

# Unexpected Witnesses

## An artistic practice from a 'plurality of ways of knowing' surrounding political disappearance

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores how my practice of attunement responds to the critical problem of 'political disappearance' (Amnesty International 1993: 1), which is in close proximity to my own experience. This practice includes improvisational and experimental movement, grounded in a plurality of ways of knowing – admitting Indigenous knowledge – where multiple *worlds* frame the onto-epistemological. The question *Who else is witness?* emerges through experiential and intuitive performativities and situated practices of *attunement* to the notion of presence in absence. The attunement experiments that follow are meant to give a hint of the unexpected non-human as witness that becomes revelatory and is lively in my work. I suggest that these artistic investigations impart a sense of the dynamic forces, both dissipative and generative, that circulate in the blurred territories between presence and absence, fact and memory, human and non-human; perhaps they also stand as poetic resistance to historical 'amnesia' (Galeano 1992: 262) in contemporary Venezuela about Cold War-era state violence.

### INTRODUCTION

My practice is situated in the entangled personal and political worlds surrounding 'forced disappearance', moving through the edges and depths of the social imaginary and opposing official history. It includes a 'plurality of ways of knowing' that Indigenous botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2016) inspires with her observations on the vitality and intelligence of *nature*. A plurality of ways of knowing that includes Indigenous approaches can be inferred as a multiplicity of *worlds* rather than a multiplicity of *worldviews*, which Viveiros de Castro distinguishes in this way:

Where we see a muddy salt-lick on a riverbank, tapirs see their big ceremonial house ... Such difference of perspective – not a plurality of views of a single world, but a single view of different worlds ... is located in the bodily differences between species, for the body and its affections ... is the site and instrument of ontological differentiation. (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 6–7)

In contrast to notions of the natural as an object of inspiration, manipulation and representation – a long-established Western artistic strategy – I am suggesting that the natural, understood as the non-human, participates and has agency in my practice. This approach is immersed in a multiplicity of worlds and follows the 'ontological turn' (Holbraad et al., 2015), which articulates a critique of the dichotomous EuroAmerican epistemology that separates both culture and nature as well as the human and non-human.

A plurality of ways of knowing happens in my work at various levels: the theoretical framework and my reflective thinking; an investigative art enquiry; the performative and intuitive work with my body and the haptic camera; the participatory practice with the non-human; and *what happens viscerally* with the process, because as Dufourmantelle writes, 'emotion is always also thought' (Dufourmantelle 2018: 62). These ways of engaging in meaning-making imply a close relationship with the world and open ways to reimagine reciprocities of epistemological intersections – where the personal, the collective unofficial histories and the non-human find one another. In a sense, such plurality considers the ambiguity of disappearance as a concept and as a felt experience; it gives space for the question: what is the broader context in which I am trying to make sense of things? This 'establish[ing of] connections: *intelligere*' (15) grapples with the fact that disappearance as a tool of state terror is deeply disorienting for

the loved ones and the community left behind (Amnesty International 1993:6); it obstinately defies resolution and representations. Even if one has some information on the circumstances of a disappearance, the challenges are relentless.

Intrinsically drawn to that which cannot be readily grasped, my research delves into the expanded connections of *who* and *what* has been made to disappear and has left their intangible traces of life; what remains as subjective memory accounts; but also, I suggest, the traces of memory in the non-human as witness. This approach moves away from reductionist representational claims on the charged dimensions surrounding disappearance. It emancipates the *logic of singularity* conventional in law and science regarding what constitutes acceptable evidence, testimony and witness as described by sound artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan (2018).<sup>1</sup> This is particularly relevant to my work as it is situated in Latin American rural conditions of systematic colonial violence and non-official history.

My practice is nurtured by an innate and significant *affect of care* for the disappeared. It proposes an ethic of gentleness that intervenes as a form of resistance to state violence. It is situated within a Latin American lineage of inquisitiveness, producing art that stands in contrast to oppressive geopolitics and state violence. Avoiding representational-realism, both Chilean poet Pablo Neruda (Eisner 2018) and the Tropicalia movement (Dunn 2001; Veloso and Einzig 2003), to name two examples, were part of this *resistance through poetics* that earnestly contrasted the brutal dictatorships of Chile and Brazil from the 1960s through to the 1980s. Noticing this background invites me to '[think] from [my] heritage' as Haraway (2016: 131) suggests and to attend in care to welcomed 'obligations that inhere in starting from [my own] situated histories, situated stories'.

As my artistic practice is experiential and process-oriented, the artworks are motivated by creative prompts that develop from my extensive training with the body and improvisational skills from the Skinner Releasing Technique (Skinner *et al.* 1979), Simone Forti (Davis 2012) among others and Grotowski's Poor Theatre (Grotowski and Barba 2002). These practices have in common an emphasis on performative intention and deep

listening to inner and outer impulses: before a performer makes a move to ignite a space, for example. In this way, the performative gestures manifest in clear improvisational scores. In retrospect, I find interesting how both Skinner's and Forti's improvisational kinaesthetic approaches are concerned with chance procedures and the everyday practices of observation and how these are in kinship with attunement processes. My formative relationship with these practices provides a foundation of skills and sensitivities that, by their somatic nature, include the kinaesthetic and the perceptual. Participatory art is then enacted by giving attention to the web of connections between the various worlds; at the same time, without the premise to enact these gestures for a human audience, the performative is contested. These performative interventions in my work come from a disposition to protest or make a claim – but always with offerings of care in regards to the disappeared.

In this practice, the inherent expansive notions of body and its entanglements with the world are in open processes, imbued with poetic imagery that access attunement as a way of 'thinking with the body' (Todd 2008). Engaging with matter, energy, subtleties and densities, the concept of body is central as it extends to the world in a multitude of forms, encompassing a body of history, a body of a story, land as a body, moss as a body and the disappeared body.

Attention to inner and outer awarenesses that are further deepened by a poetic of kinesthetics unfold heightened perceptions between my body and those bodies beyond-the-human, to what is witnessed and to suggestions of evidence. Attunement as a method suggests a way to validate signals and elusive processes, encountered through my practice from the worlds of the disappeared. Could this signaling be made tangible, even if only as tenuous formings?

I meander through relationalities, moments of unforeseen convergences, performativities and attunements into intimate worlds that gestate, approximate, release and reach out with me, the artist. In so doing, unexpected testimonies unravel from the more-than-human witness on my own politically disappeared father, Iván Daza.

My work of attunement to unexpected witnesses springs from my art-led research with a theoretical

<sup>1</sup> The logic of singularity is used in courts of law to break down and isolate evidence, separating the organically occurring relationalities between materials, events, causalities, nature and peoples. Artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan analysed audio files of recorded shots that killed Nadeem Nawara and Mohamed Abu Daher in Palestine's West Bank in 2014. His artistic investigation proved that these boys were shot by real bullets and not rubber ones. This became the centre of a murder investigation that went through military courts, international news and to the US Congress, where it was used to argue that the Israelis had breached the US–Israeli arms agreement.

framework supported in part from philosophical discourse on the nature of testimony. Testimony, in the commonly used sense of implying a verbal act, is inherently problematic given the unreliability of human testimony and witness. This is expressed by Derrida in this way: 'witnessing appeals to the act of faith with regards to a speech given under oath' (Derrida 2000: 188) and 'testimony [is distinguished] from the straightforward transmission of knowledge' (194). In the context of Auschwitz, Agamben discusses Primo Levi's notion that the true witnesses were not those who survived, but those who perished (Levi 1988: 63). Agamben contributes to this complexity, proposing that 'the witness' is neither from those who died nor those who survived, but what is the 'remnant' between them (Agamben 1999: 162). For Agamben, this remnant becomes a testimony that allows human beings to remain human while enduring inhuman violence. This notion is relevant to my work as those who remain after the enforced disappearance of their loved ones attempt to make sense of their loss. In the case of my own work, meaning-making takes place through artistic processes that admit a nonhuman 'remnant' in testimony. This has similarities to Weizman's (2017: 54) commentary about buildings sensing the human from their perspective, and 'acting as ... political sensors to be read'. These brief ideas on testimony and witness will be further developed in my upcoming works.

As an artist and researcher from the Global South, it is important to me that my practice gives significant deliberation to ways of knowing through the sensorial, the intuitive and what is felt deep within the body in relationship *with* the world. This is a practice of embodied knowing that is visceral; it attempts to find its grounds while carrying out research alongside the-more-than-human.

The works I present here could be read as immanent actions that create empathic forces to summon a *power in proximity* described by social activist Stevenson (2016). They admit investigative sensory moments, attunements and a recognition of meaningful reciprocities taking place between myself, the artist and non-humans. The performative experiments that follow attempt to relate a practice that is fundamentally experiential and elusive to documentation and

material representation. Processes of haptic visibility in the register of performative actions manifest in poetic-documentarian works of photographs, video and experimental writings that I identify as metaphorical testimonies.

The titles of the following works mirror common legal practice concerning evidence (as in 'Exhibit A'). This naming strategy identifies clusters of themes in what I propose as case testimonies. These are part of a larger body of related artworks from my ongoing art-led research.

#### TESTIMONY A-4 - I ALMOST GAVE THEM SWEATERS

I am haunted by what I do not want to say. What do I grieve? It grabs me and bullies me, my body jolted. For the last twelve days, my grandmother with her children, my uncle and my father, are outside in my backyard. From my window, I see them. I go out and sit there with them. I come back inside and wonder, how much longer will they be *there-here*? I'm surprised by my thoughts and my feelings. One night, I looked for them to see if they were still *there* and I saw them holding on against the fence. An unexpected swoon from my belly towards my heart took hold of me. At that moment, I did not feel alone. They were *here* with me.

When I first put the image on my backyard fence, all kinds of contradictory things coiled inside my guts. My eyes dropped heavy, fearful, not wanting to see my family in that life-size image. What was it I did not want to see? My daughter came to visit today. I was in bed with a headache, or was it a heartache? The kind of heartache that climbs up and stomps on my head. My heart's survival strategy, this heartache. For how to understand that my father was disappeared, taken away, torn into pieces? I push it away, all away. I battle poorly. My daughter came to visit. I did not want her to see me in grief, but grief is all she sees.

My grandmother in my backyard for twelve days, with her children, my uncle and my father feels like too long a visit and yet, I don't want them to go. I'm terrified. Of what? I have this fear that they will leave at any moment. Has it not been like this forever? Yesterday, it happened. It rained for three days straight. The image gave up, and the moment of their departure arrived. They were torn in half. One part on the floor, the other hanging on. Their faces split but their eyes looking up straight at me. The image ripped cleanly, just like that. Does this wound me again?



I know this silent scream. It swirls anxiously through the soft tissue of my body, where my history lives and the deepest pain finds its home. The torn image feels cruel. It's over now. I'm relieved.

Before this moment, I wanted to place flowers at their feet, but didn't. I wanted to prepare a special meal and serve it at the table and eat with them, but I didn't. I wondered if they were cold. One night *I almost gave them sweaters but didn't*. They are on the ground now, as discarded paper nestling between leaves and mud. Today, I will go outside where the image lies and touch the remains. But first, I must sleep. Perhaps the promise of snow will give this story a gentle rest ... until spring comes.

**Commentary:** The litany *I Almost Gave Them Sweaters* is an integral part of the work **The Family Portraits, Chapter 2. Testimony A-4 (2016–19)**. It was first created following the invitation to present at the 2016 Project Anywhere Conference at Parsons School of Design in New York. In this experiment, on the backyard fence of my Montreal home, I placed a life-sized portrait image of my father Iván as a child, with his mother (my grandmother Lucía) and his older brother, my

uncle Raúl, that was taken in Venezuela (c.1944). I decided to leave the image facing towards my window, exposed to the changing conditions and natural elements of an early Quebec autumn. In this setting, I would sit next to them as if I were part of the portrait. Over days of this performative play, as well as noting, photographing and video recording the changes over time, I sensed a poetics of decay and erasure occurring that seemed to claim presence in absence: when their image-portrait was 'here', it paradoxically implied a deep sense of their absence. This process enhanced the potency of the image, signifying meaning for me beyond the materiality of the print. A certain liveliness within this portrait became evident by this process of decay. The artistic experiment opposes such disregard towards the disappeared and to the forced erasure of grieving inflicted on the family that remains.

Amid this experiment, the question *Who else is witness?* emerged: Were the changing leaves on the trees and vines, the occasional squirrels gathering food for winter, the rain witnessing

■ Testimony A-4. The Family Portraits, Chapter 2 (2016-19). Stills from video. Camera: Livia Daza-Paris, Editor and image composition: Alba Daza. © 2019 Livia Daza Paris. This composite of images are frames from the author's video work of the same title. It can be viewed here: <http://bit.ly/38tjpf1>



with me? Taking part in a performative witnessing of my family's slow disappearance from the portrait? The intensity of this artistic experiment, felt through states of attunement, let me recognize them, intuitively, as *non-human witnesses* to my father's political disappearance. Alongside my expectation, witnessing and wonderment, I found myself asking: what would happen next to *my family* (represented in the image)? This lively, durational and partially public performance of open-ended processes had no predetermined completion time and no specified audience. In retrospect, the experience of sensing *the non-human witness* had announced itself before in my practice, but, this time, I was able to feel it with certainty. This was deeply unexpected and revelatory and led to the question which is at the heart of my research.

#### TESTIMONY O – THE WITNESS AT THE BOUNDARY LAYER.

##### **Tuesday 7 May 10:30 a.m.**

The email read:

Be careful, the attachment titled Iván Daza.JPG that weighs 135.29KB is the image of the body of your father after fallen (killed).

I unexpectedly received this message while I was at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity in the spring of 2019 attending the first Indigenous Visual Arts Residency: *Ghost Days: Making art for spirit*. In Spanish, the size of a file is referred to as its *weight* and in receiving the message literally, indeed it carried an unexpected and impactful 'weight'. A large batch of documents on my father accompanied the image as part of the email. These documents had been confined to archives with restricted access but have been recently released to the Venezuelan Truth and Justice Commission. Someone on the commission decided to send them to my research assistant in Venezuela, who forwarded them to me by email.

#### NINE DAYS EARLIER

##### **Sunday 28 April 9:30 a.m.**

I am walking up the 'Sleeping Buffalo Mountain' – as the Nakoda<sup>2</sup> peoples of the area named it before the settlers called it 'Tunnel Mountain'

later on in the 1800s. It is Sunday morning; there's seldom anyone around. There is fresh snow on the ground, and in some parts, there are patches of ice, which makes the climb difficult. I'm listening to a radio conversation with Irish poet Pádraig Ó Tuama, a theologian and former leader of the Corrymeela Community, Ireland's oldest peace and reconciliation community. As part of his conversation, he begins to recite an excerpt from his poem 'The Pedagogy of Conflict' (Ó Tuama 2013:26):

When I was a child, I learnt to count to five:  
one, two, three, four, five.

But these days, I've been counting lives. So I count:  
one life, one life, one life, one life, one life.

Because each time is the first time that that life has been taken.

*Legitimate Target* has sixteen letters and one long abominable space between two dehumanising words.

The artistic experiment I carried out in Sleeping Buffalo Mountain (see fig. 2) instigated a performative and metaphorical conversation about time, history, the disappeared and the non-human witness. This was explored from the premise of such a conversation between the following 'participants': the recently declassified Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) documents on the 1960s Venezuelan armed insurgency; the ground mosses ubiquitous in Banff; and the documents I unexpectedly received from Venezuela with photographs of my dead father, soon after he was fallen in the ambush attack. A hovering shadow over his body suggests that the photographs were taken by a soldier.

As in Ó Tuama's poem, the documents I placed to lie softly with the mosses participate together in grieving these instances of 'one life' that not only were taken but that were also disappeared during the 1960s Cold War era in Venezuela.

#### TWELVE DAYS EARLIER

##### **1 May 5:00 a.m.**

There is an attempted coup d'état to overthrow the Venezuelan government. The US government threats of military intervention to support the opposition are all over the news. There is no mention anywhere of any previous US intervention in Venezuela.

<sup>2</sup> The Nakoda people are related to the Lakota and Nakota nations. The Nakoda territory was traditionally the Alberta's Rocky Mountain foothills from the headwaters of the Athabasca River south to Chief Mountain in Montana (Getty 2015).





■ Testimony O-1. *The Witness at the Boundary Layer* (2019).  
Photos Livia Daza-Paris  
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## TEN DAYS EARLIER

**3 May 11:51 p.m.**

At breakfast time, this past Wednesday morning 1 May, I looked at my phone only to find out that it was inundated with news from Venezuela on the attempted coup d'état! This was a bizarre situation as I felt isolated with my concerns and had no one to talk about it here in Banff; my colleagues took no notice of this news. The week of my arrival, I had been wondering what artistic project I would occupy myself with during the residency since what I had originally proposed could not be developed at that moment. How was it that I became suffused with the idea of working with moss and the declassified CIA documents I had collected from the US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)? These documents attest to the extent of US covert interventions in the political and revolutionary processes of mid-1960s Venezuela in the years when my father, Iván, was made to disappear. On one of those mornings, as I was walking on the grounds between the buildings, I heard the mosses call from the forest, or was it a song? I heard them tell me, without words, 'Here, place those documents, by us, over here. We will be witnesses at the *Boundary Layer*.' And so, I did.<sup>3</sup>

## COMMENTARY

In this experiment, I suggest that the mosses become *active* non-human witnesses to these declassified documents, which for many I had the privilege of being the first-time viewer in the NARA archives. To date, these documents have not yet been circulated in Venezuela or elsewhere. The implication of this artistic experiment suggests that nature could actively participate in enacting a form of 'momentary' justice. Despite the fading of facts and a legacy of historical amnesia – the moss is gently holding the body of history represented in the documents; metaphorically, it is also holding the body of the disappeared. There is a tension in this and because of the nature of moss, the documents, printed on recycled paper, will eventually be absorbed and become soil. Something inhuman (the political violence, the disappeared) is reverted into something life-giving and generative.

In her work *Gathering Moss*, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes: 'Mosses inhabit surfaces: the surfaces of rocks, the bark of trees, that small space where earth and atmosphere first make contact. This meeting ground between air and land is known as the boundary layer' (2003: 15).

<sup>3</sup> Biologist David George Haskell discusses in his book *The Songs of Trees* how sounds from the forest carry stories that are joined as well to other lives, beyond non-human lives. As an artist, I am aware of the counter-cultural significance of working with such concepts, especially as I describe them as experiential occurrences within my practice.

This boundary layer is the place where life on the ground began, as well as where life begins in ongoing ways. Kimmerer's work first informed me about the dynamics of creating and fading organic materials that occur between mosses and rocks, but what was fascinating to me was something of an attunement that made itself evident as I discovered while in the artistic process that mosses are 'the evolutionary first step toward a terrestrial existence' during the Devonian era (21, 23). This particular exploration with the moss was somehow calling for what could be generative, or enlivening in intriguing ways, considering *what* and *who* has been disappeared.

I proposed this work to be a conversation but perhaps it is rather a dispute that hopes for a resolution to be concluded in time.

A conversation that happens beyond human frameworks between mosses, ubiquitous in Banff, and the declassified CIA documents that began to be transformed and absorbed while exposing, albeit deep in the forest, a scarcely reported US military and political meddling in 1960s Venezuela. Mosses in this work become witnesses at the boundary layer of a historical fact that continues to be omitted from public life, even recently with the open threat of US military intervention. The experiment alludes to a denied history of state violence: while Venezuela was nominally democratic in the 1960s, it was a focus of Cold War-era geopolitics and supported by the infamous US military programme 'School of the Americas'.<sup>4</sup>

My performative process with the moss and the documents intersected with a directed photographic task given to the residency participants and taught by the invited Indigenous faculty artists. Unlike working with digital photography, it was a very physical, even performative process, which was enhanced by the chemical reactions produced from the organic elements used in the image development. I took 35 mm film photos of the moss and documents, but the film was developed by hand with Caffinol – a mixture of coffee mostly, with baking soda and vitamin C – and then I printed some of them by the same process. The images you see in this paper, however, are digital scans from the original 35 mm film but they maintain as much as possible of the quality and texture of the Caffinol prints.

The work emerged in deep attunement to the exuberance of nature and to the serendipitous events happening close in time, at large geopolitically, as well as personally, while attending this residency in April and May of 2019 (as described in the journal notes). These experiments were not conceptually prescribed, nor scripted, but rather they came to be by allowing the intensities of these converging realities and working with them through artistic processes that follow creative impulses. Being already involved in these durational, performative and participatory practices with mosses acting upon history, even a week after the attempted coup it was impactful to continue to trust a process whose result I could not foretell; this daily engagement of attentiveness led to discoveries of attunements filled with meaning that were engaging and surprising.

The experiment goes on even though I am no longer in Banff; the documents and the moss will continue to be there, deep in 'Sleeping Buffalo Mountain'. Maybe elk or the mountain lion, that I was told roamed around campus, will find the site, or perhaps a human climbing up the mountain through unusual paths. 'Mosses,' Kimmerer notes (2013: 5), 'may be a mystery to scientists' but in my work, they come to perform what she has described as 'an ancient conversation ... poetry to be sure'. Certainly, I understand now, the conversation I set out to happen between the documents and moss is taking place outside of human time, exploring the potential of what may be both alive and tender, delving into *what* and *who* is not there – the disappeared and what has been erased from history – a conversation that transforms absence into presence, and perhaps, if one is in luck, it can be heard.

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<sup>4</sup> The School of the Americas, now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC), operated both in the US as well as in Latin American countries. They provided counter-insurgency training, including incorporating extra-judiciary covert activities and interrogation techniques that included torture (Rabe 1999: 106).

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