

# UNRESOLVED

# — HEAD Genève

**Ghofran Akil**

**HEAD – Genève**

2017 - 2019

Master Thesis

Master of Arts HES-SO in Design

**Media Design**

Tutor: **Daniel Pinkas**

*Set in Alegreya and Roboto Condensed*

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to

- my tutor and advisor, Daniel Pinkas, for his guidance, detailed grammar and structure corrections, and for bearing me through our long meetings.
- the jury members of the presentations, for their advice and input.
- my loving family, for keeping me in their prayers and driving me to my interviews with the families of the disappeared.
- and finally, to my husband, for his devotion, unconditional love and support.

Without you, none of this would have been possible.

# ABSTRACT

Enforced disappearance is a widespread phenomenon that has taken place in several countries around the world and is still ongoing in countries like Syria and Yemen. The families of the disappeared suffer from severe psychological damage due to unresolved questions and lack of proper support. Psychologists continued to misdiagnose them with Freud's melancholia, until the late 1970s, when Pauline Boss introduced the term *ambiguous loss*, which best delineates the families' psychological state. Boss describes it as the most devastating type of loss since it remains unresolved. In our paper, we define and introduce two types of ambiguous loss, while proving that the families fall into both types depending on the situation. We then move to exploring the economical, social and legal burdens that follow the families, in addition to analyzing how the absence of rituals, spirituality and perspective on life affect their psychology. Next, we present Boss's six proposed guidelines for the families to achieve resilience. At this point, we connect these guidelines with previous projects done on the phenomenon of the disappeared, whether by family members, international and national organisations, or even artists interested in the subject. We argue that, while all projects are extremely interesting, some tackle the subject beautifully, maintaining deeper therapeutic concepts that consciously or unconsciously relate to Boss's guidelines.

# CONTENT

09	<b>Introduction</b>
10	<b>The Enforced Disappeared</b>
11	<b>From Freud's Melancholia To Boss's Ambiguous Loss</b>
12	<b>Burdens Of Ambiguous Loss</b>
14	<b>Boss's Guidelines Towards Resilience</b>
17	<b>Projects On The Subject</b>
22	<i>Retratos No Hablados</i>
24	<i>Magdalenas Por El Cauca</i>
26	<i>Anunciando La Ausencia</i>
29	<b>Conclusion</b>
31	<b>Bibliography</b>
35	<b>Appendix</b>

# INTRODUCTION

Jamila grabbed onto her five children, of which the youngest was barely seven months old, as the militiamen asked her to leave them in the headquarters and get into their car to take her to her missing husband. Suddenly, she was anguished by the memory of tens of women who were raped and abandoned around the city. She left the headquarters, glimpsed her husband's motorcycle parked outside, and went home. Sleep escaped Jamila's eyes that night as she felt guilty of putting her own paranoia in the balance with her husband's well-being. The next day, she went back to the headquarters to find out her husband's motorcycle had vanished, along with the militiamen. Later, every once in a while, policemen would send her boxes with presumed evidence, clothing and accessories found on dead bodies around the city. But none were her husband's, which in a way was a relief, but also a burden. So Nazih was not dead; neither was he alive. Thirty-eight years have passed, Jamila has bravely raised her five children on her own, and now has fifteen grandchildren, and still lives in limbo. **"I feel lost and scared. I am always uncomfortable. Imagine you lose some money, whether a small amount or a big amount, you want to know where it is. Of course, the bigger the amount, the more you worry. What if the thing you lost is the most valuable thing you have? It is the man you love, the father of your children, your backbone. What would you do? Especially when you see that no one cares, and the government is doing**

**nothing to help you,"** so says Jamila Agha, wife of the disappeared Nazih Agha (personal communication, 2018).

We live in a world replete with war and conflict, which almost always result in casualties and destruction. Even if statistics show that "violence has been in decline for long stretches of time, and that today we are probably living in the most peaceful time in our species' existence," as Steven Pinker argues in his talk entitled *The Surprising Decline of Violence* (2007), regardless, thousands of people, like Nazih, still go missing in countries like Syria, Iraq and Yemen, while thousands of Jamilas search for them, barely receiving any support or acknowledgement. Moreover, thousands have gone missing in the near past in countries like Argentina, Colombia, Nepal and Lebanon... Each disappeared leaves behind relatives who grieve his/her loss. But when does this grieving start? Is it when their loved one goes missing? Or when the family loses hope? Do they actually ever lose hope? Does their grief decrease through time? Whether it is Jamila from Lebanon, David from Croatia, Martha from Colombia or Shirisha from Nepal, they live their lives trying to cope with their loss against all the social, economical and legal burdens that stand in their way, having been deprived from the solace they could have received from rituals and memorials, or sometimes even social and governmental support.

In what follows, we will pursue two interconnected goals: first, we will explore and explain the concept of ambiguous loss, what affects it, from social burdens, to rituals, and perspectives on life, while also digging through Pauline Boss's proposed guidelines; second we will present and analyze, partly through the prism of the guidelines, at an inevitably small group of art projects that have been elaborated around the awful phenomenon of enforced disappearances.

According to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (2006), enforced disappeared are the people who are secretly abducted or imprisoned by a state or political organization or by a third party, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the person's fate and whereabouts, either for avoiding punishment, or

simply because they haven't kept track. It is a world-spread phenomenon that has been a result of past, present and most probably future conflicts. Each disappeared has left behind a family that grieves their loss and searches for evidence about his/her fate. Unfortunately, their search usually reaches a disappointing dead end.

Practitioners and psychologists have studied and diagnosed the psychological state of the families of the enforced disappeared for years. Older results refer to Sigmund Freud's theory of *Mourning and Melancholia*, which claims that family members suffer from an unconscious pathological state of endless grief and mourning caused by uncomprehending fully the loss of a loved one (Freud, 1917, p.153 - 155). Nevertheless, it wasn't until the late 1970s that Pauline Boss, a pioneer in interdisciplinary study of family stress, introduced the concept of *Ambiguous Loss*, which in fact best encapsulates the suffering of the individuals and families of the disappeared. In our paper, we will explore the definition and different types of ambiguous loss; additionally, we will delve into to the societal contribution in deepening or lightening the families' suffering. We will also dig into Boss's proposed guidelines for helping families achieve resilience. The guidelines can play a role in encouraging family members and individuals to explore various means of expressions. We will argue that most of the artistic projects in our survey have been somewhat shy in their means of expressions; however, the work of visual artist María Alejandra Ordoñez, *Retratos no Hablados*, has beautifully captured the journey of the families, while digging deep into the Colombian case study. In addition to that, ten years ago, Gabriel Posada and Yorlady Ruiz have launched *Magdalenas por el Cauca*, an annual intervention, in collaboration with the missing's families, that pays tribute to the dead and the disappeared who have been thrown in the Cauca River. Moreover, El Tente, a group of female relatives of the disappeared, have instigated *Anunciando la Ausencia*, a theater play where they play the protagonists, each narrating her insufferable journey of searching for their missing loved one. The projects implement, perhaps unknowingly, Boss's guidelines, either by persuading relatives

into expressing themselves, or through engaging the families in expressive workshops. We believe that studying these projects will hopefully grant us the right means and mindset to design an experience/experiment that addresses the atrocious emotions of the families of the enforced disappeared.

## THE ENFORCED DISAPPEARED

Over the last centuries, our world has gone through numerous wars and conflicts resulting in destruction and death. Even today, war is still greedily stealing the souls of innocent children and families, combatants, and sometimes, in the case of outright genocide, whole nations or ethnic groups. Millions of people have died, leaving behind grieving families with nothing but agony and fuzzy memories. Even though the loss seems unbearable at first, time, as the saying goes, is the best healer. As days pass, the pain recedes and the memories hurt less, until the grief fades almost entirely; the bereaved families know and come to accept that their loved ones are no longer part of this world. But what if they are not sure? What if they do not receive an official death certificate? What if they do not have a body to bury, cremate or even cryogenize? What if their loved one just vanishes into thin air with no warning whatsoever? How can these people "move on" if there is even a remote possibility that the missing person could be alive? This happens to be the case of tens of thousands of families whose relatives have become victims of enforced disappearance during war or repression and are continuously searching for closure as hope eats them alive.

Enforced disappearances are a widespread phenomenon that has occurred in several countries around the world and is still ongoing in Syria and Yemen. The term "Desaparecido", meaning disappeared, has entered the common vocabulary in Lat-

in America, including Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Panama, Peru and Mexico. Ethnic cleansing, such as in Armenia, Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo and Rwanda is compounded by families still searching for loved ones missing in the conflict region. As for Americans, terrorist attacks of September 11 has left behind over a thousand victims unidentified, with no trace of their remains. Even small countries such as Lebanon with a population of roughly 2.6 millions at the time of its civil war (1975 - 1990) has at least 17,000 disappeared persons resulting from internal conflicts and Israeli invasions. When talking about war, we tend to list the number of casualties and the extent of material destruction; yet we hardly ever mention the disappeared people that forcefully go missing. However, disappearances have a profound effect on individuals, relatives and even the whole community. Each case entails a number of people searching year after year for closure, in most cases in vain. While the voices of the families might sometimes be heard at the national level, nevertheless, the fight against enforced disappearances is not receiving enough attention and support internationally neither from individuals nor organizations (Jimenez, 2000).

*"I am in a dual state of mind regarding whether she is dead or alive. If the door makes a noise at night, the children think that their mother might have come back. The children and I could not sleep properly till midnight because of the pain. The children are still hopeful that their mother will come back"*

*— a focus group participant from Kathmandu, Nepal.*

## FROM MELANCHOLIA TO AMBIGUOUS LOSS

Loss by itself is difficult enough, but add ambiguity to it, and the results are agonizing and immobilizing, even across generations. The uncertainty of a relative's whereabouts can cause tormenting stress

leading to symptoms that are more often than not misdiagnosed. For a while, practitioners diagnosed families of the disappeared as suffering from *melancholia*, which simply means deep sadness (Webster, 2014). According to Sigmund Freud, mourning is a natural and non-pathological conscious process resulting from the loss of someone or something we love. For its part, melancholia is the morbid unconscious pathological state of endless mourning caused by being unable to fully integrate the loss (Freud, 1917, p.153 - 155). Mourning is obviously hard, but it is time-bound. People who are emotionally healthy can eventually "let go" of the lost object and move on. However, some people, in certain circumstances, get stuck in the process. This is precisely what Freud called melancholia and more recent psychologists "complicated grief" (Blaauw & Lähteenmäki, 2002, p. 769 - 772).

Unlike the permanent loss of death, enforced disappearance is deeply disorienting and doesn't allow people to attain normal closure and detachment. The greater the uncertainty around the person's loss, the more difficult it is to overcome it. There is no clear 'end of life, start of grief' phase. Families bounce between hope and hopelessness, while trying to search for their loved ones, not knowing where to being the search effort. The anxiety and somatic illness hardly ever subside- as is the case in normal grief. It sets in, affects the individual then "can radiate in a ripple effect that impacts the whole family, as people are ignored or, worse yet, abandoned" (Boss, 2000, p. 10). Some family members can become obsessed with resolving the loss of their relative to the extent that they ignore other members of their family. The psychological state of the families of the enforced disappeared goes beyond Freud's melancholia, into a state explicitly defined by Pauline Boss as *"Ambiguous Loss"*.

To be clear, the phenomenon of ambiguous loss is not new, but the explicit labeling and detailed description is. Melancholia and ambiguous loss share important features, but they are not identical. Ambiguous loss is the most devastating loss experience in personal relationships precisely because it stays indeterminate and unresolved. According to Boss,



there are two main types of ambiguous loss: the first refers to when a person is physically absent, yet psychologically present; for example, when it is unclear whether the person is dead or alive. The second type involves people who are physically present yet psychologically absent, as in the case of Alzheimer patients and other chronic mental illnesses, or even people whose extreme absorption in their work and own world brings about neglect of the people around them (Boss, 2000, p. 8 - 9). In fact, both types of ambiguous loss are found in families of the disappeared: the first type reflects on the family members losing their relative, while the second covers the state of some family members who are preoccupied with their loss to the extent that they disregard other members of their family. In our research, we will be focusing on both types since together they characterize the rough psychological state of the families- as a whole- of the enforced disappeared.

*“[My mother]’s struggle never stopped, but it also contributed to perpetuating the other event [father’s disappearance], as if the disappearance was still going on. If [she] had made other choices, the impact of the disappearance on me would have been different,”* says Ghassan Halawani, a son of Adnan Halawani, a disappeared from Lebanon, talking about his mother’s search for his dad. *“We didn’t even think of questioning her absence... We missed her, of course, but we couldn’t think of delegitimizing or questioning her struggle. I don’t think she gave us any other choice,”* (“Sons of a Father’s Disappearance”, para. 20).

## BURDENS OF AMBIGUOUS LOSS

Families of the enforced disappeared have to deal not only with the agony of the ambivalence, but in addition with the economic, social and legal problems generated by the tragedy. Searching in vain

for a loved one can be a harrowing experience, especially since the affected people “might not be given the support that family members normally receive in cases of death,” (Blaauw & Lähteenmäki, 2002, p.769). Many of the disappeared have been breadwinners and the only source of income for their families. Thus, when they go missing, the family loses its economical support. Furthermore, when there is no official death certificate, some cultures forbid women to remarry, placing them under the status of spouse and widow at the same time. Needless to say, this psychological and social pressure makes the lives of these women, especially if they have children, extremely difficult. Families who can afford it seek legal advice, but most families cannot or do not even know how to go about seeking it. Also, Blaauw and Lähteenmäki observe that the community and religious groups often don’t have a clear idea on how to deal with such situations and might involuntarily aggravate them by stigmatizing them. These complications are constant reminders to the families of their unresolved loss, especially if they cannot rely on the support they need (Blaauw & Lähteenmäki, 2002, p. 769).

*“The disappeared are denied a place among the living and also denied a place among the dead.”*  
–Shari Eppel & Amani Trust Zimbabwe.

Rituals surrounding death are universal and an essential way for dealing with loss; without them, families tend to undergo abnormal bereavement processes. Bowlby’s attachment theory suggests that it can be impossible to let go of a person unless we participate in the mourning and farewell rituals as a basis of the detachment process (Bowlby, 1980, p. 105). When losing someone, human beings seek solace through the rituals that gather around them supporting relatives, friends and acquaintances and let them say their goodbyes. The act of mourning, whether during a memorial service, funeral or by dressing in mourning apparel help the relatives by breaking down denial and cognitively begin to cope and grief during the period directly after death (Boss, 2002, para. 6). Paradoxically, having the body of the deceased empowers letting go of it. Contrariwise, in the case of the disappeared, the mourning

process of their families cannot get under way. They are as if frozen between trying to cope with their everyday lives, grieving the real possibility that they might never see their beloved ones again, while also trying to find meaning for their unclear loss. As is understandable, families tend to refuse the idea that their relative is dead unless there is an official statement that allows them to start the process of bereavement. But without proof, the psychological adaptation to the loss remains stuck in uncertainty (Boss, 2007, p.2).

According to Boss, closure is a state that cannot be attained in the case of ambiguous loss. Actually, the very concept of closure can lead us astray (Tippet, 2016). Some people can actually move on in spite of the lack of the body, which of course becomes way easier when they are granted the necessary support from respected people in authority. For example, in the case of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the city of New York launched a solemn ceremony where they distributed more than 4000 urns of polished cherry mahogany that included powdered debris from the World Trade Center attack. It is interesting to note that Mayor Rudolph Giuliani launched this event in an attempt to stop profiteers from selling samples from the site to grieving families (Waldman, 2001, para. 3 - 4). This, by the way, perfectly demonstrates the human need to find and bury a deceased loved one, which itself "illustrates the intersection of cognitive and emotional processes in close human relationships- the circle of attachment and detachment," as Boss explains. Some people have chosen to accept the urns, finding comfort in the idea that part of their relative's ashes might be in there. Others, however, decided otherwise, foregrounding the difference between dust and ashes (Sturken, 2004, p. 313 - 314). Needless to say, different opinions are expected in cases of ambiguous loss: each person tends to deal with the ambivalence differently.

The profiteers of New York not the only ones who have tried to take advantage of the families' vulnerability. In Lebanon, numerous cases have been reported where unscrupulous people approach the relatives of the disappeared claiming they have information about their missing loved one. They

promise to disclose their clues and evidence- which unfortunately will later prove false- in exchange for money. In spite of suspecting that the crooks are vicious liars, some relatives still opted to pay for the fake evidence hoping that this time- with the slightest chance- it would turn out to be true (Di Mayo, personal communication, 2018).

In addition to rituals, a person's perspective on how the world works plays a huge role in helping him/her cope with their potential loss. People have a strong longing for certainty. Surprising as it may seem, being certain of the beloved's death can be preferable to the devastating continuation of doubt. Ambiguity breeds a feeling of incompetence while disproving that the world is a rational and fair place where people get what they deserve. The experience of unresolved loss causes even the strongest to question their view of reality as rational, fair, safe and understandable. Good things don't always happen to good people and bad things don't always happen to bad ones. When looking at the world in this secularized manner, individuals and families can come to understand that what they are going through is not their fault (Boss, 2000, p. 104). Also, when the families ask "why did this happen?" they tend to be ready to look beyond simple cause-effect thinking. The world has been unjust to them, and for them to make sense of their complex unbearable situation, some families resort to greater forces: spirituality and religion. Determining that what caused their loss is an external Higher Power can be a relief for the families. It can free them from feelings of anger and guilt. People experiencing ambiguous loss can have either secular or religious belief system, but what unites them is the attempt to find some meaning for their unresolved uncertainty. Letting go of trying to find a clear answer of what has happened may be an answer in itself (Boss, 2000, p.126 - 127).

**"God brought us together and then He brought us apart. I don't know why exactly but I am sure that everything happens for a reason. Maybe it is for the best. I am still finding out why, even after thirty-six years" – Jamila Agha, a Palestinian wife of an enforced disappeared from Lebanon.**

As we have seen, families of the enforced disappeared are torn by conflicting thoughts and emotions: on the one hand they dread the idea that their beloved ones are dead, but on the other hand, they are in desperate need to bring to a close their open-ended waiting. They resist their beloved's absence but also want to be done with their grief. Often, families even find themselves feeling anger towards their disappeared relative, and then they start experiencing grief for having angry thoughts in the first place. These emotions result from the state of unresolved ambivalence and the difficulty in making cognitive sense of the situation (Robins, 2010, p.264).

Ambiguous loss also affects decision-making since it leaves the grieving person muddled and blocks his/her coping mechanism. Even though ambiguous loss is a relational disorder, individuals are its first victims. Symptoms may include depression, trauma, guilt, identity issues, stress-related illness and so on, which themselves affect the individual's relationship with his/her family and society. Since the cases of enforced disappearances are replete with unanswered questions, each individual in the family perceives the situation differently, depending on what makes sense to them (Boss & Yeats, 2014, p. 66). What might be a relief for some members, might also cause further injury for others. Thus intrafamily quarrel arises. In an interview with Ferdous Agha, a daughter of the disappeared Nazih Agha from Lebanon, Ferdous repeats her optimistic hope that one day somebody will knock on her door, and when she opens it, she will see her dad coming back. Meanwhile, her son Afif sits next to her with obvious mocking expressions on his face. When asked, he replies that he has no doubt that his grandfather is dead and will never come back.

The ability of a family to allow its members to perceive their ambiguous loss in different manners is the main way to minimize their relational immobilization (Boss & Yeats, 2016, p. 66). According to Ferdous, it is normal that Afif thinks this way since he never met his grandfather and doesn't really have a relationship with him or even any memories. But she also expresses how hard it has been for her at the beginning to accept Afif's perspective. At

the same time, Afif respects to a certain point his mother's hopes and wants her to cope with her loss in whatever way she finds bearable (Agha, personal communication, 2018). Apparently, the family has developed strategies- unstated guidelines of sorts- to help them overcome their differences.

## BOSS'S GUIDELINES TOWARDS RESILIENCE

In her groundbreaking book *Loss, Trauma and Resilience*, Pauline Boss introduces six guidelines that families can follow –most effectively with the guidance of professionals and counselors– to achieve resiliency. The main aim of these guidelines is to ease the apparently intractable pain of ambiguous loss. Whether it is an individual or a whole family who are affected by ambiguous loss, the goal is to be able to live well despite the lack of certainty and the unanswered questions. It is important to keep in mind that these guidelines are circular and not at all linear (see fig. 1), but must always start and end with finding meaning (Boss, Yeats, 2014, p. 67).

### Finding meaning

*Finding meaning* could be called the alpha and omega of Boss's circular approach, since it begins and ends with it. Because of cultural and religious beliefs, a variety of answers ensue when the central question is asked: what does this situation mean to you? Some say that they believe it is a challenge in their life, or God is punishing them, while others with a more positive attitude state that God is giving them another way or opportunity to show their love for the disappeared person. Some people

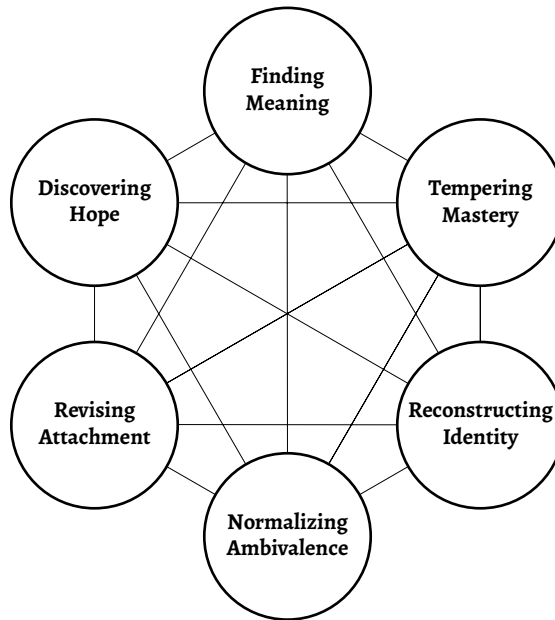


Fig. (1). Pauline Boss's guidelines to achieve resilience

simply put the blame on destiny saying that life can be unfair. According to Boss, professionals should build on all possible answers while also reinforcing positive meaning. They should first start by naming the problem, explaining that what they are going through is called 'ambiguous loss' and that it is the hardest type of loss for the very reason that it remains unresolved. In theory, once people have a clear-cut characterization of what is tormenting them, they have a better chance of coping effectively with it (Boss, Yeats, 2014, p. 67 & 68).

## Tempering Mastery

According to Pearlin and Schooler (1978), mastery is a person's ability to control his/her life and agency. With the expression *tempering mastery*, Boss implies that individuals suffering from ambiguous loss should aim at taking control over the very ambiguity of their loss in order to moderate their stress. Families of the enforced disappeared usually feel helpless and disempowered because they don't

have any control over what is hurting them, thus it is necessary to cede a bit of control over their situation, rather than being stressed by it (Robins, 2010, p. 255). Relatives of the disappeared should keep busy doing anything that makes them feel more powerful, be it exercise, music, work, or even meditation and praying. Some individuals tend altruistically to protect others who are enduring, or may suffer, a similar loss, as a way of tempering mastery. They tend to believe that other families should not undergo the same unjustifiable pain as they have, so they militate in order to decrease that risk. One might also describe this as making meaning out of chaos (Boss, 2000, p. 119). They found NGOs, spread awareness, and even create activities that shed light on their painful experience. In the case of Lebanon, interviewed families have a common message: 'nothing good comes from civil war. Let the new generation learn from our mistakes,' (personal communication, 2018). Though the families come from opposing warring factions, they share the same unending pain, the same acute shed of hope, and the same revulsion to enforced disappearance. Surprisingly, in this way,

the suffering families infuse hope in a seemingly hopeless situation.

## Reconstructing Identity

Ambiguous loss threatens the identity of family members, who sometimes get confused between different statuses of social identification. Such situations can traumatize unless people are able to reconstruct their self-definition. *Identity reconstruction* is therefore necessary to move forward towards resiliency. Who do I consider myself to be now that my loved one has disappeared for all this time? Am I a wife or a widow? Neither? Am I a child or an orphan? Am I still a parent or have I lost my child forever? According to Boss, relational boundaries and rules should be loosened so that members can be more flexible in their ways of functioning without the missing person. Of course family members will try to cling to the status quo hoping that things will some day go back to normal and their loved ones will return. However, since in general the odds are against that, it is important to encourage change of identity and roles in the bounds of the family and in the society (Boss, 2006, p.115 - 116).

## Normalising Ambivalence

Boss's guidelines also include *normalizing ambivalence*, as some family members find themselves harbouring conflicting thoughts. According to Robins (2010), ambiguity is related to cognition, which is something one knows. However, ambivalence arises from contradictory beliefs and feelings; in the case of the families of the enforced disappeared, it is caused by the conflict between the belief that the disappeared is dead, and that he/she might one day come back. As explained above, some people wish for the termination of their unresolved situation; they may wish for the recovery of the body of their beloved for the sake of closure. Usually these thoughts are followed by guilt and anger, but the therapist's role is to help family members understand that their

conflicted emotions are the understandable result of lack of clear evidence. Helping the families express their mixed feelings is one of the most important steps in overcoming their state of ambivalence, or perhaps better said, of integrating it into an ongoing life (Boss, 2006, p. 68).

## Revising Attachment

As ambiguous loss assumes attachment, the pain felt is actually the result of losing this attachment/relationship; thus, a person needs somehow to revise his/her attachment with the disappeared relative in order to move forward towards resiliency. *Revising attachment* means to be able to live with the ambiguous loss of "a close attachment, even as finding new human connections," as Robins describes it (2010, p.255). What seems to prove effective is what Boss and Yeats call '*both-and thinking*', which is a paradoxical way of including two different notions in the same idea, such as 'I have both the anxiety of no closure and the ability to move forward,' or even 'I must move on and organise my life without the missing person, but at the same time, I can hope and remember' (Boss, 2002, para. 5). The ability of people to practice both-and thinking helps them discover and accept new transformations of attachment to their disappeared loved ones. What might hinder the revision of the attachment process is the *idée fixe* that people must totally get over their relationship with the missing person.

## Discovering Hope

Last but not least, we reach the sixth guideline: *discovering hope*. Once family members are more comfortable with ambivalence and unanswered questions, they are ready to discover new sources of hope in life. As mentioned earlier, the obsession to bring an end to their grief and to find closure becomes in itself an impediment to the process. What they are going through is unfair and rough, but that doesn't mean that the world is a vicious place;

it might still be holding beautiful things in reserve, despite the pain of ambiguous loss. They might also contribute to this beauty by helping others avoid the pain they suffered, which takes us back to *tempering mastery*- the second guideline. All of these guidelines intertwine to help families reach resiliency (Both & Yeats, 2014, p. 68).

Boss's guidelines are indicators of organisations' success in helping family members suffering from ambiguous loss. NGOs around the globe, with the collaboration of practitioners, have achieved very encouraging results with individuals and families pursuing resilience. In an interview with a psychologist from the International Committee of the Red Cross, ICRC- who preferred to remain anonymous- she reveals that they use Boss's guidelines in their workshops that aim at verbalizing emotions and discovering sources of hope as encouraged by Boss. She reports that these workshops have a huge positive impact on the families, who when understanding that they are undergoing ambiguous loss, start building meanings out of their situation. They also express deep emotions through various means. Some have resorted to artwork, while others have preferred to engage in forms of social interventions as a memorial manifestation and political demonstration. Family members have reported feeling relief and **"as if a big weight has been lifted from my chest,"** as Ferdous states when talking about attended workshops (personal communication, 2018).

Being in the state of continuous ambivalence while maintaining hope calls to mind the story of Sisyphus. According to Greek mythology, the gods condemned Sisyphus to an eternity of rolling a rock up the mountain, only to have it roll back down the second it reached the top, thus forcing Sisyphus to start over. Sisyphus knew that there was no end to his punishment. According to the myth, the gods were clever; they realized that there was no harder punishment than hopeless labor (Britannica Encyclopedia, 2018). On the other hand, Camus (1942) believes that we must imagine Sisyphus happy: "il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux." As shocking as this statement can be to a first reader, Camus implies that Sisyphus has learnt to understand his situation;

he has somehow found meaning and pleasure in the endless labour, rather than focus on the pain and misery, and this is how he reached resilience.

## PROJECTS ON THE SUBJECT

Artists from various countries have used different media, such as art, cinema, performance and installations, to structure and give form to their feelings towards the subject of enforced disappearance. For instance, the Lebanese artist Ghassan Halawani, a son of a disappeared, created *Fouad*, a short animation movie that narrates the story of a young boy who lost his father. The autobiographical character of the story is obvious. The artist emphasizes the boy's memories and hopes, while using black and white sharp, linocut-style drawings which set the mood quite accurately. The boy is seen dreading the darkness of the night, until the memory of his disappeared father relieves him and dissipates his fearful ideas. The young boy knows that his father is not physically present, but he believes he can call upon him whenever he needs, and his father will rescue him from all his scary thoughts, ergo *discovering new sources of hope* in the very memory of his father. So he is both here and not here, and it is acceptable. In addition to that, Halawani's *tempering mastery* dimension is clearly obvious in the way he ends his animation, where he reaches out to the public with the closing message: "some things slowly fade away, but the missing remain," and then asking them to cooperate with him to resolve the enforced disappeared issue in Lebanon.

Fernando Traverso, a hospital worker, political activist, and artist from Argentina, offers another example. He has spray-painted life-sized bicycle stencils in the streets of his hometown Rosario as a symbolic memorial of his friends who have been





Fig. (2). Fouad (Halawani, 2013)



Fig. (3). *The Bicycle* (Traverso, 2010)

abducted during the war. The bicycle is the main means of transportation. Now, the stenciled bicycle has become a symbol of the disappeared for the citizens of Rosario where you can find more than 350 stenciled bicycles in the urban area, each placed precisely where the missing person has left it lastly (Sandoval, 2014, para. 1 - 3). What is notable about

Traverso's memorial art is that it is a form of street art; it transforms the city as a whole, for those in the know, into a distributed memorial service for the disappeared. It represents the common demand to thwart the capacity to forget the conflict in general, and the enforced disappeared in particular. Each stenciled bicycle is now a reminder of the disap-

peared, for their family members, friends and even the people that never met them.

In addition to individual efforts, the Lebanese human rights association, *Act for the Disappeared* (ACT), fighting to clarify the fate of the disappeared of the Lebanese civil war, has several projects and exhibitions on that theme. ACT develops continuous workshops and events in order to encourage the families to speak up and express their ambivalence and sorrow on one hand, and stimulate the Lebanese public's interest in the subject of the enforced disappeared on the other hand. The NGO also works hand in hand with the ICRC, and Artichoke Studio to help families discharge their feelings towards their missing loved ones in a less morbid fashion. In 2016, the group launched a workshop called *Empty Chairs*, where family members have been invited to paint and create collages on chairs using whatever reminds them of their disappeared relative. The empty chairs symbolize the empty spaces which the disappeared have left behind. The results actually vary in concept and aesthetic: some are collages made from pictures and articles written about the disappeared, while others include illustrations that

revolve around their professions and personalities. At the end of the workshop, the chairs have been exhibited in different cities in Lebanon as a memorialized ceremony for the disappeared in hope that it will give a space to different narratives and stories that will provoke empathy and engage more people. Family members report feeling relieved after seeing the results because they felt that their loved ones are not only numbers and statistics; they are given time and space to be remembered after missing the opportunity for a decent ritual or commemoration in the past. Another astonishing fact is that relatives actually have visited the chairs frequently and talked to them as if sending messages to their disappeared. After understanding that they are not alone, that other relatives endure the same agonizing ambivalence state, they could transfer their sorrow into artistic elements, as if conducting hope into a seemingly hopeless situation, as recommended by Boss.

“...If only you knew how your kidnapping shook me! Your cause is my cause, the cause of all who disappeared. We shouted our lungs out, and walked until the streets melted into our footsteps... We didn't give up. If you could sit a bit longer, I would tell you



Fig. (4). Wadad Halawani's chair from 'Empty Chairs' (2017)



Fig. (5). Jamila & Ferdos Agha's chair from 'Empty Chairs' (2017)



about [politicians] who violated their positions and never made a homeland... I would tell you more about our identity.” – *Wadad Halawani*, talking to the chair that now represents her missing husband (Empty Chairs, 2017).

Another one of ACT’s main goals is to generate a greater public visibility for the phenomenon of enforced disappeared and the suffering their families. In a series of tv ads, the NGO recounts everyday life anecdotes from family members years after the disappearance of their beloved relatives. One story shows an old man running to answer the phone, hoping that it would be his brother calling after years of going missing. Another shows a woman preparing dinner where she sets the table for two. Eventually she is seen eating alone with the other plate clean and empty on the table. A third story shows an old woman cleaning the room of her disappeared son, leaving everything as it was at the time he disappeared. The series of ads goes on, each reflecting a different scenario, hoping it will provoke the Lebanese public to support the NGO in order to enforce a law that calls for DNA testing for bodies found in mass graves in Lebanon. The cause’s slogan

is “we have the right to know.” In 2012, a consortium of civil society organizations, including ACT, proposed a draft law to the Lebanese parliament for the creation of a national investigative entity to clarify the fate and whereabouts of the Lebanese enforced disappeared. I am happy to report, that a few days ago, on November 11, the referendum has been finally accepted (“Les députés votent enfin,” 2018).

Other artists, who are not related to any disappeared, have shown interest in the subject of enforced disappearance as well. Lina Ghaibeh is a Syrian-Danish animation and graphic novel artist living in Lebanon. In her short animation, *My Son*, she portrays a mother’s angst and daily battle with the emptiness of living her life waiting for news of her disappeared son. She is walking around the streets of Beirut with her black-and-white photo of her son, not knowing if he is detained or dead. She remains in limbo, unable to sleep in a city full of ghosts of the disappeared. All she can do is take the bus everyday and sit in Martyr Square in downtown Beirut, where the relatives of the disappeared usually do their sit-ins. When she eventually realizes that all of this is in vain, she gradually disappears



Fig. (6). TV ads series (Act for the disappeared, 2012)

from the scene, reappearing in her apartment. She listens to news on her old radio, cries her eyes out after noticing that nothing is changing in the enforced disappeared crisis in Lebanon. She clears her tears with a towel, and then adds the towel to a series of other towels on a spring to dry, which represents the days she has been crying over her missing son. The artist shows sympathy with the disappeared of Latin America by mixing Arabic and Latin songs throughout the scenes. Ghaibeh dedicates her work to the mothers and the families of the missing, saying that after she became a mother, she understood better how hard it is to lose a child (Ghaibeh, personal communication, 2018).

We consider the last two projects mentioned as spectatorial work, which consciously chooses to educate the public on the unbearable grief and intense lives of the families of the enforced disappeared. Even though they do not relate to Boss's guidelines, we believe that they introduce a specific genre of projects done around the phenomenon. Their main focus is the general public, without any engagement with the victims themselves, whether the disappeared or their families. These projects aim

towards provoking the public to empathize with the missings' families simply by visually narrating anecdotes from their everyday lives.

Even though the projects mentioned above attempt to stimulate the wide audience to identify and empathise with the families, along with constituting a means of expression for relatives of the disappeared, they are still, in our minds, somehow shy in their concepts and tools. They do not push the concept of identification and empathy far enough to have people engage psychologically with the disappeared and their families. However, María Alejandra Ordoñez, in *Retratos no Hablados*, Gabriel Posada and Yorlady Ruiz, in *Magdalenas por el Cauca*, and the Grupo de Teatro el Tente, in *Anunciando la Ausencia*, have explored, in our opinion, the subject more forcefully, as they have developed extensive research that has yielded beautiful and conceptual results which we will scrutinize in the next section.



Fig. (7). *My Son* (Ghaibeh, 2012)

## Retratos no Hablados

*Retratos no Hablados*, translated to “non-narrated portraits,” is an art installation by the Colombian visual artist María Alejandra Ordoñez, who is now a doctoral candidate in the Romanisches Seminar at the University of Zurich. She is part of a research group called *Contested Amnesia and Dissonant Narratives*, which is an ongoing project by a team of researchers and designers in order to study the conflict and post-conflict situation in the Global South, particularly in Lebanon and Colombia. Apparently, each society has reacted differently to the conflicts it has fostered. The landscapes of memorial culture in both countries claim truth and accountability, yet they are extremely diverse. The study reveals that the Lebanese post-conflict society opts for an amnesty that encourages invisibilization of their extended civil war and occupation, whilst the Colombian society in general leans more towards cultural and political processes of transitional justice. In Lebanon, the amnesia, official silence and fragmented society have shaped complex memory cultures that have yielded different aesthetic interventions, cultural productions and dissonant narratives as symbols of remembrance of the conflict (“Dissonant Narratives,” 2017). Ordoñez’s project is inspired from her research at the Dissonant Narratives group, focusing on the Colombian case study, especially the Colombian families of the enforced disappeared with whom she has been in contact with for years now.

The first stages of Ordoñez’s research began with the relatives of the disappeared: Adriana, Alvaro, Antonio, Beatriz, Consuelo, Erik, Fabiola, Faustino, Martha, Mery, Valentina, Elsy, and Walter, who unfortunately passed away recently during the development of the project. For almost three years, she has worked on building a relationship based on confidence and mutual care with these members, via phone calls, emails, and most importantly, direct human contact. During these meetings, she incites the individuals to express their feelings, especially those springing from ambivalence, as encouraged by Boss. They inform her about their journey searching

for their loved one, while society condemns them, or at least is indifferent. She then analyses her inputs- which she refuses to call interviews- and extracts the main elements in order to adapt them in a designed experience aiming at creating a better empathetic engagement with the public. Ordoñez has embraced the voices of the relatives, which she believes enshrine the deepest emotions (Ordoñez, personal communication, 2018).

Ordoñez’s sound installation revolves around the subject of dealing with and remembering violence, extracted from personal narratives. The main objective, according to Ordoñez is “to problematize the concept of disappearances from its different semantic possibilities, as well as a strategy of concealment of the intentions, facts and ways in which the conflict was narrated.” *Retratos no Hablados* allows the public to listen to audio conversations of family members of disappeared through a landline telephone, giving an audience to invisible memories and stories not heard. In a simple setup with white homeland telephone appareils with black buttons on wooden desks, people shockingly have to answer the random ringing phones from family members talking about how their relatives have disappeared. These testimonial conversations introduce the listeners to the emotions, perceptions and hopes of those who daily coexist with the memory of their missing loved ones.

In addition to having to listen to these heart-breaking testimonies, which vary greatly from one story to another, the artist also aims to explore the reaction of the person on the other end of the phone call. Listeners have the impression that they are in a conversation where they can react and talk back to the family members; however, the attendee’s intention to dialogue is fruitless since they are actually trapped in a one-sided conversation. No matter how hard the attendee wants to help the family members, he/she can never be heard, a notion mirroring how society hardly ever actually lends an ear to the families’ cries. Also, the installation puts the attendees in a direct relationship with the family members, where they can actually listen to their stories and sad voices, feel the agony they have been living with throughout and explore how they express their grief.



Fig. (8). *Retratos no Hablados* (Ordoñez, 2016)

It is also important to state here that the choice of the telephone is not at all random, but actually a part of Ordoñez's memory of her uncle's absence. Her grandfather has insisted to keep the landline free at all times, hoping that one day the ringtone will announce his son's return. Sadly, most other families also share the same experience (Ordoñez, personal communication, September 26, 2018).

In an interview done with the artist, Ordoñez admits that what triggered her interest in the subject is the fact that her uncle is an enforced disappeared person from Colombia. Having lived most of her life with her grandparents, she grew up watching the misery of her grandmother, who died grieving her disappeared son, and her grandfather who is almost ninety years old now and is still searching for any trace or evidence that could lead him to his son. The artist continues by stating that she is not doing her research and artwork for her uncle *per se*, but to give a voice to the families of the enforced disappeared of the world in general, and of Colombia in particular, who have been by and large ignored by society and forgotten by the international organizations. She also insists on not using the word 'victim' all through her research and projects when describing the families' state, but rather refers to

them as humans and people in general (Ordoñez, personal communication, September 26, 2018). The project *Retratos no Hablados* has won several grants from different institutions, such as the III Convocatoria Nacional de Propuestas Artísticas y Culturales de Memoria and the Colombian Ministry of Culture. It is now exhibited in the National Museum in Bogotá and Museo de Memoria Histórica de Colombia (Dissonant Narratives, 2017).

Being a relative of a disappeared, Ordoñez grew up watching the vast agony of her grandparents, while also suffering herself. Since a young age, she has opted to help family members of the disappeared, as herself, and this is what inspires her artistic journey, and now her research study. Boss, by the way, considers art as the best method for *tempering mastery* (Boss, 2000, p.136), which is Ordoñez weapon of choice to overcome the tragedy of ambiguous loss that she is living through, and has witnessed her grandparents and other relatives suffer from. Not only does she guide the families- and herself- to *find meaning* out of the chaos of ambiguous loss, she also succeeds in *discovering new origins of hope* after her grandparents, and other family members, have reached one dead end after another in their search for evidence. She admits that seeing

the public react to her work has given her a feeling of contentment, somehow satisfying her hunger for unresolved answers about the disappeared. With her witty artistic installations, she has become the bridge between the emotions of the families, and the eyes of the spectators.

Ordoñez does not plan to stop here; for her next step, she has been in collaboration with anthropologist Maria Fernanda Olarte, who explores the topic of enforced disappearance from the perspectives, experiences and logs of Colombian forensic researchers. This phase also includes the testimony of a new participant, Maria Isabel, who has witnessed for decades numerous people being killed and tossed to the Cauca River, which passes through the backyard of her former house. Those people have not been identified, and their families consider them disappeared as well (Ordoñez, personal communication, 2018). The Cauca River has witnessed numerous bodies throughout the past conflicts of Colombia, and now is associated with the dead and disappeared of the country, which itself has become an inspiration for Colombian artists interested in the subject.

## Magdalenas por El Cauca

**“The disappearance of [Rosalba Lozano’s] brother Agustín in the waters of the Cauca River in 1990 led to the death of his mother, Ignacia Calderón, due to pangs of guilt. The father looked for his son in a crossing through the Cauca river until arriving at Beltrán in Marsella (Risaralda) without any result,”**  
– *Magdalenas por el Cauca* (April 24, 2014).

Between 1986 and 1994, a series of killing, uninterrupted torture and a wave of disappearances took place committed by paramilitaries in the northern valley of Colombia. The rivers of Colombia, especially the Cauca River, have been used as a mass grave for thousands of disappeared people. Its waters are full of massacres, harrowing memories of regional violence accumulated and segmented in events caused by political violence. Family members consider the rivers as a cemetery where they would go

to pay tribute for their loved ones, whether knowing they are dead or hanging in the world of the disappeared (Intendencia de Montevideo, 2017, para. 1). Ten years ago, on November 2008, two young visual artists from Colombia, Gabriel Posada and Yorlady Ruiz, launched *Magdalenas por el Cauca*, an annual intervention that pays tribute to the disappeared people and their mothers, while denouncing the horror that the inhabitants of towns on the banks of the Cauca River have had to endure. Magdalena refers to Mary Magdalene, one of Jesus’s followers who lamented his death and died shortly after his crucifixion. ‘Cries more than a Magdalene’ is a famous Colombian phrase chosen to describe women grieving a loved one, let it be parents, siblings, partners or even children, hereby making Magdalene a symbol for the grieving woman, (Institute for Public Art, 2018, para. 4).

*Magdalenas por el Cauca* is a collective project that collaborates with the citizens of the villages nearby the river, such as Trujillo and Cartago, through workshops led by the artists every year around the same date. In Posada and Ruiz’s workshops, individuals extract and define themes and images that they believe best highlight the disappeared. These workshops bring forcefully to mind Pauline Boss’s guidelines, in particular, *finding meaning* and *reconstructing identity*, as the participants dig through their emotions to extricate connotations out of their forlorn memories of the conflict. They transform themselves from being a grieving relative or friend, into an active agent, trying to *normalize his/her ambivalence*, surrounded by people undergoing the same affliction. Next, they use the extracted themes to build rafts which eventually drift downstream, summoning a symbolic act, an act of painful memories of the people whose bodies have floated on the waters of the Cauca River, “a place of search, impunity and forgetfulness,” (Museo de Memoria Histórica de Colombia, 2018, para. 2). The rafts are lit with candles, decorated with gifts and flowers, historical records of discovered bodies in the rivers, in addition to the most prominent element: large drawings depicting women holding portraits with the faces of disappeared



people from the Cauca region. They also mirror the horrific image of the bodies that once floated on the river (Institute for Public Art, 2018, para. 3 - 7). Eventually, Ruiz conducts a performance which evokes the legend of La Llorona (translated to: the weeping lady), evoking the mourning and desolation of the women who continue to demand justice and *discover new sources of hope* (Museo de Memoria Histórica de Colombia, 2018).

*Magdalenas por el Cauca* has been described as a useful therapeutic project that involves the grieving families of the victims of brutality during the Colombian conflict, in order for relatives to unravel their emotions in a poetic and respectful form that substitutes belated rituals and goodbyes. One of the purposes of the project is to be a participative work of the whole community and not that of a sole author. This collaboration has yielded an effective annual commemoration of the dead and the disappeared by the family members themselves, with the guidance of visual artists who care deeply about their pain. The intervention deciphers these individual -yet communal- emotions into a language than everyone relates to and understands: visual imagery

immersed in the very landscape where the atrocious events occurred.

In a nutshell, the project is a set of installations, performances, murals and community actions that have instituted the Cauca River as a metaphor of life and pain echoing the cry of thousands of women who seek their loved one's murder or disappearance in the waters of the Cauca. It reflects the contemporary sensitive scenario of current Colombia: "a country that strives to develop, but still has very deep marks in relation to the insecurity of its people," (Institute for Public Art, 2018, para. 8). The project has been shown in a large part of Colombia, in addition to other cities such as Berlin, Buenos Aires and Montevideo. It has also received recognition from the Ministry of Culture and has been the subject of documentaries by national and foreign directors, thus spreading the voices of the families of Colombia's disappeared (Magdalenas por el Cauca, April 24, 2014).



Fig. (9). Consuelo Valencia's raft in *Magdalenas por el Cauca* (2010)



Fig. (10). Orlando Naranjo's raft in *Magdalenas por el Cauca* (2010)

## Anunciando la Ausencia

- Mom, I dreamed that I was being chased by chickens. I escaped, ran, and when I woke up, I was tired.
- O, Mamita, that's a bad dream, take care over there.

This is the last nightmare of María Cristina Cobos, a young nurse who has gone missing on her way to work. Her mother, Paulina, has attempted to recreate the footsteps of her daughter, wishing to find her, but all she has received are these comments: 'Madam, do not look for her, or else the same thing will happen to you,' and 'Stop searching and end your suffering by making a symbolic burial with some of your daughter's garment,' (Gomez, 2016, para. 14 - 21). Paulina, along with other mothers of the disappeared from the Colombian department of Meta have refused to succumb to these voices; instead, they joined forces, and transformed their stories and compiled evidence from a state of hopelessness into a theater play that has been performed in different cities around Colombia (Toro, 2018).

*Anunciando la Ausencia*, which is translated as *Announcing the Absence*, is a theater play that narrates the story of a group of women who have lost a loved one to enforced disappearance. They call themselves

El Tente, in reference to the bird of the Orinoquia that farmers train to take care of their children in the fields- as the women are now taking care of the memories of their, and all people's, disappeared (Gaviria, 2017, para. 5). In Colombia, the records of Information System Network of Disappeared and Corpses (SIRDEC) reveal that 83,267 people have been forcibly disappeared during the conflicts (Gómez, 2016, para. 3). However, some mothers have refused the notion that their loved ones are just records and numbers, and have decided to join support and training groups, such as the Family Training Schools for Enforced Disappearance promoted by Movice, a movement that deals with victims of state crime. There, they have learnt legal concepts about body search and identification process. Eventually, they have reached the conclusion that the law is not always fair, and have found a new means of collecting evidence: the memory notebook (Gómez, 2016, para. 55).

In the memory notebook, the mothers have assembled detailed information about their missing children, from vaccine reports, birthday pictures, report cards, and also pieces of clothing, which are evidence that their loved ones exist as humans, and not just numbers. What is important to mention

here is that these women would probably not have had the strength and courage to achieve these results without the help of the family training schools, where the guidelines of Pauline Boss are followed. The meetings take the shape of support groups, where relatives *find meaning* behind their loss by expressing their emotions and telling their stories out loud. Afterwards, they debate on the best way to deal with their loss in order to cede a bit of control over their situation, rather than being burned out by it, which is one of the main points of *tempering mastery*. What first started by taking law courses and advice, rapidly switched into compiling stories in a notebook and transforming them into performances, once family members come to the conclusion that the law might not give them answers. They did not cling to the status quo, rather they *revised their attachment* and *reconstructed their identity* to become both: a grieving female relative of a disappeared and a strong woman with a message to convey. Again, they took control over ambiguity and moderated their stress by transforming their emotions into a successful theater play, where they have *discovered new sources of hope*, and have refused to stick to laws

that would take forever, or even would never, bring information on the whereabouts of their loved ones.

The stories of the notebook have undergone a metamorphosis from being small storytellings behind the closed walls of the family training school, into *Anunciando la Ausencia*, a public theater performance in different cities of Colombia. The ambiance of the first scene's setting is dark and gloomy, with lit candles, flowers, and wooden crosses painted in white, with the text N.N inscribed in black, which is in conventional usage to refer to the unnamed or indeterminate. Consequently we are placed in a Christian cemetery for unidentified people, a place where relatives of enforced disappearances generally denunciate the disappearances. A woman conveying the figure of a Catholic annunciation, dressed in mourning apparel, approaches the stage, representing the annunciation of death. She then recites historical facts about the Colombian conflicts, demonstrating the impact of the disappeared on their families in particular, and society in general.

Later, a group of middle aged women, with photographs hung on their necks like necklaces, are seen dancing and cooking sancocho, a fa-



Fig. (11). *Anunciando la Ausencia* (El Tente, 2016)



mous Colombian soup, while each of them states where she comes from and who is she looking for. Characteristically, dance is their chosen form of being together in search for their loved ones. One by one, the protagonists, who are female relatives of the disappeared, clasp a cross from the graves and narrates the unbearable journey of searching for their loved ones, whether a child, a partner, a spouse, a sibling or even a parent. They exhibit the belongings of their missing relatives, while stating names, origins and dates of disappearance as testimonies. They read diaries and tell anecdotes, forcing the public to acknowledge their loved ones' existence as humans, and raising awareness of the subject of enforced disappearance. Perhaps the most symbolic act of the scene is the fact that each protagonist hands over the cross to the next narrator, a symbolic transfer of their painful search on one hand, and the unidentified state of their loved one on the other. The emotional facial expressions of the protagonists, their sorrowful voices, along with the belongings of the disappeared transform the missing from being just an additional number in the records, into a reality that hurts. The main

message is forgiveness, but in order to forgive, they demand to know the truth behind their relatives' disappearance (Gaviria, 2017).

"I am part of a theatre group called El Tente, with other women whose relatives were victims of the armed conflict. In our work, *Anunciando la Ausencia*, we tell our stories with the hope of raising awareness about the problem of forced disappearance, and share our realities filled with pain, injustice and impunity. This artistic exercise has allowed us, in some way or another, to heal inside and unburden ourselves, and be able to move on little by little," expresses Maria del Rosario Peña (2016), one of the protagonist of *Anunciando la Ausencia* and a member of El Tente.



Fig. (12). *Anunciando la Ausencia* (El Tente, 2016)

# CONCLUSION

Being Lebanese, having been born and having lived my early years in Colombia, it was a shock when I realised that disappeared actually exist in both countries. It took me twenty-one years to acknowledge their existence; not because I didn't want to, but because mentioning them, or any incident about the war in this instance, is considered a taboo, especially in the case of civil wars and internal conflicts. There is not a clear enemy; even if there were, the enemy is not agreed on by all parties. The details of our civil war are not certain, but sometimes, even death is not certain, it is a hypothesis, a torn absence, as in the case of the disappeared. Even if I am not a relative of a disappeared, having conducted a few interviews with them, I feel as if part of their community. I aim to hold on to their emotional messages and sorrowful journeys, using my education as a graphic and interaction designer, to create a designed experience that will spur empathy with the families of enforced disappeared around the world.

Let us recapitulate: enforced disappearance is a worldspread phenomenon. Due to unresolved questions, lack of appropriate support, and absence of rituals, the families suffer from severe psychological damage. Psychologists continued to misdiagnose them with Freud's melancholia, until the late 1970s, when Pauline Boss introduced the term ambiguous loss, which best delineate the families' psychological state. This state is further impaired due to social, economical and legal burdens. Boss has proposed a list of guidelines that aims to escort affected individuals towards resilience. We use these guidelines to analyze projects done on the subject, arguing that some of the projects, however valuable in themselves, are somehow shy in their means of expressions, while others tackle the subject beautifully, maintaining deep therapeutic concepts.

We believe that studying the psychology of the families of the enforced disappeared, along with examining the relevant thematic projects has enhanced our understanding of ambiguous loss. What has added value to our research is that some of the projects are actually authored by family members themselves, or by individuals in collaboration with family members. Consequently, the projects mentioned in the last part of this thesis reveal a deeper interpretation of what relatives aim to achieve from their artistic projects. All of which has hopefully equipped us with the right means and mindset to design an experiment/experience that addresses the emotions of the individuals suffering from ambiguous loss. As virtual reality is thriving nowadays, claiming that it has the power to put its users in someone else's shoe through the perceptual illusion of embodiment (Bertrand et al., 2016), it is worthwhile experimenting to see if it has great potential in achieving empathy with the families of the disappeared. In our upcoming project, we would like to explore the potential of virtual reality. To what extent does it achieve empathy and provoke emotions? How realistic can it be? Is there a relationship between the level of realism and the spur of emotions? And most importantly, how would emotions of the families of the enforced disappeared be best presented in a designed experiment/experience?



# BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agha, A. (2018, July 9). Personal communication.
- Agha, J. (2018, July 9). Personal communication.
- Agha Sondos, F. (2018, July 9). Personal communication.
- Al Akouri, M.H. (2018, July 12). Personal communication.
- Anunciando la Ausencia*. (2018, March 22). Desaparicion for Zada. Retrieved October 9, 2018 from <https://colombia.desaparicionforzada.com/portfolio/anunciando-la-ausencia/>
- Barak, O. (2007). "Don't mention the war?" *The politics of remembrance and forgetfulness in postwar Lebanon*. Middle East Journal, 61(1), 49-70. Retrieved 27 August, 2018 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4330356>
- Berg, R. (2017, April 24). *The Holocaust: Who are the missing million?*. BBC news. Retrieved September 1, 2018 from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-39062221>
- Bertrand P, Guegan J, Robieux L, McCall CA and Zenasni F. (2018). *Learning Empathy Through Virtual Reality: Multiple Strategies for Training Empathy-Related Abilities Using Body Ownership Illusions in Embodied Virtual Reality*. Front. Robot. AI 5:26. Retrieved November 1, 2018 from <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frobt.2018.00026/full>
- Blaauw, M. & Lhteemki. (2002). 'Denial and silence' or 'acknowledgement and disclosure' (Vol. 84). IRRC. Retrieved August 6, 2018 from <https://www.icrc.org/en/international-review/article/denial-and-silence-or-acknowledgement-and-disclosure>
- Boss, P. (2000). *Ambiguous loss: Learning to live with unresolved grief*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press.
- Boss, P. (2002). *Ambiguous loss in families of the missing* (Vol. 360). The Lancet. Retrieved August 27, 2018 from [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(02\)11815-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(02)11815-0/fulltext)
- Boss, P. (2004). *Ambiguous loss research, theory, and practice: Reflections after 9/11*. Journal of Marriage and Family, 66(3), 551-566. Retrieved August 27, 2018 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3600212>
- Boss, P. (2006). *Loss, trauma, and resilience: Therapeutic work with ambiguous loss*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Boss, P. (2007). *Ambiguous loss theory: Challenges for scholars and practitioners*. Family Relations, 56(2), 105-110. Retrieved August 20, 2018 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4541653>
- Boss, P. (2016, July 23). *The myth of closure*. On Being. Retrieved August 27, 2018 from <https://onbeing.org/programs/pauline-boss-the-myth-of-closure/>
- Boss, P & Yeats, J. (2014). *Ambiguous loss: A complicated type of grief when loved ones disappear*. Bereavement Care 33(2):63-69. Retrieved August 27, 2018 from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271943194\\_Ambiguous\\_loss\\_A\\_complicated\\_type\\_of\\_grief\\_when\\_loved\\_ones\\_disappear](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271943194_Ambiguous_loss_A_complicated_type_of_grief_when_loved_ones_disappear)
- Bowlby, J. (1980). *Loss: Sadness and depression* (Vol. 3). New York, NY: Basic Books. Retrieved June 21, 2018 from <https://www.abebe.org.br/files/John-Bowlby-Loss-Sadness-And-Depression-Attachment-and-Loss-1982.pdf>
- Camus, A. (1942). *The myth of Sisyphus*. Encyclopaedia Britannica. Retrieved August 27, 2018 from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Myth-of-Sisyphus>
- Citroni, G., Hardy D. & Rice, P. (2009). *No one shall be subjected to enforced disappearance*. APDH Argentina.

- Retrieved August 20, 2018 from <http://www.apdh-argentina.org.ar/sites/default/files/u6/enforced-disappearance.pdf>
- Clavijo, R. (2009). *The disappeared*. The University of Texas at El Paso. Retrieved September 2, 2018 from <http://artpulsemagazine.com/the-disappeared>
- Cotter, H. (April 7, 2007). *Unresolved chords echo for 'the disappeared'*. The New York Times. Retrieved May 28, 2018 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/07/arts/design/07barr.html>
- Del Rosario Peña, M. (2016, September 11). *The Youngest Suffer the Most*. PBI Colombia. Retrieved September 30, 2018 from <https://pbicolombia.org/2016/09/11/the-youngest-suffer-the-most/>
- Dewhirst, P. & Kapur A. (2015, March). *The Disappeared and Invisible revealing the enduring impact of enforced disappearance on women*. ICTJ. Retrieved October 8, 2018 from <https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Global-Gender-Disappearances-2015.pdf>
- Di Mayo, J. (2018, July 4). Personal communication.
- Dorfman, A. (2018, August). *Chile: now more than ever*. The New York Review of Books.
- Dowsett S. (2016, October 4). *Spain's killing fields: dig unearths dozens of Civil War era dead*. Reuters. Retrieved Septmeber 1, 2018 from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-spain-graves-widerimages/spains-killing-fields-dig-unearths-dozens-of-civil-war-era-dead-idUSKCN1241UV>
- Edkins, J. (2011). *Missing: persons and politics*. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press. Retrieved August 27, 2018 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt7zCW5>
- El Ali, H. (2018, July 12). Personal communication.
- Empty chairs, waiting families*. (2017). ICRC, Act for the Disappeared & Artichoke Studio.
- Enough Waiting*. (2012). Act for the Disappeared. Retrieved June 3, 2018 from [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=act+for+the+disappeared+campaign+%22enough+waiting%22+tv+spot](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=act+for+the+disappeared+campaign+%22enough+waiting%22+tv+spot)
- Every parent's worst nightmare*. (2017, December 11). ICRC. Retrieved June 3, 2018 from <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/every-parents-worst-nightmare>
- Freud, S. (1917). *Mourning and melancholia*. London: The Hogarth Press. Retrieved June 12, 2018 from [http://www.english.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Freud\\_MourningAndMelancholia.pdf](http://www.english.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Freud_MourningAndMelancholia.pdf)
- Gaviria, N.T. (2017, September 7). *Las víctimas que quieren actuar para el Papa*. Retrieved September 30, 2018 from <https://colombia2020.elespectador.com/pais/las-victimas-que-quieren-actuar-para-el-papa>
- Ghaibeh, L (2012). *Ya waladi: my son*. Retrieved October 4, 2018 from <https://vimeo.com/51024954>
- Ghaibeh, L. (2018, October 9). Personal communication.
- Gómez, A. (2016). *Mujeres sobrevivientes de la ausencia*. El Tiempo. Retrieved November 5, 2018 from <https://www.eltiempo.com/multimedia/especiales/mujeres-sobrevivientes-de-la-ausencia/16748605/1/index.html>
- Halawani, G. (2013). *Fouad*. Retrieved June 23, 2018 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YnN3vqWDAqo>
- Halloran, N. (2016, October 26). *The fallen of World War II*. Retrieved November 5, 2018 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwKPFT-RioU>
- Hamad, J. & Hamad, S. (2018, July 10). Personal communication.
- Hassan, N. (2016, February). *Sleepless Nights*. Al Jazeera Documentary. Retrieved July 13, 2018 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKo368x355I&t=9s>
- Hope against hope*. (2018, September). The Economist.
- Jaacks, J. (2001). *Los Desaparecidos/The Disappeared*. Retrieved July 16, 2018 from <https://vimeo.com/5253673>
- Kaawach, S. (2018, July 12). Personal communication.
- Kapur A. (2015, April 14). *Overlooked and invisible: the women of enforced disappearances*. Open Democracy. Retrieved November 1, 2018 from <https://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/amrita-kapur/overlooked-and-invisible-women-of-enforced-disappearances>

- Kassab, M. (2018, July 10). Personal communication.
- Les députés votent enfin la loi sur les disparus : "C'est l'issue d'un très long combat."* (2018, November 12). L'Orient Le Jour. Retrieved November 12, 2018 from [https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1143154/les-deputes-se-reunissent-pour-legiferer-en-labsence-de-gouvernement.html?fbclid=IwAR3drcNkaYajx7hssjH-6QC1H4bkjX9cNjFZ11p4IoTyQMnABT\\_3QJKinYXc](https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1143154/les-deputes-se-reunissent-pour-legiferer-en-labsence-de-gouvernement.html?fbclid=IwAR3drcNkaYajx7hssjH-6QC1H4bkjX9cNjFZ11p4IoTyQMnABT_3QJKinYXc)
- Lewis, F. (2016, November 8). *Ambiguous loss: when the loss doesn't end*. Huffpost. Retrieved August 23, 2018 from [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ambiguous-loss-when-the-l\\_b\\_11423558](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ambiguous-loss-when-the-l_b_11423558)
- Luster, T., Qin, D., Bates, L., Johnson, D., & Rana, M. (2008). *The lost boys of Sudan: Ambiguous loss, search for family, and reestablishing relationships with family members*. Family Relations, 57(4), 444-456. Retrieved August 23, 2018 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20456809>
- Magdalenas por el Cauca*. (2014, April 24). Magdalenas por el Cauca. Retrieved October 20, 2018 from <https://magdalenasporelcauca.wordpress.com/>
- Magdalenas por el Cauca*. (2017). Intendencia de Montevideo. Retrieved November 2, 2018 from <http://www.montevideo.gub.uy/ciudad-y-cultura/agenda-cultural/magdalenas-por-el-cauca>
- Missing persons and international humanitarian law*. (2010, October 29). ICRC. Retrieved September 9, 2018 from <https://www.icrc.org/eng/war-and-law/protected-persons/missing-persons/overview-missing-persons.htm>
- Museo de Memoria Histórica de Colombia*. (2018). Retrieved October 11, 2018 from <http://museodememoria.gov.co/>
- Ne laissez pas mon histoire s'interrompre ici*. (2017). L'orient Le Jour.
- Ordoñez, M.A. (2018, September 26). Personal communication.
- Pérez-Sales, Durán-Pérez & Herzfeld. (2000). *Long-term psychosocial consequences in first - degree relatives of people detained - disappeared or executed for political reasons in Chile. A study in Mapuce and Non-Mapuce persons* (Vol. 20). Catholic University of Temuco. Retrieved August 20, 2018 from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/28112566\\_Long-term\\_psychosocial\\_consequences\\_in\\_first-degree\\_relatives\\_of\\_people\\_detained-disappeared\\_or\\_executed\\_for\\_political\\_reasons\\_in\\_Chile](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/28112566_Long-term_psychosocial_consequences_in_first-degree_relatives_of_people_detained-disappeared_or_executed_for_political_reasons_in_Chile)
- Pinker, S. (2007). *The surprising decline in violence*. TED2007. Retrieved November 5, 2018 from [https://www.ted.com/talks/steven\\_pinker\\_on\\_the\\_myth\\_of\\_violence?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/steven_pinker_on_the_myth_of_violence?language=en)
- Ribeiro, G. (2018). *Magdalenas por el Cauca*. Institute of Public Art. Retrieved November 2, 2018 from <https://www.instituteforpublicart.org/case-studies/magdalenas-por-el-cauca/>
- Robins, S. (2010). *Ambiguous Loss in a non-western context: Families of the disappeared in postconflict Nepal*. Family Relations, 59(3), 253-268. Retrieved August 20, 2018 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40864538>
- Sandoval, C. (2014). *Fighting sorrow; preserving memory*. ESCALA. Retrieved November 8, 2018 from <http://www.escala.org.uk/collection/artists/fernando-traverso/AUTH378/350-intervencion-urbana-rosario/O706>
- Shaery, R. (2012). *The local politics of the Lebanese disappeared*. Middle East Report, (262), 2-5. Retrieved August 23, 2018 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41702428>
- Shear, K. (2015, January 8). *Complicated grief*. The New England Journal of Medicine. Retrieved September 1, 2018 from <https://www.sdpsych.org/resources/Documents/Complicated%20GriefShearNEJM.PDF>
- Sons of a father's disappearance and a mother's struggle*. (2018). ICTJ. Retrieved October 1, 2018 from <https://www.ictj.org/multimedia/photo/sons-fathers-disappearance-and-mothers-struggle>
- Sturken, M. (2004). *The aesthetics of absence: Rebuilding ground zero*. American Ethnologist, 31(3), 311-325. Retrieved October 8, 2018 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3805360>
- Toro, J. (2018). *Trece obras de arte para hablar de desaparición forzada*. CNMH. Retrieved October 9, 2018 from <http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/en/noticias/noticias-cmh/trece-obras-de-arte-para-hablar-de-desaparicion-forzada>

- Traverso, F. (2010). *Historia del arte en Rosario*. Retrieved September 18, 2018 from [http://arnoldogualino.com.ar/traverso\\_fernando.html](http://arnoldogualino.com.ar/traverso_fernando.html)
- Tubbs, C., & Boss, P. (2000). *Dealing with ambiguous loss*. *Family Relations*, 49(3), 285-286. Retrieved September 3, 2018 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/585892>
- Until we know their fate. (2017, July 10). *Act for the Disappeared*. Retrieved October 17, 2018 from <http://www.actforthedisappeared.com/promote-right-know/public-events/exhibition-until-we-know-their-fate>
- Volpe, A. (2016, November 15). *The people who can't stop grieving*. *The Independent*. Retrieved September 1, 2018 from <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/people-who-cant-stop-grieving-science-mourning-psychologists-a7416116.html>
- Waldman, A. (2001). *A nation challenged: Mementos*. *The New York Times*. Retrieved October 8, 2018 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/15/nyregion/nation-challenged-mementos-with-solemn-detail-dust-ground-zero-put-urns.html>
- Working group on enforced or involuntary disappearances*. (2018). OHCHR. Retrieved October 10, 2018 from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/disappearances/pages/disappearancesindex.aspx>
- Young, M. (2000). *The sneer of memory: Lebanon's disappeared and postwar culture*. *Middle East Report*, (217), 42-45. Retrieved August 24, 2018 from [https://www.jstor.org/stable/1520176?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1520176?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)



# APPENDIX

## Jamila Agha's Interview

*Wife of disappeared Nazih Agha*

*Nationality: Palestinian*

*Habitat: Saïda, Lebanon*

*Interview conducted on: July 9, 2018*

### **How long have you been in Lebanon?**

For so long, around 45 years if not more. But I am Palestinian, and I got married in Lebanon, I married my cousin (Nazih), who is also Palestinian.

### **Where were you during the Lebanese conflict?**

We were living here in Saïda, but at the time of the Israeli invasion we had to leave. We went to safer place, but when they left we came back to our home. But before the invasion, we were renting a small apartment in the poor allies of saïda.

### **How many children do you have? Are they all from your disappeared husband?**

I have 5 children, all from Nazih. I didn't remarry. When did he disappear?

In 1982. All my children were very young. Now they grew up, got married, and now I have 15 grandchildren, and until now he is nowhere to be found.

He disappeared from Saïda?

Yes in Saïda, more particularly in Abra. He went there to sell fish; he is a fisherman, and he never came back. The Lebanese Phalanges Party kidnapped him.

### **How can you be sure that the Phalanges did that?**

Yes, I am sure because there is an eyewitness that told us that. She told me that the Phalanges had a checkpoint and they were waiting there. Then she saw the militiamen take Nazih from the checkpoint.

I don't understand why to be honest. Even though the area there was majorly Christian, but we were all nice to each other, except these Phalanges. So I went to Abra, and I contacted some of my Christian friends to contact the militiamen, and they told us that they would bring Nazih back. So I went with my husband's sister there, and again the people of Abra used to love my husband. They thought he is a nice gentleman. But the problem was with the checkpoint militiamen.

I wanted to make sure that Nazih was with the Phalanges. So I went to my friend's apartment, directly in front of the headquarters of the Phalanges, and peeked through the window. I saw my husband's motorcycle parked outside. So now I was sure that the Israelis didn't kidnap him. No, but by the Phalanges. And now it has been around 36 and 37 years. Damn them...

### **And after that what did you do?**

I started asking around. I went again the next day to the headquarters and asked them, they said he is not here. My husband had fish with him. And I smelled they were frying fish that day! He had the best fish, all the doctors of Abra waiting for his fish.

And they said no. I saw the motorcycle, and also they said they didn't have him! They then said that they would release him in the coming days.

15 days passed, and the neighbor is still watching them from behind her window curtains, but she was terrified as well. She told me that after 15 days, they blindfolded Nazih, put him in a car and took him. After 15 days. We don't know if he is alive or dead, we know nothing. And we are always asking about our loved ones. We still do not have any answer. The Red Cross is helping up also, and that woman from that NGO, Inaya is also standing by us. We are trying out best and we won't let this go. Dead or alive, I don't care; we want them. We want to know what happened to them.

### **So you are demanding to know what happened?**

Well yes of course, thousands like Nazih just disappeared and no one has any clue about their whereabouts. Where's the logic behind that? And the gov-



ernment and politicians are sleeping, not asking about anything. If they need money from you, they will come after you. But these disappeared, no one is asking about them! This is too much. We worked with the ICRC to create a law, and we are running from one place to another and we are doing meetings from time to time, but until now we didn't get any result.

**Do you still have hope that you will see you husband?**

Honestly, God knows. If God wants me to see him then I'll see him. I feel like I have collapsed during these 37 years, imagine if Nazih is still alive in prison, in prison for 37 years, imagine how he would be like? This is if he is still alive. I always curse them, night and day.

**Tell me more about your children.**

I have 5: 3 boys and 2 girls. They are all married. And God bless them now I have 15 grandchildren. I raised them by myself. They have uncles and extended family members but I was a strong woman. I didn't make them feel like anything is missing. I was their mom and dad, and thank God now they are all well-behaved and kind people.

**You always lived in this apartment?**

No we were renting a small place, but my husband bought this apartment before, but it was still under construction. It wasn't ready yet.

**Do you think they kidnapped him because he was Palestinian?**

The Phalanges used to ask for people's IDs on the checkpoint. They kidnapped Lebanese, Palestinian or Syrian. They kidnapped a lot of people. There wasn't a clear criterion. What is even more terrifying is that they used to kill people and throw them in the sea or bury them in mass graves. Curse you Phalanges, oh curse you. You left me alone with 5 children, one of them was still breastfeeding and another three were still drinking milk. They were young! The oldest was ten and the youngest was 7 months. Nazih was young; he was 36 years he was at the prime of his life.

We have madame Wadad Halawani, the cofounder of the NGO and a wife of another disappeared as well. She is a very strong woman that is helping us a lot and working hard to know any news about the disappeared. She organizes meeting so we can share our emotions and brainstorm together ways to let people empathize with us. I thank her a lot.

**Now what are you asking from the government?**

We just want to know what happened to them. Are they alive? Are they dead? I do not know what to tell you honestly.

**When a wife loses her husband to death, she passes through a clear stage of grief and mourning. When she misses him, she goes to visit his grave. These rituals were taken away from you.**

I lived a very hard life. They used to kill people and throw them. You know I reported my husband's disappearance to the police. So when the police found any dead body, they used to put some of the body's clothes in a box, like a shoe or a belt or anything, then they'd come and ask me if it belongs to my husband. Honestly these things used to terrify me. One time they got me a shoe from a body they found in a will. They killed people and threw them in wills. When they came here with the box, I fainted. I cried I thought it was one of my husband's limbs. But apparently it wasn't my husband's. The next time they got me a belt. The policemen mean good, you know, they didn't mean to terrify me. So I touched the belt and said that it wasn't my husband's. And then I knew that this belt belonged to a dead person. Until this day, whenever I remember this story I have to wash my hands. I am terrified of these things. I am terrified of bodies. It really affected me so badly, especially my psyche. They got me lots of clothes and pieces but nothing was my husband's.

**How long did the police bring you these things?**

This was still at the beginning, when his kidnapping was fresh, in around 1982. We kept on searching by ourselves. His sister went to his parent's place in Palestine to check if he went there. But I was sure that he was not there. I saw his motorcycle with my

eyes. And they were frying fish. My husband's fish. We really lived a very hard life. Life was really hard. Sometimes I don't think about my husband's disappearance, and I would be calm. But then I remember and my blood boils. Did you see how much I cursed now? I can't help myself. It is not just the case of my husband's; they are lots of people like him that left behind family members, even here in Saida.

Do you feel like you could have done more? Maybe go again to the headquarters and ask about him?

Listen, one day, I took all my five children and I went there. I told them look at these young children, have some mercy on us. Please give me my husband or any new about him. They told me: 'Madam, you can keep your children here and we can take you by car to one of our bosses.' I said no. They are dirty people by the way. I said that my children cannot stay without me. I went back to my apartment with my children. I knew they are bad people. They raped lots of women; and I was still young. They might have also killed me. What would happen to my children then? You never know.

**Was your husband involved with any party during the conflict? Or maybe part of the Palestinian resistance?**

No no no. You know what I always say? I wish that Israel had taken him, then I'd understand that this is my enemy and they took him. Israel took lots of people from the area as well. Just a second. (She talked to her granddaughter: Listen dear, put some juice for our guests. Be careful not to drop anything my darling.)

What was I saying? Ah yeah, so Israel is our enemy. If they had our loved ones then they would be martyrs, or even forcibly missing by a clear enemy. And by the way, there were lots of people in the Israeli prisons kept alive, because they have space to imprison people. Then when Hezbollah did the exchange with them, many disappeared came back home to their families! But the militias here do not have big prison, so it is a burden for them to keep prisoners. So they used to kill most of the people they kidnap. But these pigs, sons of pigs, they did not take record of who is alive or who is dead. My heart is burning. It has been 37 years and I feel as if it happened yesterday.

**Now in the meetings, there are family members from the Phalanges as well, because also some Phalanges are disappeared, and they have families looking for them. Do you ever have conflict with them? Do you feel comfortable around them?**

It is normal, you know, we sit together in meetings and each individual asks for their loved one. Listen to me, the kidnapped people are mostly innocent people they had nothing to do with the conflicts. A person would be going to work; they kidnap him; traveling; they kidnap him... There are also young people that were kidnapped as well. One couple, a bride and groom, were killed on their wedding night and thrown in the sea of Jiyeh. They found their bodies! So again I ask you, after you talked about all of this killings, do you still have hope to see your husband? Honest to God, this is something in the hands of God the great. If God has given him more time, then he is still alive. So no I didn't lose hope. Even, you know, when my children got married, they would never right 'family of the late Nazih Agha'. No they totally refused it.

**Do they still remember him?**

Yeah for sure. The eldest two were 7 and 10. They still remember him. But you know my daughter Ferdous doesn't really know her dad. She saw his picture of course. Mohammad as well, and Fadi. They were very young. But Nesrine, she was 7, for example she still can imagine him a little bit. And Farouq, the eldest he still says he remembers how he looked like. He was more mature.

**Do you have any of Nazih's belongings?**

No I don't. Every now and then I used to give some of his clothes to the poor, thinking that maybe these good things would bring him back. But I kept his picture. I'll bring it. Meanwhile please drink your juice dear. It is really good for your health. Wait wait I will also bring you cookies.

Listen, I have a question for you, why are you asking me these questions? Do you want to help us? Are you trying to spread our voices to Switzerland?

**To be totally honest, now I am 26. I didn't know**

**about the case of the disappeared until I was 21. I am Lebanese; I lived most of my life here. I didn't hear about them, nor did my parents tell me. So when I knew about this, it hit me hard. So now I am doing my masters, and I wanted to work on this subject.**

Okay, listen, I feel lost and scared. I am always uncomfortable. Imagine you lost some money, whether a small amount or a big amount, you want to know where it is. Of course, the bigger the amount, the more you worry. What if the thing you lost is the most valuable thing you have? It is the man you love, the father of your children, your backbone. What would you do? Especially when you see that no one care, and the government is doing nothing to help you.

**But of course now you feel better than what you felt before, right?**

Honest to God, no this is not true. I keep on remembering and I keep on thinking how did I raise these children. You know they were little kids in school, but I couldn't afford school anymore. They were forced to leave school, learn some profession and work at a very young age. But anyway, thank God now they grew up and turned to be amazing people.

**Do you want to tell me anything more? Do you have any messages you would like me to convey in my project?**

I just want to tell you that in this country, life is cheap. No one will ask for you. It has been 37 years. I need to know what happened. Why did we have to live in this unjust world? My husband had nothing to do with the conflicts around us. He was a fisherman. We didn't have much but we were happy. I did a chair representing him in the workshop 'empty chairs,' did you see it?

**Yes I did. It was very interesting.**

It was me and Ferdous and her son. It was his last station. His chair. His place. He did the fishing, got the fish, and then he vanished.

**Thank you Jamila for all of this. I am sorry if I took**

**a lot of your time, or if I made you remember sad memories.**

Don't worry about this dear. The sad memories are my everyday life.

## **Ferdous Agha's Interview**

*Daughter of disappeared Nazih Agha*

*Nationality: Palestinian*

*Habitat: Jiyeh, Lebanon*

*Interview conducted on: July 9, 2018*

**Tell me a bit about yourself.**

I have two boys, the eldest Afif, and then there is Riad. I am not sure if mom told you. My dad's real name is Nazih, but everyone used to call him Riad. My brother named his son Nazih, so I named my son Riad, as my dad's nickname.

**How was growing up without your father?**

I was two and a half years old when my father disappeared. I was very young. When I was at my early years I didn't really understand that my dad is missing. But later, when I matured more, when I turned 6, I started understanding more. My friends talk about their dads, and I saw them together. So I started asking about my dad. I wondered where he was? So I used to ask my mom and she told me that he disappeared; some militiamen took him.

**So she didn't hide the facts from you?**

No not at all. She told me that he disappeared when we were younger. And when we used to visit our relatives, they used to talk a lot about the situation, and spoke about his personality. He was a very good man. So this is what I used to hear. I loved when people talked about him. I wanted to maintain a beautiful picture of my dad in my imagination. I don't really know my dad, but I have seen pictures. And I kept on drawing his personality in my head and imagining memories.

**Some mothers used to tell their children that their dad is traveling.**

No my mom didn't hide anything from us. I remember I was 6 years old and I used to know that we are living in conflict –you know at that time we were still in conflict- and I used to watch the news and see what's happening. And I knew that my dad's disappearance was part of this conflict. But I tell you something for sure. We grew up fast, faster than people my age.

**What do you think about your mom?**

All the words can't describe her sacrifice. My mom is an incredible woman. She was 24 years when my dad disappeared. She raised 5 orphans, the eldest was 10 and the youngest was some months old.

So you consider yourself an orphan?

Maybe (She starts crying).

**Whenever you feel like you need a pause or that we need to stop this meeting, do not hesitate to tell me. Do not feel pressured please.**

At sometimes I really felt like an orphan. My mom tried her best to be a mom and a dad for us, and she did a great job. But still I felt I need a dad. I used to hear my friends saying: 'My dad got us this, he bought us that...' She tried her best to make us feel like we do not need anything. I do not blame her at all. But still you can't but feel that there is something missing.

**Did you feel that you were affected by your dad's disappearance more or less than your other siblings? Knowing that you have 2 elder siblings that remember your father more.**

I have my sister Nisrine, she comes to visit sometimes. I am very close to her. I love my brothers as well but she's my only sister and we have a special bond. We talk about our dad. I ask her a lot of questions about him. How did he used to treat them? What was he like? I tell her that I feel that I really know him, as if I do remember him. But I am not sure if those memories are real, or they are things I built up from hearing stories about him. I still go to my relatives that were close to my dad, just to ask about him. They told me he was a funny guy, always making jokes and pranks. I love that about him.

**Do you still think that one day that you will see you father?**

Ohh yes for sure, especially that a while ago we heard about a person that ran away from the Syrian prison. He has been disappeared for 32 years! He said there are still people in the prison there as well. These people are forgotten, not only by our government, but also by the Syrian government. I urge the government to do something about that. My father can be there also.

**So what I understand that at that time, the Phalanges and the Syrian government had an agreement? Knowing that now they do not have a good relationship.**

Yes they were in good terms at that time. The phalanges used to send them lots of prisoners.

**Your dad wasn't politically affiliated at all?**

He was a fisherman. He sold his fish and that was it. My mom's friend told her she saw dad. And mom went to the headquarters and saw his motorcycle there. When she asked about him they said they do not have him. And after some days they blindfolded him, and 4 others, and took them in a car.

I never miss a chance to talk about my father, whether to my children or my husband. Yesterday, I was at my husband's aunt and I talked about my dad, and how my mom raised us on her own. You feel like this story is never ending, I talk about it almost everyday. Believe me I am not exaggerating; it is the truth.

**For example, I lost my grandfather not so long ago. Whenever I come to Lebanon, I go visit his grave and talk to him.**

Me too. My father-in-law passed away recently, and I go visit him every chance I get. I feel better every time I do that. But in the case of the disappeared, we are talking about a person that is missing without any clues; he is missing and making you lost with him. It is not his fault anyway. I mean, the hardest day of my life was my wedding. When my eldest brother walked me down the aisle, I felt deep sadness. (Cries again.)

The phrase: 'God bless his soul' can be used for the

dead and the living. People tell me 'God bless the soul of your father', and it is a normal thing to say, I say it too. But still it gives the wrong connotation, the connotation that my dad died, but he didn't. I didn't see him dead, so no, he did not die. I cannot even read some verses from the Qur'an as a gift to his soul, or even do charity as a gift to his soul. I cannot. It is too heavy for me.

**Are you angry? Do you feel anger?**

I know it is not his fault. But I do feel angry. I am angry because we live in such a world full of war and conflict. People are losing their relatives, kids are living without their parents, and the politicians don't care. They have their children and parents, so why would they care? This makes me furious.

I notice you are sending a message to politicians, what are you waiting from the government exactly? To search for them! They are not forgotten people. If they can forget about this problem and move on, we can't. Apparently they do not have emotions, but we do.

**Does it frustrate you that people does not know about your cause?**

Yes for sure. My mom used to always go to the meetings with the ACT for the disappeared and the ICRC. I refused at first but then she nagged a lot so I changed my mind. They talk a lot about the disappeared. And since then, I do not miss a meeting. I felt a connection. I feel like I belong to a community, a community of relatives of the disappeared that feel how I feel. I pray to all of the people in the meeting. We have the same cause, the same wound. We listen to each other. We make each other feel better. I tell my husband that I feel like I am doing something useful, and there is still hope that my father will come back.

**What do you also do in these meeting?**

For example, I took part of the "empty chairs" workshop. I made a chair for my father. I drew the sea, and fish and his motorcycle, his footsteps as well. I felt that this is his chair and he will come back to sit on it. I do everything they ask me to do. It is always

useful. I feel better every time. Sometimes we just talk out loud about what we are feeling, and I feel better already.

**Do you feel like the hope you have might torture you more that make you feel better?**

Of course it is tormenting, but I would never lose hope. You might think I am exaggerating. I have hope, you can ask my sister if you want, I have hope that one day, my eldest brother will knock on my door and tell me that my father came back.

**Do you want to send a message to the world?**

Enough wars, do not do the older generation's mistakes. I hope that we can live in peace. The war is all around us now, especially in the Arab world. I don't want people to feel what we are feeling. It was and still is very hard.

**Do you believe that there are still disappeared in the prisons?**

Yes. Look you might think I am crazy. But I had a dream, I was sleeping before the morning prayer. I am the kind of person that dreams something and then it happens. I believe this is a gift from God. So I was sleeping next to my kids, in their room, and then I suddenly wake up and I saw a man standing. This man started speaking to me and telling me about my father. He told me that he is still in prison, with many others, and that he stills loves my mom and all of us, and he has a picture of my mom as well. I moved to sleep next to my husband because I was terrified. Suddenly, I heard the Azan (call for prayer). Glory be to God.

**Do you think that something will happen to change this situation? Politically speaking.**

Listen, I used to think that the situation is very hard, but honestly it is not. The thing is that the politicians just do not want this folder open again, all of them from all parties. It is not for their benefit to remind the people of the massacres and the bad things they did. Look at the countries outside Lebanon. There are lots of disappeared. Some of them went back to their families, and many others are still like us. But

their government stood next to them. So it really depends on the country and on the governments. Eventually we are the ones that are paying the price. This is always the case. The public pays the price. But I really believe that my dad will come back. One day I'll have that phone call.

(Afif passing next to where we were sitting)

**Afif, would you mind joining us for a second? How are you?**

Afif: All is good praise to God.

**Does your mom tell you about your grandpa?**

Afif: Yeah she does.

**Do you think of him?**

Afif: No.. I mean I don't really know him. But I think if I knew him before he disappeared I would have thought of him sometimes. You know? It is because I do not know anything about him and I never met him, so what really annoys me is my mom's situation. I know she really wants to see him again. That is it.

**Do you think you will see your grandfather ever?**

Afif: Honestly? Honestly no.

Ferdous: I know he is different. This is normal he doesn't really know my father. The first time I heard him say that it annoyed me. But now I understand that he never had a relationship with dad, so I understand his perspective. But I am different you know? I have a different perspective. But you know what is shocking? Riad, my second son says yes, he might see his grandfather one day. Each one is different. Ah and by the way, he sometimes goes with me to meet ups to know more about the situation. Glory be to God, each thinks differently.

(Afif leaves.)

**In meetups, you sit with people from the Phalanges party. Did any problems happen between you?**

Honestly, yeah but only once. A woman, whose brother was kidnapped by the Palestinians, told

me that 'you Palestinians did that'. I didn't answer. Anyway I didn't have to because the ICRC made her understand that we are all in this together, with the same cause. We were at war all of us, and all parties did terrible things. We are not sitting in the meet ups to put blame. We are all families of the disappeared waiting to know any evidence about their whereabouts. But anyways it wasn't us, it was the militiamen, not the public. There isn't any difference between us, especially Lebanese and Palestinian. Look at me, I am married to a Lebanese person. So what? Even between Christians and Muslims, there isn't any difference. We are living all together. Religion was never the problem. It is politics and the politicians and the militiamen.

**If you want to explain your emotions towards your father, what would you say?**

I am sad. And I have big faith in God and in His plan. The world was unjust to the disappeared, and to us. So again, I tell you, I am sad. I feel like my heart is on fire. You know how many years have passed, and still my heart is on fire. Listen, the ICRC and the NGO helped a lot. They make me relieved. They help me understand how to move on, how to cope with the idea. Just talking about it and sitting with people like me, going through what I am going through helps. I thank them a lot. And I am very active, always.

## **Hussein El Ali's Interview**

*Son of disappeared*

*Nationality: Lebanese*

*Habitat: Burj Al Chimali, Tyre, Lebanon*

*Interview conducted on: July 12, 2018*

**Tell me a bit about yourself.**

My name is Hussein El Ali. I come from Tyre, precisely AlBurj AlChimali.

Originally I am Palestinian, but now I am Lebanese. My parents moved here a long time ago and I was born here.



**Who did you lose?**

I lost my father after the Israeli invasion on Lebanon, in 1982. We were living in AlBurj and my dad had a kidnapped Israeli soldier, who eventually ran away back to his apartheid Zionist state. Then my dad and his group suddenly went missing.

**All of them or only him?**

No no all of them, the three of them. People said they saw their martyred bodies on the ground in this place. We went and inspected that place after a while, cause you know whenever something happens it surely leaves trace behind it. We didn't find any trace at all that says that there were people here that got killed. There weren't even blood, clothes or even body parts. I am telling you, we went there seven days after the disappearance of my father, the body wouldn't have just vanished.

**In your opinion, who might be behind the kidnap?**

We deeply believe that it was our enemy, Israel, without any doubt.

**Tell me more if you may about it.**

We don't accept this state at all. We didn't mourn him. We didn't make any funeral. I tell you our neighbors and people who knew him considered him as a martyr, you know, since he was in war, but we as family members, we don't believe that he is dead. We didn't even ask for a death certificate, not at all, because we didn't touch any clue or evidence that tells that our dad is really dead; we didn't see a body that belonged to him. We don't have any evidence that this person really is a martyr or even was injured. Where is the body? As long as I don't have a body of my father I will always consider him disappeared and alive.

**A while ago there was an exchange between Hezbollah and Israel where some Lebanese and Palestinian prisoners were liberated, along with some bodies that were in their custody.**

Yeah that's true. I also have a martyred cousin that was there and we got his body back. But from what we heard is that the body of my father was in Leba-

non during the invasion of the Lebanese lands, so it should have been here in Lebanon and not there. But if the Israeli soldiers imprisoned him and took him with them, or even if they killed or buried him, I do not care. What I care about is where is he? If he is really dead where is he buried? At least I would pay that grave a visit. But I didn't see him dead, I did not see him dead to say these things.

**Of course. Do you still have hope that you would see him again?**

Honestly? Honestly no. Since years ago we lost hope of seeing him again. We heard that some bodies were buried somewhere and we need to know were exactly. He might be one of them. With some DNA testing we can know if this is truly him. We'll always be confused by the fact that we didn't see his body.

**How old was your father when he disappeared?**

I was seventeen years old, and now I am fifty-three years old. He was forty-two years old. It was really hard on me. My future suddenly became the responsibility of taking care of my family. We were five boys and three girls. Listen, as long as the case of the disappeared is found, especially here in Lebanon, this means that the civil war did not end, even if my dad was kidnapped by the Israelis. But a lot of the other disappeared were actually lost on the hands of Lebanese militias. This case should end so that the civil war can end.

**Majeed Al Akouri's Interview**

*Son of disappeared Hashem Al Akouri*

*Nationality: Lebanese*

*Habitat: Zgharta, Lebanon*

*Interview conducted on: July 12, 2018*

**Tell me a bit about yourself.**

My name is Majeed Hashem Al Akouri, from Zgharta, north Lebanon. I was born in 1970. My dad was kidnapped from Zgharta on the 28th of July, 1982, which means that on the 28th of this months my dad would have been missing for 36 years, and until now we do

not know anything about him, nothing at all. I have three siblings. My mom passed away so long ago, after the kidnap of my father. We suffered from lots and lots of problems, especially financial problems. We were young when my dad got kidnapped; personally I was eleven. So as I said financial problems, psychological problems, we got separated, and lots of people talked badly about us. Whenever someone sees us, they would start saying: 'oh look at him, he is the son of the kidnapped' and so on. We suffered a lot, and we don't wish anyone to pass through what we passed through, not even our enemy.

I'll give you an example. We would be sitting home with our belated mother, then someone would knock our door. My mom would tell me: 'Majeed open the door for your father.' This kept on going on for years after his kidnap. Or for example she would say: 'listen, that is your dad going up the stairs,' or 'this looks a lot like your father.'

My mom died at the age of forty-eight. She died out of misery and sadness over missing my dad. She was still young. Lots of things have happened to us.

### **But you didn't lose hope?**

No, we did not lose hope. It has been thirty-six year and I do not miss a meeting by the ICRC or the NGO Act for the Disappeared. And I'll do whatever they ask for. I just spent ours to arrive to this meeting here in Beirut and will always follow this case until the end of it. I will never let go of it, of course, this is the fate of my father. Who forgets his father? I will always say, Ghofran, I will always say, God forgive the people who did this, yes they did ruin our lives, but we will always say God forgive them. If we couldn't find any info about the disappeared, we will ask God to deal with them [the kidnappers]. We are innocent people and my dad is an innocent man.

### **So you are telling me that your dad wasn't part of the conflicts?**

No he didn't interfere at all. My dad was a painter. There were some militias in Zgharta, as the case anywhere in Lebanon at that time, and we believe they did the kidnap.

### **Tell me more about your dad's disappearance. How did it affect you?**

Whenever we hear some news on tv around the subject of the disappeared, such as imprisoned people in Syria or Israel, this would cause problems. If we had our uncle over, and talk about our dad, he would start crying, so we couldn't even talk about him to our closest relatives. We did not lose hope, even his siblings didn't lose hope. We are still grabbing to our cause and never letting go. We should never lose hope. But I still believe that we live through unbearable amounts of pain and misery, and this will need long hours for me to express it, in order to express my dad's personality and our relationship with him as well, so that you can have a bit of understanding of what we are going through. He was barely forty-four when he got kidnapped. He was young, he was born in 1938, and was kidnapped on July, 1982, and in around sixteen days, we would have been waiting for my father for thirty-six years.

## **Sawsan Kaawash's Interview**

*Sister of disappeared*

*Nationality: Palestinian*

*Habitat: Al Maashouk, Lebanon*

*Interview conducted on: July 12, 2018*

### **Tell me a bit about yourself.**

My name is Sawsan Kaawach. I am Palestinian, living in Al Maashouk, south of Lebanon. The disappeared is my brother, the year of 1981. I am thirty-eight years old so I do not remember him that much, but I remember what my parents used to tell me about him. We do not have any information about his whereabouts.

### **Do you at least have an idea who would have kidnapped your brother?**

Listen, the case of my brother is different. My brother and some other guys went into the Palestinian territories for a martyrdom operation against the Israelis. People actually saw it on Televisions and the word of mouth was that they are martyrs. But we



never saw their bodies, neither did anyone. He was part of the Palestinian resistance against the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

Mom used to always say that if she had seen a body at least, she would have accepted the fact that her son died. But since we didn't see any body, we can never accept this idea. Even if everyone told us he was part of that operation, we will still have this acute amount of hope that says he is still alive.

How was it after the disappearance of your brother? We were a happy family with loving parents. However, right after the disappearance of my father, my dad's heart started to weaken and he had cardio problems. My mom's psychological state changes drastically. She became depressed. The ambiance of the house in general changed a lot.

## **Justine Di Mayo's Interview**

*Co-Founder of Act for the Disappeared*

*Interview conducted via skype on: July 4, 2018*

**I'm doing a research about the forced disappeared people in the world in general but particularly in Lebanon. Lebanon's case is interesting for me because these people still have hope since the disappearance happened a little while ago.**

**The case of Lebanon is important because it's not like the Holocaust that happened a long time ago; it happened in the recent past, so they still have hope that their beloved ones are still alive.**

Yeah I would say that very few people still have hope.

**Wow, this is very interesting for me. What can you tell me about the families? Do you think all of them feel hopeless?**

Not all of them. First of all, you know there are thousands of missing people in Lebanon, the vast majority have been kidnapped and killed, and some of them were transported to Syria and might have been detaining secrets in Syria. Considering the security situation that was taking place last year, I don't think a lot of people might still be alive.

## **Not in Israel as well?**

What we know regarding Israel is that the International Red Cross is visiting Israeli prisons, and they said that the people that disappeared are not there, so there is no secret detention in Israel. People that are detained in Israel are detained due to common crimes, and not for any other reason. Some families still believe that their loved ones could be in Israel because some of the people that have been killed in the Lebanese territory in the war were transported to Israel, but over the last years, there has been 2 exchanges between Israel and Hezbollah under the International Committee of the Red Cross, and I think it was the German government that was responsible for this exchange of human remains. I think that a transfer of 200 or more people took place in 2008, so we don't believe that the secretly detained people are in Israeli prisons because the ICRC is visiting the prisons. For Syria it is a bit different because there has been a transfer of about 600 people that were kidnapped in Lebanon. There is no information on the fate and whereabouts of the kidnapped people, but we believe that there is a very little chance that people are still alive there. I mean it could happen because we know that some of the people that have been detained for 25-30 years in Syria have been released, so there is a possibility that there are some people that are still alive there.

## **So some of the disappeared came back home?**

Regarding Syria there has been two releases of Lebanese people that were being detained there; one was in 1998, and the other one was in 2000. Over the last decade, we had one or two people that were detained in Syria, but they didn't necessarily disappear there. They were just detained there. So, their families had information about what their fate was. This is not the case of disappeared people, you know, disappeared people's families have no information about their fate or whereabouts. People who were detained for common crimes, one or two people, if I remember, were have been released over the last decade and they had been detained for 20 years. I think one was detained for 30 years. Since 2000, there has been no releases for disappeared people from Syria.

**Do you have any contact with the Syrian government all these years? Do you talk to them?**

No, the Syrian government always denied detaining prisoners. And even when they released these people in 1998 and 2000, it was still in the context where there was lying. So no there is no contact with the Syrian government. There was a commission created in 2005 by the Syrian and Lebanese governments. It was a mixed commission. Half of them were Lebanese and the other half was Syrian. The Lebanese part of the commission were given names of people, considering information regarding those detained in Syria. And the Syrian part was supposed to investigate and give answers about their fates and whereabouts to the Lebanese part of the commission. But, they never clarified any of these cases. So there is a deny in the Syrian authorities.

**What about the families? You said that most of them had lost hope. Was it during the last years, or was it since the beginning? Did they know that they beloved ones were killed and they just wanted their bodies, or did they have hope for a long time and then they lost hope?**

Are you talking specifically about those kidnapped in Syria?

**No, just in general.**

In general, I think that a lot of them don't have hope because, as I said, most of them had been kidnapped in Lebanon and people know that there's no secret detention center in Lebanon since the end of the war. There is no militia. The militias were disassembled by the end of the war. They know that they didn't keep anyone alive. So those who were kidnapped by Lebanese and Palestinian militias in Lebanon were not transferred to Syria have been killed in Lebanon. So for those families, there is not hope to see them alive. They want to know what happened. They want to retrieve their remains and bury them with dignity. For those, it's true that there might be some families who might have some hope. But I would say that I didn't actually read about the psychological

situation of the families, but even though objectively you know that there is almost no chance to see your loved one alive, the ambiguity is still there because as long as you don't have specific information about what happened, you have no information about the burying place of your loved one, the uncertainty is still there. And this is what happened with most of the families. And the certainties are also more important because of this possibility that their loved one was transferred to Syria, because during the war, when the people were kidnapped their families did not have any information about their fate and nothing that was possible for them to get information about their loved one. So they went to meet with militia men, they went to meet with politicians. They went to meet a lot of people in order to find even the slightest piece of information. For a lot of them, people took advantage of the situation and took money from them, telling them that they have information, claiming that they know that their loved one is alive or in Syria. So this scenario of having a loved one was in Syria was used by a lot of people to take advantage and take money from them because the detention in Syria was the only hope for them to see them again. Even though there's no objective or concrete information that could lead to believe that they were still alive in Syria, they still wanted to keep this hope alive. That's why I think it's complicated. It's not like in Argentina for example, where there is a change in the regime and the people who were kidnapped we know that they were killed. In Lebanon, we know that those kidnapped in Lebanon and weren't transported to Syria, have died. But it is very difficult for the families, first of all to know if their loved one is part of those taken in Lebanon or part of those taken to Syria, because most of them don't have any information about what happened. During the war, even though your loved one had been kidnapped by a Lebanese and Palestinian militia, it doesn't mean that they were killed or buried in Lebanon because there was alliances between the militias and the Syrian army. And some of the people could have been given to the Syrian army. Again, we are talking about unheard of cases. There are thousands of missing people killed and buried in

Lebanon. The thing is, it's very difficult for the families as long as they don't have any information to know what happened and to be convinced that they were killed and buried. It's very good to know what is the percentage of families who believe that their loved one is dead and don't have any hope. I think it's the vast majority. Even though that you know objectively that your loved one was killed and buried, the families still want to know what happened. It doesn't mean that they are not demanding any investigation and anything from the states. The question here is not that it's only the families who have doubt about their loved ones being dead or alive, who are claiming for something, it's all of the families, even those who believe that their loved ones have been killed. Even these ones want investigation and want the state to clarify their fate and want to retrieve their bodies.

**Regarding the people who are believed to be kidnapped by the Syrian government or militias, where they kidnapped in Lebanon then given to Syria, or were they in Syria?**

No, they were kidnapped in Lebanon. Again, what I was saying is that, first of all, it's the Syrian army. Also, these people could have been kidnapped by the Lebanese or Palestinian militias then given to the Syrian army. During the war, the Syrians were allied with different militias. So it wasn't the same militia that was allied to the Syrian army. They might have been taken in Lebanon then transferred to the detention center in Syria. We have a few cases of Lebanese people who were kidnapped in Syria, who were in Damascus to visit their family or for work, who were kidnapped in Syria. But the majority was kidnapped in Lebanon and transferred to Syria.

[...]

**What do you usually do for emotional support for the families? Do you refer them to psychologists? Do you do some sittings? What do you do?**

We started on a project, with the families of the missing along with the ICRC. That's why I want you to meet with my colleague Naya and Rubina from the ICRC next week because you could attend one

of the meetings which is part of the project. So it's a psycho-social project which supports the families of the missing. It includes home-visits of the families of the missing and information sessions about their rights, or about what they can do, with sessions about their psychological situation. Also meetings to identify their needs, meetings where they meet with other families of the missing and share their experience which is something great and important for them. It also includes psycho-social sessions that are led by psychologists, and also memorialization activities with therapy.

**Do people respond to that? Do you have good numbers or just a few people attending?**

It's not something that was easy at the start of the project because most of the families don't think that it will bring them any support. What they really need is answers about the fate of their loved one and most of the time, they don't feel that they need such a support. They just focus on getting answers. So anything that is not related to the investigation is not something they really receive positively. So we need to explain to them that it is important that they get this support, because most of them are in a state of depression. They don't even take time to take care of themselves. They also feel guilty because they did not avoid the disappearance of their loved one and they didn't manage to find out what happened to them. They also feel guilty because they can't continue with their lives as long as their loved one is not released or not buried in dignity. And so that's why the first reaction isn't to take care of themselves. They feel that they should take care of the one who disappeared. And they should put all their effort to find out what happened to their loved one. So when you come first and you talk to them about psychological support, it's not something that they understand easily at the first stage, but after introducing the project and taking time to talk to them. And also once they realized that there are many families in their situation and they could benefit from talking to other families and exchanging about their experience, they get more and more interested in what we are doing. A lot of them who participated in these

activities give very positive feedback. So they want to be more active and participate in advocating for their right to know. So the result of the project is very positive. We've been walking with hundreds of families in different regions in Lebanon. And we are continuing with other families in other regions. So if you want you can talk more about this project with the people in charge of it, so, Inaya, my colleague. Also, I think it might be important to talk to Robina from the international Red Cross who is a psychologist, and who is also in charge of the project for this organization.

**Our parents don't usually talk about the civil war, especially about the disappeared. So it was shocking. And then I learned that you do activities and some exhibitions. Is the main aim from your activities to put pressure on the government to find closure, or is it to spread the knowledge of these people?**

I would say that it is both. Our first aim as an organization is to contribute to clarify the fate of the missing because it is the first demand of the families. And the main reasons why we founded the organization is to support these demands of the families. So that's why we started documenting and collecting information that could contribute to finding the fate of the missing. So we collect information from former combatants, witnesses, or from families of the missing. We also try to locate the sites of graves, where the people were buried to protect them. What is very dramatic in Lebanon is that over the last decades, graves have been destroyed for construction of buildings. There is a high risk for having all these sites being destroyed over the next years. So our first subjective is to protect these graves and also to collect the information about their fate before it's too late. That would be because regarding the former combatants, already all of them died with the information which they have. On the other side, the public events which we organize, exhibitions, film screenings, communication campaigns, it's also to have this issue recognized by the society and by the authorities, and to bring recognition to the families, because it's very important for their psychological situation, to have their voice recognized, and to have

the case of their loved one be recognized. It's one of our objectives. But our other objectives are of course to memorialize what happened in order for the new generation to know what happened, and to know the consequences of the war, and in order not to repeat it, or avoid this cycle of violence. So it's very important for us to publicize what we are doing because the crimes of most of the people who are responsible for these kidnappings were never recognized. It is very important for people to know what really happened and to know that many people suffered from the war. As you said, most of the young people from the new generation which we have met over the last decade, most of them have no knowledge about the issue of the missing. So we think that it's our responsibility to raise awareness about that and not to forget what happened. First of all, no to forget because these people that were kidnapped deserve to be remembered, but also we shouldn't forget in order not to fall again in a civil war.

**Do you think that Syria will pass by the same thing?**

Like with what happened in Syria, I think a lot of people have disappeared as well.

The scale of disappearances is huge. What's happening in Syria is a tragedy. I would say that this situation is really sad because Lebanon was not able to find any solution on the issue we are talking about, less than 20,000 missing people in Lebanon. In Syria, we are talking about 100,000 missing people. We were not able to find any solution in Lebanon. I think the case of Lebanon may make us pessimistic about our chances to deal with this issue in Syria. Our context in Syria is even more complex and more unstable than in Lebanon. That's why we believe it's very important to find the solution for the missing people in Lebanon because it could be a positive thing that could serve for the case in Syria.

**Thank you so much Justine, I took a lot of your time.**

No it's okay. I'm happy to help you.

## **María Alejandra Ordoñez's Interview**

*Visual Artist*

*Interview conducted on: September 26, 2018*

**You said that you fell on this project because you have a disappeared relative. Is he a far relative?**

Actually, it's an uncle, but somehow I found this motivation to ask about it, and ask what means to have a disappeared one. It was my first question. What happened with my family after this? But it was a question I had 10 or 11 years ago. At that moment, I was making my bachelor degree in visual arts. And after this is noticed that this question doesn't possible have an answer if I don't open this question to more people. And then I found that in Colombia, we have thousands of cases about it. Then I starting doing my Master's program and I changed my methodology completely, because I somehow can make a change, because at first I was just talking to my family. Then, I would open this conversation for people who would like to take part in this. It was not easy because even in Colombia, we have some people talking recently about a peace agreement. Somehow there are many big things, even I don't like to call it that way. I will explain this to you later. Many people are not comfortable talking about it, also because somehow, they were threatened, scared, or in danger. So, it was challenging to get this confidence.

**Was it your uncle from you dad's side?**

Yes my dad's side. He was travelling from Colombia to Peru. He needed to cross to Ecuador. And in the middle of the trip, in the border between Ecuador and Peru, the only information we received at that moment, which we have right now is that he left the bus. And suddenly we lost him, if it's possible to say. But it was like 22 years ago.

**So you knew him?**

Yeah. And at that moment, Peru and Ecuador were in an armed conflict for a specific reason, and this was the region where he disappeared. So, until now, we have not found anything.

**You can stop whenever you want and if you don't like my questions, you can tell me. So does your father or grandma or any of you think he's dead?**

Yes actually my grandmother died somehow just thinking about it. After his disappearance she got really sick. She felt that her life was finished. And my grandfather was the only one who took all these researches on his shoulders. And it was very hard because he tried for 5 or 6 years to look for answers and to look for him and it was really impossible, because it was not something that happened in Colombia, it was between two countries. He can be in Peru or Ecuador. At the end he just gave up. Now he's waiting. He's almost 90 years old. I was living with my grandparents, not with my parents. So that's probably why I felt this crisis and change in my life. Then I just decided to focus all my career and motivation trying to find answers.

**It's not only for your grandfather, but for other families as well?**

Actually, I've always said that I'm not looking for my uncle. I'm not looking for him. I need to answer all the questions to help me understand what happened to my family.

**Your research is to find answers in general, and this inspired your artwork. You reminded me just now of an interview I did in Lebanon with three generations of the same family. The wife, the daughter and the grandson. The daughter and wife were very optimistic that the missing person is going to come back after 38 years. They still have hope. The grandson said that he believes his grandpa is dead. And that is the only thing that he accepted. Is that the case with you or with other families in Colombia?**

I will talk right now about my family. As I told you, my grandfather took everything on his shoulders. He was searching. Many people in the family decided to break with this: either to continue without talking about it, or just believe that he's living with another person at another part of the world, not that he's dead. Maybe he decided to go because he had a lot of problems, but never dead. My grandfather was the first one to face the political and social re-

ality. I'm sure he knew that he's dead. But because I've been working about it, I know that he's waiting for his son right now. It's complicated for my family, because he's not here anymore, but his little child is like a new person that came out. But I think it helps my family a lot because it's like a new life.

**You're working with several families now?**

Yes. Not several, but at least 10 different families from different places in Colombia, all Colombians. [...] The first cases of disappeared that were recorded started in the 80s. Now, the institution that is in charge of analysis had stages and contexts and different stories. But also, there are cases from the 50s. So it's a real long way. In the 50s, we had a huge conflict between the traditionalists and the conservatives and the liberal party. This conflict turned into a real bloody thing and many people disappeared there. It was a kind of different context than Argentina. Many cases just came out. Many relatives started to say that they're looking for their loved ones and they need an answer from organization. [...]

**Did the government help in any way?**

At that moment, no. right now, we have many different organizations that are looking for people that disappeared from the army, and the mothers for their children.

**And now is the government helping?**

No. The government, also because of the framework of the peace agreement, they have tried to do as well as they can under institutions and organizations. Also, we have huge organizations looking for disappeared ones right now. But, the thing is that somehow I think that there is not a political motivation to help. Also there isn't enough budget. Many families and relatives are excluded from these frames of this big team. If your son or daughter disappeared after this year, you won't receive help. It's very hard. Also, years back, many people which I'm talking to right now for my research told me that at the beginning they didn't know that it was disappearance. So, what can you do when you say that your son did

not come back last night? So it takes time to go into this and also to know the language to call it. So it's problematic.

**In your research, do you study the psychological state?**

Actually, the first step of portrait, was just trying to find someone who would like to share with me his/her experience. Then I thought I need help from a psychologist. But it was not possible. When I was trying to find information in an organization, they were not open to talk about it. So I just left this and continues to look directly for relatives. So, my only approach till now has been directly with them. But it is visual arts. It is somehow experimental, but my focus was on this concept that you said.

**So now, your research focuses on doing interviews and searching for relatives for families and analyzing them.**

Yeah. Actually, I've never used this word, "interview", because I somehow feel like we share a relationship because we are linked. And I have been talking to them for two or three years. So it's like a common exchange of experiences. Also I know that all this information is a lot. But I think it's a focus on the understanding of how is it possible to deal with it, even if you're searching or not, even if you already have a corpse or not. It's very interesting and urgent to think of this, because many of them had different levels of education which changes everything, or different economic levels who live in far regions. These people might be excluded from everything. So it gives you a completely different perspective about this phenomenon.

**So do you try to help them move on?**

I'm not really like an activist. But I think I always try to be clear that I cannot offer a type of help. But I think that many of them have told me, just sharing and listening is good. And after I moved here, we continue this exchange of Whatsapp, voice notes mainly.

**Do you mind sharing some of them? I want to hear the tones of their voices.**

Yes I can share them with you. [...] It's really inter-



esting because I did not plan it. I just moved here and right now they tell me that they're worried. Like, "you're so far". So it's a group. It's more than a group. I love that it is not something that I need to force. Right now it's like a way of sharing more than a project.

**Did any of these receive any answers from governments of NGOs?**

Yes, one of them, a mother of a Colombian girl who disappeared in Ecuador, which is the only case I have for a Colombian person, like my uncle, and right now she hasn't gotten an answer from the Colombian or the Ecuadoran governments. She got an answer from the International Commission for Human Rights. They will somehow review the case of her daughter. It is a huge achievement for her that an international organization has accepted to read her case.

**Why her?**

Because right now she's working with an organization of victims in Colombia. I think it's important to know if you disappear in your country, that's one condition, but if you disappear in another country, you have to search. It is really difficult especially with her economic situation and the governments are not answering, and the father of the girl died a year ago in extreme depression after looking for his daughter for two or 3 years.

**When did his daughter disappear?**

Six years ago.

**This is very recent. How come these things are still happening in Colombia?**

Because even though in the frame of the peace agreement that was signed almost two years ago. We have many different conflicts in this country. So it's still happening. She disappeared in Ecuador. This is another context. But many Colombians disappeared in Ecuador.

[...]

Actually a week ago, in an area called "Lakomona Trese," I knew that a young man disappeared. Many

people said that someone just came here in a car, took him by force, and we never saw him.

**So, now, why did you move here? I was very interested when I read your email.**

Good question. I think that the main reason is that the day that I finished my master's I had to read my project. I also shared it with more people. My supervisor was in Colombia at the moment. She asked me later if I would come here and join her research team. I never expected something like this because I never had in my mind that I wanted to make a doctoral program. So it was like a change of my plans I had. But I think it basically because it's an opportunity to continue with my project even if it's in a very different condition.

**This is inspiring of course. What you're doing here will inspire you to do more projects.**

Yes. Right now we are in the second stage of our project because right now I'm working with an archeologist called Maria Fernando, a woman in Colombia. She's really interested to know how forensic researches take notes about their research about the disappearances in Colombia. So we found that relatives have different ways of searching by themselves. So now we are trying to join these two perspectives, because they are not in contact. It's like going in a parallel world now. So this is the second step.

[...]

My research is focused on narratives of the relatives. But also right now I'm interested to know how this notion of disposable subject in Colombia is related with the way society perceives disappearance. It's a big conflict because I'm just starting to find this. Usually also families of the disappeared are neglected and stigmatized everywhere, even in Lebanon, especially by religious groups and political groups. I'm working with a woman and she used to take part of an organization of mothers of the disappeared ones. But these mothers, their sons and daughters were disappeared by the army. Her daughter was part of the army and disappeared among this. But somehow, there's another mom whose son was part of the armed political group. The mother was



there for almost 5 years. They worked together for 5 years. They even made a play about it. And suddenly, there was political change in Colombia, like human rights change. The other group of mothers said, 'You should not be here because your son was part of the army.' The she called me crying and she didn't know what to do because her son was part of this. So he cannot be named a disappeared one. She said that there was no place for her. It was challenging for me to give her support. Right now she's trying to work with another group of people but somehow she feels that she doesn't have a place anywhere. So also among victims, you need to perform this process, otherwise, you're not accepted.

**This is very weird because they have one cause, which is finding information about their sons and daughters. It's been over for a while now. They should get over the political conflict.**

Actually I prefer to depoliticize this desertion. But a year ago, it changed completely. So people are taking a clear statement and sides and it's been causing a lot of tension and trouble. For me I need to go deeper in this.

[...]

**When did you start with Retratos no Hablados?**

I started this is 2016. I had one year to come up with something so it was a short period of time. Being in contact in families is important. You can't go for one week then say goodbye. The first person I was working with was the man who died. So when I knew he had died it was really bad for me. I knew he was so depressed. His family were asking me because I was the closest person to him at that moment and I couldn't do anything. [...] By the way, "victims," I don't like to name the disappeared and the family members "victims". I am sure they have many other layers of human beings. I call them "people."

**So your project is an exhibition?**

A sound installation. It has a visual part but it's the description of the project and the methodology and some figures about the disappearances in Colombia. I also made drawings, like portraits of the relatives.

**So you're focusing on the relatives as well.**

Yeah I think it has always been like this. As I told you, I've never been searching for my uncle. Since I found that I have a lot of questions about it, it has been related to the way who people can overcome this if it's possible.

**Do you want people to identify the aim of your project with the families? Or do you just want to share their information? What do you want exactly from your project?**

When the non-narrated portraits started, I think the main aim was to face some kind of audience with this phenomenon. Even if it's very well-known as I used to believe, when you go to see this in another context, many people have never thought about it. They know that the disappeared exist but they don't mind. So, when I start to make this installation light to exceed different places, for instance, once, someone turned off the cables, and turned off the exhibition.

**Why?**

I realized, that for many people, it's probably a problem they don't want to remember. It's better not to have this conflict. After many things that happened to me this year, it's become kind of like a prototype of how society can deal with it. That was interesting because I was not planning to use this prototype as a way to talk about society. It was more like a group of people. Now you can have a lot of information about the way society is denying the right to talk about it. But it's not the society in general. Some of them want this.

Actually when this project goes to this kind of memorial places, it different. Another interesting thing, I started with 5 people, suddenly many people were engaged in this. And just by themselves, they started asking to be part of this and have their stories there, and work with me. I was not there at that moment so they left me notes or phone numbers or emails saying to contact them. Even people would say, "I have a neighbor who has a disappeared son, and I never realized how hard it is. I would like to talk about it". I could not believe it. So it was interesting.

But again, it's like this interaction with people that probably is not close to these types of phenomena. [...] I started with one person, and then I remembered that it was the International Commemoration Day for the Disappeared. So I decided to talk to some people who don't know me. They would give me their phone number and talk to other people. The thing is in Colombia mainly, it's about how the people need to trust you. Also because you are a strange person getting in touch like this. It's like another step I need to consider.

**But don't they consider you as one of them? You're family relative is also disappeared.**

Yeah but I didn't mention it in the beginning. Now they know everything about it. [...] I would like to mention that when I started, I decided not to work with images, because I know that the disappearance in many contexts of the images, the people are not now here. [...] I decided to avoid images. I thought that if I would just go to them with a camera, it would be scary [...].

**How was the reaction of the general public? How did you call them in? Were there posters?**

Yes, posters. Also, this project won a grant for creation and design and projects about memory. So it was possible to receive this grant. And they help us a lot with the information and to circulate them. They even call a lot of people to come to this place. It was like 2-3 hour event. Many people were there. Many people were talking to the families, not just with me. This was the aim behind it they are the important ones here. The phones are ringing and you have to answer a phone call that someone is making for you. [...]

**So anyone can reply to a ringing phone.**

Yeah. If you try to answer, it's not possible to answer. You are in a recording. You cannot do anything.

**It's like you're saying that even if the audience is trying to help them, they can't.**

Yes. But I was also struggling. When I started this, I was interesting in the way I would like to know

them but not just to their dramatic experience. I also remember asking them if they were happy. What are you doing daily? Most of them were going back to talk about the disappeared.

I remember one person told me, "I think no one has ever asked me this". It's also a reflection I'd like to trigger through this installation, but it's difficult. It takes time to find a better way to do it.

One of them is says that if you would like to overcome this depression and trauma, her strategy is to imagine that her daughter is travelling all around the world. But maybe this is good for one day, but she's really depressed in the rest of the days. She gets excluded from her family. It was her decision. She said that she cannot celebrate any birthday or Christmas because it's too sad. They also start to disappear from many other environments.

[...] I remember that many of them at the beginning were asking me, "If you're not an anthropologist or a psychologist or a journalist, why are you looking for me. You're an artist and I cannot understand how you can help me". I'm like I'm not offering you help. I would just have a conversation and ask you about it. By the end, I remember having millions asking, why don't we start an NGO. They discovered different things. I noticed they felt more comfortable talking about what they are going through, and I felt that they became stronger just by talking about what they are feeling.

[...]



*Dedicated to the families of the enforced disappeared all around the world...*