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Book Review Essay.

The Mystery Behind the Disappearance of the 43 Ayotzinapa Students: What's left?

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Abstract

This book review essay will provide an in-depth analysis about the mystery behind Mexico's 43 disappeared students of Ayotzinapa. There are two tightly defined themes throughout the four books: forced disappearances and political violence in Mexico. Such themes bring to light some of the most consequential questions that the books help uncover. Where have the students vanished and who is responsible? Firstly, this review essay will assess the books' approach, and how each writing avails to capture the truth through interviews, testimonies and personal narratives, investigative journalism, and even by way of an illustrated non-fiction and graphic form. Although each book has a different form, they all efficaciously demonstrate and prove that, the Mexican government was responsible for the forced disappearances of the 43 normalistas from the Raúl Isidro Burgos Normal Rural School of Ayotzinapa. The books expose a world of government corruption, political violence, murders and impunity, while revealing the authentic culprits connected to the killing of six and forceful disappearance of 43 students. Secondly, this diversified range of books, withal point out that, the disappeared students' families were not going to allow the government to simply vanish their loved ones. The parents of the 43 students and survivors of the attack, mobilized in protests, met with government officials, and gave interviews to journalists. However, not one of the parents' efforts sufficed to propound the complex and perturbing reality they were experiencing. Almost six years after, the families are still searching for the 43 students, who mysteriously vanished into the dark night. The forced disappearance of the 43 Ayotzinapa students continues to be an unsolved crime.

Keywords: *Ayotzinapa, forced disappearances, political violence, the 43*

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Introduction

This review essay is an informative and descriptive reading of four books that address the disappearance of the 43 students and the broader issue of systematic government corruption and violence and the violation of fundamental human rights. These themes are revealed through a diversified range of books, while conclusively exposing this striking and awful reality. It was the night of September 26, 2014 when it all began. The night when 43 *normalistas*¹ of Raúl Isidro Burgos Normal School, vanished without a trace and were never seen thereafter. The school, also known as Ayotzinapa's Rural Teachers College is one of sixteen left across Mexico.² Founded under the concept of "student governance," the normal rural teachers' college offers free tuition and dorm, and accepts students from some of Mexico's poorest regions.³ The *normalistas* take on a Marxist-Leninist ideology and commend the values and beliefs of revolutionists like Che Guevara and Emiliano Zapata. On the given day, as a part of a years old tradition, the students commandeered additional inter-city buses in Iguala, Guerrero, to travel to Mexico City to commemorate and take part in the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre, in which the Mexican army killed hundreds of innocent students.⁴ To put an end to this, the local, state and federal police intercepted and gunned down the busses, while killing six and disappearing 43 students.

*¡Fue el estado!*⁵

In *A Massacre in Mexico*, investigative reporter and journalist, Anabel Hernández, reconstructs the tragic events that took place on the night of September 26, and the impact it had thereafter. Hernández reveals a truth never heard of before. She

¹ Secondary school students or student teachers training to become educators.

² Tryno Maldonado, *Faces of the Disappeared Ayotzinapa: A Chronicle of Injustice* (United States: Schaffner Press, 2018): 6.

³ Anabel Hernández, *A Massacre in Mexico: The True Story Behind the Missing Forty-Three Students*. (London: Verso, 2018): 39-40.

⁴ Hernández, *A Massacre in Mexico: The True Story Behind the Missing Forty-Three Students*, xi.

⁵ *¡Fue el estado!* – roughly translates to "The government did it!" After the Ayotzinapa tragedy, protesters carried posters with this statement and identified the Mexican government as the responsible party for the disappearance of the 43 Ayotzinapa students.

demolishes the Mexican government's version of the "historical truth" by calling it the "historical falsehood" and claims that the attacks on the students were prearranged and executed by the orders of the highest level of government, involving not only local, state and federal police, but also the Mexican army. During her investigation, Hernández uncovers unpublished official government documents and surveillance videos and conducts in-depth interviews with the survivors and families of the disappeared, including the officials and cartel members behind bars, whom the government alleges to have ordered and participated in the attacks. Hernández inculpates the Peña Nieto administration to have tampered with evidence, falsify statements and lie to the Mexican people. Hernández's research further shows that, the government manufactured a story by torturing and coercing people into confessions. *A Massacre in Mexico* provides a persuasive case of the that night's occurrences and marks Hernández's corrupted "historical truth." Through investigative journalism, Hernández ferociously exposes the Mexican government by constructing a noteworthy timeline and reveals "who is responsible for this monumental crime and who needs to be held accountable."⁶

Seguir Buscando⁷

Tryno Maldonado's *Faces of the Disappeared Ayotzinapa: A Chronicle of Injustice* is a riveting, yet intriguing chronicle, narrated by the surviving students and families of the disappeared. Maldonado directly immerses himself within the lives of the *compañeros*⁸ and their families. He takes a four-month break from his personal and professional life and lives at the rural teacher's school in Ayotzinapa. Through in-depth interviews, Maldonado writes about the lives of the disappeared students. Maldonado takes the time to understand the students and their families. He gains knowledge about who the students were and what and who they left behind. He uncovers the the parents' and students' lives, before, during and after the night of

⁶ Hernández, *A Massacre in Mexico: The True Story Behind the Missing Forty-Three Students*, front cover.

⁷ "To continue to search."

⁸ *Compañeros (or compas)* – In English, often translated as "comrade." It is also used to refer to someone of equal standing, such as a coworker or a classmate. John Gibler (2017) defines it as "a companion in struggle and friend" (p. 19).

September 26. By writing this book, he shares their personal life stories and exposes their truth to the world.

Notwithstanding, the book does not fail to describe the night of the horrific attacks and how the 43 students from Ayotzinapa went missing. Further, Maldonado descriptively reports on the families' continual and desperate struggle while searching for answers about their children's whereabouts. The parents, who are constantly on the go, come from poor marginalized indigenous communities. Some do not even speak Spanish. They are farmers who have no education and now no sons. All they want is their children back and they want them alive. Even more than that, the book exposes the Mexican government's attempt to manipulate the entire investigation related to the forced disappearance of the 43 students.

Los Desaparecidos⁹

In *I Couldn't Even Imagine that They Would Kill Us*, John Gibler, delivers a compelling oral history of the events of September 26, 2014, by using the first-hand accounts, perspectives, and experiences of the surviving students, parents of the disappeared, reporters, photographers and kidnap victims, among others. Days after the horrifying night, Gibler takes the initiative and places himself among the students and parents of Ayotzinapa. He carefully listens, as each student relives the terrifying night. In Gibler's words, these personal stories "describe a night of chaos and horror, erratic communications, confusion, shock and disbelief."¹⁰ The stories narrate state violence and impunity and expose the Mexican government's role on September 26. The perspective of each witness reveals questions that, six years later, have yet to be answered. Who is the responsible for the deaths and disappearances? Why did no one help the students that night? Where are their *compañeros*?

⁹ "Los Desaparecidos" – roughly translates to "the disappeared." This expression is used throughout all four books. It the most commonly used expression to refer to the forced disappearance of the 43 students.

¹⁰ John Gibler, *I Couldn't Even Imagine that They Would Kill Us: An Oral History of the Attacks against the Students of Ayotzinapa*. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2017): 19.

*¡Vivos se los Llevaron! ¡Vivos los Queremos!*¹¹

*Vivos Se Los Llevaron: Buscando A Los 43 De Ayotzinapa*¹² is an illustrated non-fiction graphic novel, that besides in Spanish, thus far has not been translated into any other languages. Authored by Andalusia K. Soloff, sketched by Marco Parra and visualized by Anahi H. Galaviz, like Hernández's and Gibler's approaches, this book also narrates the experiences of the surviving students, while assiduously focusing on the parents of the disappeared, who have dedicated their lives looking for their children. In this book, Soloff fixates her attention to four principal characters, including two surviving students and two parents, who wanted their voices to be heard. Since the tragic night, the parents of the disappeared students have tirelessly devoted themselves to finding their children. This graphic novel depicts these families mobilizing into collective action by marching the streets and protesting the Mexican government with the slogan, ¡Vivos se los Llevaron! ¡Vivos los Queremos! To understand both, the parents and students, Soloff had to see it herself. She spends countless of days with the parents and students of Ayotzinapa documenting their movement and emotion, which undoubtedly helped her to convert their story into a visualized illustration.

Ayotzinapa 43: The Never Heard Before Voices Come to Life

As mentioned above, the four books portray the night of September 26, in Iguala, where students were massacred and 43 forcefully disappeared without any trace. The books undoubtedly expose truths, question answers and reveal testimonies of the mothers, fathers and surviving victims of that night. All books blame and identify the Mexican government as the main culprit. The books seek to unmask the government's involvement, in which they were not only the organizers that ambushed the buses the students were driving, but also to show the different ways the governments tampered with evidence, lied to the national and international media, made-up testimonies and tortured innocent people into confessions.

A *Massacre in Mexico* by Anabel Hernández, a Mexican investigative journalist, provides a detailed outline of the events that took place that night and

¹¹ "They were taken alive, we want them back alive!"

¹² "Taken Alive: The Search for the 43 Ayotzinapa Students."

dismantles the government's version. In *Faces of the Disappeared*, Maldonado also walks us step by step through that horrible night; however, Maldonado does not point fingers the way Hernández does. Instead, he vividly portrays a more humane side of these horrifying events. Maldonado lets us see through the parents of the disappeared. He punishes us to feel the pain they do -not only the emotional pain, but the physical, which appears to have expanded and worsened during the six years of searching and grieving.

In a third book, *I Couldn't Even Imagine They Would Kill Us* by John Gibler, we relive the horrific events through the eyes of the survivors, the people que vivieron para contarla.¹³ Quite different from the novel-looking type, the fourth, *Buscando a los 43 de Ayotzinapa* by Andalusia Soloff, the illustrated non-fiction novel, gives us a visual of families' emotions through photographs. This graphic novel reveals the emotional journey of the surviving students, but most importantly, that of the mothers and fathers, who are still searching for their children.

It is intriguing and captivating to see the ways in which these four books underline the same events and approach similar questions and themes, yet, they take on different *forms*. The books, each in their own way, effectively deliver one implicit message – ¡Fue el estado! One thing is for sure, while continuously assuring the public that the Guerrero Unidos drug cartel was responsible for the forced disappearance of the 43 students, the Mexican government never conclusively solved the mystery behind the disappearances. Although many arrests were made, as of today, no one has been convicted.

A Massacre in Mexico is not Hernández's first book that speaks of the social unrest and 'the war on drugs' in Mexico. The book is yet another excellent example and continuation of the work she began years ago. Hernández's investigative skills are out of the ordinary. Clearly and convincingly, Hernández directly targets the Mexican government, something that neither, Gibler, Maldonado or Soloff do. Correspondingly, Hernández does not solely depend on the testimonials and revelations of the survivors, especially the way in which Gibler and Maldonado do.

¹³ "Live to tell the tale" - a common expression in the Spanish speaking communities; often used after surviving a dangerous situation or the most unexpected circumstances.

Hernández draws her conclusions based on facts only, including, but not limited to official government documents and video surveillances, among others.

In *I Couldn't Even Imagine They Would Kill Us*, however, Gibler organizes the testimonies of the eyewitnesses in such an order that, they are easily able to compose a storyline. Gibler allows each eyewitness the opportunity to have their own voice, giving his audience the advantage to live through the horrific events as if they were physically present that night. Gibler's greatest contribution to this book is that, he ascertains that his audience hears the voices of both, the surviving students and parents. He wants the world to get to know the poor and powerless people whose voices are often shut. Gibler wants to ensure they are never forgotten.

One thing is for sure, through the eyewitness testimonies, Gibler's book critically explores one side of the story. The buses of the students were attacked by local and state police, who killed six students, and disappeared 43 students. I cannot help but think that, the purpose for this collection of personal narratives is not only to tell the truth from the students' perspective, but also to offer a testament of hope not only for the ones related to the disappearance of the 43 Ayotzinapa students, but for all of Mexico's disappeared. ,

Intriguingly, the story of the 2014 Iguala mass shooting is not only being told as an investigative novel like Hernández's or as a personal narrative like Gibler's. Andalusia Soloff's *Buscando a los 43 de Ayotzinapa: Vivos se los llevaron*, offers a stunning account of the story through illustrations. It is more than conspicuous that Soloff's notion goes by the famous phrase that, "a picture is worth a thousand words." Soloff is convinced that, no words suffice to describe the events that took place on the night of September 26. Homogeneous to Maldonado's *Faces of the Disappeared*, Soloff vestiges the emotional journey of the parents; however, the emotions are visually present. One can visually perceive people's countenances and feel their cries, anguish, and frustration.

It is useful, necessary even, to mention the fact that, this graphic novel was originally intended for an international audience. Soloff did not believe that this illustrated non-fiction book could be accepted or even understood in Mexico; however, she was wrong. Something unexpected ensued that changed that. Soloff printed a copy of one of the book chapters and shared it with Minerva Bello, mother

of one of the disappeared students, Everardo Rodriguez. Minerva's response was unforeseeable. She showed a great appreciation for the book, exclusively because the story was told through illustrations. Minerva's lack of education impeded her reading capacity, which is why she found easiness within the pictures. Minerva has since passed away. Minerva never got to see her son alive again.¹⁴ Indigenous and *campesino*¹⁵ communities in Mexico have been long neglected by the Mexican government, which is why the parents of the 43 and many others like them, never had the opportunity to receive the right form of education. However, these undereducated, poor and indigenous families travelled worldwide to spread awareness about the disappearance of their sons.

Maldonado's *Faces of the Disappeared* book also awakens the voices of the families they never knew existed. He starts off his book by introducing Mario González, "a coarse-spoken native of the state of Tlaxcala"¹⁶ and the father of César Manuel, one of the 43 disappeared students. We learn of Mario as a man of few words, who could not speak in public without stuttering.¹⁷ The loss of his son and distrust in the government and institutions, turned him into a different person.¹⁸ This new person now had a voice. Mario became the voice for all the parents. He learned to speak up and took charge, something he never thought he had inside him.

¹⁴ Andalusia Soloff, *Buscando a los 43 de Ayotzinapa: Vivos se los llevaron*. (Mexico City: Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, 2019): 12.

¹⁵ "Peasant" or "Small-holder farmer" are the most frequently used translations in English. *Campesino* refers to people who live and work in rural areas and everything associated with that way of life. "*Campesinos* are rural producers who often do not own land and work small plots, with the family constituting most or all of the labor. The food they harvest is for their own consumption and sale to the market, but both activities are aimed to maintain the life of the family as opposed to accumulation of capital." <https://www.heifer.org/blog/a-word-about-the-word-campesino.html>

¹⁶ Maldonado, *Faces of the Disappeared Ayotzinapa: A Chronicle of Injustice* (United States: Schaffner Press, 2018): 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

Soloff's and Maldonado's books, both reference the parent's anger and frustration. They both reveal who these parents were before and what they became after. While Soloff's illustrative novels' intention is to show the emotional journey of the parents and guide them to understand the events that disappeared their children through illustrations, Maldonado's book affirms their strengths. And while Soloff portrays a much more emotional side of the parents, Maldonado screams their heroism. We learn of the parents' endured emotional and physical pain, which has contributed to their character and has given them courage to continue fighting and searching.

Conclusion

September 26, 2020 will mark six years since the disappearance of the 43 Ayotzinapa students. Nothing is known of the whereabouts of the 47,000 who have disappeared in Mexico in the last 12 years.¹⁹ The Mexican government attempted to camouflage the facts by inventing "the historical truth," where they claimed that the 43 students were incinerated in a trash dump. The GIEI²⁰ concluded that the fire in the trash dump would have never occurred and there was no scientific evidence pointing to confirm such allegations.²¹ The GIEI's report showed the parents that they were victims of their own government. That is precisely what brings us here today. The injustices committed against these parents and many others are excruciating. However, it is those same injustices that keep them moving. The world must know that, Ayotzinapa is not just another case. Ayotzinapa does not only speak of the disappearance of the 43 but also brings awareness to all of Mexico's disappeared. Consequently, the books of Hernández, Maldonado, Gibler and Soloff do exactly that. The books, each in their own way, reach people from different

¹⁹ Arturo Conde, "On fifth anniversary of Mexico's missing 43 students, anguished families still seek answers." NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/fifth-anniversary-mexico-s-missing-43-students-families-still-see-n1058806>. Accessed May 13, 2020.

²⁰ "Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI, by its Spanish acronym). The group was set up by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights. See Hernández's *A Massacre in Mexico* (2018): xxvi-xxvii.

²¹ Hernández, *A Massacre in Mexico: The True Story Behind the Missing Forty-Three Students*, 234.

backgrounds, screaming *¡Fue el estado!* and chanting the voices of the parents, *¡Vivos se los llevaron! ¡Vivos los Queremos!* For the moment, *that is all that's left.*

Books Reviewed

A Massacre in Mexico: The True Story Behind the Missing Forty-Three Students by Anabel Hernández, translated from the Spanish and with an introduction by John Washington Verso. (London: Verso, 2018, 404 pages).

Faces of the Disappeared Ayotzinapa: A Chronicle of Injustice by Tryno Maldonado, translated from the Spanish by Chandler Thompson. (United States: Schaffner Press, 2018, 216 pages).

I Couldn't Even Imagine that They Would Kill Us: An Oral History of the Attacks against the Students of Ayotzinapa by John Gibler, translated from the Spanish by Gibler and with a foreword by Ariel Dorfman. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2017, 261 pages).

Vivos se los Llevaron: Buscando a los 43 de Ayotzinapa by Andalusia K. Soloff, Marco Parra and Anahi H. Galaviz. (Mexico City: Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, 2019, 198 pages).

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