



Enforced Disappearance: Spaces, Selves, Societies, Suffering

Kevin M. DeJesus¹

Rhode Island College
kevinm.dejesus@gmail.com

Fernando Bosco

San Diego State University
fbosco@mail.sdsu.edu

Iman Humaydan

Novelist and Independent Scholar

This special issue of ACME is devoted to advancing critical geographic research on the global human tragedy that is enforced disappearance. According to seemingly conservative, recent estimates, there are over 53,000¹ cases of unresolved enforced disappearances across the globe (The United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, 2011), while only 38 countries have ratified the 2006 United Nations Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (as of 2013, United Nations Treaty Collection). This admittedly limited picture reveals a significant global imbalance of justice toward the cessation of this geographically widespread practice of political violence. However, the legacy and implications of the pervasiveness of enforced disappearance yields a writhing effect. This impact the haunts spaces of the families of the disappeared, is located in the psyches of societies where systematic campaigns of enforced disappearance have been employed by regimes as a means to control political space, and is embedded in the places of memory and erasure where the struggle to exact justice and end impunity concerning the practice of



enforced disappearance permeates the lived and public spaces where this very legacy is resisted and reclaimed by survivors of the disappeared. The United Nations 2006 International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance defines enforced disappearance as

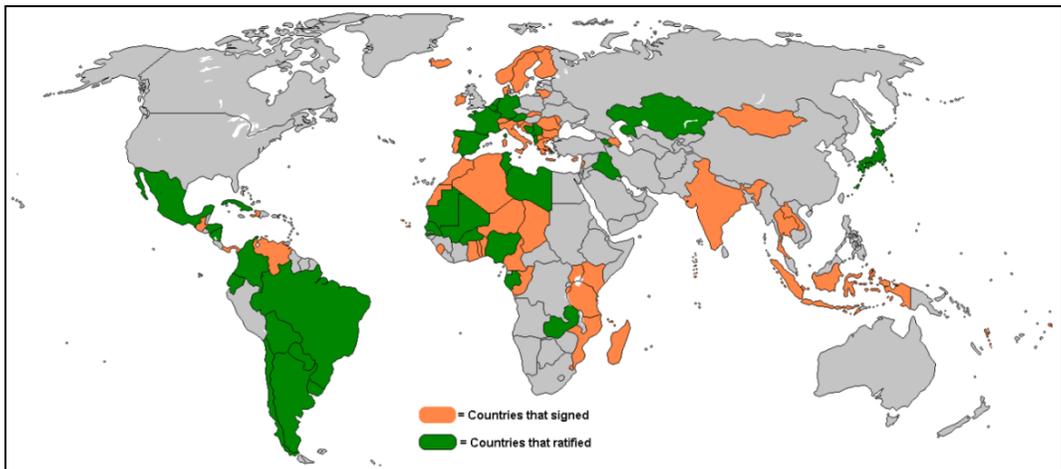
... the arrest, detention, abduction, or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State [sic], or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State [sic] followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law.

Beyond this clarification of the intent and practices that constitute enforced disappearance, the convention also prohibits the utilization of these practices by state or non-state actors in times of political crisis, including war. The convention asserts thus, “No exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification for enforced disappearance.” However unequivocally forbidding this convention is concerning those states of exception so often deployed in official rhetoric as a rationalization for this practice in the recent postmodern past, enforced disappearance is an historically prevalent tool of war and terror. While the origins of enforced disappearance are argued to be a 20th century phenomenon originating in state systematization of this practice of terror (see Vranckx, 2007), it remains notable that during World War I, it is estimated that 7,750,919 persons during the span of the Great War were either political prisoners, deemed missing or both (PBS, n.d.). Enforced disappearance remains a contemporary instrument of political violence, innovated and spatially reinvented anew by western governments of great global power, such as the United States. A striking innovation in the practice of enforced disappearance, implemented at a global scale, has been the extraordinary rendition program conceived of by high-ranking officials in the Bush Administration during the execution of the notorious War on Terror. A recent critique of this policy by The Open Society Foundations (2013) reveals that over 50 nations were involved in operationalizing this policy, one which violates the most fundamental principles of the 2006 International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. As the global complexities of the ways in which enforced disappearance rely on covert geographies and globalities, the need for the discipline of critical human geography to center this phenomenon and re-engage its power, entanglements, spatio-political intricacies and evolving structures of power and resistance.

Figure 1. Map of countries where enforced disappearance has been documented and denounced by local or international NGOs. Source: The Enforced Disappearance Information Exchange Center.



Figure 2. Map of countries that have signed or ratified the 2006 United Nations International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (as of October, 2012). Source: International Coalition Against Enforced Disappearance.



This special issue of ACME constitutes an advance in the study of enforced disappearance by centering an analytical and methodological focus on the distinctive approaches that critical geographical study brings to this intensely terrorizing, vastly employed tactic of political repression. Indeed, enforced disappearance remains an understudied socio-spatial phenomenon across disciplines. While early works outside of geography by scholars such as Agger and Buus Jensen (1996), Feitlowitz (1998) and Taylor (1997) set the pace for the study of enforced disappearance, geographers have also played a role in distinctly conceiving, researching and explaining the ways in which enforced disappearance is an inherently spatial phenomenon and practice,. Particularly, critical human geographers have also uniquely described the spatialities of resistance by which survivors of the disappeared have invented geographies of ritual and reclamation of political voice (see Bosco, 2001, 2004, 2006). Further, Sidaway (2010) has advanced enforced disappearance as a critical matter of geographical analysis in his comparative analysis of rendition as a tool of colonial terror, and contemporary trepidity and pursuit. The authors contributing to this special issue have engaged a complex array of cases, politics, places and peoples enduring the experience of enforced disappearance and its aftermath, rendering insightful, peer-reviewed contributions which are global and local in scale and implication.

Bruce D'Arcus interrogates the Bush Administration's extraordinary rendition program, and its relationship to the spatiality of legal rights and sovereignty, thus deconstructing the territorial logic of the Bush Administration's legal argument deployed to sanction this dangerously neoteric form of state-sanctioned enforced disappearance. Exploring legal-geographic transformations as a result of Bush policy and practice, D'arcus ties to these multi-scalar spatial permutations to the ways in which this policy and practice of extraordinary rendition is grounded in a spatial imaginary that views global sovereign spaces as borderless and transgressive terrain from which to assure an American territorial security calculus in the wake of 9/11. This paper not only reveals the intricate spatialities of enforced disappearance and the emerging geographies by which this practice is actualized, the author expands theoretical approaches to conceiving of the interconnectivity of geopolitics, law, space and nationalist territorialities.

Gould and Estrada explore the timely centrality of the legacy of enforced disappearance in Guatemala, a country whose former leader is currently the first Latin American head of state to face charges in his own country for crimes against humanity, including genocide and enforced disappearance. Gould and Estrada explore the making of counter narrative and historical discourse through the opening of spaces for memory and memorialization by an organization constituted of survivor families of the disappeared, who employ the visual (public art) to re-inscribe public space with remembrances of the disappeared, in direct resistance to a politically-driven landscape of official amnesia and impunity with regard to the crimes of disappearance. The authors draw on the work of this organization known as H.I.J.O.S., *Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio*,

Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice Against Oblivion and Silence) to expand how Maya and Ladino are differently imagined and re-imagined in the discourse concerning the disappeared, as it officiated, and resisted by H.I.J.O.S. Understanding the specificities of discourse and representation of these two ethno-cultural groups constitutes a central aspect of understanding the nuances of the Guatemalan civil war.

Jones uniquely engages the matter of memory and imaginings of the disappeared through a poetic exploration of representation and the bodies of the disappeared, and their meaning in streetscape, embedded, as they are, in imaginaries and spatialities of the political. Jones therefore re-centers the body and its spatial meanings as axial to the practices of imagining and remembering the disappeared, their suffering, and the spatial vortex which their social being enters upon capture. Jones's intervention enables a reconceiving of the ethical and human place of the disappeared person, with the effect of amplifying the inherent dramaturgy of the act of disappearing, necessary to evoking the terror which the removal of the body and self from known spaces of the everyday serves as requisite to yielding the effect of political repression – the intent of campaigns of enforced disappearance as they have been and continue to be enacted across the globe.

It is our hope that this special issue spurs an expanded focus on the vital concern that enforced disappearance represents to a world struggling to achieve human rights, justice and geographies of everyday peace and security, particular as this human struggle is engaged and considered by critical human geographers spanning the globe.

We would like to thank the exemplary editorial support we received from ACME editors Lawrence Berg, Sara Gonzalez and Levi Gahman. We would also like to thank our contributors for their energy, scholarly imagination and efforts. Finally, we wish to thank our reviewers who provided invaluable critiques of these papers, suggesting productive ways toward sharper elucidation, richer discourse and penultimately, more powerful contributions.

References

- Agger, I. and Soren Buus Jensen. (1996). *Trauma and Healing Under State Terrorism*. Zed Books. London, UK.
- Bosco, F. (2001). Place, Space, Networks and the Sustainability of Collective Action: The Madres de Plaza de Mayo. *Global Networks: A Journal of Transnational Affairs* 1,4: 307-329.
- Bosco, F. (2004). Human Rights Politics and Scaled Performances of Memory: Conflicts Among the Madres de Plazo de Mayo in Argentina. *Social and Cultural Geography* 5,3: 381-402.
- Bosco, F. (2006). The Madres de Plaza de Mayo and Three Decades of Human Rights Activism: Embeddedness, Emotions and Social Movements. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96, 2: 342-365.

- Feitlowitz, Marguerite. (1998). *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture*. Oxford University Press. Oxford, UK.
- Open Society Foundations (2013). Globalizing Torture: CIA Secret Detention and Extraordinary Rendition. Retrieved from <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/globalizing-torture-20120205.pdf>.
- PBS. (n.d.) WWI Casualty and Death Tables. Retrieved from http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/resources/casdeath_pop.html
- Sidaway, J. (2010). One Island, One Team, One Mission': Geopolitics, Sovereignty, 'Race' and Rendition. *Geopolitics* 15,4: 667-683.
- Taylor, D. (1997). *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"*. Duke University Press. Durham, NC.
- Vranckx, A. (2007). A Long Road Towards Universal Protection Against Enforced Disappearance. Asser Institute: Centre for International and European Law. Retrieved from http://www.asser.nl/default.aspx?site_id=9&level1=13337&level2=13350
- United Nations. (2006). *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance*. Retrieved from <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instree/h4paped.html> Accessed on May 10, 2013.