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The Political Afterlives of Mexico’s Dead and Disappeared

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For Kjell Ohlson

And Mexico’s desaparecidos and their families
Abstract

This PhD thesis is a study of Mexican activism that aims to show how relatives of Mexico’s disappeared—often without earlier experience of human rights advocacy—become activists protesting violence through public displays of grief. Political street protests transform over time to become annual commemorative events at new memorial sites for the disappeared who, as neither truly dead nor alive, are in need of special rites and cannot be incorporated in the Day of the Dead celebration with its satirical political altars. Mexico’s material culture and new activist strategies sustain political afterlives of the nation’s more than 200,000 dead and at least 37,000 disappeared victims of state and criminal violence, which, in turn, cast light on how Mexico’s necropolitics cause new challenges for and responses from its necrosociality.

Key Words: Mexico, Activism, Necropolitics, Disappearances, Political Afterlives
Resumen

Esta tesis de doctorado es un estudio sobre activismo mexicano que tiene como objetivo mostrar cómo las familiares de los desaparecidos de México—sin experiencia previa en defensa de los derechos humanos—se convierten en activistas que protestan contra la violencia del país a través de demostraciones públicas de dolor. Con el tiempo, las protestas se transforman para convertirse en eventos conmemorativos anuales en nuevos sitios conmemorativos para los desaparecidos—quienes no son muertos en los pensamientos de sus familiares—y por eso necesitan ritos especiales porque no deberían ser incluidas en la celebración del Día de Muertos. Nuevas estrategias activistas y una cultura material mantienen las vidas postúmas de victimas de violencia estatal y criminal, quienes son más de 200,000 muertos y al menos 37,000 desaparecidos. Esto muestra, esta tesis afirma, cómo la necropolítica de México causa nuevos problemas para, y respuestas de, su necrosocialidad.

Palabras Clave: México, Activismo, Necropolítica, Desapariciones, Vidas Postúmas Políticas.
Lay Summary

This is a study of Mexican activism that aims to show how relatives of Mexico’s disappeared—often without earlier experience of human rights advocacy—become activists protesting violence. Mexico has more than 200,000 dead and at least 37,000 disappeared victims of state and criminal violence, and this thesis cast light on new activist strategies to bring this to an end. Political street protests transform over time to become annual commemorative events at new memorial sites for the disappeared who, as neither truly dead nor alive, are in need of special rites and cannot be incorporated in the Day of the Dead celebration with its satirical political altars.
# Table of Contents

*Introduction. Political Ethnography as a Form of Engagement* 13

Chapter I. *Who Owns the Dead?* 37

Chapter II. *Pilgrims of Grief* 58

Chapter III. *Su Dolor es Nuestro Dolor* 81

Chapter IV. *Even if it’s the Last Thing I’ll Do* 106

Chapter V. *The Day of the Dead* 129

Chapter VI. *The Necrographies at Estela de Luz* 144

Conclusion. *Mexico’s Rebellious Afterlives* 167

*References* 174
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My father, who passed away right before I went to Mexico, played a key role in my decision to embark on this PhD project to begin with, and the fact that it took place in Mexico, since he, too, once, started a PhD project about Mexico although he never finished it. By his side what we didn’t know back then was my father’s deathbed when he stayed at a hospital in Gothenburg
to rehabilitate, a few months before I was off to Mexico, I often discussed the minor changes of my project and he never lost his interest in my studies over the course of his own illness.

All things considered, a major stumbling block to complete this thesis was hard cash, the Wenner Gren Foundation provided me with enough to complete my fieldwork, and my close friend Patrik Munthe stepped in twice in dire situations so I could pay rent and put food on the table. I still owe him a considerable sum and I hope for both our sake his was a good investment, in any case my gratitude due to his kindness should be recognised here. He also visited me in Mexico and the times we spent there are among the fondest of memories I have from those years, and this I must extend to the time my mother spent with me in Mexico City and Quintana Roo during a short stay.

When I returned from Mexico I didn’t know that I would soon leave Edinburgh again and spend much of the writing-up period in Lisbon and São Paulo, where I have been lucky enough to accompany my partner Bruna Potechi who since we met has been my first reader and finest supporter, but most importantly una ser querida.
Acronyms

CIDH – *La Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos* (The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [IACHR, or CIDH in Spanish]).

CNTE – *La Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación* (The Teachers’ Union in Mexico), particularly strong and active in Oaxaca.

EAAF – *Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense* (the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team). An international team of forensic experts helping with a criminal case of 43 disappeared students from Ayotzinapa, Guerrero.


FEVIMTRA – *Fiscalía Especial para los Delitos de Violencia Contra las Mujeres y Trata de Personas* (The Special Prosecutor’s Office for Violence against Women and Trafficking).

GIEI – *Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes* (the Group of International Interdisciplinary Experts), working for the CIDH – *Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos* (The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights). The GIEI produced an independent report about the case of the 43 missing students from Ayotzinapa.

IOM – The International Organization for Migration.


PGJ – Procuraduría General de Justicia de la CDMX (the Police Department of Mexico City).
PGR – Procuraduría General de la República (The National Attorney General of the Republic’s Office).
SEGOB – La Secretaría de Gobernación (the Interior Ministry).
UNAM – Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (The National Autonomous University of Mexico). A Mexican University located in the south of the capital.
Spanish expressions and political movements

**Compañeros** – (comrades), common way to refer to friends, co-students, co-activists, or colleges.

**Dolor** – (pain), often referring to emotional pain or grief.

**El tren de la muerte** (the train of death, the nickname of the cargo trains that Central American and Mexican migrants climb onto to travel across Mexico towards the border with the United States in the north).

**La Caravana de Madres Centroamericanas** – (The Caravan of Central American Mothers). Mothers of missing migrants from Central American countries who belong to the Mesoamerican Migrant Movement which arranges a transnational activist caravan that travels to Mexico annually to search for missing migrants in the country.

**La Noche de Iguala** – (The night of Iguala), refers to a massacre that took place in Iguala, Guerrero, on the 26th of September 2014, when municipal police attacked students from a nearby college in Ayotzinapa, resulting in six dead and 43 disappeared students.

**La Noche de Tlatelolco** – (The night of Tlatelolco), refers to a massacre that took place on the 2nd of October 1968, at **La Plaza de las Tres Culturas** (the square of the three cultures) in the northern neighbourhood Tlatelolco in Mexico City. This massacre is commemorated with an annual protest march that takes place on the 2nd of October in the capital.

**La Normal Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos de Ayotzinapa** – (The Raúl Isidro Burgos’s Rural Teachers’ College of Ayotzinapa) whose students were attacked by municipal police in **La Noche de Iguala**.

**La Plataforma de Solidaridad con Ayotzinapa** – (The Solidarity Platform for Ayotzinapa). This is an activist platform that emerged during my time in Mexico consisting of several different social movements—the MPJD, human rights groups, unions, student spokespersons, students from The Rural Teacher’s College of Ayotzinapa, and the Fathers and Mothers of Ayotzinapa—to organize nationwide protests for the 43 disappeared students.

**Las Madres de Ciudad Juárez** – (The Mothers from the northern city Ciudad Juárez). Mothers of disappeared daughters involved in the activist organization **Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa** – (May Our Daughters Return Home).

**Los caminos de la vida** – (the life paths), a poetic and common phrase to talk about one’s destiny and life journey.

**Los desaparecidos** – (The disappeared), referring to kidnapped and missing persons.
Los Padres y Madres de Ayotzinapa – (The Fathers and Mothers of Ayotzinapa) parents of 43 disappeared students from Ayotzinapa in Guerrero whose sons were taken away by municipal police in the Iguala massacre. This massacre gave rise to a nationwide protest movement that continues to this day.

Narco plaza – (narco square, narco cartel-claimed smuggling territories or market places).
Normalistas – Students at the Rural Colleges in Mexico known as Normal Rurales.
Migrantes – (migrants).
Ofrendas – food offerings put forth at altars to the dead during the Day of the Dead festivity when the dead are said to come back to eat with the living.
Periodistas de a Pie – (Journalists on Foot), an NGO of journalists who, among other things, assist The Caravan of Central American Mothers when they travel to Mexico.
Introduction
Political Ethnography as a Form of Engagement

A political ritual took place in Mexico City on the 26th of each month for over a year. Commemorating the 43 sons who were disappeared from municipal police in the city of Iguala on September 26, 2014, Los Padres y Madres de Ayotzinapa (The Fathers and Mothers of Ayotzinapa) marched through the streets carrying photos and wearing t-shirts with the faces and names of their missing. They were not alone: many citizens from the community without direct relation to the disappeared took part in these ritualistic protests and marched alongside them with placards or burning candles in hand. Marking the “Iguala massacre” that killed six and disappeared 43 civilians studying to be teachers, the mix of commemorative march and protest demanded justice and truth and called for the disappeared to be returned home. Don Emiliano Navarrete, one of the fathers of the disappeared young men, spoke at el Zócalo capitalino—the main square of Mexico City—where tens of thousands congregated with the families outside of the National Parliament on September 26, 2015, the one-year anniversary of the massacre:

¿Cómo puedo describir ese día el 26 de septiembre? Un día que derrumbó nuestras vidas. Se repiten las cosas. El tiempo pasa rápido. Desde que llegamos aquí, es como si la naturaleza nos dice que las cosas se repiten, porque hace un año, un día como hoy, por la tarde, también estaba lloviendo, cuando se llevaron a nuestros jóvenes. Lo que han pasado con nuestros hijos es indignante, miserable, cobarde ...

How can I describe that day, September 26 (2014)? A day that overturned the course of our lives. Time goes fast. Since we got here it is like nature is trying to tell us that things repeat themselves, because a year ago, on a day like this, in the afternoon, it was raining too, when they took our sons. What they did to our children is outrageous, miserable, cowardly… (public speech, don Emiliano Navarrete, el Zócalo, Mexico City, September 26, 2015).

In a cruel repetition of history, the 43 young men were disappeared during their preparations to go to Mexico City to participate in another annual protest ritual, the commemorative march for the massacre at Tlatelolco that saw hundreds of civilians and students killed in 1968 (Aguayo 2015; del Castillo Troncoso 2013; Taibo Ignacio II 2018). To this day, new generations of students continue to partake in the annual commemorative protest on the 2nd of October, parading from La Plaza de las Tres Culturas to the Zócalo in the heart of the city’s historic
centre. The crowds cry “never forget the 2\textsuperscript{nd} of October” on their way to the Zócalo, and now also add “never forget the 26\textsuperscript{th} of September.”

Another political collective known as \textit{La Organización Familia Pasta de Conchos} (the Organization for the Pasta de Conchos Families, OFPC), congregate annually outside of the gates of Mexico’s largest mining company, Grupo México, on the 19\textsuperscript{th} of February. Here, they demand that the 63 dead mineworkers whose bodies never were excavated after a mining accident in 2006 be taken out of the earth and given back to their families so they can finally bury them. Here, they shout “\textit{Rescaten Ya!”} (rescue them) and perform religious commemorative ceremonies to honour their dead. Some of the Fathers of Ayotzinapa participated in the remembrance ceremony for the unburied mineworkers of the Pasta de Conchos Families in February 2015, praying and protesting together at the sidewalk outside of the company’s headquarters. In solidarity with their cause, Don Bernabé Abraján, among the fathers of the 43 disappeared students from Ayotzinapa, told the families of the dead miners that: “\textit{Pues, ustedes tienen el derecho a los restos de sus familiares, de tenerlos afuera, ya pues, que les rescaten de ahí, para que puedan darles una buena sepultura. Tenerlos, pues, darles flores…}” (You have a right to have their remains taken out, have them saved from there, so you can give them a good grave. Have them, give them flowers) (public speech, don Bernabé Abraján, Polanco, Mexico City, February 19, 2015). This occasion illustrates the solidarity between families of different tragedies and atrocities in contemporary Mexico.

Another organization, \textit{el Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad} (the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity, MPJD), consists of relatives of victims of violence in the Mexican government’s war on drugs launched in 2006. The MPJD arranges caravans and performs religious ceremonies in the inner-cities of Mexican towns, especially in the capital, meant to support families that have lost loved ones to violence. The MPJD seek an end to Mexico’s many killings and disappearances and pressure the state to deliver on justice and security without engaging in wars that claim further victims. They have created an informal memorial site at Estela de Luz outside of the Chapultepec Park in Mexico City where they have carved metal plates into the streets that tell biographic stories of their disappeared family members. They come here occasionally to arrange remembrance ceremonies, grieve, and project their frustration with the government they critique for turning a blind eye to the crisis of violence and impunity in Mexico. Relatives cannot find peace or continue with their daily lives after violent deaths or disappearances—they need justice to be served first. Doña María, a mother of four disappeared sons and a member of the MPJD who I came to befriend, once described the close families’ desperation by saying: “\textit{El corazón quiere arrojarse de un}
“acantilado desolado, hacia un arbusto de espinas” (The heart wants to throw itself off a desolate cliff, down into a bush of thorns). Fortunately, doña María and the other families of the Movement for Peace do not jump off desolate cliffs, rather they grieve in public to get recognition and continue their protests to get justice for the victims, year after year.

Every winter between November and December, Mexico is also visited by a transnational activist caravan, La Caravana de Madres Centroamericanas (the Caravan of Central American Mothers) who travel across the country to search for their missing. Doña Martha, from Guatemala, explained why she travelled to Mexico in the caravan: “Yo vengo a exigir justicia porque mi hermano murió en la massacre de Cedereyta donde murieron muchos centroamericanos. Todavía él está en esa fosa. Los dejaron allí, y no tenemos ningun resultado, ninguna información” (I have come to demand justice because my brother died in the massacre at Cedereyta where a lot of Central Americans died. He is still in this mass grave. They have just left him there and we have not had any results. No information) (testimony at activist meeting, doña Martha, UNAM, Mexico City, December 8, 2015).

Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa (May Our Daughters Return Home), another group of mothers of disappeared girls from Ciudad Juárez in the north of Mexico, mark public space where crimes have been committed with pink crosses and, occasionally, performs hunger strikes or other protests in the capital. Doña Norma, the mother of a missing girl, explained their situation when I interviewed her during a protest in Mexico City: “Tenemos esta protesta, es por, a ver, queremos una solución a las desapariciones de nuestras niñas. Ha pasado un año sin que sepamos ¿dónde está ella? Queremos respuestas” (We have this protest to put an end to our girls’ disappearances. A year has passed without us knowing anything about where she is. We want answers) (interview, doña Norma, the Chapultepec Park, Mexico City, September 23, 2014).

All the political collectives mentioned above consist of families of victims that tend to congregate outside of the gates of municipal, state and federal authorities to demand justice and hold the Mexican state accountable for the impunity and violence their families have suffered. Here they demand justice for their dead and call for their disappeared or unburied dead to be handed back to them. This PhD thesis is about them: their struggle, their protests, their sorrow and desperate hope. Together these groups insist, through protests and commemorative ceremonies performed in the capital of Mexico, to make their presence known and visible in the public sphere. Their gritos de indignación (cries of indignation) are shaping contemporary Mexico and most likely its foreseeable future, just as El Grito de Dolores—the uprising that sparked the Mexican War of Independence in 1810; the peasant revolts that led to the Mexican
Revolution (1910-20); and the armed indigenous uprising of the Zapatist Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in Chiapas (1994) have done in the past. Together, Mexico’s contemporary local protests carried out by small collectives made up of relatives of victims, make up a massive nationwide wave of indignation that leaves no Mexican state or city untouched. And during my time in Mexico, they would be brought together and unite in a new national movement: the solidarity for Ayotzinapa.

The importance of this research is intertwined with the challenges Mexico faces today and for the foreseeable future in addressing these urgent issues which the above-mentioned social movements are bringing forth. Civil society groups and surviving relatives’ gathering of testimonies have played a crucial role in the aftermaths of violent epochs across Latin America in recent decades by providing witness accounts and data for truth and reconciliation commissions and by breaking the often silencing nature of terror (CEP 1999 Informe Guatemala, memoria del silencio; CONADEP 1986 Informe Nunca Más; Rothenberg 2012). While the truth and scope of the tragedies were often kept hidden in countries like Argentina during the military junta, Guatemala during the civil war and in Chile in the time of Pinochet, Mexico’s contemporary violence is, in contrast, receiving a considerable amount of coverage in popular culture in real time, e.g. from Netflix series to Vice documentaries, which often give the perspectives of narco cartel leaders or police officers. Quantitative research methodologies can bring forth the scale of the problem but there exists a pressing need to anchor both policy making and our understanding of these vast social challenges in the perspectives of those directly concerned. A participatory fieldwork study with relatives of victims of violence and Mexican activists on the ground can help making sure that their perspectives are not allowed to be missing from these debates.

In this PhD thesis, I shall accompany such groups of families of victims of violence who are involved in attempts to spark a nationwide transformation by engaging in activism in Mexico. Researching such an ongoing, multifaceted wave of protests at times demanded a multi-sited fieldwork methodology which accompanied several social movements at the same time (Marcus 1995), a method that seeks to better capture and depict this new and pluralistic face of Mexico’s contemporary protests. In other words, since the indignation out on the streets of Mexico’s capital has many faces, so will this thesis.

There are also several important theoretical concerns that motivate this study. I will explore Mexico’s “necropolitics”—an umbrella term for state and non-state agents’ management of dead bodies and capacity to dictate over life and death, forensic controversies and investigative-technologies (Mbembe 2008; Ferrándiz & Robben 2016)—by distinguishing between state
necrogovernance, and corporate and subversive necropower to cast light on how different stakeholders such as state institutions, mining companies, and social movements compete for the control over the narratives surrounding, and the fates of, Mexico’s many victims.

Necropolitics, in my definition and use, is thus a contested field where state institutions’ management of the dead (necrogovernance), and corporate power over workers’ life and death (corporate necropower), and social movements or relatives’ counterstrategies to reclaim their lost loved ones (subversive necropower) entangle. This dynamic is the topic of Chapter I where we shall see how the OFPC and the Families of Ayotzinapa seek to bring an end to how the state and the mining company Grupo México, respectively, used the criminal technique of disappearing bodies as means of social control (Berlanga 2015; Concha 2015; Noble 2015; Marcial 2015; Reveles 2015; Robben 2007, 2000a; Robledo 2018; Rojas-Perez 2017; Suárez-Orozco 1987; Sanjurjo 2017).

It is clear that the state needs to be understood as a “multilayered, contradictory, translocal ensemble of institutions, practices, and people in a globalized context” (Gupta & Sharma 2009: 6), in other words, a contested entity which practices may be swayed that way or the other which is exactly what the activists this thesis accompanies seek to do when they try to push it their way by using human rights oriented language or street protests at the gates of authorities. Sometimes they meet closed doors and resistance from transnational companies and sometimes they are helped by international forensic experts, human rights commissions or international laws (GIEI Informe Ayotzinapa 2015). Most often they draw on regional activist repertoires established by other social movements who came before them (Auyero 2006; Rivera Hernández 2017; Robben 2007; Tilly 1995, 2006).

I will also reference “necrosociality”, the ways in which people engage with, use or evoke the dead, such as the offerings and political alters used in Mexico’s famous annual festivity the Day of the Dead (García-Godoy 1998). Activists use a wide protest repertoire to respond to the state’s necrogovernance and criminal groups or the mining industry’s necropower and sustain what I call “political afterlives” for Mexico’s contemporary victims of violence.

But what is a political afterlife? Coupled with other activist strategies that recall memories and continue the pursuit of truth and justice, I use this concept as a tool to explore and shed light on the material culture of the dead and disappeared. I dissect multiple instances of this concept across this thesis—for example, in Chapter III’s discussion of staging public acts of mourning (Rivera Hernández 2017), in Chapter V’s analysis of the making of political street altars during the Day of the Dead (Garcia-Godoy 1998), and in Chapter VI’s report on the creation of other memory objects at new memorial sites.
This, then, is not a thesis for the faint of heart. It tells about horrible crimes, some of which have never been resolved, and the lingering grief and desperation of close family, as the necropolitics around the remains of their lost loved ones unfold. But at the same time, it is also a story of how grief can bring people and a society together when something new is born out of the ashes of the past, out of love and solidarity among and between concerned families and Mexican citizens, and out of unbelievable courage in the face of the worst of nightmares.

I ask the following set of research questions; how do Mexican relatives of victims respond to the nation’s contemporary violence? And more specifically, how do activists and families of victims sustain political afterlives of their dead and disappeared? For what purposes do they do so? How does this relate to other repertoires or collective actions used by similar social movements before across Latin America? And how do these political afterlives contest Mexico’s state necrogovernance and criminal and corporate necropower? How do the political altars and famous satire associated with the Day of the Dead frame society’s experience of these death? Who has the right to evoke contemporary victims in public space and are the disappeared incorporated in this festivity as well? If not, by what means are their political afterlives sustained? What new subversive repertoires of collective action do the social movements studied here make us of or help establish?

Overall, this thesis serves as an ethnographic observation of how political action, such as street protests, can transform and become ritualized performances, such as annual remembrance ceremonies at new memorial sites, over time. This, I shall argue, casts light on how Mexico’s necropolitics create new challenges for and responses from its necrosociality.

The public displays of sorrow that Mexican activists and surviving families often use to protest violence constitute a rather new way of grieving in Mexico. The mourning for the disappeared—who have never been buried—has never been marked by ritual closure, and it results in an abnormal postponement of the completion of their grief. I observe that the disappeared, who are not truly dead, are in need of special rites that guard their status as different from those who are confirmed to be dead in ways that stay true to their surviving family’s hope of having them back alive. Their stubborn protests that call for them to come home, in turn, is what, as I see it, continue the political afterlives of Mexico’s disappeared and seek to promote these victims as objects of collective grief and activism. The collective protests show the ungovernability of the afterlives of Mexico’s victims while also fighting state necrogovernance and criminal necropower.

This thesis will show the political realities that Mexican activists face daily. The families I write about, often poor working class or indigenous peasants with no earlier experience as
activists or in human rights advocacy, live with the consequences of destructive exercises of power as they struggle against criminal and state violence. This thesis will therefore emphasize nonviolent cultures in violent times and directly confront what is at stake for many people in the societies we build. Writing ethnography about these families’ political engagement, by using participant-observation, turned me into an activist ethnographer (Alexandrakis 2016; Angel-Ajani & Stanford 2006; Nash 2007). This in turn, raises tough questions about ethics and methods, questions that I struggled with throughout the course of writing this thesis, and whose complexity I by no means have come to terms with yet.

Mexico has witnessed an intense period of narco-related violence over the last decade with the death toll skyrocketing when the government launched the war on drug cartels in 2006. This war together with criminal groups fighting for dominance and control over cocaine and opium smuggling routes has resulted in a staggering toll of 37,435 disappeared and more than 200,000 dead (RNPED 2018; INEGI 2017; Instituto Belisario Domínguez 2018: 1). Mexico’s state institutions have tended to ignore the crisis of disappearances and violent deaths. Indeed, the police and the armed forces have been blamed for their involvement in the narco business, as well as for grave human rights violations, such as the involvement of the municipal police in the disappearance of the 43 students from Ayotzinapa in Iguala in 2014 (Carlsen 2012; Concha 2015; GIEI Informe Ayotzinapa 2015; Marcial 2015; Pereyra 2012; HRW Report 2013).

The term “disappeared”, or desaparecido in Spanish—frequently used in these pages—refers to those who have gone missing in Mexico due to cartel and state violence and is commonly used in Mexico to refer to those victims of the drug war. It is also used for those who have vanished in the political state-sponsored violence in other Latin American countries in the past, such as Argentina and Chile during their military dictatorships in the ’70s and ’80s (Robben 2007).

Most of the families and activists referenced in this thesis have been affected by either the Mexican government’s war on drugs or the country’s wider narco-related violence and have seen their loved ones killed or disappeared by corrupt state agents or criminal gangs that haunt the nation today. In some cases, as with the Tlatlaya massacre of 22 people in July 2014 and the Iguala massacre with its 6 dead and 43 disappeared in September of the same year, the army and police were directly involved and later tried to conceal what had happened (Berlanga 2015; Méndez Franco 2015; Modonesi & González 2015; Sierra 2015; Velasco 2015). State institutions such as the National Attorney General of the Republic’s Office (PGR in Spanish) sought to cover up the truth of how the 43 disappeared students from Ayotzinapa had died by staging a fake crime scene, but the Ayotzinapa Families—together with international experts in
the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF in Spanish) and the Group of International Interdisciplinary Experts (GIEI in Spanish), who worked on behalf of the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights—revealed the PGR’s cover up attempt (GIEI Informe Ayotzinapa 2015). The Families of Ayotzinapa, together with many of the other political collectives in Mexico that this thesis discusses, protested this under the banner “Ayotzinapa is just the tip of the iceberg” and congregated outside of the gates of the National Parliament on the Zócalo capitalino. They still do so, and most likely will continue to do so, on the 26th of September, for years to come.

**Political Ethnography as a Form of Engagement**

I studied several different collectives of families of victims for the simple reason that they themselves are often supporting one another and participating in each other’s events. Following one meant you got involved with the other. Two important persons to me during my first weeks in Mexico was a priest called Gustavo, who wasn’t a relative of a victim of violence himself but nevertheless was involved in the MPJD and Iglesias por la Paz (Churches for Peace) that organized various events for victims, and doña Yolanda, a relative of a victim and member of the Movement for Peace. They presented me to many people inside this network and Pasta de Conchos. Doña Yolanda and padre Gustavo were middle-class intellectuals living in central parts of Mexico City, and they often went to political events in Coyoacán, Centro Historico, or Tlalpan. My friendship with these two lasted throughout my time in Mexico. Doña María Herrera, a mother of four disappeared sons, was one of the most vocal members of the MPJD, and she often spoke at their public events. Her short biography will be told in Chapter II. Doña María comes from a working-class background and lives in Pajacarán, a small community in the state of Michoacán, where her family made a living by trading metals, a common occupation in Pajacarán, but María was a seamstress. This was before she became a traveling activist and, in her own words, a “pilgrim of grief” for her disappeared sons.

I met with the three of them, Gustavo, Yolanda and Maria, during protests and at the weekly meetings at the House of Solidarity in the neighbourhood Benito Juárez in Mexico City. These meetings would later transform into la Plataforma de Solidaridad con Ayotzinapa (the Solidarity Platform for Ayotzinapa). This platform would involve several other social movements, human rights groups, unions, and student spokespersons—which I will discuss more below—all involved in organizing the nationwide protests for the 43 disappeared students from Ayotzinapa. Doña Yola, who I often also met with outside of the meetings in the House of Solidarity or at the public events they organized, came to arrange several interviews for me.
during my first months in Mexico City. She constantly fed me with information about events, contacts, and newspaper articles she thought would be of interest to me and would help me orientate myself in the networks of activists where I conducted my fieldwork.

Los Padres y Madres de Ayotzinapa are the 43 families of the disappeared students who were attacked in Iguala in September 2014. Most of them are farmers and work in the fields of Guerrero or Estado de México. I befriended some of them and constantly met them in meetings, at protests, in street marches, before and after their public events, and mainly, but not only, in Mexico City where they came and held weekly protests during my time there. Don Bernabé Abrajan, don Emiliano Navarrete, don Celemente Rodriguez, don Epifano Álvarez, and don Felipe de la Cruz were the ones that I met with and came to listen to most often. They are the main protagonists in the first chapter of this thesis that tells about their struggles in the wake of the disappearance of their sons, a tragic massacre often referred to as La Noche de Iguala (the night of Iguala). I also met Omar García, who had been studying to become a teacher at la Normal Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos de Ayotzinapa when he survived the police attack that killed 6 and disappeared 43 of his fellow students on that sad night. As a survivor of that atrocity, he became a spokesperson in the midst of camera flashes and a national spotlight in the months that followed. He was the first one I met as, just a few days after the Iguala massacre had occurred, he came to give his testimony at the House of Solidarity in Mexico City. Here, Doña Yola, padre Gustavo and doña María sat next to me, and we listened to his story and watched as the nationwide indignation movement for the Ayotzinapa students started to take shape.

Those meetings, as I said above, would turn into the Solidarity Platform for Ayotzinapa. Here, Gustavo and Yola, among others from the MPJD, sat next to the rights organization SERAPAZ, the Electricians Union, Omar García, some of the Fathers and Mothers of Ayotzinapa, and student representatives from the Inter-University Assemblies that represented thousands of students in the capital that took part in the protests in Mexico City. I was fortunate to access and be able to participate in these meetings where the nationwide protests were planned, search efforts coordinated, and activist tactics discussed.

I lived in Mexico City throughout my sixteen months in Mexico, first in the city centre in La Roma, and later in the southern “barrio popular” Pedregal Santo Domingo, in the south of the city. Mexico City tends to be the main national scene for protests but being based here also limited me in terms of accompanying the everyday lives of the Families of Ayotzinapa. These families didn’t live in the capital, but rather had set up a temporary camp in the rural college of their missing students in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero. The families of the disappeared students were constantly on the move, travelling around the country. I followed them as much as I could, and
in Mexico City I had access to the platform that took part in orchestrating the nationwide movement the families led. Without a doubt, this unforeseen turn of events, *la Noche de Iguala*, played a part in shaping this research project and its ethnography.

The neighbourhood of Santo Domingo has a certain history of community mobilization too, as its many brick-buildings were once set up as an informal neighbourhood whose residents had to fight for their rights to their homes and were supported in doing so by the students in the nearby *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM). Those ties remain to this day as Los Pedregales de Coyoacán continue to oppose the large-scale urban plans of “*La Ciudad del Futuro*” (the future city), by hosting events together with student activists at UNAM.

The Families of Ayotzinapa also came to Santo Domingo to sell Marigolds, which are widely used in and sold before the annual Day of the Dead celebration, to make a living. In October before the holiday in both 2014 and 2015, they set up a flower stand next to the small taco stands and street vendors at the Ahuanusco street and participated in the Sunday sermon at the local church where the collection went to their cause.

I lived at the nearby Jicote street with my girlfriend at the time and other students from the UNAM. Some of them, especially my flatmate Chavela, were very involved in the student protests for Ayotzinapa’s missing 43 *normalistas* that went on in the city during this time and also often participated in the University Assemblies held at the same University. Chavela was part of the Student Assembly at the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature, where she studied, and brought me to the assembly meetings there. These meetings organized events and made decisions about blockades, and protest actions. The spokespersons of the student assemblies formed part of the Solidarity Platform for Ayotzinapa. I came in contact with the Caravan of Central American Mothers thanks to Chavela who was involved in campaigning for migrants’ rights and knew all about the Caravan of the Mothers. She brought me to one the events that the mothers took part in at the UNAM. Thus, the place where I lived and the friends I had there came to interweave with the networks I studied and vice versa.

The movement led by the Families of Ayotzinapa would bring many different political groups into the fight against the injustice of Ayotzinapa. This cooperation is also highlighted by the “solidarity caravans” of *chilango* (residents in Mexico City) activists who travel to indigenous communities involved protests and seeking outside support. I found myself going on one of these solidarity caravans to *la Policía Ciudadana y Popular de Guerrero* (PCP, The Citizens’ Popular Police of Guerrero), a self-armed resistance group in the indigenous communities in the highlands of Guerrero. After the Iguala massacre, they provided protection for the camp of the surviving students and families of the disappeared 43, set up at the Rural
College of Ayotzinapa. The PCP also organized an annual commemorative protest for their own villages’ disappeared and killed that ended with a ceremony at the Zócalo in the city of Tlapa, a ceremony which I took part in.

Many of the interviews and conversations I had with families and activists took place in these activist settings, whether in the Solidarity Platform for Ayotzinapa, or the student assemblies of UNAM, and they often transpired in the midst of the movement and chaos of street protests, hunger strikes, and commemorative ceremonies in city centres. They occurred in Mexico City around el Paseo de la Reforma, el Zócalo, el Ángel de la Independencia, or Estela de Luz outside of the Chapultepec Park, in el Monumento de la Revolución, Plaza de las Tres Culturas, or Hemiciclo a Juárez in the Alameda Park. Families of victims come to these places to protest or grieve in dramatic gestures, and here, media outlets and ordinary citizens can take notice of them.

I tended to be welcomed with open arms in these forums, not only because of the warmth of the heart that I indeed found there, but surely because I, as an international researcher engaged in the protests as well, was seen as a useful tool to give publicity, spread their agenda and support the interests of the involved activists and networks I studied. I must say that I didn’t find this to compromise my work or cause a conflict of interest between my lines of investigation and the agenda of those I studied—perhaps because I full-heartedly came to support their cause and was so involved in the protests myself that I couldn’t then, nor now, distinguish my role as anthropologist from that of an activist. I was simultaneously an “engaged scholar” or compañero (comrade) and an ethnographer (Alexandrakis 2016; Angel-Ajani & Stanford 2006; Nash 2007).

I found that being involved in activism and protests side by side with the families I wrote about and “extracting data” from such field-settings allowed me to challenge ethnographic theory and political theory. The anthropological research method of participant-observation fieldwork—with the anthropologist immersed in ongoing activities—positions us to develop both theoretical and practical understandings of political realities and possibilities in a time when human fate is increasingly tied to how these two interacts. Additionally, far from merely reflecting the political convictions of the researcher, the participation-based method offers a way to explore what concerned communities themselves find to be the most urgent challenges they face and articulate how it should be dealt with in a community-driven rather than intellectual elite-based knowledge-production of political theory.

Writing about political movements that mobilize against violence in Mexico today may be perceived as a form of intervention itself. This is shown in the fact that Mexico has become a
dangerous country for journalists who write about such topics. According to the rights group Articulo 19, 109 journalists have been killed in the country since 2000 (Articulo 19, 2017-09-22). To write about the struggle against violence and impunity in Mexico, to be involved in the mere act of raising knowledge about the phenomenon, entangles you in the ongoing power dynamics of Mexican society. This raises tough questions about risks and ethics for the anthropologist who participates in protests shoulder to shoulder with activists, who may be willing to put their own lives at risk to learn the fates of their lost loved ones. I took part in most protests, but I stopped short of engaging in hunger strikes. I have opted for using real names in most cases through this thesis rather than pseudonyms, since publicity, as the Fathers and Mothers of Ayotzinapa are well aware, can be one’s best protection.

My fieldwork experience of gradually becoming an activist ethnographer is not, however, a declaration of what I believe the discipline ought to be, as others have argued before (Scheper-Hughes 1995), as much as it felt like a natural outcome of the contexts and settings I found myself in, and perhaps the background or convictions I had in the first place that inspired me to put myself in those settings. In this case, for me, it felt natural to hold the pen and the field diary in one hand and a protest placard in the other. This does not mean that I simply recite the rhetoric of the Mexican activists I came to befriend, although I seek to anchor my analysis in their concepts and worldviews, and indeed shall recite them quite a lot, but I shall also reflect on their tendency to make use of public testimonies, to use their grief as a form of activism, among other topics. My overall goal in this thesis is to think about the complex impact and legacy of a violent past on—and in the ways in which—Mexican families and Mexican society live with it. The way they, to quote doña María: “Pasemos del horror y la indignación a la digna acción” (turn the horror and indignation to dignified action) (public speech, doña María Herrera, La Paseo de la Reforma, Mexico City, October 15, 2014).

Most of the surviving relatives of los desaparecidos (the disappeared) who form part of the aforementioned movements that I accompanied for sixteen months, did not tend to stumble for words. The Families of Ayotzinapa, just like many of the relatives within the Movement for Peace, as well as the other political collectives of grievers mentioned earlier, tended to raise their voices with all their strength in public outcries against the violence their families had suffered. The Families of Ayotzinapa would often repeat phrases like “we raise our voices”, “we are not afraid”, and “we show the government the cry of indignation”.

Doña Adriana, an indigenous woman among the Mothers of Ayotzinapa, couldn’t even speak Spanish a year earlier when her son was abducted by municipal police and she, along with the other mothers and fathers, became enrolled in the nation’s media spotlight. She learned
Spanish over the course of the year, so she could talk to reporters, researchers like me, and address fellow Mexicans; she and the others all felt a responsibility to “raise their voices”. Their political rhetoric would become a well-rehearsed performance during the many months, and now years, they have acted as national spokespersons for victims of violence. They often repeated similar, powerful phrases borrowed from one another. At the same time, they were, as don Bernabé Abrajan once said, “corn farmers” from one of Mexico’s poorest regions who had ended up in the middle of a political storm where a media spectacle followed their personal grief and trauma.

Many families who see a family member shot dead or disappeared never take to the streets or join groups of organized mourners who fight legal and political battles for proper police investigations, truth and justice. They are much harder to access for a foreign researcher like myself with limited time in Mexico, and the ethical terrain of including them is vaguer than with those who seek the spotlight in public events and protests and who want their words to be heard. Many relatives also receive threats, and thus remain silent and stay in their houses. From time to time, activists are killed for protesting. For example, Nepomuceno Moreno of the MPJD was murdered for his persistent demand for truth about what had happened to his disappeared son and his stubborn call to the prosecutor’s office in Sonora for a proper investigation.

Relatives themselves are aware of the dangers. Doña Carmen Mendoza, mother of the disappeared boy Jorge Anibal from Ayotzinapa, once addressed this topic in the following way to a small crowd at the UNAM in Mexico City, on August 31, 2015:

Estas cosas están pasando a través de que hay personas de que ya les desaparecieron un familiar y se quedan callado, porque ya los amenazaron, porque tienen miedo, porque ya van a matar igual otro familiar. Pero entonces pueden continuar desapareciendo y esa familia también se queda callado.

These things are allowed to happen because families who have a disappeared remain silent, because they are threatened. Because they are afraid. Because they think that they can kill another member of their family otherwise. But then they can continue to disappear and that family is also silent (public speech, doña Carmen Mendoza, UNAM, August 31, 2015).

For the relatives of Mexico’s disappeared who take to the streets like doña Carmen, the political tends to be intensely personalized. They respond to and fight violence by raising their voices in public displays of grief and providing testimonies of their personal trauma, using these performances as an activist strategy. When I recite them here and lend my ethnography to their voices and by depicting their struggles, my thesis indeed becomes an instrument for
their cause—but then again, I always wanted it to be. I have strived for this thesis to mirror their efforts and indignation. This strategy risks showcasing personal trauma rather than theorizing the political, but I believe that the analytical perspective that runs through the following chapters with their focus on activist strategies to counter state necropolitics, corporate and criminal necropower, and sustained political afterlives of Mexico’s many victims of violence, do so, through, what I hope to be, a unique theoretical framework.

Going back to the use of testimonies as a form of activism, I conducted many interviews with close relatives and listened to hundreds of speeches at the events, ceremonies and protests staged in public places; took notes and recorded during discussions or talks at meetings in the Solidarity Platform for Ayotzinapa. In some cases, obtaining consent from those who were recorded speaking in front of large crowds was practically impossible, like when the Families of Ayotzinapa talked up on stage through a microphone at the Zócalo in front of tens of thousands, but those speeches were made for the public and medias use anyway.

Both interviews and speeches at public events are artificial environments staged for certain purposes, though this is not to say that the sentiments expressed are not genuinely felt. Things said in everyday life can be just as manipulative and may be told for certain gains or other unspoken reasons. But the performative nature of the spoken word, in any setting or context, is often best combined with detailed reflexive observations from one’s own participation in the same activities. By participating ourselves, we, as scholars can acquire a better grasp of the complex dynamics at play in any given field setting: “[Through] participant-observation methods, we are confronted ethically with the problems of the stakes in our writing” (Bourgois in Angel-Ajani & Stanford 2006: x). The activist ethnographer may, furthermore, gain valuable understanding of the conditions of those who our research concerns by virtue of our participation: “In the process of assessing the personal risk involved in participatory action, the ethnographer is sensitized to a greater awareness of the implications of those who make up the social movement” (Nash 2007: 30).

The participant observation fieldwork method offers unique ways to “engage with political stakes that matter to the people” we study (Bourgois in Angel-Ajani & Stanford 2006: x). For this project this means to show the political realities Mexican activists face today. By accompanying Mexican families’ stubborn struggles for their disappeared over time, I also came to observe a larger pattern. Time seemed to repeat itself, political protests became ritualized and happened again and again, and commemorative ceremonies continued to evolve at new memorial sites. This emergence of new annual protests appeared to be at play over long stretches of time, far beyond my short period in Mexico.
I have built this temporal process into this thesis structure itself. By this, I hope to shed light on the sociopolitical processes that make up Mexican society’s legacy and contribute to the ethnography of political engagement. Simultaneously, this political ethnography aspires to form part of that same engagement.

**An Anthropology of Activism**

My research on activism among families of Mexico’s disappeared touches on several academic debates spanning the classic anthropology of death (Bloch & Parry 1982; Hertz 1960; Robben 2004), violence and memory (Argenti & Schramm; Bravo 2012; Das 1996; Green 1999; Robben & Suárez-Orozco 2000; Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004; Zur 1998), and necropolitics and disappearances (Aikin & Muñoz Anaya 2013; Ferrándiz & Robben 2016; Morbiato 2017; Robben 2007, 2000a, 2000b; Sanjurjo 2013; Sosa 2014.), as well as the study of activism and engaged anthropology (Alexandrakis 2016; Angel-Ajani & Stanford 2006; Hale 2008, 2006; Ngwane, Ness & Sinwell 2017), to mention only a few. I draw from both research and truth commissions on earlier atrocities in the region (CEP 1999 Informe Guatemala, memoria del silencio; CONADEP 1986, Informe Nunca Más; Robben 2007; Rothenberg 2012; Sanjurjo 2017; Schneider 2019; Suárez-Orozco 1987; Taussig 1992). The research of Mexican scholars writing on the indignation of Ayotzinapa is particularly relevant to my own work as we write about the same topic (Aguayo 2015; Berlanga 2015; Concha 2015; Modonesi & González 2015; Sierra 2015; Velasco 2015). The same can be said of scholars working on community mobilization or aftermaths of violence in Mexico or the wider region in general (Azaloa 2012; Gledhill 1998; Green 1999; Nash 2001, 1997, 1995; Reguillo 2012; Rivera Hernández 2017; Robben 2007; Robledo 2018; Smith & Offit 2010; Varela Huerta 2016a, 2016b; Warren 1998; Wilson 1998; Zur 1998).

But the analytical tools I shall use to approach this subject when I analyse what goes on in my field context perhaps build more directly on recent years debates on necropolitics (Ferrándiz & Robben 2016), work on death in Mexican culture (Brandes 2006; Garciagodoy 1998; Lomnitz 2005; Norget 2006; Nutiti 1988) and the idea of exploring the political lives of the dead in material culture (Verdery 1999). Mexico today witnesses the creation of a new material culture devoted to the nation’s disappeared at new memorial sites with clear similarities, in my mind, to Mexico’s long-standing tradition of making political altars to the dead in the famous religious festivity the Day of the Dead. This rich material culture and its necrosociality offers ways to approach what I refer to as “the political afterlives of victims”. Relatives of the
disappeared draw on Mexico’s rich ritual tradition to commemorate the dead, while simultaneously reinventing it.

The growing momentum of methodological approaches associated with engaged anthropology appears to be linked with the emergence of ethnographies on new social and political movements, which, in turn, have made their presence increasingly known on a global scale (Alexandrakis 2016; Courpasson & Vallas 2016; Graeber 2009; Nash 2007, 2001, 1997; Ngwane, Ness & Sinwell 2017; Stephen 2002). However, new social movements in Latin America are often responses to violence (Rivera Hernández 2017; Robben 2007; Robledo 2018; Sanjurjo 2013; Varela Huerta 2016a, 2016b; Staudt 2008), and they have emerged from completely different sociopolitical, economic, and cultural contexts than those which came to be in Europe and the United States in the wake of the last financial crisis (Alexandrakis 2016; Graeber 2009). What scholars who research new social movements and community mobilizations against violence in Latin America or elsewhere tend to have in common, however, is their frameworks’ overdependency on wider socioeconomic arrangements. That is, the power of global economic forces in a familiar narrative of the governance of neoliberal regimes and the state.

Observers of violence, narco trade, and community responses towards neoliberal governance in the region, in general, and Mexican scholars writing about the indignation of Ayotzinapa and the Iguala massacre, in particular, have also focused on the wider economic and political arrangements in attempts to explain violence (Azaloa 2012a; Blackwell 2012; Calverio 2005; Concha 2015; Gledhill 1998; Nash 2007, 1995; Marcial 2015; Modonesi & González 2015; Ngwane, Ness & Sinwell 2017; Noble 2015; Pereyra 2012; Pitarch, Speed & Leyva-Solano 2008; Velasco 2015; Walter & Smith 2009). This literature thus associates violence with neoliberal governance and tends to see it as a form of state terror in an authoritarian restructuring of society and the economy (Aviña 2014; Berlanga 2015; Modonesi & González; Noble 2015; Robben 2016; Suárez-Orozco 1987). Several scholars such as John Gledhill (2017) and June Nash (2007) have made convincing arguments about the relationship between the neoliberalization of the Mexican economy and the rise of violence over the past decades (Aviña 2014, Azaloa 2012a; Guerra Manzo 2015; Marcial 2015; Morton 2000) while others have focused on the connection of current drug warfare and accumulation (Gibler 2014; Zagato 2018).

Building on these, I shall approach Mexico’s ongoing indignation by depicting Mexico’s protests from within and interpreting incentives and political actions as subversive repertoires that draw their moral authority from a kinship and human rights based necropower that reclaim
victims for their families in ways that fight state necrogovernance, and criminal or corporate necropower. Some of the key works on surviving relatives of Latin America’s disappeared have otherwise addressed kinship relations, liminality and crisis of identity after a disappearance in the family (Gandsman 2009; Sosa 2014). Instead of treating kinship bonds with a disappeared only from the horizon of prolonged trauma and identity crisis which undeniable are part of the lived aftermaths for relatives (Gandsman 2009), I focus on how concerned families use such bonds and turn it into a moral force in the way they instrumentalize what I referred to as a subversive necropower.

Conducting political ethnography about contemporary political movements among activists in Mexico also made me gradually divert from the ways in which anthropologists have written about the aftermaths of violence and disappearances, with the common tendency being to do so through traditional narratives of psychological or embodied trauma (Green 1999; Robben 2007; Robben & Suárez-Orozco 2000; Zur 1998). The anthropology of violence has been critiqued for making a “suffering subject” its main research object (Robins 2013). Physical violence and wider socioeconomic and political injustices are understood to manifest themselves in victims’ bodies and psyches (Bourgois 1996; Bourgois & Scheper-Huges 2004; Gaspar de Alba 2010; Green 1999; Robben 2007; Robben & Súarez-Orozco 2000; Scheper-Huges 1992; Zur 1998). I will instead seek to explore the productive political potential in the transformation of relatives of victims when turning into activists and using their grief to force the state to comply with their will.

The political groups I research all deploy a “touring model” that “creates processes of political empowerment for poor, indigenous peasant[s] … who have no previous experience as activists” by their persistent use of “a politics of visibility based on public acts of grieving” (Rivera Hernández 2017: 108). Mexican scholars and those working with the same political movements that I study have thus also turned their focus to how political subjectivity comes to be present in the process of empowerment, especially through the practice of sharing testimonies and using public space to create a state of “shared political feeling” (Noble 2015: 422; Revelo Blancas 2010; Rivera Hernández 2017; Robledo 2018). I shall embed this process of empowerment in my discussion of historic setting and cultural contexts, both of which are crucial to their becoming political subjects. Additionally, I will draw upon and contextualize what I will refer to as “Mexico’s strong ethics of commemoration and tradition to honour the dead” (Brandes 2006; Garciagodoy 1998).

Mexico’s poor campesino schools, Normal Rurales—where Omar García and other young men train to become rural teachers, and the same school that the 43 disappeared students
belonged to—also have a long tradition of local resistance and popular struggle. *La Normal Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos de Ayotzinapa* teaches in a socialist tradition based on Mexico’s now century old peasant struggles for redistributing farmland with roots in the Mexican Revolution (1910-20). After the revolution, the Mexican state redistributed land through what was called the *ejido* system in which rights to farm communal land was handed out to community members and campesinos throughout Mexico although the land itself remained state owned. The *ejido* system and the redistribution policy ended in the early 90s (Markiewicz 1993; Yetman 2000).

However, at the rural schools in the *Normal Rurales* system which has survived until today, students still farm the land collectively to support and provide for themselves at the same time as they study to become teachers. *La Normal de Ayotzinapa* was founded—along with the other *Normal Rurales* Schools across the poor rural states of Mexico—in the early years of the socialist state (1926) under the visionary Public Minister of Education José Vasconcelos, with the explicit aim of teaching poor campesinos to read and write (Modonesi & González 2015).

Likewise, student activism in Mexico City builds on the legacy of the Tlatelolco massacre and the protest movement born in its wake. Most activist groups in Mexico today are also influenced by the legacy of Zapata and the current Zapatistas in Chiapas. But more important to my analysis is what I just referred to as Mexico strong ethics of commemoration and tradition to honour the dead in the religious ritual festivity the Day of the Dead (Brandes 2006; Congdon 2003; García Godoy 1998; Nutiti 1988). “Having an understanding that the dead do not go away forever, that they can return to visit” teaches Mexican children to “respect death and that if they do not do so, it could result in severe danger” (Congdon 2003: 200). Mexico, often exotified for its romantic view of death (Congdon 2003; Paz 1961; Quigley 1998; García Godoy 1998; Strupp 1972; Vargas 1971), in fact sees a clear political conflict over the nation’s ambivalent and contentious treatment of the country’s contemporary victims of violence. This brings forth Mexico’s politically “differentiated attitudes to death” (Lomnitz 2005: 16) and the ways they cause severe friction in the nation.

The failure or unwillingness on behalf of the Mexican state to deliver justice has meant that justice has been “delivered through informal channels” (Lomnitz 2005: 20). Together with “a traditionally high homicide rate”, this has “made it difficult to draw a sharp line between the nation and its enemies… between the dead who must be named and honoured and those who are to remain uncounted for and anonymous, in unmarked graves” (Lomnitz 2005: 20).

Sophocles, the ancient Greek drama writer, depicted such a political conflict over the treatment of the dead, in his play *Antigone*, in which the close family’s will to grieve and bury their victims of war clash with the state’s policy to not grieve those whom its violence has
killed. Though it was forbidden under the law of Thebe, Antigone buried her dead brother Polynices after he fought for the enemy in a civil war. This is one of history’s first depictions of civil disobedience and can, in my mind, be seen as a symbol of the close family’s emotional need, as well as social obligation, to bury their dead (Hertz 1960; Harrison 2003: 142-53; Kwon 2008: 162-63). This interpretation parallels what Hegel once saw at stake in the epic drama and what he called “the law of kinship” (Kwon 2008: 162-63). Antigone’s predicament, whether she should bury her lost brother or not, is comparable to the one Mexican families of victims face today—whether they should raise their voices and take to the streets to demand justice or remain silent inside their houses to be haunted by nightmares. The dilemma is highlighted by people like Nepomuceno Moreno, mentioned before, who was murdered in this quest for his disappeared son after pressuring the prosecutor’s office in Sonora. In cases like his, the loyalty close family feel to their disappeared and the ways in which they seek to honour this motivates their protests. Much like Antigone in Sophocles’s epic drama, Mexico today witnesses a political clash between state policy on the one hand and family obligations to unburied lost loved ones on the other.

Mexico’s strong ritual ethics of commemoration in the Day of the Dead offers or obliges—depending on how you see it—surviving relatives the chance to sustain political afterlives of victims by offering and devoting public altars to them during the celebration. Political altars devoted to victims of violence in public spaces give the dead a chance to talk back to power. Seen in this light, the religious festivity—the Day of the Dead—is not merely a happy annual holiday with an element of satire that is rather harmless to wider political arrangements (Brandes 2006, 2003c; Congdon 2003; Garcia godoy 1998), but may in fact present an opportunity to challenge state authorities by making victims of violence visible in the public sphere. This sacred festivity’s strong ethics of commemoration guard the interests of the dead to be remembered and grieved properly, and thus highlight the important role the commemoration can play in the epoch of human rights.

The public celebration demonstrates the agency and intentionality of the political subjects (the activists) I study, as structured by ritual obligations and ethics drawn from Mexico’s cultural tradition. It should therefore not be treated as a binary-polemic between subjects’ “free” choices or agency and state power. Moral discourse among social movements that advocate human rights and their shaming of state institutions in fact “follows an essentially Foucauldian path, in that it seeks to institute new norms by publicly identifying immoral or transgressive behaviour as an object lesson of what societies ought not to be” (Courpasson & Vallas 2016: 21). Ethnographers of contemporary protest movements tend to view the social movement as
an “autonomous, self-producing, and self-organized organism—an individual entity on its own” (Kurik in Courpasson & Vallas 2016: 58). Public shaming can become such a self-moving mechanism. This technique has been used across Latin America for a long time as part of the standard repertoire to “denunciar” (to denounce), and expose “wrongdoing of the powerful before the court of public opinion” in order to spark democratic reforms (Samet 2016: 3).

Mexican activists and social movements protesting violence tend to use human rights discourses that they instrumentalize in various ways and with a wide plethora of strategies. The MPJD has pushed for the passing of new laws such as la Ley General de las Víctimas (The general law of the victims) while most of these political collectives of relatives tend to travel across the nation carrying photos of their disappeared in their “tours” or “caravans” to give testimonies to onlookers. When I refer to justicia y verdad (justice and truth) it will be as a reflection of how the concerned families used them to mean criminal punishment of perpetrators and to know what happened to their disappeared. But the question of their human rights-oriented activism is much more complex. Mexico’s government has tended to put human rights as opposed to security in its discourse about the war on drugs (Carlsen 2012), and when legislation new has been passed it has often been impotent to address the issues and not been implemented in practice (Dominguez-Ruvalcaba & Corona 2010: 160). This thesis will show how many families and social movements struggle to find ways forward after years of fruitlessly seeking legal changes and solutions from state institutions. In the past as well as in recent years this has led to several groups taken up arms to address the problems they face (Aviña 2014; Sierra 2015).

Others tend to link their protests with strong religious symbolism by comparing their plights to the suffering of Christ like the MPJD do (Azala 2012b: 164), and by carrying figures of the Virgin of Guadalupe with them—Mexico’s patron saint—as the Families of Ayotzinapa do. In the annual protests, they make their personal traumas public and personalize the nation’s experience of mass violence (Feldman in Argentí & Schramm 2010). What is at stake here is the important personal and political transformation this may bring about for concerned families, as well as for the Mexican society as a whole, and the ways in which it makes families of victims deal and live with Mexico’s violent past.

As a last observation about the literature this study builds on, I would like to cast light on the tragic circumstance of how families of Latin America’s disappeared tend to “live with” the fact that they have a close loved one missing. This displacement in death, the vanished body, makes their grief lack its proper object, the corpse, and prevent any burial from taking place. Disappearances are generally considered a form of necrogovernmentality, a criminal or political
technique to get rid of corpses as a means for social control by spreading terror and fear and to erase evidence to avoid future criminal charges (Berlanga 2015; Concha 2015; Mastrogiovanni 2014; Méndez Franco 2015; Modonesi & González 2015; Morbiato 2017; Noble 2015; Robben 2000a, 2000b; Sierra 2015; Súarez-Orozco 1987; Velasco 2015). The vanished corpse politicizes and complicates the grief for the surviving family. When a body cannot be buried, the transitional period of mourning cannot be marked by ritual closure and thus extends indefinitely (Hertz 1960: 85; Robben 2000a, 2000b). Mexico’s relatives of the nation’s disappeared therefore, like elsewhere in Latin American countries before, cling on to the desperate hope that their disappeared may return home once more (Robben 2000a, 2000b; Sanjurjo 2017).

As the disappeared person is neither truly dead nor alive (Mastrogiovanni 2014), el desaparecido is therefore a third ambiguous category that falls between the conventional duality of the living and the dead. Their ambiguous status and existential predicament trap them in a grey zone, a no-man’s-land, as their surviving relatives maintain that they may come back home again. While activists of victims who have been confirmed to be dead can put up altars for their lost loved ones in the Day of the Dead, as mentioned above, families of those who remain disappeared feel unable. As the Day of the Dead traditionally only celebrates and honours those who are confirmed to be deceased, some families do not feel that they can incorporate the disappeared into the celebration as their deaths have not been proven. Additionally, as we shall see later on, relatives of the disappeared may not want their missing to be included in the political altars in the first place; this would imply that they are indeed dead and may never come home. These victims who lack proper burials, therefore, are in need of special rites (Hertz 1960: 85) that can address their special existential predicament.

In his classic work on the anthropology of death, A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death (1960), Robert Hertz writes briefly about such uncommon forms of death: “Finally, the type of death also causes numerous exceptions to the normal ritual. All those who die a violent death or by accident… are often object of special rites. Their unquiet and spiteful souls roam the earth forever… It seems... that their death has no end” (1960: 85).

This observation seems to me to be an enlightening description of what I came to observe in Mexican society today as well, where new and special rites are needed for victims of violence, especially for the unburied disappeared whose social lives have never been marked by ritual closure. These special rites that we can see emerge at new memorial sites devoted to Mexico’s disappeared are different from the conventional rites of passage—the transition of the soul away from the land of the living on its way to the afterlife and land of the dead (Hertz 1960: 80-85;
in that these new protest rituals and annual commemorations for the disappeared sustain their liminal and ambiguous status and guard it as different from those who are proven to be dead by calling on them to come back to life. The special rites of Mexico’s disappeared are not linear passage rites that incorporate them into the world of the dead (Hertz 1960; van Gennep 1960), but rather a labyrinth between the worlds where the anomalies of our societies roam, the Minotaurs of our psyches. Taboos are broken for them, and the world is turned inside-out as the untamed grief for their unsettled souls, roaming in a state of perpetual liminality, escapes the conventional private funerary wake in the house, el velorio, and burst into the open—Mexico’s main political square, el Zócalo.

Mexico’s current necropolitics thus cause new problems for and elicit new responses from Mexican culture’s old tradition and rich forms of necrosociality (Congdon 2003; Garciagodoy 1998). Activists make creative use of the nation’s necrosociality with political altars of the dead and reinvent the altars with new rites and ways to visualize the disappeared. Studying their protest repertoires, in turn, shows how grievers become activists and—to complete the circle—cast light on the temporal process of how Mexico’s protests for the nation’s disappeared gradually become ritualized and transform into commemorative ceremonies at new memorial sites.

Chapters

“Chapter I: Who Owns the Dead?” focuses on how activists are contesting Mexico’s contentious necropolitics which often see state’s necrogovernance and criminal and corporate necropower dictate life and death. By criminally disappearing corpses or otherwise withholding them from their families, the state’s necrogovernance often prevents justice and denies close family the right to bury their dead—leading to a reign of fear. These actions are met with civil disobedience and inspire human rights advocacy, opening up a moral discourse that I analyse as a subversive form of necro-morality that stresses victims’ rights to “a good grave”. Surviving families engage in stubborn struggles to restore a sense of worth and value for the nation’s many victims of state, criminal and corporate violence.

“Chapter II: Pilgrims of Grief” depicts the personal and transformative journey the relatives of victims of violence find themselves on when they become activists and move away from their lone grito de dolor (cry of pain) towards a more empowered political movement’s collective grito de indignación (cry of indignation). Activists learn a wide protest repertoire and tend to use a touring model that includes protest caravans and the sharing of testimonies to pressure authorities to ‘make things happen’.
“Chapter III: Su Dolor es Nuestro Dolor (Your Pain is our Pain)” analyses what became an important part of the indignation of Ayotzinapa: the participation of wider society in the protests. It argues that shared political feelings and the act of evoking symbolic family in and between subversive communities in Mexico creates platforms for nationwide political action. Outsiders came to share the grief, risk and anger of the Ayotzinapa Families in ways that expanded traditional trajectories of kinship and ideas of the close family’s ownership of the experience of grief. New “imagined communities” challenge the hierarchy of the state with new forms of political participation.

“Chapter IV: Even if it’s the Last Thing I’ll Do” looks at activists’ public displays of grief in protest performances. I detail a hunger strike staged by the Mothers of Ciudad Juárez in Mexico City, an experience which explicitly demonstrates that grief and pain are not merely internalized states, but can also be expressed as “a kind of action” even as wider society remains “strangers to their pain”. Thus, while Chapter II discussed processes of empowerment and Chapter III stressed the solidarity with surviving relatives, here we face their limitations.

“Chapter V: The Day of the Dead” reflects on the political street-altars erected during Mexico’s famous religious festivity El Día de Muertos (the Day of the Dead) that are devoted to victims of violence’s to demonstrate the celebration’s important role in the epoch of human rights. By demanding that the dead are properly honoured and commemorated and by critiquing state violence through black humour, satire and activist altars, the Day of the Dead turns into a ritual of rebellion that illustrates the ungovernability of Mexico’s dead. However, the disappeared also presents a challenge to Mexico’s horizontal ethics of commemoration; controversies arise over whether the disappeared should be included in the festivity or not. Such ambiguous souls do not fit the celebration’s “duality of days” that otherwise commemorates both “good” and “bad” death. The disappearance of the corpse, or “the ritual hierarchy of death”, causes new problems for Mexico’s longstanding and democratic necrosociality.

“Chapter VI: The Necrographies at Estela de Luz” explores a new memorial site in Mexico City where families of the nation’s many missing come to perform commemorative ceremonies. They have engraved political street epitaphs at the site with biographies of their disappeared, what I call “necrographies”, that speak in first person, as if those who talk were still alive. These objects, I argue, promote Mexico’s disappeared as objects of collective grief and activism. Mexico’s disappeared are in need of their own material culture and special rites outside of the Day of the Dead since they are not truly dead in the first place. The special rites that take place at Estela de Luz memorial site guard the ambiguous status of the souls of the disappeared and
separate them from those who have been proved to be dead, thus making them linger in a state of perpetual liminality.
Chapter I

Who Owns the Dead?

“Llegamos al este nueveno memorial para honrar a nuestros muertos. Todos nos pertenecen a nosotros. No a las empresas. No a Grupo México, ni al gobierno al turno. Todos son nuestros. Honramos nuestro muertos” (We’ve come to this ninth commemoration to honour our dead. They all belong to us. Not to the companies. Not to Grupo México. Nor to the government. They are all ours. We honour our dead) (public speech, doña Margarita, Polanco, Mexico City, February 19, 2015). Doña Margarita proclaims. She is a mother of a dead mineworker, her child one among a total of sixty-three bodies who were never recovered after a mining explosion took their lives in Pasta de Conchos in Coahuila, north of Mexico, in 2006.

Doña Margarita belongs to the Organization for the Pasta de Conchos Families (OFPC) who fight for their right to bury their lost loved ones. She was speaking before a small crowd of mourners performing an annual protest and remembrance ceremony dedicated to the dead miners. Among them stood some of the Fathers and Mothers of Ayotzinapa, another collective, this one made up of the parents of the three killed and 43 disappeared students who were victims of a massacre by municipal police in Guerrero, south of Mexico, in September 2014. They had joined the ceremony in solidarity with the OFPC since they, too, shared a similar plight. Bernabé Abraján, one of the Fathers of Ayotzinapa, soon followed doña Margarita’s example and addressed the gathering of grievers after the families had finished their mutual praying: “Pues, ustedes tienen el derecho a los restos de sus familiares, de tenerlos afuera, ya pues, que les rescaten de ahí, para que puedan darles una buena sepultura. Tenerlos, pues, darles flores…” (You have a right to have their remains taken out so you can give them a good grave. Have them, give them flowers…) (public speech, Bernabé Abraján, Polanco, Mexico City, February 19, 2015).

Remembrance ceremonies and protests are common in Mexico nowadays as they form part of a ritualization of protests against corporate, state and criminal violence. The Pasta de Conchos Families travelled thousands of miles south from Coahuila to congregate outside of the gates of Grupo México’s headquarters, in the posh inner-city neighbourhood of Polanco, Mexico City, to shame the company for its indifference towards their dead. They demanded their dead be excavated so they could give them proper burials. All the while, the Fathers and
Mothers of Ayotzinapa continuously led hundreds of thousands of Mexicans who supported their struggle for justice and truth to el Zócalo, Mexico City’s main square in front of the National Parliament. These new commemorative and highly political ceremonies have evolved into annual protest events, often with street marches that parade through Mexico City, and serve as an alternative way to pay tribute to those victims who have never been buried and still await justice. Many Mexican families of such victims—often with campesino and working-class backgrounds—engage in nationwide civil disobedience campaigns.

These protests, I argue, are contesting Mexico’s contentious “necropolitics”—political struggles over the rights over the dead and forensic politics in the aftermath of tragedies and atrocities (Robben and Ferrándiz 2016)—as surviving families seek to reclaim their victims and restore a sense of worth and value for their dead and disappeared. I ask whether “necropolitics” or “necropower”—often understood as top-down and state initiated de-humanization processes (Mbembe 2008; Robben 2016)—are precise and multifaceted enough as analytical tools to address this diverse and contested area of politics? How are we, for instance, to think about corporate influence over the fate of dead bodies, and activists and social movements long engagement for victims? I suggest, and will here cast light on, state necrogovernance, and corporate and subversive necropower as different nuances of Mexico’s contemporary necropolitics.

Latin American nation-states’ strategies in the wake of state violence—or their state necrogovernance—have often aimed at preventing justice and circumventing excavations of mass-graves in order to hide the truth (Robben and Ferrándiz 2016). Likewise, rough Mexican state agents have been involved in disappearing people just like the criminal narco cartels, all while state institutions fail to act (Marcial 2014; Noble 2014; Pereyra 2012; Steinberg 2013).

This generalized state of impunity also allows conventional corporations such as Grupo México—Mexico’s largest mining firm and the world’s third largest copper producer, which is run by chairman and CEO Germán Larrea, who refuses to excavate the dead miners from the shafts—to exploit both workers and the environment in shocking ways.

Researchers and journalists alike have shed light on how Mexico’s narco-related violence has created a “situation of social and political decomposition brought about by a new cycle of capitalist expansion and accumulation” (Zagato 2018: 55), and on how state and criminal warfare has opened up new markets of extortion, smuggling, and killing (Gibler 2016).

Anthropologists have labelled these vague boundaries between violent entrepreneurships and conventional ones a “neo-extractivist economy” where organized crime, state violence and impunity work in conjunction with one another (Gledhill 2017, 2014: 507). Investigative
journalists have also pointed to how Mexico’s forced disappearances have benefitted the petrol industry (Mastrogiovanni 2014). Fear and terror are essential elements in the illicit drug markets and neo-extractivist economy that perpetuate Latin America’s long history of exploitation of the bodies of both workers and the indigenous population (Gibler 2016; Nash 1979; Taussig 1984). This situation is further fueled by drug wars and new markets for kidnapping, forced labor and human trafficking (Gibler 2016; Mastrogiovanni 2014; Reveles 2015).

One way this necrogovernance makes itself known in contemporary Mexico is the spectacular violence that has come to characterize governmentality and the criminal technique of disappearing corpses (Berlanga 2015; Concha 2015; Marcial 2015; Noble 2015). Those victims who disappear are referred to as los desaparecidos (the disappeared)—a term used across Latin America to refer to those who have been kidnapped and remain missing due to political or criminal violence (Robben 2007; Suárez-Orozco 1987). This criminal technique acts as a means for social control; it prevents criminal charges and keeps both community members and close relatives silent and obedient via a reign of fear (Berlanga, 2015; Robben, 2016; Suárez-Orozco, 1987). However, more and more Mexican families are rising up and taking to the streets to speak out, just like other relatives of Latin America’s disappeared have done in the past (Robben 2007). This chapter will analyse the civil disobedience campaigns and protests that try to reclaim victims, and fight state necrogovernance, and criminal or corporate necropower.

Necropolitics will serve as the overarching unit of analysis here; between the conflicting interests of state institutions, corporations, and families of victims, as multiple different forms of necropower, state necrogovernance, and activist counter-strategies compete for the power to decide who dies and lives, how death should be handled, and who is deemed worthy of being grieved or having a proper burial (Robben and Ferrándiz 2016).

The terms “necropolitics” and “necropower” are often used interchangeably to refer to forms of state repression and terror (Mbembe 2008; Robben 2016). I shall instead use the term “state necrogovernance” when I refer to the state’s capacity to take lives through police or military violence—its power to decide who may live or die (Mbembe 2008: 11)—as well as when referring to state control over forensic processes and police investigations, as illustrated by the Ayotzinapa case (Concha 2015; GIEI Informe Ayotzinapa 2015; Marcial 2015).

Necropower stands for “the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (Mbembe 2008: 11), but I will use the term “corporate necropower” to more specifically refer to the power of corporations to dictate the circumstances of their workers’ lives and deaths.
For instance, Grupo México’s power over the fate of its 63 deceased but unburied workers in Pasta de Conchos.

Subversive necropower will, on the contrary, refer to the different strategies activists use to reclaim ownership of their dead or disappeared. I label this as necropower not only to bring forth how this competes with forms of corporate, criminal, and state necropower, but also to connect this to how Mexico’s contemporary repertoires of collective action seems to build on the wider regional history of social movements that used a politics of visibility by recalling memories of victims in public spaces (Noble 2015; Rivera Hernández 2017; Robben 2007; Sanjurjo 2018; Tilly 1995, 2006).

The Mexican state’s necrogovernance in the case of the Iguala massacre as well as the corporate necropower in the case of Pasta de Conchos both appear to have intentionally violated all sense of human decency by making use of the criminal technique of disappearing people and withholding bodies from their right to burial, respectively, and hiding the truth of what happened to victims (GIEI Informe Ayotzinapa 2015; Hernández 2017). Such practices will be referred to as “authoritarian necrogovernance,” and they beg the question: To what extent do such tactics of social control serve business interests, capital accumulation, or profitmaking in the underground economy of the narco trade? At least some forms of capital accumulation take advantage of or deploy macabre forms of necropower through spectacular violence and the criminal technique of disappearing corpses (Berlanga 2015; Gibler 2016; Mastrogiovanni 2014; Zagato 2018). It is in this zone of impunity that the extractive industry is free to operate (Gledhill 2017; Mastrogiovanni 2014).

However, many Mexican families are taking to the streets to speak out, just like other relatives of Latin America’s disappeared have done in the past (Robben 2007). I coined the term “subversive necropower” precisely to cast light on how this is meant to fight regimes of necrogovernance (Robben 2016; Rojas-Perez 2017), and I refer to criminal and corporate necropower as analytical units to further draw out non-state influence. As shall become clear, the international community also exerts influence over the forensic processes that may cause controversy, truth disputes, and prolonged activism (GIEI Informe Ayotzinapa 2015).

Achilles Mbembe, who coined the term “necropolitics,” uses it to develop Foucault’s concept of biopower, which he sees as insufficient to “account for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death” (2008: 39–40). He analyses who in society is rendered “killable” in colonial contexts. Necropolitics, he makes clear, operates through a de-subjectivization process (Mbembe, 2008: 2–3). Likewise, Robben uses the lens of necropower to describe how Argentina’s military junta killed and tortured dissidents in what he understands
as a territorialisation of state terror in public space (2016). But this, in my view, is merely considering the side of the state’s attempt at necrogovernance when it seeks to create zones of death and legitimize its violence. Necropower can also be subversive and undermine the very dehumanization processes that Mbembe and Robben describe.

Necropolitics should be viewed as a contested field of social action and discourse where acts of subversive necropower may instead render victims visible and thus mournable. The benefit of exploring this as subversive necropower is that it more clearly links the activist repertoires used by Latin American collectives of relatives of victims (Auyero 2006; Rivera Hernández 2017; Robben 2007; Robledo 2018; Sanjurjo 2017) to regimes of necrogovernance (Mbembe 2008; Robben 2016; Rojas-Perez 2017). We might even talk of a discourse of “necromorality” that declares that the dead have rights and that the nation’s victims must have truth and justice and be remembered. This activism draws upon legal rights discourses when it seeks to shame state institutions or corporations by teaching them a moral lesson through “an essential Foucauldian path, in that it seeks to institute new norms by publicly identifying immoral… behaviour as an object lesson of what societies ought not to be” (Courpasson and Vallas 2016: 21).

Earlier research and truth commissions have stressed the important tendency among surviving Latin American relatives to recall memories of state violence in public space (CEP 1999 Informe Guatemala, memoria del silencio; CONADEP 1986, Informe Nunca Más; Gandsman 2015; Rivera Hernández 2017; Taussig 1992). Such “shared strategies of political action and the production of shared meanings” (Sanjurjo 2017: 113) talk to Tilly’s social movement theory on “repertoires of contention”—the set of tools and actions available when people band together to respond to macroprocesses in any given place and time in history (1995, 2006). Mexico’s contemporary protest repertoires, this chapter intends to show, entail a strategic deployment of victims’ moral power (Taussig 1992: 48). Drawing on these perspectives, the ensuing argument will frame such protest tactics and suggest that they might be explored as a subversive necromorality that, more specifically, seeks to counter state necrogovernance, the criminal use of dead bodies to instil fear, and break free from the corporate control over life and death.

State Necropolitics: La Noche de Iguala

I was at a crisis meeting held in the House of Solidarity in central Mexico City in the end of September 2014. On the meeting’s agenda was a discussion of the police attack on young students that had taken place just days before on the evening of the 26th in the town Iguala. Six
civilians had been shot dead and forty-three normalistas, students from an all-male Rural Teachers’ College known as La Normal Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos de Ayotzinapa, had been taken away by municipal police—never to be seen again. Omar García, a survivor of the massacre that would soon become infamous as La Noche de Iguala (the night of Iguala), had come to give us his testimony and organize protests for his disappeared comrades. At the meeting on September 30, he testified:

Fuimos a Iguala para boteear dinero y tomar autobuses, pero cuando nos íbamos, la policía nos detuvo y comenzó a dispararnos. Estabá con un amigo herido que recibió un disparo en la cara. Huimos por las calles de Iguala para salvar nuestras vidas, tocando puertas en busca de un hospital. Estaba oscuro y todo lo que se podía ver era el fuego de las armas.

We went to Iguala to raise money and commandeer buses but when we were leaving the police stopped us and began shooting at us. I was with an injured friend who had been shot in his face. We were running for our lives through the streets of Iguala, knocking on doors in search for a hospital, it was dark and all you could see was the fire from the guns (testimony at activist meeting, the House of Solidarity, Benito Juárez, Mexico City, September 30, 2014).

Omar García would, in the aftermath of this tragedy, take a leading role alongside the fathers and mothers of the disappeared students in the nationwide protest movement that was about to sweep the country. Why this massacre occurred and what exactly happened to the students (who are, at the time of this writing, still missing) have been topic of controversy ever since. In the immediate wake of the massacre, the Fathers and Mothers of Ayotzinapa travelled in protest caravans and held weekly marches through the capital to demand that their sons be handed back to them alive. Bernabé Abraján, the father of one of the missing and, as were many of the parents, a campesino from Guerrero, expressed his bewilderment when I talked to him in one of their protests staged in Mexico City in early November:

El día 26, mi hijo salió este día a la ciudad de Iguala. La última llamada se hizo fue a un sobrino en la escuela, diciéndole: “¿Sabes qué? La policía de los municipales nos están atacando.” Fui a la escuela tan rápido que sea posible despues que me enteré y me quedé allí toda la noche sin dormir, sin saber qué hacer. Nos preguntamos ¿por qué nos ha sucedido esto?, porque no estamos involucrados con los carteles o el gobierno;

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1 A common practice among normalistas in Mexico, although not popular among the commercial bus companies they “borrow” from.
Nosotros somos campesinos humildes, sembrando el maíz, queremos vivir en paz, nada más. Lo que sucedió ha cambiado nuestras vidas. Estamos buscando a nuestros hijos desde el amanecer hasta que se pone el sol.

On the 26th [of September 2014] my son left for Iguala. The last call he made was to a nephew in the school, telling him: “You know what? the police are attacking us.” I went to the school as soon as I heard about it and stayed there all night without sleeping, without knowing what to do. We wonder why this has happened to us, because we are not involved with cartels or the government; we are poor farmers, growing corn, who want to live a quiet life, nothing else. What happened has changed our lives. We are looking for our sons from when the sun goes up until the sun goes down (interview, Bernabé Abraján, Centro Nacional de las Artes, Mexico City, November 12, 2014).

In the months that followed, several mass graves were discovered in the mountainsides outside of Iguala. A total of 28 bodies were found, and though first thought to be the missing normalistas, this was later disproved by El Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense (the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team [EAAF]), an independent group of forensic experts who helped with the investigation of the case. In contrast to the forensic doctors in charge of the investigation who worked for La Procuraduría General de la República (the National Attorney General of the Republic [PGR]), the EAAF had the trust of the Fathers and Mothers of Ayotzinapa.

The people who led the protest movement, such as the Families of Ayotzinapa and the survivors of the attack, began suspecting that the Federal Government had tried to cover up what had truly happened to the disappeared students that night. They called for the resignation of then-President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018), crying “¡Fuera Peña! ¡Fuera Peña!” (Out Peña), accompanied by their call to arms in the street rallies, “¡Fue el Estado!” (It was the state who did it).

Meanwhile, José Luiz Abarca, the mayor of Iguala, was on the run with his wife. They were suspected of having ordered the attack and of being members of the local narco cartel Guerreros Unidos (United Warriors). Soon, the National Attorney General of the Republic, Jesus Murillo Karam, held a press-conference and declared what he referred to as “the historic truth” about the tragedy: that the 43 students had been handed over to members of Guerreros Unidos criminal organization, brought to a local dumpster outside of the city of Cocula, executed, their bodies burned in a bonfire, and the remains put in plastic bags and thrown in the nearby San Juan River. Iguala’s municipal police were said to have attacked the normalistas because they mistook them for the rival narco cartel Los Rojos (The Reds) (press conference, Jesus Murillo
Karam, Mexico City, November 7, 2014). However, the EAAF critiqued the evidence for these claims and could not identify any of the students from the DNA of the alleged remains found in the river. The material was sent to an Innsbruck lab for further testing and in the end only managed to identify one student, Alexander Mora.

At the same time as many Mexicans suspected that the investigation tried to divert blame by pinpointing it on organized crime and the local mayor from the left-wing party PRD—a different political party from the PRI-administration who held power back then—the investigative journalist Anabel Hernández revealed that the federal police had also taken part in the attack that night. She said she had evidence that the last registered GPS locations of two of the phones belonging to students came from within the military camp of the 27 Infantry Battalion stationed in Iguala (Hernández, 2016: 23, 51, 58-60, 161-75). No one was allowed to search their camp nor ask them any questions since both the ruling party, PRI, and largest opposition party, conservative PAN (in government from 2000-2012 and responsible for launching the war on drugs) insisted that Congress had to protect the integrity of the Mexican Army, which only roused suspicion that they might themselves have been involved in the massacre.

Hernández also exposed that intelligence gathering, or so-called C4 centers, were operating that night, which implicated the army, the federal police, and the state government of Guerrero, as the C4 system had the students under surveillance three hours before they were first attacked by police that night (Hernández, 2016: 7). In this light, the Iguala massacre appeared an act of intentional political repression against predominantly indigenous, left-leaning, and poor but rebellious students.

Without any consensus about their fate that night, the Ayotzinapa Families held on to the desperate hope that their missing sons would come back home alive once more. They continued their stubborn protest call: “¡Vivos se los Llevaron, Vivos los Queremos!” (They Took Them Alive, We Want Them Back Alive), an echo of the cries of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo (the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo), the relatives of Argentina’s many disappeared who vanished during the military junta in the ’70s and ’80s in Buenos Aires (Robben 2007). In the days after Murillo Karam’s press conference, don Bernabé Abraján and the others disputed his “historic truth”. As don Bernabé put it during a rally at Centro Nacional de las Artes on November 12:

Están vivos, y están vivos porque los compañeros nos dijeron que la policía y los federales se los subieron en sus patrullas y se los llevaron vivos. Mi hijo se llama Adnan Abraján de la Cruz. Él fue secuestrado y permanece desaparecido. El gobierno culpó a los delincuentes, diciendo que fueron ellos quienes los tomaron, ellos los incineraron,
They are alive because the police put them on trucks and took them away alive. My son’s name is Adnan Abraján, he was kidnapped and remains disappeared. The government blame it all on criminals, saying that it was they who took them, who cremated them, made them to dust and spread it in a river. It is painful for me, not finding my son. Above all because he had two children, one seven and one two years old. He is supposed to get married December 20. That is why he is alive. He should farm, he is a person who resists, and he will come home to see his family (public speech, Bernabé Abraján, Centro Nacional de las Artes, Mexico City, November 12, 2014).

PGR’s “historic truth” still appeared to many to be the most likely scenario at this point, though the parents seemed to simply deny their sons almost certain death, especially after the announcement from Innsbruck that the recovered remains had DNA from one of them. To make bodies disappear can be an effective way to keep families quiet; close relatives may choose not to speak up in fear of causing the death of their abducted loved ones, and it prevents any future criminal charges “impossible without any corpora delicti” (Robben 2000b: 83). Relatives of such victims, however, often refuse to stay inside their homes to be haunted by nightmares and instead respond with activism. When they speak up against the terror, they break the reign of silence and fear that the criminals seek to keep.

Doña Adrianita, one of the indigenous mothers among the Parents of Ayotzinapa, illustrated this when the parents held one of their many protest rallies after marching through the streets of Mexico City. While congregating at the Monument of the Revolution on December 6, 2014, she held a large protest placard with her missing son’s name and photo and declared:

_Hoy levantamos la voz, y no quedamos en casa. Nos faltan cuarenta normalistas y tres y miles más desaparecidos. Salimos a los calles. Eso es el momento a levantar la voz y cambiar al país, cambiar el gobierno que nos engaña. Exigimos que cada uno de nosotros gobierne y no el gobierno con sus armas._

We raise our voices and do not keep to our houses at home. We miss 43 students and thousands of disappeared. We take to the streets. This is the moment to raise our voices and change this country, change the government who tricks us. To demand that every
one of us will govern and not the government with its weapons (public speech, Adrianita, the Monument of the Revolution, Mexico City, December 6, 2014).

Latin American relatives of victims of state violence often show defiance against regimes of necrogovernance by recalling violent memories in public spaces, like Adrianita above (Rivera Hernández, 2017; Robben, 2007; Taussig, 1992). By doing so, they form a “shared strategy of political action” and partake in “the production of shared meanings” (Sanjurjo, 2017: 113). These protest repertoires draw their strength from a strategic deployment of a “politics of visibility” (Rivera Hernández, 2017: 108) that make full use of the “moral and magical power of the unquiet dead” (Taussig, 1992: 48). They use testimonies and photos of victims to call on society to join them in their struggle, even as they engage in more direct protest tactics.

In January 2015, they tried to storm the 27 Infantry Battalion’s army camp in Iguala in their relentless quest for their sons, but they were met with rubber bullets that held them at bay (with several injured as a result). Gradually, the Fathers and Mothers of Ayotzinapa adopted a more profound critique of Mexico’s political and economic system and turned to targeted civil disobedience: they embarked on a midterm elections boycott. The midterm elections this year were for five-hundred seats in the lower house of the Mexican Congress, for nine of thirty-one total governorships, and for hundreds of local mayoral positions. The Families of Ayotzinapa now sought to disrupt the “business as usual” of Mexican politics and break the status quo by blocking the election in as many states as they possibly could. “Votar es apoyar a narcopolíticos. Estamos hasta la madre. Primero queremos que se encuentren a nuestros hijos, después pueden tener elecciones” (To vote is to support the narcopoliticians. We are fed up. We want our children to be found first, and then there can be elections), as the families proclaimed.

Miguel, the spokesperson for La Comisión de la Enclave Chéran in Michoacán², participated in a round table discussion about Ayotzinapa on January 29, shortly after the parents’ first announcement of their boycott of the election. The event was held at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in Mexico City. Miguel explained his community’s support of the boycott during the debate in the following way:

Ya se acercan las elecciones. El PRI, PAN, PRD y Los Verdes, los partidos grandes son los mismos para nos en el Chéran, porque en Michoacán ellos están involucrados

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²This is a self-armed Purépecha village, known for its auto-defensa (self-defence group). The group was created to protect the village from the local narco cartel, Las Caballeros Templarios (The Knights Templars), and the corrupt police, both of whom attack villages in order to take control of natural resources (Domínguez-Guadarrama 2016; Guerra Manzo 2015; Paleta Pérez and Fuentes Díaz 2013).
con el crimen organizado. Los grupos armados trabajan para ellos. Entonces para nosotros los partidos grandes y el crimen organizado son los mismos.

There will soon be elections. PRI, PAN, PRD, and Los Verdes, all the major parties, are the same for us in Chéran, because in Michoacán they are all involved in criminality. They have armed groups who work for them. Organized crime and the big parties are one and the same (round table, Miguel, UNAM, Mexico City, January 29, 2015).

When election day approached, the Families of Ayotzinapa led the boycott in different municipalities where they took over ballot stations and election offices, collected the ballot papers, and burned them out on the streets. Bernabé Abraján and Clemente Rodríguez, whose sons, along with a total of 15 of the 43 disappeared students, came from Tixtla in Guerrero, arranged a bonfire of votes in the neighbourhood La Fortín in Tixtla. They declared, while burning the votes, that “Tixtla para los tixtleños” (Tixtla is for the tixtleños). In the end, they managed to prevent voting at 444 voting booths, 4.4% of the voting booths in Oaxaca and Guerrero, and postpone the election altogether in the municipality of Tixtla where the Rural Teachers’ College of Ayotzinapa is located (Lorenzen & Orozco 2016: 185). While this attempt to set the Mexican political system ablaze and prevent the regeneration of Mexico’s political class was thus not successful in preventing the election from proceeding on a national scale, it nevertheless shook society and scared the political establishment.

The state’s response to the boycott was a large pro-elections propaganda campaign meant to render legitimacy to the country’s representative system and the forceful deployment of the police and army to stop the burning of votes. Thousands of soldiers and police officers were ordered to guard polling stations in what became “the most watched-over vote” in Mexico’s history (The Guardian 2015-06-07).

After almost twelve months of chaotic street protests, El Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes (the Group of International Interdisciplinary Experts [GIEI]), working on behalf of La Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, IACHR), released a report about the Iguala case. The group refuted the official version of the investigation reported by the National Attorney General of the Republic, Jesus Murillo Karam, and declared it “scientifically impossible” since there was no evidence of any large bonfire at the garbage dump site outside of Cocula where PGR had claimed the students were killed and their bodies burned (GIEI Informe Ayotzinapa 2015: 340-42). The 43 disappeared young men had not been killed there after all. The conclusions of GIEI’s report appeared to suggest, as many Mexicans had come to suspect, that the PGR had staged a fake crime scene in the Rio San Juan.
The report’s conclusions challenged PGR’s “historic truth” (GIEI Informe Ayotzinapa 2015) and, more broadly, posed a challenge to Mexican state institutions’ control over the forensic process and evidence as a basis for truth claims. The PGR refused to accept the GIEI’s report and continued to repeat its original narrative. Now the necropolitics played out on the level of forensic technicalities and analysis as well as out on the streets with protest banners and marches. The suspicion that PGR’s federal prosecutors actively had sought to conceal the truth and the degree of state involvement in the disappearance of the 43 students enraged the masses enough to return to the streets for the first annual protest event that marked the anniversary of the Iguala massacre. This suspicion, of course, also infuriated the families of victims. They took to the streets yet again for the first annual protest event, marking the one-year anniversary of the Iguala tragedy and their resulting civil disobedience campaign. Their spokesperson, Felipe de la Cruz Sandoval, voiced their anger in his public address from el Zocalo on the anniversary, September 26, 2015:

Estamos en huelga! Hoy sabemos que no sólo es en el Guerrero sino en todo el país donde hay tumbas clandestinas y desapariciones. Estamos enfurecidos porque han jugado con nuestros sentimientos. En todo el país hay ejecuciones extrajudiciales y secuestros... Con toda nuestra voz denunciamos al gobierno de Enrique Peña Nieto y su complicidad en los asesinatos de Iguala, el 26 de septiembre. No puede quedar en el olvido un crimen como este, porque si hoy nosotros nos callamos, nos condenaremos a revivirlo nuevamente y está pesadilla no debería repetirse jamás.

We are on strike! Today we know that it is not just in Guerrero but all across the country that we see clandestine graves and disappearances. We are enraged because they have played with our feelings. In all the country there are extrajudicial executions and kidnappings...With all our voice we denounce the government of Enrique Peña Nieto and their complicity in the killings of Iguala, the 26 of September. A crime like that cannot be kept in oblivion, because if we keep quiet, we will condemn ourselves to relive it again and this nightmare should not be allowed to repeat itself ever again (public speech, Felipe de la Cruz Sandoval, el Zocalo, Mexico City, September 26, 2015).

The GIEI’s report also suggested that PGR’s investigation should look into the missing fifth bus, which was never mentioned in the official report about the massacre. GIEI put forth the hypothesis that this bus may have had a cargo of heroin meant for the United States, which then would connect the Iguala massacre and the coordinated police attack on the students with the narco trade business and criminal economy (GIEI Informe Ayotzinpa 2015: 191–94). The
unarmed students may have had the bad luck of commandeering the wrong bus. GIEI also reported that soldiers were present at several of the crime scenes that night and recommended a search of the army base in Iguala (GIEI Informe Ayotzinpa, 2015: 191–95).

The breakdown of the Mexican state’s necrogovernance and their control of the forensic narratives of the Ayotzinapa case would reveal even graver things than this. One of the students confirmed to have been murdered that night in Iguala, Julio César Mondragón Fonte, was found on the streets in the early hours of the following morning with signs of macabre torture: his eyes had been carved out and the skin of his face had been ripped off. The forensic doctors working under the State Prosecutor of Guerrero attributed this to “wild fauna”. A collective of independent forensic experts and activist academics created a group called El Rostro de Julio (Julio’s Face) to demand a second autopsy of his corpse to determine the cause of his mutilated face. The documents from the old autopsy that they demanded to see were delayed for months, and in the end, some of the documents were said to have “disappeared”. Julio’s brother, Lenin Mondragón, spoke about the case at the University El Colegio de México in a round table discussion on September 9, 2015, when the first anniversary was approaching:

Lo arrancaron el rostro, los ojos, cuando aún estaba vivo, y, pues, se salgan con esto no; Que era la fauna que lo desollaba. ¿Y por qué el rostro no? Viene aquí la pregunta ¿por qué el rostro y no un mano, un pie? ¿Por qué específicamente el rostro? Pues, luego va a ser un año, sin justicia ni esclarecimiento de los hechos. ¿Y nuestro dolor? Mi hermano era del Estado de México y apenas acababa de comenzar en la Normal, hace un mes y medio, habían solamente comenzado a conocerse. ¿Cómo es posible? ¿Cómo es posible que le hayan hecho esta injusticia? Querían manchar la memoria de mi hermano. Espero que no se repita y que otras familias sufran lo que sufrimos en este momento, pues, estamos luchando para que no vuelva a suceder.

They ripped off his face, his eyes, when he was still alive, and then they come up with this: that it was wild fauna that skinned him. And why the face? Why the face, and not a hand, a foot? Why specifically the face? It will soon be one year without justice or explanations of what happened. And what about our pain? My brother was from Estado de México and had just started at the Rural Teachers’ College of Ayotzinapa a month ago, they had just begun to know each other. How is it possible? How is it possible that they made this injustice to him? They wanted to stain the memory of my brother. I hope that it won’t repeat itself and other families must suffer what we suffer in this moment. We are fighting for it never to happen again (public speech, Lenin Mondragón, El Colegio de México, Mexico City, September 9, 2015).
On the day of Julio’s exhumation for the second autopsy, a ceremony was held in Mexico City to symbolically reconstruct his face with colourful sawdust from his family’s village. After the second necropsy, Julio’s corpse was held for no reason at the PGR’s morgue in Mexico City, denying his family a reburial. *El Rostro de Julio* made a public statement critiquing the Mexican state’s revictimization of Julio César and demanded that his corpse be handed back to his family. It was not until February 2016, three months later, that Julio’s body finally returned for reburial. The second autopsy indeed proved the “wild fauna” hypothesis wrong, provided evidence that Julio had been subjugated to morbid torture and determined that this torture was the cause of his death (press communique, Colectivo El Rostro de Julio, January 3, 2017).

Julio’s face became a powerful symbol. It did not scare people away from the streets but instead made many Mexicans engage in activism in solidarity with his surviving family. The case of the 43 disappeared students, however, remains unsolved to this day. The new MORENA administration under current President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO, 2019-), who managed to break the PRI and PAN parties’ long monopoly on the presidency, set up a now-ongoing truth commission last year (2019) that may yet bring truth, forensic consensus, justice, and closure to the families and resolve the case.

Awaiting the results of the truth commission, the Pandora’s box of Mexico’s necropolitics remains wide open. The criminal necropower on display in the Iguala massacre manifested itself through acts of spectacular violence, disappearance of bodies, and improper management of forensic investigations. The illicit drug business and authoritarian regimes often seek social control through fear (Berlanga 2015; Gibler 2016). Criminal agents territorialize disputed *narco plazas* (smuggling routes and trade zones) in undeclared drug wars, marking them with morbid violence and dismembered bodies in a politics of fear meant to help them maintain their monopoly on violence and profits (Berlanga, 2015; Pereyra, 2012). The Mexican state’s war on drug cartels, and alleged cooperation with some of them, also partake in this geography of terror by exercising control through acts of state violence (Berlanga 2015; Pereyra 2012). But Ayotzinapa is also the story of the breakdown of macabre regimes of necrogovernance (Berlanga 2015; Robben 2016; Rojas-Perez 2017), when the stubborn struggle for truth and justice by a collective of *campesinos*—now paraphrasing Adrianita once more—challenged “the government with its weapons and its tricks.”

**Corporate Necropower: Pasta de Conchos**

Political protests can become commemorative ceremonies that live on for decades in stubborn calls for justice. This is the case with the annual remembrance ceremony and protest event
staged by the working-class families of the miners who died in the mineshaft explosion in Pasta de Conchos in 2006. The surviving families still congregate on the streets in Polanco, Mexico City, outside of Grupo México’s head office, once annually on February 19, the anniversary of the accident.

A mineshaft collapse is not unique in itself. What separates Pasta de Conchos is that the 63 dead workers’ bodies were never excavated. Their corpses remain in the moist earth of the collapsed mineshaft, as Grupo México called off the mission to recover the bodies on April 4, 2007. This is the cause of the prolonged anger of the OFPC, which continues to demand that the bodies be recovered and with their call to arms proclaiming: “¡Rescate Ya!” (Excavate Now!).

Grupo México’s search for the trapped miners was first paused on February 24, 2006, due to the high levels of gas inside the mine. On the 25th, the company claimed in a press conference that there could be no survivors from the methane gas explosions that had occurred in two of the tunnels. Mineworkers had complained about high levels of gas and poor security conditions in the months before the explosion happened. The Pasta de Conchos mine was already infamous for its poor working conditions among miners and their families. But Grupo México had not listened to any concerns about the insecure working conditions. When they paused the rescue mission, the level of gas in the shafts was, in fact, similar to what the miners had to work in daily. Only two bodies were recovered before the rescue operation was called off.

The annual protest that surviving relatives carry out at the company’s gates often sees the participation of other collectives of similar tragedies in Mexico, such as the Families of Ayotzinapa and the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity (MPJD), another group of relatives of victims of the drug war.

Padre Gustavo, who belongs to the latter, prepared for communion during the annual ceremony I took part in, standing in the protective shadow of a small tent at a table that had a large white tablecloth on top off it. The tent and our gathering occupied most of the sidewalk and made it inconvenient for the office workers at Grupo México’s headquarters to enter and leave their workplace. A mariachi played corridos and then we got together in a circle, holding each other’s hands, and said all the names of the 63 unrecovered mineworkers out loud, adding: “Presente” (present), a call for the souls of the dead workers to be there with us. After all names had been called out, we cried “¡Justicia!” and then our gathering resorted to chanting more slogans: “¡No más no honrar las víctimas!” (No more of not honoring the victims!), “¡Ya Basta la injusticia!, ¡Ya Basta un México sin Memoria!” (Enough injustice! Enough of a Mexico
without memory!), “¡Murió por culpa de la empresa Grupo México!” (He died because of the company Grupo México!).

This took place in February 2015, on the ninth annual commemoration of the Pasta de Conchos tragedy. It was yet another chance for the surviving families to display their grief in the capital to demand their lost loved ones’ bodies back. Representatives from the Families of Ayotzinapa were also there on the sidewalk protesting the disgraceful handling of the tragedy. A small stage had been set up outside the company’s entrance. Several lines of small foldable plastic chairs stood in front of the stage. The widows and relatives then gave their testimonies and read statements at this mix of religious commemoration ceremony and political protest. Remembrance as activism.

Silvia, one of the widows of Pasta de Conchos, walked up on the small stage, and we listened to her proclaim: “The tragedies of the coal mines are not accidents, they are not spontaneous events, they happen because of the company’s negligence, by omission, complacency, and corruption among the majority of the mining companies . . .” (public speech, Silvia, Polanco, Mexico City, February 19, 2015). Margarita then followed suit and began speaking:

_Tres presidentes, tres administraciones, de dos partidos diferentes, el PRI y el PAN, y el caso no está cerrado. Representamos más de seiscentos familiares directos. No queremos más muertos en las minas de carbon, ni violaciones de las normas de seguridad. Somos de la región más pobre del estado. Todo la riqueza de la extracción de carbon queda en los manos de los dueños de la minas y del gobierno de Coahuila, a todos menos nosotros las familias mineras y nuestros comunidades. Ellos no cambian, no importa de que partido o de cual empresa son, todos actuan igual… El Grupo México contamió y destruyó el Río Sonora, y a travéz de un siglo de minería industrial, las empresas son responsables por la desastre ecológico y ambiental, nos hemos dejado en este desastre ecológico en el que nosotros, las familias mineras, tenemos que vivir. En nombre de nuestro muertos, en nombre de los mineros de Pasta de Conchos que vamos a rescatar, y en nombre de miles de personas que vivieron en nuestros pueblos exigimos el rescate de Pasta de Conchos! Tenemos también el derecho de la vida, a la salud y un nivel de vida digno. Llegamos al este nueveno memorial para honrar a nuestros muertos. Todos nos pertenecen a nosotros. No a las empresas. No a Grupo México, ni al gobierno, todos son nuestros. Honramos nuestro muertos. La vida, nuestras vidas, vale más que el carbón. Decimos que el caso de Pasta de Conchos no está cerrado. Vamos a rescatar nuestros familiares._
Three presidents, three administrations from two different parties, the PRI and the PAN, and yet the case is not closed. We represent over six hundred concerned relatives. We do not want more people to be killed in the coal mines, nor more security violations. We come from the poorest region of the state. All of the riches from the coal extraction have stayed in the hands of the owners of the mines and the Coahuila state government, gone to everyone but the families of the miners and our communities . . . They will not change. It doesn’t matter what party they belong to or what company might be in charge. They all act the same . . . Grupo México polluted the Sonora River, and after a century of industrial mining the companies are responsible for an ecological disaster that we have been left with and that we, the families, must live in. In the name of our dead, in the name of the miners of Pasta de Conchos that we shall rescue, and in the name of the thousands of people who live in our communities, we demand a rescue mission for Pasta de Conchos! We also have the right to a worthy life, to health, to a level of life that grants dignity . . . We’ve come to this ninth commemoration to honor our dead. They all belong to us. Not to the companies. Not to Grupo México. Nor to the government. They are all ours. We honor our dead. Life, our lives, are worth more than coal. The Pasta the Conchos case is not closed, we will recover our relatives (public speech, Margarita, Polanco, Mexico City, February 19, 2015).

The fact that Margarita had to rhetorically reclaim their dead this way points to the fact that it is the company and state institutions, such as the court system sympathetic to it, which dictate the terms and rights over the dead bodies here. Under conventional circumstances, the “honoring of the dead” is done through burials, but in this case the company’s refusal to pay for a prolonged rescue mission to recover the corpses, and Mexico’s justice system’s refusal to force them, prevents it. For it is the treatment of the dead bodies, and the fact that the corpses remain beneath the earth in the mineshafts, that continues to outrage the OFPC today and makes them congregate in these political commemorative events thousands of miles south of Coahuila every now and then. The fact that their dead remain unburied.

When I took part in the ceremony, the OFPC had performed this commemorative protest for almost ten years. A decade of demanding that the bodies of their dead be brought up to daylight from the dark tunnels where they were left to be honored by proper reburials.

Bernabé Abraján also addressed the widows of Pasta de Conchos that day, as we heard in the opening vignette, expressing a profound solidarity with their plight, one that he himself knew only too well. Abraján gave voice to a universal ethics of commemoration saying: “Luchamos por los restos de sus familiares, que tienes el derecho a rescatar que puedas darles
“una buena sepultura. Tenerlos, pues, darles flores. Realmente es muy doloroso lo que estamos pasando” (We fight for the remains of your family members, which you have a right to have taken out so you can give them a good grave. Have them, give them flowers. It really is very painful what we are going through) (public speech, Bernabé Abraján, Polanco, Mexico City, February 19, 2015).

The unburied dead lack ritual closure, their souls never seem to find peace, and their relatives can never be at ease. They are stuck in emotional limbo and a state of never-ending, untamed grief. Surviving relatives’ grief and anger, in turn, now drives the nation and its contemporary protests forward with repetitious displays of public acts of mourning that shame state institutions and corporations alike in a stubborn pursuit of justice for victims. Not only do they deploy a politics of visibility on the streets of Polanco, but they also utilize a strategic evocation of shared and shareable emotions, such as grief, anger, pain, and hope, to make wider society sympathize with them (Noble 2015; Rivera Hernández 2017; Sanjurjo 2017) as they claim their right to have their dead husbands brought back for a final farewell—fighting again the company’s “right” to withhold the bodies of the dead to save costs.

Pasta de Conchos left 64 widows and 160 orphans. After 13 years of court proceedings, Grupo México has, astoundingly, not yet been forced to recover the bodies, and the concerned relatives persist with their protest commemorations along with their shaming of the mining company for its flagrant indifference toward the workers and their families. The OFPC keeps on reclaiming their moral ownership of their dead as its members strive to uphold their relatives’ rights to “a good grave.”

In March of 2018, the case was admitted before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR, or CIDH in Spanish) who stated in its report, “Report 12/18”, that the company did not comply with the security norms. It also recognized the Mexican government’s failure to uphold the dead miners’ rights to life; personal integrity; access to justice; and economic, social, and cultural rights as protected in articles 4, 5, 8, 25, and 26 of the American Convention on Human Rights (CIDH, Informe No.12/18 Petición 178–10 2018). Mexico’s current President AMLO has now promised to recover the miners, but until that day comes, the Pasta de Conchos case remains a reminder of grave corporate negligence in which profits from mineral extraction took precedence over decency and the right to life.

Corporate necropower in Mexico must, of course, be seen in the light of the nation’s generalized state of impunity, which allows conventional corporations such as Grupo México—Mexico’s largest mining firm and the world’s third largest copper producer, which is run by chairman and CEO Germán Larrea, one of Mexico’s richest men—to exploit workers in this
shocking way. In a situation “dominated by the parallel power of organized crime, paramilitary violence, and impunity,” or what has been called the “neo-extractivist economy” (Gledhill 2017, 2014: 507), the boundaries between violent entrepreneurship and conventional ones dissolve. David Harvey was reflecting on something similar with his term “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2004). However, what makes contemporary Mexico stand out is how the criminal technique of withholding bodies is used as an instrument both in illicit drug markets and the neo-extractivist economy. Grupo México’s corporate necropower continues Latin America’s long history of commodification and exploitation of workers’ bodies, a history that reaches all the way back to the extractive regimes and exploitation of indigenous people in colonial times (Gibler 2016; Nash 1979; Taussig 1984). Similar regimes of necropower now live on in drug wars, kidnappings, forced labor, and human trafficking across the nation (Gibler 2016; Mastrogiovanni 2014; Reveles 2015).

Grupo Mexico’s continuing use of corporate necropower to control the fate of the dead workers’ remains creates contention, both in the courtrooms and on the streets. It is far from given that Grupo México will continue to dictate the terms, but what will be left to recover, grieve, and rebury if their grip lasts even longer? Corporate necropower comes with a more sophisticated method of silencing in comparison to the macabre violence of the narco cartels or corrupt state agents seen in the Ayotzinapa case. It aims to erase the memories of corporate abuse and secure profits, but it perpetuates unfinished grief and family trauma in ways just as unsettling as the legacies of war or violence. That is why the annual ceremonies of the OFPC are important; they refuse to forget or cede ownership of what is theirs.

The ritualized annual protest event has—at least since the start of the commemorative march every October 2nd in memory of the Tlatelolco Massacre in 1968 and the movement of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires in the ’80s—been part of the standard repertoire of Latin American collectives of victims who seek to make their claims heard and remembered so as to outlive the indifference of the administrations in power for the time being. These public displays of grief are simultaneously brave acts of defiance that reclaim public space and social acts of mourning for the victims whom governments and corporations have reduced to expendables.

**Reclaiming the Dead: A Subversive Necropower**

In this chapter I have shown that Mexico’s contemporary necropolitics see different stakeholders (e.g., state institutions, federal prosecutors, international forensic experts, narco cartels, corporations, social movements) involved in political struggles for control over the
narratives surrounding the dead (GIEI Informe Ayotzinapa 2015; Robben and Ferrándiz 2016; Wright 2011). These stakeholders compete for the control over who is to live and who is to die, and for the power to decide who may be deemed worthy of a proper burial and which families can receive closure after death. Necropolitics should not merely be viewed with a state-centered lens, and necropower should not be seen purely as a top-down implementation of terror (Mbembe 2008; Robben 2016). Instead, I used necropolitics as an overarching unit of analysis to draw out how two of its features—state necrogovernance and corporate necropower—are met by a subversive protest repertoire.

Two field-research cases demonstrated how state necrogovernance (in the case of Ayotzinapa’s missing 43 students) and corporate necropower (on display in the case of the still-unburied mineworkers from Pasta de Conchos) both made the most of the impunity offered by the criminal technique of disappearing bodies to prevent justice and utilize fear as a means of social control. Necrogovernance renders some citizens, and corporate necropower workers, as expendable in the interests of capital accumulation, as seen in Grupo México’s unwillingness to exhume the dead workers in its mine. Narco state control over forensic evidence and criminal investigations can be used to hide state involvement in massacres and its potential links to the narco trade, as yet to be fully understood in the case of the Iguala massacre and its ongoing truth commission.

In both cases, it appears the regimes of state necrogovernance and corporate necropower are on the verge of breaking down—thanks to the OFPC and Fathers and Mothers of Ayotzinapa’s stubborn fight for justice. They use a wide repertoire of collective actions that may be understood as a strategic deployment of a certain subversive necropower. Through their public acts of grieving and a politics of emotions and visibility, they “cry out for the recognition of the lives of their dead . . . who should also be worthy of defense, courage, mourning, and memory” and seek to make their victims “seen, heard, and felt by others”, as they fight to reclaim their dead, their disappeared, and public spaces (Noble 2015; Rivera Hernández 2017; Robledo 2018; Sanjurjo 2017: 126).

These protest movements are somewhat different from how indigenous groups in Mexico have banded together in armed uprisings against capitalism in bids for autonomy (Gledhill, 2017; Guerra Manzo, 2015; Stephen, 2002), since these social movements of relatives of victims of violence instead draw upon non-violent protest-strategies that aim to find truth and justice for victims as well as announce state accountability. The OFPC and the Ayotzinapa Families reclaim public space in a contestation of “everyday passive revolution” (Morton,
when they take back the streets and important monuments, congregate at public squares or outside corporate headquarters, and dispel the politics of fear.

Photos of the victims appear on banners and T-shirts, testimonies are given at public squares, and the public narrative declares that “they have names, they had dreams, they are not numbers”. This reclaiming of Mexico’s dead and disappeared is acted out in annual commemorative events in collective protest performances that recall violent memories, much like the parade in memory of the Tlatelolco Massacre and the Mothers at Plaza de Mayo. They seek to make their victims mournable once more and restore a sense of human decency while mobilizing for truth and justice. This, I argued, should be understood as a subversive necropower that serves as a repertoire of collective action under contemporary regimes of necrogovernance.

Here echoes a timeless necromorality, that the dead must be honoured, that they must be buried, that the victims must have their humanity restored. This classic necromorality interweaves with contemporary human rights advocacy when the OFPC and Fathers and Mothers of Ayotzinapa use public protests and civil disobedience to force state institutions to take responsibility for the nation’s many victims, give them justice and grant them a good grave.

The next chapter will now focus on the mobile strategies Mexican social movements use in their politics of visibility and for their stubborn fight for justice.
Chapter II
Pilgrims of Grief

“Somos peregrinos del dolor” (We are pilgrims of grief) (public speech, María Herrera, in front of the PGR at el Paseo de la Reforma, Mexico City, October 15, 2014), doña María describes herself and other relatives of victims of violence. Doña María, who I befriended in the weekly meetings of the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity (MPJD), is a mother of four disappeared sons who she suspects were taken away by criminal groups in Guerrero. Her poetic description of activists as pilgrims fits well with something that I came to observe during my time accompanying families of disappeared persons in contemporary Mexico. That is, how close families walk in ritualistic street protests through Mexican cities with photos or T-shirts of their disappeared, and how they travel across the country in protest caravans to visualize their victims at zocalos and other public places. Relatives also tend to link their political struggles with strong religious symbolism: They carry figures of saints with them, for example, La Virgen de Guadalupe (the Virgin of Guadalupe—a local manifestation of the Virgin Mary and Mexico’s patron saint). Or, as doña María does above, they compare their activism to Catholic pilgrims who go to holy sites and maintain their faith that their disappeared can suddenly resurrect, reappear out of the shadows and enter the light of our world anew.

This description of activists as pilgrims of grief is illuminating in several other ways as it points to their martyr-like victimhood that appeals to the outside world and public authorities. The activists tend to explicitly encourage state representatives and institutions to act through their testimonies and by casting light on the personal and transformative journeys that they have found themselves pursuing. Close family, often with no earlier experience of activism or human rights advocacy, start on the path to becoming activists, perhaps even moving towards what scholars used to call “empowerment” (Craig & Mayo 2004; Parpart, Rai & Staudt 2002). They move away from their lone grito de dolor (cry of pain) towards the political movement’s collective grito de indignación (cry of indignation).

This chapter looks at the research questions how Mexican activists and their repertoires of collective actions build on similar movements before, and what they may add and help to establish themselves? It will detail the transformative process activists may experience by telling the personal biography of the activist doña Maria of the MPJD and the stories of the Caravan of Central American Mothers to illustrate how activists both draw from and add to an
existing repertoire of collective actions as they “learn to… stage public marches, petition, hold formal meetings, organize special-interest associations” (Tilly 1995: 26). I also examine “collective claim-making and regularities in the ways people band together to make their demands heard across time and space” (Auyero 2006: 166). While the last chapter looked at necropolitics, civil disobedience and efforts to reclaim ownership of victims’ bodies, this chapter shall, more specifically, highlight another aspect of Mexican activists’ repertoires, namely their use of a touring model to travel across the nation with caravans to stage protests (Rivera Hernández 2017; Varela Huerta 2016a, 2016b).

Accompanying such travelling protests made me reflect on the essence of this activist strategy, a reflection at the heart of this chapter’s focus on what unfolds and happens during this journey. Whatever the outcomes, these activists engage in a militant activism and direct action to bring light to grave human rights violations, and they throw away their victimhood, or make use of it, to become political interlocutors.

Empowerment may not be an adequate term to describe this process. Rather, both disappeared victims—especially missing migrants—and their surviving relatives’ are in transit (Varela Huerta 2016a); they are in many ways stuck in a liminal phase, an existential grey zone, or a sort of no-man’s-land where action is required for things to happen. Before the truth can come out and justice can prevail, bodies must be found, dug up from mass graves, returned home and reburied. As the Caravan of Central American Mothers describe, they must create “puntes de esperanza” (bridges of hope).

Faith is important to the political movements as well as to the activists I befriended who tended to connect their struggles to the suffering of Jesus. In the words of the founder of the MPJD, don Javier Sicilia, Jesus “was also murdered and judged for political reasons” (Azaloa 2012b: 164). Christian tradition has been dominated by the “dying God in the shape of a suffering man” (Brandes 1998: 195), and in that sense, Christianity promotes the suffering body as a universal symbol of identification, now also a pervasive idea in humanitarian and academic discourse (Fassin 2012; Robbins 2013; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004;). Relatives of victims are on an almost holy mission when they campaign, search for their disappeared throughout Mexico and pressure authorities by marching up to their gates or mobilizing spectators with their testimonies. This, I believe, just like don Javier and doña María Herrera, parallels the story of Christ, in which his body disappeared but was later resurrected, as well as the journey of Catholic pilgrims to holy sites in the hopes of witnessing miracles. Families of the disappeared find comfort in their faith in God as they are supported by activist priests, such as padre Gustavo and padre Alejandro Solalinde—famous in Mexico for running several
migrant shelters and for being nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize—and they pray together for their missing, who they tirelessly continue to search for and hope shall return home. The bodies of those who disappear vanish only to return in visual and material culture, like Jesus, whose body once mysteriously vanished from his tomb. Jesus is, in some senses, the first disappeared.

Surviving families constantly travel around the nation to arrange protest marches and visualize their lost loved ones through images and material culture such as protest placards. But these journeys far away from their homes also accentuate how their daily lives have entered a state of exception. Their grief has never been marked with closure, and thus they leave their homes in search for the missing bodies and to pressure authorities to make “things happen”. They are caught in emotional limbo. Families of the disappeared spread their heartfelt testimonies across Mexico and beyond, just like the first Christian pilgrims who allegedly went to Jesus’s tomb only to find it empty and who began to travel out in the world to preach. Mexico’s “pilgrims of grief” embark on arduous journeys, everlasting protest tours and roads seemingly without an exist, never stopping their endless calls for their disappeared to be brought back.

A Pilgrim of Grief: Becoming an Activist
Doña María, an elderly woman with short grey hair originally from the state of Michoacán, a widow since 2009 when her husband died of a heart attack, is, as mentioned before, a mother of four disappeared sons. She is also, since 2011, a member of the MPJD. Doña Maria, now in her late sixties, has seen half of her family taken away in “forced disappearances”, the new legal term that María and other activists have managed to pass into law to describe kidnappings. A mother of eight children, she has now spent over a decade looking for her four missing sons. Before her sons were kidnapped, María’s family worked with metals in Michoacán, southeast of Mexico: “Antes me consideraba una dona de casa que cuidaba a mi familia, pero luego mi vida cambió drásticamente. No sé cómo llamar a este horror, qué palabras usar para describir este dolor que estamos viviendo” (Before I thought of myself as a housewife who took care of my family, but then my live changed dramatically. I don’t know what to call this horror, what words to use to describe this pain we are living through) (interview, María Herrera, Estela de Luz, Mexico City, September 18, 2014). Maria describes her situation and her new life as an activist mourner as we talk shortly before one of the MPJD’s many protests and remembrance ceremonies held by surviving families in the name of their lost loved ones.
Pajacarán, the community where María and her family come from and where she still lives, has traditionally been home to an active trade in metalworking and the selling of copper, silver and gold. In recent years, however, this business has attracted interest from criminal groups who have made their presence increasingly known in the violence-torn state. Her two sons Raul and Salvador, who first disappeared, were kidnapped together in 2008, supposedly by a criminal group in the neighbouring state of Guerrero while on their way home from work.

Doña María and the remaining brothers began looking for them and started the organization *Familiares en Búsqueda* (Searching Relatives). “*No sabíamos qué hacer o cómo hacerlo*” (We didn’t know what to do or how to do it) (interview, María Herrera, Estela de Luz, Mexico City, September 18, 2014), Maria explains it now, looking back. But then and there she managed to assemble the strength to start her own activist organization to push for change and pressure Mexican authorities to conduct proper investigations and serve justice. She relentlessly called on municipal and state authorities and demanded that they search for her sons and investigate their case. In 2010, after two years of activism and campaigning on their own, when the family was out of money after spending their time searching for Raul and Salvador, María and her remaining family went back to the metal business. She had become a widow the year before, to add to the difficulties that the family already faced. And unfortunately, misfortune seldom comes alone, or, as a Mexican proverb says: “Death stops by the rich, too, but first visits the poor twice”. Disaster struck again when her two remaining sons back in Pajacarán, working in the metal trade once more to support the family, were disappeared as well.

Pajacarán has seen several more of its community members disappear over the years apart from doña María’s four sons as the metal trade has become a new source of income and a lucrative business for the narco cartels. The neighbouring community Chéran, also in Michoacán, has seen its village attacked by armed men and corrupt police who sought to take control over the mahogany trees in the area that are used to make luxurious furniture and wood panels in, for instance, Rolls Royce cars. Michoacán’s natural resources have become hot trade and a booming business for criminal organizations, especially the infamous narco cartels such as the Knights Templars and *La Familia Michoacana* (The Michoacán Family), who operate in the state and seek to take control over its rich natural resources as they diversify their business (Aguirre Ferreyra 2015; Domínguez Guadarrama 2016; Gledhill 2017, 2015: 107; Guerra Manzo 2015; Paleta Pérez & Fuentes Díaz 2013; El Proceso 2012-06-12; The New York Times 2014-02-03).

Several indigenous communities in Michoacán, including both Chéran and Pajacarán, have taken up arms to protect themselves and their villages from the narco cartels and formed *Grupos*
de Autodefensa Comunitaria (community self-defence groups). Initially, they were very successful in throwing out the cartels and keeping corrupt police away, but fortune turned again as federal authorities became increasingly worried about the new self-defence groups and the potential challenge they might pose to the federal government. The former leader of the self-defence groups, Dr José Manuel Mireles Valverde from Tepalcatepec, was arrested and put in a high-security prison. A place, one would think, better suited for the leaders of the narco cartels that harassed the state rather than the civilians who stood up to them.

Meanwhile, doña María and her family followed another path. They “Llamamos a todas las puertas de las autoridades” (knocked on all the doors of the authorities) to receive answers and help, but when they pushed for truth and proper investigations, they instead got threats from the municipal and state authorities. She then joined the nationwide organization, the MPJD, founded in 2011 by the journalist and poet Javier Sicilia, from Cuernavaca, after his son was shot dead out on the streets of the city and termed “collateral damage”. Don Javier Sicilia vowed, in his grief, to never write poetry again. As an immediate response to his son’s murder, he started a campaign against violence meant to pressure the government to stop its frequent use of lethal force and to halt the deployment of the army in “the war against drugs”. He also called for prosecutors to investigate all killings and disappearances properly. This soon became a nationwide caravan that turned into a social movement as more and more relatives of victims of both criminal and state violence joined in.

The MPJD has tried peaceful protests, it has turned to and pleaded with—rather than challenged—Mexican authorities to take responsibility. Doña María and the other families of the MPJD tend to show up outside of the gates of federal or municipal institutions to light candles and perform religious ceremonies for the victims so that politicians, media and fellow citizens cannot close their eyes to the problem but must instead see the evidence before them of the nation’s many victims. While the MPJD has a predominantly urban middleclass base and includes academics and professionals (many of the academics involved, like don Sicilia himself, are mainly based in Mexico City, Cuernavaca, and Xalapa in Veracruz), this is not always the case. Doña María, one of their most vocal members who often give speeches at their events, comes from the poorer and rural Michoacán.

After joining the MPJD, she became a travelling activist touring the nation alongside don Javier and other mourners, frequently going to the capital to participate in their protest performances. At the same time, she started working as a seamstress, sewing school uniforms for kids nearby in Pajacarán:
Me considero una persona emprendedora porque yo tenía un tallercito donde fabricaba uniformes escolares y los vendía ahí en los lugarcitos circunvecinos al pueblo, en los ranchitos y yo de ahí sacaba mi sustento. Pero la vida ha cambiado por completo y todavía también soy una peregrina del dolor.

I consider myself an entrepreneur since I had a little workshop fabricating school uniforms which I sold to places close by in the village, to the small ranches, and that was how I made a living. But life has changed completely and I’m also a pilgrim of grief (interview, María Herrera, Estela de Luz, Mexico City, September 18, 2014).

She searched for her four sons everywhere, she says, travelling the country to mobilize for justice and to put pressure on Mexican authorities to push for proper investigations of criminal cases. On the road, she grew accustomed to telling her story in public speeches to encourage fellow citizens to help when the authorities didn’t lift a finger.

Nowadays, at times, she participates in the weekly meetings held at the House of Solidarity in the neighbourhood Benito Juárez in Mexico City, it is a place where the MPJD meets to plan its actions, and where her friends doña Yolanda Baron and the priest Gustavo, both living in Mexico City, also participate. However, she cannot participate as often as she likes since it is a long way for her to travel. She comes to the capital for the protests and commemorative events that the MPJD stages here at important dates for the families.

In the autumn of 2014, when I met her for the first time, these weekly meetings and the efforts of the MPJD transformed into what became known as La Plataforma con Solidaridad de Ayotzinapa (the Solidarity Platform for Ayotzinapa). This platform brought several social movements together in order to help coordinate efforts to find the 43 disappeared students from Guerrero. The platform involved unions, social movements, human rights organizations, student representatives from student assemblies across the Universities in the capital, survivors of the attack and co-students of the 43 missing, along with the Parents of Ayotzinapa.

The movement that was born through the indignation for Ayotzinapa presented an opportunity for all the different social movements and political groups across the nation to come together and work for a mutual cause under the same banner: the Ayotzinapa 43. Together, they became a strong nationwide movement that pressured the Mexican government, as well as the PGR who handled the case, to push for justice in cases of disappearances and violent deaths, which was why María and many others also joined in. This massive wave of protests, the powerful “cry of indignation”, held Mexico in a firm grip during my time there and would shake Mexican society and its political institutions to their core. This political uprising saw much larger crowds than what don Javier Sicilia, doña María and those involved in the MPJD
managed to assemble in 2011 in their own nationwide cry of indignation—*La Hasta la Madres* (Fed Up) campaign. This new platform also inspired far greater nationwide solidarity and support than the community self-defence groups of Dr Mireles.

When I first met doña María in early September 2014, she had come to the informal memorial site at Estela de Luz along the avenue el Paseo de la Reforma in central Mexico City, where the MPJD comes to commemorate the involved families disappeared loved ones. At Estela de Luz, the members of the MPJD pray and perform religious ceremonies together as a group of activist mourners. These families all share the same tragic circumstance of having a kidnapped loved one, a *desaparecido* (disappeared) brother, sister, mother or father, and are themselves “sisters and brothers”, or “*compañeros en la lucha*” (comrades in the struggle). On that day, doña María Herrera was dressed in white from top to toe and was surrounded by her remaining family.

This day, they were also accompanied by padre Gustavo who led them in prayers. Doña María gave us her testimony. Her voice was low at first, with tears in her eyes as she spoke. Although she had grown accustomed to giving public speeches like this, it still clearly affected her when she did so. She now assembled her strength once more and began her testimony to the small crowd at the site:

*Estoy frente a ustedes con mi triste historia. El 28 de agosto del 2008 desaparecieron dos a mis hijos en Atoyac de Álvarez, en el Guerrero. Dos años después, desaparecieron otros dos de mis hijos, Gustavo y Luis. Fuimos a las autoridades, pero nunca nos ayudaron. ¡Intentan hacer invisibles a mis hijos desaparecidos! Hasta ahorita han estado desaparecidos durante seis y cuatro años. No pasó nada. Nuestra vida ha sido destruida totalmente, atrapadas en este momento y situación que nunca pasa. Sentimos este dolor, sentimos esta frustración. Nuestros corazones están rotos. No hay palabras para eso. ¡Tenemos que convertir la indignación en la digna acción! Sentimos esta rabia, la rabia de tener un ser querido arrancado, quitado de ti, del mundo. Y le pregunto al presidente: ¿cuántas familias más? ¿Cuántos tendrán que perder a sus hijos y nietos, cuántas madres tendrán que perder a sus hijas o hijos? Mi corazón está con todas las familias que sufren lo que nosotros sufrimos. ¡Ni uno más desaparecido! Les estamos diciendo a las autoridades que no nos rendiremos, continuaremos buscando nuestros desaparecidos. Con dignidad. Este grito de dolor también tiene fuerza.*

I stand before you with my sad story. On August 28, 2008, two of my sons, Salvador and Raúl, disappeared in Atoyac de Álvarez, in Guerrero. Two years later I had two more of my sons disappeared, Gustavo and Luis. We went to the authorities, but they
never helped us. They try to make my disappeared sons invisible! They have been missing for six and four years now. Nothing has happened. Our lives have become completely destroyed, trapped in this moment and situation that never pass. We feel this pain, we feel this frustration. Our hearts are broken. There are no words for it. We must turn the indignation to dignified action! We feel this rage, the rage of having someone that you love ripped away, taken from you, from the world. And I ask the president: How many more families? How many must lose their children and grandchildren, how many mothers must lose their daughters or sons? My heart is with all the families that suffer what we suffer. Not one more disappeared! We are telling the authorities that we won’t give up, we will continue to search for our missing. With dignity. This cry of pain also has strength (public speech, María Herrera, Estela de Luz, El Paseo de la Reforma, Mexico City, September 18, 2014).

After doña María had spoken, she received hugs from her family and friends in the audience. Some minutes later, we all held each other’s hands, praying to Nuestro Señor Jesus Cristo, and then we repeated the names of the victims commemorated on this day. Then, we called out “Presente” (be present), like an invocation for the disappeared to be there with us, which was repeated for each and every one. We finished the ceremony by calling out together, “¡Vivos se los Llevaron!, ¡Vivos los Queremos!” (They Took Them Alive, We Want Them Back Alive!). This call for the disappeared to be returned home to their loved ones echo again and again in ceremony after ceremony, protest after protest, year after year. This way, surviving families’ grief in Mexico turns into a political slogan that captures the process of how mourners become activists; it tells the story of how terror and trauma slowly evolve into a political awakening that shall shake and remake society, but it comes as a tough personal journey, a pilgrimage to open the nation’s eyes to one’s sorrow.

After her first two sons disappeared, doña María didn’t know what to do. In her desperation, she went to Morelia to look for them, walked out on the city zócalo (main square) and cried out into the air: “¡¿Dónde están mis hijos?! ¡¿Dónde están mis hijos?! ¡¿Dónde están mis hijos?!” (Where are my boys?!), thinking that she was the only one in Mexico with such a heavy grief to carry, and without anyone to listen. Here at Estela de Luz, in Mexico City, these calls are better heard, now through the voice of an entire group of mourners who stand together in honour of their disappeared. The lone relative’s desperate grito de dolor (cry of pain) has transformed into a collective voice as a grito de indignación (cry of indignation). After the protest ceremony on that day, María Herrera said: “For me every day is a nightmare but joining MPJD made me reborn. I learned how to fight with dignity. I won’t stop searching for my sons until the last
minute of my life has come” (interview, María Herrera, Estela de Luz, El Paseo de la Reforma, Mexico City, September 18, 2014).

A Touring Model: The Caravan of Central American Mothers

The Caravan of Central American Mothers come to Mexico annually to search for missing migrants. No one knows exactly how many Central American migrants have gone missing in Mexico on their way north during their pursuit of the American Dream. For many, Mexico is a transit country (Varela Huerta 2016a, 2016b), a space to cross towards a goal, but this crossing of international borders often turns into a nightmarish labyrinth. Migrants must navigate bureaucratic border controls and criminal groups fighting for control over territories and bodies, and it is a dangerous place where they may get lost forever and never come out of alive (De León 2016). Migrants are perhaps the best illustration of how different groups in society reflect their own interests upon certain populations. Governments may seek to portray migrants as a national security risk to sway voters, while vigilante border militias attempt to guard their nation’s borders and ethnic composition from them. Migrants themselves embark on the dangerous journey in the search for a better future, while relatives back home end up searching for them.

In an overcrowded flat at Jumil—the street above mine in the south of Mexico City—lived a group of Central American migrants who I befriended. They were all on their way to the United States in search of work but had become temporarily stuck on the road along that arduous pursuit. There were nine guys sleeping in a small two-room flat. Most of them didn’t have proper beds but rather slept on cardboard paper. Seven of the migrants were young men, and among them was José, from Nicaragua, and Miguel, from Guatemala, both in their early twenties. José loved to play on gaming machines next to the subway station close to where they lived in Santo Domingo, and he always wore his cap backwards. Miguel had been working as a kitchen assistant in a restaurant in Guatemala for a couple of years, but his dream was to go the United States to take a similar job and save money so he could start a Guatemalan restaurant of his own one day. Aron, also from Guatemala, had lived most of his life in New York, and he still had his wife and two kids in Brooklyn. He had recently been arrested at his workplace and deported for not holding a green card. He had first arrived in the United States, carried by his mother, when he was only a baby, and he was now in his mid-thirties. Together with the thirty-eight-year-old Bartolomé, also from Guatemala, they tried to take care of the younger guys who they shared the flat with and sought to keep them out of trouble and keep them motivated.
One late afternoon before I had them all over for dinner, I found myself running up and
down the busy Ahuanusco street in Santo Domingo to buy tortillas from the tortillerías, quesillo
(Oaxaca cheese), avocados, onion, green chili, meat, beer and all the other stuff needed for a
classic taco dinner. I had just finished cleaning the flat when they all arrived, sitting down in
what soon became a rather crowded living room. Chavela, who I shared flat with, and our friend
Jorge were also there. As we were eating around the table, Aron told us about how he and
Bartolomé were trying to turn their two-room apartment into a mini migrant shelter. They hoped
to get hold of a larger place in the future and arrange English classes (Aron was fluent in English
after all his years in New York) to keep their minds off the things they had experienced on their
way there and to prepare for the continuation of their journeys—and potentially new lives—
north of the last border they still had to cross. Many of them had already experienced robberies
or assaults while travelling on el tren de la muerte (the train of death, as the cargo trains that
migrants climb onto to travel across Mexico have come to be called). It is easy to fall into
depression or destructive living when one gets stuck on the road, when one’s life path is halted,
or one’s future becomes uncertain. Aron told me that he had developed these short-term plans
since it was “simplemente demasiado peligroso para cruzar en este momento” (simply too
dangerous to cross at the moment) (conversation, Aron, Jicote, Santo Domingo, Mexico City,
December 5, 2015). He had decided to wait a few months until his next try as many migrants
were disappearing or being used as forced labour by the narco cartels, and corpses were
frequently found in mass graves in the northern states.

After dinner, hanging out of the window of my living room looking at the old street dog that
slept outside of my neighbour’s door, Aron smoked a cigarette while talking to his wife back
in Brooklyn on Viber. His young kids didn’t even know that their father had been deported
since they had decided to keep it a secret so as not to worry them. They thought he was away
working somewhere in the States. He couldn’t muster the strength to talk to them that night as
it was too emotional for him and he wanted to enjoy our company and have fun as we were all
laughing and drinking. This was the first time I had met Bartolomé, so when I got the chance—
he was the next one to have a cigarette while overlooking Jicote—I took the opportunity to ask
him why he had left Guatemala. He responded:

Tenía un trabajo nocturno en el puerto de la ciudad donde vivía. Me gustó. Pero son
los narcos quienes gobiernan allí, son dueños de toda la ciudad. Era peligroso ir a
trabajo durante la noche. Un día, un hombre armado del cartel me dijo que no saliera
de noche jamás. Estaba amenazado. Simplemente prohibieron a las personas salir
durante la noche. Entonces, no pude ir a trabajar.
I had a night job in the harbour in the city where I lived. I liked it. But it’s the criminals who rule there, they own the entire city. It was dangerous to go back and forth from work at night. One day, I was told by an armed man belonging to a criminal group not to go out at night at all anymore. I was threatened. They just forbade people to be out at night. So, then I couldn’t go to work (conversation, Bartolomé, Jicote, Santo Domingo, Mexico City, December 5, 2015).

Bartolomé’s experience appears to attest to how the narco cartels are using cargo ships to move their narcotics from country to country. They therefore are seeking control over strategic harbours across Central America, as well as seeking control over who is moving around within certain narco plazas (narco cartel-claimed smuggling territories or market places). No unwanted eyes are welcomed at night at such sites.

José, who was more of the quiet type, was texting. Aron joked that he was trying to get a Mexican girlfriend, but it is hard for the guys since they don’t have much money nor do they enjoy a particularly high status as Guatemalan migrantes (migrants). José, who spent much of his time and the little money he got hold of playing on the gaming machine close to the metro, hoped to one day get a big win. Miguel, on the other hand, said, when they left for the night, that he would cook dinner in their house next time, and that he would make “comida verdadera gutemalteca” (proper Guatemalan food).

They lived only temporarily in Mexico City, where el tren de la muerte passes by on the outskirts. They were waiting to gather enough money to continue their precarious journeys along the railway tracks of the train of death, whose long and dangerous railroad they now had covered about half of. They had come this far, and their spirits had not yet been broken by the harsh road they would have to continue to travel in order to reach the border in the north. They had great hopes for what awaited them further ahead and were eager to pursue the journey that lay in front of them, the uncertain caminos de la vida (life paths) that awaited them. Back home in Guatemala and other Central American countries, their families left behind await just as eagerly to hear news from them, praying and hoping that they will arrive safely.

One such relative left worrying in their home country was doña Cristina Murzia Zepeda from Honduras, a mother of two disappeared sons who vanished somewhere along the way when they migrated north. Doña Cristina belongs to the Mesoamerican Migrant Movement, which arranges an annual transnational activist caravan of mothers of missing migrants known as the Caravan of Central America Mothers. These mothers, as mentioned before, come to Mexico to search for missing migrants that are believed to have disappeared in the country on their way north. Her first son went missing back in 1987. She has come to Mexico in search of
her boys for almost twenty years now. The caravans started around ten years ago, but they were an outgrowth of earlier efforts, which Cristina was part of creating, by mothers of missing migrants attempting to organize themselves and collaborate in their searches for their disappeared loved ones in 1999.

When the Caravan of Central American Mothers comes to Mexico annually around November and December, the members tend to stay for about one month or so to try and find their missing loved ones or clues about what has happened to them and to pressure the authorities and the embassies to investigate their whereabouts. They carry out searches themselves by contacting migrant shelters run by the Catholic Church, calling detention centres, visiting towns they know their relatives had passed through on their way north, or, as they describe it themselves, “buscando la vida en los caminos de la muerte” (searching for life on the roads of death).

When the Caravan of Central American Mothers comes to Mexico each winter, it also meets with different non-governmental organizations (NGO:s) who may be able to help them find their missing. One such NGO is Periodistas de a Pie (Journalists on Foot). Together they held a meeting in December 2015 in a semi-lit room in a half-empty auditorium at UNAM in Mexico City, where I met with them. All of the thirty or so mothers were wearing white T-shirts with photos of their missing relatives, and they raised their concerns one by one to get advice from, and explain their situation to, the journalists present. Doña Cristina was among the first to speak, and she threw light on the outrageous bureaucratic obstacles that they face when Mexican authorities try to thwart the mothers annual caravan:

_Vengo representando ochocientas madres quienes tienen hijos desaparecidos también igual que nosotros. Vengo buscando a estos dos jóvenes desaparecidos, Orlando Murzia Zepeda y Alessandro Murzia Zepeda, esto muchacho vino mil novecientos ochenta y siete y el otro a dosmil dos. Y yo no he tenido notica ninguna de ellos. Entonces, quiero hacerles una pregunta: ¿Por qué nosotros cuando hemos venido aquí a México siempre encontramos personas desaparecidas? ¿Y por qué las autoridades aquí en el México no han encontrado a nadie? ¡Porque no buscan! Porque no sienten el dolor que estamos sintiendo._

_Y venimos exigiendo al gobierno que no nos niegan a las visas! Hemos venido aquí varias vecez y no nos quieren dar visas a las madres para buscar a nuestros hijos. Pido a el gobierno que nos ayuden. Darnos visas. Y vengo pidiendo también, en nombre de todas las madres que estamos aquí representando y que quedaron en nuestros países,
I have come to represent 800 mothers who also have disappeared sons just like us. I have come to search for two disappeared young men, Orlando Murzia Zepeda and Alessandro Murzia Zepeda. My boys came here in 1987 and the other in 2002. I haven’t heard any news about them. So, I want to raise a question: Why is it that every time we come here to Mexico we find missing people? And why have the Mexican authorities never been able to find a single one? Because they don’t search! Because they don’t feel the pain we are feeling.

We demand that the government stop denying us visas! We have come here several times and on various occasions they have refused to give visas to us mothers who search for our sons. I ask the government to help us instead. Give us visas! I also ask, in the name of all the mothers that we are here to represent who remain in our countries, that they make justice, that they punish those responsible who are murdering, who are kidnapping, who violate people. I have come in the name of all of us to demand that they find those who are missing. I think that the governments across all our nations really could help us if they just wanted to. But they don’t want to do it. It is not fair, all these years spent searching for my sons. How old I have become after more than twenty years searching for them. And no government give us any answers. It will cost what it will cost. This struggle has just begun. If I will die, there are others behind me, there will come other mothers behind me (testimony at activist meeting, doña Cristina Murzia Zepeda, UNAM, Mexico City, December 8, 2015).

Mexican municipal and federal authorities have done little to investigate the whereabouts of the many thousands of disappeared migrants in Mexico, or to DNA-identify the bodies that have been found, instead leaving it to the close family, such as the mothers involved in the caravan, to conduct their own informal searches. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM’s) Global Migration Data Analysis Centre, at least 6,915 migrants (both Mexican and Central American) died crossing the United States-Mexico border between 1998
and 2016, and 3000 more are officially reported to be missing, but many more Central American migrants go missing inside Mexico before they ever get to the border (IOM 2017: 77-79). While no one knows the exact statistics and the numbers vary a great deal, around 150,000 people are estimated to cross into Mexico from the south every year and several thousand are believed to have gone missing in the country over the years. According to the Mesoamerican Migrant Movement, there are at least 2000 disappeared migrants based on the reported cases from their own members. Some Mexican researchers have estimated 20,000 abducted migrants per year, 72,000-120,000 disappeared (between 2006 and 2015), 24,000 corpses in clandestine municipal graves and more than 40,000 unidentified bodies in public morgues (Varela Huerta 2016b: 32-33).

With limited resources, the Central American Mothers bring together families from several Central American countries to organize journeys to Mexico to contact authorities, visit morgues and migrant shelters, build contact networks with collectives of scholars and journalists, enlist human rights organizations, and appeal to some of the activist priests within the Catholic Church, such as padre Alejandro Solalinde who run shelters in Chiapas and Oaxaca, and is outspoken about the situation migrants face on their way north. The Mesoamerican Migrant Movement carried out their 13th transnational caravan in 2018, and thus when I met them in 2015, it was their 10th caravan in search of disappeared Central Americans inside Mexico.

Many migrants are thought to have been kidnapped by gangs who hold them for ransom money and women are believed to sometimes be forced into sex slavery, but some of Mexico’s narco cartels, such as los Zetas, have also been found to systematically kidnap migrants and force them to work for them—they then massacre those who they deem useless to them. This was found to be the case with the infamous San Fernando massacre of 72 migrants in Tamaulipas in 2010, with other narco fosas (mass graves) found in the same area in 2011 that contained another 193 bodies (Grayson 2017; Slack 2015; Varela Huerta 2016b: 35, 38).

Doña Martha is a relative of such a victim and was searching for her missing brother whose body was eventually found in one of Mexico’s many clandestine mass graves. She still travels with the caravan to demand justice and pressure authorities for answers about the exhumation of the mass grave where her brother’s body was identified and to make sure that the investigation and exhumation are progressing. She said this at the meeting:

*He venido a exigir justicia. Porque mi hermano murió en la masacre de Cedereyta, donde murieron muchos centroamericanos. Su cuerpo todavía está en esa fosa. Vengo a exigir justicia, para la demanda que ya tenemos, pues, que cumplan con las demandas que tenemos, porque solamente los dejan allí y no hemos tenido ningún resultado.*
Ningun informacion sobre como van. ¿Cómo va la investigación? Fueron nueve meses desde que enviamos nuestras demandas y no hemos tenido ninguna respuesta...

I have come to demand justice. My brother died in the massacre at Cedereyta\(^3\) where a lot of Central Americans died. His body is still in this mass grave. I come here to demand justice, make sure they comply with the demands that we have, because they have just left them there and we have not had any results. No information has come. How is the investigation going? It has now passed nine months since we sent our demands and we haven’t had any response… (testimony at activist meeting, doña Martha, UNAM, Mexico City, December 8, 2015).

When the mothers seek to trace the last known steps of their disappeared relatives, they face many dangers themselves, as Cristina reminded us earlier: “If I die, there will come other mothers behind me”. This is one of the main concerns for the Central American Mothers and their caravan. Doña Roxana Gómez Gally raised her safety concerns in the meeting they had with the journalists; she wanted to know how she could learn about her missing son’s whereabouts “in these vast places”, and wondered if it was too dangerous for her to go to the border area in the north herself to conduct searches where she suspects that her son vanished:

* Soy parte de Las Madres Contra Secuestros, venimos representando un montón de madres, ochocientas que están en búsqueda de sus hijos desaparecidos. Mis preguntas al equipo de periodistas son los siguientes: ¿Qué podemos hacer nosotros? Porque mi hijo no desapareció aquí en el D.F, mi hijo desapareció en Sonora. Hasta aquí hemos llegado, pero mi pregunta es: ¿cómo nosotros vamos saber sobre nuestros hijos en esos lugares tan grandes? ¿Podemos ir allí también, todo el camino (a Sonora)?

Yo he hecho hasta lo imposible, había enviado cartas a los centros de detención, carceles, a organizacones de derechos humanos. Pero nadie me ha mandado respuesta hasta el día de hoy. Se tiran la pelota, como dicen. Por eso estoy aquí, andando. Andamos en la caravana. Tengo poco información que he encontrado sobre mi hijo, él estuvo en el Hotel del Valley, de allí él salio, según un familiar del proprietario del hotel. Nadie más me ha mandado respuesta. Entonces yo quiero saber con quien yo puedo convocar? Mi pregunta es sobre la distancia de nosotras como madres, porque ellos se perdieron allá, allá, tan lejos en la frontera, ¿y se quiero hacerlo, llegar allí? Pero se dicen que es muy peligroso. Y se allá mi hijo ha perdío su vida y de repente yo la pierdo la mia, ¿qué quedará para mis otros hijos?*

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\(^3\) Nuevo León, where 49 migrants were found in a mass grave in 2012.
I’m part of Mothers Against Kidnappings and represent a lot of mothers, 800, who are searching for their sons who are disappeared. My questions to the team of journalists are these: What can we do? My son did not vanish here in Mexico City, my son disappeared in Sonora. We have come this far, but my question is: How can we come to learn about our sons in these vast places? Can we go there as well, all the way (to the border region of Sonora)?

I have tried until it was impossible. I have sent letters to detention centres and to human rights groups. But no one has responded to my letters until this day. They have dropped the ball, as they say. That is why I’m here, walking. We walk in the caravan. The little information I have found about my son is that he was at the Hotel del Valley, he went from there, according to a relative of the owner of the Hotel. But no one else has responded me. To whom can I turn? My question is about the distance for us mothers, because they vanished there, so far away at the frontier, and I want to go there, but they say it is very dangerous. If it was there my son lost his life and if I will lose mine, what will be left for my other sons? (testimony at activist meeting, doña Roxana Gómez Gally, UNAM, Mexico City, December 8, 2015).

Roxana and the other mothers who are forced to undertake their own private searches for their disappeared often refer to their struggle by saying “andamos aqui” (we are walking here), thus linking their political struggle to concrete movement in geographic space across international borders via the metaphor of walking. Much like the Parents of Ayotzinapa, the Caravan of Central American Mothers also tend to walk ritualistically in parades through inner cities with T-shirts or photos of their missing relatives. They walk to try and make things happen, to put an end to the emotional limbo that they share with the Families of Ayotzinapa, the MPJD, and other relatives of Mexico’s disappeared. They do not wait for their missing to come home by themselves or for authorities to act. They “walk” because of the failure of state institutions across Central and North America to provide safety for the transnational migrants who cross the borders between their countries.

First, their children had to leave their homes and go north because of poverty, disappearing on the dangerous roads in Mexico while seeking upward socio-economic mobility; then, the mothers have had to undertake their own journeys, following in the footsteps of their children, to try to find out what happened to them, all while facing the very real possibility of disappearing themselves and carrying with them their worries, just like Roxana when she wonders what will be left for her other children if she, too, loses her life.
The daily lives of migrant families tend to be characterized by rather precarious living conditions even before they set out on this dangerous journey to face the menaces of systematic disappearances and institutional indifference (De León 2015; Rivera Hernández 2017; Varela Huerta 2016a, 2016b). Doña Laura Sandival from Chichicastenango, Guatemala, highlighted this by proclaiming: “Nos cuesta ganar la vida, y yo hablo día por día. Nos cuesta ganar suficiente para nos mantener” (It is hard for us to make a living, I’m talking day by day. It costs us to gain enough for food) (testimony at activist meeting, doña Laura Sandival, UNAM, Mexico City, December 8, 2015). But what they lack in private resources, they make up for in collective moral force. Together as a collective of mothers, these poor peasants stubbornly advocate for human rights and shame Central and North American institutions by showing up and protesting at their gates, by demanding justice, truth and proper investigations. Laura Sandival, whose son has been disappeared for eight years, continued the meeting by denouncing Mexican authorities and the Guatemalan ambassador to Mexico:

Le pido al gobierno mexicano que tenga conciencia. ¡Les digo que tenía un hijo, tenía una mujer! El gobierno nos debe una deuda, y ellos ganan un salario, no es como nosotras, no tenemos nada, somos pobres. Le pedimos al embajador que nos ayudara. Andábamos hasta allí para pedirle ayuda, porque se supone apoyarnos, están aquí para ayudarnos. En todas las caravanas, nunca hay representantes que nos apoyen, y nunca aparecen en las reuniones que queremos con ellos. El embajador de Guatemala nos ignora. Exigimos que se ponga a trabajar, investigue nuestros casos, porque hay muchos casos de Guatemala. Queremos que haga su trabajo. Porque es nuestro dinero lo que paga para que él esté aquí, que estamos pagando a nuestros impuestos.

I ask the Mexican government to have a conscience. I tell you he had a son, he had a woman! The government owes us a debt, and they earn a salary, not like us, we have nothing, we are poor. We asked the ambassador to help us. We walked there to ask him for his help, because they are supposed to be here for us. In all the caravans, there are never any representatives who support us, and they never show up in the meetings we want with them. The Guatemalan ambassador ignores us. We demand that he gets to work, investigates our cases, because there are many cases from Guatemala. We want him to do his job. It is our money that pays for him to be here, the tax that we are paying (testimony at activist meeting, doña Laura Sandival, UNAM, Mexico City, December 8, 2015).

Los Caminos de La Vida: Ruined Life Paths and Miracles Along the Way
After the event at UNAM and before the mothers had lunch and then went elsewhere to continue their caravan’s long quest for their lost loved ones, I talked to doña Cristina Murzia Zepeda and asked her if she still believed it was possible to find her sons after so many years. At first, she answered, “Sí, cada año encontramos personas” (Yes, we always find people every year). Then she paused for a moment. She continued by telling me about a dream-vision she once had, a couple of years after her first son, Alessandro, had disappeared. In the dream, Cristina woke up in her home and found a coffin in her living room. A man was sitting in the corner of the room, and then he slowly walked to the casket and pointed at the corpse. “Miralo bien” (look closely), he said. “Este es su hijo” (this is your son). She approached the coffin and saw that indeed it was her son, “pero tenía una sonrisa en la cara, estaba en paz” (but he had a smile on his face, he was in peace). However, Cristina explained, “Nunca tuve un sueño como este sobre mi otro hijo” (I never had a dream like this about my other son). “Por eso” (therefore), she said, “ando aquí con todas las madres” (I walk here with all the mothers). (interview, doña Cristina Murzia Zepeda, UNAM, Mexico City, December 8, 2015). Cristina understood this almost divine foretelling about her son’s perishing as his soul’s last farewell to her, but also as an indication that her other missing son was still out there and could be saved.

Disappeared Central American migrants, like Alessandro and Cristiana’s other son Orlando, once set out searching for a new and better life, a pursuit brought about by the “push-and-pull factors” of poverty and violence in their home countries and the allure of the American Dream in the United States. Hundreds of thousands of young Central Americans embark on the dangerous roads across Mexico annually, climbing on top of cargo trains in the southern states on their way to the northern border. They get on the trains in Tabasco or Chiapas, but they must often walk for days after crossing the southern border illegally before reaching the first train station in Mexico. They also face robbery, assaults, dehydration and starvation along the way. As so many migrants die in accidents or assaults or simply go missing along the railway tracks, the cargo trains are known by many infamous names including la bestia (the beast), el tren de la muerte or el tren de los desconocidos (the train of the unknown). Migrants jump on and off moving trains and sleep on the roofs, exhausted, when it is easy to fall off. When migrants die along the railway, co-passengers tend to throw their shoes, tied together with their shoelaces, over electric cables to mark the place where a journey came to an end. Shoes that symbolizes walking, movement, one’s paths in life.

Los caminos de la vida (the paths of life) is a common phrase in Mesoamerica representing the idea of a life journey. It is often expressed by the word andar or its synonym caminar (to walk) by saying “andarlos” or “andar los caminos de la vida”, meaning “to walk or pursue
one’s life path”. To *andar* (walk) one’s *caminos* (roads) is thus a metaphor for pursuing one’s destiny, and in Mexico and Central America this is often associated with one’s pursuit of socioeconomic upward mobility, the rising out of poverty and earning of money so as to afford a better life elsewhere. *Caminos* are often, when they metaphorically signify life paths, seen as blocked or arduous to walk: “*Los caminos de la vida... Son muy deficil de andarlos... Yo no encuentro la salida*” (The paths of life... are hard to walk... I cannot find the exit), as a popular salsa song by *Los Diabolitos* poetically says it. One’s life paths are also imagined to be mysterious, only for God to know. They are thus seen as difficult, wrapped in melancholia and unpredictability. Doña Claudia Rosas Cartagena of the Caravan of Central American Mothers made an explicit connection between their efforts to *andar los caminos de la vida* (to walk their life paths) and heartache by saying that: “*Nuestra corazón camina dolido*” (Our hearts are in pain. [Literally: Our hearts walk with pain]), (testimony at activist meeting, doña Claudia Rosas Cartagena, UNAM, Mexico City, December 8, 2015).

People have to fight hard and *luchar* (struggle) to move forward on their life paths⁴, and it is often said when things finally do move forward that “*se echan a correr*” (things start “walking” or “running”). To get there, one must make things happen: “*hacer que las cosas se caminen*” (make things walk) (Panagiotopoulos 2016: 4). These cultural metaphors of hard life journeys and the need to walk them to get things moving are particularly true for the Central American Mothers and their missing migrants who needed to cross borders to make a living and climb out of poverty. For migrants, to *andar* the arduous *caminos de la vida* in the pursuit of the American Dream is viewed as necessary; they do it so as to support their families by sending money home from abroad. Thus, their *caminos* are deeply embedded in macroeconomic conditions as well as the micro-family sphere and its sociality with responsibilities and obligations to one another. The mothers would describe their sons in these terms: “*Ellos vinieron a buscar su vida*” (They came to search for a better life), or “*Él vino a buscar su trabajo, vino para mantener la familia*” (He came to find a job, he came to provide for the family), and they were disappeared on that quest. Doña Laura Sandival, for example, described her son in these terms, too:

*Ellos vinieron a buscar una vida mejor, así como para nosotros guatemaltecos no hay trabajo, así como mi hijo, no tenía trabajo, no podía estudiar. ¿Por qué? Porque no había dinero para pagar sus estudios. Por eso el vino a buscar trabajo. El vino para mantener la familia que tenemos.*

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⁴ Here I build on an observation made by Panagiotopoulos (2016).
They came in search for a better life, because for us Guatemalans there are no jobs. Like my son, he didn’t have any work, couldn’t study. Why? Because there was no money to pay for his studies. That was why he came to look for work. He came to provide for the family that we have (testimony at activist meeting, doña Laura Sandival, UNAM, Mexico City, December 8, 2015).

The life paths of migrants and their “search for a better life” have forced them out on the harsh roads and when they go along the railroad tracks of the train of death, and the desert landscapes of the border region, they never know if they will be able to find their way out alive. Roxana Gómez told us there in the UNAM auditorium about her son, who pursued this arduous road in order to fulfil his dreams but never seems to have found his desired destination:

*El nombre de mi hijo es Samuel Gómez Gally, de Honduras. Él no se vino por ser delincuente, él vino buscando una vida mejor. Él vino buscando un trabajo, él vino buscando el sueño americano. Y él desapareció en Sonora. Su compañero dijo que fueron deportados el veinte de octubre. Los dejaron en Sonora, en la sierra donde dejaron a mi hijo con ocho horas para caminar dentro del desierto. Él (su camarada) me dijo que él (mi hijo) llegó a un pueblito donde lo secuestraron y lo utilizaron para trabajo forzado y que probablemente regresó a la frontera después. Entonces, él está en la frontera o las autoridades lo agarró y está preso.*

My son’s name is Samuel Gómez Gally, from Honduras. My son didn’t come to be a criminal. He came for a better life. He came to search for a job, he came in search for the American Dream. He vanished in Sonora. His comrade said that they were deported on October 20. They were left in Sonora, in the hills where my son was left with eight hours to walk in the middle of the desert. [His comrade] told me that [my son] came to a village where he was taken and was used in forced labour and that he probably later returned to the border. So, he is at the border or the migration authorities have taken him as a prisoner (testimony at activist meeting, doña Roxana Gómez, UNAM, Mexico City, December 8, 2015).

The harsh realities of walking across deserts, being forced into labour, taken into detention centres, or being deported or imprisoned in a land of disappearances (Reveles 2015; Varela Huerta 2016a, 2016b) can put an abrupt end to life journeys, and in such tragic circumstances, surviving families often talk about “ruined life paths”. Migrants, who may see their paths ruined in many ways, may find themselves in a no-man’s land when crossing international borders, may be detained by migration authorities or be dropped off and left in the middle of deserts (De León 2015). A borderland that, at the same time, appears to be a liminal space between life and
death, balancing on a knife’s edge, a labyrinth where nothing is clear, where one can get lost for years with no easy exit in view, a place where a thick mist covers the land. Roxana’s son Samuel Gómez Gally is said to have wandered around in this no-man’s land and lost his way; Here, he became a desaparecido, a word that accentuates his liminal status, lost among Mexico’s cactuses and agaves in the vast Sonora desert.

The mothers of the Caravan are constantly on foot and on the move, walking in protests or travelling in their caravan to dispel the fog that haunts this land and bring light to their children’s destinies. They follow in the footsteps of their missing children to rebuild their ruined dreams or get their life journeys moving again, to find them in the desert landscapes where they have gotten lost, to get them out of the places where they may be held and get them going again, or to bring them back over the bridge of hope. This calls for more walking. Doña Claudia Rosas Cartagena from Tegucigalpa, Honduras, for example, talked about it this way:

Andamos aquí y venimos de cada país en buscando a nuestros hijos... Vamos continuar andar siempre. Nuestra corazón camina dolido, porque somos madres que hemos sufrido, yo he sufrido por ocho años. Mi hija venga buscando una vida mejor. Ella dejó una niña pequeña de nueve años que siempre pregunta por su mamá. Lloramos juntas. Ella como hija ya empieza a sentir falta de su madre, y yo como madre, pues, yo quiero encontrar a mi hija. Y no solamente andamos por nosotros pero andamos por todas las madres que quedaron y hay muchas madres que no vinieron por falta de recursos.

We walk here, from all our countries, in search of our sons... We will continue to walk here, always. Our hearts are in pain, because we mothers have suffered, I have suffered for eight years. My daughter came in search for a better life, she left a little girl behind who always asks about her mother. We cry together. She, as a daughter, begins to feel the absence of her mother, and I as a mother want to find my daughter. We are not only walking for ourselves; we walk for all the mothers who stayed behind too, many couldn’t come due to lack of resources (testimony at activist meeting, doña Claudia Rosas Cartagena, UNAM, Mexico City, December 8, 2015).

To have a desaparecido calls for action, to make life itself move, because the disappeared dwell in an immobile, motionless space. These souls are caught in an in-between, in need of movement and for their journeys to be completed and to reach their destination, dead or alive. Mesoamerica’s dangerous borders with deserts and the train of death may lead them on to the American Dream, or it may lead them astray, domed then to roam a barren land forever, or, at least, until their bodies are found, emerging out of the Sonora desert’s sand.
The dangers migrants face on the train of death and in the Sonora desert are indirectly caused and orchestrated by political authorities. The blame falls upon Mexico’s indifferent police and American border security guards who push migrants out into the hot desert landscape and into the hands of smugglers, smugglers whose business is conducted in the shadow of the two states and that operates in a kind of symbiosis with authorities’ clampdown on legal routes for economic migrants into the United States (Aikin & Anaya Muñoz 2013; De León 2015). De León (2015) has shown how the Sonora desert at the United States-Mexico border, with its rough and uninhabitable landscape, is used as a scapegoat, blamed or used as an excuse that allows American and Mexican authorities to escape the responsibility for deaths in the desert, despite the fact that it is their policies and actions, especially American border security measures, that force migrants to take this uncertain and dangerous route.

This brings us back once more to migrants’ ambiguous status as non-citizens or illegal migrants. In The Rites of Passage (1960), Arnold van Gennep wrote about how transitions must be brought about by a territorial exile into liminal space, a place in transit, awaiting transformation and reincorporation, back into the world and new social status or position. For Central American migrants who search for the American Dream in the north, Mexico is such a transitory space, a transit country where the border territory extends across the entire geography of the nation as it is passed through on the way to somewhere else (Aikin & Anaya Muñoz 2013; De León 2015; Rivera Hernández 2017; Varela Huerta 2016a, 2016b: 41). A transitory space where one’s life path gets easily stuck and one is forced to live in “extreme juridical precarity”, vulnerable to state and criminal violence (Varela Huerta 2016b: 42). The disappeared who dwell in this terrain, and their families, are desperate for their lives to get back on track.

Migrant caravans, the act of travellers banding together in a group for the journey, must be seen as a response to this precarity. Safer and stronger together. The Caravan of Central American Mothers is also on a certain kind of pilgrimage, like María Herrera described it before, when they travel across Mesoamerica in search for body remains and traces at important sites, a journey that strives for an utter miracle: the resurrection of their desaparecidos. The mothers of the caravan come a long way from their countries to Mexico to make this miracle happen.

Doña Silvia Trujillo who, for example, had come all the way from El Salvador to Mexico City to create this “bridge of hope” also wanted to address the few of us in the desolate UNAM auditorium that winter day, before the mothers would take their caravan and its tireless search elsewhere:
Esto con mi hijo ha estado sucediendo durante seis años. Desapareció desde seis años. Con la ayuda de todos los que nos apoyan no perderé la fe de que lo encontraré algún día. No podemos sentirnos alegre, al menos no yo, pero quienes están del lado del amor están con nosotros. No perderé la fe de que encontrare a mi hijo vivo. Desapareció en el río San Rodrigo, mi sobrino que vino con él dijo que fue allí donde se perdió, porque él llegó a Estados Unidos, pero mi hijo nunca llegó. He estado caminando aquí desde entonces con la esperanza de que lo encontraremos algún día ... (suena una llamada a un celular interrumpiendo a Silvia brevemente). Como lo sea, vivo o muerto, quiero saber la verdad...

This with my son has been going on for six years. He has been disappeared for six years now. I won’t lose faith that I will find him one day. With the help from everyone who supports us. We cannot feel happy, at least not me, but those who stand on the side of love are with us. I won’t lose faith that I will find my son alive. He disappeared in the San Rodrigo River, my nephew who came with him said that it was there he got lost, he came to the United States, but my son never arrived. I have been walking here since then with the hope that we will find him one day... (a cell phone rings, interrupting Silvia briefly). Whatever it will be, dead or alive, I want to know the truth... (testimony and discussion at activist meeting, doña Silvia Trujillo, UNAM, Mexico City, December 8, 2015).

Silvia’s speech was interrupted again as the cell phone kept on ringing, and then one of the mothers picked up her phone and answered the call. Everyone turned their attention to her as she shouted out loud and started crying, holding the phone close to her ear. The call was from a migrant shelter in the south and talking at the other end was her missing sister. Cheers and applause filled the room, and the mothers started to hug each other when the happy news was announced. She had not heard from her sister for several years—what her sister had been through I dared not ask, but it mattered little in this moment—but at last she had finally found her in a shelter. When the Caravan of Central American Mothers comes to Mexico, in the rare cases when they do find someone, it is the walking of these brave mothers that made things move, and even, sometimes, resurrected those who appeared to be nothing but ghosts.
Chapter III
Su Dolor es Nuestro Dolor

“Su dolor es nuestro dolor, nuestra es su digna rabia” (Your pain is our pain, ours is your worthy rage). Such a slogan that the solidarity movement used in support of the Fathers and Mothers of Ayotzinapa. This slogan demonstrates how activists in the solidarity movement and the Families of Ayotzinapa have come to create a mutual “politics of emotions” (Noble 2015: 422). Activists, as the slogan indicates, who didn’t know the 43 disappeared personally, still took part in the dolor (pain or grief) and rabia (rage) of the concerned families. This chapter will explore the general question of how relatives of victims and Mexican society respond to violence? It will show how shared emotions came to expand the traditional trajectories of kinship and family and to formulate a subversive form of national unity with new forms of social and political participation during the indignation for Ayotzinapa.

Activists and families of victims came together in what could be called an alternative “imagined community” that evoked the emotional force of symbolic family during the nationwide “cry of indignation”. Evoking symbolic family tends to be understood as serving the interest of the nation-state (Anderson 1983), but inside this protest movement it challenged rather than served the hierarchy of the state. In fact, in recent decades, activism and community responses to violence have create a powerful political base in popular assemblies and self-armed citizen police forces to handle ongoing violence in Mexico (Modonesi & González 2015; Sierra 2015).

I will argue that sharing political emotions in and between these groups creates platforms for nationwide political action. Current ethnographies and anthologies on protest movements tend to frame agency with a focus on affect and by looking at social assemblages (Alexandrakis 2016; Courpasson & Vallas 2016; Graeber 2009; Hale 2008; Juris & Khasnabish 2013; Theodossopoulos 2014). Scholars writing on the indignation of Ayotzinapa have, in a similar trajectory, pointed out the role of “a state of shared political feeling” during the protests for the 43 disappeared students (Noble 2015: 422).

In what follows I will explore protests that cross class and ethnic boundaries. In Mexico, this has a history tied to the solidarity activism of both rural and urban student movements at UNAM and the Normal Rurales and to the legacy of the Massacre at Tlatelolco in 1968, which
will be laid out in the following pages as I consider how Mexican unity has often been expressed as cries of indignation in an attempt to bring the nation together. I start with the student movement in Mexico City that rose up in support of the Fathers and Mothers of Ayotzinapa, and then I move on to the Normal Rurales special political tradition. Finally, I consider the wider intersectional solidarity in modern Mexico and its use of symbolic family in a certain politics of emotions and examine how new political formations challenge the state.

Solidarity and the Politics of Disappearance in Mexico City

We stood perplexed under the old streetlights at the crossroads of Calle de Bolívar and Calle Venustiano Carranza in el Centro Historico (the historic downtown of Mexico City). The colonial architecture of the neighbourhood with worn colours, small balconies, ornaments and old doors and with streets so crowded that it seemed as if you stood in the middle of a river of people, full of vendors and workers, street entertainers, noises and smells, surrounded Chavela and me, frozen like statues in the middle of the movement with no idea of what to do next. The sun had set, and the November night was soon upon us. We had come here to buy sleeping bags in our preparations for going with a “solidarity caravan” to the Rural College, La Normal Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos de Ayotzinapa, in Guerrero, where the Families of Ayotzinapa stayed and held political planning meetings. I had arranged interviews with some of the parents and was rather excited about the opportunity to do fieldwork where the much-in-gaze families of the 43 disappeared students were planning their next moves. Two of our mutual friends were also coming; we had all been taking part in the protest marches in the city in the weeks before. However, disturbing news had just reached us. Sandino, a student at the UNAM where Chavela also studied, had been kidnapped when walking on one of the streets in Copilco next to the University campus.

Sandino had been abducted after one of the student assembly meetings at the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature. The meetings were organized after the disappearances of their compañeros in Guerrero, and in them, activists made decisions on what blockades, protests, or possible occupations students would make. Indeed, students all over the country had participated in street marches and launched protests during the months after the 43 students had been kidnapped in Guerrero in what was surely the largest student uprising the country had seen for decades. Things had become increasingly tense between authorities and students. Clashes between radical students and police had occurred after the protest on November 1 at el Zócalo, when the gate of the National Parliament had been set on fire. It was later claimed that police infiltrators were behind some of the more provocative vandalism that night. Photos of
police officers undressing and putting on hoodies circled the internet, and the newspaper *La Jornada* constantly reported on provocations by police infiltrators. But without any doubt, *el bloque negro* (the black block), as the radical anarchists were called, did participate in confrontations with police and perform vandalism on these occasions.

Sandino had been an active speaker in the student forums. Chavela knew him personally and instantly connected his kidnapping to the fact that he was so outspoken in the meetings. We decided to go back to Santo Domingo, where we lived in the south of the capital, while we followed everything that was written about Sandino’s kidnapping on social media. A witness had published a video of the incident on YouTube in which we could see three men in civilian clothes attacking him and forcing him into a grey car while Sandino was shouting “¡Ayudenme, ayudenme!” (Help me, help me).

Chavela and I were frightened and angered by the kidnapping of Sandino; both of us also participated in the faculty assemblies at UNAM, as did several of my Mexican friends. We walked the same streets and chanted the same slogans in the same protests as Sandino. It was the forceful kidnapping of students that had caused the general state of shock and outrage in the aftermath of *La Noche de Iguala*, and in Sandino’s case, which we now followed on all the social forums we could on our way back south (calling friends, checking Facebook and Twitter), it was suspected that the men in civilian clothes who kidnapped him in broad daylight were most likely undercover police. If they were police officers arresting him for some legitimate reason, then why not do it in police uniforms and with a police car? The YouTube video revealed conduct that was deeply disturbing.

It was decided between our friends, Sandino’s friends at the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature, and his mother that we should all go to the jail where he most likely had been taken and demand his return. I decided to cancel my trip to the Rural Teachers’ College in Ayotzinapa and reschedule the interviews. This seemed so close, a kidnapping within my own circle of friends. It shook my sense of safety. That is the thing with the politics of fear—it produces a certain kind of anxiety that infiltrates your mind. This anxiety moves into your being. Friends ask one another to text notifications when they get home alright at night, parents cannot sleep until they know their sons or daughters have returned home or arrived at their locations, everyone keeps glancing behind their backs…Society is filled with tension and invisible terror. At some point, it is destined to burst out in public displays of anger.

Chavela once expressed the shock she felt from what was going on with the disappeared students from Ayotzinapa after one of them, Alexander Mora, had been identified among the burned remains sent to Innsbruck for DNA testing. We were travelling south in one of Mexico
City’s red metrobuses along Insurgentes, and we were sitting side by side when out of the blue she said: “No mames. Que locura. No sólo mataron ese güey, lo quemaron y arrojaron las cenizas al río” (Damn. It’s crazy. They not only killed the guy but burned him and dumped the ashes in the river) (conversation, Chavela, Insurgentes, Mexico City, December 10, 2014). I just nodded in silence. She would always text and call her friends to make sure they got home if they went to bars and told me to do the same. At night if we went by taxi, we always called the same taxi driver, Emiliano, who we knew, and though we often had to wait a long time if he was driving someone else, we did it. At the beginning I thought this was silly, but my Mexican friends thought that to take a random one at night was too risky.

Back south, where we lived, we put on extra sweaters to guard against the chilly winter night before walking down to the metro again. We got off at metro Hidalgo in the Alameda Park, just some ten minutes’ walk from where we had stood hesitating an hour or so earlier. But we now continued on el Paseo de la Reforma, heading north until we reached el SEIDO (the Assistant Attorney General’s Office for Special Investigations on Organized Crime). Twenty or thirty people had already gathered outside the gate of the building. It was late in the evening, and the city was a little bit less busy. The traffic along la Reforma, on whose sidewalk we now congregated, was infrequent, with a yellow or white city taxi driving by only once in a while. Some of the students made short speeches denouncing the abduction of Sandino and chanted his name at the government building in front of us.

Sandino was a student of literature and a poet, and some of his friends read his poetry to us there on the street. Chavela and I went over to some of our mutual friends who had made a little camp, sleeping bags and all, to protect themselves from the cold so as to be able to stay throughout the night if necessary. They sat close to a lady who sold tamales (a Meso-American dish consisting of corn dough with either a vegetarian filling or chicken in the middle) and atole (the traditional Mexican beverage made of corn), both of which I bought to fill my stomach and keep warm in the cold, clear night under the city lights where we made camp. Some journalists arrived after a while from a smaller news channel, but not much happened. We all chanted slogans from time to time, but mainly time just passed as we refilled our atoles and talked about all kinds of things in our little group on the sidewalk. Occasionally, we would stand up to walk around in order to get warm or smoke a cigarette as the hours passed by.

Late into the night rumours began to circulate that Sandino would be released soon. Who said it or where the source came from I had no idea. For all my friends and I knew, he might not be inside the jail behind us at all. The men dressed in civilian clothes who had taken him away could have been kidnappers looking for a ransom. We waited eagerly, but Sandino didn’t
appear. The hours dragged on, but at least we were lucky that the barrel of atole seemed just as infinite as the night. At times, we saw an officer move at the open entrance to the jail about thirty meters away from the gate. New rumours emerged that his release would be imminent, and this time the source was clear. Sandino’s mother, who stood among us, was talking on the phone with a lawyer inside. So, it was the police who took him after all. It was 3:00 a.m. on Saturday November 29. We saw more movement inside the building and began to chant: “¡Libertad, Libertad, Por los Presos Por Luchar!” (Freedom for Prisoners Jailed for Their Activism), “¡Sandino, Sacelo, Sacelo!” (Let Sandino Go), and “¡Aparición de los Estudiantes Secuestrados Por el Estado!” (Find the Students Kidnapped by the State). We saw a silhouette of a long-haired young man in the entrance, accompanied by a police officer and a guy in a suit, presumably Sandino and his lawyer. Indeed, it was them! They came towards us as we celebrated and chanted his name “¡San-di-no! ¡San-di-no! ¡San-di-no!” His mother cried and hugged him, and we all gathered around them. The few journalists who had come put forth their tape recorders, along with mine, and his lawyer spoke first:

Fue golpeado, Sandino. Aquí vemos las marcas (apuntando a la oreja izquierda de Sandino sobre cual corrió una herida). La Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, que ayudó con su liberación, ha documentado esto. La policía trató de fabricar un delito que nunca cometió. Las acusaciones eran que debería haber llevado en su mochila explosivos, evidencia que fabricaron. ¡Basta ahora con la policía federal y municipal en todos los estados fabricando evidencia contra jóvenes y estudiantes!

He was beaten, Sandino. Here we see the marks (pointing at Sandino’s left ear over which ran a large wound). The National Commission of Human Rights, who helped with his release, has documented this. The police tried to fabricate crimes he never committed. The accusations were that he should have had explosives in his backpack, evidence they fabricated. Enough now with federal and municipal police in every state fabricating evidence against young people and students! (spontaneous press conference, Sandino’s lawyer, in front of El SEIDO, Mexico City, November 29, 2014).

Sandino then spoke himself:

Saliendo de una asamblea de la facultad de filosofía y letras para ir a una lectura de poesía me dirigíras al metro Copilco y en la esquina de la calle un grupo de policías vestidos de ropa civil me agarró el brazo y me subieron a un coche. Me golpearon todo el tiempo. Condujimos por mucho tiempo con la puerta abierta y mis piernas aún fuera de la puerta del vehículo. Me amenazaban que me iban a desaparecer como los de Ayotzinapa. Me dijeron que me iban a violar, me golpearon en el rostro, la espalda y el
pecho. Me trajeron ida y vuelta en todo el centro histórico y me subieron a otro auto y me agoraron a las piernas y empiezan golpearme en la cara varias veces. Me pidieron que me dijera mis contraseñas de mis redes sociales y me pidieron nombres, comenzaron a investigar a otras personas, y me dijeron que a mañana van a matar más personas. Entre ellos discutían al cual lugar llevarme y a un momento que pedí auxilio me golpearon aún más. Estaban persiguiendo una camionete con logotipo de PGR. Me trasladaron a esa camioneta y me llevaron por varias horas mientras me amenazaban constantemente con matarme y hacerme desaparecer. Bueno yo creo que eso es la maquina del terror que usa el gobierno federal para difundir el miedo en todos los jóvenes, en todos los que se movilizan por un mundo mejor, eso es sus mecanismos de asustar a la población. Su estrategia es poner miedo en la población. El día de hoy me toco a mí, ya le pasado a otros compañeros en situaciones parecidas. Pero no podrán sustar a todos los que están luchando por cambiar este país, somos miles, no nos podrán agarrar a todos, nosotros somos más. Y bueno no sé a donde me habrian llevado si no hubiera sido por tanta presión que ustedes pusieron a ellos.

I left the student assembly at the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature to go to a poetry reading and walked towards the metro station Copilco, when a gang of civilian cops grabbed my arms and pulled me into a car. They hit me during the entire time. We drove around for a long time with my legs still sticking out the car door. They threatened that they would make me disappeared, just like those from Ayotzinapa. They said they were going to abuse me. They hit me in the face, on the back and over the chest. They drove me around in el Centro Historico and moved me to another car while holding my legs and hit me in the face several times. They demanded to get my passwords to social networks and began to investigate other people and wanted me to give them names and said that tomorrow they will kill more people. They discussed among themselves where they should take me and after I had cried for help in one moment they beat me up even more. Then we followed a van with a PGR logo. They moved me to that van and drove me around for several hours while constantly threatening me that they would kill me and make me disappear. I believe that this is part of the terror machine that the federal government uses to spread fear among young people, among all of us who are mobilizing for a better world. Their strategy is to put fear in the population. Today it was me they took. It has happened to other compañeros in similar fashion before. But they cannot scare all of those struggling to change this country, we are thousands, they cannot take all of us, we are more. I do not know where they would have brought me
had it not been for the pressure that you people here put on them (spontaneous press conference, Sandino, in front of El SEIDO, Mexico City, November 29, 2014).

One of Sandino’s friends shouted, “¡No fue el narco, fue el Estado!” (it wasn’t organized crime, it was the State), a common chant in the protests that had taken place for the disappeared students from Ayotzinapa. Protests that Sandino, we suspected, was arbitrarily detained and tortured for participating in. Sandino’s mother then addressed us in the chilly winter darkness:

*Pude saber quince minutos después que se lo llevaron, que secuestraron a Sandino, porque construimos una red de papás y mamás y jóvenes, donde los chavos saben quienes somos, donde se comunican con nosotros y saben que actuamos rápido cuando algo pasa. Como padres y madres de familia tenemos que hacer que esta red se fortalezca y crezca. Cada vez que los chavos vayan a realizar una acción tenemos que estar presente de alguna manera, en cada marcha donde hay cinco mil estudiantes participando, tiene que haber cinco mil padres y madres apoyando esa manifestación. Es claramente que nos quieren desmovilizar y nos quieren mandar a nuestras casas y quieren que las madres digamos “no salgas, no vayas”, pues no. Estamos aquí también así como los padres de los chavos. ¡Ni un desaparecido más!, ¡Ni un asalto más!, ¡Ni un más detenido arbitrariamente! No lo vamos a permitir.*

I found out that they had taken him, that they kidnapped Sandino, fifteen minutes after it happened because we have created a network of fathers and mothers and young people who know who we are, how they can communicate with us and that we act fast when something happens. As parents we need to strengthen such networks and make them grow. In every protest where there are five thousand students, we must have five thousand parents who help the manifestation. It is clear that they want to demobilize us and they want to send us home to our houses, that we parents should stay at home and say “don’t go out, don’t go there”, well, no. We are there as well as parents of the young. Not One More Disappearance! Not One More Assault! Not One More Arbitrary Arrest! We cannot allow it (spontaneous press conference, Sandino’s mother, in front of El SEIDO, Mexico City, November 29, 2014).

After celebrating for a while there on the sidewalk, Chavela called Emiliano, our taxi driver, and the two of us and some other friends shared a taxi back south, satisfied with the outcome of our protest at the gates of el SEIDO. As Sandino’s mother told us, new community initiatives were on the rise in Mexico as responses to violence; she had “created a network of fathers and mothers” to prevent disappearances from taking place or to respond to them when they did occur. Contemporary Mexico sees the creation of new forms of political participation and social
involvement forged to counter the “terror machine”, to use Sandino’s words. His case not only shows the pervasive solidarity in this activism when someone is taken away, but makes explicit that those involved in protesting disappearances, like Sandino, despite risking the same fate themselves, still act. This activism needs to be understood not in spite of, but because of, the shared risk of disappearing. It was a threat that the police made clear when telling Sandino that they would “make him disappear too like those from Ayotzinapa and tomorrow kill more people”. This very real threat that faces Mexican society today also makes it necessary for those who haven’t a disappeared person in their own family yet to get involved, to stop the barbarism from spreading so it won’t happen to them. They too feel fear and thus need to take action, and by this, those who take to the streets multiply by thousands when that fear turns into anger.

Student assemblies and parents’ networks are created to deal with the threat. The motto of these activist communities and networks was well summarized by a protest banner in one of the protests for Ayotzinapa, saying: “No esperes que seas familiar para ayudar” (Don’t wait until you are a relative until you help).

The History of Activism at La Normal de Ayotzinapa

Only weeks before the abduction of Sandino, a police shooting had occurred within UNAM. UNAM has its own surveillance force, and the police are not allowed to enter the autonomous campus area, but an undercover police patrol was spying on the student assemblies from a car in the parking lot in front of the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature. When they were spotted by students who then went out to take photographs of their car, one of the undercover police officers pulled out a gun and shot at the students. An eye witness who was shot at told me about the events afterwards:

Apuntó su arma directamente a mi cara, luego disparó hacia mis piernas, las balas rozaron mi ropa. Estaban aquí en la Universidad, disparándonos nosotros aquí en frente de todos. Corrimos a la fuente cerca de Insurgentes. Un coche de la vigilancia (guardias de seguridad de la UNAM) estaba ahí parado y les dije que un tipo estaba disparando dentro de la Universidad, que atacó a los estudiantes. Pero me dijeron que no habían visto nada y me preguntaron ¿qué podían hacer al respecto? Mis compas encontraron una identificación, y identifica como personal de la PGJ (Departamento de Policía de la Ciudad de México), tenía nombre, foto y todo. Están usando el miedo. Esta agresión es una clara señal de lo que estamos viviendo nosotros como estudiantes en todo el país. Y ya, se paso con nuestros 43 camaradas de Ayotzi que desaparecieron, sólo piense en lo que sucedió com ellos. Nos atacan, nos matan., un chingo de casos.
Es intolerable esa situación. Este tipo sacando su arma. Tenemos un amigo que está en el hospital ahora con una bala en la pierna y mi perro recibió una bala en la pata. Parece que no podemos estar seguros en ningún lugar de este país.

He pointed his gun straight at my face, then he shot towards my legs, the bullets stroked my clothes. They were here at the University and shot at us, here in front of everyone. We ran to the fountain close to Insurgentes. A car of UNAM security officers was parked there and I told them that a guy was shooting inside the University, that he attacked students. But they just told me that they had not seen anything and asked me what they could do about it? My comrades found an ID card, it was from the PGJ (the Police Department of Mexico City), it had name, photo and everything. They are using fear. This aggression is a clear signal about the situation we live in as students in this country. Just think of what happened to our 43 comrades from Ayotzi who disappeared. They attack us, they kill us, a lot of cases. This situation is unacceptable. This guy pulling his gun out. We have a friend who is at hospital now. He got a bullet in his leg, and my dog got a bullet in his paw. We cannot be safe at any place in this country it seems (interview, José, UNAM, Mexico City, November 15, 2014).

A mutually reinforcing back and forth seemed to be at play between police repression and students organizing in assemblies and protesting, which is then followed by new police repression meant to monitor, infiltrate and disrupt these activities. The student movement denounced the police shooting inside UNAM in the following weeks, and one of their protest banners said: “En México a los jóvenes secuestran, asesinan o criminalizan” (In Mexico the young are kidnapped, murdered, or criminalized).

A similar interplay between police violence and student responses have long been a reality for the students at La Normal Raul Isidro Burgos de Ayotzinapa in Guerrero. José Solano, one of the surviving students from the Rural Teachers’ College of Ayotzinapa, explained the precarious situation that normalistas endure to me during a protest rally at Ángel de la Independencia in Mexico City on December 1, 2014:

El gobierno siempre ha querido cerrar a los Normales. Siempre hemos protestado por continuar nuestra educación, para obtener una mayor capacidad de estudiantes. Hay muchos que no tienen los recursos financieros para estudiar. La policía mató a dos de nuestros estudiantes, Jorge Herrero y Gabriel Echeverría, asesinados en la Autopista del Sol en 2011 por pedir ser matriculados y exigiendo ciento cuarenta espacios en la escuela. Las investigaciones quedan totalmente en impunidad. Queríamos educación y no balas.
The government has always wanted to close the Normales. We have always protested to continue our education, for increased capacity to take more students. There are so many who don’t have the financial resources to study. In 2011, the police killed two of our students, Jorge Herrero and Gabriel Echeverría, murdered at Autopista del Sol because they demanded to be inscribed in the school and that they opened up 140 more vacancies there. The investigations have been left in impunity. We wanted education and not bullets (public speech, José Solano, Bellas Artes, Mexico City, December 1, 2014).

The 2011 killing of Jorge and Gabriel during a protest at Autopista del Sol that José referred to would only be a prelude to what he would survive and what would take place three years later in Iguala (Concha 2015). Nonetheless, the history of resistance of the Normales Rurales was crucial in their quick mobilization in the aftermath of the massacre at Iguala and the birth of a nationwide protest movement. Several of the surviving students were part of what, at la Normal de Ayotzinapa, is known as Casa Activista (the house of activism), where their political student movement has educated young campesino students in political ideology and direct action for the poor for many decades.

The Rural Teachers’ College of Ayotzinapa teaches in a socialist tradition based on Mexican peasants’ struggles for land in the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). It was founded in the early years of the socialist state (1926) with the aim of teaching the poor to read. In recent decades, the school has developed a history of protesting corporate and government intervention in the state of Guerrero. In the seventies, former student Lucio Cabañas founded the Party of the Poor (PDLP), which later became a left-wing guerrilla group in Mexico’s Guerra Sucia (dirty war) (Aviña 2014; Sierra 2015). PDLP organized against the governing party el PRI and waged revolutionary armed struggles against the federal government after decades of massacres and state violence against the social movements of Guerrero (Aviña 2014). Their leader Lucio Cabañas became involved in politics when he studied at the Rural Teachers’ College of Ayotzinapa and led the student union there, and he later became a revolutionary while working as a schoolteacher in the area (Aviña 2014; Sierra 2015). He tends to be the role model for young normalistas at Ayotzinapa, and his graffiti depiction decorates the college’s walls.

Today’s heirs to Lucio Cabañas and his Party of the Poor, Las Policías Ciudadanas y Populares de la Unión de Pueblo y Organizaciones del Estado de Guerrero (The Citizens Popular Police of Guerrero [PCP])—created by indigenous communities in the state as a response to criminal and state violence in recent years—quickly came to protect the Rural Teachers’ College of Ayotzinapa after the Iguala massacre and helped search for the 43
disappeared students, discovering 47 mass graves in the state during that search (Sierra 2015). The Teachers Union (CNTE), which has engaged in frequent protests for educational reform since 2006, also took part in the indignation of Ayotzinapa since they share the normalistas’ poor opinion of the PAN (2000-2012) and PRI (2012-2018) administrations’ privatization of the education system in Mexico (Modonesi & González 2015). Likewise, students in Mexico City have a long history of activism in university assemblies and the annual commemorative protest for the Massacre at Tlatelolco in 1968 that were able to be set in motion as the indignation for Ayotzinapa began. The Iguala massacre of the young, poor, rural teachers’ students was the event that managed to bring these movements together in a nationwide cry of indignation, in part thanks to surviving students like Omar García, who travelled across the country with Parents of Ayotzinapa to mobilize Mexican communities and Student Unions.

**Las Asambleas Universitarias**

On October 15, 2014, a month and a half before Sandino’s kidnapping, I found myself outside of the PGR at Paseo de la Reforma in central Mexico City watching as a small stage was set up. From afar, I heard a growing roar from thousands of students singing protest chants along the avenue. The PGR was in charge of the investigation of the 43 disappeared and 3 murdered students from Ayotzinapa, and it was towards this institution that the main part of the new protest movement directed its frustration over the disappearance.

I was standing with Yola and Maria of the MPJD, the latter would give her testimony from the stage later on. Large columns of students from UNAM, Politécnico, and other universities in Mexico City began filling up the avenue, organized by department, and congregating outside of the gate of the PGR. They chanted slogans such as, “¿Por Qué? ¿Por Qué? ¿Por Qué Nos Asesinan? Somos la Esperanza, de América Latina” (Why? Why? Why Do You Kill us? We Are the Hope of Latin America), high and loud as they were marching in. Some of the students carried large protest banners depicting the faces of the 43 disappeared normalistas, others began spraying graffiti of the missing on the sidewalk so that their eyes looked up at us from beneath our feet. When all the Universities had arrived at the scene, the student spokesperson from la Asamblea Inter-Universitaria (the Inter-University Assembly) took the microphone on the stage and began addressing the crowd. Her name was Sélvi, and I would later come to recognize her from her participation in la Plataforma de Solidaridad con Ayotzinapa (the Solidarity
Sélvi was first to speak from the stage and she said:

¡Esta maldita guerra contra el pueblo, no es una guerra contra los narcos! Después de la agresión contra los estudiantes de maestros en Iguala, esta nación tiembla, abrió una herida profunda en los corazones de todos los mexicanos. Este dolor está moviendo al México hacia adelante…

This war is not a war against narcotics but against the people! After the aggression against the teachers’ students in Iguala this nation shivers, a profound wound has been ripped open in the hearts of all Mexicans. This pain now moves Mexico forward…

(public speech, Sélvi spokesperson of the Inter-University Assembly, in front of PGR at El Paseo de la Reforma, Mexico City, October 15, 2014).

After Sélvi followed doña María. She took the microphone, looked out over the people and then began: “We have to turn the indignation to dignified action. We feel this rage, the rage of having someone you love ripped away. Taken from you…” The crowd instantly responded to her words by shouting, “¡No está sola! ¡No está sola!” (You are not alone!), over and over. As doña María was about to continue, some of the activists in the large crowd outside of the PGR began to climb up the fence of the government building behind her. Whispers at first, then widespread mumbling and small talk broke out between groups in the crowd and finally became whistles and applause that mixed interchangeably as one of the activists, dressed in large black boots and a dark hoody over his head, managed to jump onto the façade of the government building. He stood on its windowsill with a graffiti can in his hand. People were openly and loudly debating his actions, shouting different messages to him: “¡Bajense! ¡No vandalismo! ¡No violencia!” (Climb down! No vandalism! No violence!). Some shouted and whistled disapprovingly as he shook his spray can, other spectators applauded and cheered. He then started to paint graffiti on the front of the Department of the Attorney General of the Republic.

Meanwhile, doña María had finished her speech and didn’t seem bothered. She gave the microphone back to Sélvi who began presenting a theatre group that would perform, but she paused and turned towards the PGR again to look at the young man on the window ledge who was about to finish his piece of graffiti. He had written, in large red letters, “Estado Asesino, Los Queremos Vivos” (The State is a Murderer, We Want Them Alive) over one of the large windows. As he jumped back down to the crowd, others began to climb the fence to mimic his actions.

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5 La Plataforma de Solidaridad con Ayotzinapa was a forum where students from Ayotzinapa (like Omar García), student representatives in Mexico City (like Sélvi), and members of the MPJD (like Yola, María, Javier Sicilia, and father Gustavo), the human rights organization SERAPAZ and several unions coordinated with the Families of Ayotzinapa to plan monthly protests in the capital, as described in the introduction.
Some activists began throwing balloon-bombs filled with red paint at the building, others had their hands coated with red paint, which they smeared across the gate and its fence. At some point people began throwing rocks at the windows, smashing some of them completely, again accompanied by the ambiguous mix of applause and disapproving whistles. After the protest was over, the façade of the PGR, now with smashed windows, was covered in graffiti of the disappeared students’ faces, hundreds of red hands, and large splashes of blood-red paint.

As I came to know some of the student activists at this protest in the following days, among them Chavela and Jorge, I was invited to la Asamblea Universitaria at UNAM. The discussions in this forum could go on for hours, even entire days, and tended to end with the need to go back to the smaller faculty assemblies to approve and anchor decisions before taking them to the Inter-University Assembly, of which Sélvi was the spokesperson. These student meetings and the coordination between them were vital for the protests for Ayotzinapa. The Inter-University Assemblies managed to bring together more than 60 student assemblies from different universities on several occasions and to coordinate nationwide strikes during the autumn of 2014 (Modonesi & González 2015: 132). The student assemblies were rather spontaneous and disorganized forums. Among the topics that were usually discussed were whether they should organize short-term occupations of some of the faculties, or try to shut the universities down completely for an extended period of time.

I frequently attended the meetings at the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature during the following months, and the students there soon decided to occupy their faculty for a night and invited me to take part in the occupation. At first, I was unsure if it was wise to participate, but I was soon convinced. I arrived late one night at the faculty entrance, just as the street lights were beginning to lighten up the city. I met up with Chavela and Jorge, a geography student, and we went by a store to buy atole to keep us warm. As we were waiting for the lady who sold the atole to heat up our drinks, Jorge started to talk about the disappeared students from Guerrero, saying:

\[ \text{Está jodido porque realmente fue un ataque contra el pueblo. Ya sabes, los normalistas se preocupan por esto; que el conocimiento debe ser para el beneficio de la gente, estaban estudiando para enseñar a los pobres a leer y escribir, todo eso, en contrario a lo que hacemos nosotros aquí.} \]

It’s fucked up because it was an attack against the community really. You know, the normalistas are all about this thing that knowledge should be for the benefit of the

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6 Facultad, in Spanish, tend to refer to the actual building rather than the staff members of any given department.
people, they were studying to teach the poor to read and write and all that, in contrast to what we do (conversation, Jorge, Santo Domingo, Mexico City, November 6, 2014)

Back inside the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature, the occupation turned out to be a rather calm event. It began by finding sleeping places in different empty classrooms, moving chairs and desks to make space for us. Since the faculty had an open-air construction with most hallways lacking walls, and since the rainy season insisted on cooling down the landscape, it was freezing. A small meeting was held in the open hallway, with pitch-darkness outside, discussing future protest actions. People sat on the stone floor and in a staircase, talking and participating in the debate, while I leaned towards the wall and listened to all the different opinions in the discussion. They had no microphone, so everyone tried to be as silent as possible to hear those who spoke. “We should not confront the general public nor provoke them, but use symbolic actions”, argued some. “We should use direct actions no matter if it provokes anger among the general public”, argued others. After an hour or so of discussions, which led to the rejection of a longer occupation of the faculty (not a particularly appealing idea for the simple reason that it was a chilly October in 2014 and they’d have to sleep on the cold concrete floor of the lecture rooms during an extended occupation). Instead they opted to arrange a traffic blockade the morning after.

When the student assembly was over, people broke up in small groups, chatting with each other so that the stillness was replaced with a cacophony of voices. People had brought food, cookies, snacks, sandwiches and hot drinks that were shared. The rest of the night was spent talking. Some people, like Chavela, stayed up most of the night playing guitar, listening to music and trying to keep their body heat up by breathing on their cold hands and fingers, perhaps because it was fairly difficult to sleep on the hard floor in the cold rooms anyway. The university security officers probably didn’t even notice or care that we were there, nor would our presence have been controversial if they had. Many professors didn’t object to students occupying the university since they also took part in the protests for Ayotzinapa. When I asked Chavela about it, she reminded me “al la mierda” (fuck it, or, in this case, never mind) since “de todos modos el auditorio Ché” (the nearby auditorium Ché Guevara) where some of the assembly meetings were held “está ocupado permanente por los anarquistas” (is permanently occupied by the anarchist anyway) (conversation, Chavela, UNAM, Mexico City, November 6, 2014).

On my way back from the female bathroom, which we all used this night since it was the only one on the floor where we slept, I remembered the novel Amulet by Roberto Bolaño. Its plot unfolds in one of the stalls of the restroom I had just visited. The novel’s protagonist,
Auxilio Lacouture, is trapped there in the year 1968 when the army storms the university, a real historic event. In the story, she hides in one of the stalls in the bathroom and spends two weeks inside the restroom. Indeed, her name means “help” in Spanish. In the true historical events that this novel was inspired by, the army had, on the order of the then-President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, shot straight into a crowd of civilians and killed several hundred students congregating at Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco in the north of the city. The event became known as the Massacre at Tlatelolco. In *Amulet*, though, the university campus is completely empty of students, there is only the occasional sound of the boots of some army patrols passing by, and, of course, the secret presence of Auxilio. Hiding in the bathroom with a pen and a notebook in her hand, she writes, “I am memory”. One could say that Bolaño places Auxilio right at the epicentre of modern Mexican history as an emblematic and subversive piece of memory positioned against the army’s occupation of UNAM and crackdown on the student movement.

The massacre still lingers in society’s memory. Every year tens of thousands of students march through Mexico City to commemorate the victims of the Massacre at Tlatelolco. As it happens, the *normalista* students who were attacked and disappeared by municipal police in Iguala were actually preparing for their trip to participate in the commemorative event, held every October 2. The parents of the 43 disappeared and, in total, six killed of *La Noche de Iguala*—an event echoing *La Noche de Tlatelolco*—led the commemoration march for the Massacre at Tlatelolco in 2015, the event to which their sons never arrived the year before. Thousands of voices cried out, “Never forget the second of October” and added “Never forget the twenty-sixth of September”, shouting in the streets of the city. The Fathers and Mothers of Ayotzinapa stood by the students, just as the student movement had stood by them.

It was during the same time of year, when the survivors of *La Noche de Iguala*, with Omar García among them, ran to hide from the police and soldiers in the city of Iguala that Auxilio found herself trapped, hiding from soldiers, in the women’s bathroom at UNAM. The novel begins: “This is going to be a horror story. A story of murder, detection and horror. But it won’t appear to be, for the simple reason that I am the teller. Told by me, it won’t seem like that. Although, in fact, it’s the story of a terrible crime” (Bolaño 2010: 1). I remembered it as I paused for a moment in the open hallway on my way back, recalling that Auxilio, just like me at that moment, had also seen the moon outside moving slowly as she looked out in her solitude.

I woke up to the noise of sirens the next day. The others were already gone. I quickly gathered my stuff and walked out of the empty classroom, ready to see police storming the university. Out in the bright hallway now bathed in early sunshine (this would be a rainless and hot day), I saw two students holding a megaphone that had sirens as one of its automatic sound-
options, laughing as they saw everyone wake up ready to flee the scene. After cleaning up the lecture rooms and putting back all the chairs and desks, we all had coffee and then everyone headed towards the highway. Insurgentes goes from south to north and crosses the city centre. It carries hundreds of thousands of cars and public buses moving workers to and from their workplaces, and it is busy day and night. We walked over to Insurgentes, close as the highway is to UNAM, to block its traffic.

At the scene, the student activists unfolded large banners and stopped all traffic, including public transportation, from passing their blockade. This was accompanied by the noise of hundreds of car horns from angry drivers irritated about being held up in the middle of Insurgentes. The students tried to inform them about the disappearance of the 43 normalistas, a topic that covered much of the daily news reporting at the time. Police quickly arrived at the scene and helicopters circled in the air above, but they didn’t make any arrests. Instead, they tried to redistribute traffic to alternative routes. Angry bus passengers left their buses and began to walk north, cursing out loud when crossing the blockade, to which the activists replied: “Indifference kills, too”. The blockade went on from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m., efficiently shutting down the vital Insurgentes highway during the megacity’s busy morning rush hour. A few of the commuters did, however, happily receive the information sheets that were distributed. For whatever it was worth, many chilangos, as people of Mexico City are called, arrived late at work that morning, perhaps blaming it on the general state of siege the country found itself in after La Noche de Iguala. In this way, the interrupted everyday lives of the families of the disappeared “trickled up” through minor interruptions into the daily lives of Mexico City commuters.

If the fictive character Auxilio Lacouture’s bathroom stall at UNAM is an amulet of subversive memory politics of the Tlatelolco Massacre that refuses to let the State’s crimes sink into oblivion, then the student activists involved in the protests for Ayotzinapa used the same faculty building, and their own bodies in a traffic blockade, as political amulets so as not to let the Iguala crime be forgotten. They exemplified an intersectional activism that cried out to the close families both in words and actions: You are not alone!

**Solidarity with Indigenous Movements in Guerrero**

Mexico’s intersectional activism is further underscored by the many solidarity caravans that take place in the country and in November 2015, Chavela and I would finally go on a solidarity trip to Guerrero which we had hoped to do already the year before when the police abduction of Sandino had prevented us. It was called “La Caravana Solidaria con la Montaña de
“Guerrero” (the Solidarity Caravan with the Mountain region of Guerrero), and it was arranged by left-wing groups within the Faculty of Political Science at UNAM where we both had friends, other university faculties in Mexico City and a political collective that called themselves Colectivo Conciencia y Libertad (The Collective for Freedom and Consciousness). The solidarity trip was for La Policía Ciudadana y Popular de Guerrero (The Citizens Popular Police of Guerrero [PCP]), a self-armed resistance group in the indigenous communities in the highlands of Guerrero, which I referred to earlier as the heirs to Lucio Cabañas’s Party of the Poor. The PCP would celebrate their third anniversary as a self-organized community police force with a parade in the city of Tlapa, which would end in a remembrance ceremony for their communities’ dead and disappeared at Tlapa’s city zocalo. Some of the organizers of our solidarity trip were themselves part of the PCP’s coordinating body. They announced the solidarity caravan on social media and distributed flyers during the protests for Ayotzinapa in Mexico City in the weeks before. It cost 500 pesos to participate, which covered the bus trip to Tlapa and back, payed for the breakfast that members of the PCP would make for us, and covered the sleeping arrangements in a local school where we would stay for most of the time (the last night was spent in a local monastery). The bus would leave on November 28 and return December 3. The first planning meeting of the solidarity caravan took place out on the grass in front of the popular cinema Cineteca in Coyoacán, south of Mexico City. Another one a week later was held at the Faculty of Political Science at UNAM. At these meetings we divided ourselves into different groups that would be in charge of smaller tasks in preparation for the trip and during the stay in Tlapa. Our bus was to be shared with musicians and entertainers who would perform at the remembrance ceremony at the zocalo in Tlapa on the day of the manifestation and the third anniversary of the PCP’s creation.

It was a long bus ride from Mexico City to Tlapa. We had first planned to leave late at night, around 23:00 p.m., drive during the night and arrive early morning. But due to military patrols and checkpoints along the Chilpancingo Highway where the parents of the 43 disappeared students had created blockades over the past twelve months, we feared that the army would detain us and stop our trip. Instead, we left early in the morning and travelled during the day, thinking it was safer to travel in daylight should we be detained. We also avoided Chilpancingo Highway and travelled on smaller roads to avoid the checkpoints. Our bus barely fit on the small, bumpy dust roads, it smashed into branches of trees and we had to push it out of the mud, but finally we got to Tlapa.

We arrived when the sun was about to set, unloaded our backpacks and the food we had brought, and began walking up a hill along a tiny backstreet where our bus wouldn’t fit in a
poor area of Tlapa. We walked over a large field where the local street dogs seemed to congregate in a pack and finally got to our school, a rather simple building without running water.

The following morning, we had breakfast outside in the neighbourhood and met with La Coordinadora Regional de Seguridad y Justicia-Policía Ciudadana y Popular (CRSJ-PCP), the decision-making arm of Guerrero’s Popular Community Police. One of them, an elderly indigenous woman, was making *atole* and *tamales* for us. Their spokesperson, Citlali, a mother in her thirties, was wearing a white PCP polo shirt and cap different from the brown clothing the men were wearing. Her kids were playing around with the street dogs behind her as she told us about the PCP’s history and why it had been founded.

The mountain region of the highlands of Guerrero was mainly populated by *pueblos originarios* (indigenous communities/original communities). *Los americanos nativos* (the native Americans) of the mountain regions of Guerrero, Costa Chica, Puebla and Oaxaca are mainly either Tlapanecs or Mixtecs, the latter being decedents of the ancient Zapotec kingdom that had its centre in what is today the ruins and popular tourist site of Monte Alba in Oaxaca. *La Sierra* (the mountain region and the highlands) of Guerrero is rich in natural resources, especially gold. In recent years, criminal gangs, corrupt police and soldiers have attacked their communities. “*Quieren que nos vayamos, quieren que nos alejemos para que puedan tomar los recursos*” (They want us gone, want us to move away so that they can take the resources), Citlali explained. As a result of this, more and more families and communities started to organize and cooperate, and the result was the formation of the PCP. “*Se trata de algo más que protección a nuestras comunidades*” (It is about more than just providing protection for our communities), Citlali continues in the shadow of the increasingly hot sun. “*También queremos educar y cuidar a nuestros jóvenes para que no se meten en problemas*” (We also want to educate and take care of our youths so that they don’t end up in trouble). She ended her talk by saying, “*Es una paradoja que las comunidades más pobres de nuestro país duerman encima del oro*” (It is a paradox that the poorest communities in our country sleeps on top of gold) (speech, Citlali, spokesperson of PCP, Tlapa, Guerrero, November 29, 2015).

After PCP was founded, their communities continued to be targeted by military violence; checkpoint and roadblocks have been set up around their villages and some of the PCP members have disappeared or been shot dead. The PCP police officers are mainly using sticks or machetes as weapons, and they walk *rondas* (patrol rounds) and light *fogatas* (bonfires) in the street corners or outskirts of their communities as outposts to keep watch for armed introducers. The *rondas* and *fogatas* that these self-defence groups use are also part of much wider ongoing
resurgence of Tlapanec, Mixtec and indigenous mobilization inspired by the Mayan descendants who formed the EZLN in Chiapas to gain autonomy from the state (Holloway 1998; Nash 2001; Modonesi & González 2015; Sierra 2015; Stephen 2002).

The PCP are by no means the first community mobilization of la sierra; Guerrero has a long history of popular uprisings that dates much further back than even Lucio Cabañas’s revolutionary guerrillas in the 70s. The state took its name from Vicente Guerrero, of afro-mestizo decent and whose mother was an African slave, who would become one of the most prominent generals in the Mexican War of Independence (1810-1821) against Spain. He eventually served as the independent republic’s second President in a short reign in which he abolished slavery, but he was ousted and executed in 1831. In the neighbouring state Michoacán, Purépecha communities have also taken up arms in similar self-defence groups as a response to narco cartel terror in the region, as discussed in Chapter II (Sierra 2015). The presence of the army, who is supposedly fighting the narco cartels in the war on drugs, is often seen more as a threat, and it is commonly suspected that the army works in conjunction with the narco cartels and mining companies who seek to extract the region’s national resources and take them away from the local population to benefit the country’s elites (Gledhill 2017; Gibler 2016). Soldiers have been accused of disappearing and killing members of PCP’s communities.

On the day of the anniversary, several hundred PCP members had travelled to Tlapa in buses from their villages in the surrounding mountains. They lined up in the early morning in the outskirts of town, in two long lines, some wearing their brown polo shirts and black caps while others just marched in their normal cloths, women in jeans, blouses or skirts and men in jeans, shirts and straw-hats. Those who had a stick or machete carried it in their right hand, parading towards the zocalo through the sleepy Tlapa city. The people walked at a slow pace so the elderly could keep up. Some were bringing protest banners. Slogans were chanted along the way. After about an hour and a half of marching, the parade reached the zocalo. The men and women wearing brown polo shirts and black PCP caps now marched by themselves while the rest of us watched on. The Citizens Police Officers of Guerrero walked with high steps and with their right hand resting on the shoulder of the person in front of them. They walked around the square on command while a curandero (healer) performed a rite in the centre of the zocalo, putting forth a small ofrenda (offering) with corn for the dead to eat, decorated with a yellow flower wreath of cempúsúchils (Marigolds) normally used in the Day of the Dead offerings, and placing a chalice of burning copal at its centre to purify the souls of the dead we would honour. Citlali and the leaders of the PCP read statements on a stage that had been set up for them, celebrating their movement and communities’ resistance, calling upon the names of their dead
and disappeared by reading their names out loud, an event upon which the crowd would respond “presente” (present yourself or be present). The families stood next to Citlali holding photos of their dead or disappeared relatives.

After the remembrance ceremony, the celebrations of the third anniversary continued in more cheerful tones. The artists who had travelled in the same bus as us in the solidarity caravan now went up on stage to perform. First out was two payasos (clowns) who satirized Mexico’s contemporary politics. Then the musicians began playing. However, in the middle of their performance Citlali went up on stage and took over the microphone. She told us that the municipal police had stolen the tires of the PCP buses and now they could not return home to their communities in the surrounding mountains. She called on us all to turn around and walk the thirty or forty meters to the municipal government building to demand that the municipal police hand the tires back. The staff at the municipal office and their security personnel were overwhelmed when hundreds of persons congregated outside their entrance and hallway. First, a representative of the police denied that they had done such a thing. But since the bus guards of the PCP, who had taken a break from their guard duties while eating and left their buses unattended for a while (perhaps to take a siesta in the shade), had seen them driving away with the tires, the crowd kept on waiting outside of the municipal authority. Hours passed. The sun set, darkness fell, the night began to cool off. Citlali gave interviews and denounced the police harassment, and still we stood on the stone pavement, chanting slogans, sitting down, standing up, walking around, waiting and waiting for the tires to be returned so that we all could go home. Finally, late in the evening the tires were returned. The municipal police representative celebrated his officers who so “quickly had caught the thieves”, but his speech was met with boos and disapproving whistles.

The next morning, after taking our atole and tamales, we said goodbye to Citlali and the representatives of the PCP by taking a selfie together and exchanging emails and numbers with promises to stay in touch in the future. We who had come to participate in the solidarity caravan were perhaps not part of the family just yet, but Guerrero’s Mixtec and Tlapanec communities continue to build a better life for their inhabitants by reshaping their political organization and representing themselves in their communities’ pursuit of autonomy, taking up arms to protect their villages as a response to the violence that has plagued them for years. They are forming “imaginary communities” with new forms of political and social participation that pose a direct challenge to the hierarchy of the Mexican nation-state as the only legitimate actor to use force in the name of the people.
In the past three decades, the resource-rich but poor and violence-torn states of Guerrero, Michoacán and Chiapas in Mexico’s south have all seen the rise of these self-armed community forces. They have organized their own police, armies and political systems of representation outside of established state institutions as a response to repression and in a bid for autonomy from the federal state. These subversive enclaves not only rebuild and reshape their own communities, but also reinvent the contemporary world’s capacity for imagining political, community and social organization (Graeber 2009: vii-viii; Holloway & Peleas 1998; Hernández, Mattiace & Rus 2003; Juris & Khasnabish 2013: 66-87; Morton 2000; Stephen 2002). The solidarity movement for Ayotzinapa brought many of Mexico’s local forms of resistance, its islands of “imagined communities”, together in a short-lived national front in ways perhaps not seen since the Mexican Revolution.

This intersectional movement of solidarity trips across class and ethnicity brought chilangos to Guerrero’s vulnerable communities and acted as but one of many expressions of this intersectional politics across lines of segregation in a nation with traditionally sharp divides along such lines (Lomnitz 2005: 20). New solidarity platforms created in its wake aimed for nationwide political action: Normalista students travelled to Mexico City to participate in the commemorative march for the massacre at Tlatelolco, while UNAM students arranged assemblies to call for justice for the Iguala massacre. Middle-class students from urban areas linked up with self-armed indigenous communities and rural campesinos, and the Families of Ayotzinapa came to UNAM and the capital to support the unions who fight against disadvantageous economic reforms. And in the House of Solidarity, many of them sat together to discuss what strategies to use.

Mexico’s vivid student activism in Casas Activistas at the Normal Rurales and in Inter-University Assemblies in Mexico City has perhaps been overlooked when international scholars have focused on indigenous resistance groups like the EZLN (Holloway 1998; Nash 2001; Stephen 2002). We need to remember that the man the Mexican government has named to be Subcomandante Galeano, former Marcos—the former spokesperson of the EZLN—Rafael Sebastián Guillén Vicente; the masked front face of global resistance against global capitalism—is a mestizo himself, and was once a student at UNAM at the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature. Rafael Guillén, or Subcomandante Galeano, thus comes from the capital’s vibrant activist sub-communities and their solidarity with indigenous regions in the south (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2019-05-03).

Still, in the long run, it could be that this solidarity will only live on in tiny sub-cultures that harbour a special breed of activists, in Mexico’s islands of autonomous villages in PCP or
EZLN territory or via short-lived national uprisings under a powerful banner like the one of Ayotzinapa, when Mexicans for a short moment saw a dream—to paraphrase Juan Rulfo, the nation’s grand narrator of the post-revolutionary era—rise out of Mexico’s deepest ravines. Or as he put it in his dystopian collection of short-stories, *El Llano en Llamas*, “People in Luvina say dreams rise out of those ravines; but the only thing I ever saw rise up from there was the wind” (Rulfo 1953: 20).

**The Politics of Emotions, Symbolic Family and Political Participation**

Those from the wider public who took part in the indignation for Ayotzinapa but didn’t know the disappeared young men in person took part because of a general feeling of outrage over the violence that haunts Mexico. It seemed like anyone could just disappear without a hope for justice. But listening to the testimonies of the parents at the end of the protest rallies gradually established an emotional bond between spectators and relatives. A particularly memorable address by don Clemente Rodriguez, one of the fathers of Ayotzinapa, took place, as they often did, at the climax of a protest. Clemente was talking at el Zocalo in Mexico City where protesters congregated, and in the middle of a heartfelt speech he said something rather extraordinary. He called the bystanders family: “…mi hijo, Cristian, ha encontrado en nueva familia en ustedes ayudandonos a encontrar a los muchachos” (…my son has found a new family in you who help us find our boys) (public speech, Clemente Rodriguez, el Zocalo, Mexico City, September 26, 2015).

But how could we be his son’s “new family”, become a relative to a person we had never even met? Clemente’s words were, of course, a symbolic evocation of, and part of a political rhetoric that played on, the new sense of mutual cause that participation in the protests created. Clemente used the “creative possibilities” of evoking symbolic family bonds and tapped into the emotional potential that can bind people together in an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983; Carsten 2004: 154). The “great symbolic force” of extending family bonds this way can be “a power that is all the more salient because it emanates from the emotional…” (Carsten 2004: 154). However, in Clemente’s use, his son’s symbolic family of activists is very different from how symbolic family is often thought to generate violence in the name of the nation-state and serve nationalism and state interests associated with the unity of a nation, authoritarianism and patriarchal orders (Anderson 1983: 15; Das 1996, 2007; Delaney 1995). Don Clemente’s son’s new family of activists in civil society in the aftermaths of the Iguala massacre aimed for the very opposite: to put an end to state terror. Likewise, new community and political formations such as the PCP and other self-defence groups pose a direct challenge to the state.
These political formations, the “new family” of activists built around Mexico’s dead and disappeared and on resisting violence, also exemplifies an ongoing expansion of the experience of grief in the nation that goes beyond blood-relatedness (Gandsman 2009; Sosa 2014). The solidarity movement and indignation for the 43 disappeared students created a new form of sociality that transgressed, at least symbolically, traditional conceptions of kinship as people outside of the close families came to share the dolor (pain) and rabia (rage) of the surviving families. In this way, the drama of mass disappearances and the strong emotions they elicit may shape new forms of belonging (Sosa 2014).

In the aftermath of la Noche de Iguala, Mexico has seen an emerging debate on political emotions (Noble 2015). Juan Villoro (2014) called it the birth of an “emotional republic”, defined as “a state of shared political feeling” (Noble 2015: 422). Likewise, the emerging anthropology of activism and social movements (Alexandrakis 2016; Graeber 2009; Hale 2008; Juris & Khasnabish 2013; Ortner 2016: 61-64; Theodossopoulos 2014) as an heir to the old anthropology of resistance of the ’80s (Ong 1987; Scott 1985) has come to focus on the role of social assemblages and politics of emotions. It has moved on from “the desperate search for the subject of change” to view social movement as an “autonomous, self-producing, and self-organized organism—an individual entity on its own” (Kurik in Courpasson & Vallas 2016: 58). The “birth” of a “new emotional republic” out of the ashes of Iguala cannot be seen as a stable or permanent societal condition. Instead, as it came to be in the heat of the moment in protests, it could be dispelled just as quickly afterwards. It is an elusive politics of atmosphere achieved in some moments that may be dispersed in the wind in others.

Nevertheless, it could bring about a powerful state of shared political feelings of rage and grief. Modern Mexico had its founding moment in El Grito de Dolores (1810), the speech by the Catholic priest Miguel Hidalgo y Castillo, which marked the starting point of the Mexican War of Independence. The birth of Mexico was, therefore, also a moment when parts of Mexican community came together in a mutual experience of repression and violence and formed a new “imagined community”, the independent Mexican nation. While anthropologists have been thinking extensively on the problem of mediating one’s pain to others, and how it relates to social position and social texture beyond the domain of the biological body (Asad 2000; Das 1996; Taussig 1984), Mexico can serve as an example for how a mutual experience of dolor and rabia can be a very productive force in (re)building society. In El Grito de Dolores, just like with the indignation for Ayotzinapa, pain is cousin of rage.

Consequently, the activism in the wake of the Iguala massacre differs from the usual accounts of suffering and passive victimhood in the aftermaths of violence (Bourgois &
Scheper-Hughes 1994; Green 1999; Zur 1998) since rage, in this case, was used as an important political response. *Rabía* is not merely an emotional and existential response to death (Rosaldo 1984) but can be a productive political outlet, too. Many Mexicans were enraged in the wake of the Iguala tragedy, perhaps because they knew it could be them the next time. Just how my Mexican friends and I felt after the kidnapping of Sandino. This simple fact can forge a deep-rooted identification with the disappeared and their families.

The protests for the 43 disappeared students from Ayotzinapa had their own emotional gravitas with heartfelt testimonies mixed with displays of rage and political anger, the latter illustrated by a common protest song that went:

¡Políticamente Vivo!
¡No has Muerto!, ¡No has Muerto!, ¡No has Muerto Camarada!
¡Su Muerte, Su Muerte, Su Muerte Será Vengada!
¿Y Quien la Vengara?
¡El Pueblo Organizado!
¿Y Como? ¡Luchando! Entonces: ¡Lucha Lucha Lucha!
¡No Dejes de Luchar!
¡Por un Gobierno Obrero Campesino y Popular!
Politically alive!
You have not died, you have not died, you have not died comrade!
Your death, your death, your death shall be avenged!
And who shall avenge it?
The organized people!
Therefore, fight fight fight!
Never stop fighting!
For a government for the working class and farmers!

Mexico has constantly revisited this breaking point of electric social tension, authoritarianism met with popular uprisings, throughout its modern history. Think not only of *El Grito de Dolores* (1810); but also of the peasant revolution of Zapata and Villa (1910); the Massacre at Tlatelolco (1968) and the student movement in its wake; the ¡Ya Basta! of the EZLN uprising in Chiapas (1994); the government’s war on drugs (2006) and the *Hasta la Madre* cry of Javier Sicilia’s MPJD (2011) to commemorate the war victims; and the indignation of Ayotzinapa and Citizens Popular Police of Guerrero today. Mexico has come back time and time again to this snapping point of social tensions through a recurring drama of authoritarian rule and popular revolts. One massacre, *La Noche de Iguala*, is an echo of an older
one, *La Noche de Tlatelolco*. Perhaps there is progress, though, in the fact that the last time Mexico’s *campesinos* rode in to take the National Parliament at el Zocalo, they came with rifles, while this time when the Fathers and Mothers of Ayotzinapa came—accompanied by hundreds of thousands on the street on December 6, 2014, the hundred year anniversary of the Mexican Revolution—they came instead with candles, photos and flowers in their hands.

There is creative potential in these political emotions that guard a status of victimhood in the epoch of human rights, when the creation and recalling of collective memories of a violent past partake in shaping contemporary identities (Gandsman 2009; Robledo 2018; Sanjurjo 2013; Sosa 2014). Or, as Sélvi expressed it before, “this pain now moves Mexico forward”. Mexico’s solidarity activism achieves important things. It converts grief and suffering into political anger, and then this “cult of victims” expands the experience of grief and rage for Mexico’s missing beyond the close family. When don Clemente talked about his missing Cristian’s “new family”, this was part of such an expansion of the domain of the disappeared. The disappeared demand our engagement because they come with a threat: if we do not engage and fight for what is right, we might join them. Their fate is our risk, their pain is our rage, their unsolved mystery is our legacy. It was even better put by don Clemente and the other Parents of Ayotzinapa in the hashtag #Ayotzinapa30meses in a video they spread across social media 30 months after their sons’ disappearances, which ends with them saying: “*Nuestros hijos pueden ser tus hijos*” (Our sons could be your sons).
Chapter IV

Even If It’s the Last Thing I’ll Do

Few words were uttered under the pouring hot sun. I stood on the sidewalk along the avenue el Paseo de la Reforma, in the city centre of Mexico City, where a white tent had been set up, covered by large photos of missing girls. Three middle aged mothers, doña Silvia, doña Bertha and doña Alicia sat outside the tent with caps and sunglasses in the sunshine. None of them had eaten anything for nearly a week. They were all mothers of disappeared daughters, and they were now performing a hunger strike next to the large avenue so that as many people as possible could see them. I could tell on this day, in late September 2014, they didn’t have much energy left to speak. I stood by their tent, participated in the traffic blockades they carried out with other activists who supported them, and waited for a couple of hours while the mothers took turns resting inside the tent. When the last light of the day had vanished as the sun went down, I left for the night. I returned the next day to see how they were doing and again take part in some more blockades and manifestations. Hour after hour and day after day passed at the same slow pace for nearly two weeks.

Mexican parents who have a disappeared son or daughter tend to perform public displays like this as “acts of public grieving” (Rivera Hernández 2017: 108). While the last chapter asked how activists and wider society respond to violence and focused on solidarity activism with close relatives of Mexico’s victims, and Chapter II followed concerned families’ journeys as they became activists and analysed their mobile strategies and protest caravans, this chapter will, on the contrary, show the limits of this solidarity and their struggles to gain empowerment more clearly. Part of the answer to how society responds include state institutions ways of dealing with the concerned relatives and their demands and this chapter takes on that dynamic.

Parents’ public displays of grief, I will now argue, seek to bring forth their disappeared, representing the absence of missing persons via acts upon their own bodies, such as hunger strikes or other protest performances, which may actually put their lives at risk. These protest performances try to communicate pain across bodies, but they may still fail to resonate with wider society. As doña Blanca Álvarez Nava of the Mothers of Ayotzinapa would phrase it, “que no sea ajeno al dolor que traemos” (don’t be a stranger to the pain we bring).

The grief of surviving Latin American relatives of victims of atrocities, who may or may not engage in activism, has been thought to manifest itself in embodied states through bodily aches,
susto (soul lost) or psychological trauma in introverted and unconscious expressions (Green 1999; Robben 2000b; Zur 1998). I was able to see in those I befriended that Mexican parents of missing children tend to use their own bodies to visualize their victims in displays that externalize their grief and their anger and that not only show that pain acts upon both the body and the psyche of the griever (Asad 2003; Green 1999; Harrison 2003: 55). Additionally, these displays may also be used to act upon and in the outside world. But the fact that parents of Mexico’s disappeared children deploy a politics of visibility through public acts of grieving (Azaloa 2012; Revelo Blancas 2010; Rivera Hernández 2017; Staudt 2008) does not automatically mean they succeed in being heard.

Mothers on a Hunger Strike

I met doña Silvia, doña Alicia and doña Bertha, all from Ciudad Juárez in Chihuahua, north of Mexico, during the very first weeks of my fieldwork in Mexico City. In September 2014, the day before they started their hunger strike, they led a demonstration from Estela de Luz along el Paseo de la Reforma and towards Los Pinos, the Presidential Residence. Several other mothers of missing daughters were present too, as were journalists, photographers and political collectives supporting the much-in-gaze “Ni Una Más” (Not One More) activists. Most of the mothers there that day came from Chihuahua or Estado de México, a region around Mexico City. Doña Arlen, a mother of a disappeared daughter, and her sister doña Norma (aunt of the missing girl) from Estado de México participated in the protest and explained their situation to me during the protest march:

Es por, a ver, bueno, queremos una solución porque las niñas desaparecen tan tan fácilmente. Muchas niñas despareceren y no sabemos que pasa. Ha pasado un año sin que sepamos donde está ella. Estoy aquí para mi hija. Tenía catorce años cuando desapareció. Queremos respuestas. Los periódicos solo nos dan las mentiras de los criminales. Las autoridades nos piden que esperemos, no pasa nada. No saben cuanto duele eso. Queríamos hacerlo público, pero luego recibimos llamadas de amenazas. Tuvimos que quedarnos adentro por quince días. No pasó nada, el tiempo se nos escapó, hasta que mi hermana contactó a la red de madres y nos aceptaron. Revisé su Face para ver si ella ha estado en contacto con alguien, tengo la contraseña, se la di a la policía pero ni siquiera verla. Reunimos con los investigadores, pero estaban ocupados y no querían vernos. La investigación no ha llegado a nada. Semana pasada mi hermana fue a la policía y le dijeron que seguramente volvería a aparecer, pero no lo ha hecho, no les importan este tipo de casos.
We have this protest to put an end to our girls’ disappearances. They disappear way too easy. Many girls have gone missing and we never know what happened. A year has passed without us knowing anything about where she is. I’m here for my daughter’s sake. She was fourteen when she disappeared. We want answers. The newspapers only give us the lies of the criminals. The authorities ask us to wait, nothing happens. They don’t know how a death pains. We wanted to go public but then we received telephone threats. We had to stay inside for fifteen days. Nothing happened, time ran away for us. Until my sister contacted the network of mothers and they accepted us. I have checked Facebook to see if she’s been in contact with anyone, I have her password, I gave it to the police, they didn’t even want to look at it. We went to meet the investigators, but they were busy and didn’t want to see us. The investigation hasn’t come to anything. Last week my sister went to the police and they told her that she would surely reappear again, but she hasn’t done that, they don’t care about this kind of cases (interview, Arlen and Norma, the Chapultepec Park, Mexico City, September 23, 2014).

There were roughly forty or fifty activists and mothers present in the protest that day. It began with some of the mothers of the missing girls displaying protest banners, reading a public statement out loud (the essential message of which was that the government must keep its promise to investigate the crimes), and letting photographers take photos of them before the march began. The traffic had to be stopped by traffic officers, who were forced to run in front of the protest as the crowd filled up the wide avenue la Reforma. The tail of the protest march stretched perhaps fifty meters. It was a tense atmosphere with photographers running along the sidewalk and taking photos of the parading mothers. After about a kilometre, the protest ran into trouble. A police barricade had been set up to block its way. Here, on a small road that led from la Reforma towards the Presidential Palace inside the Chapultepec Park, the march was stopped. They didn’t let the mothers pass.

Several mothers tried to talk to the police, to convince them to let the march continue toward the Presidential Palace by saying that they had a right to protest. After half an hour or so had passed without any success, the protest started to march back towards la Reforma again, retreating from the police barricade. However, when we came closer to the avenue, we saw that a new police barricade had been set up there as well. The protest was now surrounded by riot police that prevented the mothers both from moving forward towards the Presidential Palace and from returning to where they came from. The situation was getting more and more tense; no one knew what the police had in mind next. Would they arrest some of us? Why were they keeping us there? It created an uncertain and nervous atmosphere. The mothers stood firm,
however, shouting at the officers or, in some cases, trying to reason with them. Doña Bertha took to words:

_Nuestras hijas han sido secuestradas, tenemos el derecho a que se investiguen a los delitos. ¿Por qué nos tratan como una amenaza? ¿Por qué no nos dejas pasar? Tenemos el derecho a realizar una marcha de protesta y exigir justicia. ¿Por qué no hacen su trabajo y encuentran a los delincuentes que cometieron estos delitos?

Our daughters have been kidnapped, we have a right to have the crimes investigated. Why do you treat us like a threat? Why don’t you let us pass? We have a right to have a protest march and demand justice. Why don’t you do your job and find the criminals that did these crimes instead? (public speech, Bertha, the Chapultepec Park close to La Reforma, Mexico City, September 23, 2014)

Another activist from the Nahua village San Salvador Atenco—a community whose inhabitants have long struggled in a land dispute with the regional authorities in Estado de México over the construction of an airport on their land (the construction has been prevented thus far, and the stubborn struggle has made Atenco into a symbol of indigenous land resistance in Mexico)—had come to support the Mothers of Ciudad Juárez and the State of Mexico, and he now raised his voice in front of the police blockade as well:

_¡Miralo, eso es la represión de un estado policial! No dejan las madres pasar, no dejan que las madres de las víctimas se expresen. Tenemos derecho a la expresión, a la libertad de expresión y a protestar. ¡Defenlas pasar! ¿No tienen conciencia? ¿Y si fueron sus hijas que desaparecieron? Un día pueden ser sus propias hijas que faltan si se permiten que estos crímenes continúen. Deberían estar del lado de la gente, aquí estamos, no contra nosotros no, sino arrestar a los delincuentes en Los Pinos. Somos una manifestación pacífica, ¡dejanos pasar!

This is the repression of a police state! You don’t let the mothers pass, you don’t even let the victims’ mothers express themselves. We have a right of expression, of free speech, and to protest. Let the mothers pass! Don’t you have any compassion? What if it were your daughters who were disappeared? If these crimes are allowed to go on, one day it can be your own daughters who are missing. You should be on the side of the people, here we stand, not against us, arrest the criminals in Los Pinos instead. We are a peaceful demonstration, let us pass! (public speech, anonymous, the Chapultepec Park close to La Reforma, Mexico City, September 23, 2014)

Doña Silvia and the other activist now posed in front of the riot police’s barricade with large banners that said: “We demand a response to the appeal that was sent on July 14, 2014, in which
we seek an audience [with the president] on the femicide cases with families of murdered and disappeared women of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua”. Another banner called: “Mexico’s President Enrique Peña Nieto attend and solve the femicides”, and another: “Ni Una Más”. Other mothers carried pink paper crosses with names of victims written in black ink, letting photographers take photos of how they had been encircled and trapped, stopped by the very authorities who were supposed to help them find their girls. The scenery for these photos was dramatic with the pink crosses of the mothers who sought an end to impunity against the backdrop of dark riot police with their transparent shields. Peaceful mothers of homicide and kidnapping victims from poor areas of Mexico met with a forceful hand that kept them at distance from the very authority to which they tried to reach out for help. After keeping us trapped for an hour or so at the site, the riot police let all of us go without any arrests or explanation for why we had been held. The protest march returned the same way it had come, now moving away from the Presidential Residence.

Several families, like Arlen’s, Silvia’s, Bertha and Alicia’s, who took part in this protest have waited for proper police investigations of their daughters’ disappearances or murders for years. Three among them, Silvia, Bertha and Alicia, now responded to the police disruption of their protest march by remaining in Paseo de la Reforma, at the exact spot where they were held by the police, for the following weeks. When no new police investigations were launched into their girls’ disappearances, and in response to the police repression that they faced in its place, these three mothers decided to try a new strategy. They decided to go on hunger strike. By using their own bodies to express their dolor in the capital, they aimed to raise awareness for their cause and pressure the authorities to take action. With this drastic action, they hoped to evoke sympathy among the public and to promote their cause so that the government could not continue ignoring them but would rather be morally compelled to respond. Bereaved of the possibility of direct dialogue with the authorities, they turned inwards and used their own bodies as silent but visible political vehicles to express their dissent. Their hunger strike began the day after the march and would go on for over two weeks.

Systematic disappearances of women and girls have become common in some of Mexico’s more crime-torn states, such as Chihuahua and the State of Mexico. Women go missing and yet, startlingly, the state’s municipal and federal authorities tend to cover up the crimes or refuse to investigate them properly. Anonymous threats like the one doña Arlen’s family received often keep families silent (Domínguez-Revalcaba & Corina 2010; Gaspar de Alba 2010; Segato 2006, 2004; Staudt 2008). If bodies turn up, they are often mutilated.
When the hunger strike of doña Silvia, doña Bertha and doña Alicia was announced and information spread about it through social media, it received immediate support. Political groups and activists joined them daily to help to carry out traffic blockades along la Reforma. The traffic blockades were made during certain hours and in short intervals so as not to stop traffic completely but rather only for periods of five to fifteen minutes at a time. On Twitter, the hashtags #NiunaMas, #PeñaAtiendeFeminicidios, and #AtiendeMadresenHuelga served as channels for solidarity. The organization May Our Daughters Return Home that Silvia, Bertha and Alicia were part of, and which doña Silvia had been part of creating, organized further practical support for them.

A small tent was set up for Silvia, Bertha and Alicia, as mentioned above, right at the road exit/entrance of Calle Arquimedes and la Reforma. Aside from being the very place where the police had held them, this was a place where traffic passed all day long. Both the tent and its surroundings were covered with banners, pink crosses, and protest placards with capital letters stating “Huelga de Hambre, Madres de Juárez” (Hunger Strike, Mothers of Juárez). Photos of their missing girls decorated the place in white and pink colours that stood out in the grey traffic, forming a sharp contrast to the modernistic window-filled skyscrapers and the green Chapultepec Park in the background. Among the three mothers, Bertha was the spokesperson who addressed the press and who led most traffic blockades with her energetic presence and persona. I visited them daily, and by the third day of their hunger strike they seemed profoundly exhausted. Alicia did not have the strength to participate much in the blockades and often needed to leave the street and rest in the tent. Bertha, however, explained that: “Tenemos que hacer esta huelga de hambre para obtener alguna respuesta a nuestra solicitud de una audiencia con el presidente, para que nos garanticen investigaciones nuevas” (We have to make this hunger strike to get some response for our request for an audience with the president so that they guarantee us new investigations) (interview, Bertha, El Paseo de la Reforma, Mexico City, September 24, 2014). Understandably, they became less talkative by the day, and their body language seemed increasingly tired and plagued but, impressively, Bertha still had her distinct energetic style a week into the strike.

In spite of their rapidly decreasing energy, Silvia, Bertha and Alicia had transformed a conventional avenue into a subversive space to display their civil disobedience. They had little other choice but to turn to the wider public after direct face-to-face-dialogue with the authorities had been denied them.

During the first week of their hunger strike along el Paseo de la Reforma, their protest tangled with the daily movements and constant traffic of the never-sleeping metropolis of
Mexico City and its busy rush hours. Sometimes they received support from passers-by, at other
times they heard angry rants about the delays as car lights flowed past their tent. Drivers and
pedestrians alike were faced with the embodiment of dolor and political dissent instead of the
constant commercials usually covering the public space. By interrupting car commuters, it was
as if their protest said that spectators were equally responsible for the current state of affairs
and that their support was necessary to change it. In the end, many of the drivers and pedestrians
I saw passing by expressed some sort of support for the hunger strike of the Mothers of Juárez.
They donated money, paused for short conversations, gestured encouragingly with their hands
from the other side of the car window and voiced their support when driving by. Agreeing, it
seemed, about the outrageous status quo of cases with missing girls being ignored by

On the third day of the hunger strike, Alicia had received threats from a prosecutor working
for FEVIMTRA (the Department for Violence against Women and Trafficking), the very
authority that should have been investigating these crimes towards women. The prosecutor had
threatened that Alicia’s police protection in Ciudad Juárez—which had been granted after Alicia
received several death threats—would be withdrawn if she continued to protest. That is to say,
in clear speech, that if Alicia did not stop pressuring the police to investigate what had happened
to her kidnapped daughter, the police would not protect her nor prevent her from being the next
one to disappear. Worse still, she told me, her family back in Ciudad Juárez was now being
followed: “Han sido fotografiados afuera de casa y acosados por hombres vestidos de civil y
armados que vienen a nuestra casa” (They have been photographed and harassed by armed
men in civilian clothes who come to our house) (interview, Alicia, El Paseo de la Reforma,
Mexico City, September 26, 2014). She interpreted these harassments as a threat to her family
and as a direct response to her civil disobedience from the authorities in Mexico City. May Our
Daughters Return Home and other activists who supported them handed out information sheets
about the threat from the prosecutor of FEVIMTRA and spread information on social media
about Alicia’s family being followed in order to inform and engage the public. What if these
“armed men in civilian clothes” were now about to kidnap yet another one of Alicia’s family
members as punishment for her protest for her already kidnapped daughter? These are the very
real threats and nightmarish questions that the surviving family of Mexico’s disappeared have
to face far too often. But Alicia did not give in, she continued to fight, and the three mothers
made the bold choice to move their hunger strike to the gates of the authority that had threatened
her.
Six days into the hunger strike another protest march was held. Information sheets were distributed along el Paseo de la Reforma and a public statement of the mothers read: “Not Peña Nieto, nor any other functionary of the institutions of this country have turned up to listen to the demands of justice…”. Their hunger strike had, until this point, faced the daily presence of police officers who constantly monitored them in the background. In the following days, the hunger strike moved from la Reforma, where it was seen mainly by pedestrians and drivers, to Calle Atenas in front of la Secretaría de Gobernación (The Interior Ministry [SEGOB]), outside of the very gates of the responsible government department. This was also a neighbourhood filled with police patrols. At first, this move appeared successful as the mothers did manage to get a meeting with FEVIMTRA. A four-hour meeting, however, ended with only an informative statement by the authorities and no concrete commitments. This illustrates too well that it is not a lack of proper laws but rather an unwillingness to implement them that is the current problem of Mexico’s justice system (Domínguez-Ruvalcaba & Corona 2010: 160). Among the mothers and those who supported them, this, of course, provoked anger. No real progress had been made, and we were now more than a week into the hunger strike, which had started to wear hard on the bodies of Silvia, Alicia and Bertha. The authorities continued to keep them at arm’s length and when they agreed to meet, nothing came out of it.

After nine days of the hunger strike, they had another fruitless meeting with officials of SEGOB and CONAVIM (the National Commission for Preventing Violence towards Women). The authorities refused to comply with their demands in this meeting, as well. Their hunger strike in the heart of the city thus continued. However, at Calle Atenas, their protest was more isolated than it had been on the busy Paseo de la Reforma. No more traffic blockades were carried out, and I saw less and less people coming up to them. Police patrols were always present in this area outside of SEGOB, and they kept a close watch on the tent of the Mothers of Juárez, which also made me much more uncomfortable when going there to talk to them. They had moved there to put pressure on the authorities, but when they did so, they lost the more direct interaction with the general public.

Mexican authorities would not give in to their protest. The wider solidarity their hunger strike had initially generated evaporated over the following days. The protest never succeeded in forcing any policy change. The mothers were ignored, met with indifference or direct threats. The momentum of their hunger strike was gradually lost, and the support they received at first never converted into a substantial political force. During its last days outside of SEGOB, the lonely tent of the mothers made a rather sad view. It was surrounded by uninterested police patrols who were either on break or stationed in the area, but not even for the purpose of
monitoring the mothers, it seemed; their strike was no longer a concern for the authorities. Inevitably, the indifferent government buildings outlasted the firmness of their starving bodies. The Mothers of Juárez’s public display, meant to make their disappeared girls visible, fell back into invisibility, withdrawn from the spotlight as the camera flashes moved on and the car lights continued to pass by.

**Symbols and Bodies at the Barricades: Representing Absence**

The Mothers of Juárez—doña Silvia, doña Bertha and doña Alicia—from May Our Daughters Return Home and their, at times, dramatic hunger strike in the backdrop of state institutions ultimately failed to solve the crimes that had vanished their girls. However, their actions still sought to counteract the politics of disappearance by embodying and bringing forth their missing children and making them visible once more.

Their hunger strike illustrates how “public acts of grieving” (Rivera Hernández 2017) can be a productive social and political force. The three mothers displayed their anger and grief in an attempt to reach out to society. They used their bodies as political vehicles to bring forth their absent daughters, letting the pain of their children’s absence possess them so that the missing could be visualized, their absence represented at the gates of responsible authorities. “I’m here for my daughter’s sake”, as Arlen said that first day in the protest that was stopped by the police. Likewise, Silvia, Alicia and Bertha performed their hunger strike for their absent daughters’ sake. When they refused to eat, what they sought to show us bystanders through their hungry bodies was, as I see it, the pain associated with their daughters, who were thought to have been victims of degrading crimes, and the grief they feel from the fact that their girls are missing. They carried large banners with photos, names and other information about “las muertas” (the dead women), as the murdered and disappeared women and girls of Ciudad Juárez have become known. The tent of Silvia, Alicia and Bertha was covered by photos of their daughters. It is the fact that they are parents of missing girls that makes them grievers, that forces their political activism, that turns their daily lives upside down and makes them travel to the capital, take to the streets, and, in this case, embark on a public hunger strike. As the well-known Mothers of Juárez, their dolor has become tied to their social roles and has become embedded in their family relations. It is a part of their motherhood, this dolor, and when displayed in public as it was, it took on the attributes not only as a “cause of action, but…[as] itself a kind of action” (Asad 2003: 69).

The hunger strike of Silvia, Alicia and Bertha, just like other public acts of grieving or protests in the public sphere, aimed at evoking wider solidarity through interaction with
spectators. In these public displays, the body is used as a medium for transmitting pain. While the last chapter defined shared political emotions and detailed how a symbolic family that transgresses traditional familial narratives can be developed in the mutual experience of grief for the disappeared, in this case, the illusive atmosphere of shared emotion that may capture a wider audience was not achieved. Despite this, the specific protest performance of a hunger strike did bring forth a wider pool of shared cultural imagery.

The suffering body can be an effective communicative instrument since we all have one, and we therefore share the capacity to identify, at least to some extent, with others (Aretxaga 1995). The three Mothers of Juárez came to embody the powerful image of caring motherhood. In this sense, they used orthodox gender ideology associated with the caring mother to reassign a sense of worth and value to their objectified young daughters, girls who have been degraded as victims of machismo violence. In sharp contrast to how women’s protests have been considered to negate dominant models of femininity “embedded in the idealized asexual Catholic mother” (Aretxaga 1995: 140-1), the three Mothers of Juárez embraced this ideal in their own barricade version of motherhood. The idea of mothers on hunger strike can become a powerful cultural metaphor precisely because it evokes the idealized Catholic mother who sacrifices herself for family values. The mothers’ hunger strike aligned with traditional ideas of familial love, and hence it helped to reinforce the idea that a sacred bond had been violated. The protests of mothers of disappeared children in Mexico, like the protests of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, are “both [an] expression of maternal protection and strategic socialization of their private pain to draw attention to their plight” (Robben 2000b: 81). They wield idealized motherhood and showcase their special maternal love to appeal to Latin America’s and Catholicism’s strong emphasis on traditional family values.

This is not, however, as other scholars have thought, necessarily because of a unique natural feeling of maternal protection rooted in the psychological nurturing dynamic between mother and child (Robben 2000b) any more than the activism of the Fathers of Ayotzinapa is. They may both best be described as expressions of parental love. In fact, parents’ public displays of grief and protest seek solidarity across ethnic, class and gender boundaries. Thus, the hunger strike of Silvia, Alicia and Bertha was an attempt to bridge the gendered body politics that are to blame for the machismo violence, paradoxically as it may be, by acting out a radical version of Catholicism’s idealized image of the carrying mother.

In Catholic Mexico, two of the primary iconic images are the figures of the crucified body of Jesus and the Mother Mary lovingly holding baby Jesus in her arms. They are national symbols “which [seem] to enshrine the major hopes and aspirations of an entire society” (Wolf
1958: 34). Just as Eric Wolf wrote about *La Virgin de Guadalupe*, Mexico’s patron saint whose figure was once carried by the insurgents in Mexico’s War of Independence (1810), just as the revolutionary forces of Emiliano Zapata “fought under her emblem” in the Mexican Revolution (1910), just as it is carried by the Families of Ayotzinapa in their protests today (2014). Parents of Mexico’s disappeared and their bodily displays of grief merge these two figures—the suffering Christ and the Mother Mary carrying her child. They are fathers or mothers who suffer, who ‘carry their cross’ because of their love for their children. This casts light on how their protest performances—such as the hunger strike of the three mothers from Ciudad Juárez, which was accompanied by a threat of suicide and self-sacrifice for political aims— are, first and foremost, ways of caring for life.

As food and eating tend to manifest belonging, family bonds and togetherness, one can symbolically refuse to participate in the community by not eating (Carsten 2004: 37-39), by rejecting, then, the implied unity. Silvia, Alicia and Bertha’s hunger strike was, in this sense, a form of symbolic disobedience created by breaking social norms. They hoped their hungry bodies would become symbols that could be felt across gender, ethnic and economic lines of segregation, that they would evoke compassion that would translate into political support for their cause and force the responsible authority to respond.

If eating tends be at the heart of sociality, kinship, family belonging within the household, and important life events (Carsen 2004: 37-39), then it is clear that the intention not to eat, not to participate at the table, carries meaning. It has been said that Mexicans eat everywhere and at all hours of the day. In Mexico City, where several millions travel on public transport each day and small street food stands encircle every metro entrance, eating often takes place on the streets, in the middle of traffic and movements, or while waiting in line for public transport. It is therefore telling that Silvia, Alicia and Bertha chose to locate their hunger strike in the middle of one of the vast metropolis’s many traffic arteries in the central part of town, occasionally interrupting car traffic with banners carrying photos of their missing daughters. By blockading traffic, they displayed their hunger strike to the general public as well as interrupted the flow of workers so essential to the economy.

In Catholic tradition in general, sharing the holy sacrament of bread and wine that symbolizes the body and blood of Jesus is a way to manifest religious community, receive forgiveness, and act upon one’s faith. And in Mexican tradition, offering food to one’s deceased and eating with one’s dead during the annual ritual festivity the Day of the Dead forms part of Mexico’s inter-generational continuation of care and highlights the moral commitment that exists between the living and their deceased (Brandes 2006; Garciagodoy 1998). Thus, food
offerings constitute a reciprocity of care passed across generations in households that manifest solidarity with their deceased (Brand 2006: 8-15). As I’ve discussed, the close family of the disappeared generally do not accept that their disappeared are truly dead. However, they are also not truly alive, they are not present at the table to share a meal with their loved ones, and thus they cannot reassert belonging and togetherness. Therefore, a hunger strike and the active choice not to eat must be seen as a manifestation of solidarity with those who are missing from the table.

Consequently, the MPJD have also performed hunger strikes. One took place in the summer of 2014 in Mexico City, just two months before Silvia, Alicia and Bertha embarked on theirs. The Fathers of Ayotzinapa would, in turn, stage a three-day fast starting on September 23, 2015, ending on the one-year anniversary of the police attack that disappeared their sons in Guerrero. This fast was held at el Zocalo outside of the gate of the National Parliament and received much more attention than Silvia, Alicia and Bertha’s had a year before. In total during my time in Mexico, there were thus three different symbolic food protests, two hunger strikes and one fast, staged by families of the disappeared in the same city within little more than a year.

What is truly unique with these symbolic food protests, however, and what separates them from other hunger strikes, is that they do not only communicate the suffering of the bodies that underwent the strike (Feldman 1991; Sweeny 1993; Wee 2007). These public displays of grief were about bodies who weren’t present in the protests themselves, just symbolically evoked as the absent objects/subjects of the pain on display. They brought forth Mexico’s disappeared children, seeking to shame the responsible authorities for not taking responsibility and fulfilling their obligations towards these boys and girls. And they showed, at the same time, a profound caring for life by bringing forth the missing, who their parents want to see returned home again more than anything else.

**Don’t be Strangers to Our Pain**

At times, parents of disappeared children in Mexico receive a great deal of support from wider society (Chapter III), but mostly they are left by themselves to cope as best they can. Their interactions with Mexican state institutions as well as passers-by reflect a degree of indifference toward their plights. Three other mothers, doña Carmen Mendoza, doña Angelica Navarrete González, and doña Blanca Álvarez Nava, among *Las Madres de Ayotzinapa* (the Mothers of Ayotzinapa) found themselves in such a sad scene of uninterested spectators during a rally they held outside of the Department of Medicine at UNAM, where they felt as if they were speaking to thin air. A monthly protest for Ayotzinapa’s missing had just taken place in the capital and
since the protest marches had seen fewer and fewer people marching along with the Parents of Ayotzinapa, doña Carmen, doña Angelica and doña Blanca had come to the University to rally the students and revitalize the student movement that had sprung up the year before in solidarity with their missing sons. When Carmen Mendoza, mother of the disappeared student José Mendez, was addressing a crowd of students at UNAM in August 31, 2015, she gave voice to close family’s desire to share their grief so that others would also help take up the responsibility for the nation’s many disappeared:

_Bueno, nosotros venimos pidiendo apoyo. Nosotros venimos para informarles de viva voz sobre nuestro dolor. ¿Quién sabe lo que puede pasar? Hoy o mañana cuando salimos de nuestras casas nada nos garantiza que llegaremos de volta, podría ser el día cuando no volveremos y, bueno, por eso que tenemos que ser sensibles a los sufrimientos de las personas y de las problemas de los demás. Creo que, somos mexicanos y como mexicanos tenemos que luchar por las problemas del país. Estamos luchando por nuestros hijos pero no nada más por nuestros cuarentaytres hijos, estamos luchando también por los miles de desparecidos en el país._

We ask for help. We have come here to talk about our grief. Who knows what could happen? Today or tomorrow when we leave our houses nothing guarantees us that we will return. It could be the day when we are not returning and that is why we must be sensitive to the sufferings of other people and the problems of others. We are all Mexicans and as Mexicans we must fight for our country. We are fighting for our sons but not only for our 43 sons. We also fight for all the thousands of disappeared in the country.

As doña Carmen spoke, it became increasingly clear that only a few spectators cared to listen. Most students walked by her without taking any notice of her testimony. Her speech then began to address the lack of interest from the crowds:

_Hay muchas personas jóvenes y adultos que no saben ni conocen la problema en el país, con este presidente que tenemos. Si alguno de ustedes no tiene conocimiento, no están al tanto de la situación, porque yo he visto que hay muchas personas que nos ignoran, pasan como si nada les importa, no sé, detienen para preguntar ¿qué está pasando? La verdad es nosotros tenemos este dolor ahora de nuestros hijos que queremos de volta, queremos que todo el mundo nos apoyará a buscarlos, a encontrarlos. Porque tenemos que encontrarlos, nuestros hijos están vivos. No están muertos como nos han tratado de hacernos creer este gobierno, ello, porque quieren lavarse los manos, echar la culpa a crimen organizado cuando realmente los criminales_
están en las sillas presidenciales. En este caso con nuestro hijos, en la desaparición de nuestros hijos, participaron los tres niveles del gobierno, el federal, estatal y municipal. Los jovenes sobrevivientes son testigos. Ellos miraron cuando los policías municipales se llevaron a nuestros hijos incluyendo los militares del 27 batallón de Iguala, que participaron en estos hechos. Y temenos pruebas de lo que dejimos, no nada más porque hablamos. Es por eso que quiero que la gente tome conciencia y por eso que estamos luchando para que esto nunca vuelva a suceder. La verdad es que deseo que ninguno de sus familiares, ninguna persona, tenga que estar en nuestros zapatos porque es muy feo, horrible. Estamos sufriendo demasiado por la ausencia de nuestros hijos. Nosotros necesitamos a nuestros hijos a nuestro lado. El gobierno no tiene derecho a rincarnos nada, a quitarnos nada. Son nuestros hijos. Es por eso que continuaremos buscándolos y gritando, aunque se moleste a la gente. No nos interesa. Ya la verdad, no tenemos miedo a nada. Vamos a buscarlos y ustedes deben hacer lo mismo, organizarse, luchar por lo que realmente queremos, por estar libre, porque si no luchamos ahorita, este pesadilla continuará.

There are many people, young and adults, who do not know of the problems in the country, with this president that we have. If some of you are not aware of the situation, because I have seen that many people just ignore us, going about it like nothing matters (she spoke before a dispersed crowd now with only a few people while large numbers of medical students in their white doctors’ coats walked by unbothered by her presence, talking to each other, laughing, using their cell phones). I don’t know, pause and ask what is going on? The truth is that we, right now with this pain of our sons that we want back, want the help of the entire world to find them. We have to find them, they are alive and not dead, like this government has tried to make us believe because they want to wash their hands clean and blame it all on organized crimes when the real criminals are in the presidential seats. In this case with our disappeared sons, all three levels of government, the federal, the state and the municipal, participated. The young survivors are witnesses. They saw the municipal police take our sons away, including soldiers from the 27 Battalion of Infantry in Iguala who participated in the deed. And we have proof of this, we are not merely saying it. That is why I want to make people aware and why we are fighting for this never to happen again. The truth is that I wish that no one of your family members, no person at all, shall have to be in our shoes because it is horrible. We are suffering too much from the absence of our sons. We need our sons by our side. The government doesn’t have the right to take anything away from us. They
are our sons. That is why we will continue to search for them and shout, no matter if people are disturbed by it. That doesn’t interest us. We are not afraid of anything. We will search and you should do the same, organize yourself, fight for what we want, to be free, because if we won’t fight now this nightmare will continue (public speech, Carmen Mendoza, UNAM, Mexico City, August 31, 2015).

Listening to doña Carmen speaking to the crowd who, in the end of her address, did not consist of more than seven spectators, watching the hordes of medical students leaving the University building behind her pass by, completely apathetic to what she had to say and more interested in buying food and candy or smoking cigarettes, hearing the cacophony of their voices overtake hers, made for an incredibly awkward situation. Doña Angelica Navarrete González spoke after doña Carmen and continued to address the indifferent students passing by, trying her best to mobilize their interest and political fighting spirit, after first criticising the investigation:

Buenas tardes. Pues si, yo soy la mamá de Jorgé Ángel Navarrete González. Pues a once meses no sabemos nada de nuestros hijos. Tenemos la esperanza de encontrarlos, tenerlos con nosotros con vida. El gobierno nos quiere hacer creer todas sus mentiras que han dijó, pero gracias a El Equipo Argentino (EAAF) desmintieron todo lo que pasa en el basurero de Cocula. Nos quisó creer que ellos eran nuestros hijos. Pero llegaron ellos y nos ayudaron. Y gracias a dios no fueron nuestros hijos pero fueron otras personas que tienen familiares buscándolos. Este gobierno con sus mentiras nos quisó creer que fueron nuestros hijos, pero no. La PGR también escondía unas pruebas y no las mostraron, pero gracias a Los Expertos Independientes (GIEI) no lograron. Eran unas playeras que encontraran en las autobuses que PGR nunca nos contaron y hace poco tiempo los expertos presentaron las pruebas y si, esas playeras pertenecían a los muchachos, unas playeras, una mochilla y cartera. ¿Por qué la PGR nunca nos dio nada? Deberían habernos dado la siguiente día o al tercer día, nos hubieran dijó, saben que padres, aquí están las cosas que encontramos en los autobuses, ¿reconocen si son de sus hijos?, pero no. Se las guardaron. Gracias a los expertos independientes nos estamos dando cuenta de muchas cosas.

Yo les digo que hagan conciencia. Si nosotros nos paso esto, mañana o pasado mañana, pueden ser ustedes. Porque no sabemos con este gobierno. Y si, nosotros vamos a seguir luchando y gritando por nuestros hijos hasta se nos los estreguen, así si estamos frente a el ejército o quien sea nosotros, nosotros vamos a gritar. No nos vamos a cansar. Porque este dolor que teníamos se tranforme a coraje y rabia y no tenemos miedo.
Ahorita que llegamos fuimos a enviar salón por salón para que bajaran y se dieran cuenta pero creo que no les importan. Esperemos que no les pase lo que a nosotros nos están pasando. Este dolor no se desaliemos a nadie. Porque es un dolor insoportable no saber nada de un hijo. Y como les he dicho, nos vamos a seguir luchando gritando, porque fue el estado quien se los llevo, el estado los se llevo vivos y vivos los queremos. Y ellos se van a regresar a nosotros. Yo como madre siento que mi hijo se está vivo porque lo siento en mi corazón. Y yo no me voy a quedar callada. Aunque la gente nos digan revueltos, que ya nos callemos. Esa gente, no saben que nos estamos pasando. Pero una madre haga todo por un hijo. Y nosotros vamos a seguir. No nos cansaremos hasta encontremos nuestros hijos con vida. Así yo les digo por favor hagan conciencia. Y les pido que las actividades que tengamos se unan con nosotros. Aunque el gobierno haban dicho también que nos han dado dinero, pero para nosotros nuestros hijos no tienen precio. Nosotros preferimos de ustedes un peso que un millón de ellos. Nosotros queremos que devuelvan a nuestros hijos, no están en venta.

Good afternoon. Well, I am the mother of Jorgé Ángel Navarrete González. After eleven months we don't know anything about our children. We hope to find them, have them with us alive. The government wanted us to believe all their lies, but thanks to The Argentine Team (EAAF) who denied everything they said happened at the Cocula garbage dump. They (presumably the PGR and the government) wanted us to believe that they (the bodies that were said to have been killed at Cocula´s dump site) were our children. But they (the EAAF) arrived and helped us. And thanks God they were not our children, but these were other people who have relatives looking for them. This government with its lies wanted us to believe that they were our children, but no. The PGR also hid some evidence and did not show them to us, but thanks to the Independent Experts (GIEI) they failed. The PGR had found t-shirts on the buses that they never told us about and recently the experts presented the tests and yes, those t-shirts belonged to the boys, some t-shirts, a backpack and a wallet. Why did the PGR never give us anything? They should have given them to us the next day or the third day, they should have told us: parents, you know what? here are the things we found on the buses, do you recognize if they belong to your children? But no. They saved them. Thanks to the Independent Experts we are learning a lot of things.

I ask you to become aware. If this happened to us, then tomorrow or the day after it can happen to you. Because we don’t know with this government. Now when we arrived here, we went from hallway to hallway so that people will come down and listen, but it
seems like it is not important to [the students]. We hope the same thing that happened to us won’t happen to you. We don’t want anyone else to have this pain. The pain of not knowing of your son is unbearable. We will continue to struggle, because it was the state who took our sons. The state took them alive, and we want them back alive. They will come back to us. Like a mother, I feel that my son is alive, I feel it in my heart. I won’t keep silent. Even if people are calling us rebels and say that we should calm down. This people don’t know what has happened to us. A mother does everything for her son. We will continue. We won’t keep quiet until we find our sons alive. That is why I ask you, please, become aware. I ask that you unite with us in our activities. The government have offered us money, but our sons doesn’t have a price for us. We prefer one peso from you over a million from them. Our sons are not for sale. (public speech, Angelica Navarrete González, UNAM, Mexico City, August 31, 2015).

A lone collection jar stood on the table behind doña Angelica as she spoke, but in spite of her spirited rallying cry, no one approach it with a contribution, not one single peso that would have been worth more symbolically than a million of the government’s pesos found its way in there. The last to address the few people who listened to them was doña Blanca, who warned the spectators once more about the risk of facing violence themselves one day. While her words highlighted how pain can be used as a social force, “itself as a kind of action” (Asad 2003: 69), the very context of uninterested passers-by testified to the fact that it is not always a straightforward one. On the contrary, even if society at times share the anger and grief of the families of Mexico’s disappeared (Chapter III), this sad rallying event in which the mothers’ calls for collective action fell on deaf ears demonstrated that the close family remains the sole and true owners of their grief, and that they alone have that heavy load of responsibility on their shoulders, together, of course, with the government that has failed them:

Yo soy otra madre de familia de mi hijo Jorgé Álvarez Nava, que el gobierno nos quitó. Siempre yo he dicho eso. Que el gobierno nos quitó. Porque ellos se los llevaron. Tenemos pruebas. Por eso nosotros no nada más estamos andando las calles gritando nada más por gritar. Tenemos prueba que se los llevaron los militares. Aunque Peña Nieto no quiere aceptar que es un crimen del estado, una desaparición forzada. Por eso nosotros andamos por las calles luchando gritando para encontrar a nuestros hijos. No vamos a parar, no vamos a callar. Porque si ellos piensaron que nosotros vamos a quedar callados, jamás, nosotros no callaremos. Seguiremos gritando en las calles y luchando por nuestros hijos.

Dijimos a Peña Nieto que con un millón de pesos no nos van a mandar a la casa, ¡NO!,

122
nuestros hijos no tienen precio. Yo no quiero dinero, quiero a mi hijo. Yo tengo fe en mi dios que mi hijo está vivo. Y no porque yo no quiero aceptar que está muerto, no, no hay prueba que diga que está muerto. Venimos a la UNAM, aquí un doctor forense nos dijo que le había hecho una investigación, y dijo que cuando lo matan, no sé, no me recuerdo cuantos litros de sangre deben ser que él estaba dijiendo, y dijo él que ya pueden examinar la tierra, si la sangre, si tiene sangre allí se examina y vamos a ver si pertenece a sus hijos o no. Hicieron el examen de la tierra y no hay nada de sangre. Cuando nos dijeron que allí los habían matado, que allí habían quemado, fue pura mentira. Eso era pura mentira, fue un teatro que formó Murillo Karam. Le dijimos que ya descubrimos la mentira y este teatrito ya se le cayó, aunque quería creerlo. Por eso se cambio y se cansó y se fue, porque descubrimos su mentira. Ella ya la descubrimos.

Gracias a los argentinos (EAAF) y los expertos independientes (GIEI) también. Ellos encontraron la ropa como dice mi compañera, en las autobuses. ¿Por qué no nos dijeron que tenían esa ropa, ¿por qué lo ocultaron? Y dejaron ir Aguirre. Ellos no se van a castigar. El pueblo unido tenemos que hacerlo. Porque nosotros podemos.

Nosotros somos los que pagamos para que están en donde están sentados. Ellos no van a mandar a nosotros, nosotros les pagamos con el dinero con que pagamos nuestros impuestos. Los malos que tenemos son los gobernantes.

Y por eso, aquí andamos nosotros, como madres, luchando y diciendoles en viva voz, informándoles a ustedes, a todos que quieran oír, quien quieran abrir los ojos. Diciéndoles, no nos callemos, no nos quedemos callados, ante la represión del gobierno. Porque por eso sí, por eso sí están buenos ellos, para matar y para desaparecer. Y no nada más matan normalistas, no nada más desaparecen normalistas, también han matado doctores, también han matado a enfermeras. ¿Y qué hacen? Nada, ¿Por qué? No alzan la voz. Hay que unirnos y alzar la voz, no hay que quidarnos callado. ¿Por qué? porque ya no puedo pasar esto, ya no puede volver a repetirse. Nosotros tenemos que luchar para cambiar todo esto. Yo les pido el apoyo a todos ustedes. Todos que están oyendo que no sea ajeno al dolor que traemos, que se unan a nuestro dolor, porque este sufrimiento que traemos no se lo deseo a ninguna madre que lo sufra.

I am another family mother, of my son Jorgé Álvarez Nava, who the government took away from us. I've always said that. That the government took them. Because they did. We have proof. That is why we are walking the streets, raising our voices, not just shouting for the sake of it. We have proof that the military took them. Although Peña
Nieto (then president of Mexico) does not want to accept that it is a state crime, a forced disappearance. That's why we walk the streets fighting, shouting to find our children. We will not stop, we will not shut up. If they thought that we are going to stay silent they are mistaken, we will never be silent. We will continue shouting in the streets and fighting for our children.

We told Peña Nieto that even with a million pesos they will not send us back home, NO! our children are priceless. I do not want money, I love my son. I have faith in my god that my son is alive. And not because I don’t want to accept that he’s dead, no, there’s no proof that he is. We came to the UNAM, here a forensic doctor told us that he had done an investigation, he said that when someone is killed, I don’t know, I don’t remember how many litres of blood he said there is supposed to be, but he said that they can examine the soil for blood, if there’s blood we will see if it belongs to your children or not. They did the soil test and there was no blood. When they (the PGR) told us that they had been killed there, that they had burned there, it was a pure lie. That was pure lie, it was a theatre that Murillo Karam (then National Attorney General) created. We told him that we discovered the lie and this little theatre has fallen apart, although he still wanted to believe in it. That's why he changed (job) and got tired and left, because we discovered his lie. Thanks to Argentines (EAAF) and the independent experts (GIEI) as well. They (EAAF and GIEI) found the clothes as my compañera said, on the buses. Why didn't they tell us they had those clothes, why did they hide it? And they let Aguirre (former governor of Guerrero) go, they are not going to punish themselves. We, the united people must do it. We can. We are the ones who pay for them to be where they are. They are not going to control us, we pay for them with our taxes. The bad guys we have are the rulers.

As mothers we are fighting, and we tell you with our own voices, informing those of you who want to listen, who want to open your eyes. We won’t keep quiet against the repression of the government. That is the only thing they are good for, but not only disappearing normalistas, they kill doctors and nurses and pharmacists as well. What are you doing? Nothing? Why? You don’t raise your voices. We must unite and raise our voices, we can’t keep quiet. Why? Because this cannot be allowed to happen, it cannot be allowed to ever take place again. We must fight to change all this. I ask for the help of all of you. Everyone who listen, don’t be a stranger to the pain we bring, so that the pain will unite us, because I don’t wish any mother to have to suffer what we are going through (public speech, Blanca Álvarez Nava, UNAM, Mexico City, August
In this case, at this place, the spectators remained strangers to the pain the mothers carried. It would not resonate, it could not “build… a world that the living can inhabit with their loss”, not could it “[build] a world in which the dead can find a home” (Das 1996: 88). It was a scene where “the tremendous moral and magical power of the unquiet dead… flowed” into the public sphere” (Taussig 1992: 48), but without much magic or moral power. These were merely restless ghosts, represented by their mothers, who appeared in a public place with a rather quiet reception. They were there, but were they truly heard or seen?

The Last Thing I'll Do

When bodies are disappeared, surviving family are “suspended between two emotional worlds”, and as Antonius Robben writes about the Argentinean Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, “identification and projection are therefore likely outlets when the corpse is missing. A mother can turn her grief inward through identification or externalize her anger on those responsible for the loss” (Robben 2000b: 86-87). Their grief drives them on in their strong desire to:

...be reunited with the deceased, grief puts the griever at odds with reality… One wants to revoke the irrevocable, call out to one who can’t answer, feel the touch of a hand that has gone cold forever… In the wake of a loved one’s death, we feel guilty for living, it seems that we are stealing something that doesn’t belong to us, we would like to die with our dead (Harrison 2003: 55).

This potential desire to “die with our dead” makes “grief one of the most dangerous and potentially self-destructive psychic crises” (Harrison 2003: 55). Parents of Mexico’s disappeared children try to transform this personal crisis into something politically constructive by acting out their grief at the same time as they try their best to master it. They use it as a tool for communication and as a productive force in their dramatic interactions with the Mexican public, the nation’s authorities and police.

When parents of the disappeared bring their grief to Mexico City to perform protests and display their pain in public, they also strategically enter the main national political scene. Here they visualize their missing sons and daughters, and one must remember that this is in the wake of a life-changing trauma. Yet, even in this bewildered state they are ready to do anything to get their children back. During the very first weeks after his son’s disappearance, Don Clemente Rodriguez, among the Fathers of Ayotzinapa, stated his readiness to fight for his son Cristian no matter the consequences, in a similar fashion to what we have heard from the activist mothers throughout this chapter. Speaking at an event in Mexico City at Centro Nacional de las
Artes on November 12, on one of the first occasions I saw him speak in public, he declared: “Unos padres de familia vamos a organizarnos... yo voy a ir porque el día de mañana me pueden desaparecer junto con los compañeros, pero que sea el último que yo haga, quiero ver a mi hijo por última vez. Ver a mi hijo, verlo vivo” (We the fathers of the families will organize ourselves… I will come along because tomorrow it could be me they disappear, along with my comrades, but even if it’s the last thing I’ll do, I want to see my son one last time. See him alive) (public speech, Clemente Rodriguez, Centro Nacional de las Artes, Mexico City, November 12, 2014).

Don Epifano Álvarez, among the fathers, echoed a similar readiness to face whatever came his way at a protest rally where I saw them on December 23, 2014. They would try to storm the military camp in Iguala in January 2015, the camp where it was believed that their disappeared sons could have been taken. At the rally held at el Zocalo, Epifano said:

... por culpa de esta maldita gobierno, quiero decirlo que aquí estamos al pie, y que se nos van a matar, pueden hacerlo cara a cara. Porque nuestros hijos son inocentes. Por eso estamos luchando. Por esos cuarenta y tres desaparecidos que estamos llamando, y estamos luchando por todos los desaparecidos también. No tenemos miedo. El miedo se terminó.

…it’s this damn governments fault, and I wish to tell them that here we are, on foot, and if they want to kill us they can do it face to face, because our boys are innocent. That’s why we fight, for the 43 missing who we are calling for, and for all the disappeared. We won’t be afraid, the fear has gone away. We won’t rest a single day (public speech, Epifano Álvarez, el Zocalo, Mexico City, December 23, 2014).

Their attempt to break into the camp led to a violent confrontation with the Mexican Army; rubber bullets were shot at them that night instead of the real ones their sons had faced a few months before. Several of the fathers as well as some of the surviving students of the Iguala massacre who also took part were injured in the unsuccessful storming of the 27 Infantry Battalion’s facility.

The Fathers and Mothers of Ayotzinapa, just like the mothers involved in May Our Daughters Return Home, are famous activist groups in Mexico who receive a lot of media coverage, and this gives them some protection, at least, from state violence. However, other activists who pressure authorities for truth put their own lives at risk by doing so. Nepomuceno Moreno Núñez was a member of the MPJD when he was killed while searching for his missing son. A commemorative epitaph his family has made in his memory in Mexico City reads:
SOY NEPOMUCENO MORENO NÚÑEZ. FUI ASESINADO POR BUSCAR A MI HIJO EL 28 DE NOVIEMBRE DEL 2011 EN HERMOSILLO, SONORA.

[...] 
Me acribillaron por exigir justicia a funcionarios de la procuraduria del estado de Sonora, para que investigaran y encontrar a mi hijo secuestrado, él sigue desaparecido, mi asesinato sigue impune. [...] 

NEPO
28 de marzo del 2014.
Donado por El Grito Más Fuerte.

Eslabones por la Paz. Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad.

I AM NEPOMUCENO MORENO NÚÑEZ. I WAS KILLED NOVEMBER 28, 2011, IN HERMOSILLO, SONORA.

[...] 
They killed me because I sought justice from the officials at the Sonora State Prosecutor’s Office and demanded that they would investigate and find my abducted son, who is still lost. My assassination remains unpunished. [...] 

NEPO

Donated by El Grito Más Fuerte (The Loudest Shout; an activist network connected to the MPJD).

Metal plates for Peace.

(Epitaph, El Grito Más Fuerte and MPJD, Estela de Luz, Mexico City, March 28, 2014).

The lower the media spotlight, the less engagement from wider society, the easier it is for perpetrators to erase relatives who dare to protest. Still, many families never give up their pursuit of justice, risking their own safety when they confront authorities or criminal groups. They are aware of the risks involved in challenging corrupt authorities and criminal networks in Mexico but do so anyway, so strong is their will to find their children, so great the loss of meaning in their absence.

These brave political activists put their own bodies at the barricades and their own lives at risk to change their society for the better and make sure others won’t live through what they have had to go through. Showing with their own bodies that their missing children are worth grieving, worth fighting for and caring about. The Fathers and Mothers of Ayotzinapa often ended their rallies by crying out—in an echo and paraphrasing of the Mexican revolutionary
slogan, “¡Patria o Muerte!” (homeland or death)—“Hasta las últimas consecuencias” (until the bitter end). Likewise, when Angelica Navarrete González was speaking during her visit to UNAM mentioned above, she too proclaimed her firm commitment to find her disappeared son: “Continuaremos luchando y gritando por nuestros hijos hasta que los devuelvan, no importa si nos encontramos frente al ejército o quien sea, seguiremos gritando. No nos callaremos. Este dolor que llevamos se ha transformado en coraje y rabia, y no tenemos miedo” (We will continue to fight and shout for our sons until they give them back, no matter if we find ourselves in front of the army or whoever it may be, we will continue to shout. We won’t shut up. This pain that we carry has transformed to courage and rage, and we are not afraid) (public speech, Angelica Navarrete González, UNAM, Mexico City, August 31, 2015).

If, as has been said, the anthropological literature on the subject of empowerment and political action “is marked by a lack of attention to the limits of the human body as a site of agency” (Asad 2003: 68), then the self-sacrificing acts of parents of Mexico’s disappeared may be seen as an embodiment of pure desperation. When they use their own bodies in hunger strikes or in other similar demonstrations, it is as a last desperate act to protest and achieve justice and change when the gates of state institutions are closed to them. Their pain is not from physical harm done to their bodies, but is rather a pain that resides in and derives from the absence of a close loved one. When their memories and testimonies are met with indifference, this implies a lack of recognition that devalues these victims and denies them their sense of worth and value once more. They become society’s forgotten ghosts. Mexican activists, as the last two chapters shall show, try to make sure that this will not be the fate of las muertas and los desaparecidos by immortalizing their political afterlives in material culture.
Chapter V

The Day of the Dead

If one of the driving questions of this thesis is to consider how Mexican society and relatives of victims of violence respond to the nation’s contemporary violence? Then this chapter will look closer at and explore how the country’s famous annual festivity, the Day of the Dead, is part of that response. What can the Day of the Dead do for those who have suffered a violent death or disappearance in recent years? How do the political altars of the Day of the Dead frame society’s experience of these deaths? How do present-day ofrendas (altar-offerings) and contemporary political circumstances, in turn, re-frame the Day of the Dead? And who has the right to use or evoke the nation’s dead victims in public spaces?

Mexico has a strong ethics of commemoration and a long tradition of honouring the dead displayed in the Day of the Dead altars when families give food offerings to their deceased. This puts relatives of contemporary victims of violence, altar-makers and celebrants of the festivity at odds with those who kill and disappear for the simple reason that the Day of the Dead demands that the dead be respected and properly remembered.

Nevertheless, violence in recent years has created a problem for Mexico’s traditional form of “necrosociality”—with this I mean the Day of the Dead altar-offerings known as ofrendas, which are meant to honour one’s deceased relatives and which allow surviving family and society to engage with the dead through material culture—since many victims today are never found after they have been kidnapped. These victims pose a challenge to the Day of the Dead tradition and celebrants who seek to honour their dead with alter-offerings—otherwise often explicitly political in nature and satirizing those in power (Brandes 2003b; Congdon 2003; Garcíagodoy 1998)—since it is unclear whether the disappeared are dead or alive. Thus, there is a great deal of ambiguity surrounding how society should honour them. Should the disappeared be included in the Day of the Dead or not? Where do they belong?

During my 16 months of fieldwork in Mexico, I found that this problem of displacement in death causes political controversy and general confusion; Mexicans didn’t know exactly how to handle the disappeared during the celebrations. However, the altars devoted to victims of violence, I shall argue, show another side of a celebration that traditionally tends to be described as a humorous, satirical and cheerful tourist event in the literature (Brandes 2003a, 2003b, 2006;
The ofrendas for victims of violence that I came across in the Day of the Dead celebrations in 2014 and 2015 were distinguished by their fierce political critiques and satires, far less harmless and far more challenging to the legitimacy of the Mexican state, the political establishment and the justice system.

The Day of the Dead has been examined for its role in shaping Mexican identity; the roots of its macabre iconography have been traced through history, often in critique of the idea of a homogenous national Mexican view of death, what could also be called the myth of Mexico’s romantic view of death (Brandes 2006, 2003a, 1998a; Congdon 2003; Fragoso 2011; Garciagodoy 1998; Lomnitz 2005: 20; Malvido 2006; Nutiti 1988; Strupp 1972; Vargas 1971). My concern here will instead be on what I see as the important role of the Day of the Dead today in the aftermaths of violent deaths.

Contemporary activist ofrendas for victims of violence illustrate, I shall further argue, how the Day of the Dead—with its ancient tradition of nourishing deceased ancestors to please the dead and gain their blessings in life (Brandes 2006)—sustains political afterlives of the dead in public space. This, I argue, enables the dead to influence worldly affairs in new (and more secular) ways.

In asking what the Day of the Dead can do for families who have suffered a violent death or have a disappeared person in their family, I will also shed light on what these political victims do to the Day of the Dead. This take casts new light on the well-researched old festivity, interpreting it from an alternative angle by exploring how politicized and violent deaths are incorporated in the festivity and have forced its aesthetics to evolve and reinforce political critique in public debate. Some of the politicized deaths also present the Day of the Dead with the new set of problems as mentioned before; namely, how to address the ambiguous souls of the disappeared, which tests the very foundations of the remembrance festivity including who it can honour and who it must not celebrate.

The Day of the Dead
During Mexico’s Day of the Dead—on November 1 and 2 annually—the dead are said to come back to eat with the living. Families celebrate and remember their deceased by putting out food offerings, objects and gifts for them at altars in houses or at cemeteries. While the exact traditions vary across different states within Mexico (Nutiti 1988: 4), in most cities, street altars are also made in public places such as popular squares and outside of universities, museums, work places and parks. No matter where they are constructed, ofrendas always contain food for the dead to eat as their souls are believed to come back at midnight to eat the offerings their
families have put forth for them. Therefore, families tend to cook the favourite meals of their deceased, accompanied by something to drink (often Tequila or Mezcal) and salt (said to purify the soul).

The ofrendas consists of many objects apart from food. Among the most important things are the cempasúchtli (Marigolds), the “flower of the dead”, which are sold across the country in street markets and generally decorate most houses and public places at this time of year. Copales (copal from trees) is burned in chalices at the altars, and its distinctly pungent smoke is also meant to purify souls. Photographs of the deceased are generally included in ofrendas inside the household, at cemeteries, and in public places. A special bread called pan de muertos (bread of the dead) is eaten during the holiday and omnipresent on the altars, popular for its sugary taste. Calaveras, small sugary candy in the shape of a skull; papel picado, a colourful paper with carved holes in it depicting skeletons; and religious objects or personal belongings the dead was particularly fond of also make up the altar offerings. In other words, an entire material culture of the dead has evolved that manifests how the living commemorate and celebrate their lost loved ones on the Day of the Dead.

Meanwhile, newspapers will publish short rhyming poems, also known as calaveras (skulls), that mock death or make satire of the powerful and wealthy, usually referring to events during the past year. Additionally, satirical cartoons have their own distinct tradition in the Day of the Dead; the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cartoonist José Guadalupe Posada’s famous figure La Catrina—a dressed-up lady-skeleton, built at various sites as a full-sized early twentieth-century lady with an upper-class outfit and a hat over her white skull—has not only been included in the festivity as a funny satirical character but has come to personify it more than any other figure. She represents death herself during the festivity, as death tends to be thought of as a woman in Mexican tradition, although La Santa Muerte (Saint Death) has begun to replace her at some sites across the country in recent years (BBC 2017; Chesnut 2017; Kristensen 2014).

During the celebration, families tend to travel to their local zocalo during the day to see the public ofrendas, buy candy calaveras and pass the time looking at the carefully decorated and colourful altars that are set up by local municipalities or people living in the area. Families also go to graveyards and decorate the tombs of their deceased, putting drinks and food there, lighting candles, burning copales, and praying for the souls of their dead. In Mexico City, families tend to construct ofrendas in the household, as well, though they will divide their time between in the house, the public spaces and the cemeteries, with all three sites given at least some attention through decoration, care and attendance.
The tradition of offering food to ancestors has pre-Colombian roots, but the Day of the Dead is an outgrowth that has synthesized Mexico’s indigenous legacy with newer Catholic customs. The celebration now occurs on the Christian holiday All Saints’ and All Souls’ Day (Brandes 1998a; Garciagodoy 1998; Nutiti 1988; Strupp 1972). Today, the Day of the Dead is characterized by the humorous and cheerful nature of its morbid aesthetics (Brandes 2003b; 1998a: 198-201; Congdon 2003; Fragoso 2011: 6-8; Garciagodoy 1998; Vargas 1971). Dressed-up skeletons and cartoons are a parodic twist of *momento mori* (remember that you shall die), captured in a famous proverb coined by José Posada: “Death is democratic” (Brandes 1998a: 198-201; Fragoso 2011: 5).

Mexico’s cultural and religious tradition come with the “understanding that the dead do not go away forever, that they can return to visit”, which teaches Mexican children to “respect death and that if they do not do so, it could result in severe danger” (Congdon 2003: 200). The annual return of the dead in the Day of the Dead continues Mexico’s unique tradition of visible death. What is truly interesting about the Day of the Dead today, in my mind, at least, is not the part it has played in shaping national identity (Brandes 2003a, 1998a; Garciagodoy 1998; Lomnitz 2005), but instead the important role it may play after real death occurs in the epoch of human rights. This, as we shall see, demonstrates how the Day of the Dead has become much more than just a happy annual holiday.

**A Ritual of Rebellion Part I: Black Humour**

The Mexican axiom that “death is democratic” appears to be a playful ethical reversal of life’s conditions on earth, since life in a country like Mexico is defined by vast inequalities between the rich and the poor. During the Day of the Dead—as in most rituals—things can be turned on their head. This ethical reversal is a core theme of the festivity’s playful satire: “When the humble classes… have spoken, in a bold and visible, but humorous way, to the ruling class” (Congdon 2003: 208). Humour in the Day of the Dead is expressed through the *calaveras*—the rhyming poems accompanied by satirical cartoons published in newspapers around the time of the holiday—and through the morbid skeletons built and displayed in public street altars that may come with ironic messages attached to them (Congdon 2003). The humour can thus be divided in two: First, the papier-mâché skeletons in public *ofrendas* (Congdon 2003). Second, the literary humour of *calavera* poems (Brandes 2003b). Death and the dead are used to make satire of the vanities of the upper-class through expressive altars and skull imagery, and there is plenty of irony on display in the dressed-up skeletons (Congdon 2003; Garciagodoy 1998). But today, for Mexicans that live through the ongoing epoch of the narco cartels, mass killings,
disappearances, corruption and impunity that haunt the nation, new themes lend themselves to political satire in opposition to the nation’s elites.

In recent years, the Day of the Dead has seen an associated explosion of black humour that satirizes and directly challenges the legitimacy of the Mexican state and those who run it. It critiques the homicides and impunity and provides a new way to honour and remember the nation’s victims of violence. Mexico’s narco violence, corruption, and infamous cases—including the army’s massacre of 22 people in Tlatlaya in June 2014; the 193 migrant victims found in mass graves in San Fernando in 2011, a crime attributed to the narco cartel Los Zetas; and the 43 students who were disappeared by municipal police in Guerrero in September 2014 (Concha 2015)—have been frequent topics of black humour and satire.

This display of death and the dead or by other means visualizing victims is far from particular to Mexico but must be viewed in the light of Latin American nation states shared history of violence due to colonial domination, and later neoliberal restructuring and the prevalence of authoritarian regimes and organized crime in the region which have given rise to necro-cultures, although it may take its most extreme form in Mexico (Berlanga 2015; Gibler 2014; Mbembe 2008; Reveles 2015; Robben & Ferrándiz 2015; Taussig 1984; Zagato 2018). Dark humour and satire have also been pervasive in the aftermaths of violence elsewhere in Latin America, for example in the context of Argentina’s disappeared (Sosa 2014). But Mexico’s Day of the Dead provides both an abundance and annual event that centres around it like few other places.

Consequently, the dark jokes I came across during the Day of the Dead in 2014 and 2015 did not primarily focus on the vanities of the rich, nor was the most prominent humour defined by the soft satire of class relations when the poor have fun by declaring that the rich also shall die one day, long since the dominant interpretation of the festivity’s humour in ethnographic descriptions (Brandes 2003b; Congdon 2003; Garcíadogoy 1998). Instead, in recent years, the Day of the Dead has seen the rise of a political satire that casts light on a divided nation, torn over its treatment of the nation’s dead.

These grim jokes reveal the political polemic between different attitudes in society towards the nation’s contemporary victims of violence. In recent years, satire has focused on the state’s failure to take responsibility for victims by making macabre jokes about its complicity in their unjust deaths. This black humour comes with a fierce political critique that challenges the hierarchy and legitimacy of the state. Take any calavera on the topic of the 43 disappeared students from Ayotzinapa as an example. I give one example below, taken from the newspaper
La Jornada (Buendía Roque 2014-11-02): 7

Calavera de Ayotzinapa
La nación pedía a la flaca
justicia en Ayotzinapa.
“Acaba con tanta rata
que todo queman y tapan”.
La muerte, que es justiciera,
atóndió la petición,

El primero de la lista
era el “Gober” de Guerrero [...]  
Calavera for Ayotzinapa
The nation asked the skinny lady 8
for justice in Ayotzinapa.
“Finish off the rats
who burned them all and covered it up”.
Death, who is just,
attends the request...

First on her list
was the “Government” of Guerrero [...] 

Calavera poems like this one tend to be accompanied by morbid or funny cartoons with politicians portrayed as naked skeletons digging mass graves or running away with money and the bones of victims. A Mexican version of an emperor with no clothes, so to say. These poems often come with cruel descriptions, like the one above, which compare politicians to rats and encourage Death to put them higher up on her list. During the autumn of 2014—in the wake of the massacre that had taken place in Guerrero and when hundreds of thousands Mexicans took to the streets to call for the resignation of then-President Enrique Peña Nieto, shouting “Fuera Peña” (Out Peña) and “Fue el Estado” (It was the state that did it)—such calaveras were no soft satire. They formed part of the efforts to topple the federal government of Mexico (after managing to topple the state government of Guerrero), and as the fathers and mothers of the

7 My translation of the calavera poem by Luis Fernando Buendía Roque.
8 One of Death’s many nicknames in Mexico.
disappeared students cried at their protest rallies, to “bring them to the books!”

Black humour and satires about the state that were displayed in the Day of the Dead celebrations I took part in formed part of a profound political indignation and activism. Although they were humorous, they still challenged Mexico’s political system and establishment. Exploring this political humour allows us to exit the narratives that focus on suffering, embodied pain and psychological trauma in the wake of violence in Latin America (Green 1999; Rivera Hernández 2017; Robben 2007; Robben & Suárez-Orozco 2000; Zur 1998). Black humour and political satire make up another, in Mexico at least, pervasive response from wider society in the wake of atrocities.

The Day of the Dead provides an annual space for such political satire, even in the midst of public debates about activism in response to homicide, and it will continue to do so for years to come. It allows the dead to be used like tools in public debates for political gains. This opens up alternative ways for the disappeared or violently killed victims to express political solidarity or participate in political debates. Here, on the Day of the Dead, victims may also be evoked by non-family members, though this, as we shall see, may lead to controversy and disapproval from close relatives. Nevertheless, the political afterlives of contemporary victims—sustained in public memory when they are evoked at public altars or calaveras—tend to echo the demands for social change and add to the pressure on the state in public debates.

A Ritual of Rebellion Part II: Political Altars

Political altars designated to victims of violence that I came across further illustrated how calls for justice and truth after violent deaths appear to have become an integral part of the Day of the Dead in recent years. Such street altars were put out for public viewing in Mexico City at places such as the Alameda Park in the city centre outside of the Museum Bellas Artes. On my first celebration of the famous festivity in 2014, I was struck by the protest messages included in the altar-offerings before me. Some even mentioned specific police patrols that took part in killing civilians or named different state institutions that had failed to provide justice after the death of the person the ofrenda was devoted to.

One set of ofrendas were dedicated to the violent deaths of the EZLN operating in Chiapas who took up arms against the federal government in 1994. Though the EZLN later made a peace agreement with the Mexican state, they continued to suffer violence at the hands of paramilitary groups in the region. In the Zapatist ofrendas, the sugary calavera skulls were dressed in rebellious pasamontañas (balaclavas) that covered their skulls rather than revealing their macabre features. Red socialist stars covered the ground and the red campesino scarves
that the EZLN uses were placed in the ofrendas or tied around the necks of the sugar skulls. Though the images were funny on the surface, these ofrendas depicted a past injustice and called for something to be done about it. They called for the onlooker, supposedly, to engage themselves in the struggle against the injustice done to these dead people. Some of these ofrendas even made explicit calls for “justicia”, which was written all over them.

Another site with activist altars was the southern area known as Coyoacán—a popular destination for thousands of Mexicans during the Day of the Dead where people would go to dine, drink, and entertain themselves—and where ofrendas included full-sized skeletons dressed up with cloaks and scythes. The ofrendas here had political altars devoted to las muertas, the many girls and women who have been abducted and murdered across the country during last decades and whose mothers we met in the previous chapter (Gaspar de Alba 2010). They lined one of the pathways that led up to the centre of the zocalo of Coyoacán. They were political in a blunt, direct sense, with small white gates marking them as if they were actual graves rather than street altars. Inside the altars were pink crosses, the trademark of the mothers who fight for justice for las muertas. The pink crosses had “Ni Una Más” (Not One More) written over them in black letters. On top of one of the large altars a sign read: “No perdí mi vida, alguien me la quitó” (I didn’t lose my life, someone took it away from me).

Instead of humorously dressed lady-skeletons, these activist altars had headless mannequins that were cut off below the waist and above the neck, showing only a female torso. They were true torsos, not skeletons, and photographs of las muertas covered the breasts. These altars faced a certain problem, however, in that many of the girls and women that they were meant to honour were missing, not confirmed to be dead. When I asked Araceli, a middle-age women and activist living in Coyoacán who participated in the making of the ofrendas, about this, she told me: “Pues, trabajamos junto con Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa... como ven, las ofrendas aquí tienen fotografías y nombres de las víctimas de homicidio, y colocamos las cruces” (We worked together with May Our Daughters Return Home9...[and] as you see, the ofrendas have photographs and names [of those who have been confirmed] as homicide victims, and we put up the [pink] crosses) (interview, Araceli, Coyoacán, Mexico City, November 2, 2015). The pink crosses unambiguously signified that death had occurred in those cases. In the words of Araceli again, these activist offerings put the spotlight on the political problems of “violencia e impunidad” (violence and impunity) and provided a broad critique of “el fracaso de las instituciones federales y estatales para garantizar justicia y seguridad para las mujeres

9 The political collective of the mothers of these victims previously discussed in Chapter IV.
en el México” (state institutions’ failure to guarantee justice and security for women in Mexico), but they additionally specified who the dead were and who was being remembered and commemorated in the altars (interview, Araceli, Coyoacán, Mexico City, November 2, 2015).

Similar activist altars found across Mexico during the festivity in recent years tend to critique government institutions in the same way by protesting violence, and they are quite different from earlier descriptions by anthropologists who sought to show the world Mexico’s harmonious popular philosophy of living with death by mocking it (Brandes 2003b; 1998a; Carmichael & Sayer 1992; Congdon 2003; Garcia-Godoy 1998; Vargas 1971).

Mexico’s contemporary ofrendas devoted to victims of violence come with a different message. They want us to discuss other things. These altars carry text such as “my life was taken away from me” and remind us that the dead haven’t had justice yet and still seek a reckoning with state institutions and criminal perpetrators. Activist offerings focus away from the old identity debate over the Day of the Dead’s morbid iconography and its origins to instead shed light on the ofrendas’ potential for serious political critique in public debate. Activist offerings seek to mobilize the Mexican community in the interests of the mistreated dead, and in doing so, they parallel the very essence at the heart of the old commemorative festivity to honour the dead and invert power relations on earth.

Political altars for victims of violence teach an old moral lesson. By displaying the unjust deaths to the authorities, they seem to say that society still has a moral obligation to them. The Day of the Dead, in this sense, may be used as a “ritual of rebellion” that shows cultural resilience in times of violence (Gluckman 1952; Wilson 1999). These altars, and the festivity’s strong ethics of commemoration of the deceased, demand that the dead be properly honoured. Thus, the holiday guards the rights of the dead to be recognized and remembered. Altar-offerings provide the dead with a space to display their rebellious afterlives so that their souls can talk back to power. Rather than viewing the Day of the Dead in the light of the state’s management of death (Lomnitz 2005), activist ofrendas—as I understand them—illustrate the ungovernability of Mexico’s dead.

Political altar-offerings truly express the rebellious spirits of “unquiet souls” (Hertz 1960: 85). When these souls are welcomed back to our world through the public theatre of the Day of the Dead—the Mexican nation’s rite par excellance—they enter the public sphere where they can continue their fight for justice. Families of victims as well as others who construct political altars for the dead thus strategically exploit “the tremendous moral and magical power of the unquiet dead” by making use of them and letting them reclaim public space (Taussig 1992: 48).
The Day of the Dead’s political altars, I claim, may in this way grant public recognition to the souls of unjust deaths by securing a place for them in the nation’s spotlight. Here, the institution of the ofrenda is discovered to simultaneously be a guardian of tradition and a space for the continued rebellion. Altars and poems comment on contemporary political circumstances of death as they change through the ages.

In contrast to what scholars have come to believe, the Day of the Dead does not so much steal away the symbolic power of death by mocking it and making it visible as much as it simply disregards the fear that is said to dominate the Western relationship with death (Ariés 1981; Garciagodoy 1998; Quigley 1996: 21). It does make use of death’s power, though, by putting it to work to sustain the symbolic potency of death for when the dead return to the world of the living. When Mexico’s dead are called upon: “they turn the world upside down… They are not forgotten, they are not out of sight”, making the unnamed “dead and the unprivileged the focus of attention” (Congdon 2003: 208-9). This important work of the Day of the Dead in the wake of violent death reveals exactly why the ritual is so much more than just a happy fiesta. For here are Mexico’s dead “stripped down to the bones, having come back to haunt you and bite you back” (Garciagodoy 1998: 201).

**Controversies Over Altars for the Disappeared**

In the days that led up to the Day of the Dead in 2014, some of my Mexican friends were involved in setting up a huge ofrenda for the 43 students who, only shortly before, had been disappeared by police in Guerrero. Their disappearance had caused protests throughout Mexico during the month of October before the festivity. Already it seemed likely to outside observers and those who participated in the protests that they would not be found alive, even though the protest slogans read, “Vivos se los llevaron, vivos los queremos” (they took them alive, we want them back alive). This was nothing anyone wanted to say out loud, of course, since it would have been dismissive of their families’ hopes.

My friends, at the time students at UNAM, wanted to pay tribute to their 43 student comrades from the south. Those involved in making the ofrenda had participated in the massive protests, and some of the student activists had arranged occupations and strikes at the university in solidarity with the 43 disappeared (as discussed in chapter III). The case with the missing students was all over the news during these weeks, and it completely dominated public debate. Normally, ofrendas in public places will comment on and play with the topics currently in vogue.

To make an ofrenda, one normally goes to local markets, preferably the “magic markets”, to
get cartonerías (paper sculptures used in the altars) and all the other necessary objects. By far the most famous magic market is el Mercado Sonora, which is situated in the southeast outskirts of Mexico City’s city centre, a smoke-filled bazaar devoted to brujerías (witchcraft) and the occult. I followed my Mexican friends to the bazaar in the days before the celebration to buy what was needed for the public altar at UNAM and for the private altars everyone would set up in their homes. At the bazaar, we bought copal and chalices. In a conventional market in Pedregal de Santo Domingo, where I lived at the time, we found marigolds at a good price and filled our bags with calaveras and the other necessities.

When the ofrenda for the missing students was finally ready at the UNAM campus, it spanned almost ten meters, marked by long rectangular lines of yellow marigolds and with the names of the disappeared written on white paper next to the sugar skulls inside it. It had incense to attract their spirits, chalices with burning copal and candles to light the way for the dead and to guide them upon their return. Inside the altar, colourful palmprints marked the staircase. Students had put colour on their hands to mark the ground in red, like a blood trace of the crimes and the bodies that had been abducted. My friend Jorge described it this way: “It’s the hands of the dead reaching out to us from earth below”.

When it was finally completed, students chanted slogans in a big crowd that congregated around the altar. We cried: “They took them alive, we want them back alive!” The inauguration of the ofrenda ended with all one-hundred or so people present at the site counting from one to 43 out loud and then shouting “Justicia!” People took photos of the tribute to the disappeared students, posting it on social media, spreading word of the altar devoted to them to the outside world.

The fact that we screamed that we wanted them back alive was, of course, a paradox. The dead are believed to return during these days and nights, but our call was for a permanent return—not only for their souls to come back for a short visit, but for them to come back with their bodies intact, alive once more. Los desaparecidos are neither truly dead nor alive, and their ambiguous status makes it unclear if they should be included in ofrendas or not since the altars are traditionally devoted to the dead. In October of 2014, when the nation followed the search for the 43 missing students and the news reported on one mass grave after another being uncovered in the violence-torn southern state of Guerrero, it seemed highly unlikely that they would be found alive. My friends and I, like other student activists who wanted to show solidarity with the missing, may be forgiven for conflating their disappearances with their deaths and for using the tragedy without the authorization of their parents, just as many other people and political movements did throughout Mexico on that Day of the Dead. It was always
meant to honour them, express solidarity with them, place political pressure on the authorities by recalling the memory of the 43 in public debate.

Their fathers and mothers did not like the ofrendas for their disappeared sons. After the annual festivity, they complained about the use of them in ofrendas. Understandably, it had upset them to see their sons publicly portrayed as dead rather than missing as they clearly hoped to have them returned alive. Moreover, as discussed earlier, a clear conflict was unfolding in Mexico between the PGR in charge of the investigation, who claimed that the students were dead, and the parents who refused to see the case closed and could not let go of their hope as independent forensic experts had not confirmed that the students were dead. The ofrendas for the disappeared could therefore play into the PGR’s attempt to close the investigation in order to quell the protest movement. The activist ofrendas across Mexico that were devoted to the 43 were meant to put pressure on the federal government to halt state violence, but instead, they had come to parallel government discourse by unintentionally depicting the disappeared as dead and by devoting ritual attention to them in a day explicitly dedicated to the nation’s deceased.

The following year, in the weeks that led up to the Day of the Dead in November 2015, even though it seemed even more likely that the 43 still-missing students were actually deceased, we ofrenda makers had learned from our mistake. The fathers and mothers of the students declared publicly and repeatedly that they did not want their sons to have ofrendas. Epifano Álvarez, among the fathers, said: “No debería haber ofrendas para nuestros hijos, para nuestros normalistas, porque están vivos, no muertos” (There should not be any ofrendas for our sons, for our students, because they are alive and not dead) (public speech, Epifano Álvarez, Hemiciclo a Juárez, the Alameda Park, Mexico City, October 26, 2015). The fathers and mothers thus told their supporters that devoting Day of the Dead altars to their missing sons was not an appropriate way to pay tribute to them.

This unambiguous message was adhered to by student activists and other political collectives. I did not see any ofrendas in Mexico City in 2015 that were devoted to the 43 disappeared students, though the city had been full of them the year before, and not only at the UNAM. Now they were suddenly excluded from the celebrations due to the unclear status of their souls. The Day of the Dead could no longer guarantee recognition and remembrance for the disappeared, nor could it provide them with a space in the public sphere where they could display their rebellious afterlives. Their ambiguous status as “disappeared” had made them the Day of the Dead’s “personas non-grata”.

The Hierarchy of Death and Duality of the Days
Relatives of Mexico’s disappeared who call for “no ofrendas” for their missing show how some victims of violence in Mexico today must not be included in the Day of the Dead due to the circumstances of their death. Some bodies remain displaced in death—disappeared, as it were—stuck between the land of the living and the land of the dead, belonging then to neither of the two. The Day of the Dead cannot always display the ungovernability of the dead, nor can its altars always form part of a straightforward “ritual of rebellion” (Beezley & French 1994; Gluckman 1952; Marchi 2006) under such tragic circumstances.

Instead, the necessary exclusion of the disappeared from the festivity points to an inherent friction in the Day of the Dead’s ritual legacy. This problem derives from what we might call “the ritual hierarchy of death”. That is, that death differentiates insiders from outsiders. Death, this clarifies, is structured in a strict symbolic hierarchy that separates those whose bodies have been endowed with funerary rites and have been buried or placed in cemeteries or other appropriate places—souls that have thus symbolically found their way to the land of the dead—and those who remain unburied, condemned, it seems, to “roam the earth forever” (Hertz 1960: 85). Those who have not enjoyed proper burials are stuck between the world of the living and the world of the dead in a state of perpetual liminality (Kwon 2006: 12). Consequently, it appears as if the Day of the Dead cannot adequately incorporate such souls. Those who are displaced in death have no clear place in Mexico’s necrosociality.

The problem of the ambiguous souls of the disappeared is reflected in decisions about who the Day of the Dead must not celebrate. Relatives of the disappeared deny their death, and thus such contentious souls pose a new challenge for society, which must now address how to commemorate them. Mexico’s disappeared appear to be in need of their own material culture and new rites that are devoted solely to them outside of the Day of the Dead. This once again confirms the fact that Mexico’s necropolitics renders new problems for its necrosociality.

The anthropologist Stanley Brandes argues in Skulls for the Living, Bread to the Dead (2006) that the Day of the Dead’s tradition to cook and offer food to the deceased in a household is a way to care for one’s dead. At the heart of this is a reciprocal exchange between the living and their lost loved ones that sustains relationships after death and that allows children to give back to the deceased parents who once cared for them (Brandes 2006: 8).

If children die before their parents, hence breaking this genealogical continuity and reciprocal cycle of care, they can still be on the receiving end of this care when they return to eat in el Día de los Angelitos (the Day of the Angel Children) on November 1. El Día de los Angelitos is the first day of the Day of the Dead celebration, devoted to los inocentes (the innocent), while November 2 is called el Día de los Difuntos (the Day of the Deceased) and is
devoted to souls of departed adults.

These two days of the Day of the Dead celebration—the duality of its days, we might say—appear to correspond with “the duality of death”, that is, the cross-cultural tendency to differentiate between “good” and “bad” death in some way (Bloch & Parry 1982: 6; Hertz 1960: 85-86; Kwon 2008: 162-63, 2006: 8-20). What is seen as “good” and “bad” death may vary over time and across cultures, but there tends to be a symbolic continuity in that: “Good death is a socially constructive and regenerative death… the body that experiences a bad death—the untimely death of a child, for instance—takes up the opposite meaning” (Kwon 2006: 14). Souls who have suffered from “bad” death are often thought to linger on earth as ghosts that haunt the living; they are often hard to deal with and may pose a threat to the principle of “social triumph over death” (Kwon 2008, 2006: 15).

One of the many things that makes the Day of the Dead celebration so extraordinary is that it has a ritual structure—its duality of days—that mitigates this common symbolic hierarchy between “good” and “bad” death; it embraces both forms of death by devoting one day of the festivity to “the untimely death” of children, El Día de los Angelitos. In other words, the Day of the Dead includes troublesome cases of “nongenerative” death in its grand celebration of the continued bonds between the living and the dead that symbolize the regeneration of life and the continuation of it in the afterlife with a food-oriented annual fiesta. That is to say, this death rite celebrates both familial and societal triumph over death as much as it celebrates the dead themselves and mocks the mortals who soon shall perish (Brandes 2006). This inclusion of premature “bad” death in the festivity—that otherwise would risk being “nongenerative” and thus threaten its capacity to overcome the death of the individual, and perhaps disturb the cheerful mood of the celebration—makes it possible to also honour troublesome, tragic deaths.

The Day of the Dead enables this by gradually transforming tears to smiles via its temporal structure: the sequence of its days. It begins with the arrival of the souls of angel children, who are often welcomed in a night vigil at the cemetery during the first night of the celebration. It then moves on from these “bad” deaths associated with heartfelt grief and misfortune to celebrate the more cheerful welcoming back of deceased adult souls who passed away according to the regenerative “natural” sequence of time’s passing. The Day of the Dead thus is an extraordinary death ritual with a rather unique symbolic structure. It has a horizontal ethics of commemoration at its core that does not differentiate between “bad” and “good” death nor treat death in a hierarchical way that may exclude the former. This may, therefore, help to deal with the recovery from more tragic forms of death. Both types of souls are welcomed back on either the day devoted to los angelitos or the second day devoted to los difuntos, and both are
given food offerings that signify the continued exchange of care within a family over generations. Hence, the festivity has a clear democratic ethics of commemoration when it welcomes back all dead and invites them to the table to eat with the living, together again, if only for a night.

This duality of days—*El Día de los Angelitos* and *El Día de los Difuntos*—has left the celebration with some capacity to confront problematic, uncommon forms of death and suffering souls without losing its celebratory spirit as a community fiesta. The Day of the Dead, it seems, has triumphed over bad, otherwise-nongenerative forms of death. Mexico’s necrosociality is traditionally based on the principle of inclusion, one that demands that all dead are celebrated equally. Death, we may remember once more, is democratic. Mexico’s celebrations also seek to treat all dead equivalently by devoting specific days to honour them. This is also why the disappeared pose such a challenge to Mexico’s necrosociality, the principle of social triumph over death, and its longstanding horizontal ethics of commemoration: there is no day for the disappeared, no *El Día de los Desaparecidos*.

Mexico’s disappeared fall into such an ambiguous category that not even the Day of the Dead can adequately incorporate their souls and make a triumphant celebration out of them; they are not dead to begin with and thus not welcome in death’s kingdom. Death rites have their own inherent friction—a ritual hierarchy—because it is only when the dead have passed through death’s gates, after the completion of the funerary rite of passage, and “only when this process is completed that society, its peace recovered, can triumph over death” (Hertz 1960: 86). What, then, happens to this “principle of social triumph over death” or Mexico’s tradition of honouring the dead, if society must come to terms with a reality in which these ideals have become “almost unattainable” goals? (Kwon 2006: 15).

Further ethnographic research that follows these developments over the coming years closely is vital. Will the disappeared find their way back into the celebration? Will they find a proper place elsewhere and outside of the Day of the Dead? Can Saint Death, as the saint of the precarious, be of any help here? She is, after all, the guardian of those who live in society’s margins, the one who protects them from violence and misfortune (Kristensen 2014). For now, death’s closed gates will cause unforeseen problems for its celebrants. Souls who remain displaced in death’s vast and dark spaces create disorder in the netherworld, shatter its duality, and continue to roam the earth in search for a place where they may be honoured and remembered. The following chapter will explore such a place and the special rites and unique material culture that have been devoted solely to the disappeared.
Chapter VI

The Necrographies at Estela de Luz

“Acudimos a las autoridades y jamás nos resolvieron nada, nuestra vida ha sido destruida totalmente, atrapados en este momento y situación que nunca pasa” (We went to the authorities but they never solved anything. Our lives have become completely destroyed, trapped in this moment and situation that never passes) (public speech, María Herrera, Estela de Luz, Mexico City, September 18, 2014). Doña María explains her situation in a ceremony held at Estela de Luz, where, as mentioned in Chapter II, families of victims have created an informal memorial site next to Chapultepec Park in Mexico City. She is, as we might recall, the mother of four of Mexico’s disappeared persons. At this peculiar place, her disappeared son Salvador also speaks through a commemorative epitaph: “Cuando me desaparecieron mi hija María Guadalupe aún estaba en el vientre de su madre, no nos hemos visto físicamente pero sé que me espera con amor” (When they made me disappear my daughter María Guadalupe was still in her mother’s womb, we never met physically, but I know she is waiting for me with love) (Epitaph, MPJD, Estela de Luz, Mexico City, March 28, 2014). Salvador’s street epitaph, written by his surviving family, tells his story. His daughter now also takes part in the ceremonies held at Estela de Luz. Holding her grandmother doña María by the hand, she commemorates her father.

In what follows, I shall answer how relatives of Mexico’s disappeared sustain afterlives of their missing? I will describe the memorial site at Estela de Luz, specifically examining the commemorative epitaphs that give each of the disappeared, such as Salvador, a personal voice to tell their stories and ensure that they are not forgotten. I argue that this place sustains the political afterlives of Mexico’s disappeared—in similar ways to the altars of the Day of the Dead for Mexico’s deceased. This memorial site also promotes the missing as objects of collective grief to inspire activism. But, in a tragic paradox, the Estela de Luz memorial site also illustrates the emotional limbo that relatives like María and her granddaughter are trapped in as it fosters hope that the disappeared may come back home once more.

I accompanied doña María and other families involved in the MPJD on several occasions when they performed commemorative ceremonies at the informal memorial site. Estela de Luz is located on the sidewalk of a busy inner-city avenue outside the Chapultepec Park. Doña María and the other families have carved biographical stories of their disappeared into metal plates in the street. I will refer to these interchangeably as epitaphs and “necrographies”
(biographies of the dead or disappeared) (Panagiotopoulos 2016). If you walk towards the main entrance of Chapultepec Park from el Paseo de la Reforma and approach the Estela de Luz monument, you can simply bend your head to read the stories beneath your feet:

**SOY PAOLO CÉSAR ANTONIO CANO MONTERO. ESTOY DESAPARECIDO DESDE EL 29 DE OCTUBRE DEL 2010 A LA EDAD DE 26 AÑOS EN MICHOACÁN.**

Soy alto y fuerte, disfruto estar con mi familia y amigos, me encanta la playa, comer mariscos. [...] descubrí mi más hermoso tesoro: mis hijos, mis pequeños Camila y Emiliano que son el motor de mi vida, se que les hago mucha falta y ellos a mi, extraño a toda mi familia, a mis papás, a mis hermanos. [...] Mis padres han hecho todo por encontrarme, están desesperados y yo sé que no hay día, en que no piensen en mi, desgraciadamente no han tenido el verdadero apoyo de las autoridades para investigar. Quiero pedirles a todos que exijan justicia al Estado Mexicano para que nos busquen. No pueden ni deben olvidarnos, ustedes son nuestra esperanza.

**PAOLO CÉSAR**

28 de marzo del 2014.

**Eslabones por la Paz.**

**Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad.**

**I AM PAOLO CÉSAR ANTONIO CANO MONTERO. I’M DISAPPEARED SINCE THE TWENTY-NINTH OF OCTOBER 2010, TWENTY-SIX YEARS OLD, IN MICHOACÁN.**

I’m tall and strong and love to be with my family and my friends, I love the beach, and to eat seafood… I found my greatest treasures in my children, little Camilía and Emeliano, who are the engines of my life and have never done anything wrong. I miss them and my entire family, my parents, my brothers… My parents have done everything to find me. They are desperate and I know that not a single day has passed without them thinking of me. It’s a shame that they haven’t had any help from the authorities to launch an investigation. I want to tell all of you to demand justice from the Mexican state so that they search for us… You must not forget us, you are our hope.

(Epitaph, MPJD, Estela de Luz, Mexico City, March 28, 2014).

This and other necrographies at Estela de Luz have been written by their surviving family as commemorative epitaphs that simultaneously display protest messages in public space. They were created in activist meetings the MPJD held in Benito Juárez in Mexico City. Doña María and other relatives came to these meetings to plan their activities and create banners and similar
things that they later use in protests. The street epitaphs were made before I started to attend the weekly Tuesday meetings, but they often use similar testimonies, photographs, poems and paintings in activist posters and video installations that are spread on social media. Some might say that these are not the most effective strategies to force the state to investigate disappearances and punish perpetrators, which the MPJD is ultimately aiming for, but they have also used hunger strikes and street protests before without much success. These more commemorative efforts must be seen as a way for them to express and deal with their tragic losses. “Ceremonias conmemorativas” (commemorative ceremonies), as doña María once said in one of the meetings that debated activist strategies and religious events versus radical protest methods, “son importantes para muchas familias” (are important for many families). Still, the way in which the members of the MPJD memorialize their victims at Estela de Luz is explicitly activist.

Paolo Montero’s political street epitaph above forms part of an emerging material culture devoted to Mexico’s disappeared. Since surviving relatives insist that their missing may still be alive, the disappeared—who have never had proper burials—cannot be incorporated in the conventional places for the dead like the necropolis nor be included in Mexico’s Day of the Dead festivities, as last chapter showed. Their ambiguous and contentious status as missing rather than dead requires special rites and a unique material culture.

Paolo César Montero’s necrography has been strategically positioned in the middle of the capital where it seeks to mobilize a wider audience for the fight for justice. When the relatives in the MPJD devote specific ceremonies and memory objects to the absence of the disappeared as an activist tactic in a public space, they create political afterlives for the disappeared. The political lives of the dead have been explored through analysis of the material culture of statues and sculptures of official political leaders as indicators of social transformation from state policy (Verdery 1999). What is happening in Mexico today, however, is the opposite: the subversive afterlives of the marginalized dead, or persons displaced in death, actively function to garner support from the wider public to put pressure on the state itself. This has not been successful so far, but such efforts nevertheless form part of a wider activism over the last couple of years that may bear fruit at some point in the future.

By building on Verdery (1999) and coining the term ‘the political afterlives of the disappeared’ I hope to interweave some of the dominant trajectories in the literature on disappearances by bringing together how collective action, affect and traumatic memory (Robben 2007; Sanjurjo 2017) intersect in physical space through visual representations (Gómez-Barris 2009). This analytical term combines a consideration of what “symbolics of
memory tell us about its afterlife” (Gómez-Barris 2009: 8) and the contentious politics that may unfold between different stakeholders in the aftermaths of violence.

Observers of Latin America’s necropolitics tend to emphasize the state’s necropower (Mbembe 2008: 152; Robben in Robben & Ferrándiz 2016; Wright 2011). The necrographies of the MPJD instead constitute a subversive necrosociality—also discussed in Chapter V in relation to satirical political altars, which contest the state’s necrogovernance and criminal or corporate necropower (Berlanga 2015; Rojas-Perez 2017; Sanjurjo 2017), and similar to civil disobedience campaigns and protests discussed in Chapter I—thus showing the ungovernability of the afterlives of Mexico’s disappeared. By immortalizing victims at Estela de Luz, the necrographies of the nation’s many missing give an active voice to the fight against state-sponsored necropolitics and criminal necropower through material culture and memory politics.

The permanent trace in the urban landscape left by street epitaphs sets the MPJD apart from previous political actions by relatives of victims of violence. While they, too—like the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo of Argentina’s disappeared—congregate outside of the gates of authorities to pressure state institutions (Robben 2007; Sanjurjo 2017), their construction of a permanent mourning site via engravings in the city centre leaves a physical reminder of the state’s responsibility to the nation’s victims. Surviving families involved in the MPJD perform remembrance ceremonies and ritualize their protests at Estela de Luz, creating events that orbit around the material objects that immortalize the voices of the disappeared.

**The Necrographies at Estela de Luz**

Mexican relatives of the victims of disappearances use different strategies to evoke their missing, as we have seen in previous chapters. They carry photographs of them around the country, arrange protests, and grieve in public spaces (Rivera Hernández 2017). The epitaphs found at the Estela de Luz memorial site are street engravings that contain necrographies told by the disappeared themselves. Families congregate at this site in the capital along el Paseo de la Reforma on important occasions to pray, place flowers and light candles by the metal plates. Here, they give testimonies, sing songs, and lament in dramatic gestures, displaying their grief to the crowds entering or exiting the beautiful Chapultepec Park in the background. On these occasions, the epitaphs are read out loud. They seek compassion, identification and support; they tell intimate stories of the lives lost for political ends. They are the voices of Mexico’s disappeared:
SOY MELCHOR FLORES HERNÁNDEZ. SOY VÍCTIMA DE DESAPARICIÓN FORZADA DESDE EL 25 DE FEBRERO DE 2009. FUI RAPTADO POR POLICÍAS MUNICIPALES, DE MONTERREY CON PATRULLAS 534 – 538 Y 540, A LA EDADE DE 31 AÑOS.

Soy muy alegre, tengo muchos amigos y amigas, me gusta el mole de olla, practique Ciclismo [...] mi canción favorita es “Perfume de Gardenias”, aunque mi mayor sueño es superarme como artista, en este medio se me conoce como “EL VAQUERO GALÁCTICO”. Extraño a mis cuatro hermanos, a mi mamá, a mi papá que no he dejado de buscarme desde el momento que la policía me arrebato de su lado, como durante estos cinco años ha recorrido el país cargando a mi fotografía [...] 

MELCHOR
“EL VAQUERO GALÁCTICO”
28 de marzo del 2014.
Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad.

I AM MELCHOR FLORES HERNÁNDEZ. I WAS FORCEFULLY DISAPPEARED THE TWENTY-FIFTH OF FEBRUARY 2009, TAKEN AWAY BY MUNICIPAL POLICE. IT WAS THE POLICE PATROLS 534-38 AND 540, IN MONTERREY.

I was thirty-two years old. I’m a happy person and have many friends. I like mole de olla and cycling… My favourite song is “Perfume de Gardenia” and my biggest dream is to hit in music, a medium in which I’m known as the “galactic cow-girl”. How I miss my brothers, my mom, and my dad, who haven’t stopped searching for me since the moment the police took me, and who for five years have travelled across the country carrying my photograph…

SOY MAYRA ELISA REMESS DE LA VEGA. FUI SECUESTRADO Y ESTOY DESAPARECIDA DESDE EL 15 DE JULIO EN ORIZABA, VERACRUZ, A LA EDAD DE 23 AÑOS.

Me gustar ir al gimnasio y escuchar musica, ademas adoro a mis perritos. Antes de salir de mi casa, le llame a mi mamá para avisarle que iría al gimnasio como ere mi rutina, al cual no llegue ya que me secuestraron integrantes de un grupo delictivo. Mi madres ha pedido ayuda a todas las instituciones, fiscalias y mandos para poder localizarme pero... ¡sólo le dan falsas promesas! Exijo que investiguen la verdad y me encuentren.
Yo quiero regresar a mi casa, extraño a mi familia y a mis perritos. No me gusta la vida que hoy me obligan a vivir, por eso el día que se descuiden yo me escaparé y correré a refugiarme... ¡¡¡a los brazos de mi mamá!!!

Exijo al Estado Mexicano que busque a las miles personas desaparecidas, a la gente le pido que apoye a nuestras familias, nucesitamos la Verdad, y Justicia para vivir en Paz.

MAYRA ELISA
28 de marzo del 2014.
Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad.

I AM MAYRA ELISA REMESS DE LA VEGA. I WAS KIDNAPPED AND REMAIN DISAPPEARED SINCE THE FIFTEENTH OF JULY 2013, IN ORIZABA, VERACRUZ, ONLY 23 YEARS OLD.

I like to go to the gym and listen to music, and I adore my small dogs. I called my mom before I left home and told her that I was on my way to the gym according to my daily routine, but I never arrived because members of a criminal group took me.

My mom has asked for help from all institutions, all the prosecutors, and demanded that they find me but… they only give false promises! I demand that they investigate the truth and find me.

I want to return home now, I miss my family and my dogs. I do not like this life that I am forced to live, I want to run away, escape… into the arms of my mom!!!

I demand that the Mexican state search for the thousands of disappeared, and I ask the people to help our families, we need Truth and Justice to be able to live in peace.

SOY LINO LÓPEZ GONZÁLEZ. FUI SECUESTRADO Y ESTOY DESAPARECIDO DESDE EL 19 DE MAYO DEL 2013 EN EL ESTADO DE GUERRERO A LA EDAD DE 49 AÑOS.

Desde pequeño me gusto trabajar en el campo, soy feliz sembrando la tierra y tuve la fortuna de trabajar en varios estados de la república, hasta que me quedé a trabajar en la bella Costa Grande de Guerrero, me encanta el golpeteo de las olas durante la noche, la variedad de alimentos del mar, aprendí a preparar pescado zarandeado, cocteles, caldos y un delicioso tamal de pescado relleno de mariscos. Dios me permitió compartir estas delicias con mis padres, hermanos, tios, esposa, hijos y amigos. Los extraño a todos, los necesito, quiero mi vida de regreso para estar con ellos.
Empezaba a palpar la ILUSIÓN que me mantenía en ese lugar y ver los frutos de tantos años de trabajo que me motivaban a seguir. Tengo proyectos de trabajo, esperanzas, ilusiones y todo terminó por unas malas personas que no saben el dolor que causaron a mis seres queridos, con los muy pronto ESPERO REGRESAR A MI HOGAR. Somos miles de personas desaparecidas, ezijamos juntos al gobierno Estatal y Federal que nos busquen, que nos encuentren, que hagan su trabajo e investiguen hasta dar con la verdad y hagan justicia.

LINO

28 de marzo del 2014.

Eslabones por la Paz. Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad.

I AM LINO LÓPEZ GONZÁLEZ. I WAS KIDNAPPED AND REMAIN DISAPPEAREDED SINCE THE NINTHEENTH OF MAY, 2013, IN THE STATE OF GUERRERO, 49 YEARS OLD.

Since I was a child I have loved to work in the countryside. I am happy harvesting the fields and had the luck of working in several of the republic’s states until I decided to stay at the magnificent coast of Guerrero, where I love how the waves sound at night. I love the fruits of the sea, shellfish and fish, and I got the opportunity to learn how to cook fish, make cocktails, soups and a delicious tamal-dish filled with fish and shellfish. God allowed me to share these delights with my parents, my brothers, uncles, my wife and my kids and our friends. This is all I need. Everything that I miss. I want my life back to be with them.

THE ILLUSION that I linger here in this place is falling apart, here where I can see the fruits of my many years of hard work which motivates me to continue. I was working on projects, I have ambitions, I have dreams, and everything ended with evil men that do not know or feel the pain this has brought my close loved ones, my near and dear, who I hope to RETURN HOME TO SOON.

We are thousands of people who are missing, let us call on the state and the federal authorities to search for us, that they shall find us, do their job and investigate until they find truth and restore justice.

(Epitaphs, MPJD, Estela de Luz, Mexico City, March 28, 2014).

My first encounter with the grievers at these expressive epitaphs was on Sunday, September 28, 2014. It was the last day of a ten-day campaign for peace. Different commemorative
ceremonies for victims, all religious in nature and organized by the MPJD, had taken place in Mexico City and Cuernavaca. It was called the “ecumenical ceremony for victims of violence”. A priest I already had befriended in the other events of the campaign, padre Gustavo, greeted me as he was setting up a table where he would hand out the holy sacrament. About forty relatives of the victims—elderly grandparents, middle-aged parents, and their children—formed a circle, and we stood with our heads down, repeating the words of the prayer padre Gustavo opened the event with. Then we sang, chanted protest slogans and commemorated the victims by reading the epitaphs one by one—the crescendo of the event.

Estela de Luz, meaning Ray of Light, is a tower as tall as a skyscraper covered in small, reflective panels at the site where the financial district along el Paseo de la Reforma ends and the avenue splits the Chapultepec Park in two. We now stood in the shadow of the tower. It’s a busy site in an upper-class neighbourhood; tens of thousands work in the skyscrapers and eat lunch in the area, others pass their time in the Chapultepec Park, and traffic constantly passes by. Estela de Luz was constructed between 2010 and 2011 to celebrate the hundred-year anniversary of the start of the Mexican Revolution. However, the company and politicians involved in its construction were accused of corruption, and it was a project associated with then-president Felipe Calderon (2006-2012) who launched Mexico’s controversial war on drugs in 2006. That war started an intense period of violence in Mexico in which many families lost their loved ones and the founder of the MPJD Javier Sicilia, lost his son. The MPJD was founded as a direct reaction to the Calderon administration’s indifference toward the victims of his war.

The families of the MPJD who engraved the metal plates at this site have hijacked the Estela de Luz monument, so to speak. Renamed it and made it their own. Mourning at this place was always meant to be seen. The MPJD seeks to take over the site and hopes to rename it Estela de Paz (Ray of Peace) to symbolize its reinvention as an unofficial memorial site for victims of state and criminal violence. The pompous Estela de Luz tower reaching high toward the sky was supposed to manifest diachronic national togetherness by transcending a shared national legacy as decided by state policymakers. The necroographies carved into the asphalt at its feet, in contrast, spread out like synchronic fragments of those excluded from official commemoration—symbols of the divisive legacy of Mexico’s current violence.

As we stood around the epitaphs covered with candles and white, red and pink rose petals, padre Gustavo asked us to come closer. We encircled the epitaphs on the ground. Gustavo read the necroographies one by one while we bystanders ended each one of the necroographies by chanting “presente” (be present). After reading all of them, padre Gustavo cried out “Porque
“Vivos se los Llevaron” (Because they took them alive), upon which the crowd answered, “Vivos los Queremos” (We want them back alive). This rallying cry ended the ceremony on this Sunday in late September, to be repeated in the future on victims’ birthdays, before protests and annually on March 27, when the MPJD celebrates its founding. Henceforth, I shall cast light on the important legacy of the political afterlives of Mexico’s disappeared for surviving families and for the future of the nation.

**Shaming the State & State Response**

This construction of a permanent memorial site in the capital aims to nationalize the disappeared as objects of collective activism, pursuing a reckoning with the state and attempting to force it to grant justice to victims. Here the MPJD has found a concrete way to instrumentalize their human rights discourse in ways to raise awareness about their plight at the same time as they mobilize for criminal punishment of perpetrators. “We need a country that is run by a government that guarantees safety and strives for justice”, one epitaph declares. But this is not without its risks.

Human rights advocacy that shames state institutions like this use a moral discourse that I, in Chapter I, claimed followed “an essential Foucauldian path, in that it seeks to institute new norms by publicly identifying immoral… behaviour as an object lesson of what societies ought not to be” (Courpasson & Vallas 2016: 21). “La denuncia” (denunciation), when used outside of the juridical realm, “retains its accusatory significance but takes on aspects of public performance. It is a shaming of sorts…as a fundamentally democratic practice… an act of consciousness-raising” and a tool of popular mobilization that exposes “wrongdoing of the powerful before the court of public opinion” that can “provide the impetus for democratic reforms of even spark political revolution (Samet 2016: 3). Don Javier Sicilia and his movement have denounced the Mexican government’s war on drugs that tended to suspend human rights concerns to instead prioritizing security, which many activists like Sicilia as well as scholars viewed as a false dilemma as they claimed that you cannot have one without the other. “The idea that security and human rights are a trade-off is pernicious to a rights-based society” (Carlsen 2012: 153). While other political movements in Mexico have sought autonomy from the state (Aviña 2014; Gledhill 1998; Stephen 2002), the strategy of the MPJD has primarily been to turn to state institutions and plead with them to take responsibility. In the words of their founder don Javier Sicilia:

_Cuando me dicen que los diálogos no van a servir, les he dicho, [...] a los zapatistas [...] que lo que ellos no entienden es que somos un movimiento de víctimas. La gente_
quiere justicia y hay que estar encima de las autoridades, exhibirlas, no podemos prescindir de ellas, pero el hecho de darle consuelo le permite a la gente vivir con su dolor y ésa es ya una forma de justicia (Azaloa 2012: 166).

When they say to me that dialogue won’t work, I have answered, … to the Zapatistas… that what they do not understand is that we are a movement of victims. People want justice and for this we must turn to the authorities to demand it, we cannot do without them, but giving comfort allows people to live with their pain and that is also a form of justice.

Before the creation of the MPJD in 2011, Mexico’s contemporary violence had primarily been blamed on organized crime. Javier Sicilia, María and the other families involved in the movement now, however, began to hold the state accountable for the impunity that plagued the nation. They began casting light on state abuse, state violence, the victims of its war on drugs, the corrupt and dysfunctional justice system, and the narco cartels’ infiltration of state institutions in ways that highlighted the vague and blurred lines between state agents and criminals. This was in sharp contrast to the official discourse that emphasized how the state, “the good guys”, was fighting a war against crime, “the bad guys”. The MPJD turned the spotlight on the grave human rights violations committed by police and soldiers in the war on drugs and its correspondingly high death toll. The human rights language they have used so far plead to the state and international agencies to take action to protect citizens and punish perpetrators according to existing laws. This made it possible for concerned families across the country to congregate outside the gates of local authorities to demand responsibility from elected politicians and prosecutors—not quite as dangerous as confronting narco cartel bosses, but which may come with equally grave consequences for those who are brave enough to do it.

During my time in Mexico, I came to witness a gradual shift in the attitude of the MPJD. They had seen their long-proposed legislation, “la Ley General de las Víctimas” (the general law for victims), and the introduction of another bill on “forced disappearances” specifying the state’s responsibilities in cases when state agents are suspected to have taken part in disappearances, pass into law without anything changing much. It is not primarily a lack of legislation—as we might remember from Chapter IV—but rather a political unwillingness to implement it in practice that is the problem with Mexico’s justice system (Domínguez-Ruvalcaba & Corona 2010: 160). The nation’s “traditionally high homicide rate” and “the weakness of the Mexican state” have meant that “justice has often been delivered through informal channels” (Lomnitz 2005: 20; Gledhill 1998; Kyle & Yaworsky 2008).
Consequently, the MPJD started to build up their own networks of forensic doctors and DNA databanks so that they would have the capacity to reveal cover up attempts and fake autopsy reports by the forensic doctors working under federal prosecutors. Activist forensic scientists now have their own groups, such as *El Rostro de Julio* (see Chapter I), who help relatives with investigations and assisted the parents of the disappeared students from Ayotzinapa. In my conversations with don Javier Sicilia, he made clear that the MPJD now looks for other ways to achieve their objectives. As he said in an interview I did with him in el Centro Historico in November 2014:

* Necesitamos un cambio fundamental de este país. Ya hay partidos políticos que no nos representan pero sólo los intereses suyos de los criminales. Entonces tenemos que hacer un cambio profundo, o buscaremos otras alternativas. Tenemos que considerar todas las formas de cambiar a México.

We need a fundamental change of this country. We have political parties who represent the criminals instead of us. Therefore, we need a profound change, or we will seek other alternatives. We must consider all ways to change Mexico (interview, Javier Sicilia, Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso, downtown Mexico City, November 10, 2014).

In contrast to earlier efforts of the MPJD to hold direct talks with the former president or put forth legislative initiatives, neither of which achieved the desired impact, Estela de Luz memorial site now, consequently, turns to fellow Mexicans to inspire action. At this busy site where inhabitants of Mexico City come on their leisure time, surviving families may get an alternative form of recognition when the doors to the courtroom are closed. Families use public space to engage ordinary Mexicans with the hope that broader support for their pursuit of justice shall force the state to deliver what they desire: for the state to investigate all cases of murder and disappearances and stop being involved in them.

Moreover, Estela de Luz’s street engravings leave a permanent trace in the city that turn the cityscape itself into an agent. While the Sonora desert, as discussed in Chapter II, offers a landscape that allows state institutions to deflect blame for migrants who disappear on their way north (De León 2015), this memorial site for such missing victims in an urban space brings the problem forth.

While Mexican authorities may not be overly concerned by unofficial memorial sites, they do have a track record of responding violently if members of the MPJD dare to push hard for investigations. Instead of achieving justice for their victims, the MPJD’s activism has put its own life at risk. The activists are well aware of this but continue their stubborn fight for justice anyway. The MPJD activist, Nepomuceno Moreno Núñez, was murdered for his persistent
search for truth about what had happened to his missing son. His epitaph—the only one of a confirmed death at Estela de Luz—which we heard retold in Chapter IV before, is now also memorialized at the site:

Me acribillaron por exigir justicia a funcionarios de la procuraduría del estado de Sonora, para que investigaran y encontrar a mi hijo secuestrado, él sigue desaparecido, mi asesinato sigue impune. [...] They killed me because I sought justice from the officials at the Prosecutor’s Office in the state of Sonora; that they would investigate and find my abducted son, who is still missing. My assassination remains unpunished.

(Epitaph, El Grito Más Fuerte and MPJD, Estela de Luz, Mexico City, March 28, 2014).

When the strategic deployment of a human rights language and policy-oriented activism may not have been successful for Mexico’s contemporary social movements protesting violence in achieving the immediate goals of justice and putting an end to further violations by punishment of the perpetrators, this leaves the quest for “la verdad” (the truth) to bring reconciliation and recognition by bringing forth past injustices.

**Preventing the Second Disappearance of the Disappeared**

Families who have seen their children, brothers, sisters, fathers, or mothers disappear often respond, as we have seen in the epitaphs, by using biographical narratives or providing public testimonies about their lost loved ones in national scenes. They domesticate “public space by introducing symbols of the home” (Robben 2000b: 81-82). Since the overall goal with this is to transform state policy and institutions to achieve justice, no matter who the perpetrators might be, the MPJD does not distinguish between criminal and state violence. However, they do mobilize for state accountability through a politics based on identification with victims, who they insist “have names, faces, dreams and families”. Everyone, they appear to tell the nation, has a responsibility to grieve for them. In line with the Day of the Dead’s activist altars for victims of violence, the MPJD seeks to mobilize the public by using the disappeared in public spaces as a critique of state policy.

Recalling violent memories in public is essentially a moral practice “more intersubjective… than individual, more act [remembering] than object” (Lampek 1996: 239). The MPJD’s memorialization of their disappeared in the manifestation of their voices in material culture seeks polemic with certain state practices and to sustain political afterlives to achieve certain goals in the long run. “When memories recall acts of violence against individuals or entire
groups… as emblems of victimized identity… [they] often take on a performative meaning within a charged field of contested moral or political claims” (Lambek & Antze 1996: i).

Estela de Luz memorial site, in its harbouring of mnemonic objects on which generations to come will stand, serves as a subversive space of memory recollection. Here, Maria and other relatives make their personal traumas public and personalize the nation’s experience of mass disappearance (Feldman in Argenti & Schramm 2010). What is most significant here, however, is not just that the victims’ stories and their suffering are retold through these narratives (Robbins 2013); the crucial point is the important role these memory objects may play in the way they make families of victims, and Mexican society as a whole, deal and live with Mexico’s violent past.

In Mexico, as last chapter showed, the dead are remembered on the Day of the Dead when their souls are said to return. But those who lack proper burials cannot be included in the festivity. Thus, the disappeared are out of place and may be at risk of being forgotten. Surviving family congregate around the alternative objects, the necrographies, that they have made for their disappeared at Estela de Luz year after year, ceremony after ceremony, so that this shall not be the fate of Mexico’s disappeared. They refuse to let their victims be forgotten.

Survivors often remain marginalized and their testimonies surrounded by distrust. Some scholars have argued that Latin America’s disappeared are seldomly allowed to ‘reappear’ in public spotlight or discourse (High 2015: 351; Gandsman 2015). Likewise, subcomandante Galeano, formerly known as Marcos, of the EZLN has argued: “No podemos permitir que los desaparecidos desaparezcan dos veces, la primera vez cuando son sacados de sus campos y calles, y otra cuando son arrancados de nuestra memoria” (We can’t permit that the disappeared disappear twice, once when they are taken from their fields and streets, and another when they are taken from our memory) (Guillén Vicente 2006)\(^\text{10}\). The epitaphs at Estela de Luz memorial site exemplify one strategy to prevent what we thus may call “the second disappearance of the disappeared”.

**Mexico’s Untamed Grief**

Doña María often gave her testimony during the ceremonies at Estela de Luz, and one of the many times I listened to her was when the fathers of the missing students from Ayotzinapa had

\(^{10}\) The entire speech of Subcomandante Galeano of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN), held at La Normal de Ayotzinapa in 2006, is available online: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xY0r-xAWBYk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xY0r-xAWBYk) . (2016-02-06. 09:42).
joined the MPJD at the site. The sun was setting over the city, draping its avenues with the last light of day. Doña María slowly entered the circle of people who stood around the epitaphs to address the audience, particularly the parents of the missing students lost in Guerrero. She said:

*Yo también perdí hijos en el Guerrero, hace seis años. No ha pasado nada desde entonces. Sentimos su dolor, sentimos la frustración. Nuestros corazones están con todos ustedes ... Sentimos esta rabia, la rabia de tener un ser querido arrancado, quitado de ti, del mundo. Nuestras familias son destruidas. Somos locos de dolor. Pero ayuda que están aquí para representar ese dolor.*

I, too, lost sons in Guerrero, six years ago. Nothing has happened since then. We feel your pain, we feel frustration. Our hearts are with you… We feel this rage, the rage of having someone that you love, ripped away, taken from you, from the world. Our families are destroyed. We are crazy with grief. But it helps that you are here to represent that pain (public speech, María Herrera, Estela de Luz, Mexico City, October 23, 2014).

After her speech, a protest march commenced, and we walked through the streets under the city lights calling for justice, truth and an end to the violence. During the march, I kept thinking about something doña María had said: "*Somos locos de dolor*” (We are crazy with grief). Burials are generally thought to structure the emotional devastation of losing a loved family member (Hertz 1960). Under conventional circumstances, the grievers pass through different stages that correspond to the funerary treatment of the corpse; during the period of mourning, these stages have been thought to function as a transition between the inner negotiation of longing and letting go (Harrison 2003: 55-66; Robben 2000b). Mexico has three famous death rites that help to structure grief that correspond well to van Gennep’s (1960) idea of a tripartite structure of the ritual passage and Hertz’s (1960) emphasis on how mourning unfolds in gradual steps and in a state of transition. Mexico’s Catholic funerary wake *el velorio*, when the body is laid in an open casket in the household and friends and relatives are invited to bid farewell, corresponds well with van Gennep’s and Hertz’s ideas of an initial phase of separation. Then a second transitory phase is said to begin (van Gennep 1960), which corresponds with Mexico’s practice of *el novenario*: nine days of praying the rosary for the safe passage of the soul to heaven. Finally, a third phase with a rite that marks “incorporation” into the world of the dead is said to take place, which in Mexico would be the inclusion of the deceased in the cheerful celebration of the Day of the Dead that transforms tears into smiles.

However, Mexico’s three death rites and their mutual transformations of grief cannot take place in cases when the body remains missing; no *velorio, novenario*, or *Día de Muertos* can
be held in the name of a disappeared person when the surviving family continues to hope that the missing loved one is still alive. Without any funerary rites, there is no clear structuring of the mourners’ emotions, and the transitory period of the mourning extends indefinitely (Hertz 1960: 85; Robben 2000b). Families of the disappeared “always carry their disappeared with them”. As I often heard close family of the disappeared say, they are “in their hearts”, and without ritual closure the grieving goes on and on, untamed.

If bodies are not found for reburial, it appears as if the close family are condemned to remain “crazy with grief”. They even try to suspend their mourning; they do not want to grieve as if their missing were dead since the lack of a body makes them deny their likely death. Relatives hold on to the desperate hope that their disappeared can come back home but grieve and cry over their absence nevertheless. Close family like doña María are torn in this state of emotional limbo. “Their hearts suffer, their souls cannot find peace, their minds never be at ease,” as one of the necrographies describes it (epitaph, MPJD, Estela de Luz, Mexico City, March 28, 2014).

The ceremonies at Estela de Luz are part of the point when political protest begins to transform into ritualized practice. By repeating the ceremonies at Estela de Luz, close family have found a way to at least display their untamed grief in public performances, in metal engravings in the ground and in special rites devoted to their missing loved ones. Here, they can offload the crazy grief they carry. Surviving family who gather around the epitaphs at Estela de Luz find comfort in the community of grievers that congregate there. “It helps”, as doña María said, to “represent that pain”. At this site, relatives cry together; they recall their unjust losses, express frustration and lay down flowers.

But herein lies the paradox, for what these specific memory objects do and what these necrographies at Estela de Luz try to reassert is the continuation of the disappeared as social and political agents in society. “The love of my family and the longing I feel is mirrored in the love they feel toward me”, the disappeared person Fernanda says, via her necrography. She continues: “Today I need kisses and hugs of my near and dear”. Her family will read this in one, five and perhaps ten years and be reminded that she still needs them. They do not want to let go, nor forget, and this statement that they carved in steel on the streets serves as a constant reminder of their lifelong commitment to their daughter. Marco Antonio’s necrography ends in a similar way with his surviving family saying that they shall “search for you until the last breath”. Close family members are caught in this emotional limbo and eternal wait for proper closure, and the force of Mexico’s untamed grief shakes the entire nation.

Anti-Monuments & A Divided Nation
Estela de Luz is not the only monument for Mexico’s disappeared. The families of the 43 students from Ayotzinapa raised an alternative remembrance monument of their own in Mexico City: the “Anti-Monument”. The name plays with both the aesthetics of the monument itself and the fact that is was raised by the Families of Ayotzinapa as a symbol against, rather than by, the Mexican state. Just like the epitaphs, it was placed along el Paseo de la Reforma but closer to the historic downtown of Mexico City. It forms the numeric symbols “+43”. This monument stands as a complete contrast to the epitaphs at Estela de Luz. Instead of personal narratives and biographies of the missing who speak in first person with the voices of the disappeared, it only shows voiceless and faceless numbers. No personal identification is promoted, no testimonies given, no love declared, no ruined life dreams vented. Yet within the protest movement for the disappeared students, the monument carries meaning. It makes the students symbols, “+43”, of all of the disappeared in Mexico. A slogan used by the members of the MPJD in the protests for them alluded to this: “Ayotzinapa es sólo la punta del iceberg” (Ayotzinapa is just the tip of the iceberg).

Both the Anti-Monument and the epitaphs at Estela de Luz are examples of how Mexico’s current politics of commemoration stands out from similar politics elsewhere. Nation-states in the twentieth century tended to praise their war victims in grand nationalistic monuments, and after World War I and II, nations often desired to turn their dead into national heroes and commemorate them collectively in order to exploit their potential as martyrs for the state (Aronson 2016: 5; Cassia 2006; Lacquer 2015). Memorialization of war victims is seldom known to take the family’s preference for personalized or private expressions of grief into account (Aronson 2016; Cassia 2006: 121). Instead, they tend to be made in conformity with the state’s will to commemorate them collectively. It results in a “lack of fit between official commemorations and private memories” (Cassia 2006: 121). At times, this has led to conflict between state policy to nationalize the dead in the service of state interests and the surviving families’ desires to mourn their lost in more personalized ways closer to home. This, in turn, has been thought to “point to the gap between national imaginings and local sentiments generated out of kinship, which the state nervously tries to conceal through such rituals and symbols” (Cassia 2006: 121).

The Mexican state has, instead, adopted a strategy of ignorance regarding the nation’s disappeared, whose bodies are displaced in death just like many unknown soldiers have been in other parts of the world. It is the families of these victims that try to nationalize their disappeared to pressure state institutions to recognize them. Exactly as we have seen in the necrographies, families in Mexico seek to nationalize their disappeared by strategically using
personal grief and personalized memorial objects. It is the Mexican state that does not want to participate.

The contentious afterlives of the disappeared at unrecognized or hijacked memorial sites reveal different attitudes regarding the nation’s victims and make Mexico’s disappeared the symbols of a divided nation. The Anti-Monument and the necrographies cast light on the national conflict over the treatment of the nation’s disappeared. Estela de Luz and the Anti-Monument are meant to stand as reminders of state crimes and to visualize Mexico’s marginalized political victims. The families involved in the MPJD strive for their missing to be recognized by the state, but the state has no interest in drawing attention to its crimes.

Mexico, this makes clear, struggles to “draw a sharp line between the nation and its enemies… between the dead who must be named and honoured and those who are to remain unaccounted for and anonymous, in unmarked graves” (Lomnitz 2005: 20). The state’s necrogovernance wishes Mexico’s disappeared to remain anonymous and unmarked, erased from the face of the earth. The institutions responsible for investigating and punishing perpetrators, the police and the municipal and federal prosecutors, are the same institutions that seek to deny and cover up state atrocities. They are accompanied by an official discourse bent on rendering some victims’ deaths “unmournable” either by blaming the victims and framing them as criminals who deserved their punishment or by ignoring their cases all together (Marcial 2015; Noble 2015; Rojas-Perez 2017). The Estela de Luz memorial site and the Anti-Monument defiantly counter this necrogovernmental by highlighting Mexico’s internal political conflict over who should be honoured in the name of the nation and who should not by naming the anonymous and marking those who lack a grave.

Here, via these monuments, Mexico’s disappeared talk back to the state’s necrogovernance and wield their own subversive necrosociality. Instead of being “missing as subjects of mourning” when they are nationalized (Cassia 2006: 121), Mexico’s disappeared are political subjects who seek to ignite a nationwide wave of protests by reminding us of the forgotten crimes. Those who talk to us through necrographies seek to be the missing of the entire nation but refuse to be used for state purposes. At Estela de Luz, families of victims seek to further endow their missing with a sense of national aura by including epitaphs with the biographies of disappeared police officers and soldiers who themselves served the state:

SOY ESTEBAN MORALES SANTIZO. ESTOY DESAPARECIDO DESDE EL 03 DE DICIEMBRE DEL 2009 A LA EDAD DE 28 AÑOS EN LÁZARO CÁRDENAS MICHOACÁN.
Me gusta bailar, soy sociable, siempre estoy de buen humor, soy “ojos alegre”, me encanta la comida de mi mamá, sobre todo el pozole y la pancita; desde chico decidí servir a mi país, antes de cumplir 18 años ingrese al Ejército Mexicano. Desde 2007 me integrè a la Policía Federal, donde me comisionaron a Michoacán, ahí me desaparecieron y a mi madre ni siquiera le avisaron.

Para la Policía Federal sólo soy un elemento más desaparecido. Ni mis jefes inmediatos, ni mis mandos, ni mi institución me han buscado. Para ellos no somos valiosos, nos consideran desechables, carne de cañón, no nos respaldan, ni nos respetan. ¿Si no hacen por encontrarnos a nosotros que somos parte de la misma Institución? ¿Entonces, cómo buscarán a los miles de civiles desaparecidos? Sé que es difícil investigar pero hay que empezar por tener voluntad y decisión de harcerlo. ¿O temen que abría la verdad exhiba la corrupción y los vínculos criminales que se tejieron en Michoacán? Y seguramente en todo México, pues tienen que hacerlo porque nuestras familia y todos necesitan saber la verdad y encontrarlos.

Somos miles de desaparecidos en México, personas con historia, sueños y proyectos de vida. Quiero abrazar a mi madre que me extraña y no se ha cansado de buscarme, quiero pedriles a todos que exijan justicia al Estado Mexicano para que nos encuentren. No pueden ni deben olvidarnos, ustedes son nuestra esperanza.

ESTEBAN
28 de marzo del 2014.

Eslabones por la Paz. Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad.

I AM ESTEBAN MORALES SANTIZO. I AM DISAPPEARED SINCE THE THIRD OF DECEMBER, 2009, AT THE AGE OF 28, IN LÁZARO CÁRDENAS IN MICHOACÁN.

I like dancing and am a social person, always in a good mood, I am an “ojo alegre” (happy eyes), and I love my mother’s cooking, above all panzole la pancita. Since I was small I have always served my country, I inscribed in the Mexican army before I was 18 years old. Since 2007 I have served the federal police force who sent me to Michoacán, here where I would disappear without my mother being informed.

For the federal police I am just another disappeared element. Not even my own institution or bosses search for me. To them we are not worth anything, to them we are expendables, canon meat, they do not stand behind us, they do not respect us. If they do
not even search for us who belong to the same institution, how shall they search for the thousands of disappeared civilians? I know it is hard to investigate, but to decide and have the will to do so is a start. Or are they afraid that the truth will reveal the corruption in Michoacán and over the whole of Mexico? Well they must, because our family and all the others need to know the truth and find us.

We are thousands of missing in Mexico, persons with a history, dreams and life projects. I wish I could hug my mother who I miss and who has not tired in her search for me. I want to tell you all to contribute in the pursuit of justice in the Mexican nation, that you shall find us. You must not forget us, you are our hope.

ESTEBAN

Metal plates for Peace. MPJD

SOY LUIS ÁNGEL LEÓN RODRÍGUEZ. FUI SECISTRADO Y ESTOY DESAPARECIDO DESDE EL 16 DE NOVIEMBRE DEL 2009, A LA EDAD DE 23 AÑOS.

Desde niño fui muy alegre y balarín, me gustaba trabajar para ganar dinero y ayudarle a mi mami Araceli. Así creci, soy muy coqueto, me gusta toda la musica y me encanta que mi mami compre mi concha de chocolate y mi litro de leche. Le digo a “mi reyna” que la amo, porque es mi madre y mi padre al mismo tiempo y me siento orgulloso de ella, “mi guerrera incansable”, porque sola nos sacó a sus cuatro hijos adelante como personas de bien, con orgullo me hice policía federal para servir a mi patria.

Nos secuestraron en el camino a siete policías y un civil, cuando fuimos enviados a Michoacán por las fuerzas federales contel Iztapalapa sin los medios de seguridad necesarios, (si la institución no es capaz de cuidar a sus propios policías, menos lo será para cuidar a la ciudadanía). Pasaron seis días para que nuestros mandos “se dieran cuenta” de que estábamos desaparecidos y sólo fue por la insistencia de nuestras familias. Algunos delinquentes han dicho que nos descuartizaron, si eso fuera cierto, entonces no tuvimos ni siquiera el derecho a una muerte digna.

Soy la voz de muchos de mis compañeros que están desaparecidos y para nuestra institución sólo somos cifras, carne de cañón, no seres humanos. Exijo justicia y que paguen los culpables, incluyendo nuestros mandos, responsables por omisión o comisión.

LUIS ÁNGEL
28 de marzo del 2014.
I AM LUIS ÁNGEL LEÓN RODRÍGUEZ. I WAS KIDNAPPED AND HAVE BEEN DISAPPEARED SINCE THE SIXTEENTH OF NOVEMBER, 2009, TWENTY-THREE YEARS OLD.

Since I was a child I have always been happy and a dancer. I like to work to earn money and help my mother Araceli. I grew up like this, always flirty, I liked all music and when my mom bought me chocolate and my litre of milk. I call her “my queen” and tell her I love her. She is both my mother and father at the same time, and I am so proud of her, my “tireless warrior”, who raised four kids to become good people by herself. I proudly worked as federal police to serve my country.

We were kidnapped, seven police and one civilian, on the road to Michoacán where we had been commanded to serve the federal forces in Iztapalapa without the necessary security measures having been made beforehand (yes the institution cannot protect their own police officers, and it’s worse still at protecting the citizens). Six days passed before our officer “realized” that we were missing and it happened only after our families had insisted. Some criminals have said that we were dismembered, if that is true, we have not even had the right to an honourable death.

I am the voice of many of my comrades who have disappeared, for our institution we are only numbers, canon meat, we are not humans. I demand justice and that the guilty shall pay, including our officers, and the responsible management who are guilty of omission.

LUIS ÁNGEL

MPJD.

SOY ROSENDOR TORRES CORTÉS. FUI SECUESTRADO Y ESTOY DESAPARECIDO DESDE EL 10 DE JULIO DEL 2014, A LA EDAD DE 32 AÑOS, EN DURANGO.

Soy hogareño, disfruto mucho la conviencia en familia, en mi tiempo libre salir a caminar con mi esposa y llevar a pasear a nuestros perros al campo, faltaban tres meses para que Adri diera a luz a nuestro primer hijo, quise que se llamara Rosendo igual que yo. Me gusta saborear los ricos camarones que cocina mi mamá y los deliciosos postres que hace mi esposa, también disfruto correr, bailar y viajar al bello puerto de Acapulco para visitar a mi familiar y nadar en el mar de la tierra que me vio nacer. Lo
I AM ROSENDO TORRES CORTÉS. I WAS KIDNAPPED AND HAVE BEEN DISAPPEARED SINCE JULY 10, 2011, IN DURANGO, WHEN I WAS 32 YEARS OLD.

I am a person who likes to stay at home, who enjoys being with my family. In my spare time I go out walking with my wife and bringing our dogs to the fields. Only three months were left for Adri to give birth to our first son. His name is Rosendo just like me.

I like to enjoy delicious prawns and my mother’s cooking and my wife’s delicious desserts. I also enjoy running, dancing, travelling, to travel to the beautiful port of Acapulco to visit my family and swim in the ocean and walk in the soil where I was born. What I want most in this moment is to return to my home to take care of my family and hug them, meet my son, play with him, take him to school and see him grow.

I am a federal police investigator and I was kidnapped by municipal police in Lerdo in Durango—like different videos show—when I carried out my mission escorting one of the candidates to the post as governor of Coahuila.

That is why I demand that the federal and state authorities shall investigate where I am, punish those responsible and implement justice, so that no more Mexican families under any circumstances shall suffer from further disappearances of close relatives.

ROSENDO

MPJD.
WE ARE VICTIMS AND MEMBERS OF THE MEXICAN ARMY, THE MARINE TROOPS.\textsuperscript{11}

Many of us disappeared when we performed our duty. We have been declared deserters by the same institution that we stubbornly served with dignity. Many of us are also disappeared in military prisons whose ethics and legality have never been legally tried. We have been denied freedom and justice, been accused of and faced reprisals for alleged disobedience.

Our families have been without any association—when the military and civil authorities have not listened—so they have had to take refuge in civil society organizations that have supported them and helped them strive for justice. We ask that you do not forget us, that we will have justice and independent investigations that give back our honour and declare us not to be deserters, so that our families will have the compensation that are included in our work contracts that they have a right to have in our absence.

(Epitaphs, MPJD, Estela de Luz, Mexico City, March 27, 2014).

These victims’ fates are more consistent with the unknown soldier monuments found elsewhere, as the heroes of the nation who sacrificed themselves while protecting others. How strange it seems that some of the epitaphs blame police patrols and military involvement for their deaths, while yet others praise detectives and soldiers who fought for the nation against the cartels, and that the state won’t even give the nation’s heroes “the right to an honourable death”, as Luis’s epitaph says. Nonetheless, this coexistence of victims of state violence and state agents acts as a desperate plea to elevate every one of these victims into proper objects for national grief and plants a small seed for the hope of future reconciliation.

\textbf{The Legacy of the Disappeared}

Mexico’s disappeared need special objects and rites that aim to address their peculiar predicament, very different from those who are confirmed to be dead. Or better put in the words of doña María from one of her speeches at Estela de Luz: “Los desaparecidos de México están aquí con nosotros, a veces invisibles, pero están aquí, no pueden irse, para ellos no hay otro lugar” (Mexico’s disappeared are here among us, sometimes invisible, but they are here, they

\textsuperscript{11} Original text in Spanish of this epitaph—saved as a photograph—has been lost.
cannot leave, there is no other place for them) (public speech, María Herrera, Estela de Luz, Mexico City, October 23, 2014).

They are also, as doña María said about herself before, “trapped in this moment and situation that never pass”. This displacement in death breaks with the conventional pattern of souls passing over to the other side, “the Hertzian strict linear tendency”, when such souls instead are thrown into limbo due to the lack of a proper burial (Panagiotopoulos 2017: 55-56; Kwon 2006: 12). The ambiguity of these victims sustains their prolonged victimhood and makes them talk to us and point fingers at their abusers through a secular, more than occult, post-humous agency (Sanjurjo 2017). They demand special rites and legal rights to find peace.

Latin America’s disappeared “haunt the living in the form of the constant anxiety of relatives who cannot mourn the disappeared and keep demanding a reckoning from society” (Robben 2000b: 95-96). As long as the disappeared remain “undead”, they remain “politically alive” and there cannot be forgiveness “nor a premature forgetting of the perpetrators’ guilt” (Harrison 2003: 145). While Latin America’s military dictatorships in the 1980s deployed their necropower over life and death by openly controlling public space and “territorializing state repression” (Robben 2016: 54), much like Mexico’s invisible narco plazas do today through criminal terror and repression, activist groups like the MPJD take to the streets to reclaim public space and dispel this politics of fear with their own “everyday passive revolution” (Morton, 2018: 118). In this light, the political afterlives of the disappeared have an instrumental role to play in the future of Mexico. Mexico’s missing occupy the city and claim their place in collective memory to wield their necrosociality (Taussig 1992: 48). They are destined to come back and haunt the nation’s future, condemned as they are by its past. Call it the legacy of the disappeared.

Mexico’s missing call on us to resolve their predicament as prisoners of perpetual liminality: “find me”, “search for us”, or “I want to return home and see my family”, as some of their necrographies say at Estela de Luz. But their memories evoked through street engravings are under constant threat of simply being passed by, walked over and thus knocked back into oblivion. As Lino López’s necrography reminds us: “The illusion that I linger here in this place is falling apart”. Therefore, one finite remembrance ceremony is not enough; protests and rites need to be repeated again and again. These victims’ deaths have no end, and their surviving families have to endure this lifelong commitment of performing protests and special rites to guard the ambiguous status of their missing as separate from those who are undoubtedly dead. They sustain the possibility that their missing may be alive, and like keeping a door open, the families wait for the disappeared to come home again. The political afterlives of the disappeared
continue to denounce violence and build momentum to bring closure through justice. At Estela de Luz, the calls echo for the disappeared to return to our world to speak the truth, as efforts continue to restore a sense of worth and value to Mexico’s many missing. The disappeared are here to stay.
Mexico’s Rebellious Afterlives

Mexico’s contemporary victims of violence—whether they are confirmed dead or remain disappeared—have important and contentious political afterlives. But they are also deeply tragic since they condemn the surviving families to lifelong quests to restore these victims’ human value. This thesis has cast light on these political afterlives of Mexico’s dead and disappeared, the necropolitics that cause them and the activism that sustains them. As an ethnographic observation in relation to this, my main theoretical claim argued that political protests transform over time to become ritualized in annual commemorations at new memorial sites, and these rituals perpetuate the rebellious afterlives of victims. This shows, I claimed, how Mexico’s necropolitics create new challenges for and force new responses from its necrosociality.

Mexico’s Untamed Grief & Liminal Centrality

Mexico—the land of tame death\(^{12}\), of Saint Death (Chesnut 2017; Kristensen 2014) and of the Day of the Dead (Brandes 2006; Garciagodoy 1998)—has become the nation of the disappeared: the land of untamed grief. Mexico’s strong ethics of commemoration and its old tradition of honouring the dead, as reflected in its Antigone-esque contemporary activism, now echo in the calls for rights for the disappeared. They are further reiterated in new special rites at memorial sites and days devoted to restoring their sense of worth and value anew. What this activism does, first and foremost, is display the surviving families’ “untamed” grief in public space. When this tactic is ritualized around certain dates and places in the public sphere, I argued that it gives rise to political afterlives for the nation’s victims in ways that seek a reckoning with state institutions in the stubborn pursuit of truth and justice for lost loved ones.

Street protests and surviving families’ public displays of grief are the outcomes of a transformative personal journey towards a sort of empowerment that occurs when families of victims—often with no earlier experience of activism or human rights advocacy—become activists. The form this activism takes also transforms over time into annual commemorations,

\(^{12}\) Here I use Philippe Ariès terms “tame” and “untamed death” (1981, 1974). Although he used them to talk about changes in attitudes to death in European tradition, I seek to highlight that there is no death taboo in Mexican culture as he claims there is in Western secular societies.
ceremonies at new memorial sites or other protest rituals that come to be repeated for years, if not decades. For close relatives, performing these new rites on special days devoted to their victims becomes a lifelong commitment they engage in as they wait for the ritual closure that a proper burial and justice would provide.

Those victims who suffer displacement in death when their bodies are vanished and denied burials cannot complete the Hertzian passage where the soul transitions from the world of the living to the world of the dead. Such missing persons thus linger in a no-man’s-land, an existential grey zone in a state of perpetual liminality. The disappeared are neither truly dead nor alive. Their ambiguous status creates prolonged rebellious afterlives. The ways these victims are used and evoked by their surviving relatives and other activists in Mexican society—in annual protest marches, in the Day of the Dead, at new memorial sites or otherwise ritualized protests—make them rebel against the hierarchy of the state and its necrogovernmentality. Their dramatic afterlives also come with a rather new way of grieving in public space in Mexico, different from *el velorio*, the Catholic funerary wake, and different to *el novenario*, the nine days of praying, but with clear similarities to and sometimes including the altar-offerings of the Day of the Dead. Nevertheless, the ambiguous status of the missing poses a problem to Mexico’s cultural traditions and established necrosociality—a problem that I referred to as “the ritual hierarchy of death”—that differentiate insiders from outsiders, those who have been buried and those who have not. Mexico’s contemporary necropolitics, this thesis has thus made clear, causes new challenges for and elicits new responses from its rich necrosociality.

This display of death and the dead or by other means visualizing victims is far from particular to Mexico but must be viewed in the light of Latin American states shared history of violence due to colonial and imperial domination historically, and later neoliberal restructuring and the prevalence of authoritarian regimes and organized crime in the region which have given rise to necro-cultures although it may take its most extreme form in contemporary Mexico (Berlanga 2015; Gibler 2014; Mbembe 2008; Reveles 2015; Robben & Ferrándiz 2015; Taussig 1984; Zagato 2018).

In the Mexican context, I have noted that state and criminal violence with their denigrating treatment of the dead violate nation’s historically strong ethics of commemoration and the nation’s tradition of honouring the deceased. Political street altars during the Day of the Dead and other strategies meant to prolong political afterlives of the nation’s disappeared attempt to refute such necropower and ensure, through a wide set of protest repertoires, that such victims come back to haunt perpetrators and insist on their right to justice. Annual protest ceremonies
devoted to victims and necrographies that speak in the names of Mexico’s disappeared show that the nation’s old tradition to honour the dead has, in fact, an important role to play in the epoch of human rights.

This human rights advocacy, however, far from merely being a universal handbook, has become inseparably tangled with the need for the disappeared to have culturally appropriate special rites that address their existential predicaments and ambiguous status as neither dead nor alive. In Mexico, this means that the disappeared cannot be included in the Day of the Dead out of respect for their close relatives who hope that they may still be alive. Mexico’s disappeared must be given their own places, and they need special rites and their own commemoration days.

New memorial sites and annual commemorations devoted to the disappeared are, in turn, full of paradoxes. They are remembrance ceremonies for people who are said to still be alive. These special dates and places are both a time and a space to cry, and simultaneously, a postponement of the surviving families’ grief. They are protests, but flowers and candles are laid on the streets. They call on the missing to come back, but they also say that they are “politically alive” and that their “death shall be avenged”, as if confirming that they are not “living” in any other sense of the word. Finally, these days devoted to the disappeared become events where those who are invisible and absent are made visible and present. This is a form of necrosociality that negates the necropolitics that caused it, a shameful technique to vanish corpses laid bare in its naked bones. The kidnappings and murders were part of a criminal tactic to spread fear and silence activists, to enact social control and silence the opposition. But these annual protests, with their reclaiming of bodies and their memories, provide a place for activists to defiantly speak out. These political outbursts cannot be tamed until the displays of “crazy grief” tame the state itself, the nation’s justice system, and its narco cartels. Because war ends where collective grief begins, Mexico’s untamed grief acts as a rebellion of other means.

Surviving families’ public displays of grief, therefore, are acts of protest intended to compel the state to fulfil their needs. They use heartfelt testimonies as an activist tactic, put on performances that make their personal traumas public, and personalize the nation’s experience of mass violence in order to counter violence and bringing it to an end. In order to, as don Felipe de la Cruz Sandoval once said, stop “this nightmare from ever repeating itself again”.

In other words, in order to change Mexico’s future, we need to properly commemorate those lost in its past. Collectives of activists seek to do so when they go on campaigns to spread their testimonies across the nation in a “touring model” with “acts of public grieving” (Rivera Hernández 2017) that utilize the subversive necromorality of victims by expanding the
experience of grief beyond blood-relatedness (Sosa 2014: xi, 51-80). This sharing of political emotions subverts traditional trajectories of kinship where the close family are the only ones obliged to grieve. Surviving relatives strive for Mexico’s contemporary victims to turn into objects of collective grief and activism. When they make permanent memorial sites that leave physical traces for the wider public and future generations to engage with, they also utilize urban space itself so that it brings forth those they have lost as well as the state’s and nation’s collective responsibility for these victims. Their fate is our risk, their pain is our rage, their unsolved mystery is our legacy.

This legacy of the disappeared is by no means only a Mexican predicament. On the contrary, several countries across Latin America have lived through epochs of political or criminal violence and have seen widespread disappearances and murders. Argentina and Chile experienced it during their military dictatorships in the 70s and 80s, and Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Colombia and Brazil currently see a high homicide rate that has led relatives to organize and protest, just like many Mexican families have done in recent years. Across the continent, collectives of organized mourners carry photos of their victims to the gates of state institutions and cry “Vivos se los Llevaron, Vivos los Queremos” (Bravo 2012; Rivera Hernández 2017; Robben 2007, 2000a, 2000b; Robledo 2018; Sanjurjo 2017, 2013; Suárez-Orozco 2018).

Latin America’s legacy of disappearances has inspired a prolonged political struggle for “justice and truth”, an activist pursuit that often makes surviving family “raise their voices”, tour their nations or the nearby regions to spread information and testimonies, and grieve in ways that reclaim the public sphere as well as their victims. This rebellious grieving is important precisely because it dispels the fear aimed at it by criminals and the state and their technique to use disappearances to expand social control (Berlanga 2012; Robben 2016; Sanjurjo 2017; Suárez-Orozco 1987). Instead of letting the dead be used as scarecrows in macabre violence, this activism uses victimhood to exploit “the tremendous moral and magical power of the unquiet dead” (Taussig 1992: 48) and to mobilize against violence and transform society for a peaceful future. Ayotzinapa was merely the latest symbol of how forced disappearances can backfire when surviving families take to the streets with massive public support (Méndez Franco 2015; Modonesi & González 2015; Noble 2015; Velasco 2015).

Unfortunately, another legacy left by the disappeared is darker and casts a heavy shadow over the lives of remaining family members. Part of the psychological trauma of having a desaparecido (a disappeared person) is that it invites the denial of death, it fosters a sort of imaginary thinking that your disappeared loved one may still be alive: “Encouraging a form of
prerational, magical thinking: just as a son or daughter magically ‘disappeared’ one day, they could so ‘reappear’ another” (Suárez-Orozco 1987: 384).

In a conventional “good” death, Mexico’s three rites—the funerary wake el velorio, the nine days of praying for the safe passage of the soul to the afterlife known as el novenario, and the grand and cheerful festivity El Día de Muertos—correspond perfectly well with van Gennep’s (1960) idea of a tripartite structure of the rites of passage and Hertz’s (1960) emphasis on a gradual passage of the soul of the deceased from the world of the living to the world of the dead, which in Mexico would be completed with the inclusion of the deceased in the Day of the Dead festivities. But the disappeared do not follow such a linear trajectory and thus cannot pass over to the afterlife (Hertz 1960: 85; Kwon 2008, 2006: 12; Panagiotopoulos 2017: 55-56; Robben 2000b: 95-96).

Octavio Paz, Mexico’s Nobel laureate in literature, writes in his book the Labyrinth of Solitude: “The word death is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London, as it burns the lips. The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favourite toys and most steadfast love” (1961: 57). Those words have long stood as a symbol for the idea of Mexico’s romantic view of death (Brandes 2003a). Today, as I claimed before, Mexico is no longer the nation of tame death but rather a country of untamed grief, and el desaparecidos have become the minotaur of the labyrinth. An anomaly of society and our psyches. Neither dead nor alive, these ambiguous persons fall into the abyss between the conventional duality of life and death.

In the second chapter of his book, The Rites of Passage (1960), Arnold van Gennep writes about the territorial passage, that is, that the second liminal phase of any ritual transition that is brought about by a geographical exile or occurs in a place of exception in the margins or in hidden spaces. This emphasizes another duality between “inside” and “outside” in which beings in liminal states belong to the outside. Mourning, for example, has often been the subject of strict taboos and limited to certain private or ritual spaces (i.e., the night vigil in the family house, the church, the cemetery, short funerary corteges) (Hertz 1960; van Gennep 1960). Mexico’s untamed grief turns this inside-out, and activists break such taboos and conventions by grieving in public spaces where mourning does not traditionally take place. Ambiguous souls such as ghosts, likewise liminal beings, are often thought to appear and roam in the margins of our world (Kwon 2008, 2006:8-16), which again casts light on liminality as a state of exception outside of the conventional order. The disappeared, however, do not appear in the outskirts of Mexico’s towns; they are in the heart of the city centre, in the middle of media
attention, at el Zócalo right outside of the National Parliament in broad daylight. They change the status quo and come with what we might call “a principle of liminal centrality”. These minotaurs are not lurking as a dark threat deep inside the labyrinth, they are crawling out of it to beg for our mercy.

This principle of liminal geographic-centrality appears to be equally true for Mexico’s tame death and its untamed grief; they are merely different expressions of the same principle that, to me, appears to be central in Mexico’s long-standing cultural tradition to make death and the dead more, rather than less, visible. This leads me to believe that Mexico’s disappeared, “displaced in death”, may not be “out of place” for much longer. Indeed, they are being “placed” as we speak. On the dark days and nights of the year when their protest rituals will take place, los desaparecidos are called upon once more. They become “politically alive”, “present”, and they seek recognition from society. For this, they need a place, like Estela de Luz, and a day in the calendar to be regularly recognized so that when they are called upon, candles will light their way.
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