Entanglements Of Sovereignties: Searching Mothers, Criminal Organizations And The State Apparatus Amid The Mexican War On Drugs

by

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Abstract

My thesis explores different registers of sovereignty amid Mexico's war on drugs, explained as the nationwide deployment of the army to combat drug trafficking and annihilate drug lords, which to date has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. My research is focused on Guadalajara, the second largest city in the country, in which criminal groups assert their power to take life over the population, and the justice system is overloaded with dozens upon dozens of disappearance cases and an overcrowded morgue.

In this war, different sovereignties are made visible through the relationships with victims' bodies established by their relatives, criminal organizations, and the state apparatus before and after death. Specifically, my project follows the actions of the victims' mothers in their effort to claim the bodies of their loved ones, which, I propose, functions as an expression of an emerging sovereignty shaped by a cluster of affects in conjunction with an unmaking of the law and silence of the state. I pay particular attention to the forensic methodologies created by the mothers of the disappeared. From the morgue to the search for clandestine graves, they have created notebooks with multiple notes and images that serve as tools for identifying the deceased.

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Entanglements of sovereignties: searching mothers, criminal organizations and the state apparatus amid the Mexican war on drugs

Isaac Vargas

Supervisors: Valentina Napolitano and Christopher Krupa

This project is devoted to the searching mothers of my homeland, to my own mother, and to Dano — my childhood best friend

Introduction

> You're trying to understand that your relative is missing. You are in deep denial. Every day is an opportunity to find them, to find out who has taken them. But something snaps inside you when the official in charge of the case tells you that you have to go to the forensic facility to give a DNA sample. I felt offended and angry when he told me that. I replied, 'My son (Luis) is not dead. He is not dead.' He tried to calm me down by telling me that the sample was part of a protocol, 'just in case.' So, I asked him: 'Just in case? Say more.' That's probably the moment when we are faced with the possibility that our children are dead in this city full of mass graves (Miriam, April 29, 2022).

We find ourselves in the midst of a march in Guadalajara, surrounded by police, while the mothers of the disappeared shout in unison: *"Vivos se los llevaron, vivos los queremos"* — alive they took them, alive we want them back.[i] The police try to block our way, preventing us from reaching the city hall where an important meeting between the governor and members of his cabinet is taking place. The voices, bodies and energy of the searchers unite to confront these men with their faces covered who try to stop us from moving forward in this confrontation between a predominantly male group and a collective body (*cuerpo*) made up of searching mothers.

I found these paragraphs, with which I open the text, in a green notebook that I bought when I began my fieldwork. That day of the march was important to me because I met Miriam, whose son Luis had disappeared six months earlier, on his way back home from a family party. After the march, she invited me to her house, preferring to stay there in her safe place, or as she calls it: *"A refuge in this martyrdom that I still don't understand."* Throughout the evening, Miriam described all the paperwork she had been dealing with over the preceding months. *"We have to endure long waits and disrespectful treatment from the authorities."*

Miriam baptized this process as "the pain of bureaucracy," which I consider a precise description of the multiple struggles that relatives of the disappeared have to deal with during their searches for their loved ones.

Moreover, I find Miriam's testimony disturbing and a clear example of what is often the victims' families first encounter with death. In Mexico, providing a DNA sample is directly linked to the possibility that one's child may be in a clandestine grave—a reality that becomes increasingly tangible as officials outline the chain of procedures families must follow at the morgue. I remember Miriam telling me that she went in fear, wondering if Luis might be there, in the morgue. One does not know what to expect in a city such as Guadalajara, where death roams the streets and whose forensic institution has been unable to respond to the violence since then-President Felipe Calderón launched the war on drugs in 2006—the analytical timeframe of my project takes that year as its starting point and concludes in 2024.

The conversations I had with Miriam and other searching mothers of missing persons made me think of an entanglement of sovereignties in the context of the war. I conceptualize sovereignty as the production of a system of practices and efforts carried out by a group or community to establish the capacity to decide over their bodies, the fate of their land, or their dead. It is a practice that extends beyond the subjugation of individuals. This is bound up with the idea that living bodies become producers of knowledge in the face of the state's refusal—or inability—to deploy its technologies and expertise. Think of Luis' body as an example. The situation described by Miriam is replicated in thousands of other cases throughout the country: the state tries to claim the *cuerpo* of the disappeared via bureaucratic procedures framed by official protocols. However, my interlocutor, like many other mothers

driven by affect, develops her own strategies for search and forensic identification. These strategies, at times, complement but also challenge and disrupt official sovereignty. At the same time, in the background of this story, there is the violence exercised by the so–called drug cartels: their claim on and appropriation of the citizens inhabiting the territory. I focus most of my ethnographic attention on Guadalajara –Jalisco's capital– as it is a critical epicenter of the conflict, being the city with the highest number of reports of disappearances in the entire country. Additionally, I have personal ties with this city, as it is where I was born. There are accounts of the war in and from Guadalajara that are inscribed in me, and from that affective place, concerns have arisen, as well as questions that have led me to choose this land as a geographical point for my ethnographic and theoretical explorations.

The landscape of local violence has been framed by corpses emerging from the bowels of the earth and a local morgue flooded with unidentified remains of deceased citizens. As of December 2023, there were at least 6,500 fragments of mutilated bodies held in Guadalajara's municipal morgue. It is complicated to know the veracity of the numbers, as there is always uncertainty about the recording and processing of official data. Julieta, a lawyer who belongs to a non-governmental organization focused on human rights, asked me: *"Is it possible to fully trust authorities who disregard victims?"* The deceased often arrive at the morgue as fragments, evidence of human lives that were probably violently mutilated as they were caught up in a complex set of alliances and rivalries between criminals. On a local television program addressing the forensic crisis, a former employee stated that the institution has, in fact, been in trouble since 2011, when the first set of bodies were discovered, found in vehicles that had been abandoned just hours earlier.

Less than a month after taking office as president, Felipe Calderón arrived at one of his first public activities wearing a military-style jacket and cap to pay homage to the forces of the state. That morning, he was accompanied by more than 250 soldiers in the state of Michoacán, his homeland, where he launched a military operation to crack down on drug-related crime. Over the weeks, similar operations were deployed in states such as Guerrero, Baja California, Sinaloa, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas. In parallel, the presidential narrative was changing. Calderón began to use words like battle and common enemies (i.e., criminals) in official discourses proclaiming a national war on drugs.

However, as operations were implemented in each state, the figures on violent deaths gradually began to rise. According to Atuesta, as part of her research compiling data from the Mexican government, in those municipalities where there were more confrontations between alleged criminals and the armed forces, homicide rates increased.[ii] Rather than reducing the drug market, the security strategy had the effect of incentivizing the destabilization of the cartel system by fracturing the relationships within it, among them and with the state, contrary to the practice in the 20th century, when the federal government played a role of "arbiter" due to the agreements it established with some of the largest criminal groups. I will return to this point, but for now I want to put on the table two central elements: the history that precedes the current war on drugs and its connection with the idea of doubt as an analytical concern.

To contextualize the history of drugs in Mexico, it is important to situate ourselves in the 1950s. According to specialized literature on the topic—although almost always relying on official sources—during this decade, the so-called drug cartels were primarily composed of family-based networks located in rural areas. There, they were mainly engaged in the

cultivation of opium poppies and marijuana.[iii] However, in the 1980s the international market began to change, as South American cocaine gained popularity among consumers in the Global North. That process faced a major obstacle with the blockade of the Caribbean route promoted by the U.S. government, which forced South American criminal groups to look for new ways to transport their merchandise (Andreas 2014). Thus, Mexico came to occupy the place of a large cocaine warehouse, where the product was stored and then moved north of the Rio Grande. The arrival of cocaine was marked by a new criminal model, presumably much more structured, pyramidal, and violent.

The narrative told from academia emphasizes that Mexican criminal groups began to move out of rural areas to establish not only an urban presence but also an international one as they positioned themselves as key players in the cocaine trade (Guerra 2023; Maldonado 2018). Over the years, the landscape became increasingly complex due to disputes and the emergence of new organizations, which was used as one of the main arguments to initiate the current war. The strategy has been framed by a military approach, employing armed conflict tactics in efforts to weaken or dismantle drug trafficking groups using the U.S.-inspired "Kingpin Strategy," which seeks to eliminate the organizations' leaders. However, the result has been fragmentation and realignment within the groups, accompanied by widespread violence.

Government narratives have contributed to portraying criminals as an omnipotent entity—an enemy that must be eradicated to achieve not only peace but also national wellbeing. Behind this official story, dozens of books have filled the shelves of Mexican bookstores. A recurrent hypothesis in these works is that the war was launched as a legitimacy strategy created by Calderón, who won the presidency with a margin of only 236,000 votes over then-candidate

Andrés Manuel López Obrador (better known by the acronym AMLO).[iv] Obrador eventually became president in 2018 (after three attempts) supported by MORENA (*Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional*—National Regeneration Movement), the political party he previously founded. In the 2006 election, the narrow margin of victory was accompanied by an intense campaign against AMLO, as he was accused of being a danger to Mexico due to his leftist stance, leading him to stage a nearly two-month-long sit-in in the country's capital to protest the election results. Some analysts argue that this chapter of the national political life influenced Calderón's decision to launch the war as a political maneuver for containment and legitimacy–building (Aguayo 2021). While part of this hypothesis may hold some truth, it is undeniable that significant reconfigurations were already occurring within certain criminal groups in the country as the international market underwent a metamorphosis, although not with the violent consequences we witness today.

Doubt

The realms of narcotrafficking and politics have always been intertwined in Mexican history. While conducting fieldwork in Guadalajara, a trial was underway in New York against Mexico's former Secretary of Public Security, who held this position between 2006 and 2012. Genaro García Luna was known as the trusted right-hand man of former President Felipe Calderón. The trial of García Luna reverberated across both traditional media and social networks in the country. The case focused on proving that the former Secretary received millions of dollars in payments to protect and provide key information to the Sinaloa Cartel, one of the most notorious criminal organizations in contemporary history. Witnesses, under the protection of the U.S. government, revealed that Mexico's now-defunct Federal Police—an institution García Luna led before becoming Secretary—provided information and

surveillance equipment to various cartels. According to political commentators who appeared frequently on national newscasts during those days, García Luna's assistance, made possible by the institutional structure he controlled and put at the service of criminals, was a decisive factor in enabling certain criminals to expand their smuggling routes and gain power over their rivals.

A revealing fact highlighted during the hearings in New York was that Federal Police officers even acted as escorts for drug shipments transported along Mexican highways. Authorities were said to have informed criminal leaders about federal government operations aimed at apprehending them. What transpired in the U.S. courtroom revealed a symbiosis that goes beyond the mere exchange of monetary and informational resources between authorities and criminals. This symbiosis unfolds a semiotics of power, as García Luna provided *narcos* with police uniforms, vehicles, and credentials identifying them as agents of the Mexican state.

Certainly, there is a multiplicity of hypotheses and political analyses regarding the war on drugs, many of which refer to a criminal state or a weakened state apparatus. However, reflections frequently raise questions about who is who, and what the true story is behind Mexico's security strategy. In this regard, I turn to doubt (*duda*) as an analytical tool to explore the porous boundaries between state officials and drug trafficking groups. In anthropology, there is an important discussion about rumors—often regarded as the oldest form of communication in the world.[v] Rumor has always been present in human relations, woven into the very fabric of society's formation. Rumor is typically defined as a process of information exchange whose truthfulness or veracity is not firmly established. It is a form of knowledge shaped by *doubt*, nourished by uncertainty.

I vividly recall how frequently, during our conversations, my interlocutors pointed out the investigative agents in charge of their cases. In nearly all instances, a pervasive doubt emerged about whether those agents might also be working for the cartels, passing on or concealing information. This *duda* permeates all levels of government, from the municipal level to the office of the president. Darlen, the mother of Lola, who disappeared in 2016, recounted stories of police officers who, instead of investigating, used advancements in investigations to orchestrate further disappearances. These actions coincided with the emergence of a new criminal group seeking to displace the family that had controlled the drug trade in her town for years.

Similarly, my interlocutors recounted instances of military personnel whose uniforms shielded them as they engaged in criminal activities. *"When the army arrived, there were more deaths and more drugs. A lot of people say they began collaborating with the narcos,"* Daniela told me, describing the criminal context in her town in southern Jalisco. In fact, militarization has increased from 2006 to 2023, spanning three presidential terms under three different political parties. While Calderón deployed the military to the streets, it was in 2020 that President López Obrador issued a decree directly authorizing the Armed Forces to undertake various public security tasks. Since 2019, the Armed Forces have been involved in the construction and remodeling of hospitals, airports, the operation of the Mexican Space Agency, while also operating a militarized high school system. These activities are carried out alongside their security responsibilities, which includes combating fuel theft, monitoring the northern and southern borders, distributing supplies and fertilizers, and even manufacturing flags and uniforms for federal institutions.[vi] Additionally, AMLO created the National Guard, a civilian institution with a structure that includes military personnel.

It sometimes seems as though everything happened so quickly, as if violence suddenly emerged one day, transforming the country and militarizing it in the process. In the first chapter, I will delve into how the adoption of the neoliberal model was a critical factor leading to the current state of violence. However, what I want to emphasize here is the role of doubt as the foundation of rumors and scandals that have shaped the timeline of the war on drugs. This is significant because my interlocutors strive to make sense of these years of horror as they attempt to unravel the enigma woven into the narrative of war. They often speak of and investigate the connections between authorities and narcotraffickers—both the widely publicized links and the hidden ones that have slipped out of institutional corridors and reached the ears of the searchers. During fieldwork, I frequently heard journalists and activists discussing the role played by then–Secretary of National Defense, Salvador Cienfuegos. There were rumors of his connection to drug trafficking, rumors that in fact permeate the entire structure of the Mexican Army. In 2020, the former Secretary was arrested in the United States for his alleged connections to criminal groups. After a diplomatic rift between the two countries, Cienfuegos was released and returned to Mexico without further explanation. As one activist told me, *"We will never truly know what happened, but that's just the tip of the iceberg."*

But what lies beneath the surface? Essayist Oswaldo Zavala (2020) categorically asserts that cartels do not exist. By dissecting Zavala's work, it can be inferred that war, from his perspective, is the outcome of a securitarian epistemology framed by the current neoliberal order. It is not a matter of a weak or failed state.[vii] On the contrary, deaths and disappearances result from the ways in which the state apparatus operationalizes its interests and those of its allies through strategies of (in)security. From a different standpoint, Zavala's work suggests

the war is a struggle to define power, rooted in the benefits of controlling specific geographic areas to facilitate multiple illegal businesses.[viii] In fact, there is an ongoing and vivid debate within certain intellectual circles about a refusal to use the term "cartel," a concept created and imposed by the United States, which has always played an ambiguous role in shaping Mexico's security policy. The term "cartel" has also become saturated with media-driven connotations that reproduce stereotypes about certain bodies, communities, or regions—such as poor youth, Indigenous groups, or rural populations—depicting them as inherently criminal. Moreover, the use of the term reinforces the notion of a clear-cut division between a "good" state and "bad" criminals, thus obscuring the complex and often complicit relationships between state actors and illicit economies.

I will use the term "cartel" sparingly and only in quotation marks; nonetheless, I will make more frequent use of the concept of organized crime. I understand organized crime as a network made up of nodes or groups with varying capacities for action that collaborate with one another. This network is sustained through alliances that are constantly formed and reconfigured. Collaboration, of course, is not free from conflict; such disputes are among the main factors that help explain the cycles of violence that have disrupted life in the areas where I conduct fieldwork.

But, if cartels do not exist, is it analytically productive to attempt to differentiate registers of sovereignty? I argue it is because, as academic literature aptly demonstrates, the so–called "cartels" are often created or supported by authorities, yet they can also assume unexpected dimensions, at times rebelling and asserting their own exercise of authority in the territories where they operate.[ix] As I mentioned earlier, when referencing Miriam's testimony, the conversations I had with mothers of the disappeared led me to reflect on an entanglement of

sovereignties, with the bodies of victims at the center of disputes. The deceased are claimed by various actors, both within and outside the state apparatus, who exercise differing registers which sometimes collide or intertwine.

From a perspective primarily focused on sovereignty as a practice of control, it is important to consider anthropologist Rita Segato's assertion that sovereign power is never merely physical. Without the psychological and moral subjugation of others, there is only the power to kill. Thus, sovereignty is not confined to the ability to take lives or make individuals disappear but also resides in the display of such power. I will discuss this notion and expand on it in the following sections, but for now, Segato's premise lays the groundwork for understanding that sovereignty (whether driven by criminal groups or by authorities) entails a sensorial dimension, as the lifeless body of another can serve as a message, evoking fear and a range of sensations among those who witness the deployment of violence.

We can find, for example, the sovereign register exercised by criminal groups that brutally kill their victims and often publicly display the lifeless bodies *(cuerpos)* of their victims. However, focusing solely on this layer of the war obscures the involvement of the state apparatus in mass violence. Within official institutions, decisions have been made that shape the dynamics of drug trafficking and formulate the official narrative of this conflict. The criminal dimension of the Mexican political system has resulted in over 440,000 violent deaths and nearly 115,000 disappearances since 2006.

Disappearance as State technology

Sayak Valencia (2018) has proposed the concept of *gore capitalism*. Their theory defines a manifestation of a capitalist system that commodifies and disposes human bodies.[x] Drawing from necropolitics, Valencia focuses on border societies marked by poverty and hyper-consumerism, where *gore capitalism* emerges through the violent treatment of *cuerpos*.[xi] Lifeless bodies and mutilated human remains are thus interpreted as instruments that reveal the reproduction of capital in our current historical moment. In this sense, the study of violent interventions on the human body is central to understanding what it means for a *cuerpo* to be broken, fragmented, disfigured, or dismembered. One such violent intervention is undoubtedly disappearance, which reveals how, within multiple state apparatuses, the relationship between the state and the subject has been transformed. Disappearance becomes both a control technology and a population regulation mechanism, whose origins some authors trace back to World War II, as part of the repertoire of practices used by the Nazi regime in Germany (Feitlowitz 2011). Enforced disappearance is a global practice that takes on different forms depending on the historical, cultural, and political contexts in which it is deployed. While in Latin America this phenomenon has been widely documented and denounced, it has also been implemented across the globe—following patterns that reveal a shared logic of repression and silencing.[xii]

According to Laakkonen, disappearance is a continuous crime: "it endures as long as the body of the person has not been found and/or the state does not provide information about their fate."[xiii] In this sense, the crime is not only surrounded by rumors and uncertainty, but it also constitutes a way of evading accountability—an essential feature of authoritarian governments. In countries such as Syria and Sri Lanka, enforced disappearance has

functioned as a systematic mechanism in civil wars or armed conflicts. The aim is not only to eliminate the "internal enemy" but also to spread terror within whole communities, deterring all forms of dissent.[xiv] In countries like China and Egypt, disappearance is not necessarily tied to armed conflict but to ideological, religious, or ethnic control regimes. The practice targets minorities such as the Uyghurs, or political activists, using secret detention as a method of punishment and "re-education."[xv]

In the case of Latin America, the region has undergone profound political transformations marked by repressive governments. Authors such as Greg Grandin (2004) argue that Guatemala was one of the first countries on the continent where widespread acts of terrorism and genocide were committed during the twentieth century. Grandin argues that disappearance was employed as a state policy beginning with the *Operación Limpieza* in the mid 1960s. Through the collusion between a nominally democratic state and the military, a campaign of persecution was waged against the Maya population by groups trained by the U.S. government. The American advisor John Longan, trained in counterinsurgency, was sent to Guatemala with a clear mission: to establish a rapid, centralized intelligence unit by integrating police and military forces with technological resources provided by the United States. This operation marked a critical turning point in the militarization of the Guatemalan state and served as a model for strategies such as the transnational campaign of repression known as Operation Condor, part of the broader U.S. presence in the region during the Cold War. The mass disappearances that unfolded across Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s reveal the consolidation of disappearance as a technology of domination—engineered through military intelligence and molded by a U.S.-led geopolitical doctrine. This technology was later adapted and modified according to the needs of each nation-state.

In countries such as El Salvador, Nicaragua, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Honduras, Bolivia, Haiti, and Mexico, human disappearances have been documented in the context of governmental political control, with widespread impunity.[xvi] The nation-states of the Global South have been implicated in disappearance processes either as perpetrators or as accomplices, due to their inaction in investigating, prosecuting, and punishing those responsible. For this reason, disappearance becomes a technology of the state insofar as it manages social fear, disseminates terror, destroys familial and community bonds, and produces a prolonged absence that has enduring consequences for the victims' loved ones.

What does it mean to disappear in Mexico today? Various monographs describe Mexico—particularly since the adoption of neoliberalism in the 1990s—as a laboratory in which capital has implemented its population-management policies to increase the profits of the political-economic elite. Case studies include Ciudad Juárez and the feminicides linked to maquiladora workers; the industrial expansion in Guanajuato, in specific the Bajío region, whose industrial corridor has grown alongside a rise in disappearances; and, of course, the war on drugs, which has fostered militarization policies, the dismantling of local security institutions, and the expansion of drug trafficking.[xvii]

Nation of disappearances

The spacious conference hall of a hotel in downtown Mexico City is filled with journalists and relatives of the victims. A non-governmental organization is set to present its annual report on the state of disappearances in the country. One of the speakers is Fabiola, a searching mother from the state of Veracruz. *"I have been searching for Jaime since 2017,*

and I believe the situation is worsening every day. This is the nation of disappearances," Fabiola emphatically declared in 2022 during our conversation. Although enforced disappearance in Mexico has been documented by the state itself since 1962, there is an undeniable turning point marked by the militarized security strategy implemented since December 2006. According to official data, between January 1, 1962, and December 31, 2005: 2,280 individuals were reported disappeared, of whom 2,029 remain unaccounted for to this day. During Calderón's administration (from 2006 to 2012), 40,881 disappearances were recorded, with 17,655 (43%) still unresolved.[xviii] In this six-year period, the number of disappearances surged to nearly eighteen times that of the preceding four decades combined. However, this was only the beginning of a severe human rights crisis. Under Enrique Peña Nieto's presidency, spanning from 2012 to 2018, the number of disappearances grew by 143%. The arrival of Andrés Manuel López Obrador to the presidency in 2018 failed to reverse this trend, reaching a record 9,617 cases in a single year. On average, at least 27 people disappear daily in Mexico, with three out of ten being women.

The war itself has been a cross-administration policy that has exacerbated violence and fear. When discussing the statistics of disappearance, it is crucial to consider the existence of underreporting. Many people do not file complaints due to fear of reprisals or, as often happens in towns and small cities, because the justice system is well known to be co–opted by criminal groups. During a protest in front of Jalisco's city hall, Luisa, who has been searching for her son José since 2014, said she could not understand how so many people could disappear in this country. *"It's as if the earth swallows them all,"* she stated. Since 2006, disappearances have become an everyday topic in the country.

In Mexico, the phenomenon of disappearance has been analyzed from various perspectives, depending on the historical context. According to Atuesta and Vargas: "The first body of studies has focused on the disappeared during the Dirty War (*Guerra Sucia*), which took place from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, an historical period in which the Mexican regime was responsible for systematic and widespread human rights abuses on leftist social movements. The second body addresses the crimes reported since 2006."[xix] Disappearances during the Dirty War were a result of political–military repression against social movements opposing the federal government. A range of authors specify that during the *Guerra Sucia*, the government recruited criminals to form squads tasked with carrying out multiple crimes.[xx] Consequently, the techniques used to violate fundamental rights today can be seen as a transfer of knowledge between legal and illegal actors dating back decades. This interchangeable knowledge has evolved over the years, becoming the foundation of the logics underpinning the so-called "drug cartels."

Today, when attempting to identify a perpetrator, there is no single profile but rather a network of actors, including individuals both inside and outside the state apparatus. However, both in the past and present, a crisis emerges from the inability to place the victim among the living or the dead. Mourning is hindered by the absence of the body, relegating the disappeared to a liminal space. This liminality—an existence nullified by the body's absence—becomes a source of ongoing uncertainty for the victim's loved ones. The lack of bodies gives rise to divergent forms of mourning; in many cases, it takes on a political dimension as relatives publicly demand justice and answers. Yet, in the absence of justice, these processes remain open for years, like deep wounds that refuse to heal. Disappearance

is not only physical but also material and narrative, as this crime is exacerbated by the lack of extensive official documentation and a discourse of denial propagated by authorities.

However, the searching mothers have emerged as the primary voice of resistance against the war to construct a memory that brings the disappeared into the present and ensures that the names of the intellectual authors behind the war are not forgotten. This project, geographically situated in the nation of disappearances, examines how mothers begin searching on their own due to state neglect. Throughout the pages, we will observe how the mothers of victims transform into activists, searchers, forensic experts, and legal advocates. As I will detail, the war on drugs is deeply intertwined with a gendered division that largely separates those who disappear (men) from those who search (women).[xxi] In the following chapters, we will accompany the searchers (*buscadoras*) on their journeys, while also highlighting the presence of sisters, aunts, and wives who are searching for their loved ones.

Why to these people disappeared?

A key topic that must be highlighted when discussing disappearances in Mexico is forced recruitment. Rumors about vans entering peripheral neighborhoods to abduct young people have become a recurring narrative circulating on social media, in news reports, and in everyday conversations. Carolina, one of my interlocutors, told me how the local gang in her neighborhood pressured her daughter into joining a criminal group to sell drugs. "*They threatened her by saying they would harm us—her family. You know, those gangs used to be quiet. They didn't cause any major problem, now they're part of the narco.*" Weeks later, I came across a news article describing how men were traveling between the country's bus terminals, smuggling drugs hidden inside religious figurines stored in their luggage

(González 2022). One of the detained men claimed that he simply wanted to save money to buy a house for his family. Speaking of buses, it is impossible not to invoke the case of the 43 students who disappeared in 2014.

The 43 young men disappeared after being attacked by municipal police officers from Iguala and Cocula, in the state of Guerrero, in collaboration with members of organized crime. The conflict began after the students took over buses to redirect them to Mexico City, where they planned to participate in the October 2nd march (commemorating the Tlatelolco Massacre). However, the original destination of those buses was the United States. Hidden among the passengers' luggage, and with the complicity of bus terminal employees, a criminal group had concealed packages of heroin (GIEI 2022). What I aim to underscore through the fragments in this section is the diverse range of individuals involved in the drug trade—some because they are forced to participate, while many others are drawn in by the economic incentives tied to the *narco* imaginary, which portrays the trade as a fast track to great wealth.

A crucial point to stress is that drug trafficking relies on the human body as its primary instrument for sustaining the business. In this regard, labor becomes the foundation of an economy fed by forced recruitment, which is defined as the involuntary incorporation of individuals into criminal organizations for roles such as couriers, lookouts, street-level drug dealers, and perpetrators of extortion, kidnapping, or murder (Martínez-Solares and Gottsbacher 2024). Organized crime networks operate through hierarchical structures in which members are positioned across various levels of command, each with differentiated value. The labor force I refer to occupies the lowest rung of this hierarchy, and its relationship to those in higher positions is marked by a "master–servant" dynamic. In this logic, the servant is used and discarded once they no longer serve the criminal machinery. Thus, in

contrast to popular narratives that romanticize or mythologize the drug trade, upward mobility within criminal hierarchies is rare—especially for those who enter at the bottom (Valencia 2018).

Criminal machines such as the Mexican cartels require a steady supply of "human resources" to meet their operational demands. Nonetheless, while it is essential to consider the link between disappearance and forced recruitment, it is equally important to clarify that this relationship is not entirely direct. Not all disappearances in Mexico result from forced recruitment, nor does all recruitment take place via enforced disappearance. As previously stated, this nuance points to the cultural dimension and to the imaginaries of both social and economic prosperity in a country where the future for young people is increasingly bleak (Reguillo 2015).

Furthermore, regarding the recruitment–disappearance nexus, and as mentioned earlier, the expansion of criminal groups into transnational networks has created a greater demand for human labor. To meet this need, scholars have identified two main strategies of forced recruitment employed by organized crime: abduction and deceptive job offers posted on social media (Colmex 2025; CNDH 2023). Disappearances resulting from fraudulent job postings are particularly telling, as they reveal how the infrastructure of enforced disappearance established in Jalisco is interconnected with other regions from which people migrate in search of decent and stable employment. In Jalisco, this recruitment strategy involves posting job ads seeking security guards, surveillance personnel, or factory workers, among others, with advertised wages ranging from 3,000 to 5,000 Mexican pesos per week (200 to 400 Canadian dollars).[xxii]

Individuals are summoned to a specific meeting point, and through deception, they are taken to remote locations outside the city. In March 2025, the search collective *Guerreros Buscadores de Jalisco* uncovered a case directly related to this type of criminal violence. Acting on an anonymous tip, the group entered Rancho Izaguirre, located in the municipality of Teuchitlán, just over an hour from Guadalajara. There, they discovered what is now considered to be a clandestine extermination camp operated by the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG). José Ascensión Murguía Santiago, who was then the municipal president of Teuchitlán, was formally indicted for collaborating with the CJNG in the operation of the Izaguirre ranch, being on the cartel's payroll, and providing them with security.

The evidence found on site was overwhelming: over 200 pairs of shoes, hundreds of personal items, school backpacks, charred human remains, torture instruments, and several makeshift ovens dug into the ground—presumably used to cremate bodies. These findings pointed not only to mass killings, but to a systematic pattern of forced recruitment, training, and extermination. According to official figures, the age group most affected by forced recruitment includes people between 15 and 29 years old (Colmex 2025).

Corporeal sovereignty

When I first read Hansen and Steputtat's definition of sovereignty, I found compelling how it encapsulated diverse perspectives on the concept. According to these authors, "sovereignty is a tentative and always emerging form of authority based on violence that is exercised and designed to generate loyalty and legitimacy from neighborhoods to the apex of the state."[xxiii] This definition vividly underscores violence as the cornerstone of sovereignty in its classical conception, similar to Segato's postulate I previously mentioned. This premise is shared by

more scholars, for example Von Lampe, who asserts: “The main tenant of sovereignty—the right to kill—can be defined and carried out by multiple and seemingly antagonistic actors at the same time, and in quiet, routine, and everyday ways.”[xxiv] Nonetheless, sovereignty is not always about quietness. In his ethnography on the Colombian state’s efforts to demobilize the guerrilla fighters and control the propaganda, Fattal indicates that each bombing and each assassination inside the conflict could not be disentangled from a broader war between the state and anti-state actors to control the narrative of the moment and thus expand fear among the people.[xxv]

Denyer makes a similar argument in his anthropological analysis of police work in São Paulo, Brazil: “Sovereignty means control over the right to kill (…) as a practice of ideal subordination of population.”[xxvi] Analogously, for Stepputat, sovereignty is intimately related to the body and the attempts to govern it from the moment of birth until its death, controlling not only the deceased but their loved ones as well through a chain of both bureaucratic processes and the funeral industry, understood as a technology which manages every step of the mortuary process.[xxvii] A key element for this author is not only how dead bodies are managed, but how different entities claim those bodies through rituals, delimitation of spaces, and constant negotiations. Here, Stepputat formulates a central precision: It is important to take into consideration how different entities claim bodies and negotiate the fate of the deceased with or without the use of physical violence.

Thus, all these authors focus on the body as the site and object of sovereign power, a point already noted by Epstein. While the postulates presented here directly associate sovereignty with violence, I want to gradually open more windows of analysis to contribute to this discussion. First, it is crucial to note that sovereignty neither produces docile bodies (as

discipline does), nor regulates life (as biopolitics does), nor governs human behavior (as governance does). In summary, sovereign power fundamentally concerns the control over life and death.

Sovereign power establishes a law, which is a type of discourse. Insofar, it dictates how to produce docile bodies, how to regulate them, and what is permissible within a political community. As previously emphasized, sovereignty requires psychological and moral subordination to be effective. As argued by Cossío and Lomnitz, laws are canonical elements shaping political communities, regulating human conduct by prohibiting and permitting certain behaviors. The law is always at the disposal of those with the power to suspend it. As Carl Schmitt argues, the sovereign is the one who decides on the state of exception—that is, the individual or group capable of suspending the legal order itself when deemed necessary. What appears to be an autonomous legal system is, in truth, tethered to political power.[xxviii]

Like the sovereign practices in this region demonstrated, to generate fear and loyalty, psychological and moral subordination are needed. According to Farreira da Silva, old and contemporary national projects show the importance of these logics, such as in Brazil, where both security and raciality together create a symbiosis to justify the rampant official violence.[xxix] Farreira da Silva brings to the conversation the question of how certain bodies, depending on their skin color, phenotype, area of residence, socioeconomic class, and ideology, become more vulnerable to be excluded, to be afraid, and to be the target of killings, a point also analyzed by Krupa in the context of Ecuador.[xxx] Ferreira da Silva emphasizes that the subjection of specific bodies to violence is not incidental but constitutes an internal condition of normative sovereignty itself.

During the cycle of dictatorships in Latin America, the main logic of exclusion that germinated was the category of *internal enemy*, which can be understood through the friend-enemy binomial proposed by Schmitt.[xxxi] In the context of Latin American dictatorships, the concept of the internal enemy refers to a constructed figure within the nation—often civilians or dissidents—who are perceived as a threat to the established order, national security, or ideological unity. The internal enemy is best understood as a political and discursive category through which the state enacted violence, produced fear, and sought to reshape society in accordance with authoritarian values.[xxxii]

Through the friend-enemy binomial, but within the framework of the war on drugs, various researchers have highlighted the ways in which criminal groups have constructed a type of sovereign register which surpasses the mere power to inflict death.[xxxiii] Beyond the divisions between those who argue that "cartels" pose a threat to the state and those who contend that they are an extension of the state itself, the literature converges on the idea that criminal networks have their own code of laws. This code operates both inside groups and externally, establishing moral and psychological subordination over the bodies inhabiting the territories these actors have claimed as their domain. Such subordination may either complement or conflict with that imposed by authorities. Although a significant portion of the literature on the subject acknowledges that, when the state so desires or requires, it makes efforts to exert control over a particular criminal group.

Nonetheless, during these years of fieldwork I began contemplating other registers of sovereignty (*soberanía*). I believe Lula's testimony serves as a point of entry for the argument I develop in this section: *"We place our bodies even in hell. Out of love for our children,"* Lula shared with me during one of our conversations about the search process she began in

2015, when her daughter disappeared. Here I postulate that mothers create a register of sovereignty as their bodies become the axis and site of resistance to violence. This register is not a practice of control but rather an attempt to reverse or alter the very control established by the state or criminal groups. But before continuing, I want to emphasize something that I will demonstrate in the coming chapters: the register of the searchers is not a wholesale opposition to official sovereignty. It is far more complex, as it simultaneously challenges, collaborates, collides, and entangles with that register.

In *Resisting Disappearance. Military Occupation and Women's Activism in Kashmir*, Zia (2019) addresses the same topic but from the other side of the world. I came across this book toward the end of my fieldwork, in which the author revisits the concept of law, insofar as normative sovereignty is precisely concerned the system of rules—with the aim of creating subordination to regulate *cuerpos*. However, Zia offers a compelling shift by introducing the concept of affective law. She uses "law" to characterize an unwritten system of social and political practices legitimized by the constancy with which women carry them out to preserve the memory of the disappeared and continue their search. Zia's argument resonates with me, but I believe there is something deeper at the root of what she calls affective law. The system of political and social practices she identifies is rooted in the body, because it is all we have left amid violence[xxxiv]. The body that resists, the body that transforms itself and continues to search, even at the cost of its own life, becomes a site of memory and political struggle. My intention is not to romanticize the fact that the searching mothers face multiple adversities, nor to view their *cuerpos* from an instrumental perspective. As I outline in this section, the aim is to examine how their bodies come to disrupt or elude both the state's sovereign register and that of criminal actors. I invoke here Lula's testimony, about the fact that mothers place

their bodies even in hell to find their loved ones. Affects such as grief, rage, and care emerge not only as responses to violence but as forces that sustain the body in its ongoing struggle to endure and make meaning. Affect binds bodies together, creates solidarities, and mobilizes resistance.

Searching mothers' agency, then, solidifies through the use of their *cuerpos* as devices of search and confrontation. Thus, when I propose the idea of corporeal sovereignty, I refer to bodies that vibrate, feel, perceive, smell, and hear the land, and even forge relationships with documents related to the investigations of their children. Corporeal sovereignty weaves networks with human and non-human actors to disrupt or weaken the control that the state and criminals exert over the *cuerpos* of their loved ones amid the war on drugs.

This register is also about bodies that, in times of war and uncertainty, break and question the scripts imposed on them by the structures they inhabit. Here, we speak of women leaving their homes to occupy public squares and to place their bodies not only in government offices but also in areas deemed highly dangerous, seeking clues about possible burial sites. Some feminist scholars interpret the searching process of my interlocutors as double or triple work shifts, a mandate these women feel compelled to follow.[xxxv] This is undoubtedly a critical component of the context they navigate, but there is also another dimension: their bodies venture into desolation to summon other bodies and retrieve them from the control of different sovereign registries. Therefore, this entanglement opens a window for the understanding of the *cuerpo* as territory, one the state apparatus and criminal groups seek to control. Mothers, in particular, point to the use of the body as a territory transgressed by other actors. Victims bear the marks of violence inflicted by criminals, leaving traces across their skin. These are victims who are displayed on the streets or through posts on social media as

warnings to rival criminal groups. Others are bodies cataloged and stored in forensic drawers, awaiting eventual identification: *cuerpos* that are counted and managed with no regard for their dignity. As we will see in the following pages, searching mothers accentuate that the dead can feel, and that their remains must be treated with respect, restoring their dignity.

The entanglements of sovereignty involve other ramifications of the corporeal, including what no longer forms part of it but exceeds it. Saliva opens a window to consider this aspect. As a bodily fluid, it is incorporated into the biopolitical management of the state through DNA collection swabs provided by forensic workers to searchers. This saliva is processed to regulate the bureaucratic forensic disaster and ideally determine the legal identities of the deceased found in graves. Mothers often recount their visits to the morgue, hoping for updates, only to encounter delays. Alicia's case is a typical one: *"There's a body they found in the same street where my son disappeared. A year ago, the authorities informed me, but they still haven't found the time to make a match. It's absurd."* When saliva enters bureaucracy, it exemplifies how official power, in delving into or extracting from the body, creates a management system aligned with its rhythms and interests. In response, mothers' bodies navigate uncertain terrains, tracing mass graves and deciphering the fluids emanating from corpses—those commonly identified by their distinctive scent of death. These fluids, amid war, become part of something larger, exceeding the corporeal while integrating other materialities and substances, forming what I conceptualize as assemblages of disappearance. Through my fieldwork, it became evident that the mothers' journey traverses a dynamic assemblage of associations, creating, delineating, or transforming their search. An example lies in the flora of extermination zones. When my interlocutors embark on the search for grave sites, they often rely on trees for guidance. If treetops persistently sway despite the

absence of wind, it might indicate bodies buried beneath or near them. Similarly, the life under the soil nourished by *cuerpos* raises questions for mothers about whether maggots have consumed the victims. *"It's terrible to find bodies with maggots, but that also tells you about the terrain's conditions and how much time has passed,"* said Alondra as we headed to an open field to continue digging. Her words bring me back to the centrality of the living body and its senses, as interpreting the agency of trees or subterranean life requires a sensorial kaleidoscope these mothers employ to locate their loved ones. Their action illustrates that sovereignty is never a fact but a claim—always a process in motion. While criminals may have killed the victims, families reclaim the right for the missing to be found and brought home, even as the state apparatus asserts authority over those lifeless bodies. However, these women challenge authority through various practices, including the homemade archives they have developed to identify the bodies crowding national morgues (chapter III).

It is important to emphasize that the assemblage of search is fundamental to challenge authority. The interactions among humans and non-humans create a dynamic resembling an intricate network of actors that mutually influence one another. The search is, therefore, as I postulate: an assemblage filled with objects, entities, and substances, characterized by asymmetric relationships that intersect with various registers of sovereignty within the landscape of the war on drugs.[xxxvi] At the core of the assemblage, we find a group of women who tend to be between 40 and 60 years of age. For now, I want to highlight that with their agency, the searchers also challenge ideologies tied to domestic and caregiving labor traditionally defined by gender. As noted earlier, the search work is often viewed as an extension of the parameters of womanhood and motherhood, even to their ultimate consequences. However, some of my interlocutors radicalize caregiving, bringing the

intimate into the public sphere. They have formed a polyphony which has become one of the most critical voices against a war that has proven to be one of Mexico's few long-term policies. Mexican searchers enact collective power that fosters a distinct sovereign register, one that originates within their homes —as I explore in the following section— where they demonstrate that official sovereignty is never absolute but divided and contested from the intimate sphere to the public square.

Sovereignty interrupted

This project focuses on the forensic dimension of the war on drugs and the overlapping sovereignties that arise within this context. Throughout these pages, I develop the concept of corporeal sovereignty through the agency exercised by my interlocutors. In the course of the war on drugs, we have—at least in part—romanticized the role of the searching mother. Not only because, as feminist scholars have pointed out, the search process entails a double or even triple workload. It is undeniable that these women are compelled to uphold a mandate of care imposed upon their gender, even in the midst of mass violence. Unlike many fathers, they are forced to protest, *"because if we don't search, no one will,"* as Alina, the mother of Fernando, who disappeared in 2018, puts it. In other words, in a context marked by absence, if they do not search—if they do not "fulfill their duty as mothers"—then possibly no one else will.

At the same time, my interlocutors manage to subvert this role, politicizing it and confronting a state apparatus that enacts a necropolitical regime over the social body. But it becomes necessary to reflect on the other form of sovereignty these women once held prior to the war. Many of them have abandoned their life projects, their dreams, and personal aspirations in

order to devote themselves almost entirely to the search for their loved ones. While the search process gives rise to a form of sovereign agency—as I argue—it simultaneously entails the subsumption of part of the sovereignty they once possessed as women, as they devote themselves to locating the disappeared of the war on drugs. Just as I contend that there is an overlap of sovereignties between my interlocutors, the state, and criminal groups, there is also an overlap within the mothers themselves. These are women who search for the disappeared as part of an extension of a normative role that has been imposed on them.

Ethnographing registers of sovereignty

One afternoon, during a conversation, Christopher Krupa asked me: *"What does sovereignty look like, ethnographically speaking?"* Honestly, I am unsure if I have found the answer or if this project offers a tentative response to such a question. However, in *Incarnate Politics beyond the Cross and the Sword* by Carlota McAllister and Valentina Napolitano (2021), I encountered an argument that clarified my doubts about how to frame my ideas concerning an ethnographic perspective attentive to various registers of sovereignty within the war on drugs. In their work, the authors advocate for the central role of the theological in contemporary anthropological engagements with the nature of power and terror. While theology is not the central focus of my work, McAllister and Napolitano examine the theological sensoria through which the actions of the living, the dead, and a multitude of non-human entities transcend or evade capture by the sovereign powers of church and state.

Speaking with mothers of war victims searching for their children brought this argument to mind. It stayed with me during the final part of my fieldwork, particularly as I witnessed the actions these women have taken to resist and even challenge state power. A pivotal moment

was observing my interlocutors as they mapped the land to locate clandestine graves—a sensorial event where the bodies of the living, the dead, and other non-human agents converge, clash, and reconnect. Another striking moment was when the mothers encountered bones, carefully examining them to determine whether they belonged to a human. A shovel is thrust into the soil; the extracted earth is sniffed to detect the telltale scent of death. What unfolds is the manifestation of what I previously defined as corporeal sovereignty and its assemblage. What these authors' work adds to my argument is the understanding that, ethnographically, the assemblage emerges within a gap in the concretization of official sovereignty—between the moment of decision and the establishment of a state of exception, a reflective point I describe below.

The Mexican context is defined by an ambiguous internal conflict that has led to nearly 115,000 disappearances since 2006, where the constant invocation of the state of exception is a defining feature.[xxxvii] What I aim to highlight is what becomes evident in the process by which this exception is concretized, for it is precisely there that other registers of sovereignty can be found. Ethnographically, we must focus on the gap between the moment of decision—the murder of victims facilitated by a structure of legal and illegal alliances—and the moment of establishing the state of exception, which I locate in the specific handling of the forensic crisis, where morgues overflow with bodies awaiting identification (chapter III). The gap between killing and the state's oblivion is marked by the searching mothers who visit extermination sites, reclaim the bodies of their loved ones, demand swift action from bureaucratic offices, and bring their own bodies into public squares, creating a counter-narrative through their protest slogans.

A central point raised by McAllister and Napolitano—drawing from a theopolitical perspective—is that the decision on the exception (who, where, and what) constitutes an ethnographic moment that mirrors the theopolitical logic of indecision and oscillation at the heart of sovereign power. The moment of ambiguity is where ethnography comes in. Extrapolating this notion to my ethnographic work has led me to reflect on how these other registers of sovereignty become perceptible in the oscillations between decision and exception. It is within these gaps, fissures, interstices, and oscillations that we must direct our attention to uncover what persists or emerges there. I argue that the home of these mothers is where the register of corporeal sovereignty begins to take shape. It is in this space, often considered neutral in political terms, where they cultivate their agency as searching mothers. It is here that the gendered social expectation surrounding grief and care also becomes palpable—an expectation that is later projected onto the public sphere.

From the pain sown by disappearance, a metamorphosis occurs, transforming many women's homes. Altars for the missing are created; photographs on the walls take on new dimensions. Even on days when, as Vicky says: *"We feel hopeless,"* the house darkens, curtains are drawn, lights are dimmed, and silence screams (chapter I). The home, as a place, becomes a refuge where women navigate a journey of emotions, engage in conversations with fellow searchers, with themselves, and with their missing children. It is there, in the warmth of their houses, that their tears flow, and their anger grows in response to the absence of their loved ones in daily life.

From the home to the march, from the streets to the zones of extermination—a process unfolds in which the bodies of these searchers become sites of protest and instruments of search. Parallel to this, they forge a new way of reclaiming the bodies of victims through

non-violent logics that, at times, suspend or alter both state sovereignty and the sovereignty asserted by criminal groups claiming dominion over geographic and corporeal territories, treating the population as the labor force necessary to sustain illegal enterprises embedded within the international drug market circuit.

Ethnography at home

Guadalajara is the city where I was born and where much of my ethnographic work has taken place. Contrary to the anthropological tradition of venturing to distant, unfamiliar places, I chose to conduct research at home, driven by a lack of full understanding of what was happening in my country and, particularly, in the city where I grew up. At the root of my concerns lay my mother's reflections: she would often say she could not grasp what had happened to Mexico, that if someone had told her in her youth what the country would become, she would not have believed it. "*Back then, you didn't hear about disappeared persons. There were deaths, but not as many as now. It's madness."* Indeed, the Mexico of my childhood is different from that of my adolescence. Insecurity, war, violent deaths, and disappearances arrived. I began to learn more about my own land through the geography of horror revealed in national news: a new massacre in San Fernando, a confrontation in Cadereyta, a clandestine grave in Tuxtepec. This context raised questions for me: What does a mass grave represent, and why are there suddenly so many? These perhaps vague questions propelled me to seek answers. I started as a volunteer for a non-governmental organization (CEPAD A.C.) that supports families of disappeared persons, which eventually led to my own research on this topic.

I often questioned whether conducting research in Guadalajara meant staying in my comfort zone, whether I should move to other places like Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, or the mountain regions of Guerrero. I constantly asked myself if my choice to stay in my city was due to a sense of greater safety in navigating a minefield that I understood at least somewhat better than cities I barely knew or had never visited. Could I still consider myself a proper anthropologist if I decided to stay in Mexico and in my city? After these moments of self-doubt, I would recall how little ethnographic work had been done on this topic with a geographic focus on Guadalajara, or Jalisco as a whole. Something was happening in my home region. The city was no longer the same; a part of it seemed to be vanishing as the murmur of disappearances spread among us. This was made clear to me by the searching mothers (chapter I), who guided me and helped me realize that my choice to stay had been the right one.

The city that has become the focal point of my ethnographic work is known for its semi-warm climate, though in the summer months torrential rains often flood even its grandest avenues. Over the years, however, the city has grown warmer — a consequence of urban sprawl and the overwhelming dominance granted to the automobile. It has now become something of an urban legend that Guadalajara once enjoyed a temperate climate all year round. It was once known as *the city of roses*, for some of its most important thoroughfares were adorned with hundreds of them. *"It was the most beautiful city in Mexico,"* the elders often recall. Beauty — a quality that extends beyond its landscape to its people. Across the country, it is commonly said that the most beautiful women in Mexico are found in Jalisco, especially in Guadalajara. When I speak of beauty, I refer to women whose features reflect the city's proudly proclaimed Spanish and French heritage.

This same heritage — of beautiful people and proper customs — is even more fervently celebrated in the northern region of the state. In the area known as *Los Altos de Jalisco*, a supposed French lineage is often cited, though there is no concrete evidence of a large-scale French migration to the region. In truth, an entire imaginary has been woven around this notion, crafting an identity that sets the area apart, rooted in the idea that its inhabitants carry physical traits linked to European ancestry. This is a form of whiteness that, in the local imagination, is associated with beauty and modernity — the very opposite of the Indigenous world, which has historically been cast as its antithesis (Doñan 2013).

Los Altos de Jalisco played a significant role during the civil conflict known as *La Cristiada*, which spanned from 1926 to 1929. During those years, anti-clerical laws were enacted, banning the Church's participation in education and prohibiting priests from wearing their vestments outside of the temples. These laws were perceived by many devout Catholics as a form of religious persecution, sparking an armed uprising under the rallying cry: *"Viva Cristo Rey"* (Long Live Christ the King).[xxxviii] Given *Los Altos'* deep-rooted Catholic tradition, many of the military leaders who fought for the Church hailed from this region. It is undeniable that part of Jalisco's identity is entwined with Catholicism and a vision of beauty inherited from its colonial past. But the truth, of course, is far more complex. Anthropologists like Regina Martínez (2002) have studied the waves of Indigenous migration from other parts of Mexico, as families arrive in Guadalajara in search of a more promising future.

Today, an important part of Jalisco's identity — and that of its capital — is shaped by war and by the heavy burden of being the state with the highest number of missing persons in the country (chapter I). A friend once told me that, here, we all share a common grief: each of us

has at least one friend, family member, or acquaintance who has disappeared. Ever since she spoke those words, her thought has haunted me. In my case, it was my childhood best friend, Dano, who disappeared five years ago. An armed group came for him at his home, and to this day, no trace of him has been found. Dano often drifts through my mind; I think of him often. I remember the afternoons spent at his house — finishing our homework, then rushing out to play in the street. Though life eventually scattered us, and our paths grew distant, I carry him with me still. At times, I wonder if, in truth, I did not simply move away from Guadalajara but rather fled from the very outskirts where both of us grew up. That neighborhood I now only return to when I visit my mother.

When I arrived at the University of Toronto to begin with my PhD, all but one of my cohort members were also conducting fieldwork at home. We began discussing the reasons behind our decisions. We had read stories about our territories written by researchers who came to observe us with their inherent privileges which, of course, does not mean that we are not also imbued with other privileges. But was this our chance to tell another side of the story? All of us shared a political stance, rejecting the anthropological tradition of traveling to remote latitudes when our own countries—or parts of them—were falling apart. From a drug war in Mexico to efforts to achieve food sovereignty in the Middle East, to the echoes of global warming in Toronto. Was our decision to conduct ethnography at home a coincidence or a reflection of the times we were living in? Were our decisions influenced by the fact that anthropology has often been a tool for the Global North to narrate the stories of the Global South or the margins of the North itself? And if so, were we reclaiming the power to narrate the stories that afflict our own people? Nearly all our research carried a deeply personal dimension, leading us to reflect on the importance of autoethnography and how to ensure that

our activism did not overshadow the critical insights emerging from our work. I do not claim that the anthropological tradition of venturing into other territories is inherently flawed or purely extractive. Local ethnographers can sometimes be more extractive than those of outsiders. However, being local also provides advantages, allowing us sometimes to more easily peel back the layers of stories surrounding our topic, our own histories.

Yet what disturbed me most during my fieldwork—more than the security conditions—was the unjust exchange I had with the searching mothers. I quickly decided to avoid in-depth interviews or taking up their time needed for searching. Once several of them allowed me to, I began a process of accompaniment. I would join the mothers on their visits to the prosecutor's office or other government agencies, but we also often shared long breakfasts or dinners at our homes. After-dinner conversation would become a moment for political analysis, reflecting on the social realities of Mexico.

My work spanned multiple facets: participant observation at the NGO offices where I volunteered, joining searches for clandestine graves, protests, and engaging with forensic institutions, thanks to the mothers who introduced me to key political figures. In this project, I have changed all the names of my interlocutors, particularly those of the searching mothers (*madres buscadoras*), to ensure their safety. I employ various creative strategies to alter the names of local organizations, activists, and certain places. I even interconnect stories to obscure details that might reveal the identities of those who allowed me to accompany them over the months. Beyond the specifics of each story, I believe the important thing is to reflect on the individual and collective agency demonstrated by the mothers.

Throughout these pages, my analysis weaves itself with ethnographic description, engagements, and the voices of my interlocutors. Here, I extend an invitation to the reader—to embark on an emotional exploration, and to partake in a reading experience that interlaces multiple rhythms of writing. Another important point is that this ethnography is a story of fragments, voids, traces, and fears. It is not comprehensive, chronological, or an attempt to impose coherence on horror. During my fieldwork, I grew close to a collective of searching mothers, which nearly shut me out from others due to disputes among them. I chose to focus on the women I had come to know and care for deeply. Through this journey, I remain convinced that ethnography can be a tool for action within the realities we inhabit. Above all, I advocate for the role of the local ethnographer as an activist working on a project in uncertain times—in those familiar yet alien places where life reveals the rawness of its fragility.

Chapters

Chapter One offers an immersion into the social context in which this project is situated. The mothers recount how Guadalajara has transformed under the war on drugs and how rumors of disappearance spread throughout the city. The *buscadoras* share their initial efforts to form collectives composed of the victims' families and how they occupied public spaces to pressure the state to address their collective demands. **Chapter Two** engages with the movement referred to as the material turn, as it centers the analysis on objects and spaces that are key to my interlocutors. I delve into the documentation the *buscadoras* preserve as part of their official investigative processes. At the same time, due to the lack of progress in formal investigations, other materialities—such as photographs and the personal belongings of the disappeared—take on diverse meanings in the absence of the victims. My interlocutors reveal

the political potential of materiality in a context of violence such as the one framing this project.

Chapter Three explores the forensic methodologies created by the mothers of the disappeared. From the morgue to the search for clandestine graves, they have created notebooks with multiple notes and images that serve as tools for identifying the deceased. The mothers' bodies become producers of knowledge in response to the state's refusal or incapability to employ its technologies and expertise. **Chapter Four** seeks to briefly and intimately explore the ways in which we can recover fragments of the lives of victims. Moving away from gruesome narratives that emphasize death, I focus instead on what is often overlooked when discussing violence: the dreams, aspirations, and projects of those whose lives have been interrupted by this ambiguous conflict.

Finally, **Chapter Five** offers a sonic description which takes us to the search for clandestine graves. I describe aspects of the soundscape of the war on drugs to reflect on how each actor seeking to assert authority or claim dominion over the victims does so accompany by sound. In other words, as I mentioned at the beginning of this text, every enactment of sovereignty is framed by a sensorial burden that delineates and transforms the relationships shaping the present reality of massive violence in Mexico.

A note on writing amid this war

It is March 2024 in Guadalajara, and I am waiting in the line for the bus home after a day doing fieldwork at the Search Commission. Next to me there is a newsstand, and all the newspapers share the same series of photographs on the front page. Images depict the recent crisis at the forensic institution: extensive stains of blood and bodies on the floor, which cannot be preserved in the freezer due to limited space, a consequence of the continuous influx of bodies into the morgue. This is a new crisis at the institution, with new photos of unidentified bodies exposed to the gaze of pedestrians. Life histories converted into figures of violence. The so-called war on drugs has been constantly galvanized by images spread through media outlets. Our everyday has been marked by videos and photographs of mass graves, mutilated *cuerpos*, and other atrocities, the details of which I will spare readers from in the coming pages.

On my way home, during those days when I was deeply immersed in writing this project, I reflected frequently on the fact that the Mexican territory is covered by the horror and fragmentation of social life, and further, the fragmentation of thousands of bodies. As a political community, we inhabit pain, but pain also inhabits us. We write about this war, but the conflict rewrites us as a society, too. The necessity and political challenge of writing about violence is fundamental in times of uncertainty or during the aftermath because it is an exercise related to the marks of pain over our social body.

When I began with the writing phase, I often questioned whether I should follow a chronological structure, a kind of timeline. I chose not to, as doing so would mean falling into the trap of imposing a totalizing logic on war, of ascribing meaning to horror—

something that would contradict the testimonies of my interlocutors.[xxxix] They have shared their stories in fragments, acknowledging gaps in their narratives—voids born from the crime of enforced disappearance, which continues to shape their lives today.

The war has transformed and fragmented the social as well as the material landscapes of this nation. Therefore, I think that writing is an exploration which becomes an exercise of reconstruction; memory and intimacy amid the ruins and atrocities committed in mass violence scenarios. This is a project focused on a different type of visibility and audibility of the Mexican war on drugs. In the following pages, writing is used as a tool—not to understand violence, but to analyze and document how a group of searching mothers recovers the corporeal, material, bureaucratic, and narrative fragments of the *guerra contra las drogas.* More than a theory, I propose and engage with a constellation of concepts rooted in the bureaucratic and forensic journeys of my interlocutors.

Image 1. This is an estate that, years ago, functioned as a grocery store. After closing, when its owners left town, the store was taken over by a criminal group and used as a torture house. Since then, this place has remained abandoned, marked by the events that took place here—ruins of the war on drugs. Spaces filled with traces that preserve stories. This structure stands as a tangible testament to our recent history of atrocities. Photo taken by the author, September 2019.

Image 2. The families of the disappeared have used the façade of that abandoned store as a canvas on which they have painted a mural evoking the victims, especially the group of boys whose bodies were found there. Photo taken by the author, September 2019.

Image 3. A cross as a memorial. Each ribbon represents a woman who has disappeared in the city of Guadalajara. Photo taken by the author, October 2023.

Chapter I. From Murmurs to Rumors of Disappearance in a Transformed City

"It was during summer that we found out that several boys disappeared in the span of less than a week; they were our neighbors. I think that was the first time I heard about disappearances, but before, they called them levantones." Hilda's words take us back to 2011, when stories began to circulate in Guadalajara about vans abducting young people against their will. The term *levantón* came to replace the typical term for *secuestro* (kidnapping), serving as a euphemism for what we now understand as *desaparición* (disappearance). Hilda has lived in the southern part of the city for over 20 years, in a neighborhood historically framed as marginal by mass media and local politicians—an area perceived as risky and inhabited by gangs.[xl] However, recent ethnographic records indicate that some of those groups have been co-opted by criminal organizations during the war on drugs. "Cartels" now control the territory via tactics of domination underpinned by unprecedented and recurrent violence.[xli] Hilda recalls that among her neighborhood friends, they spoke about the cases in the area as rumors began to accumulate about the erasure of bodies spreading around their homes. *"I've lived here for more than twenty years, and things like these never used to happen."* Sometime later, in 2015, her only son disappeared on his way back from work. When she arrived home, her son would usually already be there, waiting for her so they could eat together. Luis often prepared the food. That afternoon, however, Hilda was surprised to find the TV off and the kitchen spotless. When she called her son's cell phone, it went straight to voicemail.

In the many conversations we had, Hilda always emphasized that she never imagined how drastically things would change in this land. *"On the news, you'd hear about violence, but it was always something distant, happening in other places."* When the war was launched, its initial impacts were felt primarily in northern Mexico and Michoacán, a state bordering Jalisco. Yet Guadalajara continued to be perceived as a safe place. Paradoxically, the city has a deep historical connection to drug trafficking, playing a pivotal role in the global drug economy—a fact even reflected in the narratives of international productions like *Narcos* on Netflix and *Zero Zero Zero* on Amazon. It was said that this city was protected by northern drug lords, whose families lived in the city's most affluent neighborhoods. An often-stigmatized migration from Sinaloa—a state historically seen as the cradle of drug trafficking—was linked to the region's violence. In this chapter, I reflect on the process through which women like Hilda transformed into searching mothers in a city overshadowed by the rumors of a war once thought foreign to this land. I particularly analyze how, as disappearances increased, murmurs evolved into rumors that reverberated throughout the urban landscape, amid a collective uncertainty—a city the mothers recognize as different, changed. In parallel, I unpack the social field in which this happens, emphasizing how the victims' mothers wove together collectives and occupied the public square to demand answers from the government.

From murmurs to rumors

In 2014, journalist Ricardo Raphael published a book about the transformation of the archetypal drug trafficker. This new prototype boasts a university education, a business-oriented mindset, and a more visible display of economic status. Raphael argues this marks a paradigm shift within criminal organizations, now run like international corporations or

holding companies, requiring a cadre of specialized leaders. His book, which delves into this emerging criminal model, draws on an archive of unpublished stories in an effort to understand Mexico's current reality. After reading the book, Amelia, one of my interlocutors, shared that she found it interesting because it helped her better understand the context. She also noted that the text seemed to be filled with what she referred to as urban legends. *"It seems to me that there are many rumors on every page, although at the same time, those rumors help us understand what's happening and isn't being reported in the media, even though there's always doubt about their accuracy."* Here, I draw on Amelia's testimony to delve into my argument about the centrality of rumors and disappearances in Guadalajara.

In anthropological literature, rumors are understood as a genre which creates zones of communication, connecting or dividing groups and individuals based on widespread but uncertain information (Luna 2020; Guevara 2020; Das 2008). The messages conveyed by rumors reflect imaginaries about status, power, risk, and societal changes that may impact the population.[xlii] By 2010, rumors of disappearances had already begun to circulate in Guadalajara. However, this was preceded by what I call the *emergence of murmurs*. In our conversations many searchers recounted how, in the years Hilda previously referenced, stories of boys who never returned home began to surface. What started as murmurs grew louder, amplified by the trail of violence left as the war took hold of the city. But how is it that murmurs often precede or contribute to the formation of rumors? To reflect on this, I first draw from my own family's experiences with violence in the neighborhood in which we lived.

Let us go back to a Saturday morning in mid-2012; as my mother was preparing a cup of coffee, the wailing sirens of a patrol car broke the silence. It sped past our street with such urgency it seemed propelled by dynamite. *"What happened?"* my mother asked, bewildered. In the area where I grew up, news of deaths and disappearances has become commonplace for residents of this *colonia*, built on what were once cornfields. Urbanization of this fragment of the city began in the 1980s, creating a new periphery that was eventually absorbed by the city's relentless expansion. This growth devoured even part of a nearby forest situated next to a dormant volcano (known as *Volcan del Colli*), one that could awaken at any moment to punish those who have encroached on its habitat. The volcano, visible from my mother's house, often goes unnoticed. *Volcan del Colli* is a silent witness to the violence that has taken over the streets where I grew up playing until midnight.

A few minutes after the sirens went off, my aunt Sandra arrived at our house. *"They just killed the butcher,"* she told us quietly. *"This isn't good!"* was the first thing my mother said. *"You know what they say—that he was selling drugs, that he was mixed up in dangerous things. They don't kill you just like that,"* my aunt concluded. The trope that someone was "mixed up in bad things" (*andar en malos pasos*) has often been used to explain a person's murder or their sudden economic prosperity. *"How is it possible that Mrs. Lola has three luxury trucks if she just owns a grocery store?"* I heard my aunts say on more than one occasion. But, anchored in my fieldwork and personal experiences, these questions or reflections based on events—like the butcher's death—are usually shared in private spaces or only with trusted people, due to the uncertainty surrounding the event and the fear of whether it is safe to talk about it. Thus, people turn to those closest to them, those they trust. Later, the information begins to circulate, undergoing a metamorphosis that gradually

transforms it into a rumor over time. When the butcher's death began to appear in more conversations, it became associated with his belonging to a small-scale drug dealing group that was being pushed out of territorial control in our neighborhood.

Murmurs are part of local speech, which differs from rumors that circulate among larger groups or across regions, as Das suggests when discussing significant events such as the assassination of Indira Gandhi.[xliii] The nature of a murmur, I propose, is rooted in the ground, in the community one inhabits. The etymology of this word comes from the Latin *murmurare*, "a confused noise," because unless one is close, it is almost impossible to perceive what is being said. A murmur, then, refers to a communicative act expressed in hushed tones, like on the first night when mutilated bodies were left in black plastic bags just steps away from my family's house. During the first few days, conversations about the event were confined to our home or with our closest neighbors. Few dared to mention it openly in the streets.

A similar situation occurred with several of my interlocutors, who, before becoming searchers, heard about disappearances near their homes but kept their conversations in hushed tones with their closest relatives and friends. "*We knew something was happening, but we couldn't talk about it with everyone. Imagine you talk or ask the wrong person. Something could happen to you for being a gossip,"* Lorena shared this with me when we talked about the fear she felt when some friends told her about the first cases of disappearance in her neighborhood, and the information trickled in slowly. *"I feared for my daughters,"* she said. Hence, murmurs become a way to stay informed about what happens in your area of residence. In her ethnography focused on sex work in northern Mexico during the war on drugs, Luna posits that rumors are an act of care. People close to the anthropologist told her

to never walk past trucks with tinted windows because such vehicles are often driven by criminals who would not think twice about harming someone who appeared to challenge their power.[xliv]

Luna first heard this information, which she defines as a rumor, during a party in McAllen, Texas. This act of listening that occurred in the United States reaffirms Das's assertion: rumors have the quality of moving across places or regions. They travel through the air, whereas murmurs are almost always rooted in the ground, as their purpose is to explain violent events that happen just around the corner from home. Like rumors, murmurs are an act of care and a performative discourse that does not merely describe but enacts something in the social world in which it is uttered.[xlv] Nonetheless, a rumor describes the power that exists "out there," how it behaves. In a way, a murmur is a preliminary step to a rumor. The butcher's death, for example, was part of a series of murders committed in a fraction of the city due to the territorial advancement of a new drug trafficking network. However, this broader scale of the story was not initially considered; it was only over time that the story was shared with others, and people even began to name the criminal groups involved.

Rumors serve as a means through which people react to and become informed about collective experiences that are more broadly marked by inequality and mass violence. Both murmurs and rumors intervene in the social world in which they are formulated. A murmur is born and circulates among those close to you, who inhabit the same community. It is shared with trusted people. Its intention is to explain violence in that specific piece of land where everyday life takes place. In this case, the echoes of the drug war in the social dynamics of a neighborhood. However, murmur turns into rumor when (violent) events become interconnected, transcending geographic, social, and economic borders. The conversation

expands in tandem with the perception that it is *safer* to speak about those events. This happened in 2011, as Hilda pointed out—the year when disappearances began to increase in the city. In conversations and widely shared social media posts, there was talk of tinted-window trucks kidnapping people in various parts of the metropolitan area. Thus began the rumor of disappearance in Guadalajara (images 1.1 and 1.2). More than ten years later, some of the victims' mothers have now dubbed this city "the world capital of disappearances." For several years, Jalisco has remained one of the states with the highest number of missing persons nationwide, with nearly 15,000 cases reported at the beginning of 2024 (San Juan 2025).

Image 1.1. Guadalajara has embraced the trend of city branding, creating an image designed to attract tourists to what is also known as Mexico's second most important city. Photo taken by the author, October 2024.

Image 1.2 The families of the victims have intervened with this popular sign located in the city center, prompting disapproval from the government, which quickly orders the removal of the search files. Photo Mario Marlo.

A transformed city in a transformed nation

I want to return to the year mentioned by Hilda—2011—which defines, for many searchers, a key moment in the local history of the drug war. On November 24, the lifeless bodies of 26 men were abandoned inside several vehicles. National news outlets reported that these murders were the result of a conflict between two major "drug cartels". The information caused panic among the local population, as this was the first significant demonstration of brutality in Guadalajara since the security strategy officially began.[xlvi] The searchers remember the event because, for them, something changed after this incident—as if the city had announced its entry into a never-ending spiral of horror, it would go on to become the urban center with the highest number of disappearances nationwide for three consecutive

years (2021 to 2023). For my interlocutors, as the rumors of disappearances spread, the city they had inhabited for decades also seemed to vanish. According to media outlets, the lifeless bodies were left at one of the city's most significant intersections, next to the so-called Millennium Arches (*Arcos del Milenio*), inaugurated in 1999 to celebrate the arrival of a new century while projecting Guadalajara as a cosmopolitan hub. However, the original design by Enrique Carbajal included six arches, of which only four were constructed, leaving the project incomplete. Mexico's second-largest city has undergone a profound metamorphosis, shaped by the effects of the drug war, real estate speculation fueled by money laundering, urban industrialization, and the uncontrolled expansion of the metropolitan area, as I elaborate in the following pages.

In her book on the intimate and political aspects of kidney transplants in Guadalajara, Crowley-Matoka describes the city as nationally renowned for its political conservatism and deep Catholic roots. It is also important to note that the city's narrative highlights a population renowned for its beauty, tied to white skin and Caucasian features stemming from its colonial Spanish heritage. At the same time, Guadalajara is now considered one of Mexico's most LGBTQ+ friendly towns, boasting dozens of bars and nightclubs catering to diverse sexual expressions and gender identities. Notably, it is also home to important symbols of national identity: the birthplace of mariachi music, *jarabe tapatío* ("Mexican hat dance") and tequila, highly profitable pillars of the government's tourism campaigns.

Image 1.3. An ode to the new millennium. Photo taken from the archive of Egea.

According to Crowley-Matoka, this is also “a global city with longstanding connections shaped by complex flows of money, people, and technology from around the world”. [xlvii]At the turn of the millennium, the city hosted approximately 20 per cent of IBM’s global production. The local government branded Guadalajara as the “Silicon Valley of Latin America,” attracting multinational companies such as Kodak, Motorola, and Siemens. While some of these companies have since relocated their operations to Asia, remnants of this narrative persist, portraying the city as a hub for technology production. A part of these industrial plants have been transformed into large shopping malls. For example, where Motorola once operated, there is now a mall called Ciudadela; similarly, the former Kodak site has been replaced by La Perla, a recently opened commercial center that substitutes public spaces with fountains and plazas connected to popular fast-fashion retailers. At the

same time, Guadalajara is home to the largest and most prestigious book fair in the Americas: Feria Internacional del Libro (FIL).

Amidst this economic transformation, the city's urban image has also undergone significant changes. The U.S. suburban prototype has gained popularity across all social classes. The current model of urbanization is framed by fear and insecurity as collective sentiments that amplify various architectural strategies depending on individuals' purchasing power. The first gated communities (*fraccionamientos*) were built as elite enclaves surrounded by high stone walls offering security, privacy, and increased property value. In the south of the metropolitan area, the municipality of Tlajomulco saw the emergence of a massive social housing project—a misguided attempt to replicate luxury developments. Initially envisioned as an ideal community for a growing middle class, the Tlajomulco housing project soon collapsed due to inadequate infrastructure and the rapid establishment of criminal groups, facilitated by local authorities.[xlviii] This municipality has been described as a "bedroom city," characterized by easy access to credit that attracted precarious residents who must commute daily to Guadalajara and Zapopan for work in commerce and services.

Within these developments, mass graves containing 30 bodies were discovered in abandoned homes between July and August 2018. In fact, the Tlajomulco housing project comprises 34,000 homes, of which at least 18,000 had been abandoned by 2019. According to a journalistic investigation, the main factors behind this widespread abandonment include poor-quality services (e.g., water and power outages), lack of public transportation, and rising rates of crime.[xlix] I interviewed a former social worker from the forensic institute, who explained that most of the bodies found in mass graves at that time came from Tlajomulco. *"They just tell us, 'this body is from [Tlajomulco],' and we immediately know it's likely*

related to an act of violence." In February 2022, mothers of missing persons from various states formed search brigades with the goal of identifying abandoned houses to excavate rooms initially designed as kitchens or bathrooms, which criminal groups have repurposed as covert burial sites. In just three weeks, using shovels and picks as forensic tools, these mothers uncovered twelve mass graves and 59 bodies in abandoned homes. Although this was not the first search they participated in, it was significant for my interlocutors because it was among the first times they were able to trace clandestine graves in that area of the city. Accompanied by personnel from the Prosecutor's Office and the Army, they managed to enter abandoned houses and residential buildings.

This case demonstrates how violence reverberates through spaces and objects alike. The houses in Tlajomulco now dominate local headlines, and the mothers have through their searches reshaped national perceptions of Guadalajara. These abandoned constructions constitute an extension of the clandestine graves proliferating throughout the metropolis. These spaces 'offer' ideal conditions for concealing victims, as they provide hidden corners originally designed for the privacy of the families who once inhabited them. Local media frequently discuss these abandoned houses, which have even been featured in art exhibitions and journalistic investigations. Through this, a narrative has unfolded, to the extent that a large section of 1,200 abandoned apartments has been nicknamed "Chernobyl." This heavy solitude, according to some, evokes the area affected by the infamous nuclear accident. It is as if radiation here, too, has rendered the site uninhabitable.

These houses have been imbued with a range of fear-based perceptions, although the reasons for their abandonment have been scarcely addressed in collective discourse. Stigmas surrounding this territory have grown, as have questions about how many bodies might lie

within these properties. In the midst of war, I argue, this city has become witness, victim, and stage for horror. Guadalajara has become a witness by being part of the expanding militarization of public security, as well as through its own affectation—having been impacted by the war both in its physical spaces and in the narratives that frame it as a dangerous city or composed of violent neighborhoods.

"Guadalajara is no longer the same," seems to be the conclusion that my interlocutors often reach when we talk about how disappearances have increased in the city. "*Before, you could go out and walk the streets safely; that doesn't happen here anymore,"* Beatriz told me as she described how much her neighborhood has changed. Diego's mother, whose son disappeared in 2015, recalled how during summer vacation nights, children would often play outside after dark. Their laughter and shouts would drift through the windows into their parents' rooms. *"We knew they were safe, that the streets were secure for them."* Beatriz's words take me back to my own childhood. Despite growing up in a neighborhood considered risky, I often stayed outside until nearly midnight during vacation.

Reflecting on my conversations with the searchers, I realize that they often spoke, in parallel, about the disappearance of the city—at least the one they knew and grew up in. In other words, *their Guadalajara*, they claimed, has been *disappeared*. But it is not just this city that has changed; the entire country has transformed in many ways, though violence has perhaps been the most visible shift. My own mother has told me that she never imagined everything we are experiencing today. *"In my time, children could play in parks without any problems; now that's almost impossible. That's why people move to gated communities,"* she reflected. Her words encapsulate a socio-spatial reading of the impacts of violence on contemporary

urbanization, a perspective my interlocutors also share. But when did it all really start to change? Was it in December 2006, when the war was launched?

The bitter sentiment of change expressed by the mothers of the disappeared has a strikingly similar root, temporally speaking, as they see everything beginning to shift drastically from the early 1990s onward. According to specialized literature, those years marked the full entry of Mexico into the dynamics of neoliberalism, a project spearheaded by then-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. This phase later gave way to a profound economic crisis that began in 1994 which, according to various authors, culminated in the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI) losing the presidency after more than seventy years of political dominance.[1] In 2000, the National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional, PAN)—positioned on the right wing of the ideological spectrum—won the federal elections, marking the beginning of what we know as the democratic transition. However, the PRI had crafted a nationalist narrative that defined our identity and the nation's very project for decades. Yet, this same party undermined that vision through the adoption of economic policies that transformed entire regions; Ciudad Juárez and its maquiladoras are perhaps the most well-known example. Meanwhile, the previously paternalistic state framed by revolutionary nationalism was eroded, and pillars of the state apparatus were giving way to uncertainty and violence as the new markers of national life. These shifts were further amplified by the changes on the political stage, from municipal to federal levels, as other parties began challenging the PRI's dominance. The first PAN presidency was just the beginning of a profound transformation.

Image 1.4. This image, found in an online archive, shows Carlos Salinas from behind, who became something of a national enemy when the economic crisis began shortly after his presidency. Photo taken from the archive of El Informador.

Image 1.5. I came across this photograph taken by Francisco Mata at an exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City. The image is titled *"The True Face of Neoliberalism"*, depicting the face of a young girl unveiled as a hand removes a mask of Carlos Salinas de Gortari. At a national level, various artists have explored, through their unique perspectives, the transformations that occurred following the adoption of policies implemented during Salinas's administration. Photo taken by the author, November 2024.

The sense of uncertainty, fueled by the perception of insecurity, began to spread even before the war. During PAN's first administration, from 2000 to 2006, anti-kidnapping marches took place across the country. As mentioned in the introduction, political analysts attribute the increase in violence to the fragmentation of agreements that criminal organizations had with the PRI. These agreements were either rejected by the incoming governments or supplanted by alliances with new criminal groups supported by those new administrations, as Zavala (2020) has argued.

One afternoon, Vilma and I agreed to meet on the steps of a popular church. Beforehand, I stopped to buy coffee for both of us to accompany our conversation. After catching up, I asked her if she, like other mothers, felt that everything was changing. Immediately after my question, her eyes widened, and she began recounting various stories with emotion. *"Insecurity has changed us so much; it has changed how we live—nothing is the same anymore."* I tried to delve into the source of insecurity: *"It's the narcos, all those soulless people who have destroyed our lives without caring about anything."* We talked about how one of the old peripheries had become filled with thousands of houses and how buildings were now starting to rise everywhere. When we finally tried to drink our coffee, it had gone cold. At the end, she emphasized the old bus station located in the historic downtown, *"It's a wolf's den—if you go in, you might not come out."* In 2024, several disappearances were reported there, allegedly committed by criminal groups that hunt young people to train them as hitmen (*sicarios*).

Beyond the specifics of political science, it was during these years that Mexico began to transform for the searchers—a change with severe impacts on Guadalajara. The city, they feel, lost part of its essence, and whose infrastructure morphed into a metropolis filled with gated communities. But is the gated community the new model of community replacing the traditional neighborhood? Is violence the only central axis that explains the changes described by my interlocutors? For many who grew up here during the second half of the 20th century, this city is no longer the same. Guadalajara continued to change even further as it cemented its position within the international economic circuit of the drug trade.

Buscadoras

Her right hand moves up and down, as if ready to take a cautious flight, only to return again. Each motion leaves marks that intertwine more and more with each pass. Vanesa sighs occasionally. Sitting on a gray stool, with her head bowed forward and set apart from the others, her hands are marked by tiny freckles scattered by years under the sun. Her ring finger bears a thin gold band, purchased during a family trip to Taxco. After several minutes, the marks stitched by Vanesa form an "o," completing the name of her son: Mariano.

She removes the hoop to gently unfold the handkerchief, raises it, and examines it closely. From a small brown box, she retrieves scissors to trim the loose threads. Her hand, like a velvet cloth, carefully cleans the surface. Using a wooden hook, she places the handkerchief on a line strung between two light posts. She steps back and joins a group of women crowded on a bench. The handkerchiefs hanging on the line flutter in the light afternoon breeze. She watches passersby approach to take photos before moving on. Turning back to her companions, she sees them embroidering names as well, stitch by stitch. These

handkerchiefs, ordinary objects of daily life, have become tools of protest. Each one bears the name and date of a missing person. Others feature statistics of horror overlooked by the immediacy of the media, or brief poems striving through their verses to make present those who have yet to return home.

Displayed on clotheslines, the handkerchiefs traverse diverse spaces, weaving a language in opposition to the state's narrative on war. As a mobile memorial, the embroidered handkerchiefs establish new modes of circulation and communication amid violence. This act of embroidery transforms into a moment of union, a space for sharing stories among those who live with the effects of disappearance. Relationships are woven. Nadia explains that they embroider *"to make ourselves visible, to tell everyone we are here. This could happen to anyone. We could all disappear."* When this activity began ten years ago, the goal was to become visible to a state and society indifferent to their plight. Indeed, the embroidery meetings, which began in 2011, were among the first collective actions undertaken by mothers in Guadalajara. It is noteworthy that, similar to the actions of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, these public expressions by the searchers were rooted in gender, in the act of embroidering and hanging cloths. The primary aim was to establish a physical presence in public spaces, particularly during years when disappearances were dismissed as mere rumor by the state and the local media.

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Across various regions of the world affected by violence—from Latin America to Western Asia and the Balkans—search collectives composed primarily of women have emerged in response to the enforced disappearance of their children or close relatives. Although the historical, political, and cultural contexts differ, these women share an experience of pain

that has been transformed into political action. In most cases, the disappearances are linked to systems of structural violence: armed conflict (as in Sri Lanka or the Balkans), state repression (as in Argentina or Chile), or criminal activities in collusion with state actors (as in Mexico).[li] These same systems also obstruct the search for the disappeared by denying access to information, hindering investigations, and criminalizing the mothers themselves.

South of the Río Grande, we find organizations such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the Mothers of Soacha (Colombia), the Mothers of Pain (Chile), and other collectives in Mexico. The Argentine case is arguably the most emblematic and thoroughly analyzed in recent Latin American history. According to Guzmán Bouvard (1994), as women embedded in a patriarchal society, her interlocutors were surrounded by psychological, social, and political barriers that confined them to the domestic sphere. Once violence disrupted their lives, they committed themselves to making the invisible visible. They began to protest publicly, appear at political events, hold up photographs of their children, and create bulletins about what was happening in their country—at a time when newspaper editors and journalists were being disappeared for resisting government mandates, as demonstrated by Graham (1986).

In Latin America, women have often entered the political arena via grassroots groups addressing problems that affect their families and communities, thereby demonstrating a political consciousness that reveals the interconnections between the public and the private spheres. Robledo Silvestre (2017) reminds us that several of these collectives have developed community archives, memorials, and alternative forms of justice. They have built transnational solidarity networks—such as the connection between the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and various Mexican collectives—that have enabled the exchange of search

strategies, visibility practices, and mutual protection (Estrada 2023). Although many mothers do not formally identify as feminists, some scholars have interpreted their struggle as a form of decolonial feminism of pain, insofar as the practices of searching, caregiving, and denouncing reconfigure women's roles in contexts marked by war, crime, and repression.[lii]

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The visibility of these mothers, no matter the country, represents a rupture, a break in the helpless waiting, as Fernanda put it. They make themselves visible by taking over the public square to embroider, converse, and display photos of their loved ones. The rupture is also related to the shattering of their role as passive citizens. Many of my interlocutors had never attended a protest or demonstration before, which might be explained by Guadalajara's reputation as a conservative or politically timid city. Yet, many of these women came of age during the years of repression the PRI imposed on student movements. While each case is unique, I found it profoundly moving to see this group of women gathered in the public square. These are women who, driven by their role as mothers, placed their bodies in public spaces as an act of protest. Most of my interlocutors are between 40 and 65 years old, part of the working class, and many have only a basic education. While they step into public life as mothers of missing persons, in doing so, they break a script that confines mothers to docility, tenderness, and a life centered around the private sphere of caregiving. They wield the moral authority of motherhood to amplify the strength of their protests. *"We went from being scared to being angry,"* Hilda told me.

> Rodrigo left for school one morning. He was headed to the university but had to leave very early, almost two hours in advance, to catch the first bus. Around here, it's very isolated, and at night, it gets dangerous. I always gave him my blessing as he left. That day, he didn't come back. They took him from me (Silvia, January 22, 2023).

Bordamos por la Paz (We Embroider for Peace) was born in 2012 as an initiative led by women who, although not involved in search efforts, had a long history of activism within moderately leftist groups. Some of these women were supporters of the political project of Enrique Alfaro, who would go on to become governor of Jalisco in 2018 and later be linked to criminal groups. However, at that time, before joining the ranks of local institutional politics, they expressed to the collective *Fuentes Rojas* their intention to bring the embroidery initiative—originating in Mexico City—to Guadalajara. The goal was to create a gathering space where victims could meet, share their stories, and discuss paths toward justice. The practice of embroidering in the context of the war gained momentum thanks to the pacifist narrative promoted by the *Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad* (Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity, MPJD).

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In April 2011, following the murder of his son, poet Javier Sicilia staged a protest. During this demonstration, the initiative arose to organize a march from Cuernavaca (his town of residence) to Mexico City's Zócalo -approximately 90 kilometers away-. At the end of the march, from a platform set up in the heart of the capital, the demands of the Pact for Peace were read, with the aim of having them signed by the president. This political action marked the birth of the MPJD, which sought to demand a complete overhaul of the government's anti-drug strategy. According to Azaola (2012), this movement fostered a social and political dialogue with national implications. One of the Movement's legacies was the General Victims' Law of 2013, which I propose marked the beginning of an institutional framework advocated by the families of the deceased and disappeared to achieve justice.

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Bordamos por la Paz became an extensive network primarily composed of women who replicated the experience of public embroidery throughout Mexico—especially in medium and large cities—during the early years of the war. Over time, the embroidery network expanded to Guatemala and Nicaragua, where conflict had also caused profound social harm. Through this act, participants sought to address the lack of platforms for transforming reality, much like the mothers and grandmothers in Argentina turned the white handkerchief into a symbol of resistance during their protests in Plaza de Mayo to demand the safe return of the disappeared.

The act of embroidering in public spaces also demonstrated, as Veena Das (2008) suggests, that witnessing and experiencing violence fundamentally reshapes subjectivity, particularly when dealing with brutality that wounds both the individual and the social body. Most importantly, it revealed that being a victim is not solely synonymous with vulnerability; it also represents the potential to undertake a process of transformation and reparation. According to René—a lawyer familiar with various cases since 2012—the act of embroidering:

> Attracted people who had experienced violence in those years. Cases would come in, and the activists would channel them to other organizations that could help. *Parque Rojo* (a downtown public park) became a meeting point. For this reason, I believe that they were the first collective in the state, even when they didn't present themselves as a collective of searching mothers at the moment.

At the end of 2013, an event took place that, according to several of my interlocutors, was fundamental for grasping the magnitude of the problem, recognizing themselves as victims, and emphasizing that enforced disappearance spares no social class. At the *Laboratorio de Artes Variedades* (Larva)—formerly operating as Cine Variedades from 1940 to 1996 and

later rehabilitated by the Jalisco Ministry of Culture—*Bordamos por la Paz* organized the event *Memoria y Verdad* (Memory and Truth), where all embroidered handkerchiefs created up to that date were displayed. Simultaneously, letters written by relatives to their disappeared loved ones were read aloud, serving as a way to evoke their presence in the venue. Among the people there was Josefina, who, on September 8, 2011, interrupted then-president Calderón at the Pan American Volleyball Complex to demand an investigation into her son's disappearance (which had occurred earlier that year in January), as state authorities were doing nothing. Josefina handed Calderón a folder summarizing the investigation. He took it and promised to help her. During that evening of readings, Josefina recalled that this promise had not been fulfilled.

The *Memoria y Verdad* event was significant in bringing together victims from different parts of the country invited that day. The exchange of experiences fostered the creation of bonds that would later lead to the birth of the first local search collective, modeled after the structure established by mothers in northern states such as Coahuila and Nuevo León. These northern collectives gained prominence for securing monthly meetings with the governor and members of the cabinet, as well as holding plenary sessions to establish joint work plans. The mothers gathered at *Memoria y Verdad*, inspired by the experiences shared by those from the north, decided it was time to form the first collective in Jalisco. It is important to note that this collective emerged in the state's capital, where the operational centers of state power, media hubs, and non-governmental organization offices are located. According to lawyer René, the families—particularly local women who attended the event—alongside other figures such as artists, activists, and journalists, gradually developed the project over the

months: “Everything happened very organically. The logo was donated, the website was built by volunteers, and the women’s trips were funded through collective contributions.”

From the beginning, Josefina played a pivotal role in the formation of what would become *En Busca de Nuestros Desaparecidos Jalisco*. She had previously participated in the Movement for Peace Caravans and gained media attention after confronting the president. Josefina chose to join Sicilia and travel on one of the Movement’s main buses. Along the way, she met other mothers who inspired her to create a search network in her own state. As she told me: The journey taught her that a collective voice could have more impact with authorities than if each family continued working independently, only occasionally gathering for symbolic acts or displaying handkerchiefs on the clotheslines in *Parque Rojo*. After a meeting with authorities, Nora—whose daughter disappeared while driving from Nayarit to Guadalajara—spoke with me about the initial steps:

> It was very important for us to be together because here, no one knew anything. Two or three of us used to go to Mexico City and ask questions. We took turns, then we would come back and tell the others how we needed to proceed (...) despite being very different from one another, we were united by the same cause.

When Nora speaks of *“no one knew anything,”* it takes me back to those moments when murmurs began transforming into rumors, spurred by the events that occurred at the Millennium Arches. Likewise, Nora recalled how members of non-governmental organizations present in the city became immersed in the issue, finding ways to contribute to the search processes of this initial collective, which was beginning to consolidate with nearly 300 families. *“Since we opened the office, we’ve had close contact with En Busca de Nuestros Desaparecidos. At that time, they were meeting very close to where our previous*

office was located," said Sandra, a former member of Amnesty International's regional office.

In the same building where Amnesty International once had its headquarters, the Strategic Litigation Center (SLE) was also located. This organization provides legal assistance for cases involving severe human rights violations, such as territorial defense, disappearances, and torture. Legal defense forms the cornerstone of this civil society organization's actions, which also include publishing reports and conducting peace education workshops to share conflict resolution methodologies. Since 2009, SLE gradually began to learn about cases of disappearances in the region. In this context, the organization became crucial in offering free legal counsel to the victims' families, made possible in part by funding from international donors that enables this NGO to continue its operations.

"We are supporting many cases, closely monitoring proceedings, identifying obstacles, demanding that authorities fulfill their responsibilities, and always working alongside the searchers," Carla, an attorney who has been with SLE since the first wave of cases in 2012–2014, explained to me. In fact, it was in 2014 when the collective *Bordemos por la Paz* stopped meeting after a security incident, Rosaura recounted: *"Some men arrived, asking threateningly about one of the women. We gathered to raise awareness, but at the same time, we were exposing ourselves."* This created a void in the city for public gatherings among victims. It was during this juncture that *En Busca de Nuestros Desaparecidos Jalisco* grew stronger and even adopted a different role, engaging the institutional sphere with greater determination.

One of the ways the collective began to amplify its reach was through statements published on its blog, which were later cited by local journalists in print media and other digital platforms. The first of these statements, dated September 2014, addressed the context of victim care in Jalisco. It questioned the official figure of 2,230 missing people and accused the authorities of violating the Victims' Law. By 2015, after several additional statements, there was a noticeable shift toward more specific demands for requirements, investigative actions, and forensic measures that needed attention. Comparing these writings reveals the knowledge acquired over months. The searchers emphasized the need for access to their investigation files (a topic to be explored in depth in chapter II). The documents demonstrate changes in the collective's language, where technical terminology became a prominent feature. This point, I argue, demonstrates a form of specialization within a group of women who represent themselves before the state, demanding recognition of their rights in an increasingly politically charged environment.

For some of the activists I spoke with, these acts of self-representation were viewed as acts of autonomy and empowerment. They had, in large part, passed on this technical knowledge to the mothers to help them avoid being manipulated by authorities. For example, on Mother's Day, a public event titled *Nothing to Celebrate* was held. I arranged to meet with some activists and Ruth, Joaquín's mother, in the city center. While riding in the taxi, she reviewed a statement co-written by local NGOs and collectives that are part of the National Movement for Our Disappeared (*Movimiento por Nuestros Desaparecidos en México*). She admitted feeling nervous and read the text one more time. *"I'm not sure I can pronounce this word,"* she said. Rosaura, a lawyer supporting several cases, encouraged her: *"You can do it; we'll be there for you."*

When Ruth took the megaphone to read, she stumbled over words like *macro-criminality* and *counterinsurgency.* The moment, of course, heightened her nerves. But when she set the paper aside and spoke off-script, her voice grew stronger. *"We want justice. We want our children home. The state must not forget the disappeared."* Her voice, breaking at the end, was met with a resounding *"You are not alone"* from the crowd. During my fieldwork, I frequently witnessed conversations in which the searchers asked about specific terms or legal concepts to understand and incorporate them into their linguistic repertoire. This technical knowledge, provided by NGOs, seemed essential—or one of the few available avenues—for victims to establish a dialogue with the state apparatus. Mastering the same jargon becomes necessary to comprehend, for instance, the language used by investigative agents following up on disappearance cases. However, I propose that acquiring this knowledge also creates a marginalization gap between those who possess technical expertise and those who do not. While a significant motivation for the collectives of families of the disappeared has been to weave extensive networks of solidarity, there are often setbacks. Victims who achieve a level of specialization inadvertently create hierarchies, which are then exploited by groups in power to limit the mothers' scope of action.

When *En Busca de Nuestros Desaparecidos Jalisco* displayed significant strength in confronting the government, internal realignments and debates emerged regarding the paths the collective should take. Some members supported continuing meetings with authorities, while another faction was reluctant to proceed, viewing these meetings as mere simulations. Similar tensions had arisen in other regions, such as Tijuana and Coahuila, two notable examples from the national map of collectives. In the border cities, Robledo documented how frequent meetings with the state led to a rupture among victims' families. Those who decided

to establish a new platform argued they felt used, with no real progress being made, and that their efforts would be better spent in the streets, protesting.

In 2016, as part of a demonstration in Parque Rojo—the same location where handkerchiefs had previously been embroidered—a group of women announced their split from *En Busca de Nuestros Desaparecidos Jalisco* to form the *Red de Buscadoras* (Network of Searchers). When I inquired about the rupture within that group of mothers, what unfolded before me was a spectrum of variables that helped explain the division: from disagreements over how to engage with authorities to feelings of insufficient emotional support in the previous group. Various factors contributed to this division, but I sought to delve into the less visible causes, discussed below. For activists like René, the rupture *"was something natural, a cycle."* While I have seen them come together at events, there often seems to be an invisible wall separating collectives when they share the same space.

But despite internal challenges within each group, in Laura's words, *"being understood by them"* is one of the cornerstones of these victim groups, which have faced public scrutiny and, in some cases, the indifference of their own families. While these groups were initially created to demand the return of the disappeared and expose society to the lack of justice, they simultaneously serve as a crucial platform to support those experiencing internal fractures within their families as a result of enforced disappearances. During my time in Guadalajara, I observed many reasons among the searchers to explain both the conflicts and dynamics within their groups. One of the most striking elements was how these women end up demanding more commitment from one another—a moral obligation to act as a victim, particularly if they are mothers or wives of the disappeared. They ask the impossible of themselves to make up for the failures of the state. Yet, despite the disagreements that can be

named, it is undeniable that these groups also become a kind of family, one that understands their unique circumstances. Even after leaving one group to join another, some of my interlocutors mentioned maintaining sporadic communication with their former companions to check in and see how things were progressing.

In the preceding section I trace the evolution of the movement created by local searchers. From the private sphere to the public square, they bring their bodies into the streets, making themselves visible, occupying the spaces where city life unfolds to expose what began as a murmur in some neighborhoods and later transformed into a rumor, and ultimately crystallized into feature stories or front-page news in the local press. This shift came as criminal groups escalated the qualitative display of their territorial disputes by abandoning lifeless bodies on major city arteries. As Hila mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, 2011 marked the start of a cycle of violence that has yet to come to an end. Its fluctuations have left a profound impact on a city once considered peaceful, though not entirely untouched by drug trafficking, as noted in previous paragraphs. The searchers emphasize that Guadalajara is no longer the same. Their perception, it seems to me, is rooted in the echoes generated by the intersection of the war on drugs and the deepening of the neoliberal model adopted by the Mexican state.

My aim has not been to depict the social field in which this project unfolds, and to provide a tentative panoramic view of a constantly changing social landscape. Currently, there are more than ten search collectives in the metropolitan area of Guadalajara, all of which have faced the same challenges the first search networks encountered.

There are two points I want to highlight. First, I want to draw attention to the co-optation strategies deployed by authorities to weaken these collectives, such as offering selective support to certain members, encouraging internal divisions, or incorporating them into institutional frameworks that limit their autonomy. The second point I would like to stress is that throughout these years of ethnographic research, I have witnessed how women shoulder a double or even triple workload as they take on tasks that compensate for the state's failure to fulfill its responsibility in locating the disappeared. My interlocutors represent a diverse group of women who defied social mandates relegating them to certain spaces and behaviors.

Oneiric manifestations

After the disappearance of her son, Alondra began dreaming about him almost every night. He would appear to reassure her, telling Alondra to stay calm and that everything was fine. *"I started having these dreams about a month after his disappearance. I think that's when they might have killed my son, and he wanted to tell me that he was now at rest."* This testimony illustrates her own interpretation of dreams as a way for her son's spirit to manifest itself and even engage in a communicative process between the living and the absent. The dream serves as a message through which Luis tells his mother to find peace, and she interprets this oneiric manifestation as the possible death of her only son.

This case was not the only one I encountered in fieldwork. Time and again, the searchers shared accounts of dreams in which their children communicated with them. The oneiric realm becomes a way of understanding the world and establishing dialogue with an otherness that does not inhabit the earthly plane.

For the searchers, dreams have held an important place as a means of communication with their loved ones. This sensorial spectrum activates during the night, as it is then that the disappeared reappear to reassure their mothers, allowing them to embrace, touch, and hear once more the voices they have been longing to hear for months or even years. On several occasions, during these dreams, victims reveal to their mothers the location of their lifeless bodies. In one instance, Andrés told his mother he was in an abandoned house at the foot of a hill, precisely where she had suspected he might be. It was a blue building with a black door. Since then, Gabriela has been using Google Maps to explore the area and identify a potential search quadrant. Yet, she remains unsure of what to say to investigators: *"I can't tell them about my dream; they won't take me seriously if I tell the truth."*

To some extent, rather than as premonitions, oneiric manifestations are interpreted as information conveying the possible death of a loved one. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, these dreams are sometimes used as tools in the searching process. Diana's case is another example. Months before I met with her, she had a dream in which she saw that her son was in Zamora. This town is located in the neighboring state of Michoacán, and in 2023 was labeled the most violent city in the world due to its high murder rate. Zamora has become a key transit point within the narcotrafficking circuit due to its roads connecting to the Tierra Caliente region—considered as a stronghold of drug cartels. Moreover, it is connected by highways to Guadalajara and the port of Lázaro Cárdenas, identified as an entry point for precursors used by "cartels" in the production of methamphetamine and fentanyl.

When Diana went to Zamora, she visited the local morgue, several hospitals, and the Public Prosecutor's Office. Despite warnings to avoid Zamora due to its insecurity, she felt compelled to go. "*The dream made it clear that he was there. I couldn't live with the anxiety*

of doing nothing." Although she did not find her son, she spoke with the investigator in charge of the case to request that Zamora be included in the analysis being conducted by the authorities. "*Of course, I never told them that this information had been revealed to me in a dream."* Searchers never fully disclose their dreams to the authorities, fearing they will be dismissed as delusional. Julieta explained to me: *"Trying to get an investigator to follow something revealed in a dream is absurd. They would laugh in our faces."* The information derived from the oneiric becomes key pieces subsequently used either in official investigations or in the independent inquiries that mothers conduct on their own, following their intuition, listening to their children, with whom they reconnect in the depths of their dreams.

Although the oneiric may seem "outrageous," particularly when viewed through a rational lens, for the searchers, it is a source of possibilities that should not be underestimated. Several interlocutors recounted the case of Fátima, who dreamed that her son's body was in the morgue. She visited the institution and found Pedro there. *"Apparently, the body had arrived just days earlier from a clandestine grave."* When I met Fátima, she told me how restless the dream had left her, particularly because it intertwined her son's spirit with the divine. *"Without God, our loved ones wouldn't be able to manifest themselves,"* confided Braulio's mother.

According to the *buscadoras*, the disappeared and the dead are guided by a divinity that allows dreams to act as intermediaries, communicating what authorities have failed to resolve. Ethnographically, the dreams that mothers interpret—and use as evidence—highlight the ways in which these women articulate their concerns and transform what they

receive while sleeping into knowledge that aids their search processes. I argue that oneiric manifestations are, in fact, part of the register of sovereignty exercised by these *buscadoras*. Dreams arise from the fissures and interstices between decision and exception. Oneiric manifestations not only provide clues that may lead to the bodies but also serve as a means to maintain the relationship between mothers and their children despite the uncertainty produced by this crime.

However, the oneiric realm has also been a source of disputes, especially when dreams direct mothers to places where their children's bodies might be. In the city, some collectives focus on searching for clandestine graves. Yet, some of my interlocutors criticized these groups for merely extracting bodies from the earth while the morgue is already overcrowded. A significant tension emerges among the searching mothers, between collectives and even within subgroups in the same collectives, which I differentiate with the labels of the "excavators" and the "scientists." The latter accuse the former of mishandling the exhumation of bodies, neglecting proper protocols, and proceeding even without the presence of the Search Commission (*Comisión de Búsqueda*, the institution in charge of conducting official searching).

"I've seen how they retrieve the bodies, how poorly they conduct their forensic work. If they do something to my son's body, I'd kill them. It's just not acceptable," Mirta told me one afternoon. We were discussing a video shared on social media by the searchers themselves. The women featured in the footage explained that they were livestreaming *"so everyone could see the horror of what's happening and be alert if something occurs to us,"* as no security personnel accompanied them that day. Mirta emphasized, *"no police were there*

because they don't follow the protocols for requesting a field search. It's just not acceptable".

The argument of the women I call "scientists," based on the criticisms directed at them by other mothers, is that the relentless searches must halt to first demand government action to address the morgue's crisis. These women, who claim to adhere to protocols and recognize the role of forensic experts, prefer that bodies remain buried rather than become unidentified fragments in an overcrowded forensic institute. Another factor that triggers disputes among my interlocutors stems from the approach to searching, whether under the presumption of life or death. *"All those women who focus solely on clandestine graves neglect other equally important areas,"* Lorena told me in a tone of complaint. The mothers I categorize here as *scientific searchers* emphasize the importance of visiting prisons, hospitals, and mental health institutions as part of their efforts. Moreover, Lorena argues that searching exclusively under the presumption of death is tantamount to patting the government on the back: *"It reinforces what the authorities say—that all our children are probably dead. And maybe they are, but the authorities have an obligation to conduct extensive searches."* Over the years, I have witnessed how my interlocutors have immersed themselves in the forensic spectrum, absorbing knowledge and regenerating it. They have integrated forensic science into their language of protest, which was previously centered almost entirely on the bureaucratic aspects of search files.

Within the context of education, literacy is usually understood simply as the ability to read and write (Barlett 2008). However, in the context of the war in Mexico, this understanding extends beyond the classical definition of the term. In this case, mothers have undergone a process of literacy to master a particular code—the language of bureaucracy. According to Lidia: *"We have learned key concepts and the content of various laws, which helps us better understand our investigations. This knowledge also helps us defend ourselves as victims so that no one can belittle us"*.

Thus, the process of literacy has empowered the searchers, making them feel more confident in the tools they possess as they navigate the bureaucratic labyrinth. Although the women engaged in literacy processes facilitated by NGOs have acquired knowledge sanctioned by the state, it is undeniable that speaking the same language as the authorities gives them confidence during their search efforts. *"Understanding writing or what politicians are talking about is very important. When they mention a protocol or a law, we already know what they're referring to. They can't easily fool us,"* argues Cynthia, who has been searching for her daughter since 2017. In recent years, as more clandestine graves have been discovered, my interlocutors (particularly the "scientists") have requested that activists provide them with workshops on forensic knowledge—an area I explore in greater detail in Chapter III.

Thus, as searching mothers develop new forms of literacy, one of the main sources of conflict among them now revolves around whether to continue unearthing bodies or leave them buried—despite the pain of knowing decomposition continues. These tensions underscore the depth of the horror in the drug war: *buscadoras* are torn between searching for graves or leaving the bodies in extermination zones. It is within this context that oneiric manifestations

emerge as a channel of communication between the searchers and their children. In these dreams, children reassure their mothers and provide clues about how to find them. Dreams also sustain the relational bond between my interlocutors and their loved ones, offering hope and guidance in the dark and arduous journey of the search.

Conclusions

From whispers to rumors, the crime of disappearance has become part of Guadalajara's daily reality. The war has transformed the metropolis, reshaping perceptions of security, widening the margins, and recasting certain neighborhoods as forbidden zones—potential sites of extermination. In this context, mothers have emerged as a collective actor, albeit not without contradictions, to confront widespread violence. By placing their bodies both in public squares and at clandestine graves, they search for their loved ones through intuition, hope, and even the revelations granted to them in dreams.

The presence of these women has "unsettled" other actors who exercise a different register of sovereignty. Teresa Magueyal, María del Carmen Vázquez, Esmeralda Gallardo, Rosario Lilián, Ana Luisa Garduño, and Aranza Ramos are the names of some of the mothers murdered during my fieldwork simply for trying to find their children. The bodies of these women disrupt and provoke discomfort because their actions challenge the intended purpose of enforced disappearance: to ensure that nothing is ever known again about the missing person. Yet, the interstices and gaps between the moment of decision and the establishment of the state of exception, while powerful, remain hostile terrain for the searchers as I demonstrate in following chapters.

The searchers create and transform knowledge as part of a process that begins in their homes, where some start to become politicized through dozens of questions and the gathering of information, which they conduct by watching local news broadcasts and purchasing the newspapers circulating in the city. Driven by the desperation of knowing nothing, they later weave support networks with other *buscadoras*, whom they contact through social media or meet at the first public events they attend in an effort to find some light amidst uncertainty. In this context lies an entire spectrum of materialities that come into play to invoke the victims, despite the war's determination to erase their bodies permanently and the perpetrators' efforts to silence the truth by murdering searchers. The following chapter focuses precisely on the materialities of absence and their potentialities.

Chapter II. Materialities of Absence

One of the most striking aspects of my fieldwork was the way in which various objects became essential to the search efforts undertaken by my interlocutors. Over the months, I witnessed a growing presence of material artifacts in the protests organized by family members, in the homes of the *buscadoras*, and during the tracing of clandestine graves. These materialities acquire meaning not only due to the victims' absence but, more profoundly, in the face of the absence of justice. In this chapter, I deliberately use the term "absence" because when a person disappears, they leave behind a cascade of voids— their laughter, their scent, their voice, their presence— which loved ones attempt to recover, transform, or reimagine through different material expressions.

Amid the kaleidoscope of materialities I observed, what most captured my ethnographic attention was the way in which, as my interlocutors explained, the disappeared assert their presence through their investigation files. These documents hold fragments of their loved ones' lives, transforming bureaucratic records into personifications of the victims. As time stretches on without answers, the disappeared also surface in other forms, with images taking on new dimensions in the lives of those who search. Perla, for example, has found Daniela among the objects in her room. Each of her personal belongings represents a fragment of her daughter, whom she has been searching for since 2015. Silvia, on the other hand, framed all the photos of her son Pedro and placed them on every wall of her living room, *"So I can see him every day*," she noted, "*to always feel close to him. It's as if Pedro is still here, in our house with us."*

In multiple ways, the victims continue to participate in the everyday lives of their social world through materialities that carry distinct potentialities. Some of these objects attempt to subsume disappearance in small doses by making present the victim's energy and spirit, as in the case of the photographs hanging in Silvia's house. Simultaneously, materialities serve as evidence that a person existed—that they were here. I remember Carolina reaching into her bag and pulling out a photo of Dulce. She held it up as undeniable proof. *"This is Dulce; I want you to know her."* The photograph testified to her existence—albeit a suspended one—as she belongs neither to the world of the living nor to that of the dead, trapped instead in the uncertainty and ambiguity of the crime of disappearance.

Within the same spectrum, but from another angle, some objects that are part of the materialities of absence come into play precisely to reverse disappearance. Such is the case with shovels or rods that cease to function as construction tools when used as part of the forensic toolkits the mothers have assembled to search for mass graves and unearth bodies from the depths, as I will show below. But when do materialities begin to gain relevance in the life of my interlocutors? Are some materialities a way of experiencing absence through the tangible? In the following pages, I will address these questions. Here, I propose the concept of *materialities of absence* as an attempt to capture what is no longer present—the disappeared—yet still seeks to manifest, to speak, and to protest. Their energy lingers, whether in the spaces they once inhabited or in the extermination zones where their bodies lie.

Kaleidoscope

Photographs, investigation files, victims' personal belongings, and even the search tools used by the mothers in tracing mass graves are some of the materialities that speak of a dialectic between people and things. It is a conversation among the living, the disappeared, and their objects. The search for the disappeared is the result of a symbiosis of agency distributed among human and non-human actors. It is an assemblage that I will elaborate on in the following lines, as this chapter explores the situated experiences of material life, and the entanglements forged through objects. In this case, I propose focusing on objects as central nodes of relational networks created by disappearance.

Since the 1990s, a material turn has emerged in the social sciences, in which materiality has gained renewed centrality—not merely as a backdrop, but as an agent, a relation, and a core element of assemblages.[liii] A key figure in this discussion is Bruno Latour (2008), who introduced a relational perspective in which humans and non-humans (such as objects and technologies) form networks that generate life. Appadurai (1991), in turn, proposed that objects possess "social lives," circulating and acquiring value as they move through different contexts. In fact, the author advocates understanding the social life of objects, exploring their meanings, uses, and trajectories, as significant transformations or economic changes are often condensed into artifacts that carry diverse meanings. While Appadurai focuses on commodities, I aim to shift this perspective to follow the objects of the disappeared in the world of the living and delve into what they produce, investigating what they display or reveal.

Materiality is neither "dead" nor neutral, but rather alive and always relational[liv]. For example, in the Peruvian Andes, a mountain may be regarded not as a natural elevation of the earth's surface, but as a political subject.[lv] Similarly, in other geographies, non-human forms such as religious figures intertwine with other living beings to generate complex relational webs.[lvi] Objects and materiality are essential to the constitution of subjectivity; we exist through them, and parts of ourselves are deposited in the materialities that surround us.

In this case, the *materialities of absence* not only reshape search trajectories but also profoundly disrupt the lives of the victims' families. Latour (2008) posits that the social "is not located in any particular place but can circulate everywhere as a movement connecting non-social things." These non-social things are precisely the non-human actors that embody various energies and forces. A key aspect of engaging with them is recognizing the affect they radiate and the affect they absorb from those who interact with them. A photograph, for instance, ceases to be merely a memory; it becomes an essential part of my interlocutors' lives, a repository of their emotions and hopes. In Manola's home, images of her son Pedro, disappeared in 2014, cover the walls of her office, creating a large-scale visual display of Pedro's life story. *"They make me believe he is still here,"* Manola told me during my visit.

Similarly, a jacket is no longer just a piece of clothing. Luisa, for instance, treasures her daughter Catalina's green parka as a memory that reminds her of her daughter whenever she feels lonely or desperate. The tangible becomes a means of establishing direct contact with the disappeared, a way to feel their presence and summon their essence at any moment. The ambiguous mourning experienced by those who search is inscribed onto these objects, forging relationships through which the disappeared are continually invoked.[lvii]

As previously mentioned, one of the first times I noticed the power of materialities during my fieldwork was when some of my interlocutors spoke about and showed me their investigation files. These files (*carpetas*) were placed on altars, safeguarded in important areas of their homes, or carried in their arms by the mothers. These objects contain the official investigation conducted by the state apparatus to locate the disappeared. Through the files, authorities control the bureaucratic search process by setting timelines, establishing formats, and defining lines of inquiry. Thus, the state dictates the rules of how to search by handling knowledge in very specific ways, creating power dynamics that influence daily life and reach into the intimacy of the homes of the disappeared via this bureaucratic object.

The mothers of the disappeared are surrounded by materialities that accompany them in their search. My interlocutors reinterpret objects, transcend rational limitations, and use imagination as a political force. Materialities often become central to corporeal sovereignty, serving as producers of knowledge and extensions of the searchers' own bodies, such as the shovels used to excavate mass graves. I understand these materialities as *assemblages of search*, the convergence of diverse elements that come together to form a structure dedicated to bringing the disappeared back home.

The files

In the living room of her home, next to the window, Braulio's mother has placed a small table adorned with a vase filled with beautiful pink dahlias, a portrait of her son, a small effigy of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and copies of her son's investigation file. This is an altar where affect, religiosity, and the signature of the state converge, the latter infiltrating the intimacy of the victims' families, cultivating a sense of omnipresence—a power that permeates the

most hidden corners of our lives, creating an illusion of control. However, focusing solely on this aspect would be analytically unproductive because Amalia's example reveals the reinterpretation families give to bureaucratic objects in intimate spaces. There is an intersubjective process between the files and many searchers, a process that imbues this artifact with a political aura, demonstrating how victims continue to participate both in the daily lives of their families and in demands for justice from the Mexican state apparatus.

A political aura, drawing on Walter Benjamin's (1969) concept of *aura*—the unique presence or atmosphere of an object—implies that something generates affective responses linked to power, conflict, and justice. "Something" with a political aura signals its entanglement in systems of power. For example, a worn-out shoe left behind by a mother at the site of a protest, after a police crackdown, may appear trivial at first glance, but from an anthropological perspective, it can be interpreted as a politically charged symbol expressing mourning, resistance, and presence. A political aura often reveals or suggests an underlying network of relations. In this case, what constitutes the aura evokes the broader structure behind it: one that speaks of state violence, marginalization, and also the enduring hope that the disappeared will return home.

In Amalia's particular case, her religiosity materializes through her needs and desires. It is a call to the divine, seeking intervention to advance the official investigation. The altar is, in a sense, an affective reinterpretation of Amalia's belief system, blending the Virgin and the state for her own purposes. As she explains, the file represents *"a possibility of finding our loved ones—not the only one, but an important one."* Mothers have increasingly turned to unofficial searches, particularly from a forensic perspective (chapter III). However, as I will analyze later, official investigations and their findings remain central to my interlocutors.

Amalia's experience is not unique. For many other mothers, copies of investigation files serve as a means for the disappeared to make their presence known, signaling that they are still here in various ways. More than 15,000 kilometers from Guadalajara, Shanta's story similarly prompted me to explore how extermination and disappearance extend beyond the physical to the material—especially in contexts where documentation is scarce, nonexistent, or manipulated.[lviii] I focus on the intimate and the unseen. My aim is to illuminate how, in the face of the profound uncertainty caused by disappearance, bureaucratic objects acquire distinct yet interconnected meanings and potentialities—bureaucratic, political, and affective. In the following pages, the searching mothers share their relationships with these files—relationships that resonate from the privacy of their homes to the public squares where they demand justice. In the final section of the chapter, my interlocutors invite us into a deeper, more personal realm, revealing how the victims also manifest through other objects and surfaces, particularly when investigations stall and months of waiting stretch into years. This exploration is guided by key questions: Why does the file hold such profound significance for so many mothers? Who is responsible for producing this object, and how does it function within the structure of the Mexican state's search system?

A bureaucratic body

Since the war began, collectives formed by families and NGOs have shed light on human rights violations, impunity, and lack of information about the consequences of the security strategy owing to the country's militarization and the fragmentation of multiple criminal networks. Families, accompanied by activists who serve as allies, have led the debate on the need to create laws and institutions focused on access to justice, although the interpretation of what justice means varies both among collectives and family members. While several local

movements have been formed since the beginning of the war, 2011 was a pivotal year—as I mentioned in the previous chapter—with the formation of the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity (MPJD), which was instrumental in creating a space for dialogue between relatives of victims and state agents, both at the federal and state levels, as previously mentioned. The movement, in fact, managed to enter the National Congress by lobbying for the creation of laws that responded to a war that was escalating in the territory.

The MPJD was able to influence constitutional changes and encourage a legislative conversation. After several protests throughout the national territory, a high point occurred in 2017, when the Mexican Congress approved the national law on missing persons. I turn to the metaphor of the body to underscore how a previously fragmented bureaucratic organism is now divided into two major segments that are intimately connected and, supposedly, in constant communication: the criminal justice system and the search system.

On the one hand, we find the classic Criminal Justice System from which the local and national Prosecutors' Offices are derived. This system is in charge of conducting all judicial investigations to locate the victims. As it leads the official investigation, the file has a greater weight in this part of the bureaucratic body. A large percentage of the workers are police officers who have become, or specialize in being, investigators (known as agents). In fact, most of my interlocutors do not fully trust those who carry out the investigations of their children because the agents have a past as police officers, an occupation linked to corruption, omissions, and stories that evoke the horrors of war.

On the other hand, the new Search System, which is focused on creating official tracing groups to find victims dead or alive, derives from the 2017 law. Although the Search System takes elements from the case files to plan the searches, it does not legally require them. That is, a person can go to a Search Commission without having previously filed a missing person's report. And although, at the time of their founding, the search commissions hired activists, anthropologists, psychologists, and bureaucrats close to the human rights field, these commissions have lost some of their legitimacy. For example, since its creation, the National Search Commission has not made public one of its main commitments under the law: to publish in its entirety the Registry of Missing Persons in Mexico. This omission has raised doubts among relatives about the effectiveness of those who run this institution.

Although, as mentioned above, the search commissions do not legally need the files to conduct searches, they do try to recover elements of the investigations. Notwithstanding, police investigators are not always willing to share their work with their colleagues. Romina's testimony condenses the most common responses I heard in the field: *"Agents do not want to share the files because they have not investigated anything, nothing."* In multiple ways, whether as a promise or as evidence of the lack of state capabilities to locate the victims, the files are always present in the search process. Therefore, I argue that they are the heart of the bureaucratic body, a heart whose valve is the Homologated Protocol for the Search of Missing Persons (*Protocoloco Homologado de Búsqueda*), composed of 282 pages, which indicates step by step all the procedures that an agent must follow to build an investigation file.

Filled with nothing

But what is the particular relevance of the investigation file in the search for the disappeared? Within the national legal framework, a file signifies the state's acknowledgment of a disappearance and its commitment to trying to find the victim through its justice apparatus. Although authorities argue that a *carpeta* is no longer necessary to initiate search actions, in practice, such a file remains the material axis connecting victims' families to the state. However, rather than searching, the Mexican state appears to be archiving. On several occasions, Susana spoke with me about the pain of bureaucracy, referring to the long waits in offices, the poor attitude of authorities, and the *"eternal stagnation"* of all investigations. Yet the women I met during my ethnographic work persistently demand *investigaciones*—not only because this is how cases of missing persons are managed but also because many have developed an intimate relationship with the *carpeta*, which has become an embodiment of the absent loved one. As Susana says, *"That is Luis; he is there (*stored in the file*)."*

According to official guidelines, the files should include the disappearance report, all records of inquiries conducted by investigators, photographic records of the victim, a report on the criminal context of the area where the person disappeared, and other documents that might help locate the person. One afternoon, Mariana texted me. Raúl's mother, whose son has been missing since 2017, invited me to a monthly meeting held by mothers at the premises of a local NGO. A week later, when I arrived at the organization's offices, Mariana introduced me to the women present that day. The room was filled with the strong aroma of coffee and the murmurs of a chorus of voices which, according to Raúl's mother, *"are like birds singing in the morning because this is when we catch up on each other's lives."* After

several minutes of conversation and coffee, the mothers began exchanging views on a protest they were planning to hold outside the Prosecutor's Office to demand the immediate release of copies of all investigation files held by the state.

Article 19 of the Constitution establishes that families are co-participants in the investigation and are entitled to a certified copy of the *carpeta*. However, authorities often deny access to these documents, citing the highly sensitive nature of the information that must therefore remain within the Prosecutor's Office. This argument is paradoxical since it is the families who provide the set of clues that authorities allegedly use as the basis for following any trail left by the disappeared. Most of my interlocutors who have access to their files reside in the state capital (Guadalajara), where the bureaucratic heart is physically located. Those who have obtained certified copies of the files described a tangle of emotions when recalling the first time they received this object. Mariana, for example, remembers that day as a shock. Paola, the mother of Luis, who disappeared in 2014, shared part of her experience with me: *"When I opened my file, I began to read the statement I gave when I reported the disappearance. One document says I mentioned my son used drugs. Can you believe it? It's an insult."*

Ruth and Gabriela expressed disappointment when discussing their cases. Both had believed their investigations would be thorough; instead, they found omissions and paperwork that investigators had never completed. Ruth, Alma's mother, told me: *"The files are a disaster. The government thinks we're fools."* She also mentioned that her meetings with the agent feel like torture due to long waits and endless paperwork. According to the searchers' testimonies, some original files are often kept in boxes piled up in office corners. For

Gabriela, whose son disappeared in 2009, *"the way they treat the documents is the way they treat our children."*

"When you take a journey to an unknown place, you usually rely on a map. The file is our map to follow a search route, but in ours, the coordinates are wrong, so you end up lost," Luisa shared as she outlined all the pending tasks she must complete before her next meeting with the investigator. Speaking about how other mothers reinterpret the file, she said to me: *"This is not my son. This is a story or a compilation of documents that they (*the authorities*) have stashed in their drawers. My son is missing; his story is not here."*

Luisa's testimony breaks with the perspective of many of my interlocutors, revealing the distinct paths mothers conceptualize state documentation. However, the file is not merely a material object that accumulates mothers' experiences in their interactions with authorities. This object also has a life of its own. As it moves from one office to another, the *carpeta* leaves traces that mothers strive to track. The women perceive the file's life as akin to their children's lives. Below are fragments from a conversation I had with Paola and Mariana one afternoon in January 2021:

Mariana: Sometimes I wonder if all this paperwork is interfering with our search. They're fooling people with all these words and papers. They should be out there searching!

Paola: That will never happen. They've filed away our children. Do you remember that time they couldn't find my *carpeta*? That's proof they don't care about what happens to us.

Mariana: I remember. They told you the *carpeta* wasn't in the office because they'd sent it to another city.

Paola: Exactly. I asked why they'd sent it, and they said it was a mistake. They couldn't give me any other reasons. They'd lost it! As if it were just any piece of paper!

Mariana: These *carpetas* are the only proof that our children exist to them. It's their way of keeping them both alive and dead at the same time. Do you know what I mean?

Mariana's question struck me with an intellectual depth that lingered in my mind for days. For Andrés' mother, the file represents the state's promise of justice, the assurance that answers will soon come. Yet, at the same time, it offers only that: a promise, which is not reflected in exhaustive investigation. It becomes a kind of governmental strategy, wielding power over victims' families by constructing a narrative that portrays bureaucracy as a gateway that, once opened, will reveal the whereabouts of those disappeared during the war. But without the constant presence of women in the Prosecutor's Office, the *carpetas* would remain archived, blend into other documents, or even disappear.

By being physically present, my interlocutors ensure that the information is neither altered nor omitted. Gupta (1995) and Mitchell (2018) have argued that documentation systems are foundational to state apparatuses, but this system can also operate oppositely, omitting or concealing documentation when necessary. Omissions and alterations are a sensitive topic for mothers, who express the uncertainty of *"not knowing which side the agents are really on,"* as Lorena put it. Gabriela's testimony sheds light on this: *"We suspect that some agents are working for the cartels."* The rumors of collusion between agents and criminals are among the main reasons the file's bureaucratic-political potential is diminished, though its affective potential remains intact for many *buscadoras*, as I show below.

Bureaucratic objects are a matter of great importance for victims, due to their multiple dimensions in our lives, as noted by Veena Das (2006) in her reflections on the signature of the state. Das focused particularly on written documents, which create an aura of legality—even when such documents are tied to the ambiguous development of the state apparatus within contexts of systematic violence. This ambiguity, she argues, can affect individuals in the form of anxiety, tension, and contradiction, as also observed by Tuckett (2018). In *Rules, Papers, Status*, Tuckett introduces the notion of a *documentation regime* as a framework for understanding the bureaucratic obstacles migrants face in their interactions with the Italian state. Similarly, Matthew Hull (2012) reminds us to pay close attention to the networks of relationships generated through the circulation of bureaucratic artifacts, whether outside or within government offices.

"My Alberto is there"

I visited Mariana's house on a hot July afternoon. She invited me to have a glass of iced tea and talk about her son, who disappeared five years ago on his way back from a medical appointment. After the second glass of tea, I asked her about the investigation: *"How was the process of getting the file for you?"* Mariana remained silent for a couple of seconds, which felt like an eternity. I told her we could end our conversation if she wanted to. *"Of course not,"* she replied. Mariana finished her tea and said, *"You know, for me, Alberto is there (in the file)."* She recalled the moment when the agent first handed her the object. There at her kitchen table, she held her arms in recreation of that episode, as if she were carrying a baby. *"After months, (on) that day I felt close to him, in contact with my son,"* she argued. The agent told Mariana that her reaction was not necessary, and she replied, *"You don't understand, this is my Alberto."*

That afternoon, Mariana shared with me an emotional fragment of her life after Alberto's disappearance and explained how the file is the material embodiment of her son. Mariana's perception is articulated through a cluster of experiences in which the investigation file plays a fundamental role, like a graphic artifact that evokes and invokes an absence which manifests itself in multiple ways. A couple of days after visiting Mariana, I interviewed Gabriela at her home. She approached a beautiful old cabinet where she keeps important documents –birth certificates, the deeds to the house– and pulled out the file on her son Eduardo, who disappeared in 2018. Gabriela then said to me, *"Accessing these papers was a very difficult job. And although the investigation has gaps, I have hope that the findings here can shed light on finding my little one"*, as she often refers to Eduardo. During our conversation, as she narrated the story of the disappearance, Eduardo's file remained in her lap the entire time. Gabriela's living room is filled with photos, all pictures of Eduardo: his first day of elementary school, a trip to the beach, his first day at summer camp. It is the visualization of an interrupted life, an absence that, once again, manifests itself in multiple ways, not only in forms conditioned by the bureaucratic spectrum. For Gabriela, these photographs are also the embodiment of Eduardo. *"My child is here with me"*, she asserts. Through Gabriela's words, the possibility arises of analyzing this set of images as traces, understood as "a material reminder that incorporates affective circulations produced […] by remnants of stories" (Napolitano 2015, 52).

The photos on Gabriela's walls represent traces that converge onto a single wall. Each photo, as a trace, is a material form where memories are printed. When multiple stories condense, as on Gabriela's wall, they become powerful because they represent more than a single story, (Napolitano 2015). In this case, the wall is a display of the family album in the living room,

which is also an altar, a memory, a constant circulation of affection. The investigation file is an important trace too, as it is a reminder full of fragments. It represents the missing person, composed of photographs, stories, interviews, descriptions, and biometric data. For Lisa, as for other mothers, the file is Sergio, *"Mi hijito (*my little boy*)"*, as she called him in our conversation.

The homes of Amalia, Lisa, Gabriela, and Mariana are affected by the state's documentation regime, a regime that quite often limits, complicates, or denies evidence, that controls the files and wears down families with its bureaucracy. Extrapolating on Hull (2012)—the networks of relationships generated through the circulation of bureaucratic artifacts—the file is an axis in which the victims' relatives and the state apparatus are interconnected. But this bureaucratic potential is decreased due to a long road marked by stamps, papers, and long waits. The missing person is stored in archives, boxes, and the file itself. The authorities' disdain for documents recalls what Gabriela previously mentioned when she equated the stacked boxes with the lack of justice, *"the way they treat the documents is the same way they treat our children."* However, through their testimonies, the mothers conjure a different conceptualization of the file, one that fissures the notion of simple rationality associated with the documentation regime (image 2.1).

Image 2.1 Mariana with all the documents related to the search for her brother, disappeared in 2018. Photo taken by the author, November 2024.

Out of the files

The walls of Paola's room are painted in a beautiful lilac colour which reminds me of the flowers that bloom in the parks during spring. Fernanda has invited me to enter the room of her daughter, who disappeared in 2018. In the room, everything is just as Paola left it: *"I only enter to sit on the bed, to think about my daughter. The truth is that I spend some evenings locked in this room."* This space has become sacred for Fernanda since everything is still intact and not everyone can enter. For Fernanda, her daughter's room is an embodiment of Paola, her identity is imprinted here. *Pao* (Paola's nickname) bought the pink sheets with her first salary as a secretary in a medical office located in Guadalajara's downtown.

On the bed are cushions in pastel shades that, Fernanda tells me, Paola bought little by little: *"Every month she would buy a new one, set aside a little money and go to Suburbia– a popular department store. And so on, until she had them all."* Next to the bed, on the bureau, there is a photograph of Azúcar, a cute French poodle with an endearing look: *"They were inseparable, when Azúcar died, almost six years ago, my poor Pao was heartbroken. She didn't even want to get out of bed. I gave her this photo so that she would always have it by her side."* In front of the bed is a small wooden chest of drawers. On it there are Paola's necklaces, earrings, and make-up. When Paola disappeared, she was just shy of her 24th birthday. *"At that age you really like to put on makeup, you're experimenting."* Experimenting to eat the world, to go out with your friends, and pick up guys.

Fernanda tells me that her daughter had a suitor who visited her at home every weekend, but once her daughter disappeared, the boy's mother forbade him to be in contact with Paola's family. Life has been complicated since then, as many people have distanced themselves

from my interlocutor.[lix] She takes refuge in this room. Her favourite object is a green jacket hanging in the closet *"because it still smells of Paola"*. The trace of her daughter's perfume is a reminiscence of her existence. The scent becomes a trunk of memories that leads Fernanda to feel Paola is present, just like those days when she would leave the house and leave behind a halo of floral and citrus aromas. In this room, there are multiple fragments of Pao; all of them are embodiments of this girl who disappeared five years ago. *"I need to see her everywhere, photos are no longer enough for me,"* she specifies.

At one point in our conversation, Fernanda says something about the investigation carried out by the authorities. She regrets the lack of progress: *"At this rate I will never find my daughter and that fills me with rage. That's why I lock myself in here."* Taking refuge in the room is, for Fernanda, like melting into a long embrace with Paola. Faced with the failure of the investigation file, the families also look for the disappeared in other spaces, on other surfaces, where they feel in contact with their loved ones and subsume the emptiness of absence in small doses. In this perspective, the room transmits something to Fernanda, something she feels in her gut. It is about how a space concentrates affections in uncertain times. This room is the memory of an interrupted return that fills Paola's mother with rage.

A similar story is condensed in the case of Lourdes, who told me that, for her, the guitar her son played became a sacred item because it was the object into which Antonio poured his emotions. The guitar takes Lourdes back to those afternoons when her son would rehearse in the backyard of the house: *"He was learning to play. He wasn't the best, but he had a lot of passion for learning his favourite songs."* Lourdes expresses that she often despairs over having no answers in this country where the earth swallows you. She feels imposed on and alone on this pathway. *"Years have passed without finding answers. We – the families – are*

holding on to everything, to stay here, insisting", she postulates. Lourdes mentions that in the face of the absurdity of what is happening in the country, it is necessary to take different routes: *"We have to do what politicians have not been able to do. Our investigations end up archived or forgotten in the prosecutors' offices. That is why we must not stop demanding for a single moment the return of our disappeared. Our investigations must be carried out."* As I have analyzed, the mothers reinterpret the case files and construct a critical discourse regarding these bureaucratic objects as conduits of justice. Parallel to this, other spaces and objects have undergone a metamorphosis, taking on new dimensions in the lives of the *buscadoras*. Photographs are perhaps one of the most striking examples of this, as families have found ways to reappropriate them.

Photos

In the homes of many of my interlocutors, photographs of their loved ones have taken on a new life. I remember Sara's case vividly. She went to a store specializing in professional cameras, seeking help. She asked the employees to enlarge her favorite photograph—the one where her now-missing son, Raúl, is emerging from a swimming pool while her husband, swaying in a hammock, smokes a cigarette. It was taken eight years ago during a vacation in Puerto Vallarta. Though not recent, there is something about this image—something ineffable—that, for Sara, captures Raúl's essence. While slightly worn from the passage of time, the original photo remains tucked away in a drawer: *"Perhaps those were the last photos I ever printed, because you know, we hardly do that anymore. I've always liked pictures; they remind you of something"*.

The enlarged photograph, now framed, hangs in Sara's bedroom. It is this image, above all others, that makes her feel close to her son. This reminds us that certain photographs leave an indelible mark, perhaps because of the moment they capture or the multitude of stories they accumulate and evoke within a single, immortalized instant. Photographs weave connections between the past self and the present self. In Sara's case, they also reveal her transformation as Raúl's mother—a motherhood that now orbits around clandestine graves and morgues.

The meanings of photographs also evolve over time. Now this image is a constant reminder of an absence. Faced with Raúl's disappearance, the photo recalls a memory that strikes Sara's heart. *"I look at it and wonder, when will he be with me again?"* Among the consequences of a person's disappearance, images take on a meaning similar to that of photographs of the deceased. However, in this context, the image is tied to a suspended mourning, intertwined with the hope of finding the person alive. The image, as I will explain later, also becomes a sign of protest: a political tool.

When I met Nadia, she showed me a photograph of her daughter, Ximena, which she keeps in her bag at all times, not just to feel close to her, but to present it to authorities whenever she visits their offices to check on the investigation's progress. This printed image stands as tangible proof of Ximena's existence, *"so they can see her and know who they are looking for,"* Nadia explains. In this way, she confronts the authorities with a worn photograph, creased from repeated folding, showing the face of a girl with black hair, thin lips, and hazel eyes. With this image, my interlocutor ensures that authorities recognize Ximena—not just as a statistic or another case file, but as a person.

The creases on the photograph that this searching mother carries in her bag speak of the wear caused by time but also of the agency photographs themselves possess as they change and transform. Each crease, each fold, contains stories that recount the photograph's use. A new fold develops each time Nadia shows Ximena's photo to an authority, a journalist, an activist, or an anthropologist. During one of our conversations, Nadia told me, *"seeing and touching this photo is like having my daughter with me."* This powerful postulate suggests that a photograph as a tactile object embodies a sensorial experience, awakening emotions tied to memories, and the reality of a present marked by absence.

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Martha's house is located near the highway, surrounded by fruit trees and flowers that seem to invite you to pull up a chair and chat for hours. Yet, life in this coastal town in the state of Jalisco has become increasingly difficult in recent years. The presence of the Navy in the streets has dramatically grown. Rumors about disappearances have multiplied. News arrives in trickles. According to journalists based in Guadalajara, the violence in the region stems from the growing importance of its highways, which connect major cities to ports used for the import and export of synthetic drugs. Criminal organizations began recruiting the youth they needed to carry out their trafficking operations.

According to the mother of Fabiola—who disappeared in 2020—trucks full of hitmen began to arrive to take people away. To disappear them. *"They know exactly who serves their purposes, because it's the very people from the town who now work with them,"* the cartels, she tells me. Martha says life used to be peaceful, *"until the day came when you no longer know who you can trust. Everything has become strange."* The destruction of everyday life and of the networks of solidarity built over decades among neighbors has been deeply

disrupted. Some families have moved to other towns or states, an act of internal displacement as a means of survival.

What Fabiola's mother recounts reminds me of what Tatiana Huezo (2021) captured in her film *Noche de fuego*. In the movie, the mothers of young girls disguise their daughters' gender by cutting their hair, trying to prevent them from being abducted by criminals and forced into human trafficking networks. Some homes even have hiding places to protect them. That village is nestled in a mountainous region. Martha's town, by contrast, is hot. The sun burns after eleven in the morning. Rain is scarce. A town once devoted to sugarcane harvests has now become a warehouse for synthetic drugs.

This geographical margin, which was already a political and economic frontier, has been further accentuated with the expansion of the narcotics market and the intensification of the war on drugs. Martha describes a sense of abandonment, a feeling of not knowing what is going on. These are emotions that coexist with the hypermilitarization of this part of western Mexico. These margins carry a contradiction: the increase in cases of enforced disappearances *"justifies"* the presence of military forces, yet militarization simultaneously functions as a machinery of human rights violations, including extrajudicial executions and, of course, disappearances.

As I noted in the introduction, Denisse Ferreira da Silva (2009) titled her essay on youth violence in Brazil as *No-Bodies*. The power of her argument lies partly in this very title, for when pronounced aloud, it evokes "nobody." Ferreira questions how certain bodies—based on skin color, phenotype, place of residence, socioeconomic class, and political ideology—are rendered more vulnerable to exclusion, fear, and lethal violence. In Mexico, scholars

addressing the high rates of youth deaths under violent conditions have introduced the concept of *juvenicidio* (juvenicide) as an expression of necropolitics that precarizes, criminalizes, and systematically eliminates young people, rendering their bodies disposable (Valenzuela 2019; Reguillo 2015). These same patterns can be observed through the lens of enforced disappearance. The most affected age group includes individuals between 15 and 29 years old. These are our *No-Bodies*. Fabiola was 19 when she disappeared.

Martha's other daughter, Carolina—who moved away a year ago "to be able to live in peace," as she puts it—tells me the house has felt empty ever since Fabiola disappeared. Something broke within the family dynamic. In his photographic series *The House That Bleeds* (*La casa que sangra*, 2013), Yael Martínez captures this sense of absence in homes marked by disappearance—a space that feels and reflects that loss. Carolina shows me all the documents they've gathered since her sister failed to return home one April afternoon in 2020: copies of the investigative file, newspaper clippings, and a photograph of Fabiola taken for her high school graduation diploma.

Martha touches the photo with her gaze. Fabiola faces the camera. She wears her school shirt. The image is in black and white. *"We don't have many printed photos,"* Martha tells me. Carolina adds, *"There are photos, but they're all on our phones."* Fabiola's mother says she looks through her phone from time to time to see pictures of her daughter. But this printed photograph is different—it can be touched and captures an important moment in the life of a young woman with wavy hair and a small, oval-shaped mole on her forehead.

A common thread among similar projects led by the families of the disappeared from the Southern Cone and other regions is the appropriation and use of ID photos during protests (Da Silva 2011). According to Karen Strassler (2010), based on her work in Indonesia, these are examples of how objects produced by the state apparatus are repurposed and recontextualized. As Strassler explains, the history of identity photographs is linked to the expansion of the modern bureaucratic state and to the global diffusion of a semiotic ideology in which the photo functions as both legal and scientific evidence. Thus, with those "passport-sized" photos taken when we first enter school, or when we sit before a camera and a stern photographer captures our face for a voter ID, a documentation system is assembled—one that simultaneously visualizes and materializes the population for classification.

Fabiola's image, though aligned with the conventions of bureaucratic photography, emits a special kind of energy that captures Martha's attention. There is something sensorial about the act of touching the photo—something that ties her to the moment it was taken. That rite of passage once symbolized a better future, a step toward moving to the city to study accounting. It has now become a trace of non-existence; a wound felt daily in this home. Meanwhile, outside, the Navy continues to expand its presence in the town's streets.

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Most of my interlocutors now turn to digital photos. These are the type of images they post on social media, the pictures set as their cellphone backgrounds, or the ones they publicly display on their phones when talking about their loved ones with others. While there may be differences, both printed and digital photographs hold the power of circulation, and both possess a social life that reveals how images have embedded themselves in the daily lives of these searchers, who channel their emotions into photos that depict their loved ones' faces. Whether digital or printed, photos reproduce the interpersonal relationships we all weave. In this case, the way these *buscadoras* talk about, care for, and show their photos is comparable to the care they provide to their children.

Yet, due to systemic injustice and the apparent impossibility of finding the *desaparecidos*, mothers of victims have transformed photographs into other formats and presentations. Whenever they march or attend an event organized by authorities, many of them carry large banners imprinted with their children's faces. With these posters, which they either hold in their hands or hang around their necks, a poignant panorama unfolds, comprising dozens of photos that play a central role as material objects within the symbolic and affective repertoire of mobilizations designed to draw the attention of different publics. These enlarged images, though often losing detail in the process, "shock by evoking the horror of imagining the sheer number of simultaneously disappeared persons" as Johnson states.[lx] Their visual presence in the streets seeks to provoke social outrage and demand action from authorities, who continue to downplay the scale of the disappearance crisis in Mexico.

Amid the uncertainty, the mothers who become searchers find ways to make absence visible. Just as the Public Prosecutor's Office is notified of the event through an official report, the posters pasted on walls, posts, and phone booths serve as notifications to the public, encouraging anyone with information to come forward and contribute to locating the victim (images 2.2 and 2.3). Photographs, as technological tools, are the centerpiece of posters that inform us of the horror and the lack of justice. These posters, or search cards, are testimonies by themselves, yet they are silenced when removed from public spaces. Torn down or covered by advertisements vying for the citizen-consumer's attention amidst urban hustle, they are often ignored. Guadalajara, in its pursuit of branding itself as an attractive, marketable city, prioritizes cleanliness and aesthetics. The government has ordered the removal of all posters in the city center, even as mothers have pleaded with authorities to allow them to post their search cards. This act, rooted in a hygienist mandate, enforces forgetting, disrupts the construction of public memory, and reveals the state's priority of being a tourist destination rather than finding the disappeared.

To resist these erasures and amplify the reach of search efforts, the digital realm has become an essential alternative. In recent years, Facebook and Twitter pages dedicated to sharing information about the disappeared have proliferated. These profiles are updated constantly, providing case details, and some accounts are even devoted to specific cities. In this way, the social life of images expands, transcending borders, shared hundreds of times and creating an echo that spreads across distant places, where perhaps someone might know something about the missing person.

As mentioned earlier, a network is woven between the photographs and their viewers, whether intentional or accidental, as these images appear unannounced on social media feeds when a friend shares a post or comments on one of these photos. The photographs reveal that the mothers' activism centers on the bodies of the disappeared, making absence visible through material forms—including digital images—that become tools of search and resistance against the negligence of the state. In this reinterpretation of materialities within the context of disappearance in Mexico, searchers have also redefined other objects, such as pickaxes and shovels. These tools take on a political meaning, transformed into extensions of their bodies and senses during their expeditions to uncover mass graves. The following section of this chapter delves into this aspect.

Image 2.2 Search card created by the relatives of the victim. Photo taken by the author, June 2020.

Image 2.3 Families intervene upon the urban landscape to demand the return of their loved ones. *"Nobody deserves to disappear,"* reads the phrase on a newspaper stand. Photo taken by the author, July 2024.

Image 2.4 *"#HastaEncontrarte"* (#UntilWeFindYou), an oath and phrase used in protests which has become a hashtag used throughout Mexico. Photo taken by the author, July 2024.

Forensic toolbox

I met Juan Manuel on a March morning in southern Mexico City, at his office within the building that houses the National Search Commission. This institution, established in 2017, develops strategies to assist in the location and identification of missing persons. As I mentioned earlier, the Commission's efforts run parallel to the work of the Prosecutor's Office, but in theory, both institutions collaborate in the process. Juan Manuel, a lawyer and sociologist, is now part of the contextual analysis unit, which produces reports to understand the circumstances surrounding a disappearance, both in specific terms (the area where the crime occurred) and in general terms (the broader regional criminal landscape). Previously, he worked for a prosecutor's office in northern Mexico, where he often participated in field searches. I asked him about his experiences on institutional accompaniment. He gave me an ironic look and immediately replied, *"They were never easy."*

Juan Manuel told me that every day was a new challenge, especially because the mothers wanted to conduct field searches constantly, and agents could not always accompany them. When searchers go out on their own, the risks increase because there is no security to guard the dig site. Some authorities have also criticized the *buscadoras* for allegedly contaminating or damaging evidence due to their lack of expertise. *"In their eagerness to uncover everything, they sometimes end up destroying remains,"* said the new member of the Search Commission. As the mothers themselves have previously noted, disputes often arise among them in terms of how to search for and unearth the bodies, and even about whether to continue searching in a country that resembles a minefield, where every few steps another mass grave seems to appear (chapter I).

Due to the spread of violence across Mexico, scholars have emphasized the emergence of a civic engagement with forensic science.[lxi] A body of studies has focused on the lack of state capacity to locate victims, alive or deceased, opening the door to an alternative production of forensic knowledge led by *buscadoras* who learn to use GPS devices, keep records, and develop skills to analyze potential crime scenes. This literature is part of a reflective tradition known as the "forensic turn," named after the systematic use of forensic sciences in the context of massive violence. The founding event of this turn was the creation of the *Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense* (EAAF, Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team) in 1984, supported by Clyde Snow and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Snow was a pioneering forensic scientist who developed the field of mass grave investigations to gather evidence of human rights violations. Although the EAAF was established to excavate graves and recover the bodies of those disappeared during Argentina's dictatorship (1976–1983), its work had a broader impact by contributing to the reconstruction of historical memory. The EAAF's experience was replicated in other countries, resulting in knowledge that families of victims in multiple nations, not only within the region, began to absorb and replicate (Clacso 2004).

In recent years, Eyal Weizman (2017) has added a new perspective to the forensic turn by introducing the concept of "counter-forensics," which highlights the complexities of accessing courts and official investigations. Counter-forensic findings are often excluded from legal decision-making processes and the official narrative, requiring their dissemination through alternative channels such as popular tribunals or online platforms. According to Weizman, forensic science is, on the one hand, a primary tool of state apparatuses because official power has monopolized both killing and identification. On the other hand, counter-

forensics represents an opportunity to debate and redefine the epistemology of evidence. Forensic medicine is a tool of official sovereignty, while counter-forensics is a civil practice that seeks to address omissions, silences, and atrocities via scientific or civic strategies that compensate for the failures of state investigations.[lxii]

However, when we dissect Weizman's work, we see that activists and researchers rely on specific know-how and high-level professional credentials while speaking on behalf of the international human rights community. My interlocutors, in contrast, sometimes lack such expertise and well-funded professional networks. While some have learned more sophisticated techniques, such as reading GPS devices to aid their investigations, the vast majority rely on tools that could be described as rudimentary. If we were to categorize their methods, they would fall under "vernacular forensics," a practice that repurposes everyday objects to navigate the landscapes where they search for their children. This knowledge is shaped by sensorial engagement and the use of materiality. For instance, much like state-appointed forensic experts, one of the primary tools searchers rely on upon reaching a site of extermination is their gaze. Through careful observation, they detect alterations or anomalies in the terrain, systematically scanning the area and exchanging perspectives on its conditions.

Image 2.5 Finding human remains is significant because it allows for the initiation or continuation of a mourning process that has been suspended due to the uncertainty caused by the disappearance of a loved one. In this photo, Ximena showed me what she had found after digging for several minutes upon noticing irregularities in the soil's texture—small bones that specialists from the Search Commission identified as animal remains. Two hours later, four human bodies were discovered. Image taken by the author, July 2022.

When the Search Commission does not accompany my interlocutors, the absence of other techniques for detecting clandestine graves becomes evident, such as the use of drones or trained dogs capable of identifying decomposing bodies. The mothers sharpen their senses to compensate for the gaps left by the absence of the state. Listening becomes a central instrument, enabling them to detect movements or approaching individuals. Smell is another indispensable tool. Searchers have adopted the use of metal rods, similar to those used in construction, which they drive into the ground and then withdraw to detect the smell of death. This odor is complex and difficult to describe, but according to Sara, *"there is nothing like it. At first, it might be confused with something rotten or stagnant water, but the smell of death has something that gets into your nose and churns your stomach."*

But the use of rods is not exclusive to these searchers. Indeed, the image of mothers searching with rods has become emblematic of the current historical moment in Mexico. Through dialogues among searchers from various states and countries, as well as workshops organized by non-governmental organizations, the *buscadoras* from Guadalajara have built their forensic toolkit, which they use whenever they explore a deserted area where illegal burials might be found. Besides rods, shovels have an important role. They are used to cautiously dig into the graves, hoping to unearth a bone amidst the soil. When this happens, whether or not the Search Commission is present, they call morgue technicians to continue the task.

> It's something [the rods] that others were already using. When things got worse here and we began searching for mass graves, we knew we couldn't go out without the rods. The women from the north taught us how to use them, and even TV reports show how it's done (Sara, June 20, 2024).

Sara highlights a knowledge passed from mother to mother across regions—a wisdom shared in the relentless pursuit of their loved ones. Even national news outlets acknowledge these tools, which become extensions of the searchers' bodies and senses. Shaped by the agency of the *buscadoras*, these tools follow the traces left by violence and decomposition. Their search unfolds in a web of interactions, between the living and the dead, between bodies and materialities, and even with intangible forces, like divinity, which some mothers believe guides them through signs, such as moving tree branches indicating the presence of bodies.

As mentioned in the introduction, I understand this assemblage as the union of several elements that interrelate, giving rise to varied consequences. The mothers smell the rods, trying to distinguish between the essence of the sewage and the scent of death that merge beneath the earth. Not far off, the underbrush moves through the air, accompanied by the scurrying of rodents. Like a collective body, aided by various instruments, the searching mothers see, smell, and feel the soil. Guided by the trees, dodging the undergrowth, and observing the debris up close, what occurs here is a convergence of encounters between life and death, between energies and temporalities that serve as markers of sovereignties. In the search for graves, the temporalities of criminals—those who bury evidence beneath the earth to erase their brutality—intersect with the temporalities of an indifferent state, which not only allows but forces these women to search for the victims of war. The *buscadoras* move through yet another temporality, one that seeks to undo silence and omission by exposing the destruction left in war's wake. And there are still other temporalities at play, those of microscopic agents, like bacteria, that inhabit the barren lands where these searches unfold. These timelines and actors do not merely intertwine; they sometimes collide, generating intimacies, contingencies, and the unexpected.

Image 2.6. *Madres buscadoras* and authorities Photo taken by the author, August 2022.

Image 2.7 A collective body in action. Photo taken by the author, August 2022.

The tracing for mass graves, which is connected to a forensic toolbox, vividly illustrates that sovereignty is never fixed but is, rather, an ongoing process unfolding across multiple registers. I recall Juan Manuel's words about the mothers not being forensic experts, but I also remember a conversation with another Search Commission member who emphasized that every intervention in a grave always alters it: *"The question is how it's done, and I think the mothers have learned a lot over these years; we should not doubt their work."* Within state institutions, opinions differ on the mothers' efforts, and as we saw in the previous chapter, even among the mothers themselves, there are disagreements about how the search should be conducted. In María's words, they all aim for the same goal: finding their children, though along the way they recognize their differences, which lead them down diverse paths to locate their loved ones. *"In the end, we all want to hold our children again."*

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have delved into what I call the materialities of absence—objects that emerge or take on a new dimension when a person goes missing and is continually invoked through altars or photographs. There is another kind of materiality that acts even more directly to reverse disappearance by unearthing the bodies buried beneath the ground. Together, the kaleidoscope of materialities form what I identify as relational assemblages: dynamic associations that create something new or distinct, that and that shape, delineate, or transform the search. These heterogeneous connections intertwine divergent temporalities and agencies, establishing momentary or prolonged relationships—such as the temporality of bureaucracy alongside that of the victims' family, or the agency of a photograph that both visualizes and sustains the bond between a mother and her child.

The search assemblages created by my interlocutors focus on the bodies of the victims, striving to make them present, to do everything possible to bring them home by integrating both human and non-human actors. I have specifically highlighted how materialities often originate in intimate and private spaces and possess the power to act within the gaps and interstices that exist in the processes of consolidating other sovereign registers. For instance, an investigation file becomes a condensation of the resistance carried out by my interlocutors, or a jacket of the loved one that is cherished and prevents the severing of the bond that the crime of disappearance seeks to break. In the second part I have analyzed how, through their agency, mothers have created assemblages in which the forensic dimension has taken on a central role. Yet, given their technical limitations, their practice emerges from an approach I identify as vernacular, one that repurposes everyday objects to find—or literally unearth—

justice. The next chapter continues along this line, focusing on the archives created by mothers to locate and identify their loved ones amid the overcrowding of morgues.

Finally, I want to highlight how the bodies of the searchers are at the center of these assemblages, where a sensorial dimension plays a driving force that illuminates the uncertain path of searching. This is a path which, as Muehlmann (2024) notes, is defined by waiting as a mechanism of coercion and weakening implemented by the state. However, I argue that the assemblage created by the mothers reflects their efforts to undermine this mechanism by rejecting the timelines imposed by official authority. While the mothers at times collaborate with authorities, this does not diminish their role as a sovereign record. Their demands are accompanied by other practices, desires, and emotions that transcend the logics of the state's sovereign framework. This will become more evident in the following pages.

Chapter III. Forensic Archives: Identification Methods Created by Mothers of the Disappeared

From the outside, it looks like any other government institution: gray walls, security checkpoints, and a tall white gate. The institution's logo engraved on one of the walls offers the only hint at what occurs inside. Once the security guard fills out a form with your details and requests an official ID, which will remain "safeguarded" during your visit, you can enter the premises. As you proceed, a peculiar smell begins to emerge, signaling that this institution is not an ordinary one. The intense odor seeps through your pores, clinging to you entirely. You walk down a long hallway that splits into two paths; you take the one to the right and find yourself before a large glass door that can only be opened with an access badge. A woman opens the door and tells you to go through. The smell starts to fade. The offices look like those of any other bureaucratic institution.

A man in an immaculate blue suit greets you in a wood-paneled room. For a moment, you forget that the crematory oven in this facility was used illegally for over a decade. Its purpose was to dispose of unclaimed corpses to make room for the bodies that continually arrived as the war escalated. A total of 1,559 bodies were incinerated without even a genetic profile being created for them. These individuals were reduced to ashes, leaving families to wonder whether their loved ones are missing, kidnapped, or buried in clandestine graves—questions that will never be answered. The secretary informs you that you may proceed to the main office. This is the Jalisciense Institute of Forensic Sciences (*Instituto Jalisciense de Ciencias Forenses*, IJCF) in Guadalajara, and home to the metropolitan morgue.

*

Across Latin America, various authors have analyzed how the body of strategies collectively known as the war on drugs has evolved into policies of annihilation, with brutality largely inflicted upon the poorest segments of the population, pursuing and stigmatizing them simultaneously. Whether in Brazil, Colombia, or El Salvador, anti-drug trafficking strategies have not resulted in the weakening of this illegal business but have instead brought about killings, disappearances, mass incarcerations, and an increase in the power of armed forces.[lxiii] In Mexico, amid the vortex of violence, even setting aside the impossibility of finding the disappeared, there is a national forensic crisis stemming from the underfunding of morgues, caused by the thousands of human remains still awaiting identification after being found in mass graves.

My interlocutors recounted stories of bodies lost within forensic facilities as though they had entered a hidden dimension with no return. Perhaps due to overcrowding or the corruption entangling authorities across the entire justice system, these bodies vanish without leaving a trace behind them—a phenomenon seemingly replicated across the territories I traversed during my fieldwork in Mexico. It is precisely due to the overcrowding of forensic infrastructure that a proliferation of archives has arisen. These include both those created by the state to classify and identify the deceased and the archives developed by the mothers of the disappeared, who undertake their own forensic identification methods in parallel to official ones.

In the following pages, I use the concept of archive to highlight the centrality of documents used and produced, particularly by the mothers of victims. My analysis focuses on how documents or other records are created, classified, and stored by the *buscadoras*. Thus, the

archives I address in this chapter belong both to the present and the past, as they speak of disappeared persons still awaiting their return home. I recall one afternoon I spoke with the director of the IJCF. I asked if he foresaw, not an end, but at least significant progress, in addressing the local morgue's crisis, as mothers had protested outside these offices just under a week ago. His response was a forceful *"we are working on it."* As we parted, he directed me to follow his secretary, who was already waiting at the door. When I approached, he handed me a visitor's kit that included a notebook, a pen, and a notepad, all bearing the institution's logo. I found this somewhat contradictory—a gift celebrating the identity of an institution that has failed to identify hundreds upon hundreds of bodies.

Thus, guided by my interlocutors and the concept of archive (*archivo*), I analyze the creation of identification methods developed by these women in Mexico. But first, I begin precisely where they often start their forensic journey: in extermination zones, where mass graves are located.

Are mass graves a type of archive?

As we search, Daniela tells me that graves *"are pits holding horror."* Her testimony has led me to reflect deeply on what graves represent, both literally and symbolically. What are their conceptual dimensions? Is it possible to think of them as a type of archive? The proliferation of burial sites across the country speaks, at its core, to the geographical extent of horror, as Daniela asserts. Along these lines, Anstett defines mass graves as sites of burial, deposition, and silencing.[lxiv] Yet these vaults of horror possess multidimensional meanings and interpretations, depending on the sociohistorical context. Nonetheless, their nature always seems to entail invisibilization as a primary objective.

Mass graves (*fosas clandestinas*) are an attempt to eradicate one or more individuals—not only their bodies but also the life stories of these victims. The goal is to erase every trace of their existence. Yet, in some ways, mass graves also become storage sites, as their contents—lifeless bodies—are treated as possessions whose geographic location is known only to a few. This may be to keep them accessible to perpetrators or carefully hidden from others' view. Some authors, particularly activists and journalists, have referred to Mexico as a country of graves (Guillén, Torres and Turati 2018). Between December 2018 and January 2023 alone, more than 2,700 clandestine burials were discovered nationwide. The war on drugs, I argue, is marked by a lethal juxtaposition: the ongoing disappearance of people and the proliferation of *fosas clandestinas* across the territory, as though it were a minefield.

How does the idea of invisibilization fit with the proliferation of thousands of mass graves? I invoke Stepputat's proposition, which asserts that death is the limit or end of power—that is, power literally ignores death.[lxv] However, thinking through the Mexican context, it seems that there is, instead, a governmental silence around and about death. This silence emerges because dead bodies are perceived as dangerous entities that must be separated from the realm of the living to prevent the spread of harm. Lifeless bodies are cast into a discursive realm that vilifies them, labeling them as internal enemies for having disrupted societal peace. They are directly associated with drug traffickers who, it is claimed, willingly entered a trade where life is merely a currency.[lxvi] There is an invisibilization fostered by the official narrative, which delineates the boundaries of the political community—those who belong and those who must be exiled or relegated to the margins, whose deaths hold no significance for our social body.

Between the war and mass graves, one aspect intrigues me: these pits of horror raise questions about the true authorship of thousands of burial sites. Are the criminals who dig the graves truly responsible, even when they themselves might soon become victims? Or are the responsible parties those operating the war within the state apparatus? Although the methods of killing are constantly evolving, there is a revealing point about the authorship of *fosas*. A security specialist shared with me during one of our conversations that when bodies found in a mass grave are meticulously arranged and segmented, it is likely that police or military personnel were involved in the killings. Another hypothesis is that members of a criminal group, formerly or currently part of state security forces, participated in the act of extermination. The internal structure of *fosas* speaks to the ways in which knowledge is both formed and applied. These pits of horror reveal alliances between those whom official narratives insist on portraying as our enemies.

When I began my ethnographic work with families of the disappeared in 2016, accounts of extermination practices involving chemicals to completely destroy victims' bodies were more common.[lxvii] While such practices persist, mass graves now seem to have become the ultimate expression of death south of the Rio Grande. Bodies are still burned or dissolved, but more often they are dismembered and thrown into the depths of the earth. Beneath us lies an underworld of victims longing for justice, waiting to resurface. Maricela, a searching mother, told me from her experience that mass graves are a convenient tool for criminals. *"We used to be certain that criminals would transport bodies to other municipalities or neighborhoods to dig graves far from where the killings occurred. Now it is increasingly common to find lifeless bodies near their own homes. It seems the criminals no longer have time."* The testimony of Armando's mother, whose son disappeared in 2017, is revealing as

it exposes that mass graves speak to us, telling us that perpetrators lack the time because they must rush to extinguish more lives.

Fosas clandestinas are sites of storage, and the arrangement of bodies, as the security specialist indicated, can even provide specific insights into the authors of these crimes. Yet, I have also questioned whether mass graves might themselves be a type of archive. Derrida suggested that archival practices are rooted in the management of events—and its registries—that are erased, manipulated, and destroyed in the name of the power behind the production of the archive.[lxviii] It is no coincidence that the concept derives from the Latin *"archivum"* which, in turn, originates from the Greek *"arkhē,"* bearing two meanings: origin and authority. Consequently, mass graves, like official archives, are the result of an act which demonstrates an expression of sovereignty, inasmuch as they attempt to gather in one space the bodies of those who died as part of a sovereign mandate—one potentially stemming from an entanglement between legal and illegal spheres. The fact that graves serve as storage spaces underscores their proximity not only to archival practices but also to the possibility of understanding bodies as texts—a notion I will revisit in the next section.

Yet clandestine graves are not like most archives that one can revisit from time to time to reexamine and reinterpret the past. Graves are subject to the passage of time due to the decomposition of bodies. Nevertheless, some bones remain, awaiting interpretation by forensic experts who must translate what they observe into official reports. Given the saturation of morgues in Mexico, families have found alternative potentialities in *fosas clandestinas*. Bodies, bones, and objects found within them are read in ways that sometimes break with the forensic guidelines of state power, thereby momentarily, or at least partially, reversing or altering the mandate inherent in the concept of an archive. The search for graves

and the subsequent exhumation of bodies by victims' families, as well as the creation of their archives, challenge the erasure that lies at the very core of a clandestine grave's existence.

I want to emphasize that a mass grave is, therefore, a pit, a mark of horror, a storage site. It is an archive of the brutality of war, though it harbors a glimmer of hope. Graves, as archives altered by victims' families, have uncovered thousands of bodies buried beneath the earth. In spite of that, once the state reasserts its sovereign claim over the victims, the remains are transferred to morgues, where each deceased is treated in a manner reminiscent of how texts are handled and analyzed by paleographers roaming the halls of old buildings housing grand archives.

The morgue as an official archive

There they are, lying on the slabs, others piled in various nooks and crannies. The technicians try to identify the cause behind the death of the body they observe. They take photographs. They use technical terms I do not understand. They touch the skin of a lifeless person to carefully examine their contusions. They write notes. Witnessing this forensic exercise repeatedly, I began to think of bodies as texts and this morgue as a (dis)ordered archive containing over 1,500 unidentified bodies. A vast building housing documents with stories administered and interpreted by institutional power. Still, this archive is accessible to few; it is not available for public consultation.

When the technicians scrutinize the victim's injuries, it is as though they are reading what the skin can tell them. They decipher the largest organ of the human body. It seems to me that each body has a kind of textuality, understood as the set of characteristics that distinguish each existing text in its singularity. My purpose in equating a body as a text is to draw upon

its etymological root, which comes from the Latin *textus*, literally meaning "woven." This takes me to the function of the skin as a broad tissue which covers us, even serving as a boundary with the external world. *Textus* inevitably leads me to think about the texture of the skin, its appearance as a surface. Skin as a repository, an object of analysis and intervention. In fact, in her study on skin as an aesthetic and political device, Thuy Linh Tu argues that this organ is the site where ideas like race or beauty are constructed.[lxix]

Linh Tu adds that skin can be seen as a kind of archive, but based on my experience in the morgue, I prefer to see the body's surface as an extensive text. Our surface is composed of marks and features that hold stories which are interpreted depending on the social, political, and geographical context in which we are situated. The lifeless body is also a text. It is an organic text in the sense that it undergoes transmutation over time. Its fluids, its flesh, and the decomposition it experiences while buried in a clandestine grave speak to a textuality that changes gradually. These are texts that slowly disintegrate, eventually reduced to remains that may one day be exhumed and taken to the morgue.

It is important to highlight the fact that our own lives are stored within a wide variety of archives. Family photo albums, whether physical or digital, become domestic *archivos* aiming to construct an image of the family—a fiction composed of fragments that will be told and remembered years later. Additionally, as we grow, we become part of another set of archives—the official ones. These include vast databases or the files in the shelves of institutions like the civil registry, where our birth certificate becomes the first document the state creates to establish its authority. These are biopolitical archives, which classify and organize in order to generate knowledge that allows for the management of the population.

Thus, I see the morgue as an archive, or even as the culmination of the archival practice orchestrated by the state. In this case, archival practice is intertwined with the war on drugs and the ambiguous role of authorities. Investigating the reasons behind the morgue's overcrowding, I encountered a range of responses from forensic institution workers. Frequently, officials pointed to a lack of financial resources and the need to expand facilities, which can no longer accommodate the daily influx of bodies. Others argued that the problem lies with the Prosecutor's Office: many of the victims stored in the morgue are part of investigations that the institution has not resolved. As long as these cases remain open, the bodies will continue to occupy space in the IJCF.

For the searchers, however, the overcrowding stems from *"the insensitivity and corruption of everyone in government,"* as Mónica puts it. This testimony from the mother of Joaquín, who disappeared in 2016, highlights the multiple interpretations surrounding what happens in the local morgue and the political use of this institution. Beyond the current crisis, authorities seek to read lifeless bodies to classify and identify them according to official standards. In other words, science is used as a tool to reveal identity. However, in this particular forensic archive, the bodies are disorganized, even fragmented. Is overcrowding a deliberate practice of forgetting created by the authorities? In the eyes of many mothers, it is. They believe that officials prefer to exhaust the *buscadoras* rather than return their loved ones' bodies and provide answers, as doing so would expose the authorities' connections with drug trafficking groups.

But it is not only about the state: criminals also use their victims' bodies as texts. The qualitative violence (i.e., brutality) inflicted on individuals leaves marks on the skin, with communicative intentions aimed at rival groups, certain authorities, and the general population. Here, I draw on Krupa's (2009) work on lynchings in Ecuador, which he conceptualizes as political spectacles that not only punish alleged offenders but also convey deeper messages about power, legitimacy, identity, and exclusion. Lynching, in this view, is not an isolated act of violence, but a strategic and semiotic performance that shapes the local political imaginary, racial boundaries, and conceptions of authority. Krupa notes that the bodies most frequently targeted by lynching tend to be *highly identifiable ones*, highlighting race as a master code in the enactment of lynching in the country. I emphasize this argument—particularly the communicative dimension that emanates from each lynching—in order to connect it with the display of bodies by criminal groups in public spaces or on social media. This is something that Mendoza (2016) also addresses in her analysis of written messages, often threats against rival groups or the police for detaining criminal leaders, which are placed next to victims. These written messages, when combined with the lifeless body, work together to produce broader, more forceful, and *gore*-saturated messages. Using these arguments as my analytical foundation, I now turn to a case I encountered during my fieldwork.

On one occasion, Susana shared her thoughts about the bodies marked with circular shapes on their arms, apparently made with a tool that had torn through their skin. These bodies were found in mass graves located in the southern part of the city: *"It's most likely criminals marking their men for identification—to know who lives and who dies and when."* The searchers have woven together a grassroots epistemology, formulating theories that authorities have neither uncovered nor acknowledged. By connecting evidence seen on bodies with news and rumors, my interlocutors create contextual analyses which demonstrate criminal patterns and propose categories for understanding what is happening in this territory. The marked bodies speak to the creation of a criminal textuality forged by the reconfiguration of criminal territories. This case reveals that the murdered body is both a medium and a message. Killing, marking, fragmenting a body, displaying it in public spaces or through images, constitutes a significant discursive act, redefining the boundaries of criminality and horror.

The forensic exercise conducted by the *buscadoras* is based on interpreting all marks on the skin—a topic I delve into in the next paragraphs—with the goal of returning as many remains as possible to their families. I want first to emphasize the idea of thinking about the morgue as a place where hundreds of texts are stored, stacked one on top of another. If, as Derrida suggests (1996), the archive marks the beginning of some kind of authority, the morgue becomes an epicenter for understanding how the Mexican state apparatus manages death in the present historical moment. It is a place where knowledge is produced and administered, contributing to an official narrative defining death amid the war. Nonetheless, rather than meticulously classifying the body-as-text, this archive opts for disorder as a mechanism of control. What occurs in the country's morgues also echoes Derrida's notion that there would

be no impulse to create an archive without the possibility of forgetting. However, as Didi-Huberman argues, a defining feature of an archive are its various gaps.[lxx] It is precisely within these gaps in records and information that mothers of victims immerse themselves, weaving through fragments and silences. These archival gaps become opportunities, intertwined with imagination as a transformative force in wartime. The *buscadoras* demonstrate how archives can confront the absence or denial of state technologies and sciences.

Forensic notebooks

The smell of tobacco permeates the air of the house. Dinora holds her coffee in her right hand while smoking a cigarette with her left. We are on her patio, surrounded by orchids and violets. This retired secretary has spent years searching for Juan, her son. Throughout this journey, Dinora claims to have witnessed the unimaginable. *"I never thought I'd find myself among clandestine graves or walking into a morgue to see all those bodies."* After finishing her coffee, she brings out notebooks filled with annotations and drawings, part of the archive created by the group of searching mothers she belongs to.

Before beginning her account, Dinora lights another cigarette in the kitchen, and returns to the patio with her dogs in tow. We sit under a small mango tree. The mother of Juan recalls that in 2016, rumors and local newspaper reports began circulating about "something happening" at the forensic institute. In response, the collective decided to visit the facilities to find out what was really going on. They requested permission to enter the area where the bodies were kept, but their request was denied. *"We were fed up. Some of us already knew the facilities were overcrowded with unclaimed bodies."* Taking a drag from her cigarette, she pauses and tells me: *"Out of desperation, we stole the photos the authorities showed us—photos of some of the bodies stored on the shelves."*

The photos Dinora refers to belong to the institution's forensic photographic archive. Whenever a body enters the morgue, photographs are taken and later shown to *buscadoras* who visit the facility. However, this practice is relatively recent and was not part of the IJCF's routine processes to aid families in their search and identification efforts. Due to weeks of pressure, some of the mothers gained access to this archive and photographed the images, later publishing them on the collective's social media accounts. This provoked anger from authorities who had "trusted" the searchers. Following this leak and subsequent protests, the forensic institution allowed the women to enter the IJCF to see the *archivo* in its entirety and even view some of the bodies. With the morgue's opening, my interlocutors began documenting what they saw in their notebooks (*cuadernos*). This marked the birth of an archive that reveals a different way of reading bodies using techniques that forensic medicine might consider rudimentary.

Dinora places another *cuaderno* on the table. Its cover resembles an ordinary school notebook, but its pages reveal a different kind of annotation. The first page shows the silhouette of a man. From his left arm extends a line leading to the phrase: *"Yin-yang tattoo."* On the next page, there is another male silhouette, this time not drawn but cut from a magazine. *"We looked for a picture of a man in a magazine because he had so many tattoos that we needed to specify where the designs were on his body,"* Dinora explains as she flips through some of the volumes forming this archive. When I ask her how this forensic exercise works, she replies, *"It's all in the details."* Often, the mothers do not have direct access to the bodies (*cuerpos*), so instead, forensic workers show them photographic records. In a sense, the exercise my interlocutors perform involves replicating these photographs, paying close attention to details such as moles, scars, and tattoos. It is important to highlight that the

forensic photographic archive is not public, as authorities argue that these "gore" images cannot be shown to all families. *"Seeing them is a shock for the relatives,"* the IJCF director told me when I inquired about the matter. For their part, the families believe this is an excuse since they have long demanded full access to the archive, which has grown significantly over the years.

Additionally, many of the images depict bodies lacking genetic profiles, a lack, the authorities claim is due to their excessive workload. Faced with these state-imposed obstacles, forensic notebooks are shared on the collective's social media accounts to ensure families *"see everything,"* according to Juan's mother. While this observation and writing exercise may not completely redefine forensic practice, it is undoubtedly a politically charged exercise. Perhaps the state apparatus has monopolized both the act of killing and the identification of bodies. However, the work done by the *buscadoras* offers a chance to see light where there is darkness or where institutional neglect has flourished as a policy limiting families' actions. These notebooks demonstrate a unique way of reading victims' bodies. As a matter of fact, they serve as a kind of "rudimentary" DNA test. Describing the collective's work, Dinora states:

> Our work is based on how you can recognize your child, wife, or husband through very particular characteristics. Tattoos are significant because many bodies have them. From the beginning, we knew we had to pay attention to those marks.

Thus, as my interlocutor highlights tattoos, it is evident that the content of this notebook archive shows that skin is an interface for interconnection, condensing bodily modifications—whether due to time (aging) or personal desires. It represents a visible

identity, an external DNA that the mothers of the disappeared attempt to read or decipher. Of course, this deciphering depends on whether the conditions of a body found in a mass grave allow for the reading of the code composed of scattered marks across the skin. Dinora says, pointing to a drawing, *"There are families who see our notebooks and immediately go to the morgue. We give them hope"*.

Juan's mother points to a sheet of paper and then explains, *"Not long ago, a man contacted the collective because he saw a drawing on our social media with notes about a crescent-shaped piercing and a scar on the right forearm."* She closes the notebook, sighs, and adds, *"He went to the morgue, and it was indeed his daughter, even though they had already told him there wasn't a body matching the characteristics he described."* Due to the authorities' restrictions on the forensic photographic archive, this group of mothers has become overwhelmed with tasks as they replicate that *archivo* using pencils, crayons, paper, and magazine clippings. To ease their workload, they have decided to focus primarily on tattoos, which have become the core of their forensic work since they are symbols that *"families can recognize more quickly,"* explains Dinora.

However, Juan's mother clarifies, *"We know not all bodies have tattoos."* She adds something equally significant: *"We've faced problems because, as you know, there's still a stigma associated with tattooed individuals... why can't a tattoo be seen as art? In the end, it's a form of expression."* Her words remind me of Gell's conceptualization, for whom "the tattoo is the exteriorization of the interior, which is simultaneously the interiorization of the exterior."[lxxi] In other words, a tattoo results from multiple intersubjective processes in which we are immersed as individuals within the social systems we inhabit throughout our lives. Understanding the body as a canvas goes beyond a static comprehension of marks, delving

into the symbolic importance of tattoos as forms of affirming or revealing an identity (not merely genetic).

"We know what helps us recognize our loved ones, and from there, we will keep resisting." In this sense, I believe the forensic *cuadernos* compensate for the lack of genetic profiles created by morgue technicians—profiles that should include photographs, DNA samples, fingerprints, and other critical components based on legal protocols. Equally important, the archive created by my interlocutors is part of their forensic work, which includes finding mass graves and recovering bodies. These notebooks materialize a process that combines affect, intuition, and detailed observation. This sensorial practice has evolved from being carried out in open fields or urban peripheries to taking place within morgue facilities. Therefore, I argue that this archive has undergone a metamorphosis, becoming a political technology that embodies the possibility of victims' reappearance.

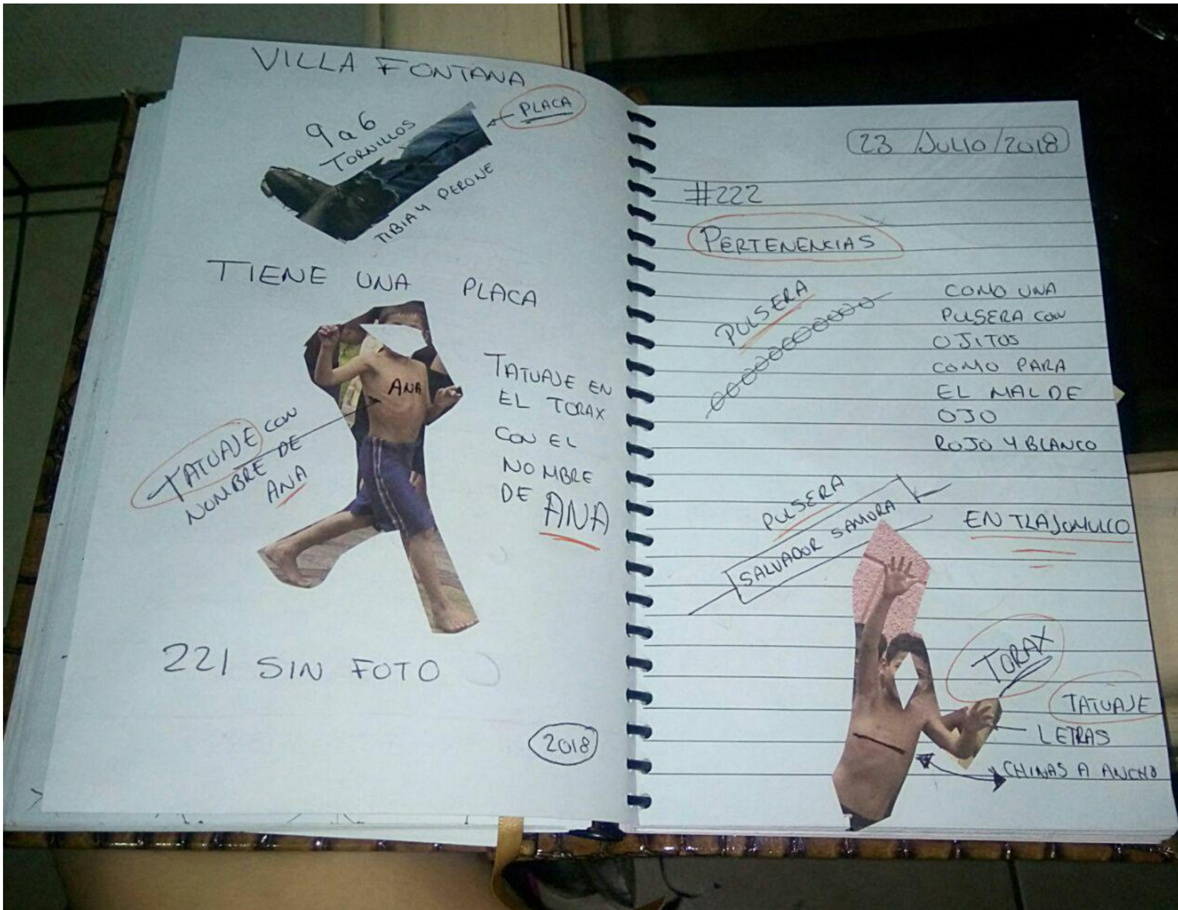


Image 3.1 A fragment of the archive. Image shared by my interlocutors.

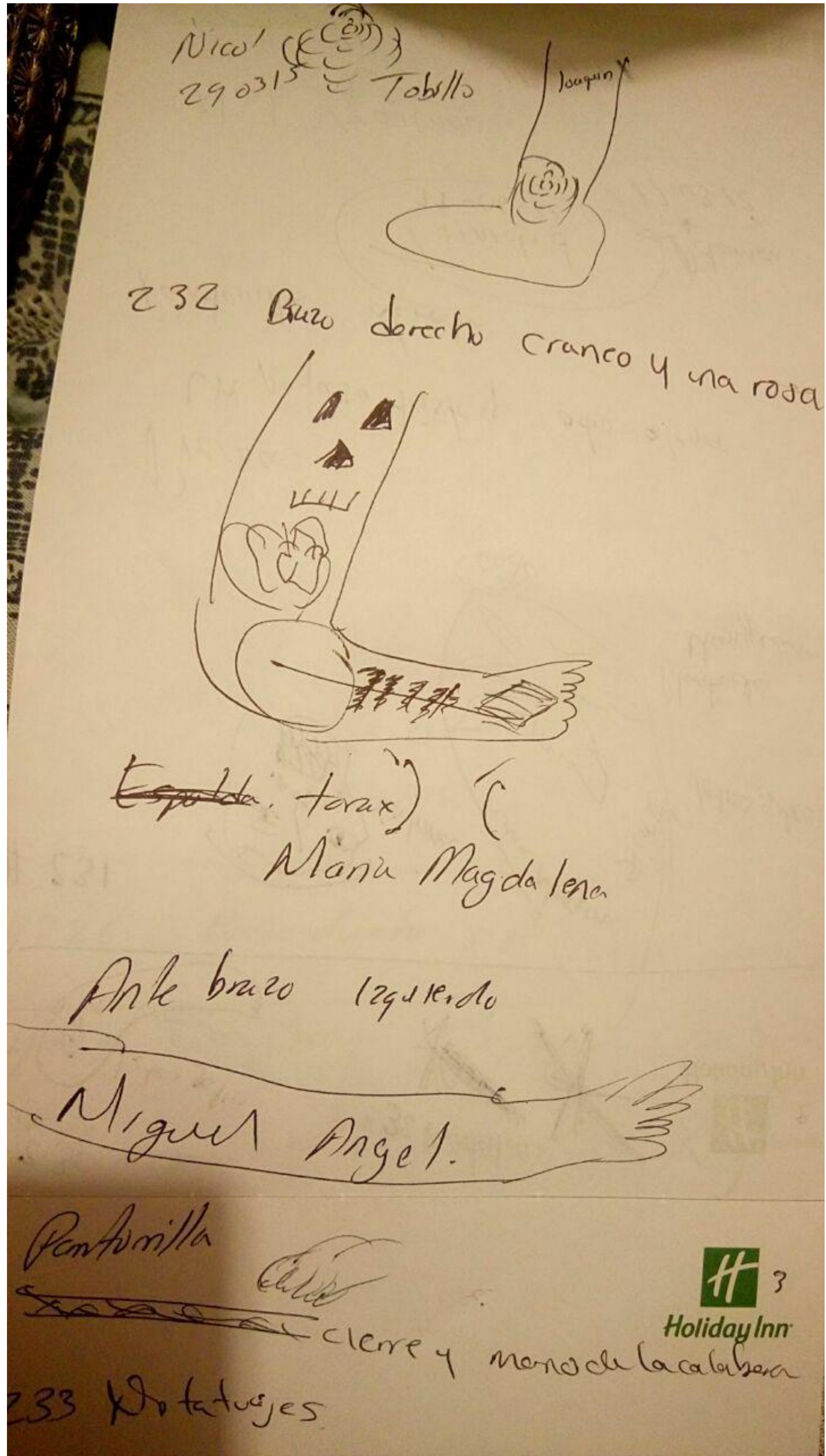


Image 3.2 “It is not doodling, it is forensic knowledge”, say Lorena. Image shared by my interlocutors.

Coordinate log

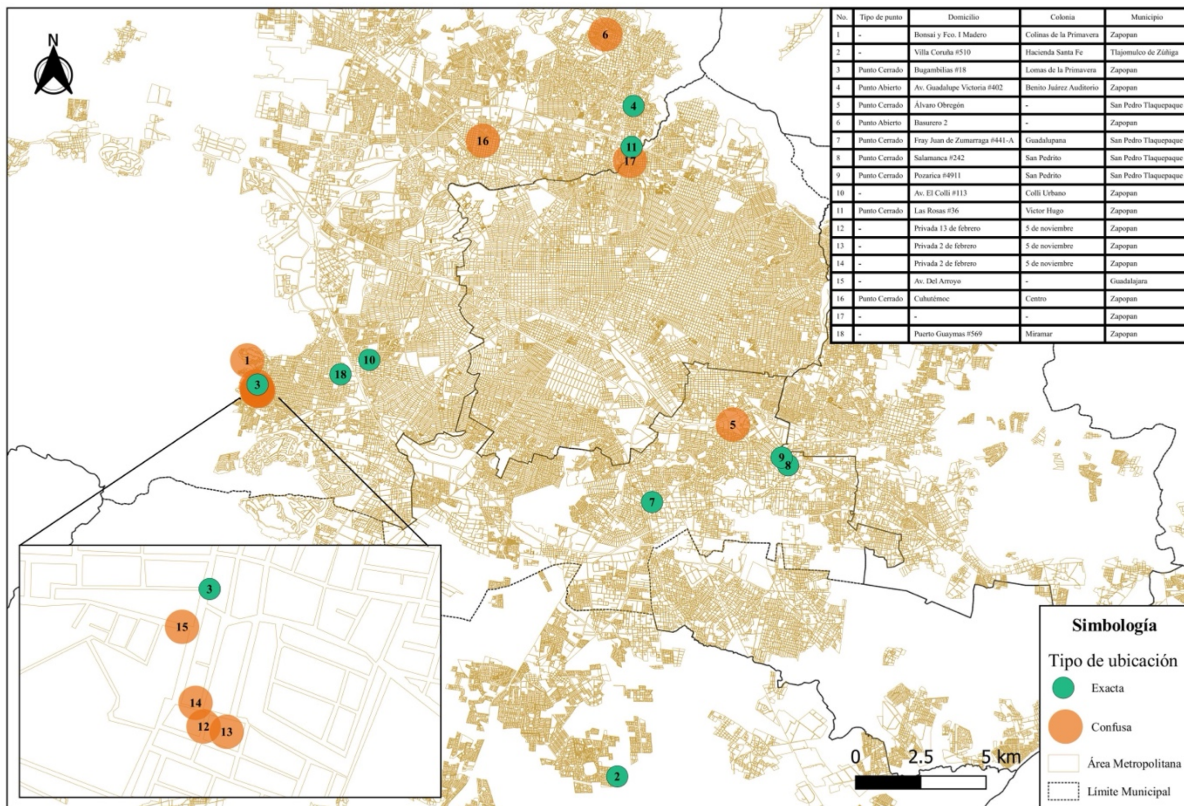
We are resting under the shade of a canopy after four hours of excavation to recover fragments found in three mass graves. I ask Juliana about the notebook she always carries with her. She begins to show me her notes: street names, dates, neighborhoods, municipalities. In this notebook, she has recorded all the possible locations where the bodies of her fellow collective members' missing children might be found. Juliana has meticulously gathered this data. Each page follows the same format created by Rafael's mother: first the name, then the date of disappearance, the last known location of the person, and the possible place where they might be buried. The information about possible locations has been gathered through rumors and anonymous calls made to the mothers. However, authorities have not taken the collective's coordinate log, contained in a gray-covered notebook, seriously. *"They ask us how we obtained the data. They dismiss our efforts simply because it's not their work, done themselves,"* Juliana tells me.

Authorities have disregarded this notebook, which serves as a repository of knowledge with the potential to be used as a searching tool. It contains fragments of the geography of disappearances in the city and even reflects how violence has erased bodies across Guadalajara. This notebook is a document filled with coordinates of crime's territoriality, illustrating the spatial and bodily claims criminal groups have imposed. The oldest case recorded in Juliana's notebook dates back to 2014. Some of the coordinates in that *cuaderno* even point to areas of the city where clandestine graves have been discovered inside abandoned houses. Juliana's work is evidence not only of how the crime of disappearance has unfolded in Guadalajara but also of how these spaces have been shaped by war. Nevertheless, authorities dismissed this document as mere scribbles of streets and

neighborhoods, based on rumors. When Juliana shared her frustration over seeing this valuable knowledge ignored, I proposed creating a map using her data. I contacted a geographer colleague, and together we developed a map that "appropriately" visualizes the spatiality of disappearance.

This data, transformed into a map, now possesses the legitimacy conferred by cartographic imagery, a technology recognized by the government. During one of our calls, Juliana told me they had taken the map to the Prosecutor's Office—so it could be incorporated into investigations—and to the Search Commission, with the aim of visiting these locations to attempt to locate possible clandestine burial sites. I want to emphasize that Juliana's notebook is a document containing valuable knowledge that ultimately influenced state structures when presented according to the parameters of legibility established by the state itself.

Furthermore, this *cuaderno* is part of the homemade archives created by the searchers, an extension of the archival practices that include the forensic notebooks mentioned earlier. These archives are stored in the homes of my interlocutors, kept in boxes and drawers. As a document integrating the searchers' *archivo*, it is a fragment whose information holds the potential to transform the future. As a material object embedded in my interlocutors' processes, this notebook participates in the effort to find *desaparecidos*. However, as I previously highlighted, it is only when the *cuaderno* is transformed into another type of document—a map—that the state decides to pay attention to Juliana's work. Juliana has become the official scribe of her collective, interpreting the data shared with her by other mothers in the city (image 3.3).



No.	Tipo de punto	Domicilio	Colonia	Municipio
1	-	Bonsai y Fco. I Madero	Colinas de la Primavera	Zapopan
2	-	Villa Coruña #510	Hacienda Santa Fe	Tlajomulco de Zúñiga
3	Punto Cerrado	Bugambilias #18	Lomas de la Primavera	Zapopan
4	Punto Abierto	Av. Guadalupe Victoria #402	Benito Juárez Auditorio	Zapopan
5	Punto Cerrado	Álvaro Obregón	-	San Pedro Tlaquepaque
6	Punto Abierto	Basurero 2	-	Zapopan
7	Punto Cerrado	Fray Juan de Zumarraga #441-A	Guadalupana	San Pedro Tlaquepaque
8	Punto Cerrado	Salamanca #242	San Pedrito	San Pedro Tlaquepaque
9	Punto Cerrado	Pozarica #4911	San Pedrito	San Pedro Tlaquepaque
10	-	Av. El Colli #113	Colli Urbano	Zapopan
11	Punto Cerrado	Las Rosas #36	Victor Hugo	Zapopan
12	-	Privada 13 de febrero	5 de noviembre	Zapopan
13	-	Privada 2 de febrero	5 de noviembre	Zapopan
14	-	Privada 2 de febrero	5 de noviembre	Zapopan
15	-	Av. Del Arroyo	-	Guadalajara
16	Punto Cerrado	Cuhutémoc	Centro	Zapopan
17	-	-	-	Zapopan
18	-	Puerto Guaymas #569	Miramar	Zapopan

Image 3.3 Annotations transformed into a map. A notebook that has turned into a graphic representation legitimized by the state apparatus. A map that visualizes cases of disappearance on a terrestrial surface known as Guadalajara. Map created by Daniela Rodríguez.

An archive to find answers

Lola places three cardboard boxes on her dining table. They are filled with newspaper clippings and photographs related to the case of her son, Pablo, who disappeared in 2016. She tells me it is time to organize this archive that has grown throughout its nearly five-year existence. She cuts out every piece of news related to the context of disappearances, both at the state and municipal levels. She has been buying several newspapers a week to track the iterations of this topic. Thus, Pablo's mother has been building a small newspaper archive that forms part of her personal collection, which also includes photos she prints—images taken during searches with other mothers. *"I take pictures of everything because if the authorities don't record anything, we must,"* she says. Lola has asked me for help digitizing the documents, so I brought my portable scanner to her home. We sorted everything into four categories: local news, national news, search photographs, and a smaller pile of papers containing Pablo's personal documents, such as his birth certificate. Lola shared her concern about keeping everything in order, fearing that something might get lost or that time could damage these documents.

For Pablo's mother, the contents of these boxes represent an invaluable part of the work the government has failed to do to locate her son. Lola has carefully collected and stored all these papers, buying nearly three different newspapers every day to track news about the war. Her cellphone has served as a camera to capture moments during fieldwork when searching for mass graves. Lola's archive reminds me of Cristina Rivera Garza's book, *El invencible verano de Liliana* (*Liliana's Invincible Summer*), in which Cristina pieces together the story of her sister, a femicide victim.[lxxii] Unlike Lola, Cristina found boxes filled

with documents, including letters Liliana received from friends, notes, and other writings that, unknowingly, recorded her final days.

Cristina pieced together a puzzle composed of some dated notes or scribbles on grid paper—her sister's favorite. This archive also contains phrases written on napkins, tickets, and other scraps of paper. Liliana loved to write; she saved everything. In her book, the author assembled all these documents to create a chronological order, paying attention to the color of the ink and handwriting style to determine the timeline of undated documents. Cristina sought to answer what had happened, focusing on when her sister's ex-partner's haunting presence turned into constant stalking.

In contrast, Lola's archive is built around a different question. The conundrum of what happened undoubtedly drives this searching mother, but the question that most strongly fuels the creation of this archive is: Where is Pablo? Cristina's archive reconstructs fragments of Liliana's life and the thoughts triggered by her predator's stalking—a trail that years later would help clarify the crime. On the other hand, Lola's archive retrieves moments from a life suspended by the war on drugs. It's an archive of disappearance. Rather than Pablo's traces, it is actually the absence of them that empowers the creation of this homemade *archivo*. Days after he disappeared, Pablo's truck was found in a nearby city, but there has been no news since. This project seeks what Liliana's case had: clues, traces, and opportunities to answer the questions that haunt Lola.

Pablo's mother traces hints found in media reports and her fieldwork, attempting to piece them together, gathering every trace to connect them. Along the way, she collects pieces of stories, holding onto them in the hope of eventually piecing together an answer. *"I know I won't randomly find news about my son one day, but it helps,"* she says. Lola records every story to see if there's information about the area where her son disappeared, the criminal groups operating there, or the arrests made in that region. She ties all this to the data in her investigation file and what she has been told during her visits to the area where her son's truck was found. Like a private investigator creating her own archive to solve a mystery, Lola keeps photos, knowing they might also help other *buscadoras*.

Over the hours we spend scanning documents, Pablo's mother tells me about the importance of gathering all the material traces we produce throughout our lives. She emphasizes the need to create and preserve personal archives in order to tell our own stories — especially, as she puts it, "because you never know if something bad can happen". For her, the archive is not just an antidote; it is a preventive measure against the possibility that something could happen. The archive is a place to turn to for answers if something does occur. Therefore, we must condense our life stories into notes, photographs, letters, or journals. Lola also returns to the idea of the body as a text: *"It's important to know every detail about a person. Later, they ask you for your missing loved one's characteristics, and you have to give a good answer. That's why I save everything and pay attention to everything."* Pablo had a scar on his forehead, and there is even a photo of that mark among the documents. This archive is an invocation—a summoning of the absent.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have argued that within the forensic infrastructure of the Mexican state, there are gaps from which the mothers of the disappeared exercise their corporeal sovereignty. By conceptualizing the morgue as an archive, I have highlighted the practices of disorganization and control over *cuerpos* carried out by authorities within the context of the war on drugs. At the same time, however, the searchers have developed their own types of *archivos*, precisely emerging from these interstices. These archives underscore the role of materialities (such as notebooks) in the sovereign registry created by my interlocutors, forming assemblages shaped by a multiplicity of agents contributing to the processes.

Furthermore, I have emphasized how the mothers turn to the surface of the body to formulate and implement their own methods of identification. I argue that the archives created by these women have evolved into technologies that challenge the absence or denial of official technologies and sciences. The methodologies developed by my interlocutors demonstrate that there is a production of knowledge capable of permeating and, at times, disrupting the state apparatus's own management of death.

Chapter IV. Invocations of the Absent

An invocation is often conceived as a prayer intended to summon the presence of God or another divinity—a form of calling. In my attempt to invoke the absent, I draw inspiration from the work mothers in western Mexico who search for clandestine graves on the outskirts of Guadalajara, the city with the highest number of reported disappearances in the country. In 2006, then-President Felipe Calderón launched a security strategy that deployed the armed forces and public security under the pretext of combating drug trafficking organizations. This plan unleashed criminal fragmentation and realignments, igniting public battles that have redefined Mexico's security landscape. Guided by the work of the mothers and the insights of Saidiya Hartman, I argue that the bodies lying in mass graves or abandoned in morgues are not merely awaiting identification—they are waiting to be heard.[lxxiii]

My analysis is rooted in the perspective of defamiliarizing the familiar, as proposed by Hartman (2008). My application of Hartman's approach begins by arguing that in Mexico, we have become so accustomed to understanding war via stories of mutilation, death, and armed confrontations that we overlook the existence of other narratives—those eclipsed by the spectacle of violence. At the onset of the war on drugs, the government used to present alleged criminals in press conferences. Physically displayed before the cameras, these individuals were made to pose as bait to sustain the narrative of a state actively working to eradicate crime. Although such press conferences no longer take place, the dominant media representations of violence remain largely unchanged: they continue to emphasize the capture of drug lords and confrontations involving high-powered weapons, armored vehicles, and fear-inducing pursuits. Defamiliarizing the familiar entails shifting our gaze away from the paraphernalia of conflict to shed light on the lives of victims, thus avoiding a fixation on

gruesome accounts of sacrifice and enabling a more nuanced understanding of their experiences. Following Hartman's assertion, one of my central objectives is to "investigate the construction of the subject and its social relations" as an invocation of victims through the traces on their bodies and the voices of their relatives.[lxxiv] My intention is to draw upon biographical fragments stored in the traces that mark our skin over time or are deliberately created through our desires—such as tattoos.

At first, I thought that only material objects would play a central role in this invocation, as our life stories are intimately tied to them. In the Mexican context, for instance, objects found in mass graves become evidence and, according to the searchers, awaken the hope that they may contribute to the identification of the victims. However, during my fieldwork—both in grave searches and at the morgue—I discovered that objects located alongside bodies are rarely treated as central pieces of evidence. Instead, they are almost always stored in the forensic institution's warehouses, much like the victims themselves. By the end of 2024, there were 34,699 bodies remaining unidentified in morgues across the country.

In this nation, *cuerpos* buried with the intent to remain underground resurface thanks to the work of mothers, as part of an assemblage of living and dead bodies. This assemblage extends into the morgue, where a process of reading begins, reminiscent of paleographers deciphering parchments, but in this case, working with the skin to identify scars, birthmarks, and piercings. Traces on texts. Traces on bodies. Due to the lack of official records, my interlocutors write down everything they observe in notebooks. As demonstrated in chapter III, they have created an archive which documents the physical characteristics of those they have found in graves or who are still in the morgue. The forensic notebooks kept by mothers serve as the foundation for the invocation I propose here, which entails delving into the traces

on each body to uncover a part of its identity. Due to the impossibility of accessing the material objects held by the authorities, I focus on tattoos as life traces inscribed in ink, functioning as condensed narratives.

With the intention of making tattoos analytically comprehensible, I propose viewing them as objects that can be examined in detail and appreciated with careful attention. Thus, I consider the tattoo an object which encapsulates the possibility of knowing, alongside the loved ones of the person, a fragment of an interrupted life story. I engage with that object (the tattoo), through photographs or drawings related to the ink marks on victims' bodies. By treating tattoos as objects or artifacts, they become tangible reminders of a singular life. As fragments of experiences, tattoos encapsulate desires, joy, pain, and also "fears, violence, intimacies, and forms of belonging," as Napolitano describes in her analysis of traces.[lxxv]

Following Derrida's assertion (1996) that traces serve as reminders of absence, tattoos emerge as testimonies of the disappeared. This invocation, noted earlier, draws on Hartman's work, particularly her proposal of critical fabulation. This approach aims to "put the status of the event at risk," challenging the silence and oblivion that so often frame the lives of victims. It seeks to tell or recover the stories that remain at the margins of official archives and historical narratives.[lxxvi] Thus, in the following pages, we (my interlocutors and I) invoke the disappeared. Contrary to the general claim that the dead and the survivors never share the same temporality, my proposal is based on creating a dialogue between past and present, between the victims and their loved ones. This is a conversation framed in ink, between families and the stories of the deceased stored in mass graves or the morgue which, despite its overcrowding, reveals the vitality of flesh—perhaps as a type of relic, understood as parts of the body, skin, blood, or other personal objects serving as socio-politically significant

vessels.[lxxvii] This invocation expands to include tattoos as relics amid a war seeking to establish a total landscape of destruction. The mothers turn to these relic-objects, wielding their power to challenge the sovereign state's absolute authority over their loved ones, as they are part of their forensic practices of identification. Through their agency, these *buscadoras* meticulously document everything they observe on the victims' bodies in their records. My interlocutors have created an archive filled with notes and drawings, which they gradually publish on social media.

*

During my fieldwork, I spoke with women who continue to search for their children or have found them, using tattoos as a mechanism of identification. We discussed the significance of these ink marks in the lives of their loved ones. However, in the frequent absence of photographs of the tattoos in question, one of the *buscadoras* handed me a drawing of her son's tattoo design, *"So you know what I'm talking about,"* she said. Other mothers also began giving me drawings, which I carefully stored in a folder. Below, I present images accompanied by fragments of conversations in which they evoked stories related to the lives of their relatives. This is a brief and intimate glimpse into the worlds of my interlocutors and their children, conveyed through testimonies that speak to the memories emanating from the marks on their skin—tattoos as relic-objects.

Finally, the words of the *buscadoras* remind us that speaking about the people we love is a sensorial event rooted in feeling, listening, and even smelling. As Mónica told me, *"when I talk about Luis, I see him again; I feel him by my side."* The invocations weave several stories that are now shared in these pages.

Invocations

"Sofía got a tattoo when she was 15. I was furious when I first saw it—imagine the shock! It was on her left leg, and honestly, it looked beautiful. The tattoo, done in black and pink, stood out due to its striking contrast. Sofía often talked about the energy people carried; she believed in spiritual practices, like crystals and incense. She explained to me that dreamcatchers are meant to trap negative energy with the web at their center. To her, having one was a form of protection. She always tried to calm me down, telling me I needed to relax to enjoy life because, as she put it, that is what we are here for. Sofía rarely felt sad; she always had a positive outlook. That tattoo was her good luck charm.

She was the kind of person who would give you advice when you needed it or simply listen without judgment. Her siblings often talked to her about their relationships or work. Milton, one of my sons, used to say, *'your daughter is like a psychologist.'* Whenever I think about her tattoo, I focus on the good things, on how much I love my girl. I remember her words, reminding me to relax and enjoy life. She told us that dreamcatchers held magical properties, and honestly, she was magic herself. You could see it in her eyes, in her way of being. She was the family's dreamcatcher—always finding the positive in every moment.

Sofía was studying to become a lawyer. She wanted to channel that same positive energy into defending others. She was excited about university, the first person in our family to pursue a degree. We were all so proud of her. One day, she told me her dream was to buy me a house so we would not have to pay rent anymore."

Viridiana, mother of Sofía

Sofía, the girl who was a dreamcatcher, was found in a mass grave in 2019. Her body was returned to her mother five months later.

Image 4.1 Drawing made by Viridiana.

*

“They say Geminis are restless and adventurous, and that is exactly how Jesús was. As a child, he was full of energy, and I was constantly tired from trying to keep up with him. As soon as he entered high school, he started going to parties every weekend with his friends. Sometimes, he would go for runs in the park and come back even more energized. When his first children were born, he was the happiest man on earth. He carried them all day, always playing with them. Jesús was a great father, and I am not just saying that because he was my son. Neighbors would tell me, *‘Jesús is such a wonderful dad.*’

He had a tattoo on his back of Luis and Roberto’s birthdates, his first two children, written in Roman numerals. I do not remember why he chose that style, but those tattoos are proof of how much he loved his boys. From a young age, he dreamed of being a father, though he always wanted to have a daughter as well.

He had another tattoo—a symbol of his zodiac sign—that he got when he was 20. He did not ask for my permission, but what could I do? There was no way to remove it. Jesús believed in astrology, and though I don’t know where he picked that up, he would always tell me, *‘You’re a Taurus, and Tauruses are determined. Plus, you’re the most beautiful mom.’* Jesús worked as a vendor in local markets. He supported me financially, and his disappearance has been the hardest thing I’ve ever faced, a wound that will never heal. I miss him so much.”

Natalia, mother of Jesús

Jesús’s body was identified in 2021.

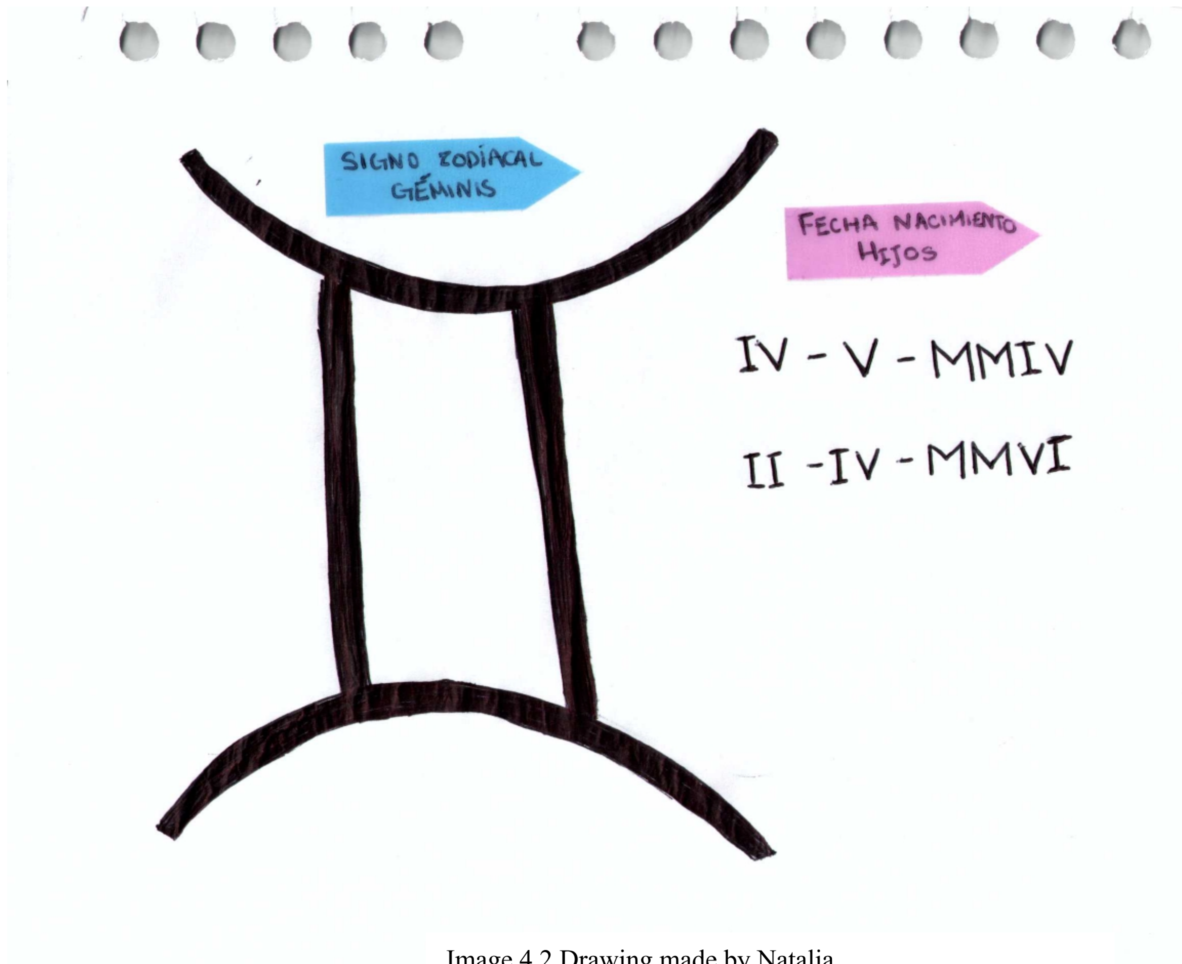


Image 4.2 Drawing made by Natalia.

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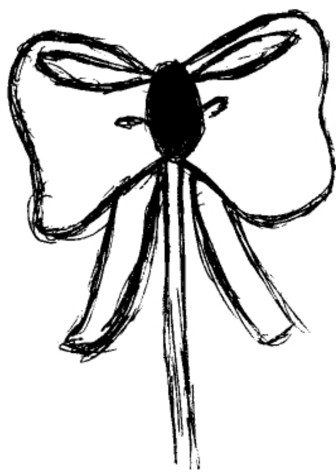
"Dafne loved dressing up—pretty earrings, new shoes, or a fresh outfit. She had a passion for perfumes and would come home from the market every weekend with new clothes. Sometimes, I used to scold her, but I must admit she had impeccable taste. On Fridays, she would go out with her friends, and the house would be filled with a lovely fragrance. It was not just about looking good for Dafne; she believed smelling good was just as important. She loved going out with her friends and always looked stunning.

Sometimes I used to ask her to run errands, like picking up something for dinner. She would not go until she was dressed to the nines. *'You're just going to buy tomatoes, not to a party.'* Those moments make me laugh now.

Her way of being has helped me cope since she has been gone. I have started putting more effort into how I look before leaving the house, in her honor. Dafne was always giving me fashion advice—suggesting haircuts or pairing skirts with certain blouses. She had a tattoo of bows on her back, in shades of purple, her favorite color. Those bows reflected her personality—always polished, always smiling. Everyone remembers her for her lovely smile. When I think of her, I see that radiant smile. She had so many dreams. She wanted to travel, have children, and study to become a stylist so she could open her own salon. I get nostalgic when I think about how passionate she was about her goals."

Rosa, mother of Dafne

In 2022, a group of mothers discovered a grave containing seven bodies. Rosa went to the morgue for DNA testing. One of the bodies was identified as Dafne.



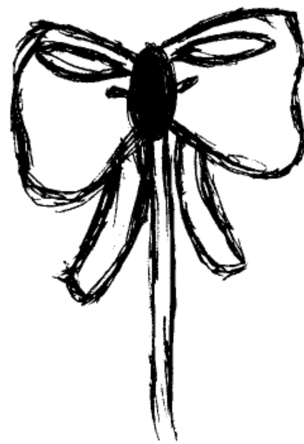


Image 4.3 Drawing made by Rosa.

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"The name Johan means *'full of grace,'* and I find that so beautiful. My son Joaquín and his wife struggled to have their first child. They wanted a big family but faced many challenges. Five years after getting married, my first grandchild was finally born. They named him Johan.

A month after Johan was born, Joaquín decided to get a tattoo to commemorate the date. Johan brought light into our lives and resembled his father with similar facial features. When I look at my grandson, I see my son. Joaquín always dreamed of becoming a graphic designer, but we could not afford to send him to school for that. Despite this, he created the design for his tattoo and took it to a friend who owned a studio. When he showed me the tattoo, he said, *'Look, I want you to see something,'* with the biggest smile, like a child showing off a new toy.

There is not a single day that I do not think about my son, especially his dream of having a big family—a dream that was tragically cut short. His wife now lives with me, and we help each other care for the child, who does not remember much about his father. Johan has grown up knowing about his dad through photos and stories. Thanks to the support of a psychologist who has been very present, he now understands that his dad disappeared."

Alisa, mother of Joaquín

Joaquín's body was identified at the end of 2023.

Image 4.4 Drawing made by Alisa.

*

"I don't know if I can say much. I feel guilty for what I'm about to say, but… I regret never asking my son the reason behind his tattoo: '*Why an antique clock? What did you want to express?'* It was a beautiful design on his back, so not everyone could see it. Few people knew about that tattoo, but now that I'm speaking with you, I wonder what led him to make that decision. Maybe it was his way of reminding himself to make the most of the time we have in this life. I remember that I didn't get angry, but I did make a face when he showed me his new acquisition: *'Ay, mijo.'*

Fernando had so many plans for the future. He wanted to study international business. He dreamed of opening a café with my other son. The disappearance of a child disrupts the dreams and aspirations of an entire family. I feel suspended in time. Maybe Fernando was trying to tell us something with his tattoo. Time passes, and with each minute, the desolation grew—until his body came home. Yet the questions and nightmares have never stopped haunting me."

Yolanda, mother of Fernando

Fernando's body was found in a mass grave near Guadalajara International Airport. Twenty lifeless bodies in eight graves. Yolanda saw a drawing very similar to her son's tattoo in Facebook posts made by other searching mothers. When she went to the morgue, she identified her son, who had disappeared in 2021.

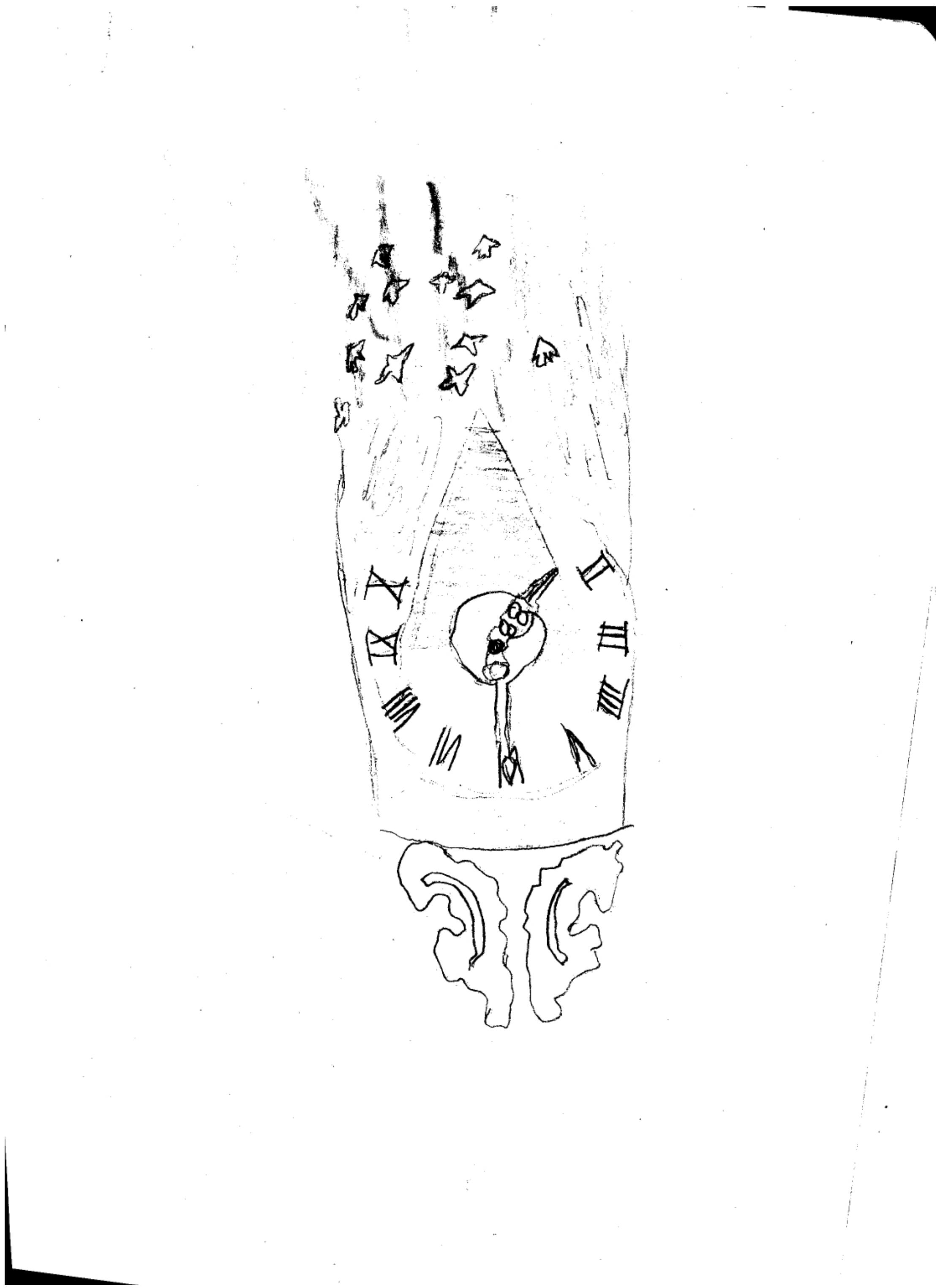

Image 4.5 Drawing made by Yolanda.

*

"Those markings on her right side stretched across her back. They resembled the spots on jaguars or cheetahs, but hers were in shades of pink, black, and a touch of purple. They were beautiful. I have never liked tattoos—I just do not—but hers were undeniably striking. When I first saw it, I got so angry and scolded her repeatedly. Now, I regret being so harsh. Life is short, and we should live it fully as long as we harm no one.

Cynthia had dreams of becoming a forensic scientist, but I did not support the idea because of how grim that field is. Now, ironically, I find myself immersed in those horrors. She loved watching crime dramas and forensic shows. I used to tell her that kind of work seemed too tough, too male-dominated. But that is what she wanted. She had just started university when everything happened. Watching shows like *CSI*, seeing characters analyze evidence, reconstruct crime scenes, and solve mysteries gave her an excitement that pushed her toward imagining herself in those labs, uncovering the truth.

Now, I am the one chasing clues, trying to find answers about my daughter. I have so many unanswered questions. Cynthia was determined and always worked toward her goals, whether it was training for dance, sticking to a diet for her high school graduation, or any of her other aspirations. That is something I deeply admired about my daughter. She would want me to say that about her—that she always pursued her dreams."

Karina, mother of Cynthia

Cynthia's body was found in a mass grave on the outskirts of Guadalajara. A month later, her remains were returned to Karina, who had them cremated and placed in an urn at a nearby church. Karina visits her daughter there, bringing flowers and talking to her, just like they used to during their evenings together, watching Cynthia's favorite TV shows.

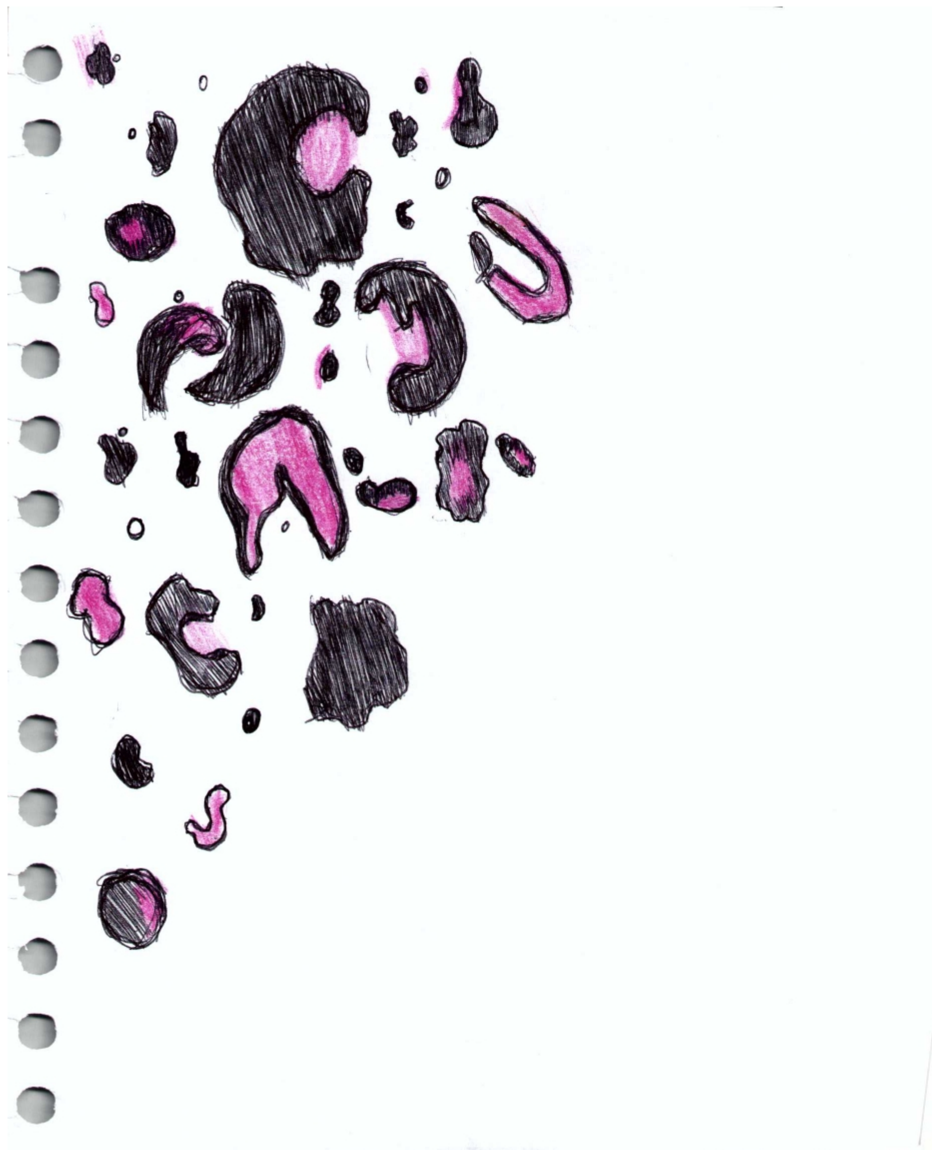

Image 4.6 Drawing made by Karina.

*

“A lion is strong and commanding, and my son identified with that. He always had to look out for his sister and me. When my husband abandoned us, Humberto became our protector. He was physically strong, too, so he truly resembled a lion. My son had to grow up too fast because of what life threw at us, and I will always be grateful for the way he supported me. We were like a pack—always together. When Humberto disappeared, it broke my heart into a million pieces. He was warm and kind, but also fiercely protective—just like a lion. He got his lion tattoo when he was about twenty. He started working at 17, first in a mechanic’s shop, and eventually opened his own. That filled me with pride. Now, I am thinking about getting a lion tattoo myself, so I can have my son with me forever, by my side until the end.”

Perla, mother of Humberto

Humberto’s body was identified in early 2022, but due to bureaucratic delays, it was not returned to his mother until six months later. When I last spoke to Perla, she told me: *“The lion has come home. We’re together again.”*

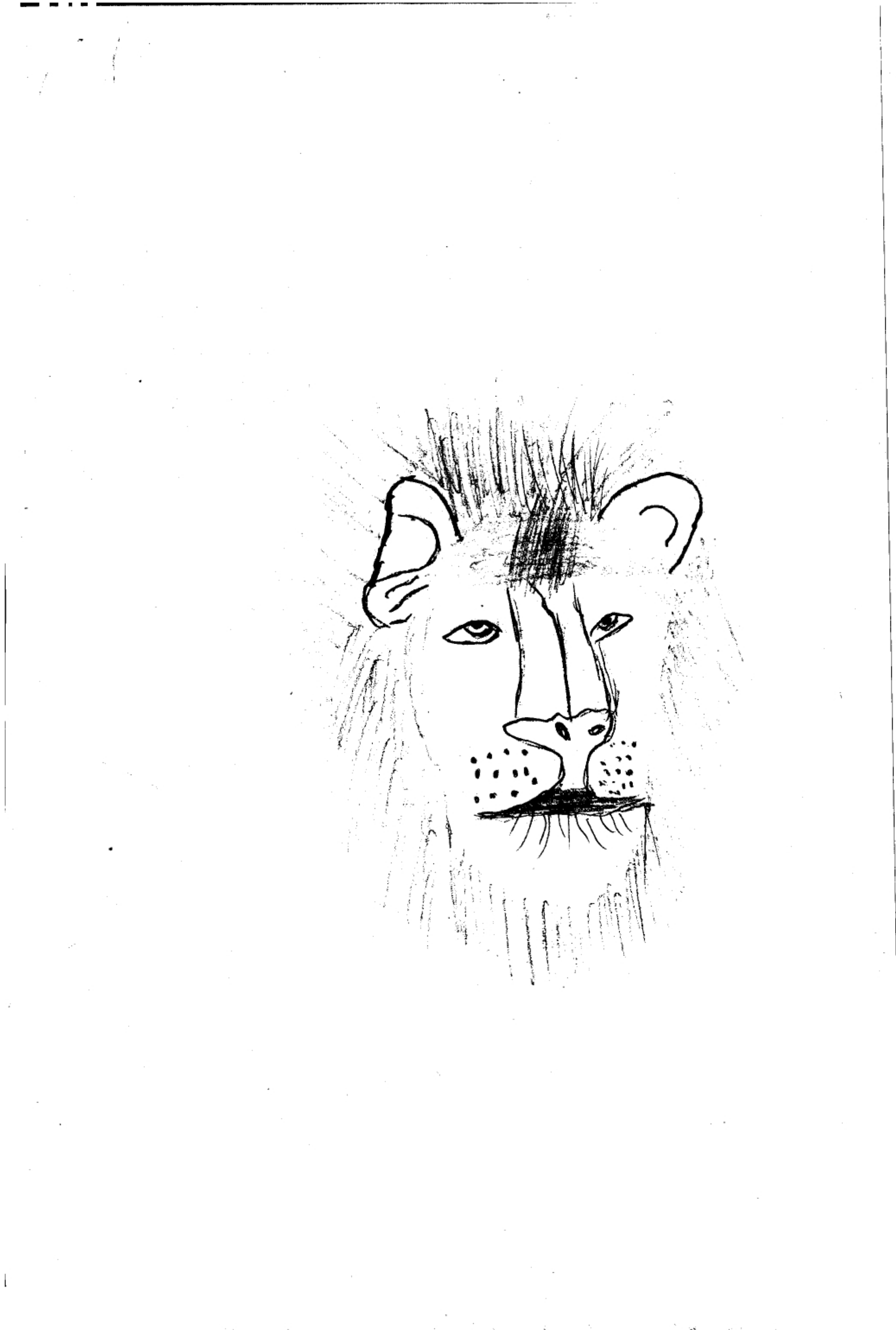

Image 4.7 Drawing made by Perla.

Conclusions

Invoking the dead in the context of the war on drugs becomes a political act—one that recovers fragments of the life stories of those who, having been found in clandestine graves, are labeled by the government as war casualties, internal enemies, and lives deemed worthless to the political community. In this chapter, inspired by the forensic work of my interlocutors and Hartman's theoretical insights, I presented a methodological exercise that bridges the living and the dead—an ink-bound connection traced through the tattoos of the victims. In a certain sense, this invocation also confronts the category imposed by the state apparatus when bodies remain unidentified or unclaimed by their families. The state refers to them as NN (no name). But there is a singularity rooted in each body—one that the authorities fail to acknowledge—and it is only through acts of memory retrieval that we can come to know the victims as persons with experiences, dreams, and a trace left in this world.

Ultimately, this is one of the possible methodological approaches we can develop in times of mass violence and uncertainty. These methodological proposals seek to foster connections through affect, designing projects that can be disseminated across various media and reach beyond academic audiences. The results of these *invocaciones* are intended to serve the people I work with. They are envisioned as part of a public exhibition proposed by the *buscadoras*, who strive to have their voices heard beyond traditional media channels. The act of invoking the disappeared is meant to symbolically restore their presence in our civic squares.

Chapter V. The Soundscape of this War

The driver of the Search Commission vehicle takes us down a major avenue, and almost immediately, the driver of a gray truck honks their horn, urging us to speed up before the light turns red again. Traffic moves slowly because a crew from the municipality is repairing the characteristic potholes that emerge during the rainy season. The pounding of the machinery against the pavement creates an unsettling noise. Sitting in the front passenger seat, I decide to roll up the window to block out the intensity of the sound. We advance a bit further. From the cars come snippets of music, voices from conversations, and even, as in the case of a white Chevy, laughter erupting from the driver and passengers. Buses brake and then accelerate to gain the right of way. Their engines emit a roar drowned out by the orchestra of angry honks announcing a traffic jam which keeps us stuck for several minutes.

Inside the van, the mothers speak about their hopes for today: *"We want to find them all so they can come home,"* Daniela states, while her face reveals a trace of optimism. When Juan's mother speaks of "them all," she refers to seven young men reported missing nearly eight months ago. Based on information obtained by the *buscadoras*, the bodies of these youths could be located on a plot of land in an area that once served as a city outskirt but is now rapidly filling with residential developments. This is an important concern for some of the women I am speaking with. *"If we don't act, those* cuerpos *will remain buried beneath new houses,"* one says. Bodies mingling with the new habitat taking shape there, south of the metropolis, exemplify how urban margins are transformed in multiple ways. That is why the collective must go—to break the uncertainty and determine whether bodies indeed lie beneath the ground where new homes will soon be built. The whistle of a traffic officer signals us to move forward. After finally escaping the traffic jam, Diego—our driver—

accelerates to make up for lost time, while the rest of us continue our conversation about the weather. Though we are now moving quickly, the shortcut leads us to the peripheral highway.

It is almost ten in the morning. A soundscape, woven from the hum of engines and the murmur of pedestrians, blankets the moment (audio 1, **use your phone or tablet camera to scan the QR code**).[1] We pass a bus stop, where a group of girls erupts into laughter, their voices rising above the din. Behind us, a trailer blasts its piercing horn. In an unexpected maneuver, Diego turns onto a narrow street that leads us into walled-off neighborhoods: the perimeters of new housing developments. The traffic noise fades, so do the voices inside the van. Diego eases his speed. Up close, the lot we are heading to emerges from the landscape. Conversations taper off, giving way to silence. Only the tires whisper against the dirt road. Amelia speaks softly: *"We're finally here."*

Audio 1

[1] Or you can visit this link: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/12Y_hfXhVk0u7C-3MR5ub2ia_XXA-1gFF?usp=share_link

White and yellow butterflies flutter around these mothers carefully traversing the terrain. *"It's clear there are graves here,"* Liliana tells me when we arrive at this site, located near the outskirts of Guadalajara. It is as if, upon setting foot on this soil, Sergio's mother was met with an omen. Liliana shares more details about how, after receiving several anonymous messages warning the *buscadoras* about shady dealings in nearby neighborhoods, they decided to organize a search day here. *"Look closely; this place is perfect for burying bodies because it's a hot zone,"* she says—a euphemism for horror. A "hot zone" means murders, disappearances, shootings, and fear have intensified in the area. That is why; after receiving the anonymous tip, this group of women approached the Search Commission for support. Generally, my interlocutors provide the Commission with information about potential grave sites, and, in turn, the Commission offers a plan and a team of state-authorized searchers to assist with the excavation, along with nurses and police to secure the perimeter during the search for mass graves.

Liliana explains to me that finding graves requires all of the senses: *"You have to keep your eyes wide open, feel the ground you're stepping on, distinguish odors, and listen carefully."* Her words reminded me that the search is always framed within a sensorial dimension. The body acts as a territorially-deployed toolbox to locate lifeless bodies. I remark to Sergio's mother that the site seemed too quiet, to which she replies, *"That's precisely a clue. They might have dumped the boys' bodies here because it's far from the urban commotion."* What silence says—or conceals—thus becomes a crucial piece of information in the analysis conducted by these women, who defy a war that deliberately uses silence as a strategy of control, as I analyze further on.

Sonic agency

While the mothers search for signs indicating the presence of clandestine graves, I take a few steps back to capture a photograph. At that moment, I consciously reflect on the blend of sounds encapsulated in the image, prompted by Liliana's earlier words when we arrived. The mothers' voices, their footsteps on dry leaves, the noise of metal rods entering the soil, and the silences—all of these together, concatenated. In subsequent mass grave searches, I implemented listening as a research method, focusing on the circulation and impact of sound on the *buscadoras*. That is, I focused on sound as an experience that is felt, that pierces the body and how it is interpreted by these women.

One of the first sounds that caught my attention was the noise of motorbikes and the reaction it triggered in my interlocutors. This is a sound with agency, as it generates responses and conveys messages about the possible surveillance network deployed by a criminal group, letting the mothers know they are being watched—and, at times, stalked—especially if no police or Search Commission personnel accompany them. This example allows me to invoke the idea of sonic agency, as I consider that certain sounds, due to the context in which they emerge or are produced, have the power to provoke reactions in the searchers' bodies and other materialities around them, as I elaborate in the following paragraphs.

In subsequent pages, I reflect on our encounters, both mothers' and mine, with specific sounds within the framework of the war on drugs.[lxxviii] From silence to extreme sonority, I weave together our intimate experiences with noise and how they are perceived in the sonic environments that shape the processes my interlocutors continuously traverse. I argue that the soundscape of this war is an integral part of the search assemblages, not merely an

ambient backdrop but an active force—one that transforms and conditions the paths of the searching mothers. Among these sounds, the rhythmic strikes of shovels and rods emerge as perhaps the most profound sonic articulation: a sound born from an act of corporeal sovereignty, from the physical effort of those removing the earth to recover *cuerpos sin vida*. This is a sound produced by an act fueled by the desires and needs of a group of women challenging necropolitics. Achille Mbembe (2019) defines necropolitics as the power to decide who may live and who must die. It represents an extension and radicalization of Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics but applied to contexts in which control over bodies and life is exercised primarily through death. Rather than merely regulating life—as biopolitics does—necropolitics concerns itself with how states, armed groups, and other forms of authority determine who is disposable, who can be killed, and under what conditions.

However, the understanding of this war's soundscape is conditioned by the experience of those who live and survive throughout Mexican territory. Consider the following case. A Spanish journalist friend named Valeria once recounted to me a visit she made to Panama for a congress on illegality. After the event, the attendees gathered for dinner on a terrace, a long table filled with correspondents from various regions. That evening, a brief shootout erupted nearby. Valeria noted how the Mexican journalists were the first to recognize the sound, immediately seeking shelter inside the restaurant—followed closely by the other diners. A Colombian journalist was among the few who also reacted swiftly, identifying the shots as a *balacera*.

Whether these individuals possessed a keener ear than their colleagues is uncertain, but I attribute their instinctive reaction to a shared sonic culture. The intensity of violence fluctuates across time and geography, but for more than fifteen years, this country has endured the sounds of car bombs, gunfire, and the unrelenting chants of the searching mothers. These sounds have become embedded in our collective memory, inscribed in the auditory fabric of contemporary Mexico.

To illustrate my argument further: every so often, videos surface on social media showing people in parks, at parties, or walking down the street when sudden bursts of sound—fireworks, perhaps, or the rumble of an old engine—cause them to scatter in panic, seeking refuge from a perceived danger. Most humans would likely respond the same way, but I believe there is something notable here, as this scenario repeats itself across diverse populations throughout the country. These are people who know the sound might signal an armed convoy, a clash between criminal groups, or a confrontation with the army. Mexico has developed a sonic culture created by the so-called war on drugs—a culture understood as a "whole complex" of values, beliefs, and knowledge acquired through a common historical and intersubjective process, as proposed by Tylor.[lxxix] Our shared history shapes a collective memory that awakens, traverses, and unsettles us. Thus, I propose the notion of sonic agency, in which certain sounds, at specific moments, can impact both our bodies and surrounding materialities. There are sounds that we have learned to interpret as indicators of risk—or of the imminent possibility that risk may emerge. These sounds linger in our bodies long after the immediate danger has passed, becoming part of an embodied memory shaped by fear.

Sonic sovereignties

It is essential to emphasize that this soundscape is shaped by a diversity of actors who employ sounds to mark bodies and, above all, to inscribe temporalities. A bullet passes through a *cuerpo*, thereby delineating the temporal arc of a life. A group of motorcycles establishes the timeframe within which mothers are compelled to leave, forcibly displacing them from the grounds where they search for mass graves. In this context, I explore the ways in which various registers of sovereignty manifest themselves sonically. Attuning our attention to sound provides a crucial analytical lens for understanding how these registers emerge, are reshaped, or contested. Moreover, as previously noted, sound reveals that each sovereign record is a sensorial experience—one that weaves particular social relations amid violence. It is an experience that transcends official power, as sovereignty is co-produced, not only by state actors but also by searchers and criminals alike. These sonic experiences serve to amplify, consolidate, or construct power, enabling different actors—be they authorities, organized crime, or the searchers themselves—to impose their will upon the victims of war.

I turn to echoes, voices, rhythms, and silences. I trace a fragment of the soundscape of the war on drugs, focusing in particular on the auditory textures of a grave-searching expedition in the area Liliana described as "hot." The text is accompanied by images and recordings I collected during various moments of my fieldwork, aided by a Zoom H1 recorder. Each QR code links to a recording integrated with the words. Our sonic journey begins with the arrival of motorcycles—their roaring engines carving out territorial boundaries in response to the presence of outsiders.

The roar of the engine

I stay close to Liliana during the first part of the morning, as she decides to separate herself from the rest of the group. She explains this is necessary to expand the search area and broaden the scope of observation. We begin looking for mounds of earth or surfaces with irregularities. This moment is dedicated to interpreting the conditions of the area. We are surrounded by towering ahuehuetes, oaks, and walnut trees. This area may have once belonged to a forest. Today, it is being consumed by urban sprawl. Trees are being replaced by houses, utility poles, and asphalt roads. I follow Sergio's mother, guided by her words and steps. We observe in silence, broken only by the crunch of our footsteps on the stony path (audio 2).

Audio 2

Liliana points out a small zone where the soil seems to have been disturbed. We approach it to mark the perimeter. This group of *buscadoras* uses a particular kind of green flag—reminiscent of those waved by soccer fans during matches—to designate the points where rods will later be inserted into the ground. Not far from us, Liliana spots two old, abandoned

tires. We move toward them, as such objects could indicate the presence of a clandestine burial site (audio 3). The mothers have discovered that certain criminal groups use objects to mark locations where victims' bodies have been buried. Liliana interprets these spots as signals for the perpetrators themselves, allowing them to return to bury more bodies or monitor whether the grave has been discovered.

Audio 3

It is six in the evening. The mothers have found three graves since we arrived at this site. Each grave contains dozens of bones. Officers from the National Guard surround the area. According to the searchers, they are here to "ensure nothing bad happens". But as night falls, the roar of motorcycles grows louder. We are in a fraction of the terrain covered by large trees, making it difficult to determine the direction from which the vehicles approach. One thing is clear, though: it is not just one motorcycle but several, their engines revving simultaneously. Suddenly, the noise stops. As the mothers continue searching, they interpret the sounds: *"They're watching us,"* Violeta states. *"They're already outside,"* Lorena adds,

as though speaking of a predator stalking its prey or describing the motorcycles as living entities prowling the streets.

And indeed, they are not just here, seemingly surrounding us. The large numbers of motorcycles in Guadalajara reflects the need for efficient and fast transportation amidst the chaos of the city. Simultaneously, the phenomenon becomes visible in the countless riders working for food delivery apps. These deliveries are a punctual example of the country's labor precarity, according to Ferrer.lxxx Being a delivery rider here is synonym for informal employment, unstable pay, and risks when navigating urban traffic. One searching mother also reminded me of the boom of motorcyclists who take over major avenues on weekends. They speed up, perform stunts, and run red lights. *"They hijack the city with their rides,"* Sofia told me on one occasion. I decided then to gather all the recordings of motorcycles I had collected during fieldwork, whether at clandestine grave searches or at night, when I observed them prowling the streets (audio 4).

Audio 4

Among my interlocutors, it is not uncommon to hear varied complaints about street violence and grievances regarding a city that has grown rapidly: constructing high-rise buildings, creating gated communities, and consuming green spaces. The main arteries are so congested that, at times, they resemble large open-air parking lots. In this context, motorcycles (or *motos*) have become a cheaper and faster option amid the challenges of urban mobility. According to data provided by local authorities, *motos* have been the fastest-growing type of vehicle in the city since the year 2000. By early 2022, for instance, 649,416 motorcycles were registered in government databases.[lxxxi]

The use of *motos* has surged particularly in some peripheral areas where massive housing developments, inspired by affluent gated communities, have been built. These projects, aimed at the working class, are characterized by small houses and intermittent access to public services. Many of these housing developments have seen the arrival of hundreds of motorcycles. A significant number of these vehicles are purchased through monthly payment plans, facilitated by companies offering accessible financing options, as advertised on billboards throughout the metropolitan area. In essence, anyone over the age of eighteen can easily acquire a *moto*.

In many of these real estate developments, streets are so narrow that public transportation cannot navigate them, giving rise to *mototaxis*, a covered three-wheel vehicle resembling Asian autorickshaws. The popularity of this mode of transport has grown so significantly that some claim the city's southeastern area at times resembles India, invoking images of India's bustling streets teeming with motorcycles. Yet what initially appeared to be a solution to the challenges of limited public transportation has revealed problematic aspects. Narratives have emerged associating *mototaxis* with robberies committed by drivers or their use for

transporting drugs, especially between neighborhoods and housing developments on the periphery of Guadalajara (images 5.1, 5.2, 5.3). There is now a class marker linking *motos* not only with the rise of precarity in the country but also with violence, danger, and drug trafficking. An inseparable association between *motos* and criminality has gained traction. A specific term has even been coined to describe individuals who commit robberies on motorcycles: *motoladrones* (motorcycle thieves).

Image 5.1 “Where do you want to go?” Image taken by the author. November 2023.

Image 5.2 Mototaxis. Image taken by the author. November 2023.

Image 5.3 A cheap means of transportation that "moves our world", declares the advertisement of the Italika brand, the most popular in the country and founded by Salinas Pliego, the third richest man in Mexico. Photo taken by the author. November 2023.

"You must always be aware of your surroundings," and *"stay alert at all times,"* the searching mothers often advised me. They stress the importance of vigilance, especially at dusk or dawn. Several media outlets have described the so-called *motoladrones* as a "plague" ready to snatch your phone and wallet at any moment. Local journalists frequently document how these assailants use firearms to threaten their victims.

An infrastructure in motion

In the search area, the mothers remain on alert due to the proximity of motorcycles. The fear stems from the sound emitted by these vehicles—the vibration of the engine acting as a signal that we are being watched, as Violeta argues. Later, I learned that on some occasions, the riders also whistle (mimicking the sound of a bird) to communicate with one another. What are they saying to each other with this noise, produced by expelling air through pursed lips? From the beginning, alongside the testimonies shared with me by the mothers, it became evident that *motos* transport and deliver goods but also carry information, weapons, or serve as tools for monitoring, ensuring that police or rival groups do not enter certain territories.

When discussing drug trade infrastructure, academic attention is often drawn to clandestine airstrips, drug production laboratories, or buildings resulting from money laundering (Ballvé 2019; O'Neill 2016). O'Neill offers a compelling example of this in his study of how specific elements—such as the armored car industry in Central America—reflect changes in how built environments are designed to facilitate the drug trade.[lxxxii] He focuses on bulletproof windows as architectural feats, alongside other adaptations like narco-tunnels or spaces repurposed for drug delivery. I find O'Neill's observation crucial—that these phenomena possess an architectural dimension. However, I aim to incorporate all these elements as nodes within a

solid, spatial-material infrastructure, one that operates as a complex network of nodes that shift, transform, or disappear according to the demands of the business. While I have previously employed the concept of assemblage to discuss the networks woven by the mothers, I postulate that when addressing crime, it is more fitting to adopt the concept of infrastructure, drawing on a large body of anthropologists who have worked on this concept.

*

The conceptual antecedents of infrastructure can be traced back to the intellectual production of Karl Marx (2000). In his theory of historical materialism, we find a notion closely tied to the economic structure of society, which can be understood as a form of infrastructure. In this view, infrastructure represents the condensation of the productive forces (tools, technology, human labor) and the relations of production (forms of property, and the relationships between social classes organized around labor and the means of production).

Over time, anthropological scholarship has explored the concept of infrastructure not only in its material form, but also in its social, symbolic, and cultural dimensions—including the ways in which these are embedded in everyday life. According to Leigh Star and Bowker (2000), infrastructures remain invisible when they function smoothly but become highly visible when they "break down". A fundamental contribution comes from Brian Larkin (2013), who argues that infrastructures not only transport goods or people, but also meanings, affects, and ideologies. Among the works focused on the state, notable analyses examine roads, telecommunications, and electrical systems.[lxxxiii] These infrastructures not only reflect deep-seated inequalities but also allow for the imagination of the state's presence—its material deployment or its absence can be felt and seen. Likewise, important contributions

come from studies on abandoned infrastructures, understood as vestiges or ruins of modernity or of once-promising pasts.[lxxxiv] These remnants reveal shifting visions within state projects and the evolving objectives of political and economic elites—shifts that profoundly impact the lives of communities and the ways in which space and everyday life are inhabited.

*

Waqas Butt (2023) argues that infrastructure comprises histories, knowledge, and diverse materialities. An infrastructure is simultaneously oriented toward the production and consumption of goods. Infrastructures are critical sources of livelihood, generated by the circulation of multiple materialities across spatial and temporal scales. For an infrastructure like that of drug trafficking, certain components are essential to enable the dynamism required to facilitate the circulation of illicit goods. In this case, *motos* are a critical node within the drug trade's infrastructure, just like other spaces and objects, such as miniature grocery stores, for example. Throughout the city, *narcotienditas* have spread—small drug stores that open and close intermittently. These establishments outwardly resemble traditional neighborhood convenience stores, but their true business lies in retail drug sales.

Some of these *narcotienditas* are also consumption sites, similar to those described by Bourgois in East Harlem.[lxxxv] The difference is that in Guadalajara, mass graves have been found near such consumption sites, where criminal organizations occasionally dispose of the bodies of users who fail to pay for drugs purchased on credit. Motorcycles are an equally essential dimension of this infrastructure, having become a valuable instrument in the hands of those who know the territory. Motorcycles map, through their movement, the contours of local trafficking routes. This knowledge is applied to delineate points of sale, which also

function as control points. In confrontations with rival groups or security forces, *motos* offer unmatched speed, easily outpacing the bulky police trucks or weaving through the city's congested avenues. Motorcycles, along with their sound, are used by criminals to assert sovereignty—a demonstration of their territorial power. There is a sonic agency in their roar that amplifies as they assert their presence, like a bellow carrying a message.

"Why do they rev their engines? It seems intentional." (Mónica)

"It scares me because we can run if they come, but of course they would catch us. I don't know what their intentions are." (Lorena)

"They feel powerful, like they're untouchable." (Romina)

The engines rev. The riders circling us demonstrate their power via the noise they produce. I wonder whether they act with impunity as they roam the streets, perhaps because some police officers avoid patrolling specific areas due to monthly bribes paid by criminal groups, or because of other agreements with state agents. The noise emanating from the engine can also serve as a signal of what is to come—a sound that may act as an omen of impending conflict between rival groups or with security forces. In fact, as the sun sets, the roar of the engines merges with another sound: gunfire. The shots become increasingly frequent.

Weeks later, Liliana tells me that on that day, the police requested permission from a criminal group to enter the area but were only granted a few hours. This example, I argue, illustrates the tensions between sovereign regimes and their constant reconfigurations, which at times even restrict the power of authorities. Additionally, motorcycles open an analytical path for reflecting on drug trafficking through the concept of infrastructure—how it is configured and

its territorial transformations. This infrastructure consists of multiple components, both material and immaterial, ranging from airstrips and sales points located in abandoned houses to the whistles of motorcyclists and the circulation of weapons throughout the country.

The brief rumble

Marlene glances at Liliana out of the corner of her eye. Liliana grabs Marisol's arm, and Marisol tenses up, her body shrinking. Julieta crosses herself. Gabriela fixes her gaze on the air as if searching for something. My skin bristles. The gunfire puts us all on alert. Its roar cuts through us. The police exchange glances while the workers from the Search Commission who, alongside the mothers, have entered the earth's bowels, think it is time to leave. There is a moment of silence. My interlocutors want to continue. Despite the risks, they insist on staying.

"There are certainly more graves; we can't leave yet. Besides, if we leave, they [—the criminals—] *will come and take the remains,"* Claudia exclaims. The forensic team has not arrived; in fact, just minutes ago, they informed the Commission workers that they might take another two hours to get here as they are recovering evidence at a crime scene nearby. Again, we exchange glances laden with fear at the sound of the gunfire. The Commission staff announces they have called for additional patrols to monitor the perimeter and escort us to the nearest highway. The mothers interpret the gunfire as not being aimed at our group. Instead, it seems we are caught in the midst of simultaneous clashes. Not far from where we stand, people are being killed because, as Liliana postulates, *"this is a hot zone."*

Throughout my ethnographic work, I recorded—and was given—recordings of various gunfights that took place in Jalisco (audio 5). The sound of gunfire is used by criminal groups to establish or reinforce territorial sovereignty—whether against another group or as a response to the presence of state forces in their area. The sound of bullets demarcates who must die as part of the reconfiguration of social relations that emerge from the intertwining of the global trade in psychoactive substances and the war on drugs in this part of Guadalajara.

Audio 5

Bullets have a direct objective—to wound or kill one or more people—but at the same time, they produce other effects as they fly through the air. While bullets are not sound sources in themselves, they carve a distinct sonic presence as they cut through the air, generating waves along their path. This noise carries messages for those who hear it. Gunfire can trigger fear, adrenaline, or heightened alertness. The sound of bullets urges you to seek shelter or warns you to stay inside. Bullets are objects propelled by a charge of affect—fired by someone likely immersed in a whirlwind of emotions: fear, exhilaration, the thirst for revenge, or the

intent to witness death. Beyond the one who fires, I am interested in emphasizing the sound of each bullet and the sensations it conveys. Flocks of birds erupt from the trees in a frenzy, bearing witness to the shockwaves of gunfire in this zone scarred by mass graves.

Bullets take me back to a fragment of my own biography. For all of us who grew up in neighborhoods, towns, or regions marked by the violence of war, shooting reminds us of events tied to episodes that now form part of our histories and those of our communities. The neighbor who was murdered outside their home; that time the police arrived shooting at a property where drugs were sold; those bursts of gunfire heard not too far away. Back then, we learned about such events from the newspaper vendor walking down our street, announcing that a violent episode had occurred nearby. Now we find out through social media. During my childhood, I was not truly aware of what bullets meant. I believe very few of us were. I remember adults saying they were stray bullets (*balas perdidas*), as if the weapons had discharged on their own or were lost, unable to find their target. Perhaps those stray bullets were warning us about the intensification of violence that was yet to come.

When the first major gunfight happened outside my home, I was watching television when the loud bangs began. I thought something had exploded in the street, probably the neighborhood's electrical transformer. But more bangs followed immediately. My mother told me to step away from the window because it was a shootout (*balacera*). I moved to the dining room, where she was. We sat there in silence, staring at the window. Brown and Kulik argue that certain events are so vivid and intense that they become embedded within us.[lxxxvi] These are defined autobiographical memories, so detailed they resemble a photograph stored in our brain, one we can access at any moment. They introduced the concept of "flashbulb memories," referring to episodes that leave a lasting imprint, making you remember what

you were doing and where you were when, for example, an earthquake shook your city or a volcano erupted, covering your home in ash for days.

In the context of war, I propose there are also flashbulb memories imprinted or revived through sound. Thinking about that shootout while I write sends a shiver down my spine. The gunfire was so loud that my mother remarked it sounded as if grenades had exploded, though she had never heard such a blast before. Silence blanketed my street for several minutes before the sound of sirens announced the arrival of an ambulance. I remember we waited hours before venturing outside to head to the supermarket, as we had planned earlier that morning. Bullets are fired to delineate not just geographic territories, but also bodily ones, wounding or killing their victims. At the same time, bullets often embed themselves into walls or other surfaces during *balaceras*, asserting power over space and not merely over people. These marks become traces that encapsulate stories of the widespread violence that has characterized Mexico over the past fifteen years. Bullet-riddled surfaces, for example, stand as testaments to the horror of this conflict.

In March 2011, in the municipality of Allende, located in the northern state of Coahuila, a massacre took place in which, according to journalistic records, 300 people were exterminated. The few available images reveal more than bullet-riddled walls. Each photograph exposes the ruins caused by war. Farms damaged by projectiles convey the message that this territory became a no-go zone—a community turned into a ghost town. Marks assume the role of evidence when witnesses are killed, and archives are either denied or made inaccessible, as Navaro points out.[lxxxvii] These marks are often erased when walls are repaired, as if restoring physical surfaces could erase the memory of past atrocities.

But human and non-human bodies retain memory, holding the traces of a sonic violence that shook them. *"Every time you hear those noises, it turns your stomach,"* says Paulina, whose daughter disappeared in 2015. The war on drugs demonstrates that the sounds emanating from bullets in motion are markers of shifting sovereignties. The bullet that strikes the body, marking and penetrating it. Moreover, this was likely the last sound heard by those now being exhumed from the earth's depths through the efforts of searching mothers across the country.

Shovels

The police pressure remains relentless. They urge the mothers to stop searching, insisting it is time to leave the site. Gunshots are no longer sporadic; now they echo with increasing frequency. The roar of motorcycles grows louder too. Over the course of the day, seven *fosas clandestinas* have been located. The number of fragments in each remains uncertain. Forensic technicians have just arrived, following repeated calls for their urgent presence.

Under the cover of darkness, surrounded by towering trees, there is a fleeting moment of stillness as the technicians step into the first grave. With the help of large flashlights positioned at the burial site's depths, beams of light illuminate our faces. As Liliana watches the forensic team at work, she exhales deeply. *"I hope these bodies can return home soon,"* she whispers to me. More than ten hours of labor have passed. The day began with the distribution of steel rods, like those used in constructing large buildings, now repurposed by the mothers to pierce the earth. They pull the rods out and sniff their tips to detect the scent of death. Together, they interpret the essence of each, hoping to find traces left by decomposing bodies. The mothers of the disappeared blend metallurgy, astrology, and spirituality. They purify themselves with a prayer before beginning. They ask permission

from both God and the earth to drive the rods into the soil. They rely on scents, sounds, and intuition. Some even claim that trees sway more intensely if bodies are buried beneath them. The search for graves is always a multisensorial event (image 5.4).

Image 5.4. Tracing. Image taken by the author. September 2022.

But what is the soundscape that emerges from this moment, and what does it tell us about the sovereignties reshaped by the war on drugs? Two sounds particularly define the searchers' work. The first is the noise produced by driving the steel rods into the ground, a hammering against the earth. This sound repeats with each rod pressed into the soil, made in the hope of catching the scent of death. When the flesh of those *"swallowed by the earth"* leaves its odor on a rod, a circumference is marked, and shovels come into play.

The mothers, alongside officials from the Search Commission, begin to dig feverishly, removing as much earth as possible. The edge of each shovel strikes the soil with a cutting effect. I watch Liliana's arms, and her entire body, as she pours every ounce of her energy into uncovering the ground in search of lifeless remains. She wipes the sweat from her brow with a bandana. Some mothers and workers from the Search Commission begin sifting the soil to detect fragments of bones. The sonic agency of the shovels evokes something profound—it holds the power to herald the possibility of unearthing a hidden treasure (*cuerpos sin vida*). Amid the war on drugs, this sound has transformed into a resonance of justice. By editing, I isolated specific noises emerging from the rhythmic maneuvers of these tools in the hands of my interlocutors (audio 6).

Audio 6

At times, the only sound emitted by those digging are pants of exertion. When a fragment of bone surfaces through the soil, the intensity of the shovels diminishes. Work proceeds cautiously around that fragment. The mothers urge everyone to be careful. Since families have become a forensic network, several authorities have criticized them for not being fully qualified to perform this "official" work. When I asked a member of the Search Commission for their opinion, they responded:

> There will inevitably be some destruction of human remains. Any recovery or excavation involves altering what will later be called 'evidence.' It's true these women are not forensic anthropologists or archaeologists, but they have participated in workshops over the past few years. I believe much of the criticism from the authorities stems from a desire to prevent the mothers from uncovering what is hidden (March 23, 2024).

From Weizman's perspective, these practices carried out by the mothers could be framed as counter-forensics.[lxxxviii] Medicine is one of the primary tools of official sovereignty because the state apparatus has monopolized both killing and the work of identifying bodies. Forensic

medicine is an instrument of official sovereignty, whereas counter-forensics represents a civil practice aimed at reversing omissions, silences, and atrocities through scientific or civic strategies to conduct investigations neglected by authorities.

I believe what Mexican *buscadoras* have done aligns more closely with a spectrum we might call vernacular forensics. Let us return to the sounds emitted by the steel rods and shovels, common, everyday objects donated to the searchers or purchased by them at hardware stores. I call these practices "vernacular" because they respond to the families' needs, not those of the juridical state, using these mundane objects to enter extermination zones. These objects are not necessarily classified as part of the expert toolkit. In fact, the search practices of my interlocutors have incorporated the skills and experiences of many families in the region—knowledge that does not always align with the expertise legitimized by government-backed professionals.

The mothers produce a different kind of knowledge than the one authorized by the state, one that, instead, emanates from their sovereign registry. Their focus is on recovering lifeless bodies from graves not through violent or bureaucratic means but through different, novel mechanisms. This emergent register arises from the condensation of resistance, self-organization, the amalgamation of knowledge, acts of care, and interactions with inhospitable landscapes where their loved ones are buried beneath the earth. In this register of sovereignty, the body sets the tone by feeling, seeing, and, of course, listening. As Amanda, mother of Sandra who was disappeared in 2016, told me:

> The body speaks to you. You feel an emptiness every time we find bones; every time we know we are at risk. The skin tingles with every search. Our emotions are in constant turmoil, and our bodies respond to all of it.

This emergent sovereign register, which employs a vernacular forensic practice, unfolds while *motos* and bullets simultaneously exercise a different type of sovereignty. It is an entanglement of registers that compose and recombine the social relations of the war on drugs. Meanwhile, the authorities seem trapped between the sovereignty exercised by the mothers and that wielded by criminal groups. The police insist it is time to leave because conditions are no longer safe. They demand that we get into the vans to evacuate the area. The forensic experts quickly pull out some forms and ask the mothers and members of the Commission for details. The knowledge created and applied today is documented and tentatively understood by the experts. As the paperwork nears completion, the sound of gunfire draws closer to us. We load the rods and shovels into the vans. The police escort us the entire time. They observe the approaching group of motorcyclists. The clanging of shovels and rods reminds me that these tools, once merely instruments of labor, have become essential to a forensic practice—one that produces knowledge capable of momentarily unsettling necropolitics.

Although criminal sovereignty forced us to leave the site in haste, the sovereignty woven by the mothers managed to uncover seven mass graves. Yet in some of them, bones were left behind because security conditions were no longer optimal. On the way back to the city center, the mothers say they will return tomorrow, if possible, to recover the rest of the bones, which will soon become evidence and part of an investigation—or will undergo a lengthy identification process that, according to the *buscadoras*, could take anywhere from two months to over a year.

After a sharp maneuver by our driver, we exit onto a dirt path leading to the nearest highway. Once we reach the avenue, we are greeted by the blaring horns of nighttime traffic eager to get home. Just minutes ago, we were in a dark, desolate place where the apparent silence was interrupted by *motos* and gunfire. Now we are surrounded by the sounds of the urban night (audio 7). In a short time, our soundscape has changed, though our bodies still bear the weight of the experience. Lidia mentions she needs her medication because her blood pressure is dangerously low. Two police vehicles escort us until we reach the offices of the Search Commission, where we divide into groups to accompany each other home.

Audio 7

Conclusion. A breaking silence

As we return to the offices we use as our meeting point, I think about the silence we leave behind or the noise that fades as we move away from those open pits, the mounds of earth, the uprooted weeds. The noise we produced, which abruptly ceases as we move away, transports me to streets filled with people shouting slogans that dissipate when the protest concludes. I recall the vibration of *"They were taken alive, we want them back alive" ("vivos se los llevaron, vivos los queremos"*). Yet after every march, once the crowd disperses, the urban noise resumes its dominance. The chorus created by the voices of the participants fades away. This evokes what the mothers frequently told me about the silence that shrouds this war and the disappearances of their loved ones. Is silence, then, the sound that both defines and marks the war on drugs? Over the years I have spent studying this subject, I have come to think that what matters is the intensity of the sounds we create to confront silence—a wall that is difficult to crack but that weakens with every outburst. Every shout, every slogan, creates a polyphony which, over the years, has been breaking that wall, even if it sometimes feels insufficient.

A particular moment comes to mind when I speak of outbursts cracking the wall—I am referring to the chants of mothers*. "Son, daughter, listen, your mother is in the fight."*: a collective voice that gives you goosebumps. Dozens of women are here speaking to their sons and daughters while also sending a message to the government, reminding the authorities that they will not cease their work, even in the most challenging moments. *"Son, daughter, listen, your mother is in the fight."* The experience of the crime of disappearance is now verbalized as a slogan in the public square. There, among so many *buscadoras*, the voices create a bond sustained through sound. Tears are redefined as they are brought into

the public arena. Hundreds of cries of emotional liberation speak of anger, of social discontent, through the power of these women's voices. The question is how much attention we pay to them—where does the politics of listening focus when it comes to this war? Perhaps, due to the extensive channels of dissemination, we have paid more attention to the official narratives constructed by the authorities to justify violence. But these women, the searchers, have always been there, making themselves present.

The mothers continually insist on the prolonged silence that cloaks the war, almost as if it were a state policy subtly orchestrated by multiple agencies. Parallel to this, they argue that this same silence is being cracked by their cries, by their slogans. "*Let my cries be heard all the way to the president's office,"* Alondra once told me. Her words make me think of the sonic manifestations accompanying tears—sounds that can even be heard through certain images. On her phone, her background is a photograph of a march where, alongside her fellow collective members, she shouts chants. It is an image that can be heard. *"Seeing the image reminds me that we are here to fight together,"* shared the mother of Nubia, who disappeared in 2016.

In *Photography and Memory* by Alberto del Castillo, the archive of Argentine photographer Eduardo Longoni is brought to life.[lxxxix] Within its pages emerge the faces of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo—captured moments that reveal pain and anger. The composition of the pictures emphasizes facial expressions. I find resonances between the images of the Argentine mothers and the photograph that Alondra has as her phone background. A shared characteristic intertwines them: they are sonic images, as they can be heard. Viewing them takes us back to those shouts and slogans that have defined our recent history. *"They were taken alive; we want them back alive." "Son, daughter, listen: your mother is in the*

fight." These are phrases that are part of our national soundscape and confront the roar of bullets. *"Let my cries be heard all the way to the president's office."*

In this chapter, I have presented a fragment of what I describe as the soundscape of the war on drugs, referencing a day spent searching for mass graves. I have proposed that the exercise of various entities and actors asserting their sovereign registers, to determine the fate of victims, is framed by sensorial experiences. Sound here is a key component that deepens our understanding of how social relationships, in the context of massive violence, are composed, transformed, and challenged. The acoustic fragments analyzed in this chapter are part of a broader soundscape. My intention has been to show the relationships people have built with and around sounds, as well as to disentangle the information each sound conveys to the public. Every noise, every roar of a motorcycle engine, or every brief outburst is simultaneously the result and product of knowledge. Let me evoke the motorcycle riders. Through their intimate knowledge of the terrain, motorcyclists trace a shifting infrastructure of drug trafficking in the city—one that allows them to outmaneuver police convoys and elude their enemies. The voices of the searchers represent another central element within the landscape of the *guerra contra las drogas.* These examples suggest that the ever-shifting registers of sovereignty encapsulate sounds (with their respective sound agencies) which shape the experiences of those who inhabit a country marred by widespread violence—a violence that is deeply sonorous and sensorial.

As a way to conclude and distill my argument into a sonic piece, I present an experimental editing exercise in which I interweave multiple recordings to connect the fragments collected during my ethnographic work (Audio 8).

Audio 8

Final Conclusions

Reaching the Zócalo—a term used to refer to a central public square or plaza, typically found in the heart of a city or town—in Mexico City is nearly impossible. Police officers strive to maintain order among the thousands of people. Supporters wait anxiously for Claudia Sheinbaum to take the stage, where she will deliver her first public speech as the first woman elected president of Mexico. It is October 1, 2024. Before addressing the crowd, the former head of government of the nation's capital—who was a climate scientist before formally entering politics—must first arrive at the Chamber of Deputies (*Cámara de Diputados*) for the inauguration ceremony, broadcast nationwide. Sheinbaum won the election with just over 58% of the vote, becoming the most-voted candidate in the country's federal election history, even surpassing her predecessor and political mentor, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, known as AMLO, who secured 53% of the vote in 2018

AMLO's final months as president were defined by important constitutional changes. Determined to implement reforms before leaving office, he sought to reshape the foundations of key institutions—security being no exception. In a decisive move, the now-former president issued a decree granting the Army full control over customs operations. Shortly thereafter, in his final quarter in office, he restructured the very police force he had created at the start of his term: the National Guard was elevated to the status of an armed force, equal to the Army and led by a military general. When the reform was debated in the Chamber of Deputies, ruling party legislators chanted in unison: *"Long live the National Guard, long live the Armed Forces, long live MORENA!"*

Today, Claudia Sheinbaum is about to arrive at the very building where Mexico's militarization was cemented. In the Zócalo, giant screens capture her every step. The crowd waves banners celebrating the new president. Across the city, posters invite citizens to join in the historic moment, the arrival of the first woman at the National Palace (*Palacio Nacional*). A civic festivity unfolds in the country's largest public square (image 6.1). I stand shoulder to shoulder with thousands, all eagerly following the live broadcast. The cheers intensify. Claudia has reached the *Cámara de Diputados*. AMLO appears on screen, ready to hand over the presidential sash. Each time the camera focuses on him, the crowd's excitement swells.

Between Andrés Manuel and Claudia stands Ifigenia Martínez, the president of the Chamber of Deputies, a symbolic figure of the national left since the student movement of 1968. She was a powerful voice against student repression. In 1967, Ifigenia became the first director of the National School of Economics. Her activism led to her imprisonment in Mexico City. Later, she became one of the founding members of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (Partido de la Revolución Democrática, PRD), a cornerstone of the contemporary national left. Ironically, the PRD weakened significantly after López Obrador founded MORENA, ultimately losing its electoral registration in 2024. Ifigenia appears on screen, assisted by a portable oxygen respirator, visibly struggling to move. On social media, political commentators underscore the historical weight of this moment—Ifigenia passed away just four days after the inauguration (image 6.2).

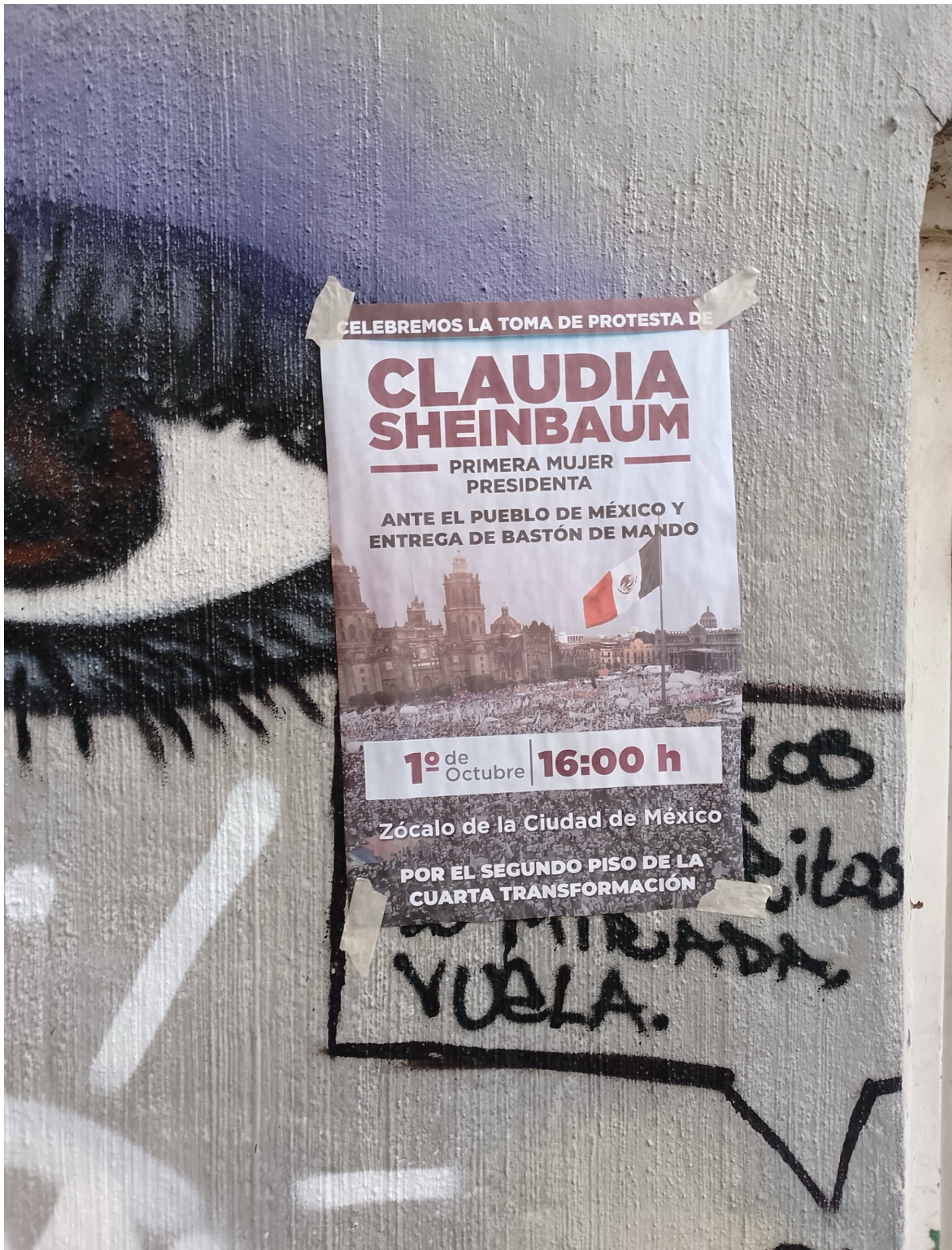

Image 6.1 A public invitation displayed in Escandón neighborhood, Mexico City. Image taken by the author, September 2024.

Image 6.2 A historical moment being photographed for posterity. Image taken by Hector Guerrero.

Claudia’s eyes shine as she dons the tricolor presidential sash. In the months leading up to the election, I frequently heard criticisms of Sheinbaum: *“It doesn’t matter that she’s a woman; AMLO put her there,” “she’s a puppet,” “she didn’t win on her own merits.”* These remarks echoed in countless conversations. While Sheinbaum enjoyed strong support outside the country’s metropoles, her popularity in major cities was less pronounced, largely due to a middle class that questioned the ruling party’s performance. I often discussed the political landscape with the *buscadoras*, who closely followed what was unfolding in Mexico. The vast majority of my interlocutors were disillusioned with López Obrador’s administration and viewed Sheinbaum as a continuation of his militarization policies. Indeed, Sheinbaum received negative comments for her decision not to allow families to create the *Glorieta de los Desaparecidos* (Roundabout of the Disappeared) on the iconic Reforma Avenue during her tenure as head of government in Mexico City. For many of the *buscadoras*, this was a glimpse into how the president might approach their concerns during her administration.

Sheinbaum’s smile lights up the screen, and the crowd erupts in cheers. Her speech is about to conclude. Soon, she will join the thousands of supporters awaiting her here. But something has surprised me: neither the *buscadoras* nor the disappearances were mentioned in the president’s first address. That morning, she centered her speech on gratitude for her political mentor—AMLO—hailing him as the most beloved president in recent history. Weeks later, I returned to Guadalajara to take part in the search for mass graves. I asked my interlocutors what they thought of Sheinbaum’s speech. Lorena said it was predictable—her stance, 'her silence,' as she called it, was a silence that, according to Lorena, symbolizes the impossibility of dialogue.

Sheinbaum acknowledged the women who, from their workplaces and homes, have been and continue to be indispensable for Mexico. No mention was made of the searchers. Not a word about the disappearances occurring within a state that cannot guarantee the safety of its inhabitants. A month after the presidential transition, I had a conversation with Rita, one of the first interlocutors I met ten years ago, whose son, Julián, disappeared in 2014. We reunited in a public park near downtown Guadalajara. We usually talk about the progress of her case and recent developments in our lives. On this occasion, we discussed the state of the country. I asked her how she assessed the presidential transition and whether she anticipated any possible changes. *"I don't think anything will change,"* she replied. *"We've learned that no matter the political party, there's something more powerful preventing disappearances from stopping."*

When Rita mentioned something *"more powerful,"* I asked her what she meant. *"It's hard to explain, but there's a lot of money involved, many interests. Mexico is a global powerhouse in drug trafficking, and it's even worse now that everything is militarized*". Following this statement, she quickly added, *"But no matter what happens, we are still here, confronting the horror of violence with our bodies and our hearts."* In academia and activism, we often encounter a lack of information regarding the profits of criminal groups and their economic structures. When certain authors present data, their arguments are sometimes widely discredited. The truth is that, as an illegal enterprise, it is challenging to estimate the revenue generated by the drug trade, which has found in Mexico a sort of epicenter. However, the number of disappeared, murdered, and displaced people serves, from another perspective, as a metric to grasp the scale of these years of war. It reflects the horror

stemming from a market that is not inherently violent but has been transformed by the state's war and prohibitionist policies.

Rita's words that day evoke what I have previously referred to as corporeal sovereignty. That is, they demonstrate that sovereignty, as exercised by the state, is not limited to the domination of individuals. On the contrary, sovereignty is the production of a system of practices carried out within a group or community with the purpose of having the capacity to decide for themselves and their surroundings—for example, the authority over their territory or the fate of their dead, as in this case. For the mothers of the victims, the body becomes both the axis and the site of resistance against the war. Their bodies are embedded in assemblages composed of spaces, objects, and other actants in the arduous journey of searching for a person in this land. Through various material forms, the searchers have crafted an entire array of political tools, each one forged with the hope of bringing the disappeared back home. In particular, my interlocutors have developed their own forensic methodologies, deeply marked by sensorial elements: smelling, touching, listening, and feeling. Intuition becomes a tool against the denial imposed by the state apparatus and the absence of its technologies.

That day, I asked Rita about the role intuition has played for her over the years. *"Many times, we rely on gut feelings because that's all we have left,"* she said. After her response, Julián's mother pointed out the beauty of the sunset. Its deep red hue inspired us to walk toward the cathedral to watch the sunset from there. We spoke about how much our country and city have changed. *"Maybe one day we'll wake up,"* I replied. She closed the topic with a forceful sentence: *"Neither you nor I will be here to see it."* This point brings

me back to the beginning, when the *madres* spoke to me about the uncertainty that has overtaken their lives.

Rita's words also lead me to reflect on death and how it has remained a totem of national identity (Lomnitz 2006). However, we have shifted from its artistic and festive representation to its most brutal manifestation, as evidenced by the thousands of mutilated bodies found in countless clandestine graves (Valencia 2018). Thus, rather than a crisis, what we are witnessing is the way in which the state has configured the management of life and death in this historical moment. Further analysis of the Mexican case will allow us to delve deeper into the political and economic forces that have designated this territory as a hub for the large-scale production of goods classified as illegal.

During the final weeks of my fieldwork, I had conversations with activists and attended academic events. There was a sense of heaviness—a mix of unease and helplessness about the inability to change reality. The general consensus seems to be that, for now, all that remains is to document the present through our work. Rita, 58, told me that it would likely be her granddaughter—Julián's daughter—who would continue searching for her son after she is gone. Her powerful words remind me that we are heading toward a future of intergenerational searches, as has happened in Guatemala, Argentina, and in other contexts where the children and grandchildren of the disappeared continue the work. Since those events and conversations, a question has lingered in my mind: When will this violent present become the aftermath of this land? Meanwhile, death, in its most grotesque and violent expression, continues to be a defining element in the biography of this territory.

Epilogue

In 2022, I met Natalia, a Nicaraguan searching mother whose daughter disappeared in 2017. The last time my interlocutor had any communication with Sara was through a phone call. Natalia told me that her daughter had said she was in the state of Jalisco, not far from Guadalajara, waiting for dawn to continue her journey north. The plan was to reach Tijuana, attempt to cross the border, and start a new chapter in her life. According to Natalia, *"Nicaragua has become an inhospitable place, especially for a 26-year-old woman. I decided to gather my savings and send my daughter to the United States. But you know; almost every day, I reproach myself for having made that decision."*

Sara was traveling with a group led by two men. *"One of my neighbors put me in touch with the man who had managed to get her son to the United States,"* Natalia paused before continuing: *"The last thing my daughter told me during our phone conversation was that they were resting and that I shouldn't worry about her. She assured me that everything would be fine."* Natalia moved to Mexico to conduct the investigation that authorities had failed to undertake. "*The government doesn't investigate the disappearances of people here; it was clear they wouldn't do anything for me. I'm just Nicaraguan with no rights in this country"*.

Sara's mother has dedicated herself to writing contextual analyses, conducting interviews, collecting newspapers, and attending marches. One afternoon, I received a text message from Natalia, inviting me to visit a migrant shelter in Guadalajara so that we could later write an analysis together—one she intended to include in the investigative file she had independently compiled. During the days I spent with Natalia at the shelter, I realized that her story resonated with the testimonies of other migrants. Juxtaposing these experiences made it

evident that migrants share a common narrative framework, one that reveals the interrelationship between the war on drugs and the migratory experience. Below, I reproduce the brief text that I wrote together with Natalia. To do so, we met on several afternoons at her home, laying out on the table our knowledge and the texts we had previously read in order to construct an argument that would enrich the contextual analysis Natalia had been developing over the past five years. But first, I present the message she sent me inviting me to collaborate with her, as it deploys a powerful testimony.

*

He pensado mucho en lo que hablamos hace días. Sabes, en ocasiones me desespero por estar lejos de casa, de mi gente. Me gana la impotencia de no poder hacer nada, de no tener respuestas. Me encierro en el departamento y no salgo por días, luego quiero gritar, salir a las calles y destruir todo. Me siento como si luchara contra un monstruo al cual nunca podré vencer. Mi hija perseguía un sueño y ahora yo vivo una pesadilla.

Estoy intentando escribir de nuevo, seguir con los análisis que hago. A lo largo de estos años me han ayudado muchos periodistas y activistas de aquí, que ahora son mis amigos. Son mi familia mexicana. Les estoy muy agradecida. Te quería contar que me dejaron entrar a un refugio de migrantes, me preguntaba si tú me quieres acompañar. Mi propósito es escribir más cosas para llevarles el resultado a las autoridades, como siempre: yo haciéndoles el trabajo. Quiero llevarles avances de la investigación, para que no tengan pretextos de no buscar a mi hija.

I've been thinking a lot about what we talked about a few days ago. You know, sometimes I feel overwhelmed by the frustration of being far from home, far from my people. I'm overcome by a sense of helplessness—by not being able to do anything, by not having any answers. I shut myself in the apartment and don't go out for days; then suddenly, I feel the urge to scream, to run into the streets and destroy everything. It feels as though I'm fighting a monster I will never be able to defeat. My daughter was chasing a dream, and now I'm living a nightmare.

I'm trying to write again, to keep working on the analyses I've been doing. Over the years, I've been helped by many journalists and activists here, who are now my friends. They've become my Mexican family, and I'm deeply grateful to them. I wanted to tell you that I've been granted access to a migrant shelter, and I was wondering if you'd like to come with me. My goal is to keep writing, to gather more findings and present them to the authorities—just like always, doing their job for them. I want to bring them progress in the investigation, so they have no excuse not to search for my daughter.

*

Natalia's vocabulary and analysis are composed of the names by which criminal groups are popularly known. She speaks of cartels and kingpins (*capos*). I decided to join her reflective process, although, as I mentioned at the beginning of this project, I reject several of those concepts due to the political matrix they share. Nonetheless, the text we created together reveals a part of the dynamics of violence intertwined with the rising number of disappearances in the area where I conduct fieldwork. This is only one piece of the broader

mosaic of texts compiled by Natalia and her *familia Mexicana*— below is the text co-written with Natalia, in which I refer to myself in the third person.

*

December 2023

During the weeks that we were able to spend time in that shelter, we heard multiple stories from women and men about the violence that they had suffered on their way from South American countries to Guadalajara, the capital city of Jalisco. The stories often referred to organized crime groups attacking migrants. Above all, the testimonies indicated that drug cartels are involved in the illegal migration market. Our hypothesis is not only that human trafficking and cartels are closely related, but that the same routes used for drug trafficking are now the paths used for human trafficking, and migrants themselves are sometimes used as smugglers as well.

Context

On August 22, 2010, the San Fernando massacre occurred—better known outside of Mexico as the *Tamaulipas massacre*—although other mass murders have been committed in that state. The crime was perpetrated by the Los Zetas cartel in the municipality of San Fernando. The victims were 72 migrants from different countries, who were in transit through Mexico on their way to the United States. Of the 72 executed (58 men and 14 women), the majority came from Central and South America. Their bodies were later piled up and left on the outskirts of San Fernando, thus accelerating their decomposition. According to the first official investigations, they were killed after being kidnapped. Based on her ethnographic

work, Huerta proposes two hypotheses with the purpose of understanding this crime.[xc] First, the massacre was the consequence of a dispute over the ownership of turf between cartels. A second hypothesis is that the migrants served as a message for *coyotes* (a colloquial term for migrant smugglers) outside criminal networks who "*dared*" to enter a territory with an owner, possibly Los Zetas. Thus, the coyotes tried to manage their business in an area where they rapidly came to be seen as enemies. In this sense, the San Fernando massacre exposed the dispute over migration routes in Mexico. Scholars and political institutions agree that human trafficking and organized crime to be closely related.[xci] The case of the 72 migrants and the current Mexican criminal context demonstrate that there is indeed an important link between those two fields, at least in this country.

In recent years, drug cartels have diversified their branches in order to obtain more streams of revenue and secure their territorial power. It is important to remember that cartels, as a type of organized crime, can be understood as social systems composed of relationships and, according to Von Lampe (2015), each system has a division of labor, a coordination of activities through rules and codes, and an allocation of tasks with the aim to achieve certain goals.[xcii] Moreover, in the fight over the territory, Mexican cartels have expanded their presence outside the drug market (the main reason for their existence), and within their structures we can now find an overlap of different functions, such as human trafficking and the production or distribution of pirated products —technology, medicine, and clothes.

In terms of migration, in her book *Violencias y migraciones centroamericanas en México*, the sociologist París Pombo (2017) explains that the evolution of drug cartels has been accompanied by their formation as important regional actors in the migrant market. Despite the fact that those organizations have a growing presence in a diversity of underworld economies, the author points out that drug trafficking still tends to be at the core of their logistics and businesses. The constant confrontations between cartels in order to dominate the drug routes are the best example of the point made by Pombo. For example, the Gulf of Mexico route that runs through states like Veracruz and Tamaulipas went from being part of the Gulf Cartel's domain to being fought over in 2010 by Los Zetas, the former armed wing of the Gulf Cartel. We have also seen these kinds of battles in the Pacific corridor, a route which has become more popular for migrants because, theoretically, it is less violent.

However, the organizations with presence in the Pacific corridor (western region) are undergoing a series of readjustments due to the apparent weakening of organizations like the Sinaloa Cartel or the Knights Templar (Caballeros Templarios), and the emergence of other networks such as the Michoacan Family (La Familia Michoacana) and the New Generation Jalisco Cartel (Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación). Due to their clashes, and their confrontations with authorities, these organizations define a landscape of fear in which people, including migrants, are potential victims. Migrants are especially at the mercy of disputes in the entities through which they travel (or are trafficked) in order to reach the United States. The western region of Mexico, where Isaac conducts fieldwork, is a key geography in constant dispute on the national drug trafficking map for various reasons. Between them, we can find an extensive highway network which connects with northern cities (like Tijuana), whose marine ports are important entrances to the Asia-Pacific route,

where chemicals for making drugs come from. Those are some of the reasons why western states have become notorious territories in the production chain of synthetic drugs whose primary destination is the north of the Rio Grande (*Rio Bravo*).

As Bruckert and Colette (2002) state, trips such as those carried out by migrants require a well-oiled organization, particularly amid a war on drugs framed by clashes with authorities and systematic violence. That is why, after the massacre of the 72 migrants, Mexican scholars have pointed out the need to study the involvement of drug cartels in the trafficking of people, as a new ramification of their thirst for power and money. The involvement of drug cartels in the migration process represents a conceptual redefinition of the topic. Following Bruckert and Colette:

> Various government agencies now tend to make a very clear distinction between trafficking and smuggling (…) smuggling of migrants refers specifically to procuring the illegal entry of a person into a state of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident in return for a financial or other material benefit. *'Trafficking in persons'* sets itself apart through the presence of fraud, coercion, physical or physiological abuse and often involves organized crime networks or syndicates.[xciii]

The business of migration has a long history in Mexico. In the past, *coyote* families and small organizations were the ones who ran the business. Currently, it seems that drug cartels have expanded their tentacles into this illegal market. One of the main pieces of evidence of drug cartels' involvement in the business is the proliferation of violence against migrants, as the director of the shelter told us. In 2019, the National Commission of Human Rights (Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos) published a report about the increasing number of violations against this group.[xciv] According to the report, there are four principal factors: economic violence (high fees that migrants have to pay to cartels), physical violence

(beatings, rapes, and torture), symbolic violence (threats that cause psychological terror) and the use of migrants for drug trafficking in the territory. In the second part, through the voices of our interlocutors, we deploy the repercussions and effects of these factors in the field and the penetration of cartels in the dreams of people whose sole purpose is to have a better life, to have a life *"where we can feel freedom,"* as Ramón from Honduras shared with us.

At the migrant shelter

Rodrigo was the first migrant we met. He is from Honduras and arrived in the city as part of a migrant caravan. Rodrigo told us that in his country it is well known that Mexican cartels are the ones who manage the business. *"They have their members there too (in Honduras) and they connect you with their people on the border between Mexico and Guatemala."* From that border, payment must be made to the person in charge, who stipulates the rules of the trip from the beginning. *"Cell phones are forbidden unless you ask for permission, and you must give them your belongings,"* says Rodrigo. Days after talking with our first interlocutor, we met Jaime, a 25-year-old who fled El Salvador because, according to him, a gang wanted to forcibly recruit him. Jaime's mother put together some money for him to pay for the trip to Las Vegas, Nevada, where one of Jaime's cousins has been living since 2005. However, the family did not have all the money to complete his trip, so he had to stay for two months in a mountainous area of southern Mexico where there are poppy plantations where he worked as a *campesino* (Jaime did not know the name of the criminal organization in charge of those plantations). But once he paid off his debt, he was able to return to the road.

Each step in the migration process involves costs that must be paid by migrants in multiple forms. However, a question arises. If a drug cartel (or a criminal syndicate) is in charge of organizing the migrants' trip, how do they end up in a shelter? According to the testimonies

of our interlocutors, there are two reasons. First, because some cartels get rid of the migrants and abandon them in the middle of the route, especially if they arrive in states where their organizations do not have a strong presence or are in dispute with the dominant cartel(s) in the area.

Another explanation is that some cartels tell migrants to go and ask for food and a place to sleep in shelters. Thus, the cartels use the humanitarian aid infrastructure created by Mexican and international non-governmental organizations. Mariana, one of the coordinators of the shelter told us that they know that some migrants do not come on their own or in-migrant caravans, but they cannot select who does and does not enter the place: "*Migrants who come accompanied by cartels are living a high-risk situation in order to achieve their dream. We cannot deny them something as basic as food or a bed, it is the least we can do."*

Mariana shared with us that since the New Generation Jalisco Cartel has become one of the biggest criminal networks in Mexico, the routes through the western part of the country are now more dangerous for migrants. New Generation grew exponentially at a national level beginning in 2012, after a series of internal fractures in the Sinaloa Cartel; these episodes coincided with the administration of Aristoteles Sandoval, from Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), as Jalisco's governor from 2013 to 2018.

In one of our talks with Luis from Belize, he told us that the cartels forced them to *put on a backpack*. That backpack contains drugs that migrants must carry during their journey. *"You have no choice, you have to put on the backpack because otherwise they can do something bad to you,"* Luis informed us. The shelter coordinators affirm that it has long been known that cartels force migrants to transport drugs in various ways. In this line, it is important to

emphasize the fact that there are not always members of cartels accompanying migrants, but they do *watch them* at certain points or tell them where to stop in order to deliver the drugs, as Rita, a woman from Guatemala who had the plan of working as a nanny in the US, told us.

The migrants we have had conversations with could not identify the organization that *"accompanied"* them, but due to the criminal context of the city it is possible to infer that New Generation Jalisco Cartel possibly was the group in charge, or perhaps an organization holding alliances with that cartel. In the Mexican context, it is important to highlight how cartels have entered the migration business because it is highly lucrative and allows them to have a presence in an important area that solidifies their structure. Although more research is needed in this regard, the fact that cartels use migrants as smugglers is clear evidence of the intersections between human and drug trafficking and allows us to reflect on how the presence of cartels is involved in multiple phases of the migratory process.

Thus, we suggest and consider that the investigative process related to Sara's file should include the human trafficking variable. This is a form of trafficking which, according to our findings, tends to be controlled by drug cartels that have absorbed the illegal migration business: merging markets and even using migrants as components of their criminal infrastructure.

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Photo reference
The photo of the Millennium Arches is from the archive of the EGEA project portal: thhttps://www.egea.com.mx/portfolio-archive/arcos-del-milenio/

[i] This slogan has historical roots that take us back to the marches organized by the Madre de Plaza de Mayo, in Argentina.
[ii] The author contrasts government data to assess how violent deaths increase in specific regions as the Armed Forces were deployed there as part of the state's strategy in the war against drug trafficking. For more information, see: *Narcomessages as a way to analyse the evolution of organised crime in Mexico* by Laura Atuesta (2017).
[iii] Some of the foundational academic works for understanding this context from a historical perspective are as follows: Luis Astorga (2005), *El siglo de las drogas: el narcotráfico, del Porfiriato al nuevo milenio*; Edgar Guerra (2023), *Organizaciones criminales. Apuntes desde la Teoría General de Sistemas Sociales*; Salvador Maldonado (2018), *La ilusión de la seguridad: política y violencia en la periferia michoacana*.
[iv] There are two books in particular that have been key for national political essayists: *De Tlatelolco a Ayotzinapa* by Segio Aguayo *(2021)* and *Nuestra tragedia persistente: La democracia autoritaria en México* by Loenzo Meyer (2013).
[v] Some of the authors that have been key to my understanding of the subject are: Bunkley (2023); Ahmann (2023); Paz (2009); Brison (1992).
[vi] A study that has closely followed this process is the work conducted by Sara Velázquez and Catalina Pérez. An important part of their reflection has been condensed in the essay titled "El Ejército tiene permiso" (2022).
[vii] In 2010, then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton postulated that Mexico was experiencing an insurgency, as drug cartels were exerting control over portions of the country—an assessment she compared to the situation in Colombia during the 1990s. Her remarks triggered a national debate on the notion of a failed state. Political analysts, activists, and journalists responded through major media outlets, acknowledging that Mexico was indeed facing a security crisis, but cautioning against labeling the country a failed state. They argued that adopting such a narrative carried significant risks, including the potential justification for U.S. military intervention on Mexican soil. To delve into the topic, see: Meyer 2013.
[viii] Journalist Marcela Turati has undertaken extensive reflection on the significance of territory and violence: *San Fernando. Última Parada: Viaje al Crimen Autorizado en Tamaulipas* (2023).
[ix] To better understand this postulate, see: *Los Zetas Inc.: criminal corporations, energy, and civil war in Mexico* by Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera (2017).
[x] It is precisely at this point in the text that I offer this note as a first emphasis on the significance of the body within the framework of sovereignty: "The body is the political object par excellence." This is how Charlotte Epstein (2021) begins her book Birth of the State. Her analysis emphasizes that the human body is employed by the state apparatus to develop control techniques that regulate the lives of those within its borders, while simultaneously marking or differentiating the Other—those who do not belong to the political community. The author focuses on how the relationship between the state and the subject originated, rather than how it evolved. In contrast, I address one of its many historical and geographic variations. Mexico, as a postcolonial state, has been characterized—especially in recent years—by the intertwining of biopolitical and necropolitical regimes (a point that Sakyak Valencia pays attention to in her work). On the one hand, Michel Foucault (2021) introduced the concept of biopolitics to describe how disciplinary institutions exert control over bodies, both individually and collectively, in order to regulate the life of the population. Regulatory power defines which bodies are deemed worthy of life and which may be discarded. Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe (2019) has made a vital contribution by expanding the scope of biopolitical theory. His work has had particular resonance in the analysis of the Global South. For Mbembe, the application of law functions to select which bodies may live and which must die—a process that becomes more pronounced in geographic, bureaucratic, and political margins where extreme violence reveals a profound dehumanization.
[xi] See: Valencia 2018
[xii] See: Capdepon 2021
[xiii] To delve into the definition, see: Laakkonen 2022
[xiv] To better understand, see: Amnesty International 1990
[xv] See: Kirmani 2024
[xvi] To better understand, see: Camacho Quirós 2024
[xvii] See: Orozco 2019
[xviii] This information is based on data provided by the Mexican government.
[xix] See: Atuesta and Vargas (2022, 4).

[xx] Some of the books which emphasize this element are: *La guerra de los Zetas: viaje por la frontera de la necropolítica* by Diego Enrique Osorno (2012); *México armado. 1943-1981* by Laura Castellanos (2013); *Soberanías en vilo: miradas desde la seguridad ciudadana en América Latina* by Salvador Maldonado (2021).
[xxi] According to the official statistics I cite in the introduction to this introduction: 27 people disappear daily in Mexico, with three out of ten being women.
[xxii] This point refers to internal migration driven by seemingly legitimate job offers. But to better understand the dimension of migration within the country and its connection to disappearance, from a regional perspective, it is essential to turn to the work of Jason De León (2024). In his academic research, De León explores the world of human smuggling from an ethnographic perspective. Rather than portraying *coyotes* as mere criminals, he demonstrates that many of them are in fact failed or frustrated migrants, caught in an underground economy shaped by precarity, violence, and necessity. His work reveals how smugglers, much like the migrants they guide, are embedded in an unequal system that exploits and discards them.
[xxiii] See: Hansen and Steputtat (2006, 297).
[xxiv] See: Von Lampe (2015, 35).
[xxv] See: Fattal (2018, 59).
[xxvi] See: Denyer (2015, 5).
[xxvii] See: Stepputat (2014, 7).
[xxviii] See: Schmitt 1984
[xxix] See: Farreira 2009
[xxx] See: Krupa 2009
[xxxi] See: Schmitt 1984.
[xxxii] Two relevant works in my analytical process have been: Rojas (2017) and Grandin (2004)
[xxxiii] Some of the authors are Silvana Mandolessi (2022), Andrew Lantz (2016), and Peter Watt (2012).
[xxxiv] Here I am inspired by Rita Segato's work previously cited. Laura's
[xxxv] Melissa Jasso and Camila Ruiza (2020) use feminist lens to underline some of the specific challenges that women have faced while carrying out the efforts while searching their loved ones.
[xxxvi] There are three key authors that have influenced my postulate: Ruiz-Serna 2023; Tsing 2013; and Latour 2005. A key book in my reflection, and the idea of the assemblage, has been: *Vibrant Matter* by Jane Bennett (2010).
[xxxvii] As reported by the official registry of the Mexican government.
[xxxviii]See: Meyer 2007.
[xxxix] See: Feldman 1991, chapter one.
[xl] In her book *Mujercitas*, Valentina Napolitano presents her ethnography in the same area that, years later, was transformed due to the war on drugs. It is fascinating to observe this transformation through Napolitano's chapters and my own fieldwork experience.
[xli] *Jóvenes, violencia y miedo: La (in)seguridad en el Cerro del Cuatro* by Strickland offers a complementary vision to Napolitano's work, as it presents ethnographic research analyzing the impact of violence on the inhabitants of that area.
[xlii] The work of Guevara presents an interesting on the topic from a local perspective. ??
[xliii] To better understand, see: Región del Rumor by Veena Das in *Veena Das: Sujetos del dolor, agentes de dignidad* (2008).
[xliv] As described by Luna in her book *Love in the drug war: Selling sex and finding Jesus on the Mexico-US border* (2020).
[xlv] Luna (2020) postulates this on p.70 of her book, in what I consider a precise analysis on rumor.
[xlvi] Proceso published an investigation which I consider a fundamental piece to understand the moment and crime described here.
[xlvii] See: *Domesticating organ transplant: Familial sacrifice and national aspiration in Mexico* by Crowley Matoka (pp. 17-20).
[xlviii] See: Fragmentos urbanos de una misma ciudad: Guadalajara by Aceves, Torre, and Safa (2004).
[xlix] In this sense, local journalists have been following the traces of the issue. I reference here the work of Toledo (2023): El derribo es el destino del "Chernobyl" de Tlajomulco.
[l] To better understand this topic from the perspective of political science, see: *Remolino: El México de la sociedad organizada, los poderes fácticos y Enrique Peña Nieto* by Sergio Quezada Aguayo (2014) and *Nuestra tragedia persistente: La democracia autoritaria en México* by Meyer (2013).

[li] See: Ashraf, S., Badshah, I., & Khan, U. (2023); Can, B. (2022); Shaery-Yazdi, R. (2020).
[lii] See: Icaza 2017.
[liii]See: Joyce, P., & Bennett, T. 2010/
[liv] See: Roberts, J. L. 2017.
[lv] See: De la Cadena, M. 2015.
[lvi] See: Bräunlein, P. J. 2016.
[lvii] A key book regarding the concatenation between disappearance and mourning, within the Latin American context of the twentieth century, is the one written by Isaias Rojas (2017).
[lviii] See: Zia (2019)
[lix] This is an experience shared by several of the searching mothers I met. They argue that many of their relatives, friends, and acquaintances distance themselves—either out of fear that the same might happen to them, due to the stigma surrounding disappearance, or because "they see us as either too sad or too angry," as Lorena told me.
[lx] See Johnson (2018, 116).
[lxi] Some of the key references in the topic are Hernández and Trujillo (2021); Cruz-Santiago (2020); Hernández (2019); Schwartz & Cruz-Santiago (2016).
[lxii] See Weizman (2017).
[lxiii] There is a broad spectrum of works on the subject, but three, in particular, guided me as I delved deeper into the Latin American context during the writing of this text: Fattal 2018; Wolf 2017; Ferreira da Silva 2009.
[lxiv] See: What Is a Mass Grave? Toward an Anthropology of Human Remains Treatment in Contemporary Contexts of Mass Violence by Anstett (2018, 182).
[lxv] Here, I cite the text *Governing the Dead in Guatemala*, but it is important to mention that Finn Stepputat's work has been pivotal to my understanding of the management of death from an anthropological perspective.
[lxvi] To delve deeper into this topic in Mexico, see: *Gore Capitalism* by Valencia (2018)
[lxvii] Undoubtedly, Paola Ovalle has been one of the scholars who closely followed this topic in Mexico. See: Narcotraffic and power. A field of dispute over legitimacy (2010).
[lxviii] My primary understanding of the archive stems from Derrida's work; see:
Archive fever: a Freudian impression (1996).
[lxix] *Experiments in skin: race and beauty in the shadows of Vietnam* is a fascinating book that delves into multiple perspectives on the skin. It served as an important guide for this chapter.
[lxx] See, *Images in spite of all: four photographs from Auschwitz* (2018).
[lxxi] As cited in Schildkrout (2004, 312).
[lxxii] See: Rivera-Garza (2021).
[lxxiii] See: Venus in Two Acts (2008) and *Scenes of subjection: terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America* (1997).
[lxxiv] See: Hartman (1997, 11).
[lxxv] See: Napolitano (2015, 57).
[lxxvi] Hartman (2008, 11).
[lxxvii] See: Norget (2021, 359).
[lxxviii] *Desierto Sonoro* by Valeria Luiselli has been a significant source of inspiration for delving into the realm of sound.
[lxxix] See Tylor (2010).
[lxxx] Ferrer (2021) explains that Delivery workers represent one of the most visible expressions of labor precarity in the contemporary context. Their work is marked by the absence of formal contracts, the lack of basic labor rights, and the imposition of unstable income conditions, in which the operational costs fall almost entirely on the workers themselves. Moreover, they face daily risks—such as accidents, violence, and adverse weather conditions—without any form of institutional protection.
[lxxxi] For a more in-depth exploration of the information, please refer to: https://iieg.gob.mx/ns/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Ficha-Informativa_Parque-vehicular-2000-2022.pdf
[lxxxii] See O'Neill (2016) to delve into the interconnections between narcotraffic and architecture.
[lxxxiii] See: Anand, N., Gupta, A., & Appel, H. 2018.
[lxxxiv] See: Gordillo 2014
[lxxxv] See Bourgois (1995).
[lxxxvi] Laura Roush introduced me to this concept after a conference. Since then, I have turned to the work of Brown and Kulik (1977).

[lxxxvii] This specific work by Navaro (2020) has play a fundamental role along my project.
[lxxxviii] See Weizman (2017).
[lxxxix] See Del Castillo (2023).
[xc] Huerta has conducted extensive ethnographic research on migrant caravans and social life at Mexico's two major national borders, both the northern and the southern.
[xci] See Bruckert and Colette (2002)
[xcii] Von Lampe has written a monograph that provides a precise analysis of criminal organizations. The author presents a typology of criminal groups which has significant relevance to the social sciences.
[xciii] See Bruckert and Colette (2002, 5)
[xciv] See Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (2019).