

Ernesto Schwartz-Marin  
and Arely Cruz-Santiago  
**Pure Corpses, Dangerous  
Citizens: Transgressing  
the Boundaries between  
Experts and Mourners  
in the Search for the  
Disappeared in Mexico**

FROM THE MILITARY DICTATORSHIPS OF THE SOUTHERN CONE AND CENTRAL America to the paramilitary conflict in Colombia and the current drug war in Mexico, Latin American citizens have had to cope with violence in their daily lives for decades. Conflicts are lived through everyday fears, killings, disappearances, displacements, and quotidian images of spectacular violence. Extreme violence not only tears the social fabric, it produces and reasserts the social and humanitarian dimensions of shared (and even novel ways of) citizenship. This paper recovers a vignette of a type of citizenship formed around the duties of relatives of disappeared persons in Mexico. It focuses on the men, women, and children from Mexico and other countries who have disappeared and are possibly dead, waiting to be found in mortuaries and clandestine mass graves that are yet to be identified.

Bob Simpson has coined the term “thanato-citizenship” to capture the moral and political challenges that come with attempts to

manage death in anomalous circumstances, and specifically to connect the bodies of the dead with their social relationships and identities (Simpson personal comm. Nov 2015; Simpson and Douglas-Jones n.d.). Here we explore the civic engagement with forensic science as an aspect of an emergent thanato-citizenship. In our case study the relatives of those who are presumed dead are publicly managing corpses (of citizens and noncitizens alike) via the development of “forensic grassroots techniques” in order to make visible the fractures of a biopolitical logic “that makes live, and lets die” (Foucault 2007). The relatives of the disappeared are uncovering a social order characterized by the lack of the rule of law and rampant violence, and thus opening what we identify as a form of dangerous citizenship that not only attempts to reconnect the bodies of the dead with their sociality, but intends to transform the existing relationships between the dead and the living.

The work done by relatives of the disappeared and independent forensic teams in postconflict scenarios in Latin America offers a glimpse into how the lines between forensic experts and relatives of the disappeared become blurred in efforts to uncover the atrocities of the past. More importantly, in contemporary Mexico, the boundaries between experts and relatives of the disappeared are not only blurred but strategically transgressed. Hundreds of families have given themselves the task of unearthing unnamed corpses in various clandestine mass graves in the country’s most dangerous areas, such as the mountain range of the lawless state of Guerrero<sup>1</sup> (Kyle 2015).

Corpses and human remains have been matters of concern in many cultures for a long time. In Robert Hertz’s (1906) seminal study, funerary rituals and second burials are theorized as fundamental activities that allow social groups to connect the reign of the otherworldly with the existing social order, a form of rite of passage. Relying on various ethnographic case studies, Hertz<sup>2</sup> shows that families of the dead are often considered contagious before proper burial takes place. We could extend Hertz’s analysis to Mexico, where the phenomenon of disappearance indefinitely perpetuates this state of con-

tagion and taboo, or what relatives of the disappeared call the limbo between life and death: *duelo suspendido* (suspended grief). Suspended grief is a nonspace in which relatives remain tainted not only by common social stigma (i.e. if they disappeared, they must have been part of an illegal activity) but also by an overwhelming liminality in which there is no body to bury nor an authority capable of bringing back their loved ones if they even are alive. As a consequence, relatives of the disappeared live their life as prolonged, if not eternal, mourners.

Nevertheless, suspended grief and the lack of state capabilities to locate the disappeared, either dead or alive, opens the door to civic transformations by which community members become social activists and sometimes experts capable of challenging expert institutions (Schwartz-Marin and Cruz-Santiago 2016). However, unearthing activities are also seen by governmental and non-governmental experts as dangerous and self-defeating because the “unskilled” disinterment of bodies could taint or even destroy evidence. Disinterment activities delineate the contemporary workings of taboo and contagion regarding the dead (Hertz 1906) and the discourses that police the boundaries between the pure and the dangerous (Douglas 1984) regarding forensic practice. As Douglas has stated,

the ideal order of society is guarded by dangers which threaten transgressors. These danger-beliefs are as much threats which one man uses to coerce another as dangers which he himself fears to incur by his own lapses from righteousness. They are a strong language of mutual exhortation .... The whole universe is harnessed to men’s attempts to force one another into good citizenship (Douglas 1984, 3).

Throughout the paper we show that unearthing practices (Fernandez 2013) are not a sign of desperation, as many critical voices claim, but a strategic stance against impunity, lack of punishment, or even the lack of investigation by the Mexican state. Transgressors

who are looking for a missing loved one—via the disinterment of bodies—are testing the boundaries established by the state, scientific institutions, mass media, and public opinion regarding the proper treatment of corpses; they are also redefining the roles established for experts and mourners. We bring forth some of the complexities of vulnerability and defiance, but also of hope, born from challenging “the right order of things” (Foucault 2007) through processes that are resignifying forensic practices which are generally the monopoly of the state.

### **THE MEXICAN HUMAN RIGHTS CATASTROPHE AND THE INTERVENTION OF INDEPENDENT FORENSIC TEAMS**

Atrocities have a way of bringing forth civic engagement and new forms of knowledge that remained dormant or simply did not exist before (Vaughn 2013). For example, when relatives of the disappeared in Argentina came together to search for their loved ones, it was thanks to their involvement with international scientists such as Victor Penchaszadeh,<sup>3</sup> Mary-Claire King,<sup>4</sup> and Fred Allen,<sup>5</sup> and the ongoing efforts of the “Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo” that new forensic genetic techniques were developed, such as the “grandparenthood index” (Madariaga 2008). This index has allowed for 117 grandsons to be identified via genetic technologies, a genetic innovation that preceded Sir Alec Jeffrey’s DNA fingerprinting methods, which has become the dominant international method for DNA analysis used to assign paternities and identify human remains around the world.

Similar processes not all linked with genetic innovations, emerged all around Latin America in post-authoritarian transitions in Peru, Chile, and Guatemala, where the work of relatives of the disappeared has been pivotal for the creation of forensic systems to search for the victims of violence and disappearance, and where, to different degrees, relatives have been involved in forensic practice itself. However, the paradigms governing the scientific and political engagement with forensics and the so called “Right to the Truth” (UN

2013) in mass atrocities around the world enshrine a state-centric narrative that continually reintroduces the idea that a postconflict state, working alongside national or international experts, will "listen and interpret the evidence" (Stover and Ryan 2001, 7). As Stefan Schmitt, one of the founders of the Guatemala Team of Forensic Anthropologists, explains, the official exhumation of clandestine mass graves entails for the families of the victims "the first step toward peace for these (affected) communities. It is then that the survivors and victims of this mechanism of terror finally become activists for their rights" (Schmitt in Stover and Ryan 2001, 14).

Human rights discourse commonly privileges the modern notion of a state-sanctioned "truth," mainly because at the end of the 1980s, newly elected civilian governments established truth commissions to look into past abuses and pursue accountability and justice for the victims of repression (Stover and Ryan 2001). However, modern states do not always conform to such neat deontological dictums, a fact proven once and again by the Mexican state.<sup>6</sup> A statement of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights recognized that 98 percent of all crimes in the country remain unsolved, with the great majority of them never properly investigated (UN 2015):

For a country that is not engaged in a conflict, the estimated figures are simply staggering: 151,233 people killed between December 2006 and August 2015, including thousands of transiting migrants. [There are] at least 26,000 people missing, many believed to be as a result of enforced disappearances, since 2007. Thousands of women and girls are sexually assaulted, or become victims of the crime of femicide. And hardly anyone is convicted for the above crimes.

[... M]any enforced disappearances, acts of torture and extra-judicial killings are alleged to have been carried out by federal, state and municipal authorities, including the

police and some segments of the army, either acting in their own interests or in collusion with organized criminal groups ....

Overall, in Mexico there is a failure of the police and the justice system to provide a reliable and accountable forensic science system. Lack of forensic science expertise is more acute in municipalities where bodies with signs of violence are discovered on a daily basis. Apart from the aforementioned weak institutions, “the decentralized nature of search and location processes has made it difficult for the Mexican government to tackle cases of disappearance” (Hope, quoted in Archibold 2014). Some of the most documented cases of human rights violations in Mexico are the femicides in the border city of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua (*Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos*, 1998). Since 1993, more than one thousand girls have been disappeared, tortured, sexually assaulted, and then murdered<sup>7</sup> (Amnesty International 2005).

After facing police dereliction of duty and inaccuracies in all stages of the investigation process, groups of mothers started patrolling deserted areas and morgues looking for their girls. These citizens’ efforts consolidated when NGOs such as Justice for Our Daughters (*Justicia para Nuestras Hijas*) and Our Daughters Back Home (*Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa*) were founded by mothers who engaged with forensic and police knowledge, and indeed transgressed institutional and national boundaries in order to have their claims to justice heard. In 2004, in response to WOLA’s (Washington Office on Latin America) request, Justice for Our Daughters, in coalition with the Mexican Special Commission to Prevent and Eradicate Violence against Women in Ciudad Juárez and the Mexican Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, made it possible for members of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (*Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense*, EAAF) to travel to Ciudad Juárez to produce an assessment of the situation of unidentified remains of murdered women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua (EAAF 2005). Although this was not the first

time that the EAAF provided technical assistance to Mexico,<sup>8</sup> this was the first high profile case in which the EAAF intervened.

The transnational dimensions of violence prompted international efforts to help in the identification process of migrants in Mexico. Since 2009, the EAAF has been working with authorities from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico—specifically with local authorities in the southern state of Chiapas—to consolidate *Proyecto Frontera*, a multinational project to identify the remains of thousands of migrants that disappeared in the route towards the US coming from Mexico and Central America (Saul 2013; Doretti, this issue). As part of this initiative, the EAAF is also working with the Pima County's Medical Examiner's Office in the US so authorities can match the DNA of dead bodies in their database with the DNA of relatives of missing migrants in Mexico and Central America (Morales 2014).

International efforts for identifying victims of atrocities have spread all over the world. Clyde Snow and Eric Stover's work across a number of countries made it possible for the group of young Argentinian anthropology students to establish the EAAF, which currently intervenes in several humanitarian crises around the world. Experts transgressing national boundaries are commonly seen as part of humanitarian efforts that aim to bring forth the truth of the crimes committed; however, little attention has been given to the ways in which citizens transgressing expert and political boundaries within a nation are transforming the way in which we understand and engage with forensic knowledge production. We call this practice forensic civism (Schwartz-Marin and Cruz-Santiago 2016).

In Mexico, citizen knowledge, understood here as lay forensic research, is pivotal for the construction of social meaning (Wynne 1992). This knowledge includes diverse local forms of making sense of atrocities, and techniques of self-improvement (such as learning to use GPS, keeping detailed records, and developing skills to analyze potential crime scenes) in order to find the whereabouts of a loved one amidst generalized corruption and the lack of the rule of law (Cruz-Santiago 2013). The work done by relatives of the disappeared

in the wake of mass atrocities around the world reveals the importance of challenging the norms imposed by a ruling elite or a genocidal state in contexts where violence is committed in a systematic way against certain populations—generally those that disagree with the established order. However, in contexts in which the criminalization of the victims and their relatives is a common practice, and where it is difficult, if not impossible, to bring the perpetrators of crimes to justice, making visible the existence of unnamed corpses is, in itself, a huge success against societal indifference and an incapable or complicit authority.

### **THE POLITICS OF UNEARTHING BONES: CITIZENS' PRACTICES OF CLANDESTINE MASS GRAVE LOCATION**

On the night of September 26, 2014, a group of students from the Ayotzinapa Normal School entered the city of Iguala, Guerrero, in southwest Mexico, to commandeer some buses and make their way into Mexico City to participate in a commemorative event for the killings of students on October 2, 1968. Once they had “borrowed” the buses and were on their way back to their campus, municipal police and, allegedly, members of organized crime ambushed them, resulting in the killing of three students and two bystanders, and the disappearance of 43 students (VICE News, 2015).

A generalized sense of unrest enraged the country, mobilizing hundreds of thousands to publicly protest, create monuments, stage public performances, march, and demand state action. A couple of weeks later, with intense international media attention, federal authorities declared that they had recovered some human remains believed to be those of the students. However, after forensic analysis was carried out, they concluded that one of the bodies belonged to father John Ssenyondo, a Ugandan priest and member of the Chilpancingo, Chilapa diocese in Guerrero, who was abducted on April 30, 2014, by unknown gunmen (Dearden 2014). The other thirteen belonged to unidentified persons. This declaration fueled local families' fears that their missing loved ones might be part of those “unidentified



bodies.” By then, members of the Union of Peoples and Organizations of the State of Guerrero, UPOEG, led by Miguel Angel Jimenez Blanco (UPOEG’s community leader and a political activist),<sup>9</sup> were already looking for the disappeared students with no safety guarantees and relatively little local support. In their searches they had already spotted some clandestine mass graves, dozens of bone fragments, torn clothing, and many other traces that showed the extent of ongoing massacres in the state of Guerrero.

It was just a matter of time for nonstate actors, such as the small and deprived Catholic church of Gerardo Maria Mayela in Iguala, Guerrero and the UPOEG, to come together to spot clandestine mass graves in Guerrero’s mountain range. Bones have politics (Moon 2013), and anyone or any group that comes in contact with human bones performs a distinctive political act, revealing the precarious infrastructure that the state, the legal guardian of human remains, has created to face the tragedy. The contact with bones forces a debate about expertise and urgency which cannot be brought forth by any simple plea for governmental empathy towards suffering or demand for justice; it is the embodiment of resolution. It is a practical and frontal challenge against the dereliction of duty that, according to Mexican relatives of disappeared persons, as well as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and the UN Commissioner on Human Rights, characterizes the Mexican state.

Anthropologist Francisco Ferrandiz (2013) has shown that grassroots efforts to unearth the past in Spain and other parts of the world are pivotal to bringing those silenced by violence come back into the public sphere. The unearthing of one’s potential relatives might seem like the ultimate act of desperation, but it is also a strategic plea for recognition and a site upon which new forms of civic duty towards the dead emerge (Schwartz-Marin and Cruz-Santiago 2016). In Iguala, the union between members of the UPOEG, the local church, and hundreds of families searching for a missing loved one became known as “The Other Disappeared.” They decided on the name as a way to highlight that the citizens’ searches for mass graves

were not only meant to find the 43 students, but also the hundreds of other persons who have disappeared in Guerrero and elsewhere in the country.

Shortly after his initial efforts to locate clandestine mass graves in Iguala, Miguel Angel Jimenez Blanco met with Dalia (pseudonym), the mother of a young man who disappeared in 2008 when on holiday in the northern part of Mexico. Dalia had been looking for her son since then and had become a founding member of Citizen-led Forensics, a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, ESRC UK, established in 2014, that created the first national DNA database governed, managed, and produced by relatives of the disappeared in Mexico.<sup>10</sup> The aim of this citizen-led registry and DNA database of disappeared persons is to collect independent data on the number of disappearances in the country, while at the same time allowing those relatives who are willing to participate in the project to receive a DNA collection kit with which collect and enter their own biological samples in the citizen-led biobank.

Dalia's task in Iguala was titanic. Understanding that an independent (citizen-led) national DNA database was an utmost priority in Mexico, she engaged with the families of disappeared in Iguala and, with the help of a citizen-led forensics governance body (at that time fifteen relatives of the disappeared), she was able to offer 500 DNA samples for the creation of a biobank. Many families were enthusiastic at the prospect of conducting their own DNA tests while doing their own independent searches for bodies. Since a great number of the 450 families meeting each Sunday did not know how to read or write, the project's mobile technology was adapted to make it possible for those families to use it. This allowed them to collect relevant forensic information on the disappearances in the region, making Citizen-led Forensic's database the first independent record of the violence experienced in Iguala.

Each Sunday, the newly founded group would meet in the local church before setting out to search for bones and clandestine graves. At the time of writing this paper, more than a year had passed since

the searches began, and *The Other Disappeared*<sup>11</sup> had recovered more than 129 corpses. These citizen searches raised urgent questions about the proper role of expertise, making visible social boundaries that are actualized only when challenged, for example, the boundaries enforced by the modern state over the government of dead bodies (Stepputat 2014).

The story of Miguel Angel and the search for clandestine mass graves was not only marked by solidarity and family efforts but also by division and distrust. With the eyes of hundreds of international journalists and human rights organizations on the Mexican government amidst the crisis provoked by the disappearance of the 43 rural students, the emergence of the citizens' DNA database, and the continuing search for clandestine mass graves, the general attorney's office immediately provided DNA samples to anyone that went to the church where the group met. Not surprisingly, state support came with certain conditions: clandestine mass grave spotters would have to conform to state protocols, and no support or DNA samples would be given to the Citizen-led Forensics project (Schwartz-Marin, fieldwork notes, March 22, 2015). Different state agencies began offering financial support to the families—many of whom struggled to pay for the commute to Iguala—and for a few months the government organized festive activities as well as group sessions to deal with post-traumatic stress. As time went by, the group of citizens began doing searches together with forensic anthropologists appointed by the state (specifically the *peritos* of the National Prosecutors Office [PGR]) instead of members of the UPOEG.

However, attacks on these efforts came not only from the state but also from NGOs and international organizations. International voices strongly linked with the victims' movement in Mexico—like that of Emilio Alvarez Icaza, executive secretary of the IACHR and well-known leader of the Movement for Peace With Justice and Dignity. This was one of the most important citizens' movements supporting the active involvement of relatives of disappeared persons in highlighting the states' inability to search and account for all

the crimes been committed in Mexico. He condemned the citizen-searchers' practices of locating and marking clandestine mass graves, describing them as desperate efforts that would destroy important evidence and ultimately be dangerous for the families participating. As he publicly declared at a seminar in a major Mexican university:

I completely support the idea of a proactive role of citizens and victims. It has been shown that when civil actors engage [politically], at least what you get is a different attitude from the authorities. Citizens have to engage, support, revise, demand ... but I don't share the idea, first because it is the state's responsibility and because is not advisable for people to go out and search for mass graves all by themselves, because this [activity] can also have tricky effects on evidence. You need expertise, knowledge; you need to know what you are doing because otherwise desperation is going to play against victims ... because evidence will be damaged (Alvarez 2015)

At the time of this statement, Alvarez Icaza had not met with the relatives searching for mass graves in Iguala, nor engaged with their practices, nor with how they handled human remains.

Once, in a private communication, an independent forensic expert working in Iguala told us that the fact that relatives were doing their own mass graves spotting and, sometimes, digging was way too dangerous and too explosive. Local teams of independent forensic anthropologists were afraid to go and talk with the relatives in the area not only because organized crime still operates in Iguala (murders in the city are a common occurrence), but also because their reputation as experts could be damaged.

All these factors made it more stressful and difficult for Miguel, Dalia, and Jonas to continue their search for clandestine mass graves but, despite the obstacles, their efforts continued. Soon after their searches in Iguala became globally known, other families began to

reveal what they had been doing over the years in order to draw the world's attention to their own local tragedies. The practices of locating mass graves started to become public in Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, and other regions of Mexico. Some of the groups worked along with police forces and specialized *peritos* (experts) to complement their searches, so *peritos* and police officers could learn about and be witnesses to the horrors they found.

Reflecting on Alvarez Icaza's statement, and reflecting on the Citizen-Led Forensics project, Mexican historian Lorenzo Meyer concluded:

[w]hat would have happened if the relatives hadn't insisted on looking in graves, showing all the corpses dumped there without anyone knowing who they were? If relatives had waited until now, until this moment when the experts from the IACHR are finally coming after months of what happened in Ayotzinapa, do you think those experts would have arrived? Was it not because the relatives started looking by themselves, for themselves and with their own particular reasons that the necessary momentum was generated for the IACHR experts to *finally* visit Mexico? (Meyer in Aristegui Noticias, January 19, 2015)

From September 28 to October 2, 2015, members of the IACHR visited Mexico in order to observe the "country's human rights situation on the ground, with particular emphasis on forced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, torture, citizen insecurity, access to justice and impunity, and the situation of journalists and human rights defenders among other groups that have been affected by the context of violence in the country" (IACHR, 2015). During the onsite visit to Iguala, Emilio Alvarez Icaza visited the small church of San Gerardo Maria Mayela, the headquarters of the citizen-led exhumation movement. He and his colleagues not only met with members of The Other Disappeared but also were led to the places where they had found clandestine mass graves, so Alvarez Icaza and his colleagues

could bear witness to the bone fragments, torn clothing, and shoes that had been found along with more than 100 human remains since their forensic endeavors started in early October 2014.

As part of the meeting held in San Gerardo Maria Mayela, members of The Other Disappeared explained the strategies used for locating clandestine mass graves and gave their account of the success in locating these spaces. They also urged the IACHR authorities to provide them with safety guarantees, since their forensic activities put their lives in danger (Miguel Angel Jimenez Blanco was murdered on August 9, 2015, while driving his taxi). Finally, they also demanded that authorities recognize their expertise as “mass graves locators/hunters” via an official document, provide them with new technologies, such as ground-penetrating radar to detect soil disturbances, and assist families who are part of The Other Disappeared in their efforts to get an official disappeared-persons report, among other petitions (Cuevas 2015).

The visit of Emilio Alvarez Icaza to Iguala at last blurred the boundary between experts and thanato-citizens that he had so firmly maintained in his statement nearly a year earlier. In October 2015, the IACHR published preliminary observations from its official visit to Mexico (IACHR 2015). In its twenty-six pages, the document recognized the efforts of The Other Disappeared in searching and locating the corpses of those disappeared in Guerrero. While the unearthing of the corpses found in dozens of clandestine mass graves in Guerrero might not bring the disappeared back to life, the forensic work of local families and engaged citizens is certainly making it possible for the dead who had been unrecognized by the state, who are still nameless, to reoccupy a place in public life.

### **EXPERT MOURNERS AND THE (RE)MAKING OF BOUNDARIES: BREAKING THE MONOPOLY OVER FORENSIC “TRUTHS”?**

In response to the limits imposed by law and experts on the handling of human remains, and also moved as well by pervasive distrust of

state agents, citizen-led searchers developed a technique to uncover human remains and then mark the locations with flags. Afterwards, they organize shifts to supervise the spot until a forensic authority arrives. The subsequent handling of these newly discovered clandestine mass graves is then supervised by a group of relatives, ensuring that the remains are treated in a caring and dignified way: “We take special care when handling human remains; we know our son or daughter could be there in the mass graves” (Schwartz-Marin, field notes 2014). Such practices constitute a direct attempt to combat government neglect through community-based forensic practices.

In an age of pure science and impure politics, emotions, pain, and vulnerability are inevitably seen as damaging to deliberations in the public sphere. For most of the practitioners we met in Mexico, there is no space for vulnerability and loss in the pursuit of the modern project of enlightenment; the working principle is that rationality needs to be free of passions and emotions. Nothing was more precious than the safe terrain of objectivity for many of those we interviewed. Governance structures and contemporary forms of decision-making, tacitly or explicitly, cherish an Archimedean epistemology of knowledge production. Such a model has been deeply questioned and challenged by science and technology studies scholars, who successfully show us that “we have never been modern” (Latour 2003), nor have we been able to produce scientific knowledge detached from our passions and idiosyncratic (individual and collective) features (Cole 2003; Lynch et al. 2008; Lynch and Jasanoff 1998; M’charek 2000, 2013). Despite the resistance of many practitioners, our ethnographic research shows that pain and emotion are integral for opening up the political possibilities of forensic technologies, especially in a country that would need hundreds of forensic teams such as the EAAF, or its Peruvian or Guatemalan counterparts, to locate, exhume, and painstakingly analyze the many hundreds of clandestine and municipal mass graves filled with unidentified bodies.

For us, thanato-citizens—dangerous citizens—are those who can face and deal with futility, who can recover praxis (action) not

in a philosophical sense but as a political act that should be geared towards possibilities and not only feasibility. The relatives of the disappeared who engage in civic forensic practices embody Gramsci's phrase "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will" (Gramsci 1975). We should not forget that despite the huge efforts made by The Other Disappeared, more than 15,000 remains are waiting to be identified in municipal morgues and cemeteries (Proceso 2013). Their subaltern consciousness paired with inadequacy (of formal forensic training) has produced exactly the type of engagement that challenges the boundaries imposed by legal and scientific experts, and even the dictums of political and social pollution—e.g. touching bodies is dangerous, or activists should demand social change to the government but not interfere with forensic duties.

This is clearly exemplified by the declaration of a member of The Other Disappeared, recalling one of his first encounters with a forensic anthropologist who was working with the General Attorney's Office analyzing mass graves in Iguala (not those related to the 43 missing students):

I took the shovel to start digging the soil, I remembered the soil was very loose so it was easier for me to dig ... and I found trousers, I found clothes ... and then I shouted to the anthropologist who was working on a nearby pit "anthropologist, anthropologist! I found something, can you come here?" and she got out of the pit where she was working and arrived to where I was. "Look, I found something" I said, and when she saw the trousers I found, she got really, really mad, and started shouting at me "What have you done?!, why are you doing this, you know you are not allowed to do this! Who allowed you to do this?! ... I'm not going to work on this pit!" ... At that moment I was a novice, doing the excavation and I messed up, I felt very bad, I was very nervous. And she continued saying: "You know you can't dig, you are not allowed to do it, and if you are



going to do it you have to call me! You cannot simply do this!...(SomosElMedioTV 2015)

Throughout the interview, he explained how the scolding he received from state experts and authorities was exactly what pushed him and many more other relatives to keep on with the searches for clandestine mass graves. Again and again, during our year-long fieldwork in Mexico, the fact that relatives of the disappeared lived in a perpetual state of suspended grief and contagion (recall Hertz [1906]) made appeals to “good citizenship” ineffectual, especially if those appeals came from state authorities as in the case previously quoted. However, more problems arise once transgression of the boundary between experts and thanato-citizens is accomplished—we have discussed transgressions including mass grave digging, the independent creation of a national registry of disappeared persons, and the collection of tissue for DNA analysis, which have in common that all are supposed to be performed by accredited forensic experts—since new attacks and promises are mobilized against or in favor of transgressors, and new barriers are erected to keep mourners away.

In Guerrero, sons and daughters of those who disappeared in the so called “Dirty War” of the 1960s and 70s<sup>12</sup> are working together with the parents of the youngsters who have disappeared in the past ten years (even before the so called “War on Drugs”) to start their own DNA biobank. These same relatives met with mothers of Central American migrants to include them in the project as well. As fragile as they are, such alliances could constitute one of the few grassroots movements to bring together victims of all the walks of life and periods of violence at a national (and perhaps even transnational) level.

However, it seems that for some forensic specialists in Mexico, there are still spaces where citizens and science cannot coexist. In one of her fieldwork visits to a Mexico City morgue, one of us—Arelly Cruz-Santiago—was introduced to a government forensics expert at the site. Cruz-Santiago started talking about her research and how citizens were now effectively locating clandestine mass graves, to which

the forensic expert replied, raising his voice, “Don’t you see? Citizens cannot be involved in forensic science practices, they are there (moving his hands as drawing an invisible line) and we experts are here (pointing to where he was) . . . the word ‘citizen’ and ‘forensic science’ cannot be together in the same sentence” (Cruz-Santiago, field notes 2015). The response of this expert is a vivid example of the position and feelings shared by many practitioners and their need to erect boundaries that divided their expert knowledge from the grassroots activities of mass graves spotting and disinterment performed by the relatives of the disappeared.

Another instance of the boundaries erected between experts and mourners was visible in the declarations of Franco Mora, an independent forensic anthropologist and member of the Peruvian Team of Forensic Anthropologists (EPAF) that helped with the exhumation of Brenda Damaris Solis in Nuevo Leon. Mora, at the peak of mass media interest in the ESRC Citizen-led Forensics project and the citizen-led searches performed by the relatives of the disappeared, remarked: “If it [digging mass graves] was so easy, everybody would be taking their shovels and would start digging holes all around Mexico, destroying every trace of context” (author’s translation of Tomasena 2014). In sum, on the grounds that they, as established forensic specialists, were the experts and the intervention of anyone else would “contaminate” due process—whether due to lack of expertise or emotional instability—the participation of other citizens, especially the relatives of the disappeared, was framed as counter-productive.

When faced with these criticisms, Dalia openly said:

What is there to be contaminated, come on? Have you ever been to the fields in which we look for our loved ones, in the middle of cow-shit, surrounded by garbage? Have you ever encountered one of our forensic anthropologists: that cannot tell the difference between a branch and a bone? For fuck’s sake, this is Mexico, not fucking Holland!!! (November 2014,).

Ironically, when Mora's declaration was being distributed by the mass media, "people taking their shovels ... and digging holes" was exactly what was happening in the mountain range of Guerrero, before the eyes of hundreds of national and international journalists. However, the relatives "digging holes" were much more aware of context and the local politics than Mora and other observers would like to concede. For example, a local resident, familiar with the landscape, who is participating in a search squad is able to identify a clandestine burial by looking at the differences between soil disturbances and drawing a distinction between soft soil as a consequence of anthills or a potential mass grave. It is also thanks to the relatives' links with the local community that they gather intelligence on the location of clandestine burials (Martinez 2015).

On top of the mobilization of their highly contextual knowledge in the spotting of mass graves, many relatives were keenly aware of the fact that their public determination to find mass graves, despite the danger and their own lack of credentials, was sending a clear message to the Mexican society at large, but more precisely to both governmental and nongovernmental forensic practitioners who had neglected their cases for years, or were focused only searching for the 43 students of Ayotzinapa (Schwartz-Marin field notes, March 22). Thus, by publicly breaking the "modern constitution" (Latour 2003), which dictates that science (objectivity) and politics (passion) should be separated, these pioneering relatives of the disappeared were able to reverse the power relations between experts and mourners. After all, they were the ones with the knowledge to locate, spot, and even partially dig up mass graves. The sole thing they were asking from the passive government, forensic *peritos*, and international organizations was recognition of what was already a common practice in Guerrero's mountain range.

The aim of their strategic expert-citizen boundary transgression is not simply to defy authorities and bring back the bodies of the disappeared, but to reorganize the duties and responsibilities that the government, civil society, and international organizations have

towards those who remain unnamed and unrecognized. The fact that *The Other Disappeared* captured the attention of their most vocal and influential critics, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, testifies to the capabilities that their engagement with forensic practices brought forward; it was precisely because they were able to read and more fully engage with the local context that they were able to turn their weaknesses—most notably their lack of training in forensic archeology and/or anthropology—into their strengths.

### **FINAL REMARKS: BOUNDARY TRANSGRESSION AND THE CREATION OF NEW FUTURES**

Boundaries can be erected through beliefs or shared views of the world that portray what is understood as the proper order of things, but boundaries are also spaces of political experimentation in which identities and norms can be reversed. As Mary Douglas aptly observes, “the danger which is risked by boundary transgression is power. Those vulnerable margins and those attacking forces which threaten to destroy good order represent the powers inhering in the cosmos. Ritual, which can harness these for good, is harnessing power indeed” (1984, 162). Relatives of the disappeared, sometimes opening and spotting mass graves, and other times taking their own DNA samples to build an independent biobank, show that tradition and expertise can be resignified as an indication of a world to come.

In our experience in Mexico, boundaries appear in all their coercive and arbitrary force when challenging established authorities (which in Mexico can be both criminal organizations and government officials) and when making clear that the old stunts of a sovereign power, of the “old” biopower of letting live and making die, still survive (Foucault 2007). The disappearance of the 43 Ayotzinapa students also reveals the difficulties of effectively policing the boundaries between experts and mourners, in this case, isolating “pure corpses” (that is, bodies constructed as fragile and in need of special treatment—as if the “truth” they speak is to be recovered by forensic experts) from the “dangerous citizens” unearthing them. While citizen-led searches

might tamper with evidence and “context” in ways that many experts find unacceptable, it was thanks to the work Miguel, Dalia, and Jonas spearheaded in Iguala, and that many other anonymous heroes have performed all around Mexico, putting their lives in danger in the process, that we know a bit more about the extent of massive death and disappearance in the country. Through their disruptive actions we can now grasp some of the intimate but also numerical and political dimensions of the human tragedy.

The Other Disappeared are also building something that promises to further erode the boundaries between experts and mourners in the future: a community of practice. This community is comprised of people united not by their affiliation to a group (nation, state, region, tribe, or even pain) but by their desire to challenge the absence of the rule of law in Mexico—and to do so through an appropriation of scientific means to search for the truth, means that until very recently were monopolized by the government and its experts.

At the heart of this emerging form of participatory biopolitics lies a profound consciousness of futility and opportunity. Like every new beginning, it is extremely fragile (Arendt 1958), full of challenges (not least to its sustainability), and heavily questioned by both the state and NGOs. The position of forensic experts who oppose citizen-led forensic practices shows that, for some, the only way forward is via the strong division of labor between science and activism, for the sake of not tainting evidence. If philosophy, as Peter Sloterdijk (2009) cleverly illustrates, is an epistolary friendship enacted in different times and spaces by readers-writers, then citizen-led practices of forensics are an experimental form of philosophy or epistolary community—using an ever-expanding plethora of media (text files, audio-visuals, DNA)—that exhort those who come in contact with its messages to redefine their civic duties.

We, however, are convinced that the longest fight will be the one against the deeply entrenched idea of a pure science which dictates that corpses, DNA, and evidence belong to a sphere completely removed from mourning and emotions. Clandestine mass grave spot-

ting and all the other forms of citizen engagement with forensic science prefigure a form of thanato-citizenship in which the DNA of the deceased, the disappeared, and the relatives looking for them can be brought together despite temporal and spatial gaps—gaps that are created both by the absence of the loved persons and by the death of those looking for them.

The people leaving and gathering their DNA in the citizen-led forensic project, or people who are continuously engaging with mass grave location, among other forensic practices, are taking responsibility over their own mortality, in the hope that the dignity of those they love could be restored (even if partially) by the new generations of social activists via biobanking, databasing, and strategic boundary transgression.

## NOTES

1. Guerrero's homicide rate "is the highest in the country since 2012 and extortion and kidnapping are commonplace. For perpetrators, there is near complete impunity. The state is divided into territories within which either drug trafficking organizations or community policing networks exercise control over local policing functions" (Kyle 2015, 6).
2. Central to his work were the Olo Ngaju "upriver Indonesian peoples," but he uses various other ethnographic case sources to sustain his point. The limitations to Hertz's comparative structuralist method are discussed in the introduction to "Death and the Right Hand" (1960), written by Evans-Pritchard. In this paper we use Hertz as a starting point to think about disappearance.
3. Victor Penchaszadeh is a physician who specializes in pediatrics, medical genetics, public health, and medical bioethics. He participated in the creation of the first "grandparenthood index" allowing the identification of missing children and advised Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo in the operation of the National DNA Data Bank. See <http://en.mincyt.gob.ar/news/victor-penchaszadeh-was-declared-distinguished-personality-of-science-9470>.

4. During this time, Marie-Claire King worked in Berkeley, California. Today she is a professor of genetics and medicine (Medical Genetics) at the University of Washington in Seattle.
5. At the time, Fred Allen was director of New York's Blood Center.
6. For the latest iteration that shows the incapacity of the Mexican state to follow the deontological dictum that says it is the responsibility of the government to duly investigate, sanction, and repair the damage done by grave human rights violations, read the report produced by the group of independent forensic experts appointed by the InterAmerican Commission for Human Rights (CIDH in Spanish) dealing with the disappearance of the 43 rural students of Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, at: <http://www.animalpolitico.com/2015/09/este-es-el-informe-completo-del-grupo-de-expertos-de-la-cidh-sobre-el-caso-ayotzinapa-video/>).
7. According to Amnesty International (2005), the majority of the victims have been young girls between sixteen and twenty-five years old, and from low-income households. Some of these girls worked in assembly plants and disappeared after finishing their daily job. Others were either students or informal commerce employees.
8. In 2001 the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights requested that the EAAF act as an advisor and provide technical assistance to the Mexican government. For approximately two years, the EAAF, together with Dr. Maria Cristina de Mendoca, a Portuguese legal-medical expert, developed a set of protocols for forensic investigations and the use of physical evidence, and provided training in forensic science and human identification processes to members of the Mexican Judiciary, NGOs and medical professionals via seminars and conferences (EAAF 2001).
9. The Union of People and Organisations of the State of Guerrero (UPOEG) was formed in 2010 as a "citizens and indigenous rights group, which aimed to combat abusively high electricity costs from the state-owned Federal Electricity Commission (CFE) and promote indigenous self-determination or 'uses and customs'" (Conn 2013). However, since 2013 the UPOEG has been recognized as a citizen

police force that combats the killings, kidnapping, and extortion made by drug gangs in the area.

10. Rosendo Radilla became an iconic case as the first case of enforced disappearance to have a sentence by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (ICHR). His daughter, Tita Radilla, is a national figure in the fight for human rights against disappearance in Mexico.
- 11 Both of the authors of this paper are researchers for the Citizen-Led Forensics.
12. Citizen-led Forensics (CLF) offered DNA samples to the hundreds of families that came forward when the search for the 43 rural students of Ayotzinapa began. The Other Disappeared was formed by these families, and members of the governance body of CLF helped them to organise as a social movement in their early days. However The Other Disappeared is an independent organisation based at Iguala, Guerrero.

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