

Deploying Private Memory in the Virtual Sphere: Feminist Activism Against Gender-Based Violence in Mexico

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Since 2007, there has been a recrudescence in gender-based violence and feminicides in Mexico, with an average of more than 10 feminicides a day. Out of nearly 47 million Mexican women above the age of 15, almost 31 million have been victims of some form of gender-based violence, mostly perpetrated by current or former partners. The present article investigates feminist online activism against gender-based violence and feminicides in Mexico as a discursive and mobilization strategy opposing the government's populist rhetoric in the context of a political and cultural invisibility of violence against women in the public discourse. By analyzing the deployment of private memory to remember and honor the victims of feminicides and *desaparecidas*, the article reflects on the relationship between institutional patriarchy, populism, memory, and gender-based violence in Mexico.

Keywords: feminist activism, feminist hashtag performativity, digital activism, memory, gender-based violence, feminicides, Mexico

On March 9, 2020, Mexican feminist activists declared a one-day strike to protest against the rising and worrying levels of gender-based violence in the country, mere hours away from the International Women's Day marches organized all over Mexico that showed unprecedented vigor and high levels of participation. Heinous murders and attacks on underage and adult women perpetrated by the police, government officials, and family members rose to prominence, while government institutions were attacked for their inefficiency, and the media was criticized for its graphic depictions and misrepresentations of victims of gender violence.

The mobilization was convened on social media by the feminist collective Las brujas del mar (The sea witches) under the hashtag #UnDíaSinNosotras (#ADayWithoutUs). Women and girls chose to stay at home for the day and disconnected from social media, replicating the invisibility and absence of victims of gender-based violence and celebrating their memory in the context of rising levels of violence against women and institutional criminalization of feminist activism.

The present article seeks to investigate feminist digital memory activism against gender-based violence and feminicides in Mexico as a discursive and mobilization strategy opposing the government's populist rhetoric as well as the delegitimization of feminist activism. Employing Feminist Critical Discourse

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Analysis (FCDA) to explore a selected number of Facebook posts by the feminist collective Las brujas del mar dedicated to raising awareness and denouncing the impunity for feminicides and other gender-based violence crimes, the article explores the enactment of cyberfeminism through memory, the digital resistance to populist rhetoric, and the forging of counternarratives rehabilitating the memory of the women while opposing discursive institutional revictimization. In so doing, the article intends to raise broader questions about the nexus between digital activism, memory politics, and resistance in the Global South.

Collective Memory, the *Politics of Memory*, and Social Movements

The social and cultural dimensions of memory have been influenced by the studies on the internalization of group identity (Halbwachs, 1992), and the conceptualization of memory as a collective and social phenomenon (Daphi & Zamponi, 2019, p. 401). Memory can, thus, be conceived of as an important feature of individual and collective identity, whereby competing versions of the past can and often oppose national(istic) narratives.

The contentious nature of memory entails a *politics of memory* envisaged to process the recent past through a broad repertoire of actions and representations including retroactive justice, commemorations, memorials, and other symbolic appropriations proposed by the state or by other social actors (Rabotnikof, 2007, p. 261). This is particularly relevant for grassroots movements attempting to forge an alternative collective memory and reform hegemonic narratives over traumatic events. Moreover, with specific reference to the case of Mexico, Délano Alonso and Nienass (2022) argue that activists' concerns go beyond a mere remembering of the past to invest a *politics of time* that delineates the present and future from past trauma. In other words, by producing a counter-memory, grassroots groups and activists offer a distinct version of victimhood, not only seeking legitimation and validation, but also forging a situated agency in the process.

Memory and Social Movements

Digital activism employs memory as a repertoire through the deployment of virtual memory that focuses on the relationship between memory and technology (Stainforth, 2021), and how digital media have shaped the practice of remembrance and memory transmission, legitimation, and archiving. As the concept exemplifies, memory is an important component of social movements, as it allows people to mobilize and motivate support, legitimize political claims, socially appropriate the past, and found emancipatory practices (Berger, Scalmer, & Wickle, 2021, p. 1; Harris, 2006). Accordingly, memory activism encompasses the strategic revisitation of past events carried out by individual or collective actors outside of government formal or government-sanctioned channels to influence change through collective memory (Gutman & Wüstenberg, 2021, para. 4). Moreover, shared memories are formed through social interaction (Daphi & Zamponi, 2019, p. 405), impacting collective memory and identity.

Memory activism is predominantly conceptualized as a manifestation from below. Specifically, the memory of tragic events paves the way for contentious politics and mobilizes consensus (Harris, 2006), as is the case with gender-based violence and feminicides. The present article addresses the connections between memory as a tool of feminist resistance and digital activism, filling a gap in scholarly research about the "movement-memory nexus" (Daphi & Zamponi, 2019, p. 410). The relevance of the present

research also resides in contextualizing this nexus in the Global South and within the current feminist movement against gender-based violence and feminicides, contributing to the exploration of digital platforms as a horizontal public space allowing an alternative *locus* for agency and action.

The case study here analyzed focuses on Mexico as a populist country characterized by the personalization of politics, extremely high and rising levels of violence against women and feminicides, as well as a fierce grassroots feminist movement active offline and online to voice its demands for transparency, accountability, and justice by reclaiming and appropriating the memory of disappeared and murdered women. In particular, the examination of a number of Facebook posts of the feminist collective Las brujas del mar exemplifies digital activism through the recuperation of memory as a tool for contention, connecting local instances with wider motives of contentious politics through international solidarity.

Feminist Activism and Memory in the Global South and Latin America

In the Global South, social movements have shown an increasing “feminization of resistance” (Seppälä, 2016, p. 12) against several issues, including the neoliberal economy (Mohanty, 2013), the institutional patriarchal tenets and gender-based violence (Moore Torres, 2018), and toward the furthering of women’s and minorities’ rights (Nazneen & Okech, 2021), indigenous peoples’ rights and environmentalism (García-Del Moral, 2022). The increased women’s activism attests political subjectivities and agency that challenge Western conceptualizations of the political realm and sanction the exclusion of women’s bodies (Motta, 2013, p. 36). Women’s political engagement addresses a multiplicity of axes of oppression including gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class, informing and articulating new expressions of emancipatory politics (Motta, 2013; Seppälä, 2016).

Feminist activism is currently one of the strongest social movements in Latin America, targeting a multiplicity of struggles, such as gender-based violence (Buscemi, forthcoming; Espinosa Miñoso, 2011), sexual and reproductive rights (Lamas, 2008), legal equality, the rights of afrodescendants and antiracism (Curiel, 2007), and indigenous feminisms (Bastián Duarte, 2012), effectively intersecting the broader discourse of democracy and human rights. Latin American feminist activism has historically converged with resistance to authoritarian or populist regimes, violent repressions, and human rights violations (Gago & Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2018). In this context, memory activism has been employed online and offline to further the agenda of feminist grassroots groups such as the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, employing private memories to reclaim justice and denounce the disappearance of their offspring and grandchildren during the 1970s dictatorship (Shephard, 2010). Similarly, in Mexico, grassroots groups and collectives have advocated primarily by fostering a counter-politics of memory to end impunity and demand a reformed justice system to eradicate gender-based violence and feminicides.

Feminist Activism Against Gender-Based Violence in Mexico

Feminicides are one of the many forms of violence against women, a typology that was identified at the beginning of the 2000s in relation to women’s killings in the Mexican border town of Ciudad Juárez. Feminicide is regarded as the violent death of women based on gender (Committee of Experts of the Follow Up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Inter American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and

Eradication of Violence Against Women [MESECVI], 2008, p. 6). The notion and definition of femicide have evolved to identify specific acts committed as a form of intimate violence, but also including the ambivalent role of institutions. Gender-based violence, in fact, unmasks unequal power relations relying on a dichotomist conception of men and women, as well as the structural nature of gender inequalities in Latin America (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC] and UN Women, 2021, p. 3). Historically, gender-based violence has been endemic to Latin American countries in general and to Mexico in particular. However, since 2007, there has been a recrudescence to the point that, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, in 2020 the number of femicides per day amounted to 10.5 (Xantomila, 2020).

Gender-based violence in Mexico, however, is complicated by endemic criminal and *narco* violence and by the divisive policies of the current populist administration. President López Obrador's political strategy is based on a vague, left-wing populist project of reforms (Rosales Ávalos, 2021) promising radical change, that also capitalizes on a growing antiestablishment climate against the previous governments. Over time, López Obrador has gradually personalized the institutions and has progressively concentrated on increasing power in his hands while weakening the democratic regime. In particular, he has undermined the credibility of the judicial and electoral institutions seeking to minimize the bureaucratic government apparatus to reduce the number of intermediaries between himself and the people (García Magos, 2020). Low popularity levels, as well as scandals and a poor management of the COVID-19 pandemic, have forced López Obrador to identify a scapegoat in the vibrant and rapidly growing feminist movement.

Feminist Cyberactivism

The Mexican feminist movement has historically intersected democratic instances, as well as human rights and political participation issues, which have connected it to the struggles of feminist movements across the region and transnationally (Godoy De Castro Tavares et al., 2016). Marta Lamas, an Argentinian-born activist and scholar, and one of the most prominent representatives of Mexican feminism, observes that current feminist movements in Latin America are in a state of turmoil (Buscemi, forthcoming; Drazer, 2022). She notes that feminist activists are focusing their efforts primarily on gender-based violence and political and sexual freedom, as well as identity issues through street protests and online engagement. Their activism targets anticapitalist, antiracist, and antipatriarchal narratives (Drazer, 2022), and by displaying a regional and transnational reach, it nurtures new shared imaginaries to be produced and enacted in the public sphere.

Through street protests and online campaigning, Mexican feminist activists have been able to forge counternarratives deploying memory as a mobilizing strategy. Álvarez Enriquez (2020) notes that the new feminist movement that originated at the end of 2018 is different from the previous historical forms of local activism. It is characterized by the young age of its activists, an absence of identifiable leaders, its display of novel, incisive and confrontational tactics, and a strong focus on gender-based violence that allows the movement to broaden the scope of its agency to structural inequalities. Moreover, it directly confronts the institutions and the government, and attracts large numbers of protesters, as well as international sympathy.

Online activism has taken on a progressively predominant role in articulating and voicing feminist activists' political demands. One of the primary elements of revindication has been the deployment of politicized private memories in the digital sphere. More specifically, memory has been employed as a repertoire of contention (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010), a tactic to transform the past by rejecting a victimization narrative to empower memories in the collective form. The public sharing of private memories also contrasts a tradition of nationalist monumentalization of male heroes to rewrite *herstory* and reform public narratives by recuperating memories that have been excluded from official discourses. Memory, thus, turns the *desaparecidas* and victims of gender-based violence and feminicides into resisting political subjects who have been given a voice through digital or physical platforms, thus "confronting the top-down from the bottom-up" (Fernandez, Wilding, & Wright, 2003, p. 22). Facing the institutional inactivity and dismissal of gender-based violence, as well as the lack of justice for gender-related crimes, the recuperation of memory publicly displays private suffering as a strategy of resistance (Díaz Muñoz, 2021, p. 177). Beyond a logic of commemoration, memories give materiality to feminist resistance by framing the everyday normalization of violence and impunity into formal politics through cyberfeminism intended as "a range of theories, debates, and practices about the relationship between gender and digital culture" (Daniels, 2009, p. 103). Mobilizing the personal as political, feminist activists turn the digital sphere into a novel public sphere: "network technologies and network logics [. . .] become incorporated in the everyday lives and spaces of activists [while] technological imaginaries of horizontality and networked connectivity shape feminist activist cultures" (Fotopoulou, 2016, pp. 1–7). Memory is, thus, one of the main tools that bring past struggles into current campaigns to fuel and incite a wide movement based on a renewed conscience and on transnational support and appeal, as will be examined in the following sections.

Methodology

The present research, based on the qualitative study of a feminist collective's Facebook account and of feminist activism hashtags, draws from FCDA as its methodological framework. FCDA engages with "examin[ing] how power and dominance are discursively produced and/or (counter-)resisted in a variety of ways through textual representations of gender practices" (Lazar, 2005, p. 10). Based on the assumption that gender is a social and discursive construct that intersects other categories and axes of oppression, FCDA serves as an emancipatory methodology that, by analyzing social practices and discourse structures, and how these interact with gender, is congruous with feminist digital memory activism against gender-based violence, and can further the examination of the dialectical relationship between theory and practice (Lather, 1986). As Lazar (2007) maintains:

The interest of feminist CDA lies in how gender ideology and gendered relations of power get (re)produced, negotiated, and contested in representations of social practices, in social relationships between people, and in people's social and personal identities in texts and talk. (p. 150)

While discourse is viewed as "a form of social practice" (Wodak, 2011, p. 17), FCDA is aimed at the demystification of ideologies and power (Wodak & Meyer, 2009) in discourse and their ramifications on gender, including counterpower and oppositional practices (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006, p. 54).

FCDA is here employed as an effective tool to examine the counterhegemonic mnemonic narratives that Mexican feminist groups pursue online in the interest of raising awareness on gender-based violence and feminicides coupled with the inactivity of government institutions and in a general context of impunity of the perpetrators. In this sense, the analytical methodology allows for resistance memory strategies to be investigated in a relatively untapped area of application of the FCDA (Nartey, 2020). Moreover, it absolves the tenets of engaged feminist research by allowing to “unlearn academic privileges” (Motta, 2011, p. 17) focusing on the voices of women activists, their praxis, and the theory that emerges therein.

The data for this study center on the Facebook account of the feminist collective Las brujas del mar, which was individuated for its relevance and influence over the public discourse, especially since 2020. Three posts were selected, namely published between September and October 2021, for their representativeness in relation to the deployment of private memory in the digital and public sphere. The time period was selected to ensure that the posts would not coincide with national holidays or remembrance days. The data from the mentioned Facebook account were coded according to content related to feminicides, memory and impunity. Prominent feminist activism hashtags were also analyzed in relation to gender-based violence and memory.

The analysis process employed was mainly deductive, investigating the data after formulating a theoretical hypothesis to test it. The process allowed to identify several themes related to the theory elaborated, especially focusing on feminicides, violence against women, activism, and identity. The materials selected (the Facebook posts) were individuated with respect to the relevant topics identified in the chosen timeframe, also ensuring that the analysis would cover different post formats, namely the alert on the death of a woman and the personal account of her life, as well as the circulation of information on her assassins; the alert for the suspect of the disappearance of a young woman; the sharing of detailed and articulated material on an institutional figure whose impunity following multiple accusations of sexual assault is sparking rage. The hashtags were individuated based on their performativity and for their links to the main themes analyzed, ensuring the employment of hashtags related to personal stories, as well as those of international and global campaigns, and local ones.

Results

Hashtag Performativity

One form of online activism is traceable through “hashtags [that] have been strategically used as an umbrella by feminist movements to debate and raise awareness about political issues, as well as mobilize discontent in/from the streets” (Cruz Lobato & González, 2020, para. 9). One of the most powerful cases of memory hashtag performativity was #IngridEscamilla.

Ingrid Escamilla, a 25-year-old girl living in Mexico City, was murdered by her partner. Her mutilated body was found on February 9, 2020, and pictures of her remains were published in the media. The family and feminist activists reacted to the spectacularization of the feminicide, the revictimization of Ingrid, and the validation of brutality (Signa Lab, 2020) by reversing the results of Internet searches related to Ingrid’s name using the hashtags #IngridEscamilla and #ingridescamillafotos. By posting a great many

pictures associated with positive images of landscapes, flowers, pets, and nature, which had been among Ingrid's interests, feminist activists offered a counternarrative of Ingrid's life and outnumbered the online images of her maimed body (Redacción, 2020). Thematizing "happy" memories (Hamilton, 2010) allowed activists to communicate positive attachment (Rigney, 2018) by means of a "symbolic transformation and elaboration of meanings of the past" (Jelin, 2003, p. 5). The hashtags ended up trending, and ultimately, feminist groups lobbied for a law that criminalizes the diffusion and commercialization of the images of acts of violence (Barragán, 2022):

Through hashtag contiguity, activists zoom out on the cartography of gender violence in order to situate specific cases within a conglomerate of power relations that benefit capitalism with state complicity. The hashtag also transformed mourning into vitality [. . .] and [. . .] asserted a politics of self-care and autonomy that stood in contrast to previous activism centered on women's naturalized role as mothers and caregivers. (Fuentes, 2019, pp. 435-437)

Signa Lab (2020) report on social media users' reactions to the femicide and diffusion of visual material on Ingrid Escamilla's death shows that the hashtags related to the specific case were also linked to other more global hashtags connected to Latin American campaigns aimed at raising awareness and demanding government actions on gender-based violence, like the Argentinian #NiUnaMás (Not one [woman] more), #VivasNosQueremos (We want ourselves alive), and #NoEstamosSolos (We are not alone), creating a digital transnational solidarity between cyberfeminist groups across the region. As Fuentes (2019) notes:

Hashtags evolved from performing an indexical and retrieval function to becoming a central propeller of networked protests. Like graffiti, hashtags are gestured texts that transmit affect, argumentation, belonging, and dissensus, [they] transform "posting about" an issue into "participating in" a discussion or campaign when users' individual posts are interlinked as part of a broader conversation. (p. 432)

Two days after Ingrid Escamilla's femicide, Fátima Cecilia Aldrighetti, a seven-year-old child, was abducted from her primary school in Mexico City. Her body was recovered four days later with signs of sexual violence and abuse. The indignation for the inconsistencies of the police investigation on the case, the negligence of the institutions, as well as the brutality of the crime raised the attention on underage victims of sexual violence and femicides. The case of Fátima's death ignited a digital campaign and a trending hashtag activism to recover memories of the little girl, de-victimize her and her family, and provide a counternarrative to the images and speculations abounding on mainstream media. The online activism prompted a new law on compulsory training on gender equality for public servants (Meléndez, 2022). The discursive articulation of violent acts of gender-based violence through memory hashtags can, thus, be regarded as a reaffirmation of feminist activist groups' agency, as well as a revindication of their political participation (Esquivel Domínguez, 2019, p. 189).

Victims' Remembrance

Memory activism describes how "actors struggle to produce cultural memory and to steer future remembrance" (Rigney, 2018, p. 372). Since 2018, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting suspension of street activism, feminist groups have increased their online campaigning. On February 18, 2020, the feminist collective Las brujas del mar promoted a women's strike under the hashtag #UnDíaSinNosotras (#ADayWithoutUs; Sandin, 2020). The strike went viral on social media, and on March 9, a high number of women and girls decided not to go to work or to school to mark the silence and invisibility of women victims of gender-based violence and feminicides, and to honor their memory.

As the online accounts of Las brujas del mar grew followers, the group started to capitalize on its popularity by campaigning on cases of feminicides and *desaparecidas*, employing memory as an activists' tool in everyday life. Among the strategies used by the group are commemorations, updates on the cases, the sharing of police alerts on *desaparecidas*, as well as feminist political memes and events. The updates on the cases of gender-based violence follow a specific pattern: a drawing from a picture of the woman, normally on a purple background with the repetition of the hashtag #JusticiaPara (Justice For), followed by the name of the woman, a short description of the circumstances of the disappearance, and a brief update. The purple color is widely employed by feminist activists as it has been designated as the color of protests against gender-based violence. Purple is, thus, an easily recognizable feminist visual symbol across the region, both online and offline.

The repetition of this kind of post serves multiple purposes: the replicability of the format and the great number of posts that are shared not only give materiality to the memory and the reconstruction of the circumstances of the women's disappearance or death, but also pedagogically reiterate the seriality of the occurrences. Moreover, by deploying private memory as resistance, cyberactivists attempt to bridge the gap between the private and the public, insisting on the relational nature of memory activism with their emancipatory agenda, reconfiguring personal and collective memory, as well as countering the "patriarchal dividend" (Connell, 2014) of gender-based violence.

Cyberfeminists "mobilize ideas of agency rather than of mere victimhood" (Rigney, 2018, p. 373) and expose the contentious nature of memory, as well as "the discursive constitution of the social" (Lazar, 2007, p. 150). The memory of victims of gender-based violence is resignified by subverting mainstream media hypersexualization of women's bodies, as well as reiterating the idea of gender violence as a prolonged, everyday emergency, thus highlighting "the imbrication of power and ideology in discourse" (Lazar, 2007, p. 145). Memory activism, thus, reconfigures the digital space as a site of memory and remembrance, resistance, solidarity, and agency.

Seeking Justice and Government Accountability Though Collective Memory

Mexican feminist cyberactivists, exemplified for this research by the collective Las brujas del mar, not only seek to keep alive the memory of victims of gender-based violence but also engage in seeking justice and accountability though a revision of collective memory, thus "delineating a broader genealogy of victims that identify a context of structural violence" (Délano Alonso & Nienass, 2022, p. 45).

An example is a Facebook post from October 21, 2021, on the death of Nayeli, a woman from the state of Baja California. The post reads:

#BajaCaliforniaSur. Nayeli was 33, and an animal rights activist. She was last seen at her home in San José del Cabo on October 14, helping two people identified as Hugo and Luis Pérez Barrocal, who are now fugitive for Nayeli's homicide. Her body was found on October 17, 2021, with signs of violence. If you have any information on the whereabouts of the two men, please report them to the authorities as an order for arrest has been issued. A picture of the two men [is] in the commentaries. #JusticiaParaNayeli. (Las brujas del mar, 2021a)

The post received 1,600 likes, 73 comments and 769 shares.

In another Facebook post from October 8, 2021, the collective urges the localization of the alleged author of another feminicide:

This person's [the picture is provided in the comments] name is Julio César, and he is allegedly responsible for the disappearance of María Fernanda for the past two months. The day the Attorney General's Office issued an order of arrest against him, his family notified the police a missing person report. He has not disappeared, he is on the run, his family is covering him, and the Attorney General's Office is facilitating him with its inaction. He has a lion tattooed on his left lower arm, please let's localize him and hand him over to the police. #DóndeEstáMaríaFernanda. (Las brujas del mar, 2021b)

The post, which received 259 likes, 40 comments, and was shared 507 times, tags the Attorney General's office in Veracruz.

Another post from September 22, 2021, shares information on a Veracruz MP who has been accused of sexual violence, denouncing the collusion of the local authorities:

We acknowledge the indefatigable work of the lawyers behind this case, let's help disseminate [the information] and put the necessary pressure so that during tomorrow's hearing people will know that we are on the lookout for the sentence. No more corruption, no more illicit camaraderie covering up rapists and [sexual] aggressors. (Las brujas del mar, 2021c)

In the infographics shared in the post, the collective provides accessible, friendly, and simple background information on Marco Zapotitla Becerro, a Veracruz MP from the party of president López Obrador, who has been accused of sexual assault by multiple women. However, because of the personal friendship and closeness to the governor of the state of Veracruz and other influential public figures, the institutions have granted him the impunity. Moreover, in a climate of important administrative elections, the accusations against the MP have been politicized into a discussion on the merits and faults of the government, and the gravity of the allegations, has been downplayed by the institutions. The upcoming

sentence could acquit him of all accusations (Las brujas del mar, 2021c). The post received 36 likes and three comments, and it was shared 43 times.

The three posts here illustrated show the different ways in which feminist collectives and groups in Mexico mobilize memory to end violence against women. They also display an escalation of action and the different degrees of involvement of Las brujas del mar in awareness raising and mobilization for justice, recognition of the victims and the rehabilitation of their memory.

In the first post, the disappearance and death of Nayeli are linked to the whereabouts of her two presumed rapists. They are not only named in full, but their picture is shared in the comments. Here, the collective supplies an awareness-raising function to support Nayeli's family while helping the institutions find the criminals. Remembering Nayeli is essential to the purpose of seeking justice: the inclusion in the post of personal details about her life and agency as an animal rights activist provides the "movement-memory nexus" (Daphi & Zamponi, 2019, p. 410) by insisting on memory and solidarity. Appropriating and recontextualizing Nayeli's private and intimate memories, the post opposes the perpetuation of manipulative and diminishing images of women victims of gender-based violence, often insisting on the combination between victimhood and victim blaming. As suggested by Lamas (1999), gendered bodies are symbolic constructions belonging to the realm of language and discursive representation.

The composition of the image associated with the post presents a graphic intervention on a picture of Nayeli holding a dog. The image moves from a mere function of transmitting information to the display of values and elements connected to the principles of feminist activism. The purple background simultaneously gives relevance to the depiction of Nayeli while also attracting the attention on the word "justice" reiterated in large dark purple bold captions, suggesting that the only way to rehumanize and de-victimize Nayeli is to seek justice for her and for the many other victims of gender-based violence. The image also suggests that a strong commitment to justice is the appropriate tool to de-silence these women precisely by raising their voice, either in the streets, in the squares, in the tribunals, or in the digital sphere. In a way, the image suggests a distancing from both the cold, standardized alerts emanated by the police, as well as from the Christian depictions of women saints and martyrs in holy cards, where they are discursively produced as emblems of sacrifice, modesty, and purity.

In the second post, the feminist collective is vocal about the covering up of the alleged perpetrator of María Fernanda's disappearance, also denouncing the inaction of the institutions that ultimately benefit the culprit. The post demands justice for María Fernanda, however the focus is on the author of the violence: a young man is pictured laughing and possibly dancing at a private party, exuding self-confidence while posing for the camera. The man is displaying a party outfit and boasts an expensive golden watch that contrasts with a middle-class domestic space. The image suggests not only that the person responsible for María Fernanda's disappearance is insouciant of his actions, but it also triggers a reflection on the predominant impunity of the perpetrators of violence against women, the normalization and banalization of its consequences in everyday life. Moreover, the notion of the complicity of the perpetrator's family to cover up his escape from justice subverts the institutional and religious toxic discourse on the family as the pillar of society and the cornerstone for the socialization to and the propagation of civic virtues.

Beyond mere remembrance, feminist cyberactivists undertake a call for action toward the search for the perpetrator of María Fernanda's disappearance that precedes and often takes over the work of the authorities and the police. Digital memory subverts the historical and social production of women's stereotyping through powerlessness and debility while it empowers feminist activists to seek justice through online solidarity and sympathy. In this sense, memory activism serves a transformative and emancipatory agenda based on feminist and active digital engagement through memory that foregrounds collective action aimed at transforming the narratives on the victims of violence against women, as well as seeking justice and accountability, while insisting on collective memory to bring about social change.

The third post is the most oppositional to the institutions among the three posts here examined, as it publicly denounces the direct relationship between structural violence, impunity, and institutional corruption in Mexican society. The post recalls several others that were shared during the administrative elections earlier in 2021 accusing political figures running for office of gender-based violence acts. Here *Las brujas del mar* set out to conduct a parallel investigation on the accusations moved against Marco Zapotitla Becerro, de facto taking over the role of the institutions and the police by employing social media as an alternative public. The powerful message the cyberactivists are sending is: If an MP is not investigated and held accountable for sexual violence, how should we expect the perpetrators of the death of Nayeli and the disappearance of María Fernanda to be prosecuted? Seeking justice and accountability also implies reestablishing the truth, recuperating, and often rehabilitating the memory of the victims while reconfiguring feminist mobilization in and through the digital sphere.

Interestingly, it is the networking and solidarity among grassroots groups, engaged lawyers, and other feminist activists that permitted to unveil the scandal surrounding the MP from Veracruz. Feminist activists, thus, reappropriated their legitimate rights to voice concerns and demand justice for the victims of gender-based violence, shaping their activism beyond remembrance to resignify political participation and agency online and offline. The collective, thus, absolves a pedagogical function for society to dismantle and counter "the demands placed on the female body in assessing and confining perceived sexuality in both life and death" (Driver, 2015, p. 9). *Las brujas del mar* is not merely a case study in this research, but it exemplifies the activities and tireless feminist agency and activism of a myriad of groups and collectives, and, to some extent, single individuals, who fight online and offline to eradicate violence against women and demand justice and accountability.

What emerges from the mentioned posts is that trauma and memory become motives for action. While the Facebook posts mobilized memory and action through grief, rage, hostility and a sense of impotence, the digital sharing of memories and stories enacts agency through the feminist solidarity that is implied by virtue of its own functioning. The digital discursive counterhegemony that cyberfeminists perform showcases "critical reflexivity as praxis" (Lazar, 2007, p. 152) in an emancipatory framework that is congruous with de-essentializing women's politics in the everyday (Motta, 2013).

Policy Design and the Impact of Activism on Policy Drafting

The natural link between memory and trauma (Rigney, 2018) has fueled feminist activism against gender-based violence in Latin America and Mexico. Transforming public memory encompasses a plurality of actions and outcomes, including the practice, places, and forms of commemoration (Délano Alonso & Nienass, 2022), the fight for justice and accountability, and the promotion of public policies and provisions. Among the multiplicity of forms of feminist mobilization is the lobbying for the design and implementation of public policies that can advance the fight against gender-based violence and feminicides. Feminist activists have been working with the institutions, both at a state and federal level, online and offline, to transform their claims and demands into binding laws, thus advancing a "politics of memory" (Rabotnikof, 2007, p. 260) toward the victims of gender-based violence. Since 2021, in particular, two laws have been designed to protect the memory of the victims of gender-based violence, as well as facilitating the reporting of such cases.

The *Ley Ingrid* (Ingrid law) reforms the federal penal code, establishing rights for the victims of feminicides and preventing their revictimization by severely punishing the diffusion of images of the victims' bodies and circumstances of death. The law, which has yet to be approved by the Senate after being passed by the Chamber of Deputies with an overwhelming majority of votes, protects particularly women, children, and teenagers, as well as people with disabilities and their families. This reform is directed at limiting the overwhelming consumption of violence and gory details about violent crimes in the mainstream media (Barragán, 2022). Riding the emotional wave of the pleas of Ingrid Escamilla's family and the fierce online and offline mobilization against the headquarters of the newspapers that had published the images of her body, the law was drafted and partially approved even before the issuing of the sentence against the victim's partner. Memory activism and cyberactivism sparked a debate on the commodification, vilification, and disposability of women's bodies, as well as Ingrid's revictimization.

The *Ley Fátima* (Fátima Law) reforms the General Law of Administrative Responsibility about the role and training of public officials dealing with victims of gender-based violence. It seeks to smooth the process through which women can report cases of gender-based violence by ensuring the proper attention by trained public officials (Meléndez, 2022).

Memory, thus, has fueled indignation and mobilization, connecting outrage and hope (Castells, 2012) or, as Rigney (2018) puts it, highlighting "a structural tension between hope in the possibility of change [. . .], and outrage at its foreclosure through State violence" (p. 373), and directly impacting public policy, as is exemplified by the projects of law.

Government Resistance: The Response of the Populist State

Despite the troubling and ever-increasing figures on feminicides and gender-based violence, Mexican President López Obrador has downplayed the current situation. Moreover, the austerity plan implemented during the pandemic has reduced the financial provisions aimed at shelters for victims of gender-based violence and centers dedicated to indigenous women (Blofield, Khalifa, Madera, & Pieper, 2021) at the time when they are needed the most.

Cerva Serna (2020) conceptualizes the general inefficiency and inaction of institutions toward gender-based violence as institutional violence. Moreover, the indignation that erupted during the feminist protests has been associated with "irrationality, subjectivity and, above all, with an emotional state" by the institutions and the more traditional sectors of society (Cerva Serna, 2020, p. 184). This forms part of the president's strategy to instrumentalize feminist protesters as well as the strength of their message by attributing it to "the conservatives 'masquerading as feminists' to weaken his government" (Blofield et al., 2021, para 18).

A few days before the march of March 8, 2021, the government erected a steel wall around the main monuments and the presidential palace in Mexico City. In this way, the criminalization of feminist activists shifted the public attention from gender-based violence, the generalized impunity related to these crimes, and the poor management of the COVID-19 pandemic, in a renewed populist discourse that struggles to identify new enemies to scapegoat in front of the public opinion. This strategy has allowed López Obrador to identify feminist activists as an "institutionalized other" (Laclau, 2005) based on an antagonistic logic that serves populist purposes and the "dismissal of politics" (Laclau, 2005, p. X).

Feminist activists, however, appropriated the wall by graffitiing the names of victims of feminicides in a square virtually under siege by thousands of armed forces. The activists employed memory as a tool for resistance in the main site of power in Mexico, bringing the past into the present and recuperating narratives of gender-based violence to impinge on the criminalization, policing, and punitive treatment of activists. The images of the painted walls, as well as the projection on the presidential palace of the slogan *México feminicida* (Mexico feminicide), went viral on the social media, thus bridging the divide between physical and digital public spheres, in-person and cyberactivism, local and global geographies, and providing a platform to showcase and ridicule the reactions of the Mexican government to the International Women's Day march, as well as displaying the transformative power of memory activism.

Conclusions

In this article, the complex relationship between populism, activism, and digital memory has been explored by looking into the online feminist engagement against gender-based violence in Mexico and investigating how digital memory is shared, constructed, and instrumentalized online. The exploration of the literature on memory, cyberactivism, and social movements has allowed the theoretical contextualization of the case study devoted to the analysis of Facebook posts of the feminist grassroots group Las brujas del mar. An examination of gender-based violence and feminicides in Mexico, as well as the online feminist activism generated as a reaction to it, both online and on the streets, have been analyzed with regard to the deployment of private memory to keep alive the struggle against gender-based violence:

Contemporary feminist mobilizations in Latin America are at the vanguard of a regional and international rearticulation of political resistance that has been defying widespread waves of conservatism engulfing traditional politics in most of the world [. . .], calling attention to the transnational and popular character of these contemporary feminist movements, which have been able to produce solidarity across agendas and regions. (de Souza & Rodrigues Selis, 2022, para. 1)

However, feminist activism has encountered resistance, criminalization, and discrediting by government institutions. Moreover, it has been discursively produced and institutionalized as an unreliable, emotional movement instrumentalized by the political opposition. As Vázquez Valencia (2016) observes: "Populism is the foreseeable reaction and the permanent mirror of a democracy that is not politically, economically and symbolically inclusive, in a context of constant tensions and the neutralization of the mechanisms of accountability" (p. 96).

What is truly innovative about the current Mexican feminist memory activism, however, is its reach beyond the confines of the country. At a time when feminist activists have been campaigning online and offline, these leaderless, horizontal, and digital movements have created a global interest around gender-based violence and, more generally, gender equality. A new generation of young activists has infused the movement with creativity, connectivity, and rage toward the *status quo*, problematizing the complexities and articulations between power and resistance, and producing "new imaginaries" in the quest for alternative democratic futures (Esquivel Domínguez, 2019):

In a social world still—and increasingly—marked by racialized violence and hostility, and ongoing struggles of legitimacy, affirmation, ethical expectation, re-existence, human freedom, and life visions, the pedagogical force of collective memory and ancestral knowledge—as knowledge and memory of the present in continuous relation with future and past—becomes even more relevant. (Walsh, 2018, pp. 93–94)

The systematic cancellation and criminalization of a vital part of Mexican civil society operated by the institutions is certainly turning the country away from a consolidated democracy, and, combined with economic and political difficulties, could lead it toward more authoritarian derivations.

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