

# A Haunted City: Institutionalised Orders of Violence and Memory in Guatemala

AI SLING WALSH

**ABSTRACT** Guatemala is a haunted city: one which bears the scars of colonial and neo-colonial orders of violence and is haunted by the living and dead who have resisted state violence, injustice and the prerogatives of silence and forgetting. This paper discusses the material and symbolic importance of the Historical Archive of the National Police (AHPN) and the altar to the victims of the Virgen of the Assumption Safe Home (HSVA) as sites of memory that challenge the dominant narratives of Guatemala's past and present, resist institutionalised state violence and exert concrete demands for justice for the victims and survivors.

Guatemala is a city of ghosts who do not rest easily, who do not let us forget. A city steeped in the blood of colonial pillage, military massacres and political assassinations. Memorials to fallen comrades mark every street corner. Clandestine prisons, where the tortured and disappeared cried for mercy, have been repurposed into offices and hospitals. Yet, Guatemala is a city that resists. Its streets are the site of revolutions, uprisings, marches and sit-ins. Ideological battles rage across colonial masonry between rival factions over who controls the narrative of the past and the present. Black and white posters of the dead and disappeared are pasted across city walls in the early hours of the morning. There are not enough municipal cleaning squads to scrub off the calls for "*Justicia Ya*," and the ever-present question: "*Donde están?*". Where are they: the 200,000 thousand left dead from the war? The 45,000 still missing?<sup>1</sup> And what about the most recent victims of a state which regards undesirable bodies as equally disposable now as they were during the war? Will *they* ever see justice?

41 such victims are remembered at the very heart of Guatemala City where a circle of iron crosses stands under the billowing national flag in the city's central square. There is one cross for each of the 41 girls who died in the fire at the *Hogar Seguro Virgen de la Asunción* (HSVA - Virgin of the Assumption "Safe Home") on March 8<sup>th</sup>, International Women's Day, 2017. This improvised memorial was erected and maintained by the families of the victims and local women's organisations. Twenty minutes north of Guatemala City's central square, on the dusty grounds of an almost abandoned police barracks, stands

another memorial to victims of state violence - this time dating back to Guatemala's 36-year internal armed conflict (1960-1996). The *Archivo Historico de la Policia Nacional* (AHPN - Historical Archive of the National Police), discovered in 2005, houses some 80 million files dating from the foundation of the National Police in 1881 to its disbandment in 1997.

Proceeding from Gordon's treatise on haunting, this paper understands Guatemala as a society that is 'haunted by terrible deeds that are systematically occurring and are simultaneously denied by every public organ of governance and communication.'<sup>2</sup> The AHPN and the alter to the victims of the HSVA fire are understood as contested sites of memory impregnated with the ghosts of past and present state violence. Both have acted as spaces for catalysing popular resistance to oppression and the state imperatives of denial, forgetting and oblivion; and are consequently threatened with erasure from Guatemala City's landscape.

### A Brief Note on Positionality

This paper is a product of the six years I was embedded in the daily life of Guatemala City. It reflects my experience of place, particularly the wounds and hauntings of the, often hostile, urban landscape I called home. I first arrived in Guatemala in 2014 to work in communications and advocacy with international NGOs; using my spare time to study feminist theory, participate in local feminist activism and, most recently, focusing on journalistic and other research and writing pursuits. The paper reflects my sustained and continued relationship with and concern for the people, the places and the events narrated here.

*El Archivo*, as the AHPN is colloquially known in Guatemala, often finds itself on the itinerary of international delegations, researchers or visitors interested in the history of Guatemala's recent conflict. The 80 million papers, the process of salvaging and analysing the documents, and the building itself feature on tours provided by staff from the archive. I have had the privilege of two such tours: one in 2014 when the *Archivo* had a dynamic staff of more than 50 people, and one in March 2019 when the *Archivo's* future was terribly uncertain. Aside from advocacy and journalism carried out as part of the efforts to keep the archive open, I have many close friends who, at one time or another, formed part of the *Archivo's* team. The *Archivo's* discovery, the repeated attacks on its existence and the ghosts that haunt its pages and stalk its labyrinthine corridors have occupied much space in my writer's imagination.

March 8<sup>th</sup> 2017 is seared in my mind as a day that began with the annual International Women's Day protest and ended with a candlelight vigil at the main square only hours after the first reports of the massacre at the HSVA began to trickle down to the city centre. I would spend many more afternoons and evenings over the following two years gathered at the main square as a convener, participant and observer in protests, performances, rituals and Mayan ceremonies in memory of the 41 victims and 15 survivors of the fire. I coordinated a campaign for justice among international NGOs which included a performance by local artist, Regina José Galindo, where 56 people were locked in a room to scream for nine minutes - the length of time the girls were locked in the inferno. I was one of those 56. During my last 18 months in Guatemala City I lived only half a block from the square, encountering the altar multiple times a day. I remain haunted by the deaths of the girls who died at the HSVA and committed to ensuring their struggle for justice is not forgotten.

The narration in this paper is inspired by Avery's invitation to "follow the ghosts that haunt" and write from that location.<sup>3</sup> She embraces the fictive within sociological inquiry as a means to access the "elusive, fantastic, contingent, and often barely there."<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it would be impossible for an academic article to capture the full emotionality of passing through those spaces. Indeed, this article has a

companion piece of fiction where I write myself into a ghost story set among Guatemala City's avenues, streets and architecture which are haunted by the past and present.<sup>5</sup> Even as the protagonist to my story I am still an outsider, a powerless observer, to events over which I have no control. In this article I have attempted, following Avery, to "make the fictional, the theoretical, and the factual speak to one another."<sup>6</sup> I do not pretend to 'give voice' to those whose lives were lost in either institution. Rather this paper is an attempt at straddling reporting, narrative and research, as a means of remembering, and confronting, the ghosts that continue to possess me, even from this side of the Atlantic.

### **The Violence Continuum: From Colonialism through Conflict and Beyond**

Guatemala's colonial regime, with the arrival of the first Spanish invaders to the territory in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, established, according to Chivalán Carrillo and Posocco, "a necropolitical order which sustains the biopolitical projects of those who flaunt fully liveable lives at the expense of those consigned to death or slow death."<sup>7</sup> They identify five historical cycles of dispossession which, through extraction and accumulation, have resulted in social and geographical reconfigurations of the *territorio-cuerpo* (territory-body) and *territorio-tierra* (territory-land)<sup>8</sup>: the first being the colonial period, the second relating to the post-independence or 'liberal' period, roughly 1860-1944, then the third and fourth cycles spanning from 1954 to 1994, including the period following the 1954 US-backed coup and the internal armed conflict. The final cycle is understood to be the current period of neoliberal extraction, beginning in 1995 and extending to the present day.<sup>9</sup> These reconfigurations have included the mass dispossessions of peoples from their territories, the extraction of labour from the peoples and their bodies through enslavement and feudal master-serf relations and other bio-political techniques of expropriation, corresponding "to a multiplicity of ways of producing death and life simultaneously."<sup>10</sup> This paper is particularly concerned with the fourth and fifth cycles of dispossession from 1954 until the present day.

Guatemala's internal armed conflict was preceded by a brief experiment with liberal democracy, the revolutionary period (1944 – 1954), when the successive presidencies of Juan José Arrevalo and Jacobo Arbenz initiated sweeping social and land reforms. However, the interest of local elites in impeding progressive social policies (particularly improved labour laws and agrarian reforms) coincided with growing anti-communist sentiment and the implementation of the United States' national security doctrine throughout Latin America.<sup>11</sup> The CIA provided financial and military aid to this sector which aimed at spreading anti-communist sentiment, and surveilled and targeted subversives amid preparations for a military intervention.<sup>12</sup> In 1954 a US-backed army, led by General Castillo Armas, invaded Guatemala from Honduras, inaugurating decades of military rule, "fraudulent and restricted elections and the systematic use of repression to protect empowered interests."<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s social movements pressuring for progressive change and a return to democracy, principally led by students, unions, journalists, the Catholic Church and campesino cooperatives, were met with increasing state repression, backed by US financial and technical aid. Armed groups rebelled against the repressive state from the early 1960s, and by the 1980s they had spread across rural and urban Guatemala. The state responded with counter-insurgency operations using ever increasing brutality and violence against the general population with the aim of annihilating the guerrilleros and anyone suspected of supporting them. The counterinsurgency was characterised by urban and rural death squads, scorched earth campaigns in the highlands where communities were forcibly displaced or massacred, and the systematic use of sexual violence, torture, disappearances and extrajudicial killings to crush the revolutionary forces and destroy the country's social fabric.<sup>14</sup>

By the late 1980s and early 1990s the revolutionary forces had been practically defeated, a tentative democracy had been restored and moves towards negotiating a peace agreement began. The Peace Accords were signed in December 1996, with all remaining armed revolutionary forces laying down their arms. Factions of the army and civil defence patrols (*Patrullas de Auto-Defensa Civil* - PAC) were demobilised and the National Police were disbanded in 1997 to be replaced by the National Civil Police (PNC). The Peace Accords further recommended wide-ranging structural reforms to address the social and political inequalities that had led to the war, as well as a UN-mandated (rather than state-led) Commission for Historical Clarification (*Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico* – CEH). The CEH presented its report entitled *Memory of Silence* in 1999.<sup>15</sup>

The CEH identified the concentration of land, natural resources and wealth among the few, and the systemic exclusion of the country's majority indigenous Mayan and Xinka populations as the root causes of the war. Guatemala's social inequalities and exclusions were perpetuated by a politically and economically dominant oligarchy, backed by a militarised state, who obstructed progressive movements and policies at every turn. It found there to be an estimated 200,000 dead and at least 450,000 disappeared as a result of political violence. 83% of victims were Maya indigenous. 93% of these crimes were attributed to state forces, 3% to the revolutionary armed forces and 4% to other actors.<sup>16</sup>

Disappearance, according to the report, “was a systematic practice which in nearly all cases was the result of intelligence operations. The objective was to disarticulate the movements or organisations identified by the state as favourable to the insurgency, as well as to spread terror among the people.”<sup>17</sup> The CEH found that sexual violence, particularly rape, was used in “a systematic and widespread manner” as a weapon of terror in the state's counter insurgency strategy. The threat and perpetration of sexual violence were strategies of terror and punishment against women, their families and their communities that aimed to destroy the social fabric and sow division.<sup>18</sup> Within the colonial relations established in the region, indigenous women, and their bodies, “were key to dynamics of extraction and accumulation not only in production, but also in reproduction.”<sup>19</sup>

The CEH relied on testimonies from 7,338 individuals and collective testimonies gathered from 2000 communities across the country. The state, army and police repeatedly refused the multiple requests made by the UN investigators to release state documents, either claiming that they did not exist, they had already been destroyed during the war or that they could not be released for reasons of national security. Thus the reports are punctuated by the state's determined silence.<sup>20</sup>

## 80 Million Fragile Documents

In the years following the signing of the Peace Accords the state provided few answers to the multiple demands to account for its actions during the war. Survivors, families and human rights investigators were met by a wall of silence. Claiming to have acted in defence of *la Patria*, the State denied its crimes and criminalized its victims, branded them as delinquents or communists who ‘got what they deserved’. The truth commissions were dismissed as the product of foreign interference.<sup>21</sup> It was easy to maintain this narrative in the absence of hard evidence to the contrary; there were no files or documents to back up the thousands of witnesses who testified to the truth commission about state atrocities committed during the conflict. State denial in such contexts is a strategy of repression in itself which acts “to ensure that everyone knows just enough to scare normalization into a state of nervous exhaustion.”<sup>22</sup>

The discovery of the AHPN in 2005 was an accident of history that reads like the ending of a Cold War spy novel. Its 80 million files, whose very existence had been denied since the 1990s, were never

meant to be unearthed, least of all read by those seeking evidence of state crimes. An explosion at a military base on the outskirts of Guatemala City prompted the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office (PDH) to investigate a police barracks in Zone 6, to the far north of the city, for possible arms deposits left over from the war. The team, led by a local historian, found not only the suspected explosives but also warehouse with papers stacked from floor to ceiling. The police officer on duty informed the team that these were the archives of the National Police.

A cursory inspection of the warehouse revealed the archives had been left in a state of almost complete abandonment. They found thousands of bundles of paper and metal filing cabinets bursting with documents, in various stages of neglect and decay and evidence of vermin and other plant and wildlife infestations. The PDH, filed for an immediate judicial protection order under the proximate cause that the files might contain information pertaining to the 1981 abduction of the 14-year-old Marco Antonio Molina Theissen.<sup>23</sup> The human rights community responded by sending staff and volunteers to the warehouse to ensure the security of the documents and begin the mammoth task of recovering any information that might shine a light on the violence which occurred during the war.<sup>24</sup>

The discovery of the archives represented a watershed for human rights activists. It was the product, according to Weld, of felicitous political conditions, years of social struggle and luck. It represents the largest and most complete cache of documents pertaining to the Cold War era's dirty wars in Latin America. It was heralded as key step towards uncovering the truth of state actions during the war and gave hope to thousands of families that they might finally have answers as to the fate of their loved ones.<sup>25</sup>

### Recovering Memory, Resisting Oblivion

From 2006, when the AHPN began operating officially, its team of international and national researchers and archivists, many former *guerrilleros* or families of the disappeared, dedicated themselves to cleaning, restoring, sorting and analysing the documents at the dusty police compound at the far north of Guatemala City. The sheer scale of the archive, covering the entire 116 years the National Police existed, and the urgency to find evidence of human rights violations, meant that the *Archivo* prioritised documents produced between 1975 and 1985, the worst years of the conflict according to the CEH. Nevertheless, the archive as a whole provides a deep insight into the direction, chains of command and operations of the National Police painting a picture of an institution whose principal purpose was not solving crimes nor maintaining public order, but the exercise of surveillance, intimidation and violence over the civilian population.

The Book of Delinquents, a massive tome of multiple volumes, identifies individuals with photo ID, name and details of their supposed crimes. Many of these, such as “security measures”, “subject to investigation”, “subversive activities” and “guerrilla fighter” relate to political activities, while women and gay men were identified for sexual and gender crimes, and even children were signalled out as delinquents from as early as five years of age. The infamous *fichas* or filing cards on individuals evidence the prolonged periods of surveillance of prominent political figures, social activists and union organisers. In the case of social democrat Manuel Colom Argueta, police surveillance can be traced back 22 years before his assassination in 1978.<sup>26</sup> The National Police, were, according to Doyle, a force “consumed by the chase, the kill” of Communists, students, union leaders and other so-called subversives.<sup>27</sup>

In the absence of meaningful military archives, the *Archivo* is, along with the forensic evidence from mass graves uncovered by organisations such as the Foundation for Forensic Anthropology in Guatemala (FAFG), the most important source for discovering the fate of Guatemala's thousands of dead

and disappeared from the conflict. They have served as a vital resource for the Public Prosecutors office and the International Committee of the Red Cross (both of whom maintain a permanent presence at the archive) as well families of the murdered and disappeared, human rights organizations, academics and, even, retired and current police officers requiring documents pertaining to their services. The files themselves, and the expert analysis of the *Archivo's* senior archivists, have provided crucial evidence in key cases from the war, including the murder of union activist Edgar Garcia and have contributed to cases such as the Death Squad Dossier.<sup>28</sup>

The importance of the AHPN, however, extends beyond the contents of the papers. The Zone 6 police barracks, constructed in 1980, was designed to be a police hospital. The construction was never completed, and the building was repurposed for police administration. When the National Police was dissolved in 1997 it became the unofficial dumping ground for the police archives and other “rubbish.” Although there is no official documentation to corroborate this, many suspect it to be the location of the infamous *'La Isla'* (The Island), a much-feared centre for interrogation torture, murders and disappearances.<sup>29</sup> Doyle has documented, and staff members corroborate, that when the building was discovered they found bloodied mattresses, tiny spaces, some only wide enough for a person to stand up in, and evidence of places where shackles may have been drilled into the wall.<sup>30</sup>

Other centres for torture and interrogation are spread across Guatemala City, ordinary buildings we pass every day which “harbour the facade separating the scream of its terroristic activities from the hushed talk of fearful conversations.”<sup>31</sup> None have been declared a site of remembrance for those who were tortured or disappeared.<sup>32</sup> The *Archivo*, in this sense, is uniquely symbolic not just as site where memory is being protected and history is being rewritten, but one where lives have been disappeared inside its walls and among its 80 million papers. If, as Gordon suggests, the “disappeared barely speak for themselves and not in the vernacular (...) only the language of haunting,” the *Archivo* is one of the haunted spaces through which Guatemala's disappeared have chosen to speak.<sup>33</sup>

## Orders of Violence in the City of Children<sup>34</sup>

In Guatemala, 24 years since the signing of the Peace Accords, women's bodies continue to be violently expropriated by an institutional order of violence that produces disposable lives, consigning millions to abandonment and slow death. The 41 girls who died in the HSVA on March 8<sup>th</sup>, are recent victims of this order. They perished miles from the altar that stands in their memory, far removed from the hustle and bustle of the city centre, and out of sight of the walled condominiums and estates where Guatemala's elites live protected lives behind electric gates flanked by armed guards.

The HSVA, constructed in 2010 on a forgotten edge of Guatemala City, was intended to house 600 children. By March 2017 there were an estimated 800 children resident at the home, including children with disabilities, survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation, children who had been taken into care under court protection orders and young offenders. For its residents, however, the home was anything but safe. Multiple human rights organizations had documented and filed reports relating to mass overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, inedible food, inadequate clothing and little or none of the promised education programs.<sup>35</sup> The residents at the home were subject to daily physical, psychological and sexual abuse, torture and detention at the hands of the staff. Rumours abounded of more organised forms of sexual exploitation, trafficking and illegal abortions also taking place at the home. A court order had been issued in November 2016 for the closure of the HSVA and a request from precautionary measures from the Interamerican Court of Human Rights was pending. All were met with ambivalence and inaction on the

part of state institutions. In the months leading up to the fire there was increasing unrest among the residents of the home who, in the face of state inaction, began to protest the intolerable conditions they were subjected to.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of March 2017 a group of teenagers began protesting the conditions at the home and demanding response to the complaints for human rights abuses filed with state institutions. Inexplicably, the HSVA's main gates were opened and left unguarded. Up to 100 teenagers fled the home, seeking refuge in the surrounding hills. They were soon pursued by armed officers from the National Civil Police (PNC) who used force to round them up and herd them back. After sitting out in the cold for hours under armed guard, 56 of the girls were taken to a small classroom and some 40 boys were taken to an auditorium. They were both kept under lock and key throughout the night while armed PNC officers stood guard outside.

Guatemala's President, Jimmy Morales, was made aware of the protest and break out from as early as the afternoon of March 7<sup>th</sup>. He purportedly ordered the deployment of 100 PNC officers to the HSVA that day to regain control of the situation.<sup>36</sup> Officials from the Secretary for Social Welfare and the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office made verification visits to the home the night of the 7<sup>th</sup> but apparently did not order for the teenagers to be released from where they had been locked up. The 56 girls spent that night squashed into a space with the capacity for 26 people, littered with old furniture. They were forced to sleep on bare foam mattresses and were not allowed out, not even to use the toilet.

On the morning of the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, while women's and feminist organizations gathered at the Palace of Justice in Guatemala City centre to carry out their annual march for International Women's Day, the 56 girls were still locked up. They were served breakfast but refused permission to use the toilet. Those who could no longer hold on, squatted behind an improvised wall of old mattresses. Just before 9 o'clock a fire broke out inside the classroom. Claims have been made that this was started by one of the girls inside the room, who set light to a mattress in a misguided attempt to pressure the police officers guarding them to let them out. This has yet to be proven in court.

The screams of the 56 girls were ignored and the police officer guarding the girls apparently could not find the key to open the door nor did she try opening it by other means. Children from the home watched in growing horror as their fellow residents and friends burned. They were not allowed to help. Nine minutes passed. Not long, but long enough for most of the girls to die. 19 were lost immediately to asphyxiation, their bodies burned beyond recognition. 22 more died in the days that followed at one of the City's two public hospitals. 15 survived but with life altering injuries.

Reports of a fire at the HSVA trickled down from the hills into the city centre by mid-morning and families gathered outside the still locked gates, waiting desperately for news of their children. As bodies began to be evacuated by ambulances and the coroner's office, the families followed, alternating between two of the national hospitals and the morgue in the hope of discovering the fate of their daughters. They would repeat this routine for days as neither the morgue, nor the hospitals, nor the HSVA staff could provide accurate information about how many girls had died, nor the names of those who had survived.

By the evening of the 8<sup>th</sup> of March people began to gather under the Guatemalan flag on the main square. The mourners came with flowers and candles, murmured prayers and roared with indignity against the state's latest act of femicide. 22 candles were lit that night and laid in a circle around the bottom of the flagpole. As the hours and days passed the number of candles kept increasing until there were 41. The candles were eventually replaced by crosses, and almost every week the victims' families and their supporters have gathered to mourn, to remember the girls and to demand justice.

In the hours following the fire at the HSVA staff failed to locate a definitive list of the residents of the more than 800 children and teenagers resident at the home; there was simply no complete record of all

the children in care. This was complicated by the escape a day previously of almost 100 teenagers, and the fact that some 60 missing persons reports had been filed at the HSVA during the previous six months. On the edges of the Guatemala's main square, within the radius of the altar, many aimless young people wander around, their stare vacant, their age undetermined, their clothes turning to rags. Sometimes they ask for food or spare change, but more often than not they are lost in a fog of solvents – their only escape from a reality that offers little hope. They inspire fear in the passers-by who are well accustomed to the petty thefts, muggings and even shootings that are a regular occurrence on the edges of the square. Most people try to ignore them, keeping their eyes to the ground and hurrying past. Best not to think about where they come from nor where they go at night. The daily struggle for survival is all consuming, leaving little energy to wonder about the welfare of others. Many of those young people are the living ghosts of the HSVA, the ones who never returned after their break-out on March 7<sup>th</sup>, who got lost in the chaos following the fire, who were not among those dispersed to other homes across the state or who were deemed to be 'adults' and sent out into society without support or a safety net. Writing of the violence of the archive, Machado signals the bureaucratic “crevices that people fall into” and lives lost to “impenetrable silence.”<sup>37</sup> While 41 girls were consumed by the fire many more children and teenagers were lost to a bureaucratic black hole.

### **The Institutionalised Production of Disposable Lives**

The disappeared of the *Archivo* and the victims of the HSVA, both living and dead, were considered, in their subversiveness and delinquency, not simply undesirable but thoroughly disposable. Chivalán Carrillo is concerned throughout his work with the colonial (re)production and of racialised bodies and the vampiric expropriation of labour, resources and substance from those bodies. He follows these dynamics, through the archives of *Las Indias* to those of the modern nation state, beginning with the capturing of indigenous women who had recently given birth to be used as wet nurses for the infants of the Spanish descendent criollo elite during the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>38</sup> Chivalán Carrillo and Posocco elaborate further on this historic continuity by illustrating the multifaceted expropriation of the body-territory through the fifth cycle of dispossession and accumulation. This includes the expropriation of land for mining, hydroelectric plants, monocultures and other extractive projects; the persecution of defenders of the land and territory; the illegal sale/adoption of Guatemalan children to foreigners; and the extraction of oocyte from young Mayan women to feed the demand for assisted reproduction in the Global North.<sup>39</sup> Chivalán Carrillo's most recent essay addresses the infamous medical experiments carried out by US and Guatemalan doctors on human subjects in Guatemala during the late 1940s. More than 700 incarcerated men and patients at a public psychiatric institution were, without consent or knowledge, inoculated with syphilis so as to test the effectivity of penicillin in treating the sexually transmitted infection.<sup>40</sup>

The expropriation of bodies that Chivalán Carrillo identifies, is made possible through a colonial order that distinguishes 'anomalous' bodies – those “which have no value within the “grand” stories of family, belonging and the nation” – from the sovereign body – those who merit a dignified life and death.<sup>41</sup> Such an order produces unviable, disposable bodies and lives which become vulnerable to multiple forms of expropriation including, but not limited to experimentation, disappearance and death. The (re)production of unviable bodies and the dehumanisation, according to Chivalán, is inscribed in the colonial order and intensified through institutions such as the prison or the psychiatric hospital. The prisoner, the 'madman', the delinquent or the disabled, already deemed unproductive under the capitalist system, become unviable on entering into contact with state institutions. Detained within the state

security or public health architecture they become more vulnerable still: they “have lost their home, lost the rights over their body, lost their political status (...) this triple loss of absolute domination and social death is equivalent to their expulsion from humanity.”<sup>42</sup>

Disappearance, as it was used in Guatemala, aimed to “to cleanse the nation of the internal sickness devouring its vital organs and corrupting its mind.”<sup>43</sup> It functioned by terrorizing a nation's population with uncertainty and “producing ghosts to harrowingly haunt a population into submission.”<sup>44</sup> Disappearance is perhaps the ultimate expression of corporeal expropriation: “the disappeared have lost all social and political identity: no bureaucratic records, no funerals, no memorials, no bodies, nobody.”<sup>45</sup> They become those who “*los que siempre estarán en ninguna parte*” (those who will always be nowhere).<sup>46</sup>

The girls who died in the fire had committed no crime. They were at the HSVA to escape situations of abuse, violence, abandonment, exploitation, trafficking and the gang violence which has consumed so many neighbourhoods in Guatemala City. Others were there because they had run away from home and, rather than being sent back to their families, they were taken into care pending a custodial hearing. More than 100 of the children in care had an intellectual or physical disability. Most were held at the home under an order from a judge, but others had been sent by their families who thought that, with the promise of food, clothing and schooling, their girls would be better off in state care than in their own homes. They were the daughters of Guatemala's peripheral classes: the *tortilla* sellers, domestic servants, *maquila* workers, farmers, campesinos and indigenous families. Families surviving on as little as \$2 a day. Some were from the countryside, but many were from barrios on the edges of Guatemala City where the *maras* (gangs) have all but taken control and where few outsiders dare to enter. Nevertheless, on entering the home they were branded as delinquents, a mark of their expulsion from humanity. They existed in a situation of absolute precarity “between two zones of death—social and corporeal death,” whose lives became “visible only in the moment of their disappearance.”<sup>47</sup>

## Memorialisation and Public Grieving

The ‘subversives’ and ‘delinquents’ who were disappeared by the National Police and allowed to die at the HSVA under the gaze of PNC officers were, for these state institutions unrecognizable as human and thus ungrievable.<sup>48</sup> Violence done against the unreal, othered, or unviable, according to Judith Butler, cannot injure nor negate these lives which are already negated: “they cannot be mourned because they are always, already lost or, rather, never were.” They are “neither alive nor dead but interminably spectral.”<sup>49</sup> Yet, in reclaiming public spaces of the archive and the square in memory of the victims of state violence, the families of the victims and social justice activists returned the humanity to the lives the state had been so intent on denying.

The team at the *Archivo*, over 13 years, managed to secure 23 million files on digital servers. This is not an insignificant achievement and each time a digital archive is accessed, it enables a “sentence to be passed, a partnership to be formed or a student to engage closely with a historical record, one more stone is laid along the path towards justice and in the pursuit of illumination, truth and healing.”<sup>50</sup> If, according to the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, the return of the disappeared's body, ‘a bag of bones’, without explanation or accountability means nothing. If it is merely knowledge of the deed without acknowledgement of the crime, what then is a paper cadaver?<sup>51</sup> Are the files from the AHPN, redacted and replete as they are with codes, euphemisms and silences aimed at disguising the acts of abduction, torture and death, the explanation of everything the Guatemalan government denied? Do they represent an

'*aparición con vida*' ('bring them back alive'), demanded by the Madres? Is recovering a paper cadaver and making it available for the families who desperately seek information, "the resuscitation of life, in bringing the dead back to life by reintegrating them in the cycle of time"<sup>52</sup>? Rescuing the archives and making them available to the public is thus "to stave off oblivion, to look backward, to prevent stories and lives and traumas from being forgotten, and to accord dignity to the dead, disappeared, and displaced."<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, as has been discussed throughout this article, the *Archivo* is much more than a cache of documents, it is a haunted space, impregnated with the presence of lives lost to the machine of state repression. The team at the *Archivo* seemed to have understood this better than anyone. As well as facilitating access to the documents they created a small museum dedicated to the recovery of historic memory and provided tours that illustrated all aspects of the *Archivo*'s work, from archival science to political advocacy and legal analysis.

The altar to the HSVA is positioned at the heart of Guatemala City's civic and commercial life meaning that passers-by, tourists and government staff stumble upon this site as part of their daily routine. The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo weaponised the sacrosanct image of conventional Christian motherhood against a state that claimed to be protecting the family and Christian values even as it disappeared the nation's children.<sup>54</sup> The mothers of the victims of the HSVA do not enjoy the same moral authority. They are working- rather than middle-class, and they have had to fight against the social stigma attached to institutionalisation in order to legitimate their basic demands for truth and justice. More than photographs, these families have had to resurrect an image, find a frame, illustrate the familial bonds, personal histories, favourite hobbies of the girls in order for them to "qualify as grievable."<sup>55</sup>

Their continued presence on the square and the permanence of the altar are, like the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, "an oppositional political imaginary at work, an act of sedition."<sup>56</sup> While the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo and the Guatemalan families seeking the trace of the disappeared must produce photographs in order to "conjure the ghosts and the haunting quality of disappearance," the families whose daughters died in plain sight must reclaim their lives as human from a state that has sought to perpetuate the social stigma of delinquency and criminality against teenage lives in order to avoid accountability and remain in impunity. The Plaza has become a symbol of collective grief, of rage, of the struggle for justice and the insistence that the girls would not be forgotten, that their lives *did* matter, that a crime such as this must never be repeated. The main square was renamed 'The Girls Square' by activist groups and the energy of the city's central public space shifted forever as the ghosts of those who died and survived the fire claimed that space as their own. Their ghosts speak to us, they will not rest until justice is achieved.

### Exorcising Ghosts from the Urban Landscape

In the years following the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996, Guatemala's economic and military elites had seen themselves obliged, largely by external forces such as international cooperation, to loosen their stranglehold on the country's political and social life. However, as the political tendency from North to South moves towards far-right evangelical populism, those elites have found willing allies in the governments of Jimmy Morales and Alejandro Giammattei to reassert their control over the national narrative and ensure the continuity of Guatemala's (neo)colonial order of violence.<sup>57</sup> These two administrations have gone further than any other since the signing of the Peace Accords in dismantling the already fragile state institutions, particularly branches of the legal system responsible for addressing corruption and impunity. It should come as no surprise that the *Archivo* and the altar to the victims of the HSVA have become targets of attacks.

The existence of the *Archivo* has been precarious and from the beginning its staff operated under

the assumption that the project could be shut down, or indeed destroyed, at any moment. The *Archivo's* director of 13 years, Gustavo Meoño, warned from the outset that the only part of this process that is not reversible is the digitisation.<sup>58</sup> Throughout 2017 the Ministry for Sport and Culture refused to sign staff contracts despite the availability of funds. In August 2018 six armed National Civil Police patrols arrived at the *Archivo* and escorted Meoño out of the building. Neither Meoño, nor the staff had received prior notice of his dismissal. Administration of the *Archivo* was moved from the National General Archive to the Ministry for Culture and Sport. Speaking to Kate Doyle in 2018, she feared the changes at the *Archivo* were “intended to derail the archive's investigative work, at a minimum, thereby halting its fruitful and important contributions to human rights justice (...) we must assume the worst.”<sup>59</sup>

Doyle's fears have proved to be well founded. Since September 2018 the Ministry for Culture and Sport has overseen the steady dismantling of the AHPN's functions through a sustained reduction in staff, the closure of the public information, and, eventually, the dismissal of all remaining staff in May 2019.<sup>60</sup> At the time of writing the AHPN has ceased all investigative work, fired all staff and is closed to the public pending the resolution of an injunction submitted to the Constitutional Court to ensure its protection. The existence of the archive and the integrity of the “millions of fragile documents” remains terribly uncertain.

Three years on from the massacre at HSVA, the families of the victims and the survivors remain in legal limbo. They want justice, but also reparations. Many of the girls who survived the fire need specialist medical attention which their families cannot afford and which the state has, to a large degree, neglected. Multiple public officials and staff from the HSVA have been charged with manslaughter, mistreatment and abuse of minors and breach of duties and are facing trial in three separate processes.<sup>61</sup> The cases have made few advances in the face of constant delays including the cancelling of hearings without prior notice, the recalling of judges and injunctions filed by the defence. In one of the most sinister manoeuvres, a defence lawyer filed a complaint accusing the 15 survivors of the deaths of their 41 friends through a macabre list of crimes including: public disorder, threats, aggravated injury, arson and attempted murder. In doing so the state continues to evade responsibility for its crimes and perpetuates the criminalisation of its victims.<sup>62</sup>

Meanwhile the families of the victims and survivors and their supporters, continue to gravitate to the altar on Guatemala City's main square for weekly and monthly vigils to remember the girls and to demand justice. For two years and six months, no one dared to disturb or interfere with the little circle of crosses. In September 2019, however, the Ministry for Culture and Sport ordered their removal over concerns for public safety ahead of the annual Independence Day celebrations. The families of the victims and survivors, and the organisations that support them responded by reclaiming this space for the girls once more and erecting new crosses on the same spot. Nevertheless, their removal remains an ever-present threat.<sup>63</sup>

The attacks on both these sites are emblematic of the state's determination to obstruct and, if possible, halt the transitional justice process, the strides that had been made in investigating and combatting corruption within state institutions and, of course, the investigations into the events that led to the fire at the HSVA and the prosecution of those responsible. While the families have reclaimed their space at the centre of Guatemala City's main square, the archivists and activists continue to campaign to save the AHPN's 80 million fragile documents from oblivion. Their existence, resistance and threat of destruction represents the tug of war between a state determined to erase all trace of its crimes both past and present and the ghosts of a violent past and present who demand truth and justice.

---

## NOTES

1. "Guatemala Memory of Silence Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification Conclusions and Recommendations," *Commission for Historical Clarification* (CEH), (Guatemala: CEH, 1999), 17. Available at: <https://hrdag.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/CEHreport-english.pdf>, last accessed 16/10/2020.
2. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 64.
3. Ibid, 22.
4. Ibid, 26.
5. Aisling Walsh, "Xibalbá," *Pank Magazine*, November 1, 2020, <https://pankmagazine.com/2020/11/01/hauntings-xibalba/>
6. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 27.
7. Marco Chivalán Carrillo and Silvia Posocco, "Against Extraction in Guatemala: Multispecies Strategies in Vampiric Times," *Interventions: Decolonial Trajectories* 22, no. 4 (2020): 524.
8. The body-territory is understood as the constitutive relationship (spiritual, cultural, social and ecological) between bodies and land where bodies are an extension of the territory and visa-versa. In the context of (neo)colonialism, both bodies and the land become territories for conquest, expropriation and extraction. Ibid 523 & 524.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Kirsten Weld, *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala*, (London: Duke University Press, 2014).
12. Stephen Schleisinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).
13. Daniel Rothenburg, *Memory of Silence: The Guatemalan Truth Commission Report*, (New York : Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), xx.
14. Ibid. ix-xli.
15. "Guatemala Memory of Silence Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification," *Commission for Historical Clarification* (CEH), (Guatemala: CEH, 1999).
16. Rothenburg, *Memory of Silence*, ix-xli.
17. CEH, "Memory of Silence Report," 37.
18. Ibid, 54-56.
19. Chivalán Carrillo and Posocco, "Against Extraction in Guatemala," 526.
20. Weld, *Paper Cadavers*.
21. Weld, *Paper Cadavers*, 66.
22. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 64.
23. International Justice Monitor, "Four Retired Senior Military Officers Found Guilty in Molina Theissen Case," *ICJ*, 2018, <https://www.ijmonitor.org/2018/05/four-retired-senior-military-officers-found-guilty-in-molina-theissen-case/> Last accessed: 27/05/2020
24. Weld, *Paper Cadavers*; Kate Doyle, "The Atrocity Files: Deciphering the archives of Guatemala's dirty war," *Harper's Magazine* 60, December 2007, available at: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/guatemala/police/harpers.pdf> Last accessed 30/07/2020
25. Weld, *Paper Cadavers*, 88.
26. Information provided by staff as part of the tour of the AHPN in March 2019, Weld, *Paper Cadavers*, 93.
27. Doyle, "The Atrocity Files," 60.
28. Weld, *Paper Cadavers*, 242.
29. Ibid, 2; Uli Stelzner's *La Isla Archives of a Tragedy* (2009).
30. Weld, *Paper Cadavers*, 161; Doyle, "The Atrocity Files," 56.
31. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 64.
32. Kristel Best Urday, "Entrevista a Gustavo Meoño. Director del Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional de Guatemala: El valor reparador que tiene la información," *Aletheia* 4, no. 8 (2016): 6. Available at: [http://www.memoria.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/art\\_revistas/pr.6259/pr.6259.pdf](http://www.memoria.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/art_revistas/pr.6259/pr.6259.pdf), Last accessed

30/07/2020.

33. Godon, *Ghostly Matters*, 64.
34. The facts presented in the following section are, unless otherwise indicated, are principally drawn from UNHCR's report: "Las víctimas del Hogar Seguro Virgen de la Asunción Un camino hacia la dignidad," *UNHCR*, 2018. This represents the most comprehensive account of the circumstances that led to the fire at the HSVA, the events of the 7th and 8th of March 2017 and the subsequent struggles for justice, pending the resolution of the criminal case. Additional details have been drawn from the author's direct experience in the campaign for justice, as mentioned in the introduction.
35. UNHCR, "Las víctimas del Hogar Seguro Virgen de la Asunción Un camino hacia la dignidad," 36; Carolina Gamazo, "Colapso en La ciudad de los niños," *Plaza Publica*, November 18, 2013 <https://www.plazapublica.com.gt/content/colapso-en-la-ciudad-de-los-ninos>.
36. Asier Vera, "Jimmy Morales ignoró a jefes de la PNC y ordenó que 100 policías llegaran al hogar Seguro," *Nomada*, May 1, 2019 <https://nomada.gt/pais/actualidad/jimmy-morales-ignoro-a-jefes-de-la-pnc-y-ordeno-que-100-policias-llegaran-al-hogar-seguro/>.
37. Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2020), 3.
38. Marco Chivalán Carrillo, "Nodrizas e infantes a finales del siglo XVIII: biotanatómica de la lactancia." In *Sexo y Raza: Analíticas de la Blancura, el Deseo y la Sexualidad en Guatemala*. Edited by AVANCSO (Guatemala: AVANCSO, 2015), 171–204.
39. Chivalán Carrillo and Posocco, "Against Extraction in Guatemala".
40. Marco Chivalán Carrillo, "Cuerpos En Experimentación. Sífilis Y Fármacopoder En La Ciudad De Guatemala (1946-1948)." *Entre Diversidades* 7, no. 2 (2020): 127-59.
41. *Ibid*, 137 & 138.
42. *Ibid*, 140 & 141.
43. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 115.
44. *Ibid*.
45. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 80.
46. Weld, *Paper Cadavers*, 150.
47. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 26 (2008): 12.
48. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004): 32 & 34.
49. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 33.
50. Tamy Guberek, Velia Muralles, and Hannah Alpert-Abrams. "'Irreversible': The Role of Digitization to Repurpose State Records of Repression," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 13, no. 1 (2019): 70.
51. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 115.
52. Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and its Limits," cited in Weld, *Paper Cadavers*, 256.
53. Weld, *Paper Cadavers*, 256.
54. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 112.
55. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 32 & 34.
56. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 110.
57. Walsh, Aisling "Impunity reigns: threats to the historical archive of the national police in Guatemala," *Open Democracy*, September 2, 2018, Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/impunity-reigns-threats-to-historical-archive-of-national-police-in/> Last accessed 16/10/2020.
58. Weld, *Paper Cadavers*, 197.
59. Walsh, "Impunity reigns".
60. "Joint Declaration on the Guatemala Police Archive," *National Security Archives*, November 18, 2019 <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/news/guatemala/2019-11-18/joint-declaration-guatemala-police-archive>.
61. Gremaud Agnee, "A juicio, 5 presuntos implicados del incendio del albergue Hogar Seguro en Guatemala," *CNN*, February 21, 2019, <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2019/02/21/a-juicio-5-presuntos-implicados-del-incendio-del-albergue-hogar-seguro-en-guatemala/>.
62. Asier Vera, "Un giro macabro: Con una extraña denuncia se quiere culpar a 15 niñas del incendio en el Hogar Seguro," *Nomada*, October 29, 2019, <https://nomada.gt/pais/actualidad/un-giro-macabro-con-una-extrana-denuncia-se-quiere-culpar-a-15-ninas-del-incendio-en-el-hogar-seguro/>.
63. Asier Vera, "Ministro: 'Quitamos (el altar de las 56 niñas) porque ya pasaron dos años,'" *Nomada*,

September 12, 2019, <https://nomada.gt/pais/actualidad/ministro-quitamos-el-altar-de-las-ninas-porque-ya-pasaron-dos-anos-suchite/>.

## WORKS CITED

- Agnee, Gremaud. "A juicio, 5 presuntos implicados del incendio del albergue Hogar Seguro en Guatemala." *CNN*, February 21, 2019, <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2019/02/21/a-juicio-5-presuntos-implicados-del-incendio-del-albergue-hogar-seguro-en-guatemala/> Last accessed 30/07/2020
- Best Urday, K. "Entrevista a Gustavo Meoño. Director del Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional de Guatemala: 'El valor reparador que tiene la información.'" *Aletheia, Memoria Académica* 4, no. 8 (2014). Available at: [http://www.memoria.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/art\\_revistas/pr.6259/pr.6259.pdf](http://www.memoria.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/art_revistas/pr.6259/pr.6259.pdf), Last accessed 30/07/2020
- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004.
- Chivalán Carrillo, Marco. "Cuerpos En Experimentación. Sífilis Y Fármacopoder En La Ciudad De Guatemala (1946-1948)." *Entre Diversidades*, 7, 2(15) (2020): 127-59.
- Chivalán Carrillo, Marco. "Nodrizas e infantes a finales del siglo XVIII: biotanatopolítica de la lactancia." in *Sexo y Raza: Analíticas de la Blancura, el Deseo y la Sexualidad en Guatemala*. Edited by AVANCSO, Guatemala: AVANCSO. (2015): 171-204.
- Chivalán Carrillo, Marco, and Silvia Posocco. "Against Extraction in Guatemala: Multispecies Strategies in Vampiric Times." *Interventions: Decolonial Trajectories*, 22, no. 4 (2020): 514-32.
- Doyle, Kate. "The Atrocity Files: Deciphering the archives of Guatemala's dirty war." *Harper's Magazine*, December (2007): 52-64. Available at: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/guatemala/police/harpers.pdf> Last accessed 30/07/2020
- Gamazo, Carolina "Colapso en La ciudad de los niños." *Plaza Publica*, November 18, 2013, <https://www.plazapublica.com.gt/content/colapso-en-la-ciudad-de-los-ninos> Last accessed 30/07/2020
- Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly Matters : Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- Guberek, Tamy, Velia Muralles, and Hannah Alpert-Abrams. "'Irreversible': The Role of Digitization to Repurpose State Records of Repression." *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 13, no. 1 (2019): 50-70.
- Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, 26 (2008): 1-14.
- Machado, Carmen Maria Machado. *In the Dream House*. London: Serpent's Tail, 2020.
- Rothenburg, Daniel. *Memory of Silence: The Guatemalan Truth Commission Report*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012.
- Vera, Asier. "Jimmy Morales ignoró a jefes de la PNC y ordenó que 100 policías llegaran al hogar Seguro," *Nomada*, May 1, 2019, <https://nomada.gt/pais/actualidad/jimmy-morales-ignoro-a-jefes-de-la-pnc-y-ordeno-que-100-policias-llegaran-al-hogar-seguro/>
- Vera, Asier. Un giro macabro: Con una extraña denuncia se quiere culpar a 15 niñas del incendio en el Hogar Seguro, *Nomada*, October 29, 2019, <https://nomada.gt/pais/actualidad/un-giro-macabro-con-una-extrana-denuncia-se-quiere-culpar-a-15-ninas-del-incendio-en-el-hogar-seguro/>
- Vera, Asier. "Ministro: "Quitamos (el altar de las 56 niñas) porque ya pasaron dos años", *Nomada*, September 12, 2019, <https://nomada.gt/pais/actualidad/ministro-quitamos-el-altar-de-las-ninas-porque-ya-pasaron-dos-anos-suchite/>
- Walsh, Aisling. "Impunity reigns: threats to the historical archive of the national police in Guatemala," *Open Democracy*, September 2, 2018. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/impunity-reigns-threats-to-historical-archive-of-national-police-in/> Last accessed: 30/07/2020
- Weld, Kirsten. *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala*. London: Duke University Press, 2014.