

In this regime all values other than exchange melt into the air. Does the *deshechable* (garbage) simply extend the logic of globalization until it reaches the end of human history?

—Jean Franco, *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City*

## **BODY COUNTS ON THE MEXICO-U.S. BORDER: Femicidio, Reification, and the Theft of Mexicana Subjectivity**

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*Since 1993, residents from the colonias and feminist activists of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, have denounced a campaign of femicidio in the border city that has rendered poor migrant women vulnerable to gender violence. Their justice movement has mobilized international campaigns for solidarity in order to bring pressure on the Mexican government to enforce Mexican women's civil and human rights. The essay examines the political linkages between local and international groups to address how the distinct elements of the movement represent the targets of the femicidio and interpret the meanings of the crimes. Using the Marxist concept of reification, the essay argues that international solidarity campaigns are undermined by their inability to displace, or their collusion with, dominant constructions of poor Mexican women as bodies made for violence. Common uses of the cadaver as a signifier for the crimes have a demobilizing effect on the justice movement, forestalling the political work of mourning the dead and disappeared as subjects with rights.*

This essay reflects on the ethical and political vacuum opened up by the ongoing brutalization and murder of subaltern Mexican girls and women in the northern border region. The evident refusal of the Mexican government and much of civil society to provide even the most minimal protections to victims signifies a collapse of law or its replacement with new forms of social control that render racialized migrant women vulnerable to torture, sexual abuse, murder, and disappearance. The eleven-year *feminicidio* in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua marks a campaign of gender terror that alternately mimics the repressive campaigns of Latin American “dirty wars” and the seemingly irrational codes of urban violence and serial killing (Fregoso 2003; Reguillo-Cruz 2002). Since 1993, some 370 women have been murdered in Chihuahua City and Ciudad Juárez, of which approximately 137 were sexually assaulted prior to their deaths (Amnesty International 2003).<sup>1</sup> Of these, 100 fit a pattern of serial killings. Approximately 75 of the bodies have not been identified or claimed. The mothers’ organization *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa* (Bring Our Daughters Home) estimates that in addition to the killings, 600 women have disappeared from the Juárez/Chihuahua metropolitan areas (Nuestras Hijas 2003). The victims of these crimes have been poor girls and women from the *colonias*, recent migrants to the border city from rural towns in Mexico’s interior.<sup>2</sup> I will refer to them as *pobladoras* and *obreras*.

Current responses to globalization have taken up the *feminicidio* as a symptom of “the production of ‘human waste’ or more precisely, wasted lives, the ‘superfluous’ populations of migrants, refugees and other outcasts—an inevitable outcome of modernization” (Bauman 2004). The insertion of the murdered *pobladoras* of Juárez into this generic account of wasted humanity offers neither explanatory nor ethical engagement with the specificity of their deaths.

The discourse of human waste is primarily a cosmopolitan dialogue among scholars and politicians that mirrors, rather than interrogates, the perspective of world elites by invoking horror at the apparent death of subjectivity before the unstoppable capture of humanity by exchange value. But does this panic actually stop the conversion of certain populations into “the new juridical category of ‘life devoid of value’” that can be extinguished without penalty? (Agamben 1998, 139). Or does it repeat an occidental trick of privileging a singular subjectivity as authentically human while vanishing others?

If violence against this population of women is not new, then we should be cautious about gestures of solidarity that, even unwittingly, may fail to recognize Mexican women’s struggles to articulate their *contestation-in-survival* in relation to many feminicidios—remembered or forgotten, hidden or public, sanctioned and unsanctioned—historical assaults on women’s bodily integrity, sexual autonomy, political being, and personhood. Mobilizations of afflicted communities against the murders represent an ardent effort to retrieve pobladoras’ identities from their annihilation in death. The feminicidio aims to produce a society where victims’ subjectivity is reduced to the instrumental value of the “‘homo sacer’, dispensable noncitizens” (Franco 2002, 19; Agamben 1998). Precisely because the feminicidio entails a social fantasy that certain women are made for killing, that is, to be used up to the point of extinction, those invested in stopping the crimes must not collude with any depiction of vulnerable Mexican women as less than fully human, less than fully alive.<sup>3</sup>

The discourse of death surrounding Juárez consigns the targets of feminicidio to an unchanging death-in-life in ways that come dangerously close to rationalizing the violence against them. Solidarity requires making room for narratives of personhood that unsettle cosmopolitan observers of the border, of pobladoras exerting their desire, their sexuality, their consumerist fantasies,

their labor, to create conditions for survival *beyond the spaces they are supposed to inhabit*. “Sur-vival,” as Marianne Hirsch tells us, means living in excess, to outlast one’s “intended destruction” (Hirsch 1997, 19). That the international discourse has met the killings in Mexico with fatalistic pronouncements of their inevitability makes me wonder if here too the pobladoras are being told that they have outlived their usefulness or transgressed too far from the circumscribed space of the periphery. The unacknowledged other of the cadavers that proliferate in representations of the crimes is the young maquiladora worker living *life in excess*: she consumes, she barter her sex, she moves through the border as a figure of cultural contamination. For the dominant classes, in Mexico and abroad, 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.

We may recognize that the negative economy of the feminicidio (and its associated institutions within the bankrupt patriarchal state and the maquiladora industries) deny Mexican women’s worth in life; but we should also ask the perhaps more troubling question why the international institutions that govern rights and liberal value have only just recognized Mexican womanhood at the moment of her extermination. I say this because the prevailing international discourse about the feminicidio has shown itself so willing to recirculate the construct of poor Mexican women as the living dead, natural extensions of a harsh border landscape that cannot support meaningful existence.<sup>4</sup>

In what follows, I discuss the reified image of feminicidio victims as wasted humanity in order to address the theft of mexicana subjectivity, by the culture of impunity *and* by the anti-globalization discourse that has engulfed the international protests against the Juárez murders. By reproducing such deadening images of mexicana identity the international solidarity movement

impedes a full ethical engagement with the pobladoras in their struggle for justice. This distancing has a dangerous demobilizing effect on local movements to stop the killings because it is entirely discordant with what Melissa W. Wright eloquently underlines as the vital “project of reversing the discourse of female disposability” enacted in the precarious grassroots organizations from the colonias (Wright 2001, 564). I begin this analysis with my own lesson in solidarity, dating to my earliest research about obreras in the maquiladoras. I follow with a reflection about reification and violence: on how the feminicidio draws on and enacts the symbolic reduction of its victims’ humanity.

### **An Object Lesson from *La Llorona***

At the border of Mexico and the United States, the legend of La Llorona circulates as a tale of both female fragility and supernatural power, of an alternately victimized and predatory womanhood. The story of the woman in white haunts the frontier as a chronicle of Mexican women’s status in the shifting lines of power and conflict demarcating the geopolitical divide between Mexico and the United States. It would seem only appropriate that the maquiladoras should have their own rendering of the legend. The northern boundary occupies a prominent position in both Mexican and U.S. visions of capitalist modernization, and more broadly, the ways North Americans conceptualize and determine the cultural dimensions of economic globalization. The factory complexes that adhere to the two thousand-mile strip of territory conjoining the two nations are widely credited with ushering in new social phenomena linked to the multinational stage of corporate capitalism; their most important effect being the wholesale transformation of the gendered division of labor in the region.

The evolution of the maquiladora industry since 1965 has produced new narratives of gender and labor value, not only for northern Mexico, but also

for communities of consumers and displaced workers located well beyond the border space. As a consequence, obreras have been the object of public scrutiny and political surveillance during a period when the volatile forces of market integration and economic dependence put Mexican sovereignty in crisis once again. La Llorona's appearance in the guise of a factory worker suggests an oral, communal ritual of contestation to dominant discourses of economic rationalization and progress that feminized the industrial workforce worldwide.

In the late 1980s, following an exposé of severe brain damage in children born in the Matamoros-Brownsville area, the story of La Llorona resurfaced as a reinterpretation of the racialized and gendered hazards of the export-processing zone. In this version, La Llorona is a young obrera in an electronics assembly plant who develops a relationship with her married Anglo plant manager. She becomes pregnant and gives birth to two stillborn infants who show signs of terrible birth defects.<sup>5</sup> Desperate, she kills herself. Her restless spirit walks the polluted Río Bravo behind the factories, searching for children to fill her loss.

The legend of La Llorona as factory worker enacts a complex critique of the social relations of production sustaining the high-turnover, production-intensive economy of the border industrialization project in which Mexican women have been valued as a low-cost, flexible source of labor. At face value, the story repeats an almost literal retelling of obreras' accounts of sexual exploitation and physical exhaustion in the rigidly gendered factory system during the height of women's employment during the 1980s (Arenal 1986; Iglesias Prieto 1985). La Llorona's tragedy warns of the particular location of poor, racialized women in the neocolonial order structuring the partnership between Mexico and transnational capital, figured here as an Anglo plant manager. Not only does the obrera's body serve the industry as an instrument for maximizing profit, but also her sexual availability serves the state as a means to secure foreign investment.

In the spring of 1993, when I first heard the legend recounted at a club in Austin, Texas, I was busy writing a dissertation chapter about transnational labor organizing in the maquiladoras. At the time, scholarship about women in global assembly focused primarily on the question of whether development (through induction into the industrial economy) was good or bad for third world women. Labor mobilizations in the export-processing zones were waging valiant struggles to demonstrate the environmental and social costs entailed in Mexico's bid for modernization, arguing that multinational corporations reaped enormous profits by transferring the burden of global economic restructuring onto the most vulnerable sector of the world's working population. Within this context, La Llorona's appearance in the guise of a factory worker seemed to point to the potentially subversive circulation of cautionary tales about the sexual and economic exploitation of women in the maquiladoras. I accordingly used the story as evidence of a female counter-discourse anchored in the resignification of the obrera's body as the target of capitalist discipline and patriarchal authority.

In invoking the oral narrative as a performance of women's expressive desire for social change, I failed to consider where I was when I heard the story. I was not in a factory. I was not in Matamoros. The narrator was not an obrera, but a Chilean folk singer. The story had the ring of authenticity like so much else I was hearing from obreras: about women collapsing suddenly on the line, young girls being locked into the plants during the night shift, illegal pregnancy tests, unwanted pressure from supervisors for sex, and strange-smelling chemicals that made bodies weak and thinking difficult. These stories were folklore of a sort, too, involving both direct experience and suggestive rumor. But obreras' testimonies came leavened with an assertion, however wistful, of the narrators' sense of self worth, an assertion wholly absent in the cautionary tale of La Llorona.

In retrospect, La Llorona's tragedy functions all too clearly as an allegory for national anxieties about the partnership between U.S. companies and the Mexican government. Her legend resurfaced during debates that preceded the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994. Its equation of the maquiladoras with death must have resonated among U.S. audiences as an instructive parable of the perils of globalization, at a moment when leftist movements needed a pretense for halting the mobility of jobs and capital. (There is the faintest suggestion that the Anglo manager has abandoned his wife, just as corporations turned away from U.S. workers in pursuit of cheaper labor.) For a Mexican audience, the obrera's seduction would figure the suspension of national sovereignty in the export-processing zone, and the social dangers unleashed with young women's emergent labor power. The woman does not die from her exposure to toxins at the plant, after all, but rather from her transgressive relationship with her employer.

In this way, the story echoes the popular conflation of women's sale of their labor with the sale of their bodies for sex. For the dominant classes in Juárez, girls and women exercising mobility beyond the sanctioned spaces of patriarchal supervision are immediately suspect of "la doble vida," as prostitutes (Tabuenca Córdoba 2003). While obreras may enter into sexual relationships with managers as a strategy for advancement or for pleasure, La Llorona's legend exacts a double punishment: she loses both her children and her partner. The story chillingly prefigures the dominant discourse about the victims of the feminicidio, the Mexican government's cynical claim that the murdered girls and women courted their own deaths as sexual deviates and prostitutes.

While the infants in the story reference the actual anencephalic births in Matamoros and Brownsville, the specter of the original's infanticide determines the outcome of this story as well. The implication is that the obrera's damaged



fertility is fatal—both to the children and to her community. The patriarchal state can only recognize women as national subjects in their role as bearers of citizens; the stillborn babies mark the obrera as a failed national subject. The taint of pollution associated with the maquiladoras works its damage through the poisoned body of the female worker. All too predictably, we are made captive in a Malinche story, as the obrera's promiscuous liaison with the foreign, imperial presence dooms her to wander the figurative margin of the nation, the water boundary of the Río Bravo.

I wonder at my own misapprehension of what it may have meant for La Llorona to reappear at the initial stages of the carnage in Ciudad Juárez. Although La Llorona has come to represent women's unfulfilled longing for autonomy or rage at patriarchal power, her deviance from normative femininity nevertheless consigns the female worker to premature death. Whether or not the legend did *in fact* emerge from the communal oral traditions of working-class Matamoros and Brownsville, it tricks us into thinking it is feminine speech. "As La Llorona passes from betrayed grieving mother to frightening phantasm," writes José Limón, "she returns in women's consciousness to 'speak' for their interests against...domination" (Limón 1990, 400). In performing the inevitable death of La Llorona, the story restores cultural unity. What makes this ritual sinister is that it pretends to voice the interests of the dead, all the while appropriating the obrera's body for patriarchal renewal.

I am no longer certain that La Llorona *did* speak, nor that she spoke *for* mujeres on the line. At the time, her story principally concerned the deaths of infants from the effects of toxic dumping practices associated with the border factories. By the end of that year, rumors of other deaths of young factory workers would come to haunt border discourses about the maquiladoras. The ensuing feminicidio changed everything I might have claimed about mexicanas

as political actors in the export-processing zone. At the very least, it exploded the limited frame with which scholarship and activism have confronted the problem of gender violence and modernity. If La Llorona could speak, she might identify with so many mothers in Juárez and Chihuahua who have lost their daughters to inexplicable violence, only to find that the border society refuses to recognize their claim to violated motherhood.<sup>6</sup> Like the ghostly woman in white, mothers from the colonias are routinely blamed for their daughter's murders. Just as La Llorona's complaint is heard as a wail, the demands of mothers for the truth and justice for their missing daughters have fallen outside the grammar of normative political speech. "Go home, Señora," the police told Soledad Aguilar when she reported her fourteen-year-old daughter and newborn granddaughter missing in 1995. "Your daughter is off somewhere enjoying herself so why are you here crying?"<sup>7</sup>

### **From Nimble Fingers to Disposable Bodies**

If intensified Mexican industrialization of the border during the 1980s allowed the emergence of the new denationalized subject, the obrera valued as the "nimble fingers" of global assembly, the following decade made this figure synonymous with death.<sup>8</sup> The representation of third world women as "nimble fingers" comes from the notion that poor women of color are temperamentally and biologically conditioned for the repetitive, minute processes of assembly required in offshore production sites.<sup>9</sup> Although roughly 20 percent of the murdered women have been factory workers, to date no evidence exists to establish that obreras are, or have ever been, the prime targets in the killings (Monárrez Fragoso 2000). Nevertheless, the murdered maquiladora worker emerged as the iconic figure for gender crime victims in the border city. In November 2003, author and investigator Alicia Gaspar de Alba convened an international conference of mothers' groups, activists, artists, and scholars in Los Angeles under the title "The Maquiladora Murders, Or Who Is Killing the

Women of Juárez?” The gathering drew an enormous response, demonstrating that the link between the murders and the border factories remains an important mechanism for drawing international attention to the situation in Juárez.

My point here is not to deny that current crimes against poor women may owe a great deal to how the border has been industrialized through the devalorization of Mexican women's labor; I do wish to intervene against any notion that the campaign of gender terror is the *inevitable* outcome of this economic scheme. An incomplete solidarity with the obreras of the maquiladora has engendered an incomplete solidarity with the communities afflicted by the feminicidio; international campaigns have tended to reproduce neocolonial, patriarchal constructions of Mexican women as bodies without consciousness (Schmidt Camacho 1999). The legacy of this construct may be found in similarly abstracted depictions of the feminicidio's victims as anonymous cadavers, without reference to the victims' biographies. Mexican women's bodies, on the assembly line, or ravaged and disposed of in desert trash heaps, have come to figure the space between humanity and non-humanity, between subjectivity and its absence. Prevailing narratives of the feminicidio coincide in their depiction of the victims as the inevitable casualties of globalization, effectively dead prior to their brutal killing. Scholars, journalists, and activists invariably term maquiladora workers, the dead, and the missing alike as *disposable bodies*. Wright cautions readers that the depiction of the Mexican woman “as a figure whose value can be extracted from her [and] discarded...is a *utopian image*” (Wright 1999, 472, emphasis added). The uncritical repetition of this trope as *cultural fact* forecloses prematurely on the emergence of distinct narratives of gender and value voiced by mexicanas at the border, displacing women from the very debates meant to be about them.

Compelling arguments connect the rise in gender violence and the labor poor Mexican women must perform in the current course of economic restructuring

and maquiladora-led modernization. Wright demonstrates that in the gendered organization of production within the maquiladoras “the Mexican woman takes shape in the model of variable capital whose worth fluctuates from a status of value to waste,” so that the corporate narrative about female turnover in the plants figures a female laboring subject whose intrinsic worth decreases in direct relation to the fantastic wealth she can produce (1999, 454). In this way, corporate treatment of Mexican obreras as disposable workers reinforces other cultural narratives that convert poor women into sources of value that can easily be discarded as they are used up. Obreras narrate the oppressive labor conditions in terms that describe a sense of the fragmentation of their bodies, the loss of personal agency.<sup>10</sup>

I am nonetheless troubled by the recirculation of the figure of Mexican women as disposable bodies, even in service of a discourse of protest. Certainly the fragmented labor-processes involved in the repetitive assembly work have produced a feminized workforce, disciplined and regulated through the control of women’s bodies and their sexuality. To reduce the complex forms of women’s negotiations with patriarchal, state, and corporate power to an abstract narrative of human wasting is to neglect the important ways in which mexicanas have narrated their struggle for control of their own bodies, labor, and political agency, and often militated for better working conditions and fair wages.

The conflation of violence in the workplace with feminicidio obscures the particular logic of gender terror taking place in the distinct spaces of home, work, and the street, and may actually have a depoliticizing effect on how international institutions and groups confront the problem. While observers outside of Mexico commonly view the murders as the more visible symptom of the “far more widespread—violence of work on the global assembly line” (Nathan 1997, 22), the afflicted communities point to the complicity of the

Mexican state as the issue of greatest political urgency for resisting gender terror. Again and again local activists and victims' families rage against the *impunity* of the crimes, charging local, state, and federal institutions with denying citizenship to poor women and their families. The maquiladora narrative can easily absorb the feminicidio into a totalizing account of global maldevelopment so that it is unclear precisely what crime is actually being prosecuted, and who the victims ultimately are. In this sense, the anti-globalization narrative places the Mexican crisis of governance in the service of a larger complaint about global capital. This abstraction from the particular history of Mexican development can obscure the ways the Mexican government has used its continuing state of crisis to expand its repressive authority, extracting labor and political concessions from vulnerable migrants while absolving itself of the most basic protections of democracy. "Violence," argues Rosa Linda Fregoso, "is not only a problem for the Mexican state, but in fact, endemic to it" (2003, 19).

Representations of maquiladora workers and pobladoras as "wasted" people also repeat a dangerous paternalism that places subalterns in the position of requiring remediation and rescue. They reinstate the very global relations of gender, national, and ethnic inequality that mark Mexican women off as a distinct category of humanity. Worse, these constructs collude with efforts to blame women for the violence directed against them. One recent tract exemplifies this tendency in its depiction of Juárez as a barbarous outpost of imperial capitalism. Joel Kovel, professor of psychiatry and social science at Bard College, cites the feminicidio in his ecological critique of globalization:

The fabric [of Juárez] is made from certain elements unknown to nineteenth century capitalist society: the decay of religion, narco-trafficking, promiscuously available assault weapons, gangs (an

estimated 250 in Juárez) who are a law unto themselves....There is a nihilism that brings out the predatory remorseless killing potential in human beings bred in conditions of extreme alienation. (2002, 57)

Having cordoned off Juárez as a space apart from European and U.S. history (nineteenth-century capitalist society), Kovel tellingly depicts the murders as a product of juarenses' animalistic natures. If the blame ultimately rests with U.S. imperialism, his critique nevertheless mirrors right-wing racism in his representation of the border as a space of subhumanity, reckless fertility, and violence. Kovel, a prolific author of anti-racist and anti-nuclear scholarship, writes for an established British and U.S. left. Zed Books publishes works by such distinguished Marxists and postcolonial scholars as Samir Amin, Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, and Immanuel Wallerstein.

Into this collective accounting of savage capitalism enters a view of the feminicidio's targets as:

hapless women [who] may join up with their executioners, themselves suitably positioned by the macho barbarism set going in places like Juárez, whose murder rate becomes a grim index of capitalist nihilism. (58)

Here, Kovel neatly marries the narrative of obreras' death by capitalism to what Melissa Wright aptly calls the narrative of "death by culture," infusing the scene of ritualistic rape and murder with a voyeuristic eroticism (Wright 1999, 472). As "the discourse of globalism equated *exploitation* with *extermination* of gendered bodies," as Rosa Linda Fregoso has shown, "the cause of one condition (exploitation of gendered bodies) has served handily to explain the other (extermination of gendered bodies)" (2003, 6–7). Kovel neither accounts for the complexity of the gender crimes nor provides a narrative of feminicidio that can voice the pobladoras' own expressive desire for social justice.

### **The Discourse of the Cadaver**

The tragedy of Chihuahua unfolds as a wholesale inability to imagine a female life free of violence. This points to an even more profound democratic failure of the state and international civil society to conceptualize these young women as autonomous beings, to recognize their value as subjects, and thus, to protect them. The absence or refusal of state and civil institutions to ensure women's entitlements to freedom of movement represents a negation of their political agency at its most basic level. When Norma Andrade, the mother of Lilia Alejandra García, described how her daughter's killing took place with full cognizance of the police, she exclaimed, "When we found her, my daughter's body told of everything that had been done to her" (Amnesty International 2003, 2). Two years later, Andrade has yet to obtain any credible accounting of why the police failed to respond to emergency calls from witnesses of her daughter's capture.

It is difficult to listen for what the bodies of the women are saying when the vast majority of gender crimes remain undenounced and some seventy-five bodies are left unidentified. In material terms, the protest movement cannot even calculate the number of the dead; in symbolic terms, the society cannot mourn the enormity of what has been stolen. The international movement's fixation on the image of the cadaver represents a cultural caesura into which the subjectivity of subaltern Mexican woman vanishes.<sup>11</sup> Artistic responses to the feminicidio invariably adopt titles that consign Mexican womanhood to an unchanging death: "Las muertas de Juárez/The dead women of Juárez," "The City of Dead Women," or, more intimate, "Para las muertas." When the curators Rigo Maldonado and Victoria Delgadillo mounted a group exhibit of altars, works on paper, digital art, and sculpture devoted to the feminicidio, they opted for an aesthetic of kinship, calling the show "Hijas de Juárez." Even so, reviews subsumed the exhibition under the discourse of

death, neglecting what Delgadillo highlighted as the revolutionary associations with the name Juárez, chosen to convey the “sense that the poor and indigent do have the ability to change things” (Delgadillo and Maldonado 2003, 191). The proliferating figure of the dead body, which invites indignation at the victimization of Mexican women, incites observers’ identification with their wounded femininity *after* death, but may displace any recognition of poor women’s subjectivity in life.

Artists and writers working closely with the international solidarity movement have often intentionally resorted to mass-media depictions of female victims as human refuse. In 2000, playwright Coco Fusco dedicated her play “The Incredible Disappearing Woman” to the memory of the victims of the feminicidio (Fusco 2002). The plot revolves around the figure of the unidentified corpse of a Mexican woman, represented as a mannequin that occupies center-stage throughout the performance. The drama takes place in a prominent art museum, and thematizes cultural constructions of Latinas as bodies available for exploitation. It is unclear whether the play seeks to disrupt the processes of bodily appropriation it depicts, or simply to reinscribe them as spectacle. Even in her eloquent advocacy for the mothers’ organizations, Fusco is often unconscious of how her discourse reinstates the relative privilege of the cosmopolitan intellectual to act as interlocutor for those dispossessed of rights. At a reading of Fusco’s play at Yale University in 2002, the playwright related an exchange with a “high-level” Mexican official in the course of her research, in which she colorfully indicted the country’s treatment of women. (She was perhaps not conscious of how difficult it has been for the families of the murdered women to obtain such access to government officials.) Fusco seized on the figure of the female Mexican cadaver for her play, she said, because “Mexican women are the walking dead” (Fusco 2002). What does it mean to travel under the sign of death?



In Mexico City, the feminist organization *Mujer Arte, A.C.* has organized various forums, performances, and exhibitions in homage to the victims of the Juárez murders (*Mujer Arte* 2002). The organization's website documents these initiatives to make the visual arts an instrument of social change, to produce "una cultura de la no violencia."<sup>12</sup> One link lists "El genocidio de mujeres en Ciudad Juárez y las artistas visuales," an ambiguous title that suggests that its artwork serves a descriptive, documentary function in the service of its historical narrative of feminicidio.<sup>13</sup> The site pairs a brief narrative about crimes against women at the border with paintings of women's corpses by Maritza Morillas and Yan María Castro, two prominent members of the *Mujer Arte* collective. Perhaps most striking about the images is how much they mimic the photos of crime victims carried in the Juárez newspapers: they show exposed mutilated bodies without reference to a single actual victim or crime. Like newspaper images, these paintings appear to claim a transparent, documentary status. Morillas entitles her works "Paisaje Cotidiano de Juárez" and "CAroDAtaVERnibus" (cadaver rota), and Castro names her contribution "Basura." Castro, invoking the discourse of disposable femininity, renders the victim in full dress, the body still fresh, as if the young woman has simply fallen asleep in the desert dumping ground. The sweep of her hair, the way her clothes reveal the curves of her body underneath, makes her resemble cantina hostesses advertised in Juárez papers turned upside down. It is unclear here what Castro intends in the eroticism of the picture. The ironic posture of these paintings means to incite indignation at the cultural tolerance for seeing women's tortured bodies pile up in the desert. But irony works through distance, by adopting a posture of removal from its object. As such, the website has the unintended effect of reinscribing the status of feminicidio victims as merely flesh without subjectivity.

Such art, despite its shock value, cannot contest the official indifference to the crimes, because it shares with the state's moral discourse a voyeuristic

preoccupation with monitoring poor women's mobility in the border space.<sup>14</sup> More fatal, it reproduces the dominant construction of poor women as bodies available for appropriation. Where *Mujer Arte* means to link aesthetic practice to concerted social change, however, the vast volume of journalistic, photographic, filmic, and artistic texts devoted to the Juárez story use the dead bodies of the murdered women as simply ground for narrating a particular account of the border as a space of death. Charles Bowden's now infamous work, *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future*, compiles the work of local documentary photographers Jaime Bailleres, Gabriel Cardona, Julián Cardona, and others in a narrative of savage capitalism as solipsistic as it is pornographic (Bowden 1998). In one passage Bowden contemplates the death grimace of a presumed victim of the feminicidio in terms that deny altogether her subjectivity:

Jaime Bailleres [the photographer] has projected a beautiful black carved mask on the screen. The hair is tilted and the face smooth with craftsmanship. The hair is long and black. It takes me a moment to get past this beauty and realize the face is not a mask. She is a sixteen-year-old girl and they found her in the park by the Puente Libre linking Juárez to El Paso, Texas...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. (Bowden 1998, 67)

This deliberate conversion of the dead body into an aesthetic object repeats the violence of the murder itself, subjecting the young woman to the possessive gaze of the male viewer. Bowden represents himself and the photographer as guerilla journalists, documenting the true horror of the border space, but tellingly, neither of them concerns himself with what the dead girl might be saying.

The value of the image has nothing to do with its reference to the girl's living existence, but rather in its service to Bowden's governing narrative about Juárez as the space of death. In fact, the dead body does not actually come from the feminicidio at all. Bowden misrepresented an artistic photo taken by Bailleres in a Mexico City morgue for the Bailleres's other work on the Juárez murders.<sup>15</sup> But for Bowden the specificity of the girl's death does not matter. Her dead body is a figure for a kind of non-humanity produced by globalization—not inhumanity of treatment, but the inherent lack of humanity afforded the poor women of Juárez.

That the feminicidio has served as ground for staging political claims against savage capitalism, Mexican corruption, or border contamination is perhaps not surprising; its citation in global popular culture is perhaps more unsettling and ambiguous. The historic feminicidio receives unacknowledged fictional treatment in a number of mystery novels set in the southwestern United States, including Rudolfo Anaya's *Zia Summer*, Allana Martin's *Death of a River Master*, and Linda Howard's *Cry No More* (Anaya 1996; Martin 2003; Howard 2003). Precisely because the figure of the cadaver can serve as a seemingly pliant platform for fantasies either political or commercial, it has little utility as a signifier for outrage at the crimes against Mexican women. Use of the cadaver in artwork and journalism documenting the crimes does not demonstrate an authentic connection with the dead or their communities, but rather an ethical and political distance between observer and victim; it has a demobilizing effect where it intends to incite the desire for change. It mimics the theft of mexicana subjectivity, rather than marking the site of its violent evacuation.

### **Reification and Feminicidio**

The impunity of the feminicidio lends veracity to the notion that the border society and the networks of power interacting there will tolerate a view of pobladoras as dispensable noncitizens, as disposable people. The pervasive

cultural construction of poor Mexican women as female bodies readily available for violent appropriation represents an instance of reification in the service of the feminicidio. For Marxist scholars, reification emerged with industrialization as a technique of representation linked to new modes of social control in which the image serves to make a given social order or cultural practice appear natural, inevitable, and fixed. The reified image masks the contingent nature of its emergence, hiding the mechanisms or interests behind its production and dissemination. As Susana Rotker notes, citing Theodor Adorno, “all reification is forgetting” (Rotker 2002, 11).

Reification masks just as it reveals. The notion that politically marginal pobladoras represent wasted humanity participates in this forgetting. The violence targeted at women, in my view, is less a consequence of their inherent disposability than the *inordinate* and *unacknowledged* burdens placed by the masculinist society, the state, and the international economy on poor women’s labors, waged and unwaged, voluntary and involuntary. Pobladoras belong to the class of the working poor that sustains the costs of Mexican social reproduction in conditions of extreme economic crisis. In the course of the neoliberal reforms guiding Mexico’s current development strategy, poor women have been forced to bear the social and economic costs of structural adjustment. The emergent construct of disposable bodies conceals female subjectivity in order to rationalize a demand for female citizens without claim to rights, in Mexico and in the international division of labor.

In denouncing the impunity of the crimes, pobladoras protest this process of reification, offering distinct chronicles of how victims negotiated the sale of their labor and the demands for their sexualized services within the masculinist social order of the border space. Speaking of her daughter’s abduction on her route home from the Maquiladora Lear 173, Señora Josefina González testified,

“Sabíamos que la llevaron a fuerza, porque aunque Claudia no era miedosa, sí era muy desconfiada” (Justicia 2003b, 35).<sup>16</sup> Señora González’s account of her daughter’s victimization voices an assertion of her daughter’s will in life, a refusal to go quietly. Voicing the unspeakable in public has been a vital means to interrupt the devalorization of the dead as disposable bodies. “Ahora con la ayuda de otras mujeres,” says Señora Carmen Villegas, mother of Míriam Gallegos Venegas, “estoy aprendiendo que tengo derechos y que puedo luchar” (Justicia 2003b, 1).<sup>17</sup>

This new pedagogy of struggle has unleashed a second wave of gender crimes: mothers themselves are targets of the state’s repressive violence. Police routinely tell mothers that if they wish to see their daughters alive again they should refrain from “creating scandal in the streets.”<sup>18</sup> Local media, business leaders, and civic organizations in Juárez echo this threat, arguing that the protest movement threatens the economic viability of the city, particularly in its precarious relationship to foreign industry and tourism. The most cynical attacks charge the non-governmental organizations representing victims and their families with generating a new industry based in demonizing the city. Writing in *El Diario de Juárez* on 22 April 2004, M. Orquiz reported charges levelled against the women’s movement by the Maquiladora Association (AMAC) President Rubén Parga Terrazas, who claimed that “la acción de grupos locales y de otros puntos de la República y fuera de ella...han hecho un ‘modus vivendi’ con la explotación de la situación de violencia local.”<sup>19</sup> Precisely because the Juárez society is so oriented toward the exterior, the management of its image has been a mechanism for silencing the pobladoras. For this reason alone, the international movement must elaborate a discourse about the violence that can counter the concerted denial of Mexican women’s agency. Women’s organizations in Juárez denounce the border society’s capacity to normalize their suffering, marking the ways that the failure to recognize

women as subjects with rights, forces victims to endure their injuries in private. The trope of Mexican women as disposable bodies, even in the service of protest, can have the dangerous effect of demobilizing the very targets of this discourse by failing to disrupt the local campaigns to discredit women's political legitimacy.

### **Combing the Desert**

In June 2003, I traveled with my mother, Aurora Camacho de Schmidt, to the capital city of Chihuahua, Mexico, to meet with a group of women, men, and children under the banner of "Ni Una Más" (Not One More) for a new form of political action, the *rastreo*.<sup>20</sup> Summoned by the organization Justicia Para Nuestras Hijas (Justice for Our Daughters) and its U.S. partner, the Mexico Solidarity Network, we met with residents of Chihuahua City as *las maestras*, international visitors drawn together in a promise to make the state responsive to victims of gender violence in the border region. Our purpose that day was to search for human remains linked to the disappearances of nearly a dozen young women from Chihuahua City over the past two years.<sup>21</sup> The bodies of two young women, raped and mutilated in a manner similar to the victims of sexual murders in Ciudad Juárez, had recently been recovered from the desert outskirts of the city.

The *rastreo* functions both as an act of protest and as a corrective to police inaction. Because of police corruption and manipulation of crime scenes, families of the disappeared have begun to mount forensic investigations on their own. The *rastreo* is literally a combing of the ground to see what the desert may yield up as evidence of crimes that remain unimaginable for the afflicted families of the missing. We gathered on a vast dirt lot behind a Motorola factory. Organizers of the weekly *rastreos* had designated the site a likely location for the disposal of presumed murder victims. Behind the brightly painted buildings dedicated to producing that emblem of modern

mobility, the cell-phone, lay a vast dumping ground for industrial and human refuse. The assemblage of fifty or so people included local activists from El Barzón, families of the missing girls, men in neomilitary uniforms, neighbors from the colonias, and members of an international coalition of activists.<sup>22</sup> Local attorneys Lucha Castro and Alma Gómez convened the group with a reminder that we were there because of the indifference of government officials to the problem of violence against young women in the city.

The *rastreo* was well organized and highly disciplined. Two men in camouflaged scouting or military dress divided us into teams of ten, delineating an imaginary grid for us to cover. The families seemed to hover between wanting and not wanting to find the missing girls, between needing to know their daughters' fates and needing to assert that they were still alive.<sup>23</sup> We exchanged few words as we searched the low-lying brush, turning over burnt trash and abandoned industrial material.

For a time, I walked with Virginia Berthaud, the mother of fourteen-year-old Claudia Judith Urías Berthaud, absent since 9 March 2003 from her grandmother's home. Señora Berthaud reported experiencing continuous harassment from unknown sources after she denounced her daughter's disappearance. In March, she received anonymous telephone calls from a man who spoke in obscenities as he offered to exchange her daughter for another young woman. She had noticed a dark van following her around the city. At her daughter's school, students reported sightings of similar vehicles that seemed to track the school's director and one of her daughter's friends (Comisión Mexicana 2003). Virginia Berthaud has received little assistance from local authorities. Her story repeats the dominant narrative of the decade-long *femicidio* in the state: that of government officials violating the very civil rights they are charged to protect (Monárrez Fragoso 2000).

As we walked over the rocky terrain, Virginia Berthaud stopped several times to collect various objects from the array of detritus that lay in our path. The first of these was a hand-lettered poster that advertised the sale of tacos and tamales from a private home. Señora Berthaud held the sign out to no one in particular, saying softly, "This comes from my colonia. This address is near my house." She handed the sign to the captain of our search team, who, using tongs, placed it carefully in a clear plastic bag. A little later, Señora Berthaud leaned down beside a small prickly bush and began to dig at a piece of bone submerged in the sandy soil. The whitened bone was about eight centimeters long, and perhaps two centimeters in diameter. "This could be human," Señora Berthaud said. "It's human." Once again, the captain bagged the item. Finally, as we climbed uphill from the gully of a dried-out arroyo, I picked up a torn receipt from a pharmacy caught in the thorns of another bush. I looked questioningly at Señora Berthaud. "He might have left this here," she answered, scrutinizing the handwriting on the bill. The "he" almost certainly referred to the perpetrator of whatever crime accounted for her daughter's disappearance. I continued behind, listening to her discuss the possible scenarios in which these seemingly disparate objects could come together to reveal what might have transpired there.

In her imagining, Señora Berthaud had to contend not only with her own, private terrors about what actually happened to Claudia, but also with the nightmarish official explanations for the crimes. The state government and popular media have at various moments alleged that the murdered young women were victims of narcotraffickers and satanic worshippers, were abducted into slavery as prostitutes, or were killed in order to harvest their internal organs (Guillermoprieto 2003).<sup>24</sup> Señora Berthaud's scenario, if that is even the right word for a narrative of trauma, demonstrated the terror of loss that accompanies the disappearances. Into the void of unknowing enters any



number of theories to explain how young girls could be subject to such brutal and dehumanizing violence. That the families of the missing must now also act as forensic investigators of the crimes committed against them points to a monumental failure of the Mexican nation-state to act as guarantor of rights for this population. The abuses of state officials add another layer of trauma to the original loss, reminding the poor and vulnerable residents of the border colonias of their meager purchase on the entitlements of citizenship.

As I reconstruct my interaction with Señora Berthaud, I keep returning to the fragmentary narrative she began to elucidate during the *rastreo*. As the captain bagged the objects she retrieved, Señora Berthaud did not construct a coherent theory linking the items, but rather suggested that they revealed the work of some malevolent intelligence that had left them there. The knowledge of what had happened to the young women resided not with her, but with the perpetrator. Although she repeatedly named the male perpetrator, “él (he)” she never named Claudia but spoke only of “el hueso (the bone)” she had identified as human. I felt then some sense of the dispossession she was confronting. To name her daughter in death would be to consign Claudia to the status of the cadavers that have filled the reporting of the *feminicidio*: tortured remains without any trace of subjectivity.<sup>25</sup> Señora Berthaud’s claim to the full potentiality of Claudia in life lay violently suspended. She and her daughter had mysteriously and terribly been forced to act as pawns in a narrative of some others’ brutal design. The controlling narrative of the *feminicidio* belongs to the unknown perpetrators and with the authorities charged with prosecuting justice. While justice remains an unattainable abstraction, the afflicted communities cannot act as agents of their own narrative of wounding and retribution. In this way gender terror works to reinscribe the subaltern status of the border communities: through the violent theft of bodily agency in murder and the simultaneous suppression of victims’ political rights at the hands of the state.<sup>26</sup>

The emergent movement against the killings attempts the enormous task of exposing a violence deemed unspeakable, of voicing concerns entirely outside the norms of political speech. The mothers' mobilization is not merely a matter of arresting the killings, but a vital struggle to retrieve the subjectivity of the victimized women from the brutality of their deaths, to establish their value and social meaning *in life*. Family members describe how the photos of the bodily remains appear in newspaper accounts alongside speculations about the hidden lives of the victims, often depicted as promiscuous or given over to vice. During the first wave of crimes, Juárez newspapers used a red high-heeled shoe when they ran stories of disappearance or death, invoking the association of women's wage-earning power and prostitution. A telling disjuncture lies between the proliferated image of the cadaver and the mothers' refusal of these images. The use of family photographs to depict loved ones enacts a vital struggle to retrieve victims' integral personhood from the space of death.

This contestation of memory against forgetting and deliberate erasure enacts what Jean Franco has described as the "struggle for interpretive power" shaping Mexican women's efforts to assert their claims as bearers of rights in the public sphere of the nation-state (Franco 2002, 3). Whether this in turn will translate into new constructions of gender power and female citizenship will depend a great deal on how the diverse elements of the movement conceptualize the violated, and perhaps never instantiated, agency of the feminicidio's victims as subjects with rights. In taking their mourning into the public eye, the mothers' movements in Juárez have begun to articulate a distinct account of female value and citizenship. Refusing the discourse of death, mothers begin the work of reconsecrating the appropriated bodies of their daughters.

As the feminicidio forces mothers to experience their own bereavement as a spectacle for others, the power of the *rastreo* as a political act comes

in part through its visible confrontation between female kinship and the violent deformations of poor women's citizenship at the hands of the state.<sup>27</sup> The mother's demand for her daughter's body appropriates, in the work of mourning, state power to produce and recognize national subjects. By countering the state's refusal to recover the dead, then, the mothers' defiance registers an incipient claim to sovereignty beyond the state, mourning the absent daughter as an unrecognized locus of value. Mothers' ardent efforts to preserve the barely visible remainder of their daughters' living selves open "that political possibility that emerges when the limits to representation and representability are exposed," a potential that depends so much on how the larger movement enters that space of mourning with them (Butler 2000, 2).

### **Madres at the Frontiers of Justice**

Justicia Para Nuestras Hijas invokes the mothers' suffering to adopt a posture with deep roots in Latin American social movements, that of Antigone before the state (Franco 1992/1999b). The funereal protest marches organized by the Mujeres de Negro, an organization of women in Chihuahua operating in solidarity with Justicia Para Nuestras Hijas, implicitly invoke the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo of Argentina by staging confrontations between the moral discourse of the state and the mothers' grief.

Like the Argentinean Madres, mothers in Chihuahua have had to defer the act of mourning in the realm of consecrated ritual and politicize their grievance as a means to contest the state discourse that blames the families for their daughters' deaths. An open letter from Justicia Para Nuestras Hijas links the violation of their motherhood to the humiliations of class and social repression:

Somos mujeres humildes que vivimos en colonias populares de Chihuahua, usamos el transporte público; somos trabajadoras que

percibimos menos de dos salarios mínimos; la mayoría sólo estudiamos la primaria. Somos madres de jóvenes desaparecidas, algunas de nosotras finalmente encontramos a nuestras hijas: violadas, asesinadas y tiradas en cualquier lugar, otras continuamos buscándolas. Hoy nos une el sufrimiento de haberlas perdido o la angustia de no saber de ellas. Nuestras hijas, las desaparecidas, están forzadas en algún lugar, corriendo grave peligro. Nuestras hijas muertas, buscaban ser felices, tenían sueños, planes, que les fueron truncados por asesinos. Todas hemos sufrido el mismo calvario. A la desesperación, el dolor y la angustia de perder una hija o no saber de ella, debemos añadir el maltrato que sufrimos de las autoridades investigadoras. Sufrimos el descrédito en los medios de comunicación masiva al exhibirnos como familias conflictivas y desintegradas, concluyendo que ellas se fueron por su propio gusto y de libertinas. (Justicia Para Nuestras Hijas 2003a)<sup>28</sup>

Jean Franco writes movingly of how the “space of death... is particularly important as a site of struggle in the colonized areas of the world, and this struggle is necessarily ethical” (Franco 1986/1999a, 31). The appearance of mutilated bodies, the vanishing of others, and the cruelly bizarre harassment of the mothers exposes a political culture in which women’s social marginality in the border space can be abused as a source of eroticism and violence. The state’s refusal to grant protection, even for the sanctity of death, to women from the colonias reveals the integral relationship between the negation of poor women’s citizenship and the reproduction of class power and masculinist control of the border’s public sphere.

Where the Madres of Argentina could name their children’s abductors as agents of the state, the mothers of Chihuahua must ultimately depend on the state to locate and punish their daughter’s killers. The open letter continues:

Cuando hemos querido denunciar u organizarnos las autoridades nos amenazan con que si andamos de borloteras no buscarán a nuestras hijas. Han pretendido comprar nuestro silencio ofreciéndonos despensas y dinero. A personas que se acercan a acompañarnos las amenazan y hostigan. En Chihuahua disminuyeron los secuestros, robos de autos, etcétera. Como los secuestrables son ricos, se creó un grupo especial con recursos humanos y materiales que ha dado resultado. ¿Por qué no hay atención, personal y recursos para investigar la desaparición de nuestras hijas? Lo sabemos muy bien, porque todas las desaparecidas y muertas son pobres. El Gobierno nos discrimina y los asesinos lo saben, nadie las busca porque nuestras hijas no le interesan a la autoridad. Estamos cansadas del acoso que sufrimos por los elementos policíacos de la investigación. Exigimos que se castigue a los responsables de los asesinatos y se busque a nuestras hijas. (Justicia Para Nuestras Hijas 2003a)<sup>29</sup>

It is worth remembering, as Franco tells us, that the movement in Argentina attained the respected appellation of “las madres” only after having been cast out of polite society and referred to as “las locas” (Franco 1986/1999a, 32). The letter from Justicia Para Nuestras Hijas, by contrast, describes a class of women who have never enjoyed full membership in that society. The writers narrate a state of abjection in which their violation as mothers is inseparable from the material deprivations that delimit their claims to rights. The feminized domestic sphere functions in the masculinist state as the site of social reproduction, where women are charged with maintaining national values and birthing citizens. The mothers in Chihuahua speak from a condition of social marginality where their mothering is so devalued that they have little claim on the protections afforded the bourgeois spheres of domesticity. The letter underlines this point by referring to the unequal administration of justice in Chihuahua: those kidnapped for ransom may be protected, while

the daughters of the colonias represent bodies available for exploitation at little cost. The unequal distribution of justice to mothers illuminates the way class conditions the perception and exercise of rights: the coalition between women from the colonias and middle-class feminists has sometimes foundered on this construct of wounded motherhood (Wright 2003). The state cannot recognize the violated motherhood of women from the colonias, precisely because the dominant society imagines that such violence is an expression of the urban poor's natural condition (Reguillo-Cruz 2002).

### **Conclusion**

The prevalent images of Mexican women as “the walking dead,” “cuerpos abandonados como desechos” illustrate the contradictions inherent in staging political claims in relationship to the dead, particularly those killed with such spectacular violence. “Does violence have a gender?” asks critic Mary Louise Pratt, only to answer, “Of course it does” (Pratt 2002, 91). For the international solidarity movement, gender violence is also *spatialized* as a natural feature of the postcolonial periphery. The danger of mobilizing around the figure of death is the misrecognition of what precisely is under threat. That is, our collective responses may have the unintended effect of reinstating the very structures of gender and desire that mark women and girls as natural victims, as bodies made for violence. The gesture of solidarity needs to mark the space, still so precarious, that the pobladoras' movements open when they perform the work of mourning in public. The refusal of impunity is a refusal to accept the construct of subaltern femininity as wasted humanity.

The stakes are enormously high. Guillermina González, the sister of Sagrario González Flores, who was killed in 1998, founded the NGO Voces Sin Eco (Voices Without an Echo) to serve the needs of families of the dead and disappeared. In July 2002 she publicly announced the dissolution of the

organization out of a sense that the group had been misused. In an interview with Sandra Nieto Rodríguez published as “Lucran grupos con muertas de Juárez” in *El Diario de Juárez* on 22 April 2004, González went public a second time to accuse various people who she charged “took advantage of the suffering of the family members of the disappeared women” for promotion and gain. González cited the inclusion of the disappeared women in various documentaries, books, and films, whose authors never delivered on promises of assistance to the members. Charges of intellectual piracy reveal a seamier side to this emergent discourse of the border as a space of death.

The unwillingness of international activists and intellectuals to engage poor women’s realities is complicit in their isolation and bereavement. The very name of González’s organization, Voces Sin Eco, sadly prefigured her predicament—the distancing and alienation produced when subalterns are asked to accept such a limited role in a reified script. The charge that some could profit (*lucrar*) from victims’ suffering has proved immobilizing at critical junctures during the international mobilizations to prosecute the Mexican government for its complicity in the feminicidio (Wright 2003). Local government and civic leaders have all too willingly appropriated this discourse to discredit their opponents.

International campaigns do bring valuable pressure for change. They have permitted the local movement to make its incremental gains, however costly. For this very reason, the *desconfianza* that Guillermina González articulates deserves a hearing beyond Juárez. (In citing her charge I do not mean to pursue the debates over willful profiteering where I have no authority or interest to pass judgment.) Her metaphor of *lucro* contains a critique of the process of reification, that is, the conversion of an abstracted image (Mexican women) into a serviceable good (disposable bodies). Reification does not only enable the circulation of commodities, however, but also is a central feature of how

new subjects are recognized and incorporated into formal politics. González's complaint registers a pervasive sense of loss accompanying the conversion of family grief into a political resource. Soledad Aguilar describes her own participation in the mothers' movement as her "calvario," burden, of having chosen to persist *against* her own better interests or the needs of her family. The viability of the international solidarity movement will depend on how it partners with the melancholic work of pursuing justice. This melancholia manifests itself above all as a refusal to fully relinquish the missing to the logic of reification, to place memory above abstraction and forgetting.

I have returned again and again to how difficult it was for Virginia Berthaud to name her daughter during the *rastreo*. It may be that my own presence and limited perspective mediated that difficulty. That is, perhaps Señora Berthaud could not discuss Claudia in the politicized context of the *rastreo*. The barren lot did not lend itself to an evocation of Claudia's life. Señora Berthaud did give me numerous pamphlets to distribute with Claudia's picture, and so to some extent, I was entrusted with her image, her recovery. With that transfer, repeated so many times in the course of a political mobilization, the conception of Claudia as a living person necessarily gets abstracted and reified into the proper object of a political campaign. Her image has gone distances she never moved in life, as far as I know. The missing and the dead cannot speak for themselves; their voices do not resonate in the realm of the living. It is time to raise the dead.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The actual statistics for these crimes are far from certain. The numbers of deaths and disappearances have been the subject of contention among government authorities, victims' advocates, and non-governmental organizations. In the absence of rigorous investigation of the crimes, the scope of the problem cannot be determined. Given the interest of government officials in obscuring the problem, I have chosen to rely on the findings of Amnesty International. The Amnesty report reinforces the accounts of local non-governmental organizations about the origin and development of the feminicidio.

<sup>2</sup> Although the actual numbers of residents in the colonias is uncertain, the 2000 census suggests that the overall Juárez population has more than tripled since 1960. The colonias are likely underrepresented in the official figure of 1.3 million residents. The census also shows that the majority of the population has arrived from other areas of Mexico, and that some 40 percent of the known population have lived in Juárez for five years or less. Figures come from the 2000 Census conducted by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática (INEGI), [www.inegi.gob.mx](http://www.inegi.gob.mx).

<sup>3</sup> Melissa Wright, echoing Esther Chávez Cano, writes, "This is femicide: a climate for declaring women so unworthy that their deaths do not warrant concern" (Wright 2001, 563).

<sup>4</sup> Even Eve Ensler, ardent supporter of the movement for justice, cannot articulate an account of the feminicidio without reference to the "existential landscape of broken nothingness" that makes the killing seem inevitable, perhaps natural (Ensler 2004, 110). This framework does not permit her to distinguish the individual subjectivity of the victims, as she extrapolates from the stories of two young women who share the same name: "Juárez is a city of Brendas. They are young, brown, pretty, and very poor. Sometimes their bones turn up next to old bottles in parking lots. Sometimes their bodies are never found. They are rapidly becoming an endangered species" (110). It is perhaps an ungenerous observation on my part about the crusading author of *The Vagina Monologues*, but I cannot help but notice how many times Mexican women are referred to as a species, or breed, apart (Ensler 2000).

<sup>5</sup> From 1986 to 1991, the relatively rare disorder of anencephaly appeared to cluster in Mexican and Texan communities in the Matamoros-Brownsville area. Cameron County officials reported an abnormal rise in the number of babies born with neural-tube defects and related brain deformities, to a rate of more than four times the national average in 1986, which peaked in 1991. These defects begin in the womb and cause major damage to the nervous system, brain, and spine. In the most severe cases, children are born without brains and die shortly after birth. Epidemiologists investigating the problem have argued that pollution from border factories was a likely factor in the increase. In 1993, afflicted families sued General Motors and some forty U.S. companies operating maquiladoras

in Matamoros for allowing toxic emissions and hazardous waste to contaminate the area inhabited by poor Mexican communities in the Valley. For further information, contact Dr. Irina Cech, principal investigator in an ongoing study conducted by the University of Texas Health Science Center at the Houston School of Public Health, [www.uth.tmc.edu/](http://www.uth.tmc.edu/).

<sup>6</sup> In this context, La Llorona's story repeats the historical story of La Malinche, who Rita Cano Alcalá argues, was also denied her full maternity in engendering the mestizo/a nation. Cano Alcalá points to the forgotten daughter of La Malinche, María Jaramillo, as a figure for a feminine national subject that has yet to be recognized within the patriarchal Mexican nation-state (Cano Alcalá 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Testimony of Señora Soledad Aguilar. Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 15 April 2004.

<sup>8</sup> I discuss this tendency of transnational labor campaigns in "On the Borders of Solidarity: Race and Gender Contradictions in the 'New Voice' Platform of the AFL-CIO" (Schmidt Camacho 1999).

<sup>9</sup> For a foundational analysis of the corporate mythology surrounding third world women in global factories, see the work of Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson (Elson and Pearson 1988).

<sup>10</sup> See the ethnographic interviews conducted by Norma Iglesias Prieto and Sandra Arenal, which can be viewed in this context as a form of (mediated) testimonial literature (Iglesias Prieto 1985; Arenal 1986).

<sup>11</sup> For a striking parallel to the current situation in Juárez, see Jean Franco's discussion of the post-modern fascination with cadavers in "Gender, Death, Resistance: Facing the Ethical Vacuum" (Franco 1986/1999a).

<sup>12</sup> My translation: "A culture of non-violence."

<sup>13</sup> My translation: "The genocide of women in Ciudad Juárez and female visual artists."

<sup>14</sup> Notable exceptions to this type of representation include Verónica Leiton's lyrical film that reanimates the body of the woman in the desert landscape. See the film *Tierra Mia* (Leiton n.d.). The feminist collective S. Taller de Narrativa wrote a form of testimonial, *El silencio que la voz de todas quiebra: mujeres y víctimas de Ciudad Juárez*, in response to the dominant discourses about the feminicidio. The authors' inclusion of portraits of the murdered young women contests their dehumanization in the popular media photographs of their physical remains (Benítez et al., 1999). Lourdes Portillo also used family photographs to illustrate the feminicidio in her film *Señorita Extraviada* (Portillo 2001). Screenings of the film have brought the justice movement to a broad international arena and served as an important organizing tool.

<sup>15</sup> Thanks to Miguel Gandert for this information.

<sup>16</sup> My translation: "We knew that they took her by force, because although Claudia wasn't timid, she was very distrustful."

<sup>17</sup> My translation: "Now, with the help of other women, I am learning that I have rights and that I can fight."

<sup>18</sup> Testimony of Señora Soledad Aguilar, New Haven, 15 April 2004.

<sup>19</sup> My translation: "The actions of local groups and other parts of the Republic and abroad... have made a living out of exploiting the local violence."

<sup>20</sup> My mother is Aurora Camacho de Schmidt, Associate Professor of Modern Languages at Swarthmore College.

<sup>21</sup> "Justice for Our Daughters" is the name of the organization of victims' families and allies in Chihuahua, the capital city of the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua. For the names of the victims and the disappeared, including Ciudad Juárez and the capital, refer to the organization's website (Justicia Para Nuestras Hijas 2003a).

<sup>22</sup> El Barzón, A.C., is the institutional base of a national grassroots movement in opposition to Mexican neoliberal economic policies. El Barzón emerged during the economic collapse of the 1980s, when structural adjustment policies forced a crisis of insolvency for small-scale agricultural operations, businesses, and landowners. El Barzón created a significant political base in Chihuahua for other grassroots political campaigns, including the local movement against the feminicidio.

<sup>23</sup> As I write, the family of Diana Yazmin García Medrano is gathering for her burial. García Medrano disappeared at noon from downtown Chihuahua City on 27 May 2003. Her remains were discovered in early September and identified in early November. DNA testing confirms the identity of another victim, Neyra Azucena Cervantes, whose body was initially refused by her mother, because of police mishandling of her daughter's remains.

<sup>24</sup> For a critical account of the popular and official responses to the killings, see María Socorro Tabuena Córdoba, "Baile de fantasmas en Ciudad Juárez al final/principio del milenio" (Tabuena Córdoba 2003).

<sup>25</sup> The families of the victims use family pictures to depict the missing young women and have fought strenuously, but with little success, to control the dissemination of images of loved ones' remains.

<sup>26</sup> Of course, if in fact state officials prove to be perpetrators of these crimes, as some have charged, then we would have to ask what kind of state power this regime of gender terror is intended to produce. See Rosa Linda Fregoso, "Voices Without Echo: The Global Gendered Apartheid" (Fregoso 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Here I am helped by Judith Butler's rereading of the Antigone myth which Butler uses as a model for feminist defiance of statism and of anti-authoritarianism (Butler 2000).

<sup>28</sup> My translation: "We are humble women who live in the colonias of Chihuahua. We use public transportation, we work two jobs for less than the minimum wage, and most of us have only received a primary education. We are mothers of young women who have disappeared. Some of us have finally found our daughters: raped, murdered, and disposed of anywhere. Others of us are still looking for our daughters. We are united today in our suffering, suffering the loss of a daughter or the terrible anxiety of not knowing where our daughters are. Our daughters, the disappeared, are captive somewhere, and are in grave danger. Our murdered daughters wanted to be happy: they had dreams, plans, all cut short by their killers. We have all borne the same cross. Along with

our desperation, our pain, and our anxiety at having lost a daughter, or of not knowing what has happened to her, we have to add the mistreatment we have incurred at the hands of investigating officials. We suffer from being discredited in the mass media, which paints us as divided and broken families in articles concluding that our daughters left our homes of their own will, because of their own licentiousness.”

<sup>29</sup> My translation: “When we have tried to denounce the killings or organize ourselves, the police have threatened us with refusing to search for our daughters. The police have hoped to buy our silence with handouts and money. They intimidate and harass anyone who tries to join us. In Chihuahua, the rates of kidnapping, auto theft, and other crimes have gone down. Because the likely targets for kidnapping are rich, the government created a special task force, with resources and personnel to address the problem. They have been successful. Why has there been no comparable attention, personnel, or resources given to investigate the disappearances of our daughters? We know the answer very well, that it is because the murdered and the disappeared are poor women. The government discriminates against us, and the murderers know that no one will come after them because authorities have no interest in protecting our daughters. We are tired of the persecution we face from the police in charge of the investigation. We demand that the justice system punish the perpetrators of these crimes and search for our daughters.”

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