

## CHAPTER VI

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# Traumatic Memes

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*Con los padres de las víctimas, sostengo: no hay nada peor que estar enfermo de incertidumbre. Y vivos los queremos.*

(With the families of the victims, I affirm that nothing's worse than to be sick with uncertainty. Back alive.)

ENRIQUE GONZÁLEZ ROJO ARTHUR

### 1

When I first met the family members and classmates of the 43 disappeared students of Ayotzinapa, I almost felt I knew them. The enlarged photographs of the missing young men crowded the room. I recognized the photographs but also the strategy of using the oversize images to claim justice for the disappeared. In April 2015, the families and advocates of the students arrived in New York as part of their caravan throughout the United States seeking international support for human rights. A brutal state attack on September 26, 2014 left three students dead, 43 disappeared,<sup>1</sup> and about fifty who survived by hiding and running for their lives. As a member of an International Jury for the People's Permanent Tribunal (PPT), I heard them tell of the anguish of disappearance and blame the Mexican government for obstructing justice.<sup>2</sup> The testimonies resounded amid the photographs of serious faces. At the end of the session, everyone shouted in unison: "*vivos se los llevaron, vivos los queremos*" (they took them alive, we want them back alive) and "*¡Presente!*" The photos, the grieving mothers, the chants making political claims were very familiar to someone who has followed mother's movements since the Madres of Plaza de Mayo started protesting in the late 1970s in Argentina. They replicated

and circulated as traumatic memes. At the end of the event, I asked one of the mothers of a disappeared student if she knew of the Madres from Argentina. She had never heard of them.

This essay explores some of the factors that made the 43 a cause célèbre nationally and internationally and proposes an additional explanation that has not been advanced in the media or in academic studies: the family, fellow students, and human rights advocates who demanded an account from the government did so by animating powerful, traumatic memes to further their cause. The grieving mothers, the chants (or *consignas*) demanding justice, and the use of photo IDs are the recognizable traumatic memes that made the tragedy immediately register with a public now only too familiar with disappearance.

Traumatic memes capturing the affective and political dimension of disappearance circulate throughout the world to make violence and loss visible. The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined “meme” in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*, to rhyme (imperfectly) with “genes,” accentuating what he saw as the biological mechanism vital in the reproduction of cultural codes, and with the Greek *mimeme*, which he says “comes from a suitable Greek root.”<sup>3</sup> As *mimeme* does not exist as a Greek root, I assume that he is referring to *mimesis*, from the root *mimeomai*, “I imitate” (infinitive *mimeisthai*).<sup>4</sup> Memes, which he calls cultural “replicators,” are behaviors, gestures, ideas, tunes, practices, and so on that catch on and spread from person to person in a version of the survival of the (cultural) fittest.<sup>5</sup> “Just as genes propagate themselves in a gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.”<sup>6</sup> Good ideas, the belief in God, and the notion that the world is flat are cultural units that catch on and then seemingly replicate themselves. “Happy birthday,” for example is sung throughout the world, including in the many places where people do not speak English. Nonetheless, everyone immediately knows what it signals. Memes are cultural items of social thought or practice (ideas, jokes, styles, and other forms) transmitted through repetition. Like viruses, like social practices, they are successful only if they catch on, if people continuously transmit them. “For a meme to survive and spread in a competitive environment it must have attributes which give it advantages over other memes.”<sup>7</sup> Gradually, the notion and use of memes themselves became rampant, memetic. But instead of the version of virus-like genetic “mutation”

Dawkins had identified in cultural memes, he noted that memes were now “altered deliberately by human creativity” through digital transmission.

Whether they start as a mutation (as in the replication of genetic code) or as a deliberate alteration (say of a photograph), memes are never for first time.<sup>8</sup> They become themselves through the force of repetition, by catching on.<sup>9</sup> The fact that they have been creatively altered matters less, to my mind, than the force of the uptake. It makes no difference whether or not the cultural unit was designed to spread—it becomes “memetic” at the moment of propagation.

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, 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. While mimesis is an extremely complex philosophic and aesthetic term that ranges from “representation” to “imitation” to “a family of concepts,” for the moment we can limit ourselves to the oversimplified meaning of the classical Greek *mimēsthai* as “to imitate.”<sup>10</sup> For Aristotle, a dramatic work imitates action. In this sense, mimesis often involves corporeal repetition of actions. We learn to walk and talk by following others. You sing, I will try to sing as you do. Learning, for Aristotle, becomes pleasurable through mimetic repetition. Memes, unlike mimesis, emphasize replication and copying often lacking corporeality—as in ideas jumping from brain to brain or proliferating digitally. They have multiple and different ways of entering our system.

People commonly use words such as “contagion” and “virus” to describe mimetic and memetic transmission. The viral component, after all, was central to Dawkins’s theory. Does that mean that people have no choice but to transmit materials from their memespheres?<sup>11</sup> It depends. Jingles may enter our heads and be difficult to shake, however hard we try. We tend to be hosts, not agents, in Dawkins’s paradigm.<sup>12</sup> But singing Happy Birthday or using a political meme entails choice. Nonetheless, it is hard to assess where ideas and cultural forms originate. Mimetic and memetic repetition serve different though at times related and overlapping functions. The political force of memes lies in their ability to catch on, circulate, interrupt a governmental discourse (for example), and reproduce uncontrollably.

The traumatic meme, like all memes, depends on the simplicity of structure for its power and efficacy. The Woman + Photo + Chant/Demand is actually a cluster of memes, a “memeplex,” 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>13</sup> The memeplex I study here—the grieving mother, the photo, and the chant—includes memes recognizable in their own right. The Virgin Mary or Pietà is only the best-known example of the grieving mother, for example. The centrality of mothers, as opposed to fathers or other family members, in these movements varies from place to place. Because this particular memeplex becomes recognizable after the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires developed it, three central reasons account for the predominance of “mothers.” First, the Argentinean mothers had to leave their husbands at home in order to go to the plaza—the military would have killed them otherwise, staging the protest as an act of armed resistance by subversives. Secondly, in many of the countries where we first see this memeplex, such as Argentina, Chile, Guatemala, El Salvador, mothers enjoyed a privileged symbolic status denied other women. The military did not want to be seen gunning down unarmed mothers. Third, once the memeplex was circulating globally, transmitting a recognizable story of disappearance and criminality, others protesting the disappearance of their kin could use it to telegraph their loss and their demands for justice. The use of “mothers” is often a strategic choice and does not entirely reflect the gender composition of the group.

In 1977 the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo started moving around the square, holding and wearing the photo IDs of their disappeared children and demanding that their children be returned alive. Other women, such as the Saturday Mothers in Turkey sit surrounded by the photographs of their men disappeared by the Turkish military in the 1980s and 1990s, as Meltem Ahıska writes in this volume. Photographs in the exhibit *Yuyanapac* (I remember) that document the violence of Peru’s internal conflict (1980–2000) show women holding a small photo ID of their missing in their hands.<sup>14</sup> Each variation contributes something of its local context while remaining immediately identifiable. Always, however, traumatic memes speak to the specific violence of forced disappearance. In the case of Ayotzinapa, the fathers joined the mothers, and the classmates were necessarily male, given the gendered separation in the *escuelas normales*. Those using traumatic memes in Ayotzinapa had 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. Only the most transmitted ones “succeed.”

The cluster or memeplex of traumatic memes—the grieving mothers, photos, and the demands—accumulates affective and symbolic power in each new iteration. Memes, clearly, are not in themselves traumatic. They are 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, is never for the first time. It is also known by the nature of its repeats.<sup>15</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 contagious meme seems the perfect form of transmission.<sup>16</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 providing the viewer with specific details of the disappearances. That is its power. Encountering the grieving women, the photo, the demand for justice, moves me in profound and deeply contradictory ways. I feel pity, outrage, tenderness, frustration, a sense of impotence coupled with a sense of responsibility and political urgency. I struggle to imagine the protesters’ loss yet resist the pain of engaging too deeply. The traumatic memes “carry an impossible history within them.”<sup>17</sup> The more we engage, the more some of us try to 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 of the perpetrators. Disappearance, these memes communicate, exceeds violence against individuals; it is ongoing state practice that also undermines entire families and communities left in permanent states of uncertainty. Are these people living or dead? What happened to them? These traumatic memes underline the durational and globalized nature of protest as a response to continuous and globalized criminal practices. Here, then, I look for the signs of the loss, criminality, and resistance by tracing the traumatic meme back from Ayotzinapa to their first known appearance. Traumatic memes put images and memories of disappeared people back into the public sphere.

In Mexico, between 2007 and 2014 some 140,000 people have been murdered and 22,322 to 120,000 or so disappeared.<sup>18</sup> The wild disparities in the number of disappearances depend on whether authorities include the migrants from Central America who disappear in Mexico. Those are the official figures. Actual figures are believed to be much higher. The victims, if noted at all, become nameless ciphers in the official rosters. Most of the bodies lie in mass graves or have been dissolved in acid by *pozoleros* (a macabre play on *pozole*, the pre-Columbian stew popular in Mexico). Very few of these crimes have been investigated, and fewer than 1 percent 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>19</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 extraction of natural resources. Thus, it is 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 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 have been accepted as the new reality since President Felipe Calderón had taken office in 2006 and declared his U.S.-backed war on drugs.

Yet in the midst of this new macabre norm, the 43 prompted a national and international outcry that almost toppled the Mexican government: “*Fue el Estado!*”

Why this outrage over 43 disappeared students when more than a hundred thousand others have been killed and/or disappeared without repercussion?

Journalists and scholars have offered a number of important reasons. The victims were students, which certainly contributes to the outpouring of repudiation. The Mexican government has long targeted students and teachers, regarding them as unruly and critical. The massacre of some three hundred or so students in Tlatelolco Square, a working-class neighborhood of Mexico City, at the height of the student movement in 1968, was only the most egregious example and it has carried symbolic weight ever since. Every October 2, people throughout Mexico honor the students

who died in Tlatelolco. *El 2 de octubre no se olvida* (The 2 of October is not forgotten).

The September 2014 attack on students shocked Mexico and the world. The victims were all male, poor, and indigenous or mestizo students at La Escuela Normal Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos, commonly known as Ayotzina, in the state of Guerrero; they were on their way to the annual commemoration of the 1968 massacre. The students commandeered five buses from the nearby town Iguala to take them to Mexico City. They did that every year, and always brought the buses back. This time, military and security forces were alerted.

On that night in 2014, a mix of military, police, and federal forces joined with drug cartels to attack the buses. No one understood why at the time—even in Mexico, the brutality seemed completely out of proportion. More than a year later, it was discovered that the students had inadvertently taken two buses loaded with \$2 million-worth of heroin about to make their weekly journey to Chicago. The drug route needed to be protected.<sup>20</sup> The collusion of government and extrajudicial forces was clearly on display.

“43”—the number of disappeared—became a rallying call for millions of people throughout the country. People took to the streets demanding a governmental investigation, and proclaiming “*Fue el Estado*” (It was the State).

Another feature that provoked widespread shock was the viciousness of the assault. Julio Cesar Mondragón, one of the three students killed outright, had his face skinned alive by soldiers who had taken photographs, which they posted to Twitter hours before the body was “found.”<sup>21</sup> The photographs, meant to terrorize the population, went viral on social media and sparked unbridled outrage.

In the years following the tragedy, the enigmas and the public furor have only increased. After flows of misinformation, the government decided to declare the students dead in November 2014 and have done with it. The students had been killed and burned in a garbage dump in Cocula (thirteen miles from Iguala) by a few no-gooders, said Jesús Murillo Karam, Mexico’s attorney general. The murderers had confessed, he added. Period. When the press pushed him to explain incongruities—the evidence that the so-called culprits had confessed under torture and that it was physically impossible to burn 43 bodies in a dumpster overnight—he walked away saying, “*Ya me cansé*” (I’ve had enough).<sup>22</sup> Memetically, “*Ya Me Cansé*” became a rallying cry. Mexicans, too, had had enough, enough of the violence, the corruption, the impunity, the arrogance, and the incompetence. The Argentine Forensic

Anthropologists, who started their work in 1986 analyzing the DNA of the disappeared in Argentina were brought in by the Mexican authorities in a show of good faith. However, relations strained when the team found that, with one exception, the remains in the dump did not match the DNA of the missing students. The matching DNA from the one student, Alexander Mora, bore no links to the putative scene of the crime. The evidence had clearly been tampered with, increasing the families' suffering and the national ire.

Seeking international support, the families and advocates of the 43 began their caravan throughout the United States in 2015 to let people know about the cover-up in Mexico. These van or bus trips by family members and advocates have become a crucial part of the rights strategy for migrants in Central America and Mexico to bring international attention to their struggles for justice. As families of the 43 prepared for the caravan, former president Vicente Fox publically told them to “get over it”: “It is good that they love their sons so much. It’s good that they miss them, and cry so much for them, but now they need to accept reality.”<sup>23</sup> But what reality? The false one that the government kept force-feeding the population with doctored proof?

In 2015, the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (CIDH) appointed an interdisciplinary group of independent experts (Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes, or GIEI) to examine the situation.<sup>24</sup> GIEI arrived and worked closely with the families, government officials, bureaucrats, and all involved with the 43. Their resulting report pointed to the multi-faceted deception promulgated by the government.<sup>25</sup> The 43, the GIEI suspected, had been taken to a military base where all or some were incinerated. They requested to search the nearby military base of the 27th Infantry Battalion without success. Their request to continue investigating was officially denied by Mexico and the group was informed it needed to leave the country. Peña Nieto’s government no doubt hesitated to blame itself and its own military forces for its systematic use of extra-judicial violence. Anabel Hernández, a respected journalist for the weekly news magazine *Proceso*, asserted that the army “ordered, orchestrated, and organized” events related to the disappearance of the 43.<sup>26</sup>

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 clear, “disappearance is not an excess, not an error; it is a specific



repressive technology.”<sup>27</sup> Disappearance, he continues, “is not an event but a process, an assemblage of actions, omissions, confusions, in which many agents participate.”<sup>28</sup> So those shouting “*Fue el Estado*” were right even if the president did not order the killings, tortures, and disappearances. It was the state, from the president on down, that created the “disappeared” by allowing all evidence to go missing and by threatening those who searched for facts. Those involved in the functioning of disappearance include social actors from the military and security forces, the executive branch, the judiciary, the technicians who handle evidence, the bureaucrats responsible for filing documents, the compliant members of the media, and on and on. The politics of death—what Achilles Mbembe has termed “necropolitics”—and permanent states of exception during which people can be tortured, assassinated, and disappeared, dominate contemporary Latin American “democracies” just as they did during the U.S.-backed military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>29</sup> And just as in that period, the Madres of Plaza de Mayo cried, “*¡Vivos se los llevaron, vivos los queremos!*” today the mothers, fathers, and family members of the 43 give voice to their protests in the same way.



Figure 6.1 “Photos of the 43 in Washington Square Park,” New York City. April 2015.  
Source: Courtesy of Diana Taylor.

When the caravan came to New York in that April of 2015, the group held a rally in Washington Square Park. They strung hundreds of enlarged photographs of the 43 from the trees, filling the park with the presence of those absent.

The space was alive with photographs, cries of “back alive,” and calls for justice, producing an affective density and intensity—a memesphere. The parents animated the photos of their missing sons with stories about their dreams and accomplishments, thereby rendering the disappeared present, resisting even from the space of death. The hundreds of people who attended the rally repeated the 43 names, one after another, punctuated by the shout, “*¡presente!*” Those who happened to be walking through the park and joined us shared the palpable sense of sadness and indignation as we followed the families from the park, up the avenues, to the Mexican Consulate to demand answers. Bystanders and even police officers asked what we were protesting. When we told them about the 43, they looked shocked and saddened. Others joined us. The meme was contagious.

### 3

How did that meme make its way to New York in 2015? Where did it start and how did it travel around the world? Given the unrestrained ways memes circulate, tracing them does not always prove a productive endeavor. Nonetheless, memes can make visible the continuity and circulation of practices that other forms of print and embodied transmission leave out.

The political practice of disappearance, predicated on the notion of cover-up, makes it difficult to identify the crime. Are the people really gone? When can we authoritatively classify them as “missing” and, beyond that, as “disappeared,” victims of an intentional political act?

The traumatic meme, circulating since the late 1970s, demands an answer—and provides one: returning contestation to the public sphere, it displays evidence of governments’ criminal attacks on their people, their youth most particularly. While the memes may not carry much specific information, they provide hints that can point to the relationship between the memesphere and historical and political reality. Following this trace, in fact, reveals an enormous amount about political practices. The memes alert us to disappearances that otherwise go unnoticed by all but the loved ones of the disappeared. Registering the appearance of the meme is like catching

sight of a large shadow. Is there an airplane overhead? What, we wonder as we look up, disturbs the light?

To the best of my knowledge, the first grieving mothers to carry photos and demanding “back alive” started in Argentina in 1977 with the Madres, a group of unarmed, middle-aged women wearing white scarves, and holding or wearing photographs of their disappeared children; they walked counterclockwise around the Plaza de Mayo demanding information about their whereabouts. These women, nonpolitical actors, came upon the cluster of memes by trial and error. They needed to be noticed *as* mothers insisting that the government recognize the missing as citizens, thus the photo IDs. The claim, “back alive,” reflected their early hope of getting their loved ones out of jail. However, we cannot call this apparently initial instantiation of a traumatic cluster memetic, as memes are, as I said, “never for the first time,” always a repetition.

From the Southern Cone, the traumatic cluster became memetic and “jumped” to many parts of the world: the Saturday Mothers in Turkey in 1995, the Mourning Mothers and Mothers of Khavaran in Iran that started in 1981, the Committee of Relatives of Disappeared Migrants in Honduras (1999), the Comadres in El Salvador in the late 1970s, and the Tiananmen Mothers in 1989 China among many more.<sup>30</sup> Not all enactments are identical—some mothers dress in black, for example, or remain stationary and silent. Each uptake reflects contextual particularities even as it gains in affective impact by virtue of previous iterations. Each, in isolation and in tandem, points to the proliferation of disappearance as explicit state strategy.

Clearly, there are many possible routes through various parts of the world that one could take to explore the replication of the traumatic memes and the specific historical conditions that made them useful, even necessary. My route tracks the meme through Central America during the 1970s and 1980s, when associations of mothers’ movements demanded information about their disappeared in situations that shared many historical similarities.<sup>30</sup>

One less-known group, the Comadres, for example, came into existence informally in El Salvador after the 1975 military massacre of students from the National University who, like the students in Tlateloco, were protesting for better conditions.<sup>31</sup> Women began looking for their missing children, much as the Madres did, and started wearing black initially to identify themselves to each other and the world. Their movement predates the Madres by two years, but they formalized their mothers’ organization towards the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, the period when the traumatic meme jumped

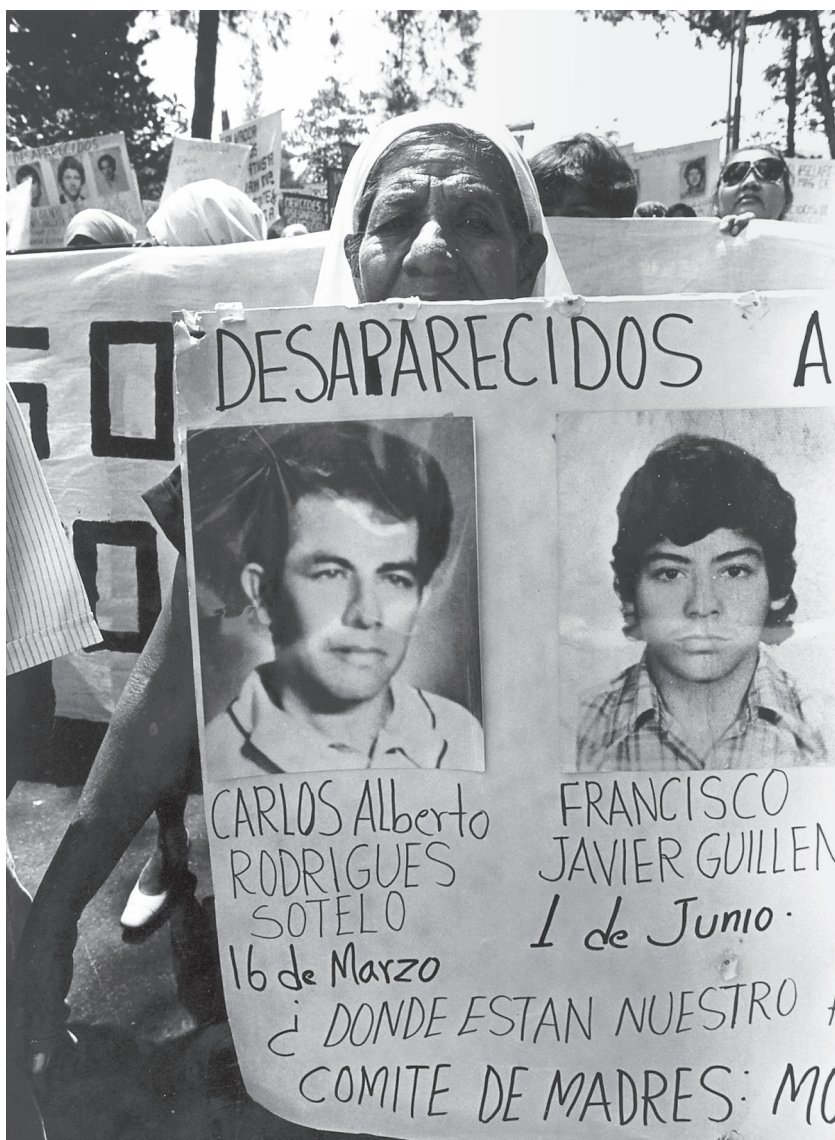


Figure 6.2 *Marcha de madres de presos políticos y desaparecidos*. San Salvador. Courtesy, Colección Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen.

Source: Unknown.

from the Southern Cone to Central America and Mexico. Mothers who had lost children during the U.S.-backed wars in Central America<sup>32</sup> donned white headscarves, waved the photographs of their disappeared, and shouted their demands.

Who carried the memes? Did they know of the Argentinean Madres? One older Madre in El Salvador told me that the Argentinean Madres visited the country in the 1990s at the invitation of Catholic Priest Jon de Cortina, who founded *Pro-búsqueda* (Pro-Search) in 1994 to find the children disappeared during their civil war, many of them given up in illegal adoption. But the photographs of the El Salvadorian women with the white scarves told of earlier transmissions. How had that happened? A search through archives in El Salvador did not turn up any local press photographs of the Argentine Madres. Had descriptions circulated word of mouth or by radio? For there they were with the photos, the women in white scarves, shouting for the return of their disappeared.

In the late 1970s the traumatic memes leapt to Mexico. This was important because it showed that disappearances cannot be limited to the U.S.-backed dictatorships and wars that have tormented Latin America. These practices persist under so-called democratic governments such as Mexico's.

One of the most important social movements that made evident the routine practice of torture, disappearance, and extrajudicial killings in Mexico during the late 1970s—and who took up the traumatic meme—were the *Doñas* of *Comité ¡Eureka!* The *Doñas* lost their children to state terrorism in Mexico in the 1970s and 1980s. They, too, hold photographs of their missing children while calling for their safe return. *Comité ¡Eureka!* was started by Rosario Ibarra de Piedra in 1977 after years of looking for her son Jesús, a student who was disappeared in 1974 for his activity in the *Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre*. The Greek word “¡Eureka!” means “*ya encontré*” or I have found it, him, or her. It denotes not just finding the desired thing but also a process, a heuristic, a way of life and exploration. This is what the search for the disappeared became for the *Doñas*.

One member of ¡Eureka!, Sara Hernández, the wife of Rafael Ramírez Duarte who disappeared 1977, has kept a record of ¡Eureka!'s news clippings, posters, and other materials in her apartment. While she did not represent her husband in the demonstrations—that role was reserved for his mother, Della Duarte viuda de Ramírez, in part because ¡Eureka!, like the Argentinian Madres, saw the affective advantage of defining

themselves as a mother's movement—she accompanied ¡Eureka! closely and kept their files.

Sara's binders of material offer evidence of the transfer of the traumatic meme as exiles from the Argentine and Chilean dictatorships were granted asylum in Mexico in the late 1970s. *Comité ¡Eureka!* learned of the Madres' strategies through them. The *Doñas* deliberately and strategically placed their disappeared in the sad trajectory of disappearances in Latin American dictatorships. They blasted the government for its hypocrisy in granting asylum to exiles of state terror while exercising terror tactics on its own population: *¡No Sólo en Argentina y en Chile Hay Desaparecidos Políticos! ¡En Mexico Hay Cientos También!*<sup>33</sup>

While the *Doñas* started animating the photographs of their disappeared, their practice reveals an intriguing variation on the traumatic memes. They wore the photos not in the plain plastic sheathes used by the Madres but rather framed them as relics enshrined in pearls and velvet around their necks. This handmade and religious dimension underlines the religious homogeneity among the *Doñas*. Madres in Argentina included many Jewish mothers in their organizations, as the military specifically targeted Jews. The use of the photograph identifies the political demand—mother searching for missing child—yet its style captures some of the specific characteristics of the group.

Today, the traumatic memes appear in Guatemala, Peru, Bolivia—everywhere that state terrorism disappears its opponents. Currently, the Madres organizations of Central America use the photos and chants to make their demands in their search for their children who have gone missing. They have joined the mass migration of young people toward the United States, pushed by a variety of hemispheric factors involving corrupt governments in the grip of multinational mining and agro corporations and by the violence of the drug trade.

One Salvadorian mothers' group, COFAMIDE, consciously uses the traumatic memes they have seen in videos of the Argentinean Madres.<sup>34</sup> Their use of the photographs and the slogans, however, has 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 presenting the evidence of loss (as it is now with the Argentinean Madres) but in identifying their loved 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).

The crimes against migrants also qualify as disappearances, as the Madres cogently explain. They, too, enter the Kafkaesque world of systemic dissimulation and cover-up. Official forces deny requests for information and refuse to carry out investigations. If coffins are returned to families, as sometimes happens, they come with instructions not to open them. Families do open the coffins, of course, to make sure their loved one is inside. In coffins coming from Mexico, they tell me, they have found body parts, or bodies of the wrong gender. One rights advocate told me they have seen coffins filled with dead animals or stones.<sup>33</sup> In short, the various governments along the route, including the United States, actively participate in obfuscating the situation and destroying the evidence.

Mothers' movements throughout the Northern Triangle have organized caravans to find their missing, who, 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 when I joined the Central American mothers recently, is not just organized, it is authorized.<sup>34</sup> The government is fully involved in it. While the participants were not familiar with the traumatic memes, Sánchez 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 not available to other women. The Central American Madres, then, started wearing the photographs of their children and chanting the well-known slogans. When their caravan arrived in San Cristóbal de las Casas in the southernmost state of Mexico on November 16, 2016, they were greeted by hundreds of supporters.<sup>35</sup> As they walked through the throng, carrying and wearing the photo IDs and chanting "*vivos los queremos*," people joined in the chants. Some of their children have in fact been found alive—some in jails, in brothels, or held captive—ashamed or unable to contact their families. Most of the over one hundred thousand disappeared, however, will never be found. Their remains lie unidentified in one of many mass graves. The Madres continue their search. "*Buscamos la vida en caminos de muerte*" (We look for life on the roads of death), they say. For the past twelve years, they have embarked on exhausting caravans through Mexico, stopping, asking, showing the photographs, and staging public protests. The Central American Madres have become a powerful force for human rights in the area and beyond. Sánchez

told me that their movement has sparked similar ones among migrant families in Africa—a second generation of memetic transfer that points to different heinous social and political conditions. Sánchez plans an international summit of mothers' movements for 2018, a worldwide enactment of protest characterized by these traumatic memes.

So when the families of the Ayotzinapa students wanted to make their search and demands internationally visible, it is not surprising that they, too, turned to the traumatic memes, even if they had never heard of the Madres or the Doñas. As early as October 4, 2014 they adopted the language (“*vivos se los llevaron*”) and visual strategies (the enlarged ID photograph) made famous by earlier mothers.<sup>36</sup> Although the parents did not know of these memetic strategies, their children's schoolmates from Ayotzinapa were politicized and likely aware of them. As human rights advocates who joined them, they drew from their repertoire of *consignas* (slogans) and images associated with *Comité ¡Eureka!* and the Central American Madres. The memes made visible not just the trajectory of criminal practices but also a strong trajectory of resistance.

4

What can the mothers' demands for “back alive” and the display of the photo do against the processes of “disappearance” as a political strategy? Traumatic memes, having gone global, light up the map. They instantly mark the continuities of criminal practices and performed resistance across space and time. We who become witnesses can observe, investigate, hear testimony, and make our own political demands.

Those responsible for state terrorism continue to cover their tracks. Nobody knows for sure where the disappeared are. “¿A dónde van los que se van?” (Where do they go, those who go?) asks Argentinian singer/composer Liliana Felipe in her song by that name, dedicated to her disappeared sister. The erasure of space for the disappeared, she says, threatens the space of political response and grief. When people disappear, she told me, “you don't have a place to put your grief.”<sup>37</sup>

Traumatic memes also powerfully transmit the continuities among the disappeared themselves—young protesters, unruly students, migrants, or the poor. The particularities might change—victims used to be called subversives in an ideology-infused regime; now they're “*desechables*” (throwaways),



disposable in today's global capitalism 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!" But who, besides the symbolic People's Permanent Tribunal, will bring up these so-called democratic governments on charges? Nonetheless, the photographs of the young faces and the women's chants provide evidence of ongoing criminal, state-supported violence.

The mothers' movements, furthermore, are affective as well as communicative. Their performance of grief and outrage delivers a strong emotional message. How do we make sense of their loss? Traumatic memes reappear, always asking the same question, always receiving the same official answer: silence. "It's hard to give an answer," says Sister Valdetta Willeman, from the Center for Returned Migrants in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, where she works with deported migrants and with the families of those who continue to search for their loved ones. With disappearance, she says, "There is no answer."<sup>40</sup>

The social movements by mothers of the disappeared now span forty years. 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 first 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 enactments of 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. For the Madres and Doñas and Comadres throughout the Americas (and beyond), the claim and the pain become transmittable, bearable, and politically efficacious through the ever-present, increasingly ubiquitous, traumatic memes.

## Notes

1. The number 43 has become iconic; hence, it appears as such, rather than spelled out as any other number would be.
2. The nonbinding People's Permanent Tribunal (or PPT), started in Bologna in 1979 to bring charges against governments for egregious crimes that their countries will never prosecute, has been the only "court" to hold Mexico responsible to date.
3. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).
4. My thanks to David Konstan, my colleague and classicist on call, for helping me identify the Greek roots.
5. Dawkins, *Selfish Gene*, 192.
6. Dawkins, *Selfish Gene*, 192.
7. Dawkins, *Selfish Gene*, 192.
8. This builds on Richard Schechner's "performance is never for the first time . . ." in *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 36.
9. 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.
10. Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 6.
11. The term "memesphere" was coined by Sergio Parra, *Cultiva tu Memesfera: Somos lo que nos Rodea* (Córdoba, Spain: Arcopress), 2015.
12. The Wikipedia entry on "Memetics" shows the widespread notion of a meme as "hosted" in the minds of one or more individuals, and which can reproduce itself, thereby jumping from mind to mind. Thus what would otherwise be regarded as one individual influencing another to adopt a belief is seen as an idea-replicator reproducing itself in a new host."Wikipedia, s.v. "Memetics," last modified September 12, 2018, 09:41, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memetics>.
13. Mark A. Jordan, "What is a Meme?" *The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science*, February 4, 2014, <https://richarddawkins.net/2014/02/whats-in-a-meme/>.
14. See Yuyanapac, especially the photograph, "Ayacucho 1984" by Vera Lentz. [http://cgs.gmu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/2011\\_yuyanapaq.pdf](http://cgs.gmu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/2011_yuyanapaq.pdf).
15. Diana Taylor, "Trauma as Durational Performance," *Villa Grimaldi*, accessed November 19, 2018, <http://villagrimaldi.typefold.com/>

16. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 1–2.
17. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 5.
18. 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” *Justice in Mexico Working Paper Series* 14, no. 3, February 2016, [https://justiceinmexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/sub\\_national\\_analysis\\_of\\_homicides\\_and\\_disappearances\\_in\\_mexico\\_rafaelmora-final.pdf](https://justiceinmexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/sub_national_analysis_of_homicides_and_disappearances_in_mexico_rafaelmora-final.pdf). The same report cites: “Though, 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 (4).”
19. 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.” Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2015: Mexico*, accessed November 19, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/mexico>.
20. See José Reveles, *Échale la culpa a la heroína: De Iguala a Chicago* (Mexico: Grijalbo, 2016).
21. Carlos Fazio, *Estado de Emergencia: De la Guerra de Calderón a la Guerra de Peña Nieto* (Mexico: Grijalbo, 2016), 364.
22. Reuters, “‘I’ve had Enough’, says Mexico Attorney General in Massacre Gaffe,” *World News*, November 9, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mexico-violence-idUSKBN0IT04D20141110>.
23. Andrea Noel, “Get Over It, Ex Mexican President Tells Parents of Missing Students on US Caravan.” *Vice News*, March 19, 2015, [https://news.vice.com/en\\_us/article/yw4aqw/get-over-it-ex-mexican-president-tells-parents-of-missing-students-on-us-caravan](https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/yw4aqw/get-over-it-ex-mexican-president-tells-parents-of-missing-students-on-us-caravan).
24. The Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes (GIEI) comprised Alejandro Valencia Villa, Ángela María Buitrago, Carlos Martín Beristáin, Claudia Paz y Paz Baile, Francisco Cox Vial.
25. GIEI, “Report by *Grupo Internacional de Expertos Independientes*,” accessed November 20, 2018, <http://prensagieiyotzi.wixsite.com/giei-ayotzinapa/informe->.
26. Anabel Hernández, interview on the release of her book, *La Verdadera Noche de Iguala*, on CNN, “Ejército ‘Ordenó, Orquestó y Organizó’ la Noche en la que Desaparecieron los 43: Anabel Hernández en CNN,” *Arestigui News*, November 28, 2016, <http://aristeginoticias.com/2811/mexico/ejercito-ordeno-orquesto-y-organizo-la-noche-en-la-que-desaparecieron-los-43-anabel-hernandez-en-cnn/>.

27. Roberto González Villarreal, *Ayotzinapa: La Rabia y la Esperanza* (Mexico: Editorial Terracotta, 2015), 140.
27. González Villarreal, *Ayotzinapa*, 143
28. Achilles Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Popular Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 17.
29. Rivera Sun, "Remembering Argentina's Mothers of the Disappeared," *CounterPunch*, April 25, 2016, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/04/25/remembering-argentinas-mothers-of-the-disappeared/>.
30. "Comadres fue fundado en 1977; un período en que 'desapariciones' andaban a la orden del día en El Salvador. El grupo se estableció porque los familiares de personas 'desaparecidas' necesitaban compartir el dolor con compañeros y para juntar fuerzas. Hoy en día las mujeres de Comadres trabajan para esclarecer un gran número de 'desapariciones.'" Comadres, Comité de Madres Mons. Romero, accessed November 20, 2018, [http://comadres.org/main\\_espanol.html](http://comadres.org/main_espanol.html).
30. The description of how comadres took form could have been quoted directly from the testimonies of Madres de Plaza de Mayo: "*Madres y familiares, luego de la masacre comenzaron la búsqueda de sus seres queridos, aquellos que no llegaron a casa. En la interminable búsqueda en hospitales, cárceles y morgues, las caras de aquellas mujeres se fueron reconociendo unas con otras, en su dolor se ayudaban, repartiéndose lugares con la esperanza de encontrar en el menor tiempo a sus familiares.*" Gloria Guzmán Orellana and Irantzu Mendia Azkue, *Mujeres con Memoria: Activistas del Movimiento de Derechos Humanos en El Salvador* (Bilboa Spain: Editorial hegoa), 2013, 34. [http://publicaciones.hegoa.ehu.es/assets/pdfs/292/Mujeres\\_con\\_memoria.pdf?1371741516](http://publicaciones.hegoa.ehu.es/assets/pdfs/292/Mujeres_con_memoria.pdf?1371741516)
31. The United States backed the Salvadorian military to the tune of one million dollars a day during the Reagan era.
32. Interview with Sara Hernández, Mexico City, 2016.
33. Interview with COFAMIDE, San Salvador, November 23, 2016.
34. Interview with Sister Valdetta Willeman, San Pedro Sula, Honduras, November 2016.
35. Interview with Marta Sánchez, San Cristóbal de las Casas, November 16, 2016.
36. The *Misión Internacional de Observación de Derechos Humanos en la Frontera* or the International Mission of Observers on Human Rights (MODH) was created to ask international observers to examine the conditions of migrants on the Guatemala-Mexico border. November 8–15, 2016.
37. See Paula Mónaco Felipe, *Ayotzinapa: Horas Eternas* (Mexico: Editorial B, 2016).
38. Interview with Liliana Felipe, Mexico City, January 2016.
40. Interview, Sister Valdetta Willeman, November 2017.