

## The Disappeared

Doctoral student, **Daniel James**, describes the subject of his fieldwork in Chile and Argentina.

Death – like birth – has a time and a place. We mark each. Societies and cultures around the world have devised (invented?) an elaborate array of rituals to close the chapter of a person's life in a way that signifies meaning. In obituaries, on tombstones, at a funeral or a wake, it is customary to note where and when someone was born, and died. Touchingly, it is sometimes even the same place that is recorded; a tantalising envelope that hints at the life led in-between, or a gesture perhaps to the lived experience before today's globalised age? But what if the time and place of someone's death are not yet known? What if there is even still uncertainty about whether somebody is really dead *at all*? This is what my research looks at.

On the wall of the memorial in the Santiago cemetery in Chile, the names of those executed during the period of General Pinochet's military rule are accompanied by their birth date, the date they died, and their ages at the time they were killed. Many lives were cut woefully short; there is even a figure of '0' carved on the wall denoting the death of an unborn child.



The names of those who were detained-disappeared, however, those who were abducted by state security forces before being tortured and presumably killed but whose whereabouts are still unknown, are accompanied only by the dates of their birth and disappearance. There is a subtle but profound difference. The disappeared, as they have come to be known, seem to exist outside time. Or in a parallel time, a liminal space. They are the not-quite-dead but-the-not-still-here. In a sense, they are ageless.

Forced disappearance has reached a certain purchase in social discourse. Watching an episode of Fox21's popular series *Homeland* recently, I was startled to hear one character joke about another being "the magician." "He liked to make people disappear," he explained. It has become all-too-frequent to read on the news about the latest person/s to have been disappeared; taken from the streets in Syria, discovered to have been dumped in a well in México. Activists in Spain meanwhile now argue that there are 114,000 'desaparecidos' as a result of the Civil War there, a term that wasn't used in its original context in the 1930s.

State-sanctioned killing is nothing new, of course. The history of nation-states is inseparable from a grisly genealogy of death, as states (as well as non-state bodies) have asked their people to give themselves up for the greater cause in civil wars, world wars, wars of liberation, revolutions and 'wars against terror.' How sad that state-led killing now counts with, and is understood to count with, such a malevolent practice as detaining someone, torturing them, and then making their bodies disappear. And that when this happens, these cases are now routinely brandished with the moniker of the 'disappeared.' For a practice that appears to undermine the carefully crafted order of the social world, this seems our best attempt at beginning to understand what's happening; at beginning to etch these people back into their (social) existence.

And yet, forced disappearance cannot surely be the latest category into which we insert the latest victims of atrocity? For me, a line is transgressed when someone is not only taken, tortured and (almost certainly) killed, as was sadly ever thus, but when their loved ones are denied the epistemological certainties of the physical body or details as to the time and place of their death. But what line? A line of space, or place, with their still being out-there-in-the-world, and not in a carefully marked and tended grave as a point of reference for those they left behind? A line of time, with the disappeared person not yet having been allocated their place in the passage of

chronological time? Is this what we mean when we talk, prompted by the literature on memory studies, of a rupture? And if so, is this enough?

When a group I am working with posted on facebook that I had gone to see them to inquire about the everyday lives of families of the disappeared, one respondent posted: 'GO TO THE MUSEUM!' Perhaps they were right. But recent scholarship has taught us to challenge the idea of a museum as the repository of truth, to undermine that Truth a little by questioning whose truth it really is, and who it serves. (Did you know that the Argentine military junta had their own Museum of Subversion?) Another contact I spoke with described the plight of relatives of the disappeared as that of a choice. When someone you love disappears, he said, you can put it in a box marked 'memory', put it away, and take it out when you need it, or you can let it destroy you.

I'm not so sure. Through fieldwork in Santiago and Buenos Aires, this is the kind of notion that I want to investigate, and interrogate. What claims can a society make in the face of the massive state-led disappearance of its people? What is lost with the continued disappearance of these individuals? And how can society represent the absence of those who are missing – if it can represent them at all?

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