The continuum of women's abduction in Mexico. Porosities between sexual and armed violence in a drug-producing area (Badiraguato, Sinaloa)

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Abstract

This paper takes the abduction and rape of a woman as a social situation and, by putting it in perspective with other cases, looks at how these acts of violence are commented on locally in order to grasp how they reveal the broader configuration of power. I show that this armed abduction, followed by rape, finally reduced into a conjugal quarrel, appears to be a particularly brutal and vivid version of the “continuum of sexual violence”. Locally apprehended by the category of “stealing a woman” (*robo de mujer*), the radicality of this porosity between armed and domestic violence refers to the singular political economy of Badiraguato, a Mexican municipality considered to be “the cradle of drug trafficking” and “the base of the Sinaloa Cartel”. From a materialist feminist perspective, I argue that the extreme porosity observed in gendered violence refers to the forms of exploitation and predation that characterize an insertion into global capitalism based on exclusion and isolation. This research is based on an 18-month ethnography conducted between 2013 and 2016 in the main village, the offices of the town hall, and the poppy-producing hamlets spread across the territory.

Keywords Anthropology of violence · Continuum of violence · Gender-based violence · Political economy of drug production · Extended case method · Mexico

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Adriana¹ lived in a room next to mine, which she rented with her brother Ismael. Like she did every night, she was working at the restaurant outside Badiraguato when six men came in, armed with automatic rifles. They forced her into a pick-up truck and drove away. She was beaten and raped twice by the person holding her, then released temporarily. Her abductor ordered her to get her belongings: whether she liked it or not, she would then come and live with him. When Ismael entered their room, he found his sister, crying, lying on the floor. She managed to explain to him that her abductor would be back, and so he helped her get away with a family in the town who were friends of their father. They hid Adriana until her father came down from the sierra to pick her up. Hidden under a blanket in her father's pick-up truck, she was taken just in time from the hamlet while her abductor and the other armed men were looking for her. All this I learned from Ismael when I returned to Badiraguato: "They stole her (*se la robaron*)". I had been in Culiacan when the abduction happened and Adriana had been hustled away the day before I returned. Standing outside our rooms, Ismael tells me that the night before, the man had come armed and belligerent to this very spot looking for Adriana. As Ismael gave voice to his anger and worries about what lies ahead, Teresa joined us from the neighboring house. She now told me that she also saw the kidnapper looking for our neighbor and how terrified she is at the thought of him coming back. After Teresa left, Ismael confided to me that he had asked Teresa for help in hiding Adriana the day before, but that Teresa was too scared and refused. Like the other neighbors, Ismael knows that Armando, Adriana's abductor, works for a *pistolero* close to one of the most important families in town. Armando already had a wife, which only stoked Ismael's anger, which he vented repeatedly as we spoke. He pictured himself confronting Armando, but everyone warned him not to. When I asked him if his sister was safe in his father's hamlet, he answered yes because Armando's men "can't go in there." He added that, in any event, reprisals by his father and the men in his hamlet could not be ruled out.

Ismael then explained to me what he thought motivated the abduction: At the village's founding festival, 2 days before the abduction, Armando noticed Adriana and sent Ivan, another of our neighbors, to ask her for her phone number. Ismael was with her at the time and said that his sister politely refused, saying that she was engaged to someone and that her companion commuted between Badiraguato and the state of Chihuahua. So, end of story. But two other neighbors, also sisters, were at the festival and knew all of the parties involved. According to Ismael, the day after the party, one of them visited Adriana in her room and caught her there with a man. According to Ismael, she went to inform Ivan: "Tell Armando that if Adriana is not interested in him, it doesn't mean that it applies to others."

Therein lie the antecedents for Adriana's abduction as provided by Ismael and the neighbor women. Indeed, when another of our neighbors named Teófilo² returned that evening to the rooms, he seconded their story. But he summed it up with, "Well yes, but as I told you, you can't feed soup to one and refuse it to the other!" before adding that this was not the first time Adriana had gotten herself in this kind of trouble, telling me

¹ To protect the privacy of my interlocutors, all names have been changed.

² Teófilo, whom I met at the very start of my inquiry, is 75 years old and has had a career that earned him a considerable local reputation. For this reason, and because of our ties, he was vital to the conduct of my investigation.

about another episode in which an armed suitor was making a scene outside Adriana's room. He said that he had personally ejected the man from the courtyard, fearing that it might turn out wrong for Adriana, whom he liked very much. But he insisted that in fact "it's her fault" and that there was nothing to be done. Moreover, he, Teófilo, was not sure about the likelihood of the father's revenge predicted by Ismael; according to him, the father "is not heavy enough."

A few months later, Adriana was still living in her father's hamlet. Rumor had it that she married an associate of her father's and that she might be returning to the town. After I had returned from a stay in France, I moved to another part of Badiraguato. One day, I visited Teresa and asked her about Adriana—who I never laid eyes on again. Teresa told me: "Oh yes, allegedly she was abducted." I am deeply surprised because we had followed the events together and shared our fears: "Allegedly?" Teresa explained to me that she too had worried, but then she learned that Adriana "had already spent time with him (*Ya había tratado con él*)... and it's not the same if a guy falls for a chick without ever having spent time with her. That is different. As for Adriana, it's as if she had been his girlfriend, something like that. He kidnapped her, sure, but hey, it's not like they never spent time together."

This armed abduction, followed by a rape transformed into a couple's quarrel, appears to be a particularly brutal and lurid version of the "continuum of sexual violence," the concept Liz Kelly (1987) developed to emphasize linkages between various forms of violence, from sexual harassment to assault by way of spousal abuse. In line with feminist works of the time (Schneider 1991; Delphy 1995; Federici 1998), Kelly rejected the distinction between private and public, so she could conceptualize gender relationships and the system of domination that encompass them through these different forms of violence. This reflection contributed to renewing the anthropology of violence in the 2000s, which happened along two parallel tracks. One, developed by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois, highlighted the relationship between domestic, political, and structural violence, the latter incorporating social, gender, and urban segregation inequalities resulting from the contemporary economic system (Scheper-Hughes 1993; Bourgois 1995; Bourgois 2001; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004). The other approach, developed by Paul Richards (2005), relied on the notion of a continuum as a means for thinking about the porosities between states of peace and war, and thus reintegrates the study of contemporary armed conflicts in their social, historical, and economic contexts. Subsequently, several studies have drawn on these two continuums to highlight the role in gender-based violence of institutions, especially military apparatus (Roy 2008; Bayard de Volo and Hall 2015), and of political economy (True 2012, 2020).

These reflections are particularly relevant in the Mexican case, as it is characterized by a paradox. In many ways, Mexico is reminiscent of certain countries at war: The 300,000 deaths since 2006 represent a higher death toll than most of the armed conflicts of the twenty-first century, higher than Afghanistan since 2001 and Iraq since 2003, exceeded only by the war in Syria since 2011. Moreover, Mexico shows similar phenomena to countries affected by armed conflicts and recognized as such in international law: proliferation of armed groups, clashes with heavy weapons (machine guns, rocket launchers, armored vehicles, combat helicopters), competition for territorial control, massacres, and millions of displaced persons fleeing violence. Yet some salient features of contemporary armed conflicts are absent: no application of international humanitarian law, no recognition of refugee status for those fleeing violence, and no UNHCR camps. Moreover, fighting and violence coexist with unusual features in

armed conflicts: elections that lead to political alternation, a vibrant tourism industry, and a cosmopolitan capital city where life is good for those who can afford it. It is thus a peace situation that kills more people than war, a context in which the characterization of violence as “criminal” conceals its social, political, and economic stakes.

The concept of a continuum of violence results from an analytical and theoretical device for bringing seemingly distinct phenomena closer together, the better to reveal, and potentially act on, the mechanisms they share (Boyle 2019). Yet, the successive situations around Adriana’s rape are striking, as they collectively bring into play, in a single located configuration, all the phenomena that the continuum of violence aims at capturing. Indeed, in this instance, continuum manifested itself as a social practice: Adriana’s rape and abduction gradually came to be described by the neighbors as a private quarrel. Shocking and brutal as it may seem, this practice of recharacterizing violent events is not the exception. It fits into a broader national context in which the same term—“stealing a woman” (*robo de mujer*)—is used to talk about situations that range from armed abductions to marriages described as consensual.

In Badiraguato, this radical porosity stems from the political economy of a Mexican municipality considered “the cradle of drug trafficking” and “the base of the Sinaloa Cartel”. This mountainous municipality of the state of Sinaloa is one of those marginalized rural areas with limited or non-existent access to jobs, services, health care, and education—in short, to a desirable standard of living and prospects. However, the vast majority of its inhabitants subsist on the cultivation of poppies, a transnational economy whose flows range from Colombia to Los Angeles by way of Malaysia and Western Europe. The relation of sexual violence with the political economy of drug trafficking is a broader phenomenon in Mexico: Gender-based violence is most prevalent in the territories worst affected by armed confrontations (Atuesta and Vela Barba 2020). Accounting for this correlation requires precisely describing the interplay between gender, criminal, state, and social violence in localized situations.

In this article, I argue that the extreme porosity observed in gender violence is related to the forms of exploitation and predation specific to an insertion into globalized capitalism that is based on exclusion. In fact, it is the exclusion—residing in the combination of geographical isolation, lack of infrastructure, military repression, absence of economic opportunities and of access to services and to the law—that paradoxically accounts for Badiraguato region’s comparative advantage in the world economy, most notably in the illegal poppy industry.³ Here, the exclusion is therefore not outside the law, but the practical way in which it is applied (Bourdieu 1990). Remoteness and military repression foster an elite of marginalization entrepreneurs with a stranglehold on the means of circulations. In a purely capitalist logic, these entrepreneurs profit from their noncircumventable position by appropriating the surplus value from the cultivators. Far from the image of an integrated organization (*the cartel*), poppy production is largely in the hands of small cultivators working on less than 1 ha. They are subject to predatory forms of accumulation⁴, especially of land, and the exploitation of their labor by these marginalization entrepreneurs to whom they must sell their crops. These entrepreneurs lay off all the risks and costs of production on them, in a subcontracting logic

³ It is worth remembering here that poppy production is only partially prohibited. The majority of it is for medical uses and is carried out by a handful of pharmaceutical companies which, in a cartel logic, benefit from the International Drug Control prohibition policies which maintain their oligopoly (Dudouet 2009).

⁴ I speak of predation or predatory accumulation in a sense similar to David Harvey’s (2003) “accumulation by dispossession”. It emphasizes the place of violence in the forcible appropriation of resources in a context that is not one of primitive accumulation, but rather hews to the most contemporary logics of capitalism. Similarly (Bourgois 2018).

distinctive of neoliberal capitalism (Blazquez 2019a). This economy of exploitation and predation is thus at work in the relationships not only of production but also of livelihood (Smith 1989) and ownership (Blazquez 2016).

The gender relationships⁵ exposed by Adriana's abduction and rape are thus entangled in the relations of production and domination.⁶ In a feminist materialist approach, and inspired particularly by the work of Nicole-Claude Mathieu (1985), I examine how my male and female interlocutors make sense of these relationships, while reflecting on the issues and constraints, in which they—the women above all—are caught (Green 1999). Following the extended case method (Gluckman 1940a, 1940b; Burawoy 1998), I observe in situ and in practice the actualization of the socio-economic context and the constraints that weigh on their material and discursive practices. I parse the description of specific situations to highlight the connections among them and how they arise out of a wider social configuration and, as they unfold, produce this configuration. The particularly violent nature of a situation in which the army suppresses the principal mode of subsistence and where homicides happen frequently moreover makes clear the common constraints and naturalization mechanisms that here can transform the irruption of armed men into a couple's quarrel.

Three mechanisms appear to be particularly decisive. First, reducing a social condition to individual behaviors blames victims for the violence they suffer. Second, the threat of violence cements the relationship of domination, making any attempt to extract oneself from them dangerous. Finally, with recourse to public institutions to protect oneself out of the question, all the more so since the entire population is considered to be criminal, domestic exploitation appears inevitable⁷. While the continuum of violence is imposed on all women, it affects them differently depending on their social status, which in turn derives from that of men: for daughters or wives of small poppy farmers as much as for traffickers' wives or sisters. This dynamic is reinforced by family organization, in particular virilocality. The description of a given social situation, in light of an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1991), thus shows how practices turn gender relationships into operators for describing the broader power configuration. In other words, the exploitation and predation that determine gender relationships reveal the exploitation and predation relationships that are more widely at work among the population as a whole.

I take Adriana's abduction as a common thread and, by putting other situations into perspective, analyze what my neighbors' characterizations reveal about the balance of power involved in gender relationships, and more broadly in the competition around drug trafficking. I will thus mobilize the ethnographic material gathered, during my 18-month stay in Badiraguato, from the networks of acquaintances in the main town, the offices of the municipal administration, and the *sierra* hamlets where people grow poppies.⁸ These materials were

⁵ Following Scott (1986) and Delphy (2001a, 2001b), by gender relations I mean a system of unequal division from which male and female terms flow.

⁶ Claude Meillassoux during the 1970s underlined this linkage between the production system and household economies (Meillassoux 1975).

⁷ The lack of recourse to legal institutions is patent in the case of homicides: According to figures from the Mexican Institute of Public Statistics (Instituto nacional de estadística y geografía, INEGI), in 2012, 99.2% of homicides in Sinaloa did not result in convictions (see Paris Martínez, "98% de los homicidios cometidos en 2012 están impunes", *Animal Político*, 17 Jul. 2013). In this respect, violence against women is no exception in a context where the cloak of the "war on drugs" conceals the diversity of forms of violence. For an analysis of the social demands related to such violence and the legal framework of violence against women, see Iribarne (2015) and Castañeda Salgado et al. (2013).

⁸ I develop these methodological and epistemological considerations in a book chapter (Blazquez 2019b).

largely produced in the course of my being present during situations and through the discursivities and visibilities to which the ethnographic approach opens (Bazin 1996, 1999; Naepels 1998, 2012).

Thus, to begin with, Ismael told me what happened to his sister in the following form: “They stole her” (*se la robaron*). The statement refers to a common category in Mexico, “stealing a girl/woman” (*robo de muchacha/mujer*), which aggregates diverse situations into one and the same logic of action. In the first part of the article, I take on this formulation to grasp what emerges from the local apprehension of these different actions as representing a continuum from violent abduction to marriage. Next, the content of the commentaries on Adriana’s abduction makes it possible to expand the scope to other cases. Thus, in the second part, the importance accorded by the neighbors, male and female, to whether or not Adriana “spent time” with Armando before being abducted will appear as a leitmotif. Behind the idea that one “spends time” with somebody lure the very possibility of abduction, which shifts the gaze to the social condition of the people subjected to this continuum. Moreover, the entanglement between what happened to Adriana, the actions of the men involved, and the relationships they maintain among themselves surfaces in the neighbors’ remarks. In a third part, I address this linkage to highlight the modalities of how gender relations figure in the violent competitions between men. Finally, through the lens of Adriana’s “protection” by marriage to her father’s associate, I will focus on the experience of women in household economies and how the context of violence weighs on them.

“If a guy likes you, don’t think he’s going to ask you for permission”: the continuum of abduction

“Woman stealing,” the expression alluded to by Ismael and Teresa, repeatedly surfaces in the external discourses on the municipality and those of the residents of the main town on the *sierra*. I regularly heard in Culiacan, the state capital, when speaking of Badiraguato: “Over there, they steal women”; and this was sometime supported by a specific case: “I have a friend who is from Badiraguato, but she lives here because, when she was 15, her father made her leave to keep her from being stolen.” The emphasis on the dangers to which women are exposed in the municipality to begin is one element in it being stigmatized more generally as “den of hundreds of bandits” and “land of violent and obstinate men”. However, to grasp what is playing out in “woman stealing” or “girl stealing” requires examining the diversity of situations captured in the expression *robo de muchacha/de mujer*. Unambiguously, what happened to Adriana—in being kidnapped by six armed men, raped twice, and then told to go live with her abductor—is woman stealing. However, “runaway lovers” (*fuga de novios*), meaning an action purportedly undertaken jointly by a man and woman, may also be lumped in with this category. In this regard, Teresa’s proposed recharacterization is interesting, because reading a couple’s quarrel into it does not keep the situation from qualifying as “woman stealing.”

“Woman stealing,” because of the variety of situations to which the term can refer, actually outlines a continuum. As such, this radical scenario hides others and in doing so conceals a more structuring dimension in gender relationships that are shadowed by the threat of armed violence. To begin with, violent kidnappings are common occurrences, as my interlocutors testified. Zeica, a 30-year-old working as a cashier in the main town, was abducted when she was 17. The man forced her to go to Mexico City where she knew no one, and from where,

pregnant, she managed to escape. In opening up about it to me, she observed: "You know, that's how it is in the sierra; if a guy likes you, don't think he's going to ask you for permission." Here the stealing implies rape. But retrospective comments on abductions often obliterated the issue of consent at the moment the act transpired⁹. Thus, Laura was stolen by an important *pistolero*. The term is apt and she uses it, but having spent several years with him, the abduction aspects seemed to have dimmed. The man, who also had a wife in Culiacan, took Laura with him wherever he went, and she spoke sadly of the day he was killed, leaving her alone with their son. Her sister was also stolen and was still married to the man who abducted her.

Other stories of stealing seem to involve different dynamics. When Rogelio stole Yaheli, he told me that he "played the game." He said that they were already seeing each other, that he already knew her parents, and, especially, that she was in on it. She knew what was going to happen. But to respect tradition, he tells me, you have to go with one or two friends. The three of them had entered the house armed to pick her up. Yaheli's mother still talks about it with a laugh and gets along very well with her son-in-law. As for Tamara, she tells me about her union with Lamberto, saying that she used to see him when he went through her village once or twice a year and that she had her eye on him until the day he "finally" came to "steal" her. Her sister-in-law, Leandra, worked it out with her abductor to be stolen on the road, but for her father and brothers it came as a shock. In an interview, Gerardo told me that the first time he sowed poppies, he harvested a kilogram of gum that would let him "take off with the woman," speaking of Leandra who was with us. The ambiguity of the terms of the unions that I recorded during several months of inquiry at that point led me to make a faux pas by asking him "did you pay for her? (*la pagó*)" Gerardo stiffened and I corrected myself: "Uh... I mean... You asked for her hand in marriage? (*la pidió*)?" He said, "No! Are you kidding, I stole her! (No! *Como crees, me la robé!*)" Leandra, next to us, laughs. Both my slip-up and my correction missed the mark: It is the stealing that makes the union.

One of the subtexts of "girl stealing" references the girl's subtraction from her family. But in the relationships surrounding this practice, by the way men and women who live together mobilize the term, "stealing" seems to register in two ways: on the one hand, as an old-fashioned locution, tinged with a local romanticism, shows of staging, and narratives of violent masculinities and, on the other, as an eminently cultural practice, an imaginary that is obvious in the popular expression: "Marriage according to the three laws: that of the state, that of God and that of the mount (*el monte*)," the last here a reference to the stealing. It would therefore involve theater and narratives that would simply reflect local ways of being joined together.

However, the difficulty lies in differentiating cases of violent abduction from those reflecting ritualized forms of marital commitment. An account by Horacio, school principal in a *sierra* hamlet, testified to this. Originally from the state of Zacatecas, he had settled here as a physician's assistant some 30 years ago, then opened his own middle school that was later accredited by the state government. In our interview, he discoursed in scholarly fashion, adopting a distancing tone toward the "local culture" and seemingly eager to let me know that while he lived there, he "never mixed". He also had this to say about "woman stealing":

"You know, here girls and boys have spent time together (*se tratan*) since kindergarten, and it's in school that couples grow close. They say they steal them, but it is a manner of

⁹ On "forgetting" as constitutive of relationships initiated by coercion and predation (Lomnitz 2005: 23).

speaking; in reality both are consenting.... It's really about saving the expense of a wedding. They take the girls (*se las llevan*) to another hamlet for a few days and, when they return, the parents can only acquiesce. That's how people do it here, but both are in on it."

Horacio is the only one of my interlocutors to point out that "stealing" raises the question of consent, only to conclude—significantly—that consent is always involved. In his remarks, however, the subject of the action appears clearly: "they take the girls" (*se las llevan*). Later in the interview, he told me, "Before, they would steal them by force, sure.... Well, now it is in school that you have to watch out. We see them and keep an eye on them. Boys often stop school before girls do, and when they stand there outside the gate looking at girls, you have to be on guard." The past and the present merged as he talked; in 1 min, Horacio developed a scholarly discourse on "local culture," the next he discussed his specific practice as a school principal. As for the former, school is the setting where couples might consolidate, in a community where people have been around each other since kindergarten, which would involve pacific relationships and, despite the term "stealing," would imply consent given. For the latter, school is a time for being on guard to keep young men—ogling young girls in the schoolyard—from abducting them after classes let out.

The case of Teófilo is particularly instructive for the continuum ranging from violent abduction, to "spending time with each other" (*tratarse*), and even marriage. Indeed, he confessed to me that he stole a woman in his youth (which unfailingly he refers to formulaically with "when I was handsome, slim and dapper") in these words: we "were already seeing each other" (*ya nos tratábamos*) for some time. Then along came Joaquín, home for the holidays from his studies in Guadalajara, tinged with the aura of one who henceforth evolves in other spheres. One dance night, the girl had agreed to dance with Joaquín. "In a burst of anger," Teófilo decided to take the girl by force: He dragged her away by her hair and took her on a mule into the mountains all night. He said that was all, and then he brought her back. He agrees, in front of me, abashed, that it was "not very nice" on his part. But he adds that the girl's father eventually saw the humor in it and that her brother still does. The father jokingly called him "my son-in-law" and even told him that he had been in the right to do it. The social texture of "stealing" here is on full display: as a moment of gender relations crystallizing, caught in the relationships between men competing to appropriate a specific category of people: single women.

"Being alone" (*andar sola*), a vulnerability blamed on individual behaviors

As we have seen, the comments on Adriana's abduction fit the act into a series of other actions that *would explain it*, i.e., attribute causes for it. Confronted with Armando's interest, Adriana replied that she was already in a relationship with a man—although effectively he was absent. Due to a combination of circumstances and the malevolence of jealous neighbor women, Armando learns that she nevertheless is seeing another man in the village. Their intervention is crucial here: The story is framed to suggest that, were it not for this episode, Adriana would not have been kidnapped and exposed herself to being raped and carried off. Teófilo's maxim, "Well yes, but as I told you, you can't feed soup to one and refuse it to the other!", as terse as it is explicit, merely distills the moral subtext that the other accounts mobilize to explain the rape:

Adriana's fickle behavior is what should be at issue, and she would have exposed herself to this consequence only because she transgressed social norms. This logic obscures the fact that the stealing continuum is not about behavior, it is a condition: Adriana is above all a single woman. If the question of consent does enter into categorizing the "stealing," it is because it is inconsequential from the moment that a person belongs to this particular social group: *single women, in the sense that they do not belong to a man apart from their father*.

"Stealing" appears non-stop along with "spending time with each other" (*tratarse*). Adriana cannot complain because she had *spent time with* Armando. The girls in middle school are necessarily consenting and *stealing* is only a "way of speaking" according to Horacio, since girls and boys have been "spending time together" since kindergarten. Teófilo was within his rights as he was *spending time with* the girl who started dancing with another man. "Spending time together" means becoming the object of a man's attention when you are a single woman.¹⁰ In this sense, the insistence on the time spent together conceals that what is truly at stake is not belonging to a man outside her family. Thus, Rosa, my neighbor and Teresa's mother-in-law, trying to get me to understand that as a single woman my spending time with Teófilo made me the subject of gossip, tells me: "It's that here people, as soon as a woman is alone (*anda sola*), they talk a lot." She explained that after her husband's murder 18 years earlier, she was alone for 7 years. "It was unbearable, people were gossiping, they were saying I was with so-and-so, and then with so-and-so." Today, she and Joaquín (the one who danced with Teófilo's acquaintance) are a couple. The gossip endangered her by the same logic as in Teófilo's saying that "you can't feed soup to one and refuse it to the other!"¹¹ Once gossip attributed relationships to her, her preferences and choices no longer mattered. But, as she points out, these comments arise solely from the fact that she "is alone". Moreover, the threats weighing on a single woman do not always involve gossip. Another neighbor, Maria del Carmen, in telling me the story of Teófilo's female cousin, shot dead by the man who "wooded" her, drives home the point—exceptionally—about men's behavior that "they get carried away" (*se vuelan*). But her story, which she returns to several times, is intended for me in a specific context: to warn me and to urge me not to hang out with Teófilo—in short, to watch *my* behavior as a single woman. "Spending time together" and "stealing" go hand in hand because being a single woman means being caught up in gender relationships marked by men's predation—and regardless of their behavior, what matters is the condition of single women. In this sense, "spending time together" is the modality by which a man tries to grant himself exclusivity over a woman who, because she is alone, is exposed to the predation of others. Such a situation can only be concluded, in one way or another, by stealing, in one stage or another of the continuum.

This vulnerability is particularly rife among young girls, whose sociality is stamped by a profound uncertainty. Several interlocutors underlined that entry into this condition of being exposed to threat corresponds with turning 15 years old, which is celebrated in a particularly big way with the *quinceanero*.¹² But, in practice, identifying this moment is more difficult than

¹⁰ The same blaming of victims is found in the case of the Ciudad Juárez femicides, with the same term "spending time with" (*tratarse*), but, probably because of the urban context, more of an insistence on being out at night and going to entertainment venues (Calzolaio 2012). This logic of social control by putting the onus on victims can be found in other contexts of armed violence, for example in Colombia (Suarez Bonilla 2011).

¹¹ Because violence occurs in close relationships, rumor and gossip are simultaneously important social spaces for access to information for self-protection and a practice where dynamics of disqualifications in the neighborhood and the threat of armed violence intersect. For other cases highlighting the place of rumors in armed conflicts, see Finnström (2008), Macek (2009), and Theidon (2013).

¹² *Quinceanero* is a celebration of a girl's fifteenth birthday. Depending on the family's means, it includes a party, a religious ceremony, a dance, many photos, and, for the richest, going on a trip.

it might seem, as Horacio, the college principal, pointed out. As it is for him, the threat of stealing is a constant concern for teachers. For example, in my fieldwork at a school in another hamlet, the female teachers expressly asked me to “set an example” by talking to the girls about my studies. Teachers reproach them for being “easily swayed” and of “letting themselves be seduced”. After some time in the hamlet, I realized that they were agitated over the recent abduction of two young girls from their school. The teachers see stealing as a problem, but their action (asking me to “set an example” for young girls) still framed the problem as one of the girls’ behavior: i.e., of showing themselves to be available.

Dances escalate these tensions in gender relations. Many families refuse to let their daughters go to them or forbid dancing with anyone. As it happens, at the only dance that I attended, I was caught up in a situation that illustrates how constrained a woman’s room for maneuver is. It was prom night at a school where I had spent 3 weeks in 2014 and then again in 2015 and where I consequently knew several students. It was a family atmosphere, with some teachers, students, and a few other young people from a nearby hamlet also in attendance. Some of the young men were armed and let the pistol grips protrude from their belts. Several couples were dancing and chairs were arranged in a semi-circle against the walls of the room, most of which were occupied by young women—me included. Several times, I was asked if I was going to dance and I said no, that I would think it over. But, at one point, a high school student who had attended my French workshops and whom I knew well therefore invited me to dance. So, I accepted; we danced, I thanked him, and sat down again. A little later, another young man I did not know planted himself in front of my chair and asked me to dance. Not really keen on dancing with an armed man, I gave a thin smile and was about to decline, when my female neighbors and the female professor rushed over to me, amused by my faux pas, but nevertheless dead serious: I cannot have danced with one and then turn down another—“you can’t feed soup to one and refuse it to the other”.

In a municipality where many young men die violently, marriage only temporarily exempts women from the condition of being single. In this environment, stealing a woman does not refer exclusively to the subtraction of a young girl from her parents’ house. As it were, many women in the main town are widowed at a noticeably young age. The majority of my interlocutors were in this situation and, more generally, “my husband was killed” was one of the phrases I heard repeatedly in Badiraguato. Elena was widowed, with two children, when she was 20, Laura at age 19, and Vera as an 18-year old. Others were widowed later in life, but the remarkably high mortality of young men makes widowhood a widespread condition. Yolanda, who lost her first husband at the age of 18, remarried in the main town. Her second husband beat her, then left without a word. From that day on, she vowed never to enter into a relationship again. She knew that so many women shared her situation that, in her words, they constituted a real social subgroup: “those who are widows”. “I see them all. those who are widows and who run around; nooo, I take care of my children, that’s all.” Yolanda no longer wants to be one of the widows, the ones who “run around,” who go with men, and who set themselves up again for stealing if not rape. This 48-year-old single woman’s disparagement of their behavior thus highlights the existence of this social group with which she does not want to be identified. “Being a widow” means being placed in the same position of vulnerability. Rosa suffered under gossip in her widowhood until she took up with Joaquin. The age difference of some couples and the predation of older men on young women are striking in this respect: Young men die and their wives are left alone, at the mercy of those who remain.

The manner in which predation dynamics exert a hold over women contributes to blaming this all too common condition on individual conduct. The formulations focus on behavior and

obliterate the fact that this experience is primarily specific to the status of a woman who does not belong to a man. However, these innuendos, far from being the preserve only of men, constitute an important element even in how women relate to each other.¹³ Thus, Teresa's inclination to reclassify Adriana's rape in hindsight hinges on a condemnation of the victim's behavior. As a married woman, she told me she felt swindled (*allegedly*) when the violence done to Adriana's affected her own sense of vulnerability at the prospect of Armando's taking his revenge in her yard. Similarly, Yolanda's critiquing of the widowed women's behavior must be viewed from the perspective of her repeated experience as a woman alone running the risk of rape.

This vulnerability cannot be warded off by formulating and apprehending it as a condition bereft of any notion of being able to do something about the uncertainty. The predation women endure is made of singular experiences, yet the latter all share a naturalization of their vulnerable condition. Zeica's formulation makes this dimension obvious: "That's how it is in the sierra; if a guy likes you, don't think he's going to ask you for permission."

Women alone: the stakes in a violent competition among men

Following Adriana's abduction, the owners of the restaurant where she worked were at a loss as to what to do. They warned her brother, Ismael, but, since Armando worked for an important pistolero, Ismael, his family's friends and Teófilo had their hands tied. Ismael, as if to compensate for his impotence and anger, fantasized to me about confronting Armando. But his relatives urged him not to. When Adriana managed to escape, they hid her until her father came to fetch her home to her native hamlet. There, she was protected from Armando's men, because, according to Ismael, "they can't come in there." But, despite Ismael's predictions to me of possible reprisals by her father's men, Adriana merely stayed several months in her hamlet, eventually returning to the main town after marrying one of her father's associates.

Adriana's abduction, rape, and "protection" in her father's village are woven into a violent competitive relationship centered on poppy cultivation. Indeed, Adriana's father owns several plots around his village. Local recognition of him as the owner of these parcels fits into a complex system of land tenure that combines the legal provision for common property rights (*ejido*) with individual and violent land grabbing.¹⁴ Thus, the father's holdings are based on his social, economic, and violent capital. Moreover, he grows poppies on plots large enough to require his periodically hiring workers for the harvest. In the context of military repression, extensive plots indicate that their owners have come to an arrangement with the local military detachments, an option not available to small cultivators. Adriana's father also buys the crops of neighboring families and keeps armed men. These characteristics make him a *pesado* in the local terminology, meaning the powerful man in one or several hamlet. But, according to my

¹³ The different forms of women's participation in stealing practices and the moral condemnation of the person abducted refer to a problem well-identified by researchers studying violence carried out by women and children. It emphasizes in particular the need to think concertedly about their conditions as victims and perpetrators of violence, and thus to recognize both the constraints that weigh on them and their autonomy of action under these constraints (Baines 2009; Cardi and Pruvost 2012).

¹⁴ For an introduction to the historical, social, and political logics underpinning the practical application of common property (*ejido*), see Nugent and Alonso (1994), Hoffman (1997), Nuijten (2003), Baitenmann (2007), and Bouquet and Colin (2009); for how it applies in poppy production areas, see Maldonado Aranda (2010) and Blazquez (2016).

interlocutors, he is still a small-time local *pesado* with only modest political and economic contacts on the coastal plain.

Indeed, the political economy of the poppy is shaped by the enclaving of Badiraguato which makes external contacts, mobility, and the ability to move illegal goods the touchstone of the relationship domination. Unlike the small cultivators who sell gum locally for a pittance, Adriana's father sells the processed poppy. However, in pegging him as a minor *pesado*, my interlocutors suggested that his ability to ship the drug out of Badiraguato is limited. In contrast, Armando belongs to one of the better-connected trafficking networks. Thus, Adriana taking refuge in the father's village, like her kidnapping in the main town by a man enlisted in a more powerful network, fits into the power relations between trafficking networks and reveals her father's limited and contested position of power.

In this game, Adriana has little room for maneuver. Starting with Armando insisting on "spending time with" her, she tries to invent a protector by claiming to be in a relationship with a man who shuttles between Badiraguato and Chihuahua state. The subtext of her answer makes him out to be an important man in the production and trafficking of drugs because he moves back and forth between these areas. She displays a keen knowledge of her position in these relationships and of the underlying logics: Not only does she depend dramatically on a man's protection, but the efficacy of this protection rests on the cards the man in question holds in the violent social game. Her position is negotiable only to the extent that she *would belong* to her father, or to her imaginary companion, to her abductor—or to the man her father has her marry.

Woman stealing is part of the economic and violent relationships revolving around the production and sale of poppies that determine who steals from whom. Thus, it is quite common in stories of armed abductions for the perpetrator-future-husband to be a *pistolero*, a *pesado*, and someone "who works for so-and-so". In this regard, abduction is only one of the practices around which the local political economy materializes. Like livelihood and access to land, stealing a woman depends on your resources in the predatory capitalism specific to the local drug economy. This homology highlights the place allotted to the subjectivity of women in this context. The phrase "you can't feed soup to one and refuse it to the other" and the ways of behaving imposed on women at dances indicate the modalities of their inclusion in these competitive relationships. Whether through the injunction to close off any availability (not giving soup at all, not dancing with anyone) or that of a non-discriminatory opening (accept all propositions), the central issue lies in the *subtraction of their choice from the violent competition of which they are the object*. These norms ensure that women avoid taking a part in social relations between men, that their capacity to act is annihilated, and that they are enjoined to remain neutral in the face of predation and thus not to play a role in the competition.

Adriana's availability in the violent game derives therefore from the stakes for the various men around her who, at one moment or another, appropriate her. This dynamic, like the local understanding of abductions, raises the question of the ability of fathers to provide protection. In this respect, Adriana's case is highly revealing: The expectations of reprisals are based on the detailed assessments of *her father's* resources. However, these are chiefly linked to observation of an obvious fact: All his resources could not protect Adriana in the main town. Thus, the *passive* protection by fathers, i.e. one that eschews taking specific actions, is not for everyone. Fathers with lower status must take specific actions, such as arranged marriage. Thus, Adriana's father has his daughter marry his associate after the abduction. A frequent alternative move is to send your daughters to the coastal plain towns where they are thought to be less exposed. This tactic, which was contemplated by a family of small cultivators that I

lived with, relies on help from members of the extended family, in this case with relatives who had moved to the city. But it still requires the ability to contribute financially or in kind to the living expenses of their daughter living with family. Due to the vagaries of weather and extortionate soldiers, such a commitment is particularly difficult to entertain in the context of household economies largely reliant on poppy cultivation. Thus, this type of protection is dependent not only on intrafamilial help but also on economic resources.

Stealing therefore places women in relationships of dependency and as stakes in the competition between men. But, conversely, this imposed passivity does not render them immune to the fallout and hazards that accompany violent competition. Thus, a conflict between two men from different hamlets ended up killing the mother and sister of one of the men. Similarly, the case of Beatriz, who was stolen by a *pistolero* from a hamlet near the main town, illustrates how little being deprived of the ability to act in the competition precludes becoming a victim. He took her with him to Tucson, where she “lived the affluent life” before returning to live in Badiraguato while he came and went. He then got caught up in a very deadly conflict in the main town which kept him from returning to Badiraguato. Then, Beatriz, who lived with her parents in the main town, received death threats from the rival group gunning for her husband. Teófilo looked after her every day, shepherded her everywhere, and controlled her doings to keep her out of harm’s way. Beatriz finally had enough of it, saying to him, as she later told me: “Look here, Don Teófilo, if they want to kill me, you know very well that they will kill me no matter where I am.” But she also told me that his emphatic presence, his reputation—and the reputation of her sister’s late husband—may also have been instrumental in keeping her alive. Regardless of how a man appropriates a woman, she endures, as an extension of him, the modalities of the violent competition that she is made part of. And the relative appropriation under Teófilo tutelage plainly confirms that protection comes by way of a man’s hold over a woman.

Being married: between exploitation and protection

The “protection” accorded to Adriana says a great deal about the material conditions of many of my married female interlocutors. Following her abduction in the town, she was taken back to the hamlet that she had until then managed to avoid except at harvest time. Protection against her abductor returned her to the family fold, that is, in the familial setting where the value of her work first benefited her father, head of the family. Thus, when she made food for farm workers, she spared *him* the need to hire a cook. But this was a temporary situation whose actual outcome was her marriage to the father’s associate. In the framework of household economies bound to the cultivation of poppies, the configuration from house to house is in fact similar. For example, Tamara, another of my interlocutors whose husband grows poppies, starts her workday at 5 a.m., chopping kindling and firing up the *comal* to make tortillas. She works the entire day without break; a good day for her is when she can take a little time off in the afternoon for socializing with the neighbor women (while looking after the children or preparing dishes for celebrations).

The actual domestic work is part of an organization of production that integrates the whole family unit. The repression of poppy cultivation is implemented through aerial surveillance and the dispatch of squads of soldiers on the ground. As a permanent fixture, it has come to be regarded in the same way as weather hazards in organizing the agricultural work. The vigilance induced by the repression affects the timing of the cultivators’ work, its organization

(collective hamlet-wide watch), and its division (mobilizing the working time of the wives and children). In this sense, the study of the production patterns of poppy cultivation and the constraints that weigh on it shows that the household as a whole is indeed the unit of production. In addition to their active participation in the production process, the wives manage the budget and the debts. As such, they are on the front line of uncertainty.

Still, only men are considered to provide for the needs of the family, and only men participate in the social spaces where work is negotiated and valued. Thus, while women are allowed in some ejidal assemblies, I have never seen a woman speak in such a context. More broadly, women's participation in poppy production and the contribution of their domestic work to the livelihood of the household are not socially recognized, and it is only after a long immersion in their daily lives that I became aware of its importance¹⁵. Radio monitoring is not seen as work when women take it on, and they only mention that they manage the budget and its contingencies when men are not around. Extreme as the violent situation in Badiraguato may be, it bears the hallmarks of a patriarchal organization, where the production relationships between men and women makes the latter's work invisible by integrating it into the man's earnings. Thus, the relative protection provided by marriage in a context where the entire population is criminalized exacerbates domestic exploitation.

The entangled logics of armed violence and gender relations continue to weigh on the experience of married women. My experience with the families I observed does not reflect the pervasiveness of domestic violence. I never witnessed physical violence in the houses where I lived and some of my interlocutors could tell me that their husbands better not lay a hand on them. Nevertheless, even the fact that the women talk in the negative about it indicates that this is a significant phenomenon. As a matter of fact, the local newspapers are full of stories about women murdered in their homes. A front page that circulated during my fieldwork headlined an article with "*Callada a balazos*," which roughly translates as "She was shut up with bullets," making armed violence a response to a common stereotype: Women talk too much. Many of my female interlocutors hinted at past experiences or fears with abusive husbands. Yolanda's second husband—the one who was not killed—beat her and Gabriela was afraid of Jaime when he came home drunk. The modalities of "spending time with" and the exercise of the same violent practices (including the use of firearms) provide a glimpse of the spillover of armed violence into domestic spaces.

Moreover, the context of violence also indirectly weighs on the experience of women in domestic settings. In all *sierra* families, when a man and the woman get married, it means the woman leaves her hamlet (however distant) and moves into the husband's house. Just as the husband owns the property, the couple is surrounded by *his* extended family. This virilocal organization, which cuts women off from their past sociality and inserts them into the husband's, is further reinforced by the context of violence. Aside from none of my married interlocutors owning a vehicle, the ability to move about in a territory structured by enclaving is an essential and unevenly distributed resource. Indeed, any movement, including within the municipality, is fraught with uncertainty due to the military patrols and the presence of armed groups that sometimes battle each other. In this context, moving around is susceptible to the timing of these conflicts and essentially relies on a person's familiarity with the locale they are moving through—namely, the extent and strength of the links with the people living in a given area. Inequality of movement is especially gendered. The wife settling in the husband's hamlet

¹⁵ For a similar case of transfer into the domestic sphere of the exploitation in the production process within a Spanish industrial setting, see Narotzky (2001).

usually extracts her from the place where she has these social resources. Few wives enjoy a wide enough sociality to let them move around alone. Thus, Veronica could not visit her family without her husband because it meant traveling through areas where he alone would be recognized and where the journey, absent this familiarity, would become unpredictable. This was also the case with Tamara, who greatly missed her family in Chihuahua and greatly feared 1 day learning of her mother disappearing without having seen her. But, since her marriage, she only managed to visit her parents every other year. Sociality in hamlets is also gendered, with women largely confined to the domestic sphere. In particular, women avoid the public places where young men hang out and that are often associated with violence. On the other hand, the federal *oportunidades* program, a monthly welfare assistance specifically for mothers, provides an occasion for all women to get together for several hours in the hamlet's center while they are waiting for the convoy.¹⁶

For the wives of men involved in the higher echelons of the drug trade, the "protection" of marriage and the dependence it induces take different forms. The bulk of the profits of the poppy economy that resides in transporting the goods means the men involved at these levels are often absent. While I never shared the daily life of these more affluent circles in the main town, I nevertheless on several occasions observed how dependent these women were on their husbands. When we first met, the wife of a *pesado* in the town proudly exclaimed: "Me, my husband supports me. Thank God I don't have to work." These women's quality of life may be higher, yet their social status still depends on their husbands and it is generally his resources that play a role in their protection. Thus, Laura, held at gunpoint with her father by the head of the municipal police for a parking violation, invoked her late husband, a highly placed *pistolero*, in order that the policeman "changes his attitude". In this context, cosmetic surgery and fitness exercise, two characteristic activities, let these women claim a social distinction in the public space that translates into body work. Thus, almost all the women who took the only exercise course in the municipality—Zumba—had in common the daily condition of being lone wives. Similarly, Beatriz, who barely saw her husband (the one in self-exile from the region due to a death threat) received money from him and had surgery three times in 2 years. Cosmetic surgery is common among women whose frequently absent husbands make a lot of money. The operation, visible and noticed, moreover provides the rationale to remain bedridden for several weeks. To be afforded these privileges undeniably indicates that, even without a man by their side, they are not single women. In this environment, dependence on the status of men is linked to competitive relationships between women through comments, displaying their riches (cars, clothing) and body work.

Some women manage to transcend this context of violence and exploitation. Mariana was the daughter of a former *pesado* from whom she was stolen by her husband in a legendary altercation (the man having threatened to drive his truck into a dance if the father did not "give" her up). Her husband, highly placed in the drug-trafficking network operating in this area, was generally absent. She took care of the children and did the housework, but her daily life differed from that of most of my other female interlocutors. Once a year, she traveled with her husband to Guadalajara to buy clothes—insisting that she only bought what appealed to her—and used a room in her house to retail them from. She sold men's, women's, and children's clothes and locals frequented her shop almost every day. Next, she started making

¹⁶ The program is restricted to mothers to avoid delivering the aid to men likely to spend it in their leisure time, including alcohol and gambling. Agudo Sanchíz (2015) conducted an ethnography around this program and, more broadly, around public policies to combat poverty.

ice cream. Her home thus became an important venue for socializing in the hamlet, whether or not her husband was around. She also evolved into a full-fledged contact in the hamlet for municipal government officials. What she achieved may have been enabled by her father's then her husband's resources, yet the fact remains that her sociality and status were her own and her business produced part of her family's monetary income. Other women worked in the municipal administrative offices: A number of *sierra* women had been appointed representatives of the town hall in their hamlets, and the post of mayor had been held by a woman between 2016 and 2019. Yet, the latter dynamic relates to the way partisan organizations in the State of Sinaloa implements provisions for parity through a blatant territorial division: The mayoral posts in the rich coastal municipalities are held by men and the marginalized *sierra* municipalities are assigned to women. Still, it remains that some women managed be dealt a hand in the game.

Conclusion

Women's abduction merges all of the following phenomena: indifference to consent, violent appropriation of a single woman, objectification and being made the stakes in violent male-to-male competition relationships, domestic exploitation of women by men, and domestic violence. The logics condensed in the practice of stealing do not exhaust the description of unique experiences, emotional dimensions in marital relationships, and the agency displayed by women. Faced with a menacing environment, my female interlocutors actively strive to find room for maneuver, in everyday practices as well as in major life decisions. Yet their violent appropriation as members of a vulnerable social group is constitutive of particularly heavy constraints and the affects are inescapably grounded in these material conditions. In this regard, Adriana's plight highlights both the extent of her efforts to protect herself and to resist and the brutality of the constraints she faces. Adriana is certainly a combative agent, but nevertheless a victim of rape, kidnapping, and forced marriage.

The problems raised by each moment of, and every commentary on, Adriana's abduction repeatedly reflected the entanglement of social relations in an illegal and predatory economy. The weight of the context is evident not only in the commonalities between the experiences I have described, but also in their singularities. Adriana's father's fight against her abduction is, as we have seen, inseparable from his relatively powerful status. It contrasts with the many fathers who publicly approve of the unions resulting from the stealing of their daughter, regardless of whether they agreed to it or not. The negotiations that result from women's stealing thus differ depending on the balance of power between the men and their relationship with drug-trafficking networks. These power relations shape the ability to steal as in *who can steal from whom*. The structuring of this triad (the woman, her father, and her abductor) thus depends on the same social dynamics as the appropriation of labor and land in the poppy economy.

This violent captation of resources, which includes women's bodies and work, results from a political economy characterized by social exclusion, criminalization, and territorial enclaving. The military repression against poppy cultivation and the historical marginalization of the region generate an atomized organization of production among small growers and feed the armed competition between drug-trafficking networks. In this context, the ability to circulate goods and the access to state agents become key resources. They enable those who hold them to appropriate the labor of captive producers and the surplus value of an illegal

transnational economy. The violence suffered by women is thus interwoven with these structural logics that insert the municipality of Badiraguato into the most predatory forms of global capitalism.

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