

Violence and Affective States in Contemporary Latin America

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INTRODUCTION: VIOLENCE AND AFFECTIVE STATES IN CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICA

This special issue brings together scholars interested in the analysis of the social, cultural and affective dimensions of violence. The contributions explore the connections between situated experiences of violence and shifting affective states, relations, sensations and contingencies in contemporary Latin America. The articles consider how violence might constitute a nexus for the production of subjectivities and forms of identification, relationality and community, alterity and belonging, in a range of Latin American contexts including Argentina, Brazil, Guatemala, Mexico and in the Mexican diaspora in Spain.

Keywords: Violence; affect; emotion; subjectivity; sociality; Latin America

Introduction

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and forms of identification, relationality and community, alterity and belonging, in a range of Latin American contexts including Argentina, Brazil, Guatemala, Mexico and in the Mexican diaspora in Spain.

These articles emerge out of a conference panel organized as part of the Society for Latin American Studies Annual Conference held in Manchester in 2013 entitled 'Violence and Affective States in Contemporary Latin America'. The panel generated a remarkable number of submissions, leading the conference organizers to allocate three sessions to it. The popularity and resonance of the panel theme speak in part to the dynamism of research and theorizing on violence in Latin America across the social sciences and the humanities (see, for example, Auyero, Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes 2015; Ríos 2015). It also points to the burgeoning interest in the study of emotions, sentiments and affect in contemporary social and cultural theory (see Gregg and Seigworth 2010).

The articles in this special issue connect to broad and varied traditions of research and theorizing on violence in the region,¹ and extend these debates through a specific focus on the relations between violence and the production and circulation of affective states in Latin American contexts. As Michael Taussig (1992) has powerfully argued, these affects are constitutive not only of social hierarchies and dis/order, but also of subjectivities, a fact that he stressed was politically critical in his assessment of the culture of terror binding exploitation and governance in Colombia in the 1980s. Through this reading, terror as a form of State governance paralyzes people and fragments collectivities through the blurring of boundaries between the imaginary and the factual, and between collaboration and resistance. This volume draws on Taussig's focus on the constitutive aspect of affects, specifically for the present day. While several papers allude to a sense of

transition between the violent event and its aftermath (post-dictatorship, post-dirty war, post-civil war, post-genocide and so on), the reverberation of the violent event in various forms precludes a clear-cut temporal and affective separation between the event itself and that which precedes it and exceeds it. The volume, then, refuses to treat violence as only action or symbol, but recognizes its affective properties and power. At times, violence might appear disembodied from social context, but its effects nevertheless become inscribed on bodies, and their social alignments within communities. Violence inscribes itself on subjects and subjectivities, shaping individual and community borders and boundaries.

The articles in this volume contribute to broadening the understanding of both the immediate and longer-term meanings and implications of acts of violence in Latin America, as they turn to examine a range of social and cultural contexts, processes and artifacts. These include public performances, protests and other forms of embodied practice (Kerry), ranging from 'corpse messaging' as in the case of the mutilation of victims' bodies as a form of social communication in narcocultures (Lantz), to transnational activist interventions in the public sphere (Ruse).

They extend to the analysis of processes of community re-creation and renewal in the aftermath of genocidal violence (Smith) and the making of gendered personhood and homosociality – that is, relations 'between men', which, as Sedgwick (1985:1) famously argued, might include patterns of 'male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry' and desire – specifically through violence (Fotta).

We approach the analysis of sentiments, emotions and affect mindful of the different meanings – and plural philosophical genealogies – at play in these debates within the field of contemporary social and cultural theory. The articles draw on different traditions ranging from (post)phenomenology, psychoanalysis and more

naturalistic approaches drawing on the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza and, more recently, Gilles Deleuze. They place different emphasis on the overlaps or points of incommensurability between theorizations of emotions and affect, the personal and the impersonal, subjectivity and anti-subjectivity, representation and non-representation (Thrift 2004). Whilst some contributors to affect theory debates often posit that clear philosophical allegiances should be established (Pellegrini and Puar 2009), others stress the importance of situated experience, the ordinary and the everyday (Highmore 2010; Stewart 2007, 2010) as entry points for the analysis of a range of affective modalities and sensoria. In an influential intervention, Sara Ahmed (2004) has bypassed the strict distinctions between emotions and affect through the use of the notion of 'affective economies' that denote the performative role played by the circulation of emotions in the constitution of individual and collective bodies. Ahmed eschews understandings of emotions as either contained within persons or contained within the sphere of private matters and foregrounds instead iterability and performativity, as well as the political thrust of these dynamics.

The articles gathered in this special issue build on these debates, extending the analysis of violence and affective states in new, theoretically incisive directions. Kerry Whighan and Frank Smith draw on Ahmed's phenomenologically inflected reflections (Ahmed 2004, 2006) to consider the post-dictatorship, post-genocide contexts of Argentina and Guatemala. They highlight the link between violence, emotions and affect and demonstrate how these relations are implicated in the production of spatial and temporal orientations and disorientations (Ahmed 2006) and related forms of embodied subjectivity, community, and belonging. In turn, Martin Fotta creatively revisits the early work of feminist anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo

on the anthropology of emotions and redeploys her insights towards an analysis of the constitutive aspect of violence on male subjectivities among the Calon of Bahia. Fotta's emphasis on violence as fundamental in the making of Calon men problematizes the seemingly inevitable nexus between violence and suffering popular in analyses of violence – especially, but not exclusively – in anthropology (see, for example, Kleinman et al. 1997).

Conversely, Jamie-Leigh Ruse's article highlights the universal aspect of suffering through an analysis of the impact of counting the victims of the drug war in Mexico on activists in Spain. These activists mobilize empathetic emplacement – an expression that denotes the effect of reading on subjectivity and, more specifically, the opening up of the possibility of inhabiting another's worldview or perspective, including those of the dead – that is explicitly premised on notions of universality at the heart of liberal politics. However, if activists are to succeed politically, the circulation of affects and their impact on subjectivities has to also be blocked and controlled. For Andrew Lantz, the 'corpse messaging' inscribed on the mutilated victims of the Mexican drugs war affectively and performatively reinscribes the boundaries of the Mexican body politic. Corpse-messages are part of a broader elaborate narco-aesthetics that marks the emergence of narco-counter publics intent simultaneously on co-opting their victims' agency and on challenging the authority of the Mexican State. Drawing on Stoler (following Foucault), who argues the analysis of affective states should take seriously how sentiments 'figured in and mattered to statecraft' (2004: 7), Lantz's article points to the hyperbolic aesthetics of narco-traffickers' responses² to the War on Drugs in Mexico. The State plays a central role in all the articles in this special issue. The modern State is, according to Max Weber's (2004 [1919]) famous rendering, defined

by its monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, which is, by means of a rational bureaucratic machine, exercised by those who represent it. As Taussig observes, while Weber's recognition of the centrality of violence for the definition of the modern State is pertinent, it also reifies violence as a substance, as 'so many ergs of spermatic effluvial power that the father exerts in the private fastness of the family, with permission of the State, and that the State exerts over civil society and, at times, over other States' (1992: 116). Taussig's own work and the essays gathered here problematize such objectification of State violence. In addition, the hegemonic ideology related to it portrays non-State violence as a disorder stemming from human 'animality' that is to be pushed by the rational bureaucratic organization to the societal margins. Fotta's article focuses on a population of Calon Gypsies who view the Brazilian State and its institutions as always already a threat to Calon sociality, but makes a very different argument. In Calon communities violence can be a source of order and an organizing principle that set it apart from, and 'against', the State. The relation between violence, order and the State can be also configured differently.

The affective resonance of violence can create identities and communities, as highlighted in Smith's article on a community of relocated internally displaced people in Guatemala. The feeling of 'sadness' (*tristeza*) that individuals from the community experience not only allows them the possibility to reconstitute normalcy within, and find their place in post-civil-war Guatemala by bracketing their experience of the civil war, but as embodied social memory *tristeza* also keeps the memory of the violence alive (*ibid.*: 48). The affective resonance of this embodied memory reverberates across and throughout the social body defining the boundaries of the community and shaping the constitution of subjectivities within. The articles

in this volume therefore challenge the view that violence is an entity of a specific material constitution, demonstrating instead that through its affective effects it is 'mysterious, mystifying, convoluting and plain scary' (ibid.: 116). For this reason, the activist 'counters of the dead' described by Ruse have to mitigate the effects of their identification with the victims of the drug war to protect themselves from the violent encounter with the 'other'. But ironically, it is the process of counting, with all its potential to overwhelm and numb the activists, which allows them to see the Mexican State – with its political, structural and physical violence – in novel ways. The systemic violence of narco-corpse-messaging described in Lantz's article – which can be viewed as an aspect of the Deleuze-Guattarian 'war machine', as it is aimed at recoding nationalized spaces and challenging the State, is also at the same time interwoven into, and dependent on, the State and its power (Kapferer and Taylor 2012). As the expat activists fleetingly recognize, the manner in which the State wages its war on drugs lays bare its own violent origins and potential. This laying bare breaks down the distinction between narco-violence and State violence.

Like the activists counting the dead, members of the Argentinean *escrache* in Kerry Whighan's article fully subscribe to the idea of the nation state, but view its current politics as unsatisfactory. They try to change the national future by reshaping communities in the present based on the actions of the past. Whighan focuses on an analysis of the affective dimensions inherent in the public activism of H.I.J.O.S., 'Hijos y hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio' or 'Sons and daughters for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence'. This group of activists was formed by young people whose parents were disappeared during Argentina's dictatorship (1974–1983), to fight for truth, memory and justice.

H.I.J.O.S. devised the *escraches*, a distinctive form of public activism based on the Argentinean Spanish verb ‘*escruchar*’, which means ‘to uncover or bring something to light’. The *escraches* engage in theatrical public performances that aim to ‘do justice’ through a ‘*condena social*’ that raises awareness of the presence of perpetrators of violence committed during the country’s ‘dirty war’. These performances take place in a broader context marked by silence and impunity. Whighan suggests that *escraches* are ‘co-embodied practices of trans-action’ that serve to process past State-sponsored violence. Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s influential text, *Queer Phenomenology*, Whighan argues that these public performances, as practices of transection, are fundamentally concerned with crossing spaces and temporalities in order to redefine what it means to be a normative body in the public sphere. The *escraches* allow for a consideration and restaging of the complex and multi-layered historical experience of political violence. As embodied practices they allow a temporary reconfiguration, realignment and reorientation of the Argentinean body politic – in Ahmed’s (2006) terms – and question everyday, ordinary forms of normalized silence, impunity and forgetting (Stewart 2007). Drawing on Axat (2010), Whighan shows that *escraches*, through their spatial and temporal rearrangement of the body politic, constitute a form of *desobediencia biopoe’tica* (biopoetic disobedience). Like the ‘public feelings’ examined by Stewart in *Ordinary Affects* (2007), the sentiments and emotions that *escraches* make explicit and circulate dramatize the quotidian affective dimensions that are commonly left unmarked, or that are tacitly assumed to belong to the realm of the intimate and the personal. Whighan incisively argues that *escraches* foreground and performatively restage ‘resonant violence’ and ‘the extraordinary affects that come to be woven into the social fabric of a society after a period of genocidal violence’. *Escraches* disrupt the

way affective states connected to the genocidal violence of the Argentinean dictatorship are normalized or left unmarked. In doing so the *escraches* reinstate a sense of their mundane and yet extraordinary character alongside new conditions of possibility for justice.

Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork with the Calon of Bahia, Martin Fotta mobilizes the early work of feminist anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo (1980, 1984). The focus on Michelle Rosaldo's work and her contribution to an ethnographically informed and theoretically salient approach to the study of emotions is particularly incisive. Michelle Rosaldo's research constitutes an important trajectory of theoretical analysis in the study of emotions and a key antecedent to some contemporary debates (see, for example, Beatty 2013, Skoggard and Waterston 2015).

Fotta outlines the theoretical and conceptual salience of Rosaldo's early work with the Ilongot for contemporary debates on emotions and affect. For Fotta – as for Rosaldo – affective flows and outbursts of emotions – especially violent affects – conjure up social relations and subjectivities. Whilst for Rosaldo, Ilongot headhunting – as a practice motivated by revenge – reconfigures social relations and enacts subjects' movements in the lifecycle, as individuals acquire knowledge and experience of complex emotions defined in the Ilongot's own terms, for Fotta, violence is central to the articulation of relations between fathers and sons, and to the making of Calon masculinities in particular. Through three vivid ethnographic vignettes, Fotta illustrates how gendered personhood among the Calon of Bahia is constituted through Calon understandings of personal development and emotions. He recounts a conversation held on the porch of the home of Gilson, a prominent Calon moneylender, who was visited by his son Jorge. Jorge told stories of violence between Calon and non-Calon, including how his own brother-in-law was

the victim of a break-in but cunningly escaped harm. Jorge also recounted how in his dream an unknown Calon had tried to gun down Gilson, his father, but had been killed in turn by Jorge. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that Jorge himself killed a non-Calon man suspected of plotting an attack against Jorge's father – a pre-emptive action fully justified in the Calon community and in Calon moral terms. As Fotta explains, from a Calon perspective, 'adult sons should protect and avenge their fathers'. Violence against potential or real aggressors is, for Calon men, a form of care. Fotta provides a compelling argument for Calon understandings of violence as central to the articulation of Calon subjectivity and sociality, and the production of masculinities and social bonds among men in particular. Violence here is shown to be a 'meaningful practice', and, in turn, Fotta's account explicitly problematizes how violence is figured in Western imaginaries, especially folk constructions of violence, as the antinomy of sociality inevitably linked to notions of trauma and social suffering. Conversely, Fotta foregrounds Calon ideas about violence as an organizing principle of social life and of gendered subjectivities and relations articulated in the masculine.

Jamie-Leigh Ruse's contribution, entitled 'Experiences of engagement and detachment when counting the dead for "Menos Dí'as Aquí"', a civilian-led count of the dead of Mexico's drugs war', continues the discussion of ways subjectivities are forged through dealing with violence. It also examines how flows of affects and their interruption allow for the continuation of a civil society project. The interplay between attachment and detachment also affects the form the project's politics takes. The Barcelona-based association 'Menos Dí'as Aquí'' was set up in order to provide a testimony to the violence in the context of Mexico's drug's war and, in contradistinction to the dehumanizing accounts of the media that focus on gruesome

physical details, to humanize its victims. Each night a volunteer goes through a number of selected regional and national media outlets online, recording deaths, including basic details about victims that are then publicized on the association's blog, as well as on Twitter. In order to effectively carry out their task the volunteers highlight their need to imaginatively occupy the subjectivity of others whose basic details they record. In doing so they are compelled to empathize with a victim, to be affected by her story. As activists engaged in rehumanising the 'other' by chronicling her death they are confronted by the victim's life which they experience as their loss as that of somebody who could have been them. In this way counting with its re-ordering and publicizing of details pertaining to the victim becomes a process of reclaiming the victim's essential humanity felt as loss. Recognition of the personhood of the victim emerges out of the creation of the connection that 'implicates the counter in the obligation to preserve their memory' – a political act that generates not only 'grief at their suffering, but also indignation' . While this openness to being affected through imaginative empathy is necessary for the very continuation of the project and for its politics, Ruse shows that it can also undermine it. First, if one is not careful, one could inadvertently form an identificatory relation not with the victim, but rather with the perspective of the murderer and their gaze, and in this way becoming complicit in their act. Second, the time-consuming aspect of the counting means that the counters need to consciously cultivate a form of detachment. Utilizing the concept of 'mimetic empathy' (Willerslev 2007), Ruse highlights that such detachment should not be viewed as opposed to the politics of the project, to the production of feelings of responsibility to mourn each loss individually. Rather, this 'dual aspect' – desiring to connect, but feeling a need to detach – ensures the political meaning of their

activities for the counters. On the one hand, conscious awareness of (the need for) detachment continually reminds the counters of the ethical implications of the engagement itself and, on a practical level, is crucial to the completion of the project and to its political significance. The article concludes by pointing out how the counters feel that through their experience of the empathetic connection with the victims counted, they gain a different insight into the conflict in Mexico – its statistical extent as well as its human depth. The counters find themselves in the paradoxical position of having to both sympathize with the others and their suffering in order to justify and maintain their engagement on the issue, based on a common sense of shared humanity, while at the same time needing to detach themselves from the other in order to protect themselves from the emotional impact of the work. This paradox also applies to the anthropologist and highlights the seemingly universal but ineffable and hence ‘beyond culture’ aspect of suffering (Robbins 2013), a perspective that is mirrored in the discourse of human rights and in violence and trauma-related arguments that also approach both suffering and death as universals detached from cultural specificities. In sum, empathetic and embodied knowledge, created through affective openness by cultivating both strategic engagement and detachment, solidifies counters’ political commitment to their country.

Without explicitly drawing on Taussig’s seminal article (1989), Frank Smith’s contribution to this special volume nevertheless effectively portrays the former’s observation, namely that a ‘continuum of violence’ (first coined by Bourgois in Schepher-Hughes and Bourgois 2004) underlies the order of the State and the sense of normalcy lived by a population that is constituted as terrorizable, and which, advertently or inadvertently, lives in the state of emergency. As Smith puts it, in

Guatemala 'social relations continue to be mediated by violence'. Based on fieldwork conducted two years after the peace accord between Guatemalan government and the insurgents of the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca, and in a community that only five years before had emerged from hiding in the jungle, it captures a moment of transition with people attempting to forge themselves as a community in a new place and space. The community, called Primavera del Ixcán, is composed of people who had lived together for 14 years in hiding in the jungle identifying with the insurgents as one of several Communities of People in Resistance. After the war, rather than returning to their places of origin or moving elsewhere, people of Primavera preferred to stay with those with whom they had lived as internally displaced people for years. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's work on 'affective economy' (2004), the article illustrates how affects emerging from experiences of violence align these disparate individuals with the community, giving meaning to a life in this particular place and in this particular moment. More explicitly, Smith argues that 'memories born from experience of violence and displacement were reshaping collective boundaries through the emotional filter of sadness that enabled people to make sense of past experiences and restore a sense of being'. The emotional category of sadness, *tristeza*, thus plays a central role in the processes through which people reaffirm their sense of normalcy. Like the *susto* of a Mayan community studied by Linda Green (1994), it may be considered an embodied social memory. It is an emotion that the people of Primavera all share – this is what they feel and who they were at that moment of transition, while, at the same time, this emotion arises from the rupture and fragmentation produced by the civil war. Military violence had threatened people's sense of humanity, among other things, by blurring a culturally constitutive boundary between

wilderness and the sphere of human sociability and because physical survival was often made possible only through violation of socio-cultural norms. Smith convincingly argues that in the post-Peace-Accords era *tristeza* fulfills a 'restitutive role': through feeling sad people filter their sense of loss, along with experiences that led to a violation of their personhood. At the same time, through *tristeza* people are able to connect to others: these 'memories of collective experiences of loss and violence bound people together into an affective community'. Ironically, and somewhat counter-intuitively, the fragile social body was not created out of a sense of shared internal displacement and (later) shared survival, but by bracketing this period and marking it as exceptional through the circulation of *tristeza* within the community.

Finally, Andrew Lantz's article highlights the impact of violence on the affective relations within a given territory. Violence has become so commonplace in many parts of Mexico that it seems to no longer disrupt social life and social relations; that it has ceased to shock. However, violence has also become a form of communication where the victim's body is inscribed with messaging aimed at regulating behavior within a specific territory. Lantz argues that corpse messaging, the terms he deploys in order to refer to this inscription of meaning, forms part of a powerful counterpublic that redefines the boundaries between what can be said and done and that seeks to challenge the sovereign power of the State and State-like structures. Lantz's article raises the question of the function of these bodies. Rather than focus on the causes of the violence, he focuses attention on its effects, on what these bodies do – as mutilated corpses displayed on full view – to the affective relations in the community. Corpse messaging, Lantz argues, serves a regulatory function, in the Foucauldian sense, where power is inscribed on the deviant

body acts as a means of regulating and controlling the social body. Lantz takes us through a brief explanation of the sharp increase of violence in Mexico over the past two decades. A combination of factors, including the defeat of the ruling PRI and the social consensus it reached with crime syndicates, the success of the campaign against drug trafficking gangs in Colombia, the law enforcement policies of various Mexican administrations, and the opening up of free trade between Mexico, the USA and Canada under the NAFTA, led to a sharp increase in the activity of drug cartels in Mexico. Accompanying this came a sharp increase in levels of violence as gangs competed over different territories. Once in control these gangs establish parallel structures that fulfill many of the functions associated with formal State structures. In doing so, Lantz argues that they are both challenging the sovereignty of the State and establishing their own claims over a certain territory. Lantz claims that in order to effectively control a territory, gangs also needed effective ways to control populations, and establish a disciplinary regime and different modes of communication that re-inscribe rules and codes of conduct on the social body. This, Lantz claims, was achieved through the practice of corpse messaging. Lantz's analysis places the corpse message within a wider grid of power where cartels control not only a quasi monopoly over violence, but also over means of cultural production through songs and cinema, and where they also provide services to local populations. This leads to the creation of an affective economy based on both fear and admiration where the brutal violence of the cartels is counterbalanced by an admiration of feats of valor and defiance against traditional authorities that have been unable to control the rise of these criminal structures and provide protection and services to the population. Lantz makes the interesting point that rather than couch killings in the language of revenge, cartels such as La Familia use

the language of divine justice, and in so doing invoke a larger power that justifies their actions and naturalizes gruesome acts of torture and mutilation as a necessary measure to 'restore' social balance. Unlike the modern State that exercises sovereignty through categorization and incarceration, thereby removing the threat of 'the abnormal' from mainstream society and in so doing regulating behavior, cartels etch out their normative expectations on the deviant human body and display it to the public in full view. In doing so they have challenged sovereign power through a combination of extremely violent and highly emotive 'stunts' that have managed to reshape affective relations and relations of power at the community level and beyond.

These articles enrich and extend understandings of violence in Latin American contexts and illustrate how through violence and related sentiments, emotions and affects, new divisions of space, territoriality and communities are enacted. Violence is tied to the production of subjectivities, sociality and belonging, as well as to the articulation of forms of embodiment and corporeality. These forms, each in their own specific and at times hyperbolic aesthetic mode, mark the dead as much as the living. While affects – at least as they are understood in these articles – are at a first glance tied to past events (see for example Smith and Whighan) or are meant to create action in the present or react almost in real time, as it were (see Ruse), by reorienting subjectivities and communities, they are also about the future (see Whighan). Practices of mourning, such as those carried out by activist counters from the Mexican diaspora (Ruse), or the forms of sadness expressed by the Guatemalan former Community of People in Resistance (Smith), are signs of absence and loss. They conjure melancholic affects and in this way make the present emerge from the past, while also referring to the future. Futurity always holds the existing potentiality

of violence, but also the will to bracket it out, and to forge a life worth living.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. See, for example, Biehl, João Guilherme, *Vita: Life in a Zone of social Abandonment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Scheper-Hughes, Nancy, *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Taussig, Michael, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1980), *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), *The Nervous System* (London: Routledge, 1992); Whitehead, Neil L., *Dark shamans: Kanaima` and the Poetics of Violent Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

2. See also Amaya, Hector, (2013) 'Authorship and Death: Narco-Violence in Mexico and the New Aesthetics of Nation', in Gray, Jonathan and Johnson, Derek (Eds) *A Companion to Media Authorship*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, and Rojas-Sotelo (2014) 'Narcoaesthetics in Colombia, Mexico and the United States: Death Narco, Narco Nations, Border States, Narcochingadazo?' *Latin American Perspectives* 41 (2): 215–31.

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