. I am not coming here to deceive you; I am not coming to make you a participant of the big swindle going on the urban transit with pencils.

Roberto, a peddler and HIV bearer, got on the bus and started to give details about his disease, showing riders a medical certificate and inviting them to read it:

Now, obviously, if someone wants to make sure, here I carry with me all the legal documents that prove that I am a HIV bearer. The person who wants to see it, by all means do so. I will be glad to facilitate this for you.

For her part, Juana (before offering the candies she planned to sell to riders) clarified for riders that she does not get on the buses to get “easy money” by misleading and exploiting people with her story. “Look, if it was about getting easy money, I would get on the bus to exploit your pity and compassion just with my story and get some change out of your compassion, but it is not about that; [...] it is about working for my children.”

3.3 Addressing Conflicting Ideas of Rebusque as a Form of Work

Since rebusque has been criminalized and many people distrust informal workers who do rebusque on the buses, it can be inferred that it is hardly considered as a legitimate form of work. Indeed, there seems to be a generalized conception that rebusque is rather a “form of unemployment.” For instance, in an article entitled “El Rebusque: La Nueva Economía de Popayán,”¹⁷ published in the newspaper *La Otra*

¹⁷ English: “Rebusque: The New Economy of Popayán.”

Popayán, it is stated that, “Rebusque is not a form of employment, but a temporary solution to the lack of it. It is a form of unemployment” (La Otra Popayán 2009: par. 4; my translation).

During my fieldwork I noticed that informal workers’ perceptions of their rebusque activities on the buses as a form of work varied. Some of them refer to rebusque as their form of work and ask for support for their informal activities as their means of work. Some informal workers on the buses also emphasized that they were not begging but making an effort to offer something to bus riders and to work. Others, however, emphasize how difficult it was to get a job, meaning a job in the formal economy, which would suggest that, similar to Aimmetta’s observations of rebusque workers in Argentina (2009), some rebusque practitioners in my study did not consider their activity on the buses as their job.

In asking permission of the bus drivers, or apologizing to them when they had stepped on the bus without their permission, some informal workers in this study spoke of rebusque as their form of work:

María: Could you allow me to work?

Nicolás: My friend, could you let me work?

Alonso: I’m sorry to get on the bus in this manner, I know it is rude to get on the bus like that but I need to get employed in something.

Jairo : Can you allow me a minute to work?

After getting permission from the bus driver, Jairo addressed passengers in the following manner: “Good afternoon dear passengers, we are a group of young people who get on the urban transport daily in order to get ourselves employed and bring you a

variety of products and promotions.” Jairo’s account shed some light into other dimensions of rebusque while clarifying that it does not only serve as a means of employment, but also as a means to bring riders a service so that riders also benefited from rebusque, not just informal workers. Note that Jairo uses the words “work” and “employment” interchangeably to refer to his rebusque activities on the buses. Using terms of “work,” and “employment” interchangeably was a common phenomena I found in rebusque workers’ narratives as will become evident in the following ethnographic accounts.

Peddlers and buskers were frequently emphatic in asking support for their form of employment and to thank passengers and drivers for their support of it:

Nicolás: Thanks to you for your attention and to the bus driver for supporting my form of employment.

Angela: Thanks to all of you and the bus driver for allowing me to get on his bus and work.

Manuela: I thank the people of good will, of good heart, if you can help me and at the same time support my form of employment, getting this delicious candy.

Simón: I also thank the person who wishes to help me since this is my only source of work that allows me to support my family honestly.

Susana: I thank all the people of good will, good faith and good heart who wish to help me and support my form of work, taking one, or if you can, two candies.

In their accounts, I noticed that informal workers did not understand the idea of “support for their work” only within a narrative about money. Indeed, rebusque practitioners on the buses frequently clarified that besides a monetary contribution, riders could support their work by showing some respect by replying to their greeting,

listening to them, and receiving their products out of respect, not necessarily in order to buy them.

Milena: I could be whatever you may want to think of me, but if in some manner I can get your goodwill, you are very kind. I thank you for your politeness and have a beautiful day.

Roberto: I don't want to take more of your time dear people. I thank you all for your politeness in listening to me [...] I would like to thank you since all of you received the incense sticks I brought to sell. It is very kind that you gave me a few minutes of your time and listened to me.

Manuela: I have dared very politely to pass by your seats, thanking the people who perhaps could receive this product without any compromise [...] Thank you very much for your attention and politeness.

Simón: In this opportunity, I am going to pass very politely by your seats giving you this delicious product [...] I hope you can receive it without compromise [...] Remember that looking does not mean buying. Thank you very much.

Leonardo: Look my friend, I bring you these little boxes with candies [...] I hope you receive them without any kind of commitment. Thank you very much.

Nicolás: I am going to pass very politely by each of your seats, giving you this delicious candy. I hope you receive it out of respect.

Jacobo: I am not coming to sell you anything. I am coming to share a little bit of universal literature. I hope you listen to me without any compromise.

When they greet passengers, most informal workers paused to wait for the riders' reply. Since most riders often did not respond, rebusque workers usually thanked those riders who greeted them, and made statements about the respect their work deserves through the use of irony. Here are some examples:

Javier: Thank you, what a good thing to find at least two people who said hello to me today.

Gabriel: Thank you. It is good that at least someone says hello to me in the whole afternoon.

Catalina: Thanks, it is great to know that there are some people who know that saying hello to someone who works on the buses is not a sin.

Informal workers' emphasis on asking for riders support for their work was also understood in terms of recommending that passengers do not drop the package of products they acquired from peddlers since it might have encouraged drivers to deny them access to the buses:

Manuel: I would thank you not to drop the package within the vehicle because it affects my form of employment.

Luz : With all my heart I truly recommend that all of those people who wish to help me with my job please do not drop the package within the vehicle.

Manuela: Please, do not drop the package within the vehicle since it can affect my form of employment.

Mauricio: I thank the person that wishes to help me for not throwing the package inside the vehicle. Thanks for your attention and have a good day.

Nicolás: Please do not throw the package inside the vehicle [...] Thank you very much for your generous help and I wish you all a pleasant afternoon.

Some peddlers on the buses also emphasized that they were not begging but making an effort to offer something to bus riders and work:

Javier : The only way I have found to survive and invest the money with which I left my land is by making these book markers [...] I thank you for supporting my form of work and my effort [...] Like I said, this is a way for me to invest the little money I came here with and work instead of begging.

Andrés: I have been getting on the buses since 1 p.m. and I only received \$3000 pesos to buy these books and work.

I noticed that such clarification on the part of some informal workers was appreciated by riders through their monetary donations and comments that valued peddlers' and buskers' efforts to get themselves a form of work. For instance, when Andrés got off the bus I heard some passengers saying, "Ah! But at least he makes the effort to work instead of just staying there begging."

On the other hand, there were some informal workers who stressed the obstacles they encountered to get a job, referring to a job in the formal economy which suggests that they do not see their rebusque activities on the buses as a form of job. Here are some examples:

Alberto: My dad abandoned us a couple of months ago. Since that time, I have had to take care of the household obligations [...] sometimes I work as a construction assistant with my uncle but that is when there is work and I have been out of work for six weeks.

Rodrigo: Unfortunately it has not been easy to get a job due to the situation and because I do not have professional experience, since the only thing I have done in my life is to work the land that we had to leave.

Thus, informal workers' perceptions of their rebusque activities as a form of work on the buses show great variability. However, the important aspect to emphasize in this chapter is that rebusque on the main public transportation system in this city is subject to multiple readings as the simple offering of their products and performances does not only serve monetary purposes, but also underlies an entire "cultural project" or "serious game" (Ortner 2006:133) while revealing and challenging broader conventional cultural perceptions that portray rebusque as linked to criminality and deceit, or simply refuse to acknowledge it as a form of work.

Chapter 4: Beyond Monetary Gain: Rebusque as Social Critique

In addition to challenging conventional ideas about rebusque, informal workers' claims and performances also reveal larger power relations through subtle social critique of the broader socio-political order wherein they perceived a lack of state attention and protection had led to informal workers' marginalization.

4.1 Bus Performances as Informal Workers' Expressions of Social Critique

Rebusque workers' feelings of having been abandoned by the state and the broader Colombian society in which they live became evident to me in many forms during my fieldwork. One of these forms was the claims and performances of numerous displaced people who did rebusque on the buses and who frequently claimed that they had had to move to the city because of violence in the countryside, and that they were still experiencing violence, albeit of another kind, in the city. In Bogotá, they experienced urban violence most strongly in terms of social segregation and lack of jobs available for sustaining their families:

Federico: Good afternoon dear passengers [...] I am from the Cauca department. I came to Bogotá due to the situation of military violence since I did not want to expose my children to it anymore [...] I came to Bogotá and the situation has been even more difficult since there is another kind of violence here [...] I have been here for four months and I haven't found any work.

Javier: Some time ago I had to leave my land because they [armed groups] threatened me and my family if we would not leave from there [...] The only way I have found to survive and invest the money which I got for my land is by making these book markers.

Felipe: Three months ago I had to leave my land due to the conflict [between guerrillas, paramilitaries, and government military forces]. Adaptation

into this city has not been easy [...] There is another war here, that of hunger if one does not get a job [...] I have three children and my wife, the five of us live in one room very uncomfortably.

Felipe's voice broke and I noticed a tone of sadness and desperation in his speech. In addition to the empathy I felt for such situations, these stories made me wonder about the role of the state in protecting displaced populations due to the armed violence in rural areas. Here, it is important to mention that during my fieldwork I was advised to be careful about the stories told by some rebusque practitioners on the buses who claimed to be part of the displaced population due to the Colombian conflict because it seems that some people take advantage of this social problem and invent such stories to get economic benefits from it. In addition, I was told that the Colombian government has a special program to help the displaced community in this country and therefore there should not be people from the displaced population resorting to informal means to sustain themselves in the city such as rebusque. However, during my stay in Bogotá I witnessed a different situation. For instance, I often heard in the local news that the government's plan for displaced people is not effective. At the same time, I saw many displaced people protesting in front of government buildings of those who are in charge of helping displaced populations such as *El Ministerio de la Protección Social*¹⁸ which is also in charge of formulating labour policies.

By the same token, scholars have documented that although within the government program for the displaced population there is a plan that offers retraining for displaced people so that they can enter the urban job market, it is not specific and targeted training. Rather, it is vague and does not guide them towards particular job

¹⁸ English: Social Protection Ministry.

paths, and therefore does not effectively solve displaced peoples' employment needs. In addition, even though displaced people are promised employment at the beginning of the government job training program, the reality turns out to be different because at the end of such programs they have to struggle to get a job without help (Garay et al. 2009b:93). Consequently, as Garay et al. conclude, "almost all the displaced population is found in the informal sector" (Garay et al. 2009a: 200; my translation). Similarly, a report written by the Ministerio de Educación Nacional asserted that, "displacement, as a result of violence in all its manifestations, is one of the factors that contributes to the increase of the informal economy" (Ministerio de Educación Nacional 2006: par.5; my translation). Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that part of the displaced population has been left unattended somehow by the Colombian government and has had to resort to informal means, such as rebusque on the buses, to provide some income for their families in the city.

After Felipe gave this brief account about his life as a displaced person he sang a song which is quite evocative for the displaced population. This song is called "A quién engañas abuelo?" (Whom do you lie to Grandpa?).

Whom do you lie to Grandpa?

Whom do you lie to Grandpa?
I know you are crying
since mom and dad
are in heaven resting;
you have never told me how,
neither have you told me when,
but up in the mountain there are two crosses
that are reminding you of it.

The older man put his head down
and caressing the young boy
says you are right son
hate has changed everything

A quién engañas abuelo?

A quién engañas abuelo?
yo sé que tú estas llorando
ende que taita y que mama
arriba están descansando;
nunca me dijiste cómo,
tampoco me has dicho cuándo,
pero en el cerro hay dos cruces
que te lo estan recordando.

Bajó la cabeza el viejo
y acariciando al muchacho,
dice tienes razón hijo,
el odio todo ha cambiado

the peons have gone away
and the land is now abandoned
I am lacking strength,
plowing is so heavy on me!
and you are just a child
to get this ranch flourished.

Chucho, the plowing man,
that lives in the sugar cane crops, tells me
that some people get killed for being part of
the “guerrillas,”¹⁹
and others get killed for being part of the “paramilitary,”²⁰
but does it matter Grand pa?
then what is it that really matters?
My parents were very good people,
they did not hurt anyone.
I just understand one thing:
that before God, we are equals.

They show up in national elections,
those who are called leaders,
that keep promising schools
and bridges where there are no rivers.
And to the peasant’s soul
comes the destroying light,
and then he learns to hate
even the person who was his good neighbour,
all for those damned
cheap politicians. “Yes Sir!”
[Felipe emphasized].

Now I understand you Grandpa,
but please, don’t cry anymore!

los piones se fueron lejos
y el surco está abandonao
a mí ya me faltan juerzas,
me pesa tanto el arao!
y tú eres tan sólo un niño
pa’sacar arriba el rancho.

Me dice Chucho el arriero
el que vive en los cañales,
que a unos los matan por
“guerrilleros,”
y a otros por “paramilitares,”
pero eso qué importa abuelo?
entonces qué es lo que vale?
Mis taitas eran tan guenos,
a naide le hicieron males,
sólo una cosa comprendo
que ante Dios somos iguales.

Se aparecen en elecciones
unos que llaman caudillos,
que andan prometiendo escuelas
y puentes donde no hay ríos.
Y al alma del campesino
llega el color partidizo,
y entonces aprende a odiar
hasta a quien fue su buen vecino,
todo por esos malditos
politiqueros de oficio. “Si Señor!”
[Felipe enfatizó].

Ahora te comprendo abuelo,
por Dios no sigas llorando!

The song lyrics to “Whom do you lie to Grandpa?” evoke the situation of violence in the rural areas of Colombia and how peasants have to cope with it. Thus, it is written from a peasant’s viewpoint and uses words peasants would use in their daily interactions such as “fueron” instead of “fueron” (they left); “pa” instead of “para” (to); “naide” for “nadie” (no one); and “taitas” for “padres” (parents). Interestingly, this song also brings into dialogue different generations, as the grandfather and his grandson talk

¹⁹ The original version of the song talks about “godos” instead of “guerrillas.”

²⁰ The original version of the song talks about “liberals” instead of “paramilitary.”

about events of violence that have affected their lives which reflects the long history of violence and social upheaval in Colombia.

I could follow the song and write down the lyrics because this is a song I learned from listening to the local radio when I was little. The fact that I already knew the song allowed me to notice some changes made to it by Felipe. For instance, I noted that Felipe changed the original version of the song which in the third stanza speaks of “godos,”²¹ which he changed to “guerrillas.” Likewise “liberals” is changed to “paramilitary.” Through these changes, it seems as if history is being updated in Felipe’s version of the song: whereas in the past those who oppressed people were perceived to be mostly godos and liberals, now they are identified as the guerrillas and paramilitaries as well. It is also important to note that Felipe emphasized the part of the song, “all for those damned cheap politicians,” expressing his disapproval of the government for its lack of effective solutions to peoples’ problems. The fact that he emphasized parts of the song drew my attention to the fact that songs serve some informal workers as a means to communicate their social critiques and to shed some light on their own broader social and political context.

Interestingly, a couple of weeks before I heard Felipe’s song on a bus, I had heard Carlos sing the same song on another bus. Carlos had introduced the song in this manner: “I am going to sing for you a very well known Colombian song: “A quién engañas abuelo?” Unlike Felipe, Carlos did not give any details about his life. However, it is interesting that Carlos’ version of the song also changed in the third stanza and spoke of “guerrillas” instead of “godos,” and of “paramilitary” instead of “liberals.”

²¹ The word “godos” is used to refer to Spaniards, but it also relates to conservatives.

This reveals the same perception of who is oppressing peasants in the rural areas, and suggests that this is somehow part of the conventional wisdom of many people nowadays. In his performance, Carlos emphasized the part of the song, “That before God, we are equals,” by saying “Si Señor!” (Yes Sir!), which is not stressed in the original version of the song. It can be argued that, by stressing this particular part of the song, Carlos is communicating a kind of resilience in the concept of equality as guaranteed by God even within the context of a lack of state protection. This view will be explored further in the next chapter. The point to emphasize here is that through their use of this song, and the changes they made to it, Carlos and Felipe were exercising their agency to express their social predicament and their dissatisfaction with armed groups and the state’s evident lack of resolve to forge peace.

On another occasion I saw Camilo, a busker and rap singer, who, like Carlos, gave no details about his life to bus riders, but still offered them revealing aspects of his social context through a song he had written. Camilo distributed copies of his song and introduced it to bus riders in the following manner:

I am going to sing a rap song called “Esta realidad que vivo.”²² The truth is that I wrote the song. It’s not the very best song in the world, but anyways I am going to sing it [...] all for a little bit of culture and talent [...] I truly hope not to make you uncomfortable as the truth is that it is about an honest work more than anything.

He starts singing the song:²³

This reality I live in

And this reality I live in, in this hidden world.
It is a reality theme that I bring to your ears.
I am travelling and walking on the streets observing.
So many souls, so many lives that want to get out,

Esta realidad que vivo

Y esta realidad que vivo en este mundo escondido.
Es un tema de realidad que le traigo hasta su oído.
Voy viajando, caminando por las calles observando.
Tantas almas, tantas vidas que quieren la salida,

²² English: “This reality I live in.”

²³ I copied and translated this song from the paper containing the song lyrics that Camilo passed on at the beginning of his performance to all bus riders.

of what?

I would say from so much poverty.
So much, that many complain
because it is a royalty.

Ten-year-old boys that already want to be hitmen.
I would say in the north, in downtown
this is part of every neighborhood.
True reality that I see on the streets.
Faith, I see it daily.
Look at it from far away,
it lives through time and on so much pavement.

So many people pass, go and come, some say
he is like a delinquent.
They see another person
very well presented: impeccable.
They see another one searching the garbage
and say to him: disposable.
If they are children, young people, seniors
that search desperately for something to eat.
I sing to you, it was never seen in the past.
And why does it expand everyday in the present.

de qué?

Diré de tanta pobreza.
Tanta que muchos se quejan
porque es una realéza.

Chicos de diez años que ya quieren ser sicarios.
Diré en el norte, en el centro
esto es de cada barrio.
Realidad verdadera que veo en las ceras.
La fé, a diario la veo.
Mírenla desde lejos,
en el tiempo, vive en tanto pavimento.

Pasa, va y viene tanta gente, algunos como dicen
disque un delincuente.
Algo otro mire encuentra mira
muy bien presente: intachable.
Ven a otro esculcando una basura
y le dice desechable.
Si son niños, jóvenes, ancianos
que buscan con afán algo que comer.
Yo le canto, en el ayer esto no se veía.
Y porqué en el presente expande cada día?

Camilo's lyrics to the song "Esta realidad que vivo," are about discrimination and segregation, and about poverty. They also show how many are forced to engage in violence and militarization in order to get away from conditions of poverty. His lyrics also lament that this situation has become worse through history, and declare how -in spite of all the suffering- there is still faith and hope. Interestingly, the songs of Carlos, Felipe and Camilo serve them as a means to convey to bus riders their analysis of their social reality, and their dissatisfaction with it.

Some rebusque workers articulate their dissatisfaction with the state's role in this social reality in a more direct manner. The following account by Simón is a telling description of such practice:

I am sorry to disturb you and take one or two seconds of your pleasant and appreciated time [...] Friends, I know this work has become a little bit annoying, right? A little bit bothersome. Many times a vendor has barely finished getting

off the bus when the next one is getting on to offer the same product or something different [...] But friends, we see this as a result of a serious problem, a problem that is increasing everyday due to our government [...] they do not do anything to help us. This is called unemployment.

Their claims show how such feelings of social alienation are shared by various informal workers on the buses and expressed through their rebusque performances. At the same time, they illustrate how rebusque workers are “situated in a social environment” (Merleau-Ponty 1945:520) and it is the experience of these social conditions which provides people with “explicit judgments” and reasons for their actions (Merleau-Ponty 1945:515). Here, it is important to note that even though Merleau-Ponty is not known for his discussions of social conditions and analysis, in my reading of Merleau-Ponty his understanding of this basis for the phenomenology of perception deserves more attention. In the case of rebusque, it accounts for how these informal workers’ actions result from the peculiarly charged social conditions for their experience of being-in-the-world, and their resulting social context which compels them to act upon it.

Furthermore, informal workers’ attempts to speak to bus riders and express their critiques of the state and of their social conditions through their claims and performances can be understood as following Ortner’s idea of “serious games” in the sense that they provide a window to “understand larger forces, formations and transformations of social life” (Ortner 2006 130) .

Thus, these and other ethnographic examples demonstrate the perception that due to the weakness of the Colombian state people have had to resort to means such as rebusque to solve their daily problems of survival by themselves. Scholars have documented the Colombian state’s failure to fulfill Colombians’ most basic expectations

and needs, and that this failure has caused great social upheaval. They argue that this country has deficiencies in education, and health care systems and that an increase of the informal economy has resulted, for many people have to depend on their own resources to address the lack of such social services (Wade 1999: 459. See also Safford and Palacios 2002: 298). Similarly, in an article entitled “El 57% de Trabajadores es Informal,”²⁴ published in the newspaper *El Colombiano*, 10 April 2008, Carlos Caballero Argaez, former mining minister, was cited saying that, “the fact that in a country more than 50% of its working population is informal, reflects inadequate policies to generate the formalization of employment” (El Colombiano 2008: par. 9; my translation). In the same vein, it was reported in the newspaper *La Otra Popayán*, 15 August 2008, that:

This situation [unemployment] that characterizes the everyday life of people from Popayán city and all Colombians, is hardly due to those people who need to go to the streets to look for some way to sustain themselves, but it is the result of the incapacity of the state to fulfill one of its constitutional duties: to offer fair labour conditions so that people can sustain themselves and their families [...] This situation that many people live, not just in Popayán city but a great percentage of Colombians, has risen in the last years as a result of the social problems that the country has had: the internal conflict, the drug trade, and inefficient state policies, among other factors, which have led people to assume the consequences of these injustices. Homeless people, beggars, displaced people and rebusque, are the most direct effects of these problematic circumstances and, sadly said, this problematic affects more than half of the population of the country (La Otra Popayán 2008:par. 4-8;my translation).

4.2 Moral Economies and Bus Rebusque: Social Expectations for the State, and Workers who Want Formal Employment

The above accounts lead one to infer that there is a moral economy sustained by these rebusque practitioners and that it is shared to some extent by others in the same society. There is an image of the way the state should respond to such peoples’ situation of unemployment which emerges from peoples’ social aspirations and expectations, and forms the basis of their interpretation of the role of the state in economic matters (Blau

²⁴ English: “57% of Workers are Informal.”

1993: 19; Svallfors 2006: 1, 162; Edelman 339; Thompson 1971: 79; Griffith 2009: 433-434). As Svallfors explains it, “There is a moral economy in society, in which the mutual rights and obligations of the governing and the governed are collected and condensed [...] People’s notions of social institutions are guided by normative ideas of reciprocity, obligation and responsibility” (2006:1). The fact that there is a moral economy in informal workers’ claims and grievances, as illustrated by the preceding ethnographic examples, shows once again that the exchanges taking place through rebusque activities on the buses are more than monetary ones.

On the other hand, there is also a moral economy through which people get jobs in the formal economy. In fact, workers in that domain also have to fulfill social expectations in order to get their formal jobs. People who want to participate in the formal labour market have to meet certain employability requirements to gain access to the formal sector. Among some of the employability requirements most people have to fulfill are education and experience. Indeed, informal workers themselves frequently claimed that it was due to their lack of training and experience that they were not able to obtain formal jobs.

For instance, Catalina, a peddler, related how she was trying to get a job that nobody wanted to give her because she lacked experience. She next commented upon how she did not need a “résumé or referees” to be able to get on the buses and make a living through rebusque. “I get on the buses because in this space no one asks for a

résumé or referees to give me some change in exchange for this²⁵ that I can do with my hands.”

Rebusque is also a form of job for displaced people who do not meet employability requirements in the formal economy:

Rodrigo: I came with my family to Bogotá from Putumayo after being removed from our land [...] unfortunately it has not been easy to get employment due to the situation and because I do not have professional experience since the only thing I have done in my life is work on the land that we had to leave.

Javier: Unfortunately, to get a job here is very difficult because I do not have the résumé they demand for the jobs they have available.

The expressions “I don’t have a résumé” or “I don’t have the professional experience” reveal these rebusque workers’ discontent towards certain employability requirements for entering the formal sector namely, education. This in turn reflects the impact of certain discourses and practices linked to education and the urban utopias of modernization that have gained force in Colombia since the Republican period. Indeed, in describing the workings of the republican period during the late 19th and early 20th century in Colombia, historian James Sanders documents the importance of education for republicans in terms of providing economic modernization for this country:

Education would also teach good habits of hard work, love of virtue, respect for the law, and recognition of legitimate authority [...] schools would discipline the masses, teach them their responsibilities and duties so that they [...] would contribute through their hard work to the economic modernity of Colombia (Sanders 2004: 146).

...

²⁵ Catalina showed some “dijes.” These are handmade metal figures that people wear on their necklaces and bracelets.

And nowadays some scholars still argue that “Colombia’s economic growth is likely to be driven by its educated labor force” (Velez et al. 2003: 611). However, throughout its history, education in Colombia, and thus peoples’ access to the formal sector, has been a privilege of the elite. As historian David Bushnell explains, “It [the oligarchy] designated the small, wealthy, educated elite that supposedly ran the government, the church, the army, business, everything including the two traditional parties during republican times” (Bushnell 1993: 198).

Inequitable access to schooling and the educational gap between the rich and the poor have persisted and widened during the last decades. According to Velez et al., in 2003, “Disparities in educational attainment among the poorest, middle income, and richest groups have increased over the last few years in Colombia, and there are indications that the gap between the richer and poorer income groups are widening” (Velez et al. 2003: 618).

In explaining the growing gap between the rich and the poor in the realm of literacy and the economy, historian Marco Palacios further explains that the Colombian poor are disadvantaged not only in terms of educational opportunities but also education quality as, unlike the rich, the poor have to accept the low quality education that is offered in some public schools and thus are less likely to have the qualifications needed to get a formal job once they graduate. As Palacios explains:

The model that developed has a dual profile, in which a public sector provides primary and secondary education of low quality while at least some of the private institutions offer something better. Since education is rightly seen as a privileged means of access to the modern sector of the economy, any family with even a remote possibility of paying private schools fees chooses to do so, in the hope of better quality (2006:217).

However, it can hardly be asserted that education is always the solution for people to get a job in the formal economy. Scholars note that the links between education and labour demand are weak in Colombia (Velez et al. 2003: 617, 622; Palacios 2006: 218). In this vein, Palacios affirms that “as early as 1970, it was reported that university education was exhausting its potential as a means of social mobility, and that academic degrees were losing their value in the job market” (2006: 218).

This added to the inadequacy of urban wages that looked unattractive to some people in Colombia. Indeed, in an article published by the Ministerio de Educación Nacional it was reported that, “For ambulant vendors, to be subject to the national wage system since the 1940s signifies and implies being condemned to hunger” (Ministerio de Educación Nacional 2006: par.6; my translation). This situation is common in other countries. Indeed, anthropologists Keith Hart’s study among the Fafra in Africa and Martin Murphy’s work in the Dominican Republic reveal how people decide to stay in the informal economy because they have better income opportunities than in the jobs they would find in the formal economy (Hart 1973: 66; Murphy 1990: 171).

Economist Laura Rawlings suggests that in the Colombian context it is critical to introduce labour market reforms to facilitate greater access to the formal sector (Rawlings 2003: 719). An example of such reforms, as briefly mentioned at the outset of this thesis, is the 2002 Labour Reform introduced by the Colombian Congress to increase formal employment by 10% within four years (Congreso de Colombia 2002). Nonetheless, Acosta notes that between August 2004 and September 2005 more jobs were created but within the informal sector and not within the formal sector as proposed in the 2002 Labour Reform (Acosta 2005: par.1).

The reform contains measures for social protection (i.e, unemployment insurance, formalization of employment), and labour flexibility, the latter policy was sought to combat informality because more flexible work schedules would include less costs for firing and more new contracts. Nonetheless, according to Núñez, labour flexibility actually caused job instability for workers while promoting major numbers of temporary contracts (Núñez 2004: 2, 19). In other words, although more jobs were created in the formal sector there was more job insecurity as jobs were temporary which meant that workers did not have a stable and secure source of income. Given these new sets of circumstances in the Colombian formal sector, it is not surprising to encounter such alarming numbers of workers resorting to rebusque on the buses as their form of work, and expressing their discontent towards employability arrangements in the formal economy, especially in terms of lacking the necessary experience and training required to enter the formal sector as Javier and Rodrigo's claims illustrated above.

4.3 Recent Neoliberal Labour Reform and State Interventions: Changing the Meanings of Formal and Informal Sectors

Another argument can be made in relation to the extent to which the 2002 Labour Reform in Colombia follows a neoliberal framework as it limits the intervention of the state, leaving to private enterprises the autonomy to regulate labour flexibility in their contracts (e.g., with regard to hiring periods). As anthropologist Lesley Gill explains the workings of neoliberal tendencies, "Proponents of neoliberalism support deregulation, privatization, deunionization, 'flexible' labor regimes, and the withdrawal of the state from social service provision" (Gill 2009: 678 n.6).

A report entitled “Reforma Laboral”²⁶ published by the *Escuela de Administración, Finanzas y Tecnología de Colombia* (EAFIT), affirmed that the 2002 Labour Reform in Colombia has only benefited private enterprises and not workers because labour flexibility lowered the costs of hiring new employees for enterprises, and there was no major increase in the number of formal jobs they offered (EAFIT nd: 1).

Thus, it is not surprising that the informal economy has increased in Colombia since the 2002 Labour Reform and implementation of its neoliberal framework, because the formal economy no longer offers the same security and stability it used to offer in the past. These phenomena are not unique to Colombia but rather a reflection of greater neoliberal global processes. In fact, Centeno and Portes note that in Latin America:

An underlying labor surplus and lack of state protections insure that firms pretty much do as they please in indicating the conditions for new “formal” jobs. Thus the meaning of informality has changed markedly in the neoliberal era. In the past, it was the sector where those excluded from the modern economy found employment; in the present it has become a place for those escaping the degradation of formerly secure jobs (2006:40).

Indeed, the new set of labour arrangements within neoliberal frameworks has led some scholars to challenge conventional ideas that treat informality as promoting job insecurity, low wages and lack of social protection (see for example Botero 2010: par. 3; Centeno and Portes 2006:40; Itzigsohn 2006: 84) because it now seems that such employment difficulties also occur in the formal sector under neoliberalism. Thus, scholars conclude that neoliberalism creates a new form of informality as people resort to it as a desirable option which shifts the meanings between the formal and the informal sector. As Itzigsohn puts it:

Neoliberalism led to the informal economy and to the informalization of the formal economy [...] New export-oriented industries, although protected in theory, present working conditions that are

²⁶ English: “Labour Reform.”

not so different from informal work. For many people, the informal economy has thus become not only a shelter of unemployment but also an employment of choice [...] this is not because informal jobs are protected, but because suddenly they are not as distinct from formal ones as they once were (2006:84).

Itzigsohn is not alone in this position. Similarly Centeno and Portes note that:

As far as the informal sector is concerned, the shift from protectionism and regulation to free markets has not led to its absorption into the modern economy, but to two unanticipated consequences: First, the weakening of labor standards and state protection produced a blurring of the line between the two sectors. When work in the formal sector becomes increasingly low-paid and insecure it begins to approximate the conditions previously associated with the informal economy. As the state ceases to regulate, the distinction between a formal and informal economy gradually loses its meaning. Second, informal self-employment ceases to be a “cushion” against the ups-and-downs of the formal-sector labor demand to become a desirable alternative to it. Street vending, for instance, becomes preferable to the wages and work conditions available in the “formal” privatized plants (2006:40).

By the same token, Pérez-Sáinz, in his work in Central America, concludes that the changes that have taken place within the informal and formal sectors due to neoliberal labour reforms have led to a new kind of informality called “Neoinformality.”

As Pérez-Sáinz expresses it:

Even though so-called informal activities still exist, the processes which give rise to them, as well as the way they operate and fit into the national economy (and even the international economy) have changed. This has led to the use of the term ‘neo-informality’ (1998:160).

Thus, contrary to De Soto and the neoliberal ideology that call for less intervention of the state in economic matters to decrease the incidence of the informal economy (De Soto 1989: 232), less intervention of the state through less regulation does not necessarily decrease the persistence of the informal economy but has the potential to create a new form of formality that favours and promotes a kind of informality that people resort to as a result of the new regimes of job insecurity brought to the fore by the autonomy given to private enterprises through the idea of “flexible” labour regimes in neoliberal frameworks. As a result, scholars argue that informality is not always a consequence of state intervention through laws and regulations but a result

of the failure of the state at enforcing such laws effectively (Persaud and Ortiz in 2003: 351; see also Centeno and Portes 2006: 41), such as when Colombia's 2002 Labour Reform basically abdicated state enforcement of labour laws, turning control over to private corporations.²⁷

To give an example, it has been documented that theory and practice of the Colombian Constitution conflict dramatically (Safford and Palacios 2002: 338; La Otra Popayán 2008: par. 2). Indeed, in terms of unemployment and the Colombian Constitution, scholars Safford and Palacios note that:

Ideals proclaimed in the constitution of 1991 have been particularly frustrating to Colombians. Urban unemployment, which in recent years has reached the highest levels since unemployment statistics have existed, contradicts the constitutional principle that declares the right to work to be fundamental (2002:338).

In fact, it is postulated in Article 25, Title 2, Chapter 2 of the Fundamental Rights Section of the Colombian Constitution that, "Work is a right and a social obligation and has, in all its modalities, the special protection of the state. Every person has the right to work in fair and respectable conditions." (Congreso de Colombia 1991; my translation). In the same vein, Article 53 of Chapter 2 of the Colombian Constitution declares that:

The Congress will implement a statute on work. The corresponding law will consider at least the following fundamental principles: Equality of opportunities for workers; appropriate minimum remuneration proportional to the quantity and quality of work; employment stability [...] The law and work contracts cannot lessen the liberty, human dignity neither the rights of workers (Congreso de Colombia 1991; my translation).

Similarly, Article 54 of the Colombian Constitution reads that:

It is the government responsibility to offer technical and professional training to people who require it. The State should favour labour relocation of people of working age and guarantee disabled persons the right to a job that suits their health conditions (Congreso de Colombia 1991; my translation).

²⁷ I owe this observation to Dr. Frances Slaney.

However, it seems that the 2002 Labour Reform and the reality of informal workers' lives illustrated at the outset of this chapter contradict what has been stated in the Colombian Constitution. To give another instance, during my fieldwork I heard Roberto who claimed to be an HIV bearer and explained how, due to his disease, he was denied a job by some employers in the formal economy, and for this reason Roberto had to resort to rebusque on the buses:

I get on the buses everyday to solve my problems of survival because unfortunately 4 years ago I was diagnosed positive for HIV, for this reason it has been very difficult for me to get a formal job for a year now [...] it is believed that a person with HIV is not eligible to work and even less to be around people and that has stained my *résumé* [...] They have rejected many of my *résumés* with many arguments because I am a HIV bearer.

Clearly, and as a result of the neoliberal Labour Reform that gives total autonomy to private enterprises in the formal sector to set up employment contract guidelines and hire whomever they think is eligible for whatever time period they want, insuring “that firms pretty much do as they please in indicating the conditions for new ‘formal jobs’” (Centeno and Portes 2006: 40) greatly contradicts the ideals declared in the Colombian Constitution and this is part of the broader social context in which the informal economy develops in Colombia.

Consequently, scholars have suggested that a more gradual form of state intervention is necessary in the economy to protect workers (Centeno and Portes 2006:41; Tokman 1992: 12). In this vein, Centeno and Portes propose an alternative solution to strengthen Latin American state intervention, which would consist of producing fewer regulations so that the state can keep up with their enforcement efficiently. “A state does not become weaker because it regulates less, it is weakened by

the inability to enforce its own rules. It follows, in principle, that the lesser the volume of regulation, the greater the ability of enforcers to implement it in strategic areas” (Centeno and Portes 2006: 41).

Thus, changes in the formal and informal economy following neoliberal frameworks that have pushed people to resort increasingly to informal economic activities are not processes unique to Bogotá, Colombia but rather very widespread and reflect global workings in the formal and informal economies of various states. Colombia’s Labour Reform initiatives of 2002 were enmeshed within this larger neoliberal trend, and in the subsequent summer of 2009 I witnessed, the alarming number of informal workers doing rebusque on Bogotá’s buses. This shows another way in which rebusque can be thought of as an example of a “serious game.” It is a practice pursued in a social context which “is global and transnational; [and where] there are many games in play simultaneously” (Ortner 1996:19). Thus Bogotá’s urban rebusque on the buses is both a reflection of Colombia’s domestic policies and the broader global neoliberal game.

Chapter 5. Neoliberalism and Expressions of “Self-Reliance” and “Resilience” as negotiated through the Social Relations of Solidarity in Bus Rebusque

Neoliberalism shifts the meanings not only of the terms “informal” and “formal” economies, but also of the workers’ own sense of economic resources and support. Again, this is a condition shared by many areas of the world. For instance, in her work among unemployed professionals in the U.S.A., who used to work in high technology companies (i.e., telecommunications), anthropologist Carrie Lane documents the effects of neoliberalism on that working population and their families, noting that their lack of stable jobs has changed the workers’ own rationalizations of their unemployment situation and created a new ideology of self-reliance that has replaced such peoples’ former dependency on the state for economic security. As Lane puts it:

Instead, the burdens of a volatile and increasingly global labor market, an ailing economy, and the disappearance of corporate welfare have been quietly transferred onto the shoulders of the dual-earner family. Yet, rather than conceptualizing those responsibilities as a burden, most tech workers draw on the self-empowering philosophy of career management, to frame them, instead, as evidence of their own autonomy and self-reliance (2009:690).

5.1 Solidarity as Emergent from People’s Shared Conditions across Colombian Space and Time

Similarly, in Colombia, people have come to rely less on the state to solve their employment needs. In fact, it seems that an increasing lack of state attention and protection for Colombian citizens under the state’s neoliberal framework and 2002 Labour Reform, has led the working population to take care of their own affairs in order to improve their unemployment situation by themselves. They have looked for new resources to rely on, such as inter-personal solidarity at their work sites, rather than depending on each other as an entire group of Colombians as mediated by the state. However, unlike Tech workers in Lane’s ethnography of labour in the U.S.A., informal workers’ in my study do not seem to frame their new sources of support as a

satisfactory replacement for their lack of formal employment or accept that they should no longer expect a larger state “collectivity” to regard their employment needs as somehow a pan-Colombian matter of interest. Rather, rebusque workers on the buses frequently expressed a desire for the government to do more to support unemployed citizens. Indeed, they criticized the state for ignoring the employment problems which led them to look for other sources of resilience and reliance through relationships of social solidarity forged through rebusque activities in compensation for the lack of state attention and protection they suffered. Simón’s account is a telling example of such tendency:

But friends, we see this as a result of a serious problem, a problem that is increasing everyday due to our government [...] they do not do anything to help us. This is called unemployment [...] due to this [unemployment] young people and adults see ourselves in the sad task of getting on the buses to be able to provide some income for our families [...] I am grateful to all of you for your attention, I also thank the persons who help me since this is my only source of work I count on them in order to be able to sustain my home in an honest manner.

Rebusque as an alternative employment, and not the most desired one, can be related to Ortner’s analysis of the multiple results which emerge from the multiplicity of games within serious games. As Ortner explains:

On the other hand the sheer multiplicity of games provides a sense of alternatives, a sense that there are other ways of doing the game of life, even if those alternatives are not immediately available or subjectively desirable. What is important is that they exist, and thus always prevent closure (1996:19).

The kind of reliance through which informal workers forge social relations of solidarity in rebusque takes two forms: “self-reliance” and inter-reliance. Initially, I found the links between self-reliance and solidarity to be quite contradictory as the first one supposes a kind of individual practice and the latter a more social one. However, in

the context of rebusque, practices of self-reliance and solidarity seem to complement each other rather than oppose each other since, as described earlier, people have to look for the alternative of people's solidarity by themselves as individuals, as opposed to relying on a Pan-colombian mutual aid mediated through the state. This idea is best illustrated by reporter Christian Betancur in his article entitled "¡A rebuscársela!" published in the newspaper *El Colombiano*, December 2003, who cites a peddler saying that, "La gente ayuda si uno se las rebusca" (People help if one looks for it) (Betancur 2003: par. 24). This peddler's opinion reflects the very idea of rebusque: to look for alternatives painstakingly (or literally, "to look again").

Rebusque then serves as a means whereby "self-reliance" and resilience become the main resources for social solidarity. The kind of solidarity forged through informal workers' self-reliance and resilience demonstrates the social character of agency in rebusque and therefore how, on this point too, it can be considered an example of a "serious game." Indeed the apparent contradiction between informal workers' self-reliance that leads them to create relations of solidarity in rebusque can be related to Ortner's discussion of the "social embeddedness" of agency and solidarity as a characteristic of this "social embeddedness of agents" in serious games (2006:130). According to Ortner, relations of solidarity contribute to an understanding of agency as being socially embedded, challenging conventional definitions that frame agency in terms of an individualistic force with little room for solidarity. As Ortner puts it:

But the social embeddedness of agents, which is central to the idea of serious games, may take at least two forms. On the one hand the agent is always embedded in relations of (would be) solidarity: family, friends, kin, spouses or partners. Children, parents, teachers, allies, and so forth. It is important to note this point because some of the critics of the agency concept, those who see agency as a bourgeois and individualistic concept, focus largely on the ways in which the

concept appears to slight the “good” embeddedness of agents, the contexts of solidarity that mitigate agency in its individualistic and selfish forms (2006: 130, 131).

This is important to my discussion because although informal workers’ self-reliance pushed them to look for these sources of solidarity in rebusque by themselves, their rebusque activities nonetheless depend on peoples’ willingness to help them and to show solidarity. Therefore, rebusque practitioners do not totally “make it on their own” as Mendoza’s account of rebusque workers in Bogotá’s streets -described at the outset of this thesis- would have it (Mendoza 2000:57). Informal workers’ agency is socially enmeshed in relations of inter-reliance and social solidarity found in rebusque on the buses.

In the same vein, the links between solidarity and self-reliance found in rebusque contribute insights into a broader definition of work that, as Kingsolver and Parelman suggest, encompasses “a whole universe of feelings and relationships that acquire significance in the individual and collective experience of the subjects” (Kingsolver and Parelman 2007: 11).

From the above discussion the following question emerges: How do people develop attitudes of solidarity towards other people they do not know? I suggest that this kind of solidarity emerges from their shared experiences in Colombian space and time. Here is where the link between space, time and social solidarity comes into play once again. Scholars agree about the importance of shared space in creating relationships of solidarity. Indeed, scholars argue that being from the same region allows people to build up a social knowledge of their situations which enables them to picture the lives of other people and develop an understanding of shared suffering that leads them to help others (Kaplan 2007: 233; Itzigsohn 2006: 89- 90; Kaplan 2008: 423; Barber 1992:153).

Thus, as Kaplan states, “In order to adequately care for others one must consider one’s own concrete situation and conditions, but one need not necessarily have a personal bind with them” (2007 233).

During my fieldwork, I noticed that social relations of solidarity emerged from peoples’ common conditions, not only through space, as a result of the fact that people live in the same country, but also through time. This became evident to me when I recognized that bus riders shared not only the space of the bus with informal workers, but also the time during which rebusque took place on the buses. Indeed, the fact that passengers were riding the bus during rebusque hours (which is the time-period when formal workers are at work, because during rush hours there is not enough space for rebusque workers and so they are not allowed on the buses), suggests that some bus riders might have been experiencing similar employment problems to those of the rebusque practitioners. For bus riders during those hours are more likely to either be unemployed or to have some sort of spatio-temporally and monetarily irregular and informal work as well.

5.2 Solidarity as Shaped by Nationalist Sentiments Evoked in Rebusque

Following Itzigsohn’s views on relationships of social solidarity, I suggest that in addition to forging solidarity as a result of sharing the same space and time, with all the economic and social hardships implied by such ‘work day’ orientations, their solidarity is also “rooted in value systems” (Itzigsohn 2006: 90). Indeed, my ethnographic data suggest that social relationships of solidarity rely on cultural expectations, and that these are expressed in terms of nationalist and religious beliefs.

Some informal workers on the buses strategically invoked nationalist sentiments to obtain riders' solidarity. One such strategy was to describe what Colombians were supposed to do and how they themselves were an example of such an image of Colombians:

Roberto: The person that does not want to receive this incense stick has a right not to and we will continue being friends like good Colombians [...] if in this afternoon you feel in your heart that it is worthy to help a person that despite adversity, and as a good Colombian, strives to succeed and more than anything brings a positive message, do it.

Gabriel: I am Colombian. I am Colombian 100%. I was born here. I have never denied my country no, no, no [...] I love my country, I love my people.

There were also some informal workers on the buses who communicated their national sentiments through songs, leading riders to sing along and to show attitudes of solidarity. For instance, during my fieldwork I encountered David and Marcos, two buskers, who got on the bus to sing vallenato.²⁸ Marcos started by greeting passengers and inviting them to engage in their rebusque activity by singing the vallenatos with them: "Good afternoon to all [...] today I bring to you two vallenatos from the soul. If you know them, don't be shy and sing with us." The bus riders that I could observe in front of me smiled at him, and one of the passengers even replied vigorously saying, "okay then." They sung two vallenatos very well known in Colombia which I also knew (and could follow to identify changes to the songs): "La Tierra del Olvido" (The Land of the Oversight) and "Los caminos de la Vida" (The Paths of Life). Marcos introduced these two songs in the following manner, "Here you have two vallenatos for our two mothers in their one hundred years of solitude." Initially, I did not understand this

²⁸ Vallenato is a type of music in Colombia for which the main instrument is the accordion and its lyrics usually tell stories about personal relationships and the land.

reference to their two mothers and its relationship to Gabriel García Márquez' book

"One Hundred Years of Solitude." I let their song continue here to explain the reason for it.

The Land of the Oversight

Like the moon that lights
the paths during the night
as the leaves are to the wind
like the sun frightens the cold
like the land is to the rain
like the sea waits for the river
thus I wait for your return
to the land of the oversight.

Like my fears wreck
if I sail in your sight
like you alert my senses
with your voice in love
with your innocent smile
how much you move my soul
how much you steal my dreams
how much you steal my calm.

Chorus

You have the key of my heart.
I love you. "Oh yes! I love you Colombia"
[Repeated the singer and some passengers
smiled and applauded]
more than my life because
without your love
I die.

Like the moon that lights
the paths during the night
like the leaves are to the wind
like the sun frightens the cold
like the land is to the rain
like the sea waits for the river
thus I wait for your return
to the land of the oversight. "Colombia!" [The
singer said].

La Tierra del Olvido

Como la luna que alumbra
por la noche los caminos
como las hojas al viento
como el sol espanta al frío
como la tierra a la lluvia
como el mar espera al río
así espero tu regreso
a la tierra del olvido.

Como naufragan mis miedos
si navego en tu mirada
como alertas mis sentidos
con tu voz enamorada
con tu sonrisa de niña
como me mueves el alma
como me quitas el sueño
como me robas la calma.

Coro

Tú tienes la llave de mi corazón.
Yo te quiero "Ay si yo te quiero Colombia"
[Repetía el cantante y algunos sonrieron y le
aplaudieron]
más que a mi vida porque
sin tu amor
yo me muero.

Como la luna que alumbra
por la noche los caminos
como las hojas al viento
como el sol espanta al frío
como la tierra a la lluvia
como el mar espera al río
así espero tu regreso
a la tierra del olvido. "Colombia!" [Repetía el
cantante].

Bus riders on this trip were very happy, and sang with Marcos and David,
especiallly during the chorus. It is interesting that Marcos and David took this song as a
reference to Colombia. At first, I did not understand what they meant by the two

mothers, but as I heard the song and the emphasis they put on Colombia in the chorus and the last stanza, I started to realize that one of those mothers was the land, which interestingly they related to sentiments of oversight throughout this song. The connection Marcos and David made between the song “The Land of the Oversight” and Gabriel García Márquez’ book “One Hundred Years of Solitude,” without mentioning the writer, also struck me as peculiar because it felt as if David and Marcos knew riders would know, share and connect these ideas of oversight and loneliness evoked in this book with the Colombian land referred to in this song. Riders’ engagement in the singing demonstrated to me the astuteness of Marcos and David’s assumptions. They knew that such ideas were somehow part of popular wisdom and a particular way to feel nationalist sentiments and solidarity in terms of shared tribulations on a shared landscape.

To develop further the above argument, I follow Kaplan’s analysis of national solidarity. Kaplan suggests that nationalism is primarily “a union of sentiment” (Kaplan 2007: 233), and that such “union of sentiment” is shaped by a kind of fraternity that creates a “singular public emotional experience” (Kaplan 2008: 414, 424). However, Kaplan argues that the fraternity that shapes nationalist sentiments does not function as an “imagined community of strangers” as Anderson would have it (Anderson 1991:6), but “as a political community of friends” (Kaplan 2007: 241). Thus, Kaplan conceives national solidarity as “a case of extended friendship” (2008: 414). Kaplan further explains that understanding national solidarity as an extension of friendship involves examining sources of identification among members of a community (Kaplan 2008: 414). In the case at hand, it seems that the idea of “the land of the oversight” functions as a source of national identification shared among some Colombians, while articulating

their experiences of shared hardships on that shared land creates attitudes of solidarity among bus riders. Once this sentiment is established, they not only give monetary donations to buskers, but also engage in the buskers' performances. For these public sentiments are evoked in unison. The next vallenato Marcos and David sang was called "Los Caminos de la Vida" ("The Paths of Life").

The Paths of Life

Chorus

Life paths are not like I thought they would be
They are not like I imagined them to be
They are not like I believed.
Life paths are very difficult to walk through,
they are difficult to walk
and I do not find the exit -oh mother [...]

Therefore I ask you,
my celestial God,
to guide me in the correct path
so that I can compensate my old pretty one.
So that she forgets all the evil sufferings
and that all torments she had to go through to
raise us go away.
My old pretty one you have to understand me
do not worry at all everything is going to change
I suffer so much dear mother upon seeing you
in so much need and I cannot give you anything.
At times I cry upon feeling myself so impotent,
there are so many things that I want to give you
and I am going to fight tirelessly
because you do not deserve to suffer any more.

Los Caminos de la Vida

Coro

Los Caminos de la vida no son como yo pensaba
como los imaginaba
no son como yo creía.
Los caminos de la vida son muy difícil de
andarlos,
difícil de caminarlos
y no encuentro la salida -ay mamá [...]

Por eso te pido a ti,
mi Dios del cielo
para que me guíes al camino correcto
para mi viejita linda compensar.
Para que olvide ese mar de sufrimientos
y que de ella se aparte todo el tormento
que para criarnos tuvo que pasar.

Viejita linda tienes que entenderme
no te preocupes todo va a cambiar
yo sufro mucho madrecita al verte
necesitada y no te puedo dar.
A veces lloro al sentirme impotente,
son tantas cosas que te quiero dar
y voy a luchar incansablemente
porque tú no mereces sufrir más.

Once again, bus riders engaged in Marcos and David's performance of the song, especially during the chorus. Similar to the lyrics of the former vallenato, this song evokes the feelings of loneliness and impotence that some Colombians seem to identify with in the middle of hardships such as unemployment situations which they have to tirelessly fight by themselves.

5.3 Religious Beliefs as Sources of Solidarity in Rebusque

It is also important to note, however, that God also represents their resilience and unites them by inspiring feelings of solidarity. Indeed, it seems that religious bonds also work as resources for resilience, inter-reliance and solidarity which are invoked during rebusque on the buses. For example, when Marcos and David finished singing “Los Caminos de la Vida,” passengers asked them to sing another song. David asked passengers what other song they wanted to listen to, and many suggested the vallenato called “Como le Pago a mi Dios?” (How do I pay my God?).

Marcos and David agreed to sing the song suggested by riders. When I heard it, I noticed that it related the tale of a man thanking God for having given him so many good things in times of adversity. Riders clapped and sang and some even sort of danced in their seats. With a louder voice, passengers sang the chorus: “And how do I pay my God? How do I pay him for having you beside me? How do I thank him if what he gives me now, I have never had?” Passengers’ active participation during Marcos and David’s entire performance struck me as peculiar, especially when they suggested this last song. For the idea that God would be a source of resilience and solidarity shared by passengers and informal workers had not occurred to me previously. A similar sentiment towards God in the middle of adversity, however, also comes from other informal workers in my study. Here are a couple of examples from their life-story narratives:

Joaquin: I don’t get on the bus to make you uncomfortable. Less to steal something [...] Unfortunately, I lost my family three years ago, I am practically living on the streets. I have had to strive. It has been difficult. Thanks to my God, I am here healthy and alive.

Daniel: I have got on the bus many times today and I have gotten off with nothing, but glory to God, I put everything in God's hands.

People's shared religious beliefs working as a source of solidarity is an ethnographic reality already documented by anthropologists in other world areas (see for example Wilk 1996: 99). This, added to the fact that the role of the church in Colombians' lives is so central off the buses, clarifies how informal workers' references to God during their performances help them receive positive responses from riders, not only in terms of monetary donations, but also in terms of riders' level of engagement with their performances. Indeed, as Safford and Palacios note, the Catholic Church has been "a core element of social cohesion" in Colombia through history (Safford and Palacios 2002: 241).

It is important to question, however, the extent to which liberation theology and its strong influence in Latin America, also plays a role in Bogotá rebusque workers' allusions to God and to peoples' solidarity with and through him. Indeed, ideas of solidarity with the poor are closely related to the precepts of liberation theology in Latin America that consider poverty and social injustice as "contrary to the will of God" (Gutierrez 1973: 291). Therefore, solidarity with the poor in liberation theology is "the first and foremost option of expressing their faith in Christ in the context of widespread poverty" (Boff and Boff 1987: 45). In Colombia, however, it is not clear to what extent liberation theology has had an effect on religion as a source of solidarity among Colombians. Indeed, scholars argue that liberation theology did not affect the Colombian church as much as the Brazilian and Peruvian ones during the 60s and 70s, and that the few clergy sympathetic to it became more militant and moved away from the formal

church to join guerrilla groups (Safford and Palacios 2002: 324). According to Palacios, liberation theology was not embraced by the Colombian poor as they were not interested in fighting against the state, but in fulfilling their daily survival problems in a more immediate, short term, way. As Palacios puts it:

This new “church of the poor” was met largely by indifference among the poor. The residents of the slums were for the most part preoccupied with the daily exigencies of survival; they had not time or energy for utopian visions of change, especially those that implied confrontation with the government (2006:181).

Thus, it can hardly be asserted that liberation theology had much influence on the extent to which religion is a source of solidarity in Colombia, and thus played a role in social relations of solidarity in the rebusque practices that I observed during my fieldwork in Bogotá’s buses. Rather, my ethnographic data suggest that relations of social solidarity developed through shared nationalist and religious ideas having become a means for people to mitigate their feelings of marginalization and distrust of the state by offering alternative ways to survive and improve their unemployment dilemmas without extending those sentiments of solidarity to either the liberation theology movement or the state.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research

Rebusque serves informal workers on the main bus system in downtown Bogotá for more than monetary gain because it expands social exchanges and relations of solidarity among urban dwellers through performances of social critique within the shared space and time of bus travel. For anthropologists, therefore, it furthers our understanding of “agency,” “work” and the “informal economy.” Indeed, it is the sense of solidarity forged through this sociability which yields rebusque workers the agency required to “earn their living,” challenging views of “agency” as individual practice (Ortner 2006:130-131), as well as notions about “work” and the “informal economy” as being solely income-driven (Aimetta 2009: 2, 3; Trager 1987: 239). As my ethnographic illustrations suggest, through their life accounts and other performances offered as part of their rebusque activities on the buses, informal workers introduce new ideas and practices into both economic and social systems in Colombia that leads them towards desired (yet partial and temporary) outcomes.

They do so in four specific, but not limited, ways. Firstly, they do so by developing spatio-temporal strategies that make their rebusque performances on the buses possible within larger public and urban spatialities and social conditions. Secondly, they do so by challenging conventional misperceptions that discriminate against informal workers’ rebusque activities and offering their views of rebusque as a form of honest work. Thirdly, they do so by conveying messages of social dissatisfaction whereby their feelings of marginalization resulting from global power relations and lack of state protection are revealed. And lastly, bus rebusque pushes toward social change by

reflecting new sources of reliance and resilience that forge social relations of solidarity negotiated through expressions of nationalist and religious beliefs that help minimize feelings of alienation.

Rebusque workers develop spatio-temporal “tactics” (De Certeau 1984: 37) that make their informal activities possible within the broader spatialities and social conditions in which the buses are located. Indeed, their very predicament is often a spatial one in the sense that various social conditions and violent upheavals in the countryside beyond the city often influence informal workers’ decision to do rebusque on the buses and the public spaces of downtown Bogotá. Also the lack of available jobs in the formal economy have led some of the unemployed population to resort to informal economic activities such as street vending as their form of work, a move which has transformed the city’s public spaces into workplaces (Low 1999b:123) and contradicted city planners’ expectations of a “homogenous” urban space (Caldeira 1999:96; Harvey 2000:179-180). In response to all this, city officials and police have attempted to free public spaces from street vending, an action which has led to persecuting street vendors (Mendoza 2000; Gil 1998). In this context, the main bus system represented a new and less hostile alternative employment environment for rebusque workers in my study than the streets because there was no state regulation, and therefore police persecution, to prevent them from doing rebusque on these buses. This allowed them to move more freely across the space of the buses and, I suggest, feel more comfortable to spontaneously communicate messages of social dissatisfaction through their life-stories and performances while working at rebusque.

Rebusque practitioners also make a strategic or “clever *utilization of time*” (De Certeau 1984: 39). They seize the best moments for doing rebusque on the buses, during specific hours of the day, gauging when traffic congestion favours them for getting onto buses, or when space is too limited on the buses for rebusque to be performed. In addition, informal workers’ interactions with drivers and riders develop at different moments during their rides on each bus. In applying De Certeau’s idea of temporal tactics to bus rebusque, I suggest that it is through rebusque workers’ bodily strategies for getting on the buses (i.e., by jumping over the front door turnstile, slipping in behind regular passengers, and climbing on the bus through the back door as quickly as they can) that they can actually use time -and space- strategically so as to take advantage of the few opportunities presented to them for making their bus rebusque activities possible at all.

Rebusque workers’ corporeal practices for getting on the buses, clearly illustrate Ortner’s discussion of the “forms of bodily activity” (Ortner 1996:19) necessary to be considered in understanding her notion of “serious games” and agency. They also uphold Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the role of our bodies in forging agency (2003 [1945]: 408), particularly when he states that, “My body is wherever there is something to be done” (Merleau-Ponty 2003 [1945]: 291). Thus, I suggest that the spatio-temporal conditions of bus rebusque above described, yield crevices of space and time within which rebusque practitioners can negotiate with various kinds of social power relations (including discrimination and solidarity), by seizing “agency” in the form of an opportunity to “work” in the “informal economy.”

In discussing rebusque, it is important to note that rebusque workers' spatio-temporal tactics on the buses are partial and temporary alternatives to the rejection they encounter in the streets and from the larger problem of scarce employment opportunities. Rebusque practitioners continue to experience discrimination when they have to face bus riders' and bus drivers' occasional intolerance towards their work. In addition, city planners' organization and control of urban public space will extend into the buses of both Bogotá transport systems starting next March (2011), when all buses will have to follow officially established and supervised bus schedules and bus stops (El Espectador 2010: par 2, 4). The amalgamation of both transportation systems in Bogotá will affect informal workers' rebusque activities because drivers in the larger bus system will no longer be in charge of their bus routes, its stops, or the people they allow onto their buses. The termination of rebusque on the buses as a result of the integration of the two transport systems in Bogotá is an example of how, in this regard, rebusque can be considered a "serious game," more than as a "tactic." For in contrast to De Certeau's analysis of "tactics," rebusque on the buses is not totally "outside the reach" of power (De Certeau 1984:95), but actually reveals "the omnipresence of power" (Ortner 2006:131) in the sense that city officials' plans to organize urban spaces extends right into the bus system of Bogotá and imposes the end of rebusque activities on buses.

Furthermore, informal workers establish more than monetary relations through rebusque by promoting their own ideas of it as a form of honest work, and as a way to potentially prevent or delay their engagement in violent scenarios. Thus they challenge conventional cultural perceptions that portray rebusque as being inevitably linked to criminality and deceit, and which lead the general public to discriminate against

rebusque as a form of work. For academia, informal workers' promotion of their views of rebusque as honest work offer an ethnographic counterpart to some scholars' analysis of the "informal economy" in terms of "illegality and delinquency" (See for example Camacho 2001:133).

In attempting to speak of rebusque on the buses as an alternative to paid violence, it is important to note that, in this respect too, it is a temporary and partial response to the broader social context of violent economic practices in this country. Above all, rebusque is a temporary solution to urban unemployment because of the imminent integration of all buses, already mentioned above, that will leave rebusque practitioners deprived of access to the buses, thus pushing them towards any source of income readily available for survival.

Rebusque practitioners' views of doing rebusque on the buses as "work" sometimes differed, one from the other. Some informal workers considered rebusque as their form of "work" and asked bus drivers and riders to support it. Others stressed the obstacles they encountered "to get a job," in the formal economy, implying that they did not consider rebusque as their form of "work." This lack of uniformity is a phenomenon shared in other areas of the world (see for example Aimetta 2009).

Informal workers' rebusque performances in downtown Bogotá's buses, however, reveal broader power relations through a social critique of the wider socio-political order in this country whereby they see their social alienation as a consequence of the state's lack of attention to, and protection of, citizens. Their critical ideas towards the larger socio-political order represent a moral economy wherein social aspirations and expectations interpret the role of the state in socio-economic matters (Blau 1993: 19;

Svallfors 2006: 1, 162; Edelman 339; Thompson 1971: 79; Griffith 2009: 433-434).

They expect the state, for example, to protect displaced populations, and to make jobs available for them in the city. On the other hand, rebusque practitioners' performances show how there is also a moral economy whereby people who want to participate in the formal economy have to fulfill social expectations and meet certain employability requirements in order to get a formal job. For example, rebusque workers in my study often claimed that due to the lack of training and experience, they were not able to obtain a formal job.

However, the literature indicates a more complex set of circumstances which exceed social expectations in terms of education and experience -which do not always determine peoples' options or access to the formal economy in this country (Velez et al. 2003: 617, 622; Palacios 2006: 218),- and helps explain whether people will get and maintain their formal jobs. These other conditions are framed within neoliberal global tendencies in the formal labour market that have influenced local processes in this country, like the 2002 Labour Reform. This reform has introduced, among other things, increased flexibility in labour contracts so as to limit the intervention of the state in the creation of jobs, leaving private corporations to set their own contract standards. Under this reform, private corporations can hire workers for any time period they wish, increasing temporary jobs and thus creating job insecurity among formal workers that causes them to engage in the informal sector. This new set of circumstances in the Colombian formal sector, along with informal worker's claims regarding lack of education and experience as obstacles to obtaining formal jobs, also explains the alarming number of workers resorting to rebusque on the buses as their form of work. It

also accounts for their discontent, expressed broadly, towards employability arrangements in the formal economy; and, along these lines, it contributes to expanding understandings of the heterogeneity found in workers' reasons to engage in the informal economy.

Lastly, my ethnographic data demonstrate that informal workers' rebusque performances reflect attitudes of self-reliance and resilience that leads them towards forging social relationships of solidarity with bus drivers, and particularly with bus riders. Signs of this solidarity were observed not only in terms of monetary donations given to rebusque practitioners, but also when riders engaged in rebusque workers' performances. These co-operative performances emerged from people's shared conditions across Colombian time and space. On a micro level, this meant that passengers riding the buses during rebusque hours were more likely to either be unemployed themselves, or to have some sort of informal work, somewhat like the rebusque practitioners. Links between self-reliance and solidarity could appear quite contradictory as "self-reliance" typically suggests a kind of individual action whereas "solidarity" implies more sociable behaviour. During my fieldwork, however, I learned that in the context of rebusque, practices of self-reliance and solidarity are not entirely contradictory and can actually complement each other. For when rebusque workers have to seek peoples' solidarity by themselves as opposed to receiving state-wide solidarity, the apparent contradiction between informal workers' self-reliance and their pursuit of social relationships of solidarity through rebusque activities on the buses, can be explained following Ortner's analysis of the "social embeddedness" of agency in serious games. This challenges Western conventional understandings of agency as an

individualistic practice that allows little or no room for social relations of solidarity (Ortner 2006: 130-131). Thus, this thesis contributes to larger discussions regarding the social character of people's agency.

Furthermore, such linkages between solidarity and self-reliance found in rebusque on the buses also add to an expanded definition of "work" as encompassing "a whole universe of feelings and relationships that acquire significance in the individual and collective experience of the subjects" (Kingsolver and Parelman 2007: 11).

By the same token, social relationships of solidarity established through rebusque performances in Bogotá's downtown buses are also "rooted in value systems" (Itzigsohn 2006: 90) that are expressed in terms of nationalist sentiments (for example, by describing shared political conditions suffered by all Colombians and the moral obligation they have to support each other) and religious beliefs (for instance, in expressing their gratitude to God for helping them in the middle of adversity). All of these processes take place in a neoliberal context wherein a lack of state intervention and protection (as evinced by the 2002 Laboural Reform) has led these workers to look for other sources to rely on to solve their situation of unemployment and compensate for the absence of government support and attention.

Liberation theology that took hold in some Latin American countries, and its main precept of solidarity with the poor as a way to express people's faith in God (Boff and Boff 1987; Gutiérrez 1973), does not fully explain people's experience of religion as a source of solidarity in Colombia and thus revealed the informal workers' rebusque practices that I observed during my fieldwork in downtown Bogotá's buses. Scholars

have demonstrated that the liberation theology movement did not influence the Colombian poor who have focused on solving their more immediate survival problems without recourse to the liberation theology movement (Safford and Palacios 2002). In this vein, my ethnographic study indicates that relations of social solidarity in Bogotá's buses emerge from shared nationalist and religious ideas which help minimize feelings of alienation by offering alternative sources of reliance and resilience for survival in the face of unemployment situations, without such sentiments of solidarity being translated into liberation theology or extended to the state's leadership and administration.

One can consider rebusque as an example of what Matos calls a "Desborde Popular" (Popular Overflow), an array of new and alternative ways to survive outside "formal economies" in the context of weak states (Matos 1984: 15). However, in this regard too, the ethnographic examples outlined above lead me to think of rebusque more as an example of a "serious game" played within a "multiplicity of games" (Ortner 1996: 19), that serve informal workers as a medium not only to earn an income and survive, but also to introduce new ideas and ways of action in the constitution of socio-economic systems. Thus they provide a window into understanding "larger forces, formations and transformations of social life" (Ortner 2006: 130). Rebusque workers' performances also reveal the "social embeddedness of agents" in "serious games" especially with regards to social relationships of power and solidarity (Ortner 2006: 130-131). In addition, Merleau-Ponty's analysis of social conditions (which is not commonly known as part of his understanding of the phenomenology of perception) also accounts for how informal workers are "situated in a social environment" (Merleau-Ponty 1945:520) and

it is from their experience of these social conditions that “explicit judgments” and reasons for their actions emerge (Merleau-Ponty 1945:515).

In sum, through rebusque on the dominant public transportation system in downtown Bogotá, the bus journey to a determined destination goes far beyond a simple trip from point A to point B. There are a myriad of social relations and conditions which accompany the dispossessed peoples’ need for monetary reward as rebusque workers. Through their access to the bus space at specific times of the day and in the most central routes of Bogotá, they hope for immediate economic results even while contributing to the expansion of bus riders’ understandings of their “work,” yielding a series of lesions on “agency,” and the “informal economy” valuable to academic disciplines no less than to their fellow citizens.

Further research will be urgently needed to examine the impacts that next year’s integration of Bogotá’s two transport systems will have upon informal workers’ rebusque activities on the buses. I am aware of the methodological challenges that such research would represent. It would be difficult to track rebusque workers on the buses because they are highly mobile and lack unions, but I raise this issue in hopes of encouraging an exploration of the methodological possibilities for undertaking such a study.

I also propose research into historically and culturally rooted socio-economic practices, such as that of patronage, which has pervaded Colombian institutions since colonial times (Gil 1998). For this might elucidate the larger implications of the persistence of the informal economy in Colombia, and in turn contribute further

understanding of rebusque and the peculiar form of social agency it affords its practitioners on the buses of Bogotá.

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