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The Historiography of Femicide in Ciudad Juárez: Critical and Revisionist Approaches

Abstract

Nearly a quarter of a century has passed since activists first denounced as “femicides” the murders of women and girls occurring with alarming frequency around Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. The accumulating, gender-based murders generated a vibrant anti-femicide movement and captured public interest far beyond the transborder region. Analysis of the murders also ignited heated debates within academic and journalistic communities. A first generation of writers studying the murders largely analyzed them within this gender-based, femicide framework. More recently, a number of journalists and scholars have challenged that approach, arguing that the death of women in Juárez did not arise from any gender specificity, and that they could only be understood by reference to the more numerous murders of men in the region. These revisionist approaches dismiss those who frame the murders as femicides as either shoddy researchers or opportunists. In this article, I explore the historiography of these debates and place the revisionist analyses within a larger debate about the utility of empiricist approaches as a primary instrument of social explanation. I suggest that critical theory, in particular feminist analysis, provides a better conceptual tool for understanding the nature and causes of violence against women in Ciudad Juárez.

Keywords: Ciudad Juárez, femicide, femicide, neoliberalism, states of exception

Introduction

Nearly a quarter of a century has passed since activists in Ciudad Juárez first denounced as “femicides” (*feminicidios* in Spanish) the murders of women and girls occurring with alarming frequency in and around that city. [1] This distance has allowed us to come to some conclusions about the killings, nearly 1,500 to date (1993-2013), even as much remains unknown (Monárrez Fragoso “Message”). The feminicides, gender-based murders of women, generated an extensive grassroots response and captured public interest far beyond the transborder region. They also compelled a broad cultural response in the form of poetry, novels, crime fiction, documentaries, and major Hollywood features films, not to mention a tangle of soft-core pornographic thrillers. Singers and musicians engaged with the murders, as did playwrights, painters, and performance artists. The scholarly community also turned its attention to the events, producing numerous monographs and scores of academic publications.

For a first generation of scholars and journalists who explored and theorized the events in Juárez from within the analytic frame of “femicide,” it was violence against women, particularly female homicide, which generated the overarching crisis of violence in Ciudad Juárez, and it is violence against women that necessarily shapes our understanding of how the crisis originated and how it should be addressed (Staudt 4).

More recently a revisionist narrative has challenged that approach, arguing that by calling the murder of women in Juárez a “femicide,” activists and scholars are perpetuating a “myth” that “ultimately serve[s] to conceal, rather than reveal, the major factors contributing to a rising tide of violence in Juárez” (Frey 5). The violence of Juárez is not rooted in gender, Charles Bowden, one of the critics, recently insisted. “The problem is that life itself in Juárez, across the board, has been devalued” (qtd. in Powell 191). Another critic, Adam Jones, questioned why men, the “vast majority” of Juárez’s murder victims, have been consigned to “conceptual oblivion” in the debate. Nor is he reluctant to provide an answer: “Clearly, feminist discourse and activism has [*sic.*] a powerful interest in adopting such a strategy...Acknowledging that women murdered in *all* contexts in Juárez constitute a small minority of victims overall would threaten the potency of this framing” (Jones 27). While the acrimony embedded in Jones’ statement suggests a misogynistic undercurrent characteristic of some of the revisionists, it also directs us toward a methodological conflict in social analysis as we attempt to understand events in Juárez. These disparate perspectives can be seen as part of an older debate about differences between empirical and critical research approaches in the social sciences. The question raised by feminist scholars is whether empirical approaches, particularly statistical analysis alone, can offer the insights needed for us to understand complex social phenomena (Probert). Finally, we should not forget that the

family and friends of the victims continue to demand that the state take responsibility for finding and prosecuting the responsible parties. [2]

Turning Points

In 1996 Charles Bowden introduced the issue of border violence to a largely uninformed U.S. public. Bowden painted Juárez as “an entire city woven out of violence” (“While Sleeping” 51). Digging down, however, one found a more complex narrative of violence against women in the border city. From 1985-1992, an average of 5.5 women per year were murdered (9% of total murders), whereas the average jumped seven-fold over the following eight years [See Table 1]. Between 2008-2010, the annual average number of female deaths soared to 147 (Monárrez Fragoso and Cervera Gómez “Actualización” 96), a partial consequence of the upsurge of drug-war related violence that claimed 3,111 lives in Ciudad Juárez in 2010.

Table I: Murder of women and girls in Ciudad Juárez and the Juárez Valley, 1985-2000 (Monárrez Fragoso, “Violencia” 279)

Year	Total Cases of Violent Deaths	Feminicides (Murders of Women)
1985	53	5
1986	77	10
1987	60	4
1988	26	1
1989	82	13
1990	44	3
1991	69	2
1992	55	6
1993	123	24
1994	211	20
1995	320	50
1996	276	45
1997	247	41
1998	213	38
1999	179	25
2000	208	38

Numbers, however, can be imperfect messengers. Data coming out of local, Chihuahua state, and Mexican federal authorities are flawed, as are the statistics published by INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geográfica e Informática) and, ultimately, we must accept that the precise number of victims remains unknown, particularly as the shallow graves that local inhabitants continue to stumble upon make it evident that many more bodies remain to be found.

The killings in Juárez circulated first as journalistic discourse in the local border press, and then as activism (led by Esther Chávez Cano and a number of organizations in Chihuahua and Juárez formed by relatives of the victims), before being engaged as a field of scholarly inquiry, appropriated by writers and musicians from both sides of the border, including Carlos Fuentes, Roberto Bolaño (Driver), Los Tigres del Norte and Tori Amos, and finally circulated via Hollywood films including Gregory Nava's *Bordertown* and *The Virgin of Juárez* (both 2006) (Volk and Schlotterbeck). Given that this singular set of events produced knowledge of Juárez for markedly different audiences, was mediated by different critical criteria, and responded to different discursive demands, one should not be surprised that it also generated heated debates and exaggerated claims (e.g., Corona 109-110; Cohen). Unchallenged is the fact that Ciudad Juárez continues to face a social crisis whose meaning scholars, academics, activists, and artists struggle to understand even as the victims' families and friends persist in demanding that the state take responsibility for finding and prosecuting those responsible for the murders.

Understanding the Crisis: Femicide/Feminicide

Something changed in Juárez in the early 1990s, as the data make clear. In 1993 Esther Chávez, an accountant, and Judith Galarza, a human rights activist, raised an alarm about an estimated forty women and girls who had been killed in Ciudad Juárez (Wright, "Urban Geography" 409). It is true that violence in the border city was not uncommon before the 1990s, but its roots were often different. Early narratives of border danger located the transborder space as both denationalized (falling outside the scrutiny of national laws) and liminal (exempt from "civilized" standards). [3] Understanding the rising wave of violence directed against women and girls after 1992 required fresh interpretative efforts.

The analytical concept of femicide/feminicide has provided a historically contextualized approach to understanding the specific nature of violence that developed in the border area in the 1990s. The term "femicide" was first used by Diana Russell and Jill Radford in 1976 to indicate the "misogynist killing of women by men" (Russell and Radford 3). Julia Monárrez Fragoso applied it to the Juárez context in a presentation at the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez (UACJ) in 1998, but it had been circulating in Latin America since the 1980s (Monárrez Fragoso "La Cultura"). "Feminicide," which can be read in one fashion simply as a translation of *feminicidio*, has been employed to broaden a critical approach to female homicide. Feminicide understands the "murders of women and girls [as] founded on a *gender power structure*," occurring in both public and private spheres (with state and individual actors), and that is systemic and "rooted in social, political, economic, and cultural inequalities" (Fregoso and Bejarano 5). Such an approach not only

provides an intersectional framework for apprehending how gender, race, and class interact within a specific history, but also offers an analytic framework for understanding how *violence against men* is part of the self-same history that gave rise to violence against women. Some scholars have proposed that femicide should be understood as “genocide against women” (Lagarde y de los Ríos xv-xvi). Instead, I use the definition proposed by Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano who describe femicide as an “analytic and legal framework for locating state accountability around ‘crimes against women’s life and liberty’” (18). Systemic abuse based on gender is central to its conceptualization, not the notion of gender “cleansing” or mass killing.

As the murders and disappearances of women mounted in Ciudad Juárez, those in positions of authority frequently blamed the victims, claiming they were “looking for trouble” by being out at night, and suggested that the spectacle of female bodies being dumped around the city and in the desert was somehow “normal” for a city like Juárez (Tabuenca Córdoba and Nathan “Work, Sex”). Journalists and bloggers put forward a series of largely improbable motives to explain the upsurge of murders, including organ trafficking by serial killers, extreme pornography, or “sport” killing (particularly as carried out by “Los Juniors,” the sons of the wealthiest Juarenses). They also raised the specter of conspiratorial activities involving U.S. and Mexican border personnel. But little evidence materialized to support these claims.

Scholars turned their attention toward the examination of factors that were generating a social emergency on the border in the early 1990s. This work centered on three central themes, occasionally linked to others and often intertwined: intensification of the neoliberal economic model, the spread of drug trafficking and intra-cartel warfare, and the state’s reluctance to prosecute serious criminal activities. I will briefly examine each of these and then address additional revisionists’ critiques of the femicide frame.

1. Neoliberalism and States of Exception:

The U.S.-Mexican border, and Ciudad Juárez in particular, occupied the leading edge of neoliberalism’s launch in the Americas. Assembly plants sprang up along the border as early as 1965, spurred by Mexico’s Border Industrialization Program and taking advantage of U.S. trade laws that allowed for the re-importation of manufactured goods that paid taxes only on the value added by (low-wage) assembly abroad (Volk). In December 1992, the United States, Mexico and Canada signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); it became operative on January 1, 1994, significantly deepening neoliberalism’s impact on the border cities.

By the turn of the 21st century, Ciudad Juárez had become virtually unrecognizable from what it was 50 years earlier. Its population (1.2 million by 2000) exploded as migrants from all parts of Mexico moved north. Value added by assembly plants (*maquiladoras*) increased from one million pesos in 1974 to thirty-eight billion pesos in 2004, and maquila employment rose from 3,135 in 1970 to 249,509 by 2000 (Sklair 35, 99; INEGI). The once-compact city across the river from El Paso now licked far out into the Chihuahuan desert.

As has been thoroughly documented, in their early years the maquiladoras relied overwhelmingly on female workers. Nearly four of every five workers were women or girls in 1976. But hiring practices began to shift in the 1980s, and by 2004 an almost equal number of men and women worked in the assembly plants. Scholars have suggested a number of different explanations for this change, including the decline of so-called “maquila-grade females,” the expansion of production to include more jobs typically thought of as masculine (e.g., furniture assembly), and the creation of higher skilled, technology-oriented jobs that were prioritized for men (Fernández-Kelly; Iglesias Prieto; Sklair; Salzinger). Tamar Diana Wilson has argued persuasively that once the trope of the woman as the “ideal” worker became “institutionalized and accepted by the working class along the border, the [actual] need to employ women in preference to men diminishe[d].” Economic necessity could force men to *become* the “docile, nimble-fingered” (*i.e.*, “women”) workers coveted by employers (Wilson 4-5; Sklair 173). Wilson’s argument underscores the need to read statistical data critically, as the gendered meanings of “men” and “women” are not captured in the numbers alone.

Was the rise of maquiladora industrialization behind the increase in the murder of women and girls (Weissman, “The Political Economy”; Quiñones)? To the extent that the victims were themselves employed by maquilas, no. In their meticulous work, Julia Monárrez Frago and Luís Ernesto Cervera Gómez were able to determine the occupation of 45% of the 877 known victims killed between 1993-2010. Of these, about 5% (46) were classified as maquila workers (“Actualización y georreferenciación” 84-85). Yet, if few murder victims were employed by maquiladoras, scholars still point to a highly significant relationship between the intensification of the neoliberal, maquiladora economy and the spread of violence against women. As Alicia Schmidt Camacho argues, conflating violence in the workplace with femicide only “obscures the particular logic of gender terror taking place in the distinct spaces of home, work, and the street...” (“Body Counts” 33). The opening of wage labor possibilities to previously excluded women was not simply a process of expanding the potential pool of workers, or a “great discovery for capital,” as one author put it, but rather one that required local and complex negotiations regarding how these changes would be understood and implemented (Iglesias Prieto xxiv).

An early promotional brochure endorsing maquiladora industrialization was forthright about the social implications of a largely female workforce.

Traditionally the father, as provider and protector, has been the dominant member of the closely knit family. Now, it is often the daughter, working in an industrial plant, who becomes the main source of family income. [...] When the father does work, it happens not infrequently that the daughter earns more. Certainly male egos, of fathers and would-be boyfriends must suffer some deflation from this dramatic change in the economic influence of these young women. (Baerresen 34)

Maquila employment could make all women more vulnerable as it combined an employment model that was, above all in its early years, largely female-based at the same time that it maintained a “politics of reproduction that stigmatized [women] for working outside the home” (Wright, “Urban Geography” 408).

Furthermore, with the rise of the maquiladoras, Juárez became a city of migrants, a denationalized space where new residents lacked the social networks they enjoyed in their native communities and were turned into “disposable non-citizens” (Franco 2002, 13). This political economy generated a particular category of residents who were “displaced, rejected, or subordinated from social protections” (Weissman, “The Political Economy” 827). Women who worked in the maquilas were turned into commodities, “waste in the making” (Wright, *Disposable Women* 88-89), but no poor or indigenous woman in the city could escape the marginalization which neoliberalism generated. And it was this extreme level of marginalization that created the environment of murder.

Foucault argued that one of the “characteristic privileges of sovereign power was the right to decide life and death” (Foucault 135). To be sure, legal frameworks usually mediate the state’s determination of “who lives and who must die” (Mbembe 11), but, as Giorgio Agamben theorized, spaces “of exception” have always existed, temporal or spatial zones in which the sovereign could remove legal protections from some citizens (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*; Schmitt). One measure of sovereignty was the state’s power to reduce a subject to “bare life” by stripping him of his political existence (citizenship) (Agamben, *State of Exception*, Monárrez Fragoso, “El destino”). Thus, under Roman law, a man who committed certain crimes would become *homo sacer* (sacred man), included within the law to the extent that he could not be sacrificed in a ritual ceremony, but excluded from the law to the extent that he could be killed by anybody (Agamben, *State of Exception* 8). [4]

Agamben’s concept of the “state of exception” well describes the situation for poor women in Ciudad Juárez who have become *femina sacer*, vulnerable inhabitants in denationalized spaces, deprived of full citizenship rights, and reduced to the barest elements of existence within their far-

flung slum dwellings (*colonias*) (Eisenhammer 101). Cervera Gómez's spatial analysis of Juárez revealed a city with pronounced zones of social exclusion, marginal areas with high poverty rates and minimal urban infrastructure, where violence was considerably more prevalent than in other areas (51). The state slashed social services, particularly for education and such city services as lighting and transportation, in ways that adversely impacted the poor. Reductions in funding for police and security services, paralleled by an increase in privatized security services for the wealthy left the poor without protection, further shredded an already threadbare social contract, and left women vulnerable to high levels of domestic abuse (Nathan, "Movie Review"). A study of 57,000 households in the country found that 47% of women experienced a wide range of abuse, with Juárez registering one of the highest levels of reported domestic violence (Staudt 32). Debbie Nathan observed that aggression "skyrocketed" only after 1993, with the increasing impact of the neoliberal political economy on the city. Domestic violence, she continued, had gone "haywire in a place where older cultural norms have been severed and murder is now endemic" (Nathan, "Work, Sex" 30; Soto 430).

2. Drug Trafficking and the Juárez Cartel

Drug traffickers, using Juárez as a preferred port of entry to the United States, had been active for years prior to 1993 (Grayson), but some researchers linked the surge in violence in Juárez to the specific moment when Amado Carillo Fuentes assumed control of the Juárez cartel (Powell, Frey). According to Human Rights Watch, some 60,000 people died in Mexico in drug-related violence during President Felipe Calderón's (2006-2012) war on the cartels (1). More than 3,000 people were killed in Ciudad Juárez in 2010, at the height of the carnage. In the face of such statistics, "[l]abeling the murders in Juarez a 'femicide,'" as Erin Frey charged, "distracted scholars, activists, and journalists from seeing the female homicides as a function of the root cause of violence against men and women in the city: the drug trade" (27).

The category of "drug-related violence" most often includes battles between the cartels for control of the Juárez corridor, the "war on drugs" launched by Calderón (and supported for years by the United States), and the violence generated by an increasing number of small-time, ever more brutal local players (Nathan, "Movie Review"; Bowden, *Murder City*). Given the explosion of violence after 2006, it is no stretch to suggest that by resolving the "drug issue" one would also resolve *all* the causes of violence in Juárez. But just as not all the violence in Juárez is rooted in misogyny, so the drug trade cannot explain all the underlying violence. In many ways, in fact, these two sources of violence are co-determined, with the gendered structure of labor segmentation that characterized neoliberalism helping to "prepare the field" for the drug violence of the late 1990s

and early 2000s. Stephan Eisenhammer maintains that the neoliberal state of exception in Juárez not only produced women as denationalized workers in the assembly plants, but men as narcos (107). Further, as Clara Rojas, a professor of political rhetoric at the UACJ, has argued, the cartels saw that they could literally get away with murder when women began to be killed with impunity in Juárez in the early 1990s. “There is no way you can change anything if everybody thinks this city is a trash can for whatever they want to do,” Rojas observed (qtd. in Beaubien).

3. Impunity and the Mexican State

The far-reaching impunity enjoyed by criminals in Mexico is seen by some as an important factor helping to explain the rise of violence in Ciudad Juárez (Albuquerque, Andión Ibáñez). While the issue of impunity does not suggest why there was an upsurge in violence after 1992, it can help us understand why it could expand so dramatically at that time. The simple fact is that the Mexican state has failed to develop a criminal justice system capable of, or interested in, locating, arresting and successfully prosecuting those charged with serious crimes. Of the 1.5 million criminal complaints filed in 1998, only 149,000 arrest warrants were issued, and only 85,000 were actually served, a rate of less than 6%, and this ignores countless charges that were never filed because of the known futility of the action (Albuquerque 84). A study by the Monterrey Institute of Technology estimated that fully 98.5% of crimes in Mexico in 2009 went unpunished (qtd. in “Study”). Indeed, a common trope in the detective novels and fiction movies that take up the Juárez femicides is the absence, or criminal complicity, of law enforcement (Volk and Schlotterbeck).

The impunity debate raises the question of who shares responsibility for the violence beyond the perpetrators who have almost uniformly evaded arrest. Those who see the bloodshed as rooted in the social crisis produced by neoliberalism often absolve the Mexican state of responsibility, pointing to the weakness of the national state in the face of stronger, globalized corporate forces. In this case they point to the drug economy, observing that cartels have formed a parallel state that can dispute the Mexican state’s monopoly over the means of violence and have even (in certain areas) assumed the social service functions abandoned by the state itself (Segato). Camacho Schmidt, on the other hand, refuses to let the Mexican state evade its accountability, observing that “the state’s refusal to grant protection [to its citizens]...reveals [the] negation of poor women’s citizenship and [the] reproduction of class power and masculinist control of the border’s public sphere” (“Body Counts” 34, 49). Further, to suggest that the Mexican state is not accountable for the protection of its citizens because it is a weak player within a globalized system is to overlook the state’s opportunistic use of the crisis as an occasion to expand its own repressive authority.

Making a Case Against Femicide

The Juárez feminicides have drawn an exceptional degree of local and international attention. An organization known as “La Coordinadora de Organizaciones No Gubernamentales en Pro de la Mujer” (The Coalition of NGOs in Favor of Women), made up of approximately fourteen local organizations, formed in 1994 to pressure the government to protect girls and women, investigate the mounting crimes against women, and forcefully address the conditions in Juárez that promoted the violence (Wright, “Necropolitics” 711-12). U.S. journalists picked up the urgency of their message, and concern soon spread to feminist, human rights, and other campaigners in the United States and elsewhere. While it is beyond the scope of this article to explore what accounts for the success of the anti-femicide campaign in publicizing its cause, there is little doubt that these “deaths in the desert” generated a public awareness that continues to resonate in media and cultural circles. [5]

Nonetheless, many of the local organizations that were instrumental in raising the issue of femicide in the 1990s had begun to decline by 2005 even though the killings continued. At the same time, as we have seen, particularly as the mayhem in Juárez increased with the upsurge of cartel-related murders in 2006, a new set of voices emerged to challenge the scholars and activists who had focused on the deaths of females on the border. Some of the critics rejected their previously held positions; others were new to the debate.

Most revisionist critiques are centered in statistical analyses which indicate that more men than women have been killed in Juárez. To the critics, in light of these numbers, those who describe the murders as femicide are either willfully or unintentionally ignoring the “real” problem. As one critic remarked, “Hundreds of corpses...piled up around Juárez over the decades...*but the subjects here are the murdered men of Ciudad Juárez, who constitute the overwhelming majority of victims...*” Yet to acknowledge this, he continued, “would threaten the potency of this [femicide] framing” (Jones 25-27), and thus the decision to persist in the discourse of femicide can only be explained by opportunistic motives. In the words of Robert Andrew Powell, a U.S. journalist who moved to Juárez in 2009 to report on the city’s *fútbol* team:

Proponents of the Femicide [narrative], most with the best of intentions, have been extremely effective in taking the generalized violence in Juarez and turning it into something that supports their agenda. I came to call it the ‘femicide business.’ As in any business, there are people profiting. The traditional narrative has funded their clinics and/or won them academic positions and/or book deals and/or paid speaking opportunities at conferences (qtd. in Cohen). [6]

Charles Bowen, who introduced the Juárez murders to a U.S. readership, blames himself for having “created a Frankenstein’s monster without even knowing it! Suddenly,” he lamented, “there developed this cottage industry [around ‘femicide’].” And Molly Molloy, a research librarian and professor at New Mexico State University who has managed the valuable “Frontera List” blog for many years, came to question her earlier focus on the death of women on the border. “Femicide is like a religion,” she observed. “I used to be a true believer. Then when I started looking at the real numbers, I changed my opinion. Now I’m a heretic” (qtd. in Powell 191, 180). [7]

For the revisionists, scholars who theorized femicide were essentially self-promoters, attempting to sell their “product” to a sympathetic world. Many of these U.S.-based critics frequently deploy the same accusation that government authorities used in the early 2000s to discredit anti-femicide activists: they were “profiting from dead girls” (Wright, “Paradoxes”). In 2003, Chihuahua’s state attorney general denounced campaigners for “selling out the victims and their grieving families for their own political and economic gain” (Wright, “Necropolitics” 717-18; “Urban Geography”; Piñon Balderrama A1). As Wright argues, this reconfigured message did more to quell activist protests after 2005 than earlier campaigns that labeled the victims as prostitutes responsible for their own murders. As one of the leaders of *Mujeres de Negro*, an activist coalition in Ciudad Chihuahua, explained, the charge by the state attorney general “wasn’t true, but the accusation of ‘lucrar’ [profiting] was very damaging” (qtd. in Wright, “Necropolitics” 718).

When one looks beyond the charges of opportunism, the row between those who theorize the murders as femicide and their revisionist critics is located in a dispute about how we understand “real numbers,” as Molloy put it. Are statistics, which can help describe a reality on the ground, capable of providing an analysis of *what* was happening or *why*. This question is not posed as a postmodern observation on the contingency of “truth,” or as a challenge to the data that have been produced. Quantitative data help *locate* the crisis which ruptured the transborder region early in the 1990s. But for many whose analysis remains largely quantitative, the numbers are *all* we need to explain the crisis.

A variety of statistical analyses have emphasized that while female murder rates were higher in some Mexican border cities than in other non-border cities, the male homicide rates in those cities were higher yet, and that the femicide share of homicides in Ciudad Juárez was not only below that of other Mexican cities (Matamoros, Tampico) but below some U.S. cities (Los Angeles, Houston) as well (Albuquerque and Vermala 4-8). But even Albuquerque and Vermala observe that “femicide rates in Juárez are high and worrisome,” and that these rates are “50% higher in selected Mexican border cities than in other cities” (4). And Frey points to “one nagging statistic” that remains in her analysis: the ratio of female murder victims in Juárez was proportionately higher

than the national average (38-39). These “worrisome” numbers are also highlighted in a report by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights that found the rate of increase of female homicide in Ciudad Juárez between 1993-2001 to be roughly double that of the male homicide rate (“Violence Against Women,” Para 42; Red Ciudadana).

However, the argument that the rate of male homicides is the best predictor of the rate of female homicides is the one that deserves most attention, for it is through this empiricist door that revisionist critics of the feminicide analysis essentially disappear women from their arguments (Albuquerque and Vermala; Frey 22-23). Thus, Frey argues that “the correlation found through the statistical analysis implies that the same factors that contributed to the increase in violence against men could have contributed to the increase in female murders in Juárez” (23), and Powell simply claims that “[w]omen are being killed in Juárez because men are also being killed in Juárez” (185).

Feminist theory provides an understanding of the way that the gendered public sphere operates as a “mechanism of violence” that defines women’s exclusion from, and subjectivity in, the modern state. [8] Persistent violence against women around the world, and the existence of what one analyst has called “gendered zones of death” (referring to honor killings, but equally applicable to other states of exception where domestic and public violence against women is allowed and/or ignored) underline the reality that in Juárez, shaped as it has been by specific economic, social, and political histories, the death of women is *not* the same as the death of men. Even if we can find a numerical correlation between the deaths of males and those of females, this is not the same as saying that women are being killed *because* men are being killed. Women are being killed because they are women (Ahmetbeyzade 188), and often men are being killed *as if they were women*. The following two examples will demonstrate this argument.

1. Gender and Murder: Reading the Bodies

In describing the murder of women in Juárez, Cecilia Ballí observes that they disclose “a certain *style of killing*.” Most of the murders of women, including victims of domestic violence, “were sexualized in some way related to the broader wave of violence we’re seeing now against both men and women” (qtd. in Vulliamy, *Amexica* 163). Ed Vulliamy, a reporter for the *Guardian*, was struck by the same realization. He found that the “message” of the mounting deaths in Ciudad Juárez had “more to do with the killers than with the victims.” This is, he continued, “why I think the *feminicidios* ultimately signal a crisis of masculinity in Juárez, not a crisis with women” (162). What he misses, of course, is that to talk of a “crisis of masculinity” is but another way of talking of a “crisis with women.”

One of the most difficult aspects of reporting and studying the Juárez murders has been how to represent the victims without reducing their bodies to signifiers of powerlessness or violent appropriation. [9] Cultural production surrounding the feminicides often has eroticized the victims and reproduced charges that those killed were “asking for it.” [10] Charles Bowden initiated this trope in U.S. journalism. “After work,” he wrote in 1996, “some of the [maquila] girls go downtown to sell their bodies for money or food” (“While Sleeping” 48). And yet the victims in Juárez quite literally embody a narrative that can be read and understood, one that offers greater insight than statistics alone can (Monárrez Fragoso “Las víctimas”).

As has been widely reported, the bodies of about a third of the femicide victims, disproportionately poor and young, have been marked by clear patterns of sexual abuse that inscribe “domination, terror, social extermination, patriarchal hegemony, social class and impunity” (Monárrez Fragoso, “Serial Sexual” 154). While this has been widely discussed elsewhere, less attention has been focused on the bodies of many male victims. Reading these bodies closely, we find that they disclose the marks of what Vulliamy earlier described as a “crisis of masculinity.” In fact, they mimic the sexual abuses to which female victims were subjected.

Dr. Hiram Muñoz works for La Procuraduría, the District Attorney’s office, in Tijuana, Baja California, where he has learned to decipher the messages inscribed on the murder victims. “Each different mutilation leaves a message,” he remarked. “If the tongue is cut out, it means the person talked too much—a snitch, or *chupro*... If you are castrated...you may have slept with or looked at the woman of another man in the business” (qtd. in Vulliamy “The Terror”). In September 2012, Eladio Martínez Cruz, a 24-year old man, was found crucified on a traffic sign in Contepec, Michoacán. He had reportedly been arrested, but then was taken from police custody, tortured, castrated, and crucified (Sullivan). The anonymous journalists behind the “Blog del Narco” report an astonishing number of similar sexual mutilations on their blog and in a recent book, *Dying for the Truth: Undercover Inside the Mexican Drug War* (Fugitive Reporters; Blog). The gendered nature of these “messages” is unmistakable.

David Campbell reminds us that violence can be understood as an act that implicitly testifies “to the entailments of identity at work, such as that of gender and social class” (110). What the sexual mutilations of many male victims tell us is that identities are being re-gendered as female. In this sense, one can only understand male victimization by reference to female marginality in a state of exception. This re-gendering of male victims recall Wilson’s analysis of the maquiladora plants where men began to replace women workers. “Due to recurrent economic crises,” she wrote, “high male underemployment and unemployment, the precipitous fall in real wages, and persistent inflation, male workers [we]re becoming docile, nimble-fingered, and non-militant” (15). In other

words, social forces defining the logic of neoliberalism required that men *become* the “ideal” female maquiladora labor force. A positivist analysis based on statistics alone would have only observed an increasing number of male workers. In the same way, to look only at numbers of men and women killed in Juárez is to remove an understanding of how women’s social marginality created the conditions and forms of violence against men as well as women.

2. The Juárez Femicides and the Disappeared of Argentina

Alicia Schmidt Camacho has observed that “[t]he 15-year *feminicidio* in Ciudad Juarez and Chihuahua marks a campaign of gender terror that...mimics the repressive campaigns of Latin American ‘Dirty Wars’” (“Ciudadana X” 259). The two cases are quite distinct in a number of ways, not the least because the large-scale disappearances and murders associated with the “Dirty Wars” in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, in particular, came at the hands of the state itself and were designed specifically to further a distinct political agenda. These states were characterized by a formal state of exception; legal and constitutional rights had been abrogated for all. In Mexico, on the other hand, while there is abundant evidence that the state was either complicit with the murders of women and girls on the border, or uninterested in stopping them, a state of exception existed primarily in relation to specific forms of violence against women. And yet, the history of state-directed repression in Argentina, in particular, provides new insight for understanding murders in the Mexico-U.S. transborder region. As Luís Fondebrider, an Argentine forensic anthropologist, recently argued, “What happened in Ciudad Juárez showed to the world that in many countries, women for different reasons have been targeted—have been kidnapped, raped and killed. Very often, this is not due to political reasons, it’s due to the condition of women” (Binkowski).

Disappearances in the Southern Cone countries—the unacknowledged arrest and (often) murder of regime opponents or innocent bystanders—were matters of state policy in Brazil after 1968 and in Chile following the 1973 military coup. But it was in Argentina, both prior to and after the 1976 coup, that the process reached its appalling pinnacle, and where it has been estimated that some 25,000 people were “disappeared” (Feitlowitz).

One of the apparently contradictory features of the disappearances was that they often involved the public performance of an act intended by its very nature to be private. Previous military dictatorships in Argentina had jailed, exiled, and even murdered their opponents, but the victims weren’t “disappeared” or removed from public records and state responsibility. The key to the idea of disappearance as a state policy was in the military’s ability to argue a lack of all knowledge of

the individual in question. And yet in many of the actual kidnappings, the initial move to “disappear” the subject was enacted in public with the perpetrators fully aware they were being witnessed by many, either direct family members or the general public (Feitlowitz). Few Argentines were oblivious to the meaning of the unmarked dark green Ford Falcons that ferried targeted individuals to secret prisons and, most likely, death. The answer to this seeming paradox is that the open display of a private act was intended as a means of spreading fear among a larger public. These were performances engineered for their demonstration effect, public displays of state power.

We can see the same logic at play with the Juárez femicides. As Monárrez Fragoso writes, “although the killers target only a few women, the most vulnerable, the message is for all women” (“Serial Sexual” 162). The deaths of men in drug-related violence, and the public and gruesome display of their corpses, were also performative. But women, particularly poorer, indigenous or *mestiza* women, became symbols of a vulnerable population on the margins of the community. Their murders, as Corona and Domínguez-Ruvalcaba pointed out, were cultural, not random, acts (9). That their bodies were scattered like rubbish in the desert was a sign that all poor women were disposable. [11]

Conclusion

If something was unusual about the feminicides of Juárez, the ever-growing number of women and girls who were murdered beginning in the early 1990s, it wasn't that females were being murdered. The gender-based killing of women in many parts of the world was, and remains, all-too common. What was unusual was the significant response the murders elicited. Spurred by local activism, opposition to the Juárez killings spread far beyond the border area, manifesting as activism, scholarship, artistic presentation, and popular culture. Scholars working in a variety of disciplines have examined the murders seeking some explanation for why they took the form they did, why they occurred when they did, and whether they fit into enduring patterns of violence against women or suggested characteristics specific to a neoliberal political economy.

This dynamic, perhaps unprecedented response undoubtedly encouraged the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to send a Special Rapporteur for the Rights of Women to visit Juárez in the spring of 2002, resulting in a Special Report detailing the human rights abuses that had occurred on the border. The Rapporteur made dozens of recommendations to improve the situation in Juárez (Inter-American 2003). In November 2009, responding to a suit brought by mothers of three of the victims and filed by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Inter-American Human Rights Court held Mexico responsible for the murders of the three young

women and ordered the government to compensate their families, formally apologize, and memorialize the deceased (Campo Algodonero).

Yet even in the face of these international findings, or perhaps because of them, pressure to discount or dismiss the gender-specific nature of the victims has mounted. Along the border, local activist responses to the feminicides ebbed after 2005 following a concerted government attempt to label the activists as opportunists trafficking in the murders for personal benefit. Such a charge played a decisive role not only in setting local campaigners against each other, but also in weakening anti-femicide work in general. A similar drive developed within some academic and journalistic circles where revisionist critics charged those denouncing the murders as feminicides with manufacturing a non-existent crisis in order to attract funding or further their own careers.

Some of the revisionists, it seems clear, are intent on undermining the work of a generation of campaigners, even as they profess sympathy for the victims and their families. “I believe that what happened to the dead women of Juárez is bad,” Robert Powell wrote. “It is horrible! But it isn’t all that mysterious. What happened to them—what is still happening to women in Juárez—is what would be happening to a percentage of women in any city in the world where the government has given up on law and order” (191). By normalizing the murders, Powell essentially discounts them.

Yet other accounts deserve more serious consideration and lead one to question if not their political intent, then their specific research methodology. These critiques are positivist accounts rooted in statistical analysis. For example, Albuquerque and Vemala concluded that “male homicide rate is the most important explanatory factor of femicide rates” (8). Other researchers extended that analysis to conclude that, “...the so-called femicide in Juárez...was not caused by misogyny, patriarchal backlash, female disposability, or a psychopathic serial killer.... What occurred in Juárez could be called a Juarencide, but not a femicide” (Frey 38). On a purely methodological level, the revisionists’ rejection of a gender-specific framing of the murders, their insistence that they are not about “misogyny” or “patriarchal backlash,” raises the question, as we saw when discussing employment trends in the maquiladoras, of how much statistics by themselves can tell us about the deaths of women and girls in the transborder region.

The revisionists’ positivist approach recalls debates that reach back at least to Kant, Marx, and the Frankfurt School, particularly the work of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (Tarr). While space limitations do not allow a full discussion, at issue is how we come to recognize reality. For “positivistic sociology” (Lazarsfeld 58), observation is the primary basis by which we understand prevailing reality. Objective forms of data gathering must be employed to obtain quantifiable data and, by those means, an accurate view of social reality. Positivism assumes that facts are value free, that, in this case, one death on the border is equivalent to any other.

Adorno, in arguing against empiricism, insisted that no object is simply “given” because objects are historical and have the potential to change. A critical theory approach argues that “facts” by themselves are incapable of indicating human intentions; they are “acted out and shaped” within a society that is not value-free. Thus “positivism’s claim to discover the ‘value-free facts’...has to be methodologically grounded in a sort-of feigned ignorance of the social issues—the power struggles, the ideological elements, and so on that are actually present in the situations under study” (Probert 1655). As a mode of analysis intent not just on describing society but on changing it, critical theory provides “an analysis of the conditions of possibility and the limits of rational faculties undertaken by reason itself” (qtd. in Supa n.p.). Quantitative modeling, such as that developed by Albuquerque and Vermala, or by Frey’s associates at Yale, can provide one description of reality, but it can also reduce or diminish what is complicated, producing a picture that is incomplete or distorted (D. Scott).

As social science research has increasingly adopted quantitative approaches, what is lost, as we have seen in much of the revisionist critique of femicide research, is a comprehension of deeper social processes that are historically shaped and critically determinative. As much as statistical analyses are used to “prove” that the death of men in Juárez reveals why women are being killed, they are incapable of providing the analysis that is needed. In the end, what a feminist analysis of the Juárez murders discloses is how women’s social marginality not only subjects them to violence, but can help us understand specific forms of violence against men, as well.

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the issue editors, particularly Laura Gillman, for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I would also like to recognize the important collaboration of all the femicide panel participants at the 2014 European Association for American Studies conference in The Hague for helping me develop this paper further. Any shortcomings that remain are, of course, mine alone.

Endnotes

[1] I will discuss my use of “femicide” as opposed to “femicide” later in the paper. By occasionally placing it in quotes I acknowledge that, as an analytic concept to explain the murder of women and girls in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua, it remains a contested term. Further, since those who argue against gender as a salient factor in understanding the Juárez murders employ the term “femicide,” I will use both although the concept of “femicide” is consistent with my own analysis. See Lagarde y de los Ríos, Marcela. “Preface: Feminist Keys for Understanding Femicide. Theoretical, Political, and Legal Construction.” *Femicide in the Americas*. Ed. Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010: xi-xxviii. Print. To explore its uses and limits in different contexts, see Bueno-Hansen, Pascha. “Femicidio. Making the Most of an ‘Empowered Term.’” *Terrorizing Women. Femicide in the Americas*. Ed. Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010: 290-311. Print.

[2] Local officials and the wealthy Juárez power structure have their own framing narrative which blamed the women for being out at night in places likely to get them into trouble, insinuating that they were prostitutes or “loose women.”

[3] See, for example, Martínez, Oscar J. *Border Boom Town: Ciudad Juárez Since 1848*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1978, and Castillo, Debra and Maria Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba. *Border Women: Writing from La Frontera*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002. Orson Well’s classic 1958 film, *Touch of Evil*, gives a good portrayal of this early narrative.

[4] See, in particular, Mbembe, Achille. “Necropolitics.” *Public Culture* 15:1 (2003): 11-40; Ahmetbeyzade, Cihan. “Gendering Necropolitics: The Juridical-Political Sociality of Honor Killings in Turkey.” *Journal of Human Rights* 7:3 (2008): 187-206; Schmidt Camacho. “Ciudadana X: Gender Violence and the Denationalization of Women’s Rights in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.” *Terrorizing Women. Femicide in the Americas*. Ed. Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010: 275-289; Debin, Megan Lorraine. “Bloody Body Doubles: Performing Testimony in the Borderlands.” *CSW Update* May 2013; and, in this issue, Julia Monárrez Fragoso, “El destino de la humanidad en tiempos inhumanos.”

[5] Wright, in “Urban Geography” and “Necropolitics,” provides the most trenchant analysis of the growth and demise of the anti-femicide movement in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City.

[6] In a similar vein, F. Meza Rivera denounced the “pseudo-organizations and pseudo-leaders who benefit (*lucran*) not only politically, but also with the donations that they receive in bank accounts in the name of women assassinated in Ciudad Juárez.” “Sí, Reciben Donativos las ONGs.” *El Herald de Chihuahua* 25 Feb 2003. Web. 25 Jun 2014.

[7] The “Frontera List” blog can be found at: <http://fronteralist.org/tag/molly-molloy/>.

[8] Among many others, see Landes, Joan. *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988 and Scott, Joan. *Gender and the Politics of History*. Rev. ed. New York: Columbia UP, 1999. Print.

[9] A number of articles in this issue take up this challenge. See, in particular, those by Aishih Wehbe-Herrera, Tobias Jochum, Laura Gillman, and Edward Avila. Other important sources include Domínguez-Ruvalcaba, Héctor. “Death on the Screen: Imagining Violence in Border Media.” *Gender Violence at the*

U.S.-Mexico Border: Media Representation and Public Response. Ed. Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2010: 61-78; Herrera, Sonia, et al. *Documentaries on Femicide in Ciudad Juárez*. Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya, 2010; and Messmer, Marietta. "Transfrontera Crimes: Representations of the Juárez Femicides in Recent Fictional and Non-Fictional Accounts." *American Studies Journal* 57.3 (2012): n. pag. Web. 30 Aug 2014. <<http://www.asjournal.org/archive/57/202.html>>.

[10] Monárrez Fragoso, Julia. "Serial Sexual Femicide in Ciudad Juárez, 1993-2001." *Aztlán* 28.2 (Fall 2003): 154. See as well: Staudt, *Violence and Activism*, 2, and Skrapec, Candice. "The Morgue Was Really from the Dark Ages': Insights from a Forensic Psychologist." Ed. Alicia Gaspar de Alba. *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2010: 245-253.

[11] For Juárez, see Wright, "Urban Geography," and Schmidt Camacho, "Body Count." On Argentina, among others, see: Agosin, Marjorie. *Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Linea Fudadora): The Story of Renée Epelbaum, 1976-1985*. Stratford, Canada: Williams-Wallace, 1989; Guzman Bouvard, Marguerite. *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1994; Fisher, Jo. *Mothers of the Disappeared*. Boston: South End P, 1989; and, Taylor, Diana. *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's 'Dirty War'*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997.

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Suggested Citation:

Volk, Steven S. “The Historiography of Femicide in Ciudad Juárez: Critical and Revisionist Approaches.” *forum for interamerican research* 8.2 (Sep 2015): 20-45. Available at: <www.interamerica.de>