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Violencia a flor de Piel - Mental Health as a Landscape of Violence

Abstract

This essay is based on a photovoice project conducted in Guatemala City from January to May 2013 with seven Ladina women living in the most dangerous urban settlement of Guatemala City. This project is part of a larger ethnography that studies the mental health systems of care in a context of acute gender violence. In fact, the Guatemalan government has yet to ratify a mental health policy, or to develop mental health jurisdiction to protect the rights of individuals diagnosed with a mental illness. In this context, women living in urban spaces suffer disproportionately from diagnosis of mental illness and incidences and gender violence and are routinely doubly discriminated: for being women and for expressing a mental health need. Thus, the photographs taken by Sara, Maria, Estela, and Ana provide the visual evidence to understand the socializing forces of violence and trauma on mental health in a country where there is no public investment in such field. This photo essay of Ladinas' everyday illustrates how a lack of policy enables feminicidal practices and thus, makes mental health a landscape of violence. The images captured by these seven Ladinas further illustrate how resisting the everydayness of gender violence is an exercise of a gendered citizenship that accounts for an expression of mental health in this particular context. Through a process of reflection and dialogue with Sara, Maria, Estela, and Ana, this paper provides a powerful in-sight into defining and conceptualizing mental health from the Guatemalan everyday experience.

Keywords

mental health, violence, violencia, guatemala, feminicide

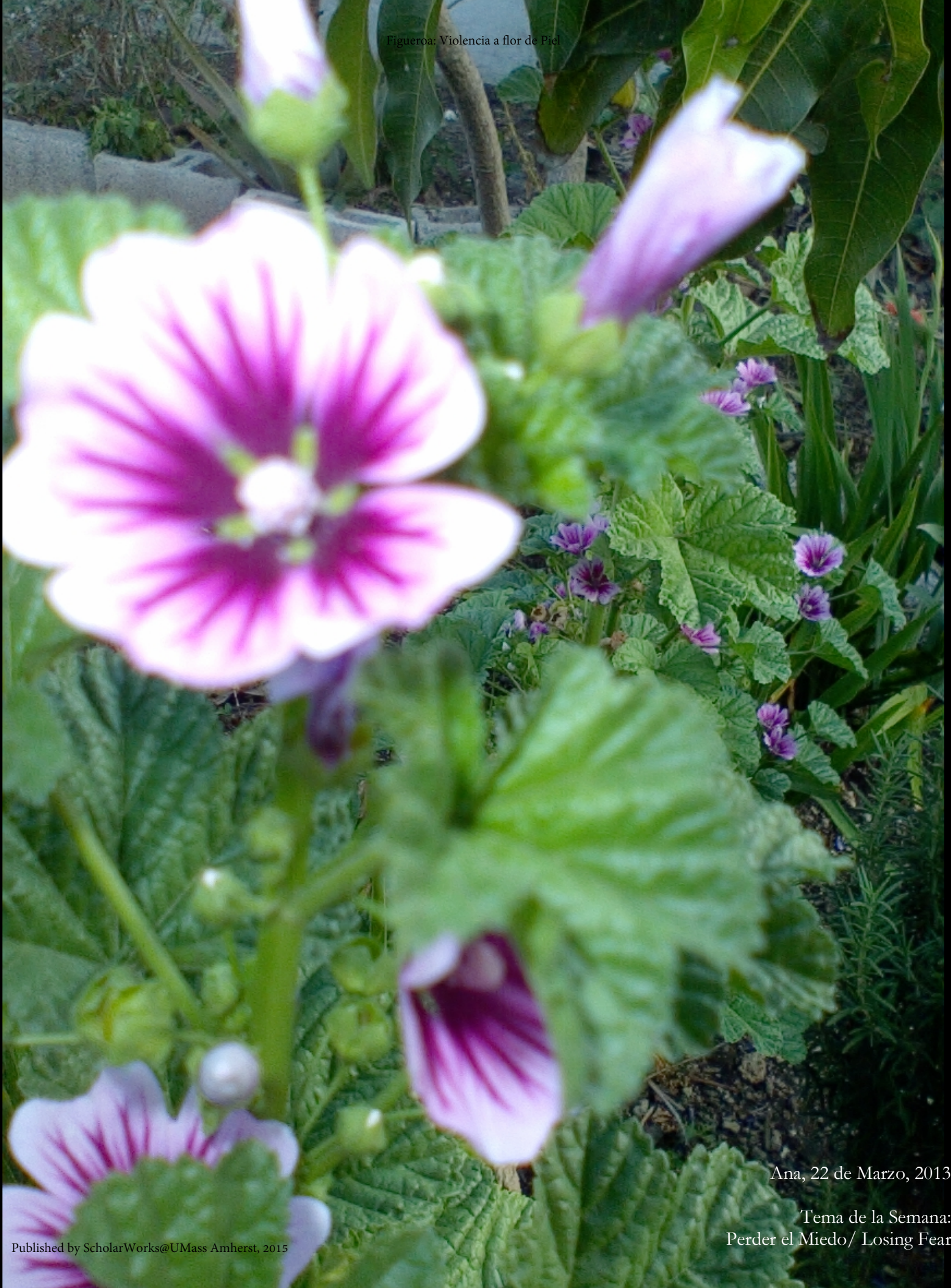
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Author Biography

Chantal Figueroa is a Ph.D. in Comparative and International Development Education from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Her research looks at the ways in which the lack of mental health policy in Guatemala enables systemic violence. In particular, how the mental health system of care further disenfranchises Ladina women and reproduces feminicidal practices. Figueroa is a Compton Fellow in the Interdisciplinary Center for the Study of Global Change (ICGC) at the University of Minnesota and has received the support of the Rigoberta Menchú Tum foundation, Club Queztal and the Centro de Estudios Mexicanos y Centro-Americanos (CEMCA) to conduct and present her work on mental health, violence and, policy.



Ana, 22 de Marzo, 2013

Tema de la Semana:
Perder el Miedo/ Losing Fear



Sara, 8 de Marzo, 2013.
Tema de la Semana:
Mi Familia/ My family

This photo-essay is based on the pictures taken by Ana, Sara, Maria and Estela, four of the seven participants of a photovoice project conducted in Guatemala City from January to May 2013. I argue that these pictures illustrate the ways in which the everyday experience of gender violence impacts mental health and call for mental health to be considered a landscape of violence in this context.

Eight years prior to this project Ana's daughter was raped and killed, and her murder was not investigated. The concept of femicide refers to structures of power that fail to protect the rights of women by action, omission or toleration (Sanford 2008), such as in the case of Ana's daughter. When I asked her if she wanted to know who had committed the crime, Ana replied, "*ni he querido saber, para que,*" "*Nor I wanted to know, what for?*" (personal communication, March 15, 2013). This reply speaks of Ana's resilience of knowing that finding the perpetrator could not bring her daughter back. It speaks of her power, as she is the sole actor behind the verb "nor I wanted." It also highlights the perversity of femicide and its impact on mental health. Ana's reply is in the present perfect indicative, a verb tense used to describe an action that happened in the past and repeats itself into the present. For Martín-Baró (1989, 1994) the every day experience of violence forces individuals into a "permanent psychological present" of trauma. "Nor I wanted" expresses Ana's psychological present that marks her everyday since the femicide of her daughter. The pictures from the photovoice project further illustrate Ana's story.



The purpose of photovoice as a methodology is to capture the everyday in images to use them as evidence for an unnoticed problem from a silenced perspective. Each week I got together with participants to discuss their definition of mental health, to analyze the pictures that were taken, share the process photographing their everyday and decide the theme that would inspire the images for the upcoming week. Five themes were decided on by participants during this 7 weeklong project: my family, what I bring to my community, losing fear, my daily life, my faith and religion.

From each of the themes identified by participants, different images of flowers were taken, because as Ana, Sara and Maria explained, flowers brought them beauty and color and would cheer them throughout their day. Although little attention was given to these pictures, as they were identified as only pretty images, I would like to analyze them further because the way in which these flowers were captured illustrates how mental health is a landscape of violence.

These pictures are very close zooms of the flowers, so much so that most frames are blurry, and one cannot distinguish anything around the target. It seems that these flowers are presented in a vacuum, as if these images could have been taken anywhere, but that is not the case. The seven participants of this project live in the most violent urban settlement of Guatemala City; focusing on flowers blurs away everyday violence. However, the shots are taken almost in a claustrophobic manner, without taking one step back and without being able to have an overview of the landscape. Sara, Maria, Estela and Ana capture therefore the perversity of everyday life of women in Guatemala, where to have a panoramic view of life is a privilege they cannot afford. Mental health becomes a static resilience, the price to pay in the Guatemalan reality where violence forces women to survive instead of thrive.



Estela, 15 de Marzo, 2013

Tema de la Semana:
Mi granito de Arena/ How I contribute to my community

Figueroa: Violencia a flor de Piel



Estela, 8 de Marzo, 2013
Tema de la Semana: Mi Familia/ My Family



María, 25 de Febrero, 2013.
Tema de la semana:
Mi Vida/ My Life

Este ensayo fotográfico esta basado en las imágenes tomadas por Ana, Sara, María y Estela, cuatro de las siete participantes de un proyecto de fotovoz llevado en la ciudad de Guatemala, de enero a mayo del 2013. A través de estas fotografías argumento que en el contexto Guatemalteco, la experiencia diaria de la violencia de género tiene un impacto sobre la salud mental y por lo tanto la salud mental también debe considerarse como un espacio donde se produce dicha violencia.

Ocho años antes de empezar el proyecto, la hija de Ana fue violada y matada y su asesinato no fue investigado. El termino feminicidio se refiere a las estructuras de poder que fallan en proteger los derechos de la mujer por acción, omisión o tolerancia (Sanford 2008) como en el caso de la hija de Ana. Cuando le pregunte si quería saber quien cometió el crimen me respondió “ni he querido saber, ¿para qué?” (conversación personal, el 15 de Marzo del 2013). Esta respuesta expresa la resiliencia de Ana, que sabe que encontrando al culpable no se le devolverá a su hija. Esta respuesta habla del poder de Ana, ya que es ella la que lleva la acción de la oración “ni he querido,” pero también subraya la perversidad del feminicidio y su impacto sobre la salud mental ya que esta respuesta es dada en el pretérito perfecto, tiempo usado gramaticalmente para describir una acción en el pasado que se repite en el presente. Según Martín-Baró (1989) la experiencia de violencia cotidiana fuerza al individuo a vivir en un “presente psicológico permanente” causado por el trauma, que no deja avanzar al individuo. “Ni he querido,” expresa entonces el presente



psicológico de Ana que marca su día a día desde el feminicidio de su hija. A la historia de Ana, se le suman entonces las fotografías del proyecto de fotovoz. La metodología de fotovoz se utiliza para capturar imágenes de todos los días y usarlas para evidenciar un problema desapercibido, desde una perspectiva silenciada. Cada semana nos reunimos con las participantes para discutir lo que para ellas definía la salud mental, analizar las imágenes capturadas, compartir el proceso de tomar las fotografías y decidir el tema que inspiraría las imágenes que serían tomadas la semana siguiente. Cinco temas fueron identificados por las participantes en las siete semanas que duró el proyecto: mi familia, mi granito de arena (o cómo apporto a mi comunidad), perder el miedo, mi cotidianidad, mi fe y religión.

A partir de cada una de estas temáticas las participantes capturaron diferentes imágenes de flores, porque como lo explicaron Ana, Sara, Estela y María, las flores les traían belleza, color y les alegraba el día. Aunque estas fotografías pasaron desapercibidas en las reuniones como solamente bellas imágenes, quisiera analizarlas a profundidad ya que la forma en la cual fueron capturadas estas flores ilustra como la salud mental se vuelve un espacio donde se produce violencia.

De hecho, todas estas fotografías fueron tomadas muy de cerca, tanto, que las flores pierden su enfoque, parecen que estuvieran flotando, desprendidas de su entorno, como si provinieran de cualquier lugar, pero no es así. Las participantes de este proyecto viven en el asentamiento mas peligroso de la ciudad de Guatemala, estas

flores se vuelven retoños de alivio en la cotidianidad de estas mujeres. Sin embargo, las flores son capturadas como imágenes casi claustrofóbicas, sin tomar un solo paso atrás y poder ver el paisaje en su conjunto. Sara, María, Estela y Ana capturan así la perversidad del cotidiano de las mujeres en Guatemala, donde tener una visión panorámica de la vida es un privilegio que no se pueden permitir. La salud mental se vuelve resiliencia estática, el precio a pagar en la realidad Guatemalteca, donde se sobrevive llevando la violencia a flor de piel.

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