The Poetics of Invocation: Haunted Writing and Political Subjectification in 21st Century Mexico

Tabaré Azcona Muñoz
University of Colorado at Boulder, tabare.azcona@colorado.edu

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THE POETICS OF INVOCATION: HAUNTED WRITING AND POLITICAL
SUBJECTIFICATION IN 21st CENTURY MEXICO.

by

TABARÉ AZCONA MUÑOZ

B.A., Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2014

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The Poetics of Invocation: Haunted writing and Political Subjectification in 21st Century Mexico
by Tabaré Azcona Muñoz
has been approved for the Department of Comparative Literature

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Dr. Leila Gómez

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Dr. David Ferris

______________________________

Dr. Brian Quinn

Date _______________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
There is a trend in contemporary literary production in Mexico that addresses a number of social issues raised by the so-called War on Drugs since 2006—an armed, ongoing conflict that has triggered a generalized eruption of violence in the country. Drawing from a theoretical framework featuring spectrality theory and certain key concepts coined by 20th century French philosopher Jacques Rancière, this research analyzes an array of diverse Mexican cultural production—digital, literary, and journalistic, among others—from the last decade. This essay proposes that these works can be defined as products of haunting that attempt to endow the greatly marginalized social group of victims with social visibility and political subjectification. Issues of memory, language, and justice are fundamental to understand the political agenda underscoring these cultural endeavors that aspire to rehabilitate the sense of community. This work attempts not only to understand and identify such motivations, but also to advance a critique of such an enterprise’s contributions, its potentialities, and its shortcomings.
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INTRODUCTION

Whoever is nameless cannot speak
Jacques Rancière

In the context of the War on Drugs taking place in Mexico\(^1\) – with a death toll estimated in approximately 70,000 plus 20,000 disappeared according to official versions and as much as 120,000 casualties according to independent estimations since 2006 (Iguala, 51) – and the increase of violence that it has produced across the country, numerous writers and intellectuals have felt ethically interpellated to account for the gravity of the situation by means of diverse undertakings: collections of short stories, essays, and other community building projects that aspire to establish communitarian links between victims, writers, and readers. One of the basic motivations behind these endeavors is to recuperate the memory of the victims of the conflict – which stem from greatly diverse origins – so as to endow them with a voice and a sense of presence otherwise lost and thus to give visibility and presence to those who have been made socially invisible and excluded from participation in the public sphere. The quest is therefore about making visible and audible something that is silenced and hidden from positions of authority and power. In her essay *Los muertos indóciles*, Cristina Rivera Garza – a prominent Mexican literary and critical author – poses the question: ‘If writing aspires to be a critique of the status quo, how is it possible then, from and with writing, to disarticulate the grammar of power

\(^1\) In *A Narco History*, Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace rightly assert that the term ‘Mexican War on Drugs’ is in fact a misnomer, for it diverts attention from the American role in its creation. The proximity of Mexico and the United States is fundamental to understand the interdependence between illegal traffic of drugs – from Mexico to the US – and that of weapons and money – from the US to Mexico. This is why responsibility on the conflict and its aftermath should be placed on the Mexican government as well as on its American counterpart.
and the predatory power of exacerbated neoliberalism and its war machines?’ (19). As will be evident in these pages, the practice of writing in a context of crisis is indeed a political effort, especially when writing is used as the medium to account for the precarious condition characteristic of certain marginalized and vulnerable social groups.

Regarding the organization of this essay, the first chapter will address the theoretical framework that will operate throughout our analysis. Additionally, we will explore the conceptual metaphors of the ‘ghost’ and ‘haunted writing’, which are especially useful to characterize the works concerned in this study and also mark our interpretative approach to them. Moreover, we will draw attention on several concepts by Jacques Rancière in order to further advance our argument. We will chiefly focus on the concepts of ‘the distribution of the sensible’ and ‘political subjectification’ while also considering the role of the ‘aesthetic’ in the process of community conformation.

In the second chapter, three works will be analyzed: 72 migrantes –a digital website–, Ayotzinapa. La travesía de las tortugas –a journalistic enterprise– and El silencio de los cuerpos. Relatos sobre feminicidios –a collection of short stories. These works share a common thread: 72 migrantes and La travesía de las tortugas are both attempts to recuperate the identity and the ‘human right to dignity’ of the victims of two of the most notorious massacres that have occurred in Mexico during the last decade: that of seventy two migrants that were on their way to the United States in 2009 and the disappearance and alleged death of forty three students in 2014. In the case of 72 migrantes, seventy-two authors wrote seventy-two texts devoted to every casualty in particular. The same was true for Ayotzinapa. La travesía de las tortugas, in which 47 journalists produced an equal number of texts, devoted to yet an equal number of victims. Therefore, in both cases an equal number of writers to that of the victims were appointed to
account for the stories of each case specifically. Not only does this correlation establish an interesting and problematic link between victims and authors, it also suggests that writing mediates between the subjects that originally experienced the events and the author that attempts to recuperate the former’s identity through language.

On the other hand, *El silencio de los cuerpos. Relatos sobre feminicidios* is a collection of short stories dealing with the notorious phenomenon of the killings of women in Mexico. Although not exclusively related to the War on Drugs, these crimes have become a widespread phenomenon during the past decade, with the border town of Ciudad Juárez undoubtedly as the most representative case of this issue. The volume is conformed by nine short stories written by nine women and a short preface by journalist Sergio González Rodríguez, whose research on the subject is regarded as authoritative. Moreover, this topic has already been addressed by major literary figures as Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño, notably in his posthumous novel *2666*. In that book, the fictional town of Santa Teresa stands as the semi-fictional counterpart of Ciudad Juárez. All of the stories featured in *El silencio de los cuerpos* explore the theme of ‘femicide’ or ‘feminicide’—a neologism that designs the murders of women as sex-based crimes. In focusing on the vulnerable position of a determinate yet complex and vast social group, these stories follow the same logic as the aforementioned writing endeavors; namely, to raise awareness of the vulnerable situation a certain faction lives in.

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2 Sergio González Rodríguez’s non-fiction book *Huesos en el desierto* and Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* are two of the most well-known accounts of the killings of women in Ciudad Juárez. Both authors were in contact and it was this collaboration that helped Roberto Bolaño in becoming more familiarized with the topic as well as to get reliable information on the subject. For more information, please see: “Femicide: a shared obsession for Roberto Bolaño and Sergio González Rodríguez” in http://www.panoramas.pitt.edu/art-and-culture/feminicide-shared-obsession-roberto-bolaño-and-sergio-gonzález-rodr%C3%ADguez
Finally, in the third chapter of this essay we will discuss the role of writing in the process of reconstruction of a broken community. In order to do so, we will analyze the book *Dolerse* (2011), by Cristina Rivera Garza and then *Con/Dolerse* (2015), a collective project that followed four years later. Also, we will focus on how narratives of the body in pain converse with the conceptual metaphors of ‘haunting’, the ‘ghost’, and the struggle to recuperate identity through the formation of an archive of social pain. These reflections will open up the space for analyzing the capabilities and limitations of such projects in order to address scenarios of severe social crisis in which the notions of community and public space are found to be lacking or fractured. Lastly, we will reflect on the transnational character of experiences of grief, loss and absence that inform *Dolerse* and *Con/Dolerse* with the intention of relating the issues at stake in this essay to a global scale.
CHAPTER I. Haunted Writing and Political Subjectification

Haunted writing and the poetics of invocation

The figure of the ghost is a leitmotif in many of the texts that will be analyzed in this work. For instance in ‘Reflex’, a short story featured in El silencio de los cuerpos, a teenager recalls staring at her house’s door silently every night as she waited for her missing mother to return “as one who invokes a ghost” (36). For this reason, we believe that these works share common features: namely, that writing is used as a means for invocation and thus the resulting texts can be defined as products of haunted writing. Be it in the form of short stories, essays, documentary writing or journalistic accounts, writing works as a medium which allows to provide a renewed sense of visibility and materiality –that of the text– to those who have lost their bodies and their voices, but consequently also to those who remain to mourn them. These enterprises can hardly be deemed merely symbolic; rather, they are politics at work. In short, this essay advances a critical reflection on the role of writing in the process of political subjectification of certain marginalized groups. As a response to the ethical interpellation posed by the state of affairs in Mexico, writing is used as a means of invocation of ghosts but also, perhaps most importantly, as a device for social visibilization, as both an aesthetic and critical experiment: writing as generator of presence. This research attempts to show that such an endeavor can be analyzed as an effort to challenge the aesthetic distribution of the sensible with regard to the victims and the ‘wrong’ they have been subjected to. In doing so, an aesthetic claim is made in order to achieve political resonance.
In order to advance a reflection on the conceptual metaphor of the ghost, it is pertinent to bear in mind the evolution and relevance that spectral theory has acquired in contemporary cultural studies. As noted by María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren in *The Spectralities Reader. Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, the metaphor of the ghost has undergone multiple theoretical metamorphoses since Jacques Derrida published his book *Specters of Marx* in 1993. As the title of that book suggests, the notion of the ‘specter’ inaugurated a critical trend that has shifted in the last few years to those of ‘haunting’ and ‘ghost’ (2). The notions of ‘specter’ and ‘spectrality’ are considered more scholarly terms that eschew from spiritualistic and occultist interpretations that would suggest a putative return of the dead. On the other hand, Blanco and Peeren note that notions like ‘ghost’ and ‘haunting’ address a more “liminal position between visibility and invisibility, life and death, materiality and immateriality, and their association with powerful affects like fear and obsession” (2). From the outset, Derrida suggested that the ghost should persist in collective consciousness and be lived with (7). This is to say that ghostly or spectral presences signal a certain ‘figuration of presence-absence’, that compels a “politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” (7); which is in tune the notion of ‘intergenerational ethics’ referred by Alberto Ribas-Cassasayas and Amanda Petersen. (3)

Ghostly matters often deal with traumatic individual and collective experiences. This is why trauma may be deemed an intergenerational haunting force (8). At stake in spectral, haunted or ghostly interpretations of the past is the political question of memory, forgetfulness and justice: “Derrida […] uses the figure of the ghost to pursue (without ever fully apprehending) that which haunts like a ghost and, by way of this haunting, demands justice, or at least a response” (8). For this reason, it is possible to conceive of notions as spectrality, ghostliness and
hauntology in order to address works that reflect on the political implications of the quest for memory and identity like the ones examined in this essay. In *Espectros: Ghostly Hauntings in Contemporary Transhispanic Narrative*, Alberto Ribas-Casasayas and Amanda L. Petersen describe how spectral presence “manifests a demand from the victim of traumatic historical events, something unfinished and ostensibly unresolvable my material means” (Ribas and Petersen 1). Furthermore, these authors note that spectral studies are profoundly rooted “within the discourse of loss, mourning and recovery that delineated the multidisciplinary project of trauma studies” (Pilar Blanco 11).

Trauma scholars like Cathy Caruth describe the condition of being traumatized as being possessed by an anachronistic event (11). The dynamic link between trauma and haunting appears to be that even while trauma paralyzes, the ghostly haunting it produces functions as a disruptive interference that prompts to action: “Such is the case with ghosts that arrive from the past, seeking to establish an ethical dialogue with the present” (12). Furthermore, trauma and spectral studies are intimately related to memory studies. In this respect, it is worth considering the ‘palliative possibilities of memory work’, “which tends to envision a conjuration of the past’s truth, primarily through giving a voice to its victims, which is subsequently laid to rest as traumatic repetition is foreclosed and the memory integrated into a narrative account.” (12)

Here, the problematic between writing, trauma, and haunting is addressed. As referred by Ribas-Cassasayas and Amanda Petersen, in *Ghostly Matters* Avery F. Gordon defines the ghost as being a conceptual means for revealing the way hegemonic social discourse excludes and violently silences certain stories and therefore reinforces the ruling distribution of the sensible, which displaces social attention from the invisible, the absent and the non-occurring to the visible, present and eventful (Ribas and Petersen 3). Specially when confronted with
authoritative discourses disseminated from positions of power, haunted writing appears as an insubordinate practice that attempts to undermine grand narratives in favor of more conflicted, dignified, and non-totalizing accounts of life. María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren reflect on the potentiality of ghostly approaches in the following terms: “[…] studies of ghosts and haunting can do more that obsessively recall a fixed past; in an active, dynamic engagement, they may reveal the insufficiency of the present moment, as well as the disconsolations and erasures of the past, and a tentative hopefulness for future resolutions.” (16)

Haunted writing provides material traces of social abandonment, invisibilization and exclusion. In that respect, it is through invocations of the ghosts from the past that the absence haunting the present is incarnated. Ribas-Cassasayas and Amanda Petersen point out that this serves as a way to highlight the imposition of hegemonic discourses that erase the voices of minority groups.

Finally, it [spectrality] provides a metaphoric vehicle to illuminate dispossession, violence and terror imposed on an (infra) citizen class–historically the indigenous or mestizo–but also modern avatars of the (infra) citizen like the subversive, or indeed, the entire population when precarious conditions of generalized violence proliferate, such as in the context of the narco wars. (Ribas and Petersen 5)

What Ribas Cassasayas and Amanda Petersen define as the class of (infra) citizens is certainly relatable to classless class referred by Rancière. Furthermore, what they call modern avatar of the (infra) citizen stands as highly relevant for the purposes of our analysis. For instance, the students of the Normal Rural School Raúl Isidro Burgos of Ayotzinapa have a well-consolidated reputation for their anti-establishment character –revolutionary leaders of the 1960s Genaro Vázquez and Lucio Cabañas studied there. Therefore, the missing students from Ayotzinapa
certainly fit the category of potentially subversive individuals. On the other hand, Ribas and Petersen’s statement that in the context of narco wars the entire population can be recognized as belonging to a class of (infra) citizens helps exemplify how a whole nation—or at least a great proportion of it—can feel identified with the classless class of the disenfranchised. We sustain that, in their manifest solidarity with the victims of the war on drugs and the invocation of its ghosts, this is precisely what the writing projects examined here do.

**Rancière: The Distribution of the sensible and Political Subjectification**

When it comes to reflecting on social visibility and invisibility, that is to say, on a certain sensible classification, it is necessary to bear in mind the critical and conceptual contributions of twentieth century French philosopher Jacques Rancière. During his prolific career as a scholar, Rancière has coined a variety of concepts that will be crucial to our critical endeavor. For instance, we will use his concept of ‘the distribution of the sensible’ in order to explore the way in which a given classificatory perception of the world is established. In other words, we will understand the distribution of the sensible as an instrumental element to think about how our conception of society, its inhabitants and their forms of political participation is conformed. In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, a definition of the concept reads as follows:

The distribution of the sensible thus produces a system of self-evident facts of perception based on the set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made, or done. Strictly speaking, ‘distribution’ therefore refers both to forms of inclusion and to forms of exclusion. (*The Politics of Aesthetics* 85)

Therefore, the distribution of the sensible can be understood as a specific ordering of perception that results in the classification of social subjects and their consequent inclusion or exclusion.
from a common world. In the context of our subject of interest, social visibility is related to political inclusion while social exclusion is greatly determined by political invisibility.

In pretending to recuperate the memory of the dead through writing and in so doing to actualize the human right to identity, an aesthetic claim is made in order to achieve political resonance and visibility. This research attempts to show that such an endeavor can be analyzed as an effort to challenge the aesthetic distribution of the sensible with regard to the victims and the wrong that has been inflicted upon them. The wrong is another concept by Rancière that defines a certain iniquitous ill doing suffered by a given social group or class. This wrong is understood as a fundamental discord that sets the basis of the political struggle between what Rancière calls the police order –broadly speaking, the ruling order that institutes and maintains the distribution of the sensible– and other social agents. For Rancière, the police is a system of partition and legitimization that seeks to generate consensus at the heart of a community through diverse procedures of aggregation, organization of powers and so on (Disagreement 28). This differs from the concept of the police that a majority of theoreticians use –for example Louis Althusser, to whom the police is one of the state’s repressive apparatuses. The importance of the police or the policing system for Rancière is that it is precisely this instance that “defines a party’s share or lack of it” (Disagreement 29). In other words, it is the police that establishes the distribution of the sensible that informs the social space –the stage– where politics occur. It is at this point that a capital concept comes into play: that of ‘disagreement’ –la mésentente in the French original version:

[...] la mésentente is a conflict over what is meant by ‘to speak’ and ‘to understand’ as well as over the horizons of perception that distinguish the audible from the inaudible, the comprehensible from the incomprehensible, the visible from the invisible. A case of
disagreement arises when the perennial persistence of a wrong enters into conflict with the established police order and resists the forms of juridical litigation that are imposed on it. (*The Politics of Aesthetics* 84)

The wrong institutes a fundamental discord between social entities. This discord is enforced by the distribution of the sensible, which establishes criteria of social inclusion and exclusion. Within this framework, those social groups who are excluded from the partition of the perceptible are left at the margins of society and political participation. Moreover, this kind of exclusion results in social invisibility and vulnerability. According to Rancière, this is what constitutes the essential wrong or blaberon in society. The part with no part is given a certain quality that has no content, an empty category: a lie. This fundamental deceit is what introduces the element of contention in the social body. Politics is born in the midst of such contentious commonality. Therefore, a contentious community is a political collectivity based on mischief, inequality and, consequently, disagreement. Politics has its basis on a dispute, which presupposes that for politics to exist there should always remain an element of contention. Consequently, politics is understood as the practice by which the part with no part in society – the common people – attempts to achieve a certain retribution for the wrong that has been inflicted on them: “politics (that is, the interruption of the simple effects of domination by the rich) causes the poor to exist as an entity” (*Disagreement* 11). Those who are cast outside of the social edifice constitute ‘the part with no part’ in society. From such a precarious position, there are only so many ways to acquire visibility. According to Rancière, it is chiefly through acts of ‘political subjectification’ that social subjects can struggle for recognition: ‘By treating a wrong, political subjects transform the aesthetic coordinates of the community in order to implement the only
universal in politics: we are all equal’ (POA 86). Therefore, the quest for political subjectification is essentially strife for equality and emancipation.

Politics has its basis on a dispute that at the same time serves as an interruption of the dominion of the superior social parts (rich, aristocrats, etc.) over the inferior ones (slaves, poor, the people, etc.). If the negotiation of politics is indeed articulated through language, it would be only logical to suppose that all human beings and social actors are endowed with the gift of speech, a common code intelligible to all other social actors. However, such a statement is rather problematic. Plato, for instance, equated the people (*demos*) with a large and powerful animal. We should remember that one of the key distinctions between humans and animals is precisely the gift of speech, which is opposed to that of voice.

The people, that “part” of society that has been wronged, has also been deprived of logos. For Rancière, this constitutes the double wrong. The part that is miscounted in society is also considered incapable of speech, and therefore unfit to articulate any political claim or activity in the proper sense. And yet, Rancière states, “the people’ is the name, the form of subjectification, of this immemorial and perennial wrong through which the social order is symbolized” (22). As a result, the distribution of the sensible is constituted. Social bodies within a community are roughly divided into two categories: those visible and those invisible; which is to say, those who possess the gift of speech and therefore acquire social and political visibility, and those who don’t. Rancière writes: “Politics exists because the logos is never simply speech, because it is always indissolubly the account that is made of this speech: the account by which a sonorous emission is understood as speech, capable of enunciating what is just, whereas some other emission is merely perceived as a noise signaling pleasure or pain, consent or revolt” (22-3). Following this line of thought, speech appears to be not only a quality but also more precisely a
form, the content of which is always an account of a wrong that is translated into political claims.

Even though there are non-discursive approaches to this problem, it should be noted that the works this research considers deal almost exclusively with linguistic and narrative explorations on the subject. Therefore, the whole process of political subjectification takes place within the domain of language in general and the practice of writing in particular. This problematizes the intertwining between politics and aesthetics. At this point, the following question should be posed: how is it that writing may be deemed a form of political resistance and subjectification in spite of being confined to the domain of language? For instance, Jacques Rancière understands politics as the practice that undermines the hegemonic distribution of the sensible:

The essence of politics thus resides in acts of subjectivization that separate society from itself by challenging ‘natural order of bodies’ in the name of equality and polemically reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible. Politics is an anarchical process of emancipation that opposes the logic of disagreement to the logic of the police. (The Politics of Aesthetics 90)

This means that the true exercise of politics is thus based on dissensus or disagreement. Moreover, it would seem as if disagreement took place, first and foremost, in and through language. In this context, writing understood as a means of invocation of ghost stands as a privileged channel in order to gain or endow visibility. Through its conjuring of marginalized subjects, writing makes manifest what remains otherwise invisible, unheard of or outright not worth of political recognition according to the ruling distribution of the sensible established by the police order. Understood as a means for political subjectification, writing becomes an
eminently political practice that aims towards emancipation and the reconfiguring of a given field of experience.

By treating a wrong and attempting to implement equality, political subjectivization creates a common locus of dispute over those who have no part in the established order. However, the very act of identifying these political subjects necessarily has recourse to misnomers, i.e. names that inadequately refer to the anonymous multitude that has no title in the police order. The logic of subjectivization is therefore based on the impossible identification of political subjects, that is to say subjects who remain unidentifiable in the given field of experience and necessitate ‘inaudible’ modes of enunciation such as: ‘We are all German Jews!’ (POA 92)

This last passage is of great relevance to our critical reflection. Stating that the works analyzed in this research attempt political subjectification, we acknowledge the inherent impossibility of such an endeavor. While it is chiefly the victims and their relatives who have endured the effects of the war on drugs, it could be argued that the goal of these writing projects is to establish the equivalent of an enunciation affirming ‘We are all victims’. However problematic such a claim might be, it is important to note in regard to this that the aesthetic plays a fundamental role in the formation of communities and in processes of identification of “parts” in society. In such formations, the parts of an understanding –and a misunderstanding– are organized aesthetically. What identifies groups is the aesthetic. People feel part of a group because they think they resemble each other. In other words, the constitution of a community is achieved partly through affect; hence the relevance of compassion and solidarity. This also is why the aesthetic is such a crucial element of politics: if we concede that groups don’t have a foundation apart from the aesthetic they choose to attribute to themselves, then their identification is only present in
appearance. This is the reason why claims by which a large group of people identifies with a minority acquire such great political resonance. In stating ‘We are all German Jews’, ‘We are all Proletarians’, or ‘We are all Victims of the War on Drugs’ an operation of aesthetic identification is produced.

We would like to suggest that the works analyzed in this essay attempt this kind of aesthetic identification in order to achieve political subjectification. Project 72 migrantes, Ayotzinapa. La travesía de las tortugas and El silencio de los cuerpos create double relation of empathy: that of the authors towards the victims and that of the readers also towards the victims but mediated by diverse writing devices. The result of this operation is the conception that, as a consequence of the established bond of empathy –affect–, both authors and readers appropriate the victims’ suffering. Hence, it is possible to claim ‘We are all Victims of the War on Drugs’.

The aesthetic definition of a group is related to inequality in that, as in the case of the Proletariat, a group is founded on the basis of aesthetic identification. As referred by Rancière, the identification of the proletariat is grounded on the assumption, or rather, the feeling, that one belongs to a part in society that is miscounted (Disagreement 38). It is such affect, rather than determinations of class, profession or religion what constitutes the identity of a new-founded group. However, this is not to say that such a group is unequal just because it is aesthetic. Rather, it means that in specific cases, the aesthetic is used as a means for identification when other criterions of equality or affinity are lacking. That being said, it can be argued that the appearance is more important than the idea. The aesthetic is the principle by which parts in a group claim to be indeed parts. What the parts have in common is often only the claim to have something in common. Hence, what takes place in aesthetic judgment is merely the form of a judgment, for it is arbitrary and not accountable. According to Rancière, the meaning or the content represented
by the aesthetic is absent in the equation of community building: it is only through affect, feeling and the aesthetic that communities and community parts acquire a sense of identity. Rancière writes: “What makes an action political is not its object or the place where it is carried out, but solely its form, the form in which confirmation of equality is inscribed in the setting up of a dispute, of a community existing solely through being divided” (Disagreement 32). This suggests it is only by aesthetic means that you can become a part of society; but that inclusion would have no content other than the arbitrary one assigned to it. Put otherwise, the aesthetic is a sort of illusory identification that binds the group together without actually overcoming the radical difference that exists within it. This is the insurmountable gap or difference that works attempting complete identification or political subjectification face. Even the most sophisticated, technically accomplished, and talented pieces of writing will never be able to fully bridge the radical space between the victim’s original suffering and the feeling of compassion such experience awakens in others. Losing one’s life will never be the same than writing or reading about it. Notwithstanding the impossibility of getting rid of such unpresentable element in language, these writing endeavors attempt to supersede the state of paralysis produced by highly traumatic –individual and collective– experiences by means of a haunted narrative, pregnant with absence and loss, that conjures the ghosts of the departed in order to make them present and accountable in politics.

According to Rancière the invisibilization of certain groups or individuals in a society is produced by a fundamental miscount or disagreement about who and what is visible or invisible, audible or inaudible, thinkable or unthinkable. In short, the distribution of the sensible –with its regimes of visibility and invisibility– determines who is and who is not a subject able to articulate its voice in a discursive fashion and therefore capable of engaging in political activity.
If the quest to gain social visibility is based on the question of what politics means, we should then ask: how is it that disagreement—and misrepresentation—in language is something political? If, as suggested by Rancière, politics takes place in an aesthetic and performative space, then what are the capabilities of writing in order to account for the misrepresentation of disenfranchised social groups and in the process of reconstruction of the sense of community? In this essay, we shall explore the ways in which diverse writing projects have attempted to work along these lines.

In a somewhat extreme version of what Rancière calls ‘the partition of the sensible’, the victims of the armed conflict in Mexico have been radically excluded from the public sensible space. In terms of the regime of senses that organize and select what is visible and audible in a community, the practice of forceful disappearance of people stands as the most brutal tactic of social invisiblization. Those who, for one reason or another, are deemed too rebellious, dissident or plainly dangerous to the establishment—be it the government or the drug cartels—are totally eradicated from the social and vital space of the nation. In this fashion, not only are these individuals deprived of a voice with which they can participate in the political arena; their very lives are torn from them, and with it, their bodily, material presence. Because of this, the disappeared are left incapable of having their voice heard. They can no longer be seen or heard and thus they are excluded from the practice of politics. Moreover, even their location—if still alive—or final destination—if dead—is unknown. The only place where they are to be found is memory: as ghosts—understood as mnemonic traces, simulacra and disembodied entities. In a context where voices have been silenced and bodies made invisible, it is suitable to think of politic resistance in terms of forms of visualization, endowment of speech and political subjectification.
As a response to the many massacres that have taken place in the country during the past decade, writers and journalists have made several attempts to recuperate the stories and voices of the victims that would remain otherwise anonymous. This phenomenon poses a series of problems regarding the relation between politics and aesthetics. Spatial metaphors being privileged to describe the sphere of the political, the aforementioned projects can be deemed attempts to rebuild and restore a political space for community that has been broken. On the other hand, the attempt to ‘give voice’ to the silent victims of the conflict is problematic in that it implies a certain necessity and incapability on behalf of the victims to articulate their own discourse. This assumption has prompted intellectuals and artists to appropriate ‘the wrong’ perpetuated upon a certain social group alongside their narratives in order to provide it with a political subjectification that grants them an intelligible and interactive presence in the public sphere. Naturally, this does not mean that the dead will be granted posthumous political recognition. Rather, we should understand this endeavor in terms of a quest for social identification with the victims.

Following Rancière, naming a universal subject of wrong is a crucial step in the process of political subjectification: “In politics, subjects do not have consistent bodies; they are fluctuating performers who have their moments, places, occurrences, and the peculiar role of inventing arguments and demonstrations […] to bring the nonrelationship into relationship and give place to the nonplace” (Rancière 89). This invention of a place, of a performative space as the theater, contributes to the materialization, embodiment and visualization of the part with no part in society. What, we might ask, do such subjects without consistent bodies look like? Is it not perhaps something like a ghostly presence that paradoxically produces a sense of presence for determinate subjects in the political scene?
Even though politics is a praxis that features language as a privileged component, it is only through a complete reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible that an effective political subjectification takes place. This opens the space not only for language forms such as literature to acquire political relevance, but also those that contribute to the configuration of our sensual perception such as photography, the cinema and art in general. Rancière’s theory of politics and language presupposes that politics and language are intertwined and somehow also co-dependent on each other, with the aesthetic reinforcing the bind between them. As noted by David Ferris, in ‘Politics and Literature’ Rancière accounts for “a specific link between politics as a definite way of doing and literature as a definite practice of writing” (Ferris 37). What this means is that literature is seen as a “historical mode of visibility of writing, a specific link between a system of meaning of words and a system of visibility of things” (38). This last statement shows the link between the order of words and the order of things and this is also a claim that opens up the discussions of the political capabilities of haunted writing in the context of the War on Drugs.
CHAPTER II. Writing for ghosts

The war on drugs has awakened not only a general interest but also a cultural need to address the issues taking place in the country. Even though the conflict has been ongoing for the past eleven years and has taken a lethal toll well above the tenths of thousands, there are two events in particular that have claimed even more attention at both the national and the international level. The murder of 72 migrants by the Zetas drug cartel near San Fernando, Tamaulipas in 2010, and the disappearance and subsequent death of 43 students of the Escuela Normal Raúl Isidro Burgos of Ayotzinapa Guerrero in 2014 stand out as some of the darkest and most brutal episodes in Mexican history. Consequently, a massive interest has been devoted to these massacres and their aftermath in Mexico’s political and cultural life.

As referred in Espectros, Jean Franco notes that in massacres there are no distinctions, there is always the intention to “banish the memory of the victims from the earth”, irrespectively of whether they posed a real or imagined threat to the perpetrators (Ribas and Petersen 4). This is why the recognition of their loss and absence constitutes a spectral moment: “ghostly (re)appearances become accusatory acts that give evidence to the existence of the missing before a state that has attempted to erase them (4). The events of San Fernando and Ayotzinapa have produced a similar kind of haunting that has been re-presented in the form of the writing projects that will be analyzed next.
On the night of August 21st 2010, members of the Zetas – one of the most violent drug cartels in Mexico–intercepted buses transporting nearly 80 illegal migrants bound for the Mexico-US border in an interstate highway. They conducted them to a nearby semi-abandoned warehouse. According to diverse accounts of the events, the migrants were ordered to call their relatives and demand ransom; another version states they were asked to decide whether to join the cartel or die (+ de 72. Periodistas de a pie.org.mx). Men were offered to work as hired assassins while the women were offered to work in domestic labor. Only one of the migrants agreed and his life was spared. The rest were shot to death in situ. There were, however, at least two survivors: Luis Freddy Lala Pomavilla, a citizen of Ecuador, and a Honduran man whose identity has never been revealed. Thirteen women and fifty-nine men were killed that night: 24 Hondurans, 14 Salvadorians, 13 Guatemalans, 5 Ecuadoreans, 3 Brazilians and one Indian, plus twelve unidentified bodies. (Pérez Salazar, BBC Mundo)

72 migrantes was an initiative of Mexican journalist Alma Guillermoprieto, who convened 72 writers – featuring several renowned authors as Roger Bartra, Valeria Luiselli, Elena Poniatowska, Juan Villoro and Jorge Volpi, among many others– to narrate or even invent, when information was lacking, the lives and deaths of the migrants killed in San Fernando. In an article published in the Berkeley Review of Latin American Studies, Guillermoprieto describes how the idea of creating a memorial for the 72 slain migrants first came to her mind. She was conflicted as to the most appropriate way to write about the incident, which by then was yet another tragic event in the long series of violent killing sprees that had devastated numerous regions in the country,
I realized with no little shock that what I wanted was to build an altar, at least partly because in Mexico altars honoring the dead are a comforting and familiar part of our relationship with sorrow. That is how the online altar 72migrantes.com came about. (Guillermoprieto 4)

This is a pretty straightforward allusion to the Day of the Dead, one of the most traditional festivities in Mexico. On the night of November 2nd, altars for the dead are set up in households, graveyards and public squares. These altars feature photographs of a beloved defunct alongside with their names written on skulls made of sugar and other dishes and drinks the deceased enjoyed while alive. On that night, the dead are believed to visit their altars and to enjoy once more some of the pleasures they cherished when living. It is a night of communion. It is also a statement of memory over forgetfulness and an attempt to pay homage to the dead. Guillermoprieto did not attempt, however, to create just a traditional altar. Instead, she thought of an initiate that conjured several authors, thus conforming a community of sorts to address the issue,

In lieu of conversations about the dead, I thought of short texts by Mexican writers. And so the online altar 72migrantes.com has 72 pages, 72 texts and 72 photographs on a black background, with trim the color of marigolds. (4-5)

In this sense, it is clear that 72 migrantes uses a digital platform from which it conjures and remembers the dead through different forms of writing. Hence, the website serves as a space of visibility. Not only are the victims of the San Fernando massacre made visible and presented to us in narrative form but also, quite interestingly, 72 migrantes is a project that attempts to reinstate the victim’s identity–be it real or made up– through writing. In this sense, the memory of the 72 migrants killed in San Fernando works as a haunting presence that in spite of being
traumatic does not paralyze but rather prompts to action. The altar confronts us with an attempt at political subjectification in pursuing the recuperation of individual identity and indirectly the construction of an identity of a group –the 72 migrants– by aesthetic means. Sergio Aguayo expresses this in his collaboration to the project in the following terms,

The anonymous horror is an abstraction that hinders empathy and solidarity. My way of rejecting these aberrations that degrade us as a country is by giving the Guatemalan [the migrant whose story he was in charge of writing] a plausible identity. (72 migrantes.com)

Take for example Jorge Volpi’s contribution to the altar. In his text, dedicated to a non-identified victim of San Fernando, Volpi writes about the lack of having a name and an identity, he writes about the never-ending task it meant for this migrant to walk the earth in search for a better life. The text lacks punctuation marks, which formally suggests the flux nature of migration:

I am nobody my name is nobody my name does not lie buried next to my body my only belonging the only unique thing that I had was stolen by force [...] to come here from so far to this place without name to finish without name buried in this identical earth To all the land to the land that I left behind to the land that I persecuted the promised land to walk in my life I only knew to walk I never did anything else [...] (72migrantes.com)

As Jorge Volpi stated in a later book, this literary exercise became political: “The only way to get our brain to become identified with he or she who has suffered is to put on his or her shoes, and this can only be achieved through the narration of his or her experience” (Volpi 71). This statement suggests that narrative is a privileged way by which empathy can be attained, which further sustains the premise that a certain ethics of compassion can be attained through aesthetically produced affect.
72 migrantes also entails an exploration of the intertwinements between fiction and non-fiction. For the representational ethics of this project, whether the stories narrated were authentic or fictional was not a decisive problem. Furthermore, the website includes photographs and songs by well-known musicians like Lila Downs and La Maldita Vecindad, among others. It also features a tab the user can click on in order to make donations. Another interesting fact about 72 migrantes is the way in which the original project has migrated between different media. Started out as an online altar, it was later published as a book, then some of the texts composing it were turned into a theater play and finally in 2011 the radio station of Mexico’s national university broadcasted all 72 texts on 72 consecutive days, culminating on the anniversary of the massacre (Guillermoprieto 5-6). In this sense, it is interesting to see that the project, just as the travelers that inspired it, became a migrating form.

Anonymity is one of the most intensely battled elements by 72 migrantes. Many authors express their concern to recuperate the face of their migrant, to give them voice, to recover their identity. This is the case of Myriam Moscona, who writes for an unidentified woman, ‘my dead migrant has fingerprints but no one claims her. I claim her, she is my dead migrant’ (72 migrantes). Moscona’s statement suggests that there exists a will to appropriation in claiming the unidentified woman as her own. This conveys the sense that a great degree of empathy has been achieved through writing so that compassion is no longer limited to feeling sympathy and sadness for other people’s suffering. In fact, the pain of the other has been made one’s own.

In the context of migration, the intercultural status of the migrant has been adopted as a moral category. In this regard, it is worth noting that Emmanuel Lévinas founded his philosophy of ethics in the notion of the face. Other academics as González R. Arnaiz have embraced this argument in order to advance reflections on the character of the migrant. In an article exploring
diverse appropriations of the Levinasian concept of *the face*, Olivia Navarro writes: “It can not be doubted that if it were necessary to give an image to the phenomenon of interculturality, the most appropriate would be the "face" of the immigrant” (Navarro 192). Therefore the face stands as a key element in relation to subjectivity. Through the recuperation of the faces of the disenfranchised migrants, *72 migrantes* attempts a kind of materialization: it makes present the absent that haunts and demands recognition. In a text dedicated to one of the unidentified migrants, Braulio Peralta writes:

> Today I have no face, I have no country: I am out of the world […] Around here pass those who cannot get anywhere. People who want a higher destination. Those who go after hope: head bowed like a candle that cries: hidden by shadows in which day and night fuse. They are the invisible. The nameless. (*72 migrantes*)

Being out of the world can be understood in several ways. Firstly, it can be understood as being materially out of the objective world as a consequence of being deceased; secondly, it can be thought of as the exclusion from a world that does not allow participation or engagement. This last interpretation follows the lines of what Rancière defines as the condition of ‘the part with no part’: people who exist and yet are not granted inclusion into the social body. These are the invisible, the nameless, the faceless, and the exiled. And they seek recognition.

*Ayotzinapa. La travesía de las tortugas*

The disappearance and killing of 43 students of Ayotzinapa in 2014 motivated a similar undertaking: *Ayotzinapa. La travesía de las tortugas* (2015) –The journey of the turtles–. The book is also a journalistic endeavor to recuperate the life-stories of those students who disappeared on the night of September 26th of 2014 and never came back. The circumstances
that resulted in the events of that night remain largely unclear and existing versions on the matter are constantly questioned. There are only so many uncontested facts. Namely, that around one hundred students from the Escuela Normal Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos of Ayotzinapa in the southwestern state of Guerrero set off on a quest to ‘borrow’ some local buses – actually temporarily taking them by force – in order to use them to get to Mexico City and attend a yearly massive student demonstration commemorating the anniversary of the infamous massacre of university alumni on October 2\textsuperscript{nd} 1968. At some point that night, something went wrong. It is said that local authorities might have mistaken the students for Rojos – members of a cartel rival to Guerreros Unidos, the local violent drug trafficking gang. Others say it was José Luis Abarca – mayor of the nearby city of Iguala – and his wife Maria de los Ángeles Pineda Villa that ordered the detention of the students in order to prevent them from disturbing a public event they were hosting that night in the civic plaza. Moreover, Abarca and his wife have since been linked to organized crime, which would render possible the hypothesis of them being confabulated with the Guerreros Unidos (Boullosa and Wallace xviii-xx). Irrespective of which of these cases were true or if the development of events was a combination of different causes, the fact is that the police actively pursued the student-filled hijacked buses. Confrontations took place in the streets of Iguala. Shots were fired by the police. By the time the forty-three students were arrested, already 6 others had been killed and twenty-three more injured. (xvii)

One of those students was Julio César Mondragón, who was brutally killed by yet unknown individuals who “tortured him, gouged out his eyes, ripped the skin from his face, then shot and killed him and dumped his body in the street” (xvi). As Carmen Boullosa and Mark Wallace point out, it is strange that the killers decided to leave him in a public space for everyone to see whilst the same night there was so much effort and coordination in order to leave
no trace of the other students. Furthermore, a photograph of Mondragón’s dead body featuring the skinned face began circulating on Twitter and other social media the same night of the incidents. It is not known who took the picture and uploaded it. Whatever the reason, it should be noted that the ripening of Julio César Mondragón’s face amounts to a very particular way of obliterating his identity in depriving him of his most distinctive features. At the same time, however, the fact of uploading the photograph to social media implies that from that moment on, the image became publicly visible. This poses a paradoxical relation between a brutal practice of dis-identification – the erasing of identity – and the display of an image to a massive audience. Of course, this kind of spectacularization was meant as a statement. Drug cartels usually recur to spectacular ways of exposing their rivals’ bodies as a means of intimidation. Even today, the image of Julio César Mondragón’s face may be found if searched on the web. According to an article by journalist Blanche Petrich published in the newspaper La Jornada on June 26th of 2015, there are records of at least eight other cases of murder in which the victim’s face had been flayed (Petrich).

In La travesía de las tortugas, Emiliano Ruiz Parra writes, ‘A reporter looks for stories but in Ayotzinapa finds faces’ (36). Moreover, Ruiz Parra reflects on how the human face has become a political banner for the victims and their relatives, ‘They go around the country with the photograph of a face hanging from their necks. They may shout our chants, but the most powerful slogan is the face itself, the face that was stolen by violence, forced disappearance, [and] the ambition of narcopolitics (37). With regard to this, Ruiz Parra thinks the crime of Ayotzinapa represents a negation of Levinasian ethics for in that philosopher’s thought the human face stands as a fundamental element for the establishment of his ethics of alterity.
Getting back to the events of that night, it was presumably with the cooperation of the police and according to some versions even that of the army, plus with the explicit avowal of Abarca—who is now imprisoned as well as his wife—, the young men of Ayotzinapa were later handed over to the Guerreros Unidos. Nothing beyond this point is known with certainty. The official version states that the students were executed and incinerated in a nearby garbage dump. According to this same account, their ashes would have been later discarded in a river, “Finally the bodies were reduced to ashes and bits of bone, which were then pulverized” (xix). One of the thugs reportedly texted to his superior in command, “They’ll never find them.” (xix)

It is possible to understand that night’s events in terms of an utter annihilation in which forty-three individuals were reduced to a state of nothingness. This is perhaps one of the most radical examples of what Rancière calls *the police order* taking radical measures to invisibilize those who have no share in society. The issue is made even more extreme and complex when considering that governmental institutions—repressive state apparatuses included—collaborated with criminal organizations in order to exterminate a group of people that seemingly threatened their interests. And yet, what’s perhaps more striking is the fact that this massacre was only one among uncountable others. It was the circumstances in which it took place and not the massacre itself that caught global attention and produced a severe crisis for president Enrique Peña Nieto and his government. In *A Narco History* Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace eloquently summarize the situation in Mexico as follows:

Forty-three bodies? Since 2000, more than one hundred thousand have been killed. Mass graves? Tens of thousands have been disappeared, many likely moldering in such pits. Horrific executions? Roughly two thousand out of the hundred thousand killed suffered death by decapitation. (xxv)
Mass graves have become a widespread phenomenon and a gruesome discovery in Mexico during the last years. In the weeks and months following the disappearance of the forty-three students several clandestine burial sites were found in the area, containing thirty-four bodies. None of them belonged to the students who went missing on September 26th, “Who they were was a new mystery, soon compounded when more mass graves turned up, containing an undetermined number of bodies. Other families now came forward to demand investigation to see if their disappeared relatives were among the bones had been uncovered” (xxi). In January of 2015, Attorney General Murillo Karam held a press conference in which he summarized the findings up to that date and sentenced the official version, which he called ‘the historical truth’. After months of investigation and research, only one bone fragment was identified as belonging to Alexander Mora Venancio, a student from Ayotzinapa, following which Attorney General Murillo Karam declared the case closed, “arguing that no new information had been unearthed that would require revising the official narrative” (xxiii). Considering the collaboration between government and organized crime, it can be logically assumed that behind the proliferation of mass graves lies a systematic practice of social invisibilization and annihilation.

Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace recount that during a five-hour meeting with President Peña Nieto, one father stated, “‘We are not sheep to be killed whenever they fell like it’, after which he asserted he had gone there to demand the children be found “because I am a citizen of Mexico, and I have rights” (xxii). This demand by one of the parents of the disappeared students addresses a deep problem. He refused to be treated like an animal arguing he was a citizen of Mexico. Behind this reasoning seems to be the notion that the butchering of animals is permitted because they are not people and therefore not citizens either. Although this is a fairly obvious conclusion, it is important to delve deeper into the matter.
As noted by Aristotle in his *Politics*, it is precisely the power of speech that differentiates humans from animals, which only have a voice and are unable of articulating it discursively. Speech allows human beings to distinguish what is good from what is bad and what is useful from what is harmful. It is important to note that while such distinction may be considered an effect of the power of language it can also be argued, perhaps with a stronger foundation, that such a distinction is primarily something that is represented in language. Language is the substance of politics because it is through language that agreement and disagreement happen as a result of negotiation. In *Disagreement* Rancière states: “The supremely political destiny of man is attested by a sign: the possession of the logos, that is, of speech, which expresses, while the voice simply indicates” (2). Language understood as speech has the capability of articulating discourses in order to express ideas, structure arguments, claims and refutations. On the other hand, voice only amounts to indicate sense experience—such as pleasure or suffering. As Rancière puts it: “We could say that the difference is marked precisely in the logos that separates the discursive articulation of a grievance from the phonic articulation of a groan” (2). Therefore, when one of the students’ father declared that they were not to be slaughtered like sheep because they were in fact citizens, he was also implicitly claiming both his right and his ability to articulate a discourse by which to interpellate and challenge authority. He was claiming his existence not as an animal but as a man. He was asserting his existence as a political subject.

The events of Ayotzinapa have opened a deep wound in the consciousness of the whole nation. Just as the project 72 migrantes, which originated from a similar tragedy, *Ayotzinapa. La travesía de las tortugas* is a quest to give voice—more precisely, to provide discursive form—to the suffering of the victims and most importantly, to prevent their destiny from becoming yet another mere number or empty cipher in the ever growing body count. In *Los 43 de Iguala*. 
México: verdad y reto de los estudiantes desaparecidos, Sergio González Rodríguez states that the governments of Mexico and the USA jointly made the decision to embark on the war on drug trafficking without considering the ‘collateral damages’ that such an enterprise would entail. In this sense, the lethal victims were deemed merely a subordinate consequence of the conflict, “The secondary that, being not of convergent importance in the management plan, is condemned to the waste. The executed, the dead ‘by accident’, the disappeared by one or another cause: the vile number that makes invisible” (54). In his preface to the book, Héctor de Mauleón provides a similar statement. He coincides with Ruiz Parra and González Rodríguez in that violent deaths are no longer considered events worthy of attention in the country. Every such death is immediately metamorphosed into statistic: “Death is nothing more than a measure: since the country has produced corpses in an assembly-line fashion, tragedies have become quantitative. We make them simple numbers and we refer to them with the coldness of figures” (Tortugas 17). The will that informs the book is therefore the rejection of the cipher in favor of the recuperation of the face, the repossession of identity through discourse and the consequent political subjectification.

In face of the state crime, this book proposes to rescue the ethics of the face. The reader will find here 43 stories that are 43 faces, faces that impose the ethical commandment of "thou shall not kill" (and "you shall not disappear"), who claim truth, justice and non-repetition. Each one of these faces is a mirror where one must look at the country, because their faces are more tragic and, at the same time, the most dignified. (Tortugas 37)

At this point it is worth noting that participation in the book was non-profit: none of the authors that collaborated in it received any money for their work; all the revenue from the book sales was
donated to the students’ families. *La travesía de las tortugas* features 47 short biographies written by 47 different authors. It is a book that runs counter to the so-called ‘historical truth’ proclaimed by Jesús Murillo Karam, former Attorney General of Mexico.

Since these endeavors have been deemed community-building projects, it is important to draw attention to the mediums in which they have circulated. As has been mentioned before, *Proyecto 72 migrantes* is a website, however, a printed edition of the venture has also been published by Editorial Almadía, an independent yet growing Mexican publishing house founded in 2005 that focuses mainly in publishing young national talent, although it also features works from more consolidated literary figures –both Mexican and foreign– like Juan Villoro, Sergio Pitol, J.M.G. Le Clèzio and Samantha Schweblin, among many others.

On the other hand, *Ediciones Proceso*, the book-publishing brand of *Revista Proceso* –a left-wing weekly journal of considerable circulation– published the book *Ayotzinapa. La travesía de las tortugas*. After the massacre of the 43 students, the collective Marchando con letras was created. As per the official website, Marchando con Letras is a collectivity formed by editors, reporters and photographers committed to ‘explain rather than just inform’ in order to make sense of every story and character without recurring to easy condescendence and victimization. In the collective’s website there is even a declaration of principles featuring its mission: namely, to produce journalistic works that allow for reflection and action beyond official versions while also “giving a face and name to those who have been victims” (Marchandoconletras.org). As for the group’s vision, it pretends to articulate a network of journalists engaged with rigorous research and ‘precise language’ in order to realize journalistic projects that inform and explain to the population topics of high social, economic, or politic impact.
This declaration of principles is illuminating in that it demonstrates the key motivations that inform not only their own endeavor but also, as we would like to argue here, the project underlying the diverse forms of writing analyzed in this essay: the quest for the recuperation of identity and thus political subjectification and the reconstruction of a community. Interestingly, in this case it was a community or collective of professionals that united in order to undertake the task of investigating the lives of the students prior to the night of September 26th 2014. What’s interesting about this is the fact that the creation of communities of writers is consequently followed by the formation of communities of readers. Language is at the foundation of these collectivities while it mediates between protagonists, authors and readers.

Proyecto 72 migrantes and Ayotzinapa. La travesía de las tortugas are attempts to undermine official narratives claiming the status of ‘historical truths’ that perpetrate the invisibilization of some of the most vulnerable groups in society: migrants and the poor. As we have seen before, these groups are excluded from political participation and in extreme cases as the ones addressed here, they are even deprived of their lives and thus they are made equitable to that classless class –the demos in Ancient Greece, the Proletariat in industrialized civilization– that is the part with no share. Indeed, these literary and journalistic efforts are examples of what David Spurr –talking about the work of James Agee– calls antijournalism; namely, a sort of ideal journalism that:

‘[…] seeks to avoid conventional representation in order to provide evidence, not of poverty as an abstract concept, but of life as lived under the conditions we call poverty. In its rejection of a facile aesthetic formulation, Agee’s work approaches the level of a higher art by attempting to draw the reader into an unmediated encounter with the lives of the poor. (Spurr 53)
Questions about who the students were before the night they disappeared, what their lives, families and dreams were like are said to have ‘detonated’ the book. As Héctor de Mauleón points out, the project is exemplary in that it shows the solidarity of professional journalists toward the victims. In their challenging of power-imposed narratives and their intention to convey a more humanized side of the otherwise nameless and spectral crowd of students, Ayotzinapa. La Travesía de las Tortugas is a book that seeks to incarnate the disembodied ghosts that haunt a whole nation.

_El silencio de los cuerpos. Relatos sobre feminicidios_

This book is a collection of short stories featuring the works of nine female authors. The volume was published in November of 2015 by Ediciones B in Mexico City. The publishing house has also published several other volumes regarding the problematic of drug trafficking and violence, including both journalistic and fictional works. The writers are Mexican women born between 1964 and 1986. Each one contributed with a short story in order to compose a collection that addresses the widespread phenomenon of the killings of women in Mexico. In his preface to the book, Sergio González Rodríguez –author of _Huesos en el desierto_ and _The Feminicide Machine_– states: “Mexico is among the five countries with the highest growth rate of murders against girls and women, so it is inevitable to confront the reality that literature seeks to dignify in memory of the victims” (8). Then he provides statistics showing that, out of the 3,892 women murder cases recorded between 2012 and 2013 only 1.6% were convicted, which demonstrates the high level of impunity associated with this kind of crime. González Rodríguez then poses a capital question that will orient the reader in his or her engagement with the book: “How to account for this threshold of arrogance and cruelty? It is only from the strength and integrity of
women themselves to detach from this abjection by means of lucid knowledge and prodigal imagination to their companions of misfortune, where solidarity never incurs in the easiness of melodrama […]” (10). Lucid knowledge and prodigal imagination thus stand for González Rodríguez as means to show the solidarity of the authors toward the victims. Nevertheless, it is the aspect of solidarity that renders this passage most interesting for our purposes. Solidarity entails compassion, i.e. a strong feeling of sympathy – and even the sharing of emotions – for other people’s suffering. In this sense, solidarity and compassion amount to both a desire and an urge for identification with the victims. This is interesting and problematic in that it presupposes a desire and strife for identification by means of language and, more concretely, by means of fictionalized narrative. Moreover, González Rodríguez believes that each story featured in the volume proposes a specific mode for understanding femicide as a phenomenon (11). Furthermore, he concludes the preface as follows: “The book delivers a compelling catalog, very distant from the morbid and victimizing attitude, to understand barbarism. It expresses a rare political determination and literary dignity. It is a lucid alternative to helplessness and contempt in favor of critical reflection. These are letters for a generous memory”(11). The preface is very illuminating as to what the reader will find in subsequent pages. As has been shown, there is an intention to literarily address a topic situated at the very limits of comprehension. In these few lines, some of the book’s most important concepts and motivations are displayed, specifically: the recuperation of identity, the understanding of barbarism, the political determination underlying the project and, quite interestingly, the notion of literary dignity. González Rodríguez seems to suggest that writing is capable of all these things. Even though he does not elaborate on the concept of literary dignity in his very short preface, González Rodríguez pinpoints the
presuppositions that inform not only this volume, but also the other works that are analyzed in this essay, namely: that writing fulfills a fundamental role in the recuperation of dignity.

*El silencio de los cuerpos* can be regarded as an initiative to compose an archive featuring different narratives and modes of understanding barbarism. We are presented with a collection of short stories of the utmost contemporaneity. All of them are set in Mexico and have both female Mexican characters and authors. The book is featured in a collection inaugurated by another preceding compilation of short stories: *Narcocuentos*. However, *Narcocuentos* is more focused on the criminal aspect of the war on drugs. Although the victims occasionally appear in the stories, the emphasis is not so much based on them as it is on the perpetrators. As proof of this, suffice it to mention some of the titles of the stories that make up the volume: “Los amigos del patron” (*The boss’s friends*), by Alejandro Almazán; “Entre narcos, balaceras y muertos” (*Between narcos, shootings and dead ones*) by Ricardo Ravelo; “Hombres armados” (*Armed men*) by Daniel Espartaco Sánchez; and “Mujeres, puros y champá” (*Women, cigars and champagne*), among other of the sort. In this sense, *El silencio de los cuerpos* is notably more centered on the victims, their families and bereaved, and also in the overwhelming feeling of absence left by their departures. In the presentation of the book that precedes the preface by González Rodríguez, Yaena González –the editorial director– states: “Absence is the quotidian” (6). However, we shall see that in the context of this kind of literary production, absence is not merely a void of presence. Rather, it is a semi-absence, semi-presence that reminds us of the figures of the ghost and the specter. As was mentioned earlier, the ghost is a recurring motive in many of the works considered by this research. However, it is in *El silencio de los cuerpos* that ghosts are more frequently and literarily evoked.
The first story in the book is “Sin nombre” (Nameless), by Cristina Rivera Garza. It is a story that narrates the paralyzing experience of fear aroused by watching the news on television. Narrated in first person, it tells the story of a woman –whose name and age remain unknown– that takes care of an elder lady in her apartment. The old lady is remarkably absent minded, as if her thoughts were so focused on something particular that her attention could not be directed at anything else. Then the old lady speaks, “The hands –she said– they cut off their hands” (16). The elder woman had been watching the news; “This time they also cut off their legs”, she goes on. It is in this manner that we learn that it was the fragmented impression caused by the news – the new finding of dismembered women’s bodies– that has gotten her so weary. Interestingly, the effect of watching the news on television in this story runs counter to David Spurr’s idea of aesthetic distance as developed in The Rhetoric of Empire. According to Spurr, the press establishes a particular relation between the objective reality of the world and the way in which the audience perceives it.

Following this argument, the media frames real events in diverse aesthetic and narrative forms in a way that produces “a dynamic image of the world that is both volatile and stable” (44). This sort of representation of reality creates ‘a certain detachment’ between the audience and the object of representation, “The mosaic form of the newspaper, like the rapid succession of images in television news, helps maintain this aesthetic distance” (Spurr 44). Nevertheless, the old lady in Cristina Rivera Garza’s story is far from seeming aesthetically detached from the images and the narrative that were presented to her in the news. The same can be said about the narrator, who at this point faints thinking about the women who were unable to escape an apparently inescapable fate. She states: “On television they kept recasting the same news. This time the dead were two nameless women, as always” (ESDLC 18). This last phrase emphasizes
the recurring nature of such crimes. And yet, despite the routinely character of such events, the women in the story are paralyzed by the fear of a threatening yet undefined presence that might be lurking in every corner, waiting for the moment to attack and harm them. There is something unsettling in the fact that the crime the older woman has learned about is only one more in a series of similar events. Furthermore, these crimes are yet more results of a spree of violence that is indeed very close to the characters.

In David Spurr’s examples there always seems to exist both a literal and aesthetic distance mediating between the reader of a newspaper or the viewer of television and the events depicted in such media. Notably, he cites Marcel Proust’s description of his experience reading *Le Figaro*, where he unaffectedly learns about “the upheavals of the universe” and “battles that have cost the lives of fifty thousand men”, while simultaneously enjoying “a morning feast” in a “particularly stimulating and tonic manner” and drinking *café au lait* (Spurr 45). Irony aside, Proust conveys his state of indifference in a way that makes clear that he did not feel endangered or concerned in the very least by what he read in the newspaper, no matter how tragic the news actually were. In such circumstances, the production of an aesthetic distance between the world and the reader is achieved. However, the same cannot be said about the characters in “Sin nombre”. They are aware of the fact that what they see in television can very well be their own fate in the near future. Therefore, the confrontation with the news does not produce any sort of aesthetic distance but reader an authentic sense of alarm. Apart from the fear the two women experience, what is more striking in the narration is the non-identification of the women that have been killed: they remain nameless, unidentified as many others. Apart from being deprived of their identity, they have been physically dismembered.
Destruction of the body and anonymity are therefore two consequences of the brutal violence inflicted on these victims. These women were once full-bodied subjects whose identity and corporeity were later torn from them. We should ask: what is left of a person without a body or a name? “Sin nombre” is a story of annihilation, of the most radical effacement of the attributes that constitute one as a human subject: our body and our identity. Consequently, it is also an account of the most ruthless form of social invisibilization.

Many of the stories that compose the volume are recounted from the point of view of a character who has endured the loss of a beloved one. This is the case of the stories “Bato”, by Orfa Alarcón; “Réflex”, by Abril Posas; “Consuelo de tontos”, by Iris García Cuevas, and “Viva”, by Raquel Castro. Out of these four stories, two narrate the murder of women at the hands of a male relative and thus are examples of domestic violence. In “Réflex”, it is the husband that kills his spouse while in “Viva” it is an uncle that kills her niece after sexually abusing her. On the other hand, “Consuelo de tontos” is about a woman whose lover was killed while driving the same car she would later use to work as a taxi driver and halcón (hawk)–, a term designating an individual commissioned to roam the streets in order to provide information to drug dealers about police movements and other reports of the sort. Lastly, “Bato” narrates the disappearance of a lesbian teenager and suffers discrimination for it in her neighborhood, by boys and even her sister. One day she leaves with her sister’s ex boyfriend, who was fried with some of the guys that used to bully her and never gets back. Her sister would later write, “The worst moment of the night is when you realize that the absentee will not return.” (31)

“Réflex” is one of the crudest stories in the book. It begins narrating the feeling of expectation aroused by the disappearance of the narrator’s mother. At the time of the story, she has been gone for fourteen and a half months, “They say it is in the expectation of something that
one learns to count the hours. I learned to do it through the absence [of my mother]” (35). The narration offers a strong depiction of the state of abandonment and almost resignation in which the daughter of the missing woman is.

Before midnight, still, I go to my father’s house, wash the dishes, take care of his clothes and spend time looking at the door in silence as if invoking a ghost to return, no matter if it does it by crawling, half waste or turned into a corpse, in the middle of the road, decided to come back when realizing just how definite the great beyond is. (36)

The invocation of ghosts is a central notion for the purposes of this essay. This passage is definitely one of the most interesting in that it displays key elements in a condensed fashion: the routine of everyday life that imposes its rule even after something terrible has distorted the ordinary rhythm of existence –washing the dishes–; the nearly hopeless expectation in the beloved’s return, the ghastly imagining of the possible forms of such a come back, and the overwhelming sense of definiteness aroused by the confrontation with death.

Nevertheless, here the invocation entails a vague yet persistent sense of hope. The narrator yearns for her mother to return no matter in what shape –crawling but still alive, half deformed or even dead. What seems to be the most important thing for her is to know what happened, what condition her mother is in, no matter how terrible the truth. Nor the narrator nor her father dare move any of the things the disappeared woman left behind, they don’t dare swipe a cloth on anything the woman might have touched, “What if the last trace of her body is erased from that moment and without remedy?” (37)

Sometime before disappearing, the missing woman had taken up photography. The denouement of the story is punctuated by a photograph took by the narrator with her mother’s camera: in the image, she appears with her husband during a family event. It is towards the end
of the story that the narrator discovers the real nature of the image: what was seemingly a moment of tenderness was actually a moment of domestic violence in which her father was approaching her mother in an aggressive manner. The picture, which hung framed on the wall of the living room was actually a denunciation too subtle for the eye to distinguish at a first glance. It is the discovery of this image that makes the narrator realize that it was her father who had killed her mother. A close analysis of an image prompts the discovery of the truth: a murder committed as a consequence of an ongoing history of domestic violence.

“Viva” presents a similar scenario, although in this case it is the disappearance of the narrator’s sister that triggers the action. About ten years pass between her disappearance and the moment in which the story is narrated. In those years, mother and sister join diverse associations of other mothers looking for their daughters. They are organized; they participate in public demonstrations and support each other. However, everything seems to revolve around the search for Sabina, the missing girl. At one point, the narrator states: “I know it’s irrational, but I’m furious with Sabina for disappearing, against my mother for not moving forward with her life and mine, and above all I’m furious with myself because I have not been able to do anything in all these years other than living the absence of my sister” (149). These lines show the impasse produced by the traumatic event of the disappearance. Sabina’s absence weighs too heavily on the women who can’t even mourn because they still believe the missing relative can return. In a somewhat anticipating scene, Marcela, the narrator, recalls how she felt afraid whenever her sister would come back home from work late at night, she would ask out loud if it was Sabina, “I asked with much fear because back then I was terribly afraid of ghosts and monsters” (145). In time, Sabina too would become a sort of ghost, physically absent but always present in some way, haunting her sister.
When Marcela finds out almost by accident that it was her uncle who killed her sister after sexually abusing her—he had previously forced himself on the girls’ mother as well—and buried her in his house’s backyard, it is her mother and other women from the association of mothers which save Marcela and help her denounce and prosecute the killer. The intervention of the members of an association is important because it shows the fundamental relevance of collective organization. Furthermore, it illustrates Alice Driver’s assertion in *More or Less Dead. Feminicide, Haunting, and the Ethics of Representation in Mexico* (2015), stating: “This situation requires that families of the victims function in the interstices of the justice system; they create a parallel, informal system for the investigation of crimes or the search for bodies of victims” (11). Driver’s point is all the more relevant in context of “Viva”, where we can find an example of the ways in which the victim’s families attempt to compensate for the institutional void of justice. *El silencio de los cuerpos* is a book in which women as individuals are almost always found in vulnerable positions—towards men and sometimes also towards other women. However, solidarity and social organization helps compensate this apparent weakness. There is an interesting scene in the story: the associated women are having a public demonstration in the street. Although the women are not in the way of traffic, a man gets off his van and confronts them. He is furious at the women for no apparent reason, seemingly just because they are out there protesting, making themselves visible.

“Consuelo de tontos” is set in the coastal city of Acapulco, once a great touristic attraction at the international level, nowadays greatly affected by violence and organized crime. The narrator is also a woman. She has suffered the loss of a former sentimental partner at the hands of a hit man. The motives that led to the killing of Ricardo remain unclear. She is left alone, driving the taxi Ricardo used to drive and in which he was killed as she helplessly
watched from the passenger seat. At the time the story develops, the narrator works as a taxi driver while also selling drugs and working as an informant for a local drug cartel. One night, the narrator attends a call to pick someone up in the street only to find it is the body of a dead woman that’s lying on the sidewalk where she was supposed to make the pick up. She decides to drive off and in doing so she encounters a police car that is circulating suspiciously close to the place where she found the dead woman. “I go to the bar across the street and sit at the bar waiting for dawn to let the sun or the alcohol scare away the ghosts” (100). Once again, we find the figure of the ghost haunting, as it were, the narrative.

As happens with most of the stories in the book, there is something disembodied that seems to be lurking between the lines. This unfortunate event will trigger all action in the narrative. It seems as if the police is involved in the murder. There is one moment in which the narrator remembers her father, whose leg had been amputated. She recalls, “Nor the stump neither any other part of his battered body hurt, it was the part that was missing that caused him pain. It was his only pain until his death. That’s what happens to me. Ricardo is a part of my body that has been amputated, which has ceased to exist and yet it hurts” (100). This is indeed a very interesting passage. It gives the example of what’s known as the phantom limb, the sensation that an amputated or missing limb is still attached. A majority of individuals with an amputation feel phantom sensations. Interestingly, the majority of those sensations are painful. The example of the phantom limb is very illustrative and shares features with the practice of post-traumatic writing. Something or someone who is absent is the source of a very real pain in the present. This sort of phantom pain constitutes a sense of the presence of the absent. In the narratives we are analyzing, writing materializes as an expression of a similar kind of haunting. There is pain left by those who are absent and it is through writing that this absence is soothed or
Writing is haunted by a phantom component and the leitmotif of the ghost is a manifestation of this phenomenon. When we speak of invocation, we mean precisely this practice of conjuring those ghosts into narrative or other type of writing. Furthermore, we will suggest that haunted writing in this context is politicized in that it conjures the unprivileged and the disenfranchised to give them more visibility in the political arena and hence to challenge the principles of the ruling distribution of the sensible.

The remaining stories in the volume are “Estación Cora”, by Ivonne Reyes Chiquette; “Lepidosirena”, by Tania Tagle; “Soñarán en el jardín”, by Gabriela Damián Miravete; and “Las gallas”, by Susana Iglesias. “Estación Cora” tells the story of a failed family trip in which a man, his young daughter and his new girlfriend attempt to visit a town in which he used to work as a doctor nearly twenty years earlier in the state of Nayarit. Surprisingly, the town and the surrounding area have changed. Once populated by regular and friendly folk, now the streets look almost empty. Only the unsettling presence of men who seem to be on the lookout – standing still at porches or circulating slowly in their vans – is noticeable. When the doctor meets doña Rita, an old acquaintance, he learns about the things that had been happening in the past years: rapes, murders, clandestine executions and disappearances. He is warned not to spend the night in the town. Furthermore, doña Rita tells him: “Violence is unleashed […] Besides, justice does not exist here” (74-5). Convinced it is not a good idea to stay anywhere near the town, the doctor and his companions take off with the hope of arriving at a bigger, safer town before nightfall. On their way out of town, they notice a van that is driving straight towards them. “Estación Cora” portrays the institutional and power vacuum in a large portion of Mexico, where the absence of the rule of law allows criminal organizations like drug cartels to take over and ravage local populations.
Of all the stories composing *El silencio de los cuerpos*, “Lepidosirena” is the one that most distances itself from fictional narrative. It is written in the first person and the narrator is a woman that travels to Ciudad Juárez in order to do field research about Susana Chávez, a late activist and poet that was one of the first to publicly protest about the growing problem of women killings in Ciudad Juárez during the 1990’s. She was killed in January of 2011. The narrator writes:

At the beginning of this project I had intended to read the complete list of their names in order to give them back at least that now that they had been converted into figures. I think I was halfway through when I realized the absurdity of it. I would babble lots of syllables that meant nothing to me, names that once had a face and a story that I could never give back to them simply by uttering their names. (82)

Enclosed in these lines lies the question of an impossibility. Even though the narrator’s first intention was to give back the victims at least their names, she finds this endeavor to be futile, even absurd. The mere recuperation of a name in its syllabic composition amounted to nothing when it came to actually knowing what that person’s face used to look like, what her story was. And yet, the narrator does not quit. Rather, she modifies her approach to the problem. In discovering Susana Chávez is somewhat of an urban myth –no one actually knows what her life was like, everyone remembers her only from her murder– the narrator states, “I had spent the whole day indignant at the loss of memory, for the lack of consciousness of the inhabitants of Juarez. To forget in such way a woman who lost her life fighting for them, trying to give them some voice” (93). There is an interesting parallel between Susana Chávez’s quest and that of the narrator: both attempt to ‘give voice’ –which is also to make visible– to an individual or group that has been neglected, abused or even killed. This suggests there is always the need for a
mediator; it is almost never the victim herself who speaks up or protests: Susana Chávez spoke out for other women, and Tania Tagle, the author of this text, writes about Susana Chávez because she was inspired by her, “I wanted to write about Susana Chávez because it was the only way to steal a life that I found fascinating […] What good would it be for all Juarez to know her and recite her life by heart? The real horror is that in Mexico we only have two options: either we institutionalize our dead or we forget them completely.” (93)

“Lepidosirena” offers an interesting example of the challenge to the distribution of the sensible constituted by this kind of writing. Shortly after arriving at Juarez, the author rides a taxi and listens to a radio emission:

The taxi driver listened to the state news: inaugurations of public works, events to combat obesity, water cuts. Nothing was said about the dead or the levantados, or any of that morbid news about the barbarian north of the country that would reach the capital. The impression left by the news was that there was an unfair stigma of terror and violence on the town, when in reality it was a quiet province aspiring to become a progressive city. […] In contrast to the enthusiastic speech coming out of the radio, the city seemed uninhabited, like a ruin in the middle of the desert. (81)

This passage shows the contradiction between the official versions disseminated by the media and the objective conditions of Juarez. Not only is the official version contrasted with what the narrator sees; it is rather diametrically opposed. As David Spurr asserts, the media presents an image of the world in which events are somehow brought back under control by means of diverse narrative devices (44). Whether or not actual order is imposed in actuality, the media tends to domesticate an otherwise chaotic reality by enclosing events within the limits of

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3 Literally meaning ‘picked up’. It is a term designating a person that has been abducted and that will very likely be killed.
narrative representation. This restoration of order is all the more evident when such discourses are evidently subordinated to instances of power, as is the case with the speech featured in the radio broadcast. Therefore, a subtle relation between narrative order and the perception of representation of a given political order is established. The media contributes to propagate—and even model—the perception that everything is better than it actually is. In disseminating a message focusing on alleged improvements to the life of the citizens of Juarez, the official broadcaster actually intends to mold a determinate kind of perception of the city and its situation. The government imposes such deformed perception of reality as the true state of affairs, therefore implementing a given way to perceive the world. Moreover, David Spurr states:

As suggested by the connection in journalism between the resolution of narrative order and the imposition of political order, the aesthetic stance itself is taken from within a position of power and privilege: the power to perceive poverty as aesthetic value is a privilege not granted to the poor. (47)

It is precisely this that Rancière considers to be one of the most important functions of the police; namely, to generate consensus at the heart of the community by establishing a distribution of the sensible that informs the social space. And this kind of distribution is always imposed from a position of power. Rancière’s statement that the policing system defines a party’s share or lack of it goes along the same lines as Spurr’s in saying that ‘the power to perceive poverty as an aesthetic value is a privilege not granted to the poor’. Omitting the barbaric characteristics of reality, the radio broadcast effaces not only the reality of the acts of barbarism but also the existence of the people who endure it. Here, overlooking the pain and loss of those who suffer is as much as ignoring their relevance and excluding them from the social and political space. In this sense, the description provided by the narrator runs counter to this
articulation from power. In establishing the gap between the official version and what the author perceives, a claim is made as to contest the systematic distortion of the sensible.

“Soñarán en el jardín” (They will dream in the garden) is a story by Gabriela Damián Miravete and it is set in the future. It describes a particular site: a holographic memorial dedicated to commemorate murdered women. There, “Each of the killed women, along with their bodies and their names, would be replicated in a three-dimensional hologram using testimonies and materials provided by their relatives and friends […] all of this would be useful to recreate their voices, movements and reactions, to somehow bring them back to life” (127-8). Hence, the holographic memorial serves as a place in which an artificial sense of presence and visibility regarding the victims would be restored. It is a place for the production of images and simulacra. The intention of this is to ‘bring them back to life’ in order to raise awareness of the violence they endured and prevent such a thing from happening again.

In the story, a mature woman who goes by the appellative of ‘The Guardian’ hosts groups of schoolchildren and other people who visit the holographic memorial. When praised for devoting her life to the strife for justice, she states, “there is no merit in it. It was the only thing we had left. So much horror left us without purpose, senseless. Preserving memory was the only way out” (130). The holographic memorial is placed in a garden. In it, visitors can interact with the holograms of the departed women. They are artificially intelligent, sensitive to touch silhouettes capable of telling the story of the late woman they represent. When a child approaches one of them he is intrigued, he asks her why she does not have a body: “Because they took it away from me. I’m dead. […] –Are you a ghost? –No. I’m a memory, like a photograph” (125). In this fictional account of a future memorial, Gabriela Damián Miravete offers a clear example of an act of making visible. The victims are posthumously given back a body and a
voice. And yet, they remain images, phantasm representations of dead people. This is why the boy confuses the silhouette with a ghost; he cannot discern it from a memory. The holographic memorial produces embodied re-presentations of women in a quest for memory. Alice Driver notes that considering the state of abandonment the victims are left in, it is frequently up to their families to safeguard the memory of their loved ones. In order to do so, they engage in diverse activities and cultural production. On a similar note to the holographic museum described in “Soñarán en el jardín”, Driver points out: “Families and victims regain authority over the narrative of their own lives by creating graffiti, monuments, and memorials rebutting official rhetoric that tends to blame women for the violence they experience” (12). This is an example of how victims’ families dispute the memory of their loved ones to hegemonic discourses, which can be understood as a political practice in that it challenges authoritarian rhetoric in favor of more intimate and truthful accounts of the past.

Lastly, “Las Gallas” is a story that revolves around the relation between sex workers and their pimp. The text is heavily marked by violence and pinpoints the criminalization of women who work as prostitutes. At the same time, “Las Gallas” emphasizes the danger these women endure every day as a consequence of their profession and the gender-biased system that oppresses and exploits the cultural over-sexualization of women characteristic of patriarchal societies. Alice Driver states: “Victims of feminicide are often criticized for being prostitutes, and the rape and mutilation of their bodies is implied to be a result of their profession or lifestyle. To participate in sex work as a woman is seemingly, according to public discourse, equally offensive as or more offensive than the rape or murder of a woman” (8). The fact that killed women are criticized and condemned for being prostitutes even when in reality they weren’t shows how pervasive and gendered social perception on the matter is. Exposing the vulnerability
of prostitutes and the gender violence they are subjected to, this story criticizes the
criminalization of women based on grounds of their occupation.
CHAPTER III. Archives of Pain

Writing and the Rehabilitation of Community

In one of the several public demonstrations that have taken place in Mexico during the last decade, a young woman held a cardboard high above her head, reading: “¿Qué cosecha un país que siembra cuerpos?” (What is the harvest in a country where bodies are sowed?) The question is hardly metaphoric. Numerous clandestine mass graves have been found across the country in the past ten years, some of them containing as many as 250 bodies (Kahn). A newspaper article from April 2015 referred an inedited phenomenon that happened in the northern state of Tamaulipas: as a consequence of intense rain, corpses started sprouting from the ground (Martínez). According to the Secretary of the Interior, around twenty five thousand people had been declared missing or “disappeared” in Mexico as of 2015. It is a commonly shared assumption that many of the remains of such people lie in yet undiscovered clandestine burial sites. Indeed, we should ask what the prospected harvest of such a scenario in terms of cultural and artistic production is? If, as suggested by Jacques Rancière, politics takes place in an aesthetic and performative space, then what are the capabilities of aesthetic discourses to rebuild the space for community?

In a preface to Con/Dolerse Cristina Rivera Garza –Mexican novelist and historian–writes: “I wish this book did not exist” (5). It is the first line in a volume that was published in 2015 as a sequel to Dolerse. Textos desde un país herido, of 2011. The first book was not originally conceived as a whole; rather, it was a compilation of newspaper articles, essays, poems and chronicles, some of which had been published in print or digital media between 2007 and 2010, others unpublished. In terms of authorship Dolerse was, although deeply grounded in
a social reality and intertextuality, an overall individual effort. Rivera Garza wrote all the texts that compose the book and they all deal with the state of affairs that was succinctly described above. In its pages, Rivera Garza attempted “to activate the critical and utopic potential of language.” (Dolerse 17).

The Spanish word dolerse is a reflexive verb which can be translated as ‘to take offense’, ‘to be offended’, or ‘to be hurt’. The meaning of the word condolerse, on the other hand, is to do this same thing in community; in other words, to sympathize, to commiserate, to feel sorry for. In the context of this work, however, a more precise translation would be ‘to bring oneself to feel pain for others’, in short: to feel compassion. Therefore, the purpose of the book is to bring oneself —as the writer but most importantly as a reader— to feel pain for others, and to do so as one who is out in the open and seeks shelter. The reason why Rivera Garza opens the second volume stating her regret concerning the book’s existence is justified: it means that after four years, the situation of the country required yet more pages to be written and more people to be involved in the project. Four years after Rivera Garza’s first efforts to rehabilitate the public sphere through writing things had only gotten worse.

While Dolerse contains twenty-two texts by one author, Con/Dolerse features sixteen pieces of writing by an equal number of writers. Although Rivera Garza is both a literary figure and a renowned academic in Mexico, neither of the books are scholarly works. Rather, they represent a compilation of thoughts, reflections and aesthetic expressions whose root is individual and social pain, collective grief, mourning, and also hope. When Rivera Garza called for reconstructing the sense of community through the emancipatory potentiality of language she was in fact, knowingly or not, calling for the formation of an archive. Therein lies the feeling that a state of humanitarian crisis needs a proportionate response on the side of culture. Therefore,
whatever artistic, cultural, or social forms such a response may take, one thing is certain: it will be a political one. In such a way, culture becomes both a means and a space for struggle and resistance; it is a ground where politics and art converge.

One of the main theses in *Dolerse* is that the Mexican State has rescinded its role as protector of its citizens’ bodies. As a starting point for that reflection, Rivera Garza refers the case of a female patient of a hospital in 1939. This woman was in a feeble state of health: she suffered from cough, flu, had a bad stomach and was about to have surgery. She had no family, so she wrote letters to the local mayor with one particular concern: the final destination of her body. Indeed, the question of her bodily remains was not merely an individual worry: having no family to take care of her, this ill, agonizing woman had nobody to entrust the disposal of her body when the time of her death came. Therefore she addressed diverse functionaries with a demand in which a specific certainty is implied: the handling of her body was a matter of state intervention and responsibility. (51-9)

If we think of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* and Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, the incorporative nature of the State becomes quite evident. The very word ‘incorporation’ should shed some light here, for it comes from the Latin word *corpus*, which means body; thus incorporation refers to the action of including an alien element within something else. To incorporate, then, is to absorb external elements into one’s own body. This metaphor was represented in the frontispiece featured in the first edition of Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1651). In it there appears a giant crowned figure representing an Absolut Monarch –the head of the State. His arms and chest, however, are formed by hundreds of tiny individuals looking inward, thus representing the all-encompassing nature of the state. Moreover, Hegel depicts the successive phases of incorporation that an individual goes through in order to become a member of society, namely:
the child is incorporated into the family, then he is absorbed by civil society and lastly he is constituted as a functional member of the community, subordinated to the power of the state (Hegel 159). Given the incorporative nature of the state, it is only logical to believe that the state is in some way responsible for all the bodies it incorporates within itself.

Rivera Garza states that this facet of state duty has been neglected and is completely absent in present day Mexico: “From its origins, the Neoliberal state has established a relationship without entrails with its citizens” (55). The so-called War on Drugs, declared by former President Felipe Calderón in 2006, has multiplied the spectacle of mutilated bodies across the country. Our bodies are for us to take care of, they are our responsibility, Rivera Garza writes: “It is forgetfulness of the body which opens the door to violence” (59). The most dreadful feature of the so-called War on Drugs is that it entails a declaration of war by the state to its own population. With regard to the incorporative nature of civil society cited earlier, it could be said that such an enterprise is actually one of dismembering and mutilating of the social tissue.

In a scenario where the state has forsaken its citizens and has neglected to care even for their very bodies, the whole concept of association and universalization normally sustained by the state collapses. It is thus left to the disoriented citizens themselves to try and reconstruct a sense and a practice of community. Rivera Garza writes: “Only a historiography centered in the body can harbor studies about pain […] The aching body speaks, but in its own way. It speaks faltering […] We have to find a way of writing (a way of representing) that emulates and incarnates such manner of speaking” (37). The enterprise consists not so much in the paternalistic effort to “give voice” to the abounding narratives of pain, but rather to create a space where such voices can be heard and engage in dialogue. As we have seen before, this creation of a space should not be understood exclusively in a literal way. Although this space
may well take the form of an archive—as is effectively the case with the works examined so far—, we should remember that to Rancière any attempt at engaging in dialogue or other way of political exchange is first a quest for a creating a common code—be it linguistic or other—by which victims acquire social visibility and thus political agency (Disagreement 22-3). The fear expressed by Rivera Garza is that “without a great archive that shelters the voices of the victims of the war [on drugs] […] not only would we forget the massacres and the pain but also, perhaps above all, we would have lost the work it takes to form the community we call neighborhood” (138). In order to soothe the wounded social body, the first remedy that comes to her mind is no other than writing. At this point, it is worth remembering Rancière’s claim that groups are founded by aesthetic means: “Aesthetics […] is what allows separate regimes of expression to be pooled” (Disagreement 57). This is why Rivera Garza believes that a ‘great archive’ would serve as a space where the persistence of memory and the sense of community could be aesthetically guaranteed. Also worthy of consideration is the fact that an archive such as the one suggested by Rivera Garza is necessarily a product of haunting. The ghostly presence of those who have suffered underwrites the necessity to create an archive that accounts and bears testimony of collective experiences of violence, absence, and pain.

*Con/Dolerse* includes a wide range of artistic and writing forms. It features texts about dance, performance, political essays, and documentary poetry. For instance, Eugenio Tisselli writes an entry in which he proposes a new way to dance. He warns that he does not mean any choreography, but rather the sort of movement that “turns bodies into presences” (28). Referring to the “political weight of congregated bodies in a common spaces”, Tiselli is actually talking about public demonstrations, social congregations and assemblies: gatherings motivated by a shared impulse to bring together otherwise distanced members of the social body.
In another contribution, Monica Nepote writes about the performances and interventions of Argentinean artist Tania Solomonoff. Nepote describes the occasion in which the aforementioned artist visited a former police station in Argentina. During the years of the military dictatorship, the building was used as a detention center and many people were tortured and ultimately disappeared within its walls. Solomonoff walks by these walls, inspecting them; wherever she finds a crack, she fills it with honey she carries in a jar. The symbolism of this intervention rests on the conservative, regenerative and restoring qualities of honey. In applying the substance on the fissures of the building, the artist attempts to honor and symbolically regenerate the bodies that were broken inside it.

On a clearly more political note, Irmgard Emmelhainz asserts: “we could consider the violence in Mexico as the local version of the New World Order, a manifestation of global processes” (129). Emmelhainz affirms that while public demonstrations offer a sense of community and collective intimacy, these are only evanescent emotions. Hence, he claims that it is imperative that collective suffering be politicized. Condolences should be transformed into political discourses transcending ephemeral manifestations of sympathy such as the previous examples. For Emmelhainz, a clear program of action is very much needed, although he does not provide any. To re-signify violence –he concludes– would be to create forms of being in common in the public space that could open spaces for self-management and autonomy. (138)

The whole enterprise proposed by these authors seems to revolve around the idea of the dignity of thought. This notion is central to their project in that it presupposes a certain degree of dignity in the mere action of becoming aware of the crudity of the present. Let there be no doubt: it is a noble quest to bring oneself –and others, if possible– to face the truth. The value of true journalistic work lies precisely in this effect. However, it is not enough to recognize violence or
to name horror, however dignified such a task may be. There is something more to be done once the human moment of recognition, commiseration and solidarity occurs. David Spurr addresses this problem when he states that the mediation of journalism between reality and its given audience inaugurates a gap between them. Furthermore, this aesthetic distance results in a rather passive role on behalf of the spectator: “The audience’s role is largely passive and consuming, though appreciative of what it perceives as the satisfaction of its desire for information and amusement (Spurr 45). This is related to what Spurr calls ‘the economy of pity’, by which the suffering of others is made both real and removed from us: “The consequence of this reduction is the alienation produced by ordinary journalistic representation” (Spurr 53). This is the reason why Emmelheinz believes the mere confrontation with truth characteristic of conventional journalistic representation is insufficient and thus advocates for ways of re-signifying violence in order to restore the sense of an autonomous public space.

In contrast to last century’s discussion over committed art that confronted prestigious intellectuals lier Jean Paul Sartre, Theodor Adorno and Georges Bataille, among others, the project outlined by Rivera Garza and joined by many others seems to offer, from the outset, a different kind of commitment. First and foremost, it is not a question of ideology. Even though in the pages of Dolerse and Con/Dolerse Neoliberalism is commonly recognized as the main economic system responsible for the ravages that have taken place in Mexico and a great part of the world during the past decades, the enterprise does not entail any precise ideological definition. The project is about something more fundamental than political parties and ideological affiliations: principally, it is a question of acknowledging the pain of others that surround us, a pain that may very well be our own. Therefore, it is a matter of human compassion, solidarity and consolation. The sole question of recognition is crucial and should
not be taken for granted. The first step towards the reconstruction of any community is the acknowledgment of the fact that the bedrock of civil society has been fractured. In a historical perspective, the act of recognition is an evident sign of the struggle between memory and obliviousness. For this reason, we believe that enterprises like Rivera Garza’s attempt to achieve the political subjectification of a wronged class in society in order to set that identity as a starting point to rebuild the sense of a community that has been broken. Furthermore, this is what Rancière would define as including the excluded non-communal part into the community.

The construction of an archive is crucial for this enterprise. Not only has the archive served in the past as an instrument in the struggle against forgetfulness, but it has also been an indispensable tool in the fight for justice. In the context of post-dictatorial democracies in Latin America, the testimony of victims was used in a widespread movement whose premise was ni perdón ni olvido: neither forgiveness nor forgetfulness. In this regard, the testimony served as evidence in judicial procedures against former authoritative figures that facilitated the torturing, disappearance and murder of citizens.

Argentinean scholar Beatriz Sarlo has widely explored the relevance of testimonial practice in the context of dictatorial violence in South America. For instance in Tiempo pasado, she reflects on the testimony as a historical source and the complexity of its status as an “Icon of Truth” (Sarlo 23). It is not within the scope of this essay to discuss whether testimonies from victims of torture and other abuses can stand as indisputable symbols of truth: there is, of course, an overwhelming emotional charge that can render such testimonials opaque. Nevertheless, testimony has such an authoritative quality precisely as a consequence of its direct involvement with the facts, because it implies an endurance of horror on behalf of the speaker. It is something like a voice sprung from the heart of darkness.
Documentary poetry in particular and writing in general are artistic forms explored in Dolerse and Con/Dolerse. “La escritura doliente” (aching, sorrowful, writing of mourning) practiced by Rivera Garza and others is often documentary. It is about including actual historical documents, quotes, oral speech, newspaper excerpts and other forms of language into poetry or narrative. The result is a text featuring a plurality of voices and therefore suggesting multiple subjectivities (Dolerse 131). In documentary writing the artist does not attempt to ‘give voice’ to the actual victims; rather, the author incorporates such people’s words into his own writing. Thus, testimony and artistry intertwine. Therefore, documentary writing entails both an ethic and an aesthetic positioning. It is a way of re-signifying violence.

American scholar Elaine Scarry is the author of a book named The body in pain: The making and unmaking of the World. In it, the author explores the uses of pain in the context of torture and war. As Peter Stearns remarks in his review of the book, “the essence of the argument in the first section is that war and torture are ultimately equivalent […] because they both depend on infliction of pain and death. They are ultimately destructive of civilization; indeed, the are the negation of civilization” (191). What’s more interesting for the purposes of this work is Scarry’s take on the creative potential that results from destruction. Where Scarry states that war and torture represent the negation of civilization, she affirms there are also creative powers of civilization: “Human imagination, the ability to envisage that which has not existed, is the positive analogue to pain, as creative as the other is negating”. (191)

A very relevant point The body in pain makes is that physical pain is an experience that precludes contact with the subject’s external, sharable world. In contrast to other human emotions or feelings, writes Scarry, physical pain does not have referential content (5). This is to say that pain is an immanent feeling that turns the suffering subject towards itself, blocking
communication with any form of exteriority. In this sense, pain is totalitarian. The more a body endures pain, the less it has an ability to have an external world; thus the individual’s capacity to think and act in community is hindered. Here, it is worth bearing in mind the problematic relation between the conceptual metaphor of the ghost and that of the body. As Ribas-Casasayas and Amanda Petersen write in *Espectros*:

The ghost is neither dead nor alive, neither absent nor present [...] It can be a translucent vision, an echo without a communicating body, something forgotten that remains in place, or a recurrence without a future. In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida describes the specter as a trace that evidences the ruptures in hegemonic discourse.

As echo without a communicating body, the ghost resembles the subject whose tormented body has precluded any interaction with the external world: both seek a new materialization that frees them from the burdens of past trauma and pain. Ghosts have a task to perform in order to achieve emancipation. This is the reason why Derrida defined the specter as evidencing the ruptures in hegemonic discourse. That being said, haunted writing appears as a disruptive element that challenges authoritarian discourses in order to reconfigure the regime of senses that establishes differentiations between the visible and the invisible.

The kind of pain that Rivera Garza compels us to feel is not physical and individual, but rather emotional, ethical and social. In *Dolerse* and *Con/Dolerse*, she delineates an ethics of compassion that comprise victims, authors and readers as the foundational members of new, rehabilitated communities. Although documentary writing finds its origins in the violent transfiguration of the body, these books transport this physical materiality to the domain of social solidarity. This transition from the individual to the social implies both an ethic and a political positioning: it is an individual physical pain that becomes social and politic.
In *Horrorism. Naming Contemporary Violence*, Adriana Cavarero, deals with the question of horror as a new paradigm that defines our time. To Cavarero, the atrocious and “monstrous” presence of horrific scenes in contemporary media is proof that human society is tilting towards barbarism in a global scale. Here, the concept of horror is inseparable from the disfiguration of the body. Through torture and dismembering the body is dehumanized, causing a horrific shock. Martín Camps, in his review of *Horrorism* writes: “Horrorism seeks to disintegrate every human particle and it is because of this that it focuses on the most vulnerable” (196). Therefore, following Judith Butler, the victims of horror are often those who lead the most precarious lives.

Horrorism is a suitable concept to define the state of affairs in Mexico and other parts of the world such as the territories occupied by the so-called Islamic State. As Sergio González Rodríguez argues in *El hombre sin cabeza*, (The Headless Man), Mexican drug cartels and Islamic terrorists use decapitation as an extreme means of subverting normality and thus causing horror. Moreover, decapitation is a highly symbolic act that communicates a complete absence of reason: “One who decapitates is capable of any crime” (*El Hombre sin cabeza* 60). The dissemination of decapitation in the form of videos that are uploaded to the Internet and watched thousands of times by the most assorted kinds of people in reduced time spans contributes to the spectacularization of violence; it facilitates the implantation of terror. However, even when such horrific images flood the media, there is always an insurmountable aesthetic distance between the objective world and the audience. For this reason, David Spurr believes the aestheticization of journalism can be thought of in terms of privilege, displacement, consumption and alienation:

Taken together, these terms imply a certain possession of social reality which holds it at arm’s length and makes it into the object of beauty, horror, pleasure and pity […] In this
sense, aestheticization does not so much falsify as it takes hold of and commodifies reality, securing it for the expansion of the observer’s sensibility” (59).

Conventional journalism presents a domesticated version of reality in that it submits the objective world of events to aesthetic principles that allow for their rationalization. In the context of massive communications, events are represented following the principles of an aesthetic of consumption. As we have noted earlier, this consumption is mostly passive on behalf of the spectator irrespectively of the empathy it might feel towards the ones who suffer on the other side of the screen or the page. In this sense, the audience is alienated from reality no matter how poignant the representations of it are on the news, the printed press, or radio emissions. There is always an element of social privilege implied when one sees the tragedy suffered by others. The perception of the suffering of others is thus aestheticized for, as David Spurr puts it: “the power to perceive poverty as aesthetic value is a privilege not granted to the poor.” (Spurr 47)

Horror and pain are commonly thought to be beyond the grasp of language. It is debatable whether documentary writing can come close to express the dismal sensation horrific and painful experiences produce. Nevertheless, the attempt to construct an archive featuring such disrupted and disrupting voices represents a first step in order to build up a conglomerate of texts that may help bring closer such experiences and thus contribute to their sedimentation in the collective mind. Such an endeavor is not only necessary but also urgent inasmuch as it entails the ethic acknowledgment that the pain of others and the horror has become a feature of everyday life. This is where González Rodríguez’s claim acquires the utmost relevance: “Against the ideology of the “unspeakable”, the “inexpressible” and the “incomprehensible” […] it is necessary to expose and imagine the state of barbarism in order to resist and counter it”. (154)
In *Los muertos indóciles. Necroescrituras y desapropiación*, Cristina Rivera Garza engages in yet another aspect of this issue; namely: writing. The concept of *Necroescrituras* (“Necrowriting”) is inspired by Achille Mbembe’s article “Necropolitics” (2003). In that essay, the author developed the notion of Necropolitics as a complementary concept to what Michel Foucault called bipolitics a few decades earlier. Necropolitics implies the exertion of power over death, thus defining life as a manifestation of such power. For Rivera Garza, *necrowriting* alludes to a writing that is born in environments of high mortality and violence. Arguably, the concept of *necrowriting* is close to what we have defined earlier as haunted or ghostly writing for it is inextricably linked to the dead. Moreover, both *necrowriting* and haunted writing manifest a debt with the victim, which renders them deeply political practices.

On the other hand, *desapropiación* (dis-appropriation) refers to a writing practice in which the individual author is displaced by a communal authorship. Dis-appropriation conceives language and writing as social phenomena that cannot be circumscribed to the domain of property. Dis-appropriated writing thus implies a dispossession, the result of which is the establishment of writing and language as a communal space for conversation, mourning, and consolation, but also for a struggle for justice. One of the main goals of dis-appropriated writing and *necrowriting* is to “produce present”. In other words, these kinds of writing are deeply aware of the urgency of articulating cultural responses to critical social scenarios. (Rivera 2013: 22-4)

The question of mourning is crucial and is certainly the backdrop for *Dolerse* and *Con/Dolerse*. In this regard, the text by Judith Butler “Violence, Mourning, Politics” is of great importance. Rivera Garza writes: “Mourning, the psychological and social process through which the loss of the other is acknowledged publicly and privately, is perhaps the most obvious instance of our vulnerability and, ultimately, our human condition” (123). This is to say that
vulnerability and the precarious nature of life are some of the most commonly shared features of human experience. However, there is a scale of vulnerability and precariousness that informs the stratification of societies across the globe. This has a relation to mourning in that, as Butler puts it, some lives are grievable while some are less prone to be so. This is made particularly evident in the context of terrorists attacks: while a terrorist attack to a Western city that takes Western lives is capable of generating a massive reaction of solidarity in social media, the mortal victims of a similar attack in a peripheral or “Third World” country hardly creates such empathy. This kind of distribution of the sensible, to quote Rancière, precludes the realization that all lives should be grievable to an equal measure.

**Transnational Spaces for Mourning**

While the efforts of Mexican writers and intellectuals concerned with the question of community have logically made emphasis on the Mexican context, it should be noted that the creation of a communal space for mourning transcends the limits of nationality. For instance, in *A Transnational Poetics*, Jahan Ramazani explores the struggle to build a communal and transnational space for mourning. The fundamental question Ramazani addresses in his book is whether poetry can be detached from its national constraints in order to be understood as a transnational and trans-linguistic production that contributes to the global process of interculturalism. The third chapter of this book delves on nationalism, transnationalism and the poetry of mourning. Therein Ramazani focuses on the elegy as a genre that has served both the purposes of nationalism and transnationalism; in this respect, Ramazani advocates for the construction of transnational cultural spaces of mourning not contained by nationalist boundaries. He believes poetry in general and the elegy in particular can serve this purpose.
Ramazani reflects on how certain narratives of victimization get established as ‘chosen traumas’ that serve as a basis for national identity. While it cannot be said that the violence of the past decade has informed national identity in Mexico, it is evident that pain, grief and mourning have become shared experiences across the country. As collective experiences, grief and violence transcend national boundaries. In this regard, it is important to highlight Judith Butler’s assertion that mourning furnishes a sense of political community while at the same time it theorizes fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility (82). Ramazani believes that the elegy as a genre helps dissolve boundaries between mourners and mourned and that it also aids to establish micro communities between them. In this sense, there is a deterritorialization of grief for collective experiences of pain become a shared feature of humanity:

> Constructing transnational cultural spaces of mourning, spilling grief across boundaries of race, ethnicity, and nation, they [the elegies] build structures of feeling that represent alternatives to modern nationalist efforts to bind mourning within an imagined community of compatriots. (85)

In a time marked by the resurgence of nationalism and xenophobia in Western countries, the question of transcending national barriers in order to acknowledge precariousness and vulnerability as fundamental conditions of humanity acquires particular relevance. Furthermore, the mere act of recognizing the responsibility of both the Mexican and the American governments in the conflict of drugs could help readers realize that even when scenarios of extreme violence may appear as endemic particularities, they are in fact embedded in much larger, indeed often global contexts generated at least in part by the planetary hegemony of Neoliberalism. Although there are some hints and references to the global presence of social pain, grief and mourning in *Dolerse* and *Con/Dolerse*, we find this particular aspect to be slightly
underdeveloped in these books. While this absence does not constitute a flaw of the works inasmuch as the authors did not explicitly set out to bring the global dimension of these experiences to bear on the books, we believe that an exploration of such scale would strengthen their claims and even allow them to communicate their concerns to larger audiences. This is to say that the contributions to the archive of pain that is being created in Mexico should not detach from others that are being produced in different countries and contexts. This would contribute to the establishment of pain and grief as communal human experiences that transcend national boundaries, cultural diversity and geography. Moreover, the practice of transnational mourning of victims of violence and the construction of narratives and other artistic and critical expressions that address their loss would aid to create a communal corpus that addresses specific and general demands in matter of human rights.

For example, in *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form and International Law*, published in 2007, Joseph Slaughter attempts to establish the interrelations of and the writing of human rights’ laws in an international perspective. The central point in Slaughter’s book is to show the way in which both human rights law narratives and ‘coming of age’ novels deal with the fundamental concept of social incorporation. Traditionally, the ‘coming of age’ novel deals primarily with the question of social recognition. In its conventional emplotment, these novels portray the incorporation of the protagonist into a greater corporal entity, thus acquiring certain legibility being recognized as a subject by the whole of society.

In the context of human rights law, this particular kind of narrative resembles that of the individual who acquires the status of a rights holding citizen. Interestingly, Slaughter’s work is successful in revealing how narrative fiction contributes to the individual’s process of normalization and incorporation to the social whole. In showing this, Slaughter’s work takes an
Althusserian, Foucauldian and Hegelian turn: it portrays the individual as constantly subjected to interpellation by institutions, normalization by authority and ultimate incorporation to civil society. In other words, the *Bildungsroman* allows us to convey a figure of the transition from individuality to sociality. As we have seen throughout this essay, this logic of social incorporation is not always fulfilled. In fact, more often than not certain members, classes or groups of society are excluded from participation and political engagement. A narrative form as the *Bildungsroman*–which has been considered by certain scholars an essentially conservative sub-genre of the novel– hardly seems appropriate to address such scenarios of social exclusion. This is where alternative approaches such as haunted writing seem more relevant and capable of reconfiguring the way in which we perceive the world.

Similarly, the formation of a global archive for social pain would represent a remarkably contribution to the humanities in that it would help articulate the different cultural responses that have emerged in humanitarian crisis contexts. Moreover, it would help to establish the social implications that have germinated from the soil of Neoliberalism in a wide variety of countries. In such fashion, aesthetic experimentation, documentary writing and popular expression can fuel and articulate strong political claims in matter of human rights on a global scale. Optimistically, the constitution of a transnational space for communal mourning can set the ground to dig trenches for the political, human rights battles of the present and the future.

While the project outlined by Rivera Garza and supported by many others is a noble one, it seems to me that it still fails to reach an extensive social scale. Consider Theodor Adorno’s text *Commitment*, in which he praised the works of Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka as artworks that made officially committed works –like Sartre’s and Brecht’s– look “like pantomime” (314). Adorno considered that such works portrayed the true condition of mankind, namely, the
abdication of the subject. He went on to suggest: “The inescapability of their works compels the change of attitude which committed works merely demand” (315). It is no doubt a matter of debate to establish just how many social changes were brought about by readings of Beckett and Kafka –or Sartre and Brecht, for that matter. What seems to be missing here is the awareness that the work of prestigious artists –such as Rivera Garza– is usually appreciated in privileged bourgeois and cultivated milieus.

High culture addresses privileged interpretative communities. This is not to say that such aesthetic expressions lack value. However, rational objectivity compels the pragmatic mind to believe that such endeavors –not in themselves but by themselves– lack in-depth transformative potential. There is an undeniable sense of tenderness and solidarity in *Dolerse* and *Con/Dolerse* and this is perhaps one of the works’ major merits, for it succeeds in bringing the reader to feel pain for others and to commiserate. In their conjuring of the ghosts of recent Mexican history, these works contribute to the ever-unfinished process of political subjectification of the wronged by society and the yet unsatisfactorily answered claim for justice. In the first edition of *Dolerse*, one thousand copies were printed. Perhaps a few thousand readers –most likely students, artists, liberal professionals and academics– found solace and inspiration in its pages. Five years later came *Con/Dolerse* adhering the sensitivity and talent of a valuable handful of people. A new community –of victims, authors, and readers– was born. Just as 72 migrantes, Ayotzinapa. *La travesía de las tortugas* and *El silencio de los cuerpos*; the work initiated by Rivera Garza and followed by others contributes to give legibility, a name and a face to the disenfranchised. In this sense, these works are valuable contributions to incarnate the invisible. Is this enough to cure the heart of a broken country? –Not nearly. But it is something: like a heartbeat.
CONCLUSION

Haunted writing circulates at the crossroads between the politics of memory, spectrality theory, trauma studies, the notion of ethics of representation, and the power of the written word. In this context of the works that were analyzed in this research, writing serves as an invocation that allows materializing, visualizing and making present those who have been forcefully made absent. Additionally, this kind of writing serves as a device for political subjectification in that it operates as a linguistic means that aesthetically contributes in the process of formation of groups and social identification.

As we have seen throughout this essay, there have been multiple attempts made by numerous writers, artists and scholars to use writing as a tool and a vehicle in the strife for memory and justice in Mexico during the last decade. In this sense, the quest to recuperate the identity of victims stands as a political exercise for it presupposes an attempt to ‘give voice’ to those who have been excluded from political participation and even life. All the works analyzed in this research share a similar motivation, however distinct cultural productions they might be. These writing projects have been defined as haunted because they invariably deal with absences that somehow persist and haunt the consciousness of diverse collectivities. Therefore, writing is used as a medium to invoke the ghosts of those who have been wronged in order to posit claims to memory, recognition, and justice.

Political subjectification implies a confrontation with power and its constructed principles of perception. Furthermore, it entails a challenging of authority and the assertion of dissentient views that undermine the ruling distribution of the sensible. All subjects aspiring to such identification are in some way marginalized and misrepresented. In the cases that were analyzed
in this essay, the protagonists are victims and close relatives affected by the national phenomenon of the War on Drugs in Mexico and also other social issues as gender violence and the abuses against migrants. For that reason, these works serve as instruments of representation that aspire to compensate, up to some extent, the shortcomings of civil society with regards to its most disenfranchised members. Through acts of political subjectification that eschew from the invisibilizing nature of mere statistics and cyphers, social agents are made visible and rendered capable of political participation. In the works that were studied in chapter two lay a quest to incarnate the invisible yet ever present ghosts from the ravages of history and the economic system.

Moreover, chapter three examined two works that attempt to supplement the fractured sense of community through language and other artistic expressions. In this regard, writing is understood as a fundamentally social practice that creates bonds between victims, writers, and readers and that is thus capable of creating communities of interpretation, remembrance, and resistance. The third chapter also explored ways in which narratives about the body, human rights, and communal experiences of grief intersect in a global scale and amount to the creation of transnational spaces of mourning that may adopt the form of an archive of social pain.

We have demonstrated the political nature of all the artworks featured throughout these pages. And although we acknowledge the power of the written word in the struggle for justice and even value such attempts at a more remembering and dignified world, we are also aware of the insufficiency of such endeavors by themselves. These works are marked by an impossible ethical fulfillment. In emerging from deeply conflicted social contexts, in finding their inspiration and motivation in the most radical obliteration of human dignity, these pursuits are irremediably haunted by a horrific origin. With regard to this, there is a temporal disjunction that
informs the problematic relation between a traumatic past, a conflicted present, and an uncertain future.

At this point, we feel inclined to evoke Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*, arguably one of the most influential Mexican novels of the twentieth century. The book tells the story of Juan Preciado, who travels to the town of Comala in search of Pedro Páramo, his father, who used to be the town’s overlord. Juan Preciado was instructed by his mother to go there and demand what was owed to him. After arriving, Juan Preciado gradually finds out that the people he encounters—the voices he hears, the bodies he sees—are all dead. Comala is a ghost town. Its inhabitants were betrayed, forgotten, and wronged by Pedro Páramo, who thereby sentenced the entire population to perdition. Juan Preciado never leaves Comala. As a consequence of his interaction with the town’s forgone inhabitants, hopeless and fearful, incapable of escaping their domain, he too joins the dead.

*Pedro Páramo* is a highly illuminating example of how a figure of power and authority is capable of condemning large groups of people to vulnerability, precariousness, and even death. Unfortunately, the contemporary political and economic situation in Mexico suggests a metaphoric proliferation of Comalas—with its whispers and its apparitions. The country is populated by spectral presences that haunt many of those who remain to mourn. This research pays homage to those ghosts and hopes that, unlike Juan Preciado, we can return from the domain of the dead and, by keeping a dignified memory of those we have lost, be able to build a more just country for the living.
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