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**Guest Editors:**

**Laura Gillman**

**Tobias Jochum**

**Laura Gillman** (Virginia Tech) and **Tobias Jochum** (Free University Berlin)

Nowadays, we know too much, and yet we continue to know nothing. In the process of learning; reading; researching; raising consciousness; signing petitions; writing stories, poetry, and music; making art; organizing conferences; and collecting anthologies, there are only two things that have changed. The number of victims continues to grow. And now the Juárez femicides have become a legend.

—Alicia Gaspar de Alba & Georgina Guzmán, *Making a Killing* (2010)

### **New Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Femicide at the U.S.-Mexico Border**

For more than two decades now, Gloria Anzaldúa's famed metaphor for the U.S.-Mexican border as an open wound *where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds* has been imposing itself in shockingly literal manifestations of increasing intensity. The case of Ciudad Juárez, plagued by a gruesome epidemic of extreme gender violence since at least 1993, stands out. When at his presidential inauguration in December 2006, Felipe Calderón declared open warfare against Mexico's transnationally operating drug cartels, the city's international infamy for its "femicides" was already firmly established. [1] His subsequent deployment of the army followed by the federal police force triggered an unprecedented escalation of violence that turned the border metropolis into the world's statistical murder capital for three consecutive years (2009-11). Altogether Juárez accounted for over 10,000 of the at least 60,000 casualties that "Calderon's War" claimed nationwide during his administration. Add thousands of never investigated disappearances and tens of thousands of local residents who abandoned their homes, fleeing bloodshed and economic downturn, plus a level of criminal impunity approaching a hundred percent (not least exonerating the numerous blatant human rights violations committed by the federal forces [Human Rights Watch]) to complete a dire panorama of a hemorrhaging community.

Faced with the dramatic upsurge of violence in Juárez, scholars introduced the term *juvenicidio*, designating the killing of the young, and increasingly deploy postcolonial theories to conceptualize what many regard as a de facto war against the underclass merely masquerading as military operations against sophisticated crime organizations (Wright "Necropolitics"). [2] But whatever the rationale behind the metastasizing mayhem of late, it effectively obscured the insidious continuation of violence against women to the larger public. With the homicidal violence finally in decline since 2012 (Figuera), the dust now settles on a traumatized and fundamentally transmuted urban setting, one that urgently demands—once again—our clear-eyed critical attention.

Why then a continued focus on gender violence against female victims in a contemporary context where predominantly young men and boys are being "killed like flies," as one critic put it (González Rodríguez, qt. in Driver)? Indeed, both sincere and disingenuous voices who question the justification of the term, the study and even the very reality of feminicide have regained purchase, pitting *relative* percentages of female murder victims, which dropped below the ten percent mark during the escalation of violence, against the record-breaking rise of male-on-male murder (Hooks); in absolute terms, of course, the number of female murder victims skyrocketed as well. It is also true that formerly neglected hotbeds of feminicidal violence have emerged to challenge Juárez' presumed preeminence when it comes to the killing of women: the state of Mexico, Guerrero, Oaxaca and Chiapas within Mexico, and Guatemala and El Salvador in Central America, all exhibit alarming proliferations of systemic violence against vulnerable female populations (Bejarano & Fregoso *Terrorizing*). If only Ciudad Juárez were as exceptional as some of the earlier studies might have implied!

Let us be clear, however; the *myth* that reemerging revisionists and number crunchers purport them to be, the Juárez feminicides are certainly not. [3] That we know and talk about them at all is to the credit of a vibrant activist movement that successfully politicized *las muertas de Juárez* against an initial discourse of silence and evasion. Women and girls continue to be exposed in the public and the private sphere to high risks of assault, abduction, and sexual violence in a climate of impunity. *Juarenses* sociologist and contributor to this issue, Julia Monárrez Fragoso, who has been chronicling the feminicides at the border since they were first registered, updated the aggregate death toll of murdered women in the past two decades in Juárez to nearly 1,500 victims, more than doubling any established pre-2008 estimates (Monárrez Fragoso "Analysis"; González Rodríguez *Machine* 71-75). Today, as the city's putative return to normalcy is hailed in international news outlets such as the New York Times (Cave), local journalists and intellectuals, along with the still ubiquitous missing-person posters adorning walls and lampposts around the historic center, attest to the fact that, whereas slain female corpses indeed no longer turn up in erstwhile frequency, women and girls do continue to simply vanish at an alarming rate.

There can be no doubt that the mass killing of young marginalized men at the border (and elsewhere [4]) merits keen attention and careful analysis, but in no way does this infer that *feminicide* as a concept had forfeited any of its pertinence. Utilizing one kind of violence in order to discredit and silence inquiry in another persistent phenomenon purports a rather false and dangerous dichotomy. The term *femicide* was theorized by Diana Russell and Gill Radford in 1992 and can be defined in the broadest of terms as the "killing of women for being women" (Monárrez Fragoso, "Serial" 9). The recent modification to *feminicide* constitutes, first of all, an adjusted re-translation from the Spanish *feminicidio*, for *femicidio* in Spanish simply denotes the homicide of a woman, irrespective of any gender dimensions. We favor the use of this new term—following Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano, editors of the interdisciplinary anthology *Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Américas*—as it takes the constructed nature of gender as well as the dynamic relations of power between gender, sexuality, race, and class into account to thus "shift the analytic focus to how gender norms, inequities, and power relations increase women's vulnerabilities to violence" (Introduction 3-4). To reiterate the obvious, men are not killed for being men. They are, however, victimized under very much the same system of impunity that protects and enables the misogynist practice of feminicide. Anyone interested in probing into the conditions behind *juvenicidio* could do worse than consult the existing scholarship on feminicide and heed the lessons of the anti-feminicide movement in Ciudad Juárez. As Melissa Wright points out, the focus on feminicide has unlocked interconnections between violence, economy, and politics, and feminist perspectives remain indispensable to understand how gender is key for the distinct ways in which both feminicide victims and young male murder victims have been blamed for their own deaths by official discourses ("Necropolitics" 726). [5]

While the scholarship on feminicidal violence against subaltern women on the U.S.-Mexico border remains a shifting and contested terrain, what is beyond dispute is the remarkable wealth of cultural responses and knowledge production that has been accrued around the Juárez cases over the past twenty years. The myriad songs and poems, comics and graphic novels, articles and essays, book-length fiction and nonfiction accounts, feature films and documentaries, art exhibitions and installations, public gatherings and performances, well-intentioned to ill-conceived, dedicated to the victims and their families, creating awareness, empathy, outrage or merely voyeuristic titillation, have become too numerous to list with any claim to completeness. [6]

Meanwhile, scholars from both sides of the border have dedicated scores of studies on the causes of the violence, seeking to fill the epistemological vacuum left by a failing criminal justice system. Crossing disciplinary, discursive and geographical boundaries to enter into productive dialogues and political coalitions in their quest to diagnose and alleviate the intolerable situation, they gradually untangled an intricate web of interrelated socioeconomic, geopolitical, and cultural

pathologies converging in Ciudad Juárez to facilitate the conditions behind the violence: a combination of a totalizing political and cultural disenfranchisement and hyper-exploitation of the subaltern border woman on the one hand and a pervasive system of criminal impunity for the perpetrators on the other. The result is a comprehensive, multi-layered, and steadily evolving corpus of scholarship that offers a host of overlapping, interconnected, and competing theories regarding the root causes of gendered violence, as well as proposed strategies addressing how best to counter them.

Early in the debate, a disproportionate focus on transnational economic forces popularized the so-called *maquiladora* narrative. Particularly U.S. critics emphasized the cataclysmic demographic, cultural, and socioeconomic shifts inflicted on the region by NAFTA. Some of these accounts displayed a lack of critical engagement with the local culture, communities, and institutions, and a problematic inclination towards sensationalism (Bowden, "While You," *Laboratory*; Nathan). Cogent if at times constrictive correlations were drawn between femicide and the feminization of unskilled labor in the export-processing plants along the border [7]; for instance, social geographer Melissa M. Wright exposed one of the more sophisticated links between the *maquila* industry and the murders in her deconstruction of the myth of the disposable third world woman. [8]

In November 2001, the discovery of eight raped, tortured, and murdered female bodies in an empty lot known as *Campo Algodonero*, uncharacteristically close to the city center, marked a new level of flagrancy for femicidal violence in Ciudad Juárez. The disastrous handling of the so-called Cottonfield Murders became emblematic for the authorities' unacceptable incompetence and willful misconduct. Together with the production of the 2001 documentary *Señorita Extraviada/Missing Young Woman* by activist-filmmaker Lourdes Portillo, widely disseminated in human rights circles, and a damning report by Amnesty International titled "Intolerable Killings" (2003), the case became a powerful catalyst that galvanized international attention and helped a diverse transnational anti-femicide movement gather momentum in the early-to-mid 2000s.

The result was a new proliferation of femicide scholarship produced on both sides of the border that provided critical correctives and expansions of preceding accounts. Feminist scholars with close biographical and/or professional ties to the borderlands and local grassroots initiatives or NGOs led the way with an applied type of scholarship that operated with a passion and urgency openly driven by an activist impetus to achieve social justice (Julia Monárrez Fragoso, Alicia Schmidt Camacho, Cynthia Bejarano, Rosa-Linda Fregoso, Melissa M. Wright). Sociologists probed into subaltern subjectivities of those women most at risk (Schmidt Camacho "Body Counts", "Ciudadana") and rectified prevalent misconceptions about the victims, clarifying, for instance, that the vast majority of targets were poor young migrants from the rural Mexican South, culturally



uprooted and politically, socially and geographically marginalized in their new home while *maquiladora* workers per se only constituted up to a fourth of total femicide victims: victims also typically included students, housewives, domestic servants, service industry employees, sex workers and drug traffickers (Monárrez Fragoso "Serial"). Political scientist Kathleen Staudt questioned the exclusive fixation on the dramatic serial kidnap-rape-and-torture murders by introducing pervasive domestic violence to the equation. [9] Feminist scholars also pondered the cultural forces of male backlash against women entering the workforce, and denounced media discourses that sensationalized the violence, objectified the bodies and colluded with the state in blaming the victims, thereby re-victimizing their families and discrediting grassroots justice movements (Staudt 49; Fregoso). Mexican voices, meanwhile, kept railing against the institutionalized system of absolute impunity, nurtured by rampant corruption throughout all levels of government (González Rodríguez *Huesos*; Monárrez Fragoso "Serial").

After the mid-2000 peak of activist momentum, the critical discourse kept diversifying, as it grappled with increasing frustrations and impasses experienced among anti-femicide activists, who proved unable to make strides against institutional inertia and impervious criminal forces. [10] Scholarship reflected the rising sense of fatigue in the border communities and pushed, on the one hand, for new and more effective human rights frameworks [11], and on the other, shifted the focus from the epistemological impulse to identify and inhibit the forces primarily responsible for the perpetuation of the killings to critical interrogations of how the femicides were being represented in public discourse. Differentiated (self-)evaluations of movement activism and acute discourse analyses of official, documentarian, academic, and artistic treatments of femicide in multiple genres and media also led to a deeper reflexivity with regards to the ethics, politics, and inherent practical and discursive limitations of academia (Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán; Corona & Domínguez-Ruvalbaca; Driver). This new phase also coincided with European scholars taking notice and actively partaking in the debate for the first time (Messmer).

The more recent femicide scholarship (including substantial contributions by several of the present collection's authors), thus readily acknowledges its own political shortcomings with regard to subaltern subjectivities, vulnerabilities and violence experienced in marginalized communities on the border, while nonetheless strengthening the resolve to find new ways to overcome their contradictions (Corona & Domínguez-Ruvalcaba 6-9). In addition to impassioned preambles that re-assert strong commitments to social justice, recent interdisciplinary anthologies—namely *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and la Frontera*, edited by Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzman, *Terrorizing Women: Femicides in the Américas*, edited by Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano, and *Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Media*



*Representations and Public Responses*, edited by Ignacio Corona and Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba (all published in 2010), also prominently incorporate testimony. As the coeditors of the latter compilation emphasize the urgently needed "strategy for 'building bridges'" across the gaps that divide the academy from the community and the humanities from social sciences (7), so we, the co-editors of this special issue, hope to build a bridge of understanding by reaching across continents for a transatlantic connection around justice, activism and scholarship.

The contributors of this special issue draw on the aforementioned scholar-activist tradition of feminist and transborder scholarship. Our collection is unique in that it brings together scholars from different geocultural sites—Europe, the United States and Mexico—to raise awareness regarding the feminicides, thereby widening the sphere of coalition building. Several of the collected articles also venture to subtly shift the location of knowledge southward, unsettling the totalizing hegemony of Western European and Anglo-American epistemologies by turning to local witnesses, artists, and intellectuals from Mexico and other representatives of the Global South as jumping off points for critical reflection.

Acknowledging thusly the geopolitics of knowledge, we, the contributors, ask questions, such as: What are the experiences of those who have been most intimately touched by the violence and what knowledge have they acquired on the ground? What strategic interventions and coalitions have scholars and activists on the Northern side of the North-South divide as well as from transcontinental sites made to engage perspectives of the global South and what strategic interventions can they make to help shift the location of knowledge about the feminicides from the global epicenters of Europe and the Americas to the global South? How can scholars and activists and cultural workers situated in such geopolitical sites form linkages of knowledge production within contemporary cultural work as well as within social and cultural theory capable of disrupting not just the physical violence but also the configuration of knowledge hierarchies that underpin and exacerbate the violence?

While we are conceptually indebted to the already important body of cross-border scholarship on the feminicides, in particular, the aforementioned recent volumes, this issue nonetheless offers several other unique features that distinguish it from previously published works. The origin of the current issue provides an important context in which to consider the analytic of femicide. This idea for this project grew out of two panels on femicide, organized by the co-editors of the current issue and presented at the 2014 European Association for American Studies (EAAS) conference "America, Justice, Conflict, War" in The Hague, Netherlands. The panelists, the bulk of whom are also contributors to this issue, agreed that there was a need to make visible the continuous abuses and violation of rights, and to begin to make sense of such violence not only within a cross-border,

hemispheric context, but also within a broader transatlantic context. The articles thus reflect a collective effort to evolve current understandings of the structures sustaining and reproducing the violence through an interrogation of representational schemas as well as state and academic discourses.

The cultural background, scholarly training, and political interests of the contributors span a wide range of fields encompassing the arts and social sciences, including visual cultural studies, human rights studies, American Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, Justice Studies, Latin American Studies, and Latin American History, approaches that in many cases intersect with or emerge out of the contributor's activism. They also originate from and/or teach in institutions representing Europe, Mexico and the United States.

One important area of critical inquiry in this issue is the critique of social ideologies and discourses. In his article, "The Historiography of Femicide in Ciudad Juárez: What Numbers Don't Tell Us," Steven Volk retraces the historiography of the feminicides to determine the types of analytical intervention most appropriate for understanding and eliminating the crimes. In his comparison of feminist and empirical approaches as competing frames used within scholarly and journalistic discourses, he shows how two generations of scholarship on the violence in Juárez offer very different, even incompatible views on the violence. The first focuses attention on the creation of theories on femicidal violence that allow for the comprehension of deeply contextualized social processes that in many ways overdetermine women's conversion into targets of violence. The second approach uses quantitative analysis, in particular, the use of statistics, to argue that women are not the exclusive or primary targets of violence. Volk concludes that while empirical approaches are helpful, they cannot take the place of feminist analysis, which provides us with motives, context and causes that reveal the explicit and more subtle and covert social processes linking femicide to women's marginality.

The correlating concerns over how to advance new or more nuanced theoretical approaches that can help explain the formation and operations of state power that freely violate human rights as well as how to aid in the elaboration of new resistance practices capable of contesting evolving forms of state hegemony constitute another thematic emphasis in our collection.

In her essay, "El destino de la humanidad en tiempos inhumanos," Julia Monárrez Fragoso also offers an evolved theoretical understanding of the gendered state. She examines the ways in which governments have the power (biopolitics) to determine who lives or dies, which they exercise through regulatory techniques (necropolitics) that convert the population into killable subjects without juridical implications. Drawing on the theoretical work of Achille Mbembe, she explores a three-tiered operation that results in the expulsion of certain women (*femicidios*) and

young people (*juvenicidios*) from humanity: the loss of bodies; the loss of place of origin or residence, resulting in the creation of spaces of death; and the loss of citizenship, resulting from the patriarchal state and its repressive regimen. She draws on the feminist scholarship of Rocío Silva Santisteban, Melissa Wright and Alice Driver in order to show how gender politics intersect with and inform necropolitics. This line of inquiry—a gendered necropolitics—is useful in producing a new critical vocabulary for understanding the impunity of the crimes and for foregrounding *feminicidio* and *juvenicidio* as the violation of the human right to life and citizenship.

Cynthia Bejarano's essay, "(Re)Living Femicide through Social Control: the Regulation of Life and Bodies through Fear and (In)Formal Social Control," examines the hegemony of the Mexican state from the perspective of the temporal vantage point of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She argues that the hegemonic state has used the feminicides to implement a regime of gendered social control in Ciudad Juárez. The state has succeeded in regulating women's bodies through the deployment of a rhetoric of fear that operates in tandem with formal and informal systems. Bejarano asserts that the rhetoric of fear naturalizes the gendered spatial divide of public and private so as to deprive women and girls of full citizenship, thereby exacerbating the already normalized sexualized and gendered violence. She further traces how regulating bodies falls into Richard Lawrence Millers' framework of the 'Chain of Destruction' (1996) which describes mass violence through five phases: identification, isolation, ostracism, confiscation, and annihilation.

A third area of critical inquiry entails the examination of linkages between femicide, human rights and art. Several of the contributors interrogate the role that cultural producers play in producing narratives, rhetorical strategies and representational schemas that unwittingly contribute to the objectification and reification of women. Others analyze alternative strategies that cultural producers have developed for invoking femicidal violence in their work in a manner that encourages the spectator's moral and epistemic agency as well as oppositional political action.

Tobias Jochum's "The Weight of Words, the Shock of Photos": Poetic Testimony and Elliptical Photography in Sergio González Rodríguez' *The Femicide Machine* (2012)," sets the stage for the critical discussion of the limitations and potential of representation for artists who seek to put their art to use as a resource for human rights activism. Jochum uses *The Femicide Machine* as a case study to argue that the ethical demands posed by extreme gender violence on the US-Mexico border as well as the analytical complexity required to pin down the causes challenge artists to transcend genre boundaries and seek out new means of representation. A vital question that he asks is: can representation respond adequately to human suffering, invoking in the spectator a greater capacity for empathy and political agency? Drawing from Susan Sontag and Jacques Rancière, Jochum argues in his analysis of the book's "Epilogue" that Gonzalez manages, through

inventive use of testimony and illustration, to humanize a complex critical analysis of the Juárez feminicides while effectively circumventing sensationalism and titillation. Using text to visually replace photographs, González anticipates and plays off of the reader's (voyeuristic) interest in the image, but then, in denying visual access, encourages her to be self-reflexive about her own voyeuristic investments.

In her essay "A New Landscape of the Possible': *400 Women*, Politics of Representation and Human Rights," Aishih Wehbe Herrera examines and assesses the role of art as mediator in the dissemination of human rights values and discourses, its power to raise awareness about violations of women's human rights and its function as a cultural and political mechanism that functions to convert spectators into duty-bearers. To address with specificity the complex nature of the intersections of art and activism, she analyzes *400 Women*, an art installation by London artist Tamsyn Challenger, in collaboration with families of the victims, artists and NGOs. Challenger's inspiration for the project emerged from the shame and discomfort she felt when Consuelo Valenzuela showed her a photo of her disappeared daughter, Julieta Marlen González Valenzuela. Drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière and Wendy Hesford, Wehbe Herrera examines the relationship between rights discourses and the politics of representation within art. She ultimately argues that against normative visual rhetorics encountered in artistic works that uncritically implement cosmopolitan and neoliberal power relations, the visual rhetorics and economy of Challenger's installation expose the unequal power relations that permeate economic and political globalization processes and instantiate an alternative visual economy that resists totality, homogenization and the (re)construction of hegemonic binaries.

In her essay, "Haptic Visuality in Lourdes Portillo's *La Señorita Extraviada*: Towards an Affective Activism," Laura Gillman analyzes the affective registers that Portillo uses to replace visual regimes of violence in her documentary *La Señorita Extraviada, Missing Young Woman*. Arguing that cinematic affect, in particular, haptic visuality, which she defines, following Laura Marks, as a tactile form of expression commonly used in the works of diasporic film makers of the global South for the purpose of developing an affective, inter-embodied contact between the filmic subject, the filmmaker and the spectator, disrupts the necropolitical discourses of femicide. She further argues, through an in-depth analysis of several examples of haptic visuality in the documentary, that Portillo uses the affective register as an escape route from a colonial way of seeing, by involving the viewer's body as a site for knowledge and political action.

Alice Driver's essay, "Risks, Challenges and Ethics of Representing Femicide: A Comparative Analysis of Sergio González Rodríguez' *Huesos en el desierto* and Roberto Bolaño 's *2666*," also concerns the problematic nature of available systems of representation of violence that compound

exponentially the feminicidal violence visited upon the victims. Driver analyzes visual depictions of femicide in *Huesos en el desierto* (2002) by Sergio González Rodríguez, and the posthumously published novel 2666 (2004) by Roberto Bolaño, arguing that while violence against women is made real in graphic and/or explicit descriptions of rape, strangulation, suffocation, and other forms of torture in these works, the authors have created a context in which such portrayals humanize the victims rather than sensationalize the stories of their deaths. González Rodríguez undermines sensationalism by connecting the bodies of victims with memories of their lives and deaths, converting his account into a vehicle of memory, including the hegemonic social forces that have contributed to the violence. In contrast, Bolaño analyzes the processes of anonymity surrounding the feminicides, which allows him to explore the depth and meaning of horror, without fetishizing a particular victim, or reproducing in Juárez what Driver calls, following Butler, “corporeal vulnerability.” Driver critically explores whether and to what extent the author achieves such avoidance strategies.

In his essay, “The Maquila Complex: Reification, Disposability, and Resistance in *Maquilapolis: City of Factories*,” Edward Avila examines *Maquilapolis*, a film by Vicki Funari and Sergio de la Torre, showing how it is possible to adopt representational strategies capable of exposing the reification of female employees’ labor in the *maquila* industry. The complex challenges of representing the intersecting social forces reproducing gendered violence in the Mexico and U.S. borderlands, Avila argues, result from the difficulty of avoiding the pitfalls of unwittingly subscribing to the default mode of reification, fetishism, and sensationalism within representation, which Avila views as the cultural worker’s encounter with the “specter of reification.” Yet Avila suggests that by engaging with processes of exploited labor, commodity fetishism, and social reification, as conceptualized in the work of Marx, *Maquilapolis* pushes beyond the limits of reification to offer the spectator a more complex representational approach. Indeed, the documentary interrogates the historically contingent character of reified identities, subjectivities, and social relations within the maquila complex. To demonstrate this more subtle approach, Avila analyzes the film’s narrative strategies, including interpersonal video diary, the performative mode of narration, and symbolic appropriation. Each of these represents centrally the voices of women working in the assembly plants, ones that challenge hierarchical gendered and classed relations under maquiladora-led industrialization, and implementing what he calls, following Alicia Schmidt Camacho, a “contestation-in-struggle.”

Looking forward to the future and beyond the confines of the borderlands, what the example of Ciudad Juárez offers us, then, is an exceptional model of how art, activism, and academia can coalesce over atrocities that have come to be theorized by femicide scholars not as an epidemic of violence but as a human rights violation—the human right to state protection and to life itself.

The aggregate activist response, the cultural texts dedicated to the dead women of Juárez, and the innovative, politically engaged scholarship that reaches across disciplinary as well as national boundaries is what truly renders this case unique. The lessons of the anti-feminicide movement and the insights gleaned by research and scholarship make valid claims far surpassing the confines of *las muertas de Juárez*, ones applicable to other loci of intense gender violence in the region, in the hemisphere and around the globe, and instrumental for an understanding of the closely related and no-less intricate phenomenon of *juvenicidio* against young, poor women and men in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.



## Endnotes

[1] A definition of the terms, including a critical distinction between the earlier established femicide vs. the more recent feminicide which we endorse, follows below. As a still-contested concept, the term will also be explicitly addressed in several of the compiled articles that make up this special issue.

[2] Giorgio Agamben's theory of 'bare life' has gained legitimacy in designating the high-risk *colonias* around Juárez as "absolute biopolitical spaces" (González Rodríguez *Machine*, 31), as has Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics.

[3] In fact, conversations indicate that feminicide is now such a loaded term in the current climate in Juárez that its affirmation or rejection has become a *Gretchenfrage* of sorts for local activists and academics. See Steven Volk's contributing article below for a thorough discussion of the issue.

[4] The case of 43 disappeared student teachers (plus six who were murdered on the spot) in Iguala, Guerrero on September 26, 2014, followed by the (apparently unrelated) discovery of several mass graves in the vicinity, serve as a stark reminder that Mexico is still immersed in a severe crisis of governance, regardless of the new political rhetoric. The insolent collusion between municipal police and cartel *sicarios* in the planning and execution of the crime attests to the inextricable entanglement between state and organized crime that has become normalized in parts of the country (Archibold). Speaking of impunity or "state-sanctioned terror" (as Rosa-Linda Fregoso did in the context of feminicide) seems like an understatement in the face this level of criminal collaboration (17).

[5] In "Necropolitics, Narcopolitics, and Femicide: Gendered Violence at the Mexico-US Border," Melissa Wright cautions that with regard to *juvenicidio*, the odds are stacked against justice movements seeking to counter the prevailing narrative of drug violence as 'criminals killing each other off'—a discourse that would frame any and every murder victim, ipso facto, as a delinquent, thus spinning the escalating murder rate into a positive indicator proving that the war on drugs is, indeed, progressing as intended. She offers that,

Feminist scholars can help in this endeavor by exposing how discourses of a rational masculinity contribute to violence, to the silencing of citizens, and to state-sanctioned impunity. Just as feminist scholars provided the term femicide, which has proven so valuable to activists in northern Mexico, feminists could help subvert the logic that depicts drug violence as a productive development ("Necropolitics" 726).

[6] For an incomplete (and by now, slightly outdated) list of books, films, and music, see "Appendix B" in Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán, *Making a Killing* 298-300. The most recent mainstream take on Ciudad Juárez may be the current crime-drama series *The Bridge*, a US-American (though in part transnationally produced) adaptation of an originally Swedish-Danish crime series, which is currently airing its second season on FX.

[7] See for instance Leslie Salzinger's landmark study of the *maquila* industry in Mexico and the gendering of its production processes, *Gender in Production: Making Workers in Mexico's Global Factories* (2003). For further historical insights into the heavily gendered industrialization of the borderlands since the 1960s (with a particular emphasis on Ciudad Juárez), see: María Patricia Fernández-Kelly *For We Are Sold, and I and My People: Women and Industry in Mexico's Frontier* (1983).

[8] Combining post-structural feminist and neo-Marxist approaches, Wright revealed a narrative that rationalizes the deliberately high turnover rates of female workers in the low-skill/high-intensity production sectors of the export-processing plants. Unlike the traditional (male) worker whose company value increases over the course of his employment through the accumulation of experience and skills, the value of this "disposable woman" is gradually used up through the tremendous grind of her work.

Within a relatively short period of time and at a young age [she] loses the physical and mental faculties for which she was initially employed, until she is worth no more than the cost of her dismissal and substitute [and] turns into a form of industrial waste, at which point she is discarded and replaced." (*Disposable* 2).

The parallels between such a systematic extraction of value followed by a disposal of the female body with the rationale behind sexual murder (by bodies then literally being discarded like waste in the desert) seems obvious, but Wright is mindful to warn against summarily utilizing the former to explain the latter.



[9] The media's fascination with spectacular violence is not surprising, but anti-femicide activists, too, had rallied around the extreme cases while strategically including fatal domestic violence into their statistics.

[10] For illustrative insights on government repression against as well as debates and inner tensions within the activist movement, see the four essays that encompass the section "¡Ni una más!" in *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*, co-edited by Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán: Staudt & Coronado; Monárrez Fragoso; Rojas; Wright, 155-241.

[11] For example, in 2009 Kathleen Staudt conceded that "national and state human rights commissions lack authority to compel changes in Mexico," just as academic criticism does (Staudt et al. Rights 2).

In 2010, Corona and Domínguez-Ruvalcaba described a generalized "scenario of pessimism", a catch-22 where "on the one hand, the authorities are defined as de facto offenders because of the prevailing impunity along the border; on the other hand, mutual disqualification and distrust among the government, NGOs, and civil and international organizations impede any sense of real progress" (8).

In reaction to the apparent impotence or unwillingness of the Mexican state and its judicial system to administer justice, Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba and Patricia Ravelo Blancas even called for a direct engagement with the cartels as de facto sovereigns of powers in the region—a proposal perhaps less practicable than illustrate of the sense of frustration ("Obedience" 194).

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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	Femicides (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 feminicide 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 feminicide 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 feminicide 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 Fragoso 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.



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## Endnotes

[1] I will discuss my use of “femicide” as opposed to “feminicide” 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 “feminicide” is consistent with my own analysis. See Lagarde y de los Ríos, Marcela. “Preface: Feminist Keys for Understanding Femicide. Theoretical, Political, and Legal Construction.” *Feminicide 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. “Feminicidio. Making the Most of an ‘Empowered Term.’” *Terrorizing Women. Feminicide 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. Feminicide 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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## **El destino de la humanidad en tiempos inhumanos**

### **Resumen**

Este artículo reflexiona acerca de la preocupante indiferencia que priva en Ciudad Juárez ante la muerte violenta y sistemática de mujeres y hombres: del feminicidio y del homicidio/juvenicidio, desde la década de 1990 hasta el año 2013. Esta preocupación se inserta dentro de las corrientes teóricas del feminismo y el humanismo, las cuales han creado un aparato crítico para pensar la desigualdad social en la vida, en la muerte y en la injusticia. Para tal empresa, se hace un nexo entre los conceptos teóricos de biopolítica, biopoder, necropolítica y necropoder. Por medio de este andamiaje teórico, pretendo comprender por qué algunas mujeres y algunos hombres son convertidos en sujetos matables, en sujetos desechables que cualquiera puede matar; ya que su muerte, de acuerdo con Giorgio Agamben, no tiene consecuencias jurídicas, porque ni siquiera se mencionan como homicidio. He ahí la importancia de llamarlos feminicidio y juvenicidio. Las guías teóricas expuestas me ayudan a entender tres elementos presentes en las muertes artificiales, en las muertes públicas—como las llama Jean Baudrillard—del ser humano. El primero es la pérdida de sus cuerpos, el siguiente es la pérdida de su lugar de origen o residencia, y el tercero es la pérdida de su ciudadanía. Bajo estos tres quebrantos, Achille Mbembe, considera que se les expulsa como sujetos de la humanidad.

**Palabras clave:** biopolitics, biopower, necropolitics, necropower, killable subjects

Para mí, eres lo humano  
y tu terrible destino es el destino de la humanidad en estos tiempos inhumanos  
—Vassili Grossman, *Vida y destino*

## Introducción

Quiero abrir este texto con una preocupación: la prevalencia de la *nuda vida* del *homo sacer* en Ciudad Juárez (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*). El caso de esta ciudad fronteriza, del norte de México, es trascendente ya que desde la década de los noventa del siglo XX y estos primeros trece años del siglo XXI, se ha caracterizado nacional e internacionalmente, por dos ejemplos muy reveladores de pérdida en vidas humanas. Atendiendo a la cronología descrita, el primero de ellos es el feminicidio, que fue descrito como paradigma de violación de los derechos humanos de las mujeres por razones de género, y el Estado mexicano fue condenado internacionalmente, por la Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (2009) a través de la *Sentencia del Campo Algodonero*. El segundo visibiliza la pérdida de miles de vidas humanas—mayoritariamente hombres—ligadas al crimen organizado y cuya atrocidad comenzó a ser del conocimiento público a partir del *Operativo Conjunto Chihuahua*, versión local de la *Guerra contra las Drogas*. Este ejemplo de pérdidas humanas inicia desde el centro del país en el año 2006 y sus efectos devastadores saltan a la esfera pública en esta localidad en el año 2008. Esto de ninguna manera quiere decir que anteriormente los hombres no hubieran sido asesinados en esta ciudad, sólo que sus muertes no estaban en la agenda pública, su exterminio inducido no importaba, tampoco saber quién los asesinó y mucho menos otorgarles justicia. Ambos mujeres y hombres fueron expulsados de la humanidad.

¿Cómo se expulsa a los seres humanos de la humanidad? Para dar contestación a esta pregunta, me voy a basar en los conceptos teóricos de biopolítica, biopoder, necropolítica y necropoder, los cuales son definiciones críticas para entender por qué algunas mujeres y hombres son convertidos en *sujetos matables* y en *sujetos desechables* que cualquiera [1] puede matar y “cuya muerte no entraña en la práctica consecuencia jurídica alguna” porque ni siquiera se mencionan como homicidio (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 244). Estos cuatro conceptos me ayudan a entender tres elementos presentes en las muertes artificiales o en las muertes públicas (Baudrillard) de las mujeres y los hombres que han sido asesinados en Ciudad Juárez. El primero es la pérdida del cuerpo, el siguiente es la pérdida del territorio, y por último la pérdida de la ciudadanía. Bajo estas tres destrucciones es como se expulsa a los sujetos de la humanidad (Mbembe). Desde estos quebrantos mujeres y hombres son privados del derecho a la vida, del derecho a un lugar en el mundo y por ende del status político de ciudadanas(os) (Comesaña).

## 1. Argumentos y perspectivas teóricas

Quién puede vivir y quién debe morir, han sido consideraciones cardinales para el poder del soberano, dice Michel Foucault. Esta facultad de ejercer el poder sobre la vida y la muerte de las personas la llamó Foucault *biopoder*. En este “hacer vivir” y “dejar morir”, el soberano (218), define de una manera desigual a una parte de la población como amenaza para la supervivencia de la otra parte de esta misma población. Esta “*biopolítica* de la especie humana” (220) permite comprender “que la vida y la muerte no son esos fenómenos naturales, inmediatos, en cierto modo originarios o radicales, que están fuera del campo del poder político” (218). Decidir sobre la vida y la muerte está basado, desde la óptica de Foucault, en la norma biológica del racismo. Por medio de ella se fragmenta, se distingue y se jerarquiza a la población en inferiores y superiores. Al mismo tiempo, la biopolítica del poder soberano utiliza técnicas regulatorias y disciplinarias de la muerte; las primera de ellas se utiliza en el cuerpo de la víctima mientras la segunda de ellas es para la población a la que se le ha permitido vivir. El reemplazo de las vidas, en el homicidio/juvenicidio [2] y el feminicidio, se hace pues, por medio de la muerte. Esta puede ser provocada por individuos bajo motivos de desigualdad generalizada o por el propio Estado que lanza la contienda bélica (Monárrez, "Sobrevivir"). Sin embargo, la guerra que se lanza contra los adversarios expone a los “propios ciudadanos” (232), y a estas bajas, supuestamente no intencionales, se les ha designado en estos últimos años como “daños colaterales” (Bauman 14).

Ahora bien, frente a este concepto de biopolítica, Achille Mbembe sugiere avanzar el estudio de la *vida desnuda* por medio del término *necropolítica*. Esta política de la muerte descansa en las nociones de soberanía y estado de excepción. Quien ejerce la soberanía tiene el poder de decidir quién debe morir y quién debe vivir. Por eso es necesario preguntarse ante las acciones que emprende el poder soberano: “qué lugar le deja a la vida, a la muerte y al cuerpo humano (especialmente cuando se ve herido y masacrado) ¿Cómo se inscriben en el orden del poder?” (20) las acciones que emprende. Para explicar el estado de excepción Mbembe se apoya en varios críticos del mismo. Para este artículo sólo citaré la referencia que hace este autor del estado de excepción propuesto por Giorgio Agamben: la suspensión del estado de derecho se da en un espacio geográfico determinado, el cual permanece continuamente fuera de la ley. Giorgio Agamben explica, en una conferencia, que asumir la definición de un concepto es asumir una posición respecto a la naturaleza del fenómeno que se estudia, y cuando se adopta la terminología, ésta, de ninguna manera es neutral. La perspectiva siempre está sustentada en una postura política (Höller).

La necropolítica nos lleva a la noción de *necropoder*. Para entender este concepto, Achille Mbembe nos provee de los siguientes elementos.

Por necropoder, tengo en mente las varias formas en las cuales, en nuestro mundo contemporáneo, el poder soberano se imagina así mismo y se despliega en el interés de la máxima destrucción de las personas y la creación de espacios de muerte; estas son formas nuevas y únicas de existencia social en las cuales vastas poblaciones están sometidas a las condiciones de vida que les confiere el estatus de *muertos vivientes* (Höller; cursivas mías)

El objetivo del despliegue del necropoder es el cuerpo muerto del sujeto matable, es su cadáver expuesto a otros a través de “innovaciones en tecnologías del asesinato” (Mbembe 27). Además, este poder de la muerte ofrece otra dimensión de análisis: los espacios donde se decide quiénes han de morir y quiénes serán las personas desechables. Estos espacios, para Mbembe, siguiendo los aportes de Frantz Fanon, se dividen en “compartimentos”, en “fronteras internas” y son “lugares de mala fama” con personas de mala reputación (ibíd. 45). Asumir esta lógica conceptual me permite incorporar los imprescindibles trabajos de teóricas feministas relacionados con estos temas.

Rocío Silva Santisteban, desde una experiencia de la “Guerra Sucia” en el Perú, y a partir de la década de los ochenta, explica la basurización simbólica de los seres humanos sobrantes en América Latina. Traza el inicio de esta exclusión de los límites del acceso a la nación para algunas personas a través de una alteridad y la conformación de otro marginado, subalternizado irracionalmente por el racismo criollo de las “capas medias urbanas”. Son ellas quienes con su “indiferencia” y “resistencia” hacia la violencia que sufrían los otros “el campesino pobre, ayacuchano o huanca/elicano o de otras zonas de alta concentración de población indígena, con patrones culturales percibidos como ajenos” los transforman y convierten en “chivo expiatorio de la sinrazón de la violencia política (82). Esta simbolización de la deshumanización de las personas, se encuentra presente y toma cuerpo de una manera diferenciada en las mujeres, especialmente en los conflictos bélicos, donde coinciden los múltiples atavismos de dominación de género hacia las mujeres y donde se entrecruzan el ejercicio de la violencia doméstica, la violencia ejercida por los militares—en especial para las mujeres excluidas que son víctimas de la violencia sexual—la injuria, el menosprecio, el sarcasmo, el impropio y las dificultades para acceder a la justicia.

Melissa Wright explica que “la política de la muerte y la política de género van de la mano”. Esta necropolítica se encuentra extendida en todo el mundo y se evidencia en las múltiples formas de violencia que sufren las mujeres. Esta política de la muerte constituye “la producción de los Estados y la reproducción de los sujetos” (“Necropolitics” 710). Wright, retoma el tema de Ciudad Juárez con dos ejemplos de la política de la muerte binaria: el feminicidio y los asesinatos de

hombres relacionados con el crimen organizado. Las mujeres asesinadas, en el discurso de las elites políticas y empresariales, fueron asesinadas porque eran “mujeres públicas”, obreras de día y prostitutas de noche que habían contaminado el espacio geográfico; por lo tanto sus asesinatos debían ser vistos en términos de una limpieza social. El exigir justicia era innecesario y podría entorpecer los negocios de una economía basada en la industria maquiladora de exportación (715). La matanza de hombres no tuvo mejores opiniones: el discurso de las elites fue culpabilizar a los muertos y decir que eran criminales que se estaban matando razonablemente entre ellos, en la esfera pública, por el mercado de las drogas y la reestructuración de los grupos mafiosos que controlan estas empresas. Por lo tanto, la buena ciudadanía no tenía por qué preocuparse. (*ibid.*)

Alice Driver reitera que para entender la “vida desnuda y la erosión de los derechos humanos básicos,” es necesario entender el nexo de las raíces de violencia física y la forma en que las víctimas [del feminicidio] son culpabilizadas por sus crímenes” (3). Igualmente aduce que: en Ciudad Juárez el poder soberano se comparte entre el gobierno y los grandes empresarios. En un nexo cómplice, estas “estructuras paralelas” de poder deciden qué cuenta y qué no cuenta como pérdida humana (*ibid.*). La vida nuda se manifiesta en contraposición a la existencia de un sujeto político de una ciudadanía con derecho a tener derechos. En este estado de excepción persiste lo privado frente a lo público. La obligación de otorgar justicia se desvanece porque hay un Estado que permanece inactivo ante la desaparición de mujeres y el feminicidio, lo que hace que las víctimas permanezcan en una situación de “más o menos” muertas (2), debido también a la ineptitud de la policía que no investiga. Más o menos muertas es no poder disfrutar de los derechos humanos, haber vivido una vida devaluada y ser parte de los cuerpos violentados que vivieron en las “geografías de la pobreza” (6).

Con estas guías teóricas organizo mi discusión de la destrucción humana de mujeres y hombres de una parte de la humanidad que ha sido considerada indigna de vivir—un desperdicio y residuo de Ciudad Juárez cuya muerte violenta no es considerada una pérdida. Por tales motivos, propongo comprender las tres pérdidas propuestas por Achille Mbembe. La primera es la pérdida del cuerpo para sujetos matables. La segunda es la pérdida del espacio físico, que se manifiesta en Juárez en las cartografías de las zonas de riesgo, en los territorios de excepción para mujeres y hombres, y en las(os) muertos vivientes. El tercero es la pérdida de la ciudadanía, que en este contexto se manifiesta en la malograda y descuidada población que se mantiene en el espacio privado y abandona la discusión pública.



## 2. La pérdida del cuerpo

Comenzaré por explicar que la historia del feminicidio en Ciudad Juárez a inicios de la década de los noventa del siglo XX es del conocimiento público. Son los medios de comunicación quienes presentan el tema ante la opinión pública como una forma atroz de asesinar niñas y mujeres, las cuales habían sido previamente desaparecidas, luego torturadas física y sexualmente, y sus cadáveres arrojados en las zonas inhóspitas, en los lotes baldíos y en el desierto que contiene la urbe. [3] Luego, las demandas de justicia por parte de familiares de víctimas junto con organizaciones feministas y mujeres de otras organizaciones de la sociedad civil comienzan a poner en *blanco y negro*, [4] los nombres y la falta de nombre—las *no identificadas* o las *desconocidas* [5]—de las niñas y mujeres asesinadas a partir del mes de enero del año 1993. Son ellas, y algunos hombres [6] quienes formaron parte de este movimiento que reivindicó el derecho a la justicia para las mujeres en cuyos cuerpos se inscribió el orden y el poder necropolítico. Todas reclamaron el derecho de vida para las mujeres/muertas/vivientes que podían ser las próximas víctimas. También revelaron desde el cuerpo de la víctima las condiciones estructurales que privan en esta ciudad y limitan la integridad de algunas mujeres. Es todo este movimiento organizado desde lo local, nacional e internacional quien logró que la Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, con la Sentencia del Campo Algodonero (2009), hiciera responsable al Estado mexicano de graves violaciones a los derechos humanos de las niñas y mujeres asesinadas en los casos de Esmeralda Herrera, Brenda Berenice Ramos Monárrez y Claudia Ivette González.

Con relación a los hombres asesinados en Ciudad Juárez, en el año de 1998, la Coordinadora de Organismos No gubernamentales en Pro de la Mujer [7], presentó a las diputadas y diputados de las Comisiones de Equidad y Género y Derechos Humanos una carta con fecha del 9 de febrero de 1998, en la cual exigían la prevención, sanción y erradicación de la violencia en este municipio. Al mismo tiempo que hacían del conocimiento de esta Comisión una lista de hombres y mujeres asesinadas, así como de personas desaparecidas en otras ciudades cuyos familiares en Ciudad Juárez demandaban su aparición. La violencia contra los cuerpos de mujeres y hombres había ya tomado cauce frecuente e impune. En contraste con lo anterior, tanto la documentación de los casos como la exigencia de justicia prevalecieron para el sexo femenino. Y la visibilización del sujeto matable masculino reinició a partir del 28 de marzo del año 2008 cuando a petición del gobierno estatal y municipal, el gobierno federal instaura en esta ciudad el Operativo Conjunto Chihuahua para combatir el crimen organizado y devolver la paz a la ciudadanía. El estado de Chihuahua ocupó a partir del año 2008 el primer lugar en homicidios en el país. Ver tabla 1.

**Tabla 1**

Homicidios en el estado de Chihuahua 2006-2013

Año	Casos	Porcentaje
2006	648	2.83
2007	518	2.26
2008	2,601	11.35
2009	3,671	16.02
2010	6,407	27.95
2011	4,500	19.63
2012	2,783	12.14
2013	1,794	7.83
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>21,128</b>	<b>100.00</b>

*Elaboración Carmen Saraí Martínez con base a INEGI BOLETÍN DE PRENSA NÚM. 288/13*

Las tasas para esos años fueron 20, 15, 76, 105, 182, 126 ,77 y 51.1 homicidios por cada 100 mil habitantes. Si bien en el año 2012 hubo un descenso, de cualquier forma Chihuahua, junto con el estado de Guerrero, registraron la misma tasa y ocuparon el primer lugar ese año (INEGI 2013). Se afirma que en este sexenio 101,199 personas fueron víctimas de homicidio en todo el país. Se considera que el 50 por ciento de estas muertes violentas están ligadas al crimen organizado, y en el estado de Chihuahua el 76.5 por ciento de los casos son por pugnas entre los diferentes grupos que pelean el mercado de las drogas. A nivel nacional, la tasa de homicidios para hombres representa el 59.6 y para las mujeres la tasa es de cinco mujeres asesinadas por cada cien mil habitantes. Ciudad Juárez destaca con una tasa de 477 homicidios—hombres y mujeres—por cada cien mil habitantes (Lara; ver Tabla 2). Esta urbe se convirtió, a partir del año 2008, en el espacio urbano nacional en el cual se asesinó al mayor número de personas. [8] Desde una distinción de los sexos sacrificables, en esta ciudad retomo el conteo que han hecho los diarios locales de la muerte continua en Ciudad Juárez a partir del año anteriormente mencionado. En la diferencia de la muerte artificial para mujeres y hombres, desde una política sexual, menciono que 500 mujeres habían sido asesinadas desde el año de 1993 hasta el año 2007; desde el año 2008 hasta el 2013—en sólo cuatro años—los casos sumaron 952.

**Tabla 2**

Homicidios y feminicidios en Ciudad Juárez Chihuahua 2008-2013

Año	Hombres	Porcentaje	Mujeres	Porcentaje	TOTAL
<b>2008</b>	1,510	93.9	98	6.0	1,608
<b>2009</b>	2,441	91.8	201	8.2	2,643
<b>2010</b>	2,780	89.1	304	10.9	3,084
<b>2011</b>	1,604	86.6	216	13.4	1,820
<b>2012</b>	666	87.6	83	12.4	749
<b>2013</b>	435	88.6	50	11.4	485
<b>TOTAL</b>	9,436	90.0	952	10.0	10,388

Elaborado por Carmen Saraí Martínez con base a: *Monárrez, Fragoso, Julia E., 1998, "Base de datos Feminicidio" [archivo particular de investigación], Ciudad Juárez, Departamento de Estudios Culturales, Dirección General Regional Noroeste, El Colegio de la Frontera Norte. Para los homicidios: con base a Diario de Juárez y Norte de Juárez.*

En el caso de las mujeres y los hombres asesinados, lo que permea frente a la voluntad del individuo o del grupo que les tomó la vida es la injusticia. La periodista juarense, especialista en violencia, Luz Elena Sosa del Carmen, menciona, que:

Juárez tiene registrados 11 mil 598 asesinatos de 2003 a 2013, revelan datos de la Fiscalía General del Estado, obtenidos a través de Transparencia. De ese histórico número, 10 mil 340 carpetas se encuentran en estatus de "investigación". Además, en 670 archivos existen acusados y sólo en 206 casos judicializados un Tribunal de Garantía dictó sentencia, destaca el informe. Es decir, sólo el 1.9 por ciento de los asesinatos de la última década han sido investigados y el probable responsable sentenciado.

La impunidad no puede ser más explícita, según explica Sosa.

Esta práctica sistemática de violencia de género, prolongadamente sostenida, tiene un propósito: "dictar lo que los "hombres" y las "mujeres" se suponen que deben ser y disciplinar a las comunidades marginadas (Nayak y Suchland 469). En este sentido, es necesario no centrarnos solamente en el término violencia contra las mujeres, porque invisibilizamos la violencia contra los hombres y dejamos a un lado la falta de la debida atención a lo que significa "hacer" género a través de la violencia o a la forma en que los códigos de masculinidad afectan negativamente a los hombres" (472). Asimismo podemos decir que el homicidio/juvenicidio y el feminicidio son actos crueles que han regularizado a los dos sexos y al mismo tiempo disciplinado a la población juarense. Una de estas disciplinas es mantener a la población aislada y sitiada en sus lugares de

residencia.

### 3. La pérdida del lugar de residencia o el lugar de origen

El especialista en el análisis de las dimensiones espaciales de la violencia, Luis Cervera, sostiene que si se quiere diseñar y aplicar políticas públicas para prevenir y sancionar la violencia, es fundamental entender el contexto del espacio urbano en el cual las conductas delictivas toman acción. En este sentido, las condiciones físicas, socioeconómicas y demográficas sobre las cuales se asientan los conglomerados humanos pueden explicar algunas aristas de la violencia (Monárrez y Cervera). Ante el incremento de la violencia que se vive en el entorno fronterizo, Luis Cervera ha privilegiado el análisis espacial. Este factor le ha permitido abrirnos otras visiones fuera de los motivos interpersonales, y acercarnos a un espectro de variables estructurales que nos ayudan a reconocer “las formas sistémicas de violencia y dominación inherentes en la riqueza y en la desigualdad del ingreso económico” (Dilts 5).

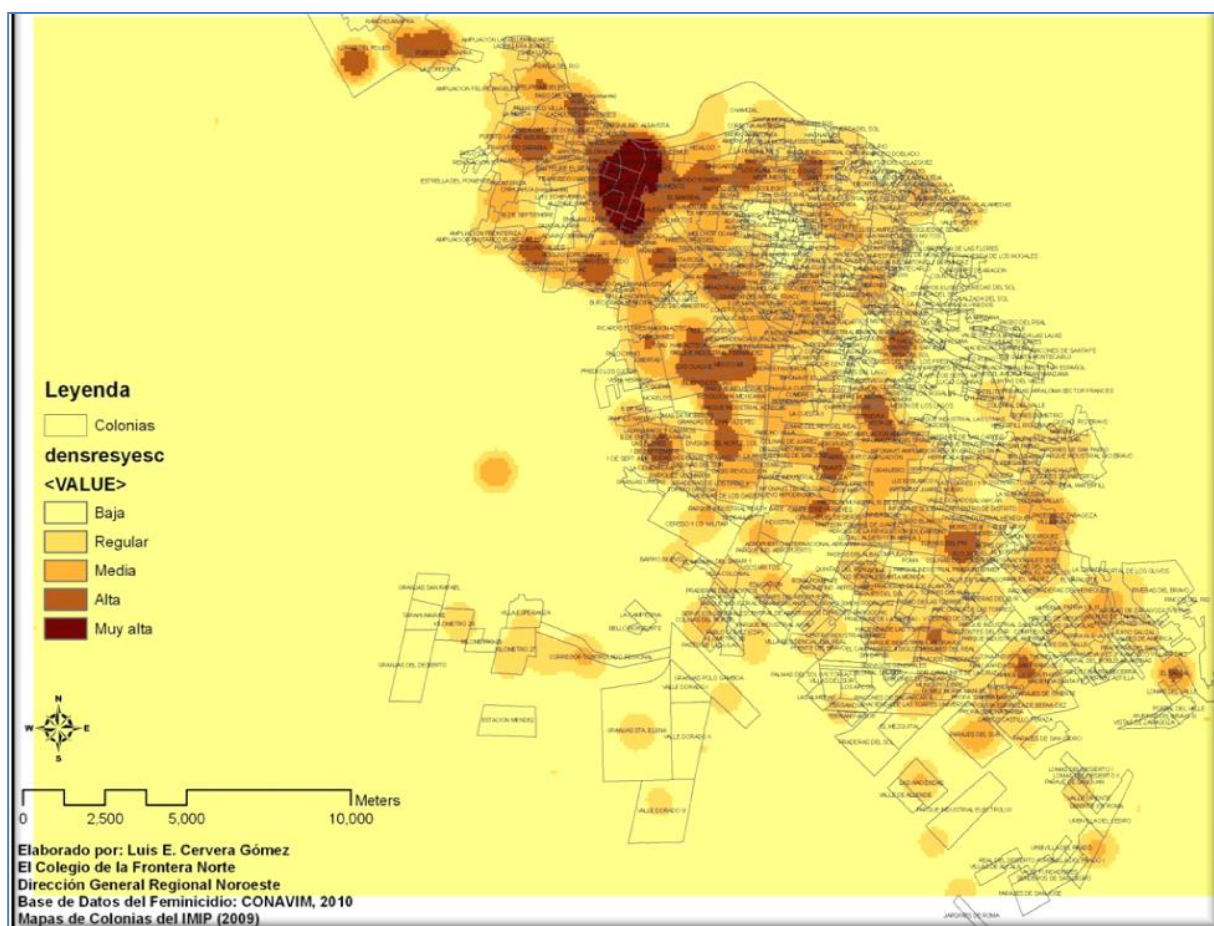
En Ciudad Juárez, si bien quienes la habitamos formamos parte de la totalidad de una ciudad, el disfrute de la misma no se da en su conjunto para todas y todos. Esto, desde la visión de Paulo Freire, se debe primordialmente a que los gobernantes no jerarquizan los gastos públicos con relación a las “necesidades, muchas de ellas dramáticas de las poblaciones explotadas” (Freire 39). Así, las ciudades quedan divididas en déficits que se acumulan en las calles sin pavimentar, la falta de escuelas, la privación de espacios de ocio y otros elementos que impiden el soporte y el sustento de la vida digna para las grandes mayorías de la población que miran anhelantes la falta de carencias o menores carencias en las “zonas *felices*” de la ciudad (ibíd.). Responsabilizar a los sujetos por la violencia sufrida o cometida deja intacto el análisis de las zonas en las cuales hacen su vida cotidiana. La forma en que se distribuyen o son forzados a distribuirse—hombres y mujeres—en el espacio se fundamentan en campos económicos, políticos y sociales que las y los hacen más proclives a ser sujetos violentados.

Luis Cervera ha mostrado que el espacio donde se lleva a cabo el feminicidio y el homicidio tiene un patrón espacial perfectamente definido. Con el uso de herramientas de los Sistemas de Información, técnicas geo-estadísticas e indicadores socioeconómicos, sus estudios revelan estos patrones espaciales agrupados en *clusters* que evidencian varias zonas de alto riesgo tanto para las niñas y mujeres como para los niños y los hombres. Para el feminicidio, el Centro Histórico de la Ciudad es el de mayor peligro; le siguen otros de menor dimensión, pero no menos riesgosas, en la zona poniente de la ciudad. Estas agrupaciones espaciales, “los compartimentos”, o las “fronteras internas” de violencia de género para las mujeres, indican una alta correlación entre

pobreza y feminicidio. En estas zonas los déficits de infraestructura urbana son altos, igual que las carencias económicas (Ver Mapa 1).

## Mapa 1

Espacios de muerte para las niñas y mujeres en Ciudad Juárez (1993-2010)



Fuente: Elaborado por Luis Cervera con datos del Sistema de Información Geográfica del Homicidio

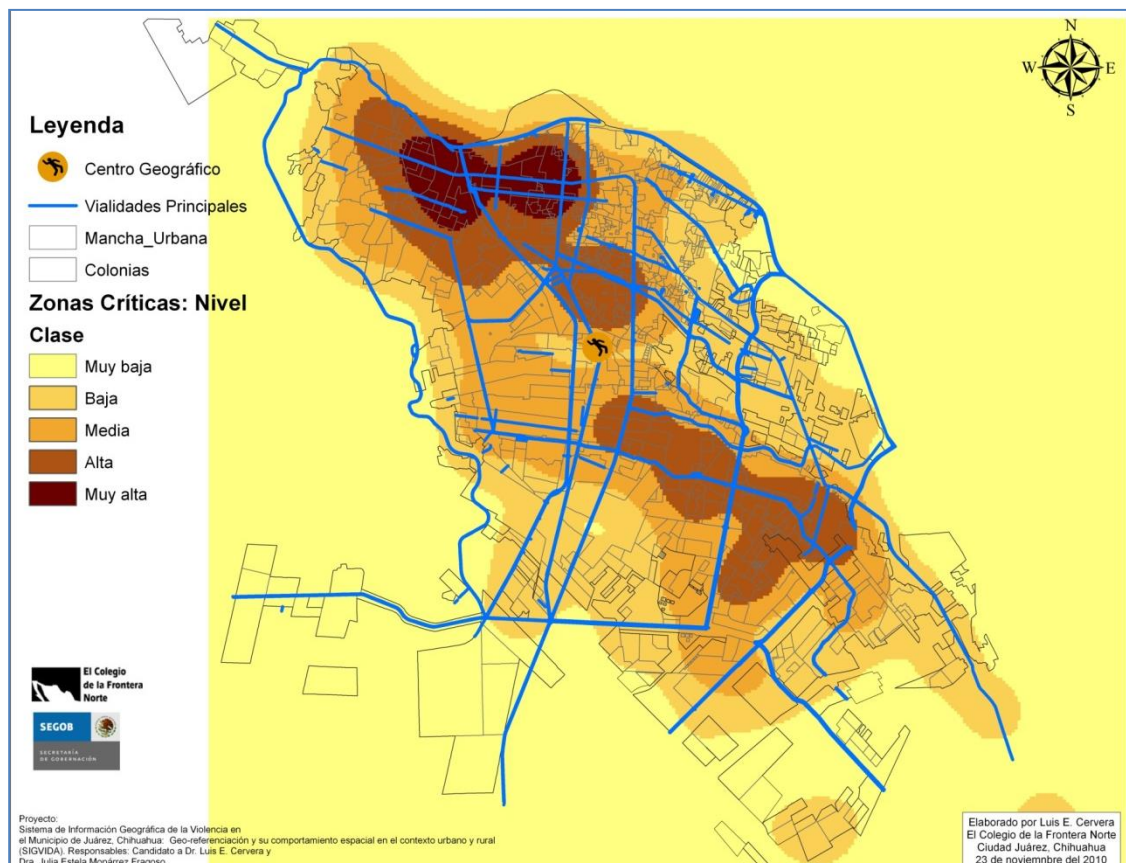
Con relación al patrón espacial que muestra el homicidio, los resultados de Cervera son los siguientes: existen dos zonas de alto riesgo para los hombres. Estas se encuentran en la parte norte de la ciudad y en el sur de la misma. La primera abarca desde el centro histórico hasta los puentes internacionales que unen las ciudades fronterizas de Juárez y El Paso, Texas. La segunda es el corredor que va de la calle Jilotepec a la Zaragoza. Este autor utiliza dos hipótesis para estas dos zonas de riesgo. La primera posiblemente esté ligada al control de territorios donde se cruza la droga hacia los Estados Unidos. La segunda es un territorio de vendedores de drogas domésticos (Monárrez y Cervera). Sólo agrego que ambas dimensiones espaciales no son del



todo diferentes ni idénticas, pero sí son equivalentes. Ambas son habitadas por los cuerpos que sobran en esta ciudad, los cuales han sido desechados en esta guerra contra el narcotráfico.

## Mapa 2

Espacios de muerte para el homicidio en Ciudad Juárez (2008-2010).



Fuente: Elaborado por Luis Cervera con datos del Sistema de Información Geográfica del Homicidio

Los estudios de Luis Cervera han develado un patrón especial donde si bien las personas somos geográficamente cercanas, socialmente nos distinguimos por nuestra separación. Este alejamiento y esta dispersión semeja lo que Achille Mbembe reflexiona acerca de los países colonizadores en su relación de dominación, explotación y opresión con sus colonias: “[I]a colonia representa el sitio donde la soberanía consiste fundamentalmente en el ejercicio del poder fuera de la ley (ab legibus solutus) y donde la "paz" es más probable que tome la cara de una "guerra sin fin" (Mbembe 23). Las colonias del mismo modo representan estados de excepción en sitios espaciales designados exclusivamente para “hacer vivir” y “dejar morir”. La ausencia de Estado y

la impunidad toman control sobre estas áreas geográficas y crean una nueva relación espacial y social entre el Estado, los agresores y las víctimas así como para una gran parte de la ciudadanía. Estos patrones espaciales de dolor han sido analizados por Rosalba Robles ya que para ella, “el dolor aquí adquiere el significado de la pérdida, la pérdida de la seguridad, la pérdida de un ser querido o conocido, la pérdida al derecho ciudadano de tener un trabajo digno, la pérdida de recorrer los espacios públicos a cualquier hora del día, la pérdida de la tranquilidad en el hogar, la pérdida al dejar de pertenecer a un grupo social” (Robles 108).

#### **4. La pérdida de ciudadanía**

Las desigualdades del sexo basadas en el género, las desigualdades de la distribución de la riqueza social y las desigualdades de la injusticia, han minado a la ciudadanía juarense; al mismo tiempo, han implantado “una sociedad donde no hay ninguna seguridad en la vida o en los bienes, porque la guerra es el modo de vida corriente” (Valcárcel). A través de este largo periodo de violencia que hemos sufrido, la población ha sido sujeta a ser testigo y experimentar de cerca o apreciar desde un punto distante, la vejación de los seres próximos o de los lejanos que habitan este espacio geográfico. La muerte violenta, las extorsiones, los secuestros, la violencia sexual, la desaparición forzada, y/o tortura, son sólo algunos de los tratos crueles e inhumanos que la han sojuzgado y han hecho de ella, o en la mayoría de ella, una ciudadanía del miedo y con miedo.

Quienes primordialmente han perdido la ciudadanía son las víctimas a las cuales se les arrebató la vida, sea por hombres conocidos o desconocidos que asesinan mujeres, y transgreden, desde la política sexual, el primer tabú que dio pie al proceso civilizatorio: no mataras. O también aquellas mujeres y hombres victimados por organizaciones criminales o por la omisión, negligencia o complicidad de los agentes estatales que matan y no otorgan la justicia. “Son estos grupos los que, de manera legal o extralegal, actúan bajo las coordenadas de un modelo de masculinidad apoyado en la fuerza y el ejercicio de la violencia; modelo que, en última instancia, es inherente a la constitución patriarcal del Estado y al funcionamiento de sus aparatos represivos.” (Padilla 315). La injusticia nos hace desiguales y rompe el contrato social. Por lo tanto, la condición de igualdad para todas y todos y la protección de sus bienes dentro de la ley han sido quebrantadas (Rousseau).

La ilegalidad ha estado acompañada de la discriminación de las víctimas. Ellas y ellos, los sujetos matables, han sido definidos y definidas desde el poder soberano como culpables de haber sido asesinadas. A través de los años en esta ciudad quienes han sido asesinadas y asesinados se les



han llamado narcos, malandros, pandilleros y delincuentes; a ellas, prostitutas, vagas y las de la doble vida, entre otros calificativos. No son reconocidos (as) como juarenses, ni tampoco como mexicanas(os). Se les niega legitimidad de sujetos públicos, y de esta manera se busca destruir y terminar con la incipiente democracia en nuestra ciudad (Wright, *Email*). La culpabilidad está en haber sido definidos como sobrantes de la comunidad, como los residuos, despojos y desperdicios que estorban o no son necesarios—y se dejan en la calle. Y se dejan en el espacio público porque no cumplieron con sus papeles de género, pues, por eso fueron ultimados. Y se dejan en los tiraderos de basura, en el desierto, en las mallas ciclónicas y colgados de los puentes que cruzan las vías principales de la ciudad para atestiguar con el sacrificio de sus cuerpos fragmentados que no son necesarios y de ninguna utilidad porque son parte de la descomposición de tejido social.

El término tejido social, acompañado de la palabra descomposición, hace rato que acompaña las explicaciones de todas las violencias que sufre Ciudad Juárez. Somos una “sociedad enferma.” Hannah Arendt asevera que no hay nada más peligroso que explicar la violencia y el poder en términos biológicos. Estas definiciones a las cuales llama “metáforas orgánicas” (Arendt, *On Violence* 75) esconden la voluntad política del soberano. En el invierno del año 2010, ante las demandas de justicia por la masacre de Villas de Salvárcar, ocurrida a finales del mes de enero del mismo año, el presidente Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), puso en marcha el programa *Todos Somos Juárez, Reconstruyamos la Ciudad*. Bajo este esquema se propuso, dentro de la estrategia de seguridad pública en el combate al crimen organizado, realizar cerca de 170 acciones concretas y con un monto aproximado de más de 3 mil millones de pesos. [9]

Un par de meses después, el representante presidencial de esta estrategia en la ciudad, al ser cuestionado por la prensa sobre la reconstrucción del tejido social, articuló la necesidad de tener “un poquito de paciencia”; los resultados para él no serían inmediatos. Las causas estaban en que los ciudadanos habían dejado de comportarse como tales para ser sólo “pobladores” de esta ciudad y que “no exigían derechos” (Gallegos). La paciencia fue tal que el año 2010, tal como lo muestra la tabla 2, el número de personas asesinadas fue el más alto. Con estas declaraciones y estas fatalidades, se le avisó a la ciudadanía, si es que hay alguna, que cualquiera podía gozar de un status de muerto viviente.

Frente a este estado necropolítico que ejerció el necropoder, la ciudadanía continuó encerrándose y volviéndose una ciudad sitiada con toques de queda y vigilancia autoimpuesta (Ver fotografía 1). Una ciudad con callejones sin salida, y con una ciudadanía que no participa en los asuntos públicos que la lastiman. Si bien, a partir del año 2011, inicia una disminución del homicidio y el feminicidio, Eduardo Guerrero nos remite a los siguientes factores que pudieron haber incidido

tanto a nivel local como nacional: las organizaciones criminales se ven con problemas para reclutar sicarios y el surgimiento de movimientos sociales que denuncian la violencia, las desapariciones y violaciones a los derechos humanos. Los Operativos que se extienden a otras ciudades son más eficaces y con mayor coordinación con los gobiernos locales. Los arrestos y abatimientos que se dan a las organizaciones criminales se hacen sopesando la reacción de la violencia con la que pueden responder. En el Reporte Especial de Drug Violence en México se advierte que la disminución también puede obedecer a una posible connivencia de los funcionarios del gobierno para negociar una paz. Igualmente, afirman que hay evidencia sustantiva que muestra un decremento en las muertes intencionales en los últimos dos años; aunque, “permanece relativamente alta y la situación de seguridad para el país permanece altamente problemática en ciertas partes del país” (Heinle *et al.* 10).

### Fotografía 1

En el encierro y en el miedo, me disciplino y te disciplino.



Fuente: Julia Monárrez [archivo particular] Fraccionamiento Villa Alegre, Cd. Juárez, 10 agosto de 2013

En septiembre de 2011, el periódico *La Jornada* preguntó al alcalde Murguía sobre los señalamientos que hizo Human Rights Watch ante la desaparición forzada de cuatro jóvenes por parte de la policía municipal, en específico por parte del Secretario de Seguridad Julián Leyzaola. Su respuesta fue “no me interesan [...] está dando resultados, que es lo que nos interesa a los juarenses. Créanme que no tengo ninguna denuncia contra él sobre derechos humanos, y si en el pasado *se tomó una Pepsi en un lugar equivocado*, de eso yo no tengo conocimiento” (Camacho Servín; cursivas mías). En esa misma entrevista “pidió defender Juárez para borrar la imagen de violencia que se tiene de ella, al tiempo que llamó a *darle un trancazo* a los que hablen mal de la ciudad” (cursivas mías). Defender la ciudad es defender el mito, es defender el “feliz avance propagandista que suele basar sus argumentos en teorías morales o relativas a los orígenes” (Millett 113), en este caso, del origen del mal en esta ciudad que puede afectar la llegada de capital. Su respuesta “no me interesan” muestra la miseria de la condición humana para el poder municipal.

Héctor Murguía Lardizábal les comentó a los presentes en la audiencia que existe nueva serie de televisión en donde hablan mal de Ciudad Juárez. “Ya basta de dejar que nos echen (sic) lodo”, expresó el edil quien se refería a la serie “en donde ponen a Juárez con situación errada de lo que somos” (Redacción). Murguía Lardizábal también comentó que lo único que van a provocar series como ésta es que cancelen las inversiones en Juárez por lo que invitó a los ciudadanos a defender su ciudad. “Hagamos cruzada para defender lo nuestro, de decir ante el mundo aquí estamos tenemos problemas pero ya los superamos”, expresó el edil. (*ibid.*)

El Alcalde utiliza las palabras “echen lodo” y evita usar la palabra feminicidio, término que dice lo que acontece en Ciudad Juárez a algunas mujeres. Tampoco habla de los miles de asesinados, por eso lo cambia por “problemas”. Y así, a través del discurso banal, “de la situación errada de lo que somos” desaparece la “tragedia humana” (Enríquez) que miles de ciudadanas y ciudadanos han padecido en esta ciudad. En Ciudad Juárez, se ha dicho que la violencia y los delitos de alto impacto han disminuido, gracias a los buenos oficios del gobierno. Ciertamente la disminución es un hecho. Para el año 2013, Juárez ocupa el cuarto lugar de municipalidad violenta (Heinle *et al.*). Con todo, habría que hacer una evaluación de estos oficios. A pesar de este triunfalismo, el homicidio/feminicidio mantiene una tasa de 39 casos por cada 100 mil habitantes (Comisión Indicadores). Otra violencia son los casos de personas que van a la fosa común porque nadie las ha identificado; este año 2013, 79 cadáveres -5 de ellos FNI- no fueron reclamados por nadie. El Fiscal Jorge González Nicolás,

aseguró que muchas de estas víctimas eran procedentes de estados como Oaxaca, Tabasco, Chiapas y Veracruz. Algunos eran personas que llegaron a esta frontera en busca de trabajo, pero al no tener una buena opción fueron reclutados por

grupos del crimen organizado. Expresó que no se descarta que algunas de las personas fallecidas sean personas deportadas de los Estados Unidos y cuyos familiares podrían desconocer lo que pasó con ellos. La mayoría fueron víctimas de la delincuencia organizada o delitos del fuero común, pero también hubo casos de accidentes fatales y muertes naturales. Al no contar con la identificación de estas víctimas sus carpetas se han archivado, al igual que su ADN para reactivar las investigaciones que lleven con el paradero de los responsables de su muerte. Durante seis meses nadie los reclamó y mucho menos preguntó por ellos, por eso las autoridades ministeriales decidieron inhumarlos, aunque ya procesaron sus restos para tener una muestra de ADN disponible en caso de que alguien acuda a buscar alguna persona extraviada. (Chaparro)

He ahí la gran diferencia entre las vidas que sí importan y las vidas que no importaron y que su muerte está en espera de ser reconocida, no por una acción gubernamental concertada sino hasta que algún familiar, en su largo peregrinar por este territorio de impunidad, tenga la suerte de encontrarla.

La disminución de la violencia de igual forma se debe a que una de las organizaciones criminales\_ presumiblemente\_ la del Chapo Guzmán, ganó la plaza [10] a la organización de La Línea. Por lo expuesto, hay algo que no queda claro, si ya superamos los problemas, ¿qué necesidad tenían quienes pronto dejarían el poder—Héctor Murguía y Julián Leyzaloa, Secretario de Seguridad Pública Municipal— de pedir escoltas personales? Las cuales les fueron concedidas por el Cabildo. A su vez, la sociedad civil organizada, liderada por Plan Estratégico de Ciudad Juárez, promovió un amparo colectivo contra esta decisión a espaldas de la ciudadanía. El 27 de agosto de 2013, 1,600 personas acudimos a firmar este amparo. Esta acción fue rechazada por el juez Alberto Escobedo Castañón, quien sobreescribió el proceso promovido por el Plan Estratégico de Juárez (Plan Estratégico de Juárez). Finalmente le fueron otorgadas escoltas al hoy expresidente municipal y a su familia. Incongruentemente, aquí no contó para este agente estatal manchar la imagen de la ciudad, ni tampoco, refrendar que los “problemas” ya habían sido superados. Si bien esto parece un fracaso, debe tomarse en cuenta que es la primera acción en México de una ciudadanía que se inconforma y se ampara contra una decisión arbitraria. Plan Estratégico continuó con un recurso de amparo. Esta es la información que aparece en su página:

El Tribunal Colegiado de Zacatecas confirmó la resolución contra el amparo promovido en contra del pago de escoltas al Ciudadano Héctor Murguía Lardizábal. La resolución confirmada, argumenta que la ciudadanía no es afectada ni jurídica ni legítimamente por pagarle escoltas a un ciudadano común con dinero público. ¿Tú qué opinas? ¿Te afecta que utilicen cada mes poco más de 104 mil pesos en la seguridad de Héctor Murguía mientras en ti solo gastan 51 pesos al mes?

Plan Estratégico de Juárez evalúa llevar el caso hasta la Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos.



## A manera de conclusión

Frente a estas pérdidas de vidas humanas, de territorios y de ciudadanía que he presentado, frente al destino de la humanidad en tiempos inhumanos y a los mecanismos de la política de la muerte que se ejercen sobre los cuerpos físicos y la totalidad de la población, estas tecnologías de ninguna manera deben verse como un proceso absoluto, integral y compartido. Si así lo asumimos, nos invadiría la desesperanza de negar la autonomía y la capacidad de articular respuestas y mecanismos antidisciplinarios y antirregulatorios de familiares de sobrevivientes, del cuerpo social, y toda la red de organismos de la sociedad civil nacional e internacional (Monárrez, *Trama*). Hay una sociedad que genera acciones en contra de la necropolítica y el necropoder que despliegan sobre los cuerpos lacerados de los hombres y las mujeres, los tres niveles de gobierno. Son opciones políticas que merecen ser tomadas en cuenta como ejemplos de una supervivencia asociadas a las acciones de las y los sujetos públicos. Estas acciones están enmarcadas dentro de la importancia de haber llamado a quienes han sido designados como sujetos matables: feminicidio y de ahí, dar pie para designar a la matanza discriminada de jóvenes: juvenicidio. Estos conceptos o definiciones críticas ponen el acento en el derecho humano violado que se les despoja a las víctimas: el derecho a la vida. Permiten visibilizar a los agresores y ponen en movimiento los aparatos de justicia, nacionales e internacionales, en pro del respeto a los derechos humanos, y en pro de la justicia para todas y todos (Ni Aolin). Estas acciones, si bien modestas, significan un avance contra la industrialización de la violencia. Nos ayudan, al resignificar y resimbolizar a las y los sujetos matables, evidenciar la violación a los derechos humanos de las y los muertos vivientes frente a las necropolíticas que asumen los líderes políticos a través del necropoder en contra de sus ciudadanía.

Mis agradecimientos a Carmen Saraí Martínez Márquez, asistente de investigación de excelencia. A mi esposo Carlos Pons, por su acompañamiento y enorme satisfacción por mi trabajo.

### Notas:

[1] Tzvetan Todorov hace una distinción muy significativa para esta generalización: "Todos los hombres son *potencialmente* capaces del mismo mal, pero no lo son *efectivamente*, pues no han tenido las mismas experiencias: su capacidad de amor, de compasión, de juicio moral ha sido cultivada y ha florecido o, por el contrario, ha sido ahogada y ha desaparecido". (151)

[2] Aunque este término aún carece de una definición crítica como la del feminicidio, su enunciación nos permite situarlo dentro de la nuda vida. He ahí la importancia de llamarlo juvenicidio.

[3] A esta forma de asesinar mujeres le llamé feminicidio sexual sistémico (2009), aunque en otras obras he analizado la complejidad del feminicidio en las formas de presentarse y de conceptualizarse (2011).

[4] Me refiero al estudio hemerográfico de mujeres asesinadas (1993).

[5] Hoy se les llama FNI Femeninas no identificadas. Doy gracias a Cecilia Espinoza de la Red de Mesa de Mujeres por acercarme a este término.

[6] Queda pendiente dar luz a ese número pequeño, en comparación con las mujeres, que acompañaron este movimiento, desde diferentes ámbitos y en diferentes momentos a lo largo de estos veinte años.

[7] Esta organización pierde fuerza a partir del 2001, con la aparición de otros grupos como Justicia para Nuestras Hijas y Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa (Pérez García).

[8] Los años 2008 al 2011 concentraron la mayor proporción de bajas en esta ciudad. A partir del 2012, inicia una desaceleración (Heinle *et al.*).

[9] La estrategia y sus acciones están a la espera de una evaluación.

[10] Si la ciudadanía se perdió, también se pierde el término ciudad por el de plaza.



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## **(Re)Living Femicide through Social Control: The Regulation of Life and Bodies through Fear and (In)Formal Social Control**

### **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to analyze how violence and femicides have created a regime of gendered social control including the regulation of women's bodies in the Mexican state of Chihuahua. Hyper-vigilant forms of social control permeate popular culture, which is heavily influenced by the patriarchal hegemonic state. The State's discursive and local practices work to impact and shape quotidian life and movement for girls and women across Chihuahua. Formal and informal legal and social systems also regulate and control female bodies, thereby generating a categorical scale of social control for women and girls that include: femicide as 'denigrated body'; activist mother as 'denouncing body'; anti-femicide activist as 'disruptive body'; and finally, State as site of the production of 'docile' bodies. This article explores how the rhetoric of fear of femicide adds to an already normalized landscape of sexualized and gendered violence. This work also utilizes Richard Lawrence Miller's framework of the 'Chain of Destruction,' which describes mass violence through five phases: identification, isolation, ostracism, confiscation, and annihilation. Miller's framework offers an analytical framework for understanding the regulation and control of bodies.

**Keywords:** Femicidal State Rhetoric, femicide, activism, social control, state repression, chain of destruction

## Introduction

For over twenty years, girls and women have gone missing or have been killed in Chihuahua. The numbers of murdered women have long surpassed one thousand, and still there is no consensus on the number still missing. The eruption of violence in Chihuahua during former Mexican President Felipe Calderón's 'War on Drugs' resulted in rival cartel killings, street level brutality, and military and federal police presence that included documented claims of human rights violations by soldiers and police (Meyer, De la Rosa Hickerson and Castro Rodríguez). The 13,000 plus killed in Juárez as a result of this War has left an indelible mark on how we understand social violence (INEGI). These deadly occurrences have overshadowed everyday violence against women and girls, including the continued disappearance and murder of girls and women in the Mexican state. When women were murdered or found dead during the 'great violence' [1] between 2008 and 2012, their death was popularly explained as the result of their involvement in the drug trade. Overwhelmed by the reality of so much death and bloodshed due to the Drug War, the feminicides and general violence against women were pushed aside by authorities, and any efforts or pretenses by the Mexican state to investigate these crimes were rechanneled to the widespread carnage that people experienced.

The aim of this article is to analyze how violence and femicides have created a regime of gendered social control including the regulation of women's bodies. In particular, I am focusing on the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez and the hyper-vigilant forms of social control permeating popular culture. [2] I will also detail how every day the hegemonic, patriarchal State and its local, discursive practices influence girls and women's movements in the region. This is salient because two generations of young people—especially girls—in Ciudad Juárez now experience hyper-vigilance as normative, and at times accept the spatial limits to their movements. Warnings of death, rape, and forced "disappearances" are naturalized as the self-evident consequences of venturing out at night. These warnings contain spatial prohibitions that limit the movement of girls beyond the domestic sphere and into the urban areas, which are the "realm of men" that are characterized as violent, chaotic, and dangerous. Similarly, nighttime is the time when perceived hyper-masculine behaviors such as drinking, carousing, and masculine confrontations occur: thus, it is the opposite of the feminine and the "safe" daytime hours in which women are allowed to be active in the public sphere. In short, women and girls are told indirectly by the State and, by extension, segments of society, that behaviors which transgress gender-conforming roles and spatial boundaries can result in their victimization and even femicide. Building on these preliminary observations, this article deconstructs the use of manipulation of "the femicides" as a controlling technology that works to limit the freedom—spatially, temporally, and otherwise—of women and girls in Juárez, Chihuahua, and throughout the borderlands more broadly.

In this article, I will argue that “Femicidal State Rhetoric” [3] is used as a subtle yet explicit mechanism deployed by State institutions to impose new societal pressures on women and girls, which focus on their movement—day and night—for their ‘own good.’ What I suggest by ‘Femicidal State Rhetoric’ is that hegemonic State forces and State actors use the reality of femicide as a way of controlling, curtailing and convincing women and girls to alter their activities and to limit their movement across the city. This also impacts women and girls’ confidence in their surroundings, and their sense of security and well-being. The transformation of earlier feminist notions of “femicide” as “the killing of females by males because they are female” (Russell 3) to the use of a feminist and human rights framework that articulates “feminicide” as a critique of sexual violence, patriarchy, misogyny, gender discrimination, and neo-liberal economic violence, are concepts used by families, activists, academics and legal scholars to address the most extreme form of violence and terror against women and girls.

Mexican Ciudad Juárez-based sociologist, Julia Estela Monárrez Fragoso, has tracked the murders of women and girls since 1993, and has worked to aggregate and typify the distinctions among these murders (Monárrez Fragoso 2005). Moreover, the Mexican feminist, cultural anthropologist and former federal Congresswoman, Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos has elaborated on the concept even further by preferring the term feminicidio to “name the ensemble of violations of women’s human rights, which contain the crimes against and the disappearances of women. [She] propose[s] that all these be considered as ‘crimes against humanity’” (xv). [4]

As an antithesis to the numerous interlocutors on femicide and feminicidal discourse involved in the anti-feminicide movement, the State has worked to use these deaths as a new tool of gender-based oppression—the threat of femicide. [5] In this work, I use the term ‘femicide’ to discuss ‘Femicidal State Rhetoric’ and how the State has used the concept as a form of social control threatening fear of death, but throughout the article, I prefer using the concept feminicide to describe the failure of the State to provide a life free from violence for women and girls. In building on the work of other scholars, Rosa-Linda Fregoso and I have further elaborated on feminicide as follows:

...the murders of women and girls [are] founded on a gender power structure...[that is] both public and private... implicating both the state (directly or indirectly) and individual perpetrators (private or State actors); it thus encompasses systematic, widespread, and everyday interpersonal violence... feminicide is systemic violence rooted in social, political, economic, and cultural inequalities...[and] the intersection of gender dynamics with the cruelties of racism and economic injustices in local as well as global contexts... Our framing follows [Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos] critical human rights formulation of feminicide as a “crime against humanity” (6)



In short, the institutions within the Mexican government and groups rebutting crimes against women critiqued for their passive or active participation in—or cover up of—the feminicides have hijacked the deaths of women and girls and transformed them into a tool of social control within society. This hegemonic rhetoric of ‘femicide’ and the social regulation of ‘female bodies’ through the social control of society make it increasingly difficult to address the sources of ongoing gender based violence. In an earlier work, I argue that:

The failure of nation-states to critically interrogate these crimes and the habitual lack of respect and due diligence in investigations granted to victims in Mexico...manifests itself in their arenas of justice (courts, police precincts, prosecutor’s offices)...[This lackadaisical response facilitates] gender-based violence, especially femicide, as a tool of informal social control for women...by institutions within society and societal members. (Bejarano 120, translation mine)

Subsequently, Mexican authorities do not use femicidal rhetoric as a cry of moral outrage. Their use of femicidal discourse reveals a pervasive belief in the futility of fighting femicide and the appropriation of language to exert power and incite fear in society. Discourse is used in formal and informal systems to regulate and classify female bodies, producing the categories of: ‘denigrated,’ ‘denouncing,’ ‘disruptive,’ and ‘docile’ bodies. In the section below, I explore how the rhetoric of fear of femicide adds to an already normalized landscape of sexualized and gendered violence. I also examine how the regulation of bodies can be understood within the context of Richard Lawrence Miller’s framework of the ‘Chain of Destruction’ (1996) which charts mass violence through five phases: identification, isolation, ostracism, confiscation, and annihilation.

## **1. Widespread Fear and Social Control**

At the Mexico-U.S. border, globalization has created a strong network for corruption, underground economies, state malfeasance, and ungovernability (Olivera). Forced disappearances and everyday street crime are rampant as organized crime syndicates fight with rivals and State entities for trafficking corridors. Ciudad Juárez remains a city plagued by poverty, domestic and structural violence and unbridled fear. This untenable situation is directly tied to the appetite for drugs in the U.S., weapons trafficking from the U.S. into Mexico, and billions of dollars associated with these two illicit trades (O’Rourke and Byrd; Payan). Rarely are connections made between U.S. drug consumption and the 13,000 approximate murders in Ciudad Juárez and the greater claims of over 100,000 deaths throughout Mexico (INEGI). Instead of State and global actors working to find linkages among various forms of violence to disrupt its deleterious effects, Chihuahuan communities experience the natural upheaval that accompanies daily violence and the threat of death and victimization with little international intervention. So much bloodshed translates into forms of survivability that dramatically change the social fabric of society and how ordinary people

live their lives. As everyday people are swept into the violence in Ciudad Juárez, life is altered with stories of unabridged terror and macabre stories of death. In Fragoso Monárrez's work titled, *Death in a Transnational Metropolitan Region*, she states:

Ciudad Juárez resembles a public cemetery; it is a modern necropolis. Yet these are not natural deaths but artificial ones, and we experience them as socially symbolic events, like a sacrifice "through the will of the group" (Baudrillard, 1993:165). The executed—the ones that are connected to the criminal groups—will sooner or later die, because in Ciudad Juárez, social memory has been engaged through personal experiences or through the eyes of newspapers and mass media that report the killings. (28)

The social violence and ungovernability experienced in Cd. Juárez is coupled with a parallel governing power through organized crime syndicates that, independently and in concert with the State, the Mexican military, and federal and State police, make conditions for people at minimum uncomfortable and for most intolerable. Although the Mexican military and federal police presence dissipated after 2012, their inefaceable footprint of human rights violations and intimidation tactics remain embedded in people's memories. Now, human rights violations and the fear of violence and death preoccupy many people; ordinary citizens try to disengage from the violence by not raising their voices against it because to do so can pose great risk. Stopping feminicides has taken a backseat to a larger-than-life fear that interrupts everyday living; speaking out against feminicide can mean harassment and even death.

Typically, "[s]tates seek to administer a citizenry which obeys the law not only because of the threat of punishment, but [because] it is 'the right thing to do'" (Chriss 22). But what if the State is a reflection of the severe negligence of its citizens? The work of Juárez sociologist Luis Alfonso Herrera Robles looks at the impact of citizen abandonment by the State through the lack of city infrastructure and public spaces. He also proclaims the overabundance of bars and 'drug houses' (*picaderos*) as an additional source of societal problems and institutional negligence. Herrera Robles asserts:

violence is becoming naturalized by the public because it is becoming part of the everyday. The generations born to this sub-culture of violence understand violence as part of the political and social landscape of the City, and come to understand it as 'convivencia' o mal-vivencia; [ostensibly] people learn to negotiate this within society itself. In other words, the generations born during this time period or who were raised during this currently violent period of Juárez, come to socially understand violence as a means of survival and a means of resolving conflict. (81-82; translation mine)

Herrera Robles further claims that apathy and lack of political will are proof of both the normalization of violence and the acquiescence of ordinary people. Conversely, apathy or the lack of political will within certain segments of society likely serve to mask their fear of death and simultaneously explain their non-participation in civil movements to curb violence. Despite these

fears, a valiant and determined subset of society, comprised of seasoned and youth activists that form part of Mexican civil groups, remains unflinchingly committed to stopping the violence that plagues their communities in the face of great risk to themselves.

As abandonment and violence become the 'new normal' in Juárez, societal norms adjust and people conform to widespread violence and its concomitant fear—real and imagined. As norms regulate behavior and work as a form of social control, fear and conformity dictate routine activities, gendered practices and all aspects of socio-cultural life. The 'new normal' is informally passed on through socialization and customs, which then forms part of norms passed down through generations as tradition, imitation, and authority (Chriss). As life becomes more restricted because of violence and fear, people become more isolated and more removed from life as they once understood it. Ordinary people will generally conform to these expectations because of fear of being labeled as deviant—or worse, blamed for their own victimization. In the next section, I argue that violence is a methodology used by the State to reproduce State power and femicide is used as a tool to control segments of society.

## **2. Violence as Power, Femicide as a Tool of Social Control**

An ongoing atmosphere of femicidal fear adds to a normalized landscape of sexualized and gendered violence that is downplayed by authorities even as victims are continuously found. A Juárez family-based organization called the Mothers and Relatives Committee of Disappeared Daughters are demanding investigations into the cases of 40 teenage girls and young women that have gone missing since 2009 in Ciudad Juárez (Paterson). In the spring of 2012, the remains of sixteen young women, possibly victims of forced prostitution were recovered from the Valle de Juárez outside of the city in a wash called the Arroyo Navaho. Several male and female remains were found at this site, yet the vast majority of bodies are still unidentified, and there is no clear indication of the gender breakdown of the remains discovered.

Authorities initially showed little interest in this case, as girls and young women who had gone missing from 2008-2011 were identified through DNA as the individuals found in the Arroyo Navaho. The Arroyo Navaho case is emblematic of the types of intersections referenced, above, where State actors neglect to investigate, including possible drug trafficking, forced disappearances, and sex-slave trafficking and prostitution. The Chihuahua City-based women's human rights center, *Centro de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres*, claims that the *fiscalía* (district attorney's office) reportedly continues to mix-up the remains of women victims and continues to mistreat victims' families. Recently, a trafficking ring was arrested for these Arroyo Navaho

femicides, but it remains to be seen whether there will be claims of scapegoating by the individuals in custody. If they are in fact culpable for so much death, then the question remains, how will they legally be punished? Elsewhere I have argued, “As systems of justice fail to ensure rights and provide due process and due diligence in investigations, people lose faith in these systems” (Bejarano 121). Consequently, fear and impunity as social control reign in the city. The 2001 femicides of eight women and girls found in a cotton field now known as the Campo Algodonero remains unresolved despite the three femicide victims’ mothers taking their cases to the InterAmerican Court. The InterAmerican court ruling of González et. al. v. Mexico, “found Mexico guilty of failure to comply with its obligations to guarantee human rights, of gender stereotyping and discrimination, and of negligence to investigate these crimes including broad sweeping impunity, among other key rulings” (Memory of Struggle 199). The lack of due diligence and fulfillment of the court issued resolutions, along with the obscene disregard for the international protocols cited in this landmark case, and the 2012 Arroyo Navaho case make evident the Mexican State’s sheer, unadulterated impunity.

Given the apathy of the State and the normalization of violence resulting in citizen abandonment, it is not surprising that two generations of girls living in the border area of Ciudad Juárez are taught not to venture out at night, alone, or to the downtown district of the city, or they may become the next victim of femicide. In the late 1990s, local media ads on billboards once asked parents in Ciudad Juárez if they knew where their daughters were, encouraging (it seemed) a stronghold on the whereabouts and activities of their daughters. Also, campaigns like *ponte vida*, a popular safety campaign ‘taught’ girls how to be aware of their surroundings and how to protect themselves by using keychain whistles. The campaign restricted the freedoms of girls and young women by situating them within the stringent control and regulation of familial, religious, education, economic, and legal systems, all the while arguing that surveillance and restrictions were measures for their own protection. In effect, femicides heightened already rigid controls and made these systems even stronger by better controlling female bodies.

Although femicides are popularly understood as part of Mexico’s current crisis of governability (Olivera), they are also a mechanism of gendered control. According to James Chriss, “[s]ocialization...then is the single important and efficient mechanism by which moral and legal rules are inculcated in and internalized by citizens” (22). Social violence frequently works hand in hand with social control. As Chriss further notes, “Ruling is made easier if those being ruled assent to the system of regulations being imposed” (ibid.). In Ciudad Juárez, a quasi-informal structure materializes where people living in terror are governed by an unwritten set of informal regulations—social norms—influenced by violence, which becomes the common rule of order in

the region. There is no trust in government, so people avoid legal systems and government agents entirely for their own protection and self-preservation. Yet, they remain influenced by how State structures conceptualize threats and violence, and people learn restricted routines and adapt to violence through their own cautionary practices. Morrison et.al. assert that, “[v]iolence is woven into the cultural fabric of many societies and becomes a part of a set of norms that guides behavior and helps shape group’s identities” (103). In the next section, I examine how social control influences segments of society in such a way as to produce derisive categories in which to classify women within the anti-femicide movement.

### **3. (De)Coding the Regulation of Bodies in the Anti-Femicide Movement**

'Femicidal State Rhetoric' combined with formal and informal systems regulate and control female bodies, producing categories of social control that include the 'denigrated body', the 'denouncing body', the 'disruptive body,' and the 'docile body.' These categories are largely inspired by misogynistic underpinnings manifested in routine life. I argue that this taxonomy also reflects what women engaged in the anti-femicide movement have endured for over twenty years in Chihuahua. Femicide is the most extreme form of gender-based violence that I will call the 'denigrated body,' the final control and power often elicited through the sexual violence and murder of a woman. The female body is desecrated and left with no mechanism for justice and no pronouncement of emotion except for her violent image of death. Femicide insures that silence is maintained. Only witness-survivors, such as the families of these women, are left to seek justice. Femicides in Juárez represent the juxtaposition of the failure of the State to protect, and the State's ability and power to control the female body even after death. Assassins involved in femicides and other gender-based violence—both private actors and agents of the State—are guaranteed safety from imprisonment, since 98% of crimes are unresolved in Mexico (Pachico).

The next category is the 'denouncing body' of the mother. As the mother of a femicide victim denounces the State for its inept investigations, the denouncing mother is ridiculed and often met with hostile confrontations by police and other State actors. She is belittled and minimized for her demands for justice. The mother as 'denouncing body' is persecuted as blameworthy and responsible for her daughter's death, for, in effect, letting her 'go out at night,' for working a late shift, for taking public transportation out of necessity and a litany of other reasons. She is questioned for not protecting her daughter from death, and is characterized as a meddling woman during police investigations, as a profiteer for speaking to the public and international human rights workers, and as someone in need of further surveillance and control.

The following category is of human rights activist. This category classifies the human rights activist as a 'disruptive body' since the activist confronts the State, demanding accountability and due process within legal systems. As feminicides have generated international interest and support, mainly women have been at the forefront of the anti-feminicide movement to counter the patriarchal forces in place that ignored investigations through negligence, which further articulated a misogynist agenda in covering up crimes. Anti-feminicide activists, then, have become targets of State control. As their work is questioned by authorities, they too become subject to surveillance and often harassment.

The final category is the 'docile' female body, which is the attempt by the State to shape women in the image of prescribed heteronormative gender roles. These gender roles place women in the domestic sphere as childbearing, childrearing, submissive and dutiful wives and daughters. The 'docile' body lacks agency, voice, and to a great extent, personhood. Additionally, the docile body accepts the "natural" place of men at the center of power, enjoying full autonomy and decision-making within the home. On a public level, these hegemonic patriarchal tendencies warn women that acting outside of standard cultural and social conventions as activists or by engaging in everyday behaviors that contradict traditional or normative activities, place women at the margins of socially acceptable behavior. The argument goes that women that work or that work late, and who travel alone or to entertainment districts, hence, seek danger, and by stating this aloud, femicides become an effortless and natural social control tool to argue blame and culpability onto victims. It is the desire of the State and other segments of society to use femicide as a tool to encourage women to act in the socially measured and acceptable ways of 'gente decente.' Gente decente become the benchmark for cultural and social scripts that influence societal governance. The taming of society and women and girls in particular allows for governance that is more oligarchical and authoritarian, despite living in a democracy. It also allows for the further construction of 'gente decente' or as the popular culture term insinuates "the right sort of people" to rule a society and to live in it. According to this discourse, 'gente decente' would not protest in the streets of Ciudad Juárez or Chihuahua City like the 'denouncing' and 'disruptive' bodies of feminicide victims' mothers and women activists.

#### **4. Richard Lawrence Miller's Chain of Destruction**

Building upon my analysis of social control and the categorization of female bodies in sections one through three above, I want to turn to an examination of Richard Lawrence Miller's framework called the "chain of destruction" to explain how throughout history and across different societies, marginalized people have been oppressed and considered disposable. Central to these examples,



is how violence has intentionally been orchestrated to obstruct them. In some settings, ordinary people have been both complicit in this violence and victims of it. Historian Richard Lawrence Miller has investigated the ways in which ordinary people are targeted for destruction. In his work, Miller discusses the Holocaust and its applicability in terms of understanding the mass incarceration of people of color in the U.S. His framework and analytical thinking coincide with the arguments made about femicide victims in particular and the anti-femicide movement in general. Miller's analysis is useful in helping us to understand victims' families as 'ordinary' women that are targeted for destruction because they are perceived as a nuisance by the State apparatus, along with the activists that accompany them in their fight for justice. In this way, Miller's discussion of everyday people and their persecution can be utilized to argue that 'ordinary' people in the anti-femicide movement are persecuted for their demands for justice, accountability and transparency, even while other 'ordinary' people remain aloof to the femicide atrocity, or minimize it or even deny it in efforts to remain nonaligned with anyone involved in this justice movement for their own self-preservation. In this sense and on a much smaller scale than what Miller analyzes in his own work, these women are targeted through what he calls a 'chain of destruction' that includes the identification, isolation, ostracism, confiscation, and annihilation of groups within society.

Miller's framework is useful in explaining how ordinary people like women activists and femicide victims' families are beleaguered. His work also describes how ordinary people themselves can be indoctrinated by governments to target particular groups of citizens. In this sense, I consider how the concept of 'gente decente' is useful in understanding how some segments of society—mainly the elite classes and business world—yearn for the anti-femicide movement to end, thereby reestablishing a façade that Chihuahua is on the mend, that femicides never existed, and that border zones like Ciudad Juárez are vibrant, thriving industrialized urban centers where 'gente decente' are rearticulating a sanitized image of this city (Morales and Bejarano).

For self-proclaimed 'gente decente' in Chihuahua, the women of this movement are troublemakers and deviants, and are personified as a paradox to their everyday and 'ordinary' law-abiding existence. These women counter the idea of obedient 'gente decente.' As Monárrez states, "[l]aw-abiding citizen[s] dismissed the constant homicides perpetuated before 2008, and 'little by little, the dead cease to exist'" (Baudrillard 126, as cited in Monárrez Frago 30). In effect, privilege provides the ability not only to ignore death, but to categorize death and afford it meaning. As Monárrez goes on to argue:

Authorities and some segments of society categorized values associated with life and death: which bodies are worthy of importance; what lifestyles are considered to be a "life"; what lives are worth protecting; what lives are worth saving; and what lives deserve to be mourned? (Butler, as cited in Monárrez Frago 31).

While self-identified law-abiding 'gente decente' attempt to forget feminicides and forge a different imaginary of their city and state, the State and its agents work to undo the legitimacy and moral authority that these women and groups have in fighting for justice and due diligence. Miller's 'chain of destruction' framework helps feminicidal scholars discern certain identifying and targeting techniques designed to defame if not destroy the momentum of the anti-feminicide movement and its protagonists.

Miller's 'chain of destruction' template links identification, ostracism, confiscation, concentration, and annihilation. His work is, as he says, 'inspired' by Raul Hilberg's book, *The Destruction of the European Jews* published in 1961, in which Hilberg analyzes the destruction process as applied to the Holocaust. Although I am not a student of the Holocaust, I have contemplated its relevance to the U.S.-Mexico Border area through my invitation to participate in a University of New Mexico symposium sponsored by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies in 2013. This symposium investigated the ways in which research on the Holocaust has inspired scholarship on mass dispossession, violence, and ethnic cleansing throughout the Western Hemisphere. I spoke about (un)silencing sexualized violence at the U.S.-Mexico borderlands since the symposium's intent was to "explore emerging Holocaust research on historical trauma and its aftermaths, as well as current research on these topics in the American southwest and its borderlands" ((UN)Silencing the Past). Presenters discussed colonization and decolonization in American Indian communities, historical trauma, relocation of African-origin populations, and mass murders of women in Guatemala. Despite the horrors contemplated in this symposium and the pain analyzed in my work, the large-scale atrocities of the Holocaust are unlike any other.

Neither this chapter nor the papers presented at the conference claim moral or historical equivalence with the Holocaust. However, what the Holocaust can do is help us to critically contemplate the great suffering that humans endure as well as how this widespread havoc is masterminded. Such is the basis for Miller implementing his framework to analyze the U.S.-based War on Drugs and the massive incarceration of people of color through the prison-industrial complex. Similarly, my use of Miller's framework serves solely as a heuristic to understand the systematic processes of "destruction" associated with the violence against women, children, and their families in Ciudad Juárez. I found Miller's comparison and 'his chain of destruction' framework eerily fitting to the social violence and feminicides that plague Ciudad Juárez. Miller states that the:

elements of destruction can be visualized as a chain. Once the targeted group is identified, members can be ostracized from community life through the boycott of social and business relations, and through the revocation of legal rights. The next link in the chain of destruction is property confiscation, followed by concentration of

the group's members into geographic localities. The final element of destruction is annihilation, by prevention of birth and infliction of death (xi)

Each element of his framework pertains to eradicating the anti-femicide movement, as well as to the categorization of (re)gulating bodies by the State as mentioned earlier. Femicidal State Rhetoric is used to tame bodies and attempt to make them into acceptable '*gente decente*.' I trace the various links of the chain of femicidal violence in the next sections.

## 5. Identification and Ostracism

The analogy of war is frequently made about the U.S.-Mexico borderlands as it relates to drug violence and State's responses to crime; and like communities riddled with war-time atrocities, Ciudad Juárez also comes to represent a conflict zone. In the 'chain of destruction' framework, Miller begins by discussing "identification" and "ostracism." Before Felipe Calderon initiated the Mexican-based War on Drugs, women and girls disappeared. They were ostensibly identified and selected for their vulnerability, their youth, and their attractiveness; they were all killed senselessly. Whether through serial sexual killings or through domestic violence, women and girls have gone missing and have been found murdered.

Vulnerable bodies are identified for abuse and ultimately death (denigrated bodies), and left, as Rita Laura Segato has suggested, as a complex system of communication between powerful figures in the local society who have authored their demise. Segato explains, "Sovereignty's mark par excellence is not the power of death over the subjugated but, rather, the psychological and moral defeat of the subjugated and their transformation into a receptive audience for the dominator's exhibition of its discretionary death power" (75). Consequently, those women involved in the anti-femicide movement are marked and identified as 'Other' and targeted for persecution because of their search for justice and accountability. Femicides as a form of social messaging simultaneously represent the State's negligence, gender discrimination and failure to protect its citizenry, and serve to identify the families and activists associated with that victim for further targeting and surveillance. [7]

Once mothers, victims' families and activists have been identified and associated with the anti-femicide movement, the process of ostracizing them begins. Both subtle and overt practices are found where claims-makers like authority figures will refer to the mothers as '*viejas escandalosas*' (exaggerative women). The mother becomes the 'denouncing body' that despite having the moral authority to criticize and demand justice from the State, is eventually questioned for her demands and is perceived and constructed as a mere nuisance. For over a decade, the mothers' accounts

that I have heard detailing their search for their missing daughters confirm that they were told by authorities to wait for more than 72 hours before looking for them. Police argued that their daughters had likely run off with a boyfriend or were leading a double life—a common script by Juárez law enforcement. [8]

Activists in the anti-femicide movement have also fallen under this identification system and have been ostracized and called ‘Malinches’ to Juárez, “who betray the City’s newfound image as a haven for tourism and modernity” (Morales and Bejarano 191). Attempts to ostracize activists by claiming they profit from the ‘pain of the families of the murdered’ garner public support from the ‘gente decente’ and ‘obedient’ citizenry that decry the negative depictions of their beloved city. The more activists defiantly confront the State, demanding accountability, the more they become transformed in the public purview as deviant and unlikeable. Their work in exposing corruption, negligence, and the brutal techniques that various appendages of the State have used against women and society at large place them perpetually in harms’ way. In the words of long-time anti-femicide activist, lawyer, human rights defender, and co-founder of the *Centro de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres* in Chihuahua City, Lucha Castro Rodríguez:

[As] human rights defenders, despite our fear, we leave our homes to demand, accompany, and to listen to suggestions, to discuss, and to denounce, in order to hope for a better life for all, yet we recognize the challenge of documenting human rights violations. We document these violations so we do not forget, so that we preserve a historical memory in our heads and in our hearts of those who torture, those who burn our homes, and who threaten, rape, disappear and murder our sons and daughters (Castro Rodríguez 6; translation mine)

Like the mothers of the murdered and disappeared, activists become targets for control and regulation, especially at a time of tremendous loss of life over the past two decades. As the State proves unsuccessful in its attempts at co-opting them, or even worse, harassing and killing these activist mothers and their supporters, it becomes further vexed in their pursuit against them.

For various State and non-state actors like the police, the military, organized crime syndicates, sexual offenders and domestic violence abusers, anti-femicide activists are a nuisance. Anti-femicide activists denounce these State and non-State actors for crimes against women which activists argue are crimes against humanity. Activists become in some ways a useful scapegoat to blame for the slow progress on revitalization efforts in Ciudad Juárez and for its never ending eruption of social problems. The scapegoating fits Miller’s claims regarding the chain of destruction:

For authoritarians a crucial benefit of scapegoating is that directing public anger toward scapegoats assures continuance of public anger, because problems creating fear and anger thereby remain unaddressed and will continue. In contrast to a

confident and contented citizenry, a fearful and angry citizenry is more susceptible to authoritarian demands, therefore, scapegoats are crucial for maintaining social turmoil needed by authoritarians. (192)

For years, human rights activists have endured defamation campaigns both personally and against their civil society organizations for allegedly profiting from the pain of the families of murdered and disappeared women. They have also worked despite great risks to themselves in seeking justice. Organizations like the *Centro de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres* have been threatened so much so that they have submitted a petition seeking protection by the InterAmerican Commission and InterAmerican Court of Human Rights ([www.cedehm.org.mx](http://www.cedehm.org.mx)).

The fear of threats and harassment against these women has been enough to alter life-as-people-know-it. Fear—direct or indirect—and social control work hand in hand. In 2010, there were rumors that a blacklist was created by local authorities targeting 42 activists for arrest. Authorities temporarily detained Cipriana Herrera, a long-time union and human rights activist in Juárez; she was the only individual arrested at that time. She had been denouncing military human rights violations and had worked closely with the well-known activist Josefina Reyes who was murdered along with several other members of her family before and after her death (Figueroa). Both women were also involved in the anti-femicide movement. Cipriana quickly began receiving death threats and random, unjustifiable visits by the military at her home. She was purportedly arrested for a civil protest she was involved in years before but was released several hours later.

Fearing for her life, she sought political asylum in the U.S. and received it in 2011 (Figueroa). Although it was never confirmed whether the blacklist existed, it powerfully worked to impose fear on people, families, activists, and other ancillary groups. Ostracism through social stigmatization has worked to perpetuate fear and to create a sense of isolation from every day, ordinary people, marginalizing these women for their activism. In Cipriana Jurado's case it meant leaving behind everything she knew. On September 22, 2014, I participated as a judge for the *Tribunal Permanente de los Pueblos* in Chihuahua City, Chihuahua, and I heard countless testimonials of human rights atrocities, forced disappearances, gender-based violence, and femicides. Cipriana Jurado skyped into the tribunal from the U.S. and shared her testimonial saying, "*Perdí todo...lo que perdimos fue nuestra patria...vivir acá es vivir una vida sola*" (I lost everything...what we lost was our homeland...to live here [in the U.S.] is to live alone; translation mine). Others representing families of femicide victims left Juárez seeking asylum in the U.S. or relocated to the interior of Mexico for their safety. [7] Living in exile or fleeing the prospect of death is unmistakably a drastic form of isolation and ostracism and in some ways is a kind of social death.

## 6. Confiscation and Concentration

The following two elements in Miller's 'chain of destruction' include 'confiscation' and 'concentration.' Within Miller's construct of 'confiscation' lies the revocation of legal rights that translates into the lack of due diligence and a disregard for the rule of law. Cipriana Jurado's case also falls within these two constructs of 'confiscation' and 'concentration.' She was granted political asylum in the U.S. in June of 2011 (Figueroa). As an exile, she was taken from her home, stripped from her belongings and everything she knew; she was forced to flee her homeland. In some respects, it is as if her belongings were confiscated from her and she was detained (process of concentration) in a foreign country. The political asylum process prohibits an applicant from returning to her homeland during the application process. Cipriana's case became known internationally; if she returned to Mexico, she would clearly be identified, ostracized, and possibly arrested (detained and confiscated) and even placed in custody (confinement) or worse. She was targeted for speaking out against human rights violations by the military that included the abduction and murder of Mexican citizens. In essence, her life as she lived it in Mexico was confiscated from her. Although she remains active in revealing Mexico's human rights violations and working with other exiles through the organization, *Mexicanos en el Exilio*, she was displaced. She survived these attacks, while her colleague, Josefina Reyes, was brutally murdered.

On January 3, 2010, Josefina Reyes was assassinated by an armed group outside of Ciudad Juárez. Josefina had publicly reported the disappearance of one of her sons at the hands of the Mexican Army. From 2008 until the time of her death, Josefina actively participated in protests against violence in the city and violations of human rights perpetrated by the military. Before her death, she would publicly state that if she were to be disappeared or killed, it would be at the hands of the military. According to witnesses, Josefina was fighting against the men who tried to kidnap her. They told her, "you think you are tough because you are with the organizations" and then they shot her in the head.

The assassination of Josefina remains in impunity and the authorities have not provided any information regarding progress made in investigating those responsible (Meyer, De la Rosa Hickerson, and Castro Rodríguez). Josefina was simply a woman who was an activist that fought against feminicides and the military presence within Chihuahua. She sought justice for the murder of her son and, as a consequence, several members of her family were annihilated. At one point, more than thirty members of her family were seeking political asylum across several countries (Figueroa). In the Reyes' family case, life was taken, confiscated and their movement was contained barring all access to the life that people had known. This upheaval was due to one



person asserting their civil and human rights, which led to the decimation of family members and the deracination of those still alive that were forced to forge a new life in a foreign land. As people are identified, ostracized, confiscated and contained, these mechanisms assure the State that 'Femicidal State Rhetoric' and the overall fear of violence keep people silenced. Fewer people are willing to speak openly against the State and other appendages of power for fear of being targeted for victimization or death.

The disregard of and attacks on civil liberties impact human rights and provide blatant impunity for authorities. Miller claims that, "[a]ttacks on civil liberties are basic if ordinary people are to be destroyed. Attacks have two premises. First, civil liberties interfere with the destruction effort and must be eliminated. Second, civil liberties are inherently undesirable because they give citizens power to affect government actions" (Miller 36). In the case of Juárez, the confiscation of basic civil and human rights and access to the Mexican legal system translate into the difficulties that mothers and activists endure in demanding justice through juridical channels. The apathetic response of police, investigators, prosecutors, and judges has led to gender-based violence, especially femicide, as a tool of informal social control for women and as a way of commandeering women's access to justice.

The confiscation of rights also deteriorates into the tendency of 'blaming the victim' and 'blaming the mother and families rather than scrutinizing the failures within the State or, again, pursuing the original perpetrators of the violence. The persistent questioning of what a woman wore when she was victimized, how late she was out, who she was with, are all pervasive questions that transcend justice. Women victims are often re-victimized by the very systems intended to safeguard their rights through law enforcement interrogations, the lack of due diligence in investigations, and the overall paternalistic or patriarchal attitudes of officers, other agents of the State, and society (Bejarano). Since justice systems are based on heteronormative patriarchal powers primarily designed and articulated by men, the lack of gender perspectives explain the obstacles women face in obtaining positive results from the criminal justice system itself.

In another blatant example of the deployment of confiscation as a mechanism of social control is the confiscation of not only rights, but the difficulty of moving freely to assert one's rights which is pervasive (containment). The families of femicide victims often made the painful decision to either make weekly visits to the *fiscalía*, to attend social protests, or to save their money for bus fare, rent or groceries. One very suspicious move by the local government was to offer cheaply made homes atop of a city landfill called *Los Ojitos*, in the southern part of Juárez, a massive urban and impoverished part of the City. Families were offered cheaply-made, two-bedroom

homes as a sign of atonement for neglected femicide cases. Many families refused to move there since they felt this move was a way to bribe the families to end their activism. A few others moved there for economic survivability.

A critical perspective, based on the framework of the chain of destruction would offer the obvious analysis of the isolation of these families in the outskirts of Ciudad Juárez and away from the public eye, the authorities' offices, and the city center, which is the heart of the activist movement. The concentration of these 'ordinary people' turned dissident activists into a distinctly desolate geographic location is suspect. One could claim that the government thus knew exactly where some of the most vocal and 'troublesome' families and specifically mothers lived. Their movement could easily be monitored as well as who they kept company with. Hence, the concentration of these families into concentric geographic localities further marginalized people from activism, from investigating their daughters' cases, and pushed them further from the social service resources primarily located in central Juárez. These ordinary people, forced to become activists, were punished, marginalized and contained in the same perimeter in a marginalized and extremely impoverished area of Juárez. The mothers and their families were punished for denouncing their daughters' killings and asserting their rights. *Los Ojitos* was not an act of atonement, but an act of controlling, containing and taming the denouncing bodies that caused them so much grief. Activists were always suspicious of this action by the local government arguing that *Los Ojitos* served as a perfect surveillance technique of the families' comings and goings.

## 7. Annihilation

The final category of Miller's framework is 'annihilation' which needs no further elaboration. Miller states that, "[d]eath can be inflicted by indirect or direct means. Indirect means include withholding of medical care. Direct means include death squads and central killing operations (camp)" (Miller xi). In Chihuahua, there is the social death that families endure in losing a loved one. Families are compelled to investigate their daughters' cases and to do the investigative work of the State. They are also made to publicly mourn instead of remembering their daughters privately with loved ones. Annihilation through indirect means has taken its toll on mothers and activists when considering the resources they expend to fight for justice that can tear families apart and bankrupt them. Their desire to find their daughters and their understandable obsession in seeking justice can also take its toll emotionally, psychologically and physically, including the fear that entire families and even their communities can suffer harassment, injury and even death. This too was evident when I heard testimonials by families of femicide victims at the September 2014 *Tribunal Permanente de los Pueblos* in Chihuahua City, Chihuahua.

There is a cadence to death, an undeniable intonation to how disruptive, denouncing, and denigrated bodies materialize. In the state of Chihuahua, they are identified, ostracized, and found suspect. They are isolated, their lives at any moment can be taken from them, confiscated and terrorized, and they are contained and categorized as deviants, as troublemakers, as *Viejas Escandalosas* by the Mexican State. In some instances, as we have witnessed, activists are annihilated like the women and girls that they work to vindicate. As Miller argues about the Holocaust and the U.S. War on Drugs, "...mass murder is probable once a society decides to eliminate a group of ordinary people, as was the case in Nazi Germany" (xi). This is where 'Femicidal State Rhetoric' works best: in terrorizing a community to the point of complacency with the rhetoric of murder. If you go out at night alone, you can be murdered; if you align yourself with activists and family-based organizations, your families are in danger; and if you speak too loudly against the State or any other associated entity or shadow governing body, you might even experience death. The denigrated bodies, the victims of femicide through serial sexual killings, domestic violence, *narco* violence, and sexualized and gender-based violence, have suffered annihilation.

The death of the activist Susana Chávez offers an example of 'Femicidal State Rhetoric' to plant fear in society that anyone can be a victim of femicide. Susana, a poet and activist, who is credited for coining the rallying cry of the anti-femicide movement "Ni Una Más!" was killed on January 3, 2011 in Ciudad Juárez by three young men, two of which were minors. They severed her left hand and suffocated her with a plastic bag (Villalpando; Nájar), purportedly to make her death look like a *narco* murder. Although the State was not directly involved in her femicide, and authorities refuted that her murder was attributed to her anti-femicide activism, her murder worked to condemn her for going out late alone and partying with men. For the State and even '*gente decente*,' she placed herself in harm's way and was the author of her own demise. To the activists and segments of society comprised of ordinary, everyday people, however, it was another poignant example of the State's failure to provide safety for its citizenry. The State refuted that she was a victim of femicide, yet the irony is irrefutable. Norma Ledezma, mother of femicide victim Paloma Ledezma and founder of *Justicia Para Nuestras Hijas* in Chihuahua City said, "The motive matters, but she was killed because she was a woman. It is part of the climate of impunity in which we live" (Nájar; translation mine).

The final example of annihilation that pulls every aspect of what I have argued in this article together is the emblematic femicide cases of Rubí Marisol Frayre Escobedo and her mother, Marisela Escobedo from Ciudad Juárez. At the *Tribunal Permanente de los Pueblos*, Lucha Castro—fellow activist and attorney of Marisela Escobedo—recounted to an audience of more than

two hundred people how twenty days prior to Marisela's death, she had explained to authorities from the office of the Secretary of the Interior in Mexico City the great risk to her life. On December 8, 2010, after meeting with the Attorney General of Chihuahua, she stated that she would hold a silent protest at the *Plaza de Armas* across the street from the government offices where the Chihuahua Governor's office is located. A permanent installation by the organization *Mujeres de Negro* of Chihuahua, called *La Cruz de Clavos NI UNA MÁS*, is in the *Plaza de Armas* facing the Governor's Palace in Chihuahua where Marisela staged a peaceful protest for several days before her death. She stated that she would hold the protest until authorities apprehended her daughter's assassin. Sergio Rafael, the perpetrator of her daughter was initially detained by authorities but was later exonerated by a Juárez court. However, a second appeal found Rafael guilty of killing Rubí. Still, he managed to escape apprehension despite Marisela escorting police to his location in another Mexican State (CEDEHM).

On December 16, 2010, Rubí's mother, Marisela would be the target. Marisela Escobedo was gunned down in front of the Governor's Palace in Chihuahua as she held her protest late that evening. Security cameras caught her murder as a man exits a waiting car and walks up to Marisela who then runs to the Governor's Palace pleading for help; she was shot point blank in front of the palace sidewalk. Before her death she had requested protection from the State government but was denied protective measures. Like Josefina Reyes before her, Marisela publicly stated that if she were killed, the government would be responsible for her murder. Again, like Josefina Reyes, members of her family received death threats and fled for their lives. They are currently exiled from Mexico in the U.S. Sixteen-year-old Rubí was killed by her boyfriend. Meanwhile, Marisela and Rubí's memories are all that are left. Marisela's legacy as denouncing mother and then disruptive activist point to the dangers in place for women and men activists; she became the denigrated body, a femicide victim like her daughter. Years before her death, when she stood before the court that was to sentence Rubí's murderer, Marisela stated, "I would like to see that the death of my daughter was not in vain, and that it was the last femicide of this city" (CEDEHM, 3).

## Conclusion

In a report by Margaret Sekaggya, the Human Rights Rapporteur for the United Nations stated that Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries for human rights defenders, "who are fighting against impunity in cases of alleged violations of human rights" (Almada 1). She additionally noted that "although the general identity of the perpetrators of human rights violations is unknown, that it

is known that between them, there are members of the police, the army, and armed groups" (ibid). Despite the dangers discussed in this article, ordinary public citizens are defying forms of social control by the State. Although 'Femicidal State Rhetoric' and incessant violence pulverize hopes for a peaceful future and life free from violence, the denouncing and disruptive bodies that work to undo so much injustice continue their work. Although the State and '*gente decente*' work to change images and breed a different kind of citizenry that is tamed and controlled, a dissident segment of society will work to heal its people and to create a reality that is not governed or illustrated by brutality.

The urgency with which activists and femicide victims' families work to curb the multiple forms of social violence that spur feminicides and other gender-based violence is evident in pivotal events like the *Tribunal Permanente de los Pueblos*. People are wary of existing systems of justice, which lead them to join responses by civic society groups, feminist and women's rights groups, and private citizens to create alternate strategies for justice with a gendered perspective in mind. The TPP in Chihuahua City was hosted by 49 civil society organizations in Northern Mexico to stop feminicides, human rights violations and impunity. The Chihuahua City TPP, like others before it, marked the numerous instances of rights violations that the Mexican people endure: the right to live a life free from violence or the threat of it is absent in contemporary life in Chihuahua, but the need to tell the histories of these atrocities lives on.

In the words of Salvador Salazar Gutiérrez and Martha Mónica Curiel García, "Existe una urgente necesidad de despertar las historias que duermen en las calles" (There exists an urgent need to awaken the histories that sleep on the streets) (9; translation mine). At the end of the day, it is really the Chihuahuenses, the activists and families who defend their rights and demand accountability from the State that are the true '*gente decente*' in its most literal translation. Decent people do not allow death and destruction to rule a society; they assert their rights and demand justice for all.

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## Endnotes

[1] The 'Great Violence' references Felipe Calderón's War on Drugs according to Kent Paterson, journalist and writer for the online news service *Frontera Norte Sur*. He states that, "In terms of the 'drug war,' the broader, national conflict really flared during the Fox administration as early as 2003, i.e. Nuevo Laredo, but escalated under Calderon. When I [Kent Paterson] speak of the drug war beginning in 2008, I am specifically referring to the war in Juárez" (Personal Communication, September 13, 2014). Other journalists and scholars point to 2006 or 2007 as the impetus for the Mexican government-led War on Drugs against Mexican-based drug cartels. Data varies on the number of people killed during former President Felipe Calderon's anti-drug trafficking war that was launched when he took office in 2006. Roughly 67,050 people were killed in México and over 13,000 were murdered in Juárez from 2006-2013 (3,075 in 2010). Other non-government affiliated accounts place the death count much higher at over 100,000 people. This violence between rival Mexican drug cartels over trafficking corridors into the U.S. also resulted in the mass departure of people from México (Payan). Although the U.S. drug market is valued at between \$63 and \$81 billion (O'Rourke and Byrd), a clear indication of why cartels are killing for control of the market, little conversation directly connects the carnage in Mexico and its responsibility back to the U.S. and the U.S. drug consumer market.

[2] I will be using 'femicide' when referring to the tactics by the State and non-State actors to incite fear of gender-based violence, and in contrast, I will use 'feminicide' in my critique of the strategies and discursive practices that the State uses, while also using 'feminicide' to describe the push back of women involved in the anti-feminicide movement against the State and other gender-based violence aggressors.

[3] I use the idea of 'Femicide State Rhetoric' to stand separately from femicide or feminicide. The term femicide alone is used to describe the deaths of women and girls and draws on the groundbreaking work of Diana Russell (2001), but does not explicitly capture the feminicides that occurred after her initial writings on 'femicide.' The original discussion on femicide does not directly make the connections between the systemic and systematic representations of gender-based violence that implicates both State and individual perpetrators, that encompasses the systematic, widespread, and everyday violence rooted in social, political, economic, and cultural inequalities (Fregoso and Bejarano). Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos elaborates even further by calling feminicides in Mexico crimes against humanity (2010). Femicide and feminicidal discourse has evolved for decades with robust debate over the use of either term and has grown in strength and in its legal importance. Feminicide has been codified into law in various Mexican States and recognized as a crime at the Mexican federal level.

[4] For a comprehensive debate and discussion of the use of femicide and feminicide across Latin America, see *Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Américas* (Fregoso and Bejarano, 2010) and Alice Driver's *More or Less Dead: Feminicide, Haunting, and the Ethics of Representation in Mexico* (2015.)

[5] For more on Richard Lawrence Miller's arguments on mass incarceration in the U.S., see his contribution to the 2012 documentary, *The House I Live In* directed by Eugene Jarecki.

[6] Another poignant example is that of the State denying or misidentifying the bodies of feminicide victims. In December of 2009, the InterAmerican Court wrote their scathing sentence of the Mexican government's irregularities in their investigations, negligence and exhibiting gender discrimination in the feminicide cases of Claudia Iveth González, Esmeralda Herrera Monreal and Laura Bernice Ramos Monárrez who were three of the feminicide victims found in the Campo Algodonero. See Bejarano's "Memory of Struggle in Ciudad Juárez: Mothers' Resistance and Transborder Activism in the Case of the Campo Algodonero" footnote four (202) for a description of the misidentification of bodies in that case. Similar claims are made by the *Centro de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres* about the Arroyo Navaho cases ([www.cedehm.mx.org](http://www.cedehm.mx.org)).

[7] Since 1998, I have followed the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez and have worked with families of the missing and murdered. Most of my involvement stemmed from my activism with *Amigos de las Mujeres de Juárez*, a local border organization I co-founded in 2001. We were the most active in Chihuahua, primarily



supporting the efforts of women's rights, human rights and family based organizations in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City from 2001-2009. Several of the examples given in these next segments are based on years of activism, advocacy, and research, and hearing families' testimonials.

[8] Co-founders of the organization, *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa*, Norma Andrade, mother of Lilia Alejandra García Andrade, Maria Luisa (Malu) García Andrade, sister of Lilia Alejandra Andrade murdered in 2001, and Marisela Ortiz, Lilia Alejandra's school teacher fled from Ciudad Juárez after receiving death threats because of their work through that organization. (For additional information on the organization's efforts see their website: <http://nuestrashijasderegresoacasa.blogspot.com/p/quienes-somos.html>).

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**Tobias Jochum** (Free University Berlin)

**"The Weight of Words, the Shock of Photos" [1]:  
Poetic Testimony and Elliptical Imagery in Sergio González Rodríguez'  
*The Femicide Machine***

**Abstract**

Since the early 2000s, the academic discourse around the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez and the state of Chihuahua has grown increasingly interdisciplinary and self-conscious—that is to say, self-reflexive about inherent ethical ambiguities and pragmatic limitations of writing about (and against) fatal gender violence in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. For politically-motivated scholars of femicide, illustration and narrative became fundamentally necessary to help humanize otherwise often faceless research and academic work: hence, recent volumes of femicide scholarship prominently incorporate photographic images and personal testimonials. In his monograph *The Femicide Machine* (2012), Mexican journalist Sergio González Rodríguez likewise adds testimony and illustration to his dense study of Ciudad Juárez, but with an unusual twist. Guided by reflections on graphic representations of violence by Susan Sontag and Jacques Rancière, this paper aims to uncover the specific strategies deployed by González Rodríguez, as he turns testimony into poetry and deflects the reader's urge for visual gratification, thereby opening a space for critical self-reflection. I posit *The Femicide Machine* as a case study for the larger argument that politico-ethical urgency and analytical complexity posed by atrocities such as the Juárez feminicides are pushing cultural producers to transcend genre boundaries and seek out novel or alternative modes of representation in the quest to engage audiences in meaningful ways and ultimately elicit political responses towards effecting social change.

**Keywords:** femicide / feminicide, Ciudad Juárez, testimony, photography, representation

## Introduction

In the increasingly international intellectual debate around femicide in Ciudad Juárez and the state of Chihuahua, the public discourse has gradually come into focus over the past decade, conceivably as a way of out the political and discursive gridlock experienced in academic and activist circles alike. The public sphere, as it were, can offer a site in which to carry out “the struggle for interpretative power” (Jean Franco, qtd. in Schmidt Camacho, “Body Counts” 47) and thereby impact more effectively the unyielding status quo of criminal impunity and political inertia. With state institutions throwing insurmountable bureaucratic roadblocks in the way of any effort to implement substantial social change from the outside, the realm of public opinion, while hotly contested from various fronts, promises at least a more accessible forum for mobilizing support and applying pressure to the state (Fregoso, *Encounters*; Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán; Domínguez-Ruvalbaca and Corona; Volk).

Conventional academic publishing and human rights reports ultimately proved to hold relatively little drawing power for larger audiences and were often dwarfed by other “louder” lines of discourse. This helped foster a palpable sense of frustration and fatigue among politically motivated scholars and activists, reflected in much of the scholarship published after public interest peaked in the early to mid-2000s when several key events galvanized international outrage and protests (Gillman and Jochum 4). With *The Femicide Machine*, Sergio González Rodríguez delivers an updated synthesis of his seminal earlier account of the Juárez femicides, *Huesos en el desierto*, repackaged for an Anglophone audience. In it the Mexican author classifies the public discourse into four categories: the “official version,” disseminated by state authorities and government spokespeople and, as such, notoriously riddled with misinformation and manipulation; the day-to-day “journalistic narrative,” locked in a more or less critical dialogue with the former, state-sanctioned discourse; the academic and human rights angle on the violence; and, finally, the “cultural narrative,” a diverse body of cultural and artistic texts produced in a variety of written and audiovisual genres and a large spectrum of sources, from investigative reporting, critical analyses, fictionalized accounts, first-person narratives, views held by the local communities, rumors and myths, each of which seeking to, in various degrees, “reinvent reality or defend historical truth” (82). [2]

As scholars grew increasingly aware of the delicate ethics of their work and its limited access to the broader cultural narrative, they responded by seeking out new ways to mend traditional confines of academic writing. The formal vocabulary of academic discourse struggled to render accessible the multifarious complexities behind the perpetuation of the violence, while conventional scholarly rhetoric seemed increasingly ill-equipped to address human suffering on such a scale,



often hampered, as it were, by a sense of analytical disconnect. While feminicide scholars such as Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Melissa M. Wright, were imbuing their writing with a passion, urgency, and political outspokenness that owed much to Gloria Anzaldúa and her deeply personal and unapologetically political writing, discursive constraints persisted. By the late 2000s, with public attention in decline and the anti-feminicide movement losing momentum, the affective tone in feminicide scholarship grew increasingly exasperated. Pondering the failure to achieve palpable progress, authors struggled to find new ways to convey the persisting urgency and jarring specifics of the continued violence without succumbing to fatalist pronouncements or losing professional countenance. [3]

From the very brief and streamlined progression of feminicide scholarship delineated above, we can detect the emergence of two fundamental needs to assist and alter otherwise faceless and powerless discourses of research and theory: illustration and narrative. The medium of photography offered the most obvious tool for addressing the former, and had, in fact, already featured prominently within public discourse, albeit in forms that provoked controversial debates (see my discussion of Charles Bowden below). Photography as such brings with it a long history of documenting injustice and human suffering, accompanied since its invention by critical reflections over inherent ethical risks, rewards, and responsibilities. In these debates, exploitation and sensationalism delimit one end of the spectrum, while the potential of utilizing the power of authenticity to elicit genuine empathy and political responsiveness marks its opposite end. Particularly in light of a media environment characterized by the inflationary display of—or, in any case, *access to*—graphic images of calamity from virtually anywhere on the globe, the use of photography warrants a careful interrogation over its practical advantages and ethical pitfalls. For this, let us now turn to one of the earliest and most problematic photographic takes on the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez.

## 1. Problematic Pragmatics

### Shock and Symbolic Violence in Charles Bowden's Border Reporting

In order to demonstrate what is at stake when it comes to the representation of violence and victims of the Juárez feminicides as well as to exemplify the bitterness that has become characteristic of the debate, let us consider the example of Charles Bowden who, until his recent passing in 2014, had been writing prolifically about the borderlands and particularly about Ciudad Juárez. Bowden first introduced the historical occurrence and graphic imagery of the feminicides to a U.S.-American public, drawing both controversy and critical acclaim. [4] His award-winning 1998 photo essay *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future* opens with Noam Chomsky's introduction that

predictably frames the abject poverty and physical violence afflicting the region as directly caused by neoliberal forces, in particular as a manifestation of the devastating consequences of NAFTA. In the main body of the volume, Bowden then showcases the personal stories and work of a group of local photographers, most of whom specialized in crime scenes of violence and death in Ciudad Juárez, often risking their lives in the pursuit of their motives. [5] According to Bowden's account, these adrenaline-driven renegade reporters, or "street shooters," genuinely regard their work as a vital service to an otherwise ignorant, indifferent, or deeply cynical public that had its back turned on the alarming levels of brutality and suffering right in front of their doorsteps. However, some of the photojournalists also display a rather morbid fascination with their subjects, regarding singular shots with the undisguised pride a hunter might harbor over a particularly rare or prestigious piece of game (73-75; 76; 90).

The most notorious among more than a dozen photographs of slain bodies that are dispersed throughout the pages of *Laboratory* depicts a face in close-up, belonging to a sixteen-year-old rape and murder victim. Enlarged to approximately the size of an actual human head, the face fills out the entirety of the page (66). Bar any discernable background, the image impedes any sense of top and bottom, and offers no hint as to the body's position. As if reinforcing this decontextualizing quality, the photograph was actually printed in two different versions, first a smaller version in horizontal scale in *Harper's Magazine*, suggesting a probable prone position of the body, and then, in *Laboratory*, larger and turned upright to unsettling effect. Disembodied and disorienting, the head appears to jut out of the US-letter-sized hardcover book, as if leaping directly towards us. The face is mummified beyond recognition from prolonged exposure to heat and light, the skin visibly blackened yet in some parts glistening bronze in the sun: a ghostly and a ghostly image. *Harper's* had first published the shot in 1996, adorning an article by Bowden titled "While You Were Sleeping", his first exposé on Ciudad Juárez and the local photographers chronicling the city's violence.

Two years later, he used the piece as one of the chapters of the transnational collaboration that became the photo essay *Juárez: Laboratory of Our Future*, featuring close to a hundred more of the street shooters' photographs in color prints. In the *Harper's* piece (as in *Laboratory*), Bowden writes in his characteristic first-person mode, the classic style of New Journalism, to relate how he first mistook the image for "a beautiful black carved mask" and admired its aesthetic faculties ("The face is smooth with craftsmanship") before realizing the horror of what the image actually portrays ("Sleeping" 46; *Laboratory* 67). The photo catches his attention as he is given a private slide show by Jaime Bailleres, the photojournalist who authored the shot and who then volunteers relevant background information—at least to the minimal extent available: where the body was found, the victim's forensically determined age, her never-resolved status of anonymity, and the fact that the

local paper had refused to print the photo. Obviously fascinated, Bowden resumes his aesthetic contemplation: “The lips of the girl pull back, revealing her clean white teeth. Sound pours forth from her mouth. She is screaming and screaming and screaming. [...] A deafening image” (ibid.). At the close of the book chapter (or article), Bowden returns to this synesthetic association of the ‘silent scream’ that so distinguishes the image for him—an image he admits being both obsessed with and haunted by: “[S]he stares at me. The skin is smooth, almost carved and sanded, but much too dark. And the screams are simply too deafening” (ibid.). Bowden here elevates the dead girl’s countenance to the level of the symbolic, a metaphor for the incomprehensible discrepancy between the inhumanity of the violence in Juárez and the indifference and silence with which it has been met: a silent cry, too loud to be heard.

While Charles Bowden’s writing expresses in unequivocal terms his shock and outrage over the physical and economic violence, as well as his solidarity with those afflicted by it, he nonetheless came under scathing criticism—and with due justification—for never truly engaging with the murder victims as individual human beings, or in this case, as one critic put it, never bothering to listen to “what the dead girl might be saying.” (Schmidt Camacho, “Body Counts” 39). Beyond the moral question of whether to publish such an image at all—and Bowden does seem to take an irksome amount of misplaced satisfaction in the fact that he, against Bailleres’ repeated prediction, has indeed managed to get the shot published—the objections against Bowden’s particular use of it would seem obvious. With no apparent hesitation he bypasses the victim’s individuality, her dignity, and any hypothetical objections by her unknown family to instrumentalize her death into a literary metaphor in the service of making a point about the savagery and surrounding silence he sees in Ciudad Juárez. Conceivably, Bowden took the anonymity and unclaimed status of the corpse as sufficient license not only to turn its destruction into a public spectacle and rhetorical tool but also to claim it as his own, symbolically, through his written projections, and physically, by keeping a copy of the picture in a folder by his desk, as he informs us, as a kind of talismanic memento that can haunt him on demand (105). This is reckless misappropriation par excellence, bar any legitimacy, sensitivity, self-reflexivity or meaningful engagement with the depicted human subject (cf.: Delgadillo).

Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Alicia Schmidt Camacho are two among a number of feminist critics to excoriate Bowden, accusing him of transforming the image of the girl into an exoticized fetish (Fregoso, *Encounters* 16) and of reenacting “the violence of the murder itself [through the] deliberate conversion of the dead body into an aesthetic object” (Schmidt Camacho, “Body Counts” 39). They lambasted the author’s unmitigated male gaze as “perverse,” “possessive,” and “misogynist”, in particular pointing to extended passages in which Bowden eroticizes Mexican girls as he observes them in local bars and dance clubs, imagining what sexual thoughts they might be

thinking. Fregoso denounces his “racist and colonialist gaze” as he indulges, laconically, in the classic chauvinist Western fantasy of rescuing a sex worker—a “whore” in his self-incriminating term of choice—from the dreadful fate her own savage culture has in store for her. To Fregoso, the fact that Bowden is quite obviously being facetious here, seeking to sell his trite digression as a swipe against sanctimonious Western liberalism, does little to alleviate his offense. To the contrary, she reads his resort to humor as an insult to common civility, given the grave immediate context of rape and murder. In her scathing final verdict, Bowden’s “perversity,” as manifested in the cited litany of harmful gazes, “constructs border women as abject” (*Encounters* 15).

These readings, while sharp-tongued and somewhat selective, are pertinent, productive critiques of a manifestly problematic writer taking on most sensitive issues—criticisms to which I wholeheartedly subscribe. In what follows, I by no means seek to issue a recuperation or defense of Charles Bowden's transgressions. His lifelong public refusal to critically reflect on them speaks volumes. His writing reflects and perpetuates longstanding hegemonic and patriarchal forms of conceiving and constructing the borderlands, fed by a literary aesthetic tradition by authors such as Cormac McCarthy and Carlos Fuentes. What I would like to propose, then, is a stance that, instead of disqualifying his work altogether based on its worst offenses, allows for further critical inquiry that might unlock more nuanced or ambivalent insights into the modus operandi of even the most misguided attempts to represent violence. And for better or worse, the border, according to Bowden, continues to resonate in a popular transnational cultural imaginary.

A self-styled nature recluse in the individualist-masculinist tradition who came of age in the sixties and seventies, Charles Bowden not only missed the feminist call as a student and later continued to ignore its widely available lessons, he also developed an ostensible attitude of disdain for ivory tower intellectualism throughout his career, presumably dating back to his walking out of his dissertation defense in frustration before turning to journalism and his own writing projects fulltime. In interviews he fashioned himself as dutiful working stiff simply out to Report The Story, the sort of seasoned crime beat writer who has seen too much to bother with political correctness or complications of deconstruction. He was plainspoken about his intentions to write the capital-t Truth to capital-p Power. Despite extensive ground research and close cooperation with local women’s rights activists, journalists, and photographers, Bowden dismissed activist intentions on his part, and routinely deflected inquiries into the dangers of the job to his Mexican peers south of the border, whom he lauded as the ones to literally be putting their lives on the line, working, as they were, under the constant threat of intimidation, kidnappings, torture, and assassination (see: *Driver "Femicide"; Blake*). [6]

On the page, his terse prose, often described as darkly poetic, betrays a deliberate kinship to the testosterone writing traditions of Hemingway, McCarthy, the New Journalists, and authors of hard-boiled detective fiction. His bleak visions of Juárez as harbinger of an apocalyptic future of free-market capitalism marked by environmental destruction and extreme violence have to answer to the charge of perpetuating the notion of the Mexican borderlands as an inherently violent space while minimizing the possibility of local resistance (Delgadillo). And yet, the force of his lyrical, well researched, and deeply personal narratives of the dire, oftentimes previously ignored consequences of global economic dynamics and U.S.-driven policies cannot be refuted so easily. Thus, even as an arguable anachronistic misogynist with a Cassandra complex, Bowden's writing continues to demand our clear-eyed critical attention, perhaps especially as feminist readers and scholars.

The political conclusions that Bowden drew from his analyses, meanwhile, run almost entirely congruent with the practical prescriptions by critical scholars and feminist activist-artists working on human rights issues on the border. His three propositions for the United States to alleviate—or rather, to stop aggravating—the violence and hardship south of its border remain judicious and comprehensive—albeit miles removed from the limited possibilities of contemporary U.S. realpolitik: renegotiate NAFTA so that Mexican workers are paid a living wage and ecological destruction is curbed by effective regulations; end the disastrous War on Drugs and reframe substance addiction as a medical problem; and, finally, implement progressive immigration reform that would open a path to citizenship for the “secret underclass” of undocumented workers, on whom the United State’s economy, in fact, crucially depends (Blake). At the same time, he readily acknowledged that concrete solutions that could diminish criminal impunity and corruption would have to be negotiated and executed on the local level. Ultimately, as he liked to quip, “Mexicans have to fix Mexico” (*Perspectives*). [7]

Bowden’s major fallacy remains his willful ignorance and insensitivity regarding gender as a vital factor in these murders of women in the borderlands. While lamenting domestic violence as commonplace and culturally accepted in Northern Mexico and acknowledging rape as a form of applied gender terror, he remained skeptical of using the terms “femicide” (“feminicide”) or even “hate crime” as analytical concepts, since he took neither to adhere to an officially deployed social policy (Driver “Femicide” 375). [8] Bowden crucially ignores the central distinction of violence against women as directed against them *because* they are women. The rationale behind the analytical term “feminicide” (or “femicide”) as a useful concept to separate these crimes from male-on-male homicide, has little to do with direct legislation, as explained by, among many others, Fregoso and Bejarano:

[Unlike] most cases of women's murders, men are not killed because they are men or as a result of their vulnerability as members of a subordinate gender; nor are men subjected to gender-specific forms of degradation and violation, such as rape and sexual torture, prior to their murder. Such gender differences in the experience of violence suggest the need for an alternative analytic concept, such as feminicide, for mapping the hierarchies embedded in gender-based violence. (Fregoso and Bejarano 7)

Bowden's disavowal of the gender dimension can be read as a misguided expression of the concern that femicide/feminicide—at least in the popular understanding of the term [9]—may not provide the key diagnostics for solving the ongoing crisis of the Mexican state and the associated explosion of seemingly non-gender-specific violence. His point that the “the murders of men aren't investigated either” may unproductively pit one kind of offense against the other, but remains factually accurate on face value (Driver, “Femicide” 376). [10]

Given the opportunity to publicly defend his representational choices against allegations of exploitation and sensationalism in an interview with Alice Driver, Charles Bowden resorted to an almost naïve candor:

I thought if I used photography readers would identify more because it is an art form, and that if I used dead girls instead of dead boys that they'd pay more attention. That's it. [...] 'Does it worsen things to show corpses or does it help things?' No one on earth knows. I thought that in this instance it helps things. I thought people needed a wake-up call. (“Femicide” 372-3)

Specifically probed about the term *porno-misery*, clarified by Driver, who first applied the term to representations of the Juárez feminicides in her book *More or Less Dead*, as “the voyeuristic exploitation of misery,” Bowden reveals both a basic grasp of the practical risks—if not necessarily ethical problem—that arise with the distribution of graphic images of extreme violence and, simultaneously, shows his lack of a definite answer to the problem. Working from his own off-the-cuff definition of pornography as “deadening [and] redundant imagery,” Bowden acknowledges the possibility of *porno-misery* “when you produce enough of these images that people don't react to them. [...] There isn't a rule,” he concludes, “It's a judgment.” Still, rights and sensibilities of the subjects in front of the camera do not enter his equation. But unsurprisingly, he goes on to insist that people did in fact have “a real reaction” to the photos in *Laboratory* back in 1998 (“Femicide” 378).

While Bowden's point about the precise *kind* of response to *Laboratory* among its readership remains up for debate, one would be hard-pressed to question the desperate need for a wake-up call at a time when U.S. media and politicians still unanimously fawned over Ciudad Juárez as a role model for successful free trade policies. Again, none of this would suggest that Charles Bowden deserved absolution from accusations of misogyny, ethnocentrism, or a proclivity toward



the sensational and the self-righteous. However, in the spirit of political pragmatism, I would simply suggest that the work by one of the most vocal—and, not least, highest-selling public U.S. critics of precisely the U.S.-policies that, as most academics and activists agree, directly contribute to the violence at the border against both men *and* women—merits a more constructive critical engagement than a wholesale dismissal and vilification of its author. Calling out and holding responsible cultural workers and intellectuals for their symbolic transgressions is a vital and productive part of shaping public debate; foreclosing the possibility of dialogue is not. Eventually, broader and more diverse coalitions willing to work through ideological differences will have to be forged in order to tackle the multiple interconnected fronts of gendered (and classist and racialized) violence in Ciudad Juárez and elsewhere. Meanwhile, Bowden’s inconclusive assessment of the effect that graphic displays of violence may have on a given viewer is indeed worth further elaboration. This elusive threshold where shock turns into oversaturation and, consequently, numbness, calls up the late Susan Sontag, through whom we shall examine more closely the potential functions, merits, and limits of shock as an affective trigger for awareness and action.

## 2. The Spectacle of Suffering Reconsidered

### Susan Sontag’s New Nuance and the Return of the Real

In her essay *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) Susan Sontag offers a nuanced and decidedly un-dogmatic examination of precisely the ethical and practical considerations around the reception of visual imagery graphically depicting human suffering, the precise problem of representation that Charles Bowden stumbled into somewhat clumsily. With *Regarding* Sontag devised a follow-up and partial revision of her 1977 seminal work *On Photography*, in which she lamented the diminishing impact of visual representations of suffering as a media landscape apparently oversaturated with visual images of violence and atrocities. Back then she concluded with a proposal for an “ecology [...] of images” to preserve our capability to react in meaningful ways to a visual confrontation with human misery from a safe distance (180). Two and a half decades later, however, Sontag came to harbor serious doubts about her former line of reasoning, and challenged several of her own claims head on, effectively complicating the issue at the cost of prescriptive moralizing and catchy generalizations. “There isn’t going to be an ecology of images,” she concedes in 2003. “No Committee of Guardians is going to ration horror, to keep fresh its ability to shock. And the horrors themselves are not going to abate” (97).

This insistence on the true nature of human suffering forms the moral center around which Sontag's ruminations gravitate. She forcefully rejects the postmodernist truism that holds reality as but a spectacle in an echo chamber of media simulations and self-referential representations (or simulacra, to use Baudrillard's popular turn of phrase), and fiercely denounces the underlying cynicism and narrow viewpoint of this discourse:

To speak of reality becoming a spectacle [...] universalizes the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world, where news has been converted into entertainment. [...] It assumes that everyone is a spectator. It suggests, perversely, unseriously, that there is no real suffering in the world. [It] is absurd to identify the world with those zones in the well-off countries where people have the dubious privilege of being spectators, or of declining to be spectators, of other people's pain, just as it is absurd to generalize about the ability to respond to the sufferings of others on the basis of the mind-set of those consumers of news who know nothing at first hand about war and massive injustice and terror. There are hundreds of millions of television watchers who are far from inured to what they see on television. They do not have the luxury of patronizing reality. (98-99) [11]

For Sontag, the assumption that images of atrocities were categorically impotent to engage any viewer, the knee-jerk presupposition of "something innately cynical" about their circulation are but cosmopolitan clichés of a privileged elite and ultimately further evidence that, "[s]ome people will do anything to keep themselves from being moved" (ibid.).

Sontag's blistering critique of postmodernism is to be read in context with a number of intellectual endeavors arguing for a departure from the postmodernist era of irony and play toward a new paradigm of sincerity, bringing with it a cultural revalorization of the real and the authentic, in however non-essentializing forms. Sometimes loosely referred to as post-postmodernism or, as theorized by art historian Hal Foster, the "Return of the Real," it is a project that emerged in the mid-1990s, then gained popular currency in the wake of the events of September 11, whereupon it was predominantly negotiated within the critical discourse on trauma with its emphasis on suffering, memory, and marginalization (Haselstein, et. al.). Exploring the popular reemergence of Holocaust literature and its accompanying scholarship at the time, Michael Rothberg proposed "traumatic realism" as a new genre template, one infused by testimony and offering an ethical response to the conflicting demands of trauma representation. Contesting previous takes on trauma by theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman, who placed extraordinary historical horrors such as the Shoah beyond the confines of what is aesthetically, or artistically, representable, Rothberg postulates documentation, self-reflection, and a critical engagement with commodity culture as urgent demands for what he deems the essentially necessary endeavor of representation (7).

Sontag's cautious optimism regarding the moral justification and political potential of representations of suffering through aesthetic means then can be read as part of an "ethical turn from trauma theory to a generalized theory of suffering" (Haselstein et. al. 17), in line with thematically linked works by Judith Butler (*Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* [2004]; *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable* [2009]) and others (ibid. 14-19). The renewed hope in a post-postmodern viewership capable of differentiation, empathy, and political agency also interlaces with French philosopher Jacques Rancière's notion of an "emancipated spectator" in his evolving philosophy of political aesthetics, which I will engage in further detail below.

In *Regarding the Pain*, Sontag displays deep ambivalence about photography's potential to invoke meaningful responses. She emphasizes the medium's unique ability—hence, its *responsibility*—to establish visual immediacy and emotional alertness to atrocities occurring in geographically, culturally and/or socioeconomically distant spaces. She further argues that only through the power of shock can violent images provide the initial spark to trigger a chain reaction in the viewer from awareness to critical reflection and thought, to, ultimately, taking the plunge to political action.

To a certain extent, Sontag defends the spectacular in war or disaster photography, scrutinizing the conventional wisdom on the ethical etiquette of media representations of suffering. "For the photography of atrocity, people want the weight of witnessing without the taint of artistry, which is equated with insincerity or mere contrivance" (23), Sontag writes. She then goes on to question the impulse by 'morally alert' photographers to artificially downplay spectacular scenes of violence to appear less visually dramatic for the sake of chasing an aesthetic that would better correspond to popular expectations of realism. In religious narratives throughout Western history, she argues, suffering has often been conveyed in spectacular terms without apparently forfeiting any affective power over the pious viewer (71-72). Moreover, Sontag holds the feeling of guilty titillation we often experience at the sight of gore and horror as less morbid and abnormal than our moral conscience may suggest, when in fact, it is an age-old sentiment traceable in philosophical consideration all the way back to Plato (86). Our urge to gawk at images of horror becomes diluted with shame over our self-awareness as distant onlookers, safely positioned out of harm's way while impotent to interfere. With our gaze fixated on the image we become uncomfortable, self-conscious voyeurs. When it comes to pictures of *ongoing* atrocities, however, a simultaneous sense of *obligation to look* may arise as we wonder: isn't there something to be done after all?

Eventually, Sontag comes to the assertion that "for photographs to accuse, and possibly alter conduct, they must shock" (72) only to put that jolt, along with similar affective responses, under close inspection. The apparent volatility of emotions that wear off over time unless transformed into

action is the key problematic for her. Sympathy or pity often remain self-serving sentiments that merely help us wash our hands clean of any co-implication with the suffering while reinforcing our perception of impotence when it comes to stopping it (91). We also use certain defense mechanisms to shield ourselves from inconvenient or overwhelming realities—for instance, we disassociate when faced with the suffering of people who look different from us (64-65) and we grow detached and indifferent in order to cope with overpowering dread and despair, long-term frustration, or merely, again, our impotence to interfere (89). The much-maligned “apathy” then emerges not so much as the *lack* of a real reaction but the transformation of emotions such as fear, terror, and frustration, which, over time and through relentless intensity, have become too unbearable to maintain. Isolated from an instructive context, all our affective responses remain fleeting impulses. What ultimately dulls our emotional responsiveness is perpetual passivity rather than repeated exposure (91). “Harrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock,” Sontag asserts, “But they are not much help if the task is to understand” (80).

Photographs depend on explanatory captions and supplementary analytical interpretations to make us understand and direct our shock and outrage, our compassion and empathy. The formal context in which images are displayed then take on fundamental importance—the CGI-rendered artificial gore pervading the entertainment industry, for instance, precisely does not constitute the equivalent to actual war photography—and Sontag insinuates that perhaps “the weight and seriousness of such photographs survive better in a book [than in an exhibition], where one can look privately, linger over the pictures, without talking” (109). From the advantages of the book format, Sontag moves to the benefits of narratives, for the sheer duration of the reader’s emotional engagement: “A narrative seems likely to be more effective than an image. Partly it is a question of the length of time one is obliged to look, to feel” (110). Photographs haunt us, but narratives can establish substantial understanding (80).

Do Susan Sontag's nuanced ruminations help justify the crude spectacle Charles Bowden makes of border violence? Not exactly. Part of the criticism directed against *Laboratory of the Future* concerns several appallingly insufficient photo captions: “a raped and murdered woman” next to the image of a brutalized dead female body, even if factually anonymous, is likely not what Sontag envisioned as satisfactory explanatory captions, even as it may be argued that, on the whole, Bowden’s writing on Ciudad Juárez does, in fact, establish—or construct—rational contexts and arrange narratives around the puncturing moments of shock. Sontag’s qualified confirmation that all “images that display the violation of an attractive body are, to a certain degree, pornographic” (85) likewise denounce Bowden’s reckless use of such imagery. However, the inherent worth she ascribes to the mere shock value of graphic imagery, particularly when it comes to ongoing as

opposed to historically sealed atrocities, does in a general sense apply to Bowden's aesthetics of shock.

Sending out mixed signals is no automatic disqualifier—the signals do not cancel each other out (and neither does an imperfect messenger). Audiences are capable of emotional ambivalence, of standing in awe at the sight of a murderous spectacle *and* at the same time genuinely resolving to stop it. But Rosa-Linda Fregoso's charge that Bowden "crosses the line between titillation and information" (*Encounters* 15) disregards the fact that such a neat line may often not actually exist—much less in contemporary Mexico, where news media covering state/narco violence have become subject to pervasive forms of (self-)censorship. [12] Ultimately, the outcry and controversy Bowden managed to stir up, by whatever flawed means, shed an unyielding light on the situation in Juárez at a moment when scarcely anyone outside of the region was paying any attention to it. His work thus played a part in instigating a substantial debate not just about the violence at the border per se but also, unwittingly, about (in)appropriate ways to represent and discuss it. Noise can be a good wake-up call, just as long as we get up and start to face the day instead of turning over and hitting the snooze button.

### 3. The Need for Narrative and the Power of Testimony

Coinciding with Sontag's assessment, from the early 2000s on, academics, activists, and artists working on the Juárez feminicides increasingly deployed narratives as auxiliary tools to humanize complex analyses, contextualize visual images in meaningful or engaging ways, or simply to create some broader awareness in the first place. The use of testimonies, meaning here the public dissemination of subjective experiences as remembered and (re)presented by survivors, family members, and friends of victims, provided a way for academics and other writers to incorporate raw and personal narratives to affectively illustrate and ethically validate their work, ideally helping to bridge the distance of their privileged positions of observation. The latest wave of femicide scholarship has indeed tapped into testimony as an essential ingredient. The three 2010 anthologies *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade and La Frontera*, edited by Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán; *Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Media Representations and Public Response*, edited by Hector Dominguez-Ruvalbaca and Ignacio Corona; and *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Américas*, edited by Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano all prominently incorporate *testimonios* by family members of victims and/or local *juareense* activists to complement their compiled essays.

The testimonies included in *Terrorizing Women*, for instance, are spread throughout the anthology, one placed at the respective beginning of each of its three subsections, providing recurrent reminders of the concrete human toll behind the murders via the unmediated voices of women who were directly impacted by femicidal violence. The testimonies cover a range of human responses to loss, suffering, and injustice. Eva Arce, mother of one of the femicide victims, has abandoned all hope of ever finding truth, justice, or closure after years of rejections, threats, and physical abuse by the authorities have worn down her spirit (45-8). Julia Huamañahui, the sister of another victim, speaks of their shared history of sexual abuse in their family upbringing, of the terror, trauma, and guilt she felt after her sister's death along with an overwhelming sense of devastation and powerlessness in the face of dismissive or outright hostile misogynist investigators. Struggling for words to explain her desperation, she momentarily transcends the level of the descriptive narration and taps into a powerful emotional immediacy: "if you could see my heart, you would see it is bleeding and bleeding from all the sorrow I feel" (179-81). Rosa Franco, the mother of another girl who was kidnapped, tortured, raped, and murdered, appears to have psychosomatically literalized the same metaphor of cardiac ailment. She suffered a heart attack nine months after her daughter's death and her account emphasizes the lingering effects: "I still suffer from after effects and will have to take many medications for the rest of my life. I suffer from high blood pressure, insomnia, and heart trouble" (273-74). At the book's closing, a final *testimonio* stakes out the possibility for hope, as Norma Ledezma Ortega, who lost her daughter to femicide, describes the comfort she found in the community of other mothers as a transformative and empowering experience that gave her new meaning in life and the strength to go forward in the joint struggle for justice (331-33). All these testimonies help turn *Terrorizing Women* into a captivating volume, as they bridge part of the distance between academic critics and affected communities, injecting outrage and empathy, and ultimately, hope into an excellent collection of dedicated scholarship.

Sergio González Rodríguez' English-language monograph *The Femicide Machine* deploys testimony in quite a different and unfamiliar way, vividly illustrating what would otherwise remain a problematic treatise. González Rodríguez is a Mexican journalist, essayist, and art and culture critic who distinguished himself early on as one of the most prominent and outspoken experts on the *feminicidios* of Juárez from outside the academic/activist sphere. In the mid-1990s, he began to investigate the murders for the Mexico City-based newspaper *Reforma*. The result was his unconventional nonfiction account *Huesos en el desierto* from 2002, in which he merged his findings with literary experimentation and academic analysis, referencing reputable femicide scholars, such as Melissa Wright and Julia Monárrez Fregoso, and applying, as one of the first to do so, Giorgio Agamben's "bare life" theory to the peri-urban "death space" along the Texas-Chihuahua borderlands. [13]



With *The Femicide Machine* the Mexican writer offers an updated synthesis of his past work on Ciudad Juárez to an English-speaking audience. The small-sized volume's main part is a multidisciplinary analysis of the border city as a space where various transnational geopolitical, socioeconomic and cultural forces coalesce to paint Juárez as a surreal urban dystopia steeped in extreme violence. His study of Ciudad Juárez makes for a dense and alarming read, informed by sound analysis, but probably hampered by a slightly awkward English translation. However, through precisely this unfavorable style, *The Femicide Machine* performs the essential challenge for nonfictional writing about femicide, to wit: how to communicate in an emotionally engaging way the cumbersome analysis of real-life horrors of such an epidemic scale, without sensationalizing the issue or alienating the common reader.

González Rodríguez' writing retains a mode of analytical distance and semi-academic register, but frequently slips into hyperbolic phrasing that strains the limits of analytical vocabulary—a profusion of intensifiers, superlatives, and absolutisms that overwhelm the reader and create an overall sense of impotent verbal rage. The Juárez feminicides are introduced here as “normalized barbarism” in a “lawless city sponsored by a State in crisis” (7); “extreme [and] plutocratic, corporate, monopolistic, global, speculative, wealth-concentrating, and predatory [capitalism]” converges there (12); the border displays a “complete alienation from the larger nation” (36); the level of brutality reveals an “unlimited psychopathy” (13) and constitutes a call for a “savage disorder” (92); the militarized escalation of the drug war meant the installment and normalization of an oppressive “police state” (52; 55), while the criminal machine of the drug-trade remains “inherent in [Mexico’s] political and economic institutions,” with U.S government institutions critically involved (59); the Mexican public, meanwhile, has become paralyzed by an “incredible degree of amnesia and indifference” (94; emphasis added in all previous citations). At the end of this verbose onslaught of grievances, the author shrugs off any pessimism on his part, insisting his analysis to simply constitute “the observation of a negative inertia that systematically grows and expands” (97).

In an evident attempt to organize his multi-angled, interdisciplinary analysis into a manageable structure, González Rodríguez divides Ciudad Juárez into four separate cities-in-one, each corresponding to one analytical vector: the Border Town in its geopolitical and historical relation to the rest of Mexico and its northern neighbor; the Global City of Assembly, as embedded in the transnational economy; the War City, ravaged by the bilaterally conducted, heavily militarized so-called war on drugs; and finally, the City of Femicide. The cumulative effect of these angles, however, is more overwhelming than illuminating, as they generate the sense to be competing for the bleakest aspect of the city. As González Rodríguez' writing rages against these “machines,” as it were, Ciudad Juárez emerges in the shape of a Hydra-shaped beast growing more terrifying and

indomitable with each added layer of analysis. Tackle one of its heads and another of the three flame-spitting heads already appears in its place. [14] Nevertheless—or perhaps precisely *because* of this—*The Femicide Machine* reads like an accurate condensation of the state of criticism at the time of its publication, down to the sense of exasperation, the exemplified representational shortcomings of nonfictional analysis, and the resulting need to branch out into unconventional modes of expression. [15]

Only by way of its "Epilogue", then, does *The Femicide Machine* transcend the analytical and representational impasse hampering academic and nonfictional literature on Juárez. Over the book's final twenty-odd pages, González Rodríguez presents a mother's account of her daughter's kidnapping, rape, killing and the aftermath for her family. It is the 2001 case of Lilia Alejandra Andrade, a young *maquiladora* worker, then 17 years old and a mother of two, who was abducted, held captive and physically and sexually abused for five days, then killed; her dead body found in a vacant lot next to a shopping mall. If the story rings familiar to readers with any prior knowledge of the Juárez feminicides, it is because the case was prominently featured in the Amnesty International report "Intolerable Killings" in 2003 that played a vital role in generating international awareness (2; 7). The 2006 feature-length documentary *Bajo Juárez: La ciudad devorando a sus hijas* also featured Norma Andrade's testimony, the mother of Lilia Alejandra. And finally, González Rodríguez himself had already included Lilia Alejandra's story in his experimental nonfiction book *Huesos en el desierto* in 2002, as a result of personal encounters and interviews with her mother (personal email). The injustice suffered by the family propelled both Norma Andrade, who co-founded the grassroots organization *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa*, and Lilia Alejandra's sister to become vocal anti-femicide activists.

Indeed, in many ways, Ale's case may be seen as, if not the most representative statistically speaking, then still a highly *emblematic* case of femicide in Juárez. In *Huesos*, her case is presented briefly in formally unremarkable language and without any mention of her mother to effectively exemplify the blatant failures of criminal investigations in Juárez at the time (221; 235; 244). Her name appears again in the book's final chapter "La vida inconclusa" among over a hundred femicide victims listed chronologically backwards according to the respective dates of their discovery from September 2002 to January 1993, each annotated with as much or little factual information as the investigations had yielded: "21/02/01, Lilia Alejandra García Andrade, 17 años, baldío frente a Plaza Juárez Mall, envuelta en una cobija, semidesnuda, fue atada, violada, mutilada y estrangulada." (...17 years, empty lot in front of the Plaza Juárez Mall, wrapped in a blanket, half-naked, was found tied up, raped, mutilated, and strangled) (259). This section became one of the key inspirations for Roberto Bolaño's "The Part About the Crimes" in 2666 (Driver "Risks"). While Bolaño's novel weaves elaborate storylines around the recurring

descriptions of mangled bodies and stagnant investigations, the list in *Huesos* performs an act of commemoration yet fails to sustain consistent reader attention due to its uninterrupted monotonous repetitiveness. Individually heartbreaking, in accumulation the words merge into an overwhelming blur of dates, names, places, numbers, physical attributes, articles of clothing, clinical terminology, and over and over again, "no identificada" ("not identified") (257-73).

By contrast, *The Femicide Machine's* re-presentation of Lilia Alejandra's story conveys immediacy and accessibility, narrated over the span of seven small pages in a colloquial first-person account that stands as a striking contrast to the preceding word clusters of the book's portentous analysis. The conclusion of what happened to Norma Andrade's daughter instills a particular jolt in the reader. The last paragraph relates Alejandra's ordeal in a few short, plainspoken phrases that carry an enormous power in their blunt, bitter, and accusatory simplicity, while assuming the formal shape of a prose poem:

They kidnapped my daughter, like so many other girls, right off the street.

They beat her.

They tied her hands.

They tortured her.

They mutilated her while she was alive.

They burned her with cigarettes.

They killed her by strangling her until she was asphyxiated.

And then they threw her into a vacant lot like she was garbage.

Alejandra.

I looked at her in the coffin and I almost didn't recognize her: She who had such a pretty, long neck was now like a hunchback, sunk down into her shoulders. They broke her. She faced an inhuman death all alone. She was just on her way home, like so many other girls. (105)

In the face of overwhelming atrocity and hopelessness, the individuality and authority of testimony becomes operational to convey the human element, countering the distant observer's self-protective impulse to simply write off the 'hell' of Juárez as a lost cause. Through its disarming immediacy, testimony has the capacity to bridge the gulf that divides subaltern subject and privileged audience. These are real people, they live here, and they tell their own stories—"human cannon fodder" they are not (González Rodríguez, *Machine* 12).

#### 4. Nothing to See Here?

##### **Un/Real Pictures in Sergio Rodríguez González' *The Femicide Machine***

Until he turned into an unlikely early expert on the Juárez feminicides, Sergio González Rodríguez was an intellectual mainly versed in the fine arts in his career as a culture editor for the liberal-leaning newspaper *Reforma* in Mexico City. With an evident nod to this background he frames the account by Lilia Alejandra's mother with a deliberate conceptual twist. The chapter is titled "Epilogue: Instructions for Taking Textual Photographs", the testimony itself then introduced as a "Photographic mise-en-scène" (99). Its language is kept deceptively plain, comprised of simple vocabulary and arranged in short, straightforward sentence structures. Yet it contains a wealth of detail and vivid imagery that effectively portray the daily life of a humble lower/middle-class family, allowing for deeper insights into their socioeconomic woes. Some of the passages may evoke Sandra Cisneros' deliberately child-like poetic prose of *The House on Mango Street* to the effect of invoking the universal through the specific:

Lilia Alejandra was seventeen and had two small children.

You'd see her with her babies and she looked like a little girl playing with her dolls.

She was very disappointed with her boyfriend, so she preferred to live with us. (99)

[...]

Since she was pretty, they used her as a model to pose next to the products the factory produced. They took her picture a lot. (100)

The theatrical allusion of the "mise-en-scène" subtitle issues an unmistakable request for the reader to approach the text in decidedly visual terms, as if setting up reading stage directions in a written play, activating the reader's imaginative faculties as if announcing, "and *this* is what the Femicide Machine looks like in reality; *picture* this!" The frame also acknowledges the utilitarian artifice of the testimonial account without diminishing its claim to truthfulness. [16]

But González Rodríguez' masterstroke is the opaque concept of the "textual photographs," the meaning of which is revealed after the testimony's harsh conclusion. On twenty blank pages, titled "Photograph 1" through "Photograph 20," we find twenty captions placed in the center of each page, each describing one nonexistent (or rather, non-displayed) photo to the ineluctable effect of making us pause to imagine and reflect. Some of the captions to the absent photographs simply specify locations and settings relevant to Alejandra's case. Others describe impossible snapshots of key moments of her kidnapping:

Alejandra resists abduction on Rancho Becerra

Street, not far from the plant where she worked. (110)

Two individuals force a woman—Alejandra—into a white Thunderbird in front of a TV repair shop, the night of February 19, 2001. (113)

Others still describe what, if depicted, would be facsimiles of official documents or technical recording devices, meticulously dated and classified:

Image taken from security cameras at the factory where Alejandra worked, the day of Alejandra's kidnapping on February 14, 2001, at the end of the workday, 7pm (108)

Printed notice of Alejandra's disappearance (112)

Alejandra's semi-hidden body as seen on television (117)

Add to these three "Satellite images," complete with date, time, and precise geographic coordinates (123-5). Some of the described images are likely to actually exist in one form or other, such as a "[photo] taken of Alejandra at the factory where she worked" (107) or a family picture "taken years after her murder" (122). The length of the captions ranges from minimal one-liners (112) to a detailed description of Alejandra's physical appearance, including clothes and attire, on the day she went missing (109), which is mirrored, ten pages further on, by an equally elaborate description of her dead body in the medical precision of an autopsy, printed in nineteen lines that form a justified block of text that visually fills out the center of the page just like a medium-sized photograph would (119).

González Rodríguez borrowed the device—unwittingly so, as he assured me via personal correspondence—from Chilean-American conceptual artist Alfredo Jaar. In 1995, he conceived an evolving series of installations on the genocide in Rwanda named *Real Pictures*. The exhibition consisted of an arrangement of black boxes that contained photographs of sites and victims, survivors, volunteers, and other people somehow linked to the genocide, but the boxes remained closed, the images kept hidden from the viewer. Instead, only white-on-black inscriptions detailing the concealed contents of each container were visible. Here the "real" evades being captured in representation; the black boxes are anti-representation, a refusal of the hegemony of representation. [17]

Jacques Rancière uses Jaar's *Real Pictures* to explicate his concept of "The Intolerable Image" in *The Emancipated Spectator*—and we may then, in turn, apply his illuminating explications to González Rodríguez' "Textual Photographs." In certain ways Rancière echoes Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*, similarly demanding that we reconsider visual representations of

atrocities and their political potential, the ways in which they operate on and are being received by the viewer. Seeking to "rescue the analysis of images from the trial-like atmosphere in which it is still so often immersed" and to "challenge [...] identifications of the use of image with idolatry, ignorance or passivity" (95), Rancière questions a series of traditionally upheld but on close inspection collapsing constructs of binary oppositions: between viewing and knowing, activity and passivity, (surface) appearance and (hidden) reality, which underlie most postmodern denunciations of the spectacle. "Emancipation," he declares, "begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting" (12). Since the act of viewing entails observing, selecting, comparing and interpreting, it is automatically in and of itself a productive act "that confirms or transforms [the] distribution of position." (13). For Rancière, much of the critique of the spectacle invariably reproduces the logic of postmodernism's diagnosed nihilism that it purports to criticize, just as political art, when anticipating and, indeed, depending on its audience's prior understanding of—including their own incrimination in—what it is that is being denounced, often merely serves to have the spectator "wallow in guilt" as opposed to "prompt her to political action" (88). Another presumed opposition Rancière takes on is testimony as oral narrative versus photographic images as documentary proof (90-3). To him, both are to be located on the same map of representation, which he defines as "not the act of producing a visible form, but the act of offering an equivalent—something that speech does just as much as photography" (93).

Turning to Jaar's *Real Pictures* installation on the Rwanda genocide as an example of a text that succeeds in disrupting accustomed viewing habits, thus enhancing the active potential of the viewing process instead of laboring to anticipate the effect the images would have on the viewers, Rancière observes: "Here the words are detached from any voice; they are themselves taken as visual elements" (95), and then more to the point: "The words do not replace images. They *are* images" (97; my emphasis). If representation is not an act of producing a visible duplicate but rather an equivalent, then Alfredo Jaar's black boxes, much the same way as Sergio González Rodríguez' Textual Photographs, create precisely that "certain connection between the verbal and the visual" (ibid.), effectively turning them into examples of visual objects that "rework the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects," that Rancière sought to champion at the outset (82). "As such," he writes, "[art] can open new passages towards new forms of political subjectivation" as long as it remains aware of that unavoidable "aesthetic cut that separates outcomes from intentions" (ibid.).

This is where *The Femicide Machine* struggles, in its premeditated intentionality and in spite of itself, against Rancière's pronouncements. The intentions of Rodríguez González' project are very much a given through the deliberately created frame of the preceding critical analysis. The author insists his work to be understood as journalistic reportage rather than artistic conceptualization.



The "Epilogue" remains a complementary addendum—unlike Alfredo Jaar's installation; it is not supposed to be the main event here. In a generous email interview, Sergio Gonzalez Rodríguez confirmed that he precisely anticipated "hacer que el lector imagine la tragedia que narro como si fueran evidencias fotográficas. Las palabras se desdoblán en imágenes mentales (...to have the reader imagine the tragedy that I narrate as if through photographic evidence. The words unfold into mental images)" (my translation). In utilitarian terms, he deems testimonial accounts necessary to oppose those re-emerging revisionist voices fundamentally questioning the reality of femicide in Ciudad Juárez as such. In my reading, however, González Rodríguez is selling himself short. More than mere illustrative supplement to support his analysis, the blank pages stage a powerful intervention in the dominant visual hegemony of human rights discourses and journalistic conventions, one that potentially carries lasting repercussions for the individual reader's habits of perception.

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, allow me a personal reflection over my own initial encounter with these evocative captions and elliptical photos. It occurred to me that in my previous research, working my way through articles and books of scholarship on gender violence and the specific history of the situation in Juárez—several of which included sections of photographic illustrations—I had tended to skip over those sections, or at best, hastily flicked through those pages, casting no more than a fleeting glance over images of protests, *rastreos*, victims' families, crime scenes, urban scenery, desert landscapes, makeshift homes and memorials. What Rodríguez González achieves here, by experimenting with form in such a perplexing yet simple way, is to create an effective miniature model of Susan Sontag's notion of how a written narrative structurally engages us for a longer period of time than an image—without even resorting to the use of a *narrative* proper.

It takes no more than a split second to take in even quite complex visual images, much less time than needed to process even the shortest caption presented on these pages. Confident to have earned our full attention through the preceding testimonial, González Rodríguez plays with our sense of anticipation, tricking us into a sort of ethical self-interrogation: We are curious to see, now that we have come to know this story and met its characters; we are eager for illustration, for the gratification of seeing the victim (not only because she was said to be attractive), her family (in their grief and in struggle), the unpunished perpetrators (for the small cathartic reward of

channeling our outrage), and even her brutalized body (for all the darker age-old reasons put forth by Sontag). Our gaze lingers on these pages between compassion, curiosity, and confusion. But our impulse for voyeuristic gratification is denied, an increasingly rare experience in today's image-driven world of instant access, and the blank pages reflect back our puzzled gaze onto ourselves. While our eyes zigzag through lines of a block of text that list in medical precision the grisly injuries inflicted upon Lilia Alejandra's body, we invariably come to question this urge to see more. What would possibly be gained by it?

Sergio González Rodríguez flips around that old slogan from *Paris Match*, retrieved by Susan Sontag and here repurposed for the title of my article. The recycled testimonial by Norma Andrade shocks with words, and it is his textual photos that trigger a deeper, weightier reflection. Rancière calls this the "redistribution of the sensible": the mapping out of new ways of seeing, thinking, and understanding, through images that "change our gaze and the landscape of the possible" (105). When I think of Charles Bowden's "carved wooden mask" image always first and foremost remember Bowden's enacted personal associations, his flagrant fantasizing and his troubling gaze; *The Femicide Machine*, however, will stay with me for forcing me to confront my own gaze. Needless to say, González Rodríguez holds little control over the broader media discourse in which his readers are immersed or immerse themselves. In fact, as one of his captions indicates, news outlets have already broadcast footage of Alejandra's half-covered body. And yet, within the confines of his thin little volume, he does successfully create an artificial space devoid of sensationalist imagery without diminishing the level of shock, outrage, and empathy elicited. And for once, someone does get to play that "guardian of rationed horror", realizing Susan Sontag's elusive old goal of an "ecology of images."

## Endnotes

[1] This is the old advertising slogan from the French magazine *Paris Match*, borrowed for my purposes from Susan Sontag's mention of the phrase in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (20).

[2] For an extensive, if by no means complete, selection of books, films, and music taking up the topic of the Juárez feminicides, see: Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán, 298-300.

[3] Consider, for example, Kathleen Staudt's concession in 2009 that "national and state human rights commissions lack authority to compel changes in Mexico," just as academic criticism does (Staudt 2), or Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán's palpable and representative frustration in their introduction to their 2010 essay collection, *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade and La Frontera*:

Nowadays, we know too much, and yet we continue to know nothing. [Throughout years of] learning; reading; researching; raising consciousness; signing petitions; writing stories, poetry, and music; making art; organizing conferences; and collecting anthologies, there are only two things that have changed. The number of victims continues to grow. And now the Juárez femicides have become a legend. (Gaspar de Alba & Guzmán 1)

[4] His 1996 article in *Harper's* magazine "While You Were Sleeping"—subject of the subsequent discussion—was awarded, among other accolades, The Hillman Prize for outstanding journalism dedicated to social justice (Smith).

[5] The term "economic violence" is proposed by Julian Cardona, a recurrent collaborator of Bowden and one of the *Juarenses* photographers featured in *Laboratory*, to refer not to physical forms of violence that are individually induced, but rather to systemic victimization associated with poverty and marginalization (Driver "En Juárez" 180-81).

[6] Since the escalation of the drug war under former president Felipe Calderón, self-censorship has become a crippling problem in the Mexican press, and many periodicals in regions most severely affected by organized crime stopped posting their journalists' bylines under articles on *narco*-related issues. In 2009, Mexico was declared the most dangerous country for journalists worldwide by *Reporters Without Borders*, even ahead of war- and terror-torn Iraq. By 2012, Sergio González Rodríguez cites 65 journalists killed throughout Mexico since 2000 (*Machine* 86) and seventeen murdered human rights defenders and activists in the state of Chihuahua alone since 2009 (*Machine* 51).

[7] Lourdes Portillo, the activist filmmaker behind the lauded documentary film *Señorita Extraviada / Missing Young Woman*, for instance, lists precisely Bowden's core factors as root causes behind the gender violence in the Mexican borderlands (PBS).

[8] While Bowden's use of statistical data to relativize femicide in comparison with the escalating (and overwhelmingly male) death count of the drug war neglects the particular forms of victimization and power relations at play, his criticism of the term "femicide" and the disproportionate focus on the murdered women in the media ties in with recent research on the war over the public discourse as presently conducted by the state with regard to the *narco* violence. In 2011, Melissa Wright predicted an uphill battle for activists trying to contest the official line of interpretation, which cynically holds the violent deaths of thousands of young poor Mexican males as merely criminals killing each other off and, simultaneously, evidence for the state's success in destabilizing the cartels. This new re-manifestation of the blaming-the-victim discourse will be even harder to discredit when the victims-to-blame were young women and girls. A preliminary step could be the new term "juvenicidio" that seeks to redefine the thousands of casualties of the drug war as young, disenfranchised victims as opposed to categorically guilty criminals (Wright, "Necropolitics").

[9] Charles Bowden's critique of the popular and narrow understanding of "femicide" in Juárez as exclusively spectacular abduction/rape/murder cases also echoes Kathleen Staudt's proposed shift of attention toward the pervasive quotidian forms of gender violence.

[10] There is no shortage of statistical evidence to back up alarmist denunciations of the Mexican justice system as de facto non-existent. Impunity rates for Mexico are notoriously overwhelming. Already before the militarization of the narco war plunged entire regions into escalating cartel- and state-induced terror and judicial chaos, Alicia Schmidt Camacho cites an impunity rate of 97 percent from a 2000 study of the criminal justice system ("Ciudadana" 268), and in 2012, at the tail end of what has since been called "Calderon's War", González Rodríguez speaks of a nationwide impunity rate of 99%-- a number so high that it entails a declining rate of *reported* crime while *real* crime keeps rising (cf.: Schmidt Camacho "Ciudadana" 269). González Rodríguez' blunt conclusion: "Rule of law does not exist in Mexico, just as it doesn't exist in Ciudad Juárez" (*Machine* 46). For a comprehensive critical engagement with precisely the kind of feminicide-skepticism displayed by the late Bowden and other critics, see Steven Volk's contribution to this issue.

[11] Jacques Rancière, for one, compellingly opposes the readily accepted assumption of our media as oversaturated with violent imagery of atrocity:

For the dominant media by no means drowns us in a torrent of images testifying to massacres, massive population transfers and the other horrors [...] Quite the reverse, they reduce their number, taking good care to select and order them [...] What we see above all in the news on our TV screens are the faces of the rulers, experts and journalists who comment on the images, who tell us what they show and what we should make of them. If horror is banalized, it is not because we see too many images of it. We do not see too many suffering bodies on the screen. But we do see too many nameless bodies, too many bodies incapable of returning the gaze that we direct at them, too many bodies that are an object of speech without themselves having a chance to speak. (96)

[12] The post-Christmas 2004 earthquake and tsunami in South East Asia may serve as an apt illustrative example here. The distribution of spectacular apocalyptic visuals through TV and amateur footage online both seemed to titillate dark voyeuristic impulses of Western audiences watching from the safe distance of comfortable living rooms while simultaneously mobilizing a wave of international solidarity, as evidenced by the considerable volunteer response and money donations.

[13] Today, Sergio González Rodríguez' is perhaps best known for his role as Roberto Bolaño's foremost on-site source of information while the late Chilean novelist was conceiving his magnum opus *2666* (2004) that centers around a thinly veiled fictionalization of Ciudad Juárez and the feminicides.

[14] More than just the "femicide machine," González Rodríguez also theorizes the war machine, crime machine, police machine, and "the machine of apolitical conformity" in Ciudad Juárez' (10; 97).

[15] Invoking Susan Sontag and Georges Didi-Huberman, González Rodríguez explained his stance on graphic images of violence to me as follows: "hay que dejar que las imágenes atroces nos persigan. Asimismo, Didi-Huberman ha añadido a tal punto de vista un concepto: tenemos que desarrollar imágenes-escudo contra la barbarie." (We have to let the atrocious images haunt us. Likewise, Didi-Huberman has added a concept to this point of view: that we must develop image-shields against atrocity; my translation)

[16] In our email correspondence, González Rodríguez was adamant about the absolute accuracy of his retelling of Norma Andrade's account: "el testimonio refiere lo sustancial de los hechos acontecidos ... Mis libros de non fiction se limitan a narrar hechos" (the testimony relates the substantial of the facts as they occurred. ... My non-fiction books merely narrate facts; my translation) and only after I clarified that I was merely speaking of a stylization—as opposed to a fictionalization—showed himself willing to entertain my question regarding the chosen narrative mode. It is a further reflection of a media environment, in which a recent "revisionist tendency" is launching ad hominem attacks against those writing about feminicide, seeking to paint the very existence of feminicide in Ciudad Juárez as a mere "myth" or academic invention. (ibid., my translations)

[17] Robert Fitterman's *Holocaust Museum* (2013) is another example that uses this technique of detaching explanatory captions from their visual signifiers in order to foreground, destabilize, and renegotiate the interaction of text, image, and narrative, while playing with viewer/reader perception. A US-based scholar and poet, Fitterman used actual captions of photographs from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. and rearranged them into the shape of a long poem, split into several thematic sections, across almost 100 pages.

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**"A New Landscape of the Possible":  
400 Women, Politics of Representation and Human Rights**

**Abstract**

This paper engages with the broad question of the (im)possibility of art to represent a feasible and effective mechanism for changing values and raising global awareness with regards to gender-based violence and sexual violence against women. It focuses on 400 Women, an art installation by London artist Tamsyn Challenger which brings to light the feminicidal reality of the Mexican-American borderlands specifically, and gender-based violence globally. The installation, which consists of 175 portraits by different artists, sends a clear message in support of women's human rights to life, and their right to live a life free from violence. Likewise, it advocates for people's right to memory, rectification and reparations. In addition, the installation compels the individual, the public, the local authorities and the international community to take a stance against gender-based violence against women and impunity, and in favour of compliance to the human right to non-discrimination. This artistic project, which developed over five years and which was exhibited worldwide, represents a cry for gender and social justice in the face of personal, collective and state violence against women. My argument, therefore, revolves around the thesis that art is a powerful tool to mobilise people's consciousness and demand accountability for gross violations of women's human rights, but also an empowering mechanism for the families of the disappeared to claim justice and bring the missing family members into our collective memory.

**Keywords:** femicide, politics of representation, human rights, visual arts, activism

Every woman has the right to be free from violence in both the public and private spheres.

—Convention Belém do Pará, Article 3

The images of art do not supply weapons for battles. They help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible.

—Jacques Rancière, "The Intolerable Image" 105

## Introduction

This paper engages with the (im)possibility of art to represent a feasible and effective mechanism for changing values and raising glocal awareness about human rights issues, in particular about gender-based violence and sexual violence against women. Although this is a very broad question, to which the paper is unable to provide a final answer, my analysis aims to problematise a series of issues such as the role of art as mediator in the dissemination of human rights values and discourses, its power to raise awareness about violations of women's human rights, and its function as an important accountability mechanism for demanding action from duty-bearers in face of system(ic) violence against women. I will focus on *400 Women*, an art installation by London artist Tamsyn Challenger, which aims to make a statement and raise *glocal* awareness on the *femicides* in the Mexican-American borderlands, and gender-based violence globally. The installation, which consists of 175 portraits by different artists and which developed over five years, makes visible the *feminicidal* reality of the region, sending a clear message in favour of women's human right to live a life free from violence and their right to life. It also advocates for the human right to memory, bringing to the fore issues of state accountability and rectification, among others. In addition, the installation invites the individual, the public, the local authorities and the international community to take a stance against gender-based violence and impunity.

Besides examining the content of the artistic message, it is also important to critically examine the way in which these messages are conveyed and codified by/through the politics of representation intrinsic to the art project, and the set of relations it establishes with existing human rights discourses. These are some of the questions with which both Jacques Rancière and Wendy Hesford engage in their respective works as they scrutinise the politics of representation that becomes activated whenever a work of art is produced, and whenever it is finally exposed to the public. Accordingly, Hesford stresses the importance of examining the particular visual economies and truth-telling mechanisms that are triggered by and intrinsic to the work of art. These visual rhetorics, more often than not, engage and reproduce cosmopolitan and neoliberal power relations through a "mass media production of the spectacle of suffering (...), [which ultimately] divest[s] it of

any structural understanding of the production of suffering itself" (Hesford 7). These visual rhetorics, which permeate the realm of literature, music, and the media as well as art, appeal to Western audiences precisely because such rhetorics constructs them as moral subjects and bearers/guarantors of human rights, mapping the world into clearly demarcated spectator zones and sufferer zones (ibid.). The humanitarian character of these specific visual rhetorics, which draws a strong line between subject/object, I/Other and powerful/powerless, reproduces and mirrors the unequal power relations that circulate economic and political globalisation processes without critically assessing their origins, outcomes, or their local impact. The problem is, as Hesford explains, that these visual economies circulate a "global market place that tends to recast structural inequalities, social injustices, and state violence as scenes of individual trauma and victimisation" (29). The complete removal of collective and systemic factors from the focus of analysis in favour of the "victimised" and "traumatised" individual decontextualises the latter from the material and power/knowledge structures and networks that make them socio-economically and politically more vulnerable (not powerless) than other social subjects. Therefore, this humanitarianism obscures power relations by embracing a "politics of pity" in which the audience/subject that looks (the saviour) constructs "what/who is being seen" within the logic of a specific cosmopolitan narrative in order to validate the "subject" who has the power of both seeing and constructing specific orders of things.

Bearing this in mind, it is crucial to interrogate what visual economies *400 Women* deploys and performs, and above all, where the victims of *femicides* stand in Tamsyn Challenger's work. If we problematise art in light of human rights practices and rhetorics, and put both into dialogue, then it becomes central to question the discursive and political relationship that is inevitably established between the two. This critical reflection is fundamental if we consider that art, as other cultural manifestations, does convey and disseminate social values that can influence individual and collective moralities, validate and subvert hegemonic principles, and also mobilise people towards certain actions. [1] The politics of representation that a specific art piece might endorse and evoke is what Hesford refers to as *spectacular rhetorics*, which "refers not [only] to individual images, iconic or otherwise, but to social and rhetorical processes of incorporation and recognition mediated by visual representation and the ocular epistemology that underwrites the discourse of human rights" (7).

The problem with these hegemonic politics of representation is that they tend to appropriate human suffering through the use of images that respond to specific politics of alterity and become intelligible within particular humanitarian and cosmopolitan Western referential frameworks and socio-economic, political and cultural logics. As a result, "victim subjects [are incorporated] into social relations that support the logic of a global morality market that privileges Westerners as

world citizens" (Hesford 9), relations that also construct those objects/subjects of suffering as ultimately "othered". Jacques Rancière, in this respect, prompts us to interrogate "what kind of human beings the image shows us and what kind of human beings it is addressed to; what kind of gaze and consideration are created by this fiction" (Rancière 102). Consequently, it is fundamental to interrogate in what specific ways (and if) *400 Women*, from its own artistic space and character, engages in a gender/social justice political project. Likewise, it is important to assess the sort of dialectical relationships that are established between and among the public, the subjects of vision, the contextual and reference frameworks, the geopolitical spaces, the imaginary inventories, and the structures of feeling involved in such (re)presentations. [2] The following sections, therefore, will try to shed light on these questions

## 1. Femicides in Ciudad Juárez

There are no survivors of femicide. All we have are the voices of witness survivors (families) who speak for them.

—Rosa Linda Fregoso & Cynthia Bejarano 11

Femicides are one of the most extreme forms of violence against women. It is a term used to refer to "the killing of women *qua* women, often condoned by, if not sponsored, by the state and/or religious institutions" (Russell and Radford 1). [3] Diana Russell and Jill Radford's definition highlights several recurrent issues in *femicides*: 1) That these women are systematically killed based on the fact that they are women; 2) that these killings are intimately linked to the level of gender discrimination in the region; 3) that this discrimination against women is systemic and permeates all levels of society and political institutions; and 4) the role of the state as a guarantor of human rights, in this case of women's.

There is a significant body of knowledge that is being produced around these issues, offering a differential and non-hegemonic knowledge that defies the "official" stories about these murders and that have forced regional and local governments to take responsibility and action for the (ab)use of women. The obstructive role of the local government and the state in dealing with the killings of women, as well as the abuse of power exerted against family members, friends and non-governmental organizations have been common practice over the years. This governmental stance has relied on a political and public discourse that holds the dead and disappeared women responsible for their own ill fate, thereby further appropriating their (non)existence through the



imposition of a “narrative” of blame. [4] In addition, the lack of thorough criminal investigations “showed that the authorities did not consider these pandemic feminicides sufficiently serious and patterned crimes; for this reason, the crimes remained in impunity and continued to be committed” (Carmona et al. 166-7). This disregard on behalf of the state—through its multiple representatives—which nurtures the “sense of impunity” of the murderers, plays an important role in the advancement of a women’s human rights framework for tackling *feminicidal* violence. This approach highlights the state’s obligations to respect, protect and fulfill human rights, conceptualises feminicides as individual and systemic violence, and situates these murders as part of a gender power structure characterised by political, economic, and social inequalities.

Precisely because of the inaction of the state as well as its victim-blaming rhetoric, the role of the families and friends of the victims has been crucial in exposing the killings of women to the public eye and in demanding social justice. The actions of these local actors have been fundamental to the process of raising public awareness with regard to the level of gender violence in the region and for demanding that authorities meet their obligations under international law. They play another important role for the community, that of giving visibility to the otherwise “invisible” women. In this context, families, support groups, and cultural production on the matter serve as active agents, subverting this attempt at erasing “existence” and “memory” from the collective (un)conscious by precisely bringing these murdered women from the “margins” to the centre of analysis, discourse, and to the public eye. Art plays a key role in these ‘decentring’ and ‘re-centring’ processes, since as mentioned above, it conveys (non)hegemonic values that can challenge the status quo, and denounce discriminatory and abusive social practices, including human rights violations. It is from this political space that my analysis of Tamsyn Challenger’s *400 Women* will develop.

## **2. *400 Women* and a "New Landscape of the Possible"**

As a collaborative project between families of the victims, artist and NGOs, *400 Women* works at a *glocal* level by denouncing *feminicide* in Ciudad Juárez and raising awareness and socio-political action against gender violence worldwide. The conceptual installation came to fruition after Challenger contacted nearly two hundred artists from several nationalities and asked them to participate in the project. [5] Challenger’s inspiration to mount the show originated in 2006, during a trip to Mexico in which she met Consuelo Valenzuela, whose daughter Julieta Marlene González Valenzuela had disappeared without a trace. Challenger says she was moved in multiple and contradictory ways when Consuelo attempted to hand her a postcard with a blurred picture of her

daughter, which prompted an unexpected feeling of embarrassment and discomfort in her. As she explains:

I'd first met Consuelo in a private room in a hotel but it was when we left the room and were in the foyer, a much more public place, that she decided to press the postcards of her daughter into my hands. In an instant I was very nervous at being scrutinized by her and then immediately ashamed of feeling like I wanted to get away from this person that was suffering so much. The shame of my reaction made everything immediately vivid; her proximity, her smell, her grip, the translator nearly shouting, as I remember it "she wants you to take them, to give them to anyone, anyone you know" but the most arresting memory for me is the face of Julieta zinging out from this 3 colour-way postcard. The face looking up at me was such a poverty of an image. It had been reproduced from a snapshot and the face was blurred. She had no eyes really, everything was faded, a bleached out nose. And I think I just wanted to bring her face back. ([www.tamsynchallenger.com](http://www.tamsynchallenger.com))

This quote highlights a few questions: the division between the private/public, the collapse of the presence/absence dynamics through the image of Julieta, and its power to trigger a series of acts and emotions that troubled Challenger, displacing her from her comfort zone. All these feelings are captured by *400 Women*, which establishes a dialogue between artists, the public, urban spaces, structures of feeling, collective imaginaries and power relations, through the presence/absence of the murdered women and their representation. [6]

In this respect, Challenger's haptic encounter with the faded photograph of the feminicidal victim triggers a powerful reaction when she is forced to confront the reality of the disappeared, or rather, her presence and her image. As a result, Challenger experienced the uneasiness of having to put a name and a face to one of the many girls abducted, therefore giving a concrete dimension to her absence, infusing it with "physicality" and "tangibility" by means of a picture that stands for existence and life. Above all, Challenger was compelled to be participant of the pain and suffering of "another", who in turn channels the pain of the missing and the abused. The connection between the presence/absence of the victim and the one who recognizes and acknowledges her is precisely what haunts and seizes the public when they undergo this immersive experience, and face each of the portraits. The face-to-face encounter with each woman in each of the portraits breaks the objectifying gaze and moves beyond narcissistic recognition, as each face compels the seer, the so-called "subject" to act, to engage, and not merely to project onto them his/her own beliefs and expectations. All of the women claim their own subjectivity and position themselves as subjects by commanding that act of engagement, that participation by figuratively defying that objectification and claiming their spatial existence in their own right.

Indeed, *400 Women* plays with a presence/absence dynamic to bring to the fore each and every woman that is part of the exhibition, as well as the collective they represent. The former problematises the latter by means of the installation's aesthetics, i.e. the physical characteristics of

the portraits and their arrangement. For example, the portraits were produced in a size reminiscent of a Mexican *retablo*, which symbolizes an act of remembrance and the tribute paid to the victims. In this respect, Challenger provided photographs of the murdered and disappeared women to each artist and commissioned them to do a portrait. However, not all the artists received an image to work with, either because these were unavailable or because it was not part of their practice, in which case, the name of the woman had to be visible in the portrait. As Challenger explains, "If I had made all the works myself this individuality in memoriam would be lost; it would have only expressed my character. So I knew I needed individuals, with all their unique qualities, to express the individuality of the woman or girl I gave them to represent" (*Edinburgh Art*).

In line with Hesford's analysis, this act of representation can be inherently problematic; an act of "ventriloquism" that involves the appropriation of these women's subjectivities by another actor. Inevitably, a certain level of "appropriation" takes place in this act of representation, since these women are dead and/or disappeared, and therefore, unable to communicate that subjectivity. However, the process surrounding the "birth" of this installation, the fact that Challenger worked closely with families, NGOs and relatives at these embryonic stages, and the fact that she sets no claims of truth neither to the victims, nor to the work of art itself, represents already a significant effort to counteract as much as possible the potential re-victimisation of these women, their further dehumanisation, and a utilitarian use of their existence and disappearances. In effect, by publicly acknowledging that *400 Women* is in itself a fiction, Challenger articulates a powerful critique of the hypocritical dynamics of artistic representation and the art industry (and by extension society in general). She points out that "these women's lives have been disregarded in a way that this work hasn't been, and each portrait in the 400 installation hasn't been, so it's a sad irony of our times that these objects have more significance than each of those young women's lives had" (*Line Magazine*). That critique highlights the commodification of women in society and their perception as disposable objects in a neoliberal economy and system of governance, in which their lives have less value than a work of art. [7]

Indeed, the social disposability of women is further highlighted by the way in which the portraits are displayed. The visual effect of the lined-up portraits, all sharing the same size and monotonously placed one after another, also denounces the dehumanization of women by being treated as mere statistical figures in criminal records, and the erasure of their autonomous subjectivity. This idea is highlighted by the fact that there is no information accompanying each portrait, just a number written at ground level. The arrangement of the portraits themselves evokes the alignment of workers in the *maquila*, their alienation, their loss of a sense of uniqueness and the erasure of their identities, being reduced to a number with a set market value in a neoliberal economy. It also

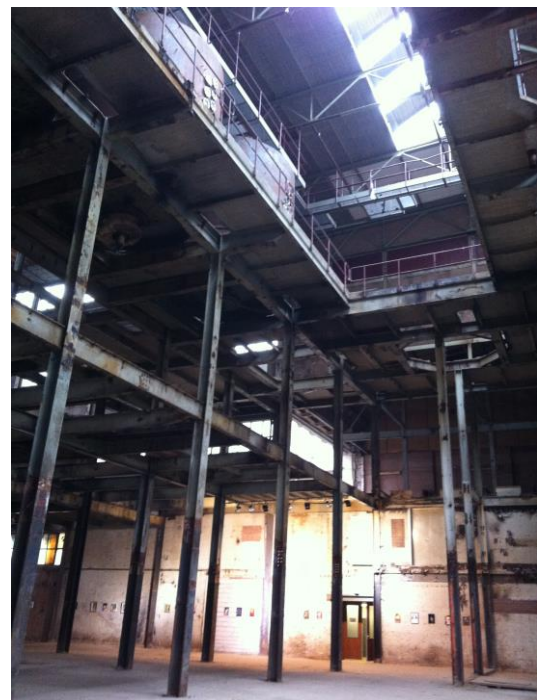
denounces the authorities' negligence to the murders, the exploitation of women in the workplace and the connection between *feminicides* and the *maquila* system.

The visual politics of *400 Women* brings to the surface its intercontextuality, exposing further the specific structures of feeling that are activated through simultaneous interactions among the public, the art installation, its visual aesthetics and the urban spaces in which it was exhibited. For

example, as part of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, the exhibition was shown in an old rundown schoolhouse, the Canongate Venture, with the ceiling coming off, and the floor covered in dirt and dust. The Amsterdam venue (see pictures 1-4) was an old and abandoned factory in the outskirts of the city (Sugar City), right by a highway and almost deserted. The state and feeling of neglect and isolation permeating these spaces mirrored the dire conditions in which these women lived, vanished and died, again exposing their marginality in society. In effect, the exhibition simultaneously confronts the public with the reality of these women, who live under "high levels of insecurity, vulnerability, and absence of social and political protection, and in zones of social devastation, where insecurity and crime prevail, along with coexistence marked by illegality [...] the disintegration of institutions, and the rupture of the State of Law" (Fregoso & Bejarano 12). This reality is powerfully cut across by gender, racial, ethnic, class and sexual factors and dynamics.



Picture 1 - Courtesy of Tamsyn Challenger and *400 Women*

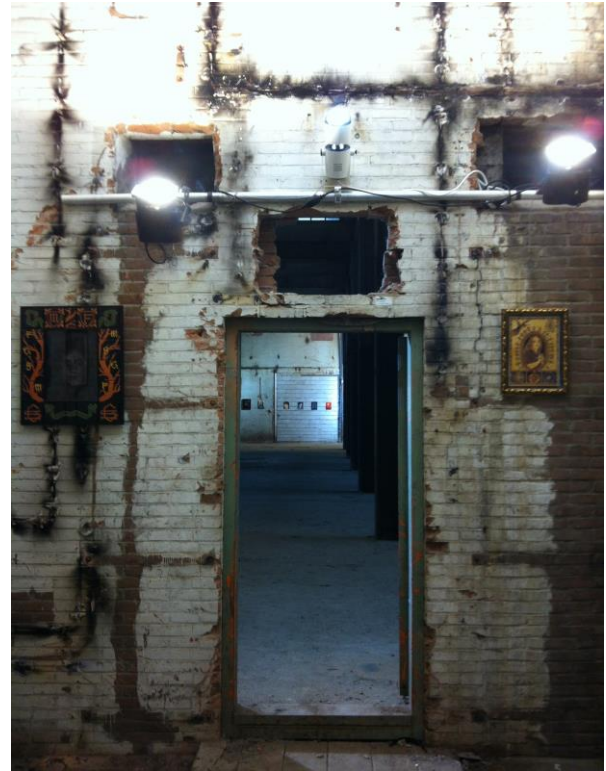


Picture 2 - Courtesy of Tamsyn Challenger and *400 Women*





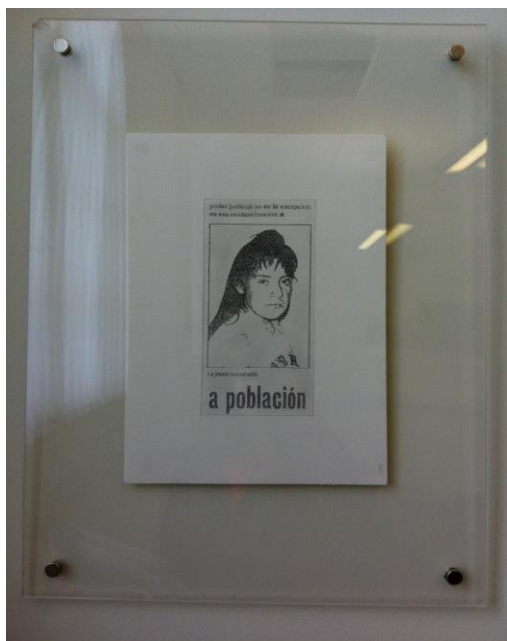
Picture 3 - Courtesy of Tamsyn Challenger and 400 Women



Picture 4 - Courtesy of Tamsyn Challenger and 400 Women

The portraits highlight the fact that the women (and girls) who are victims of *femicides* “were poor and young; that many of them worked in the maquilas; that they were dark-skinned and had long

hair” (Lagarde xv). The installation, therefore, opens up the space for exposing the levels of sexism, racism, and labour exploitation in which these women and girls work and live, which turns them into one of the most vulnerable sectors of society. All these factors intersect in ways that define these women's social realities, their life choices, the level of discrimination they experience, their desires and motivations, as well as the scarce protection they receive from the state. Therefore, the installation denounces the violation of women’s human rights and the (ab)use of women in socio-economic arenas. A number of portraits, for example, articulate a specific critique of these violations by resembling newspaper cut-outs about the disappearance of the women/girls (picture 5).



Picture 5 - Courtesy of Tamsyn Challenger and 400 Women

Another one (picture 6) holds the state of Mexico accountable not only for leaving the crimes unresolved, but for promoting impunity through its inaction. This particular portrait, with the image of one middle-aged woman, smiling and distilling life, conflicts with the reality of her death, which more powerfully conveys the denunciation of institutionalised gender discrimination and systemic violence against women, sanctioned by both, the Catholic doctrine and its traditional gender values, and the Mexican government. Consequently, the installation points to critical questions regarding the nature of these *intercontextualities* and structures of feeling, their foundations, and their adherence to a particular "shared morality", which seems to permeate human rights discourses with a humanitarian take.



Picture 6 - Courtesy of Tamsyn Challenger and 400 Women

The installation additionally problematises the relationship established between those privileged subjects who attend such an installation and those who are the subject/object of such piece of art. In effect, the hierarchical relationship between self and other, which reproduces unidirectional and top-down power relations, is not uncommon in mass media human rights campaigns, film and art pieces with a political edge. [8] Therefore, going back to the original question posed at the beginning of the paper, it is fundamental to ask whether *400 Women* succeeds in questioning and problematising such power dynamics, and whether it avoids their reification through the endorsement of a hegemonic discourse of the female "victim". As Hesford explains,

victim identifications may make distant human rights violations visible and, in some cases, provide an opportunity for the disenfranchised to represent themselves, but the limitations of victim-based politics [...] are profound. Victimization rhetoric invites interventions and protectionist remedies that can obscure structural inequalities and economic injustices, and that therefore ultimately undermine the promotion of human rights. (47)

In addition, beyond exposing the systemic violence and social structure of abuse and discrimination, victim identification and victimization politics may nurture the Western subject's moral worth and superiority by activating and reproducing a cosmopolitan politics of pity and piety rooted in cultural and ethical colonial rationalities that utilise the so-called "victims" to validate the neoliberal subject in its own righteousness instead of dismantling and shedding critical light on their privileged positions. To what extent does *400 Women* break the chain of identifications based on sameness and universalist reciprocity that obscure those power dynamics? As Hesford asserts,



"human rights representations of suffering subjects do not appeal to particularity or difference but to universality and sameness, although the appeal is initiated by difference" (Hesford 51). This fact is highly problematic as it erases power inequalities and structural differences that condone the perpetuation of such dynamics of discrimination and abuse. It also assumes that emotions and perception are prediscursive, therefore universally felt and experienced, which again further ostracises the "victim" in the aforementioned "otherness" and nurtures a sort of "narcissism of pity" implicit in the western "gaze", which by looking, seems to grant recognition and humanity onto the other. [9]

*400 Women*, however, presents a number of elements that attempt to dismantle this referential framework. As discussed above, the buildings and spaces in which the installation is exhibited engage with specific structures of feeling to produce certain effects: To challenge the public in their comfort zone through the production of asymmetric identifications. This term refers to the ways in which similarities and identifications between the public and these women can be drawn without erasing the differences among them or overlooking the relations of power that constitute all of them as subjects. As a result, "the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 139; qtd. in Hesford 49). This asymmetrical relationship engages the public in a "dynamic of acknowledgment", not only of these women as subjects (i.e. who they were, how they are remembered and how they experienced death, violence and trauma) but also of the individual's *situationality* and *positionality* on a global scale. [10] It activates and encourages, according to Kelly Oliver, a "dialogic understanding of subjectivity as "response-ability" and "address-ability" (6), in which subjectivity is constructed in relational terms, in which the "other" turns him/herself into an agent that commands us to engage with him/her as significant to us, not as alien but intimate, not in opposition but in relation. [11] By confronting the nearly two hundred portraits, the public is called to engage in a process of recognition of the "other" across the power structures that have placed both subjects at the time/spaces junctures that converge at the moment of looking. This dynamic shift reveals the spectators' socio-economic positions in relation to these women, which undermines the unproblematic chain of identifications inherent in humanitarian rhetorics, and produced in/by cosmopolitan power relations.



Picture 7 - Courtesy of Tamsyn Challenger and 400 Women



Picture 8 - Courtesy of Tamsyn Challenger and 400 Women

Like Challenger's experience with Julieta's picture, *400 Women* unsettles the public in its position of privilege through these women's presence-in-absence (their deaths). It also exposes the public to an intercontextual web that is organised around specific themes. Thus, one can identify certain thematic areas that engage with issues of remembering/forgetting/the right to memory (pictures 7 and 8), the presence/absence of these women and their right to life (picture 9), the sexual violence and severe torture they experience, women's right to humane treatment, dignity, and a life free of violence (picture 10). In addition, there are other recurrent leitmotifs such as women and flowers



Picture 9 - Courtesy of Tamsyn Challenger and 400 Women



Picture 10 - Courtesy of Tamsyn Challenger and 400 Women

(pictures 11 and 12), women as martyrs and saints through an array of religious iconography: altars (picture 13), references to the Virgin of Guadalupe and Agueda de Catania [12], and the commodification of women as objects. [13]



Picture 11  
Courtesy of Tamsyn Challenger and 400 Women



Picture 12  
Courtesy of Tamsyn Challenger and 400 Women



Picture 13  
Courtesy of Tamsyn Challenger and 400 Women

The installation also highlights how gender-based violence against women, and sexual violence against them crosscuts the whole spectrum of the female population in Ciudad Juárez, as it is a systemic practice inflicted upon girls as little as three years old, which brings to the fore issues of children's rights, to women as mature as sixty-five. Interestingly, these thematic elements were neither predetermined nor formally agreed upon. Each portrait was produced independently from one another as each artist worked with one woman/girl and her respective particular reality. However, the fact that these thematic lines emerged in the exhibition also points out to the existence of a shared collective imaginary according to which artists, public and individuals envision and imagine women, violence against them, abuse, memory, loss, injustice, rights, innocence, and childhood. [14]

In this respect, *400 Women* exemplifies Jacques Rancière's analysis of "the image" as another element within any given fiction that contributes to the creation of a common knowledge or sense that refers to the collective symbolic, material, and discursive practices. These constitute a collective frame of reference that is uncritically accepted as fact. According to Rancière, however, the problem is not whether an image should or should not be represented, but "what kind of common sense is woven by some particular fiction, by the construction of some particular image" (102). [15] The image in *400 Women*, though evocative and functional within specific common systems of knowledge and imaginaries, transcends these representational parameters by precisely fragmenting the totality of the image (and the hegemonic Western discourse) of "the victim" with each portrait, which stands for every individual woman in her uniqueness. The multiplicity of artistic

practices, visual aesthetics, themes, and women/girls represented subverts any attempt to homogenise all these experiences under a mass of "nameless bodies [...] incapable of returning the gaze that we direct at them [and] that are an object of speech without themselves having a chance to speak" (Rancière 96). The exhibition resists the spectator's neoliberal disciplinarian gaze that turns the women/girls into a faceless mass of victims and "others", devoid of any autonomy and subjectivity. [16] In fact, the portraits engage with a range of emotions (happiness, rage, vitality, calmness, etc.) that have nothing to do with traditional representations of the "suffering subject". In so doing, the installation avoids engaging in what Hesford calls a "victimization rhetoric" (47). This kind of rhetoric, according to Hesford, tends to blind the spectator to structural and economic inequalities, encouraging protectionist interventions and solutions, and annihilating the victims as individuals in their own right. [17]

In this respect, *400 Women* performs a differential visual economy that defies a linear narrative of gender violence and human rights abuses [18], while at the same time claiming accountability and justiciability, and constituting itself as a mechanism to demand both. In so doing, *400 Women* turns into itself to expose the very inner workings of the spectacle, the intolerable image, and its own fiction. Like Rancière's intolerable image, *400 Women* "construct[s] different realities, different forms of common sense—that is to say, different spatiotemporal systems, different communities of words and things, forms and meanings [as well as] new relations between words and visible forms, speech and writing, a here and an elsewhere, a then and a now" (Rancière 102). This is what Hesford refers to as *posthumanist* politics of representation (and I would add, posthumanitarian), which questions how the normative "suffering" body is embedded and made legible within specific structures of feeling, human rights discourses and visual rhetorics, and therefore legitimated. What is more, these posthumanist politics also make explicit the multiplicity of factors, structures of visibility/invisibility that display the truth-telling conventions upheld by universalism in all its manifestations (191). [19]

## Conclusion

I have tried to show the ways in which *400 Women* approaches women's human rights issues and the trauma of *feminicides* within the space of art. The installation engages with how the *feminicides* of Ciudad Juárez can be put into "images and fiction" (Rancière 102), without reproducing traditional Manichean binaries and hierarchical power relations that ultimately privilege the Western I/eye who sees. *400 Women* destabilises traditional politics of representation by constituting itself as an *assemblage* of individual portraits, women, memories, structures of feeling, artistic visions and visual-discursive possibilities. Such an amalgamation of elements unsettles the



dogmatic/domesticated spectator's vision, challenging it in its comfort zone by exposing it not only to multiple stimuli but also to strong political messages in which women's human rights violations are addressed. In this way, the installation moves away from anticipatory patterns of seeing, thus generating a feeling of estrangement, allowing for public and art, the "seer" and the "visible" to engage in a more balanced *tête-à-tête*

In addition, Challenger's work unsettles visual power hierarchies and defies the re-victimisation of the disappeared women, whose images and presence command the engagement and participation of the public with their reality through an asymmetric process of identifications. This rapport is established in a relational fashion, bringing on more ethical acts of vision in which power relations are horizontally constructed, and handled among individual subjects. Subjectivity, therefore, is questioned and reformulated in such a manner that it is not necessarily tied to a corporeal reality, but to a presence, a stance, a command, a reminder to everyone that these women lived, and still live at multiple levels of existence in people's memories, in portraits, in us as a public. In this way, it could be argued that *400 Women* becomes "a new landscape of the possible", opening up (and constituting itself) as a new space for political mobilisation, articulations of human rights principles and practices, and the construction of visual, sensorial and discursive architectures that resist the politics of subalterity.

## Endnotes

[1] In this respect, Raewyn Connell explains that governmental bodies and institutions are agents for the dissemination of hegemonic (gendered) values. Likewise, literature, mass culture and other artistic manifestations are vehicles for their circulation. All of them have an impact on wider sectors of society, and contribute to the maintenance of a specific social order. Likewise, these tools can also be used to undermine the same hegemonic order they may eventually uphold, which turns cultural production and mass media into powerful (anti)hegemonic agents. For a detailed discussion, see Connell (1995, 2002).

[2] This web of elements is what Hesford refers to as "intercontextuality", which encapsulates a collective framework of reference (of material, symbolic and discursive practices) in which images are embedded and made intelligible.

[3] The complexity of elements that collide in this egregious form of violence against women, as well as the multiple aspects that are in need of consideration when approaching this issue are also reflected in the terminology used. As observed by Rosa Linda Fregoso, Cynthia Bejarano, and Marcela Lagarde, not only does the evolution of the term from *femicide* to *feminicide* reflect the changes and development in the field of research, it also encapsulates different approaches to the same reality, which in turn points to the lack of terminological consensus when referring to the murders. The concept of *feminicide* incorporates the misogynist murder of women and contextualises it within a broader structure of systemic violence and discrimination against them from an intersectional perspective. However, *femicide* is a preferable option for some scholars in Central America since it underlines the "misogynist murder of women, independent of the element of impunity or the participation of the state." (Fregoso and Bejarano 8) In my opinion, although the two concepts do not necessarily cancel each other out, it seems to me that the concept of *feminicide* is much more holistic and comprehensive, and problematises and challenges fundamental heteronormative structures and their impact on the individual lives of women. The use of *feminicide* also refers to a "transborder perspective" that incorporates "the relevance of theories originating in the global South for the formation of an alternative paradigm (knowledge, logics, subjectivities, traditions (...)) that reverses the hierarchies of knowledge and challenge claims about unidirectional (North-to-South) flows of traveling theory" (Fregoso and Bejarano 4-5).

[4] In effect, a common explanation for the disappearance/murders was that the women/girls were provocatively dressed and therefore incited sexual attacks on them, that they ran away with their boyfriends (hence categorising the case as a "domestic" issue) or that they were "having a good time" away from the parents/family supervision.

[5] Some of the artists that were part of the project are Tracey Emin, Paula Rego, Maggi Hambling, Gordon Cheung and Humphrey Ocean.

[6] This relational network can also be found at the heart of other artistic pieces on *feminicides*, such as Lourdes Portillo's *Señorita Extraviada* (2001). Carefully examined by Laura Gillman in her contribution to this issue, Portillo's documentary film draws the audience into political mobilisation and empathy through its powerful *haptic visuality*. As Gillman argues, the audience is inescapably compelled by the film images, and then immersed into a responsiveness process at the sensorial level, in which subject/object relations are symbiotically established.

[7] Gillman's discussion of haptic visuality in *Señorita Extraviada* (2001) relates to the need of developing new systems of representation that will reproduce neither hegemonic visual politics nor normative discourses on gender, race and class, entrenched in the systemic and symbolic violence exposed by the film. *Señorita Extraviada* (2001) illustrates this point, and captures Portillo's strong concern with the risk of "exoticising", and "commodifying" *feminicides* if hegemonic systems of representation were used.

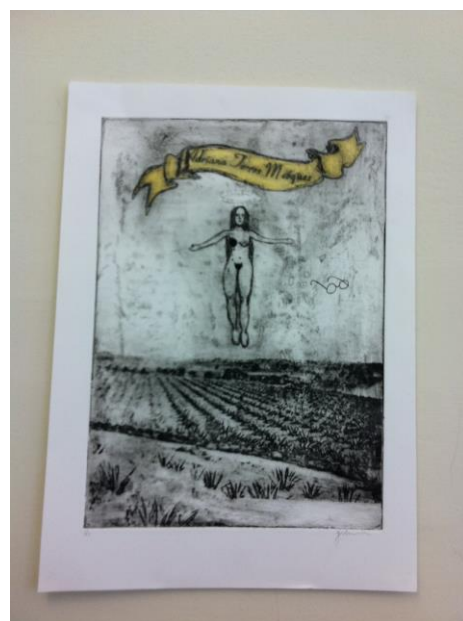
[8] New York City's 2014 campaign "Let's End Human Trafficking" is a good example of this idea (see: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/endht/html/home/home.shtml>). The Amnesty International USA (AIUSA) "Imagine" campaign in 2002 is also illustrative of this point.



[9] In effect, as Challenger summarised in her interview on Line Magazine, giving these women "visibility" both as "human subjects" under international human rights law and as a works of art involves an act of acknowledgment that rests on the idea that "humanity is a matter of endowment, declaration, or recognition" (Esmeir 1549), which can be given and taken away, further reinforcing their victimhood and their subjectless status. In addition, these dynamics classify people as human, dehumanised, or non-human depending on their position within the legitimating discourse of international human rights law. Therefore, as interrogated by *400 Women*, "if the human is a meaningful subject position and if humanity is taken away from the other, what possibilities [then] remain for the other to exist as a formed subject [...]?" Furthermore, when persons are declared dehumanized, what political possibilities exist for them, aside from being victims awaiting humanitarian interventions?" (Esmeir 1549) By dismantling and destabilising colonial and neoliberal referential frameworks, and subverting hegemonic humanitarian politics of representation, challenging our own preconceptions of victimhood, humanity, "dehumanised" and "other", *400 Women* invites us to work toward "the forging of concrete alliances with human beings who await not our recognition but our participation in their struggles" (Esmeir 1545).

[10] This is what I understand as a two-way referential process of interpellation, which takes place at this particular encounter.

[11] In this respect, "we create an impossible problem for ourselves for presuming to be separated in the first place. By presuming that we are separated from the world and other people by the void of empty space, we at once eliminate the possibility of connection and relationships even while we make a desperate attempt to bridge that abyss" (Oliver 12). Oliver suggests that the divide between "subject" and "other" is a devastating construct, resulting from violent power relations. This relational approach, however, does not involve "sameness" but acceptance of our "connectivity" in a wider discursive and material structure, our response-ability and address-ability in it and towards it, and our vulnerability to it. This is one of the ways, according to Oliver, in which the notion of "subjectivity" is reworked, in which "otherness is always internal to subjectivity and encounters with others" (10).



Picture 14  
Courtesy of Tamsyn Challenger and *400 Women*

[12] An example of this is the portrait of Adriana Torres Márquez (picture 14, right), disappeared in 1995 at the age of 15 and found dead with a nipple mutilated and a breast cut off. The portrait presents Adriana suspended in the air, her body mutilated, her hands extended as if crucified, floating over a vast field of land resembling the place where her body was found. This image is evocative of Saint Agueda of Catania, a martyr, virgin and saint who was tortured and whose breasts were both cut off as a punishment for her remaining a virgin.



Picture 15  
Courtesy of Tamsyn Challenger and *400 Women*

[13] Several portraits are composed of objects (picture 15, left)—items either belonging to each of the victims, or belonging to someone else but found near the place where the particular victim disappeared, and subsequently offered to the families and friends in substitution for their remains. Considering that their bodies were never found, the only thing that the families and friends keep as symbols of their lives, existence and memory are the objects that belong to them. These objects therefore

metaphorically capture the essence and lives of these women. Each of these portraits makes a harsh critique of the state's recklessness in the investigation of these women's disappearance and murders, their subsequent involvement in the violation of their human rights through their inaction, and their responsibility in promoting gender-based violence against women and the impunity relating to it.

[14] These "visions" are intersectionally defined.

[15] Rancière elaborates: "A 'common sense' is, in the first instance, a community of sensible data: things whose visibility is supposed to be shareable by all modes of perception of these things, and the equally shareable meanings that are conferred on them." (102)

[16] As Rancière affirms, "the issue is not whether it is necessary to show the horrors suffered by the victims of some particular violence. It revolves around the construction of the victim as an element in a certain distribution of the visible" (103). Therefore, problematising "the construction of the victim" as part and parcel of specific bodies of knowledge is at stake here.

[17] From its inception (as Challenger's words reveal) *400 Women* developed a sense of "meta-awareness," that is, a strong concern as to how the feminicides of Ciudad Juárez and the murders of these women can be put into "images and fiction." (Rancière 102)

[18] This linear narrative presupposes a correlation between "perception, affection, comprehension and action" (Rancière 103).

[19] As Hesford underscores, it is fundamental to acknowledge the "contaminated normativity of human rights" (Cheah 172) and how "the human rights spectacle both haunts and consolidates hegemonic power" (194).

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**Haptic Visuality in Lourdes Portillo's *Señorita Extraviada*:  
Towards an Affective Activism**

**Abstract**

This essay investigates Lourdes Portillo's 2001 documentary, *Señorita Extraviada / Missing Young Woman*, as a cinematic medium that functions through impressions, much like skin does, with an aim to create an affective, inter-embodied contact between the perceiver(s) and the object projected on the screen. I call this tactile form of cinematic expression, following film theorist Laura Marks "haptic visuality." In my analysis, I suggest that, like other diasporan filmmakers, Portillo draws on the proximal sense of touch in order to directly and empathically involve the viewer's body as a site for intercultural knowledge and political action. She thus aims to facilitate viewers' bodily affective capacity in the double sense of undergoing new somatic experiences and registering those changes subjectively (the body's capacity to be affected), which can lead to political feeling or action (its capacity to affect). Haptic visuality, I further suggest, counters a neo-colonial Euro-American hegemony of knowledge that is mediated through the visual, one that, within normative representation and discourses, is bent on mastery and possession of the object represented. It also offers the spectator a transformed, decolonial form of seeing, knowing and interacting, both intimate and embodied, that places the viewer nearby the object, yielding to it.

**Keywords:** affect, agency, feminicides, haptic visuality, Lourdes Portillo

## Introduction

In her internationally acclaimed documentary, *Señorita Extraviada*, Mexican-American filmmaker Lourdes Portillo investigates as well as unveils the silence surrounding the murder, torture and disappearances of girls and women in the border town of Juárez (Portillo 2001). This early documentary, perhaps more than any other, helped raise consciousness of the crimes around the world (Gaspar de Alba 3; Sandell 456). At the time of its first screening, over three hundred women and girls, many of whom worked in the *maquiladoras* and who had migrated to Juárez from the south in search of work, had been murdered. At least a third of the victims had been found in similar conditions: they were kidnapped and held in captivity. They were subsequently subjected to rape, sexual torture and mutilation, and then burned and dumped in remote places.

In her dual role as artist and political activist in human rights work, Portillo's purpose in making the film was to create a form of artistic expression that would raise world awareness regarding the myriad causes of the feminicides (Driver 216). She selected and arranged the material included so as to help the viewer grasp the complex amalgamation of interconnected systemic conditions underpinning the violence as well as causing it to continue with impunity. In the film, she addresses the problem of the precarity of citizenship in the global city in the context of the maquiladora industry, resulting in the feminization of labor or what Alicia Schmidt Camacho refers to as 'denationalized subjectivity,' whereby neoliberal policy converts "poor migrants into a population with little purchase on rights or representation within either the nation-state or new global politics" (276). She exposes the complicity of the Mexican state, which remained indifferent to the health and security of the women and girls working in the maquiladoras. She also signals the city's notoriety in terms of its history of illicit activity, providing inexpensive sex, drugs and leisure to tourists.

Portillo revealed in several published interviews some of the challenges she faced in achieving her goal of heightening audience awareness and empathic engagement. The first was how to use the artistic medium of the documentary without falling back onto the representational and discursive systems that are in their own right laden with hegemonic ideologies of gender, race and class that caused the violence in the first place. A second challenge entailed the complexity of embedding within the documentary a structure of expression capable of engendering empathy in national and international audiences as a countering to the apathy of the Mexican state. The remote audiences in the United States and Europe would be composed of people whose every day lives and concerns are disconnected from the atrocities, and additionally, whose own identity statuses as citizens of countries who benefit from a neoliberal logic might lead them to be more susceptible to believing the causes supplied by state officials within the media footage. Even the incorporation of

the personal testimonies provided by those closest to the victims that she sought to integrate into the documentary might not be sufficient to allow her audiences to think and feel outside of these entrenched hegemonic systems.

In a 2012 interview, Portillo shared her concern about the ubiquitous problem of sensationalism and voyeurism within creative non-fictional representations of the crimes. She cited as an example Charles Bowden's depiction of the feminicides in Juárez in his 1998 book, *The Laboratory of our Future*. Bowden represented the female victims, Portillo claimed, in a manner that reinforced the degradation of the victims and of women in general, making violence against women more normalized: "By showing the photographs without the permission of the family members, your aim cannot be to give value to the lives of the victims but to produce a shock effect, that is, to sensationalize and hence, capitalize on the violence" (Driver 217).

Portillo's concern about the violence of representation is echoed in the perspectives of other feminicide scholars. In her essay, "The Victims of the Ciudad Juárez feminicides," Julia Monárrez analyzes the sensationalistic media's depictions of the victims, arguing that the specific labor of the media's representation of the victims, in their portrayal of the bodies as nude, abandoned, and neglected, is to "other" or dehumanize them, which they accomplish by failing to discuss their "historical, citizenship, and territorial specificity" (Monárrez 59). In another article, "The Suffering of the Other," Monárrez shows how representation and discourse are linked in such a way so as to reinforce a hegemonic way of seeing and knowing. Symbolic violence is enacted, she asserts, when official discourses that render intelligible the discourse of pain deployed by the survivors is taken up in the media: "Their words (referring to the words of the family members), which are 'an attempt to restore justice in a societal structure of violence,' frequently become contaminated or lost within the ideology of symbolic violence that their representatives, or 'guardians of the law' generate" (186).

Rosa-Linda Fregoso further exposes how women are portrayed as abject in discourse and representation, thereby creating an environment that makes feminicide possible:

Women's visibility as abject is a subject-effect produced by the intersections of experiential violence and symbolic violence: the violence of racist misogynists, the violence of state-sanctioned terrorism, the violence of discursive frameworks of interpretation but also the violence of representation. ("Toward a Planetary Civil Society" 54) [1]

Portillo also notes the challenge of creating audience empathy. In a recent retrospective on Portillo's films, Fregoso relates the content of an interview with the filmmaker, in which the latter revealed her goal to instill empathy for the survivors in her viewers, for through empathy, the viewer would be motivated to gain political awareness and engage in activism. In noting that her



audiences consistently were moved to activism, she stated that this was her intention, to “[c]rear una especie de conciencia, incitar a la gente a actuar, y éso es lo que hizo” (“to create a consciousness, incite people to act, and that is what it did” (Fregoso, “Retrospectiva” 166). Fregoso further underscores Portillo’s observations, adding that the documentary “va más allá del nivel informativo. Incita la imaginación e inspira la participación creativa” (goes beyond the level of providing information to actually incite the imagination and inspire creative participation) (165).

In a recent article on the film, Jillian Sandell analyzes in some detail the mechanisms by which Portillo engenders an empathic response in viewers. She cites the juxtaposition of the aesthetic and the historical as one such mechanism. By pushing the pervasive repetition of poetic images such as the painting of the pink crosses, and the haunting requiem music that serves as an elegy honoring the victims against the media footage, Portillo, she asserts, humanizes the murdered women and invites in the spectator “an affective and humanitarian response” (462). Sandell further notes that Portillo refuses the traditional documentary format, one that, by emphasizing empirical data and leaving out subjective interpretations/testimonies, might (re)objectify the victims. Sandell finally points to Portillo’s deployment of some avant-garde cinematic techniques, such as the use of slow motion, aimed at giving the viewer time to reflect on the suffering of the survivors or the speeding up of motion, when portraying the exacerbated development of Juárez into a global city (457-58). [2]

Building on the important critical insights of the aforementioned critics, I want to explore here the ways in which Portillo embeds cinematic affect as a mechanism for countering neocolonial representational and discursive violence. Portillo’s film, I suggest, is structured around scenes that highlight the body’s potential to create force encounters or kinetic interconnections between the viewer, the filmmaker and the objects in the film, thereby triggering the viewer’s empathy at a visceral level, and her capacity to (re)act. In the section that follows, I provide a brief overview of contemporary affect theory. I then narrow my critical focus to cinematic affect, based on the works of Laura Marks, Jennifer Barker and Vivian Sobchack, all of whom elaborate on the conceptualization of cinema, and in the case of Marks, with a particular attention to diasporan cinema, as deeply embodied and tactile. In the final and longest section, I analyze in detail three particular tactile strategies that Portillo employs in the film: the turning crystal, the close up and the tactile event.

## 1. Affect Theory, Cinematic Affect and Haptic Visuality

Interest in affect and emotions has intensified in the last decade across the disciplines. The so called 'affective turn' is closely linked to other conceptual shifts, such as 'the ontological turn' and 'the new materialism,' modes of inquiry and meaning making that appeal to feminist, race and postcolonial scholars insofar as an analysis of materiality in relation to ontological existence offers possibilities for circumventing disciplinary and regulating regimes produced in discourse as well as the suppressive and othering mechanisms of representational systems. According to Deleuze and Guattari, affect is a material intensity that emerges via the 'in-between' spaces of embodied encounters, circulating power not primarily as a mode of discursive regulation or representational negation but rather as the potential to become otherwise (Deleuze and Guattari).

Although there is no one given meaning, definition or theoretical approach to affect, a starting point for contemporary theorists is the materialist philosophy of the 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Baruch Spinoza. In his *Ethics*, Spinoza offers a basic definition of affect: "I understand affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained" (70). Offering a materialist conception of existence, Spinoza considers bodies as always in relation. Affects are the material forces of the encounter of bodies that traverse and transform those bodies, triggering and augmenting or diminishing the subject's capacity for acting within its world. Affective encounters both constitute subjects and orient them, and in the process reveal possibilities for obliging the world to matter—viscerally and cognitively. As Spinoza states: "the human mind does not know itself, except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the body" (49).

In contemporary theory, as suggested by Melissa Greg and Gregory J. Seigworth, editors of *The Affect Theory Reader*, affect describes "visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion" (1). There is, moreover, a concern for and emphasis on what bodies can do, their potential activity, "a body's capacity to affect and be affected" (2). What is tracked and questioned is how a body "comes to shift its affections (its being-affected) into action (capacity to affect)" (ibid.). There is an emphasis on acting more than thinking or reflecting. Nonetheless, these types of shifts transpire in close connection to passages of thought. Thought is conceived not as separate from the body, but rather itself embodied (2-3). Affect, moreover, is incremental, picking up force as it moves through bodies in their encounter with one another: "At once intimate and impersonal, affect accumulates across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness, becoming a palimpsest of force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between 'bodies' (bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect)" (2).

Affect theory resonates with feminists' and postcolonial theorists' calls to bring serious attention (back) to the material substance and significance of matter, materiality and the body. Theorists such as Sarah Ahmed (2004) and Lauren Berlant (2011) have shown how power works through affect to shape individual and collective bodies in such a way as to make certain bodies move into a state of un-belonging, or attaching us to the very conditions of subordination and social norms that we should eschew for their ability to reproduce normative hierarchies and exclusions. Others have emphasized affect's transformative potential. For example, in *Touching Feeling* (2003), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls for a re-privileging of ontology through a critical focus on affect, which she understands as integral to accessing a form of life that pushes beyond the social regulation of our existence. Still others have highlighted the ambivalence of affective registers. Susan McManus, for instance, analyzes the political polyvalence of the affective register in terms of producing hope and fear, both of which are ambivalent and both of which are used within the public sphere, she demonstrates, to diminish or enhance potentially transformative agency (McManus). But it is this very ambivalence, she claims, that creates an opening or threshold for cultural workers and political actors to disrupt what appears to be an affective determinism (McManus).

The work of cinema theorists Laura Marks, Vivian Sobchack and Jennifer Barker fits within the first of eight main approaches to affect that Gregg and Seigworth list in their introduction under the heading of phenomenologies of embodiment and inter-embodiment. They define the approach as characterized by "investigations into a body's incorporative capacities for scaffolding and extension" (6). The editors thus highlight a particular orientation, one that emphasizes embodiment as mediated or affected by interactions with other bodies, human and non-human.

For postcolonial cinema theorist Laura Marks, as alluded to in the title of her work, *The Skin of the Film*, cinema, like skin, expresses meaning to the viewer through materiality, that is, through impressions of feeling, with the goal of transforming the spectator in her embodied existence (xi-xii). Marks draws on Deleuzian theory and phenomenology to contribute to theories of haptic visuality. I define haptic visuality, following Marks, as the subjective perception of touch on the surface of and inside our bodies. The dominant mode of optic visuality obliges the viewer to see things from a distance, obliging her to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space. It further depends on a separation or boundary between the viewing subject and the object. Haptic visuality, by contrast, refers to "the way in which the eyes themselves function like organs of touch. Rather than plunging to the depth of the object, haptic looking moves over the surface, not to distinguish form but to discern texture" (Marks 162). Haptic cinema encourages an embodied encounter between viewer and image, a dynamic subjectivity (164).

Cinematic affect theory also draws upon Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, one that views the relationship between the self and the world as symbiotic. As Marks affirms, the time and space of the world is, according to Merleau-Ponty's account, thick and viscous with experience. Our perceptions fold us into this thick world, merging us with it and demarcating us as well from it (148). Film theorist Vivian Sobchack suggests that cinema replicates the phenomenological relationship between the self and the world, extending the viewer's embodied existence through its staging of the interactive encounter between two bodies—that of the viewer and that of the film/world—with the viewer coming to actively participate in the cinematic experience and even inhabit the same space of the film/world (Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye* 10-15). Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological encounter, Marks notes, stands in contrast to Deleuzian philosophy of affect insofar as it acknowledges a primordial subjectivity. It posits the presence of the embodied subject in the act of perceiving while also relinquishing the belief of the unity of the self (150).

Intercultural cinema, a genre to which, I argue, Portillo's documentary corresponds, pivots crucially on the subjectivities and bodies of women in conflictive encounters that result from neo-colonial, capitalist patriarchal systems. Far from being politically neutral, the rubric 'intercultural' introduces the concept of the often fraught and conflictive encounters between and within different cultural systems of knowledge that result as people migrate across or within national borders (Marks 7). Indeed, Marks argues, while haptic visuality can be found across cinematic genres, it is more widely cultivated by non-Western diasporan filmmakers, who, by necessity, are drawn to systems of knowledge derived from the senses. Such systems offer the means for structuring sense perception differently from those pertaining to Euro-American societies "where optical visuality has been accorded a unique supremacy (xiii). Intercultural cinema is also unique inasmuch as it emphasizes the social character of embodied experience. The body in intercultural cinema is a repository not just of individual but also of collective cultural experience, memory and meaning making. Herein, Marks distinguishes herself from the individualist approaches to the body of avant-garde cinema (xiii). An emphasis on diasporan cinema as a site for making visible and reclaiming a buried repository of cultural memory and meaning, as well as a resource for the recovery of an embodied subjectivity, aids me in establishing a theoretical ground for an analysis of tactile technologies in Portillo's documentary in the following sections.

## **2. Tactile Technologies in Portillo's *Señorita Extraviada***

Portillo uses the genre of documentary in two different, almost opposing ways. She seems at first to follow the prescribed genre of the documentary. She offers a critical context for the feminicidal

violence through her own voice-over narration. Herein, she portrays Juárez as a city that had spun out of control as a result of Mexico's overly rapid industrialization and integration into the global economy. She then adds to this analysis a linear account of the murders, documented in photographs, newspaper clippings, and media footage of reports made by media anchormen, local and state authorities, including police, prosecutors, mayors, governors and forensic specialists. As an overlay to this critical profiling of the known facts and observable landscape, Portillo then integrates that which is not officially known or disseminated through her inclusion of pieces of interviews with local activists as well as the testimonies of those closest to the victims, family members and co-workers, whose narrations are discrepant with those of local and State officials. Finally, she creates and integrates with the aforementioned components an oppositional travelogue, taking the viewer with her as she walks the streets of Juárez, tracking not just the dead but also living young girls and women. She follows some in the streets and shops or as they paint pink crosses on telephone poles to bring back into visibility the dead and disappeared, others as they go out on the *rastreos* or search parties for dead bodies in the desert, and still others as they ride the bus that transports them to the assembly plant where they work—possibly to meet the same fate as the victims.

In this brief overview, it is possible to see how Portillo complicates the traditional documentary rather than displacing it completely. She does so in order to engage an affective aesthetics to reveal its distorted logic and at the same time encourage the spectator to 'be with' or be in greater proximity to affective experiences of the victims and their family members. In the section that follows, I provide a critical overview and analysis of two tactile strategies that Portillo deploys in the film—the turning crystal and the close-up—as these appear in the film. Following that, I define and analyze the third technology, the tactile event.

## 2.1 The 'Turning Crystal' and the 'Close-up'

In her work, *The Tactile Eye*, Jennifer Barker, following Gilles Deleuze, argues that film complicates the viewer's empathic, embodied identification with the character(s) and objective observations by "taking us to the edge, without collapsing, the boundaries between the 'here' and 'there' the 'us' and the 'them'" (7). This sensual/structural ambivalence is Deleuze's notion of the "turning crystal," a technique that positions different actors spatially and temporally around an event. In the case of the film, these could include the filmmaker or camera's embodied subjectivity, the protagonist's and the film viewer's (9). As film viewers, we perceive the imaginary/artistic expression of the object in the film. At the same time, we experience the real world's significance through it and we in turn express the significance through our lived body's reaction. In the

existence of our lived bodies, we are always perceiving and expressing in an inter-dynamic relation of reversibility. Each side of the crystal ball is necessary to the other in a relation of reciprocal presupposition or reversibility (ibid.). As Barker notes, Merleau-Ponty also articulated the notion of reversibility by using the image of a person's hand touching the other: each hand both touches and is touched. This structure of reversibility involves a shift of attention and of intentionality from one aspect of the encounter to another (19). This structure is the archetype of subject/object relations. Herein, the self and the world are irreducible to one another in a relation of reversibility that the film and viewer are performing in a very concentrated manner (ibid.).

Integral to the tactile register of reversibility is that of the close-up. When the camera zooms in for a close-up, it causes the film viewer to focus on the skin as a site of exchange and traversal, connecting the inside and outside of the self as well as the self with the other (Barker 27). Merleau-Ponty's concept of "flesh" helps to define the film's skin, which indicates an evocation of body and things that are really not completely separate but rather of each other. This reciprocity and reversibility between body and world is best captured in the skin, which covers and displays the body's secrets (29).

In intercultural cinema, viewers perceive, by means of the close-up, how objects gain a biography as well as how that biography tells us at once as much about the subject as about the social world in which they, she or he is emplaced. In essence, the close-up puts a face on the/our world. Marks defines faciality, following Deleuze, as the intensification of affect in an image whose motor extension is limited (94). As such, the face contains a wealth of knowledge. The camera in intercultural cinema will follow an object to trace the intensification of affect as transmitted through faciality in an attempt to elicit the cultural biography it tells and excavate memories of objects, developing more thoroughly the stories they retain.

In *Señorita Extraviada*, Portillo implements the visual technology of the turning crystal in connection with the close-up in two testimonies that are given central cinematic attention, the testimony of María and the testimony of Eva Arce.

The testimony of a woman, who, for the sake of anonymity, calls herself María, is dispersed throughout the film. It is broken up into seven segments, each of which sheds light on Portillo's chronological recording of the feminicides but from the perspective of the lived experience of a victim/survivor as well as provides the spectator access to the various institutional sites of violence in which María finds herself: the criminal justice system, the media and the *maquila* industry.

A central analytic in the first testimony is the corruption of local police. María calls the police to report that a neighbor has assaulted her husband. Rather than assist her, the police give her and



her husband an exorbitantly large fine. Unable to pay it, they are held in custody for twenty-four hours. Once separated, a female police orders María into the bathroom, and assaults and attempts to rape her. Although she screams, no other guard comes to her assistance. In a second segment, María reveals that drugs are distributed to the inmates and the guards themselves are heavily drugged. A guard called El Diablo raped her later that night. He then took her to a room filled with women's clothing—panties, bras and dresses. He told her that the clothes belonged to women that he and other guards had taken. In a third segment, María states that the guards took many photos of her. In a fourth segment, María explains that though she ultimately went to the police and the media to report the arrests and the perpetration, the perpetrators were never charged with any crime. In a fifth segment, María recounts how she heard two shots fired in the middle of the night, a month after being released. When she looked out the window, she saw El Diablo, parked outside of her house. She took it as a reminder that she should remain silent. In a sixth segment, María adds additional information to her original testimony on what occurred the night she was in jail. El Diablo grabbed María by her hair. Then, pushing her head down while screaming 'bitch,' he forced her to look at a photo album. The photos told a story in sequence: there were images of men grabbing young women by the hair and dragging them in the desert; of women being raped and sodomized, surrounded by male onlookers; of men laughing as they looked at the women's faces contorted in pain and crying out; and of men dousing the bodies with gasoline and setting them on fire. In a final segment, María tells how some time later, while in a *maquiladora* looking for work, she felt herself being stared at. When she turned around, she saw "El Diablo." Upon returning the following day, she was told that he did not work there although he had applied for the position of security guard.

As spectators of these various segments, we witness the reversibility of the image. The sixth segment in particular integrates the close-up with the turning crystal. With the oil in her skin glistening as it mixes with sweat, her voice faltering and her lips dry, María tells us that she was raped just as these women were raped. She was grabbed by the hair as they were. She was called bitch as they were. Photos were taken of her in jail and in the *maquiladora* just as photos were taken of them.

Our gaze follows the camera, our looking becoming self-conscious. Preceding the close-up, in which we see María's face as she tells us what she saw in the photos, we see images of María looking out at the desert, as if she were actually seeing the violence take place. Her back is to us, her long, dark hair blowing in the breeze. We look at her looking. We see the women who are not there through her material presence at the site of the crimes. In creating an image of María looking out over the desert, Portillo asks the spectator to reflect on the idea that María understands that

she could have been or still can be a victim of feminicide. She is looked at (in jail) but she also looks.

In the close up, each fold of her narrative picks up the affect of the memories of the events she experienced through time (several months) and institutionalized space, (home, jail, court, media exposure and maquiladora). The viewer watches María in the act of perceiving and potentially becomes aware of her own felt understandings. At the same time, the spectator witnesses how María expresses what she has perceived. Portillo zooms in for a close-up to grasp her perception. The viewer sees that her skin sweats, her voice breaks, her eyes look down, her pores open. Her skin's response becomes a contact zone.

Faciality, as demonstrated here in María's expression, can be characterized as reversibility, a facial expression that returns the look (Marks 94). María is affected by an impersonal force, (having undergone a somatic change as a result of her perception). She is also affecting, (re)acting or expressing on her face her sadness and anguish/fear. Her (re)action now serves as a material context for bringing history into contact with the viewer, who can in turn undergo and react somatically to the history of violence that has remained invisible to us. Those visceral engagements will be different and even unpredictable. Some will respond with fear if they find themselves currently in a situation similar to María. Others will respond with empathy and still others with shame for not having previous knowledge of these events or as they gain awareness of their social position within the web of power relations, one that make them feel in part responsible for the violence. The differently engendered feelings result from the ambivalence of affect, one that registers at the surface or in the skin of shared historical and contemporary social-structural relations.

Faciality, expressed as a return of the look, is also found in the fifth segment, when María narrates the scene in which El Diablo parks outside of her house, fires some shots and then drives away. In the first part of the narrated segment, María is simply sitting in front of the camera. In the close-up of María, we see her face as she explains how the occurrence served as a tactile reminder of her powerlessness to act in the public sphere and of her relegation to the private one. The viewer witnesses María swept up by forces from outside of herself, e.g. of fear. But then in the final scene in this segment, we witness not just what María perceives and expresses from the outside, but another somatic change that comes from the inside and moves outside to show on the skin of her face, drawing the viewer's body into its force field.

In the scene, María appears to be sitting in a chair or couch in her own home, looking at an image of herself in the mirror. The viewer and camera are situated behind María. We are looking at María looking at herself and looking back at us through the mirror. The viewer, in effect, is drawn into the

turning crystal, not seeing, but imagining how María sees the camera and the viewer positioned alongside the camera in the mirror, bringing us into contact with María and into the same space and time in which she is inserted. As an object that has moved through the time and space of various institutions within the social structure, she has become invested with a value that Marks calls “auratic,” that is, as containing the power to distill and make visible the hidden history of those sites (104). In bringing us into the material presence or aura that María generates, Portillo creates a scaffolding that joins the object on the screen and the spectator, encouraging cognitive and embodied understanding of the historical-spatial reality in which she lives, impelling the spectator/subject to (re)act.

Another set of images that Portillo transmits by means of the technology of the turning crystal in tandem with the close-up can be found in the testimony of Eva Arce, who tells of the 1998 disappearance and murder of her daughter Silvia. Here, the image of the turning crystal encompasses two visible figures/objects: the mother of the missing woman and a little boy of approximately two years of age, who is sitting on her lap, perhaps a grandson. As the camera zooms in, Eva tells of how she was kidnapped when pregnant with Silvia. Once in the car of her kidnapper, she was taken to a hotel and later to various abandoned sites, eventually ending up in the desert. She tried to run away several times during the night but her kidnapper caught her and put back in the car. He repeatedly raped her throughout the course of the night. She tells how she cried, fearful that she would lose her child. In the morning, when he drove her home, he reminded her of how merciful he was. Another man would have killed her. As Eva narrates these final scenes, the spectator sees images of a woman running in the desert.

The reversibility of the turning crystal here is portrayed as occurring through time as well as space. The testimony and images tell an inter-generational history of violence, kidnapping and murder. Portillo creates a visceral imaginary of the violence by showing how the violence visited upon the daughter has been part of the felt, embodied experience of the mother (and even the child in utero) and therefore is something that can be known through the materiality of the body. In this scene the spectator grasps that the feminicides are not exclusively a consequence of the contemporary State or of global politics alone but rather embedded within a longer history of structural patriarchy.

The close-up also appears as double in these scenes in the intergenerational embodied contact between grandmother and grandson. As Eva tells her story, the camera zooms in to capture her faciality. Her voice breaks and she begins to cry. At the same time the camera tracks the faciality

of the little boy, who looks at his grandmother as she tells of her fear and how she cried when the man kidnapped her and “did with me what he wanted.” The boy’s eyes get large from fear. His cheeks tighten, his lips open in fear and close downward as he starts to cry. The boy’s facial

expression bears witness to and brings into the viewer's embodied consciousness the horror of the violence, materializing and making its occurrence visible by putting a face on it.

## 2.2 The 'Tactile Event'

Let me turn, finally, to the technology of the tactile event. In haptic cinema, the tactile may be conveyed in the film's theme (Marks 44). I call this haptic technology "the tactile event" insofar as it encourages the viewer to feel the (inter)action at the surface of her fingertips. In Lourdes Portillo's film, the tactile event is expressed in the thematics of feminicide. In the hegemonic necropolitical media representations of feminicides, the original violence is exacerbated. The decomposing and mutilated bodies of the victims are re-presented as fetishized objects. The image as fetish object takes on value insofar as it has the capacity to be consumable and exploitable by the viewer, constructed as a white, heterosexual male. As fetish object, the feminicidal body serves as a tactile reminder of an illusory citizenship, as Monárrez underscores, "a citizenship for girls and women whose sexual nature has been instrumentalized as non-normative; whose racial heritage is a crack in the difference of the white social body; and whose poverty represents exclusion from material progress" ("Victims" 66).

To counteract the transformation of women into a hegemonic fetish object, Portillo elaborates on the caressing gaze as a central theme, capable of transforming the fetish object, imbuing it with a positive valence and allowing the viewer to know it differently. The caressing gaze is, as Marks observes, one that does not, like the optic gaze, imply that it knows or has mastery over the object it observes, but rather suggests that it does not even know what it seeks. The caressing gaze is thus able to yield to the image, its capacity to evoke pleasure or new knowledge of the self in relation (184). As Barker further notes, the caressing gaze asks the viewer to engage the erotic encounter as a way of redressing the problem of the abject or the assaulting image of the object. The erotic encounter between the viewer and viewed expresses the need for and pleasure in proximity, for the viewer to feel the other against herself, which implies a mutuality. This erotic relationship between two bodies, while expressive of adult sexuality, notes Barker, may also be expressive of an eros of parenthood (39).

As viewers of Portillo's film, we witness the erotic relationships in the memory images of the survivors, both lovers and parents, who remember the loved one's body as the source of joy, pleasure and love. I provide three examples, two entailing memory images provided through image and testimony and another, marked by anonymity, entailing the relationship of an unnamed mother

and daughter, and unaccompanied by testimony. Let me begin with Silvia Arce, in order to complete the discussion of the segment narrating the history of feminicidal violence in her family.

In the final scene of the segment, Eva tells of her daughter's disappearance. As if to alert the viewer to the reversibility of the embodied space of the filmic object and the viewer's, the camera shifts from the close-up to a view of Eva sitting at a window looking out, her back to the camera as if witnessing the perpetration against her daughter. The viewer is aware that her visual perception is accompanied by a visceral imaginary. The camera then zooms out and we see a sort of unidentified filmy kind of texture, a pale pink covering the screen, separating us from Eva so that we must see her image through it. As the camera zooms out further, we see that it is a pink veil that her daughter is wearing and we become aware that what we are seeing is a framed photo of Silvia Arce. In the photograph, she is wearing a pink dress and matching veil, typically worn in a *quinceañera*, a ceremony held on a young girl's fifteenth birthday celebrating her entrance into adulthood.

The viewer is recruited into the film through the tactility of this image. The veil, superimposed on the mother's image, seems to be touching it/her, as well as the histories she has narrated. Standing on the other side of the veil, the filmmaker's and/or the camera's body and the spectator's body are enjoined to touch the daughter, the pink filmy texture acting as a sort of second skin. This cinematic tactility encourages an embodied awareness of and reflection on the historic and contemporary interconnections binding the spectator and the object on the screen. When we as spectators experience the loving, caressing touch and engage it, we are also asked to remember the violence of touch that produced the disappearance. We are further asked to ponder the broader hemispheric racial-ethnic and gendered power relations in which we are entangled as hemispheric subjects, or as citizens of nations that have participated in analogous neo-imperialist or global projects framing the violence.

In the segment marked by anonymity, the viewer sees a set of slow motion images of a mother laying her missing daughter's dress on the bed. All we see are the mother's hands. The dress appears to be like one that a young girl would wear for a communion. It is a white gown, made of a sheer, satin material, suggesting the purity of the girl for whom the dress was destined. Its softness invites a caress. The mother passes her hand over the soft material, smoothing it down, as though she were caressing her daughter's body while at the same time remembering her daughter's body in it and perhaps the event itself. The Communion marks through ritual the special union of the communicant's soul with Christ. In taking the Eucharist, the daughter receives God's grace. The image of the dress functions as both a time image and a recollection image. In the time image the object is not connected to the world to which it corresponds but is shown alone, as if stranded in

time. The viewer is unable to draw objective connections, or use common sense to make sense of the object perceived, and is therefore obliged to question how this particular image got to be constructed from a particular perspective (Marks 27-28).

In the scene, the image is shown in slow motion, giving the viewer the opportunity to slow down her thoughts long enough to question the meaning of the image in its own right, for example, as one imbued with the value of virtue or deserving of a mother's love, as well as weigh this image against the so-called objective representation of the victims as loose, and therefore deserving of their violent fate. The incompleteness of the image forces the viewer to depend upon a relation of mutuality. The filmmaker provides an image and the viewer must complete it. By critically engaging the image, she must work to sort out the public image and the private rendition of the event. For example, the viewer might reflect on the range and intensities of the mother-daughter relationship, the mother's feelings of hope for the daughter's future and for their future relationship as two adult women. Here the incomplete image of the skin's touch leaves traces of unofficial or private memories that capaciously confront official history.

The testimony of María Sagrario Gonzalez's mother is a final example of the tactile event. It focalizes on a recollection object, defined by Marks as an object that encodes history and memory. In excavating such objects, it is possible to bring their violent contents into the present where memories associated with the objects, covered over by dominant histories, can be re-membered and reclaimed (Marks 77-78). Such objects may be considered fetishes. In intercultural works, the focus on the image object or fetishized object, one that moves within and between cultures and societies along with the dislocated, diasporan subject, serves to trace how value and meaning come to be encoded in objects as they move through space and in time, as well as how the filmic event itself, in its materiality, proposes a non-fetishizing form of looking.

The non-fetishizing look functions to contest neocolonial fetishism, which seizes objects to control and/or exploit them from a distance (Marks 77-78). Portillo exposes the neocolonial processes of production of the Mexican feminicidal victim as fetish, ones that, as Julia Monárrez claims, convert her into "a sensual object for death" ("Victims" 67). Her murder comes to symbolize, as Monárrez further asserts, "the exploitation of the female other in the sphere of exotic difference, in a discourse of racial superiority and economic development that legitimizes the consumption of things and people as a civilizing force" ("Victims" 67-78). But Portillo also illuminates the ways in which fetish objects associated with the victims of feminicidal violence, in condensing hidden histories, gain force and intensity in their movement, transforming the value and meaning of the embodied subjectivities of the victims.



Portillo invites the viewer to experience the non-fetishized object not so much visually as through bodily contact in the testimony of María Sagrario's mother, encouraging a caressing gaze. The mother states that her daughter had migrated to Juárez to help provide income for the family and subsequently disappeared. The testimony of the activist Judith Galarza overlaps with that of María Sagrario's mother. Galarza advises that photographs were taken of the girls and women every Friday in the *maquiladoras*. They were asked to pose, as if they were models. Numerous photographs were taken of Sagrario. This suggests, Galarza asserts, that perhaps it is through such photos that the girls that went missing were selected. They could be commoditized as models, perhaps for pornography. The camera then zooms in on María Sagrario's mother, who is holding a photo of her daughter taken in the *maquiladora*. In the photo, one widely disseminated by the media, she is standing in an objectified pose wearing a sundress. The mother then counters this public image with her testimony.

She portrays her daughter as a 'good girl' who taught catechism every Sunday, sung in the church choir and was deeply loved in the community. The camera shifts from the mother's face to images of birdcages, somewhere outside the family's home. The mother then explains that Mari's boyfriend, Andrés, had given her daughter a gift of two parakeets, Clint and Luis. The mother goes on to describe, her voice shaking as if she were about to cry, how one morning when she went to put the cages out in the sun, she found Clint dead. Only her daughter could touch Luis without being bitten, she relates; yet on that day she was not afraid to pick Luis up. Her instinct was right, for Luis allowed the mother to touch and caress it. The mother believes this was because he knew that something was wrong with her daughter. She then relates how she talked to the bird, asking him if he knew Mari's whereabouts, whereupon the bird nodded as if he understood. And the mother nods in front of the camera as she tells how Luis nodded. She then states that the parakeet flew away. It was a Tuesday. On Wednesday the authorities found her daughter and on Thursday the family received the news.

The parakeet, a material artifact linked to María Sagrario, a gift from a loved one and therefore symbolizing the loving relationship between Andrés and Mari, speaks and understands what she cannot. This counterhegemonic fetish object contests the objectifying gaze as portrayed in the photo of Mari in the sundress, serving a tactile memory of what has been concealed. María Sagrario's mother thus redeems the fetishized object of the woman in the photo by revealing values unrecognized in her and in the dislocated context in which she finds herself—the *maquiladora*. She thus allows the viewer to experience her daughter not visually but through the objects that Mari touched and were touched by her.

## Conclusion

The body is something more than just an effect of discourse or a representation. In my examination of technologies of embodiment and interembodiment I have suggested that the body is a source of subjectivity and knowledge of the world. The conceptualization of knowledge as developing potentially in the relationality of interembodied contact between diverse subjectivities rather than through individual rational consciousness and action alone runs parallel, Marks affirms, to the recuperative history projects undertaken in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century under the rubric of identity politics, ones that take identity to be viewed as always in process, and historically and culturally shaped (Marks 4). Portillo's documentary would seem to suggest how such projects work in tandem with one another even though they might at first glance appear to be contradictory. Portillo's film shows its roots in the productive projects of identity politics in that it shows how human subjectivities, shaped in connection to given bodies, seek historical identity by deconstructing official histories while also excavating the past and recording it differently, even when realizing the improbability of retrieving the meaning of historical events with any certainty or recovering the loved ones lost. But Portillo's work also exemplifies the projects of the intercultural diasporan film insofar as she moves beyond the mourning of lost objects that results from the interrogation of history through personal and family memories to use the cinematic medium to stage the knowledges of the body, ones that transmit meaning without recourse to visual representation or words. The skin of this film translates meaning more densely, beyond the visual and the audible, through affective registers.

I have also suggested in this paper that Portillo reflects a vision of embodied subjectivity as a source of agency. As film theorist Vivian Sobchack states, and I concur, the emergence of an ethics depends upon "the lived sense and feeling of the human body not merely as a material object one possesses and analyzes among other objects but a material subject that experiences and feels its own subjectivity (*Carnal Thoughts*, 178). The important point here is that viewers as embodied subjects are enjoined to empathize with the pleasures and pains of other embodied subjects on the screen insofar as they share the same affective capacities. Portillo's affective aesthetics reminds us, for example, of our own dual status as agents of vision and as visible objects, one that allow us to experience bodily affects through the reversibility of the crystal ball.

The affective space that Portillo constructs serves as a template for the reconceptualization of an ethically conceived public space. Rather than distancing the spectator from ethical responsibility to others, potentially leading to objectification of the object viewed, this reconceived space narrows the distance between viewer and viewed, in effect, as Fregoso has noted, "perturba[ndo] el

espacio del espectador distanciado" ("Retrospectiva" 166). By attending to the political polyvalence of the affective register within Portillo's documentary, I hope to have effectively suggested how cinematic affect can orient agential possibilities for (re)acting politically within the context of relationality and contact that intercultural cinema provides.

As an exemplar of intercultural cinema, moreover, Portillo's film uses the affective register to encourage the spectator, from whatever social-spatial context, to undergo and register somatically, and hence, cognitively, her/his constitutive co-implications in the maintenance of neo-colonial, racist and heteropatriarchal boundaries that allow for the separateness between and within cultures. In doing so, the film offers the spectator a means for negotiating new ways of being and thinking, potentially capable of disrupting and transforming the logic of fear that dominates Juárez' political present.

## Endnotes

[1] For further analysis of the problem of the representation of the feminicides, see also Steven Volk and Marian Schotterbeck "Gender, Order, and Femicide: Reading the Popular Culture of Murder in Ciudad Juárez." (2010)

[2] For an analysis of negative affects in relation to the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez, see Ana Del Sarto "Los afectos en los estudios culturales. Cuerpos y subjetividades latinoamericanos en Ciudad Juárez." (2012).

[3] For a thorough review of the ways in which feminist and queer theorists have analyzed the polyvalent registers of affect, see Carolyn Pedwell and Anne Whitehead "Introduction. Affecting Feminism: Questions of Feeling in Feminist Theory." (2012)

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**Risks, Challenges and Ethics of Representing Femicide:  
A Comparative Analysis of Sergio González Rodríguez's *Huesos en el desierto* and  
Roberto Bolaño's *2666*. [1]**

**Abstract**

In the past decade, several important fiction and nonfiction works have been produced about femicide in Juárez, Mexico. This article focuses on the relationship between two authors and their narratives, one non-fiction and one fiction. In Mexico, the first non-fiction work produced on femicide was *Huesos en el desierto* (2002) by Sergio González Rodríguez, a journalist from Mexico City. Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño, who had never been to Juárez, but was working on the behemoth novel *2666* (2004) that revolved around femicides, contacted González Rodríguez via email to get more information about the killings in Juárez. The two books have striking similarities, and via interviews with González Rodríguez (Bolaño died in 2003), I explore the relationship between the writers and their work, focusing on how Bolaño's novel fed off of González Rodríguez's experiences and research and on how what Judith Butler defines as "precarious lives" are represented in the narratives. González Rodríguez writes *Huesos en el desierto* to create a historically accurate document that gives testament to the lives of femicide victims. Bolaño, on the other hand, recreates the situation in which we, as humans, get desensitized to violence and cannot continue to function; we cannot continue to read, hear about, or see images of senseless violence. We shut down.

**Keywords:** Juárez, Mexico, femicide, Bolaño, violence

## Introduction

The word “flesh” implies vulnerability and carnality, two essential narratives surrounding the issue of femicide in Juárez. [2] In the introduction to *Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Media Representation and Public Response* (2010), Héctor Domínguez and Ignacio Corona assert that victims of femicide are, “[d]oubly victimized by criminals and the system of impunity on the one hand and by available systems of representation of violence on the other.” The authors discuss how the victims are revictimized by the media. In many cases, either the women were exhibited as naked, destroyed bodies or they were described as prostitutes. [3] In her article “Memoria y anonimato: representaciones discursivas de las muertas de Juárez” (2006) Núria Villanova captures the paradox of the relationship between bodily vulnerability, death, and memory. She explains that,

These women are, without a doubt, victims excluded from a society in which their memory becomes inscribed only after their death. That memory, in a paradoxical way, is generated by their death since the victims and the perpetrators, like two inseparable pieces of a sinister game, become part of the memory of violence and death in Juárez.” (145-46)

Villanova highlights the fact that most of the victims of femicide are first recognized or remembered by the media and society as dead bodies. Although victims’ families have personal memories and photographs, the citizens of Juárez and international audiences see their dead bodies in newspapers or on TV and, with little or no information provided by police, are asked to read the messages written on those bodies—to judge them by their style of clothing, their painted fingernails, or the position of their bodies.

This article analyzes depictions of femicide in *Huesos en el desierto* (2002) by Sergio González Rodríguez, and the posthumously published novel *2666* (2004) by Roberto Bolaño. [4] I explore the relationship between González Rodríguez and Bolaño and how it influenced *2666*. González Rodríguez writes *Huesos en el desierto* to create a historically accurate document that gives testament to the lives of femicide victims. Bolaño, on the other hand, recreates the situation in which we, as humans, get desensitized to violence and cannot continue to function; we cannot continue to read, hear about, or see images of senseless violence. We shut down. His tactics are the opposite of those of González Rodríguez. Bolaño seeks to show us how easily we forget or look away from violence. He creates a situation in which one can see how difficult it is to maintain memory, to not look away, to continue to read of dead bodies and to feel that one person can make a difference in the face of such violence. González Rodríguez and Bolaño, though their techniques are different, raise similar questions about whose lives are seen as grievable. They show how “[i]t is not just that a death is poorly marked, but that it is unremarkable” (Butler 35).

They describe how victims of femicide have been treated as anonymous piles of flesh in public discourse.

Bolaño, who had never been to Juárez, relied on evidence and forensic reports provided by González Rodríguez to complete the 300 page chapter “The Part about the Crimes,” which recounts a seemingly endless number of femicides (108 in total). As González Rodríguez confirmed during our interview:

No, he was never in Ciudad Juarez. He left Mexico, if I am not mistaken, in 1974, and never returned to Mexico. He did not want to return to Mexico, our mutual friend Antonio Saborit commented. Roberto Bolaño spoke with Saborit in Chile when he was last home. They met at a literary event, and Bolaño commented to Saborit that he would not go back to Mexico. (Personal Interview)

In Bolaño and González Rodríguez’s narratives, violence against women is made real in graphic and/or explicit descriptions of rape, strangulation, suffocation, and other forms of torture. In his 2003 article “El femicidio y la conversión de Ciudad Juárez en territorio de la impunidad” Carlos Monsiváis argues that the “role of the media has been the main factor: they situate the crimes in the context of yellow journalism and not, as they should, on the front page of the paper. This behavior serves to highlight the guilt of the victims, and, because they are dead, they cannot defend themselves” (15). However, some literary production, like *Huesos en el desierto*, has worked against this trend and tried to humanize victims rather than to sensationalize the stories of their deaths.

Graphic, violent descriptions and images of femicide, although they may be represented as an effort to preserve the memory of the dead or to promote justice, contribute to the exploitation and objectification of the female body and reify the idea of the spectral, ghostly condition in which women in Juárez are depicted, hovering somewhere between life and death. Works that contribute to the exploitation of the female body rely on gender stereotypes that reduce women to sexualized bodies and do not move beyond the realm of the flesh. González Rodríguez seeks to connect the bodies of victims with memories of their lives. In yet another representational strategy, Bolaño’s femicide victims are decidedly spectral and anonymous, allowing him to explore the depths and meaning of horror.

It is important to examine the ethical implications of the aesthetic choices surrounding representations of graphic violence. Perhaps some balance can be achieved between descriptions and images of dead bodies and the lives the victims lived. This balance, or as Butler describes it “framing of images,” puts the focus on the humanity of the Other. As she explains, “The derealization of loss—the insensitivity to human suffering and death—becomes the mechanism through which dehumanization is accomplished. This derealization takes place neither inside nor

outside the image, but through the very framing by which the image is contained” (148). To ensure that an image or description of a dead body does not convert it into a *thing*, some framework or reference is necessary. An emphasis on the fetishized body of a woman who has suffered extreme violence, if that representation does not include her life story, can convert the victim into a ghost. In this spectral state the Other becomes a victimized body and joins a long list of anonymous or misidentified female bodies. The two works included in this analysis wrestle in different ways with the issue of violence written on the female body, and how most effectively to represent the victims’ lives and deaths.

Butler asks, “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, *What makes a grievable life?*” (20). Butler poses these questions in light of the events of 9/11, and wonders if mourning can cross borders and overcome nationalism or if it will simply translate into anger and violence. Her thoughts are especially pertinent in the context of Juárez, a city in which violence has been translated into ever more extreme forms of violence. [5] Even though femicide was first identified in the area in 1993, it took years for the issue to cross borders and come to the attention of an international audience.

In the context of the border—which includes agreements like NAFTA that provide more protections for companies and goods than for people—the poverty of many femicide victims marks them as less than human and less than grievable. As Herlinghaus argues in *Violence Without Guilt*, “contemporary cultural conflicts over the borderlands can be understood, to an important degree, as rhetorical conflicts consisting of a struggle over the figurative potentials displayed by speech acts and bodies, and entangled with numerous practices of movement and exchange” (62). The struggle over speech acts and bodies is nowhere more evident than in Juárez, a city in which the dead bodies of women often disappear, reappear, are anonymous, are misidentified, or are put on public display. González Rodríguez and Bolaño have taken risks to represent the victims of femicide given that nationalist discourse in Mexico and the U.S. for many years refused to recognize these crimes against women.

The authors of most works of cultural production who have sought to document crimes against femicide victims faced decisions regarding the ethics of representation and how to depict the violated body. What are the risks, challenges, and ethics of representing violence? Current memory debates often address the issue of whether horror can be represented without being reproduced. An analysis of representations of femicide brings to the forefront the complicated issue of fascination with the dead female body. In relation to that body, Butler asks a pertinent question: “Is there something to be learned about the geopolitical distribution of corporeal vulnerability from our own brief and devastating exposure to this condition?” (29). The distribution

of corporeal vulnerability in Juárez points to the relationship between economic and physical violence, given that the victims have been primarily of lower socio-economic status. [6] The works analyzed here provide ample evidence that the political discourse surrounding victims of femicide has been overtly sexual. In contrast, the deaths of men have involved very little discussion of their sexuality. [7]

## 1. Linguistic Violence

An analysis of the linguistic territory of this issue shows that what is at stake is not only physical violence, but also the violence of derealization in the realm of language—linguistic violence. If the term *homicide* suffices to describe all murders, then key elements of the crimes have not been named. Of note is the fact that only one of the works being analyzed employs the term(s) *femicide/feminicide/feminicidio* to describe the rape and/or murder of women. González Rodríguez labels them “femicide[s]” or “homicides against women,” (11; 275), and Bolaño calls them “the murder of women” (444). González Rodríguez has been the most active in acknowledging and discussing the differences between homicide and femicide:

But men are not killed for being men. Women are killed for being women, and they are victims of masculine violence because they are women. It is a crime of hate against the female gender. We cannot ignore this. These are crimes of power. Yes, men are killed like flies, but they are not killed for being men. Women are. (Personal Interview)

The Inter-American Court for Human Rights recognized the legal use of the term *feminicide*, and on July 26, 2011 it was codified as a legal term in one of the 32 states of Mexico. The use of the term *feminicide* has experienced several years of evolution in which *homicide/femicide/feminicide* were used interchangeably or in different contexts by different groups. For example, politicians and the police in Juárez have generally used the term *homicide* to discuss the murders, whereas the mothers of victims and other activists use *femicide* or *feminicide*. As Fregoso and Bejarano point out, “Women’s rights advocates, researchers, and feminist legal scholars are using the terms *femicide* and *feminicide* to refer to this phenomenon” (3). Yet the evolution and growing power of the term *feminicide* is not present in 2666.

The absence of this term could be due to several different factors, including the chronological evolution of the term and the academic and activist circles in which the word is generally used. As noted in my book *More or Less Dead: Femicide, Hautning, and the Ethics of Representation in Mexico*, Cynthia Bejarano, a professor of Criminal Justice at New Mexico State University, stated that:

Everybody has a different interpretation of what the term means. I think the most important thing is to think about the term as it has evolved. People who haven't been immersed in the discourse of *femicide* or *feminicide* haven't understood the evolution of the term and how scholars and academicians or activists have come to use the term. Unless you're fully immersed in the issue, perhaps these individuals are coming at it from the periphery of either the movement or their involvement." (Driver 76)

While González Rodríguez uses the term *femicidio* to discuss the murders, I could find no reference to the term or in interviews with Bolaño or in his writing.

## 2. Feminicide: A Shared Obsession

In Mexico, the first non-fiction work produced on feminicide was *Huesos en el desierto* (2002) by Sergio González Rodríguez, a journalist from Mexico City. [8] González Rodríguez began writing for the Mexico City newspaper *Reforma* in 1993, and in 1996 he traveled to Juárez to investigate the disappearance and murder of girls and women. [9] By the summer of 1999, his research began to show the involvement of policemen and politicians in the murders, and in June of that year he was kidnapped in Mexico City, beaten, and left on the side of the street. It was just after the kidnapping that the relationship between González Rodríguez and Bolaño began. González Rodríguez described how he got to know Bolaño:

I met Roberto Bolaño in Blanes [Spain] in 2002. I did not know him when he was in Mexico. I was a member of a rock band and a student. Our social circles converged in areas that he describes in the novel *Los detectives salvajes*: in the neighborhoods Roma, Condesa, the city center, and other parts of the city. All of these areas existed during that time as points of encounter for young musicians, artists, and writers. However, I did not know him then. I met him in the process of doing research for my book, *Huesos en el desierto*, and we communicated via email. This occurred in 1999 and 2000. (Personal Interview) [10]

González Rodríguez had already decided to use his extensive research for a non-fiction book, *Huesos en el desierto*, which would eventually be published by the editorial Anagrama in Spain. Thus, he and Bolaño nurtured a friendship based on a common obsession with the murders of women. [11] As writers, they both faced the ethical question of how to represent graphic violence. Bolaño, who had never visited Juárez, relied on González Rodríguez to answer questions about the exact details of the murders. [12] The friendship proved influential to Bolaño, and he included González Rodríguez as a character in his posthumously published novel *2666*. When discussing his inclusion in the novel González Rodríguez he explained:

Bolaño loved formalist elements and adapted them to his context. We must not forget that he was a great reader of French avant-garde novels and other elaborate narrative forms. *He introduces reality as a novel*. This is why Bolaño told me, 'I'm



going to steal Javier Marias' idea, and I'll include you as a character like he did in *Negra espalda del tiempo*. Indeed, he put me there with my name among various novelistic witnesses. (Personal Interview, emphasis mine)

The relationship between these two works proves pivotal because Bolaño's fiction feeds off the reality and statistics of femicide violence as researched and documented by González Rodríguez. In *Narcoepics* (2012) Herlinghaus writes that in "The Part About the Crimes" in 2666, "if reality outplays 'fiction,' Bolaño makes perceive the invisible 'alliance' between fear, common desires for relief, and actual blindness. What can literary fiction, guided by a bet on sobriety and a rejection of psychological scenarios, achieve in that light?" (212). Herlinghaus goes on to argue that the distinction between nonfiction and fiction involves "structure, an order of meaning" (ibid.). While Bolaño clearly structures the chapter, it is also true that he relied on real forensic reports to provide many of the gruesome details about femicide victims. For me, the distinction hinges on femicide and Bolaño's representation of the violence. It appears that he copied, either partially or fully, forensics records from Juárez. Given that he describes 108 murders, often in a forensic format: date of birth, description of injuries, description of clothing, etc., this makes up a substantial part of the chapter. While he clearly structured the fiction around the murders, I would argue that the femicides themselves are taken partially or wholly from reality.

Femicide researcher and Juárez resident Julia Monárrez Fragoso, upon reading 2666, noted the striking similarities between Bolaño's descriptions and the original list of femicide victims prepared by *Casa Amiga*, the first rape crisis center in Juárez founded by Esther Chávez Cano in 1991. Monárrez Fragoso has spent the last two decades researching femicide, and has worked with forensic reports and other official documents. She noted "the similarities between how Bolaño described the murder of a woman" and how they were described in forensic records and added, "it is not an original creation" (Driver 85). Monárrez Fragoso argued that Bolaño should have discussed his reliance on forensic records given that many of his descriptions were copied from those records. Although Herlinghaus argues that Bolaño's work is fiction, he recognizes that, "Santa Teresa becomes a novelistic space into which 'Ciudad Juárez' has metamorphosed, presenting a quasi-documentary account of every murdered woman from 1993-1997" (214). The question then is why Bolaño never openly discussed his research or how much he borrowed from forensic evidence to write his description of the murders.

In a 2004 interview included in *Para Roberto Bolaño*, Jorge Herralde, editor of Anagrama and long-time friend of Bolaño, also discussed Bolaño's fascination with the femicides, highlighting the similarities between his descriptions of the victims and a forensic report. Herralde explained,

the crimes of Ciudad Juárez (Santa Teresa in the novel) are, in effect, the bloody backdrop of the four novellas of 2666 and the specific subject of one of them, the

penultimate, *The Part About the Crimes*. A meticulous and aseptic description of the assassinated women, as if it were a forensic report. (71)

Bolaño challenges readers with an eerily accurate fictional account of events rooted in a violent reality.

Domínguez and Corona note the relationship between bodies and signs, arguing that the body becomes part of the discourse on femicide and produces “a collective endeavor of a literary discourse in which ‘fiction’ is crisscrossed by references to factual events” (5). 2666 is such a work, and, as González Rodríguez said of his communication with Bolaño, “I transcribed judicial records of some case relating to the murder of a woman. He wanted to know how the crimes were described in forensic language” (Email).

### 3. Bones in the Desert

The title *Huesos en el desierto* (Bones in the Desert) alludes to the bodies of victims of femicide found in the unforgiving landscape of Juárez in empty lots within the city as well as on the periphery. The geography of the city is complicit in, or at least representative of, the memory problem: “The geography that devours [the victims of femicide] is responsible for the feeling of uprootedness and abandonment. This feeling is created by [the lack of] collective memory in the land that has expelled them” (*Huesos* 87). As an influx of migrants looking for work continues to arrive in Juárez, they are greeted by silence on the subject of the killings. In a short poem included in the book the author writes, “Nothing is happening, she will say. Nothing, those who come to the city will repeat. / Nothing. / Like the silence of the desert. / Nothing. / Like the bones of the victims scattered in the night” (231). [13] The theme of the desert as a geography of forgetfulness is evident throughout the work. The author describes Lomas de Poleo, a tract of informal housing and dumps on the northwest edge of the city near the U.S. border where many bodies of femicide victims have been found, as “that fluid earth that repels memory” (26). However, for the author, the book’s title also has another meaning:

It seems to me that what has happened there with the victims of systematic murders is very illustrative. Women’s bodies were abandoned in the desert, and therefore they are bones in the desert. I am not only referring to the geographic process, the telluric process, or even the figure of the desert as a representation of the opposite of civilization. I am referring to the desert of institutions there. (Personal Interview)

González Rodríguez analyzes the power structures at work in Juárez and demonstrates how state institutions are responsible for allowing femicide to continue. He describes how a dysfunctional justice system contributes to the spectrality of femicide victims.

In the preface to the book, González Rodríguez discusses how authorities claim to have resolved 80% of the (then) 300 official feminicides. And yet, he objects “You can distinguish there the decisive effects of actions and omissions by the authorities: the impossibility of making them uphold the law or impose justice” (11). The authorities seem to believe that through speech acts they can manifest a semblance of justice, as if declaring a case resolved after forcing a confession through torture would amount to the same thing as applying the law. [14] For González Rodríguez, beyond the lack of institutional justice and the statistics on femicide, there are two important points to make. He outlines, “Looking beyond the statistics, these crimes make evident two acts that are equally serious now and looking into the future: distraction or global amnesia before an extreme phenomenon of anarchy; the impulse to normalize brutality in contemporary societies” (12).

In the absence of investigation, victims of femicide are often forced to be associated with objects—shoes, clothing, and lipstick—rather than with names. González Rodríguez discusses how this exchange contributes to the anonymity of both the body and the life of femicide victims (153). He suggests that bodies become identified by symbols surrounding the circumstances of their death, symbols that ultimately fail to identify or make real the lost lives. The desert, abandoned roads, shoes—these have become the protagonists of femicide, things that appear in photos alongside the bodies of unidentified women. Butler argues that “[i]t is important to claim that our bodies are in a sense *our own* and that we are entitled to claim rights of autonomy over our bodies” (25). However, this becomes infinitely more difficult in death, leading to questions about how unidentified bodies are treated. Do not these bodies, even without names, have human rights? Does death convert them into public property? The answer, it would seem, is that bodies, especially the bodies of the poor, become a part of public space, free to be displayed as the media wishes.

In terms of structure, González Rodríguez’s book is a vehicle for memory, for collecting facts, figures, and for telling the stories of victims in an attempt to lend some shape to the senseless narrative of femicide. The book is divided into 18 short chapters followed by an epilogue, a list of the author’s sources, a list of important figures related to femicide. It also includes a map of Juárez titled “Geographies of Danger” that shows where high concentrations of victims of femicide have been found. González Rodríguez discusses the importance of memory and explains: “For me, more important than any stylistic or narrative choices was the fact that these events be recorded” (Personal Interview). His focus is on reconstructing bodies and putting them in context, finding out their names, the story of their lives, and how politicians and other institutional figures may enter into the equation. According to the author, “the only way that events do not

repeat themselves is if we retain memory of them. Memory is very important; it is the only thing that remains with us” (Personal Interview).

The chapter “An Unfinished Life” in *Huesos en el desierto* structurally mirrors “The Part About the Crimes” in *2666* in several aspects. Both chapters recount in exacting detail the murders of dozens of women. González Rodríguez records details about victims starting in the year 2002 and moving back in time to 1993. He provides the date of death, the name of the victim (when possible), and a description of the violence suffered. For example, the chapter begins as follows:

23/09/02, Erika Pérez, between 25 and 30 years old, brown hair, a blouse with a flower pattern, pants and panties below the knees, the strap of the purse around her neck, at the dirt path that crosses the streets Paseo del Río and Camino San Lorenzo. (257)

The number of entries that begin with the words “unidentified” reminds the reader how many bodies remain anonymous. In *2666*, Bolaño begins the chapter by describing feminicides from 1993 to 1997. Whereas González Rodríguez succinctly lists dates of death, names, and the cause of death, Bolaño couches stories within stories, showing the way in which gruesome deaths can get lost or buried among the layers of disparate information that make up media-driven societies. [15]

According to Cynthia Bejarano, feminicide makes evident that “there is a politics in killing, and there is a politics in death” (Driver 88). González Rodríguez captures one angle of the politics of death in *Huesos en el desierto* when he describes how state and federal authorities try to downplay the crimes or blame the victims. For example, González Rodríguez describes how, in 1995, the spokesman for the judicial police of the state of Chihuahua, Ernesto García, declared, “We would like to alert the community that women should not pass through unknown or dark areas of the city. They should be accompanied whenever possible and carry pepper spray to defend themselves” (15). This statement displays how the police, as state agents who are sworn to protect the population from violence, are warning women that they are responsible for their own safety.

Taking into account the initial statements by officials in Juárez, the truth to be learned is that a lone woman who traverses public spaces risks rape that will end in death. *Huesos en el desierto* provides a record of statements made by local and municipal authorities ranging from the governor to police chiefs, a record that demonstrates the belief that a female in public invites violence upon herself. By collecting and recording a range of public statements made on feminicide, the author shows how female sexuality can be used to dispossess both victims and potential victims of their personhood.

In the chapter “The Cotton Fields” the González Rodríguez tells the story of the discovery in 2001 of the bodies of eight women dumped in a cotton field in Juárez. He describes how “diverse civil organizations protested in front of the Prosecutor’s Office. They created a symbolic moment and demanded the scientific investigation of the homicides” (233). His focus on how the actions of local individuals and organizations demand justice in the face of impunity is an example of how individual citizens can and do influence local and national discourse.

The treatment of bodies in *Huesos en el desierto* and *2666* are similar in their efforts to record the graphic nature of the violence against women. However, González Rodríguez’s goal in writing the book is to leave testimony of the economic, political, and social forces that have contributed to the violence exercised against women, whereas Bolaño’s work explores more generally the metaphysics of horror and evil without articulating any stated goals related to fomenting social change in Juárez. González Rodríguez asserts that it was important to him to record information and sources related to femicide, “because in the future nobody will be able to say ‘This never happened’” (Personal Interview). The author acknowledged that he could have written the book in many different formats or even written it as a novel. However, “information, memory, the story of events, and the convergence of testimony were most urgent” (Personal Interview). The text depicts the tenuous relationship between memory and anonymity that plagues victims of femicide.

The chapter “Unending Deaths” illustrates the spectral nature of disappearing women in Juárez. Although photos of the faces of missing women and victims are plastered around the city, often the bodies of victims remain anonymous due to poor collection of evidence or the decomposed state of the body. Thus the names and faces of victims often become separated from their actual bodies in death. When discussing the flyers that display faces of missing girls and litter the streets and signposts of the city, González Rodríguez describes “a spectral montage of faces, dates, signs, and impossible stains” (143). The flyers represent disembodied faces, thus causing those women to take on a ghostly quality. Even when bodies are found, they are, as the author describes when he lists the dead, “unidentified” (257). Through these observations González Rodríguez captures the difficulty of memory and remembering in the presence of anonymity.

#### **4. 2666 and the Aesthetics of Horror**

*2666* is not about memory, but about the lack thereof, about what happens when humanity is swallowed up by a black hole. The title of the novel is a seemingly mysterious number that is nowhere mentioned in the book. It is taken from Bolaño’s 1999 novel *Amuleto* which tells the story of Auxilio Lacouture, a Uruguayan living illegally in Mexico who gets trapped in a bathroom at the

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México when the Mexican army takes over the campus in the days leading up to the 1968 Tlatelolco student massacre. While trapped, Auxilio sifts through her memories, and describes a time when she was following two people (one of them Belano, the alter ego of the author) through Mexico City. She says:

I followed them. I saw them walk slowly down Bucareli to Reforma and then I saw them cross Reforma without waiting for the green light, both of them with long hair blown by the wind because at that hour on Reforma the wind from the previous night still blows. Reforma Avenue transforms into a transparent tube, into lungs in the form of cuneiform where the imaginary exhalations of the city pass by. Later we began to walk down Guerrero Avenue; they walked more slowly than before, and I walked more quickly. Guerrero, at that hour, looked more than anything like a cemetery, but not a cemetery from 1986 or even a cemetery from 1975. Rather, it looked like a cemetery from 2666, a forgotten cemetery underneath a dead eyelid, the watery dispassionate eye that began wanting to forget something and ended up forgetting everything. (76-77, my translation)

The title sets the tone for a novel of apocalyptic horror in which Bolaño forces readers to examine issues they would rather forget. The epigraph of *2666*, a quotation of poet Charles Baudelaire, reads “An oasis of horror in the middle of a desert of boredom.” [16]

According to González Rodríguez, *2666* is not sensationalist and goes far beyond counting the dead. He explained, “On another level it is a metaphysical reflection about evil, but Bolaño is very clear in his criticism of the authorities and of the institutions in Santa Teresa” (Personal interview). This is difficult to discuss, because, for me, the work both is and is not sensational. On the one hand, Bolaño is consciously trying to be as sensational as possible to mimic the real violence in Juárez, but on the other, the work is so obsessed with sexual violence that I find it discomforting. In my interviews with Monárrez Frago and Bejarano, they also shared their discomfort with the novel. In fact, they were unable to finish the novel due to the unrelenting nature of the violence described.

When asked whether Bolaño had discussed his intentions in writing *2666*, González Rodríguez explained:

I think that he wanted to record that literature could somehow mend the world. It is something that is very clear in his novel. In his novels, we usually see that everything has to do with a political theme, and somehow his novel *2666* is also political in content. There will always be a figure of someone carrying out symbolic compensation, either as revenge or as symbolic displacement where a minimum of justice is restored for victims. This is an issue that Bolaño did not need to make explicit because it is obviously not a novella. It becomes a social novel. He is not a novelist who introduces ideological content in his novels. I have the impression that Roberto was going to continue the narrative. In fact, Bolaño’s editor Jaime Vallcorba, who was also a close friend of Roberto, told me that, as he understood it, [Bolaño] told him that the novel would continue. As I recall, Herralde was a bit more reserved about it. It is a detail that has to do with his idea of the book and of



literature. For him, it is a finished novel as such. But in the case of Vallcorba, yes, he told me that as far as he understood the project, Roberto had the intention of continuing it. (Personal Interview)

Were Bolaño alive, I would want to interview him, of course. But for now, all that remains are such secondhand accounts of the text, small literary arguments about whether it was a finished novel or an incomplete one.

In “The Part About the Crimes”, Elvira Campos, the head of the mental asylum in Santa Teresa, discusses misogyny, which she describes as “gynophobia, which is fear of women, and naturally afflicts only men. Very widespread in Mexico, although it manifests itself in different ways” (382). These elements of misogyny and many more make up the map of horror that Bolaño traces. In another scene, the narrator describes how, after taking prostitutes to the police station to question them, “[i]n the other cells policemen were raping the whores from La Rivera” (401). In yet another, a police office investigating the murder of a woman “first made inquiries among Santa Teresa’s high-class hookers to see whether anyone knew the dead woman, and then, when his questioning yielded scant results, among the cheap hookers [...]” (390). In Bolaño’s novel, the police, at every turn, associate femicide with prostitution or the sexualized female body, a commentary on the way police have behaved in Juárez, which has been extensively documented.

For Bolaño, the message is in the flesh, and the criticisms toward the police and other institutions of justice stem from comments and actions those officials have made in reference to the dead bodies. Thus he purposely grounds the text in the anonymity of death, in the creation of ghosts. “The Part About the Crimes” opens and closes with an anonymous death, and as the bodies pile up, the police get distracted from femicide by a man who desecrates churches with his urine. How easily we turn away from murder, Bolaño seems to say.

In “The Part About the Crimes,” whole paragraphs are written as if they were a forensics report and include detailed descriptions of the violence perpetrated, of the posture of the body, and of the victims’ clothing. *Huesos en el desierto* describes in spectral terms but combats that spectrality by collecting the voices of family members of victims and moving beyond the narrative of the dead body. 2666, on the other hand, treats the dead bodies of victims of femicide as a way to explore the concept of horror. In *Pretérito imperfecto*, Leonor Arfuch and Gisela Catanzaro address the connection between art, memory, and the disappeared in the context of Argentina by posing the questions: “What can impress us, when day after day we see explosions, attacks, war, famine? What potential does artistic work have to awaken the body and soul?” (112). These questions are particularly relevant in discussing Bolaño’s formal and stylistic choices in describing femicide.

The unnamed narrator of a chapter of 2666 describes the body of a 10-year-old girl in the following manner: “The dead girl was ten years old, more or less. She was four foot three. She was wearing clear plastic sandals fastened with a metal buckle. She had brown hair, lighter where it fell over her forehead, as if it had been dyed. She’d been stabbed eight times, three times in the chest” (501). Another description details, “She had been vaginally and anally raped, probably more than once, since both orifices exhibited tears and abrasions, from which she had bled profusely” (354). Bolaño also describes fractured skulls, loss of brain matter, faces smashed beyond recognition, and the mutilation of breasts. Readers are faced with the question of how to combat such overwhelming violence. This graphic assault on the reader represents women as a mass of bodies, wounds being their main identifying characteristics. As Marcela Valdés writes, “reading ‘The Part About the Crimes’ feels like staring into the abyss. Strangling, shooting, stabbing, burning, rape, whipping, mutilation, bribery and treachery are all detailed in deadpan prose” (20).

The bodies in Bolaño’s narrative have been detached from history and often family, leaving only the messages written on their bodies for readers to decipher. Although memories of their lives don’t haunt readers, visions of their tortured bodies do. Descriptions of the corporeal propel the narrative, demonstrating how the victimized “Other” is a captive of descriptions of her body. According to Butler, “The derealization of the ‘Other’ means that it is neither dead nor alive, but interminably spectral” (33). In Bolaño’s fiction the victims of femicide are spectral figures, given the obsessive focus on the dead female body. However, the repetition of violence is also a case where form and function work together to reproduce a perceived reality—the indifference or inability of citizens to relate to such overwhelming violence. Bolaño exploits spectrality to get to the roots of horror, to the roots of a society that can witness the death of so many without ever really paying attention.

Donoso makes a connection between the last chapter, “The Part About Archiboldi,” which addresses the horrors of World War II, and “The Part About the Crimes,” the chapter about femicide. He explains, “The political element has to do with the repetition of descriptions of serialized characteristics of two distinct of crimes that are in principle different—femicide and genocide—the repetition generates both *indistinction* and *difference*” (132). Bolaño points to the nature of horror as a historical fact that repeats itself. At the end of the novel, when the mysterious Archiboldi finally reveals himself, he thinks “history, which is a simple whore, has no decisive moments but is a proliferation of instants, brief interludes that vie with one another in monstrosity” (794). Santa Teresa may be the current locus of horror, but it is not the only one.

“The Part About the Crimes” produces numbness associated with porno-misery, the idea of exploiting human misery for personal or financial gain. However, at the same time, forces the reader to recognize violence that has surpassed all known or imagined limits. This analysis examines whether descriptions of bodily violence such as rape, mutilation, burning, and/or beating suffered by femicide victims fulfill the need to document the truth, and examines at what point such representations cross the line into porno-misery. *Pornomiseria* or porno-misery is a term coined by Colombian filmmakers Carlos Mayolo and Luis Ospina in *Agarrando pueblo* (1977), a short fake documentary that satirizes a group of filmmakers desperately looking for poverty in order to profit from its representation. The directors used the term to denounce the “voyeuristic treatment of abjection” seen in 1970s Colombian films (Gómez and Vega-Hurtado 64). As film critic Christian León describes, “Pornomiseria plays with the voyeuristic impulse of the spectator, exploiting, for commercial means, the fascination with violence and obscene poverty that is a latent desire in both citizens and consumers” (77). In the face of overwhelming violence and the recreation of that violence in cultural production, the term *pornomiseria* brings together issues of violence and voyeurism, allowing for a discussion of how and why graphic descriptions of femicide can turn into just another facet of consumption. The term also represents a kind of cultural production that exploits the shock value of sensational violence and misery but provides none of the accompanying complexity or explanation needed to analyze an issue.

The term *pornomiseria* is most commonly used in debates about aesthetics of film, but I think its application to photography and literature is justified. Although it may be argued that graphic depictions of femicide and misery are necessary to provoke awareness, it is also true that the content can be exploited. Monárrez Fragozo makes a connection between the media and use of pornographic images when she argues that “The testimonies that are presented by the media are also part of a graphic, elaborate, pornographic description of the bodies of victims; thus, they degrade the families of the victims. These discourses take the terrible things that were done to murdered women and create a moral vacuum” (*Trama de una injusticia* 209). The prostitution of female bodies thus continues even after death, when images of corpses are bought and sold as part of a sensationalist news cycle.

The reason that images of bodies of femicide victims appear so frequently in the mass media and in works of cultural production is that they reflect our curiosity to see damaged bodies, to witness destruction in the most realistic way possible. The concept of *pornomiseria* also relates to the way the perpetrators of the crimes deal with the bodies of victims. The bodies aren’t dumped; they are arranged so as to present a necroart exhibit to the public. I believe that arrangement of bodies is not done to desensitize but to sensitize, to gain attention and recognition for the perpetrator of the crime. Victim’s families displace the power of the perpetrators and the images of arranged bodies

by constructing memorials at the sites where bodies have been found. However, the issue remains that the crime of feminicides is used to control women and to keep them out of public space. In this issue, in her article “(Re)Living Femicide through Social Control: the Regulation of Life and Bodies through Fear and (In)Formal Social Control” Cynthia Bejarano says,

What I suggest by ‘femicidal state rhetoric’ is how hegemonic state forces and state actors use the reality of femicide as a way of controlling, curtailing and convincing women and girls to alter their activities and to limit their movement across the City. This also impacts women and girls’ confidence, sense of security, and well-being. (71)

In academic and feminist circles, Charles Bowden, who has written extensively about Juárez and the U.S.-Mexico border, has been accused of porno-misery in his works of non-fiction such as *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future*. However, when I interviewed him in 2010, he said denied that his work was porno-misery and discussed his own definition of the term:

Porno-misery I find more useful. When the term is used, it means that you use it so much it deadens people. The assumption is that pornography is deadening. That’s why we have a distinction in language between eroticism and pornography. Erotic is supposed to stir people, whether you approve of it or not. Pornography is absolutely redundant imagery. Porno-misery exists when you produce enough of these images that people don’t react to them. It’s kind of like somebody in a bar having one too many drinks. There isn’t a rule. It’s a judgment. Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony is about an hour and a half long. It’s far longer than his other symphonies, but it doesn’t deaden you. It’s the right length. Certainly, if you read the tabloids in Mexico you don’t think, “This is going to stir people to action.” I’m not defending the book, but people had a real reaction to it. I think it’s that they hadn’t seen anything like it. (Driver 55)

Although Bowden and Bolaño have been compared in terms of their exploitation of misery, I think that Bolaño’s case is different because he was actively mining porno-misery to prove a point about how we can become numb to violence. Literary critic Adam Kirsch defends Bolaño, arguing that he “succeeds in restoring to physical violence some of its genuine evil” (1). I disagree with Kirsch, and question this idea of restoration given the already publicized nature of the victimized female body in Juárez. As Butler points out, “The public sphere is constituted in part by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, and what will not” (xx). The line between restoration of genuine evil and exploitation of the female body is thin in Bolaño’s narrative. However, as journalist Lev Grossman argues,

the relentless gratuitousness of 2666 has its own logic and its own power, which builds into something overwhelming that hits you all the harder because you don’t see it coming. This is a dangerous book, and you can get lost in it. How can art, Bolaño is asking, a medium of form and meaning, reflect a world that is blessed with neither? (1)

“The Part About the Crimes” ends with a description of the last femicide victim of 1997. Despite the number of years, the investigations, the claims against the way the police have treated women, and protests and marches to bring attention to impunity, the description of how the police view the bodies of victims has not progressed.

The metaphor that Bolaño pursues to represent horror is a black hole, an ever-present part of the constellations that allows nothing, not even light, to escape. This vision of Juárez is problematic for Monárrez Fragoso because “There is something that bothers me. It is as if you were reading about a city in semidarkness, a city without ethics” (Driver 94). The black hole in the novel, the force that pulls in and routinely devours bodies, things, ideas—is the city itself, Santa Teresa. Echeverría, who compiled the first edition of *2666* as per the instructions left by Bolaño in his notes, reveals, “In one of his copious notes about *2666* Bolaño signals the existence of a ‘hidden center’ in the work that is hidden under what could be called the ‘physical center.’ There are reasons to believe that this physical center would be the city of Santa Teresa, the faithful representation of Juárez on the border of Mexico and the United States” (1123).

If the black hole is Santa Teresa, at its center is the date 2666, a date from which no one will seemingly escape. [17] In the last sentence of “The Part About the Crimes” the narrator describes, “Even on the poorest streets people could be heard laughing. Some of these streets were completely dark, like black holes, and the laughter that came from who knows where was the only sign, the only beacon that kept residents and strangers from getting lost” (633). The streets are like black holes, and the only sign that remains is laughter. Perhaps, in the end, Bolaño does offer hope, for the black hole has not swallowed up everything and has allowed, at least momentarily, that a guiding sign remain for humanity. Among the ghosts, the darkness, the bodies, the blood, the rape, the hate, the corruption, perhaps the sign will be discovered. However, what Bolaño makes clear is that black holes are a permanent part of the human constellation of life, and periodically, the blackness overwhelms us with war, murder, and hatred, but we generally do not recognize it because we are too distracted; because it is easier to look away and forget.

## Endnotes

[\*] All translations mine, except Roberto Bolaño: *2666* and *Between Parentheses*.

[1] I conducted research for this article during my 2012-13 Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) and published *More or Less Dead: Femicide, Haunting, and the Ethics of Representation in Mexico* with University of Arizona Press in March 2015.

[2] In the introduction to *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Américas*, editors Fregoso and Bejarano discuss the terms *femicide* and *feminicide*, and argue for the use of *feminicide*. They explain,

the concepts of femicide and feminicide are used interchangeably in the literature on gender-based violence and among the contributors to this volume. These are evolving concepts that, as noted in Bueno-Hansen's chapter, are 'still under construction.' However, we will make a case for *feminicide* and, in the process, contribute some analytic tools for thinking about the concept in historical, theoretical, and political terms. In arguing for the use of the term *feminicide* over *femicide*, we draw from a feminist analytical perspective that interrupts essentialist notions of female identity that equate gender and biological sex and looks instead to the gendered nature of practices and behaviors, along with the performance of gender norms. As feminist thinkers have long contended, gender is a socially constructed category in which the performance of gender norms (rather than a natural biological essence) is what gives meaning to categories of the 'feminine' and 'masculine.' Instead of a scenario in which gender and sex necessarily concur, the concept of feminicide allows us to map the power dynamics and relations of gender, sexuality, race, and class underlying violence and, in so doing, shift the analytic focus to how gender norms, inequities, and power relationships increase women's vulnerabilities to violence . (3-4)

[3] For a more complete bibliography on academic articles and books analyzing feminicide, refer to "La ciudad y el feminicidio en los textos académicos" (2010) by Juila E. Monárrez Frago, Raúl Flores Simental, and Diana Lizeth García Salinas.

[4] In 2007 Pablo Ley and Alex Rigola directed the first theater production of *2666* at Theater Lliure in Barcelona, Spain.

[5] The increasing violence is reflected in overall homicide and feminicide statistics, in the type of violence perpetrated, and in the circumstances in which individuals have been murdered. For example, in 2010 Marisela Escobedo Ortiz, one of the most vocal activists against feminicide, was murdered in front of the Government Palace in Chihuahua. Her body fell not far from a cross that had been placed in front of the Palace by the group Women in Black to remember victims of feminicide. Police surrounded her at the time of her murder. To be murdered in broad daylight, on government property, surrounded by police begs the question: was the violence orchestrated or permitted by the police or other governmental entities?

[6] On the last page of *Huesos en el desierto* González Rodríguez includes a map titled "Geografía de peligro" which shows the relationship between poverty, feminicide, and the physical geography of the city. The page that includes the map is not numbered; it appears directly after page 334.

[7] Cynthia Bejarano observes that, "If men are being killed and being tortured for a number of days, what we hear and what we're told is that men have been brutally tortured. There have been assertions that some men have been raped as well, although that's sort of beneath the surface. You aren't hearing very much about that" (Driver 167).

[8] In 2012 González Rodríguez published *The Femicide Machine*, a slim book that brought together many of his journalistic essays on feminicide.

[9] In *Huesos en el desierto* González Rodríguez states, "I became interested in the homicides against women in Juárez in 1995. One morning in 1996, I left Mexico City for the northern border. There I found a trace of blood. Since then, I have continued [to investigate] it" (284).

[10] Journalist Marcela Valdés also describes the chronology of the relationship between the two writers: "The year that González Rodríguez was first attacked, Bolaño had been working on his demented tangle for



more than half a decade. Searching for information about Juárez, Bolaño e-mailed his friends in Mexico, asking more and more detailed questions about the murders. Finally, tired of these gruesome inquiries, his friends put him in touch with González Rodríguez, who, they said, knew more about the crimes than anyone in Mexico. Bolaño first e-mailed him around the time that González Rodríguez decided to write a nonfiction book about his investigation.” (3)

[11] Jorge Herralde, editor of Anagrama and long-time friend of Bolaño discussed the relationship between Bolaño and González Rodríguez a 2004 interview with *El Periódico* of Barcelona. He stated, “The subject of 2666 came up in every conversation in the past few years. He spoke to me, for example, of the numerous times he consulted via email Sergio González Rodríguez” (64).

[12] Bolaño, who was born in Chile, spent the years of his youth in Mexico. During his many years in Mexico he never visited Juárez. In 1977 he left Mexico for Paris and never returned, spending the last years of his life in Blanes, Spain.

[13] The author talks about the precariousness of the lives of all migrants, not just women. He expresses, “Any of the Northern Mexico border forms an ideal territory that promotes the radical anonymity of migrants. For a few of them, the ‘border’ means a new identity, but for the majority, it embodies the experience of transition from Mexico to the United States, the loss of native identity, and the search for a new one, one that is volatile and likely to involve risks. A police beating, fraud, theft, bribery, or death” (*Huesos en el desierto* 13).

[14] In the case of many suspects who have been arrested for femicide, there has been evidence of torture and forced confession. According to González Rodríguez, Sharif Sharif, the main suspect in multiple femicide cases, “was forced to make false testimony and declarations, a common practice in Mexico. He also had to sign false declarations and to identify witnesses that never reappeared. Torture, whether it is physical or psychological, has to be eradicated, but it is frequently used” (*Huesos en el desierto* 99).

[15] In “La apretada red oculta” Elvio E. Gandolfo describes Bolaño’s mania for writing stories and anecdotes within other stories as an essential characteristic of his work: “The even tone that unites everything is the bulimic plot that devours dozens and hundreds of thematic threads and anecdotes in each book” (117).

[16] The word oasis is referenced several times in 2666, one of the most pertinent being a conversation between Florita Almada, a woman with visions about the future and premonitions of what is happening to women in Santa Teresa and Reinaldo, a television host. Reinaldo explains that Florita, “She said that she had seen dead women and dead girls. A desert. An oasis” (545).

[17] Echeverría adds that, “As for the ‘hidden center’...wouldn’t it indicate precisely that date, 2666, that covers the entire novel?” (1123).

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**The Maquila Complex:  
Reification, Disposability, and Resistance in *Maquilapolis: City of Factories***

**Abstract**

This article considers the ways in which the documentary *Maquilapolis: City of Factories* (2006) critically represents social reification under post-NAFTA maquiladora-led industrialization in Tijuana, Mexico, particularly as it relates to the production and circulation of myths of female obsolescence, disposability, and waste under the neoliberal (b)order. Drawing from the Marxist concept of reification, I demonstrate the ways in which the film largely overcomes the limitations and dangers associated with reified narratives and images that, unwittingly in many cases, rehearse myths of female disempowerment, victimization, and patriarchal dependency in the context of neoliberal industrialization in Tijuana, Mexico. Through a skillfully rendered combination of documentary modes of representation, with particular emphasis on narratives of personhood and human sensuousness, *Maquilapolis* captures the intersecting politico-economic, social, and cultural forces underwriting the proliferation of anti-female terror. In analyzing the narrative strategies deployed in the film, this article discusses how the film engages with the limits and risks associated with reification, including the naturalizing of social inequalities and the so-called immutable and ineluctable laws of neoliberal development in the context of gendered violence occurring within that peculiar neoliberal spatiality referred to here as the “maquila complex.”

**Keywords:** Border industrialization, Lukács, Marx, *Maquilapolis*, reification, resistance

Thus time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable 'things' (the reified, mechanically objectified 'performance' of the worker, wholly separate from [her] total human personality).  
—Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" (1923)

I make objects and to the factory managers I myself am only an object, a replaceable part of the production process... I don't want to be an object. I want to be a person.  
—Obrera/Promotora, *Maquilapolis: City of Factories* (2006)

## Introduction

In "Body Counts on the Mexico-U.S. Border," Alicia Schmidt Camacho persuasively illustrates the ways in which popular and academic discourses of gendered violence occurring along the Mexico and U.S. borderlands often rehearse reified narratives and images of female disempowerment and disposability. Such discourses and images of feminicide, writes Schmidt Camacho, often "consign the targets of feminicide to an unchanging death-in-life in ways that come dangerously close to rationalizing the violence against them" (24). As a result, proliferating images of violated bodies displace any political recognition of female subjectivity *in life*. Similarly, in "Seeing Through the Photographs of Borderlands (Dis)order," Sandra K. Soto maintains that graphic photographs accompanied by sensationalized and fetishized accounts of the victims of feminicide tend to precondition the viewers' conception of the living as already potentially dead. [1] In light of these observations, we may ask the following questions: To what extent do progressive discourses that attempt to document and critique social injustices fail to recognize and articulate female resistance to gendered violence? How do cultural producers attempt to represent female identity in the context of the gendered order of power operating in the borderlands? How do cultural producers craft narratives of personhood that avoid rehearsing reified narratives of female disempowerment and victimization? Last, what set of narrative strategies do writers and filmmakers use in order to avoid constructing reified accounts of the victims of feminicide and anti-female terror as disempowered, disposable subjects?

I am aware of the structural limitations and risks in offering what some might refer to as another well-intended, however problematic, "globalization discourse," one that Rosa-Linda Fregoso appropriately describes as the conflation of exploited female bodies with their extermination (7-8). [2] While the "exploitation-feminicide" discourse certainly falls short of taking into account the complex political and cultural forces underwriting gendered violence in the border region, we cannot disregard or underestimate the critical insights offered by cultural producers that have drawn and continue to draw critical connections between exploited labor and anti-female terror. [3] Given the complex challenges of representing the intersecting global and local forces underwriting gendered violence in the Mexico and U.S. borderlands, cultural producers—fiction writers, visual



and performance artists, journalists, and intellectuals, among others—have developed innovative and transformative modes of representation that avoid reified, sensationalist accounts of gendered, classed violence. However, in these representations of gendered violence, including graphic images of cadavers, disfigured and exploited bodies, cultural producers often encounter what I refer to as the specter of reification: that complex, ever-present narrative threshold in which reified discourses of disempowerment and non-agency complicate even the most critical and well-intended representations of anti-female terror. Drawing from Laura Gillman’s analysis of cinematic affect, which she refers to as haptic visuality, operating in Lourdes Portillo’s *Señorita Extraviada*, we would do well to consider the ways in which the artistic medium of documentary circumvents or avoids altogether reproducing “discursive systems that are in their own right laden with hegemonic ideologies of gender, race and class that caused the violence in the first place” (“Haptic Visuality” 143). [4] The following essay examines one such innovative and transformative mode of representation that effectively incites critical viewership and empathic engagement while drawing critical connections between neoliberal industrialization and anti-female terror occurring along the Tijuana/San Diego border region—*Maquilapolis: City of Factories* (2006), produced and directed by Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre. [5]

At the risk of committing what Fregoso calls the “synoptic gaze,” a critical approach that fails to take into account multiple intersecting social and cultural forces constituting the conditions for the proliferation of violence against women, I analyze *Maquilapolis: City of Factories* in a manner that reassesses the ways in which this important documentary film engages with the ever-present specter of reification that dangerously represents women as disempowered subjects who are incapable of forging resistance to complex systems of gendered violence in both global and local contexts. While offering a reading of the film through the framework of the “globalization discourse,” it is precisely in engaging with that discourse, that is, the processes of exploited labor, commodity fetishism, and social reification that *Maquilapolis* critically represents violence against women beyond immediate social appearances. [6] In taking this approach, I highlight the subtle, yet powerful, representational modes that interrogate the historically contingent nature of reified identities, subjectivities, and social relations existing within that peculiar spatiality that I refer to in this article as the “maquila complex.” I use the term “maquila complex” to denote the ways in which the film strategically configures the social and environmental ecologies of maquiladora-led industrialization in the border region, within both the assembly plants and the surrounding *colonias*, in which many of the maquila workers reside.

Through a combination of narrative modes of storytelling, including interpersonal video diary, the performative mode of narration, and symbolic appropriation, *Maquilapolis* represents

workingwomen along Mexico's northern border as critical voices that challenge naturalized, asymmetrical gender and class relations under maquiladora-led industrialization. Furthermore, *Maquilapolis* avoids the pitfalls of producing reified accounts that rehearse and reinscribe the loss of *Mexicana* subjectivity, including disempowerment, victimization, and patriarchal dependency. To illustrate this point, I turn to the Marxist concept of reification in order to analyze the complex challenges and contradictions associated with representing feminicide and anti-female terror. Reification offers a critical lens through which to examine how *Maquilapolis* contests the naturalizing of (uneven) social relations and challenges the so-called immutable and ineluctable laws of neoliberal development along the Tijuana-San Diego border region.

### 1. The Specter of Reification

Though Karl Marx never explicitly articulated a working definition of reification in *Capital*, Volume 1, he provided the groundwork for what would later become a theory of reification. In the well-known section from *Capital*, Volume 1, "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret," Marx illustrates the pervasive logic of the commodity form upon human consciousness and social relations. In particular, Marx draws out the ways in which the commodity form constitutes a cultural logic that extends beyond the specific confines of the production process. In relation to commodity production, Marx notes that the "mystery of the commodity form [...] consists in the fact that in it the social character of labor appears to them as an objective characteristic, a social natural quality [sic] of the labor product itself" (463). As Marx directs our attention to the way in which labor takes on a naturalized, objective character, seemingly emerging from the commodity in-and-of-itself, he also emphasizes how the objective character of labor tends to shape social relations in which the capitalist mode of production is the dominant form of social organization. Though the commodity form constitutes a historically specific definite social relation, it is precisely the way in which it takes on Marx's fantastic form of relations between things that the mediating force of the commodity form as a cultural logic comes to the fore. As Marx famously notes: "To the producers, the social relations connecting the labors of one individual with that of the rest appear not as direct social relations between individuals *at work*, but as what they really are, thinglike relations between persons and social relations between things" (463). It is this notion of the mediating force of the commodity form affecting social relations—and concomitantly social consciousness—that I put in relation to what Marx refers to as the "form of appearance," that is, the way in which the commodity form (logic) conceals larger, yet seemingly inconspicuous, uneven social relations under the inescapable laws of neoliberal development in the region. [7]

Georg Lukács' "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" remains one of the most influential discussions on reification. There, Lukács articulates the objective and subjective dimensions of reification as the structural limitation of bourgeois thinking, facilitated by the commodity form within an advanced capitalist mode of production and exchange. And while Lukács offers a provocative theory of the proletariat's privileged capacity to challenge capitalist social relations (deriving from having experienced the violent, structural constraints of the commodity form as exploited, alienated workers), it is his conceptualization of reification as the gradual immiseration of the workers' intellectual faculty, psychological interests, and libidinal investments and the way in which reification likewise, however differently, affects bourgeois consciousness and the bourgeoisie's ability to grasp social totality that warrants special attention in the present study. [8]

Under the structure of commodity relations, Lukács points to the growing trend towards the progressive reduction of the workers' qualitative human attributes. This reduction emerges from more intensified rationalization of the work process as "labor is progressively broken down into abstract, rational, specialized operations so that [...] work is reduced to mechanical repetition of a specialized set of actions" (88). In addition, Lukács offers insightful observations regarding the subjective experience of the principle of rationalization—the fragmentation of the production process that necessarily entails the abstract reduction of the worker, psychologically and intellectually. According to Lukács, the worker no longer appears as the "authentic master of the process," but rather constitutes a mechanical appendage to a seemingly autonomous production process. "As labor is progressively rationalized and mechanized," writes Lukács, "[the worker's] lack of will is reinforced by the way in which [his or her] activity becomes less and less active and more and more *contemplative*. The contemplative stance [...] transforms the basic categories of man's [*sic*] immediate attitude to the world" (89). Unlike its current normative use, Lukács' term "contemplative" refers to how the worker experiences the closed system of commodity production under the principle of rationalization, whereby the worker's creative, intellectual input potentially becomes a risk or impediment to efficient, calculable production. While the work-process appears to function autonomously and outside the control of individual workers under this process, collectively, the possibility of resistance *always already* exists for workers, a reality beautifully captured in the chapter "Somos Promotoras" in the film. Here, however, I want to emphasize the productive relationship between Lukács' notion of the reduction of the worker to an "isolated particle" and what Fredric Jameson refers to as the "reified atomization of capitalist life." Lukács writes:

[T]he objectification of the [workers'] labor-power into something opposed to their total personality [...] is now made into the permanent ineluctable reality of their daily life. Here, too, the personality can do no more than look helplessly while its own

existence is reduced to an isolated particle [...]. [M]echanization makes of them isolated abstract atoms whose work no longer brings them together directly or organically. (90)

In this passage, Lukács emphasizes the extent to which social totality, with respect to both labor and social relations, unravels under the objectification of the workers' labor-power. Contemplation here denotes the way in which human sensuousness (which consists of an array of human attributes, including feeling, thinking, wanting, loving, etc.) become increasingly devalued and closed off under rationalized, mechanized labor processes. It is in this respect that Marcial González's treatment of the Marxist concept of reification opens some intriguing methodological possibilities for analyzing the film's treatment of "reified atomization," particularly in terms of the naturalization of social inequalities and the ineluctable laws of modernization.

In an important study on the politics of form in Chicano novels, Marcial González offers a valuable reworking of the Marxist concept of reification, one that remains grounded in Marx's critique of commodity fetishism and objectification while also broadening the concept to include socio-political rationalities existing under contemporary capitalism. [9] In emphasizing the valuable contribution that reification as a critical perspective holds for helping us understand contemporary processes and forms of ossification, or thing-ification, González's reworking of the term also offers a critical framework for analyzing the various social and cultural *permutations* of reification, a reconceptualization of reification that points directly to socio-political rationalities by which and through which images and narratives of female disempowerment and disposability emerge. González writes:

[R]eification can also be understood in other related ways: the shallowness of perception; the naturalizing of social inequalities; the use of immutable or quantifiable laws to explain history; the categorizing of humans according to phenotype and anatomy; the fragmentation and compartmentalization of productive human activity—a development necessitated by the classifying and rationalizing tendencies of a capitalist mode of production; and, most importantly, the manner in which the logic of commodity fetishism has pervaded every aspect of social life under late capitalism. (10)

While *Maquilapolis* captures in graphic detail the exploitation of female labor and the destruction of the environment resulting from maquiladora export-production, the film emphasizes the ways in which cultural representations of gendered violence link with commodity fetishism and social reification. [10] González's description of reification offers a useful lens to examine how the narrative strategies deployed in the film engage with and, ultimately, resist reified accounts of female disposability, disempowerment, and dependency. In doing so, the film resists constructing reified accounts of female victimization (i.e., subjectivity only *in death*) by capturing and documenting female subjectivity as—to borrow from Schmidt Camacho—"contestation-in-struggle."

Furthermore, as discussed below, González's reworking of the Marxist concept of reification allows us to investigate the way in which the film complicates political discourses that often naturalize social inequalities and justify gender and class differences (and violence) as the inevitable outcome of neoliberal development in the region, particularly as an instance of the so-called immutable and ineluctable laws of historical development *qua* modernization.

In her critique of certain metropolitan discourses of femicide that rehearse—unwittingly in many cases—narratives of female disempowerment, disposability, and dependency, Alicia Schmidt Camacho demonstrates the critical value that the Marxist concept of reification holds for investigating explanatory discourses of femicide and anti-female terror. According to Schmidt Camacho, “reification [constitutes] a *technique of representation* linked to new modes of social control in which the image [or narrative] serves to make a given social order or cultural practice appear normal, inevitable, and fixed” (41; emphasis added). When we view reification as “a technique of representation,” particularly as a discursive form of cultural mediation that ascribes specific meanings to acts of gendered violence, we begin to understand the ways in which even the most well-intended representations of femicide and anti-female terror rehearse and reinscribe narratives of female disposability and consequently justify uneven relations of power as the inevitable outcome of industrialized modernization in the border region. However, if reification constitutes a technique of representation as Schmidt Camacho suggests, then we must also consider the ways in which cultural producers appropriate the semiotics of reification toward unraveling those very reified images and narratives. Put in a different manner, we would do well to consider the ways in which *Maquilapolis* constructs images and narratives of female subjectivity (as agential, empowered activists) linked to critical, artistic modes of representation that challenge and unsettle cultural practices and the established social order as natural, inevitable, and fixed. Before turning our attention to the narrative strategies of the film, let us briefly discuss the historical contexts of maquiladora-led industrialization along Mexico's northern border.

## 2. Maquiladoras and Border Industrialization

During the early 1940s, U.S. interests in acquiring Mexican labor would redefine U.S.-Mexico political, economic, and cultural relations. The acquisition of Mexican labor within a rapidly emergent U.S. Southwest agri-business established a lasting impact that would not only affect U.S.-Mexico economic relations, but also profoundly shape governmental and public discourses on immigration, border enforcement, and citizenship. With the U.S. mobilizing for war in Western Europe and the Pacific, coupled with severe labor shortages affecting growers, a bi-national agreement between Mexico and the U.S. resulted in the 1942 Bracero Program that permitted U.S.

growers to legally contract Mexican male labor in order to maintain U.S. agricultural productivity during and after the conclusion of the war.

In 1964, twenty-two years after its implementation, the Bracero Program terminated, resulting in approximately 200,000 unemployed braceros. As a way of confronting high unemployment and putting into productive activity this large reserve army of labor, the Mexican government implemented in 1965 the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) (Lugo 70). While the Mexican government lauded maquiladora assembly production as a successful model of economic development, critics from both sides of the border have pointed out a number of social and environmental disruptions associated with maquiladora-led industrialization, many of which are addressed in *Maquilapolis: City of Factories*.

We should note that throughout the 1980s, economic growth in Latin America relied heavily on external borrowing as a number of countries faced difficulty balancing budgets and paying off loans. [11] Increased capital diffusion in Latin America proved devastating for peasant societies engaged in modes of production oriented toward subsistence and full employment rather than capitalist modes of efficient output and maximum profit. As David G. Gutiérrez points out, “[t]he proliferation of maquiladora industries has not only added to the skyrocketing population of Mexico’s northern tier states, but has also contributed to the uprooting of women and men from traditional occupations and attachment to the land” (65). With the development of offshore manufacturing and the concomitant destruction of peasant communities via capitalization and enclosure, large populations faced limited means of subsistence, resulting in regional and long-distance migrations.

During the 1980s, multinational corporations established a major presence along Mexico’s northern border region. The devaluation of the Mexican peso yielded lower wages for workers and, therefore, a cheaper and more flexible labor force for multinationals. Moreover, the shift in the gender dimension of labor constituted one of the more significant and unforeseen transformations associated with the maquiladora model, particularly when put in the context of BIP initiatives. In the context of feminized labor, many women working in assembly-line production encountered various forms of physical and psychological abuse, including sexual harassment, forced sterilization, exposure to toxic chemicals, and long, arduous repetitive tasks re-shaping and de-forming the body to the point of perceived obsolescence and disposability. Labor exploitation in the maquiladora industry emerges from a complex, violent interaction of local and global forces where uneven relations of power between supervisors and assembly-line workers are grounded on culturally-defined differences based on gender, race, and class (Wright 49-59). Efforts by the State



and the maquiladora industry to survey and to discipline labor and working-communities residing in proximity to the plants form a crucial aspect of the unsettling relationship between political-economic techniques of neoliberal governing and violence against workingwomen in the border region. In order to examine the ways in which *Maquilapolis* represents this violent relationship, I turn to the Marxist concept of reification, which offers insightful analytic possibilities.

### 3. Narratives of Personhood

*Maquilapolis: City of Factories* represents the complex relationship between social reification and violence against poor, racialized maquila workers in Tijuana, Mexico during the post-NAFTA era. The film documents the relations of production and environmental degradation associated with maquiladora-led industrialization along the Tijuana/San Diego border region from the perspective of the maquila workers and activists (*obreras* and *promotoras*, respectively) actively engaged in bi-national and international movements for economic, political, and social justice under so-called neoliberal development in the region.

By offering up-close and intimate video diaries of their living and working conditions, Carmen Durán and Lourdes Luján document their struggles against maquiladora-labor exploitation and social domination. In the film, Carmen and Lourdes represent millions of *obreras* working for poverty wages in transnational factories globally. The conditions of labor documented in the film represent what Marx refers to as abstract, alienated labor—characterized effectively through the trope of mechanized, reiterative production whereby the laborer is disassociated from the products of her own labor.

Carmen and Lourdes' videographic diary constitutes an effective rhetorical strategy that captures the daily instantiations of ecological damage and gender violence. Through a complex, hybrid narrative form that oscillates among the expository, observational, and performative/poetic modes of documentary filmmaking, *Maquilapolis* offers a critical and transformative approach to documenting the ecological and sociological effects of maquiladora-led industrialization in the Tijuana border region.

Rather than representing the featured *maquila* workers (*obreras*) as passive, objectified narrative subjects—in which the expository mode of narration inadvertently speaks for the *obreras*, thus framing them as voiceless, yet hyper-visible, subjects—the film strategically uses a series of interpersonal video diaries produced by the workers/activists themselves. Through this strategic narrative approach, both Carmen Durán and Lourdes Luján come to articulate in their own voices the personal and collective struggles against labor abuses, against environmental destruction, and

against the widespread class oppression and patriarchy operative within maquiladora production. In order to delineate the way in which this hybrid mode of narration effectively resists reproducing reified accounts of female disempowerment and disposability, I focus on two distinct narrative approaches: interpersonal video dairies and choreographed performances. As I demonstrate below, a skillful narrative hybrid of the performative/poetic modes of documentary representation allows for symbolic appropriation of reification. Taking our cue from Lukács, it is precisely in the “reified, mechanically objectified ‘performance’ of the worker” that the film begins to demystify the mysterious, concealing power of reification.

In considering the film’s modes of narration, I turn to Bill Nichols’ conceptual outline of key narrative conventions of documentary filmmaking. Nichols identifies six modes of documentary narration, of which the expository, the observational, and the performative/poetic are relevant to our discussion of the film. The “voice of God” or voiceover commentary approach characterizes the *expository mode*. Other conventions associated with the expository mode include verbal commentary with visual accompaniment, which serves to provide a counterpoint to oral narration and evidentiary argumentation. This mode is most often associated with documentary film in general. The *observational mode* is characterized by the “window on the world” narration in which filmmakers observe moments of the social world as they occur. In doing so, the filmmakers attempt to capture the energy and motion of social activity. Typically this mode does not employ voiceover, non-diegetic sound, interviews, or performance for spectators for the audience. As a purely observational approach, this mode attempts to observe social action and to allow viewers to infer their own conclusions. In the *performative mode*, the filmmaker may emerge as a participant. More importantly, this mode highlights the subjective or expressive aspect of the filmmaker’s own involvement with the subject matter of the film (e.g., the subjective aspect of the filmmaker’s involvement with the narrative construction of the film, particularly Carmen’s videography in *Maquilapolis*, which offers both a personal and communitarian perspective unique to workingwomen in the region). Stressing tone and mood, this mode attempts to capture the specificities of personal experience in order to provide a more nuanced and complex articulation of more general social and historical processes at work. We should note that the performative mode may combine elements of various documentary modes—in this case the poetic mode—in order to draw connections between subjective, experiential knowledge and the more general understandings of society and the world. The *poetic mode*, like the performative, strives for subjective expression by using lyrical and rhythmic formal elements in order to capture a more experiential perspective.

While *Maquilapolis* does not resemble experimental or avant-garde film, it does emphasize symbolic association as well as tonal and rhythmic qualities, particularly when combined with the

performative mode. [12] The performative mode of documentary filmmaking “emphasizes the subjective or expressive aspect of the filmmaker’s own involvement with a subject [which] rejects notions of [objective certitude] in favor of evocation and effect” (Nichols, *Introduction* 32). Although the performative mode of documentary narration constitutes arguably the most innovative approach to addressing reification, we must also attend to the ways in which the film reconfigures the expository and observational modes of narration, a strategic approach that likewise represents the agential and empowered subjectivity of workingwomen within maquiladora production.

The opening scene from *Maquilapolis* combines the observational and participatory modes of narration, an approach that offers a window to the world of maquiladora production as it captures the sense of the social and political situation of the principle videographer, Carmen Durán. Prior to the opening credits, Carmen offers an “underground shot” of the interior of an unidentified maquila, which includes the sight and sounds of production machinery, the *obreras* at work along the assembly-line, and the well-kept yet grey, austere environs of the shop floor. Interestingly, the filmmakers deliberately and strategically construct a captivating narrative by allowing the viewer an unauthorized look into a maquila plant. While the scene lasts only several seconds, offering little indication of exploited feminized labor, it nonetheless symbolically represents an important, however subtle, act of resistance—one that we might refer to as a clandestine, videographic performance.

In capturing on film the interior space of a maquila plant, Carmen offers an insightful and poignant narrative of her arrival to Tijuana: “My name is Carmen Durán. I am a maquiladora worker. I have worked in nine assembly plants. I was 13 years old when I arrived in Tijuana. I was alone here [...] and I decided to stay” (*Maquilapolis*). Immediately, the film begins by constructing what Schmidt Camacho refers to as “narratives of personhood” that unsettle cosmopolitan discourses of disempowerment and disposability. [13] If in fact, as Schmidt Camacho suggests, “the obrera represents zero degree subjectivity tied to the undifferentiated violence and tedium of the border space, a subjectivity that can only be recuperated in death” (25), then we must consider the way in which Carmen’s videographic performance begins to articulate greater subjectivity through “contestation-in-struggle.” It is in this subtle, yet powerfully suggestive narrative that issues of dispossession, relocation, and re-settlement emerge. In offering an account of her present working condition, Carmen’s personal narrative suggests important questions related to the historical conditions that make possible dispossession, migration, and long-term resettlement, including the following: From where did she migrate—can we assume a singular point of departure? What constitutes “home” for Carmen—might we perceive Tijuana as her “home”? Does Tijuana constitute an unhomey site? [14] Under what material conditions was she compelled to migrate to

Tijuana? Why at age thirteen? To what extent do these relocations speak of labor insecurity and the devaluation of women assembly-line workers of both mass and flexible systems of production?

State and corporate discourses of socio-economic development (i.e., neoliberal modernization) often gloss over such personal accounts of proletarianized labor that speak to experiential knowledge of the limitations and dangers associated with maquiladora-led industrialization in the border region. It is precisely the way in which *Maquilapolis* constructs a highly personal yet community-oriented narrative that the film draws critical connections between local and global forces underwriting gendered, class violence within that peculiar neoliberal spatiality I refer to as the maquila complex.

Immediately following the opening credits, Carmen captures on film the intimate spaces of her home where viewers are introduced to her son, whose charming curiosity about the hand-held camera offers a momentary relief, just as it offers a personal account of everyday life at home, from the seriousness and gravity of the film's critical content. In capturing the ingenuity of making do with limited resources without falling prey to romantic idealizations of the working poor, Carmen offers a glimpse of what daily life holds for those residing within the maquila complex. In presenting herself as a working single mother of three young children, Carmen disrupts State-sponsored discourses of blame, most notably the *maqui-locas* discourse, whereby the victims of feminicide are presumed to live a "double life" or *una vida doble* characterized by a life of work during the day and of prostitution or sexual self-objectification at night. Yet, we must be careful not to project this image of mother and children in heteronormative terms, as such an image can be easily appropriated to maintain State-sponsored claims about appropriate female conduct, ones predicated upon patriarchal and heterosexual notions of domestic and public female behavior and display. In her insightful analysis of the "Tres Marías Syndrome," Alicia Gaspar de Alba informs us of the ways in which patriarchy frames the *obrero* as the very source of feminicide. The *maqui-loca* figure, as Gaspar de Alba points out, discursively transfigures or, more precisely, transmogrifies workingwomen into independent, transgressive women afflicted by "close contact with the libertine ways of *el norte*" (80). In associating so-called female independence (*qua* promiscuity) with "First World" moral depravity, the *maqui-locas* discourse insidiously maintains a culture of impunity that rehearses critiques of globalization in the service of reproducing an ethic of appropriate female conduct. While the film may initially appear to rehearse notions of heteronormative conduct with images of mother and children in domestic context, ultimately the film portrays workingwomen as agential and empowered subjects who perform multiple, complex roles as workers, activists, educators, documentarians, caretakers, and heads of household.

Seconds later, Carmen takes us on an excursion into her neighborhood, or *colonia*, where the struggles of daily life are immediately captured on film as she tracks the movement of a dented, worn pickup truck (emblazoned with the words “Policía”) struggling along a rutted, unpaved road. Shortly afterward, Carmen offers a rather stunning panoramic view of her neighborhood, *Lagunitas*, a maquila plant overlooking the makeshift houses and dirt roads of the shantytown below. From a lower angle, in closer proximity to the factory shot in the previous segment, the camera zooms in on a Sony plant, again perched high on the hilltop, securely fortified, in panoptic view. While this segment constitutes only a fraction of her entire video diary, it nonetheless provides a stunning cartography of uneven social relations associated with maquiladora-led industrialization in this particular border region. In focusing on Carmen’s documentary depiction of the social ramifications of environmental degradation, I draw critical connections between narratives of personhood and socio-political abandonment. While some viewers may too easily interpret the setting as mere background, wherein people and objects are simply contained or confined within this specific social environment, others may see the way in which Carmen’s videography brings into relief this peculiar spatial organization (or spatiality) that constitutes and sustains uneven relations of power, a subtle, yet powerful visual account that situates the buildings, homes, and people—in short, infrastructure—at the center of her narrative. As the shiny, modernized architectural structures adorned with lush green lawns and spacious parking lots (equipped, of course, with an army of well-trained guards and other security technologies) tell a story of unimpeded economic development in the region, the lived experiences of those surviving in the shantytowns below convey quite a different account.

Though Achille Mbembe’s critique of contemporary colonial occupation in “Necropolitics” may appear unrelated and therefore unsuited for an analysis of *Maquilapolis*, his discussion of vertical sovereignty and territorial fragmentation nonetheless proves instructive when thinking about the ways in which the “natural” environment (including waterways, hilltops, and valleys) are politically transformed and, more importantly, transfigured in the film into nodes or “outposts” of discipline and containment. Mbembe suggests that “high ground offers strategic assets not found in valleys (effectiveness of sight, self-protection, panoptic fortification that generates gazes to many different ends)” (28). However subtle and unassuming, I find most impressive the way in which Carmen captures on film the verticality of power and territorial fragmentation represented in the spatial juxtaposition between the maquila plants and the *colonias*. In capturing the ways in which this particular spatiality of power is expressed through mechanisms of vertical sovereignty and territorial fragmentation, the scene draws critical connections between the maquila complex (as a specific neoliberal spatiality) and political abandonment. It is in the context of political abandonment, however, that the notion of restricted sense (or sensuousness) offers insights into

the ways in which the *obreras* and *promotoras* featured in the film not only articulate narratives of resistance to neoliberal developmental policy, but, equally important, illustrate how “contestation-in-struggle” constitutes a lived process of reification and therefore the material and discursive condition upon which that very resistance emerges.

#### 4. Human Sensuousness

In revisiting Marx’s theory of the sensuous, political economist Massimo De Angelis’ discussion of commodity fetishism offers some interesting and provocative insights for thinking about the relationship between human sensuousness, abstract labor, and reification. His analysis of Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism highlights two key concepts developed in *Capital*, Volume 1: commodity fetishism and the “form of appearance” of social relations under capitalism. In an excellent essay on the often-concealed relationship between commodity fetishism and social relations, De Angelis offers an insightful discussion on the distinctions and connections between actually existing forms of labor and the form labor appears to take. In revisiting Marx’s concept of human sensuousness, De Angelis suggests that Marx’s notion helps to distinguish real relations of production from so-called “mechanistic and economic approaches” such that it brings to the fore “the question of *praxis* and human emancipation” (7). De Angelis points out that the concept of the sensuous in Marx is a confirmation of human reality grounded in what Lukács refers as the totality of historically-determined social relations. Human sensuousness, Marx reminds us, “come[s] into being only through the existence of their *objects*, through *humanized* nature” (De Angelis 8).

The significance of human sensuousness is an important, but perhaps underappreciated, conception of social relations in Marxist scholarship. As De Angelis contends:

[T]he “sensuous” is in Marx the [...] confirmation of “human reality” and manifests itself in a plurality of ways: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, contemplating, wanting, acting, loving [...]. What makes an individual human is what makes an individual a sensuous-being, not only a being with senses, but a being able to act upon these senses, to shape them, to educate them, to refine them. (7-8)

While this notion of the sensuous human experience in the context of class struggle may appear rather commonsensical and nostalgic, by situating Marx’s concept of sensuousness in relation to social constraint and restricted sense, De Angelis offers a valuable perspective through which to discuss how the film performs restricted sense as a radical critique of the processes of reification. Material need and necessity, De Angelis argues, can impose a determining influence upon human sensuousness and the way in which social subjects come to experience the totality of their personal and collective social existence. It is in this context that De Angelis introduces the idea of



social constraint in developing a conceptual understanding of “restricted sense” or “restricted sensuousness.” If restricted sense or sensuousness emerges from social constraint, then we must attend to how reification emerges from conditions of socio-economic constraint.

From the perspective of Capital, labor is sensuous-less, external objectivity to be deployed and appropriated toward generating ever-greater surplus value and profit. Experienced through seemingly autonomous, de-personalized productive technologies and procedures, the reiterative movements of assembly-line production emerge as de-humanizing activity. Yet, from the perspective of the workers, their activity—however de-humanizing and constrained—is never entirely sensuous-less; it is an experiential contradiction, or, as De Angelis suggests, a fundamental contradiction “between an activity which carries the burden of a restricted sensuousness and the reality of sensuous needs, sensuous desires, and sensuous aspirations” (11). Yet, how is the question of commodity fetishism and reification relevant to this analysis of the film? It is relevant to the extent that it offers a critical lens for viewing capitalist social relations and the way these relations are comprehended and acted upon.

Rather than situating the abstract simply in terms of false consciousness, the abstract must be understood as constituting a sensuous activity existing within socio-economic constraint. Restricted sense under conditions of socio-economic constraint nevertheless constitutes a lived experience, a concrete experience—that is, a sensuous experience. The commodity form, in other words, is not simply an external process of objectification, but rather is a *living process* of being transformed into objectified subjectivities (13). Productive activity presents itself for the worker as a *lived process of reification* within the rationalized workspace of maquila production. From this perspective, we come to understand how the abstract (e.g. abstract labor) indicates a sensuous activity, however contemplative; to borrow from Lukács, the worker stands in relation to the principle of rationalization. Even under such conditions of constraint, sensuous activity nonetheless constitutes “a lived experience in which human sensibility is confined and restricted to one dominant character (9)—abstract labor. Despite this reductive process that makes possible images and narratives of female obsolescence and disposability, social contradiction complicates the notion of reification as “locked into a prison house” (González 12) with no possibility of moving beyond or escaping reification. [15] Put differently, it is precisely through contradiction (and the symbolic appropriation of that contradiction) that a critique of reification takes form in the film. If looking at labor from the perspective of restricted sensuousness and social contradiction entails acknowledging the lived experience of the worker as consciously experienced alienation and abstraction, then I propose looking at the ways in which the film literally takes up this lived experience through performance. To illustrate this point, let us turn to the chapter “Somos Promotoras.”

In “Somos Promotras,” directors Funari and De La Torre draw particular attention to the seemingly instrumental and mundane uniforms worn by the maquila workers, particularly the *obreras* of assembly-line production. Traveling by an industrial park in the Otay Mesa region of the border, Carmen lectures to a van full of activists about the color-coded scheme of the smocks worn by maquila workers. As a group of workers enters the factory, Carmen informs her audience that the color of the smock identifies your rank and “place” in the factory: “They see your color and they know who you are: group leader, supervisor, or just an operator” (*Maquilapolis*). As the scene highlights the significance of the color scheme by acknowledging each worker’s position and status within the maquila plant, it also appears to establish the subjectivity of the workers as abstract, reified labor. Even in its heterogeneity (i.e. group leaders, supervisors, operators) the images of workers moving in and out of the maquila plant appear to frame the workers through a kind of standardized, universal, or identical imagery. This subtle yet peculiar image of homogenous labor effectively sets up a later (and significantly related) scene in which the filmmakers appropriate the very color-coded smocks used in the factory in order to illustrate the ways in which this scheme not only demarcates and discursively encloses the subject of maquila labor as abstract, objectified “things” of maquila production, but also signals organizational efficiency and calculability. And while the film certainly engages with the commodity logic of neoliberal industrialization, arguably to the point of rehearsing and therefore reproducing that very logic, the color-coded smock scene performs a transformative function in indicating the degree to which sensuous human productivity becomes reduced to a restrictive and reductive form of being, signified in the figure of the expendable, disposable *obrero*. My objective, however, is to illustrate the ways in which the filmmakers, both the directors and *obreras/promotoras*, establish the importance of the color-coded smocks that sets up the following scene that I believe constitutes one of the most artistically rendered forms of radical critique and resistance to reification in the film.

In the following scene, Funari and De La Torre carefully position a set of individual smocks of varying colors in and around various parts of downtown Juárez and the surrounding *colonias* located in proximity to the maquila plants. For example, the filmmakers place a blue smock upon a wire hanger perched high above an overpass located near a maquila plant. As the blue smock sways to a mild breeze upon the overpass, the voice of an *obrero* interrupts this seemingly tranquil and innocent reverie: “I am from the state of Michoacán. There are no jobs there like we have here” (*Maquilapolis*). Subsequent images of different color-coded smocks run in succession as the voices—and only the voices—of *obreras* accompany each of the different smocks on display: “I am from Guadalajara, Jalisco;” “I am from Sola de Vega, Oaxaca;” “I am from Mazatlán;” “I was born in Sinaloa” (*Maquilapolis*).

In their apparent simplicity and directness, these five-second vignettes appear to offer little by way of radical critique. Some may argue that this sequence of image and voice unwittingly rehearses and reinscribes the very structure of domination that the film intends to critique. On the contrary, I suggest that the scene carefully deconstructs the processes of abstraction and reification by appropriating the very objects and symbols of abstract, reified labor. In doing so, this scene of carefully juxtaposed image and voice unmoors the mysterious power of the color-coded smocks. While the scene remarkably places the smocks in visual relief it also offers a symbolic index of the extent to which erased subjectivity is figuratively linked to the color-coded smocks. By appropriating the very symbols of abstract, reified labor, and the power that it holds in constructing and shaping discourses of female identity and subjectivity within and outside of the factory, the scene appropriately identifies workingwomen of neoliberal industrialization as agential, influential mediators of socio-economic development in the region. The essence of Capital's power lies in its ability to operate reclusively as a natural, universal organizing principle. If the commodity-form and reification directly shape individual and collective identity and subjectivity, then we would do well to investigate the ways in which the film represents such commodified, reified relations through images of subjectified commodities and objectified individuals.

In a segment from "Bienvenidos a Tijuana," which I refer to as the "flyback" scene, the film beautifully captures, through a hybrid narrative style—combining the performative and expository modes—the lived process of social constraint and reification. In analyzing this scene, I consider the ways in which the filmmakers come to represent social constraint, restricted sensuousness, and abstract, reified labor through narrative juxtaposition. For those familiar with the film, recall the use of the expository mode as the voice-over narration offers a brief history of the emergence of the maquiladora industry since the implementation of BIP. Continuing with the expository narrative mode, the camera then focuses on an overpass sign that reads: "Tijuana, la Capital Mundial de la Television" or "Tijuana, World Capital of the Television."

The narrative device of visual juxtaposition again draws our attention to the way in which this scene dramatizes the objectification of individual subjects, or what we might refer to as objectified labor, a position which assumes a contemplative stance in which the object produced and the producer of the object conflate into a singular form, i.e., the commodity. Here, the "flyback" (television part) and the worker (Carmen) are literally and figuratively put into relation with one another in such manner that the distinction melts into thin air. This performative sequence begins innocently enough with a television rotating on top of a draped circular table. However, as we view the back of the television, the internal parts of the television immediately come into focus. It is at this moment that the commodity as *product* and the commodity as *laborer* figuratively become indistinguishable. And yet, as Carmen rotates on the display turntable, the internal (and typically

concealed) parts that make up the television come into full view with the “flyback” held in Carmen’s hands. It is also at this moment that the fusion (or conflation) of the object of labor and the objectified laborer takes place, that is to say, the objects of production are revealed undifferentiated upon the rotating table display.

In “Bienvenidos a Tijuana,” the filmmakers offer an aerial view of ten *maquila obreras* in straight line performing the tasks of assembly-line production in synchronous, mechanical efficiency. The soundtrack constructs a pulsating rhythmic drone that marks a distinctive sonic hybrid between early twentieth-century, Fordist production and twenty-first century, advanced, automated production. As the camera slowly makes its way toward a frontal view of the *obreras*, close-up shots of arms and hands performing the repeating, yet fluid motion of the assembly-line process dominate the screen. The performance draws to a close as the *obreras* conclude the assembly process, drawing fistful hands to their sides, bodies upright, faces expressionless—mechanical.

This carefully constructed performance represents not only a beautifully rendered enactment of the repetitive, mechanical motion of assembly-line work, but also the ways in which abstract, reified labor extends beyond the confines of the shop floor. That the performance is carefully placed in an open valley outside and in front of the maquila plant (situated in the background) deserves greater attention in at least two ways. First, the visual and spatial organization consisting of laboring bodies, open land, and factory (*mise-en-scène*) beautifully captures that specific topography of power alluded to earlier in our discussion of vertical sovereignty and territorial fragmentation. The image of the *obreras*’ mechanical movement and posture in relation to the plant located above in the distance illustrates the uneven and violent relations of power inscribed and embedded in the visual landscape. Second, the performance illustrates what Marx refers to as human labor power revealed in the specific form of its expenditure. In this performance, the film brings to our attention the actual reifying process of abstract labor. Drawing from De Angelis’ analytic insight, human activity presents itself as a *lived process of reification* as these seemingly contemplative, mechanical appendages of capitalist production enact restricted sensuousness in “clashing opposition with the humanity of the subjects as sensuous beings” (13).

## Conclusion

Though it is difficult to argue that the film offers a representational account of an alternative socio-economic totality with its own systems and institutions, it certainly offers, as Lisa Lowe might suggest, an alternative “spatial imaginary” that performs “a fiction of community” and that

effectively “comments upon the capitalist social relations that exist, defamiliarizing those social relations as artificial, as relations that could be transformed through political action” (11-12). The process of defamiliarization via the appropriation of the semiotics of reification thus becomes a vital political action in the film, one that underscores the violent artificiality of social relations under maquiladora-led industrialization along the Tijuana borderlands. Throughout the film, Carmen, Lourdes, and their compañeras-in-solidarity (*promotoras*) represent the remarkable power and efficacy of women’s struggles against local and global structures and institutions of gendered violence and class oppression operating under neoliberal restructuring along the borderlands. In documenting the struggles for fair labor practices, for greater environmental protection, and for greater dignity for all workers in the region, Carmen and Lourdes emerge as full, complex individuals-in-community whose subjectivity materializes *in life*, that is, through “contestation-in-struggle.” The *obreras* and *promotoras* fighting for socio-economic justice constitute a growing number of “non-State actors operating as a transnational advocacy network” that, as Lisa Lowe suggests, “target the governmentality—the larger set of social disciplines that includes state institutions, corporate industry, media discourse, border policing, and social norms themselves—that results in the treatment of the border[lands] as a zone of disposable rights” (18).

While the film’s critical representation of violence against women constitutes an important move toward fostering greater social awareness of gendered violence in the borderlands for English speaking audiences, filmmakers nonetheless encounter what I refer to as the specter of reification. The difficulties that arise from the apparent impossibility of transcending reified images and narratives of victimhood, disempowerment, and loss of subjectivity have motivated cultural producers to create innovative and transformative modes of representation. In deploying a set of transformative narrative strategies, including interpersonal videography, innovative approaches to modes of documentary filmmaking, and symbolic appropriation, *Maquilapolis* achieves a level of rhetorical efficacy that directs our attention to the daily instantiations of State-sponsored violence. *Maquilapolis*, like Lourdes Portillo’s *Señorita Extraviada*, a critically acclaimed and influential documentary that investigates the intersecting political, economic, and social forces reproducing violence against women in Ciudad Juárez, successfully avoids rehearsing reified narratives of disempowerment by virtue of emphasizing “radicalization rather than victimization,” forged by a skillfully rendered filmic narrative that “gives voice to women’s agency” (Fregoso 26). Last, in the midst of gendered, classed violence and grassroots contestations against patriarchy and neoliberal restructuring, the film offers a passionate and thoughtful counter-narrative that foregrounds the specificities of sensual, corporeal labor exploitation, environmental racism, and socio-political abandonment of those deemed “free” to work and reside within the maquila complex.

## Endnotes

[1] See Sandra K. Soto "Seeing Through Photographs of Borderlands (Dis)order." *Latino Studies* 5 (2007). On this point, Soto writes, "the photographs of people who are (still) alive are in many ways more haunting than those of corpses; images of living people are images of people who are not yet dead" (424).

[2] "The Maquila Complex" draws from Rosa-Linda Fregoso's critique of the interpretive discourses of femicide and disappearance, in particular two dominant discourses which we may refer to as "discourses of morality" and "discourses of globalization." While the former discourse imposes a moral interpretation that blames the victims for their deaths due to the apparent violation of traditional, patriarchal gender forms of conduct and behavior, the latter constitutes a unifying trope for explaining the brutal murders that, as Fregoso reminds us, represents a gross conflation of exploited gendered bodies with their extermination. And while Fregoso's insightful critique of these two dominant narratives offers an approach that brings into critical focus the ways in which these dominant discourses rehearse and re-inscribe the very structure of power undergirding violence against women, I fear that such an approach potentially underestimates the extent to which the intersecting forces of economic globalization and state sovereignty reproduce in complex ways the conditions of possibility of violence against mostly racialized, poor women in the U.S.-Mexico border region.

[3] See Jane Caputi and Diana E. H. Russell "Femicide: Sexist Terrorism against Women," in *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing* (New York: Twayne, 1992) on the definition of anti-female terror. Caputi and Russell define anti-female terror as follows: "Femicide is on the extreme end of the continuum of anti-female terror that includes a wide variety of verbal and physical abuse such as rape, torture, sexual slavery (particularly prostitution), incestuous and extra familial child sexual abuse, physical and emotional battery, sexual harassment (on the phone, in the streets, at the office, and in the classroom), genital mutilation (clitoridectomies, excision, infibulations), unnecessary gynecological operations (gratuitous hysterectomies), forced heterosexuality, forced sterilization, forced motherhood (by criminalizing contraception and abortion), psychosurgery, denial of food to women in some cultures, cosmetic surgery and other mutilations in the name of beautifications. Whenever these forms of terrorism result in death, they become femicide" (15).

[4] In "Haptic Visuality in Lourdes Portillo's *Señorita Extraviada*: Towards an Affective Activism" published in this volume, Laura Gillman reminds us of the challenges facing cultural producers concerned with provoking empathic engagement. As Gillman astutely asks, how might cultural producers, particularly documentary filmmakers, construct representational structures capable of engendering viewer empathy? Another consideration is the extent to which cultural producers are capable of inciting critical awareness and emphatic engagement outside of entrenched hegemonic systems. On this Gillman writes, "The remote audiences in the United States and Europe would be composed of people whose everyday lives and concerns are disconnected from the atrocities [of gendered violence, whether it be femicide or anti-female terror], and additionally, whose own identity statuses as citizens of countries benefitting from a neoliberal logic might lead them to be more susceptible to believing the causes supplied by state officials within the media footage" (143).

[5] While new aspects of globalization have emerged with neoliberalism since the early 1970s, globalization and neoliberalism denote two distinct, however related, sets of political-economic mechanisms. Globalization refers to the centuries-old process of the internationalization of the world economy marked by exploitation, international expansionism, and political intrigue. Neoliberalism, in contrast, refers to new (de)regulations and rules of contemporary capitalism that pervade every aspect of socio-economic life, including an ethos of individual prudentialism captured in discourses of hyper-individualism, individual responsabilization, and, for the marginalized, discourses of personal (but certainly not collective or social) blame and punish. My use of the term "neoliberalism" denotes the political economy of the Mexico and U.S. border since the implementation of NAFTA in 1994. Earlier forms of neoliberalism along Mexico's northern border, most notably Ciudad Juárez, however, appeared in 1965 with the implementation of the Border Industrial Program (BIP).

[6] See Steven Volk and Marian Schlotterbeck "Gender, Order, and Femicide: Reading the Popular Culture of Murder in Ciudad Juárez," in *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010). As Volk and Schlotterbeck suggest, "The exploitation of gendered bodies cannot adequately explain the murder of gendered bodies. Nevertheless, the murder cannot be understood without



recognizing the specific ways that *maquila* development has shaped both the political and sexual economy of the border” (28).

[7] In *Capital*, Volume 1, Marx offers the basic elements for a theory of reification in the well-known section from Chapter 1, “The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret.” Marx highlights two related aspects of commodity fetishism relevant to our discussion of reification. First, Marx identifies the commodity-form as a mysterious social configuration or arrangement that appears in objective form severed from its historically determined and socially constructed nature. It is precisely in the form of its appearance that the commodity inverts the real social character out of which the commodity is produced and exchanged in the market. Second, Marx notes the way in which the commodity-form performs, if you will, a seemingly *a priori* ontology in which the value of the commodity appears as that which is inherent and intrinsic to the commodity itself. Consequently, emerging from this peculiar system of valuation, the commodity-form progressively mediates relations among producers, concealing those particular and unique forms of human expenditure, including “human sensuousness” that Massimo De Angelis discusses in his work on commodity fetishism, required to produce commodities for exchange and consumption on the market.

[8] See Fredric Jameson “Commodification.” *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009). Jameson suggests that “the effect of reification on the bourgeoisie [...] lies in the *constriction* of the idea and the experience of society visible in the various specializations and disciplines” (263, emphasis added). As a result of this ideological (en)closure, bourgeoisie consciousness, in general, fails to grasp the totality of social relations under advanced capitalism and “from experiencing the blinding reality of class struggle” (263). Moreover, there exists an interesting connection between the notion of “constriction” alluded to above and De Angelis’ discussion of “restricted sense,” a connection that marks the way in which the proletariat, however restricted in the sense of experiencing the totality of the production process and social relations, is endowed with the structural possibility of grasping social totality. On the structural possibility of the proletariat overcoming the limits of the commodity-form and reification, Jameson writes: “The force that was a limitation for those who merely profit from and live off social production without themselves engaging in it will be the source of truth for the exploited producers themselves. In this way Lukács rejoins the Hegel of the Master/Slave dialectic, for whom ultimately the Master is abandoned to sterile enjoyment, while the Slave’s praxis is also productive of truth itself” (263-264).

[9] Rosemary Hennessy and Moishe Postone claim that reification constitutes “a logic that binds ways of knowing and forms of identity.” And as a dominant cultural logic, reification “remain[s] bound to the forms of appearance of capitalist social relations, thereby hypostatizing or naturalizing those social relations,” which over time, according to Marx, gains an objective reality (qtd. in González, 10-11).

[10] In *Chicano Novels and the Politics of Form*, I find González’s discussion of the structural embeddedness and pervasiveness of reification especially relevant to our discussion of the film, particularly as it relates to the way in which reification operates beyond the confines of the *maquila* work floor. “Reification,” writes González, “is not a problem of poor intelligence or lack of education [...]. Rather, reification is historically, socially, and materially based; it stems from the experience of living in a social system based on commodity production and exchange” (10-11).

[11] Under increasing import-substitution industrialization crises, political and economic elites eventually turned toward neoliberal economic policies and away from Keynesian welfare-state policies designed to protect underprivileged groups and domestic producers. Arguably, since the mid-1960s, and certainly since the early 1970s, transnational corporations operating in manufacturing and agriculture have played a significant role in production processes and rationalization, not to mention global consumption patterns, of which maquiladora assembly production plays a significant role since the implementation of BIP and continuing through the post-NAFTA era.

[12] See “Documentary Modes of Representation” from *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) and “How Can We Define Documentary Film?” from *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

[13] See Alice Driver’s “Risks, Challenges and Ethics of Representing Femicide: A Comparative Analysis of Sergio Gonzalez Rodriguez’ *Huesos en el desierto* and Roberto Bolano’s *2666*” published in this volume. Driver discusses the ever-present limitations and dangers associated with representing gendered violence (what I refer to in my article as “the specter of reification”) and the ethical implications of the aesthetic

choices surrounding such representations. Drawing from Judith Butler, the practice of “framing of images” that attempts to achieve some balance between representing graphic violence and recounting the lives of the victims constitutes an approach that ultimately focuses on the humanity and full subjectivity of the victims of femicide and anti-female terror.

[14] See José David Saldívar *Border Matters: Remapping Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). While addressing the specific historical context of Central American migrations during the civil wars of the 1980s, Saldívar’s “On the Bad Edge of *La Frontera*” offers some insightful analytic possibilities for thinking about the ways in which maquiladora operators under rationalized production processes experience permanent liminality, particularly for those workers migrating from rural areas of southern and central Mexico. “Liminal” denotes, among other things, (1) a threshold or edge, (2) of, relating to, or being in an intermediate state, phase, or condition, and (3) a transitional or indeterminate state between culturally defined stages of life, e.g., in a state of ritual passage. As Pérez Firmat suggests, “liminality should be looked upon not only as a transition between states but as a state in itself, for there exist individuals, groups, or social categories for which the ‘liminal’ moment turns into a permanent condition” (qtd. in Saldívar, 98). What is taken to be simply a transitory or temporary state or condition becomes, over time, the norm.

[15] According to Marcial González, there always exists the possibility of resisting reification within the cultural imaginary, however incomplete or partial. As González suggests, “The centrality of contradiction in the social realities that inform Chicano subjectivity contributes to the impossibility of complete reification in Chicano novels. Complete reification would mean the absence of *contradiction*” (12, emphasis added). Again, I want to stress the way in which restricted sensuousness emerges as a *lived process* of reification.

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