Epistemological Ignorances and Fighting for the Disappeared: Lessons from Mexico

Melissa W. Wright

Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Department of Geography, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, USA;
mww11@psu.edu

Abstract: Social justice struggles across the Americas have, over the last half century, transformed the urban areas of this region into international staging grounds for protesting the global devastation wrought by capitalist exploitation, state terror and social hatred. This paper maintains that there is much to learn for struggles against this triangulation in other parts of the world. In particular, through a discussion of how contemporary activism in Mexico against *feminicidio*, drug wars and brutal repression draws from a long legacy of protest across the Americas, I seek to illustrate the relevance for other places as people fight a cruel modernity that evolves through terror, profit and hatred. Critical geography has long contributed to exposing these connections and can still deepen its commitments to mapping the landscapes of the growing populations of disappeared and marginalized peoples in Mexico and elsewhere.

Keywords: social movements, Mexico, disappearance, capitalism, femicide, terror

> As it turns out, the nightmare in Ayotzinapa is not a local, state or national problem ... It is a war of many wars: a war on the other, a war against indigenous peoples, a war on youth, a war against those who with their labor make the world go round, a war on women. Because it seems that femicide is such old news, so everyday and ubiquitous in all ideologies, that it now goes down as "natural death" in the records. Because it is a war that every few minutes takes on a name in whatever calendar and geography ... (Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés, 2014, Zapatista Army for National Liberation, Mexico, 12 December)

A collective gasp sounded across Mexico on 7 November 2014 when charred bits of carbonized body fragments appeared on the television screen during a press conference of the country's Federal Attorney General. These remnants, he explained, most likely were those of the 43 rural students, "*los normalistas*" (student teachers) from Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, who had been missing over a month, ever since the municipal police of Iguala, Guerrero had detained them during a violent attack, when several others had been killed. Witnesses and surviving students say that the massacre began when two buses of students were fired upon by municipal and federal police who killed some and took the others. One student had his faced skinned and his eyes gouged out before he was left to die in the street. As of this writing, one student's remains have been identified, while the context of his death is unknown, and all 43 add to, as one magazine put it, "this country of the disappeared", now numbering the many thousands as an estimated 13 people

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disappear in Mexico each day (Campa 2015). A 2013 Human Rights Watch report had already declared the country to harbor "the most severe crisis of enforced disappearances in Latin America in decades" (Human Rights Watch 2013), and since then that crisis has only worsened (Campa 2015).

Indeed, the collective anger and despair immediately following the killing and disappearing of the students has exposed a widespread belief that the state of terror of disappearance that accompanied the country's turn to neoliberal policies in the last century is, once again, intensifying. This is a belief shared by many *normalistas* as well, who have been leaders in bringing attention across the country to the intertwined problems of neoliberalism, ethnic/racist hatred and state terror. Throughout this period, the country's *normalistas* have long been targeted as "radicals" and "trouble-makers" who have organized their rural and, largely, indigenous communities against neoliberal restructuring. The rural *normal* schools originated in the 1920s, after the Revolutionary period, as places where women and men learn how to teach in the underserved rural and indigenous areas that still characterize most of non-urban Mexico. By virtue of their educational mission, the *normalistas* are widely known as "leftists" in a context in which to educate rural and indigenous populations comes up against a political and economic order that prefers that these populations remain uneducated and disenfranchised. Many *normalistas* have famously participated in the last century's communist guerrilla movements, pro-democratization campaigns, and have organized decades of protest against neoliberal policies that, since the 1970s, have facilitated the privatization of the country's resources, the decimation of the rural economy, a dismantling of the communal farming system, an intensification of extreme rural poverty and, now, the brutal grip of a narco-state (Borderland Beat 2014).

In the months following the September 2014 massacre, *normalistas* from across the country have been joined by national and international allies who demand: "They took them alive. We want them alive!"—a demand that does not change as the victims are known or presumed to be dead. Probably the most widespread protest since the Zapatista movement shocked international leaders at the 1994 dawning of the North American Free Trade Agreement era, the current protests have provoked international scrutiny of the Mexican government's claims to democratic legitimacy after having been heralded by its North American and European trading partners, only one year previously, as the most promising political and economic project in today's Latin America (*The Economist* 2012). Now dominating international news of Mexico is the protestors' demand of "return them with life" (¡Regrésenlos!), a demand that echoes some 50 years of protests accompanying the America's neoliberal era that may be the brain-child of University of Chicago economists, but that was birthed and raised by dictators and generals across the southern continent who never gave a damn about democracy. In this article, I examine how this activist demand—"Return them with life!" (in spite of death)—illuminates the political sophistication of activists who have organized, for decades, against state terror as they expose the centrality of disappearance to modern governance across the world. I believe that these activist strategies offer lessons for activists exposing a spectrum of disappearance that connects the global North and South, East and West in these neoliberal times.

Critical to this examination is the activist vernacular that names and categorizes disappearance as an empirical fact. It is important to understand the significance of this naming of disappearance and how it represents an "innovative" activist technology emerging in Latin America under repressive dictatorships that provided the real front for the US Cold War in the Americas (Taylor 2012). This concept of disappearance emerged in the 1970s when protestors against state terror in the Southern Cone (Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, in particular) adapted the Spanish verb "to disappear" (*desaparecer*) to name the condition of "forced disappearance" (*ser desaparecido*) whereby a person would be "disappeared" and, thereby, become a "disappeared" person. The need for this neologism emerged as oppressive governments, most backed by US imperial expansion after World War II, denied their role in disappearing people, whom, they argued did not exist in the first place. "If they are not here, they do not exist, and as they do not exist, they are not here. They are neither alive nor dead: They are disappeared", declared the sadistic Argentinian general, Jorge Videla, as thousands of his compatriots disappeared under this governing logic for terrorizing the population and quashing any challenges to his authority and to his anti-socialist political economic strategy. As Videla's words reveal, given the negative empirics of a person's absence, there are no data confirming the existence of this missing person. The lack of data leads to an epistemological gap, which, in turn, generates an ontological impossibility: The disappeared do not exist because they are not here. If they were to exist, then they would not be absent. Such a maddening logic unleashed from the highest positions of state power exposes, as Hannah Arendt (2005:233) so brilliantly put it, how in modernity "... everything follows with absolute necessity once the first insane premise is accepted". Therefore, throughout the Cold War Americas, terrorizing states, backed by the US at every turn, regularly governed by disappearing the very citizens whose existence they denied.

Yet, in spite of this terror, the word, "the disappeared", came to name growing swaths of a population that grew with each official denial as activists launched a formidable challenge to the governing premise of disappearance. The disappeared exist, the activists proclaimed, within the government's own logic of denial—the negative is a positive declaration of being. Consequently, the only legitimate demand under such circumstances is for the dead to be returned just as they were taken: "Viv@s los llevaron, Viv@s los queremos!"[1] (You took them alive, we want them alive). This demand, as Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo so successfully demonstrated during Argentina's deadly dictatorship, is the only litmus for government legitimacy during times of terror: making the disappeared reappear just as they were before governing forces took them away and threw them out of airplanes, or tossed them into mass graves, or tore them apart with machetes and machine-guns. Since, as the government maintains, these things did not occur, in spite of witness accounts and in spite of the mass graves discovered across the country, then nothing has happened. If nothing has happened, then the disappeared can reappear because they are not gone. So declare the activists in Mexico today, "Son, daughter, mother, father, sister, brother—while you are not buried, we will continue looking for you!" through a social movement that makes only one demand: return them with life! (*La Jornada Jalisco* 2015).[2]

In this paper, I intend to show the force behind this demand and why it represents a threatening challenge to status quo elites within and beyond the southern Americas. A related aim is to demonstrate how the movements against disappearance in Mexico today, which have their roots in the movements against disappearance since the twinned dawning of dictatorships and neoliberalism across Latin America, offer many important lessons for organizing alternatives to the pervasive triangulation of social hatred, state terror and global capitalism in many other parts of the world, especially where social minorities are targeted by cruel legislation, incarceration, police brutality and exploitation (see also Franco 2013).

To illustrate these lessons, I contextualize the current protests regarding the disappearance of the *normalistas* within two related sets of events in northern Mexico: the local justice movement that formed the basis of a transnational movement against *feminicidio*[3] and the challenges that this movement encounters as the country reels from the consequences of a Mexico–US allied drug war. While there has been abundant examination of *feminicidio* and, to a lesser but still substantial extent, of the social campaigns against it, there has been little discussion of its larger significance for broader struggles against terror, global capital and social hatred. There is a tendency to restrict the discussion regarding the events in Mexico to violence against women (usually not including domestic violence) in a specific context of Latin American impunity. Here, I maintain, the campaigns against femicide not only draw upon a rich American legacy of struggle against state terror and disappearance, especially during the dirty wars of the Cold War and expansion of US imperialism in the region, but they also demonstrate key lessons for efforts to expand these struggles beyond Latin America, regardless of the gender and nationality of the victims, and of the official reasons justifying their victimization by state forces.

In support of that position, here I examine some of the strengths and weaknesses of the movement against femicide and contrast them to the ongoing challenges in Mexico for establishing momentum for protests against the Mexican and US funded drug war in the country. My aim is to demonstrate both the power and the stakes in politicizing the concept of disappearance (as both a social and physical condition of forced absence). I also maintain that critical geographers have a pivotal role to play in both fighting this logic and in creating counter-topographies based on other ways of thinking and being in the world (see Katz 2001). In the conclusion, I turn my attention to this role and specifically to the need for more critical geographic tools for both mapping the disappeared, and the growing stretches of landscape filling with them, and to fighting the forces behind this population's unprecedented growth in Mexico and elsewhere across this terrorized neoliberal globe.

Disappearance

To be disappeared is to be forced, either directly or indirectly by state agents, to be absent from social, political and economic life, and those so disappeared are referred to as "Los desaparecid@s", "the disappeared ones". Forced disappearance is a favorite tool of states that govern through terror as it spreads fear that anyone, at any time, can be taken away by agents who then have the power to cover up all traces of the crime. Knowledge of the disappearance spreads even as evidence of it

disappears. As geographer Amy Ross (2008:41) explains: "the power of this particular form of terror ... [is] the state's ability to deny responsibility for these crimes, while simultaneously making the entire society aware that it ... [can] kill with impunity". Yet, despite the overwhelming terror associated with this form of governance, social activists throughout the Americas have also demonstrated the radical political possibilities within their activism around it. Since anyone, at any time, can be forcibly disappeared, the disappeared ones represent a collective subjectivity that spans many identities through history and across the heterogeneous geography of state terror. The inclusivity of this political category—as anyone can be disappeared within regimes of economic and political terror—means that it offers potential for making alliances across diverse contexts and different periods of time. The category, in other words, provides a powerful basis for forming alliances not only across the diverse landscape of disappearance but also through the arc of history, as disappearances in the 1970s link to the disappearances of the 2000s.

The word, "los desaparecidos", emerged at a particular historical and geographic juncture after World War II when the old practice of getting rid of vulnerable people who cause problems for those in power met with the advanced technologies of modern dictatorships in the Cold War era. Across the continent, regional elites, often with backing from a powerful US ally quick to fund repression of any non-capitalist ideas, responded with the iron-grip of repression against their co-citizens. While military coups were more the norm than the exception in 20th century Latin America, those with US backing had the most forceful impacts in establishing longstanding regimes of terror. For instance, in 1954, Guatemala experienced a violent military coup against its elected president, Jácobo Arbénz, who advocated land-structuring that angered national elites and the country's main agricultural monopoly, the United Fruit Company. Military generals, backed by then-US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles (who had major interests in the United Fruit Company), and the CIA, ran Arbénz out of the country and inaugurated an era of bloody repression that set the stage for the continent's longest standing civil war. The Brazilian military coup, with US backing, overthrew a democratically elected pro-labor government a decade later and set the stage for over two decades of military dictatorship. One decade after that, in 1973, the US CIA and State Department orchestrated a coup in Chile that placed one of the continent's most intransigent dictators into place. Argentina, with US backing, followed suit shortly thereafter. By the decade's end, all of the countries in the southern cone were under the control of military dictatorships. The regional, intra-state network for tracking so-called "subversives", *Operation Condor*, with US tactical support, provided a powerful network for sharing networks of repressive terror in order to quash any civil unrest and challenges to the implementation of economic restructuring under what has come to be known as neoliberalism. Most of the countries (with the exception of Costa Rica) in Central America were heading into civil wars. While Mexico stood as an exception in Latin America for its lack of military coup d'états in the second half of the 20th century, this "perfect" civilian dictatorship[4] seamlessly deployed its military to repress any brave enough to challenge its authority and famously to massacre pro-democracy student demonstrators in 1968 in the weeks preceding its hosting of the Olympics. In the following years, urban guerrilla movements sprang up around the

country in response, and, with US tactical support, the Mexican government increased its repression with the methods so common during the reign of terror sweeping the Americas. Torture, assassination, disappearance and forced exile were increasingly the norm for anyone who sought to open more political and economic space to the marginalized and impoverished millions.

So, when, during the late 1970s, Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina announced to the world that were looking for "the disappeared", their activism on behalf of this newly named identity spread across the continent. Whether disappeared in Chile's stadium or from the Guatemalan Highlands or in Andean coffee groves or from Argentina's universities or from Mexican ejidos, "*los desaparecidos*" emerged as the terrorized subject of a state terror created in collusion with neoliberal restructuring, social hatred, and the virulently anti-democratic context of US-funded repression in its "backyard" (Grandin 2007). For this reason, when those protesting state terror in Mexico today demand the reappearance of the disappeared, they are connecting their struggle to decades of struggle across the diverse geography of the Americas.

A challenge that all of these movements against disappearance must confront is the "first insane premise" behind the governance that produces the disappeared populations that it disavows such that the disappeared are the subjects who neither exist in historical time nor in geographical space: they do not exist because they are not here. As such, all of the modern trappings of biopolitical governance—birth certificates, educational and medical records, digitized government identification records, marriage licenses, property titles—fail to prove this disappeared's existence. And, without proof of existence, there is no proof of a crime when that non-existing subject fails to surface. Without crime, there is no injustice. And, thus, nothing to demand. As such, while we plummet from this logical precipice, the lack of empirical data (a lack generated by the government that directly or indirectly authorizes the disappearance) contributes to an epistemological ignorance (there is nothing to know and no way to know this nothingness), which, the governing elites then claim to be an ontological condition: the disappeared simply are not.

This governing logic sets the challenge for activists, who across the Americas and since the 1970s, confront it with many creative means. Las Madres of Buenos Aires named their disappeared as "children" (*hijos* and *hijas*) and represented them as "youth" who were snatched from the lives that they were just beginning to live. Photos of young faces established the corporeality of this youth, many appearing as students in high school or, even, younger as babies. This representation allowed the mothers to fight against an official discourse of the missing thousands as "communist terrorists" who had joined clandestine guerrilla groups. This strategy for representing the disappeared as "youthful" is common across the Americas as it connects to a discourse of youthful innocence as well as to a timeline for a subject who still has yet to live a natural lifetime (Escobar and Alvarez 1992). In contemporary Mexico, for instance, the "*normalistas*" emerge young people who were taken just as they were seeking the training and vocations for teaching Mexican children. They represent a dedicated and idealistic youth whose disappearance represents their absence from their colleges as well as from their future classrooms. In addition to "youthful" and "students", other activist strategies represent the disappeared as

targeted social minorities, in some places as "indigenous", as "working women" (*obreras*), or sexual minorities (LGBTQ), and, perhaps less often, as economic minorities (the poor). All of these strategies indicate the necessity for making the disappeared recognizable as subjects with familiar identities and who, therefore, can be represented in contemporary language.

In addition to establishing the temporal presence of the disappeared, the activists must also establish their geography. The most notable characteristic of the disappeared is that they are not locatable. Their geography is unknown. Activists proclaiming their existence, therefore, represent their geography as a matter of missing corporeality within a political landscape that is filling with the disappeared. In Argentina, the corporeality of the missing children emerged through a variety of tactics, such as with the wearing of cloth diapers by their mothers who embroidered their children's names before tying the diapers to their heads as headscarves. That their children were mainly grown did not disqualify the power of the diaper to evoke the body of the disappeared child. This is the most vulnerable and delicate of bodies within dominant discourses of humanity within major western philosophical and literary traditions. In Mexico today, the missing "students" of Iguala are represented often by empty desks arranged in public places as if they were in a classroom. The desks form the infrastructure for holding a body erect and in the position for reading, writing, listening and engaging, as if in a learning environment. Within these empty desks, the missing people come into view as missing students. Their geography—they are not in those desks—indicates the reality of their absence in both place and time. The related and obvious question, then, that emerges through these activist tactics is: where are they now? And this question represents a direct threat to the governing elites who have much to lose in the recognition of its validity and, even more, in any efforts to answer it.

Immediately recognizable in this activism is the common ground it shares with the many activist and critical academic efforts to represent that which is regarded through status quo forces to be "unknowable" and therefore "irrelevant" to expert knowledge. The tautological synergy binding the lack of empirical evidence to epistemological ignorances, as Nancy Tuana has well phrased it, has created challenges for academics and activists alike who protest the absence of social minorities (including the numerical majority of women) from expert knowledges spanning the arts and sciences (see Sullivan and Tuana 2007). Black and Latina feminists, along with post-colonial and post-structuralist feminist and queer scholars, have led the charge since the 1970s across the academic–activist nexus for destabilizing this tautology (Anzaldúa 1987; Lorde 2007). By turning attention to the crisis of representation within the academy as well as within political movements, these efforts have exposed, as Gayatri Spivak (1988) presciently identified, in the dawning of the post-structural critique of knowledge and political representation, how representing the knowable subject is always a political and economic endeavor. Likewise, those demanding the reappearance of the disappeared hone their skills for representing the disappeared as a political project that exposes the intrinsic, rather than the exceptional, cruelty inherent to modernity (see Franco 2013). Rather than representing a non-modern exception to the modern era, Latin America illustrates the sadistic rationalizations of constitutional governance that legally or illegally justifies

extreme capitalist exploitation and the butchery of all those who oppose it and question state authority.

Along this vein, the disappeared arguably share characteristics with other theoretical categories of modern subjectivity, such as the precariat, the surplus, the disposable, and the subjects of bare life who inhabit uncertain worlds where biopolitical governance meets the necropolitical (Coleman and Steusse 2014; Ghannam 2013; Gidwani 2008, 2014; Gilmore 2007; Mbembe 2003; Tadiar 2013; Weheliye 2014).[5] My point here is that theorizing "the disappeared"—as a condition of modern subjectivity—does not require giant leaps for an extremely expansive critical theoretical scholarship that has so effectively proven the political and economic value generated from the rendering invisible and unknowable whole populations. Yet, making these connections does require recognizing the important theoretical and political contributions made over decades of activism against disappearance and neoliberal terror in the Americas. And such recognition requires delving into the details of the activist strategies for bringing the disappeared to life as contemporary and locatable subjects: that is, as people with history and geography. Toward this end, critical geographers have much to contribute as activists around the world endeavor to locate the disappeared, map the landscapes of their existence and connect them to the multiple scales linking embodied disappearance to state terror, global capitalism and social hatred across the planet.

Feminicidio and Disappearance

The first protests against what came to be known as "*feminicidio*" took place when concerned residents of Ciudad Juárez encountered the official attitude that the violence against women and girls was a non-existent problem. In spite of family declarations to the contrary, political and economic leaders maintained that the missing girls and women were not really "missing" and that the dead ones were normal outcomes of girls and women who make bad choices. They justified this official position by, as I have shown elsewhere, resorting to the discourse of the public woman, the age-old story of the prostitute who not only wrecks social destruction but who also deserves her own violent destruction (Wright 2006). Public women are not matters of public concern but rather indicative of families that need to reign in wayward and over-sexualized female members. These women represent crises of patriarchy, not crises of the state. Their deaths and disappearances are, therefore, private, not public, matters. As feminist scholars and activists have shown through decades of work, this strategy is not original, but it constantly proves effective in misogynous contexts, pervasive around the world, that create the conditions by which a story of a sexually promiscuous woman lays the foundation for justifying her suffering and violent death (Castillo 1998; Hershatter 1999).

Alarmed by this official attempt to render the crimes invisible and to "disappear the victims" from public knowledge, a handful of women in 1993 arranged a meeting with the Ciudad Juárez mayor to raise some practical concerns about women's safety as a matter of public safety. Among those attending the meeting was Esther Chávez, a retired accountant and pro-choice activist who had begun a new career as an editorialist for a local daily. As she scouted about for column ideas, she had

begun to keep record of public complaints by family and friends of women/girls who had gone missing. She also tallied a growing number of usually brief and fairly hidden reports of female corpses that were appearing in the city's desert edges. In preparation for the meeting with the mayor, Esther's feminist friend, Maria Elena Vargas, had mastered the new spreadsheet program, called Excel, with which she turned Esther's hand-written accounting of corpses and abduction dates into "data". So when the mayor failed to appear for their appointment, and when word spread that the women who refused to leave his office until he showed up were "occupying the mayor's office", Esther pulled out the data. "The list", Esther later explained, "got their attention. They did not think a bunch of women could count!" (conversation, 2007). When asked by the press about their organization, Esther invented, on the spot, a new feminist group, "El 8 de marzo de Ciudad Juárez" (the 8th of March in Ciudad Juárez), a sister branch of the feminist group she and Maria Elena had worked with in the state capital of Chihuahua. So, by the time that these activist friends had left the mayor's office, they had created a new feminist organization, orchestrated the first "occupation" to protest violence against women in the city's history, and they had presented "data" that proved what was being officially denied: women and girls were being killed and abducted at alarming rates. The disappearances were real. Within a year, they would be joined by over a dozen social and civic organizations in the city to form its first feminist coalition called The Coalition of Organizations for Women (La Coordinadora de ONGs Pro de la Mujer), which galvanized networks across the city and, with them, more contributing sources to the list that grew in number and in detail over the years.

By the mid-1990s in northern Mexico, there was a growing debate over the reality of these disappearances. On the one side were activists and family members who sought to make the violence visible and the victims knowable to national and international public. On the other were the governing and economic establishment (including elected officials, police officers, business owners, along with developers and maquiladora managers from both sides of the border) who continually rolled out the ragged yarn of the public woman as a way to deny the existence of any problem. The former, however, were making more headway. As the list of disappearances and murders grew and as public protests proliferated, headlines about murdered and disappeared women and girls, many of whom worked in the maquiladora factories, started to rival stories about the 1994 passage of NAFTA, of its associated economic boom and of how Ciudad Juárez was ripe for further industrialization. The frustration by political and economic elites found a voice with the then-governor, Francisco Barrio, who in 1995, tried to convince an increasingly skeptical public that the violence was "normal" for a city like Ciudad Juárez (i.e. one infamous for public women). There was no reason to protest the lack of public information and professional police investigations; there was no cause for concern among good families that kept a good handle on their female members. Such efforts to "normalize" the violence, via the discourse of the public woman, was a way to make the deaths, and the victims' lives, disappear. The state therefore, under this leadership, did not feel compelled to generate data, via investigations into the crimes, nor to account for the lack of public safety.

Feminist scholars, also in concert with social movements in myriad contexts, have identified such logic as rooted in the power of "epistemological ignorance", created

by the discursive and material mechanisms for making women and the places and processes associated with them invisible, outside of history and geography, and thereby, unknowable and unthinkable (Lorde 2007; Scott 1999; Tuana 2006). Epistemological ignorances, sustained by an official refusal to generate or recognize the empirical existence of marginalized populations (populations rendered marginal), lead into the tautological cycle whereby the empirically non-existent sustain the epistemological ignorances that generate ontological absences. Such tautology is the logical underpinning to the governance via disappearance within state terror. The disappeared do not exist because if they were to exist, we could observe them. Their lack of existence means that there is nothing to know, nothing to acknowledge and nothing to do about them (see Crow 2014; Ross 2008).

The activists against femicide in northern Mexico recognized this nefarious logic and focused on the state terror of impunity that coursed through it. And they did what activists have done for decades in Latin America: they thought of creative ways to make the victims visible, knowable and, thereby, recognizable as victims of state-sanctioned violence. First, they lined up behind Esther's list as "the public list" that would serve as the official one given that the government could not be bothered to count the missing and the dead. They then connected the names on this list to real people who lived in northern Mexico, and whose lives and disappearances exposed the poverty and vulnerability of the region's working poor, where neoliberal restructuring had met with an acceleration, under NAFTA, of global manufacturing that sought cheap and docile female workers. They held press conferences in front of official buildings, they led the press and activists around the world on tours through working class neighborhoods, they introduced the family and friends of the murdered and disappeared women/girls to an increasingly concerned international public, and they presented the victims of these crimes as everyday Mexican women and girls, with families, with hopes and dreams, with lives to life. They also drew lessons from the many decades of disappearance activism as they coined their demand: "Not one less woman, not one more death" (Ni una mujer menos, ni una muerta más), a phrasing that named both disappearance as well as murders—neither corpses nor absences were acceptable.

By 1998, and faced with increasing international and national scrutiny, Mexican officials and corporate spokespeople for the maquiladora factories (within and outside the country) could no longer easily deny the violence against women along Mexico's northern border. By then, Esther's list had become a key factor in Mexican federal and state-wide decisions to recognize officially the violence against women. Maquiladora factories were integrating programs for protection and sexual violence. And the governor appointed the country's special prosecutor to investigate crimes against women, the first in the country's history.

By the end of the decade, a new word emerged in Spanish that would prove powerful for dismantling the terrible triangle of disappearance. "Feminicidio", which means the killing of women and girls with impunity,[6] entered into the activist lexicon. Formed from the convergence of feminist scholarship (Lagarde y de los Ríos 2008; Monárrez Fragoso 2002) that translated the Anglophone feminist word, "femicide" (violence against women/girls for being women/girls) into Spanish, the Spanish word circulated through activist networks with the added component of "impunity". This meaning has since changed the meaning of the Anglophone

term: "femicide", which now signals violent misogyny backed with official impunity. In Mexico, by the early 2000s, the word along with the list effectively disabled the logic of disappearance—with now "verifiable data" connected to an epistemological framework—the neoliberal coupling of state terror with social hatred became not only knowable (as an ontological situation) but also fightable. Each addition to the list came to represent a nefarious collusion among the political economic elites who provided the impunity that allowed *feminicidio* to flourish in the era of NAFTA (see Rodríguez 2015). And the term "*feminicidio*" joined that of "*desaparecido*" as another innovative concept within the activist lexicon for naming and fighting against state terror and its neoliberal institutions. This connection was clearly demonstrated by the documentary filmmaker, Lourdes Portillo, who released her internationally successful documentary, *Señorita Extraviada* (Missing Woman/Girl), 20 years after her Oscar-nominated documentary, *Las Madres: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*.

In 2001, the chilling discovery of eight female corpses in central Ciudad Juárez galvanized activists across the country and the border. Under the banners of "Ni Una Más" and "Feminicidio No Más", activists stormed public buildings, closed international bridges, shouted down politicians at official events and in the city's most populous social movement since the democratization campaigns of two decades earlier, organized a march across the desert under the auspices of a group of Chihuahua feminist and labor activists called Las Mujeres de Negro (the Women in Black). So named for the black clothing they wore, this group of seasoned activists took their cues from the Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo and, in the black clothing of maternal mourning, demanded justice for the dead and disappeared. Met in Ciudad Juárez by thousands from the city and around the world, they erected a cross at the downtown bridges that stands as a highly public monument to *feminicidio*, represented as a partial and mutilated mannequin body, broken at the foot of a cross filled with nails. Out of this march emerged several groups organized around the families and their mourning of their lost daughters.

These family groups proved extremely effective in fighting attacks against the activists as they, like Las Madres de la Plaza, declared their legitimacy on the street as "mothers" looking for their children. Unlike the activists who came to the movement out of their activism as feminists, labor activists, human rights and other kinds of concerned citizens, the mother-activists had, because of the international respect generated by the legacy of mother-activism made most famous by Las Madres in Argentina, were immune to the charges of crazy, lesbian, feminists (Bouvard 2002). Leading the *feminicidio* fight into the next millennium, these activists galvanized increasing international awareness and support for their cause. With them, the word "*feminicidio*", circulated as a concept with growing legal meaning within and outside the country. In 2007, and based on legislation crafted by some of the feminist *feminicidio* fighters in Chihuahua, the Mexican congress passed the General Law of Access for Women to a Life Free of Violence, which names *feminicidio* as an actionable category. In 2009, the case brought forward by mother-activist groups on behalf of those victims found in the Ciudad Juárez Cottonfield led to the ruling by the International Human Rights Court against the Mexican government for denying justice and protection to the victims.

Faced with increasing scrutiny, governing elites shifted their attacks from the victims to the activists and blamed them for exaggerating the problems in order to generate political and economic resources for themselves and for their organizations (Wright 2011). They blamed them for tarnishing the business reputation of Mexico and for contributing to the economic downtown in maquiladora sector. They blamed them for being feminist and lesbian and just plain "bad women" ("viejas locas"/"crazy bitches"). As transparent as these attacks on the activists were, they were successful in fanning public suspicion of the women as well as adding to the public fatigue of thinking about femicide. And divisions, always present within the various anti-femicide campaigns, widened, especially along the fissure line of domestic violence activism versus stranger-violence activism. As a result, femicide fighting splintered and lost some of its force and, with this splintering, the meaning of *feminicidio* in Mexico narrowed to refer to a specific kind of sexual violence that excluded domestic violence and other forms of intimate partner violence, even though these continue to be the most prevalent forms of hostility against women backed by state impunity. As significantly, *feminicidio* in Mexico as both a legal and, to a notable extent, as a conceptual category lost its connection to disappearance. After the 2009 court case and codification of "feminicidio" in the Mexican legal code, the term came to refer narrowly to the murdering of women outside of the home in cases not linked to intimate partner or family violence.

Consequently, the many important lessons and strategies developed by femicide-fighters to expand the ongoing struggle of governance via disappearance within the neoliberal order have failed to be fully recognized. Instead, and as has also happened to some extent with Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, the relevance of their activism for broader critiques of political economy and social justice does not receive appropriate recognition (Borland 2006). In other words, the activism against *feminicidio* has come to be associated with a specific and narrowed definition of the term rather than with the wider problem of "governance" associated with the modern cruelties of exploitative capitalism, social hatred and state terror.

Evidence of this unfortunate outcome emerges clearly in the horrifying events catalyzed by the Mexican government's 2006 declaration of a Drug War that was backed financially and morally by the US government as part of an ongoing hemispheric war against the informal economy of the global drug trade. Just as the legislation was forming to protect Mexican women from *feminicidio* and as the Inter-American Human Rights Court was hearing proceedings against the Mexican government, this same government declared war against its own citizens who worked in the drug trade and deployed the army and federal police to occupy strategic urban areas. Chief among them was Ciudad Juárez, which by 2010 and under the patrol of some 13,000 federal elements, came to be known as the "murder capital of the world". Between 2008 and 2012, Ciudad Juárez lost over 12,000 residents to assassination along with an uncounted number of disappearances, estimated to be in the thousands as well. The country as a whole lost in these years more than 100,000 people to the government's US-backed "drug war" with thousands more adding to its disappearing population. By 2014, Mexico's rate of disappearance had doubled from its rate in 2012, with an estimated 13 people

disappearing daily as the country, during its drug war, now rivals the numbers of disappeared during Argentina's dirty war (Campa 2015; Human Rights Watch 2013).

Many similarities link the drug war and the disappearance that has skyrocketed with it and the struggles against *feminicidio* with one key exception: there has not been a successful transnational movement galvanized against this manifestation of governance via disappearance. This is not for lack of trying in Mexico and the many and massive mobilizations across the country. Rather, it demonstrates the ongoing power of epistemological ignorances for sustaining state terror that works in the interest of neoliberal concerns. I now turn to those similarities in order to further illustrate the urgent need to recognize and apply the lessons of the *feminicidio* fighters to this governing strategy.

People Not Worth Counting

In 2008, two years after the Mexican president, Felipe Calderón, declared war against organized crime, several hundred soldiers were deployed into Ciudad Juárez. The city's elected mayor effectively stepped aside as military officers assumed many responsibilities for urban governance, including some aspects of financial administration as well as policing. When the military was joined two years later by the federal police, thousands of federal units patrolled the city. They set up check points throughout the city, the federal police usually running those in the city's interior and the army running those along its edges and principal points of entry into and exit from the urban area. In addition, both groups had authority to conducted warrantless searches of residents in their homes and businesses, to stop and arrest anyone for any reason, and to demand identification on the spot. During this period, the city's violence surpassed all historical levels since the revolutionary period of a century earlier, and in 2010, at the height of the federal presence, the city gained notoriety as the "murder capital of the world". Within two years, the city's incarceration rates soared; its funeral business expanded by 1400% as morgues and cemeteries filled up with corpses under the age of 40 (Univision.com 2011), and its disappeared population more than quadrupled (Campa 2015). Those most joining the ranks of the dead, incarcerated and disappeared were the city's young men coming from poor families, the sons, as one prominent scholar put it, "of structural adjustment" whose mothers worked in the maquilas while their families eked out survival in the increasingly criminalized and informal sector of drugs, sex and hired killings (Quintana 2010). Scholars and activists from across the country, with allies from elsewhere, linked the violence to a struggling and increasingly neoliberalized economy (privatization and social cuts), to the criminalization of the country's underemployed youth and to a militarization of civilian governance as part of the US funding of never-ending drug wars across the Americas that funnel more public resources into the private coffers of the industrial–military–prison complexes (Paley 2014).

The government and its US ally claimed that the violence was gang-on-gang violence, a discourse that has consistently hinged on the depiction of the drug war as driven by megalomaniacal men who willingly engage in the high-stakes and violent underground drug trade in exchange for quick money and social status.

This discourse has succeeded in cultivating widespread credibility around the world as a global public easily accepts the story that the violence in Mexico results from a "drug war", driven by gang-on-gang violence that has erupted in response to a Mexico–US alliance (with European and Canadian support) for fighting global terrorists of all ilk, be they religious fanatics or drug *capos*. The social cleansing embedded in this story explains that with each corpse or disappeared narco, there is one less problem and one less enemy to fight (Wright 2013), as explained clearly in this US spokesperson's statement from 2009:

> We firmly believe the Mexican government is taking the steps that it needs to take and is being quite courageous as it confronts a significant problem ... The Mexican people are paying a very high price because drug-fueled organized crime groups are killing each other ... But I believe, and I think the Mexican government believes, that only through this sort of very effective, systematic work can they retake the streets (quoted in Whitesides 2009).

In short, each disappearance of a "narco" is evidence of democracy in action.

Consequently, as activists try to generate national and international support for their demands that the government end an internally focused war that tramples civil and human rights, they run up against a powerful discourse that explained the carnage as proof of a successful war. And they, in turn, find themselves frequently presented as either willing or naïve accomplices for the *narcos* as they criticize a courageous government that is trying to do something about them. This means that much of the public sympathy loyal to the femicide-fighters has fallen away during the drug war, and activists have faced increasing and often terrible repression. Mounting numbers of activists and journalists (especially) critical of the drug war, of neoliberalism, of feminicidio and of state terror have fled the country, been killed, or disappeared. Some have seen their homes burn, their family members tortured, murdered, or also forced into exile; many for good reason live in constant fear.[7]

Meanwhile, the logic of disappearance has returned in full force during this drug war, as the Mexican government fails and often outright refuses to investigate the majority of those crimes associated with gang violence, in fact investigating even fewer than 5% in some of the most violent periods during its war. The lack of investigation further generates yawning gaps in data regarding the violence even as journalists, scholars and human rights organizations, who brave the risks, attempt to fill in the gaps. Yet, most have recognized that due to the difficulty in obtaining data, the numbers used in reputable sources usually indicate wide variances and cannot be accepted as fully verifiable (Heinle et al. 2015). As a recent report issued by the policy group, Justice in Mexico, explains: while the official numbers for violence are currently declining in Mexico, they are "circumspect because of concerns about possible government manipulation and pressure on media organizations to de-emphasize problems of crime and violence. In other words, the problems related to the availability and credibility of data ..." (Heinle et al. 2015:40).

In other words, the epistemological ignorance of disappearance continues within a drug war in which a discourse of narcos provides a framework both for justifying the violence as "gang warfare" and for making it uncountable and, therefore,

unknowable. Without investigations and good data, people go missing in Mexico if this were a normal way of life (see *Aristegui Noticias* 2014; Sicilia 2014). As such, the Mexican state and its US backer consolidates the triangle that connects epistemological ignorance to empirical absence and then, logically, to the ontological impossibility. If the disappeared do not exist (because they are not there and their absence is not counted) then neither do the victims of the US–Mexican drug war —the corpses and disappeared people are not counted because they do not count as people much less as victims. This is the cruel modernity behind Arendt's wise observation: all proceeds with absolute certainty, once that first insane premise is accepted. Once the drug war explanation is accepted as a reasonable version of things, then everything proceeds quite logically.

With the presidential inauguration of Enrique Peña Nieto in 2012, Mexico's governing elites along with US and European political support, and transnational financial backers, have capitalized on this governance via disappearance strategy by further quashing any social movements that challenge the official line regarding the drug war and a whitewashing of Mexico's carnage (Campa 2015). Shortly after coming to power, Pena Nieto declared the drug war to be officially "over" and laid out an ambitious plan for further cementing the country's neoliberal political and economic order through an intensification of neoliberal changes to labor, educational and energy policies (through privatization, cutting pensions and restricting labor rights). In spite of the spirited protests against these reforms from all sectors of society, the international business community has lauded Pena Nieto for turning a formerly flagging economy into the new "Aztec Tiger" that is behind "Mexico's Moment" (*The Economist* 2012). The US government immediately lauded the country's economic climate as ripe for investment (Goldfarb and Miroff 2013) while the US President, Barack Obama, refused to discuss human rights abuses and injustices associated with the drug war, events that he characterized as "the past" (Hennessey and Wilkinson 2013). Along with such declarations, pressure has intensified even more on Mexican journalists who dare to cover the ongoing slaughter across the country, and many, as a result, have felt little choice but to surrender to the pressure to minimize body counts and coverage of violence, as more journalist corpses appear—tortured, mutilated, and brutally destroyed.

In the meantime, with an international business community sanguine over Mexico's economic prospects, officials have declared that "life is back" in Ciudad Juárez (Valencia 2015). In spite of the lack of data and investigations regarding the missing thousands and the unsolved murders, an ambitious gentrification plan for downtown Ciudad Juárez has transformed the century-old infrastructure with plans to replace the working tourist zone into a tonier scene, where cantinas and maquila-discos give way to bistros and condominiums within a stone's throw of downtown El Paso. In fact, the international investors behind much of the Ciudad Juárez renovation have described the social transformation within the plan as a silver lining brought by the unfortunate drug war as they also organize the gentrification of downtown El Paso (Wright 2014). The grand plan is for a binational elite tourist haven replacing the gritty border cities that emerged in the 20th century as places where working class border residents lived, worked and played. When Peña Nieto traveled to Ciudad Juárez to declare it both a symbol of the country's

victorious conclusion to the drug war and beacon of a prosperous future, he was met by protestors who were arrested, pepper-sprayed and beaten (Reuters 2015). Since then, other activists have fled the country. Four months earlier, the *normalistas* had been murdered and disappeared by municipal and federal police. As the US government remained silent, the Mexican federal government announced to the world that the students had been infiltrated by a narco-group called *Los Rojos*. This time, however, a powerful rebuke hailed from all corners of the country, and from many parts of the world as a national and international public refused to allow this story to circulate unchallenged.

Reviving the Normalistas Against Epistemologies of Ignorance

Despite repeated attempts by the government to declare the disappeared *normalistas* to be narco-terrorists, and have them disappear along with the other nameless and unknowable victims of an endless drug war, the Mexican public shocked the government with its refusal to be lulled into this ignorance. All over the country, people took to the streets, closed universities, blocked access to bridges and airports, and called for the president's resignation. As the Mexican government scrambled in efforts to declare the case closed as it summarily arrested people and tossed them into jail, the protests continued as the public, backed with an immediate international backing, that the government bring the students back to life just as they had been taken. Instead of accepting the government's (later to be proven a fully concocted set of lies about the September attack) version of justice having been served via the arrests of clearly tortured suspects who, themselves, did not have access to due process, the protestors demanded nothing less than a return with life. The protests gained steam as across the country activists blocked streets, held press conferences, filled public spaces with empty desks (representing the missing students), painted their nude bodies with numbers (1–43) to represent the disappeared students and appeared as nude walking billboards on public transportation. They burned the legislative building in the state capital of Chilpancingo, Guerrero. They demanded the resignation of the president and called for electoral boycotts, demands backed by some of the country's most respected public intellectuals (see Sicilia 2014). They continue today in spite of harassment and violence at the hands of paramilitaries and state agents.

Their tactics also draw from the *feminicidio* fighting activist playbook. In one movement, pink crosses link the missing and mutilated female form to a political economy that destroys poor working women and their families; in another, empty desks frame a missing body that now, as the writer Elena Poniatowska has said, indicate Mexico's "missing future". With these and other symbolic gestures that link missing bodies to a larger body politic, both movements force the public to recognize the geographic and temporal dimensions of disappearance as the knowable, observable, and countable events generated by the triangulation of capitalist exploitation, social hatred, and state terror. Their fights and need to make the case for the larger significance of each missing person illustrates the centrality of an epistemological ignorance to a political economy based upon the extreme

exploitation of the working poor, especially if they are women and racial/ethnic minorities in a neoliberal world that reaps enormous profits from the treatment of such people as disposable (Wright 2012). Just as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina refuted the military junta's logic that the disappeared did not exist (otherwise they would be present), the campaigns on behalf of the normalistas and against feminicidio subvert the insane premise that those who are missing do not matter. And as demands for the return of the disappeared—alive!—continue to rock the country and capture international attention, activists/scholars/journalists continue to generate all manner of data that prove their existence as part of a growing national population of the disappeared. These data also derive from the shifts in language resulting from the naming of those whose identities are denied —the victims of systematic and genocidal misogyny are the victims of "feminicidio" and the rural-student teachers, "the normalistas", join the transnational ranks of "los desaparecidos".

With such tools—armed, as it were, with their own logic for defying the epistemological ignorance upon which state terror rests—activists in Mexico (along with their transnational allies) will not allow that first insane premise that the disappeared are not present to proceed as desired by those in power. As noted by a *New York Times* correspondent, these tactics are not allowing the Mexican government to govern via a production of ignorance, as:

> [t]he federal government has shown a very limited and inappropriate capability to react, and it hasn't found a rhetoric and narrative that fits this moment of crisis. It will be very hard for them to find it, since every discovery and confirmation of the students' deaths only fuels the movement and empowers people to mobilize (Archibald 2014).

In other words, confirmation of death only fuels the demand for a return with life. "¡Regrésenlos!" demanded Elena Poniatowska to the thousands who shouted in chorus with her in Mexico City weeks after the September attack. In "[f]acing the terror", she declared, "there only remains the unity of the people who rise up and yell, as they have been doing for days: They took them alive, we want them alive! ... Return them with life!" (Poniatowska 2014).

The US government also finds itself without adequate explanation to account for the almost three billion in support of Mexico's drug war and the terror reflected in this the giant mirror of protest as President Obama, in his January 2015 press conference with his Mexican counterpart, continued to peddle the old line about drug gangs: "Our commitment is to be a friend and supporter of Mexico in its efforts to eliminate the scourge of violence and the drug cartels that are responsible for so much tragedy inside of Mexico". He was met by labor and human rights protestors who added to the twitter trend: #AyotzinapaFerguson.

Certainly, there are more connections to be made across a neoliberalizing planet as social movements in the southern hemisphere expose the commonalities behind the disappeared populations and the "vanishing" life experienced by social and economic minorities in the northern reaches. Those populations targeted as "surplus" and "disposable" and whose efforts to survive and have meaningful lives run up against the political and economic forces that profit from their vulnerability and precariousness do not reside in isolated regions of the world. As decades of

critical geographic scholarship has shown, these populations live and struggle everywhere in spite of the greatest odds (see also Fassin 2010; Mutersbaugh and Lyon 2010). Struggles against the epistemological ignorances that generate gaps in data as mechanisms for reproducing the conditions of vulnerability, disposability, and extreme exploitability also reach across the globe. Research into the specificities of such struggles reveal that there is no universal condition to the terrorized subject, to the precariat, to the disposable, but that there are some common threads that weave throughout their lives and experiences. Critical geography can further deepen and broaden the understanding of these connections and provide, I believe, practical insights for supporting ongoing efforts to challenge the cruel forces of modernity.

More broadly, critical geographic research, with its knitted roots in feminist, Marxist, critical race and sexuality studies, provides many powerful conceptual frames for understanding the connections illustrated by the activists against disappearance in the Americas (Harvey 2006; Mountz and Hyndman 2006; Wright 2013). The vernacular of disappearance and of *feminicidio* add further force to these frames and particularly as they resonate publicly and have staying power as galvanizing concepts. They certainly deserve more critical attention to the theoretical sophistication that drives their relevance to activists and academics, alike. As critical scholars working across disciplines seek to facilitate the cross-fertilization of academic and activist energies, there are some key areas that are especially relevant to geographers who work in visualization, big data and interactive cartographies. Moreover, as activists call for expertise to create maps of the disappeared and to publicize the landscape of disappearance, there is an urgent need for the honing of techniques for visualizing absence—for tracing the cell phones that suddenly are shut off, for tracking the GPS that comes to a permanent halt, for graphing the migration from the visible to the invisible. An international coordination among citizens, activists and cartographers has created an online crowd-mapping site for graphing the sites of disappearances across Mexico and has called for enhanced techniques and international contributions as the situation worsens daily (Viñas 2013). Unquestionably, a field as rooted in the empirical sciences as geography can rise to the occasion and turn its powerful tools, some of which have been used in order to control marginal populations by repressive governments (Wainwright 2012), for mapping the empirical data of disappearance and, in so doing, dismantle the nefarious triad that sustains the state terror of neoliberal modernity and is found within this insane logic: the disappeared do not exist; *feminicidio* occurs because women provoke it; and drug wars occur because bad guys are killing each other off. Fighting such ignorance is a key part of the larger struggles that implicate us all.

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Endnotes

[1] Where possible, I combine the feminine and masculine gender forms by using the "@", as is common practice in feminist Hispanophone texts. Sometimes an "x" is used, or the "a/o" ending.

[2] It is noteworthy that this article does not have a byline. This is now increasingly common practice in Mexico as journalists often do not sign their own articles out of fear for their lives.

[3] In this article, I use the Spanish term, "*feminicidio*", to refer to the systematic violence against women/girls under conditions of state impunity, as this term has developed in Mexico. In English, I use the term, "femicide", even as I am sympathetic to the position that there are reasons to refer to *feminicide* versus *femicide* (see Fregoso and Bejarano 2010). In my view, the term "femicide" has changed in meaning in English as well as a result of the social movements over *feminicidio* and *femicidio* (which is used in Argentina and elsewhere in the Americas). This debate raises many important issues regarding the hegemony of Anglophone terms as well.

[4] The Mexican writer, Carlos Fuentes, famously coined the term, "The Perfect Dicatorship", to refer to the PRI's long-reign. In 2014, the Mexican director, Luis Estrada, directed a film by the same title to draw attention to the entrenched tentacles of that regime even after the supposed democratic transition in 2000.

[5] This rich literature in critical geography is too extensive to adequately reference here. I have listed a few of the more recent texts that have influenced my thinking while writing this particular paper.

[6] A debate over the meaning of *femicidio* versus *feminicidio*, and its English version of *femicide* and *feminincide* continues within and beyond Mexico. In Mexico, the term "*feminicidio*" is more commonly used by activists and scholars, and is part of the Mexican legal code. In other Spanish-speaking contexts, the term "*femicidio*" is often used. Part of the debate involves whether domestic violence is or is not included in the definition, and whether impunity is central to the definition. The debate is dynamic and not settled as of this writing.

[7] Mexico has now returned to its ignominious prominence as one of the world's most dangerous places for investigative reporting, activism and academic protest. In this context, data are not only hard to come by, they come with a high price often paid in blood and suffering by those who have the courage to provide it (see, for examples, Reporters Without Borders: http://en.rsf.org/).

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