

Among the Ashes: Stories of Life in Times of Death

Grassroots Journalists Network

Among the Ashes is a collective book and multimedia project that gathers the stories of resistance, solidarity and hope of everyday men and women who have suffered from the violence unleashed during the war against drug trafficking, who overcame paralyzing fear to organize with others against death and for life.

The protagonists of this book are mother-detectives searching for their forcibly disappeared children; the network of soul-healers and massacre survivors; the victims who took to the streets and forced the President to see them; the indigenous community that stood against drug-gang illegal loggers; the religious and non-religious community members looking out for migrants on their journey north; the journalists who devised strategies to protect themselves; the parents who honor the memories of their murdered children; the indigenous people teaching us a new form of justice; the twitter users and bloggers who save lives and name victims; and the collectives snatching gang youth from the drug cartels.

The book is a project of the Grassroots Journalists Network (www.periodistasdeapie.org.mx), coordinated by Marcela Turati and Daniela Rea. It consists of ten chapters and ten videos that tell the stories of resistance and solidarity, showing the victim's capacity for rebirth, community organizing, and seeking a different future. This book tries to contribute to the construction of peace, propose ideas to recuperate the country, and transcend the paralyzing horror since the narcoviolence has been documented.

In the first chapter, "The community that spooked fear," Thelma Gómez Durán travels to Cherán where inhabitants, sitting around night fires, took up their old forms of organization to confront the illegal loggers protected by organized crime who devoured their forests, dried up their springs, murdered and disappeared several wilderness defenders.

In the second chapter, "Life on death's route," Alberto Nájar takes a panoramic view of the route taken by Central American migrants on their way across Mexico, focusing in on the small oases of solidarity with the migrants. On his first stop he narrates the daily feats of the Las Patronas (roughly, the patronesses) who alleviate with water and food the journeys of the Central Americans. From there he takes us north to another stop in Coahuila where Father Pedro Pantoja built a shelter to protect the migrants from the Zetas.

"The voices of the war," are heard in the third chapter, written by Daniela Pastrana, who chronicled from its beginning the Peace Movement led by poet Javier Sicilia. During the long marches, she witnessed how victims came

together to show the horror the war declared by President Felipe Calderón, and restore dignity to the names of those no longer with us.

Marcela Turati takes us "On the trail of the disappeared," alongside the mothers, wives, and daughters of those whom one day, in any corner of the country, were torn from their homes. In her story, she shows us how these women in a nearly intuitive way fought against the mechanisms of impunity and turned themselves into detectives to bring their loved ones home.

In the fifth chapter, "Ink against silence," John Gibler accompanies on their beats the reporters and photographers who, threatened by organized crime, unprotected by the government and their own media companies, try to work collectively to evade being silenced. Their objective: stay alive and continue to report.

Vanessa Job, in "Cybernetic resistance," takes up the citizen efforts, some individual, others collective, that from the social networks arose to show that people had not surrendered. Youth who in the north used Twitter to inform on safe travel routes, others who throughout the nation have unmasked official lies, have recused the dead from anonymity and done so as a form of collective mourning.

Lydiette Carrión visits the "Barrio under siege" and tells how, in the State's absence, civil organizations struggle in the streets in an attempt to snatch the gang youth from the organized crime groups that use them as manpower. Their efforts include employment capacity building and art and music workshops.

Violent Ciudad Juárez, in Luis Guillermo Hernández's pen, becomes "The city of the soul healers," where everyday women and war victims found in alternative therapies, art, and solidarity the method for helping victims stand and retake the reins of their lives.

A journey through Guerrero's Montaña region allows us to rediscover the Community Police, who for nearly twenty years surpassed the government and implemented their own security and justice systems to protect themselves from criminals. In "Justice for all," Daniela Rea shows how now, in full adulthood, they face new challenges: staving off organized crime's incursion and keeping their communities united to avoid the justice network's breaking apart.

"They tore your name from us," the last chapter's clamor, written by Elia Baltazar and Luis Guillermo Hernández, who take up two stories: that of the father in Morelos who fought to claim his murdered son's name, and that of the parents and teachers in Ciudad Juárez brutalized by a massacre started a sports project as a play in favor of life.

The book may be read for free on the Web site

www.periodistasdeapie.org.mx/libros/ where the videos that accompany each story are posted. The videos were filmed and produced by: Jorge Serratos, Erik Riverón, Prometeo Lucero, Celia Guerrero, Pepe Jiménez, German Canseco, Moisés Robles, Mónica González Islas, Pablo Pérez, Michell García y Alicia Fernández.

Note From the Editors

In the beginning: the horror. The so-called war on organized crime declared by President Felipe Calderón choked us from the start of his six-year term. Newspapers were filled with body counts and we journalists became war correspondents in our own country. In the news rooms people spoke of "narcos" and "capos" and the stylized language of murder arrived to stay: "los enlonados", (dead bodies wrapped in tarp), "los entripados", (the disemboweled), "los encajuelados", (dead bodies stuffed in the trucks of cars) "los encobijados", (dead bodies wrapped in blankets) "los disueltos", (dead bodies dissolved in acid) "las narcofosas", (mass graves related to the drug war) "las narcomantas", (both hand-written and professionally printed banners hung in public places with pronouncements signed by organized crime groups) and this language's crowning achievement, "el ejecutómetro" (the execute-o-meter) .

Horror became the country's ailment. The dead, the disappeared, massacres, orphans, widows, the displaced, mass graves, people disabled by wounds, people stunned by hate, broken and abandoned cities. This became our starting point, a presidential term with license to kill, where the daily dead were guilty of their own deaths.

From this strange, nebulous battle field, many journalists felt the challenge to escape the horror, or at least not become paralyzed by it. To fight, with investigation, facts, analysis, and testimonies, against the official anonymity of the victims. To gather the stories of the family members, survivors, and witnesses that described a different reality from that narrated by the war-makers in their banners and press releases. We felt the urgency to shout that behind very news story of murder there remained silenced and wounded victims that needed solidarity, that needed to be addressed, and heard.

When we shook off the initial shock, many of us wrote articles or participated in books where we documented the social impacts of the violence. During conferences and book presentations pain was everywhere. But in the audiences a question always rose up: what can we do? This question was everywhere.

We journalists asked each other if we could write about the violence without contributing to paralysis, without rendering people hopeless. What are the stories of life hidden amongst all the death, which stories most need to be

told? Amongst these doubts, a path towards an answer opened: those that encourage, those that give courage.

It was true.

This book is born of the effort to practice or perhaps to build a journalism of hope, an exploration of the possible, of building peace. An investigative journalism that provokes indignation and invites action. A journalism that finds and tells the stories of people who, controlling their fear, sketch a response to the question that haunts us: what can we do?

The book is an collective effort of journalists enraged by the loss of respect for human life during what has become known as the presidential term of death: Thelma Gómez, Alberto Nájjar, Daniela Pastrana, John Gibler, Vanessa Job, Lydiette Carrión, Luis Guillermo Hernández, Elia Baltazar and the editors. It was made possible by funding from the Norwegian Union of Journalists, especially Eva Stabell, who believed from the beginning in the Grassroots Journalism Network's project.

We took as our starting point the belief that this war should not be covered only for the blood and brutality, from the senseless perspective of the killers, uniformed and not uninformed. It should be covered from the dignity of the survivors, from love's invisible seams holding steady amongst the ruins, from the perspective of the soul-healers, those who made themselves heard upon taking to the streets to shout their truth in public, those who organized with the need to do something.

This effort required us to stand before the horror, but at a different angle in order to find the buried embers that refuse to go out, to learn to scratch through the destruction to find this country's moral reserve that stood against the war, to lend an ear to the stories of those who shook off the ashes, retook the reins of their lives and collectively proposed a different future. It required that we stand close by these people to find: what are they made of, these women who march across the country looking for the children torn from them, or the women who daily feed unknown migrants? Why would a father, without taking the time to mourn his murdered son, seek to clothe all those suffering as he is? How could a community nearly extinguished be able to disarm hopelessness?

The reporting process was not easy. We confronted our own idealisms and preconceptions, the rooted practice of seeing reality in black and white, good and bad, the simplicity of seeking solitary heroes instead of organized collectives, our impatience to discover "more newsworthy" results.

We learned that a journalism of hope demands understanding the processes and sketches of solutions that oppose violence are incipient efforts, held together by pins, acts of daily love, against the grain of the State's void.

At times, we did not find the experiences that we sought to document. We arrived too late. The terror had reached them. Nonetheless, we are convinced that every time an effort is stamped out another is planted.

We also understood that, who those of us who live in this country, the war forced us to be citizens, to take a position. We, as journalists, decided to position ourselves alongside those who suffer, trying to understand something about their strength amidst pain, and about what keeps them forging routes to peace, justice, memory, and truth.

Today we know: hope, more than a harbor, is a horizon. A long journey undertaken with small steps.

Now when we speak in public about the horror we have seen and the pain that we have touched, and people ask us what we can do, we say that the answer is built in community, around the warmth of a fire. And we begin to speak of the roads taken alongside the protagonists of this book, hoping that their stories serve to construct a few answers.

Marcela Turati y Daniela Rea