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'We are not Victims, we are Protagonists of this History'

Viviana Beatriz MacManus^a

^a University of Maryland, Baltimore County, 1627
Massachusetts Avenue SE, Washington, DC 20003, USA

Email:

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'We are not Victims, we are Protagonists of this History'

LATIN AMERICAN GENDER VIOLENCE AND THE LIMITS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS AS HUMAN RIGHTS

VIVIANA BEATRIZ MACMANUS

University of Maryland, USA

Abstract

This article centers on the Mexican and Argentinean 'Dirty Wars', examining the limitations inherent in human rights and women's human rights responses to these epochs of violence. I situate Argentina's report on the dictatorship, *Nunca más* (1984), in conversation with Elena Poniatowska's text on the 1968 Mexico City massacre, *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971), to trace the rise of a global human rights discourse that has become the dominant manner of conceptualizing human rights violations and gender violence in the latter half of the twentieth century. While feminist critiques of human rights have centered on the lack of gender-specific focus of violence committed against women, this article questions whether the women's human rights discourse disengages the historical, economic and geopolitical realities from which these violations were committed and instead focuses on women's sexual violations to garner international condemnation of gender violence. By turning to these texts, this article centers on the possibilities and limitations of women's human rights discourse and the impact this has on the shaping of women's political agency. This article calls for a critical feminist approach to women's human rights in order to document narratives of women survivors of human rights abuses without obfuscating their political subjectivities.

Keywords

Latin American 'Dirty Wars', Argentina, Mexico, *Nunca más*, *La noche de Tlatelolco*, women's human rights, gender and state violence, literary criticism

We would like to shift the focus from women as 'victims' to an understanding of how gender norms, inequities, and power relationships increase women's vulnerability to violence. (Fregoso and Bejarano 2010: 12)

During a 2009 interview I conducted with Margarita Cruz, a former political prisoner of the Argentine repression of the 1970s, she informed me: 'We are not victims, we are protagonists of this history'.¹ This marked a critical moment during my research on the gendered history of the Latin American 'Dirty Wars'.² In my investigations of women's participation in Latin American political movements and my engagement with human rights reports on Latin American violence, I have been dismayed to discover a tendency to utilize a gender-normative lens when framing women's narratives. I use 'gender normative' to refer to an analytic approach many Western feminist and human rights scholars incorporate in their research that reduces women's histories of resistance to their experiences as passive victims of sexual violence and/or as grieving mothers and partners. In my analysis of Latin American human rights reports, I interrogate the emergence of this gender-normative framework and I ask what is at stake in the depoliticization of women's testimonies.

While the 'women's rights as human rights' framework has led to greater international awareness of violence against women, the discourse of women's human rights places vexing limitations on how to combat gender violence and it does not proffer ways in which we could achieve justice for these violations. I believe that 'alternative visions of social justice' – Sally Engle Merry's term to describe how the institution of human rights should take seriously the gendered dynamics involved in the violence against women and gender inequalities present in transitional eras – would offer a more useful frame (Merry 2006: 4). Much of the current focus on women's human rights is centered on Third World women as victims of their own cultures and/or despotic tyrannical states, which reinforces hierarchical notions of the West and the Global South and situates the West as the forerunner of human rights.

I will center on works produced in the locales of human rights violations to support my claims, as it is important to be cognizant of the scholarship produced by local feminist activists and academics. As feminist scholars Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano note, we should not consider Latin America and other Third World nations as areas that we merely study, but as sites where theory and knowledge are produced (Fregoso and Bejarano 2010: 4). And while it is critical to be cognizant of theory and knowledge produced in the Third World, scholars positioned in the First World must also pay attention to what Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal term scattered hegemonies, or the existing hierarchies and power dynamics present *within* the Third World. We should also refrain from what Chandra Mohanty terms 'discursively coloniz[ing]' Third World women's narratives of resistance and political action in our work on the Global South (Mohanty 2003: 19). I approach

my analysis with these precautions and I will examine the politics involved in the production of Latin American human rights texts that exhibit the limitations and possibilities of women's human rights discourse.

I consider how these texts relate to current debates surrounding women's human rights and the creation of a gendered subject of human rights abuse that has emerged in state-sponsored reports.³ There exists a large body of feminist literature – by scholars such as Engle and Peggy Levitt – on the barriers to achieving justice and emancipation that women's human rights discourse poses for women in various parts of the world.⁴ Dorothy Hodgson articulates a few of these pitfalls and notes that critics have argued that they have come to mean a new form of Western imperialism that asserts its cultural norms on the Global South. Additionally, Hodgson notes that this framework's relationship with the term 'culture' has often portrayed many cultures in the Global South as regressive and patriarchal in the treatment of their women (Hodgson 2011: 1–2).

Another limitation appears in the work on transitional societies by Katherine M. Franke, who indicates that many women survivors of violence have felt restricted by human rights tribunals as they rely on their victimization in order to be heard (Franke 2006). Similarly, Fiona Ross's research on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission maintains that female survivors of state violence were portrayed solely as victims of sexual violence. Ross quotes from the testimony of Thenjiwe Mtintso during a 1997 hearing: 'This consistency of drawing you away from your own activism, from your own commitment as an actor, was perhaps worse than torture, was worse than physical assault' (Ross 2003: 65). This elision of political agency re-traumatizes women by erasing their histories of activism and represents a psychic assault on survivors of political violence.⁵

My intent is not to disavow the discourse of women's human rights; rather, my aim is to demonstrate how this discourse has centered on the sexually victimized woman in need of protection and rescue, and then to articulate alternative ways of retaining women's political subjectivities. I refer to Mexican activist and journalist Elena Poniatowska's report on the 1968 Mexico City massacre *La noche de Tlatelolco (Massacre in Mexico)* and Argentina's report on the dictatorship, *Nunca más (Never Again)* as cultural texts that can assist us in reconceptualizing a critical feminist approach to women's human rights.⁶ These reports reveal the diverse ways in which survivor narratives are archived, ignored or reappropriated by the state in post-authoritarian societies, and they expose the gendered subtext of human rights investigations.⁷

By utilizing an interdisciplinary methodological framework that draws on Latin American cultural studies, critical gender studies and literary criticism, a close reading of these texts sheds light on the gender politics involved in the framing of human rights reports. I utilize an analytic approach rooted in literary and cultural studies to examine how these texts represent, obfuscate and inform women's agented histories of political activism.⁸ I complicate the understanding of how (women's) human rights reports create a gendered

subjectivity that reduces women to passive roles, whereas Poniatowska's report centers on the agented subjects that were the 'protagonists of [that] history', reflecting women's active involvement in Mexico's student movement. The intent of my article is not to provide a dichotomous reading of state-sponsored reports (*Nunca más*) as only producing depoliticized women's testimonies, rendering them as in need of protection, while activist-produced reports (*Tlatelolco*) retain the political subjectivities of survivors of state violence. Instead, I examine the nuances and power dynamics involved in archiving and representing women's political agency and the possibilities and limitations of both official and activist human rights texts. Moreover, the human rights reports that I analyze not only archive women's human rights abuses, they also shape and inflect this politicized agency-formation of women survivors of violence. Turning to these texts produced in the Global South offers those invested in a transnational framework of women's human rights with alternative ways of documenting women's narratives that do not belie the political histories of women survivors of human rights abuses.

NUNCA MÁS: (WOMEN'S) HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE PATERNAL POST-DICTATORSHIP STATE

Published at the end of Argentina's dictatorship, *Nunca más* was sponsored by then-president Raúl Alfonsín who formed the National Commission on the Disappeared (CONADEP). The report included the testimonies of survivors and family members of the disappeared, shedding light on the human rights abuses committed by the regime. As the first state-mandated human rights report published in the Western Hemisphere, it marked a significant moment in the evolution of human rights in the twentieth century. Inasmuch as this text is important to survivors of human rights abuses, I believe that the depoliticization of testimony in *Nunca más* reflects a general trend in many transitional societies seeking to come to terms with their traumatic past: the evasion of thorough investigations into the causality of politically-motivated violence. I argue that *Nunca más* is detached from the historical-political context that impelled these human rights violations by forming a collective national memory that looks away from histories of state violence and instead hearkens toward a 'democratic' future.

My emphasis is on the construction of a human rights discourse in post-dictatorship Argentina that centers on rescuing human rights victims, particularly female victims. Male heads of state – as well as CONADEP, which was predominately male – desired a swift return to democracy, and passivizing women's histories of political resistance served to reaffirm the patriarchal legitimacy of the post-dictatorship state. The dictatorship had successfully vilified the targets of its repression as 'subversives' and 'terrorists' who had merited the violence against them, and this became ingrained in the national imaginary. In an attempt to reconcile a divided nation, and in order for many

Argentines to gain legibility as survivors of state violence, a specific rhetoric was used that depoliticized their narratives and instead focused on their victimized status. Women in particular were construed as passive victims of a dark epoch in Argentine history, in order to maintain the patriarchal mechanisms of the state power as guardian of its most vulnerable civilians: women and children. Cynthia Enloe's work on feminism and international politics reveals how common this phenomenon is, pointing to the need for awareness of 'which kinds of nationalist movements rely on the perpetuation of patriarchal ideas of masculinity for their international political campaigns and which kinds see redefining masculinity as integral to re-establishing national sovereignty' (Enloe 2001: 13). The state's role as benefactor to victimized women not only perpetuates these 'patriarchal ideas of masculinity', it also emphasizes the importance of 'national sovereignty' and unity in post-dictatorship Argentina.

However, state-sponsored human rights reports became a critical avenue for documenting women's survivor testimony, resulting in a more complicated representation of women's agency. Women survivors of state violence utilized the very avenue (the state) that had once attempted to eradicate their presence. *Nunca más* allowed for women to archive their narratives and officially recognize these atrocities, and this sense of national and international recognition indelibly marked their collective political agency. State and activist-produced reports converge – albeit in distinct ways – to reaffirm and legitimize women's histories of political repression. A more nuanced portrayal of women's agency is best reflected in the testimony of one particular ex-political prisoner, Adriana Calvo de Laborde, both in *Nunca más* and in the 1997 activist report, *Ni el flaco perdón de Dios*.⁹ Through an analysis of her testimony in both reports, I argue that while women's and human rights discourses offer women a critical space for the validation of their experiences, they generally evade investigating the systemic social and political issues that engender the normalization and prevalence of gender-based violence.

Calvo was a physicist working at the University of La Plata when she was abducted from her home on 4 February 1977 and detained at a Buenos Aires concentration camp. Upon the demise of the dictatorship, Calvo contributed her testimony to *Nunca más* and other sources. As significant as *Nunca más* is in the official documentation of survivors' testimonies, we fail to gain a comprehensive understanding as to *why* Calvo and others were targeted by the repression; the text's emphasis is instead on reuniting a divided nation. This is in keeping with the argument of Kimberly Theidon, made in the context of the politics of reconciliation in post-war Peru, that 'a central tenet of transitional justice is that it includes ... the reestablishment of group unity' as well as making steps towards the 'beginning of a new moral community' (Theidon 2006: 436). National unity had gendered implications as this relied on protecting the most defenseless victims of the dictatorship: pregnant women and/or mothers of young children who, according to paternal normative codes, were in need of rescue and assistance. By centering on their gendered vulnerabilities and evading the political context of their

detention, a new 'moral community' could be established by condemning the violence of the past and focusing on a new, democratic government. By examining Calvo's testimony in the chapter 'Victims', it is evident that *Nunca más* reinscribes political, leftist activists within a culture of victimhood.

Since Calvo was pregnant at the time of her detention, *Nunca más* inserts Calvo's testimony under the subcategory 'Children and Pregnant Women who Disappeared'. This section commences with a biblical allusion, condemning the state's violence against 'the defenseless, the vulnerable and the innocent': pregnant women and children (CONADEP 1984: 307).¹⁰ The collation of disappeared children and pregnant women's histories in this chapter limits the women's narratives to their physical condition and infantilizes the pregnant women by equating their experiences to those of the children. While it is critical to officially document the processes of dehumanization of the prisoners, the commission's deliberate editing of Calvo's testimony signifies the state's interest in the most fragile conditions of the detainees. This defense of society's most 'vulnerable' and 'innocent' citizens is representative of paradigms in universal human rights that eschew engagement with overt political condemnation of state violence.

Nunca más, preoccupied as it is with delving into the most egregious instances of abuse, tethers Calvo's experience to the universal human rights model: the protection of society's most vulnerable subjects is prioritized above all. As Wendy Brown states, human rights discourse is predicated upon 'a pure defense of the innocent and the powerless against power, a pure defense of the individual against immense and potentially cruel or despotic machineries' (Brown 2004: 453). The commission omits passages of Calvo's testimony to reconstruct the spectacle of childbirth under horrendous conditions of the camps, yet she alludes to entrenched power structures and the hypermasculine ideology touted by the regime.¹¹ This suggests that potential processes of political mobilization are diminished by the report's reliance on the (women's) human rights model. Furthermore, this illustrates Grewal and Kaplan's (1994) theory of scattered hegemonies, as *Nunca más* – commissioned and published by a Third World nation – reinforces hierarchical divisions between the paternal post-dictatorship state and women victims in need of rescue.

Calvo's narrative in *Nunca más* evokes the horrors of her abduction, her torture and the birth of her daughter while she is detained. Her harrowing experiences are edited in the category 'Births in captivity'. Calvo recounts that after she delivered her baby while restrained and blindfolded, she was tended to by one of the regime's doctors:

In the car the doctor cut the umbilical cord and they took me up one or two floors in another place where they got rid of the placenta. They made me disrobe and in front of the guard they made me wash the bed, the floor, my dress and made me clean up the placenta and finally they let me wash my baby, all the while they were insulting and threatening me ... (CONADEP 1984: 305)

The act of forcing her to undress in order to humiliate Calvo after just giving birth, as well as having to clean up after her 'mess', displays the power of the military officials for whom the maternity of leftist 'subversives' is tantamount to something shameful and subhuman.¹² *Nunca más* documents Calvo's experiences of bodily degradation, which importantly allows her to reinscribe her narrative within a site of resistance. The official human rights movement in post-dictatorship Argentina inflected Calvo's political agency, as she not only provided testimony to CONADEP but also presented her oral testimony at the human rights trials against former officers in 1985.¹³ However, the text reduces Calvo's testimony to depictions of bodily harm without offering alternative modes of comprehending these political forms of violence other than through the lens of victim/victimizer; this ultimately served to legitimate post-dictatorship Argentina's nascent democracy and commitment to the defense of universal human rights.

Calvo's testimony in *Ni el flaco perdón de Dios* recounts the same processes of dehumanization institutionalized during the regime, yet the editors allow Calvo's narrative voice to guide the trajectory of her testimony. While *Nunca más* limits Calvo's testimony to the torture she endured as a pregnant woman, the latter collection presents her politicized identification as a union activist and does not divorce her political identity from her experiences as an incarcerated pregnant woman. Calvo's narration of giving birth in captivity is reconstructed as an act of subversion rather than the regime's intent to shame. Meanwhile, Calvo subverts the state's abuse of power and reclaims agency by asserting two parts to her identity, as a mother and political prisoner, as not mutually exclusive.

As a member of her university's union, Calvo explains the reason why the regime sought her detainment: 'Our union represented a history of struggle ... I think this is the main reason behind my abduction. They had to finish with these kinds of organizations ... [and] they had a clear objective, to dissuade student activism and union activity in the department' (Gelman and la Madrid 1997: 99). The history of union activism in Calvo's account is omitted from *Nunca más* and Calvo attests to the dictatorship's criminalization of political dissidents and the methodical eradication of 'subversives'. Her account furthermore destabilizes *Nunca más*' reliance on the human rights' culture of victimhood as she reasserts her collective subjectivity as an activist in her union, not merely relating her experience as a woman who gave birth in captivity. Since the dictatorship criminalized political dissension and created a narrative that justified its use of violence against 'subversives', focusing on the political subjectivities of survivors could possibly serve as an erroneous explanation as to why women activists were targeted. This legacy of the dictatorship is evident in the inclusion of the 'theory of the two devils' in the first edition of *Nunca más*, which places equal blame on the political dissenters and state agents who officiated the violence.¹⁴ Therefore, CONADEP strategically omitted the political contexts to emphasize the passive conditions of the victims of society's repression (pregnant women and children).

Furthermore, *Nunca más* evades mention of the systems of repressive power – such as gender-based violence – that functioned during the military regime. In a passage recounting the gendered dynamics of torture and the military regime's display of hypermasculine, patriarchal ideals, Calvo states in *Ni el flaco* that the prison guards would deride the women prisoners while physically assaulting them: “Bitch, take care of your kids, go and wash the dishes”, they would tell us . . . To them, a woman who resisted was much worse than a man who resisted. The valor of the women drove them crazy’ (Gelman and la Madrid 1997: 107). Calvo's experience as a political prisoner addresses the heteropatriarchal order underlying gender violence in the clandestine centers. Calvo and other prisoners were perceived as subversive threats to normative gender ideals of woman as mother and/or housewife, which the regime violently reinforced. As a union organizer, Calvo was one of the many activist women who contested social categories of gender upheld by Argentina in the 1970s, and as such these women were castigated by the regime. Female resistance and political subjectivity were targeted by state authorities, and the derision of this political activism was the state powers' attempt to reinforce the patriarchal order.

Nunca más also omits a critical portion of Calvo's testimony that recounted the birth of her daughter Teresa. Calvo describes a moment when fellow inmates fought prison guards who attempted to take Teresa away. She recounts: ‘They [my cellmates] made a human barricade, screaming and fighting like lionesses in such a situation of utter and complete inferiority . . . [The guards] would have had to kill them to take Teresa away. And they didn't take her away’ (Gelman and la Madrid 1997: 110). The women's daring display of valor is suggestive of the possibilities of reinventing traditional models of femininity and motherhood in the process of resistance to state authority. Their actions proved successful: the guards did not remove the baby from Calvo, momentarily inverting the power dynamic where the guards were intimidated by this enraged, politically-active ‘human barricade’. This politically-charged moment comes towards the conclusion of Calvo's testimony, at which point she declares the following: ‘Teresa and a conviction were born together. If Teresa lived and I lived, I would fight my entire life for justice. That is how I recall that moment, as if I were taking a path of no return’ (Gelman and la Madrid 1997: 115). Calvo's narrative recaptures her commitment to social justice and her political activism is reinforced during her experiences as a young mother and political prisoner.

It is well known in the international human rights community that, since the demise of the dictatorship, Argentina has been vocal in its denunciation of the regime; CONADEP and *Nunca más* represented a symbolic gesture for survivors as this recognition of state violence opened a critical space for other survivors, prompting the creation of numerous human rights organizations and activist-based reports. While *Nunca más* condemns the violence of the dictatorship and validates narratives of trauma, it does not articulate a theory of justice or seek accountability for the crimes committed by the state. What

gets ignored in this report – and in many official human rights texts – are the systematic efforts of the military regime to exterminate a politically-dissenting portion of the population and how the violence of the regime served to uphold existing power structures and stringent notions of gender normativity. This pattern emerges in many state-sponsored human rights reports that have archived women's histories of trauma, and we can also see this reflected in contemporary discourses on women's human rights, which facilitate this depoliticization and passivizing of women's political narratives. It is thus more critical than ever that feminist scholars who focus on issues of gender justice in the Global South remain cognizant of the pitfalls of replicating this discourse. I turn to Poniatowska's 1971 publication, *La noche de Tlatelolco*, as a salient example of how we can apply a critical feminist lens to existing discourses on women's human rights so that we anchor violence against women in its geopolitical, historical, economic and gendered contexts.

ELENA PONIATOWSKA'S *LA NOCHE DE TLATELOLCO*: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF STATE-SANCTIONED VIOLENCE

In 2010 I interviewed Ana Ignacia Rodríguez, an ex-political prisoner and survivor of the Mexico City massacre.¹⁵ When I asked her why she was one of the few women of the movement who remained vocal against Mexican state violence, she replied: 'Many people have never spoken of it [the massacre] again. Many people were scared . . . there are many women who were protagonists of that history, that form part of that memory and who have not spoken of it'. Rodríguez alludes to a critical gendered history of Mexico's 'Dirty War' that is absent in the official human rights reports. Many women in Mexico have been terrorized into silence by the state, as they were repressed for transgressing their prescribed roles of apolitical mother and/or wife. The authoritarian state succeeded in its violent castigation of politically-active women, as many of these women never returned to political activism after the massacre.

It is this gendered dynamic of the 'Dirty War' and the production of knowledge and (women's) human rights framework of this history that I find critical in my discussion of Poniatowska's *Tlatelolco*. It is the first published report to document the atrocities committed on 2 October 1968, when paramilitary forces opened fire on peaceful demonstrators in Tlatelolco Square in Mexico City, killing hundreds of civilians and protestors. Poniatowska claims that the state was – and remains – complicit in the methodical cover-up of Tlatelolco's historical events and in the perpetuation of a culture of impunity that has denied survivors the ability to seek justice and accountability.

Mexican officials classified the archives on the massacre until the 1990s, which denied victims and families any recognition of human rights violations or ability to seek justice. As the state did not officiate an investigation until nearly forty years after the massacre, Poniatowska's text serves as a critical report that affirmed the experiences of survivors of the massacre. Despite

the importance the text represents for survivors, *Tlatelolco* does not have the same legibility as the state-produced report *Nunca más*; the Argentine case is more widely known than the Tlatelolco massacre, and this impacts the agency formation of the survivors. Survivors in Argentina – including women – felt encouraged to come forward and provide their testimonies to CONADEP and to the numerous human rights organizations that formed in the wake of the dictatorship. In Mexico, however, the lack of national attention given to the crimes of the state dissuaded many activists from politically organizing and, as Rodríguez noted, this had a gendered impact on women's agency as they were less inclined to speak of their traumas than their male counterparts.

I suggest that we reference Poniatowska's work, a Latin American text published *before* the mainstreaming of human rights discourses, to critically reflect on the politics of representing women's agency and contemporary discourses on women's human rights. Read against and alongside Argentina's *Nunca más*, I consider *Tlatelolco* as a model of a critical, feminist human rights report that contravenes Mexico's obfuscation of this violent history – especially women's histories – from the official narrative.¹⁶ Additionally, Poniatowska's text effectively avoids the discursive colonization of Mexican women's testimonies by retaining their histories of political resistance (Mohanty 2003: 19). Poniatowska's relationship to the history of the massacre and her narrative voice in this report distinguishes her text from subsequent state-sponsored reports. As indicated from the text's subtitle, 'Testimonies of Oral History', she allows the voices of those marginalized by state violence to emerge with minimal interference, and sets forth her politicized role in the production of this text. Poniatowska frames the report in a way that allows for these testimonies to expose the radical politics of the movement.

As a feminist activist, Poniatowska refrains from archiving testimonies in a gender-normative way. The first pages of the report depict the social momentum of the student movement via a photographic essay; Poniatowska emphasizes the importance of the political involvement of both young men *and* women. She commences the textual portion of the report with testimonial excerpts from former student activists Raúl Álvarez Garín and Margarita Isabel. Positioned next to each other, these testimonies explicate *why* Garín and Isabel joined the movement and they reflect a critical aspect of the movement's historical-political context, which is absent in *Nunca más*. For Garín, being involved in the movement was not arbitrary: 'I didn't join the movement; it was already a part of my life for a while . . . it's a question of defending everything we believe in' (Poniatowska 2004: 14). According to Isabel, the escalation of police brutality on her campus prompted her to form an actors' brigade and join the movement (Poniatowska 2004: 15). Poniatowska is careful to reflect the political consciousness of Mexican women; by pairing these testimonial accounts together at the commencement of the report, women's political subjectivities are not overshadowed by the men's histories of activism.

By weaving together the agented narrative voices of the survivors throughout the report, she exposes the mechanisms of repression implemented by the Mexican state, whereas *Nunca más* infamously adopted the 'theory of the two devils'. Similar to *Nunca más*, *Tlatelolco* gives visibility to the trauma and loss suffered by hundreds of Mexicans. However, Poniatowska's report *explicitly* condemns the authorities' orchestration of the violence, and also differs from women's human rights discourse that centers on women's identities as victimizable beings. Poniatowska allies herself with the targets of state terrorism and indicts the government for facilitating the extermination of political dissent in 1960s Mexico and its investment in maintaining gendered and socioeconomic power structures.

It is important to acknowledge Poniatowska's privileged status and how it affected the legibility of the massacre. She is able to utilize her upper-middle-class background to create a discursive spatial setting allowing for the emergence of the politicized positionalities of the witnesses and survivors of the massacre. The structuring of the text incorporates a feminist agency as Poniatowska condemns the hyperviolent, authoritarian Mexican state. In *Tlatelolco*, agency is not merely represented; agency formation is dialogic in nature, as Poniatowska's and her interlocutors' political consciences are molded and shaped by interactions with survivors, witnesses, government officials and other Mexican civilians. This is evident in the photographic essay that appears at the start of the text: the photographs serve as a visual index, aesthetically presenting the political momentum of the movement prior to the massacre; the final photographs capture the violent repression of the demonstrators. There is a direct relationship between the photographic essay, the fragmented testimonies of the survivors/witnesses, Poniatowska as the journalist/activist and the readers. In one photograph we see the body of a young boy with a visible bullet wound in his chest with the following caption 'Who ordered this? Who could have ordered this? This is a crime' (Poniatowska 2004: 30). This haunting image coupled with the denunciation of Mexican state violence is meant to provoke the reader into further critical interrogation. Additionally, Poniatowska incorporates her own voice with the voices of those she interviewed, which is evident in the photographs' captions; her own agency is informed by the narratives of the movement.

Furthermore, the structural setting provides a visual index that creates a visceral dimension to the text that is absent in official reports. *Tlatelolco* includes images of people involved in the movement – such as the aforementioned boy – while the only photos included in *Nunca más* are of former clandestine centers, devoid of any survivors. The photographs included in *Nunca más* depict a ghostly past that is delinked from the devastating effects the trauma had and currently has on those who were incarcerated; *Tlatelolco* utilizes this visual index to make legible the violence sanctioned by the state and to archive a history that the government is intent on erasing from its past.

While *Tlatelolco* recaptures the momentum of the student movement, it is also one of the few works that reveals women's participation in the political

sphere and their involvement in the student movement, whose aim included a social paradigm shift.¹⁷ This movement was critical in Mexico's history of gendered activism as there was a surge in women's participation in the political sphere, marking a critical shift in Mexico's socio-political terrain. Poniatowska's report does not portray women as mere victims of state violence, but rather women's testimonies here reflect their histories of activism.

Poniatowska's work is important when considering the politics of gender in human rights reports. Feminist scholars should be cognizant of the ways in which women's human rights discourses portray women, and how the varying, shifting language of activist and state-produced texts indelibly shape women's agency. The political agency Poniatowska attributes to women's testimonies is a critical component of her text and she includes various accounts that reflect the changing social, political and gender paradigms in Mexico at the time. Many women grew up in middle-class homes, signaling the politicization of this sector of Mexican society and the inclusion of women in public political demonstrations. One young woman states: 'My mother isn't a monster, she is a symbol of the majority of mothers of the middle class ... with her head in the sand' (Poniatowska 2004: 89). Poniatowska contrasts this with testimonial excerpts of individuals who voice their concern for the sociopolitical and generational changes by centering on the bodies of female activists rather than their political consciousness: 'Why is your skirt so short? ... It [the violence and political climate] is the fault of the mini skirt' (Poniatowska 2004: 23, 87). These patriarchal structures dictated by the state are reflected in the Mexican nuclear family unit, and Poniatowska aptly captures the generational and gendered dissonance. What is evoked throughout the report are the tensions and various social, political and gendered realities in 1960s Mexico.

Furthermore, *Tlatelolco* reveals the power dynamics of the movement, particularly the double burden women activists faced: the violence of the authoritarian, paternal state targeted at women activists and the gender-normative roles present *within* the movement. As Rodriguez informed me: 'women participated in the movements ... but the efforts women made for the cause were not very visible'. Poniatowska refers to this gender hierarchy without deriding the movement as anti-feminist, when many of the testimonies indicate that women were integrated into Mexican politics in ways that were not typical before. At various moments of the report, we are exposed to the complex gender dynamics and entrenched gender norms that were present in leftist Latin American movements. This is evident in many of the testimonies provided by the male protagonists of the student movement, such as Eduardo Valle Espinoza, who told the members of the group that they should not cry like women during a meeting. The female activists challenged his statement, but they eventually ceded to Espinoza as he claimed that he was referring to a harmless expression; the women apologized and later brought a cake to the men of the group (Poniatowska 2004: 94). While this might be an insignificant moment

in the history of the massacre, this is representative of the masculinist subtext of the student movement.

Women activists also contended with the violence of gender policing by Mexican authorities. Poniatowska incorporates testimonies of women who allude to the state's normalization of sexual violence in a manner that is drastically different from the way official human rights reports refer to it. Poniatowska's accounts of gender violence are *not* divorced from the political context of the massacre, whereas human rights texts often sensationalize the violence enacted by hyperviolent male authorities without delving into the gender norms that incite such violence. In Poniatowska's report, Rodríguez mentions that while she was detained after the massacre, she recalled the psychological terror experienced when prison guards threatened rape and physical assault (Poniatowska 2004: 100). Similarly, ex-political prisoner Roberta Avendaño Martínez recounted the prevalence of gender-specific torture in the prisons where many women protestors were detained after the massacre (Poniatowska 2004: 144).

While Martínez relates the types of gender violence committed by prison guards, Poniatowska frames her testimony in a way that does not focus solely on the sexual violence that incarcerated women experienced. Poniatowska's text presents a critical facet of the history of the student movement: the use of corporeal and psychological gender-based violence against women activists as a manner of policing gender, social and political norms in Mexico. Martínez's testimony articulates the motivating cause for the murder and incarceration of hundreds of activists: 'we are young people who fought for an ideal' (Poniatowska 2004: 144). This ideal, as she states, included a nation where political leaders 'are not corrupt and do not abuse their authority; [we fought for] the ideal that the community have rights ... [and for] true democracy and justice for all' (Poniatowska 2004: 144). This ideology posed a severe threat to the Mexican government and the state responded to the movement's demands for dialogue with violence and the criminalization of activists.

This criminalization of political dissent is a central trope in the report, and Poniatowska reveals how women activists struggled against a gendered form of repression. Martínez's narrative is not atypical of the history of Mexico's 'Dirty War', and violence against women activists is also a central motif of the 'Dirty Wars' in other Latin American nations. Poniatowska alludes to this normalization of state-sponsored violence focused on gender norms and committed against politically active bodies. Gender policing occurred in many authoritarian Latin American nations and it is critical to center on the political implications the violence of the state has upon perpetuating gender norms. *Tlatelolco* serves as a critical feminist human rights report that makes legible in a discursive manner the gender violence sanctioned by the state without effacing the political roots of the violence. Poniatowska constructs her own model of a human rights report that is inclusive of the gender politics that emerged in the violent subjugation of activists in

Mexico's student movement. Poniatowska's feminist lens presents us with a theory of justice that is absent from state-sponsored reports and *Tlatelolco* relates how women's political activism was – and continues to be – seen as a legitimate threat to the hegemonic, patriarchal authoritarian state.

TOWARD A CRITICAL WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS?

Adriana Calvo, Ana Ignacia Rodriguez and other survivors of state violence I interviewed in Latin America clearly asserted their political agency and positioned themselves as protagonists in these historical traumas and in contemporary Latin American political debates. In order to bring awareness of state and gender violence to the international human rights community, they have expressed frustration in having to diminish the political contexts of their testimonies and instead center on their victimization. This recalls Wendy Brown's claim that 'human rights take their shape as a moral discourse centered on pain and suffering rather than political discourse of comprehensive justice' (Brown 2004: 453). The figure of the victimized woman in need of protection and rescue becomes integral in women's human rights discourse and in many transitional societies.

In my analysis of *Nunca más*, CONADEP frames women's testimonies in order to highlight the figure of woman-as-victim, and this in turn benefits the patriarchal post-dictatorship state by promoting a false sense of national unity and moving away from a violent past. Women's human rights should challenge the limitations of this gender-normative lens, and Poniatowska's report offers one viable model of doing so. *Tlatelolco* archives the agented subjectivities of the women activists and tethers their narratives to larger struggles concerning Mexico's economic and political changes. However, it is important to acknowledge that (women's) human rights discourse and state-sponsored reports have opened a critical space of validation for those who have survived state violence, which has contributed to the political-agency formation of many survivors. Indeed, the confluence of state-supported human rights investigations and numerous activist-based human rights organizations in post-dictatorship Argentina has placed the nation on the international human rights map. And despite certain limitations that official human rights procedures represent to survivors, this discursive practice has opened dialogue between civilians, survivors and the state, which has encouraged many women to come forward and narrate their histories of gender and political violence. On the other hand, the state's silence surrounding Mexico's massacre terrorized many survivors and former activists into silence and these testimonies will remain in oblivion; the thirty-year silence and the state's attempt at assuaging the national memory of this historic trauma allowed for decades of apathy and amnesty, negatively impacting the once-political agencies of many women. Despite its various setbacks, the state's recognition and participation in

human rights investigations impacts and shapes the politicized agencies of women survivors of violence.

In my analysis of *Tlatelolco* and *Nunca más*, I have outlined the pitfalls and possibilities of women's human rights discourse as well as the dialogic nature of women's agency-formation in human rights reports. My intent was not to eschew the current discourse of women's human rights; rather, I hope that my analysis will contribute to existing debates on the discursive limitations and possibilities of women's human rights. By referring to women's human rights as an analytic category of inquiry, and the challenges this analytic poses in attaining what Wendy Brown terms 'comprehensive justice' for female survivors of state violence, I have centered on Latin America as a site for new epistemological conceptions of a woman's human rights (Brown 2004: 453).¹⁸ By utilizing a critical feminist approach to women's human rights, I insist that we not allow the mainstreaming of human rights discourse to efface histories of women's activism in anti-capitalist, anti-racist and anti-misogynist resistance movements in Latin America (and globally). We cannot separate the political and economic history of violence from the history of gender violence that is exhibited in these testimonies. As Margarita Cruz states: 'The women in that decade 1970s make a strong break with the dominant system according to the norms of what women should be like . . . they break with a structure of a capitalist, individualistic society'.¹⁹ Many of those repressed in various Latin American authoritarian states were individuals who politically organized against the neoliberal economic practices that were being implemented in these nations.

As feminist scholars immersed in research on the political, economic, racial and gender inequalities in the Global South, we should seek a critical, feminist human rights model that – referring to the epigraph – would reconstitute the field of women's human rights so that gender violence can be tackled 'within a comprehensive justice model that considers peoples in local communities as agents of social change' (Fregoso and Bejarano 2010: 20). Women's human rights should make central the issue of gender justice and consider the gendered dynamics involved not only in conditions that allow for violence against women, but also in the power dynamics present in transitional societies. As Margarita Cruz and other female survivors of political violence have said, these women are not passive victims of state-sanctioned violence. Rather, we must recognize women's active, political participation in histories of violence that are all too readily being compartmentalized and condemned to oblivion as simply traumas of the past.

Viviana Beatriz MacManus
University of Maryland, Baltimore County
1627 Massachusetts Avenue SE
Washington, DC 20003, USA
Email: macmanus@umbc.edu

Notes

- 1 Margarita Cruz, personal interview, 13 July 2009, Buenos Aires.
- 2 I refer to 'Dirty War' in quotation marks as the term erroneously suggests that these violent histories were instigated by two camps of equal power and that those detained were participating in an armed struggle against the government, when the majority of the victims were unarmed political activists. This, however, in no way justifies the governments' brutal repression of armed, militant activists in Mexico and Argentina.
- 3 I will be referring to the term 'state' as an authoritative agent that takes on differing roles during distinct moments. I use the same term, 'the state', to allude to its role during *and* after moments of political repression, and this emphasizes the historical link between pre- and post-violent eras.
- 4 For further reading on critiques of women's human rights, see Mendoza (2002) and Hesford and Kozol (2005).
- 5 Franke (2006) notes that even gender-sensitive states and tribunals recognize women as victims of sexual assault, not agents of social change, and they ignore the gender-based violence men experience.
- 6 Although these human rights reports document the atrocities committed in distinct geopolitical and historical contexts, they reflect the transnational state-sanctioned political repression that existed in Latin America during the height of the Cold War; these transnational operations of terror and state-sponsored violence occurred in democratic and dictatorial governments. For this reason, I have centered on the violent eras in Mexico and Argentina and it is important to consider these violences together as it suggests that these similar modalities of repression were part of a hemispheric plan to eradicate political activism.
- 7 I use the term 'post-authoritarian societies' to refer to post-dictatorship Argentina and post-Tlatelolco massacre Mexico. I am not completely satisfied with the terms to depict the eras following state violence (post-conflict, post-violence, post-dictatorship, transitional societies), as they imply that with the end of these violent moments came the end of state-sanctioned violence.
- 8 This article stems from a larger project that centers on representations of gendered violence in Latin American prison testimonies, where I turn to cultural texts (human rights reports, testimonial literature and oral histories) produced under the Argentine and Chilean military dictatorships and the Mexico City massacre of 1968. The project explores the politics of memory and justice in moments of Latin American state violence, and examines the gender politics that emerge in dominant discourses on these historical traumas.
- 9 This publication includes testimonies of survivors, as well as children of the disappeared who formed the group HIJOS (Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice Against Oblivion and Silence).
- 10 All translations from the original Spanish texts are mine.
- 11 'Hypermasculine ideology' refers to the predominately male makeup of the Argentine military forces, where military officials exercised their patriarchal authority by violently castigating the incarcerated bodies that threatened gender norms.

- 12 Hundreds of women gave birth while illegally detained in various clandestine centers in Argentina and the babies born in captivity were placed in families of the regime's sympathizers.
- 13 Calvo later co-founded the Association of Ex-Detained Disappeared in Buenos Aires where she remained an activist until her death in 2010.
- 14 'The Theory of the Two Devils' refers to a widely-accepted myth that those affected by state violence participated in armed movements and that the state was responding to the violence of leftist dissenters.
- 15 Ana Ignacia Rodríguez, personal interview, 22 May 2010, Mexico City.
- 16 *La noche de Tlatelolco* was published before the emergence of state-sponsored human rights reports and before the mainstreaming of human rights discourse.
- 17 'Paradigm shift' refers to the political platform upon which student activist groups relied, based on a more just Mexican state that would dismantle socioeconomic and political hierarchies. See Zermeño (2003) for an historical contextualization of the student movement.
- 18 Brown's (2004) notion of 'comprehensive justice' conveys the limits of (women's) human rights discourse and the inability to tackle systemic issues that engender violence against women.
- 19 Margarita Cruz, personal interview, 13 July 2009, Buenos Aires.

Notes on contributor

Viviana Beatriz MacManus is an Assistant Professor in the Gender and Women's Studies Program at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. She received her PhD in the Literature Department at the University of California, San Diego, with an emphasis on Latin American Cultural Studies and Critical Gender Studies.

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