

DESERT BLOOD: An Insight to the “Factory of Killers” in Juárez, México

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Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders. By Alicia Gaspar de Alba. Houston: Arte Público, 2005. 346 pages. \$23.95 (cloth).

Alicia Gaspar de Alba transforms a complex, often misunderstood, transnational crisis into a novel that explores the multiple layers of social injustice, plaguing women and their families in Mexico and in the United States. Her decision to produce a piece of work that speaks to a mass audience in the form of a novel is forward thinking and far reaching. Many who have never heard of the murders will be able to pick up the novel and learn about the details of these deaths in a text that is neither solely academic nor purely fiction. Although the book is written as a fictional novel, the accounts within it are based on years of research. Those of us who are already engaged in the movement to demand justice for the *mujeres de Juárez* also welcome *Desert Blood* as a novel that further explores the information we have already acquired about this tragedy. The novel forces us to deal with the moment-by-moment pain and struggle of the victims of femicide. A wonderful resource, the book underscores the significant connection of these murders to globalization, racism, patriarchy, and xenophobia. Furthermore, the book is written from a feminist, queer, and Chicana perspective—each aspect of which is sorely missing in academic and popular presses.

Desert Blood is the powerful account of a Chicana lesbian academic, Ivon “Pancho” Villa, who travels to El Paso from Los Angeles to adopt a child from Mexico only to be confronted with the horrible reality that the child’s mother

was one of hundreds of women murdered along the border. First reading about the murders in *Ms. Magazine*, Ivon is upset with herself for being clueless about the ongoing murders in her hometown. Through Ivon's growing awareness, Gaspar de Alba emphasizes that many people in the United States are ignorant about the murders in Mexico, which are part of an international crisis involving the exploited labor of people of color and the misogynistic treatment of women around the world. As so many critics point out, those most at risk of becoming victims of the brutal murderers are poor women from rural areas with no political or economic power. Many of those murdered are dark skinned, signifying the vulnerability of women and men indigenous in Mexico and Latin America, and many are women laborers in U.S.-owned maquiladoras.

Through Ivon's character, Gaspar de Alba introduces several issues and themes underrepresented in literature. For example, the story includes lesbian experiences with parenting, partnerships, and family relationships. After Ivon and her partner make the decision to adopt a child, they discuss some of the difficulties they encounter in trying to adopt as a lesbian couple. Furthermore, readers are given the opportunity to experience a story from the perspective of an educated Chicana lesbian. Throughout the narrative, Ivon makes reference to her dissertation and her goal of completing her Ph.D. In this way, the author is able to introduce several academic and theoretical analyses of the murders—an effective way to bridge literature and theory.

As Ivon becomes interested in learning more about the murders, her worst nightmare occurs—her sixteen-year-old sister, Irene, becomes one of the disappeared. Her little sister's character also signals several issues, including assimilation/aculturation, as she is a U.S.-born Chicana who feels alienated in Mexican territory. Irene begs Ivon to take her to the fair in Juárez. After being

stood up by her sister, Irene decides that she will go alone. Upon her arrival, she instantly feels out of place and shunned by Mexicanas/os. Yet her status as a U.S. citizen does not differentiate her physically from the poor women disappeared in Mexico. She too is in danger as a young, brown woman whose family did not have any power/wealth in Mexico or the United States. Her situation demonstrates the fluidity of the border, indicating that no one is safe as long as these women are unprotected. In fact, because the main protagonist of the story is from the United States, the author is able to bring to light the interconnections between these two countries.

The novel highlights the theories that abound surrounding the murders of more than 450 women who have been killed and disappeared in Ciudad Juárez, México, since 1993. The book explores the possibilities that the murderers include serial killers, satanic cults, an Egyptian chemist, gang members, bus drivers, corrupt police, border patrol, and drug cartels. The author refers to the entangled lot as a “factory of killers,” including not only the perpetrators but also the infrastructure that enables the murders to continue with impunity (333). (One of the chapters that explores these serial killers was published in this journal in 2004 as part of an issue devoted to the women of Juárez).

This book makes important contributions to a variety of academic fields, including, but not limited to, women’s studies, ethnic studies, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) studies, sociology, and literature particularly to the genre of murder mystery novels. It also assists social scientists by putting a face on social inequality, as well as globalization, and the tragedy to which such inequity is often attached. Anyone interested in issues of social justice, feminism, LGBT experience, globalization, and human rights would benefit from reading this book or using it in the classroom.

In the midst of the current immigrant rights movement, the women who have been murdered in Juárez since 1993 have become more significant to us and to this nation. As Alicia Gaspar de Alba points out, these women's only power is their ability to reproduce (332). We often refer to the murdered women of Juárez as *las hijas* (the daughters) because they are young. However, in Gaspar de Alba's analysis of the murders, these women might also be *our* daughters—they are the children of the borderlands.