

AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF DISAPPEARANCE

Politics, Intimacies and Alternative Ways of Knowing

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berghahn
NEW YORK • OXFORD
www.berghahnbooks.com

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Chroniclers of Violence in Contemporary Mexico

Feminist Reflections on Memory and Disappearance

Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo

Introduction

This chapter explores the ways in which the families of the disappeared work with their memories and experiences and make them politically relevant. At the same time, it maps the political struggles around disappearances in present-day Mexico and contributes to debates around decolonizing memory studies. I focus on the processes that gave rise to the collectively authored book *Nadie Detiene al Amor: Historias de Vida de Personas Desaparecidas en el Norte de Sinaloa* (*Nobody Stops Love: Life Stories of Victims of Enforced Disappearances in Northern Sinaloa*). My colleague Carolina Robledo and I coordinated the edited volume and brought together the accounts of Las Rastreadoras de El Fuerte (the Trackers), along with the poems and letters they shared with the feminist publishing collective Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra (Sisters in the Shadow Editorial Collective), a group of imprisoned women.¹ The stories told in *Nadie Detiene al Amor* not only bear witness to one of the most violent periods of contemporary Mexico, they also reveal the complicity between the state and the perpetrators of enforced disappearances, as well as the indifference of a society that has grown accustomed to violence.

This project has been developed in the context of one of the worst human rights crises in Mexico's history, which seems to be continuing

under Andrés Manuel López Obrador's 'centre-left' administration (2018–23).² The government's human rights organizations have reported that around 350,000 people were murdered between 2006 and 2021 (CNB 2021); more than 100,000 were forcibly disappeared; 3,000 clandestine burial pits were found, with 55,000 unidentified bodies inside them; and 70,000 migrants disappeared.³ These, however, are merely the official statistics, and independent human rights organizations consider them to be under-reported. Enforced disappearances and the mutilation of bodies – subsequently concealed in clandestine burial pits – are part of a 'pedagogy of terror' that instrumentalizes bodies to mark territories and enforce control over the population (see Segato 2013).

In this context, collectives formed by the relatives of missing persons – predominantly by women – have mobilized throughout the country in search of their loved ones. Through these campaigns, relatives have become chroniclers of violence in Mexico, using public spaces and the written word to denounce the multiple forms of violence that afflict them.

Since the year 2007, I have lived in Ocotepéc, a Nahuatl community in the state of Morelos that has been marked by the violence and impunity of organized crime. In my own street, three neighbours have been murdered, one has disappeared and another, after being kidnapped, paid the ransom and fled the country. The Latin American feminist genealogy on decolonization has significantly inspired my work on the impact of extreme forms of violence both in the lives of poor and racialized women and in my own community. I have taken the path of critical thought, which documents, analyses and denounces the violence and impunity endured by imprisoned women, as well as the extreme violence that surrounds enforced disappearances. Besides academic writings (Hernández Castillo 2013, 2016a, 2016b, 2019a, 2019b, 2021), this engagement has also resulted in my political participation as a public intellectual in national debates on punitivism and militarization in the form of a newspaper column. I also use documentaries and radio programmes to share the testimonies of the women I work with.⁴ I have also embarked on a political-pedagogical-artistic project with feminist colleagues. We are looking to dignify the prison space by carving out nooks for the exchange of knowledge. In this way, a form of sisterhood has emerged, as well as a sense of community inside institutions that usually promote mistrust, violence and individualism.⁵ In recent years I have been doing collaborative research with organizations of families of missing persons in the states of Sinaloa, Morelos and

Guerrero, first as a member of an interdisciplinary research team of the ‘Social and Forensic Anthropology Research Group’ called GIASF, and in the last two years as an individual activist scholar.⁶

On an analytical level, this chapter stems from the need to decolonize memory studies, which forms an intrinsic part of my reflections on enforced disappearances. This approach implies acknowledging the multiple intellectual and political genealogies that have contributed to the decolonizing of memory studies, as well as holding these debates outside of the Global North’s exclusive intellectual spheres. On a methodological level, the challenge lies in being willing to destabilize one’s own epistemic certainties to address other ways of understanding justice and emancipation – other modes of reconstructing history and memory that do not necessarily share a linear perspective of time. The decolonization of Latin American feminisms entails an effort to acknowledge epistemic arrogance, especially when engaging in dialogue with women who do not share dominant perspectives on patriarchal forms of violence and the potential allyships that could dismantle them.

I have divided this chapter into four sections, in which I interweave analytical arguments on memory and enforced disappearances with voices documented in memory workshops and dialogues with authors who have dealt with the epistemic and political possibilities of memory. In the first section, I reassemble my main intellectual genealogies with regard to memory studies and disappearances from a background in Latin American critical studies and various strands of feminism. In the second section, I introduce the activist group Las Rastreadoras de El Fuerte and the processes of knowledge exchange that I engaged in with them in the context of the extreme violence of enforced disappearances. In the third section, I reflect on the political usage of testimonies and its possibilities and limitations, addressing some of the textual strategies that were used in the collectively authored volume *Nadie Detiene al Amor* as counter-hegemonic forms of rebuilding memory. The last section takes a deep plunge into the stories of these activists, establishing a dialogue about the multiple forms of violence that have marked their lives, and introduces the concept of ‘indignant love’. Instead of offering a clear conclusion, the chapter ends with new questions about the possibilities and limitations of memory projects as a means by which social agents are able to develop alternative justice and indemnification projects.

Latin American Feminist Genealogies in Memory Studies

During recent decades, memory projects have experienced a newfound popularity, with the use of public testimonies as a strategy of sensibilization within the current paradigm of transitional justice in countries all over the world. The institutionalization of memory politics has been heavily questioned; its critics point out that victims tend to be homogenized, which silences their experiences of resistance and, in many cases, focuses on a single violent event while ignoring the context of multiple forms of violence that gave rise to it (see Castillejo Cuéllar 2017; Fassin and Rechtman 2009). Nevertheless, there is a different political genealogy that considers memory workshops as part of the inner-strengthening strategies of collectives in resistance.

In Latin America, memory workshops have been an essential part of social movements' fight to systematize counter-hegemonic perspectives on history, including the continent's long history of enforced disappearances. Contemporary memory studies can be traced back to the work of French-German sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, whose text *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* (1925) kickstarted a school of thought that conceived memory as an object of study (see Erll 2011; Leone 2013). However, this intellectual trajectory bears little relationship to Latin American academic production. In my previous work, I have shown the need to decolonize memory studies, reclaiming experiences through collaborative research such as the oral history workshops that have been developed across Latin America and in the violent contexts of detention and disappearances. In order for such decolonization to happen, there have to be epistemic dialogues that take into account other ways of rebuilding the past and connecting it to the present (Hernández Castillo 2020; see also Rivera Cusicanqui 2010; Rus, Rus and Bakbolom 2016). Various projects on decolonizing memory of violent pasts ask not only 'How do we remember?' but 'Which memories are considered valid and how are they disseminated to construct a hegemonic consciousness of the past?'

Similar questions have been asked by various strands of feminism to confront the exclusion of women from patriarchal historiography. Memory workshops have been an essential methodological tool for the construction of a feminist collective memory, also in regard to state-sponsored disappearances. The project of historicizing women and their fights has been an important task for female historians, including female reflections on the specific modes of remembering

and the importance of conceptualizing memories beyond isolated events and instead as conditions that underlie the ‘great events’ documented by official forms of history (see Duby and Perrot 1993).

In Latin America, feminist contributions to memory studies have been an essential tool in understanding the impact of violence on communities, as well as the strategies used to reconstruct the social fabric, commonly spearheaded by women. The pioneering work of Elizabeth Jelin in Argentina (2002, 2007, 2010, 2017), Pilar Riaño Alcalá in Colombia (2005, 2020) and *Actoras de Cambio* (Agents of Change) in Guatemala (2011) bears witness to the political relevance of memory workshops in the battles for justice and against impunity. Such questions as ‘How is the past represented?’, ‘Who represents it?’ and ‘How are these representations institutionalized?’ are more than academic enquiries: they are political and methodological tools in feminist fights for memory and epistemic decolonization.

The naturalization of sisterhood and essentialist perspectives on feminine identities have been called into question in the last decade by poststructuralist feminism. These critical voices point out that ‘feminizing memory’ – drawing attention to women in memory studies – is not enough. There must be a reflection on how these forms of generating memories are constructing gender and, in many contexts, how they reinforce the official discourses and practices that surround the notions of femininity and masculinity (see Troncoso Pérez and Shafir 2015). I thus focus on the memory workshops with mothers of disappeared persons as spaces where hegemonic representations of violence and justice are destabilized. Although these spaces are marked by contradictions and resonate with conservative discourses about women, I also observed processes of deconstructing women as gendered subjects that destabilize traditional perspectives on motherhood and family.

Las Rastreadoras: Chroniclers of Enforced Disappearance and Extreme Violence

I started to work with women in memory workshops in 2016, when I participated in an interdisciplinary research team following a civilian-led search for clandestine burial pits. While working with this team, I returned to the land of my grandparents, a territory of the Mayo-Yoreme people in the state of Sinaloa in northern Mexico, and I got to know *Las Rastreadoras de El Fuerte* and started working with them. This organization, like many others across the country,

predominantly comprises the wives, sisters and mothers of missing persons and, due to the Mexican state's unwillingness and incompetence regarding searching for, exhuming and identifying the disappeared, they have taken the search for their relatives' remains into their own hands. In the state of Sinaloa, these women have, since 2014, been going out with picks and shovels to look for their disappeared relatives. As of July 2021, they had found 243 bodies, 173 of which had been returned to their families. This group documented more than five hundred cases of enforced disappearance between 2010 and 2021 in just a handful of municipalities in Northern Sinaloa: El Fuerte, Choix, Guasave and Ahome.⁷

Ever since my first meeting with Las Rastreadoras, back in February 2017, I have identified with their cultural style, their open way of speaking, their loud voices and their sense of humour – filled with slang and double entendres. After working with Mayan peoples in southern Mexico for two decades, I was returning to my roots. After my grandparents left El Fuerte during the 1930s they denied their Yoreme identity, due to the racism that permeates Mexican society to this day. When I heard Las Rastreadoras speak, I recognized the local idioms that my mother used. I could not help but feel surrounded by my aunts, my grandmothers, my matriarchs. Among Las Rastreadoras, there are both Yoreme and Mestizo women, women of rural and urban backgrounds, illiterate women and schoolteachers, housewives and street vendors. The majority come from low-income households, with little formal education. For most of them, this collective is the first organization they have participated in. Their learning has taken giant steps: not only have they assimilated human rights discourses, they have also become self-taught forensic researchers. They have learned a new language, filled with technical terms: genetic testing, DNA, exhumations, ante mortem, post-mortem and so on.

Ever since my first visit to Sinaloa, I have felt welcomed by these women's affection, and we have built bonds that go beyond blood kinship. Inviting me to participate in their field searches was a way of including me in their loving rituals of exhumation, in which 'forensic evidence' or 'carcasses' are turned into humans: brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, husbands or wives who are sorely missed. Tracking the territory with their picks and shovels, they document Mexico's history of extreme violence and impunity. These weekly searches, with or without findings, usually finish with a collective cooking session, a sisterhood ritual that solidifies their bond as a family united by both pain and hope.

On one of my visits, to my surprise, this culinary ritual was dedicated to my mother, a great cook of Sinaloense food. This happened during Holy Week. I had mentioned that my mother used to cook and sell a local dessert known as *capirotada*, made out of stale bread and dried fruit, and typically consumed during Lent. Without notifying me, the women agreed to bring the necessary ingredients to the office so they could surprise me and, after the search, cook what was the best *capirotada* I have ever eaten. This unforgettable evening ended with us dancing in the alleyways of a marketplace, to music played by a brass band, which charged us by the song. The apparent contradiction between the pain of interrupted mourning and the energy and joie de vivre the women radiated shook my epistemic certainties about victims and their resistance strategies. These experiences, in which collective bonds were reaffirmed by everyday actions, made me think about the phenomenon that Veena Das (2008) describes as a ‘descent into the ordinary’, that is, the routines and everyday practices used by people to face social suffering. In contrast to the masculine models of heroicism and resistance, these women develop quotidian ways of dignifying life and death, which allow them to keep searching, or in their words: ‘to keep fighting’.

Through experiencing this everyday lovingness, as well as participating in the field searches and memory workshops, I gradually became part of the extended family built up by Las Rastreadoras and their allies. The book *Nadie Detiene al Amor* is a result of this shared path. It collates the stories of nineteen women and one man who embarked on the search for twenty-three individuals who had disappeared between 2011 and 2017 in the municipalities of El Fuerte, Ahome, Choix and Guasave, in northern Sinaloa. Each story has an epistolary or poetic response written by one of the members of the Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra. It could be said that this book is as important as the roads travelled to transform the memories into words. One of the participants, Manqui Lugo, describes the importance of telling their own stories to confront the discourses criminalizing their children:

I have given our book to several relatives, so that they know the true story of our children. So that they know that what the government says is a lie: that they themselves sought their death or disappearance, because they were involved in bad things.

The collective reading of each of these stories in an intimate setting allowed Las Rastreadoras to share their reflections on violence not as a personal grievance but as a consequence of structural contexts.

These workshops were also an opportunity to discuss their experiences of facing impunity and bureaucratic violence – the racism and misogyny that influenced the way they were treated before, during and after the search for their missing relatives.

Destabilizing Official Narratives through the Building of New Communities and the Articulation of Political Testimonies

In the spaces of collective reflection inside the Las Rastreadoras offices in Los Mochis, Sinaloa, women not only shared their memories about previous violent experiences – before, during and after the ‘critical event’ (Das 2015), namely the disappearance of their relative – but also strengthened their solidarity bonds as members of emotional and political communities.

Inspired by the concept of ‘emotional communities’, developed by the Colombian anthropologist Myriam Jimeno (2010), I highlight the importance of sharing emotions in the construction of political communities. I consider the sharing of different emotions such as indignation, pain and mourning – but also hope and faith in the possibility of building fairer societies – as crucial for Las Rastreadoras to develop a sense of collective belonging. They have, in their own words, built ‘new families’. When reconstructing the context of their critical event, they shared their stories as well as their experiences of patriarchal and racist forms of violence that marked their lives (and those of their children). During this sharing process, they began to question the internalized racism and misogyny that led them to accept and normalize violence. Among the topics discussed was the importance of writing their own versions of the grievances that fractured their lives. These testimonies were a strategy to confront ‘official truths’ about them and their families, as one woman noted in a creative writing workshop organized by the ‘Sisters in the Shadow’ in 2022:

We want to be the ones who tell the stories of our sons and daughters, to tell the world that they are not just numbers in the missing persons reports. Let everybody know that they were working men and women, with dreams and hopes, not criminals, nor ‘collateral damage’ of the ‘war on drugs’.

In their testimonies, they also acknowledged their own qualities, including their resistance and fighting spirit, thus confronting the

victimizing effect that testimonies can have in the context of transitional justice (see Fassin 2008).

The members of Las Rastreadoras and other collectives have seen their lives and communities shattered by patriarchal forms of violence that use the ‘pedagogy of terror’ as a means of territorial control (Segato 2013). Sharing their experiences and engaging in collective reflections has allowed them to represent violence not as ‘personal grievances’ or as a consequence of ‘bad luck’ or ‘bad parenting’, but as a common experience of structural violence that marks their lives and territories.

The political force of testimonies in the fight for justice, their importance in the construction of emotional communities and their linkage to memory are topics that have been widely addressed in feminist anthropology and decolonial feminism (Jimeno, Castillo and Varela 2019; De Marinis and Macleod 2019; Stephen 2017; Stephen and Speed 2021). Their importance lies in the recognition of other ways of relating to the past and narrating one’s place in history, through diverse and discontinuous textual strategies that include both orality and silence, memory and oblivion (see Das 2008).

Alongside this political revindication of testimonies, there has been a process of institutionalization as part of the memory-related strategies of transitional justice. The top-down imposition of the ‘truth, justice and reconciliation’ mantra has entailed the appropriation of the voices and experiences of survivors of armed conflicts. Constructed as victims, they are expected to behave apolitically and publicly represent the pain and afflictions produced by violence in order to gain access to the benefits afforded by reparation policies (see Castillejo Cuéllar 2017; Gómez Correal 2022). The productive force of the transitional justice discourse has led to a homogenized representation of victims, silencing them and denying political agency. The objective seems to be to mould a ‘suffering subject’ that can be appropriated and represented by transitional justice policies, as well as by the ‘industry of testimony extraction’ in academia (Robbins 2013).

Nevertheless, outside these institutionalized contexts, many political organizations involved in various fights for justice have used memory workshops as spaces in which to write their own stories and oppose official discourses on the multiple forms of violence that have affected them. In Latin America, a sector of academia has joined these projects, drawing on the research and participative action of the 1980s and applying these methodologies to memory workshops with victims of extreme violence, enforced disappearance and displacement

(Hernández Castillo and Terven 2017; Riaño Alcalá 2008). Although there have been tensions in the alliances between academics and social collectives, a new tradition of feminist research has been developed, which acknowledges the need for a dialogue between different forms of knowledge. Academics are no longer only ‘analysts’ but political agents who share spaces of vulnerability with the people they work with (see Berry et al. 2017; Hernández Castillo 2021).

Claudia Andrea Bacci, for instance, points out that the victims’ testimonies are not only public demands for justice but also contributions to ‘the reconstruction of bonds of trust and a symbolic form of reparation through the rewriting of memories that lend legitimacy to this suffering. Talking with neighbors, health professionals, relatives, friends and fellow militants is as important as obtaining justice’ (Bacci 2020: 3). On a similar note, Pilar Riaño Alcalá (2008) argues that testimonies shared in collective spaces contribute to the reconstruction of the social fabric, legitimizing the voices of those who are most affected by violence. Her political involvement in memory workshops consists of threading her own voice with those of the most affected, while taking part in a collective reflection on the possibilities of resistance and social transformation.

In the case of Las Rastreadoras de El Fuerte, the underlying objective of systematizing their stories was to legitimize their grievances and confront the hegemonic discourse that criminalizes missing persons by linking them to organized crime, implying that their disappearance was their own doing. With the aim of telling the families’ side of history in northern Sinaloa, the memory workshops started in February 2017. A stall in a public market in Los Mochis became the organization’s headquarters and our meeting site. The stall’s sliding glass doors were covered with pictures of the disappeared sons, daughters, brothers and sisters, claiming the attention of passers-by. Due to the stall’s small size, we used the market’s alleyways to conduct our discussion groups, thus occupying this public space with our bodies and memories. Taking inspiration from the methodologies of critical geography, we drew maps with marks that signalled the locations of the clandestine burial pits found by Las Rastreadoras. We also sketched figures that represented the armed agents who participated in the crimes or in the state bureaucracy that has stymied the exhumation processes. ‘Mapping violence’ allowed the women to collectivize their knowledge and develop a shared reflection on their grievances and the systematic nature of the disappearances.

In this reconstruction of the regional history of violence, the prevalent linear perspective on history was challenged by a polyphonic

discourse that prioritized the links between political agents – both armed and non-armed – and their spatial location over date-heavy, fact-based chronologies. While these women do remember the exact date of their relative's disappearance, and turn it into a day of collective commemoration, their sense of history is not only a chronology of political events but also includes dreams, premonitions and memories. In their shared narratives, the line that separates the living and the dead is blurred. Some testimonies mention a visit by a deceased child or grandchild, which reveals that their body will be found soon or that they are no longer alive. Taking these accounts seriously implies an exercise in epistemic decolonization, an acknowledgement of the importance of other ontologies in the search for disappeared relatives.⁸

The systematization of the women's knowledge and experience is a way for them to recognize themselves as producers of expert knowledge who have been unfairly rejected by the government's forensic teams and the judicial system's bureaucracy. These institutions have routinely worked behind such collectives' backs (see Hernández Castillo 2019a).

Unlike post-conflict memory workshops conducted in other regions of Latin America, the information documented by Las Rastreadoras is not meant to contribute to legal proceedings. The search for state justice is not among the collective's objectives. Their testimonies are not meant to be used as evidence in a trial. When, during a protest, Las Rastreadoras scream 'we do not want justice, we want truth', they are rejecting a security and justice apparatus that they do not believe in – a system that has criminalized their sons and daughters, militarized their communities and collaborated in the disappearance of their relatives. Unlike other collectives in Latin America that demand 'neither forgiveness nor oblivion, but punishment for the murderers' (Jelin 2007), Las Rastreadoras are focused on finding the bodies of their loved ones. Besides the fact that asking for the punishment and imprisonment of the perpetrators would only put them and their families at risk, their real demands for justice seek to build safer spaces and communities, where their children do not have to become disposable bodies: victims or collaborators of organized crime.

In the workshops organized with Las Rastreadoras, the participants acknowledged that the recurrence of violence is a problem that must be faced by an entire community. This is not a situation that exclusively affects women; while it is true that most of the perpetrators of extreme violence are men, so were the majority of victims

that lay in clandestine burial pits – poor, racialized young men. Some authors use terms such as *juvenicidio*, which can be roughly translated as *youthicide* (Valenzuela Arce 2019). The poorest, most marginalized young men, who inhabit racialized geographies, are victims of both violent masculinities (both their own and those of others) and patriarchal violence. The stories shared by Las Rastreadoras speak of sons and daughters who disappeared after a traffic accident with the wrong person, or after refusing to dance with a powerful man. There are also stories about addicted youngsters who, one day, did not come home. In a context defined by impunity and impoverishment, in which masculine violence becomes a form of currency, enforced disappearances are a danger that routinely lurks in communities.

In this region of the country, the mothers of missing persons reject state justice and, through various avenues, build political communities to reimagine justice in a broader sense. In this regard, Sorayma – the wife of Guillermo Pacheco, whose body was retrieved by Las Rastreadoras – describes her stance on state justice as follows:

I do not expect anything from the state, I do not believe in its justice. For me, true justice would be for all of this to end. I have children, which means that one day I will have grandchildren, and I do not want them to experience the same world that I am living in. That is the sort of justice I would ask for. Not the punishment of those who are found guilty, but for violence to stop, for all of this to stop. That when my children have their own families, they are able to live peacefully, without fearing that their kids won't come back home, that someone else is going to take them. That would be justice for me. (Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra and Rastreadoras de El Fuerte 2020: 86; translated from the Spanish original)

This rejection of state justice is reflected in Las Rastreadoras' decision not to judicialize their cases. Even those who have found their relatives' bodies prefer to invest their political energy in the search for other collective members' relatives, rather than in finding those responsible for their own relative's death. Both impunity and the context of violence influence this decision, as looking for the perpetrators would entail risks for the women and their families, as noted above. The next section deals with stories of police violence prior to the disappearances, or of bureaucratic violence suffered during the search process, both of which have also influenced this rejection of state institutions.

Nadie Detiene al Amor: Chronicles of an Indignant Love

As I listened to the stories narrated by Las Rastreadoras in their memory workshops, during in-depth interviews or in informal conversations, I could not help but think about the way in which German society during the Nazi regime was complicit through silence: while a genocide was happening in their backyard, they kept on attending mass, celebrating birthdays and marching in patriotic parades. I listened to detailed narrations of the immeasurable cruelty with which the bodies that were found had been treated, and I became ashamed of my own silence, the silence of my sisters and friends, the silence of all Mexicans who have become used to the daily count of deceased, disappeared and massacred victims. Listening to these women, I became witness to a story they needed to tell. Their narrations were not only a denunciation of disappearances and premature deaths, but also an expression of their will to live.

Even if the disappearance of a loved one was the ‘critical event’ that deepened these women’s social suffering, this event was preceded by decades of structural forms of violence. Elsewhere, I have written about racialized territories in order to highlight the way in which racial hierarchies place certain bodies in certain spaces, and the distribution of resources and public policies to different territories depends on the bodies that inhabit them (Hernández Castillo 2019b). In contexts of extreme violence, like the one currently affecting Mexico, certain bodies are deemed to be disposable and situated in specific territories, in contrast with places that become the locus of ‘valuable life’ (see Butler 2006; Cacho 2012). In other words, racism dehumanizes and distorts the value of bodies located in racialized territories. This is why the bodies found in clandestine burial pits by Las Rastreadoras do not seem to inspire an emotional reaction from Sinaloense society; these lives were already deemed worthless. Their physical death was preceded by their social death. These are brown, impoverished and criminalized bodies that carry the stigma of being guilty of their own disappearance.

Several of the testimonies contained in the book deal with experiences of police violence that preceded the disappearances. Rosario Trigueros, a woman of Raramuri ancestry, describes the run-ins her son Jasiel had with the police before his disappearance:

Before he disappeared, he was detained once. On 4 November 2015, he was stopped at a police checkpoint. The officers found a gun in his car. Luckily, a cousin witnessed the detention. Otherwise, he could have

disappeared there and then. After this cousin told me what happened, I went to the municipal police station, where they had no information on him. I went three times to the public prosecutor's office, and there was no news either. He was detained at noon, but did not arrive at the public prosecutor's office until 8 p.m. Afterwards, I found out that municipal officers handed him over to the federal ministerial police,⁹ who tortured him. At first, he did not tell me he was tortured, as he did not want to worry me even more. When he finally told me, he mentioned that he had recognized criminal hitmen among the police officers who tortured him. (*Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra and Rastreadoras de El Fuerte* 2020: 118, 86; translated from the Spanish original)

A report presented in 2017 by the United Nations' Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment alleged that in Mexico, torture is commonly applied during the arrest, transportation, imprisonment and interrogation of suspects 'so that victims make self-incriminatory declarations, or even to force them to sign blank pages' (UN 2017: 45). In this report, public servants in several institutions are identified as being responsible for torture: police officers at federal, state and municipal levels, migration officers and members of the armed forces (*ibid.*). The stories narrated by *Las Rastreadoras*, as well as the stories inscribed in the bones they retrieve from clandestine burial pits, bear witness to the violence documented in the UN report.

An essential element of *Las Rastreadoras*' political fight is redignifying the deceased whose bodies have been treated with disdain. They have adopted each and every man and woman they have found as sons and daughters. As such, they take care of them from the moment of their exhumation throughout the bureaucratic process the bodies undergo before returning to their families. Their denunciations speak out against not only the extreme violence that took these lives but the bureaucratic violence endured by the families who search for their relatives, as well as the forensic violence these bodies – treasured by the families – are subjected to.

The testimony of Berthila – the mother of Alejandra Peña, a young woman who, along with a friend, disappeared after verbally confronting a soldier who owned the apartment where she lived – narrates the violence she faced in order to get her daughter's body back, after months of searching for her. She describes her experience as a 'bureaucratic nightmare':

The day I received a call informing me that the bodies of two young women – possibly Alejandra and Carla – were found, I felt like I was dying. They asked me if my daughter had had dental work done, and

she had, as she had broken some teeth after falling while changing a light bulb. Mirna [the leader of Las Rastreadoras] kept me company as I took a DNA test. I tried to find Alejandra's father, but his phone was turned off, so I finally went with one of my daughters. In the toughest moment, when we needed him the most, he was not there. My son came from Mexico City to be with me during the entire process, which was extremely difficult. In the end, the DNA tests turned out positive. The body was my daughter's. However, they offered me no explanation as to how they found her. They assumed I knew everything. Thank God I am a knowledgeable person; I didn't finish my degree, but I read a lot, I keep myself informed and whenever I don't know something, I ask questions. Nevertheless, it was a bureaucratic nightmare: paperwork and more paperwork. Then, new interrogations: 'What's your name?', 'Where do you live and who do you live with?' I just wanted everything to end so they could give me my daughter's remains. Afterwards, they came up with another excuse: they could not give me the body until the father showed up and took a DNA test. I spoke to Mirna, and she made some phone calls. While listening to her discussions over the phone, I noticed the strength she shows whenever she wants to achieve something. She helped me to get out of that labyrinth and get my daughter back. (Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra and Rastreadoras de El Fuerte 2020: 32; translated from the Spanish original)

The experiences that relatives of missing persons have had with forensic services are an example of what some social scientists have called bureaucratic violence or desk crimes. The violence and trauma of the disappearance of a loved one are deepened by what Ariadana Estévez López (2015) describes as the administration of suffering through institutional forms of violence. The relatives face a bureaucratic apparatus that kidnaps their sons, daughters, spouses and siblings to treat them as disposable bodies that end up in a mass grave.

Bureaucratic violence starts during the search process, when the relatives are treated with contempt by the authorities. Those who come from Indigenous or rural backgrounds have to face judicial racism, multiplied in their everyday interactions with public servants. To face these forms of violence, activists have taken advantage of recently created legal tools. Pressured by the protesting relatives of missing persons, the Mexican government published the *Ley General en Materia de Desaparición Forzada de Personas y Desaparición Cometida por Particulares* (General Law on the Enforced Disappearance of Persons and Disappearances Committed by Individuals) and the *Ley General de Víctimas* (General Law on Victims).¹⁰ Through their experience of searching for their relatives, these women have become empirical forensic examiners and experts

in context analysis. Las Rastreadoras have destabilized the epistemic hierarchies of forensic science, legitimizing their own knowledge. Memory workshops were also a vehicle for the self-acknowledgement of their expertise, which enables them not only to recognize human bones, but to graphically reconstruct the geography of violence or to elaborate a context analysis that helps them to decide when and where to search with sufficient safety conditions.

Through their searches, the women have blurred the boundary between the living and the dead, building affective communities that include them all. These practices have confronted what Isaias Rojas-Perez (2017: 87) has called the state's necro-governmentality: 'through the localization, examination, individualization and eventual return of the bodies to their families, so that they are properly buried, a distinction between family and community is re-established, which is essential for the State's modern politics.' As previously stated, Las Rastreadoras look for their relatives and for every disappeared person. Mothers whose children have already been found – like Mirna Medina, the group's coordinator – continue to participate in the searches. By treating the bodies they find as human beings, rather than as mere remains, and adopting them as if they were their own kin, they contravene the 'privatization of the deceased' (ibid.: 89) and reinforce a sense of community.

Mirna describes the importance of citizen-led searches for relatives as a practice that shines a light on the ineptitude or complicity of the Mexican state with regard to disappearances:

Our purpose was always to search for and find them, as we knew that the government would not do it, no matter how much we asked for it. So, instead of waiting for something that was not going to happen, I decided to search for them and, by doing so, show the government its own ineptitude. Each body we find is a way of telling the government that the very thing it denies and refuses to acknowledge exists. The proof is there: all the remains that we have found in clandestine burial pits, which belonged to our disappeared sons and daughters. (Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra and Rastreadoras de El Fuerte 2020; translated from the Spanish original)

Nadie Detiene al Amor is a denunciation of multiple forms of violence. It also documents the different ways in which these women build communities not only around the pain of mourning but also around love for their sons and daughters, as well as the sons and daughters of the organization's fellow members, who they have come to know and love through shared memories. The title of the volume is taken from one of the poems written by the members of

Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra for Las Rastreadoras. It underlines the force of love (hooks 2001), an indignant love that becomes the main strategy with which to face the ‘pedagogies of terror’ that use the bodies of daughters and sons as mere inscriptions of territorial control. Love also enables them to keep on searching despite the paralysing fear they feel when threatened by or directly faced with the perpetrators in territories controlled by organized crime. This is not the typical form of ‘motherly love’ idealized in pop culture and mass media: it is an indignant love that goes beyond blood ties. An indignant love that confronts authorities and unveils complicities. A form of love that overpowers any hatred towards the perpetrators.

Final Remarks

The Las Rastreadoras’ memory project and the book *Nadie Detiene al Amor* serve as a chronicle both of disappearance and of the extreme, structural forms of violence suffered by poor and racialized communities in Mexico, and as an example of the ways in which communities are knit together in a world shattered by violence. I do not intend to argue that these initiatives truly destabilize the de facto powers that rely on terror to control lives and territories. Nevertheless, I consider that these life-defending strategies, which entail the documentation of stories of violence and resistance, show some of the ways in which the social fabric – ravaged by extreme and structural forms of violence – can be rebuilt. The women’s writings, along with their voices on the streets and in the media, are destabilizing the common representations of ‘suffering subjects’ that endure multiple forms of violence. Their appropriation of forensic knowledge, as well as their self-representation strategies, disrupt the epistemic hierarchies usually imposed in contexts of ‘transitional justice’.

In Mexico, we have not transitioned from a period of armed conflict to a peaceful situation: we remain immersed in an unrecognized neoliberal war. However, state institutions have embraced the rhetoric of transitional justice. The collectives formed by relatives of victims of enforced disappearance, such as Las Rastreadoras, have confronted the official discourses with their own analyses and representations. Thus, they have countered the usual representations of ‘victims’ with their work as social activists; they have subverted what is expected of suffering mothers by acting as indignant mothers who look for everyone who has disappeared, not only their own kin;

and they have widened the conceptions of family and community, beyond blood and locality respectively.

From the perspective of memory studies, the book *Nadie Detiene al Amor* is only one part of a wider process in which history is routinely shared and shaped in spaces for collective reflection. By shaping history, these women are also deconstructing traditional gender roles. They have become political agents in public spaces, lending new meaning to their roles as mothers or caregivers as they look for every victim, not only their loved ones. Their history of grievance and resistance, threaded through with the inmates' poetic voice, confronts hegemonic narratives of 'criminal violence' in Mexico and unveils the complicity between the government and organized crime. This complicity not only enabled but, in some cases, was directly responsible for the disappearance of their daughters and sons.

What impact can these projects have in a context in which fear is disguised as indifference and most of Mexican society refuses to listen to and be moved by these narratives? What role can we play as academics to echo these voices and embrace their theorizations on violence and justice in our own theoretical debates? What can these fights for self-representation contribute to the decolonization of memory studies? To answer these questions, we have to keep walking alongside these collectives, listening to them with openness and solidarity in order to learn about other forms of knowledge. In academia, said forms of knowledge are usually conceptualized as 'testimonies'; however, these are theorizations that can show us how to rebuild our communities.

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Notes

This is a shortened and slightly modified version of the original article ‘Cronistas del Oprobio: Reflexiones Feministas sobre Memoria, Desaparición y Violencias Contemporáneas en México’, *Revista de Antropología Social* 31(2) (2022). It has been translated by Luis Muñoz.

1. The book can be downloaded for free at <https://www.giasf.org/uploads/9/8/4/7/98474654/25.pdf> (accessed 3 February 2023). Due to length limitations, I have omitted the details about the epistolary exchange between Las Rastreadoras de El Fuerte and the Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra. In the previously published Spanish version of this article, there is an ethnographic analysis of this dialogue about forms of knowledge and resistance. Hermanas en la Sombra is a prison editorial project that I founded in 2009 together with the feminist poet Elena de Hoyos and a group of inmates who attended our creative writing workshops (De Hoyos, Ruiz and Hernández Castillo 2021). To date, the editorial collective has published twenty-two books, written, designed and edited by women in prisons; see <https://hermanasenlasombra.org/> (accessed 3 February 2023).
2. The annual report presented by the Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda (National Search Commission) revealed in January 2021 that there was a decrease in enforced disappearances, from the 8,964 reported in 2019 to 6,957 in 2020. However, it failed to mention that 2019 was the year with the greatest number of disappearances since the start of the so-called ‘war on drug-trafficking’ back in 2006. In spite of this decrease, 2020 was the year with the fourth highest number of disappearances in the previous two decades (CNB 2021).
3. See Registro Nacional de Personas Desaparecidas o No Localizadas (National Registry of Disappeared or Not Located Persons) 2022.
4. My newspaper articles are available at: www.rosalvaaidahernandez.com/es/publicaciones/articulos-periodisticos/ (accessed 3 February 2023).
5. This project has entailed an appropriation of the means of self-representation through the founding of a prison-based publishing house in which the inmates write, design and publish their own books. Humanitarian intermediaries working as spokespeople for those who have lived these particular experiences at first hand are no longer necessary when the means of self-representation are appropriated. In this regard, the publishing house’s editorial output has become a tool for spreading the inmates’ theorizations in print and through social media; see <https://hermanasenlasombra.org/> (accessed 3 February 2023).
6. I worked with the GIASF team from 2016 to 2019. I am still part of GIASF’s Academic Counselling Committee: see <https://www.giasf.org/> (accessed 3 February 2023).
7. A more in-depth analysis of my research with this collective can be found in Hernández Castillo (2019b). The data on the found and returned

- bodies was provided on 21 July 2021 by Mirna Medina, coordinator of Las Rastreadoras de El Fuerte.
8. The work of Isaías Rojas-Perez (2017) deals with the importance of Indigenous epistemologies in understanding the boundaries between the living and the dead. It was conducted in the Quechua region of Peru with the relatives of victims of enforced disappearance who were found in clandestine burial pits.
 9. The Federal Ministerial Police (Policía Federal Ministerial, PFM) is a Mexican federal agency tasked with fighting corruption and organized crime, but it has been infiltrated by the cartels. The agency is directed by the Attorney General's Office (FGR) and may have been partly modelled on the Federal Bureau of Investigation of the United States.
 10. For an analysis of these two laws see Leyva Morelos Zaragoza (2019).

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