**Violence and Numinosity: Healing Dolls, Allegories of Being, and the Mexican Crisis of Disappearances**

**Abstract**

This paper focus on the case of the Collective Families of the Disappeared Orizaba-Cordoba (FDOC) and the dolls created especially for the *buscadoras* by an artist connected to these tragedies. The healing dolls become a numinous link between the disappeared person and this world. These healing dolls, or children, as the mothers call them, possess numinous characteristics. As artisticexpressions fabricated using garments that belonged to disappeared people, these dolls carry more than material memories, rather, they become portals of unspoken communication. In Levinasean terms, they constitute the *Shadow* of a crushing reality. Hence, the possibility—and space—for love becomes the only means of healing for the mothers and family members who decide to adopt a healing child. Since the birth and use of healing children does not occur in a vacuum, a phenomenology of the life of a collective and their healing dolls must consider multiple components of the reality that bear the unbearable experience of having a disappeared loved one.

“Death kills hope, but a disappearance is intolerable because it neither kills nor allows one to live”

Elena Poniatowska

Searching with the Mothers of Mexico’s Disappeared

**Keywords:** Disappearance, numinosity, search collectives, dolls, , nation state, war on drugs, organized crime, community, ethics.

1. **Introduction: Allegories of Being**

On the evening of March 4th, 2024, Araceli Salcedo,[[1]](#endnote-1) founding president of the Colectivo Familias de Desaparecidos Orizaba-Cordoba (Collective Family of the Disappeared Orizaba-Cordoba) answered questions during an interview and presentation at Northern Arizona University’s Martin Springer Institute. As she was getting ready for the presentation, she took her doll Ruby out of a backpack and placed it on one of the three chairs set as stage for the interview. While answering one of the questions related to her searching group or collective (henceforth the Colectivo) and the ways in which they cope with a grim reality, Araceli explained that the doll was named after her disappeared daughter, Fernanda Ruby, who was last seen on September 7, 2012. Araceli also explained that the dolls, or healing children, as the collective members calls them, were the result of a conversation with a local artist who had fabricated this type of doll for other grieving groups—mostly women who had been victims of a variety of violent and traumatic experiences.

Families who experience the forced disappearance of one of its members, survive enduring deep wounds. This phenomenon also tears apart the social fabric in ways in which only genocide can do: It radically changes social relations, it affects cultural practices, and it reorganizes society in particular ways. Disappearance presents itself as an existential paradox given that the disappeared person is neither dead nor alive. Surviving relatives cannot engage in a grieving process—in some cases for years—until they find evidence of the death of their loved one. Such evidence can be embodied in a piece of clothing, personal object, or scattered human remains. For surviving relatives, especially for the mothers, wives, sisters, and women in general, the only way to cope with this unbearable pain is to become a *buscadora*, that is,a searcher. Women organize themselves into search collectives dedicated to do what their dysfunctional State refuses to do**:** namely, investigations and archive creation to the geographic location of mass graves and forensic work.

During her interview, Araceli showed an admirable emotional stability despite relating the heartbreakingly,overwhelming story of her—unsuccessful—struggle to find Ruby and procuring some kind of justice for the families associated with the Colectivo. However, the attending public were unable to remainunaffected. Empathizing with Araceli’s pain, most in the audience wept. At the end, many gathered around Araceli to offer hugs, touch her arm as a gesture of solidarity, or just to say how sorry they were for what happened to Araceli and thousands of other mothers in Mexico.

In the following days professors and students expressed by various means that they had felt a special connection with the speaker. For example, extremely moved by Araceli’s doll and how she handled it—as if it was alive—many students wrote reports expressing their solidarity and outrage. Professors were also impacted by the feelings that emanated from seeing the way in which Araceli treats her healing child. “I ask Ruby (the doll) where can I find her, and why she cannot tell me what happened to her? [That] I would be happy if at least she could tell me where to locate other disappeared persons…that would help other mothers,” said Araceli during a private conversation (Salcedo, 2023).

The carefully and lovingly crafted dolls are done so by a local Veracruz artist. Thinking of the particular, excruciating situation that the collective members go through, the artist requested that every mother and/or family member should bring to her a garment used by the disappeared person. Thus, she not only manufactured dolls with the most distinct facial characteristics of the disappeared person—based on a recent picture—but also, she fashioned tiny jackets, shirts, and dresses from the fabric that at some point had been in touch with the skin, the perfume, or the environment that surrounded a loved one who is now absent. Not exactly identical to the person, some dolls display thick eyebrows, straight or curly hair in different lengths and colors, as well as painted eyes that represent an effort to simulate more than a physical trait an aspect of the disappeared person’s personality.

Despite repeated efforts to convey the magnitude of this tragedy, professors and students had stated that lecturing by scholars, reading books, or even watching short videos, never gave them a true sense of the real dimension of horror and pain brought on by the disappearance of a loved one. Even at times during the presentation and discussion when Araceli neither spoke to nor handled the doll as a sacred object, the audience was able to perceive, to detect, the gaze of a human being, Araceli, who has traversed down a path of unmeasurable suffering looking for her daughter. A gravitational field of moral responsibility is created through such presentations. As such, a phenomenological approach to the impossibility of disappearance is a proper, respectful approach that seeks to uncover and unpack why the words of activists become a call to help the Other in the midst of this singular tragedy.

The overall experience of being a *buscadora* isbetter explained in terms of phenomenology. To understand the profundity of the problem facing *buscadoras*, one must attune oneself to their narrative by means other than language. In the words of Emanuel Levinas, this encounter is an epiphany of the Face, a close encounter with the nakedness of a human being launching a cry for help, an appeal to the recognition of the sacredness of humanity and the infinite responsibility to render help. To this,an indispensable component of this phenomenological expression of a disappearance is the way in which surviving family members seek healing.

From a phenomenological perspective, and based on a Levinasean view, science, art, and epistemology help to constitute, form, and shape the axiological. When *tekne* and *poesis* are at the service of ethics then the totalizing temptation of an appropriation of alterity can be avoided (Cohen, 2016, p.157). Thus, the creation of a doll by an artisan who uses the clothing previously worn by a disappeared becomes an act that goes beyond aesthetics and the self-referential. This is art in search of justice and remembrance.

In such a context, the healing dolls, as the product of a given reality, also become *images*. Furthermore, every doll is a matter of resemblance, which is not to say that this is “the result of a comparison between an image and the original, but as the very movement that engenders the image” (Levinas, 1987, p.6). Reality overflows and goes beyond itself, it has now a double: “Reality would not be only what it is, what it is disclosed to be in truth, but would be also its double, its shadow, its image” (Levinas, 1987, p.6).

Because being escapes itself, there can also be a duality in a person. In the words of Levinas: “Thus a person bears on his face, alongside of its being with which he coincides, its own caricature, its picturesqueness” (Levinas, 1987, p.6). The key to understanding the relationship between being and its reflection resides in the power of allegory, which is more than a way to represent the abstract in concrete terms. Allegories, as Levinas argues are the result of an “ambiguous commerce” in which “reality does not refer to itself but to its reflection, its shadow. An allegory thus represents what in the object itself doubles it up. An image, we can say, is an allegory of being” (1987, p.6). Dolls as allegories of being and reflections of a person’s identity that cannot be contained carry a powerful message identifiable by those who listened to Araceli’s words.

1. **A Doll Culture**

During the summer of 2023 movie goers around the world raved about a movie, *Barbie,* that portraits the existential crisis of a doll who, in many ways, symbolizes the ambitions, frustrations, and limitations of a wide segment of the female population in America. One day, just another perfect day like any other in her perfect, plastic universe, Barbie wonders aloud: "Do you guys ever think about dying?" To which her friends, who along with her inhabit an endless summer, stare at her in a stunned silence, unable to answer (Gerwig, 2023).

Noticing that her feet are becoming flat, unlike her previous stiletto-ready feet perfect for wearing high heels, Barbie embarks in a quest into the real world only to find out that the source of her ailments is the pain and confusion of a teenage girl who used to like Barbie dolls, but now coming of age, unhappiness has unnerved her once simple, carefree life. Barbie then faces the issues of patriarchy, commodification, abusive relationships, corporate greed, and many other contemporary realities that affect women around the world (Gerwig, 2023). The film encapsulates the phenomenon of the *Lichtung* or *Kairotic* moment. That is, the bolt of lightning that seems to come from nowhere but that irrevocably alters one’s trajectory, one’s life.

The 2023 Barbie moment or *Lichtung,* was certainly not a new experience for Mexicans. Mexico of the 1970's had fresh memories of the '68 Olympic Games and the 1970 World Cup. Advertisement for cars, fashion, and even housing developments tagged along a certain Olympic and *futbol* (soccer) fever that gave a sense of belonging to rest of the world. However, other types of memories had been engraved in the collective soul of modern Mexicans: For example, the images of brutal governmental students’ repressions on October 2, 1968, and June 10, 1971. Persecution, at times baseless prosecution, and even disappearance of political opponents, but specially of all those associated with subversive and communist groups, became a feared and usual practice.

Among this varied imagery there was a household name popular amongst girls and boys— specially of middle-class extraction: Valerie. Valerie, a long-haired brunette introduced as Barbie's friend, was launched only in the Mexican toy market. Ever since, Barbie, Valerie, their friends, and the myriad, associated collections of outfits, occupations, and accessories, have been a ubiquitous referent in Mexican childhood.

A powerful symbol and popular toy, Barbie became desired by children of all social strata. Thus, it was not difficult to find knockoffs in *Tianguis* (traveling farmer markets) and Mom and Pop general stores throughout Mexico. In the same places, buyers could also get locally fabricated doll outfits. Sold without fancy packaging, customers could get anything from folkloric dresses to nurse, soldier, and even wedding attires. Most were made of recycled or left over fabrics, found at the homes of seamstresses looking to increase their income by means of engaging with this novelty kid's market.

Valerie, covering the needs of a specific market demanding a doll that Mexican children could identify with, and the availability of a cheaper—and well accessorized—version of Valerie-Barbie toys speaks of dolls as cultural mirrors, of vessels of meaning that emerge form a given society. These dolls made visible two different aspects of Mexican society: One associated with the idea of race, namely, phenotypical characteristics—Valerie’s dark hair, tan skin, etc. And another stemming from socio-economic brackets and the diversity of markets that coexisted in Mexico of the 1970's.

A few decades later, immersed in a sea of violence, Mexico of the twenty first century would witness yet another—nonofficial and glamourless—Barbie transfiguration: The Barbie *Buscadora* (Searching Barbie). This time Barbie would become the embodiment of pain and a symbol of the mission of thousands of Mexican women who have left their professions and occupations so they can devote their lives to searching for a disappeared loved one.

**2.1 History and the Mexican Pile of Rubble**

As of 2023, the Mexican government has recognized and accounted for 113,060 disappeared persons since 1964 (Gerardo, 2023). The year of 2006 has become a watershed moment in Mexican history as a result of Felipe Calderon’s senseless declaration of war against drugs. Seeking to legitimize the controversial electoral process that took him to power, Calderon publicly pronounced his wish to acquire all the “toys,” (police and military equipment) and a “super-secret anti-narcotics” bunker, and firepower, just like the weapons in the TV show *24* with Kiefer Southerland (Brooks, 2010). By early 2006 the official record of disappeared persons only reached 267. Infamously, Calderon also spoke about the “collateral damage” inherent to any war, thus justifying the civilian casualties that have ever since deleteriously altered the Mexican way of living (Olivares, 2010). By 2007 the number of disappeared had already increased trifold (Statista, 2024).

With such a grim impact in Mexican society, the war on drugs and the brutal intensification of organized crime activities, scope, and penetration, have created new ways of coping with the consequences. Thousands of families have suffered the loss of one or more members. Even worse, some have endured the disappearance of a loved one, and with it the intense process of re-victimization associated with reporting the disappearanceto the authorities. Indeed, the laissez-faire attitude of police, prosecutor’s offices, and even of the public in general, is one of disdain for both the victims and those who search for them. The common perception—and this idea was first made popular by Calderon and his associates’ comments—is that if someone has been killed or disappeared it is because they were mixed in shady business and therefore they had it coming (Villalpando and Breach, 2010).

Having no support from the government and with very little solidarity by the public, groups of private citizens, mostly women, have organized themselves into *colectivos* dedicated to searching for the disappeared. These groups are usually self-funded, and while some receive only government help in various ways, the assistance is often negligible. Presently, a little over one hundred collectives operate throughout the Mexican Republic, doing archival, forensic, legal, and public relations work.

A disappearance is codified in the 2017 Mexican General Law on Forced Disappearances as the “crime . . . committed when a public servant or the individual who, with authorization, support, or agreement of a public servant, deprives a person of his or her liberty in any form, followed by the abstention or refusal to acknowledge such deprivation of liberty or to provide information related to the concerned person’s status, fate or whereabouts” (Ley General, 2017).

The crime of disappearing a person carries with it a deep wound that first affects the immediate family members and then extends to the roots of a society. It changes relations and shapes identities. Because some of these changes are negative, it becomes imperative that the families of the victims remain socially active and overall, visible. The stigma carried by those whose loved ones of the disappeared forces them into isolation and in many cases leaves them feeling discredited, as if *they* committed the crime. Moreover, the frustration of seeing other relatives and friends walk away due to the multifarious nature of the pain involved only further adds to their sense of being set apart from society, of being cast out, of being Othered.

Since a disappearance is impossible to represent because there is no corporeal remains, the actions by the collectives can only become relatively successful when they become socially visible. And what better way to present to the world a new way of being a woman in Mexico than creating a Barbie who works at a search collective? Yes, a Barbie *Buscadora,* a doll that represents the impossibility of remaining quiet and inactive in the face the tragedy of a disappearance.

Wearing camouflage pants, boots, a safari hat, and a white long-sleeve T-shirt displaying the picture of their loved one, the Barbie *Buscadora* symbolizes yet another job to which Mexican women aspire to when faced with the unbearable reality of a disappearance. Delia Quiroa, from the Colectivo de Madres Buscadoras en Tamaulipas, explained that her doll wears home-made garments that she confections from the very own clothing her collective used during their field searches (Ortiz, 2023).

Contrary to what stereotypical Barbie does in the movie, Delia, her doll creation, and the collective use this *fictional* character to promote *real* change and awareness in the somehow *surreal* world of forced disappearances. Launching the Barbie *Buscadora*, according to Delia, also represents a call for help. Indeed, the collective appealed to the public in the light of the massive success of the 2023 Barbie movie. The collective’s aim is to create awareness of all the precariousness associated with searching for the disappeared with scarce resources and under the threat of the cartels. Delia’s doll carries a white band around her arm; it represents the first truce granted by the Gulf Cartel upon the collective mother’s request. The truce meant a great deal to this *colectivo* because they were able to safely access a plot of land to survey for hidden mass graves. By exploring the vast vacant lot wearing a white band around the arm, the mothers provided assurance to the cartel of their peaceful intentions, and were allowed to carry out their task unharmed. “The cartel has shown that they care about us and can protect us,” says Delia. On the other hand, “the authorities have made an effort to hurt and even disappear us” (Ortiz, 2023). A feeling corroborated by facts that only adds layers of complexity to the world of search collectives and their interactions with the state, society, and organized crime, hence creating a reality so unintelligible that the only comprehensive answers are embedded in the allegories of being linked to a Barbie doll, and in this case, the Barbie *Buscadora* in her search attire. This doll, allegorically re-collects, facing the past, and at her feet she sees a pile of rubble accumulating. This is reminiscent of a passage from Walter Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History,* in which Benjamin refers to progress as a storm that affects the complex relations between history and its actors. Using Paul Klee’s “Angelus Nuovo,” Benjamin states that when the angel looks back at the past, he is looking at a place “[w]here we perceive a chain of events, [while] he [the angel] sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (Benjamin, 2007, pp.257-258), just like disappearance cases pile up in front of a Barbie *Buscadora*.

**2.2 Dolls and Ethics**

In the region of Northern Arizona visitors can find Kachina dolls in museums or souvenir shops. These can range between 7-8 inches in height and are customarily made of fabric. Usually, the level of detail in the fabrication of these dolls includes a few items recognizably tied to Hopi traditional attire, such as bandana, long skirt, woven belt, and boots. These dolls are the symbolic representation of the Kachina. According to Emory Sekaquaptewa, the Kachina is a spiritual being to whom the Hopi children are exposed at an early age. The Kachina is good and kind and brings presents to the children with every appearance. However, the Kachina also demands good behavior and can be a symbol of admonition (2001, p. 44).

Kachinas are believed to have the power to deprive a child from their personhood if they don’t behave. Soya, one of the Kachinas, who is often described as an ogre, may come to execute the punishment. However, as Sekaquaptewa points out, Kachinas are usually misrepresented, and they certainly do not appear as a terrible being to the children. But Kachinas can be employed asa pedagogical tool for parents and community. To this purpose, parents and relatives organize a skit by which the child will be told that the Kachina will come to get them. The catch lays on the complexity of the defense: The mother will take the kid outside and tell the Kachina that she has an important commitment that cannot be undone. As more relatives join the defense, the Kachinas become outnumbered and desist from their intent to abscond with the child; and as a result, the family’s cooperative efforts have protected their young loved one from harm (Sekaquaptewa, 2001, pp.44-45).

Kachina and the threat of being depersonalized helps the children in the process of learning about cultural norms, but more importantly, it teaches the community ethics. When the children are ready for the Kachina dance, after demonstrating certain level of responsibility and understanding of the spiritual world and its differences between this and facts, they are told that the Kachina is just an impersonation. That is to say “an impersonation which possess a spiritual essence” that won’t destroy the child’s security. On the contrary, “the experience strengthens the individual in another phase of his life in the community” (Sekaquaptewa, 2001, p.45).

Whereas during childhood the exposure to the Kachina means the emulation of the Kachina and the values behind it, during the dance ceremony the use of a mask and the subsequent disposal of it can be understood as the removal of the individual’s identity. The renunciation of the ego engenders a chance to transform the isolated self into a personification of the communal values represented in the ceremony. As Sekaquaptewa argues, “the spiritual fulfillment of a man depends on how he is able to project himself into the spiritual world as he performs” (2001, p. 46). Like Kachina dolls, the personification of the values invested in a Barbie *Buscadora* reflect an ethics, however, in different ways. For the Hopi, their dolls are the communal appeal to the respect of cultural norms; they are also “visual metaphors of life” (cited in Donald Ellis, 2021). Thus Kachinas are the virtual repository of the community’s moral consciousness. For the searching Mexican mothers their dolls are an appeal for justice and solidarity amid a dual internal war: happening as fratricide at a national level, and individually since the only justice for a mother is to find the remains of a loved one.

**2.3 War and Protection Rackets**

Dolls as a link to ethics would not be as powerful—as they are for Hopi culture—for some Mexican collective members if it were not for the ethos of violence in which they are situated within and must endure. The fragmentation and violent character of contemporary Mexican society cannot be sufficiently explained by merely analyzing a single event, namely, the war on drugs. However, understanding some basic principles by which this avalanche of catastrophe came into existence can be useful. From the crude perspective of state making, the war against the *narco*[[2]](#endnote-2) is nothing more than the amplification of the protection rackets that gave birth to the some modern nation states worldwide.

Indeed, a common way to think about the emergence of modern states is the result of social contracts or the set of aspirations linked to the freedom of the market. However, as Charles Tilly has argued, it was the monopolization of violence and the open competitionfocused on the consolidation of power that made modern states possible (1990, p.169).

Ioan Grillo provides an iconic example of how, historically, selective punishment and the exchangeability of goals among government and organized crime produced a unique and productive symbiosis since the inception of drug trafficking networks in Mexico. In 1916 American customs agents infiltrated a ring of Chinese traffickers that operated under the protection of Baja California’s governor, Esteban Cantu. Those American agents discovered an efficient smuggling apparatus that involved thousands of dollars in bribes and a chain of drugs distribution from Ensenada, Baja California to San Francisco, California (2011, p.31).

Despite solid testimonies and evidence sent to Washington, and after making a recommendation “urging the State Department to investigate and take up issue with Mexico,” the agents involved saw no actions taken by the US. According to Grillo, Cantu probably became an ally by siding with Washington’s approved faction in the Mexican Revolution of 1910, or “maybe officials just didn’t care to stop the supply of opiates, which were being handled out in bucket loads to troops on all sides in the bleeding trenches of France” (Grillo, 2011, p.31). Cantu’s participation in illegal business exposes a dual paradox. On the one hand, it demonstrates that the war on drugs that originated in the first half of the twentieth century in the US fueled by the highly exploited fears of Chinese and Afro-American crazed under the influence of drugs, was radically different from the country’s foreign policies and diplomacy. On the other hand, it exposes how Mexican political elites take advantage of the dysfunctionality inherent to birthing a state in the model of protection rackets—a la Tilly—that shape their selective modus of enforcing the law against high ranking officials who crossover criminal realms.

By declaring a selective war against the cartels, Calderon amplified the old protection schemes and unleashed a gruesome multiplicity of battlefields that replicated the same tactics involved in state making: to conquer territories with the aim of consolidating power and monopolizing violence, which would exponentially facilitate the accumulation of capital (Tilly, 1990, p.172).

In the process, victims of the war would constitute what Calderon defined as collateral damage. Within the logic of neoliberalism, that is, the politico-economic ideology prevalent in Mexico since 1982, the consideration of the average citizen’s life as collateral damage is not abnormal.

People from the “popular masses” —those who are deemed to have no purpose, and as such are ideal candidates to become foot soldiers of the narco-workforce—and their victims who stand in the way of their meagre, ephemeral success became the so-called collateral damage. Zygmunt Baumann coined a term for this type of people: “wasted lives.” Considered to be excessive or redundant, “human waste” is a side effect of modernization. This categorization of people is a product of "order-building (each order casts some parts of the extant population as 'out of place', 'unfit' or 'undesirable') and of economic progress" (2003, p.5). In the era of neoliberal measures, Mexico witnessed the frustration of those males considered "backwards" or "underdeveloped" who could not keep up with societies' demands of taking on the roles of the breadwinner and protectors of their families. These men became believers of the narco-fantasies of power. Consequently, an endless supply of organized crime foot soldiers was created.

The social fabric sufficiently frayed and torn, violence spilled throughout many communities. Rampant impunity fueled new ways of solving quotidian problems and those who seemed to live wasted lives became even more vulnerable. Gore violence, or the macabre espectacle of finding body parts in the streets or corpses hanging from overpasses,during the second half of the 2010’s decade became a normalized but terrifying affair. Now, not only bad people involved in criminal activities would become targets of extreme violence. Students, small business owners, factory workers, security guards and housewives would be eliminated due to greed or simply for the inconvenience of dealing with them in legal and/or economic terms.

This ethos was neither the result of a single cause nor some iteration of spontaneous generation. A complex chain of events, systemic oppression, and social erosion helped to create and shape this volatile formula. For example, Elena Azaola, a social anthropologist who studies teenage murderers and incarceration in Mexico City, discovered through large sample interviews that a considerable portion of these teenage killers or *sicarios*, paid assassins, showed resentment and pain caused by the absence of a father in their lives. The repercussions of such an ethos are devastating. Azaola evinces this succinctly: "For a child between 0 and 5 years of age the entire universe is their mother...if you kick, beat and insult a mother, then you are ripping the kid's life apart" (Azaola, 2024).

**2.4 Colectivo Familia Desaparecidos Orizaba-Córdoba and their Healing Dolls**

For Daniel Feierstein, genocide is a social practice aimed at changing social relations, altering identities, and imposing a prefabricated identity built by the perpetrator. In his genocide typology Feierstein suggest the concept of “reorganizing genocide” because its purpose is to restructure the society of an existing nation-state from within. This restructuring aims to modify social bonds and relationships, social conventions, aspects of daily life, forms of political mediation—in short, to transform the concrete and abstract operations of power within a given society’ (2014, p.48).

Just like disappearances, genocidal acts leave deep, open wounds that often remain unhealed. The way in which genocidal acts interweave a complex series of relations is akin to the affective transfiguration of certain energies into symbols and practices that function as the embodiment of past violences. If the affect can be described as potential—that is, a preconscious energy that engenders reactions and leads the way towards action­—then nothing can be more indicative of such an energy than talking to the Colectivo’s searching mothers and noticing the way in which they perceive history, violence, and the relations among themselves.

The varied cases of disappearance recounted by these women demonstrate that the ethos of violence prevalent in Mexico has spilled over regular citizens who have in kind become perpetrators. A backdrop of death, greed, and impunity has turned regular citizens into merciless murderers: dangerous and indifferent to other people’s pain, improvised sicarios, instant organized crime members.

Interviews with Colectivo members illustrate this dehumanizing process. Feliza P. shares the story of her brother Jose Fernando, a stylist who owned a house and profitable hair salon business. Jose Fernando is also one of the disappeared. Described as a kind and concerned uncle and neighbor, he loaned money to whomever asked for it and helped relatives and friends in need. His growing business demanded the hiring of an assistant, so he put a woman on payroll. She would be in charge of cleaning and assisting on the everyday errands at the barbershop. His new helper was married, and one of the stories associated with Jose Fernando’s disappearance tells that it was her husband, who in a jealousy attack, phoned Jose to threaten him for a supposed affair with his wife. However, to Feliza this does not make any sense, since her brother Jose was openly gay and with a partner. Jose Fernando was *levantado* (literally “picked up,” colloquially meaning that a person has been abducted) in 2017 by Ministerial Police under the pretext of an eviction order (Feliza, 2023). Oddly, Jose Fernando’s sister states, a young man had shown up at the salon in previous days requesting *derecho de piso* or protection fees. These types of fees are now commonplace in Mexico, and they are charged by local criminal groups in order to “protect” business owners and their relatives from physical and psychological threat. Adding to the complexity of the story, Jose Fernando’s life partner, who seemed to be taking advantage of Jose Fernando’s solvency, did not waste time to launch threats to Feliza’s family so he could keep the house, Jose Fernando’s automobile, and money. The main suspect, according to those close to the case, is Jose Fernando’s life partner: Yet another everyday person infected with this ethos of violence; rendered deaf to the verticality of the Call of the Other by the cacophonous call of the horizonal self. And as such, a shared life was possibly, irrevocably torn asunder for the fleeting satiation of material gain (Feliza, 2023).

Feliza has a healing doll. She sometimes loses her temper and screams at *him*. She wants to know where he is—Jose Fernando, her brother. At the beginning of the tragedy, people told her to wrap strands of Jose Fernando’s clothing to the table’s legs. That would bring Jose Fernando back. A niece spoke to a “lady” who works with Santa Muerte, or Holy Death, a saint who intercedes for all marginals left behind by the mainstream Catholic faith. But the lady requested that once Jose Fernando was found they would have to bring him in her presence (perhaps to collect their debt in a *spiritual* way), which deterred them from requesting help through this option (Feliza, 2023). Listening to a varied list of advice did not provide any hope nor healing. On the contrary, it added extra layers of confusion. At the end of the day, the only practice that has brought some relief is to talk and “vent” to her doll, who she and her family treat as one more family member.

**2.5 Sowing Barbarity**

Araceli Salcedo Jimenez, founder and president of the Colectivo Familia de Desaparecidos Orizaba-Córdoba, lost her daughter Ruby in 2012. Ever since she has worked tirelessly to find out what happened to her and where to find her remains.

Araceli founded the collective as the only alternative to a government that brutally ignores the pleas for help by thousands of surviving victims. For her, the process of victimization is infinite: First, the pain of losing a daughter without reason; then the endless sequence of humiliations by the authorities followed by threats from organized crime members and associates; and on top of everything a daily dose of indifference and judgement by the average citizen who has not been—yet—reached by the fury of one of the thousand heads of the hydra that organized crime is. "And yet, they sow their barbarity among us citizens by dumping [their victims’ bodies] in mass graves" (Salcedo, 2023).

In over a decade of searching, Araceli has developed one of the strongest collectives in Mexico. Operating only in the Veracruz—Gulf of Mexico—region, Araceli and her fellow searching mothers have run into surreal situations. They have faced threats from high rank officials. They have witnessed the people’s distrust and hatred towards authorities (Salcedo, 2023). But more than anything, collective members have been revictimized by the very own entity in charge of protecting them: the State.

Araceli recounts how once, she and the Colectivo were on a routine surveying trip searching for places that might have been positive for mass grave discovery in the town of Acultzingo. Arriving in town they encountered a contingent bearing rudimentary weapons ranging from machetes to stones. The distressed people threatened to chase the Colectivo out of the town if they did not have all state police officers leave immediately. It did not matter that the Colectivo had asked permission to enter the town’s demarcation so they could carry a search for the disappeared who had been allegedly buried in one of the town’s plots. The locals fiercely argued that they perfectly knew that the state police were an active part of the larger criminal groups causing harm to their communities. In words of Araceli, “the locals wanted to burn the *estatales* (state police agents) because they have caused to them lots of harm, they carried gasoline cans [to set them on fire] because they—the state police—has been identified as the main facilitators and perpetrators of kidnappings, extorsions…” and other crimes lacerating this community (Salcedo, 2023).

The reaction of the town’s people can be understood as consequence of the socio-political relations of diverse groups within the Mexican state. Indeed, post-revolutionary Mexico developed a complex network of relations between criminals, police, and politicians from all ranks. This type of environment generated a way of doing politics that necessarily depended on selective impunity. That is to say, justice would be served only in a few selected cases, while other groups and individuals—within criminal or political circles—would remain untouched, free of any judicial process.

An authoritarian system linked to a democratic regime has produced a *sui generis* political landscape in Mexico. Some have conceptualized this as a “perfect dictatorship,” meaning that while a multi-party system has been in place since the end of the Revolution in the late 1920’s, a single hegemonic party has imposed its policies and governing style for decades, at least until the 2000 election (in which the PRI, Revolutionary Institutional Party, lost to PAN, National Action Party).

A more detailed conceptual framework can help one better understand the mechanics of such a complex way of ruling. Carlos Flores Perez has proposed four different political models that take into consideration the relationships between politicians and criminal groups and their impact on government affairs. Flores’ perspective is based on Tilly’s approach, meaning, this type of relationship is not abnormal, but rather, is a systemic reality, a sort of symbiosis. For the case of Mexico’s post-revolutionary period—1940-2000—Flores Perez suggests a model called “centralized-descendent-incremental.” In his own words, “it refers to the kind of corrupt linkage triggered by a relatively weak state—unable to maintain its legitimized monopoly on violence, with unclear distinction of the public and private spheres, and arbitrary enforcement of laws, and a set of de facto institutions overwhelming their formal counterparts.” (2014, p.522).

In this scheme, politicians, on one hand, participate in a relationship founded on the enticement of illegal profits that they can add to their legitime incomes. Criminals on the other hand, are willing to cede part of their illegal profits to state officials so they may deflect legal actions, or even use institutional resources that can be complimentary or instrumental to their illegal activities. (Flores Perez, 522).

According to Flores Perez, the weakness of a state obscures the relationship between politicians and criminals due to lack of definition in terms of these groups’ limits and power. Nevertheless, it is of crucial importance to note that most of the time the “State’s strength confers superiority to government officials, because they have at their disposal the entire force of the State” (2014, p. 522). Which contradicts the mainstream—and even the international relations discourse—that claims that criminal corrupt politicians, that high rank politicians are only partially aware of high stakes criminal activity, and that the government constitutes an opposite and frontal threat to criminal organizations.

Araceli’s experience facing the anger of the citizens living in a small town, became an invaluable component of the *buscadora* know-how. After the incident Araceli requests permission to access and prospect towns only after confirming that the searching process will take place in the company of federal forces—whether these are judicial or the army—hence making sure that local citizens will not protest those they consider an intrinsic part of the violence problem.

**2.6 Numinous Dolls: “It feels bad…it feels nice.”**

Numinous objects carry a psychological significance rather than material. These objects seem to be inhabited by a numen or “spirit that calls forth in many of us a reaction of awe and reverence.” (Maines and Glynn, 1993, p. 9)

The key to understand numinous objects relies on the consideration of a public perception that provides deep significance by associating certain objects with a person, place, or event. “The ‘numinosity’ of an artifact or place, the intangible and invisible quality of its significance, consist in its presumed association with something, either in the past or in the imagination or both, that carries emotional weight with the viewer” (Maines and Glynn, 1993, p.10).

These objects tend to be dismissed by professional historians as merely valuable archival pieces; however, their value resides in their capacity to validate memories and physical connections with the past. Even when the link between the numinous objects and their original owners or bearers cannot always be confirmed—and this is the reason for their perceived lack of historical value—these objects are usually more potent when they become signifiers of group suffering. In other words, these objects are capable of a transfiguration that connects group experiences of pain, fear, and loss into recognizable pieces of material culture. (Maines and Glynn, 1993, p. 14).

In the midst of turbulent times due to an ethos of violence, which entails a process of revictimization by the authorities, a culture whose politics stem from an authoritarian style regime, and deep-rooted patriarchal practices, Araceli maintains that adopting a *niña sanadora* or healing kid can be soothing and beneficial for her Colectivo. Thus, she proposes that all Colectivo members should place an order with an artist who creates healing dolls. Such an artist produces similar items for other groups who also are going through a healing process due to a traumatic event. For example, some of these groups are survivors of sexual violence. The artist suggested that every Colectivo member should provide a garment worn by the person disappeared. From these fabrics, small shirts, jackets, and other customized garments were made for the dolls—exactly like the *tianguis* vendor who sells homemade attires for knock-off Barbies. Thus, some of the dolls wear clothing made from the fabrics that one day were part of the *buscadoras’* loved one’s wardrobe. These dolls become invested of a numinous veil that allows mothers and other relatives to establish a healing process that won’t reach a conclusion but will be significative enough to be treasured by those wounded by a disappearance. Eloisa, a Colectivo member shares how she learned to live with her doll: “I go on with my day, working, cleaning, cooking, and my child is sitting on a couch or at the table. I talk to him. I yell at him, asking him “where are you? Why don’t you come home? Tell us where you are! I cry. Then I apologize to him for rising my voice” (Eloisa, 2023). Other family members ask for him when he is not at the living or dining room when the family gathers. “The kid roams all over the house. We sit him in the living room, and the dining room, or at the bedroom with his daughter [Randi’s, her disappeared son’s daughter]. She lays in bed with him as if it was a real kid. She takes pictures of him and talks to him…There is nobody to talk about this pain with…At the beginning we had no idea of how this would work, I was not thrilled. But now *he* has become visible. It gives me strength” (Eloisa, 2023).

Norma, another mother from the Colectivo recounts how the piece of fabric used for her dolls came from her son’s last worn work outfit, which had not been washed because she wanted to keep his scent. Smelling his son through the worn garments became a comfort. Norma feels close to him this way. Clinching to the doll hurts, as Norma states, it is sad because it reminds her that nobody had the right to take her son away from her. Norma’s husband sometimes carries the doll on his shoulders while walking through the house, doing exactly what he did with his son when he was little (Norma, 2023). Healing dolls as numinous objects can become portals that allow proximity or at least the feeling of being connected with a disappeared person. Because to be disappeared is a transitional state that can last for years the healing dolls represent a kind of temporal abode for the absent person, a place of mourning and remembrance.

1. **Conclusion**

The concepts of nation and community have not fared well vis-à-vis the test of a war on drugs. With ever multiplying internal enemies and rival factions fighting over markets, traffic routes, and ingeniously perverse diversified businesses that supplement the already billionaire profits of the illicit drug commerce, the idea of an imagined community a la Benedict Anderson seems to crumble. Loyalties become fluid, liquid, escaping traditional ways of conceptualization. One day a person is a neighbor or school friend, the next, a perpetrator of a disappearance. Always due to greed. In the case of Cristian, a security guard working hundreds of miles away from his hometown Orizaba, it was a school friend who tricked him into buying a used stove. Cristian went back home to visit his family for his daughter’s christening and happened to run into an old friend who told him that he had some appliances for sale. After showing up to pick up a stove, he was *levantado* (kidnapped). Laura, his mother, a *buscadora*, states that the reason behind the disappearance is not clear. The authorities elaborated a search file in which they described Cristian using inaccurate and unprofessional terms: a different height, “sad eyes” and other non-technical terms. Months later, when Laura requested an explanation, the answer could not have been any more cynical, any more cold. The very own special prosecutor for the cases of disappearance said that they used a shorter height in the description because “dead people shrink” (Laura, 2023). In subsequent months Laura and Cristian’s wife received numerous calls from police officers offering “help” in exchange of money. Other extorsion calls assured Laura that Cristian was still alive in the hands of a powerful band, and they requested more money in exchange of not “returning him cut in pieces” (Laura, 2023). While facing extreme violence due to authorities refusing to participate in the search for justice, and additionally knowing that one of the culprits in her son’s disappearance was a childhood friend of Cristian, poses one question: What happened to the ties and bonds in this imagined community? Is this still one community, or town, or nation?

In this way, the traditional societal bonds, abstract ideals of country, and discourses of nationalism associated with the creation of the Mexican state have suffered a serious erosion in recent years. Modernity, globalization, economic polarization, all play a part in a *sui generis* disconnection among citizens. However, in the midst of the tragedy of disappearance, search collectives emerge as radically different micro communities that promote healing.

As Daniel G, another collective member, stated, “when they disappear a loved one, they also disappear the rest of the family (Daniel, 2023). Daniel has found in the collective another family, and in Araceli another mother. Even when pain does not teach anything, suffering opens up a common space among collective members. To ease the pain the search mothers adopt healing dolls that provide proximity with their disappeared. Araceli says that “Rubi—the doll—does not smells like Rubi anymore because I sniffed all her scent [over the years].” She holds her little hand with passion, love, and faith. “Sometimes I can feel her pulse beating,” says Araceli (Salcedo, 2023). Above all, collective members have each other, they become a *familia de dolor*, or a family born out of pain (Daniel, 2023).

All Colectivo members agree on the fact that they found a new family in the searching group. Practically estranged from their own families after years of near to obsessive search and absence from their homes, Colectivo members find a new life—not better or necessarily more comfortable—in the sorority of searching women. These are also the embodiment of communities-of-being-in-common, or inoperative communities. According to Jean-Luc Nancy the ambitious and abstract projects, such as nations, gravitate towards totality given their predilection for homogeneity and sameness, but above all a fascination with nationalist mythologies focused on sovereignty and closeness, expression of “absolute immanence” (1991, p. 12-13). The Mexican myth of a post-Revolutionary family bonded by a strong man incarnated in the president, governors, and other high rank officials became extinct in the presence of the purest and wildest forms of capitalism developed by cartels and organize crime in the first decade of the twentieth first century. Guided by the promise of inclusion, some sort of social equalization, and fulfillment of shattered male fantasies of power and wealth, the narco-entrepreneurs sign blood pacts with their employers promising their lives in exchange of a taste of lifestyle they enjoyed only by watching movies until now. The sacrificial requirement, previously embedded in nationality and Revolutionary ideals, now seems to be fragmented and demanded by any association with the thousands of cells conforming the hydra of Mexican organized crime.

Opposite to the destructive force of organized crime, the Colectivo offers a radically different existence based on space, individuality, and interdependence as a foundation of a being-in-common. A singular voice emerges from dismantling the myth and allowing space for persons who do not need to be bonded and restricted by values that promote superiority over others, “community…it is not a communion that fuses the egos into an Ego or a higher We. It is the community of others. The genuine community of mortal beings…it assumes the impossibility of its own immanence, the impossibility of a communitarian being in the form of a subject (Nancy, 1991 p.15). Space for the self, and responsibility towards the other cement this type of community where the recognition of human needs is stronger than the loyalties to abstract ideas usually embedded in the constructs of nationality and identitarian politics. Perhaps death, someone else's death, depends on an understanding of finitude needed for a establishing a community for Colectivo members. The healing dolls, as a shadow of reality and reminder of an eternal absence also help establish communication in a different way. In Nancy's words, "[c]ommunication consist before all else in this sharing and in this compearance (*com-parution*) of finitude: that is, in the dislocation and in the interpellation that reveal themselves to be constitutive of being-in-common" (1990, p. ). Thus, the Colectivo and their numinous dolls create a space for healing in the threshold of the impossibility of a disappearance. This healing begins with a chance of proximity to a loved one who has been disappeared: Colectivo members complain, vent, eat, watch TV, do piggy-back rides, have family reunions, cry, laugh, perform roll call, celebrate birthdays, and travel with their healing dolls. In the shadow cast by a grim reality, the healing dolls allow for a transfiguration of what at times can be an unspeakable, unfathomable, impossible pain into an otherwise-than-being that makes present the bonds that tie together a micro inoperative community forever in resistance to the adversity in which thousands of Mexicans live nowadays.

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1. For this article I interviewed some of the members of the Colectivo Familias de Desaparecidos Orizaba-Cordoba in 2023. With the exception of Araceli Salcedo, president and founder and public figure, I omit the last names of the interviewees. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. 1 Narco is the generic term used in Mexico to refer to organized crime bands or drug trafficking cartels. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)