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Exhuming the Night

In 1971, Elena Poniatowska published *La Noche de Tlatelolco* (The Night of Tlatelolco),¹ her iconic chronicle of repression of the student movement, which consecrated her in Latin American journalism. In 2017, writer Diana del Ángel published *Procesos de la Noche* (Processes of the Night), in which she narrates the agonizing bureaucratic process faced by the family of one of the 43 students from the Ayotzinapa rural teacher-training school who were the victims of forced disappearance the night of September 26, 2014. The book has a prologue by Poniatowska, in which the veteran author raises a question that marks the generation gap between the two: “What country is this . . . where a little girl has to sit down and write not only about killing but about flaying?”²

The prologue makes explicit the connection between the two works, joined by an unending night with constant-

ly increasing violence. The story of these two state crimes, Tlatelolco and Ayotzinapa, reveals the continuity of structural violence affecting both students and the journalists who research their stories in search of the dawning of the resistance.

More than a half-century after the Tlatelolco massacre, and despite the historical consensus on the event, the guilt of those responsible has yet to be formally established. A chasm still exists between the death count reported by civil society and that recognized officially, of 300 and 30. *La Noche de Tlatelolco* opens with a series of black-and-white photographs that narrate the conflict in chronological order, from the joy and solidarity of the protesters to the installation of altars to the fallen. “Next to the Church of Santiago Tlatelolco, a confident multitude assembled that half an hour later would lie bleeding outside the doors of the convent, which never opened to offer sanctuary to the children, men, and women terrified by the

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hail of bullets.”³ Captions like this use testimonials to shed light on what the official figures hid.

After years of investigative agencies and refuted official versions, the Ayotzinapa case faces the risk of suffering the same impunity as Tlatelolco. In *Procesos de la Noche*, Diana del Ángel denounces the callous attitude taken by the authorities: “The main focus is always to use technical, non-human language. The more technical the better; the fewer people see the victim the better. Why would you say, ‘Julio, age 22, father of a baby, husband of a woman, son of a mother?’ That would—I don’t know—bring us a bit closer to the victim, allow us to feel for a moment that we might be like the people targeted. It’s better to use the word ‘cadaver.’”⁴

In 2019 the Commission for Truth and Access to Justice in the Ayotzinapa Case was created and has shown positive signs; however, much remains to be known about the events of that night to identify the persons responsible from the lowest to the highest ranks of government and the armed forces.

Lacking institutional avenues, investigating state crimes forces us to rely on testimony as the primary source to reconstruct events. The testimonial tradition in Latin America had its heyday between the 1960s and the 1980s, as a means of expressing the traumas inflicted by dictatorship, recovering the memory of those erased from history, and forging a counter-history. It has also been a vital tool in the legal sphere, not to weaken but, on the contrary, to preserve its strength in transitional justice and historical memory.

Argentinean theoretician Beatriz Sarlo proposes a critical approach to testimony; she raises concerns about its moral hegemony in the post-dictatorial period.⁵ This narrative mode, she states, demands blind belief. In search of “truth,” a concept she questions, we forget that it is constructed from the present. As we strive to find meaning in chaotic events, in reconstructing the past we often fall into the trap of re-presenting teleologically and even myth-

ologically. Because memory is by nature a fiction, a subjective retelling, Sarlo takes the view that a more fruitful means of understanding past events is through literature.

Both Poniatowska and Del Ángel avoid the trap of the testimonial genre analyzed by Sarlo and find ways to make the form as expressive as the content. They reject the individual truths common in the classical heroic journey, of pure chronological narrative, and opt to frame the multiple perspectives of a social movement in a literary polyphony.

Sarlo is Bakhtinian when she claims that the problem with testimony is that it is too closely aligned with capitalist consumption, which classifies individual experience as true. The closest we can get to truth is to attempt to understand the friction between subjectivities expressed in dialogues, in the passions that dominate actions, in the confusion of collective events.

The Mexican authors, in contrast, seem to recognize the dilemma between reconstructing events from testimony and creating a literary text. They realize that the dazzling protagonism of individual testimony can transform it into myth. The only way to penetrate the darkness of the past is by feeling our way almost blindly, catching glimpses between blinks, aware that our senses may deceive us. That is exactly what both the writers mentioned do: allow the voices and the terrain to engage in dialogue, not to recreate a linear history, but to invoke the hidden forces that drove events.

It is impossible to recall October 2, 1968, without thinking of *La Noche de Tlatelolco*, translated into English as *Massacre in Mexico*. In Spanish, the title recognizes the palimpsest of the site: in the same square where protesters were massacred by the army, Spanish conquistadors massacred the Mexicas in 1521. There began the long night of the indigenous peoples, as the Zapatistas call the oppression that has lasted 500 years and can be tied to massacres like those in Acteal, in Chiapas, or Ayotzinapa.⁶ Tlatelolco Plaza’s polyphonic architecture lays bare the multiple layers of history and oblivion: the pre-Hispanic ruins, the colonial church, and the functionalist housing projects that ring the square and from which sharpshooters deployed by the Gustavo Diaz Ordaz (1964-1970) government gunned down the students.

After the massacre, Poniatowska interviewed survivors in numerous sessions; it is said that she spent almost as much time in Lecumberri Prison as the political pris-



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Parents of the 43 disappeared Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College students marched and held a rally in Mexico City on October 2.

oners. The result was a revolutionary tome that intersperses eyewitness accounts, including those of residents who watched petrified from their windows, with the testimony of others who learned what had happened only from the press or third parties: parents, ordinary people, police officers, and the captive audience of the Olympic Games, which Mexico City hosted that year. Some ideas are repeated in the voices of different people, recreating the atmosphere of the day and the mosaic formed by public opinion: conservatism, but also social upheaval.

The writer and journalist seems to stay on the sidelines as she records the words of others; however, there are at least two moments when her gaze is explicit: in the controversial dedication to her brother and in the introduction, which attempts to produce the effect of a crowd: "There are many of them. They're on foot. They're laughing. Here come the kids, they're coming toward me, there are so many." Poniatowska says, implicitly, "I am here": "They're coming toward me," a rhetorical gesture because we know she was not in the plaza. Finally, her authorship is also visible in the selection and order of fragments, especially at the precise moment of the shooting, since

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she chose those that helped produce tension and resemble, by way of a calligram, bullets on the page.

Despite this intention to limit the first person, Poniatowska was accused of appropriation. Gilberto Guevara de Niebla, from Sinaloa state, one of the student leaders she interviewed who later published his own books on the subject,⁷ wrote that she homogenized the voices. He added ironically that in *La Noche de Tlatelolco*, everyone speaks "Poniatowskan" instead of Spanish. That may be, but in giving it her personal style, the author shows that evoking the past requires fictional art because framing events, narrating them from a point of view, implies a certain distortion. The goal, then, would be to acknowledge that subjectivity without ceasing to aspire to a truthful narration.

Diana del Ángel seems to take this debate over first-person narrative and appropriation into account. Her voice is less noticeable in the testimonial sections; at the

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same time, her discursive perspective attempts to take ownership of her emotions and political positions. Her voice is much closer to activism than Poniatowska's. In the pulse of her text, the narrator is clearly witnessing the exhumation: "The bandages, still white, cover what remains of Julio's faceless head; it is impossible to tear your gaze away from that painful image and not feel that a piece of you is left behind when the forensic examiners reseal the coffin."⁸

Many books have been published about Ayotzinapa, but *Procesos de la Noche* is an intimate tale that seeks to reconstruct Julio Cesar's face and, with it, his dignity, as well as the chance to continue to struggle for justice in a country with Mexico's level of violence.

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Seen in the light of Sarlo's reasoning, exhumation becomes more a symbolic act of constructing the past from the present than the search for scientific and demonstrable proof of how Julio Cesar died. It is also the need to unearth systemic violence against social movements, to let the light shine on them so that justice can be done.

Academics and writers like Laura Castellanos argue that after the Tlatelolco massacre, the path to a non-radical option closed.⁹ The government showed that it was unwilling to listen or negotiate. Nineteen sixty-eight was part of what is known as the *Guerra Sucia* (Dirty War), a low-intensity conflict waged against revolutionary actions and groups in several parts of the country. In the south, a peasant guerrilla force in Guerrero state was made up of militants shaped intellectually in the network of rural teacher-train-

ing schools in place since the 1930s. One of the most renowned professors and leaders was Lucio Cabanas, a graduate of the Isidro Burgos Rural Teacher-training School in Ayotzinapa, assassinated by the army in 1974. To show how alive such conflicts remain, we need only recall that his widow, Isabel Ayala, was also assassinated, but in the year 2011.

Students at the rural teacher-training schools have a longstanding tradition of militance in social activism. The disappearance of the 43 Ayotzinapa students reopened old wounds from the Dirty War. The image of Julio Cesar's flayed face marked a climactic point in the visibility of violence in already bloody years.

As Sergio Gonzalez Rodriguez explains,¹⁰ Guerrero is a state where poverty and inequality merge with a history of guerrilla warfare, cultivation of opium poppies, drug trafficking, the presence of several criminal groups, the army, the navy, foreign investment, Canadian mining companies, and U.S. intelligence agencies. The flaying was understood initially as message from organized crime in a complex territory.

La Noche de Tlatelolco and *Procesos de la Noche* connect two periods in the same history and are part of a genealogy of Latin American narrative journalism, in this case polyphonic, which draws on collective power, creating a counter-history in which the memories of the disappeared find space and all faces count, as we continue to count the 43 Ayotzinapa students.¹¹ ■■■

Notes

- 1 Published in Mexico by ERA.
- 2 Diana del Ángel, *Procesos de la Noche* (Mexico City: Almadía, 2017), p. 17.
- 3 Elena Poniatowska, *La Noche de Tlatelolco* (Mexico City: ERA, 1971), unnumbered page in the section of photographs.
- 4 Del Ángel, op. cit., p. 74.
- 5 Beatriz Sarlo, *Tiempo Pasado. Cultura de la Memoria y Giro Subjetivo: Una Discusión Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2005).
- 6 The author refers to the Zapatista insurgency that produced the January 1994, mostly indigenous social uprising. [Editor's Note.]
- 7 Guevara Niebla wrote, for example, *Pensar el 68* (Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 1988), *La libertad nunca se olvida. Memoria de 1968* (Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 2004), and *1968: largo camino a la democracia* (Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 2008). [Editor's Note.]
- 8 Del Ángel, op. cit., p. 105.
- 9 Laura Castellanos, *México armado* (Mexico City: ERA, 2007).
- 10 Sergio González Rodríguez, *Los 43 de Iguuala* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2015).
- 11 The author is referring to the fact that marchers typically chant in unison the numbers from 1 to 43, to remember the 43 students. [Translator's Note.]