

Processing Absence: No-body Techniques and the Impossibility of Mourning Among Relatives of the Disappeared in Ayacucho

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Statements and Declarations

Ethical considerations

The Graduate School of the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú approved the interviews for this research. Participants received a written consent for review and signature before starting the interviews.

Consent to participate

Written informed consent was obtained from every interviewed persona for participating in this research.

Consent for publication

Written informed consent was obtained from a legally authorised representative for anonymised personal information to be published in this article.

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Abstract

The article examines how relatives of the disappeared during Peru's internal armed conflict (1980-2000) in Ayacucho process loss without the presence of bodies. It argues that grieving, a ritual process, is disrupted by disappearance, creating a prolonged liminal space. Through ethnographic analysis, the paper explores the strategies relatives use to confront disappearance and death in a context of uncertainty, focusing on the impossibility of mourning due to the absence of bodies. I introduce the concept of *No-body techniques* to describe strategies developed by relatives to make sense of reality and repair broken bonds. These techniques, rooted in individual and collective action, challenge the State and expand its boundaries of citizenship recognition. Ultimately, the paper concludes that *No-body techniques* are integral to the quest for truth and memorialization, embedded in mourning practices that allow the deceased to persist in the social world even after decades of uncertainty.

Keywords

Ayacucho, citizenship, disappearance, internal armed conflict, memorialization, mourning

1. Introduction: the impossibility of mourning

In 1980, the Partido Comunista del Perú-Sendero Luminoso (PCP-SL) decided to initiate its armed struggle against the Peruvian state. The PCP-SL, with an ideology that combined Marxism, Leninism, and Maoism, aimed to establish a communist dictatorship in Peru. The state responded to this threat through the intervention of the Armed Forces, particularly the Police, the Army, and the Navy. Although the violence began in the Andean region of Ayacucho in the first half of the 1980s, it had already spread to much of the Andes. By the 1990s, the war had also reached the coastal and Amazonian regions of Peru. Both the PCP-SL and the Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru (MRTA), which began its own armed struggle against the Peruvian state in 1982, used terror as a strategy for controlling and subjugating the civilian population. In turn, state agents responded with actions that did not distinguish between the civilian population and members of the subversive organisations. In this context, human rights violations were carried out in a systematic and widespread manner. Starting in 1992, the same year that the leader of the PCP-SL was captured, President Alberto Fujimori staged a self-coup that allowed him to establish an authoritarian government, dismantling the rule of law. It was not until the year 2000 that acts of corruption in the government were made public, leading to citizen mobilisation that forced the president to flee and resign. During these two decades, the Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación estimated that the most probable number of victims reached 69,280 deceased individuals. Amid this tragedy, thousands of people were kidnapped and disappeared by armed actors, the vast majority belonging to peasant and indigenous communities in the poorest and most excluded areas of the Andes and the Peruvian Amazon.

The article explores the ways in which the relatives of individuals who disappeared during the internal armed conflict in Peru (1980-2000) cope with the loss of their loved ones and the techniques they have employed to confront the disappearance in the absence of the body. It focuses on members of the Asociación Nacional de Familiares de Secuestrados, Detenidos y Desaparecidos del Perú (ANFASEP), the oldest victims' organisation in Peru, established in 1983, one of the worst years in terms of casualties during the war. This article analyses how, over the past four decades, members of ANFASEP have coped with absence and death amid profound uncertainty. It focuses on the lived experience of violence, the ways in which relatives process this experience, and the strategies they use to seek answers or construct forms of certainty. In doing so, the article also examines how these practices reshape identities within ANFASEP, sustain the memory of the disappeared, and shape local understandings of what constitutes a *buenamuerte*. In the Andean world, the notion of *buenamuerte* refers to a “good death,” one that is socially and ritually processed, allowing the deceased to be accompanied through proper funerary rites and for the community to reintegrate after loss. Its opposite, the *malamuerte*, is a “bad death,” violent, unexpected, or socially unprocessed, which leaves unresolved bonds between the living and the dead (Millones 2010; Rojas-Pérez 2017). Forced disappearance exacerbates this condition of *malamuerte*, precisely because it denies the body, disrupts ritual mourning, and perpetuates uncertainty.

The body, regarded as a cultural phenomenon and a symbol through which reality is apprehended, will serve as the starting point for the analysis. Through an analysis of the body and its role in mourning, based on interviews and participant observation during mourning rituals and collective political actions, the article examines how uncertainty is symbolised and

processed, and how these processes inform responses to loss. The relationship between individuals and the absence of the body, what I term as the *No-body* (that is, the ways of dealing with the impossibility of mourning and managing uncertainty that go beyond or do not require materiality), will enable the relatives of disappeared persons to comprehend the violent experience, the disappearance, the absence of justice, and the failures in the justice system.

Mourning is the ritual process triggered by death, aimed at healing both individual and social wounds following a loss. As an expression of grief, mourning serves as a rite of passage, symbolised through the body of the deceased. According to several authors (Cecconi 2008a; Davies 2002; García 1996; González 2015; Gordon 2008; Malinowski 1982), the purpose of mourning is to rebuild the individual and social structures left behind by the departed. Therefore, mourning, as a ritual practice, ensures that the person can detach from the physical materiality of the body and transition towards death without breaking the social bonds that connect them with others. For this reason, the ritual practice of mourning is of paramount importance in the processing of death. In the Peruvian Andes, the clothing, footwear, food, and drink consumed during the wake allow the soul to prepare for the journey of transition (Millones 2010: 131). Mourning not only serves to restructure society after loss but also ensures the division between the living and the dead on a spiritual level.

Thus, mourning serves as a transitional mechanism that utilises the body of the deceased as a consolidating entity of the symbolic at the liminal moment. Disappearance disrupts the ritual process of mourning by introducing a high degree of uncertainty and produces what I call permanent absence or extended liminality. Several members of ANFASEP mention this when discussing the ways in which they seek to remember their disappeared loved ones: “If you had found and buried them, at least you would feel some closure,” or “When we find nothing, we want to locate their remains, so the truth can be told [by the perpetrators].” Additionally, when talking about certain ritual practices that simulate a service, ANFASEP members state that “it is done in their name” and “you feel like they have come to your house that night.” In this way, “by doing this, we feel better,” they affirmⁱⁱⁱ. Therefore, I argue that the absence of the body, which is the symbolic anchor of the process of mourning, triggers a series of alternative techniques (Mauss 1973), what I call the *No-body* techniques, whose purpose is to allow individuals to navigate the liminality of absence. Marcell Mauss (1973) introduces the idea that the body is not merely a biological object but also a cultural vehicle shaped by socially learned practices, what he calls techniques. Therefore, the *No-body* techniques attempt to simulate the mourning process without necessarily constituting it amidst the absence of the body and rely on other symbolic markers that enable the relatives of the disappeared to navigate the liminality. This paper argues how techniques associated with the *No-body* facilitate understanding the impossibility of the ritual process of mourning and help cope with the uncertainty of separation. This includes expectations of truth and justice, the act of searching itself, and the relationships built among the victims' families.

Working with members of ANFASEP serves as a case study in such a way that the article develops an approach from the cultural to social processes that have been explored only in their psychological and emotional dimensions (Al-Adeeb 2016, Barrios 2015, Basharat et al. 2014, Boss 2001, Freud 2002). Consequently, the article analyses the *No-body* techniques implemented by ANFASEP members from an ethnographic perspective. I seek to demonstrate that these

techniques are characterised by notions of collectivity and a sense of belonging to the organisation, as well as by the actions and discourses of the members themselves as individual political subjects from the margins of State recognition.

The analysis presented here is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Ayacucho between 2016 and 2019. During this period, I carried out semi-structured interviews with members of ANFASEP—mostly women, many of them widows or mothers of the disappeared—together with a smaller number of male relatives and local leaders. I also engaged in participant observation during public marches, commemorative rituals, vigils, and private ceremonies, as well as in weekly meetings at ANFASEP's headquarters. These encounters allowed me to follow how absence is experienced both in intimate family settings and in collective organisational spaces. Given the sensitivity of the topic and the risk of re-exposure to trauma, I have anonymised the names of interviewees, except for public figures who hold leadership positions in the organisation. Access to certain judicial or forensic processes was limited, and this inevitably shaped the scope of the ethnography. Rather than constituting a comprehensive account, the article reflects a situated interpretation of the ways in which ANFASEP members cope with disappearance and absence.

The text is structured in such a way that it provides a brief overview of the post-conflict memory studies about Ayacucho. I then analyse the rupture in the ritual process of mourning introduced by the uncertainty of disappearance. Subsequently, I develop an ethnographic description of the profile of ANFASEP members from the perspective of citizen action. Finally, the paper focuses on the *No-body techniques*: on the one hand, the collective or public ones, and on the other, the individual or private ones. The article argues that family members process the disappearance of their loved ones through the relationship between the individual and the collective, through action imbued with meaning that constructs citizens and, consequently, political bodies that challenge the State, expanding the margins of citizenship and recognition by making claims from positions historically excluded from the political community, and refusing to be discarded.

2. Ayacucho as a space of memory and the emergence of *No-body techniques*

The provinces of Ayacucho, Huanta, La Mar, Vilcashuamán, and Cangallo were, according to the Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación (CVR 2003a: 98–104), the areas where the Partido Comunista del Perú–Sendero Luminoso (PCP-SL) initiated its armed struggle in 1980, employing an aggressive penetration strategy that extended until at least 1982. From 1983 onwards, these provinces were among the first to be militarised in response to subversive violence, marking the most critical years of the conflict in terms of deaths and human rights violations. In this context, ANFASEP was founded on 2 September 1983, during a nearly clandestine meeting at the Provincial Municipality of Huamanga (Soto 2015: 27–28). The organisation emerged from the initiative of women—many accompanied by children—who had migrated from rural regions to Huamanga and sought to create a support network in the face of systematic violations.

The CVR later identified 22,507 individuals killed or disappeared during the twenty years of conflict, along with 4,644 clandestine burial sites nationwide. By 2002, the Defensoría del Pueblo had recorded 6,303 cases of missing persons; a decade later, the Instituto de Medicina Legal reported 16,731. By 2023, the Dirección General de Búsqueda de Personas Desaparecidas

registered 22,295 missing Peruvians. The magnitude of this problem has given disappearance renewed public and political relevance, particularly following the humanitarian Law on the Search for Missing Persons (2016), which institutionalised a national search policy.

Ayacucho has long been a focal point of academic production on the conflict. Over the past two decades, scholarship has addressed the impact of the CVR on local social fabrics, the political action of victims' organisations, and memory strategies within communities (Milton and Ulfe 2011; Degregori 2011; Del Pino and Yerzer 2013; Huber and Del Pino 2015; Degregori et al. 2015; Crisóstomo 2018, among others). These studies situate Ayacucho not only as the epicentre of violence but also as a symbolic landscape of memory in Peru. As Gamarra (2002) notes, despite the official end of the conflict in 2000, violence and its consequences have not fully ceased in the region, where communities continue to grapple with its legacies.

It is against this backdrop that disappearance emerges as an academic and political phenomenon. While truth commissions, as Hayner (2008: 33) observes, often stumble upon uncomfortable truths, silences, and contested realities, their work also expands the terrain of both state action and academic knowledge. In Peru, the CVR established Ayacucho as a privileged site through which to confront and understand the violence, and, crucially, to address the uncertainty of disappearance. Scholars such as Córdor and Pereyra (2014) have further shown how longstanding disputes—land conflicts, private rivalries—were exacerbated during the war, producing selective killings and disappearances that blurred boundaries between political and personal violence.

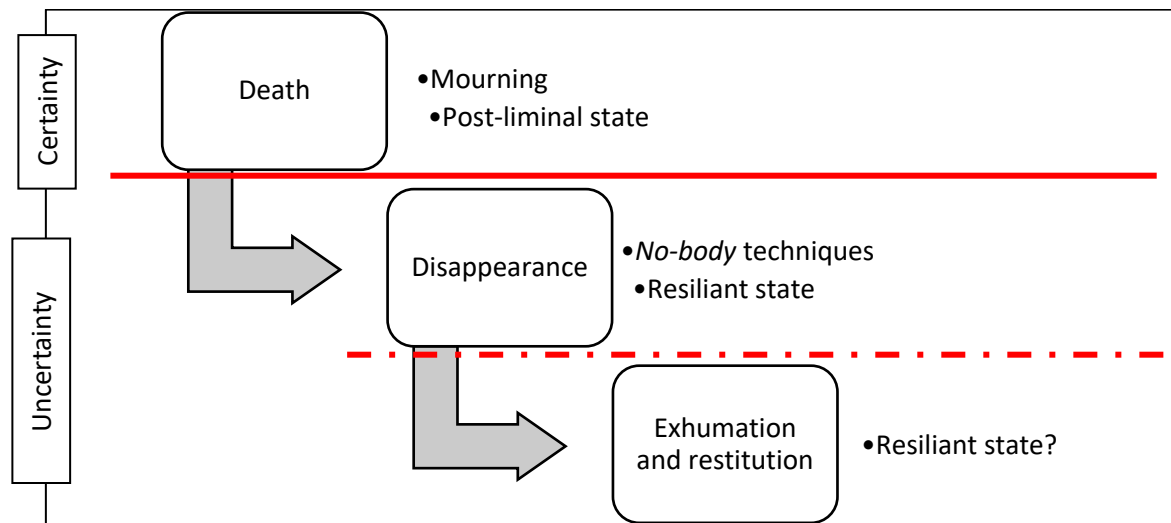
This historical and scholarly context is essential for situating the argument of this paper. For if Ayacucho became the paradigmatic space of memory in Peru, it also became the terrain in which relatives of the disappeared were compelled to invent new ways of living with absence. As Theidon (2009) observes, thinking about violence and death in the Andes often risks falling into ethnocentric explanations that portray local practices as archaic or exotic. Against such readings, I propose to foreground the creative and situated responses developed by relatives of the disappeared in Ayacucho—responses that not only make sense of profound uncertainty but also constitute a form of political action.

Mourning and what I term *No-body techniques* can be understood as two sides of the same coin: parallel yet distinct ways of processing absence. Mourning, in conventional terms, is the ritual process through which grief is mediated by the presence of the corpse, enabling the reconstruction of social bonds and the transition between life and death (Davies 2002; García 1996; González 2015; Malinowski 1982). In the Peruvian Andes, such rituals rely on the body as the symbolic anchor for expressing and healing emotions of emptiness, anger, and pain. Clothing, food, drink, and footwear at the wake are part of the preparation of the soul for its transition (Millones 2010: 131).

Forced disappearance, however, interrupts this process by eliminating the corpse as the necessary medium. The body is physically discarded, and with it the social body remains fractured. Relatives are dragged into an enduring liminal state marked by doubt, pain, and the impossibility of ritual closure. To confront this disruption, they develop alternative practices—what I call *No-body techniques*. These are strategies of (re)invention and ritualisation that do

not replace the body but simulate its symbolic functions, enabling families to repair broken ties and live with uncertainty.

Diagram 1: Spheres in which mourning and *No-body techniques* operate^{iv}



The concept of the *No-body* is situated within a longer anthropological tradition that distinguishes between the *person* and the *subject* (Mauss 1973). It refers to a process whereby the material absence of the body does not entail the erasure of the person but rather triggers new social and political responses. Drawing on phenomenological and sociological approaches (Merleau-Ponty 2003; Bourdieu 2002), I understand the body as a site of experience, inscription, and meaning-making. Disappearance disrupts embodied perception and social codes of mourning, creating a space of extended liminality. It is within this liminal space that the relatives' practices—dreams, offerings, public rituals, marches—acquire significance as *No-body techniques*.

Importantly, these techniques are not neutral. They are embedded in gendered, ethnic, and classed contexts, shaped by indigenous women's positions vis-à-vis state and society. They also carry political weight: they sustain agency, articulate claims for truth and justice, and reconfigure citizenship at the margins of state recognition. In this sense, the prolonged absence of the corpse is not only a private wound but also the foundation of collective political identities. Even when bodies are eventually recovered and buried, the subjectivities forged through disappearance persist, sustaining memory and the demand for recognition.

As noted by the International Committee of the Red Cross (2014), living with disappearance produces responses that range from silence and forgetting to insistent demands for memory and truth. Psychological perspectives (Boss 2001; Freud 2002) have often interpreted this condition as "ambiguous loss", but an ethnographic focus reveals how relatives actively generate meaning through embodied practices.

This broader framework allows us to understand the practices developed by members of ANFASEP not merely as cultural responses to death, but as situated strategies to navigate the impossibility of mourning and to transform absence into political presence. In what follows, I turn to the ethnographic material itself, examining how these relatives reconfigure mourning

through specific *No-body techniques*. I begin with collective forms of response, before moving on to individual practices such as the ofrenda and dreams, which illuminate how absence is inhabited in everyday life.

3. The collective *No-body techniques*

Before entering the ethnographic detail, it is important to clarify the purpose of this section within the broader argument. If the previous discussion situated Ayacucho as a space of memory and explained the wider political and phenomenological framework of disappearance, this section focuses on the practices through which absence is collectively addressed and transformed. It shows how ANFASEP, as an organisation, mediates individual loss, turning it into shared techniques that produce belonging, memory, and political agency. In other words, here I explore how the collective dimension of the *No-body* becomes a space of learning, ritualisation, and citizenship.

The collective *No-body techniques* are characterised by their deployment in public spaces, framed by the shared experiences and knowledge within and from the organisation ANFASEP. These techniques include marches, public vigils, the construction of memorials, and the holding of communal rituals where relatives of the disappeared gather to perform symbolic acts that honour their loved ones. These practices are not merely personal acts of mourning; they are collective forms of resistance and memory, carried out as a group to give voice to individual losses. Their effectiveness in emulating mourning is possible only when these actions are performed collectively, reinforcing a sense of shared experience and struggle.

The actions and experiences of the Victim-Subjects are embedded in the organisation's learning processes, its socialisation, and what I propose to understand as the domestication of disappearance: the way in which the reality of the *No-body* is learned, internalised, and made meaningful. This process does not signify normalisation, but rather the creation of spaces where absence is publicly acknowledged and endowed with meaning—at once a personal wound and part of a collective experience of violence and injustice. In this sense, ANFASEP mediates between the intimate and the political, producing a shared identity marked by both pain and agency. As Ana María Tamayo (2003) has argued, ANFASEP is at once a space of painful memory and marginality and a site of denunciation, mutual support, and political empowerment. Through its activities, members confront their history, learn to narrate it, and transform their individual searches into a collective demand.

The process of domestication is therefore transversal, running through the entire range of collective practices. It is visible in the way the organisation gathers individual cases and transforms them into a unified demand directed at the State; in the way experiences and memories are transmitted to new generations (Jave, Cépeda, and Uchuypoma 2014); and in the way discourses and strategies of citizenship are developed at the margins of state recognition. The violent experience becomes the core around which members constitute themselves as Victim-Subjects, exercising citizenship through action and testimony even before, or beyond, formal recognition.

Public rituals are the most visible expression of this domestication. Pilgrimages to cemeteries or clandestine graves, vigils, marches, and symbolic interventions in urban spaces emulate the ritual functions of mourning, reconfigured in the absence of the body. These performative acts mark the absence of the disappeared, while at the same time transforming the space and those who participate in it. Pilgrimages and visits to mass burial sites, for example, simulate the acts of visitation proper to conventional mourning, but do so in a way that makes absence palpable and politically charged.

Such rituals both acknowledge absence and challenge the State. They highlight the reality of violence, using the tools of mourning to create new meanings in the *No-body* realm. Following Diana Taylor (2000), these public actions are transformative: they confront onlookers, transgress established orders, and assign new roles to participants. In Ayacucho, the re-signification of La Hoyada is emblematic: from a site of mass clandestine burial, it was transformed into a sanctuary of memory through acts such as the installation of a large white cross inscribed with the words *No matarás*. As Marc Augé (1993) reminds us, space becomes place when it is infused with meaning; in this case, the cross signifies both the presence of the absent and the persistence of their relatives, anchoring memory in territory.

Symbols such as the cross and collective singing, carried through decades of marches, demonstrations, and public events, have become emblems of ANFASEP's struggle. They condense the work of domestication into portable signs: the cross, displayed permanently at the entrance to ANFASEP and mobilised in every public action, and the chants of sorrow that give voice to absence, both mark the enduring presence of those who are gone. These symbols, and the rituals in which they are enacted, exemplify how collective *No-body techniques* domesticate disappearance—by transforming absence into shared memory, political presence, and an ongoing exercise of rights from the margins of the State.

4. The individual *No-body techniques*

While collective practices make absence visible in the public sphere, individual techniques reveal how relatives sustain the relationship with their disappeared loved ones in the intimacy of everyday life. This section therefore complements the previous one by focusing on the personal responses that precede, coexist with, and sometimes feed into collective action. I pay particular attention to two techniques—the *Ofrenda* and dreams—not only because of their recurrence in the ethnographic record, but also because of their symbolic force in reconfiguring disappearance. These examples illuminate how absence is experienced at the most personal level, while at the same time generating forms of knowledge and presence that can later be articulated collectively.

Individual *No-body techniques* are not disconnected from collective ones; rather, they are the other side of the same coin, part of a unified experience in the face of the uncertainty of the *No-body*. These practices include private vigils, personal altars, offerings at sites of disappearance, and even intimate forms of communication such as letters or spoken dialogue with the absent. Often, these are the first responses that relatives put into practice, before their transition into Victim-Subjects within the collective. In ANFASEP, for example, relatives have visited remote places where disappearances occurred and left flowers, photographs, or other symbolic objects,

creating a fragile but meaningful link with their absent loved ones. These actions, while intimate, are not mere gestures of mourning: they are active responses to violent rupture, attempts at continuity and presence in the face of absence.

What distinguishes these techniques is their deeply personal character. They manifest the relationship between family members and the disappeared across the boundaries of life and death, creating bonds of connection between two separate realms. Even without the physical body, emotional and spiritual ties endure, and communion with the dead continues. In this sense, individual techniques do not stand in isolation but provide the foundation upon which collective practices can be activated: memories and experiences forged in solitude are later shared, articulated, and formalised in collective spaces.

Among the diverse repertoire of individual responses, two practices stand out for their symbolic force and recurrence across testimonies: the ritual of the *Ofrenda* and the role of dreams. Both condense in particularly vivid ways the possibility of interacting with the disappeared in the absence of a body, and both reveal how the living construct knowledge and certainty in the realm of the *No-body*.

The *Ofrenda*, performed every 1 November in coincidence with the *Día de los Muertos*, transforms domestic spaces into sites of communion. Families set up small altars with photographs, candles, flowers, drinks, food, and objects belonging to the disappeared. They spend the night accompanying the altar, remembering, conversing, eating, and drinking in the presence of the absent. In this intimate setting, the dead and the living converge, the gap created by disappearance temporarily bridged. Catholic and Andean notions of mourning intertwine: the altar becomes a site of visitation where the deceased return to their homes, not to mark their departure but to celebrate their arrival. Objects embody presence and allow, for one night, the disruption of the *No-body* space. In Turner's (1988) sense, the *Ofrenda* constructs a *communitas* that collapses social structures, bringing the living and the dead together in a communion of food, drink, tears, and laughter.

This practice is not unique to ANFASEP but resonates with broader Andean traditions of living with the dead. Rojas-Pérez (2017), for instance, describes the *mesada* in Accomarca, where relatives and neighbours share food and drink with the deceased, their souls signalled by the presence of the "flies of the dead." Such rituals reclaim the dead from the necropolitics (Mbembe 2011) of state and insurgent violence, asserting the right to mourn and to reconnect. While collective political action seeks recognition in public, the *Ofrenda* embodies an intimate, household-level response that reclaims presence from within the space of absence.

This process makes it possible to restore the broken ties with the deceased; representations of the body thus constitute alternative forms of communion with the dead. In this sense, the objects that once belonged to the disappeared embody their presence and, with it, their capacity to continue interacting in the world of the living. In this way, the experience of the *malamuerte* can be redirected insofar as the possibility of communion with the dead endures. As the women members of the organisation explain, the *Ofrenda* "is done in their name" and, in this way, "you feel that they have come to your house that night." In doing so, "we feel better."^v

Yet communion with the disappeared is not restricted to ritual tables. Fatigue during the *Ofrenda* often carries participants into dreams, extending the encounter into another dimension. As one member of the organisation explained, in dreams “her soul truly returns,”^{vi} underscoring the sense of presence and certainty that emerges from these nocturnal encounters. Dreams, far from being dismissed as mere illusions, are understood in the Andes as channels of communication and sources of truth: “In my dreams, I could hear [my son] calling me”, one of the members told me^{vii}. They reveal knowledge about the disappeared: their location, the circumstances of their death, the identities of perpetrators, or their condition after a *malamuerte*: “We even looked for him where he told us in our dreams he was,” one of the interviewees remarked^{viii}. In this way, dreams disrupt the Western division between reality and the dreamlike, unfolding instead as deeply individual but authoritative experiences that generate certainty.

On several moments in the organisation’s premises, I could hear the younger members, those who share their feelings in Spanish more frequently, sharing their dreams before their meetings — not only the most recent ones, but also others they seemed to hold in their memory with affection. In Andean contexts, as Mannheim (2015) notes, dreams propose knowledge rooted in the life of the dreamer, while Andrade (2005) shows how Quechua and Andean Spanish narrative forms allow certainties derived from dreams to be expressed as lived truths. For the women of ANFASEP, dreams have become not only private experiences but also testimonies that circulate, challenging uncertainty and reconstructing community.

As Sanford (2005) argues, the articulation of violent experiences into narratives transforms suffering into discourses of power. Dreams, when recounted, serve this purpose: they regenerate agency, mobilise justice claims, and re-anchor life amid disappearance. Although particularly vivid during the *Ofrenda*, dreams have been present since the earliest moments of disappearance, even before collective frameworks of domestication. They are often the first bridge of continuity, occurring now of abduction, before acceptance of death is possible. As such, they represent one of the most enduring and powerful individual techniques of the *No-body* space: a mode of interaction that neither disappearance nor silence can erase: “Several of us have dreamt of our relatives, and they have told us where their remains were so that we could go and recover them,” another ANFASEP member shared with me^{ix}.

These accounts, recurrent across interviews, illustrate how dreaming operates as both a personal and collective way of knowing within ANFASEP’s ongoing struggle to live with absence. Taken together, individual techniques like the *Ofrenda* and dreams demonstrate how Victim-Subjects sustain ties with the disappeared in deeply personal ways that complement—but do not depend on—the collective. By enabling communion, transmitting knowledge, and producing certainty, these practices ensure that absence is not finality but an ongoing relationship, one that sustains life in the shadow of disappearance.

5. To conclude

The *No-body techniques* not only help relatives cope with uncertainty and the impossibility of mourning; they also constitute practices through which political agency is forged. As Crisóstomo (2018) has argued in her analysis of women’s activism in contexts of violence, female relatives

often transform private pain into public demands, reconfiguring gendered expectations about mourning and political participation. Similarly, Jave (2019) shows how collective action in Ayacucho is shaped by both memory work and the everyday reproduction of community ties. In this sense, ANFASEP members mobilise their condition as bereaved relatives to legitimise their presence in the public sphere and to contest their exclusion from the political community.

No-body techniques are thus more than symbolic responses to absence: they enable the constitution of Victim-Subjects as political actors who reframe mourning as citizenship. The private acts of offering and dreaming, when articulated collectively, become resources for sustaining organisational life, negotiating with state institutions, and demanding justice. Through these practices, uncertainty itself is politicised, producing new repertoires of action and expanding the conditions under which agency is recognised and exercised in post-conflict Peru.

ANFASEP members transcend the violent experiences they have endured by becoming Subject-Victims. That is, they move beyond the passivity and sterility often associated with the term "victim", as critiqued by Rebecca Root (2012: 129–157). The case of ANFASEP reveals a complex process of self-recognition that begins with vulnerability and results in the emergence of political subjectivities. In Mbembe's (2011) terms, necropolitics refers to the sovereign power to decide who may live and who must die, a logic that in Peru's internal conflict was exercised through both insurgent terror and state repression. In Ayacucho, this politics of death extended beyond physical killing: it silenced, displaced, and erased those whose lives were deemed disposable. Against this, the women of ANFASEP have reconfigured mourning as an act of resistance.

Disappearance seeps into the bodies of family members, penetrating and reconstituting them through a transformative process that challenges and reshapes their own self-understanding. The No-body becomes a political space; ANFASEP members become political bodies. Through their very presence, they confront the state and generate meaning amidst uncertainty, turning intimate practices such as the *Ofrenda* and dreams into acts of persistence and collective re-existence. It is precisely from this uncertainty that ANFASEP has built its political agency. The path from seeking subject to Subject-Victim is fraught with difficulties, shaped by the absence of certainty. Yet, it is also a path of learning, wherein individuals develop agency both individually and collectively. In doing so, they become citizens—not in the sense of recognised legal subjects, but as agents who demand and practise rights even in spaces where those rights are denied or obscured. If disappearance attempts to negate the existence of subjects, ANFASEP members have demonstrated—through their struggle—that they refuse to be discarded. Their resistance to state-sanctioned terror gives rise to a form of citizenship that emerges from the margins, from the grey zones in which disappearance operates.

From these marginal spaces, ANFASEP members—each in their own way—have come to learn the logics of the state, appropriated its language, revealed its limitations, and proposed new ways of being Peruvian. The violent experience—forced disappearance in particular—pushed women to occupy spaces that had traditionally been denied to them and, in doing so, to transform rural Andean society. This process of constructing citizenship from the margins, as Das and Poole (2008) propose, is not simply a confrontation with the state. Subject-Victims do not oppose the state *per se*; rather, they demand its presence and accountability, as Ulf and

Málaga (2015) note in their analysis of the shift from petitioners to victims. Subject-Victims push for a more inclusive state, one capable of recognising the disappeared and those who seek them.

While the liminal space created by forced disappearance may never be fully resolved, the response techniques developed by ANFASEP members help to contain the emotional and social fractures produced by such violence. The voices that speak from this space are diverse, and Subject-Victims are not homogenous in their experiences or practices. However, what the perpetrators of disappearance could not anticipate has indeed taken place: despite the severing of physical ties, life has continued. The disappeared have not ceased to be present in the lives of their families; in fact, their memory and their symbolic presence have only grown in strength.

In essence, Subject-Victims process the absence of their loved ones not solely through personal mourning but also by engaging in collective acts of memory and mobilisation. These practices contribute to the construction of political identities that challenge the State and reconfigure the terms of citizenship. Far from being erased, the Victim-Subjects of ANFASEP have transformed their pain into political agency, expanding the boundaries of belonging and ensuring that neither they nor their disappeared are consigned to oblivion.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Own translations

^{iv} Axes represent the shifting spectrum between certainty and uncertainty as experienced by relatives. The diagram should not be read as a fixed or linear opposition between certainty and uncertainty. Rather, it illustrates the fluid and contingent ways in which relatives of the disappeared navigate between both poles through ritual practices and organisational learning.

^v Own translations

^{vi} Own translation

^{vii} Own translation

^{viii} Own translation

^{ix} Own translation