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Book Review:
Garcia, Angela (2024) The Way That Leads among the Lost. Life, Death, and Hope in Mexico City's Anexos. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Alessa Junghans

Angela Garcia's *The Way That Leads among the Lost: Life, Death, and Hope in Mexico City's Anexos* is a work that intricately weaves together ethnographic research, personal memory, literary craft, and political testimony. In her multilayered narrative, Garcia opens new perspectives on ethnographic writing and deliberately explores the boundaries between scholarship, literature, and individual experience. As an anthropologist and daughter of a family shaped by addiction and poverty in New Mexico, she guides the reader into the world of the *anexos* – often clandestine and controversial drug rehabilitation centres – which have emerged as an ambivalent response to a pervasive crisis. Garcia's account reveals that anexos are not clearly defined institutions but rather social formations born out of necessity and improvisation. They occupy abandoned spaces in the interstices of urban life, marked by hierarchy, ritual, and control, but also by care, community, and the attempt to bring order to lives fractured by addiction and violence. At the heart of their function is their role as a last resort for families, especially mothers in marginalised communities, seeking to protect their children from escalating drug and gang violence and addiction.

Garcia does not remain a mere observer in her depiction; she integrates her own biography, vulnerability, memories, and traumas as an essential part of her analysis. The book stands as a remarkable example of autoethnographic research that radically shifts the boundaries between field and self, science and literature, analysis and testimony, as well as between objectivity and subjectivity. Its relevance lies not only in the empirical depth and analytical acuity with which Garcia describes life in the shadow of the drug war but especially in how she makes storytelling itself the subject. She combines rich everyday descriptions with unflinching reflections on violence, care, gender, migration, and the role of mothers and women in the context of Mexico's drug war. Her writing is anything but detached and analytical; it relies on narrative storytelling, literary compression, and stories inscribed in bodies and biographies. Ethnographic analysis thus becomes a form of 'witnessing' (p. 92), of co-suffering and co-narrating, which leaves the reader deeply moved.

The book opens with a scene emblematic of Garcia's approach: the mother Hortencia has her son Daniel picked up by so-called 'servers' (p. 3), men

who forcibly bring people into the anexos. It is a decision shaped by fear, love, helplessness, and violence. Garcia portrays this scene not with detachment but as a listener, witness, and someone who herself grew up with the ambivalence of care and violence. From the outset, it becomes clear: hope and despair, protection and control, as well as closeness and pain, are both institutionally and within families inextricably linked to the context of Mexico's drug war. Mothers become agents of contradictory actions, where protection can also mean harm and care is accompanied by coercion. This entanglement runs as a central motif throughout the book.

In Chapter 1, Garcia recounts her entry into the field: originally travelling to Mexico City to study the urban 'Health City' megaproject, she is drawn to the world of the anexos through personal encounters and biographical resonances. The violence of the drug war, the militarisation, and the omnipresence of death and disappearance form the backdrop against which anexos emerge as ambivalent shelters. Garcia reflects on her position as a citizen of the United States of America, the daughter of an addict mother, and a researcher with 'the luxury of doing whatever' (p. 19). Rather than pursuing her original research agenda, she makes the deliberate decision to engage deeply with the complex and painful realities of the anexos. Throughout the chapter, Garcia skilfully interweaves her own experiences of depression, childhood, and marital problems with the stories of people in the field.

The second chapter focuses on the materiality and symbolism of the spaces: the small rooms of the anexos, the *cuartitos* (p. 47), in the *vecindades* (poor neighbourhoods) become metaphors for social confinement and existential compression, but also for community and resistance. Garcia links the history of Mexican urbanisation, the politics of the *guerra sucia* (p. 49), the 1985 earthquakes, and neighbourhood transformations with the biographies of the residents. Particularly moving is her depiction of daily routines, endless cleaning, and the pervasive sense of repetition and stagnation – what residents refer to as the *lo mismo* (p. 73) – which paradoxically creates space for collective healing. Garcia uses the description of these spaces to reveal the entanglement of history, politics, and everyday experience. The *cuartitos* are places of confinement and solidarity. They reflect poverty, violence, and precarity, but also resistance and cohesion. She also powerfully connects these spaces to her own biography: the rooms where she sought refuge as a child become mirrors of the *cuartitos* and the anexos.

Chapter 3 begins with the 2013 massacre at the 'Heaven' club, located in one of Mexico City's safer neighbourhoods, and the disappearance of thirteen youths from Tepito, a historically stigmatised and resilient *barrio* (neighbourhood) in Mexico City, using it as a starting point to analyse the normalisation of violence and disappearance in Mexico. Garcia shows how relatives, especially women and mothers, become political actors by publicly naming and telling the stories of the victims. She links this collective mourning to

literary and artistic practices (for example, Sara Uribe's *Antígona González*) and reflects on ethnography's role as testimony. By reclaiming grief, mothers and activists transform mourning into a powerful act of resistance against dehumanisation, and ethnographic storytelling becomes a political practice that makes the invisible visible.

Chapter 4 centres on the mother figure as a symbol of care, suffering, resistance, and ambivalence. Garcia portrays women who bring their children, partners, or themselves to anexos to protect them from violence, addiction, and poverty. She analyses the gendered dimension of care work and the structural overburdening of women in contexts of precarity, migration, and institutional failure. Particularly striking is her description of the 'Casa Dolorosa', an anexo for women in Ecatepec, a populous but rather marginalised municipality on the outskirts of Mexico City, serving as a refuge from femicide and domestic violence. Garcia shows that care work in Mexico (as globally) is gendered and associated with immense physical, emotional, and economic costs. The decision to place a child or partner in an anexo is never clear-cut; it is shaped by guilt, hope, fear, and love. The 'ethics of ambiguity' (pp. 198, 216), referencing Beauvoir and Dufourmantelle, becomes a central category for understanding mothers' actions. Garcia makes it clear that in a world of state failure, there are no 'right' decisions, but only attempts to survive, protect, and love.

Chapter 5 focuses on the central therapeutic and social ritual of the anexos: the *desagüe* (pp. 154–169), a form of public, often violent self-humiliation and testimony. Through dense observations and precise descriptions, Garcia illustrates how residents of anexos are compelled to confess their deepest traumas, guilt, and wounds in front of the group. This process oscillates between catharsis, re-traumatisation, and collective healing. She details the course of a *desagüe*, describing how the atmosphere in the room becomes increasingly agonising for everyone involved. Particularly moving is Garcia's reflection on her own sense of feeling overwhelmed during the scene: 'And sometimes I was simply unable to stomach the horrific images and purposefully blanked out. But the atmosphere of the room got beneath my skin, literally. I began developing rashes on my arms and scratched at myself at night, unable to sleep' (p. 156). The reader is convincingly shown that these practices can be both healing and destructive. It becomes clear that the recurring *desagüe* rituals foster a unique intimacy and growing understanding of others' suffering. Through this practice, physically felt connections emerge amongst participants; connections that can foster community but also perpetuate existing structures of violence.

Chapter 6 expands the view to the transnational dimension of the anexos, showing how their practices and institutions spread through migration into Mexican communities in the United States, where they take on new forms. Garcia offers vivid insights into the *cuarto y quinto paso* groups (p. 172) in

California, which practice intense, often cult-like rituals of confession and healing. She herself participates in one such *experiencia* (p. 172) and reflects on the limits and possibilities of self-healing, community, and vulnerability in the context of migration, precarity, and violence. This reveals how the longing for belonging and healing manifests in exile through collective rituals and new forms of community.

The final chapter and epilogue bring together the book's central themes, placing life in the 'gray zone' (p. 206) – a sphere of moral and existential ambiguity – at the centre.[1] The anexos become spaces where life under conditions of emergency becomes visible, and where violence, care, hope, and grief coexist. Garcia concludes with a reflection on the limits and possibilities of care, community, and healing in contexts of violence and precarity. She advocates for an anthropology that is aware of its own situatedness, affective involvement, and responsibility, and that understands storytelling as a form of political and ethical practice. The book ends with the insight that anthropology is not just observation but always also participation and compassion and that storytelling must be seen as an act of recognition and hope.

Garcia's portrayal of the gray zone as an in-between space is, in my view, one of the book's most powerful dimensions. She describes this space not only analytically but also emotionally as a place of survival, uncertainty, and moral tension. I found this ambivalence deeply affecting, especially since Garcia offers no easy answers and leaves the reader with open questions. The search for structural causes or clear responsibilities remains deliberately incomplete; instead, the book centres the complexity and layered nature of social relationships. Garcia refrains from definitive explanations, which is both the strength and the challenge of her ethnographic testimony. In this tension, the book's societal relevance unfolds, as it becomes clear how closely human relationships, responsibilities, and dependencies are intertwined – not only in Mexico but wherever state structures fail and informal networks fill the gaps.

I was also deeply impressed by Garcia's sensitivity to the significance of objects and spaces in the everyday life of the anexos. By repeatedly focusing on seemingly insignificant details – worn-out chairs, locked doors, improvised altars, shared meals, and the tightness of the rooms – Garcia evokes a tangible sense of the anexos' emotional and social landscape. One feels how relationships, power, and vulnerability are condensed in materialities and how the seemingly insignificant suddenly becomes meaningful for understanding the everyday lives and realities of the anexados. Garcia demonstrates a unique sensitivity to the unspectacular and shows how important it is to take the inconspicuous seriously in ethnographic work.

1 The notion of the 'gray zone' originates from the writings of Primo Levi (1988), a Holocaust survivor and author.

Beyond the vivid and evocative descriptions, it is striking that the book's methodological approach remains largely open and deliberately departs from classical ethnographic procedures. Garcia avoids systematic accounts of field access, data collection, and analysis, opting instead for a dense, literary-reflective engagement with her research field. She moves between participant observation, autobiographical colouring, and literary compression without clearly separating or systematically reflecting on these layers. This openness creates a strong sense of proximity to the field and makes the ambivalences of the gray zone palpable, but it also carries risks: the boundaries between observation and identification blur, and Garcia's own biography repeatedly comes to the fore. The lack of an explicitly stated methodological foundation is part of the literary concept, but it raises the question of how much the book primarily reflects the author's subjective experience.

Nevertheless, it is precisely Garcia's writing style, structure, and creative execution that makes her work so remarkable. Her approach aligns with an anthropological discourse increasingly concerned with how anthropological knowledge can have an impact beyond academic boundaries. It is not just about analytical precision but also about public accessibility and the societal relevance of ethnographic writing. Paul Stoller (2023), for example, advocates for a sensuous, narrative ethnography that draws on techniques from literature, film, and poetry to convey complex social realities to a broader audience. Garcia fulfils this ambition in her work: her writing style opens access to the book's themes in a way that is understandable and relatable not just to academic readers but also to those outside the scholarly world.

In my view, Garcia's style is not merely a literary device but an expression of a stance. She does not write *about* the people she encounters but *with* them. Her language is poetic, fragmented, often painful, and always respectful. Notably, the voices of the anexados, mothers, padrinos, and migrants are heard – sometimes in long quotations, in dialogues, or in contradictory narratives. At the same time, Garcia remains critical of the practices she describes, repeatedly highlighting the ambivalence of the anexos. The dangers of coercion, abuse, and cult-like structures are openly considered.

In a time when violence, precarity, and insecurity are on the rise globally, *The Way That Leads among the Lost* is a book of utmost relevance and urgency. Garcia's work makes a significant contribution to contemporary medical and political anthropology, particularly in the field of critical addiction and violence research in Latin America. The book stands in the tradition of ethnographies that go beyond simple dichotomies of victim and perpetrator to centre the gray zones of social practice. Garcia's approach is closely related to works like João Biehl's (2005) *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* or Philippe Bourgois' (2003) *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*, which also show how marginalisation, state failure, and informal care networks give rise to new forms of community – and new forms of violence.

More recently, anthropology has increasingly confronted the effects of precarity, neoliberal policies, and state withdrawal (see Das 2015; Allison 2013). Garcia's book expands this debate by offering a perspective on Mexico and the anexos as spaces where global dynamics of violence, care, and exclusion converge in particularly intense ways.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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