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Disappearance of Central American migrants in Mexico: Discursive formation and value forms on the migratory route

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Abstract

The article reconstructs and critically analyses two main contemporary discursive formations associated with migrants disappearing in transit through Mexico: the official state discourse and the social discourse of organizations searching for missing persons along the migratory route. This article discusses how the two discourses contradict each other, disputing how to represent a phenomenon occurring at the intersection of diverse, complex forms of violence. This exposes collusion between states and criminal organizations, as well as the scattered duplications and continuities between legal and illegal dynamic forces producing regional social order. Disappearance is a technique specific to actors who are battling one another in a broader field of transnational mobility and circulation. In addition, both discourses hinge on social value forms that go beyond the strictly pecuniary and situate people's systematic disappearance as a central feature of regional power networks. The empirical data was collected during fieldwork in Mexico and Central America, and collated with data published in recent reports (state and non-governmental) on migrants' disappearance in Mexico. *Keywords*: migrants, disappearance, migrant route, discourse, Mexico, Central Americans.

Resumen: Desaparición de migrantes centroamericanos en México: Formaciones discursivas y formas de valor en la ruta migratoria

El artículo reconstruye y analiza críticamente dos principales formaciones discursivas contemporáneas en torno al fenómeno de la desaparición de migrantes en su tránsito por México: el discurso estatal-oficial y el discurso social de organizaciones que buscan a personas desaparecidas en la ruta migratoria. El argumento muestra cómo ambos discursos se enfrentan por la representación de un fenómeno atravesado por y producido desde diversas y complejas formas de violencia que visibilizan relaciones de connivencia entre estados y organizaciones criminales, así como difusos traslapes y continuidades entre dinámicas legales e ilegales en la producción de un orden social regional. La desaparición constituye una técnica específica de actores que disputan en un campo más amplio de mobilidad y circulación transnacional. Asimismo, ambos relatos se articulan en torno a formas de valor social que van más allá de lo estrictamente pecuniario, y que colocan a la desaparición sistemática de personas en un lugar central de las redes de poder regional. La información empírica utiliza-

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da ha sido generada a partir de trabajo de campo en México y Centroamérica, y de datos de los más recientes informes (estatales y no gubernamentales) sobre desaparición de personas migrantes en México. *Palabras clave*: migrantes, desaparición, ruta migratoria, discurso, México, centroamericanos.

Introduction

In this paper, I contend that discourses addressing the phenomenon of migrant disappearances in Mexico have faced off in a dispute that a) makes the phenomenon invisible and portrays it as a set of isolated cases beyond the responsibility of the State; and, b) makes it visible as a systematic and central in the shaping of the regional social order. These two main discursive formations are reconstructed and analysed in dialogue with the current literature on migrants' disappearance (González-Villareal, 2012; Reynolds, 2014; Citroni, 2017; Gatti, 2017; Gatti & Irazuzta, 2019; Diaz-Lize, 2020), and on the transnational processes of searching for and securing justice (Varela-Huerta, 2012; López-Martínez, 2015; Citroni, 2017; Martínez-Castillo, 2020). I use data gathered during several fieldwork stays in Mexico and Honduras, to reconstruct the work of governmental bodies and social organizations in registering and searching for disappeared migrants. I also include recent data from official and non-governmental reports on migrants' disappearance along the Central America-United States route. Based on concepts of "discursive formation" (Foucault, 2015 [1973]) and "value forms" (Graeber, 2001) as analytical framework, I argue that this dispute is part of more broadly producing a legal-illegal social order characterised by various forms of violence.

First, I discuss the transnational field socially producing migratory processes and implementing technologies of violence linked to the phenomenon of migrant disappearances. It is a field disputing control over space and diverse dynamics of mobility and circulation, in response to which a continuum of value-violence accompanies the entire migratory route. Secondly, I reconstruct and analyse the official state account of the phenomenon of disappearances in Mexico, which materialises a discursive formation that individualises, disperses, and renders invisible the phenomenon and its structural dimension. Finally, I analyse the discourse built by subaltern actors, linked to the transnational procedures of searching for missing migrants and seeking justice, finding that it can be understood as a symbolic process, but which, in order to be implemented, is territorialised by means of technologies and practices of searching and advocacy.

The transnational field of migration and the value-violence continuum

I contend that contemporary migration processes taking place in the Central America-Mexico-United States corridor are socially produced by diverse actors (social, state, business, criminal, non-governmental), linked together in a com-

plex social distribution of labour. From these forms of labour, various forms of mobility are (re)produced and assorted value forms are generated. I also assume that this social production of migration is permeated, practically constituted, by various forms of social and state violence that must be interpreted in light of the conflicts and historical cleavages in the region's formation. Linked to these forms of violence, the phenomenon of migrant disappearances along the route is an indicator of one of the most dramatic and still obscure effects of contemporary mobility, and suggests the ways in which state, business, and criminal capture is implemented and managed. The scenario of these processes can be approached as a *field* (Bourdieu, 1989, 1990, 2000) in which various actors dispute material and symbolic control over space and certain forms of mobility and circulation – of people, goods, capital, and resources. Furthermore, this field extends beyond national borders, as a *transnational field* (Jiménez, undated, 2010), given the region's incorporation into the rationale and forces of global capitalism. (Mezzadra, 2012). The region's transnational field of action is conditioned both by national processes of state formation and by the national and regional operation of other actors, such as organised crime and its territorial deployment of warfare. As Martínez-Castillo points out, in addition to the "historically implemented [disappearances] by state and para-state elements to control political dissidence, disappearance is now used as a technology of terror to control territories, migratory flows, and natural resources" (Martínez-Castillo, 2020: 78).

Although I agree with Gatti and Irazuzta (2019: 2) when, referring to Bourdieu, they sustain that "a real field has been developing around disappearances," and that this, moreover, is configured as transnational because "the form it is adopting exceeds and precedes the phenomenon in its Mexican" or Central American manifestation (Gatti & Irazuzta, 2019: 2). I do not assume that a "field of disappearance" exists as such, even if it is conceptualised as "under development" (Gatti & Irazuzta, 2019). Rather, the premise is that disappearance constitutes a technique or practice (and its effects) specific to actors who are battling one another in a broader field, for example, that of transnational mobility and circulation as dynamics of the activities of global capitalism, and that in this region is similar to what Mbembe describes regarding forms of colonial warfare.[1] As a tactical technique, disappearance, or rather, *making people disappear*, is part of a war technology that is central to extraction and value capture surrounding these forms of mobility and circulation.

As I previously mentioned, this dispute is material but also symbolic, largely played out different actors' discursive formations, either to legitimise the use of space and control forms of mobility, or to impose it. This is the dimension that interests us herein, revolving around reconstructing and understanding two contemporary discourses regarding the disappearance of migrants in transit through Mexico, that is, state-official discourse and social discourse produced by organizations that search for people who have disappeared along the migratory route, particularly the so-called Committees of Relatives of Disappeared

Migrants (Comités de Familiares de Migrantes Desaparecidos, hereinafter Comités). Both discourses emerge from and are limited to antagonistic (Laclau & Mouffe, 2011) formation processes (Foucault, 2010) regarding the social production of disappearance and its effects. The impossibility of agonistic recognition of the other as something more than an enemy, that must be eliminated, places the logic of war as central to the phenomenon, and conjures up the possibility of non-violent stabilisation of the field. The extent to which actors strategically articulate this discourse (Laclau & Mouffe 2011: 143), this antagonism will be (contingently) resolved in favour of one or the other, and some representations of disappearance will be more effective than others.[2] For our case, a hegemony of the official, security and nationalist discourse is clearly consolidated.

Regarding the aforementioned forms of violence, of which disappearance is only one of its expressions, I emphasize that they are essential to operating value extraction and capture techniques along the migratory route. In order for these massive, constant forms of mobility to take place, a wide, diverse range of social actors are needed to contribute, in different ways and with different interests, to producing this mobility, and whose work generates different forms of social value (in a broad sense). I start from the premise that one of the central actors in producing mobility are the migrants themselves, who carry out work involving their own physical condition to produce their movement (Salazar, 2019).

Making [someone] disappear, as a violent value-extraction mechanism, is directed primarily at the bodily condition of the migrant population and at the forms of social value linked to their mobility. The logistics of mobility (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2019), informal and illegal labour markets (flexible or forced), corrupt, extortive state structures, local and transnational criminal actions, are all components of the configuration along the migration route of what I call a *continuum of value-violence*. These mechanisms of value extraction determine a transnational chain of violence that begins at the moment of departure (payment of guides or *coyotes*, payment for crossing at blind spots, assaults, etc.), including the constant extortion of the migrant population in transit by public officials, local and federal police, migration agents, and detention centre officials, overcharging by transporters and local traders, sexual and labour exploitation (Martínez-Castillo, 2020: 79) , as well as non-remuneration of employers, kidnapping for ransom and forced labour, and massacres.

These ongoing extraction mechanisms along the route hinge on the value forms associated with migratory mobility, yet they also reflect a specific intertwining, at different levels and intensities throughout the region, of state structures and criminal organizations. Thus, the technologies of disappearance converge around forms of social value that are useful for both state formation and criminal capital reproduction. This demonstrates the local-transnational operation of state-criminal collusion that is manifested in the supplementary participation of border-control operations and regulation mechanisms that shape mi-

gratory flows and contribute to their capture and exploitation: The state establishes a dispersed regime of border security (Pallito & Heyman, 2008) that creates conditions to capture and redirect value (Appadurai, 1991), while organised crime deploys a regime of capture and capitalisation of mobility (Cofamide et al. 2012; IACHR 2015; Izcara Palacios, 2016). These regimes complement each other to drive and capture the forces of labour and movement [3] (Salazar, 2019), in a complex economy of violence that emerges from the moment people are expelled and flee [4] and extends along the route. The output of this structure is apparent in dead, mutilated, exhausted, and disappeared bodies, and is an indicator of the specific value forms on which this apparatus of disappearance operates:

> In areas where human trafficking and organ smuggling networks operate, women and children are the main victims of disappearance. In regions with a heavy presence of drug-trafficking cartels, young men are disappeared for reasons of recruitment, hired killings, or social cleansing. Migrants are disappeared and forced into labour; Tamaulipas is the state with the highest risks. There are other areas of the country where criminal groups disappear professionals in order to force them to collaborate. Last, it should be noted that there are also disappearances within the ranks of State security forces (Martínez-Castillo, 2020: 79).

Against this backdrop, we need to understand how the main data and records on disappearance are collected by the state and principally how this information is produced in its statistical, forensic, judicial, and legal dimensions. These data show the rationale and patterns of how the state moulds its discourse regarding the phenomenon of disappearance, its social and political effects, as well as its fissures, which open up space for opposing arguments.

The phenomenon of disappearance from a state perspective

The data presented below are the product of what Diaz-Lize has conceptualised as "factualisation devices" – mechanisms, techniques, and practices of representation that bring the world of experience to a dimension of standardised realities, which can be beneficial for the *raison d'état* in its biopolitical dimension. Maps, lists, statistical databases (Diaz-Lize, 2020: 3) which, in the case of Mexico and Central America, have serious operational and methodological weaknesses and imply, like all accounting for human experiences, "a process of equivalence that obliterates the singular identity of the person and first-person testimony" (Diaz-Lize, 2020: 18). As I will show below, it is precisely the objective of various social actors who seek to recover these social and political identities by confronting and contesting state and official discourses and deploying strategies of search and reparations. The main official database on missing persons in Mexico is the National Register of Missing and Disappeared Persons [5] (RNDPED), which between 2007 and 2014 recorded 23,605

cases,[6] of which 23,271 were logged in the local jurisdiction [*fuero común*] (30 percent women, 50 percent under 50 years old, and 157 people from Central America), and 332 in the federal jurisdiction [*fuero federal*] (24.3 percent women, mostly young people between 15 and 29 years old, and 34 foreigners).[7] During this period, 2014 stands out as one of the years with the highest reported disappearances in the history of the country (5,980 victims between January and October, for a daily average of 14.2)[8]. By 2015, the figure had risen to around 27,000.

In its most recent statistical cut-off in 2018 (30 April), the database accumulated a total of 37,435 missing persons according to the number of reports filed in federal jurisdiction (1,170 between January 2014 and April 2018: 84 percent men, 16 percent women,[9] and 15 percent foreigners). In the local jurisdiction, there were 36,265 reports filed (75 percent disappeared men and less than 1 percent foreigners). The highest figures were posted between 2010 and 2015; the states with the highest number of complaints are on the northern border and in the centre of the country, where organised crime structures coincide with the main migratory routes.[10]

However, the data have been harshly criticised by various societal organisations,[11] claiming that the calculations are misleading and that there is a severe undercount. These organisations, including the *Comités*, both from Mexico and Central America, highlight the weaknesses in registration forms, given the complex conditions in which complaints are filed, and the gaps in the follow-up of cases and the pursuit of justice. The 2019 *Thematic shadow report on enforced disappearances and disappearances by private individuals in Mexico*, notes that the disappearance of persons in the country "is of a magnitude such that it can be described as a humanitarian crisis, in which more than 40,000 missing persons have been registered, including migrants in transit through Mexico" (Cepad et al. 2019: 1). The National Human Rights Commission (CNDH, 2019) indicates that "there are no accurate and reliable official figures of missing persons, nor is there a solid database in operation that centralises the registry of all persons in this situation.".

Moreover, while it is plausible to assume that many persons go missing due to forced disappearances, there is no official figure in this regard and there is no recorded evidence to document them as such. I have reflected elsewhere (Salazar, 2017) on the political, legal, and judicial implications of the category of forced disappearance, established by the Inter-American Convention on Forced Disappearance of Persons, which is the main tool for pursuing justice. This includes a genealogy associated with historical contexts (military dictatorships of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s), during which the technologies of disappearance were operated directly by state machinery using state rationale, however, different from today's more complex situation (Gatti & Irazuzta, 2019).

As Martínez-Castillo noted, "current violence makes it difficult to document the links between disappearances and state agents, further complicating the demand for justice, since cases do not easily correspond to laws that define forced

disappearance as such by state commission, omission, or acquiescence" (Martínez-Castillo, 2020: 79). For Gatti and Irazuzta, "the [Convention] category, which still prescribes certain procedures for dealing with disappearance throughout the world, no longer covers all manifestations of the phenomenon" (Gatti & Irazuzta, 2019: 4). The institutionalised definition of *forced disappearance* does not suffice to account for the new situations of disappearance (Gatti & Irazuzta, 2019: 1, emphasis in original). [12]

These gaps are reflected in Mexico's judicial system, where the majority of cases of disappearances are processed. According to the Federal Attorney General's Office (PGR), between 2006 and 2014, only six convictions for the crime of enforced disappearance were handed down at the federal level (out of a total of 239 investigations), and only 1 percent of the cases were prosecuted. [13] The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR, 2015: 73) documented "repeated complaints from victims about the actions of the state attorney generals' offices," noting that complainants are not treated adequately or at all when they try to file a complaint, and that "they encounter so many barriers and so much mistrust that they prefer not to file a formal complaint."

The state-official discourse on the phenomenon of disappearances in Mexico has specific rules for its formation, conditions that characterise the social existence of the data, and truths factualised by institutional mechanisms regarding the circumstances, scope, and effects of disappearance. These are grounded in a particular *raison d'état* and the need for its strategic deployment in the transnational field described above, and built upon a deficient statistical and informational machinery. Rather than recreating "systems of dispersion" of facts (the phenomenon of disappearance is composed of many diverse disappearance events), under one or several declarations that reduce complexity, these rules of discursive formation recreate the phenomenon based on its disintegration and disaggregation into a series of disjointed cases that "become a very long series of isolated events of people who simply disappear" (Mastrogiovanni, 2015: 32).

In other words, rather than attempting to integrate the phenomenon of disappearance, the official discourse portrays it as dispersed and lacking common structural conditions producing it. Paradoxically, this procedure of disintegrating the cases in the databases is what implements discursive distribution and establishes it under the same enunciative exercise. It constitutes the rules of discursive formation, according to which the phenomenon is portrayed according to the state's perception. While certain dissenting actors, such as the *Comités*, articulate a position that makes the phenomenon's structural dimension visible, the state discourse portrays these dimensions as a complex aporetic assertion: Cases are registered by establishing their disconnection, as if they were not the result of an operation carried out by certain identifiable forces, as if their dispersion were the only factor they have in common.

The strategic situation of the field and the (also strategic) absence of the state, exemplified by deficient procedures for factualising cases (Diaz-Lize, 2020) shows a clear (and officially recognised) weakness in the set of 'different practices, carried out by technical means in entities that participate in constituting cartographic, numerical, and statistical realities' regarding disappearance (Diaz-Lize, 2020: 17).[14] Furthermore, "in the analysis there is no adequate classification in accordance with international standards on the different cases that may arise" (CNDH, 2014), and "the official figures are not reliable and constitute the first obstacle to the search for disappeared persons, the clarification of the truth, and justice" (CIDH, 2015: 68). Although, in the last five years, some official initiatives have been implemented in response to pressure from numerous organisations, such as the creation of the Special Prosecutor's Office for the Search for Disappeared Persons (FEBPD) in 2015 or the approval of the General Law on Forced Disappearance and Disappearance Committed by Private Parties (LGMDFP) in November 2017, the weakness in registration, the lack of data systematisation, and the ineffectiveness of the search processes remain.[15]

The shaping of this state-official discourse is based on operating what we could call *devices of meta-disappearance*: institutional rationale and practices that operate by a) generating conditions that make reporting difficult or impossible[16]; b) generating conditions that make systematic registration and the development of integrated and effective databases difficult; and c) producing an official media discourse that downplays the social circumstances of disappearances.[17] These devices make people disappear through the invisibility of their possibility conditions and the institutional blurring of their personal and collective impact, discounting the social phenomenon by portraying it as a set of isolated or structurally unconnected cases, and concealing the diverse ways in which it is an element of local and national state-formation.

These devices are even more forceful when it comes to the migrant population. According to estimates by independent media agencies and societal organisations, during the six-year term of Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), an estimated 60,000 Central and South American migrants disappeared (Mastrogiovanni 2015: 13).[18] Amnesty International (2010: 18) has stated that "hundreds of irregular migrants disappear or are killed every year during their journey north, [and that] there are no reliable official figures on the number of victims, [which] has contributed to limiting public awareness of the problem."

It is only through filing complaints, undertaking advocacy, and lodging demands by societal organisations, particularly the aforementioned *Comités* and other organisations of relatives of disappeared Mexicans, that an alternative discourse on disappearance has evolved, making visible its structural conditions and its dramatic social effects. It is precisely this process of discursive formation that leads the *Comités* to become actors in the transnational field of migration, disputing both how the phenomenon is portrayed and their own media and territorial presence in terms of the search and reparation processes. As

Diaz-Lize points out, a political use of the cases of disappearance is precisely what allows a deconstructive critique of official quantifications to be deployed, after which "alternative quantifications constructed by researchers and/or non-governmental organisations [are generated] to make visible intolerable situations and to denounce them in the local and global public space" (Diaz-Lize, 2020: 6).

This alternative discourse (and the advocacy it supports) is geared to achieving other forms of social value linked to migration. This is what Díaz-Lize found on Mexico's northern border, where "the actors who count the dead and disappeared migrants (...) do not do so with the same objectives or the same valuations," but aim for a "valuation that involves producing and attributing an ethical value to what is being counted" (Diaz-Lize, 2020: 19).

> New disappearances are also being recognised as a political problem thanks to the organised struggle of family members. Family collectives – which in Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador are called committees – are also spaces constructed mainly by women, sisters, wives, nieces, daughters, but mostly mothers, who make use of the symbolic resources provided by this identity to construct the presence of their absent relatives by demanding truth, memory, justice, and reparations' (Martínez-Castillo, 2020: 79).

Comités: Discursive development and territorialisation of their struggle

Before addressing the discursive formation implemented by these organisations regarding migrant disappearances *en route* and how they enter the transnational field of migration by challenging forms of representation and territorialisation, we ought to consider some of the core attributes that members ascribe to their *Comités*, as well as the psychosocial and politic-affective work they carry out vis-à-vis their organisational processes (Salazar-Araya, 2017, 2020). The historical genealogy of the *Comités*' development (Salazar, 2017) shows how their members meet and recognise each other in the midst of individual trajectories of mourning and searching. Desperate, neglected, hurt, they begin to aggregate and share their experiences, cementing the foundations for an awareness that will lead them to recognise that their individual pain is in reality a social pain, and that the conditions of their victimisation and those of their relatives do not occur in isolation, but have a structural basis.

Various authors (Da Silva-Catela, 1998; Blair-Trujillo, 2002; Panizo, 2009, 2011; Gatti & Irazuzta, 2019) have shown how at the individual, family, and community level, disappearance generates psychosocial and affective situations characterised by the difficulty of classifying a missing person as dead or alive, which in turn make ritual and mourning not viable. This situation of social indeterminacy specific to the missing person, reflected in their closest social and family group, creates a situation of *emotional liminality*. Paradoxically

(at least at first glance), this situation of emotional liminality experienced by family members enables organisational and political-awareness that will later develop within the *Comités*. It is precisely the unviability of classifying the disappeared or socially adding them to either the world of the dead or the living (Turner 1967, 1997), that creates an ambiguity enabling them to go beyond pain and ostracism, which Panizo (2011) calls *unattended death* and Da Silva (1998) calls *deprivation of death*.

It is precisely this situation that the organisations address as a priority when a new member joins, and these are the first collective acts in the history of the *Comités*' formation. These are processes of psychosocial accompaniment (Aureoles, 2014; Souza, 2015), "practices of salvation" (Regueiro, 2011) that create a personal and appropriate space (Giménez, 2001), a place of refuge from everyday domestic and public affairs, where women can gather and exhange painful individual emotions, and repurpose them as common and collective emotions and identities; as one of its members said, it is a place "where [we can] go to cry" (Maldonado, 2014), and from there, to organise.

Reshaping families' emotional economy generated the basis for their organisational structure and territorialisation: From being a group of tearful mothers, *mater dolorosas* (Bejarano, 2002: 131), they gradually became a growing network of grassroots organisations, ready to enter the transnational field of migration, where today they challenge and influence state, criminal, and non-governmental actors. The impact of these events is enormous, in addition to participating in the transnational configuration of migratory processes, they help create the conditions for members to remain active both in terms of their care tasks and their participation in the search for migrants (Salazar, 2017). Such progressions also contribute significantly to value creation and territorialisation strategies implicit in producing these common spaces and in producing search.

Search procedures involve both locating a person or a body and tracking down the people who can account for the fact that a body is missing, that is, the social, family, and community fabric that remembers the person and knows them absent. Beyond state codification that reduces the missing to a number, the memory of family members is a basic element of search technologies and discursive formations that constitute a part of their strategies within the field of transnational migration. The memories of those who left and the conditions of their departure, the narratives that give meaning to their disappearance and the effects of their absence, are elements of a collective effort that is institutionalised in political practices and forms of articulation. Yet, their testimonies also nourish the internal space and their resilience as practices preceeding political advocacy, for example, they are conditions enabling subsequent strategic deployment.

The first location to search for a disappeared person is memory, since it is from there that the statements and representations are constructed that relatives put into social circulation as visibilisation and search strategies. Finding a

person, before finding their organic and genetic materiality, implies finding their social person, and putting that individual into circulation in a field in which their forms of symbolisation and materialisation are at stake; when they are not there, the location of the disappeared is the memory of those who know them. It is definitely more than just locating a person or their material remains; it involves weaving a social fabric that can become the basis of political organisation and subjectivation. The work carried out by the *Comités* goes beyond the operational work described for other actors (NGOs, public and government bodies, humanitarian groups) on the border between Mexico and the United States, and responds to the imperative need to "search for migrants who send no news to their families (not always called disappeared), rescue them alive or rescue them dead (in the latter case find the body or remains) and identify the human remains and return them to their families" (Diaz-Lize, 2020: 7). At that moment, the search must be undertaken in the field, involving abandoning home and country, crossing borders, opening doors of hospitals, morgues, prisons, and brothels, camping out in parks, travelling through communities, walking along train tracks, meeting with local politicians.

One of the main search mechanisms are the *caravans* (Varela Huerta, 2012; Salazar Araya; 2017), strategies of territorialisation (Haesbaert, 2011) to use spaces typically controlled by actors such as the state or local or transnational organised crime. These strategies and their realisation clash over space with these actors, but also with their strategies of discursive formation, contested by the *Comités* as part of their advocacy work. Journeys, through different opaque localities of migrant territory, change the rules of the field and the social discourses on disappearance. It is no longer so easy to make the phenomenon invisible or to ideologically separate it from its conditions of genesis; families have placed the missing persons' memory in the public space as a way of making their absent relatives visible (Blair Trujillo, 2002). What Martínez-Castillo points out in this regard is vital, showing how

> The tensions arising from generating responses to the current political violence reveal different ideas regarding the role of the State. While actors in solidarity, families, and their collectives agree that the State has the obligation to prevent disappearances, search for and punish perpetrators, provide reparations to victims, and guarantee non-repetition, there are disagreements both on the ways in which the State should be pressured/involved to address this humanitarian/human rights crisis, and on what its role and that of civil society should/could be (Martínez-Castillo, 2020: 81).

In the organisational constitution of the *Comités*, a double movement of production and power is carried out as part of all their actions. On the one hand, their search socially produces the disappeared person; on the other hand, its constitution is the result of a political, subjective configuration of the collectives as political actors within a field. As Gatti and Irazuzta point out (2019: 10), "the search is the condition of possibility of the disappeared [and] the dis-

appeared person produces agency in those who search for him or her." Yet counting, listing, and mapping are still necessary, as dialogue with the state is part of the dynamics of the field. How is this negotiated internally? What does it imply for strategies of territorialisation and discursive formation? Diaz-Lize (2020: 2) says, "How do we move from the testimony of this loss to the accounting of crimes, what do we lose and what do we gain in this exercise?

Rather than answering these questions directly, I am interested in establishing that it is precisely this task of "translation" that creates social value, "situating the practice of counting in a broader process of translating lived experience into factual and accounting data" (Diaz-Lize, 2020: 2). A missing migrant person may be coded as "missing" by an NGO, as "unidentified human remains" in the databases of forensic services, as a "reported case" in state registries, and in between these categories there is a chain of material and symbolic reconversion, translation, transformation, and (re)classification that involves tasks of location, expert appraisal, institutional, social, and political coding, transfer, notification – all of which can generate various forms of social value.[19] Yet, when the search processes are truncated (by state negligence, criminal capture, or material impossibility), these value forms are not realised or are diverted or captured by other actors. As Gatti and Irazuzta (2019: 10) noted, "dispersed horror has no political value."

Discourse formation and territorialisation are expressions of the committees' same strategic deployment within the transnational field of migration. Shouting "where are they?" while walking along the route is an act of both spatial appropriation and enunciation, for "an enunciation is always an event that neither language nor meaning can completely exhaust" (Foucault, 2010: 42). During the caravans and during the committees' daily work, the missing migrants are *counted* in the three meanings that Diaz-Lize gives to the act of "counting": they are quantified, narrated, and given worth.

> We have to take action and demand (...) human rights say that we have the right to so many things... so why don't these people enforce them? They are sitting pretty in their offices, why don't they do their job properly? With such enormous indifference (...) they should put people who want to work, not necessarily those with degrees, because these people who know about everything perhaps know nothing about human rights and never lost a family member (...) there are humble people who are more capable of defending and making sure that we are listened to and respected (Díaz-Lize, 2020).[20]

Uncertainty gives rise to a willingness to know that is central to the organic, collective processes that lead to politicising affections and give rise to the resoluteness that is indispensable for searching and struggling against the state. The *Comités* have succeeded in positioning their demands for the creation of a "transnational mechanism" that sets into motion the search, identification, and restitution of missing migrants, based on the collection of new information and

its inclusion in the Ante Mortem-Post Mortem Database of the Attorney General's Office (FGR).

Conclusions

I have established that the phenomenon of migrant disappearance is socially produced in a transnational field in which various resources and value forms, associated with the dynamics of mobility and circulation of people and things, are disputed. This field is defined by complex state, geopolitical, criminal, and cultural dynamics, but two rationales stand out. The actions of narco-state actors as the main managers of the disappearance apparatus, and the emergence of a continuum of value-violence that characterises the entire migratory route. This characterisation of the field can be established as a baseline to analyse different regional mobility dynamics, especially in terms of its social (re)production and its political configurations. This also constitutes a possible starting point for devising alternatives to the forms of oppression and exploitation that emerge in this field. In a way, similar to what happens with the disappearance of Mexicans, official figures emerge from the antagonism between the rationale making cases invisible and blurring their causes by sate metrics, and the pressures of societal organisations and their strategies of visualisation and discursively articulating the problem's structural dimension. State-official accounting of the phenomenon individualises, disperses, and renders it invisible, with its structural dimension.

Representing the disappeared implies producing them politically, circulating statements about their condition and the forces that made them disappear, as well as circulating statements about their absence. It entails promoting strategies that make it possible to locate their presence, to find their bodies, and thus to make visible the conditions in which a group of the population disappears today, for example, a group that tends to be represented by the state as a series of isolated figures. To produce the disappeared is to promote the search for them, not only as a series of actions aimed at locating a body or person, but also those who can account for the fact that a body is missing.

The *Comités* emerge in the field both by deploying territorialisation strategies as part of the advocacy and search, and through strategies of enunciating discursive formation that directly challenge official representations of the phenomenon of migrant disappearances. Additionally, this entails articulating a political subject with transnational scope, whose organisation and political subjectivation emerge as a priority from the work of collectivising and politicising its social pain (Salazar, 2020). These strategies are based on members' recognising themselves in a common pain, and on this basis, they organisationally politicise their affections and memory as an alternative to the unfeasibility of mourning. Pain becomes irritation and this becomes self-awareness, which in turn is a central element of strategic deployment in terms of both territorialisation and discursive formation. Both constitute the Committees' symbolic and

material breaking into state and criminal sovereignty (Stepputat, 2012) . For families, this has the value of social recognition of their victimisation and that of their relatives, and for many women it also means entering into a public and political space for the first time, in which they can exercise their motherhood in an alternative way to that historically assigned by the region's patriarchal structure.

State negligence and inoperativeness suggest that there is, perhaps intermingled – and disguised– with institutional inefficiency, a series of decisions to do nothing, an absent public policy, a set of omissions that make disappearances invisible as a social phenomenon, thus preventing their definition as a public problem (Stone, 1989; Hall, 1993; Peters, 1995). It has been societal organisations that have striven to place disappearances on the public agenda (Blair, 2002) and obtain a minimum of recognition (Honneth, 1997). What Martínez-Castillo points out in this regard is vital, showing how

> The tensions arising from generating responses to the current political violence reveal different ideas regarding the role of the State. While actors in solidarity, families, and their collectives agree that the State has the obligation to prevent disappearances, search for and punish perpetrators, provide reparations to victims, and guarantee non-repetition, there are disagreements both on the ways in which the State should be pressured/involved to address this humanitarian/human rights crisis, and on what its role and that of civil society should/could be (Martínez-Castillo, 2020: 81).

The committees' strategy within the transnational field of migration involves circulating statements about the conditions and forces that brought about their relatives' disappearances, as well as moving within places where disappearances occur. Discourse is formed both symbolically and materially, as a set of speech acts and search acts, as part of a broader advocacy strategy.

We are in the presence of social actors emerging who transcend victimisation (Lefranc & Mathieu, 2009) and move forward in a process in which they become political subjects who challenge the existing order (Bejarano, 2002: 144). The organic basis of the collective is the common social pain and the dynamics of reciprocity in its relations; the organisational self-constitution is grounded in this collective movement from pain to resoluteness, nurtured by gathering and recognition. It implies self-appraisal that arises in response to the narratives of precariousness, lack of opportunities, absence, and indifference; organising implies, above all, valuing oneself.

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1 Those where the enemies do not form armies as "a distinct entity", and "do not involve the mobilisation of sovereign subjects (citizens) who respect each other as enemies. They do not distinguish between combatants and non-combatants or between enemies and criminals" (Mbembe, 2011: 39). In this case, enemies emerge as a complex combination of "illegal" migrants, human traffickers, drug cartels, corrupt state officials, and a variable o dynamic set of actors that can be conjuncturally defined as enemies of the state.

2 As Vizcarra (2012: 45) pointed out, following Bourdieu, "language is the privileged territory of political struggle, a struggle for the establishment of concrete ways of seeing and shaping the world."

3 I understand forces of movement as the labour forces that migrants themselves exert on their bodily condition in order to move, and are connected to the broader social production of migration. This assumes that movement and circulation involve a variety of labour to produce mobility.

4 The conditions of structural and everyday violence exist at the place of origin of missing migrants' families, indicating that the value-violence continuum is territorialised along with the trajectories of mobility (Salazar-Araya, 2017). "The stories of the families of disappeared migrants from Honduras and El Salvador are often characterised by the intersection of multiple everyday types of violence" (Martínez-Castillo, 2020: 80).

5 RNDPED compiles data on missing persons generated by reports filed with law-enforcement authorities. Complaints filed in federal jurisdiction date from 2006 and from January 2014 in the local jurisdiction. The data can be found on the website of the Ministry of the Interior: https://www.gob.mx/sesnsp/acciones-y-programas/registro-nacional-de-datos-de-personas-extraviadas-o-desaparecidas-rnped (accessed on 20 August 2020).

6 Animal Político (2014, 19 November), 2014, el año con más casos de desapariciones en México: van 5 mil 98 víctimas. http://www.animalpolitico.com/2014/11/2014-el-ano-con-mas-casos-de-desapariciones-en-mexico-van-5-mil-98-victimas/ (accessed 13 January 2015).

7 Martínez, F. (2015, 18 January), Entre agosto y octubre hubo 1281 personas desaparecidas; 14 al día, *La Jornada*. http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2015/01/18/politica/003n1pol

8 Martínez, F. (2015, 18 January), Entre agosto y octubre hubo 1281 personas desaparecidas; 14 al día, *La Jornada*. http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2015/01/18/politica/003n1pol

9 Several social organisations have highlighted weakness in registering disappearances of women and girls, due to both social conditions and methodological and registration conditions. Cf. IACHR 2018 and 2019; CEPAD et al. 2019.

10 Tamaulipas accounts for 23 percent of all reported cases in the country and more than doubles the next state (Jalisco, 2,150 cases). Of the 15 states with the most reported cases, 7 are on the northern border and 4 in the central region, which shows that the phenomenon of disappearance is linked to a complex web of value creation, extraction, and circulation that these organisations exploit in their war for control of space. Mastrogiovanni (2015: 36) shows the effect of shale-gas extraction projects in the Burgos Basin.

11 Cf. Amnesty International 2010; COFAMIDE, COFAMIPRO, Frontera con Justicia, et al. 2012, CNDH 2014; Fundación para la Justicia y el Estado Democrático de Derecho April 2014; IACHR 2015; IACHR 2018 and 2019; CEPAD et al. 2019. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights issued two reports (IACHR) in 2018 and 2019,

highlighting these weaknesses and gaps. In relation to the LGMDFP, utilising previous CNDH criteria, the 2018 report shows that 'there is no adequate application and materialisation of this [law]' (685), due to budget shortfalls, insufficient infrastructure, the delay in adapting regulations, and the scarce participation of victims' relatives. Although positive actions have been highlighted, measures to strengthen the search system are still pending (687). In its 2019 report, the IACHR noted that the RNPED had not been updated since April 2018 and the census methodology had not been disseminated among civil-society organisations or relatives of disappeared persons (717). Lastly, the Mexican state's budget cutbacks for the search for persons is highlighted as a serious situation (715-716).

12 The Inter-American Convention on Forced Disappearance of Persons understands 'forced disappearance' as 'the deprivation of liberty of one or more persons, in whatever form, committed by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the State's authorisation, support or acquiescence, followed by a failure or refusal to acknowledge such deprivation of liberty or to give information on the whereabouts of the person, thereby impeding the exercise of the applicable legal remedies and procedural guarantees' (1994; Article II, http://www.oas.org/juridico/spanish/Tratados/a-60.html). It is clear that, in structural terms, there are various forms of state involvement and participation in disappearances, but it is also clear that the category is not appropriate to describe the current situation in which organised crime is emerging as a central actor in disappearances (González Villareal 2012), nor is it strategic in terms of initiating processes of judicialisation with real impact. Article 215-A of the Criminal Code stipulates that 'the crime of forced disappearance of persons is committed by any public servant who, regardless of whether they have participated in the legal or illegal detention of one or more persons, facilitates or fraudulently maintains their concealment under any form of detention', which further reduces the category to the figure of 'public servant'. At the end of 2015, the 'General Law on Enforced Disappearance' was sent to Congress, which, according to the government, would allow for a policy to search and locate, and it was approved in October 2017 proposing four instruments: the National Search System, the National Register of Disappeared and Missing Persons, the National Forensic Register, and the National Citizens' Council. In August 2015, the 13th National Conference of Justice Procurement approved the Investigation Protocols on Enforced Disappearance and Torture, and, in October 2015, the PGR created the Special Prosecutor's Office for the Search for Disappeared Persons, a part of the Office of the Deputy Attorney General for Human Rights, Crime Prevention, and Community Services.

13 *La Jornada*, (2015, 2 February), De 2005 a la fecha, sólo ha habido seis sentencias por desaparición forzada, http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2015/02/02/politica/004n2pol

14 In 2015 the Undersecretary for Multilateral Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SRE) of the Peña-Nieto administration (2012-2018), Juan Manuel Gómez-Robledo, acknowledged that they lacked specific information and agreed that there was no "exclusive register of forced disappearances." *Proceso*, 3 February 2015, http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=394926.

15 On transnational search, information exchange, and prosecution mechanisms, cf. Martínez-Castillo (2020: 84-86) and Doretti (2017: 110).

16 See the testimonies in Amnesty International's 2010 report (18). According to the IACHR (2015: 74), "there are usually delays in the investigation when it comes to pro-

ceedings in which the first hours are decisive," and "the search efforts are reduced to phone calls and home visits that the staff of the Prosecutor's Office sporadically make to relatives, not to give information about their case, but to ask if their relative has appeared or if they know anything else." According to the National Migration Institute (INM), in 2014 just under 3,200 cases of missing migrants were reported in the country (Sin Embargo, 9 May 2014: www.laopinion.com/Han-reportado-3177-migrantes-desaparecidos-en-Mexico). Yet, many organisations feel the data underestimate the problem, as it is very difficult for many families in Central America to file complaints, and the official information systems have technical problems (COFAMIDE et al. 2012: 3-4).

17 González-Villareal (2012) and Gibler (2016) refer to these practices as forms of "double disappearance."

18 Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano estimates that the figure may even be as high as 150,000. See also www.animalpolitico.com/2014/12/tendremos-paz-hasta-encontrar-nuestros-hijos-las-historias-de-la-caravana-de-madres-migrantes/

19 Economic in cases of reparation, emotional by catalysing mourning processes, political by promoting and strengthening organisational experiences, cultural or moral by demonstrating social power vis-à-vis state power.

20 Sergio Salazar, interview of Alba Ortiz, member of the COFAMIPRO Board of Directors (21 April 2014).

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