

## *Vidas descontadas* (Discounted Lives): Disappearance, Layer, or Palimpsest?

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In *Nightmare Remains* (Northwestern University Press 2024), philosopher Ege Selin Islekel studies the case of Newala Qesaba, a landfill in eastern Turkey that became a mass grave. The construction of condominiums transformed this place, an emblematic case that involves the destruction and reconstruction of sites of violence to shape collective memory. This history, in Islekel's account, evokes the horrors of Patio 29, within the General Cemetery of Santiago (Chile), that housed the anonymous graves of hundreds of disappeared persons. Here, the dictatorship implemented "Operation Television Removal," exhuming bodies only to make them disappear again, throwing them into the sea or mountainous terrain, turning the site into a "cemetery without the dead."

*Vidas descontadas* (La oveja roja 2025) is a collective project that delves into these layers of violence. The book's ethos can be described as an attempt to trace the circulation of the term "disappeared" in the contemporary world. To this end, the book draws on various observations about the process of accumulation of violence in the landscape in an echo of Islekel's analysis: "Layers, layers, layers, here the strata of different forms of modification of the territory accumulate as in a rubbish dump or an archaeological excavation." We read further on in *Vidas descontadas* of a host of narratives that intersect, "layers... of a disordered palimpsest."

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the distinction between layer and palimpsest. There are works that [explore layers](#) in [fascinating ways](#), with or without an emphasis on writing. However, the origin of the palimpsest is textual; it [refers](#) to the "old image... in which one sees, on the same parchment, how one text is superimposed on another, which it does not completely hide but allows to be seen through transparency." This vision of the palimpsest emphasizes the hands that erase, add, and rewrite yet leave traces of their intervention. In line with the idea of the palimpsest, *Nightmare Remains* and *Vidas descontadas* remind us that each new iteration of violence attempts to erase the previous one, even if a visible trace, as well as the lives that persist under the new text of injustice, can still be perceived.

I would like to propose that *Vidas descontadas* sees in the current uses of the category of disappearance not a layer but a palimpsest of the violence of dictatorships. To do so, I will draw on the relationship between the form of the book and its (provocative) approach to how we understand disappearance. *Vidas descontadas* is a book written by the [ViDes](#) team, a group of anthropologists, chroniclers, journalists, and sociologists that includes David Casado-Neira, Gabriel Gatti, Elixabete Imaz, Ignacio Irazuzta, Carolina Kobelinsky, María Martínez, Mariana Norandi, Daniela Rea, Iñaki Rubio Mengual, and Álvaro Villar. The entries (I lost count after 60)—in the form of diaries, daily observations, conversations, illustrations (wonderfully done, by Daniel Piqueras Fisk), photographs of "urban cavities," and references to WhatsApp messages—construct a fragmented and powerful narrative. Most of these entries are quasi-ethnographies and bear time and place (e.g., "Madrid, February 15, 2024"). They are accompanied by images that fill the book's nearly 300 pages: suitcases, interlocking hands, public parks, the burial of [Paola Buenrostro](#), umbrellas, hospitals.

*Vidas descontadas* insists on understanding these entries as *catas*, which could refer to "wine tasting," a small bite, or a sample; I will refer to them here as *flashes*. These flashes are a form of knowledge or narrative that focuses on pieces, fragments, or "bits of reality" in a provisional way. Flashes involve following rumors, whispers, and anything that does not fit into conventional narratives. They seek to challenge the languages we have inherited, the authors would say, in order to trace the skein of alliances and disputes that make up contemporary reality.

Flashes demand constant movement, constant attention and intentionality, to organize and narrate these fragments (what could be called, in the book's lexicon, the "wow effect") without the overall plot blotting out details. Flashes, therefore, focus on resonance and the meaning of the "meaningless," akin to pointillism if I may be permitted a somewhat-loose artistic comparison.

Allow me to share a flash from the book. The scene is the bridge on Gonzalitos Avenue, next to the Faculty of Medicine of the Autonomous University of Nuevo León, in Monterrey, México. “Hospital, wait, bridge, major avenue, lives in transit, and city are some of the elements that make up this liminal landscape of overflowing shelters, a place of multiple connections and lives exposed to the elements and overlapping waits.” The horror is not presented explicitly but through the tension between the act of seeing and not seeing. Phrases such as the one above coexist with many cutting and abrupt sentences, with a syntax that does not adhere to the traditional structure of subject, verb, and predicate.

Despite at times seeming disorienting, the language ends up becoming familiar, even welcoming, in the course of reading; it has a literary-academic air (for example, a very academic-Uruguayan joke from the book plays on the idea *from Bourdieu to Batlle*) that draws you into the daily life of those who chase these flashes and often end up stammering as a result. In *Vidas descontadas*, this readability functions as a provocation, a way of challenging readers: how difficult it is to read about despair in front of the hospital, under the bridge, and how easy it is to continue living daily life!

The global circulation of the term *disappeared* in contexts such as a hospital in Monterrey, the streets of São Paulo, the “asphalt people” of Paris, or Dominicans of Haitian descent who are denied citizenship, records a phenomenon that deserves careful study and not as a “degradation” or “deformation” of the legal category of “forced disappearance.” *Vidas descontadas* starts from this particular and sprawling way of understanding disappearance. The style, then, is premised on fidelity to ways of redefining or reclassifying disappearance. In other words, what the text achieves with its flashes is to immerse readers in a world where disappearance permeates daily life. Flashes, then, are a mimetic response to social disappearance, which can be understood as follows: the [“growing number of lives that are not being counted requires a new interpretation and, possibly, a more elastic understanding of the definition and scope of the category of disappearance.”](#)

This approach maintains that disappearance provides a vocabulary for contemporary violence, as something that gives refuge to, a way of enabling relationships between phenomena whose link is not apparent at first. In other words, it sees disappearance as a *container*. “We saw how they moved from the local universes of family complaints to the international universes of law, and how, transformed into a set of preprogrammed stimuli traveling along the highways of humanitarian morality, versatile notions.... We proposed a risky hypothesis: today, disappeared and disappearance refer to a total and global social phenomenon, the gradual, progressive, systemic, constant abandonment of more and more forms of existence, falling out of what we can perceive, escaping what we know how to see, hear, and feel, from our stories, our accounts, our attention.” *Vidas descontadas* makes this risky hypothesis based on the work of those who search for the disappeared, marginalized communities, and those who use the label of disappearance. The book, then, should be celebrated for its rigorous commitment to non-specialists as theorists (of human rights).

The work moves between the “Global South” and the [“South of the North,”](#) placing disappearances in various contexts, from racialized violence against Gambians in Germany and the desert between the US and Mexico to the streets of Brazil, Mexico, and Spain. In this wide range of contexts, I was left thinking about the relationship between layer and palimpsest. For instance, the book addresses the example of the [siluetazo](#), which has become a global “aesthetic-political kit” that arose from the struggles against forced disappearance in Argentina. A flash expresses surprise at seeing this repertoire associated with people sleeping on the streets of Montevideo; this reveals how contemporary violence rewrites historical struggles, without completely erasing them. The art of resistance, in this sense, is not just a new layer of protest, but brings to the surface memories erased by new ways of understanding sovereignty amid social disappearance.

Within this (re)configuration of violence, flashes are not limited to documenting but create a new “common world” by challenging the logic of what “counts” and who does the counting. If, for French philosopher Jacques Rancière, the common world is a “controversial distribution of ways of being and ways of occupying a space of

possibilities,” ViDes’ work embodies this principle by placing “discounted lives” at the center to challenge the relationship between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done.

I would therefore like to conclude with a brief reflection on the ViDes team’s decision to date the prologue November 11, which reinforces the idea that the book understands disappearance as a palimpsest. This date, which marks the armistice of World War I, encapsulates the hope for a moment of peace, but from our current perspective, we see it as a moment of transition between horrors. It is the “interwar” period, a time of precarious peace where past atrocities are not resolved but bubble up, giving rise to new tragedies. In this context, the figure of social disappearance emerges as the one that shapes a changing world, a world that saw, sees, and will see the birth of new regimes and forms of violence.

In a context of social disappearance, flashes are an act of storytelling aimed at bringing together the empirical and the speculative to map the so-called *des-* lives (“helpless, unprotected, disconnected, neglected, deterritorialized... disappeared”). The project seeks to intertwine the language of the “patchwork” lives of families affected by (forced) disappearance with the narratives of discounted lives in a speculative work of flashes. This speculative work reflects and creates real power dynamics: with repetition, one begins to feel the institutional weight (stamp?) of what the very concept of disappearance—forced, social, committed by individuals—might contribute. Contemporary violence, broadly understood, is the palimpsest of *forced affinities* in the aftermath of disappearance.