Tantos Cuerpos Dolientes

So Many Grieving Bodies: A Living Archive of Care

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In 1978, eighty-three women gathered nervously around Mexico City's Cathedral, carrying nothing but a bottle of tehuacán and their shawls to protect from the sun. After a long travel from Guerrero, Sinaloa, Sonora, they were the first in Mexico to publicly display the photographs of their disappeared sons and brothers to the indifferent government and pedestrians that pretended to ignore the large red cloth that stated "We will find them." Since this first organized hunger strike of the doñas of Comité Eureka, the photographs of the disappeared in Mexico have spread across myriad times, places, collectives and materialities. From the mothers' and families' own bodies to riverbanks and trees along hundreds of mass graves, what is it about these photographs, displayed for decades across the wounded geography of this country, that continues to compel us?[1]

1 I deliberately choose to situate this work through the first-person singular always embedded in the plural "we", trying to maintain the complexity of a situation in which the effects of violence are felt by a wide community of grieving bodies, amplifying the 'we', yet felt and experienced differentially across gendered and racialized bodies. In fact, Mexican society's apparent generalized disregard for the disappeared takes the shape of these uncomfortable questions: Why would *we* care about these lives and their stories? Why would *we* incorporate them into our collective national memory? Why would *we* mourn these absences? Who is this *we*-collectivity that hasn't cared for these lives and how has this disregard been produced? How is this *we* shaped by the very process of formulating these questions?

Figure 1

A Chilean arpillera made in 1981 under the Pinochet regime showing a woman, the photograph of a disappeared person, and a lurking soldier. Arpilleras are a form of communal textile art aimed at denouncing social injustices and violence.

How has the affective memory of forced disappearance in Mexico been registered, inscribed, and held among the territories and communities that grieve an incommensurable absence? And how do these material memories force us to rethink care, violence and gender as inextricably woven into each other?

These questions are framed within Mexico's necrocontext[2] in which (forced) disappearance[3] has become a wide-spread category to designate a blurry constellation of operations, motives, modalities and experiences. Although inextricably linked to the Southern Cone dictatorships in the seventies —that institutionalized forced disappearance as a state terror technology—, it has currently become the epitome of an engulfing violence, often invoked as the preamble of "those bad things" that could happen —with absolute impunity— to a body[4]. This particular modality of material damage pretends to physically erase the bodies *and* the traces of their existence, meaning it simultaneously attempts to subtract from social life the materiality of the body *and* the memory that verifies its existence. Intermingled with unpunished massacres, territorial dispossession, increasing gender-based violence, and ongoing narco-state political violence, the overwhelming force

2 Understood as a constellation of interwoven material-discursive political-emotional regimes in which death becomes the force of social organization instigated by disposability and indifference, when I speak of the violence of the necrocontext, I refer to the actual infliction of bodily violence, as well as the narratives and discourses that justify, normalize and minimize its presence in society.

3 The reason behind the parenthetical position of the adjective *forced* is precisely the complex usage of the category as, following the seventies coinage of the category, *forced* has been usually used to designate the state's involvement in the perpetration of the crime.

4 According to official figures, generated by the dubious counting mechanisms of the Mexican government, there are currently 100,000 disappeared people in Mexico (Registro Nacional de Personas desaparecidas, May 2022), a number that goes all the way up to 200,000 according to grassroots collectives and organizations, suspecting there could be thousands more, as people have become used to *not* reporting the disappearances to the authorities out of fear or mistrust in the juridical processes. I refuse to write these numbers without questioning what it has meant to inhabit the distant space of its abstraction. The *figure configures* our vocabulary, yet we barely grapple with what is occluded behind those numbers: the vivid absence of real bodies haunting the lives of those who cared for them, the palpable rupture of their communal existence, the tangibility of their loss.

of disappearance in Mexico has forced us to examine the many faces of the subjugation of life to the power of death (Mbembe 2003), and specifically how producing-death remains to be a civilizing technology in ex-colonial territories (Valencia, 2019, 182). Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics may be useful to "account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death-worlds" (2003, 40) through a sovereign power that dictates who may live and who must die (11). However, in order to unpack the specificity of the Mexican *death-world*, to recognize which weapons are deployed through the violence of disappearance—either as material technologies or as discursive devices—, we must first attend to the intricate continuum of violence that, through the ongoing deployment of Western modernity-coloniality (Quijano 1992; Lugones 2010), has reiteratively produced a gendered-racialized regime of disposability exacerbated under the current necropolitical regime.

As decolonial feminist scholars have extensively argued, the Mexican Nation-State, following its colonial legacies and civilizing patterns of domination that, after struggles for independence, persisted as structures of modernity/coloniality in the modern republics, has failed to account for "the oppressive logic of colonial modernity, its use of hierarchical dichotomies and categorial logic" (Lugones 2010, 742). More importantly, through what Karina Ochoa (2014) has considered intertwined ordering processes of bestialization, feminization, and racialization of local populations, the modern/colonial gender system unfolded an engulfing civilizing process through "dichotomous hierarchies woven into the historicity of relations, including intimate relations, [...] the interwoven social life among people" (Lugones 2010, 743). Such an understanding of gender as an ongoing and renewable civilizing technology, that allowed for people to be classified and for relations among them to be reconfigured, emphasizes a world-making process that articulates gender and coloniality as "the adoption/internalization of the men/women dichotomy as a normative construction of the social —a mark of civilization, citizenship, and membership in civil society" (Lugones 2010, 748).

Furthermore, through the constitution of the civilized European masculine modern individual that conceived his sensible separation from the multiplicity of life-worlds-bodies as the condition of possibility of the thriving of his World, devoted to the cognitive and material apprehension or annihilation of the worlds-bodies he encountered, the modern/colonial gender system has become a key instrument of the current necropolitical creation of death-worlds. Enforcing, mobilizing and normalizing gendered configurations of de-sensitivity and separation, the modern/colonial gender system established the basis for the ongoing necropolitical attempt to transmute bestialized, racialized, and feminized bodies' vital force into something that can be extracted, put into the service of the reproduction of capital, trafficked as a commodity and disposed with impunity. Rita Segato's in depth research of feminicide[5] in Ciudad Juárez has led her to address the colonial onslaught as inseparable from the gendered distribution of death under the current necropolitical regime, as such violence gets primarily normalized through reiterative masculinist *pedagogies of cruelty* that "teach, habituate and program the subjects to transmute what is alive —vitality— into things" (Segato 2018, 11), and therefore "habituating us to the dissection of life and vitality as the inescapable path of modernity" (Segato 2018, 12).

Situating the question of gender as ongoing civilizing processes woven and written into Mexico's diverse population not only unveils the violence of racializing and gendering entire populations with their own social, political and affective configurations. In fact,

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5 As conceptualized by feminist writer Diana Russell, and translated and re-contextualized by Mexican anthropologists Marcela Lagarde and Julia Monárrez, the concept of *feminicidio* in Mexico and Latin America has made visible a form of codified gender violence inseparable of the economic and social conditions in which it occurs with impunity. Amplifying its understanding beyond the individual misogyny or hate-crime perspective, *feminicide* in Mexico— the violent killing of women and girls— is considered both the culmination of violence against women and the systematic impunity that underlies these crimes, revealing it as a paradigmatic form of State crime (Lagarde, 2006, 12). In this sense, scholar Melissa Wright emphasizes the linkage between the term *feminicidio* and the term desaparecido as they are both entangled within disputed meanings of death, body and violence, and are considered crucial components of the "activist lexicon for naming and fighting against state terror and its neoliberal institutions." (2016, 11).

situating the question of gender as the critical cornerstone of the articulation of contemporary violence in Mexico allows for the specific violence of (forced) disappearance to appear not *only* as incidental, episodic or just consequential of a failed military strategy or lack of law enforcement (as suggested by political analysts that refrain to punitive 'solutions' for the 'violence problem'), but as constitutive of the modern/colonial gender regime through which the contemporary state was configured. In this sense, despite the shifts, ruptures, and (dis)continuities, we could trace on how these gendered processes have been interwoven and differentially deployed through historical periods, the indifference and lack of care towards people produced as disposable continues to be tied to this modern-colonial matrix of power.

Following this, understanding how such necropolitical normalized erasure of bodies undermines and fractures communities, territories, and their memory, has led me to follow the social life of objects of memory —photographs, embroideries, shrines, crosses— that re/membering the disappeared may also offer a sensible witnessing of the rupturing experience of cumulative violence. Foregrounding these objects as capable of attuning us to both the *dismembering* of social bonds and the *re/membering* labor of care towards those bodies deemed disposable, is one way to bracket the condition of inescapability dictated by the path of modernity, and to witness the resistant multiplicity that inhabits the modern-colonial fracture: "the enactment of the coloniality of gender *and* the resistant response from a subaltern sense of self, of the social, of the self-in-relation, of the cosmos, all grounded in a peopled memory" (Lugones 2010, 754).

Gathered within the narrative and theoretical space of this research, yet scattered, disposed and undermined in the social worlds they reside in, these objects have accompanied the struggle of the relatives of disappeared people in their search of their beloved. I have encountered them in the main plaza of Puebla and Mexico City, where embroidery protest collectives convene to invite pedestrians to embroider the name of the disappeared with them; I have countlessly seen the photographs hanging from

one of the araucarias in Xalapa's Parque Juárez; I have dwelled in front of so many pink crosses in protests and vacant lots; and I have become, by virtue of familiarity, dangerously accustomed to walk by "Looking for" photographs and *pesquisas* placed in phone booths, light poles and walls. But I have also followed these objects through their digital trajectories, revising material available on digital archives, independent media publications, literature, films, and social media, as these have become expanded realms of possibility for the spread of the disappeared presence, their memory, and their families' testimony. Thus, mobilized and publicly displayed by grassroots' collectives from the seventies to the present day, in this article I consider these objects of memory and protest, the affective inscriptions of care and the public tracing of an ongoing loss, which has not only lacked recognition, but also was intended to be perpetually erased. Attending to these affective objects, in their untamable multiplicity, has required a different thinking about the materiality of objects, the modern/colonial gender regime and its relation with violence and care[6]. Ultimately, tracing the social life of these objects has allowed me to pose questions on the cumulative effects of the modern/colonial gender violence, and on the delegitimizing modalities of women's struggle, but more importantly on the ethical demand to think on the collective memory of disappearance as a public matter of care.

6 This article was written under the Covid-19 pandemic, therefore it relies on the testimonies of mothers and relatives of disappeared people available in digital media such as online newspapers and videos and other academic work. All the testimonies in this article have been translated from Spanish to English by myself.

Is it normal that there is a country in which people disappear?[7]

Almost three decades after the hunger strike in Mexico City's Cathedral, Guadalupe joined "Familias Unidas por Nuestros Desaparecidos Jalisco" [FUNDEJ] after the forced disappearance of her son, to search, among the files and corpses of the SEMEFO [Forensic Medical Service], and the dust and bushes of the hills, for the thousands of disappeared people in Jalisco: "My life was transformed, but I don't see myself doing anything else: we must take care of/ care for the disappeared"[8]. To reflect on this calling, to ponder the (im)possibility of an ethics of caring in the face of necropolitical violence, has meant listening and learning from the people that have made it possible to conceive the memory of the disappeared as a matter of collective care. An approach to the etymological roots of care both in English and Spanish brings forth an association that we do not usually recall when thinking of the feminized labors of care: the old English *caru* meant sorrow and grief but also mental attention; in Spanish, *cuidar* shares a common root with *cogitare*, to think. Through this semantic constellation, I am reminded of Christina Sharpe's proposition of engaging with care in the aftermath of colonial violence as a problem for thinking, rendering care as an epistemological pivot between emotion and critical inquiry: "How can we think (and rethink and rethink) care laterally, in the register of the intramural, in a different relation than that of the violence of the state?" (Sharpe 2016, 20).

Departing from Guadalupe's relentless concern for the disappeared, I begin to trace a material understanding of care under necropolitical power—a different relation to the missing bodies from the violence of the state— as it becomes inscribed in the photographs that herself and other women carry around. Dwelling and circulating among a death-world that refuses to acknowledge how they were ripped apart from a web of communal relations,

7 I am echoing Rosario Ibarra's words interviewed by Elena Poniatowska for her book *Fuerte es el silencio* (1980) after the disappearance of her son Jesús.

8 Guadalupe's testimony in Lopez, Denisse (2019).

what does it mean that these photographs remain embedded in a caring and living relationality with their communities and territories? Such emphasis on relation and interconnection is also what María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), drawing on Joan Tronto's definition, establishes as a broader understanding of care: "everything that *is* done (rather than everything that ´we´ do) to maintain, continue, and repair 'the world' so that *all* (rather than ´we´) can live in it as well as possible. That world includes… *all* that we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 161 modified from Tronto 1993, 103). Yet, if that life-sustaining web is threatened by the ceaseless attempt to severe it, renewing, as Mbembe has argued, "the will to kill as opposed to the will to care" (Mbembe 2019, 107), then a photograph that barely holds the possibility of renewed interconnections could become a material embodiment of the care relation which "essentially aims to restore the patient to his being and his relations with the world. So that the illness and possibly death do not monopolize the future and life as a whole" (p.144). In other words, if forced disappearance means the rupture of the everyday cycles of living, and the severing of the social bonds that hold "our worlds" together, then, the labor of searching and re-membering the disappeared —carrying their photographs on their chests, embroidering their names, walking up and down a hill identifying the smell of death in between the shovels— constitutes an interrupting practice of caring precisely because it *silently* stands against the dismembering forces that, in its rampant bodily reminiscences, act to scatter, fracture, divide into parts, so as to destroy the integrity of individual and communal bodies. In this regard, the photographs become a critical-affective space from which "subject, relations, ground and possibility are continually transformed, incarnating a weave from the fractured locus that constituted a creative, peopled re-creation" (Lugones 2010, 754)

During the early period of the seventies, photographs were primarily an intimate device made public, the vehicle for the recognition of their sons, as Doña Rosario Ibarra recalls about her visits to the military barracks, when women would walk around in

prisons and hospitals with the small photographs on their purses asking around if someone had seen them. Since then, the practices of searching have been displaced from the military barracks to the thousands of mass graves and clandestine burials around which hundreds of women, now referred to as *buscadoras*, gather to look for their sons, daughters, husbands. Throughout the time span represented by these forty years, the photographs have migrated from their purses to their shirts to posts in social media, and have transformed from black and white into colorful portraits. Progressively attaching to their bodies, and as an affective weave themselves, the photographs of the disappeared embody materially and sensorially the evocative presence of the people portrayed there: their faces as a trace of their singularity, their silence as a trace of their muted life.

The grieving mothers sheltering the photograph of their missing children—which many people have also come to feel and know through another framed photograph—are enacting a form of diffused emotional resistance that amplifies the very notion of resistance prevalent in the Mexican political repertoire. These diffuse emotional resistances, as "those delicate procedures such as behaviors, ideas, actions, gestures, rumors, materials, photographs, songs, smells, performances or words, that, provided with affectivity, defy the many forms of power, structural or normative, and the emotional regimes that support them" (Rosón & Medina Doménech 2017, 420) have become a hard-to-trace residual memory. However, even if elusive and diffuse, such affectively laden objects become a way to question how an affective logic could reshape our gendered understanding of political resistance and struggle.

While amplifying and diversifying the political imaginary of a context in which the revolutionary *macho* figure had been reproduced through masculinist understandings of political action, these women seemed to carry their photographs as a means of subtlety intervening in a pre-codified public arena. "When she visited the politicians, she would do it with the appropriate outfit, the purse, the collar, the shoes, all the external organization that

calms people", comments Elena Poniatowska on her chronicle of Doña Rosario's long journey searching for her son Jesús across public offices: "She smiled. Always smiled. She didn't raise her voice […] With her shawl, with her braids, no one would have agreed to meet with her. *Very soon I learned not to cry in front of them, Elena. Almost since the first interview, I wouldn't give them that. So they couldn't say: This poor woman is out of her mind*" (Poniatowska 1980, 90). Poniatowska's acute attention to Doña Rosario's bodily negotiation with the normative space of traditional politics evidences the distinct gendered and racialized modalities of delegitimization of the mother's presence in public space. If she were dressed differently, more specifically, if she wore the characteristic dress of indigenous women, or if she had overtly cried, it would have been easier for the politicians and civil society to dismiss her. Yet, those negotiated compliances with such regulated space didn't impede Doña Rosario from placing the enlarged photograph of Jesús next to her heart, right in the middle of her *appropriate* outfit. The photograph is surrounded by white pearls carefully sewn as a powerful enunciation: *This* body, in *this* country, in *this* present moment, is missing.

Circulating among public offices ceaselessly caught up in reproducing state-violence that, as stated before, is inextricably linked to the coloniality of gender —through direct disappearance, complicity, omission, collusion, denial, acquiescence, silence, mockery and besiegement of suffering, Jesús' photograph attached to his mother's chest pulses as an affective interruption of necropolitical power: it constitutes both an inscription of disappearance as an event that aims to display the physical fracture of communal bonds *and* an inscription of a force that aims to restore the integrity of bodies into the life-sustaining web of life. But, importantly, it also pulses as an interruption of the coloniality of gender that attempts to control and erase those "knowledges, relations, and values, and ecological, economic, and spiritual practices [that] are logically constituted to be at odds with a dichotomous, hierarchical, categorial logic" (Lugones 2010, 743). Belittled, delegitimized, and depoliticized, the women carrying their photographs around

are not recognized as the political forces that —moving between gendered normative dictates, emotional attachments, and strictly codified places—struggle to place disappearance as a matter of public concern. The fact that the political identities of these mothers are engrained in their day-to-day activities —carried out under severely hostile life-threatening conditions— also poses the question of what notions of gender, care and motherhood are at stake when they are accused of abandoning or displacing their traditional caring role to face the narco-state.

Constantly in dynamic and tense negotiations, these women's re-producing and redoing of the ossified notion of gender —and its relation to care— is relegated to the marginal space of testimonies, subjective retellings or devalued "*saberes*". Across every political meeting, street protest, press conference, consciousness group, memory ritual, sensibility workshop, collective search in the desert, the mountain, the river, in every selling of clothing or food to raise funds, in every picking up a shovel, in every framing of a photo, in every sit-in and hunger strike, what does it mean to *care* for those deemed disposable? What do these public activities *do* to our gendered and privatized notion of care? These questions are specially relevant among the overwhelming circulation, and unquestioned normalization, of signs of the material destruction of feminized and racialized bodies, the hyper-exposition of actual injured bodies and its representations crudely depicting these violences. Enmeshed in fear, gender norms, racial violent imaginaries, and the expertise of technocrats who promise to bring peace and reconciliation, they choose to defiantly care for the injured and disappeared bodies and to refuse the tacit obligation to remain silent. In this regard, how are these "women-mothers-activists-political subjects who cannot hold any more death within them" (Herrera 2017, 112), carving a public caring space for grieving their/our insurmountable loss? What does it mean to think of the caring gesture of carrying around the streets the photograph of a disappeared person as political, not only in the sense of defying a regime of disposability, but in the sense of rethinking the notion of care that is supposed to be naturally, and privately, attached to gendered bodies?

"When I started, I received death-threats, society called me *loca*, they wondered how it was possible for me to be out in the street with a shovel and the photograph of my son asking for his whereabouts.... I faced the government, I faced the narco, and I faced society", recalled Mirna[9]. The re-signification and destabilizing of a gender regime that has relegated grieving-with to the feminized domestic environment opens the possibility of imagining a vast archive of intimate, yet diffuse, resistant knowledges being enacted through what appears to be a passive compliance (women grieving) with the gender regime. Yet, considering that "legitimacy, authority, voice, sense, and visibility are denied to resistant subjectivity" (Lugones, 2010, 746), women like Mirna have been subject to numerous modalities of delegitimization reproduced through the gendered tropes of irrationality, craziness, gossip and chitchat. This is, their resistant knowledge is considered too-personal, too-intimate, testimonies but not knowledge, and therefore is turned unintelligible, inaudible, irrational, and not significant (Gutiérrez 2014, 88).

Since the seventies, women looking for their sons and daughters have been called *viejas argüenderas* (old gossipmongers) and, more recently, *las locas de las palas* (crazy shovel-ladies) because they have actively disarranged the private/public divide, bringing affectivity into the public sphere through their own understanding of a political struggle, be it organizing, talking, chanting, hugging, marching, yelling, embroidering, *acuerpándose*, or even remaining in silence together. Following this, the attachment of the photographs of their children to their own affected bodies, through *camafeos*, collars, and shirts, in the public sphere is an action that makes-visible their suffering while simultaneously refusing to be essentialized in the sedimented idea of women-private sphere-emotions. Scholars who have worked with the Argentinian mothers of Plaza de Mayo have extensively analyzed

9 Mirna's testimony in El Imparcial TV (2019). "Roberto, en sueños, me decía que lo buscara por donde pita el tren"

this form of *maternal activism*[10] as shaped not by ideological positions nor anti-dictatorial strategies —a traditional political logic—, but by a logic of affect (Jelin 2001, 15).

Although their activities could be thought of as the prolongation of the caring labors they have already undertaken throughout their lives, I contend that the private notion of care is in fact destabilized and politicized by the embodied activation of the photographs and objects they carry around public spaces. The caring inscription of the memory of these bodies —the confirmation of their existence— into the public space is not solely assimilable into existing gender narratives that would essentialize these women into a position of complying to the gendered norm of caring for others. If, as examined earlier, the disappearing power is also invested in destroying singularity —turning this body into *any* body—, then the presence of each photograph in the public space has been, since that first moment in 1978, a continuous attempt to care for them as *this* life, *this* body, and thus *this* absence as an absence of myriad relations. Could a renewed relation of care, among the subjugation of life under the power of death, restore so many grieving bodies into their relational communities?

These ashes are sacred

“We will all disappear here, if no one looks for us, if no one names us”, wrote poet Sara Uribe in her book *Antígona González* (2012). The photographs carried around —attached to the families' bodies— are not only a representation of a face, an expression of grief, an emblem; it is a relational naming, the dynamic inscription of a life, a name, a face, into a world of relations where they have partially been rendered expendable. Against the monumentalization

10 The figure of the grieving mother isn't exempt of tensions or contradictions. However, my interest in this article isn't the synecdochical figure of the mother as containing the nation's pain nor the symbolic figure of an essentially caring femininity, but the actual concrete mothers situating their bodies at the forefront of a struggle against disappearance.

of history (Vázquez, 2012) and the one-world force of modernity, which invests itself in empty decontextualized monuments and museums, such attachments among bodies and objects do not stop at their bodies: photographs interlace with other memory objects and places in which those bodies that were taken away find a space to dwell. In fact, a careful attention to the geographical placement of these photographs and how they produce an interrelation with the territory they stand on—the cross at border, the ephemeral protest at the cathedral, the altar at the bank of a river, the shrine at the mass grave, but also the image imprinted on a shirt, the embroidered photograph on a napkin, the tiny photo hanging from a neck—, unveils how such connections extend beyond the human bodies. They become corpo-territorial inscriptions that assert that bodies and objects are relations, and that people become with the many places —myriad unseen relations— in which their beloved are re-membered. That is why we may understand the event of disappearance —and the caring response— as ecological: not only because the disappeared person is spread out, a distributed life-form, as Bayo Akomolafe (2021) suggests, but because the places in which these women demand the appearance of their children are already plural worlds of relations holding multiple pasts and futures.

"It is risky, we have been threatened. But I will continue to do this until the end of my days. I owe it to my son. And the sons of all the other mothers that I didn't give birth to but that I have claimed with my own hands from the anonymous earth, to bury them again, with the dignity of a name, a story, a tear", recalls Lucy[11]. The photographs of her child, hanging from her neck, are there to remind to the rest of the community, that even if she doesn't find him, if she cannot physically claim him back from the anonymity of the earth, she will still claim his memory from the eschewed imposition of necropolitical power. It is through the insistence on carrying an object that is inseparable of the story that it holds, and through the placing of that object among a materiality that

11 Lucy's testimony in Capuzzi, Lucia (2019).

is already filled with inscriptions of terror, that affective memory becomes inseparable from a geographic sensibility that remains attuned to the world of relations attempting to be foreclosed and fractured through the violence of disappearance.

In a similar vein, Minerva began embroidering the names of feminicide victims in her house after she realized other collectives of ´Embroidering for Peace and Memory´[12] were not attending to the specificity of how women were being disappeared and killed. The embroidery collectives have been one of the many instances in which the photographs of the disappeared have found a material assemblage in which to continue their inter-generational traveling. Women bring their missing children in photographs printed in their shirts or hanging from their neck, while they sit in parks and plazas to embroider the names and stories of other's children who have been disappeared or killed, joined by young people who feel close, or merely curious, of their demands. "It is not only a finished handkerchief, it is a way of bringing them back to the world and honoring their memory. Of giving back to them a physical space in the cloth", Minerva comments on a handkerchief dedicated to a dismembered woman whose 'fragments' were scattered in many places. "I thought of buying these little religious pieces known as *milagros* [miracles] —that usually have the shape of a heart—, and with them representing her body, redoing her [...] What is important is the relation among us who are still living, embroidering, and our relation with the murdered woman we embroider."[13]

Akin to Minerva, who has felt compelled to contribute to making-present the *ungrievable* bodies through restoring them to a physical space in the world —her embroidered handkerchief—, many of the mothers and relatives of the disappeared have described a tethering force that links their lives to the lives of their

12 The collective "Bordando por la paz" is formed by multiple groups and local collectives that have gathered in public spaces since 2011 to protest against violence in Mexico. In the beginning, the collective was called "Fuentes Rojas" [Red Fountains] and was part of the bigger movement "Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad" [Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity], from where many of the current 'Searching' collectives emerged.

13 Minerva's testimony in Baltazar, Elia (2018).

disappeared relatives. Through the act of re-membering, through the threshold space that the object enacts, their presence shape-shifts and remains. Laura remembers when she received her brother's photograph taken inside his confinement in the Military Barrack No.1, and later found in the official archives: "Since I received [the photograph], I haven't been able to stop looking at it. I take it from the kitchen to the living room to the bedroom… I have the feeling that it calls me, it speaks to me. I know it's incomprehensible from the rational point of view."[14] Although an attentive listening to these words will certainly reveal an ontological depth currently out of the scope of this article, I bring them as the assertion that the objects of memory that accompany these people in their struggle are not inert objects around which people gather, they are embedded in their communities and embodying modalities of presence that establish relations and worldings among living and dying, absent and present, felt through sensorial impressions, dreams and other 'affective realms'. They stand against the modernity's coloniality of gender, that "attempts to control, by denying their existence, the challenge of the existence of other worlds with different ontological presuppositions" (Lugones 2010, 749).

Attuning to those moments when the relatives of the disappeared hold the photographs of their beloved in silence, I acknowledge the limits of language to approach the density and richness of their ontological and ethical offerings. Does the relationality they enact eludes the archive, the museum, the testimonies, the theoretical insights, the very notion of gender? This interrogation is the reason behind my attempt to examine those non-linguistic ways of making-memory—photographs and objects of memory—, but also behind my own hesitant oblique approach in engaging with the relational worlds they are implicitly proposing. "I am talking of how to make nameable collective pain. In what register, in what scale, in what language? What does that say of a 'we'? What is the wound and who is exactly hurt by it?

14 Laura's testimony in La Fogata Digital. "Detenidos de la guerra sucia fueron fotografiados en instalaciones policiacas y militares."

Where is pain located? What does it mean, when we say, that a nation is in pain for its disappeared, or that the land grieves her dead?”(Castillejo 2018, my translation).

Epifanio’s photograph traveling from his wife’s hands to the main plaza in Mexico City. His encounter with the memory of Doña Rosario tied to a cross in front of the Cathedral. The tiny pink cross embroidered in Minerva’s handkerchief for “La Pantera”, *this is how they called me, but they don’t know my name, touching Rosalía’s handkerchief, no one knows my name. They found me in the river San Cipriano de Nacajuca.* The wooden crosses in the riverbank in Chimalhuacán, fallen, withering, removed by the government, and raised again. The house where the Comité Eureka built a home for the hundreds of photographs of their children. The delicate pasting of the photograph of Doña Silvia’s daughter in bottles of water that she offers to drivers in Ciudad Juárez, *in case you see her.* The three photographs and footprints in front of the Justice Prosecutor in Nuevo León taken down *this* morning because *on top of disappearing them, they want to disappear their memory.*

These objects are what refuses to disappear from them: their living remains, their myriad living relations. Mobilizing them across a disarranged time and space, they circulate among the concrete bodies that have suffered violence, their communities, their land, and ourselves, myself, being dragged towards them. The stories of pain and memory are bound to their people, adhered through the accumulative effects of violence, yet circulating, attaching, moving, and in so doing reconfiguring the communicative relations between what is present, the objects, the land, the searchers, and what is absent: the missing bodies. For many of these mothers, the insistence on a communication with their beloved through objects, photographs, dreams, and prayers, has also meant awaking gendered delegitimizing accusations that once-again render them as crazy for insisting that they feel their children are alive, or that even beyond knowing they are dead, they still feel their presence. Against the disregard of the state institutions that treat the bodies as waste or hindrance, for these women *these ashes are sacred, their sons under the earth are not bones, they are not death, they*

are treasures[15]. The profound ontological proposals of this other understanding of life and death, corresponds with relational onto-epistemologies present all over Mexico, epistemologies which are not only based on relationality within humans and the life-sustaining web that supports them, but that have long been eroded, assimilated or relegated to the margins of superstition, irrational or backward thinking by modernity-coloniality's ontological occupation of land (Escobar 2016, 14).

The distinct ways in which these families find collective meaning for the unsurmountable rupture of their lives that forced disappearance has unleashed—the chants and prayers, the placing of photographs and altars, the embroidering the names, and their care for bones and ashes— hold more than the enactment of communal rituals around a body that needs to be restored and re-bonded into the interrelations of the world. In a very material way, they are also rethinking —and spurring the government officers and civil society to rethink—what is a body, what is a corpse, what is caring, what is a remain, who is in pain, who feels, who lives, and what is at stake in our dismissals of these women's geographical, forensic, ethical, and ontological knowledge. A closer look to the regional contexts in which disappearances occur would shed light on the situated understandings of justice and repair, for example, when damage is felt communally, beyond the liberal understanding of an individual and understood through a relational notion of personhood (Hernández, 2019a). Ultimately, these women are affirming that:

> One does not resist the coloniality of gender alone. One resists it from within a way of understanding the world and living in it that is shared and that can understand one's actions, thus providing recognition. Communities rather than individuals enable the doing; one does with someone else, not in individualist isolation.

15 Collective testimony in Lozano, Erika. (2020).

> The passing from mouth to mouth, from hand to hand of lived practices, values, beliefs, ontologies, space~times, and cosmologies constitutes one. The production of the everyday within which one exists produces one's self as it provides particular, meaningful clothing, food, economies and ecologies, gestures, rhythms, habitats, and senses of space and time. But it is important that these ways are not just different. They include affirmation of life over profit, communalism over individualism, "estar" over enterprise, beings in relation rather than dichotomously split over and over in hierarchically and violently ordered fragments. These ways of being, valuing, and believing have persisted in the resistant response to the coloniality (Lugones 2010, 754).

These resistant onto-epistemologies, built on the foundation of an ethics of care and an understanding of the wound of disappearance as an ecological event, are engrained within the memory practices these women are enacting and are not usually explicit statements, but visible through their day to day activities which are, as we have seen, depoliticized for being a seemingly passive compliance with the gendered regime that naturalizes these women as *only* bearers of suffering. “These peasant women, rural teachers, house keepers, merchants, have left their work and family spaces to look in riverbanks, in channels, to march to the capital city, to speak in the congress […] They are not only ‘secondary victims’ or ‘sources of forensic information’, they are key subjects for any program of justice of this country. They are our consciousness” (Hernández 2019b). What consciousness may emerge from a mother that writes this letter to her son: “Let me tell you I am looking for you and I know you know I am looking for you, but we are in Mexico and this is a disaster. Since you are gone, I always carry your photograph, because since a year and five months ago, this is where I can see you and I believe you see me too”[16]. What consciousness may be

16 Lety’s testimony in Valdez, Javier (2012).

born out of woman who claims: “These crosses are not only wood, they are not symbols, they are the bodies of our daughters that were murdered, our daughters that are here in the river?”[17]

I didn’t want to be Antígona, but it touched me/ befell me[18]

In Spanish, *doliente* refers to a physical pain, a sickness, a grieving state; an old usage also denotes a grieving space, a grieving time, in which a disease or a suffering has been experienced. Mexican writer Cristina Rivera Garza has insisted on the verb *condolerse*, that in Spanish means to feel-pain-with, to shape an aesthetical-ethical stance against the Mexican horror: “I wish this wasn’t the grieving country from which these also grieving texts depart. I wish we didn’t have to feel-pain-with, that we didn’t have to turn the pain of others our own nor to turn our own pain into the pain of others to continue even in the midst of horror. But we have to. We have to feel each other’s pain” (Rivera 2015, 19 , my translation). The *so many bodies* of the title of this article is also an open-ended ethical inquiry: can we feel the pain of others with whom we inhabit these grieving time and spaces? How is the necropolitical *will to kill* opposing to the *will to touch and care for* these stories? How, if we don’t touch these stories are we to feel-pain-with? And how can we touch that which *—we don’t know— is already touching us*?[19] What then, is there to learn from listening, touching and feeling the affective force that is underlying and circulating among each of these bodies and objects? What are they teaching us in their inhabiting a grieving and hurtful time, a grieving and hurtful space?

17 Collective testimony in “En el Bordo de Xochiaca, ponen cruces rosas, en protesta por los feminicidios.” (Video: La Jornada, 2016)

18 Uribe, Sara (2012) *Antígona González*.

19 See Rivera Garza, Cristina (2020) “Del verbo tocar: las manos de la pandemia y las pre guntas inescapables”.

If the mothers of the disappeared have insisted on marking their losses as a way of re-inscribing their beloved to a web of interrelations threatened by the narco-state power, an ethics of care, situated in this specific scenario, has also resulted in the expansion of those relations—a life-sustaining web— in which the mothers themselves partake but that extend beyond them. It is through their shared pain, their common grief, and the memory of long histories of accumulated violence, that these women have defied the modern/colonial gender regime and envisioned loss as generative of an otherwise community, reimagining what it means to live together in the presence of such violent destruction. "Our daughters returning home", "We are all missing the disappeared", "They are all my children", "My son gave birth to me politically" have all been chanted and written in protests by collectives of women that demand for the acknowledgement of a larger community, a kinship for feeling-with. The re-arrangement of the possessive pronouns in their chants, their insistence on how their collectives have become a family of shared pain and strength, and the fact that many of these women continue on the search after finding *their* children —because all the missing people are *their* children—, signals the possibility of configuring an expanded sense of a grieving-with community. The political gesture of mourning in public extends towards vital and affective attachments that configure families, kinship, alliances even among bodies that are not (physically) present. Refusing to be disposed, forgotten or inscribed in the black plastic bag disposable narrative, these women's struggle is an affective gathering that not only stands *against* the necropolitical disappearing force but appears as *other-than*; meaning, their labor of care renders them not only as political/emotional resistant subjectivities but as producers of a reimagining and reordering of care, gender, and violence.

"Who is Antígona González and what are we to do with all the other *Antígonas*?: I didn't want to be an Antígona: pero me tocó". Sara Uribe's re-arrangement of Diana Gómez' words, taken from her blog where she narrates the search for her disappeared father in Colombia in 2006, exposes the ethical inquiry of this article as

condensed in the double-bind of the word *tocar* in Spanish: to touch me/us and to befall me/us. What are *we* —untouched, yet touched by violence— being compelled to do among a suffering to which we refuse to listen? How may the experiences of violence and loss that circulate among the mothers and families of the disappeared expand towards the rest of the *indolente* society? As I have shown throughout these pages, making-memory is the passage from the necropolitical violence of disappearance to care: the subjugation of life by the forces of disposability and indifference may be confronted by the force of tending and caring for the web of interrelations that is life, *this* life. Thus, attending to these affective experiences and objects, in their untamable multiplicity, has required a different thinking about the materiality of objects, the modern/colonial gender regime and its relation with cumulative 'painful' feelings. Tracing the social life of these objects has allowed me to pose questions on the cumulative effects of modernity-coloniality's violence, and on the gendered delegitimizing modalities of women's struggle, but more importantly on the ethical demand to think on the collective memory of disappearance as a public matter of care.

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Images

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We publish these articles as the museums consolidate into one nominal entity, het Wereldmuseum: since the articles were written between 2020 and 2023, they do not yet reflect the March 2023 name change.