

The Reemergence of the Disappeared, the Role of Remains, and the Forensic Gaze

Cath Collins

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Abstract

This essay examines what happens when the disappeared, reappear. Using examples from various Latin American contexts, Northern Ireland, and Spain, the text contrasts the divergent truth regimes, truth claims, and sources of knowing that arise. Following Gatti, it discusses the various catastrophes – of language, and of meaning – that may persist even when a forcibly disappeared person is discovered alive. The piece considers, in turn, how disappearances are administered, how they end, and the failure of restitution of remains or identity to fully dissipate radical uncertainty. Controversies arising from the paradoxical bestowing of enhanced visibility on the absent disappeared, and the victim hierarchies this creates, are discussed. So too is the question of the positionality of the forensic expert, and the credence given to forensic expertise. I argue that any mission to turn the disappeared back into still-living persons, or safely deceased bodies, is in a certain sense doomed to fail.

Keywords: forensics, catastrophe, disappearance, identification, restitution