SUBJECTS OF TERROR: The Ethical Impulse in Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood*

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This paper argues that Alicia Gaspar de Alba's detective novel Desert Blood *presents the reader with haunting scenes of violence, torture, rape, and murder to implicate the reader ethically in two registers: the first, through our participation in the economic systems that exploit the women of Juárez; the second through the "witnessing" of the violent deaths in the novel.* Desert Blood *draws on the case files of the border femicides, representing the gendered violence of these deaths in disturbing detail. While these representations are difficult to read, it is through this specter of horror that the full force of Gaspar de Alba's critique becomes clear. Ultimately, the novel reveals that the femicides in Juárez, while extreme, are not manifestations of aberrant social conditions, but rather are the all too familiar spaces of patriarchy, global capital, and misogyny, taken to their logical extreme.*

Key Words: *borderlands, ethics, femicide, Juárez, representation, subjecthood, violence*

Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood* (2005), a true-crime detective novel situated in the borderlands of Juárez and El Paso, fictionalizes the brutal murders that have systemically annihilated the lives of hundreds of poor women. The text draws attention to a labyrinthine machination that weaves together the violent forces of misogyny, industrialization, capital, and privilege, reminding us that the forces that are responsible for creating the conditions for femicide on the border are not singular, but are complex, rhizomatic, unstable, and shifting.

Before we go much further, though, let's begin with the numbers. Since 1996 more than five hundred women have been murdered in the border space of El Paso/Juárez. More than 1,000 women are missing. These numbers, while

staggering, are themselves imperfect signifiers, insofar as scholars of the femicide cannot entirely agree on precisely how many women have been murdered, though the consensus is that it is upwards of three hundred (Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán 2010, 1)[1]. Part of the sustained terror of the femicides is certainly the overwhelming scale of the crimes and their stubborn persistence. Though women in Juárez began disappearing in 1996, the crimes have not stopped, a fact that contributes to Juárez's current status as the murder capital of the world. While a number of arrests have been made in the case, the murders have continued, sparking international outrage reflected in novels, songs, films, marches, conferences, academic studies, and even US intervention (in the form of sending criminal profilers and FBI agents to assist in processing crime scenes). Nonetheless, the destruction and disposal of women on the border continues with a frightening stubbornness that shames us.

While the social forces that created the conditions for the Juárez femicides continue, I am not, for my present purposes, interested in pursuing the phenomenon as such here. Rather, I want to consider one very specific cultural product of the femicides, Gaspar de Alba's novel. *Desert Blood* is a complex and interesting text for a number of reasons, including Gaspar de Alba's appropriation of the true crime detective novel. My interest here, though, has to do with the ways that Gaspar de Alba chooses to represent the violence that the murdered women endure. In other works on Juárez, including Stella Pope Durate's novel *If I Die in Juárez* (2008), Marjorie Agosín's *Secrets in the Sand: The Young Women of Ciudad Juárez: A Bilingual Volume* (2006), Valerie Martínez's *Each and Her* (2010), and Teresa Rodriguez, Diane Montané, and Lisa Pulitzer 's *The Daughters of Juárez* (2008), we are confronted, time and again, with the complex conditions that allow for the systemic murder of women to continue. While each of these texts is powerful and haunting in its own right, I want to turn my attention specifically to a unique feature in

Gaspar de Alba's text—the graphic, intense, and incredibly detailed images of violence that we confront—and the subject positions through which this violence is enacted. Gaspar de Alba's text, informed by a queer protagonist (Ivon) with an Anzaldúan mestiza consciousness, seems to rely on a pornographically violent gaze that seems inconsistent with the ethics that Ivon is attempting to enact. In what follows, I argue that these incredibly violent depictions, while horrifying, actually have the potential to enact a particular kind of ethics by forcing us, the reader, to confront the processes that shift the women of Juárez from subjects to objects, a process that takes on multiple registers, but is ultimately articulated through the brutal deaths of the women. At stake here is how we read depictions of violence that have the potential to replicate the very structures of exploitation that they seek to undermine.

Moreover, in considering Gaspar de Alba's novel, I want to draw attention to the ways in which we represent terror and violence. While the phenomenon of the femicides is tragically important, they remind us that how we depict things, and for whom they are depicted, matter in profound ways. Representations and their circulation have the power to privilege certain scripts and stories over others, and it is precisely the circulation of such scripts—scripts of public women versus good daughters, of maquilocas versus traditional visions of Mexican femininity, of cultural contamination through proximity to the United States, of the value(lessness) of women wage earners—that has, in no small part, contributed to the continued terror that women on the border endure.[2]

As much as representations have real power to harm, it is also important to note that they also have the power to make ethical claims on behalf of those who have been victimized and silenced. As Steven S. Volk and Marian E. Scholtterbeck, in their article "Gender, Order, and Femicide: Reading the Popular Culture of Murder in Ciudad Juárez," observe:

> Indeed, it is precisely because the state has failed so abjectly in stopping these murders that "fictional" narratives have become both the site where victims are mourned and the means by which justice can be restored. Cultural producers have filled the vacuum left by state officials who continue either to shun their responsibilities or to conceal the guilty. (2010, 122)

Gaspar de Alba's novel, in part, addresses this unfulfilled need for redress, but its ethical impulse is not limited by this function. While the novel draws stark attention to the dangers, the brutality, and the exploitation of the women of the border, what it does not do is provide an easy and neat ending to crimes that continue to plague border communities. While the temptation to "solve the crimes" is intense, particularly given the detective genre she chooses, Gaspar de Alba instead presents us with something much more complicated and unsettling—a topography of violence that we both benefit from, and seemingly are unable to stop.

By looking at Gaspar de Alba's novel—a novel that fictionalizes characters and certain circumstances, but that as a whole leaves intact the social and political landscape of Juárez and El Paso, as well as the variety of social and political forces—in play, including the long list of suspects I want to explore the way that she turns an uneasy and ethically complicated gaze upon those of us outside of border spaces, safely ensconced in our privilege, who want to believe that we have nothing at all to do with the women of Juárez and their horrific deaths. Part of the ethical power of the novel is that it calls into question who benefits from the deaths of the women in Juárez, and the chilling answer—all of us—has the radical potential to leave us unhinged.

To begin, my argument assumes a few premises that are worth noting. The first is that writing and representation can be forms of ethical action, and

that moreover, fiction in particular can perform ethical work that other kinds of representations cannot. Because fiction uniquely allows us access to the interiority of characters outside our own experience, it can force us to occupy, however imperfectly, the position of the other. It is this very ability of fiction—the ability to move between subject and object—that foregrounds my ethical concerns with the text. At question here is how we read the graphic and unnerving details of pornographic violence that the text forces us to confront. How are we to read and remember that the bodies in the desert—the spine in a Mervyn's bag, the bloodied shoe—are not unnerving metaphors, but were humans, were lives, were extinguished subjects, and not just plot devices? And how do we react to a violence that both unnerves us and compels us to keep reading? I argue here that Gaspar de Alba's work does perform ethical action; that the violence that we are exposed to is not just simply plot device or titillation. Rather, what Gaspar de Alba forces us to see is a murky ethical space, one in which many people, ourselves included, are implicated, and in which the shifting grounds of guilt and innocence are not so easily established or articulated.

Representing Violence and Value(s): Maquiladoras and Misogyny

And so we are left with the question of what we are to do when we encounter representations of violence that sicken and haunt. How are we to read these detailed accounts, especially when we know that the novel revolves around real events? In this novel, we cannot take easy comfort in the fiction, since the parts we most want to be untrue—the torture, the deaths, the gratuitous and sadistic destruction of life—are precisely the parts of the novel that gesture toward truth. Can we confront this violence that sickens us head on, or as Zizek (2008) suggests, can we only look at it sideways?[3] Susan Sontag reminds us that one can only watch suffering from a distance. She writes:

> Someone who is perennially surprised that depravity exists, who continues to feel disillusioned (even incredulous) when confronted with evidence of what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands-on cruelties upon other humans has not reached moral or psychological adulthood. No one after a certain age has a right to this kind of innocence, of superficiality, to this degree of ignorance or amnesia. (2003, 114)

I read Gaspar de Alba's book in light of these claims, as she too reminds us that we are entitled neither to the historical amnesia nor to the willful ignorance that makes us believe that what happens in Juárez has nothing at all to do with those of us in the more privileged spaces of the first world. By drawing attention to the maquiladora system—its informal creation during the 1960s and 70s and its final formalization in the post-NAFTA era—and its reliance on disposable, exploitive labor practices, she reminds us that the women working in dangerous and exploitive conditions may very well be the same women found in the desert, and that there is a strong linkage between the practices that exploit, objectify, and scorn their labor, and those that exploit, objectify, and scorn their lives. As David Bacon noted, "The bitter truth is that maquiladora development relies on the labor of these thousands of young women who travel north from cities, small villages, and rural areas in central and southern Mexico. But they are important to the system only as productive workers, not as human beings. If they disappear, they can and will be easily replaced" (2004, 314). The labor of these young women is the only grounds on which their subjectivity is relevant; they are subjects insofar as they can produce labor, and when such labor ceases or is non-productive, maquiladoras rely on the disposal of these no longer useful objects.

The connection of women's labor in the maquiladora plant, and this vision of diminishing value—that is the movement between objecthood—is not

simply a coincidental feature of many of their deaths, rather, as Melissa Wright has demonstrated in her book *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*, the relationship between the labor of Mexican women in the maquiladoras is part of a larger discourse that she identifies as the "myth of the disposable third world woman" (2006, 2). In interrogating the labor practices of the maquiladoras, she finds that the women working there possess worth precisely because their labor-value diminishes; that is as they progress through their working lives (or the particular work cycle of a particular maquiladora) they do not acquire value as knowledgeable employees, rather their value is tied to perceived physical attributes, such as nimble fingers and sharp eyes, which decline over time, and which, consequently, result in a perceived accumulation of waste within the worker herself. This view of women as waste or as valueless then extends out past the confines of the maquiladora. Of this, Wright claims:

> They [the women] represent cultural value in decline and in consequence are possibly not valuable enough in death to warrant much concern . . . . The logical conclusion is, therefore, not to seek the perpetrators of the crime as much as to restore the cultural values whose erosion these women and girls represent . . . . And in such a cultural milieu, the murdering of women cannot be avoided. Their deaths are only symptoms of a wasting process that began before the violent snuffing out of their lives. All of the sorting through of the victims' lives illustrates the deep, cultural roots of waste; for as we scrutinize the victims' sexual habits and sift through the skeletal and clothing remains, we are supposed to wonder all the while, "What *was* she doing there anyway?" "What sort of culture devours its own?" (2006, 76–77)

What Wright is pointing to here is the complicated conflux of labor, class, and patriarchal notions of femininity that are brought into crisis by both the

maquila industry generally and the murders specifically. While the maquilas and the young women within them are often derided for being "public women," discourses of patriarchal femininity demand that women stay within the private sphere, even when doing so is economically impossible. The presence of women, and wage-earning women at that, in public spaces and very often dangerous public spaces, either of their own will or not, becomes symptomatic of a larger cultural shift, and the rift that the women represent demands swift, decisive and often catastrophic action. In this logic of cultural restoration, it is not that the murdered women deserved their brutal deaths, per se, as much as it is to suggest that if they had been home where they belonged—where patriarchal Mexican culture demands they be—then none of this would have happened. The symbolic wasting away of the Mexican woman within the maquilas is brought into its horrifying end in the murder of these women who are viewed as disposable and of diminishing value in multiple registers.

What I want to draw attention to is that the connection between the labor of the women in the maquilas and the destruction of women in the deserts and colonias outside the maquilas consists of linked and interdependent phenomena rather than discrete occurrences.[4] That the maquilas, in part, help create the conditions that force women to live lives permeated by violence and subjugation is clear, both in terms of the more abstract, economic conditions of late-model global capital, and the violent and demeaning experiences of women in the maquilas. Of the maquilas, Gaspar de Alba writes:

> Listen, you have no idea the kinds of things they do to women in some of those *maquilas*. They give them birth control shots, they make them show their sanitary napkins every month, they pass around amphetamines to speed up their productivity. Hell, they've even got Planned Parenthood coming over to insert Norplant, which basically

> sterilizes the women for months. What's to prevent some sick fuck from raping them during a so-called pregnancy test? (2005, 90)

There is a direct relationship here between the reproductive cycles of Mexican women, and their productivity as workers, and this relationship is so strong that it demands constant surveillance. While the women who work in the maquilas provide labor with their bodies, those same bodies have the potential to decrease productivity through pregnancy. Policing women's bodies on the level of their reproduction is an important part of maintaining their efficacy as productive workers. The bounds of intimacy intruded upon here—showing sanitary napkins, forcing birth control shots—assures that even the bodies of these women are part of the company's product. As Gaspar de Alba points out above, it is not a far step from this corporate control to rape or even murder.

The women working in the maquilas endure a kind of humiliation and subjugation unheard of in the United States. Moreover, that they do so at the behest of American corporations, reveal an important link between the murdered women of Juárez and the North American audience. This draws our attention to an unnerving ethical ground in which our own privilege is, in part, occasioned through the humiliation, decimation, and erasure of these border women. It is quite clear that one of the contributing factors creating the social conditions through which the women of Juárez are objectified, drained of value, and then discarded is the globalized capital economy of which First-World people are the primary beneficiaries. While the deaths that these women suffered were horrific, brutal, and lonely, the conditions that created them are overpopulated with multinational corporations, with First-World consumers, with patriarchal violence made manifest through cultural anxiety—and it is this crowded space that also creates the conditions for our ethical outrage.

Detecting Structure: Genre and Ethics

While drawing attention to the exploited lives and vicious deaths of the women associated with the maquiladoras is the beginning of the ethical action of the text, much of the force of the novel lies in the way that Gaspar de Alba deploys the genre of detective fiction. As Irene Mata has pointed out:

> Gaspar de Alba employs the strategies of the detective novel to challenge the hegemonic narrative structure of detective fiction and push for analysis of the crimes based on a critique of multiple, entrenched structures of power. The tangled network of corruption and injustice makes the restoring of social order an impossible task. By rejecting a traditional solution to the crimes, Gaspar de Alba expands the conventions of the detective novel and illustrates the oppositional possibilities of the genre. (2010, 22–23)

By refusing to couch her detective novel in the familiar who-done-it scenario, and by instead insisting on a variety of possible causes, culprits and factors—all of which she draws from the case files of the crimes—Gaspar de Alba forecloses the possibility of assigning singular and comfortable blame and insists on turning a scathing gaze on the systemic violence that allows for the annihilation of the Juárez women. That this violence is systemic, or more to the point, that the violence these individual women bear—atrocious, sadistic, and dehumanizing violence that annihilates their subjecthoods in multiple registers—is the result of multiple systems of power that converge in terrifying ways on their bodies is *the* ethical force of the text. The murders in Juárez are not the product of discreet social conditions or isolated violence; rather they represent the coming together of global capital, patriarchy, and misogyny in a way that defies our ability to simply intervene and stop them.

Gaspar de Alba makes this clear by manipulating the form of the detective novel. One of the primary ways she does this is by using a queer woman, Ivon, as her detective figure. Ivon, through a potent combination of Anzaldúan new mestiza ethics, border-dweller sensibilities, and academic training in Women's Studies and Marxism, is, over the course of the novel, able to "read" the various texts, subtexts, and ultimately, the structures of power that are diffusely responsible for the continued violence against women in Juárez. Ivon's movement through the novel—her literal occupation of various borderland and marginal spaces—and her ability to negotiate those spaces, is ultimately what propels the novel forward. The action of the text is situated in Ivon's growing understanding of the various systems that objectify the women of Juárez, and her probing of her sister's disappearance uncovers a number of suspects: the Egyptian; the gang of rapists known as the Rebeldes; the bus drivers for the maquiladoras; the narco gangs who celebrate successful drug runs by raping and murdering women; the first sons of prominent families The Juniors who are above the law; corrupt and indifferent law enforcement; sex offenders relocated to El Paso.

Uncovering all of these different players reveals to Ivon and to the reader that, while "no one" is seemingly responsible for all of the murders in Juárez, everyone has a stake in them. As Gaspar de Alba writes in the final pages of the novel:

> That's what this was, she realized. A huge malignant tumor of silence, meant to protect not the perpetrators themselves, but the profit reaped by the handiwork of the perpetrators. A bilateral assembly line of perpetrators, from the actual agents on both sides of the border to the agents that made binational immigration policy and trade agreements. The cards fell so perfectly into place it was almost nauseating. This thing implicated everyone. No wonder the

> crimes had not been solved, nor would they ever be solved until someone with much more power than she, with nothing to lose or gain, brought this conspiracy out into the open. (2005, 335)

This sense that individual will and, moreover, individual accountability are subsumed by forces outside individual control becomes both the ethical impetus of the text and, in a Janus-faced irony, also becomes one of its deep horrors. The thing implicates everyone, and this everyone includes the reader who is the beneficiary of trade agreements and immigration policies; terrifyingly, because everyone is implicated, no one is ultimately responsible. As Ivon reflects above, everyone has a stake in this, and it is through uncovering the structures that support those stakes that we confront the unnerving and unavoidable reality that First-World privilege is literally constructed on terror, on violence, and on graves.

Subjects and Objects: Ways of Viewing Terror

Gaspar de Alba, in her edited collection *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade and La Frontera*, poses the following question:

> Why are the Juárez women being killed the way they are being killed? This is an important point, the way they are being killed, because we have to understand that these crimes are more than murder; they are ritual acts of pure and unadulterated hatred and brutality toward the poor brown female body. (2010, 83)

At this point I want to turn to this very question: the manner and then consequently the brutality that Gaspar de Alba depicts in her fiction to further illuminate the other pressing ethical ambiguity of the text. Namely, what is to be gained by depicting the brutality of Juárez murders? As Alicia

Schmidt Camacho reminds us, we are on dangerous representative ground here, as she claims:

> 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. (2004, 40)

The seemingly ever-present image of the violated body, the cadaver, as *the* signifier of these crimes is troubling, as it has the precise power to replicate the very structures that it seeks to undermine. Even those texts or cultural products that seek to problematize the violence by rendering it in its most abject and horrifying form—the corpse—inadvertently reaffirm that the subjectivity of these women can be rendered into objects for different kinds of consumptions.

With Schmidt Camacho's concerns in mind, I would like to argue that Gaspar de Alba's text does not actually reaffirm this theft of Mexicana subjectivity, precisely because of the way we encounter the violence, not as an afterthought, but in the moment. By manipulating the gaze of the reader in precise ways, we are forced, however liminally, to encounter the horror of the femicides in their subjective, not (yet) their objective form. In other words, I want to argue that the violence we encounter from the first page of *Desert Blood*, while extreme, is not gratuitous or voyeuristic; rather it is the space

in which we as readers must confront the body *as it is in the process* of being rendered into object, and must do so in ways that force us to participate in a process that we find repugnant and unnerving. By maneuvering our gaze in this way, Gaspar de Alba reveals our complicity in these crimes, on the literal level of the text we encounter the body splayed open, cut open, terrified, tortured, and disassembled though we must often have to do this either through the subject gaze of the victim, or through the gaze of the violator. Two contrasting examples from the text will serve to illustrate this.

The first example is taken from the first pages of *Desert Blood*. While I cannot quote it in its entirety here, let me proceed with some excerpts from these pages:

> The rope tightened around her neck and she felt her belly drag over sand and rocks, the wound on her breast pricked by the sage-brush. She was numb below the waist, and her face ached from the beating . . . They'd stuffed her bra into her mouth, and the hooks in it hurt her tongue. When the car stopped, her head slammed into something hard . . . for a second her eyes were seared by a sharp light, and then she saw their faces, like large silver coins, so bright she didn't see what was in their fists until they were on top of her. The drug they had given her made her feel like she was under water. She could not feel the blades slicing into her belly. She saw blood splashing, heard the tearing sound like the time she'd had a tooth pulled at the dentist's office, something torn out by the roots, deeper than the drug. Felt a current of night air deep inside her, belly hanging open. She tried to scream, but someone hit her on the mouth again, and someone else stabbed into the bag of water and bones -that's all it is, the nurse at the factory once told her, a bag of water and bones. (2005, 1–2)

This section, which opens the book, puts the reader immediately into the position of the beaten, raped, and brutalized woman, and we are forced to view her death through her own subject position. The reader is presented with a series of traumatizing sensations—the noose tightening, the belly dragging, the injured breast prickled, the bra hooks hurting the mouth—as the body becomes the site of subject annihilation. The pain and the torture of the unnamed woman renders her body into an object, as her subjecthood is destroyed by a pain that reconstitutes the world into a series of objective relations. As Elaine Scarry tells us in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*:

> It is the intense pain that destroys a person's self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe. Intense pain is also language-destroying: as the content of one's world disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject. (1985, 35)

Scarry's points are illuminated here, as we are given an inventory of her wounds, her numbness from the drug, her terror and confusion, and the eerie repetitions—she begins crying again—they hit her in the mouth again as she attempts to make sense of her subjugation and pain through familiar spaces that fail. The body ripped open is unlike the trip to the dentist office, the roots removed are much deeper than the removed tooth, and as the night air moves through her body, the shift from subject to object becomes complete. Here it is only when the body signifies its opposition—it is an open, splayed, broken body, not a contained, discreet or whole one—that the body becomes not self but object; a sack of bones and water.

This move of the body from subject to object—that is Gaspar de Alba's choice to force us to witness the subject annihilation that the murdered women endure—is important because that objectification is both symbolic and literal. As Irene Mata has pointed out:

> The reduction of the young woman to "a bag of water and bones" illustrates the objectification she experiences and the lack of worth her body commands. The fact that it is a nurse at the maquila who uses this rhetoric becomes important as the novel attempts to connect the violence against young women to the ways the maquila industry turns female workers into objects to be exploited and discarded. Fatalistic discourse that positions the murders of these young women as inevitable automatically renders them disposable. (2010, 24)

It is the disposability of this woman—the body rendered into a sack of water and bones—that unnerves, and moreover, it is our witnessing of that process through her eyes that makes encountering this violence uncanny. In this moment the reader is forced to confront a violence that, through its extremity and its first person subject position, is unfamiliar and strange, even as it is also a script that is very familiar. To the contemporary reader, the vision of the abused, beaten, or broken body is, to paraphrase Sherman Alexie (1992), nothing surprising.[5] It is, rather, part and parcel of our weeknight TV lineup. What is unnerving is that we only encounter such bodies and images after the fact; we encounter them after the subject has been rendered object, and so our first relation with them is in their object position. In Gaspar de Alba, this is shifted. The body is not yet broken, it is inhabited by a terrorized subject, one who thinks of her children, and compares her torture to getting a tooth pulled. Here we inhabit the subject position even as it faces annihilation. The safe distance between us, the reader, and the violence that annihilates is

dispelled; we are, rather, brought into a horrifying intimacy. We experience, however incompletely and imperfectly, an abjection that we more typically consume, and in doing this destroy the distance of the ambivalent voyeur.

To put it differently, this woman's death is made real and visible. She is not, in this moment, just another dead body in the desert; she is a woman whose life, while distanced from ours, is not dissimilar. We have to encounter her in her frightened subjectness in the moment of its destruction. This is violence that haunts; it haunts because it is startling, and it haunts because though fictionalized, what it represents is real enough, as the uncanny, eviscerated, and dissected bodies in the desert remind us.

A similar kind of diminishing of distance occurs when we encounter the violence at the end of the text, only in this instance, we experience that violence through those perpetuating it, not through the woman receiving it:

> 'There's another luck penny. Hello, baby,!' Junior says. 'No tits, boss.' 'Then turn her around! Let me see her ass,' Junior says . . . . 'Fuck the shit out of her man, Camera Two, keep tight on that prick. Camera One, body shot from behind. That's it. Hump the little bitch. I want to see some spunk in one minute. Okay Dracula, do your thing, man. Let's spend this penny'. (2005, 268)

This section of the text is taken from a larger scene, where Irene, Ivon's kidnapped sister, overhears the torture and death of other kidnapped women. In this moment, the horror for the reader lies in the horror of being the violator. The language of pornography here, the turning of the woman into an object, whose usefulness can be spent like a penny, is an eerie reminder of the way that her worth is charted both in terms of her labor and her sexuality.

The moral disgust comes, in part, from the familiarity of the script that Dracula and Junior take part in; the clichés of the pornographic space, the dissection of the body into tits and ass, carves up the woman metaphorically before she is very probably carved up literally. Here the symbolic violence that can exist in a variety of ways in a pornographic culture are rendered literal and are played out against the terrified, fragmented body. The act, in all of its repugnance, nonetheless engages in a discourse that is familiar, the discourse of pornographic heteronormativity. As in the first example, the diminishing of distance between the woman and the reader is an important action. While in the first instance, this intimacy is created through the reader occupying the subject position of the violated woman, here that diminishing distance is created through a realization that the language the men use in this violent space is not different from the language used in more "benign" spaces. The body objectified here reveals a difference of degree, not of kind.

That the woman's body is being turned into both an object and a commodity raises a question asked in regard to the women in the maquiladoras. For whom is her body being rendered into an object? Like the women in the maquiladoras, the answer is plural. She is being rendered into an object by the men who are violating her, and she is made into commodity by the paying subscribers who wish to consume her suffering and death as a source of pleasure. She is rendered object, by the patriarchal space of her own country, and then consumed by the rich, anonymous viewers in the north. Ultimately, the person who profits the most from her death is the founder of the snuff ring, an American official, who like the American-owned maquiladoras is protected by both law and custom. Finally, it is worth noting that the snuff ring classifies women as "pennies," "nickels," and "quarters." Irene, due to her youth and her position as a Chicana is a nickel. The young nameless Mexican woman whose violation we are forced to witness is a penny.

Conclusion: Diminishing Distances

So, in what way does this descent into nightmarish space provide ethical grounds? The representations of violence we have to encounter in this novel are ethical, in part because they diminish distance in multiple registers. The socioeconomic context of maquiladoras reminds us that some of the privilege of First-World consumers is predicated upon the objectification and exploitation of the women in Juárez. The use of the detective genre uncovers the myriad forces that lead to the violent deaths of these women, deaths we are not so very distanced from. Finally, the extreme violence of the novel diminishes the distance between the reader and the women being violated by forcing the reader into the subject position of violated and violator, thus collapsing the distance between subjecthood and objecthood that the women occupy. Finally, the novel forces us to see the practices of violent patriarchal culture in light of their logical end-game, and moreover forces us to recognize our participation within them. In part, the ethical claims of the text are not that this violence is unfamiliar, but rather the reverse; it is eerily familiar in so far as it represents systems that include and implicate us, and even in its most extreme manifestations, we remain on familiar if uncomfortable ground.

In conclusion, the ethical complications of *Desert Blood* operate in a variety of registers, but in each it is a result of the ways that Gaspar de Alba forces us to see the spaces where subjects are rendered into objects in horrifically embodied ways. Moreover, the text resists the conventions of genre, insofar as the reprieve is limited and is manifestly complicated by the murky middle grounds that permeate the text. At the end, the hope in the novel is limited and circumspect because it is ultimately insufficient.

Notes

[1] The inconsistency in this number is due to a variety of forces, not the least of which is the incredible violence in Juárez, as it is also a site of narco-trafficking and deaths associated with the

drug cartels. In addition, the fact that some families who tried to report their daughters missing faced police who refused to take reports, etc. adds to the confusion of the precise number of missing and murdered women.

[2] There are a number of studies that interrogate these scripts including Alicia Schmidt Camacho's "Body Counts on the Mexico-US Border: Feminicidio, Reification, and the Theft of Mexicana Subjectivity." And Melissa W. Wright's *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism.*

[3] Here I am referencing Slavoj Zizek's *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections.*

[4] For more on the relationship between labor, power, and the maquilas, see Gaspar de Alba's edited collection *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade and La Frontera*; Rosa-Linda Fergoso and Cynthia Bejarano's *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Americas.*

[5] In his much discussed and famous poem "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre" Alexie claims "Believe me, there is nothing surprising/about a dead body. This late in the twentieth century/tears come easily and without sense:/taste and touch have been replaced/by the fear of reprisal . . ."

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