Researching the Uncertain: Memory and Disappearance in Mexico

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My Ph.D. project explored memory and the memorialisation of people currently disappearing in Mexico. I wanted to explore the co-production of memory and place, and how people fight injustice and live among markers and traces of the disappeared. From the outset, then, this project was shaped by impossibilities. How do you research something that isn't understood, even by those living it? How do you research traces, absence, a lack? How do you research memory in a context where the crime is not something of the past but something ongoing? How do you research disappearance when the relatives who search for their missing are murdered? And how do you do so when faced with inadequate methods which seem unable to capture the complexity of the issue, its lived experience, or the insecure context?

Contemporary disappearance in Mexico, at least when I planned and began this project in 2014, felt like an issue obscured by a dark veil. It was a problem that was barely acknowledged, let alone understood, despite the fact that in 2012 the Mexican government released data that showed more than 26,000 people had disappeared (Amnesty International 2013; more recent government data puts the figure at almost 40,000, SEGOB 2018). In reality, this official figure was likely grossly underestimated due to the fear felt by those close to the missing person and bureaucratic barriers that prevent reporting (Open Society Foundations 2016, 4). Many commentators and academics grappling with understanding contemporary disappearances seek to assert an explanation for why it's happening, who is committing the crime, and who the victims are (Gatti 2014, 9). I'm not arguing against trying to understand the causes of the issue. I am suggesting that any analysis that tries to provide or start from simple explanations will be starting from the wrong place. Contemporary disappearance is occurring in the blurred space of the so-called 'war on drugs' (Astorga and Shirk 2010) as well as a long history of state violence (Williams 2011). We can see parts of the structure of impunity and corruption that enable it but cannot explain the issue through a singular strategy or cause. Some disappearances are connected to organised crime, but others are carried out by police officers and the armed forces, and many can be linked to politicians (Al Hussein 2015). The victims are varied: some are targeted, like journalists, environmental defenders, human rights activists, and people with certain skills such as engineers or telecommunications experts (Amnesty International 2013). But many others are seemingly random, and their disappearance had nothing to do with who that person is or what they have done (Calveiro Garrido 2018).

Researching contemporary disappearances in Mexico, then, is framed and shaped by uncertainty. Furthermore, I was looking at social memory and memorialisation which, due to the ambiguous nature of disappearance, couldn't be understood through linear conceptions of time or the prevalent idea that memorialisation can 'deal with' contested pasts (Bevernage 2008; Bevernage and Colaert 2014). It also goes without saying that insecurity shaped and limited what was possible for me to do and know. In this sense, then, this research was always and already a failure; I simply could not fully know or understand the dimensions of the issue at the heart of my project. Yet despite not knowing, not fully understanding, people still act. Relatives of the disappeared are leading criminal investigations into perpetrators and the searches for those missing. Local human rights organisations and lawyers are advocating for legal changes and pressuring the state and the international community. And as we will see, many in society in

general are choosing to respond with empathy rather than fear.

This research, therefore, set out to explore (at) the limits of what was knowable, from a position of absolute uncertainty. In this chapter, I describe some approaches through which I carried out the project while accepting these uncertainties and limits. I was never going to fully understand either the issue of disappearance or other people's experiences of it, but the strategies explained below allowed me to gain a complex understanding, to stand alongside, and to glimpse other people's lives and experiences of absence. I want to be clear: I didn't know precisely how I would negotiate these issues before I began my fieldwork, I was unsure what I would spend my time doing. The process was messy, improvisational, and iterative (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007), and I don't want readers to interpret this discussion, specific to my project and context, as a solution to overcoming these problems in general. Moving through the challenges and power dynamics of this research involved a constant consideration of ethics, security, friendship, and politics; of the implications of when and when not to act. I make no claims to success, or to overcoming the difficulties. Instead, in what follows I give three examples of how I negotiated this project, namely: making, listening, and collaborating.

Making

Early on, during my first research trip to Mexico, I was put in contact with two arts-based projects seeking to contribute to public memory and to bring disappearance, and violence in general, into the public consciousness. These projects are Bordando por la Paz y la Memoria (Embroidery for Peace and Memory), an embroidery project which names, on handkerchiefs, the victims of the war on drugs,[1] and Huellas de la Memoria (Footprints of Memory), which engraves and prints the soles of shoes belonging to people searching for disappeared relatives.[2] Bordando por la Paz began in Mexico City in 2011, where a group meets weekly to embroider in public. After going to see them in the plaza one afternoon, I decided to embroider with them almost every Sunday during my months in Mexico. The project had also spread to other cities in Mexico and internationally, and I visited Bordando groups in Puebla and Monterrey. After meeting the artist behind Huellas de la Memoria I got more involved in the project, first translating the shoes into English for a mirror Facebook page, then going to the workshop regularly to engrave and print, and then helping with the project's first exhibition in Mexico City.

It was through participating in these groups, making the collective memorials with my own hands, with these people in these places, that I learnt certain things about how the projects were working, what it meant to create them, and where the value of them lies. Following both Tim Ingold (2012) and Richard Sennett (2008), I see making as a process of thinking. Making allowed me to understand that these objects' process of the becoming, both materially and socially, is a valuable and rich site of transformation, connection, and knowledge that is in the main overlooked in discussions of memorials which instead focus on the political and cultural life of the 'finished' things. Making – crafting with my hands – made certain experiences and dynamics of disappearance and violence which I was struggling to see, understand, or express, clearer. I also learned a great deal about the issue itself through the projects.

Bordando por la Paz is an effort to sensitise, rehumanise, name, and afford identity to the dead and disappeared. It brings them back into the public space and in so doing stitches torn social fabric. One of their goals is to embroider a handkerchief for each person killed in the war on drugs, whether police officer or soldier, cartel member, or bystander. Yet they are unlikely to ever achieve this goal; the embroidering and creation, the making, will in all likelihood never catch up with the violence and death, even more so when we think of the insufficient information on the number of victims. Yet I came to realise, through embroidering, that the value of Bordando por la Paz is not in achieving an end goal but is found in the transformation and affect that takes place while making. Through embroidering with Bordando I began to comprehend how slow making with hands is a process that helps people understand their context and their position within it, make social and analytical connections, and find space to construct the community they want and need. There is a sense of achievement once a word has been stitched, a feeling of participation, and a public declaration that these lives are grievable (Butler 2006).

Over the time I spent embroidering I changed; my skill improved, I learnt new techniques, and I made friends. But my relation to the project and how it affected me changed too. When I began to embroider, I felt sadness, desperation,

and injustice as I got to know these people through stitching the details of their deaths and disappearances. But as the weeks passed, I spent less time speaking and thinking about the project and the people whose names we were stitching, and more time thinking strategically about what I could do to contribute next. This wasn't a process of desensitisation nor of overcoming and moving on from trauma, but the building of understanding and community.

I first met the artist behind Huellas de la Memoria in a café, and he showed me a pair of shoes belonging to a woman searching for her son which he had just been given. We next met in his workshop, and we talked and engraved and printed a pair of boots. My involvement developed from there. The time I spent engraving and printing the shoes over the ensuing months made me value the material qualities of them, and how these in turn shape the project. Through working with and touching these shoes I saw how they contain stories and speak. I also came to understand, as I watched the project and its collection of shoes grow, that the worn-out shoes of searching relatives reveal some of the spatialities and temporalities of disappearance in Mexico and beyond. The project grew to include shoes that covered Mexican disappearances from 1969 until the present day. They came from across the country, but greater numbers from certain places revealed the epicentres of the crisis, and others were sent to the project from abroad. The growing number of shoes on the workshop shelves materialised disappearance as an issue that was not just contemporary but which had existed in Mexico with continuity for decades. They showed networks of solidarity and shared experience amongst those living this crisis across Latin America. And the shoes, objects that move, that walk, that march, allowed us to follow their footprints and traces and see the collective tracks that map spaces of disappearance in Mexico.

Like Bordando, the value of this project resides in its detail; in every cut of the lino tool, in every print, in the relationships it cultivates, in the community it constructs, in the pain it conveys, and in the stories it shares and tells. Making and observing in the workshop became inseparable from the conversations we were having and how we shared understandings of memory and disappearance as well as the craft of printing. As with embroidering, talking while doing and making made our conversations richer. I didn't conduct formal interviews with those involved in these projects. This was not because I was unable to – I am certain they would have obliged had I asked. But the only reason I could see to do this was to legitimise my research design. Formal interviews would have added nothing to the understanding that regularly embroidering and engraving with these groups gave me.

I am hesitant to label these activities as any kind of 'method'. This wasn't designed as participatory research, nor was this a classic ethnography. On the one hand, participating in these projects when I was invited to do so was a way to navigate the ethical complexities of this research. But I had also wanted to explore an embodied way of (partially) understanding what it means to be constructing memory in this context, and these projects are deeply about touch, care, community, and connection. Making with and alongside these projects gave me a different knowledge of what they do, they offered a way to act in the midst of uncertainty, and they provided different glimpses of the experience of disappearance.

Listening

A central element in navigating the impossibilities of researching disappearance in Mexico was listening well: listening to what was being said, how, from what context, what was silent, what was repeated often, and what was avoided. This, in many ways, is inherently passive. But attempting to access the everyday experiences of relatives and other activists through interviews wouldn't have worked for several reasons. Ethically (both by my own judgement and that of my university's ethical procedures), I had to restrict my research to relatives of the disappeared who were speaking out about their experiences, were already public figures, and who would not be put at greater risk by speaking to me. Their stories of disappearance, searching, and establishing relatives' associations are generally available online, and I deemed asking for their time to repeat this to me inappropriate. Additionally, I was 'just' a Ph.D. researcher, and I had to be realistic about the limited impact my academic work could have for their cause. Furthermore, I wasn't seeking to find out details of the circumstances of disappearances and searches as such, but what happens after the event of disappearance, how life functions with memory and absence. Formal interviews would not have given me insight into this or the political subjectivity of relatives. Instead, I chose to listen well to what they were saying and doing over time.

I attended seminars, workshops, public events, protests, consultations in the Mexican Senate, caravans, commemorations, and press events. I spent time with relatives, academics, activists, artists, journalists, and others who were dedicated to supporting and working with relatives in their search. I embroidered handkerchiefs and engraved shoes alongside relatives of the disappeared. I listened to what memory might mean as a concept to them, what the sites and locations of memory and absence might be, and how this might be articulated politically. I also wanted to know about more private spaces and practices of memory, as this seemed so important but so absent from the majority of academic accounts of memorialisation. However, with a relatively short amount of time to spend in Mexico, I didn't want to probe deeply into this personal area without first establishing good relationships. Instead, I found books, journalistic writings, testimonials, photographs, and videos to help me learn about how absence is experienced by people in their everyday lives and in intimate spaces. Through listening well, I came to understand the searches that relatives undertake as a practice of memory. Searching for the disappeared is, at its core, a fight against forgetting those who are being erased. Within the search there are sites and material objects of memory – the traces of where that person has been, the personal archives of investigations that are undertaken, sometimes human remains – that fall outside the boundaries of what are considered memory in the academic canon.

In her research on disappearance in Guatemala in the 1990s, Amy Ross (2009, 180) described how, when speaking to relatives, asking certain questions would be enough to convince the person not to respond truthfully as the question itself was foolish in such an insecure context. So, she described, 'Rather than initiating conversations and/or interviews, I listened a lot. I spent years and years with my mouth shut'. Ross undertook what could be confidently labelled ethnography. I listened to roughly one hundred stories of disappearance in person, as well as listening continuously both before and after my time in Mexico through the media mentioned, but I'm not sure I can use that label for my research. Yet Allaine Cerwonka and Liisa Malkki (2007) argue that ethnography is not a methodology in a traditional sense, it cannot be reduced to a standardised technique. Cerwonka writes, 'we stress that ethnography demands a certain sensibility, as well as improvised strategies and ethical judgments made within a shifting landscape in which the ethnographer has limited control' (Cerwonka and Makki 2007, 20). The complexity of fieldwork never fits the labels of research design, and the labels themselves can be unclear.

For me, this gentle approach to accessing some sense of the experiences of the relatives of the disappeared was the best way, in that context of uncertainty, to navigate my research. It certainly did not produce the 'best work' to demonstrate that I had been rigorous, that I had been a social scientist. Listening gave me glimpses into the experience of living with disappearance and the meanings of memory in that context, while allowing me to negotiate issues of insecurity and ethics.

Collaborating

After some time following and joining in with the projects Bordando por la Paz and Huellas de la Memoria, it became clear to me that I needed to bring these projects and their work to the UK. I care about the issue of disappearance in Mexico and the injustice that surrounds it, and after being welcomed into these projects I wanted to create new spaces for them. Collaboration is complicated and, particularly when connected with the academic career of one person, always exists at a nexus of power, representation, and voice. But there can still be ways to act. Organising exhibitions was one thing I *could* do: I had access to different audiences, I had the English language, and I could create a space to share these projects and stories of disappearance.

Before I made my first research trip to Mexico and connected with Bordando por la Paz, I had already begun to organise Stitched Voices, an exhibition of 'conflict textiles' in the main gallery of the Aberystwyth Arts Centre, with three colleagues from the Department of International Politics at Aberystwyth University (Andrä et al., forthcoming).[3] Knowing that we were bringing this exhibition together while I was in Mexico and embroidering, it was obvious that I could include Bordando por la Paz in it, should they be interested. There was a year's time lag between the end of my fieldwork and Stitched Voices opening so, rather than rushing commitment to the exhibition, we continued our conversations once I returned to the UK. In the end I borrowed pieces from the three Bordando groups I had developed relationships with: the group in Mexico City I had been regularly embroidering with, the group in Puebla, and the group in Monterrey who were also an association of relatives of the disappeared.

While I was in Mexico City participating in Huellas de la Memoria they held their first exhibition of 85 pairs of shoes. Once I had assisted in and followed this process, we knew that arranging the shoes to come to Europe was a logical next step for the project. This would take it beyond Mexico and I knew logistically what was needed in order to do so. A research group in my department – Performance and Politics International – financially supported the transportation of the shoes, the installation, and the travel for the artist to come to the UK (Edkins 2019, 124). I found exhibition spaces in London and Aberystwyth, and the Huellas de la Memoria Collective fundraised to enable the mother of one of the disappeared Ayotzinapa students to join. I was supported by countless people and organisations in London and Aberystwyth to realise the exhibition and a range of talks and activities. The Collective in Mexico used their networks across Europe to find people who would organise an exhibition of the shoes and prints in their cities so it could tour. In the end it moved across France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and other countries for several months.

These exhibitions were not the sort of public engagement activity that we, as academics, are pushed to deliver; they were not promoting my work or research 'findings'. The intention was to share these projects and these issues with an audience that may not have realised disappearance was taking place in Mexico, and for a Mexican audience to see that people elsewhere in the world were paying attention. That the exhibitions were possible at all was due to the relationships, trust, and intimacy we had built, but I still worried about the ways their projects and objects, and the issue of contemporary disappearance in Mexico, were represented in the exhibition narratives, spaces, and accompanying events. I was also concerned with how the shoes, prints, and handkerchiefs were treated, for example, when in transit and during installation. From my time working on these projects I knew the emotional connection between the object and the maker; the value they had went far beyond monetary. Through regular communication on decisions and plans, we prioritised what was and what was not important to those who had lent me things, at times counter to what I had assumed. For good and for bad, we negotiated what it meant to bring these objects, created in protest, solidarity, and intimacy, into the different exhibition spaces.

When writing about her experiences of working with the Sangtin Writers in Uttar Pradesh, India, Richa Nagar (2006, XXXIX) explained that when, as the academic in the group, she became anxious about the power of representing the other women and their journey, the group reminded her they had formed an alliance, 'strategically combining, not replicating, our complementary skills'. Acknowledging the inescapable ethics and power dynamics of academic and activist collaborations means that any attempt to negotiate collaborative work is risky. For these exhibitions, it wasn't necessarily the uncertainty of the issues and research context that created the conditions for failure, but the uncertainty of the collaborations themselves: they didn't have guarantees, they could have fallen apart, many things could have gone wrong. There was, therefore, a risk of 'doing something'. But I wasn't at any point doing these things alone. The risk was shared, and we acted together in uncertainty. I'm not sure the process of organising these exhibitions revealed something to me about disappearance, but it did force me to face the complications of 'doing' memory; questions of representation, curation, voice, and the politics of space.

Finally, although I am proud of these exhibitions, prioritising them alongside the doctoral thesis came with downsides. In the context of the neoliberal university, using my time to produce these came at the expense of gaining teaching experience, attending conferences, and working on publications. I am happy with the choices I made, but as early career researchers we face the unrealistic expectation that we can do everything, that we can undertake fieldwork based in close relationships that take time, energy, and resources, while simultaneously delivering publications, public engagement, and teaching. Since completing the Ph.D., applying for jobs has presented another issue to navigate: commodifying these exhibitions, and so inherently my relationships and other people's experiences, on my CV, to demonstrate my experience of collaboration, public engagement activities, and creative methods.

Conclusion

My project, from the outset, was framed by failure: it was impossible to understand, both conceptually and literally, the central issue of my project. As I explained in the introduction, working on contemporary disappearance in Mexico has felt at times like scrambling in the dark. Alongside fear, the goal of disappearance, as a crime and a political act, is an ongoing and ever-present absence – of information and of persons. The additional issues of insecurity, a lack of data, and a focus on memory, pushed my research to the limits of the knowable. Instead, I tried to accept and work

within uncertainty. I have not set out to offer my experience as a guide for how to 'do' this kind of research, but instead wanted to acknowledge and explain the challenges of it and share how I attempted to negotiate. Some of the issues I have briefly discussed are universal to fieldwork and research – the ethics of researching others and attempting collaborations for example – but other issues were specific to the problem of ongoing disappearance in this context. However, this chapter discussed the particular insights and knowledge gained from approaching research in this way. Making, listening, and collaborating enabled specific glimpses into the everyday political, social, and emotional impacts of disappearance and memorialising the disappeared.

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Notes

[1] https://www.facebook.com/fuentes.rojas.5

[2] https://www.facebook.com/huellasmemoria/

[3] https://stitchedvoices.wordpress.com

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