

The Violence of Disappearance Reading the Boko Haram Kidnapping

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'To disappear' is no longer a metaphysical-theological mystery or magic act, but a political invention that must be seen as integral to the violence of modern politics. Focusing on the disappearance of over 300 schoolgirls by Boko Haram last year, the author explores the rhetoric of the Bring Back Our Girls campaign and the creation of the political category of 'the disappeared'. This essay argues for a reading of disappearance not in abstraction, but as an agential act—real people go missing as a result of real physical acts by real people, and to speak of simply 'disappearance' without referring to the agential hand behind the disappearance is to stay focused on the victims and invisibilise the perpetrators.

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April 2015 marks the first anniversary of one more spectacular act of terror we have seen in recent times—the Boko Haram kidnapping of over 300 schoolgirls from Chibok, Nigeria, in April 2014. A few managed to escape; about 270 remain missing. President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria, having promised to double efforts to rescue the girls, has admitted they may never be found. President-elect Muhammadu Buhari said: 'We do not know if the Chibok girls can be rescued. Their whereabouts remain unknown' (CBC News, 14 April 2015). Occasional reports, founded on videos and messages left by Boko Haram, tell us the girls have been married off, sent into sexual slavery, been trained as suicide bombers, been converted to Islam and now hate their parents. The girls are the subject of a worldwide campaign, 'Bring Back Our Girls', which includes Michelle Obama, with rallies held in France, Canada, Kenya and the US even as families of the girls run their own protests in Nigeria. Mothers, brothers and fathers with photographs of their missing girls march, perform sit-ins and hope to persuade their political leaders and the world that these girls cannot be, must not be, forgotten. Obiageli Ezekwesili, founder of Bring Back Our Girls, and Vice President of the African division of the World Bank, speaking at Time 100 Gala in New York City, called on US President Obama to find the girls, stating: "If he could get Osama bin Laden, he could get our girls" (Bajekal 2015). This new report claims the Nigerian army is closing in on the forest where the girls are being held.



One of the mothers of the kidnapped Nigerian girls (Bring Back Our Girls Campaign)

Bring Back Our Girls (<http://bringbackourgirls.us>) in its rhetoric shrewdly notes that educated girls are a rarity in Nigeria (5% of the total population) and they would have formed the engines of change, and implies that by kidnapping them Boko Haram has stalled modernisation itself. “The abducted girls were about to graduate and become doctors and lawyers”. They quote the UNICEF statement about girls’ education as ‘proven to be one of the most cost-effective strategies to promote development and economic growth’. Now, ‘Boko Haram’ means literally ‘the Western book is forbidden’, and this act feeds directly into the West’s stereotype of the anti-modern reactionary Islamic/African outfit. A video released by the group shows a few hundred girls, complete in *hijab*, sitting quietly, some praying. This image adds colour to the ‘reactionary’ tag. But this ‘West versus the rest’ is not the only way of reading the horrific act, an act that leads our imagination only in *one* direction—and that direction is certainly not about alternate world views, a different education system, or even matrimony—because of the gender of the victims.

The 300 girls belong now not to Christian families, Westernised local education systems or alternate worldviews. They belong to a category by themselves: the disappeared. ‘To disappear’ is no longer a metaphysical-theological mystery or magic act. It is a political invention and must be seen as integral to the violence of modern politics. When we have a linguistic construction—‘to disappear [somebody]’—we should be worried that the incident is so common that a phrase had to be invented to describe it; a shorthand phrase that captures an entire *process* of machinic efficiency of oppression, repression, torture and death.

In what follows, I set out 10 propositions on reading disappearance.

1. The disappearing act is not new: it has been a part of political violence for a long time. The Nazis did it, Stalin did it and the North Korean and Chinese states continue to do so. Boko Haram’s actions are part of a history of similar disappearances within the African continent itself and as such we need to see a past to the act. Previous regimes in the Congo, Kenya, Somalia and South Africa have all effected similar

disappearances. In India we can think of disappearances in the Punjab during the Khalistan conflict, and Kashmir.¹ During the Irish ‘troubles’ numerous young men were disappeared in police and military action. The best known disappearances are of course those from Argentina, 1976-1983, and that is because these produced the most sustained protests the modern world has ever seen: the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires marching with their trademark white scarves, many in now over the age of 75, carrying pictures of their missing sons, daughters, daughters-in-law asking for some news, any news, about their disappeared.² Emilio Crenzel noting this tendency in the report on Argentina’s disappeared, the famous *Nunca Más* (1984. The title means ‘Never Again’), mourns the ‘absence of references to any sort of continuity with practices developed by successive dictatorships and political actors during the second half of the twentieth century’ (2013: 180). We clearly cannot isolate Boko Haram’s act as singular or particularly heinous, because that imposes a ‘firstness’ on this kidnapping. What we have to note is that disappearance, especially of youth, is part of structured political violence across the world, of which Boko Haram is only the latest, and most controversial, for its targeting of girls. A whole new ‘soft target’ population is at hand, it would appear.

2. States have always *disappeared* their ‘troubling’ citizens. Boko Haram, as a non-state group *kidnaps*, if you want a semantic quibble notable in the reportage. The end result, however, is not semantic: *real* people go missing, the result of *real* physical acts by *real* people (as the Amnesty International publication, *Disappearances: A Workbook*, 1981, clarified). There is no abstraction, no mystery: humans disappear. This also means somebody somewhere knows something about who was disappeared, where, and when (Gillian Slovo’s novel about South Africa and David Park’s about Ireland mentioned in footnote 2, are attempts to bring the *perpetrators* into the ambit of the discussion about disappearances). Disappearance is an intentional, carefully executed act, and this implies human agency. To speak of simply ‘disappearance’ without referring to the agential hand behind the disappearance is to render it almost magical, and stay focused on the victims, ironically, therefore, invisibilising the perpetrators.

3. When the state disappears members of its adult citizenry, the disappeared quickly acquire a new identity: political dissident, Jew, intellectual, Western-educated girl, terrorist, etc. But what of the school girls who, by no stretch of imagination, can be termed political threats or even political *people*? Armando Kletnicki writing about the

¹ Reports on these disappearances exist, for example Ensaaf, the Redress Trust and Center for Human Rights and Global Justice (New York University’s School of Law) prepared a document listing 32 cases to the United Nations Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances in 2007. The Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons is a collective that seeks to put pressure on the Indian state to provide information and redress of grievances about missing Kashmiri men and boys.

² An entire ‘literature of disappearance’, a testimony to global cultures of political disappearance, has emerged since the 1990s: Lawrence Thornton’s *Imagining Argentina* (1987) and *Naming the Spirits* (also about Argentina 1995), Anne-christine d’Adesky’s *Under the Bone* (about Haiti, 1994), Gillian Slovo’s *Red Dust* (about South Africa, 2000) and David Park’s *The Truth Commissioner* (about Ireland, 2008), to mention a few.

disappeared children of Argentina (children of the disappeared who were taken in by members of the army or police and redistributed to other families, and whose biological parents and families can no longer be traced) says: “The state, only *a posteriori* and out of mere caprice, turns an absolutely heterogeneous collection of individual children, who are unable to constitute a community, into a minority recipient of violence. We wonder: what *a priori* feature unifies these children who have been deprived of their identities?” (2006: 182). This *a posteriori* categorisation is not the case for the school girls. Three simultaneous shifts occur in their case. One, they lose the identities they were born with and grew into as members of families and communities. I am positing the disappeared school child, therefore, as a pre-political being. Second, for the survivors, the families and for those reporting on them, they do acquire an identity: the disappeared. They merge into a statistical data sheet: one of 300. The disappeared thus lose their primordial identity in the act of disappearing. Third, a new history is being crafted for the girls by Boko Haram—one that is separate from any planned or prepared for by their biological parents and families.

4. Central to the protests in Bring Back Our Girls and in the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo is the effort to rehumanise the statistics by referring back to their primordial identities: the disappeared as sisters and daughters. In the face of deadening and ultimately useless numbers, the protestors in Nigeria and Argentina offered filiation. To the survivors the disappeared are names, faces, bodies and not numbers.

5. The family members in their testimonies also offered insights into the child—narrating childhoods, for example. Marguerite Bouvard in her *Revolutionising Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (1994) provides several of these testimonies. The maternal testimonies too rehumanises and reanimates the disappeared, but they also do something more. The maternal and filial memories as recorded in these testimonies not only contest the statistical narratives of the disappearance, they also offer a whole new history of their country and age. Margaret Burchianti writing about Argentina’s protests about disappearances argues “When women articulate protest through the discourse of mothering, especially during times of perceived crisis, they are able to tap into culturally salient and powerful meanings and representations attached to maternal suffering” (2004: 141).

Lawrence Thornton in *Imagining Argentina* captures the slide from individual memory to a larger cultural memory when he describes Cecilia’s incarceration—“he had memory. Everyone in every prison had already made the pain and rooms and the faces of the men who tortured them part of a memory that spread like a web across Argentina” (1991: 178).

As Bring Back Our Girls expands into a global social movement we see the role of maternal and filial testimonies as instrumental in harnessing the personal into the political, and the affective history (primarily of loss and anguish) of their family with the social history of their nation.

6. The photographs of the disappeared pinned to the protestors' turbans, caps, jackets and dresses in Argentina and now Nigeria, reanimate the numbers of the disappeared into faces. Grief has a face and the fantasmatic images—the photographs—actually serve to remind regimes, and us, that repression, terrorism and state violence actually render people into *mere images*. Disappearance, writes Avery Gordon, “removes people ... from their familiar world, with all its small joys and pains, and transports them to an unfamiliar world, where certain principles of social reality are absent ... the disappeared ... are people who have disappeared through enforced absence and fearful silence” (2008 [1997]: 112). But the world left behind, to the survivors, is also no longer the same familiar world because parts of that world now suffer from a loss, a lack: of the missing girls. The houses and homes are marked—shall we say haunted?—by the disappeared. The absence, silence and fantasmatic images constitute the disappeared as ghosts, the end product of very material processes. The girls in the photographs are no longer with us, their transformation from live beings into fantasmatic (ghostly) images is the effect of real *material* processes. That is, material processes have transformed material bodies into fantasmatic images and memories.



Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, with photographs of their disappeared

7. A corollary to the process of rehumanisation and reanimation is also visible in the campaigns against the disappearances. The survivors now begin to define themselves in terms of the disappeared: mother of __, brother of __, father of __. Reiterating the filial and the familial the identity of the living is almost entirely defined or circumscribed in terms of those who are not around anymore. A family is now defined not by their family name or place of origin, but by the *lost*, the disappeared. To absorb loss into a family history and then to redefine the family as the one whose girl is disappeared, is to reconfigure a set of relations around the loss or lack.



Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo with photographs of their disappeared

8. Such a lack and loss also ensures that the families will never fully mourn the disappeared. One Argentinian mother said in her interview to Marguerite Bouvard that she had refused to sell her large, inconvenient house because the deed was in her disappeared son's name, and if she sold it, it would amount to admitting his death (1994: 5). Bouvard puts it this way: "When a family suffered the disappearance of one of its members, it was propelled into a netherworld where there were no rules, no institutions to which one could direct one's concern, and no death to mourn" (36). Families of the disappeared therefore cannot mourn because there is no (dead) body to mourn. There are no memorials to be built and anniversaries held because memorials signify death. If grief is a private condition, mourning is a visible performance of grief and this requires "a localisable and circumscribed place of mourning ... without a fixed place, without a determinable topos, mourning is not allowed" (Derrida 2000: 111). Unmarked graves, watery graves, no graves—are spaces that do not allow the survivors to mourn. The disappeared are not even *dead* bodies: they simply cease to be around. They cannot be mourned because, strangely and tragically, to mourn would be to admit they are dead, even if there is no dead *body*. A social history of Nigeria, like in the case of Argentina and China and the USSR, would include an absence of actual *topoi* of mourning, although grief informs the local history of the *place* (such as Chibok, from where the girls were kidnapped by Boko Haram).

9. Armando Kletnicki is right to propose that the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide 'restricts the classification of the [eliminated] groups to those explicitly identified by their national, ethnic, racial or religious origin' (2006: 181). Disappearance must be seen as part of a 'genocidal logic' (Kletnicki's term) because it targets specific groups of people. The targeting of school children—whether of Christian families or Muslim ones—in the case of Boko Haram's actions cannot be seen in the ambit of the above definition, since these victims, one could now hazard a calculated guess, were kidnapped for being *girls*. We can see a genocidal *logic* at work, even though the group does not fit the criteria for genocidal populations.

10. Finally, all state and non-state actors in their propensity for violence possess this genocidal logic of disappearing people. The semantics of the Convention's definition do not make sense any more, given the shifting target populations—these are now school and college children (Nigeria, Kenya, Pakistan). Disappearance works to keep the familial and social wound open—the absence of information about the disappeared ensures that the family and the community will always experience a lack and ignorance. It is not only imprisonment, torture and execution that might be deemed 'violence'. As an act, disappearance is structural *violence* too because it shatters families, leaves them wounded and unable to tend those wounds with adequate mourning and unfurnished memories.

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