

5-9-2018

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### Recommended Citation

JA, "Rhetorical Power, The Disappeared, and Feminicidio" (2018). *Writing & Rhetoric MKE*. 35.  
<https://dc.uwm.edu/writingmke/35>

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## Rhetorical Power, The Disappeared, and Femicidio

5/9/2018

**\*\*Content Warning: some discussion of violence, sexual violence, and murder\*\***


UWM's Women's and Gender Studies department invited Melissa W. Wright to speak at the annual Vilas Trust Lecture series this past February. Wright is a feminist geographer and the current chair of the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies department at Pennsylvania State University. She presented her work titled "Against the Evils of Democracy: Fighting Drug Wars and Femicide in Mexico and the Americas," about the formation and strategies of social movements spurred by the increased disappearance of Mexican citizens. Graduate students were invited to a bagel hour discussion with Wright before the lecture series where she was able to discuss the intimacies of her research. With Latinx rhetorics on my mind, there were a few interesting highlights about the relationship between rhetorical power and activist discourse.

THE WOMEN'S & GENDER STUDIES VILAS TRUST LECTURE

**AGAINST THE EVILS OF DEMOCRACY:  
FIGHTING DRUG WARS AND FEMICIDE  
IN MEXICO AND THE AMERICAS**

PRESENTED BY MELISSA W. WRIGHT,  
THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

**FEBRUARY 7  
3:30-4:30 PM  
UWM LIBRARIES  
4TH FLOOR CONFERENCE CENTER  
RECEPTION TO FOLLOW**



presented by the Department of Women's & Gender Studies

**UWM**

<https://uwm.edu/womens-gender-studies/against-the-evils-of-democracy/>

Wright's scholarship explores the strategies of social movements in Mexico that address the alarming number of disappeared Mexican students and women. Many of these movements are led by *Mexicanas* who actively oppose the misogynistic language that discourages their involvement in the public sphere. Wright focuses on how rhetoric shapes public participation and democracy when women are excluded by social norms that dictate their submissive docility. Wright's primary example was the difference between *la mujer publica* (whore) and *el hombre publico* (citizen), which attaches a stigma to women who participate in the public spheres of politics and activism. This misogynistic discourse punishes women who seek change within their communities by aligning them with sex work, and obfuscating their message.

Movements like ***Ni Una Mas*** are primarily organized and supported by women, meaning that their activism is necessary particularly for addressing the problem of the disappeared.



One rhetorical strategy of these social movements is the use of the term 'disappeared' as opposed to dead or missing. This distinction is supposed to draw attention to the political power of the disappeared in addition to the responsibility of the government for their status. *Normalistas* have been at the forefront of Mexican activism throughout history and are named for the Normal schools started during the Revolutionary Era. These Normal schools continue in indigenous and rural areas of Mexico today, training high school graduates to become teachers for their communities. Wright discussed *Normalistas* as transforming from students to activists, creating a body of protestors for the disenfranchised students who are so often the victims of these disappearances. *Normalistas* use several rhetorical strategies to draw attention to the disappeared, who they believe have political presence even when lacking a physical one. Disappeared represents an action that is done to the students rather than something they do, and it is in opposition to the government-sanctioned term 'missing,' since the *Normalistas* believe the Mexican government is directly involved in these disappearances. They use other rhetorical strategies like staging classes of instructors teaching to empty chairs with the picture of a disappeared person taped to its back. These activists really focus on the rhetorical power of absence for these issues.



[http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/photography/2015/09/disappearance\\_of\\_43\\_mexican\\_students\\_from\\_ayotzinapa\\_in\\_2014\\_transformed.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/photography/2015/09/disappearance_of_43_mexican_students_from_ayotzinapa_in_2014_transformed.html)

Similar to the rhetorical power of the disappeared, Wright discusses the cultural and linguistic nuances of the term *feminicidio*. The disappearance and murder of Mexican women has been an issue since the mid-twentieth century. *Ni Una Mas*, the organization mentioned above, began in Mexico in the 1990s as an anti-femicide organization in response to the thousands of tortured and abused women's bodies found in the border region between Texas and Mexico. The women were discussed in public discourse by the government and the media as *las muertas*, or the dead, erasing their personhood and the context of their murder. Wright credits Mexican feminist activists for coining the term *feminicidio* in response to *las muertas*. *Feminicidio* marks the murders as a national trend and human rights violation, and directly connects the Mexican government to state sponsored violence and murder. This activist language changes the

meaning of the Anglo word femicide to encompass the consequences of political impunity. This rhetorical strategy emphasizes the necropolitics of the disappeared, and their political power in instigating change.



<http://imaginepeace.com/archives/11216>

Wright's presentation provided several interesting examples of the connection between rhetorical power and activist language. By changing popular discourse, Mexican activists have drawn attention to the institutional connections and lacking government action concerning the disappeared. These rhetorical strategies have brought *feminicidio* and student disappearance into the global spotlight.

- JA