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## Perspectives

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*Searching for Life on the Roads of Death:  
Las Madres of Central America*

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**I:** When the Madres of the disappeared migrants from Central America entered the main square in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, on November 16, 2016, I almost felt I knew them. Why is that? As the women marched into the square, wearing the photographs of their missing children, carrying their signs and banners, chanting slogans and demanding answers, they brought a long history of representational strategies along with them. As they walked through the throng of people waiting for them in the square, chanting “vivos los queremos” (we want them alive) people joined them in the chants. The photos, the grieving mothers, the chants, the political claims were very familiar to

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anyone who has followed mothers' movements since the Madres of Plaza de Mayo started to protest in the late 1970s in Argentina. The staging in San Cristóbal, like others I witnessed several times before and afterwards, pointed to disappearance within a continuum of ongoing criminal politics. The photos, the grieving women, the chants demanding justice now replicated and circulated as what I call a traumatic meme. Most of us had seen it before, it was immediately recognizable, and each time it transmitted an emotional punch: the agonizing not knowing, the durational nature of the search, the pain, and the crime, the now, again, and seeming always of disappearance. The people lined up in the square to greet the Madres held flowers and signs to communicate their solidarity with the women. As the women took their seats in the first five or six rows of the make-shift performance space set up in the square, speakers and musicians took to the stage to express their commitment to migrant rights, vowing to accompany the women in their search.

The late afternoon gave way to a chilly evening in the Mayan highlands. The street lights started coming on. Copal burned in incense burners as the Madres took to the platform to communicate their struggle. "No se viene porque se quiere, pero porque se hay una necesidad" (we don't come here because we want to, but because we have to). With the help of Marta Sánchez, head of Movimiento Mesoamericano de Migrantes, they have embarked on a bus caravan every year for the past twelve years, traveling from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala to Mexico in search of their children who disappeared

somewhere on their journey north to the United States. The caravan, they tell us, “gives a name to that reality that often cannot be named.”<sup>1</sup> Caravans consist of vans or bus trips by family members and advocates embarked on a fact-finding search for the disappeared. The organizers secure temporary visas for those seeking missing relatives. They stop in towns along the way and lay out the photos. Has anyone seen them? They stop at local jails, brothels, and detention centers. They also raise public awareness about the human rights travesties. Caravans have become a crucial part of the human rights strategy in Central America and Mexico to bring international attention to the struggle for justice. After the Madres speak, a young indigenous rock group from nearby San Juan Chamula sings about justice in Tzotzil, calling out “¡Vivos se los llevaron! ¡Vivos los queremos!” They ask us all to dance to relieve our sorrow. At the end of the event, I asked one of the mothers if she knew of the Madres from Argentina. She had never heard of them.

**II:** Traumatic memes, capturing the affective and political dimension of disappearance, now circulate throughout the world to make the violence and loss visible. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined “meme” in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*, to rhyme with ‘genes,’ accentuating what he sees as the biological mechanism vital in the reproduction of cultural codes.<sup>2</sup> Memes, which he calls cultural “replicators” (192), are behaviors, gestures, ideas, tunes,

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<sup>1</sup> “La caravana da nombre a esa realidad que muchas veces no se nombra,” Madres November 16, 2016, San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford UP, 1976.

practices, and so on that catch on and spread from person to person. (“Happy Birthday,” for example is sung throughout the world, including in many places where people do not speak English. Nonetheless, everyone immediately knows what it signals.) Memes are cultural units or items that transmit ideas, jokes, styles, and other forms of social thought through repetition. Memes repeat through a mechanism of sameness and change. The structure remains, immediately recognizable, while inviting others to adapt it for their needs. While memes have links to mimesis (understood as imitation), the nature of the repetition differs. In very broad strokes we could differentiate between *memetic* repetition-as-replication and *mimetic* repetition as ‘imitation.’ Singers of “Happy Birthday,” for example, are not imitating others. On key or off, they’re engaging with a cultural form they have incorporated from who knows where. Like viruses, like social practices, memes are successful only if they catch on, if they resonate enough that many people will continuously transmit them. Gradually the concept of ‘meme’ itself became memetic; it caught on and soon assumed other forms of transmission and repetition beyond the biological.<sup>3</sup>

The traumatic meme, like all memes, depends on the simplicity of structure for its power and efficacy. The Woman + Photo + Chant/Demand is

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<sup>3</sup> Although Internet sub groups, often called macros or temes (Susan Blackmore, in a TED talk on “Memes and Temes,” refers to temes as memes that reproduce themselves via technology. [http://www.ted.com/talks/susan\\_blackmore\\_on\\_memes\\_and\\_temes](http://www.ted.com/talks/susan_blackmore_on_memes_and_temes)). They maintain some of the qualities that Dawkins identified. “An ‘internet meme,’” however, “is a hijacking of the original idea and that instead of mutating by random change and spreading by a form of Darwinian selection, they are altered deliberately by human creativity [...] there is no attempt at accuracy of copying; internet memes are deliberately altered.” Olivia Stone, “Richard Dawkins on the internet's hijacking of the word 'meme.'” *Wired*, June 20, 2013, <http://www.webcitation.org/6HzDGE9Go>, accessed December 12, 2016.

actually a cluster of memes, a “memplex,” a term developed by Dawkins to describe “mutually supportive [elements that]... clearly help to secure the longevity of the memes of which they are composed.”<sup>4</sup>

Memes replicate through a mechanism of sameness and change—the structure remains, immediately recognizable, while inviting others to adapt it for their needs. Memes spread from person to person as well as in less corporeal ways such in digitally transmitted memes, memes, and macros that rely on copying and mechanical reproduction. While they have different ways of entering our system, they always entail sameness and change. The force of memes lies in their ability to circulate and reproduce widely.

Traumatic memes, like all memes, depend on the simplicity of structure for their efficacy. The easier to identify and remember, the better: Woman. Photo. Chant/Demand. Memes, like performance, are never for the first time.<sup>5</sup> They become themselves through the force of repetition.<sup>6</sup> The particularities of each iteration vary enough to catch our attention. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires moved around the square holding and wearing the photo IDs of their disappeared children demanding that their children be returned alive. Had they been alone or left the relatively ‘safe’ space at the heart of Argentina’s most

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<sup>4</sup> Mark A Jordan, “What is a Meme?” The Richard Dawkins Foundation, <https://richarddawkins.net/2014/02/whats-in-a-meme/>, accessed March 12, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> To build on Richard Schechner’s “performance is never for the first time”....

<sup>6</sup> While mimesis, understood in its classical Greek meaning of *mimēsthai* or “to imitate,” belongs to the repertoire of embodied, reiterated practice, memes often lack corporeality. They have different ways of entering our system. While jokes may pass by word of mouth, ideas and symbols can seem to jump from brain to brain. People commonly use words such as contagion or virus to describe their transmission.

public square, they would have been murdered. The Central American Madres, on the other hand, have embarked on a transnational search. Other women stand still or sit, alone or in a group, holding a photo in their hands. Each variation contributes something of its local context while remaining immediately identifiable. Always, however, traumatic memes speak to the very specific violence of disappearance. Those using traumatic memes often have no idea where they came from. Memes circulate freely, available for use. No one owns them. Memes 'cite' and build on previous practices without acknowledging where they started or who performed them.

The traumatic memes of grieving mothers, photos, and mantras in conjuring the political practice of disappearance, accumulate affective and symbolic power in each new iteration. Memes, clearly, are not in themselves traumatic. They are notoriously agnostic—as capable of transmitting images and slogans linked to racist and misogynist violence as they are in making claims for human rights. Nonetheless, given their reiterative nature, they serve as a potent mechanism of reproduction of the affective traumatic charge. Trauma too, I have argued elsewhere, is never for the first time. It is also known by the nature of its repeats.<sup>7</sup> If, as Cathy Caruth argues, traumatic “repetitions are particularly striking because they seem not to be initiated by the individual’s own acts but rather appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate,” then the

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<sup>7</sup> Taylor, *Trauma as Durational Performance, Villa Grimaldi*. <http://villagrimaldi.typefold.com/>

contagious meme seems the perfect form of transmission.<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that the meme is or repeats the trauma. Rather, it is a form of transmission that conveys the grief, identifies the loss, and makes the claim, all without the viewer understanding the specifics. Traumatic memes “carry an impossible history within them.”<sup>9</sup> The more we engage, the more we understand the particular context.

Traumatic memes, thus, are doubly charged, repetition as form and repetition as content, accentuating the again-ness of the loss, pain, and impunity. Disappearance, these memes communicate, exceed violence against individuals; they constitute brutal state practice in various parts of the world. These traumatic memes underline the durational and globalized nature of protest as a response to continuous and globalized criminal practices.

**III:** So how did the Central American Migrant Madres come to incorporate the traumatic memes? In the late 70s, about two years after the Madres de Plaza de Mayo started performing their photographs and demanding information about their disappeared children in Argentina, the memes jumped from the southern cone to Central America and Mexico. In El Salvador, we start seeing the photos of women wearing the white headscarves, waving the photographs of their disappeared, and shouting their demands. These were the mothers who had lost

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<sup>8</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1996, pg. 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Caruth, 5.

children during the U.S.-backed wars in Central America in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>10</sup> Who were the carriers of the memes? How had they traveled, I asked everyone I encountered in Central America? One older Madre in El Salvador told me that the Argentinean Madres did visit the country in the 1990s at the invitation of Catholic Priest Jon de Cortina. Cortina founded *Pro-búsqueda* (*Pro-Search*) to find the children disappeared during their civil war, many of them given away by the State in illegal adoption. The government has erased all links to the missing. In the early 2000s, forensic biologists who worked with the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina to establish their DNA banks came to help families in *Pro-búsqueda*.<sup>11</sup> So the interactions dating from the 1990s onward are clear. But the photographs of the women with the white scarves told of earlier transmissions. How had that happened? Maybe through photographs

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<sup>10</sup> The U.S. backed the El Salvadorian military to the tune of one million dollars a day during the Reagan era.

<sup>11</sup> One possible connection might be the role of forensic biologists, who began their work on DNA banks with the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo: “

Cristián Orrego Benavente, Director of Forensic Programs at the Human Rights Center (HRC) University of California Berkeley School of Law who works with *Pro-búsqueda* says: “For me, this all began in 1984, during the military years in Argentina and Chile. So many thousands were missing, and grandmothers were looking for their grandchildren—the children of their missing or murdered children. Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo was the first organization I know of that reached out to the scientific community for assistance. They asked geneticists to help them find their grandchildren and make the connection to the grandparents, given the intervening generations were among the missing. This organization began to do its own investigations and realized science was required in order to confirm the relationships. I came to Washington in early 1984 and connected with the American Association for the Advancement of Science, which was requesting this kind of help under the leadership of Eric Stover at the AAAS (now faculty director at HRC) on the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo’s behalf. I assisted in the organization of the scientific delegation that went to Argentina to support that work. The grandmothers have organized since and to this day impeccably. There you have the most advanced example of how an organization of families can learn science, use it, and have it work very well for the cause.” In their “DNA: Finding El Salvador’s Missing Children.”

<http://www.forensicmag.com/article/2013/04/their-dna-finding-el-salvador%E2%80%99s-missing-children>, accessed December 30, 2016.

in the press that I have not been able to track down? I enlisted several archivists in the university and the human rights organizations to help me. We could not find the connection. It's not clear how the memes travelled. Memes, I noted, have their own circuitous logic of circulation. The El Salvadorian women had not been with the Madres, nor had they decided to imitate them. Yet there they were with the photos, the white scarves, shouting for the return of their disappeared.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the traumatic meme makes many leaps – we see it in Guatemala, Peru, Bolivia, and around the world--everywhere that state terrorism disappears its opponents.

Currently, the organizations of Central American Madres use the photos and chants to make their demands in their search for their missing children in Mexico, where they last heard from them. Between 2007- 2014, 140,000 people have been murdered and 22,322-120,000 or so disappeared.<sup>12</sup> The wild disparities in the number of disappearances depend on whether authorities include the migrants who disappear in Mexico in the count. Those are the official figures. Actual figures are believed to be much higher. No one knows for sure. The victims, if anything, become nameless ciphers. Most of the bodies lie in mass

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<sup>12</sup> Rafael Mora in *A Sub National Analysis of Homicides and Disappearances in Mexico* reports that “Between 2007 and 2014 138,589 people were murdered in Mexico (SNSP). Justice In Mexico Working Paper Series, Volume 14, Number 3, February 2016, [https://justiceinmexico.org/wpcontent/uploads/2016/03/sub\\_national\\_analysis\\_of\\_homicides\\_and\\_disappearances\\_in\\_mexico\\_rafaelmora-final.pdf](https://justiceinmexico.org/wpcontent/uploads/2016/03/sub_national_analysis_of_homicides_and_disappearances_in_mexico_rafaelmora-final.pdf)

The same report, Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano, a Central American non-profit that advocates for migrant rights in North America, claims that 70,000 to 120,000 Central American foreign migrants disappeared in Mexico between 2006 and 2012 (“Comunicado De La X Caravana”) the numbers cannot be accurately calculated due to faulty data bases (p. 4).

graves or have been dissolved in acid to destroy all evidence. Very few of these crimes have been investigated, and fewer than 1% of the perpetrators have been charged and brought to trial. Many of the criminals, human rights groups surmise, belong to the government, the military, the paramilitary, the police forces, and drug cartels.<sup>13</sup> International corporations, supported by the Mexican government, contribute to the violence by hiring paramilitary security forces to target those who oppose their land grabs and extractivist politics. Thus, it's impossible at times to tell who is responsible for the violence—the state, the corporations, or the narcos. Often the three work in tandem creating what is, in fact, a narco corporate state. Impunity reigns on all levels. Investigations, if attempted at all, inevitably get bogged down, evidence goes missing, and documents lost. Fighting crime in Mexico belongs to the realm of lost causes. The deaths and disappearances seem to be accepted as the new real, an unfortunate part of life. Often, Mexicans overlook migrant deaths completely—they see them not as their problem but as the responsibility of escalating U.S. efforts to keep migrants from reaching the Mexico-U.S. border.

Murder might be a straightforward act of brutality, but disappearance is a political project. It entails the purposeful mangling of bodies and evidence beyond recognition. As Mexican theorist Roberto González Villarreal makes

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<sup>13</sup> The *World Report* documented in 2015 that “Mexico’s security forces have participated in widespread enforced disappearances since former President Calderón (2006-2012) launched a “war on drugs. Members of all security forces continue to carry out disappearances during President Enrique Peña Nieto administration, in some cases, collaborating directly with criminal groups.” *World Report 2015: Mexico*. “Enforced Disappearances,” <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/mexico>

clear, “disappearance is not an excess, not an error; it is a specific repressive technology.”<sup>14</sup> Disappearance, he continues, “is not an event but a process, an assemblage of actions, omissions, confusions, in which many agents participate” (143). First, no one acknowledges the missing migrants as their problem or responsibility. Every country on the migrant route reaps the economic benefits of migration—cheap labor in the U.S., *remesas* (remittances) in Central America, the money migrants pay coyotes and other human traffickers, and so on. Yet no one acknowledges the alarming loss of life. Aside from ‘disappearing’ the crisis, disappearance as a political project requires the mangling of bodies and of the evidence beyond recognition. It is a black hole that entails the systemic cover-up of the facts, people, and circumstances leading to the death or capture of someone.

The caravan is one strategy, among others, for determining where the disappeared are and what happened to them. Young people are now leaving Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala in a massive migration towards the U.S. An estimated half million people cross the Guatemala-Mexico border a year on their way north. The push factors are many, all of them hemispheric in nature. Each of the three countries have weak or failing institutions that cannot provide basic rights or protections for their citizens. Officials take money from multinational mining and agro corporations in exchange for concessions to land and

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<sup>14</sup> Roberto González Villarreal, *Ayotzinapa: La rabia y la esperanza*. Mexico: Editorial Terracotta, 2015, p. 140.

water rights, pushing people off their lands. Those who protest or refuse to leave are threatened or killed by para military security forces, much as indigenous leader Berta Cáceres of Honduras was, along with many others. Drugs flowing through Honduras on their way north through Mexico to the U.S. strengthen local cartels, further corrupting government agencies obliged to engage the armed forces to guarantee safe passage. Like Mexico, the Central American countries are now also narco corporate states. El Salvador, not principally on the drug route until very recently, gave up its local currency for the U.S. dollar to profit from money laundering. Additionally, gangs, principally the Mara Salvatruchas (more prevalent in El Salvador) and Barrio 18 (stronger in Honduras) extort and terrify the local population, recruiting children, abusing women, and trafficking in humans and drugs. Only the richest can sequester themselves in gated communities.<sup>15</sup>

The migrant route through Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala into Mexico, has become the most violent and dangerous zone in the Americas and, some say, the world.<sup>16</sup> It's important to note that the humanitarian crisis is manufactured—it is a direct result of policy decisions made in the U.S. with the

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<sup>15</sup> The gangs started in jails in Los Angeles. Young Latino gang members, children of the Central American refugees from the wars of the 1980s, were locked up with members of African American gangs. After the Rodney King uprisings of 1991, the U.S. emptied the jails of Latino gang members and deported them to their countries of origin, countries they did not know, where they had no family or networks, and where they did not speak the language. It did not take long for these newly arrived gang members with their cool sneakers, baggy pants, clean white T-shirts, great tattoos, haircuts, earrings, and secret hand signals to take power.

<sup>16</sup> *These 10 Countries Have The World's Highest Murder Rates*, WORLDPOST.  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/10/worlds-highest-murder-rates\\_n\\_5125188.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/10/worlds-highest-murder-rates_n_5125188.html), accessed January 17, 2017.

war on terror, the militarization of the borders, changing labor laws, the loss of land, the traffic in drugs and peoples, and the willingness of Mexican officials to profit, participate in the violence, or collude by turning a blind eye. It's hard at times to remember that the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees refugees "the right to seek and enjoy asylum (Article 14(1), as well as "the freedom to travel across international borders" (Article 13(2). Migration has become a crime, and migrants are detained, locked in deportation centers, and sent back home with shackles on their hands and feet. Approximately 80% of the women are raped along the route. And they are the lucky ones. Between 2000 and 2010, the "body count" according to Ioan Grillo, is "staggering [...] More than a million people across Latin America and the Caribbean were murdered" in what he calls a "cocaine-fueled holocaust."<sup>17</sup>

One Salvadorian mothers' group, COFAMIDE, very consciously uses the traumatic memes. They have seen the Argentinean Madres in videos, they tell me.<sup>18</sup> They too, like the Madres, define themselves as mothers and refer to themselves as victims looking for victims, as they put it. Their use of the photographs and the slogans, as I noted, have an added dimension. The migrants who leave often change their names and nationalities to avoid deportation once they cross into Mexico—so the photo ID is key not just in performing the evidence of loss (as with the Argentinean Madres) but in identifying their loved

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<sup>17</sup> Ioan Grillo, *Ganster Warlords: Drug Dollars, Killing Fields, and the New Politics of Latin America*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2016, pg. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Interview, COFAMIDE, San Salvador, November 23, 2016.

ones. And because their children left as migrants, they have changed the slogan “vivos se los llevaron” to “vivos se fueron, vivos los queremos” (they left alive, we want them back alive).

These crimes against migrants also qualify as disappearances, as the Madres cogently explain. They, too, enter the Kafkaian world of systemic dissimulation and cover-up. Official forces deny requests for information and refuse to carry out investigations. If coffins are returned to their families, as sometimes happens, they come with instructions not to open them. The Mexican government is keen to declare the migrants dead and have done with it. After all the lies, the families, of course, open the coffins to make sure their loved one is, in fact, inside. Time and again, they say, they have found body parts, bodies of the wrong gender, or more painfully, a coffin filled with dead animals or stones.<sup>19</sup> In short, the various governments along the route, including the U.S., actively participate in the travesty by obfuscating the situation and destroying the evidence.

Disappearance, then, creates a vacuum. The traumatic memes reappear, always asking the same question, always receiving the same answer: silence. Sister Valdetta Willeman in the Center for Returned Migrants in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, works with deported migrants and with the families of those who

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<sup>19</sup> Interviews with Sister Valdetta Willeman, San Pedro Sula, Honduras

continue to search for their loved ones. She says with disappearance, “it’s hard to give an answer. There is no answer.”<sup>20</sup>

Mothers’ movements throughout the northern triangle have organized caravans to find their missing, whom they hope are somewhere in Mexico. Marta Sánchez started the Movimiento de Migrantes Mesoamericanos to help women who were already embarked on the search. The crime of disappearance, she told me that November in Chiapas, is not just organized, it’s authorized.<sup>21</sup> While the women were not familiar with the traumatic memes, she was and she suggested that they organize *as* mothers, sensing the symbolic power of situating the demand for justice within a recognizable framework. Unlike the Madres in Argentina, these women do not employ the language of motherhood to physically protect themselves. But mothers, throughout patriarchal Latin America, still enjoy a special status, a privileged space of appearance, not available to other women. The Central American Madres, then, started wearing the photographs of their children and chanting the well-known slogans. Most of the over one hundred thousand disappeared, however, will never be found. The Madres continue their search. “Buscamos la vida en caminos de muerte” (We search for life on the roads of death), they say. “¡Hijo! Escucha! ¡Tu Madre está en la lucha! (Child, listen up! Your mother is fighting for you!). The Central American Madres have become a powerful force for human rights in the area

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<sup>20</sup> Interview, November 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Interview, Marta Sánchez, San Cristóbal de las Casas, November 16, 2016.

and beyond. Sánchez says that their movement has sparked similar ones among migrant families in Africa—a second generation of memetic transfer that points to different social and political conditions of impossibility. Sánchez plans an international summit of mothers' movements for 2018, a world-wide enactment of the traumatic memes.

**IV** What can the mothers' demands for 'back alive' and the performance of the photo do against the processes of 'disappearance' as a political strategy? The Madres de Plaza de Mayo's protest *as* mothers gave visibility to disappearance as political practice. Holding the photos as archival evidence of their children's existence, they made their demands ('aparición con vida') in a brutal period during which the military killed its critics and adversaries. Now, mothers' movements make visible the 'invisible' practice of disappearance worldwide. The traumatic memes light up the map. They instantly mark the historical and geographic continuities. People keep disappearing, then and now.

The mothers, present in their grief, carrying photos and shouting "¿dónde están?" (where are they?), call attention to the materiality of the missing. Disappearance, like a shadow cast by the plane, prompts us to look up, and ask: Where are they? The *desaparecidos* of all these countries? As opposed to vanishing, the mothers are present, showing the photographs, making demands.

The mothers' photos of their missing powerfully transmit the continuities in terms of the disappeared—from the young militants and protestors in Argentina to the young, often brown faces of unruly students or poor migrants

seeking social justice or a reprieve from violence. The particularities might change—victims used to be called subversives in an ideology infused regime; now they're 'desechables' (throwaways), expendables in today's global economy that renders many lives precarious. During the dictatorships, the military kept records of the assassinated and disappeared, and dumped bodies into water or buried them in mass graves. Nobody counts today's dead and disappeared. Truth Commissions throughout the Americas examined the crimes against humanity committed by the Armed Forces. They all declared, "Never Again!" Who now will bring up these so-called democratic governments on charges? Nonetheless, the photographs of the young faces provide evidence of ongoing criminal, state supported violence.

The mothers' movements, however, are affective as well as communicative. Their performance of grief and outrage also delivers a strong emotional message. While the numbers and reports might fail to attract people's attention, their enacted demand for recognition is highly performative in the sense that it does something. It makes people feel something, which is exactly the thing that documentarians often hope, and fail, to do.

The social movements by mothers of the disappeared now span forty years. In that time, The Madres de Plaza de Mayo remind us that protest is a durational performance. Their resistance affirms the force of bonds that unite: love, care, loyalty, perseverance. Although they were originally dismissed as the 'crazy' women of the Plaza, their persistence contributed directly to the

Kirschner government's bringing the perpetrators to trial. Protest, the Madres show, can work. The symbolic, and at times actual, power of the 'powerless' inspires others to keep demonstrating, even though the odds against them seem overwhelming.

The Madres' performance, like the grief and resistance, is far from over. It offers no closure. Rather, as the memes make clear, they repeat, they come back again and again to the now and always of criminal practice. Part of the reiteration comes from the fact that the crimes have not been acknowledged or adjudicated either by the state or by civil society. Part of the memetic repeat stems from the traumatic nature of the injury. Trauma produces dislocation, a rupture between the experience and the possibility of understanding it. Where have they gone? Where can the survivors put their grief? Disappearance is a form of torture that goes on and on. For the Madres throughout the Americas (and beyond), the claim and the pain becomes transmittable, bearable, and politically efficacious through the ever present, increasingly ubiquitous, traumatic memes.