

Article

Archives of the Disappeared: Conceptualizing the Personal Collections of Families of Disappeared Persons

Natalia Bermúdez Qvortrup  *

Abstract

In the search for their loved ones, the families of the disappeared create, gather, and share records. The Colombian 2016 peace agreement opened spaces for memory practices that help promote a record-keeping culture at the grassroots among families. These personal collections are private spaces of struggle for memory, resistance, and justice. This article aims to make visible this documentation process undertaken by families, by giving these collections a name—*archives of the disappeared*—contextualizing their creation, purposes, and uses. By focusing on the case of Colombia, I follow a general chronology of a search for the disappeared to understand who the creators are, and trace the creation, accumulation, and uses of these archives based on existing literature, testimonies and interviews with family members, family organizations and NGOs. I argue that these archives are foundational to societies that have undergone human rights violations as they eventually form the basis of much of the NGO and transitional justice documentation, and provide counter narratives that offer an insight into the search process. The concept I propose, *archives of the disappeared*, is a starting concept to open up reflection and engagement regarding these archives, which although written about in the literature have yet to be conceptualized separately from NGO archives, transitional justice archives or human rights archives in general.

Keywords: Colombia; documentation; enforced disappearance; families of the disappeared; personal archives; record-keeping

* The author (nataliab@oslomet.no)

Natalia Bermúdez Qvortrup is a PhD candidate at Oslo Metropolitan University at the department of Archivistics, Library and Information Science, Postboks 4, St. Olavs plass, 0130 Oslo. Tel: 67 23 50 00. She researches the information practices of families of disappeared persons and the role of archives in Colombia.

Background

When researching enforced disappearances, one recurring theme is the relationship of the families of the disappeared (from here on, the families) with records. The families do an enormous amount of documentation work, usually at great risk to their own lives, collecting and preserving records about the disappeared and the trajectory of their search (Bermúdez Qvortrup, 2022). These tangible and intangible records have been ‘often reduced to mere records, private fonds and fragmented ephemera’ (Halilovich 2016: 79). Traditional archival theory highlights the role of the creator of an archive, but has ‘sidelined’ personal archives, emphasizing those created by public bodies (Douglas and Mills 2018; Hobbs 2001).

If one of the main dilemmas of a post-conflict or transitioning society that has seen widespread and systematic enforced disappearance is how to gather, manage and protect the masses of records that can shed light on the past (Baumgartner and Ott 2017), then I argue that greater academic engagement with the personal archives of these families is necessary. The concept of *personal archives* in the context of enforced disappearance is largely underdeveloped and under-researched, which poses a problem for those of us who research the information practices of the families:¹ a lack of a common concept to refer to them by; the lack of acknowledgment of the documentation work the families do and the foundational significance of these collections to the entire framework of human rights archives. Yet, without them, truth commissions, NGOs, forensic teams, and victims’ organizations would not have the basic information they need to undergo the search. They offer a multiplicity of narratives about the complexity of a political and social crisis, helping to counter the ‘master narrative(s) of the nation’ (Jelin 2003: 27).

Taking a cue from Viebach’s (2021) paper on *transitional archives*, this paper seeks to open up a space of reflection and engagement regarding a concept, which although written about in the literature has yet to be conceptualized separately from NGO archives, transitional justice (TJ) archives or human rights records in general. These are the *personal* archives of people searching for a loved one (a family member) who has been forcibly disappeared. They are conceptualized as *archives of the disappeared*, defined briefly here as the records created, gathered and stewarded by the families of disappeared persons, created *due to*, and *about* a disappearance, primarily *for* the person who disappeared, either for their justice or memorialization. They are private and personal collections that open sporadically to the public sphere, often becoming the front line of documentation for NGOs and TJ mechanisms. This article aims to make visible this existing documentation process undertaken by families in different capacities, by giving these collections a name, contextualizing their creation, purposes and uses.

This paper is the result of a three-year doctoral project researching the information practices of families in Colombia and the role of archives. I found that archives were being created by the families in response to their search process. By introducing the concept *archives of the disappeared*, I hope to inspire more knowledge and research in this field. I believe it also contributes to Viebach’s (2021) discussion about *transitional archives*, offering one way in which human rights records make their way into the public sphere and into a

1 At the time of writing, crucial literature - Giraldo and Tobón (2021) and Cronin-Furman and Krystalli (2021) - was published, helping the conceptualization and theory-building. This points to the centrality of these archives for human rights practice.

transitional justice process from the bottom up, thus opening up a conversation about ‘non-orthodox perspectives’ in human rights and transitional archives.

By focusing on the case of Colombia, I follow a general chronology of a search for the disappeared to understand who the creators are, and trace the creation, accumulation, stewardship and uses of these archives based on existing literature, previously documented testimonies,² and interviews with family members, family organizations (hereon FOs) and NGOs. This chronology coincides with the archiving process. Three family members were interviewed (‘Maria’, ‘Karla’ and ‘Maria Fernanda’),³ and representatives of four NGOs. Both ‘Karla’ and ‘Maria Fernanda’ lead FOs. The NGOs chosen consisted of: two well-known national NGOs that have been working exclusively with the issue of enforced disappearance, focusing mainly on the disappearances at the hands of State entities for more than 20 years (NGOs 1 & 3); two newer NGOs focusing on enforced disappearances by all the armed groups (NGOs 2 & 4). The interview data was supplemented with the NGO’s documentation.

The personal documentation of disappearance: the case of Colombia

Colombia signed a peace agreement in 2016, implementing a TJ system that seeks to deal with nearly six decades of systematic human rights violations. Although numbers differ depending on the source, the latest numbers from the Memory and Conflict Observatory as of March 2022 indicate 80,733⁴ disappeared persons in the context of the armed conflict (OMC 2022). This number continues to grow as the current government fails to live up to the peace agreement. Enforced disappearance is defined by the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance as,

The arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the date or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law. (UN General Assembly 2010: ICPPED, Art.2)⁵

In Colombia, many of the disappearances have occurred at the hands of the State, paramilitary groups with the acquiescence of the State, guerrilla groups or armed gangs (Courtney 2010). Prosecution has been difficult, even when the perpetrators are identified, meaning impunity is rife (Haugaard and Bouvier 2016: 1). Based on a long history of social movements and civic engagement in Colombia (Hernandez-Wolfe 2011), families have mobilized to become protagonists of the transition in exercising truth-seeking, truth-telling, and

2 Stories about the search for the disappeared have been documented and collected by the Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas Dadas por Desaparecidas (UBPD), *Verdad Abierta* or national newspapers such as *El Espectador* and *El Tiempo*. These stories corroborate the interviews that I undertook with family members, FOs and NGOs.

3 All interviews were conducted over the phone due to the Corona-pandemic. The names of participants have been changed for anonymization purposes.

4 At the time of writing the UN asked Colombia to clarify its numbers of enforced disappearances. See *Colombia en Transición* (2021).

5 For a more detailed account of the extent of the violation under international law see Londoño and Ortiz Signoret (2017)

memorialization (Mendez 2016). The Unit of Search for the Disappeared (UBPD),⁶ created due to the lobbying efforts of families and FOs, testifies to this engagement.

Amid this grassroots activism, there has been grassroots documentation practices as ‘victims of the conflict find ways to make the unintelligible, intelligible through the mechanisms they have at hand, languages, media, or references’ (Castillejo-Cuéllar 2013: 18). The work the victims have done to tell their stories has been understood as memory practices from below (Briceño-Donn et al. 2009). As Reátegui shows, there has been an explosion of studies on memory practices in Colombia related to the violence, which have not occurred in a vacuum but as a grassroots response to various initiatives by successive governments to deactivate, through political means, different parties to the conflict (Reátegui Carrillo, 2009 19). There is one particular aspect of the memory work victims do that interests me here: their record-keeping process and personal archives. These archives are made up of *pre*-institutionalized records, *before* they are transposed onto a wider historical perspective of the nation-state which necessarily transforms their character and use (Briceño-Donn et al. 2009).

I use the term ‘archive’ within the postmodern shift of archival science that integrates new frameworks of knowing and cultural theoretical movements (Gilliland and Mckemmish 2018). As Caswell explains, ‘Pluralist and deconstructionist archival theorists have challenged these dominant evidence-based definitions of records’ (2016: 5). She gives the example of Indigenous Australian scholar Shannon Faulkhead’s pluralist view of records as, ‘any account, regardless of form, that preserves memory or knowledge of facts and events’ (Caswell 2016: 5). There has been a shift in archival science’s view of records from static objects of human and administrative activity to dynamic concepts (Cook 2001: 29);

(a) shift from product to process, from structure to function, from archives to archiving, from records to contexts of recording, from “natural” residues or passive by-products of administrative activity to a consciously constructed and actively mediated “archivalisation” of social memory. (Cook 2001: 29)

I use a pluralist view of records to allow for the different forms of ‘traces’ to be represented, in what has been a society historically dominated by orality (Uribe 2009). *Archives of the disappeared* allow for a wide interpretation of what is encoded in personal collections. The concept therefore attaches itself to the individual and their representations.

Families as creators

The archival notion of creator, in the traditional sense, is complicated in the case of enforced disappearance, as the families are creators, accumulators, stewards and users (Douglas 2018). This documentation work has been taken up by the families, as they are the dominant group of searchers.⁷ There are archives created by non-family members that also support the search for disappeared people, such as the archive of Mario Agudelo, a former member of the Colombian Communist Party and military member of the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL), as well as a government official and political activist (Giraldo and Tobón 2021).

6 The UBPD is one of three TJ mechanisms in Colombia, along with the *Special Jurisdiction for Peace* (JEP) and the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (CEV).

7 The term *searcher* ‘buscadores y buscadoras’ is also used in Colombia (Verdad Abierta 2019).

However, there is an intimate affectation embedded in the purpose of creating *archives of the disappeared* that marks them from other archives that are simply *about* a disappeared case, precisely because they are created by the families, who are the ‘guardians of memory’ of the disappeared (da Silva Catela 2008). Those two lives, that of the subject in the record and that of the creator, are indelibly intertwined both in real life and on paper. Documenting the one documents the other. They have the intimate knowledge of the biography and body of the disappeared, which is necessary to move the search forward. The concept *archives of pain* which has been used to refer to these collections in the literature (Alberti 2004; Castillejo-Cuéllar 2013) highlights the ‘extreme anguish’ that can only come from the families in search of their loved ones (Adams 2019). The blood bond to the disappeared has been a central point to the appeals for truth and justice and is an element of cohesion of the searchers from where they generate the complaints (da Silva Catela 2008: 13).

It is not a coincidence that so many of the FOs that focus on the crime of disappearance include the word ‘Mothers’ in their name (Madres de Soacha, Madres de la Candelaria, Madres por la Vida de Buenaventura, Madres y Familiares de Desaparecidas del Meta y Guaviare all inspired by the iconic Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina). Other FOs focus on the children who search (Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia Contra el Olvido y el Silencio); others refer to the families in general (Asociación de familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos, Asociación de Familiares de Víctimas de Trujillo).⁸ There is a gendered dimension to this recordkeeping due to the role that mothers, sisters and wives have had at the forefront of the struggle for truth and reparations in Latin America (Dulitzky 2019), which is also visible in Colombia, the consequences of which could merit further investigation. The fact that an entire sector of civil society in Colombia has organized under the name *family associations* or *organizations*, testifies to the central role of *families* as the searchers for the disappeared, being thereby creators and gatherers of records as well as those who activate them for memory and accountability.

The terms *family* and *community* are reciprocally related to each other with the viability of families being dependent on communities and communities depending of the engagement of families (Millar 2001: 26). ‘Communities are the context where families prosper and flourish or flounder and fail’ (Millar 2001: 26). Although there is this interdependent relationship between the two, families constitute a smaller and separate unit. So even though there may be some fluidity between personal and community archives (Douglas 2018), the properties of personal archives laid out here are sufficiently inherent to merit a boundary between the communal and the private, and thus need to be conceptualized separately.

‘Maria Fernanda’ is the leader of one of Colombia’s most prominent FOs focused on enforced disappearances at the hand of the State. She ‘borrows’ records from the mothers ‘las mamitas’ for the FO cause and their events, but certain items are so ‘indispensable’ to the mothers they can never leave the home. She respects the fact that some records are ‘too sacred’ to be included in the FO archive (Maria Fernanda, interview with the author, 24 May 2021).

Conceptually, we should allow for personal archives of the families to belong to their own category away from the institutional and national, although archival science has written about the artificiality of the demarcation between the personal and institutional in

8 For a complete list of family organizations and NGOs working in the field of enforced disappearance in Colombia see ICMP (2020).

archives (Douglas and Mills 2018). The personal can of course be found in institutional archives and vice versa, and the fluidity may even be more prevalent between personal and community archives. Yet, just as communities have their own documentation practices, so do individuals who have their own ways of remembering and forgetting violence (Riaño-Alcalá and Baines 2011). By focusing on personal archives in a survivor-centred perspective, ethical and affective responsibilities to record creators, subjects and users are highlighted (Douglas and Mills 2018: 274). This way we can engage *directly* with individual experiences and ‘the symbolic and social worlds they occupy’ (Robins 2012: 84).

Learning to keep traces: the creation of the records

When a person disappears, the family often embarks on an informal search (without institutional assistance) within the local area where the disappeared was last seen or frequented (NGO 1 interview with author 26 November 2020; UBPD 2019; ASFADDES 1993). They make personal enquiries with both strangers and acquaintances with the aid of one or more photographs of the victim, preferably the most recent. In the well-known case of Fabiola Lalinde’s extensive archive, the black and white photograph of her son was the first record in her collection (Giraldo and Tobón 2021). The photographs in the *archives of the disappeared* have become symbolic of enforced disappearances everywhere (Uribe 2009), and are usually the beginning of these personal archives that grow as the search continues and as families interact with different institutions (Cronin-Furman and Krystalli 2021). The photographs are often taken from a family album, a wallet, or a frame. They are sometimes replicated with the production of homemade pamphlets or posters that some families make to ‘wallpaper the city’ in search of their loved one (UBPD 2019). In these leaflets they ask for information, whilst offering the name, age and some brief description of the victim and where they were last seen.

Although many families do start the search by themselves, the first official step in Colombia is reporting the disappearance to the *Fiscalía* (the Attorney General’s office or a Federal Attorney), the *Personería municipal* (the regional ombudsman), or the *Defensoría del Pueblo* or *la Procuraduría* (the Office of the Inspector General). If the family does not want to approach a government office, some NGOs, such as the International Red Cross, can assist by making the report on their behalf (Equitas 2015). Alternatively, the UBPD takes on cases, although their mandate is extrajudicial and limited to disappearances within the context of the armed conflict.

The reporting of the disappearance requires the families to give as much information as they can regarding the disappeared person in the form of medical records, dental records, descriptions about what they were wearing, where they were last seen, who they were last with and more. If obtained, the papers are often photocopied to be added to this ‘folder’ of documents. As the UBPD mentions, the more information the families have the easier it is for the supportive agencies in charge of searching (UBPD 2020). However, enforced disappearance is one of the most under reported violations in the world as families fear that reporting will harm the disappeared person (Congram 2016). If and when a report is made with the authorities or an NGO, a file ‘el expediente’ is produced, which the families have a right to access and have copies of. Most families do not know that they have this right (interview with Maria Fernanda 24 May 2021).

Most families struggle with the paperwork that is produced, what it means, distinguishing what is important from what is not, what to do with different papers and

how to keep track of it all. One of the mothers I interviewed, ‘Maria’, found the burden of paperwork so overwhelming that she could not continue with her search. She never understood the process, nor the documentation needed. She knew it meant travelling to the city to obtain papers (dental records, medical records, certificates for each disappeared—she has three children disappeared). Her limited reading abilities has meant difficulties understanding what the papers say and what they are for. Abuse from the authorities means she has not been able to claim her son’s body. She was informed by telephone that she could claim the body of one of her sons at the local military base some years ago. When she visited, she suffered verbal and physical abuse and they refused to hand over ‘the papers’ of his death. ‘They stole them (the documents) from me. I didn’t know until later that I needed those papers. Those papers are very important’ (‘Maria’ interview with the author, 22 September 2020). She left the military base without seeing her son’s body, and without any papers.

The revictimization encountered by both ‘Maria’, ‘Karla’ and other victims whilst trying to obtain information and documents in government offices, as documented by UBPD and NGOs around the country (NGO 1 interview with author 16 November 2020; NGO 3 interview with author 26 November 2020; ASFADDES 1993; García Franco 2019) means families become reluctant to deal with the authorities all together. This revictimization in turn leads to further consequences; a lack of papers necessary for searching, lack of institutional support and thus further difficulties for future compensation. Even though there are NGOs assisting families, it is not easy for marginalized, semi-literate rural dwellers to know where to go to obtain that support or who to trust. The result is that not all families document, ensuring a cycle of revictimization, where the poorest and most marginalized are the least equipped to find information, capture it and share it, thus remaining more hidden than those who can activate their records in society.

There are exceptional cases such as the *fonds* of Fabiola Lalinde,⁹ mother to Luis Fernando Lalinde, disappeared in 1984, whose archive is the result of meticulous documentation gathered over 30 years. It is the result of the struggle in dealing with ‘a complex bureaucratic system that led her to develop strategies for documenting and controlling information’ (Giraldo and Tobón 2021: 535). From her first document, her son’s black and white photograph, she added all the documents pertaining to her search such as bureaucratic records, reports, correspondence, letters of solidarity, messages from officials, press cuttings, descriptions of harassment, forensic records and much more (Giraldo and Tobón 2021: 535). Yet, the story of Fabiola Lalinde and the creation of her archive has become ground-breaking because of its exhaustive record of the search process, which eventually led to the inclusion of her archive in UNESCO’s *Memory of the World Register for Latin America and the Caribbean* (Giraldo and Tobón 2021; Giraldo Lopera 2021: 10). Lalinde knew how to document having already built a personal archive that dated from her childhood (Giraldo and Tobón 2021). ‘Maria Fernanda’, who also went to college mentioned that whilst she has been able to build an archive and help build that of her FO, ‘most “mamitas” need a lot of help’ (‘Maria Fernanda’ interview with the author, 24 May 2021).

9 The term ‘fonds’ is an archival term referring to ‘the entire body of records of an organization, family, or individual that have been created and accumulated as the result of an organic process reflecting the functions of the creator’ Society of American Archivists Dictionary of Archives Terminology See: <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/fonds.html>

Lalinde, using her own archiving experience, developed pedagogical materials to teach others how to document cases of enforced disappearances; 'Her work thus became a form of archival activism in favour of human rights' influenced by the work of *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina (Giraldo and Tobón 2021: 536).

Nora Cortiñas, the co-founder of *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, noted that,

Many of my *compañeras* have kept even the smallest, most seemingly insignificant piece of paper that can show to our children's children and future generations, that period of cowardly and thieving State terrorism; These fellow fighters have not only kept their papers and their stories reflected in these documents, they have also kept the papers of those mothers who died, but who also accompany us every day, in every act, in every interview, in every activity we undertake (...). It goes without saying that we all keep the papers, documents, objects, things that our children used during their freedom and that for us, they have the double value of keeping their presence alive and reminding us of our commitments to the struggle. (Cortiñas 2004: 70—present author's translation)

'Karla', realized only too late that she should have kept a diary of her search. It didn't occur to her at the time. 'I tell others to keep a diary with all the details, dates of meetings, names of people, places, everything. But I didn't and I have forgotten' ('Karla' interview with the author, 18 September 2020). Whilst 'Karla' continues her work as an FO leader, 'Maria's' search has stagnated (she still wants to know what happened to her son whose body is at the military base and her other two sons who are also missing) and has given up all hope.

Different NGOs have different perspectives on the record-keeping of the families. Whilst NGO 1 told me that most families can't do the record-keeping and depend on NGOs or FOs to help them, NGO 2 told me, 'Nowadays, the families document everything. They know how to document and are the ones with all the information' (NGO 2 interview with author 11 December 2020). This latter view of the families as record-keepers coincides with statements by the UBPD, who position the families as the source of most information and the experts in the search (UBPD 2020; see also Ramirez Zapata's 2020 analysis). Nevertheless, the cases studied here show that although families are the source of much of the information, the families are not necessarily the experts that the UBPD and some NGOs claim they are. They simply carry the burden of documenting, both because they are forced to document the disappearance due to the official route of the search which demands information from them, and because they learn how important documents are to prove their victimhood status, for any prospect of reparation and to get their voices heard in the political debate to demand answers.

As these lessons have been collectively learnt, NGOs and FOs have put together courses and workshops to teach families to document and archive (interviews with NGO 1, 16 November 2020; NGO 2, 11 December 2020; NGO 3, 26 November 2020; ASFADDES 1993).

We are a country of orality, and the people who have suffered most from this crime are people who use orality more than written records. So we are teaching people how to document. (NGO 1 with the author, 16 Nov. 2020)

NGO 3 explained how older victims will teach the new ones how to document and keep folders, 'so that they learn from past mistakes. We are teaching the next generation how to search and how to deal with the authorities, so they will know what we learnt' (26 November 2020).

The four NGOs I studied train families to understand how to keep records. ‘They already know the importance of papers’ (NGO 1 interview with the author, 16 November 2020). They teach them *how* they must keep and safeguard documents, that they must keep the originals, make copies, that the copies are their own and nobody else’s and that they get to decide who they share the papers with. They are also teaching them to read and write. The ‘professionalisation of documentation’ that characterizes the human rights field as described by Tate (2007) is part of the training the families receive.

Yet, being ‘fluent in multiple genres of production of knowledge about violence,’ NGOs also assist in the building of memory by helping families project their experiences or perspectives onto a record of some sort, by drawing maps of the locations involved with the disappearances, composing poems or songs, weaving textiles or painting about past experiences (Uribe 2009; Tate 2007: 145). These initiatives of teaching families how to document are more than the creation of records for evidentiary purposes, they are performances of pain and grief, resistance and remembrance. They are the initiatives of communities, networks, FOs and NGOs as they assist, accompany and support families, where families play a role both in teaching and learning.

‘Chasing papers’: gathering and custody

The accumulative growth of documentation by the families means that these collections are archives in the traditional sense:

Materials created or received by a person, family, or organization, public or private, in the conduct of their affairs and preserved because of the enduring value contained in the information they contain or as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator. (Pearce-Moses 2005: 31)

Yet they are maintained using their own principles, categories and order. The records may be kept in recycled folders with children’s stickers on them (Cronin-Furman and Krystalli 2021), in draws, under beds or carried around in plastic bags (Uribe 2009: 47). Under repressive regimes they are kept in secret (Villalta Luna 2014). They may be organized chronologically based on the life of the person who searches, they may be embedded in their home with records placed or hung in specifically assigned places for meaning, remembrance or display (Halilovich 2016). The gathering is not always straightforward, tidy, nor the same for families in different situations or stages in the search process.

As the search of a family continues through the bureaucratic maze of Colombia, the collections grow to include proof of their interactions with each government office, NGO, civil society group or transitional justice mechanism. Regardless of whether bureaucratic papers are obtained, the families will try to gather the evidence that is available to them also in the form of newspaper articles about military or police operations in the area at the time of the disappearance, copies of letters they sent to the authorities, maps of locations, and a pluralistic and multifaced trove of items and mnemonic aids that can help build their case (Reátegui 2009; Giraldo Lopera 2021). These types of records are the evidence they can manage to obtain when the barriers to official records are insurmountable.

Hope of finding a trace that can lead them to advance their searches means many families seek private meetings with former combatants, military personnel, or former hostages. The FO *Madres de la Candelaria* visited local jails in the region of Antioquia to speak to perpetrators who had controlled their area during different periods in the past. They asked about possible locations of graves so they could try and find remains. The women took with them the photographs of their loved ones and obtained oral information which was later recorded, leading to

the finding of 95 graves (Palacio 2016). Cases of individual mothers visiting jails or combatants on their own to obtain information have also been documented by UBPD (2019), such as the case of ‘Rosy’ or ‘Maria Carmen’ (López Morales 2020). These methods of obtaining information produce documentation such as hand-drawn maps, or notes taken by the jailed insurgents or the family member interviewing. These visits involve a high level of risk, yet a risk that many women clearly feel is necessary due to the lack of alternative sources.

As the search is prolonged, the hope of finding a loved one becomes more desperate and items belonging to the disappeared take on a new significance,

‘If I find something belonging to XXXX I take it out and make sure to protect it’, ‘Maria’ says to me.

‘Like what?’, I ask.

‘Like everything, everything that I still have that remind me of them. Their clothes...’, She breaks off ‘...I don’t have that much but this I keep’ (‘Maria’ interview with the author 22 September 2020). The items, papers and documents become treasures these families store like sacred objects, next to religious images or prayers, some items are kept in exactly the same place where the disappeared person left them.

Fabiola’s archive was organized under a clear criteria, ‘labelled by activities such as “Search”, “Interviews”, “Testimonies”, “Exhumation Process” or instances such as “United Nations” or “Organization of American States”’ (Giraldo and Tobón 2021: 535). However, there are vast differences between these collections, where the exception is Fabiola Lalinde’s, the norm consists in far humbler collections representing the journeys of stagnated searches. There are differences between those collections produced as a result of searches of the whereabouts of persons or remains, and those focused on justice as the remains of the victims have been found. Not all individuals who search know how to control the masses of information nor learn the legalistic grammar needed to navigate the bureaucratic maze. The exact extent to which families document is difficult to know. Most carry only a few documents, most iconically the photographs (Edkins 2011). The archives are painful to put together, not only because they require the victims to relive the trauma, but because ‘chasing the papers’ is time-consuming and expensive (Halilovich 2014: 238; Halilovich 2016: 79; Cronin-Furman and Krystalli 2021). It is at this point that many families are assisted by FOs or NGOs and the records produced at this stage become part of the institutional archive (NGO 1 interview with author, 16 November 2020).

The sharing and institutionalization of records. Records from Archives of the disappeared are often shared with human rights organizations or TJ mechanisms during fact-finding missions (Crenzel 2008; Crettol et al. 2017; Baumgartner and Ott 2017; Jones and Oliveira 2016). Records however must be ‘(re)-assembled, (re)purposed and (re)contextualised’ for the purposes of an institution (Viebach 2021: 2), whether that is being a part of a TJ system, a state, or community-documenting endeavour. There are institutional preconditions to what is included and what is left out as these are political and administrative negotiations.¹⁰ TJ archives depend on the personal records of survivors and NGO records to build their case material as they often face challenges accessing and using bureaucratic records because

10 A discussion of the way transitional justice institutions and NGOs absorb and capture records or silence voices is not part of the discussion of this paper. This has been comprehensively done by Viebach (2021) and Jones and Oliveira (2016).

of the realization by repressive sectors, when regime changes are in sight, of the incriminating potential of the records (Baumgartner and Ott 2017: 672).

NGO archives are collections of evidence from sources including the records and testimonies handed over by the survivors, families, eyewitnesses and individual perpetrators. NGOs must have mechanisms in place to make sure that the handling and management of sensitive information is done according to the best interests of victims and the families (Crettol et al. 2017: 612). They cannot acquire information, nor hold personal data, without a legitimate basis or informed consent and the information that is gathered must be used only for the purposes it was gathered for (Crettol et al. 2017: 613).

The procedures carried out using DNA and medical records depend on the information given by families to identify the individual and the identification of the items found with the victims (Wagner and Kesetovic 2016). Antemortem data consists of information about the individual's physical characteristics displayed on family photographs, biological profile such as previous trauma, or what clothes the person was wearing at the time of the disappearance (Wagner and Kesetovic 2016: 53). This information must be given by the families. The scientific process of identifying the missing, not only forensically, but the entire information-gathering process, depends on the families, on their consent and their identification of the victims (Wagner and Kesetovic 2016).

There is a strong fluidity between the *archives of the disappeared* and FOs' archives where families gather and institutionalize their own collections for a common cause. Nevertheless, not all personal records are shared with FOs. The FO led by 'Maria Fernanda' does not get involved with the personal items, such as the victim's clothes or items, that the mothers keep sacredly at home. Maria Fernanda's FO only makes copies of the papers or photographs. For the public events that the FO holds, the mothers choose what they want to display from their own private collections ('Maria Fernanda' interview 24 May 2021). As Taylor et al. have documented, FOs and other victim associations in Colombia have difficulty stewarding their collections; their archives can be fragmented, held by several people, or housed in unofficial spaces (Taylor et al. 2021: 18).

Other questions arise in this transition from the private to the institutional, such as what happens after an organization or institution stops working on a particular case or ceases to exist? What happens to the personal records? In Colombia, a change in the administration of the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH) saw the director replaced in August 2018 with a director who sides politically with the Duque government's discourse of denying the existence of a civil conflict in Colombia. This has somewhat delegitimized previous work the CNMH had done, particularly the main report itself *Basta Ya!* As a result the institution was removed from the *International Coalition of Sites of Conscience* and collections of both NGOs and victim organizations, originally donated to the CNMH, are being requested back by their original owners, as they do not trust the current CNMH administration (Uprimny Yepes 2020; Colombia2020 2020).

Institutional archives can potentially overrule or constrain the traumatic experiences of survivors. Once institutionalized, they become records *about* the disappeared and their families, but not necessarily always *for* them (Douglas and Mills 2018: 273). The totality of experiences of atrocities cannot be understood without the personal. *The archives of the disappeared* are a private safe space for families to collect and create, use and erase the story of their loss as they see fit, to establish a material connection with the disappeared in a context of denial.

Uses and activations: memorializing the remains of loved ones

As these individual documenting efforts come together through collective movements and organizations, the personal archives are shared and progressively take on a more public and institutional role, becoming social symbols of the search for all disappeared (Mazorra 2010). These records are released temporarily, duplicated and projected into society, not only or necessarily through institutions, but displayed in protests, digitalized, shared on social media or tattooed onto the skin. They are activated as evidence in court rooms to reconstruct ‘the victims’ life stories and the crimes suffered’ (Cugini in Lessa 2021: 190). In their work with community organizations they become the source of artwork, documentary films and museum exhibits (Briceño-Donn et al. 2009), as well as a source of research and contribution to the transitional narratives and institutions which search for reliable records that document structural and institutional failures of the country.

A few items gathered and guarded by ‘Maria’ and ‘Karla’ have been shared with a local house of memory. Although ‘Maria’ might be struggling in a labyrinth of papers and bureaucracy, she uses the items in her collection to recall her children and tell their stories. She might not have been able to obtain many official papers but those she has she activates with the help of a community of mothers. These records are activated for memory as well as denouncing the government, which in many cases is responsible for the disappearances. As seen above, these collections end up becoming the only material remains of their loved ones, the source of much of the legal evidence in courts and a source of historical accountability in the face of impunity. The activations of the records occur all through the life of the records from the moment they are created or chosen for preservation.

Archives of the disappeared cover primarily four dimensions, both in their creation and their activation, depending on the context. First, they are created and activated for legal and historical evidence of violations and structural injustices. Second, they are created and activated to memorialize the missing, not only for the singular victim disappeared but representing multiplicities of absences. Third, they are created and activated to denounce the perpetrators, mobilizing society and creating awareness—as political and social activism. Finally, there is a fourth dimension which cuts through all the three above—that of the intimate, which privileges the familial bond between the searcher and the disappeared. The relatedness of the relationship determines the archive created, so that an archive of a mother will carry different records and hold a different narrative to that of a sister. These four dimensions overlap and interact with each other.

Although not always as extensive as Lalinde’s record-keeping, archival activism takes place at different levels in Colombia, testifying to the impulse that humans have to save and bear witness (Cunningham 2015; Mckemmish 1996), even though the formats of how to save and bear witness may vary depending on the tools available to each society or group of people (Millar 2006).

Archives of the disappeared: spaces of struggle for memory and justice

Under competing and conflicting understandings and memories of the past in societies that are emerging from periods of political violence, there are ‘active political struggle(s) around meaning; the meaning of what went on and the meaning of memory itself (...) These struggles unfold on various institutional, symbolic and subjective levels’ (Jelin 2007: 140). They occur through different ‘vehicles of memory’ (photographs, the maps of possible graves,

diplomas, death certificates, clothes, places, bodies) but also vehicles of justice (NGOs, TJ institutions, State institutions, media, communities and FOs). The struggle of memory is a power struggle of meaning and interpretation on the legitimacy of ‘the proper forms of remembering’ and a power struggle over who has ‘the symbolic power to decide the contents of narrative to be conveyed’ (Jelin 2007: 155). Even though the influential power that social movements and victim groups have had means that they have been able to challenge the content of narratives, the socio-economic marginalization of many families, particularly those without the fully-fledged institutional support of organizations, means that not all families can participate in this struggle and thus remain outside the collective memory-building fold. In my research I have found that many families feel they cannot document because they do not know how. They feel overwhelmed by the meaning and content of official documents, and they don’t understand the micro-schemes of bureaucracy that produce ‘papers and papers’.

Nevertheless, families do preserve, sometimes formally, but most often informally through a process of emplaced practices and inscription that Riaño-Alcalá and Baines have described as a ‘living archive’:

Documentation is not simply inanimate storage, nor is the act of documentation solely one of collecting facts and evidence from official (or even unofficial) sources. Rather, it is historically situated action in which survivor-witnesses, individually and/or collectively, become living sites for storing knowledge about the past through their bodies, storytelling, performance and movement. (Riaño-Alcalá and Baines 2011: 416)

Archives of the disappeared consist of both living and physical archives, written and embodied, that are private spaces of memory, resistance, evidence, and restoration of dignity, created as a way to ‘talk back’ to power. These archives demonstrate that Colombia has an archival culture at the grassroots that is influenced by unofficial and informal ways of documenting. The written tools required by modern bureaucracies are also being taught by NGOs and FOs so that families can interact with the state. Unintentionally, Colombian bureaucracy has had a role in fostering these archives through the production of paperwork which families must learn to understand, organize, and keep, because they learn that ‘writing is the prime modality of engaging with the state’ (Gupta 2012: 36). At the same time, the lack of political will in giving access to military records, the constant disinformation about military operations, the impunity and the distrust towards government, means families find alternative records to prove an event occurred, prove their loved one existed and prove the significance of that person (Ramírez et al. 2017). The 2016 peace agreement opened spaces for memory practices that help expose Colombia’s archival culture and the different ways families put information to use.

Hobbs states that individuals usually create records to serve their ‘needs or predilections or personality, not because some law, statute, regulation, or corporate policy says so’ (2001: 128). The literature and cases I have studied show that the families do both. Their documents respond to the legal and political demands for evidence whilst expressing the personal resistance, memories and pain of the families.

Final remarks

I have proposed in this paper the term *archives of the disappeared* as it recognizes the ownership, the provenance, and the subjects in the records. It also alludes to the issue of enforced disappearance which brings to the fore a particularly strong role for documentation as,

a stand-in for a continued connection to a lost loved one, which invests them with a weight that may not be present for other types of victims of human rights violations engaged in grassroots documentation. (Cronin-Furman and Krystalli 2021: 85)

As seen here, these archives have both evidential and informational value for society, as well as a narrative value in (re)presenting and (re)asserting the self (Halilovich 2014, 2016; Hobbs 2001). The implications for human rights practice are that the concept can help think more systematically about the different types of archives that are categorized under the broad umbrella of human rights archives, what they do and who they are for. These archives help to understand the trajectory of search for the disappeared that the families undertake with overwhelming barriers. Recognizing these archives highlights the information practices of families and how these practices are human rights practices. Conceptualizing the personal collections of the families helps complete the 'collecting universe' by including 'human phenomena and threads of influence' at different social levels (Hobbs 2001: 135).

Just as the terms *archives of repression* or *terror* have been widely adopted to describe the bureaucratic records produced by the administration of human rights abuses, giving a snapshot of the administrative record-keeping of abuse, the term *archives of the disappeared* can offer similar usefulness. It presents a view of the human rights documentation process from below, that provides counternarratives from an intimate and 'non-orthodox' perspective. Regardless of the name we choose to give these collections, they exist in precarious conditions (physically and socially), yet are foundational to human rights archives and practices.

Recognizing the centrality of the *archives of the disappeared* has taken on a new layer of resonance in Colombia as, at the time of writing, there have been reports of widespread enforced disappearances in the context of nation-wide protests. With an ever-increasing focus by NGOs, TJ and FOs on the significance of creating archives and safeguarding documents, particularly at a time of information overflow from digital media, *archives of the disappeared* are multiplying both physically and online. There is a need for further empirical research to explore the record-keeping practices of the families in different contexts, the consequences of families having the burden to document, the process by which their collections become institutionalized and the relationships the families have with official archives that take on their collections. This can only be done by naming these collections, born out of a disappearance and created by the families.

As with the recent wave of disappearances in Colombia, both families and their organizations have taken to social media to denounce and shame the government and seek information. It is therefore imperative we understand the life of these collections in the digital sphere as well.

The case of *archives of the disappeared* attests to the statement that documenting human rights abuses has been shouldered primarily by non-archivists in non-archival institutions (Piggott and Mckemmish 2002). Considering how central to NGO and transitional archives these collections are, they are part of the 'front line' of the documentation of resistance (Riaño-Alcalá and Baines 2011: 416), and should be taking a more prominent place in the literature. Ethical concerns about prioritizing the needs of victims of human rights violations means not only finding better mechanisms to gather, manage and protect information, but recognizing that some information processes are already in place *because* of these families. This allows for the possibility to build upon existing documentation efforts.

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