

The Complexities of "Feminicide" on the Border

Rosa Linda Fregoso

The campaign to end the killing of women in Ciudad Juárez took the name "Ni una más." *Ni una más en Ciudad Juárez*. Not one more murdered woman in Ciudad Juárez. Mothers and grandmothers, women's rights and human rights groups, and friends from both sides of the border joined in a movement of denunciation, demanding an end to the most sordid and barbarous series of gender killings in Mexico's history. By mid-2002, there were 282 victims of feminicide¹ in this city across the border from El Paso, Texas, and 450 disappeared women.² Between 1985 and 1992, by contrast, 37 women were murdered in Ciudad Juárez. "Ni una más" stages women's visibility and invisibility in the nation as well as a confrontation with the historical and social trauma in the region.

The politics of gender extermination in this region took the form of the apparently random yet seemingly systematic appearance of brutally murdered women's bodies and the equally horrific disappearance of many more. What is now understood as various forms of feminicide started in 1993, a year after the signing of NAFTA. As the numbers grew, the state continued to turn a blind eye to the violence afflicting women.

Records of the identities of the assassinated and disappeared women are kept by the nongovernmental organization Grupo 8 de Marzo of Ciudad Juárez.³ They were poor women, most were dark, and many of them had been mutilated, tortured, and sexually violated.⁴ Although there have been random appearances of dead bodies in public places throughout the city, most of the bodies were found near the outskirts of Juárez, in the desert, near poor *colonias* (shantytowns) like Anapra, Valle de Juárez, Lomas de Poleo, and Lote Bravo. Ranging in age from eleven to fifty, the murdered and disappeared women shared humble origins and, in many instances, their migratory experience to these borderlands.

In a highly perceptive study, Julia Estela Monárrez suggests that the murder and disappearance of women in Juárez cannot be considered simply as the work of psychopaths. Rather than the aberration of a single individual or group, the murders of women are "politically motivated sexual violence" rooted in a system of patriarchy. In fact the various feminicides in Mexico make evident the exercise of power across the social spectrum: the power of the state over civil society; the rich over the poor; the white elite over racialized people; the old over the young; men over women. It is a novel kind of "dirty war," one waged by multiple forces against disposable female bodies. According to Franco, the women targeted in these unprecedented border feminicides represent the "stigmatized bodies," those "marked for death in drug wars and urban violence." Feminicide in Juárez makes evident the reality of overlapping power relations on gendered and racialized bod-

ies as much as it clarifies the degree to which violence against women has been naturalized as a method of social control.

From Negation to Disaggregation

The state's early response, negation, involved at first a denial that the killings were systematic. Then, when the state could no longer deny this reality, officials shifted the blame onto the victims, committing further sacrilege against already violated bodies.⁵ In many instances the state emphasized women's nonnormative behaviors, accusing them of transgressing sexual norms, either of lesbianism or of leading a *doble vida* (double life)—that is, engaging in respectable work by day and sex work by night—as though nontraditional sexual behavior justified their killings.⁶

The discourse of negation thus tended to discredit the murdered women by emphasizing their alleged transgressive sexual behavior: "She visited a place where homosexuals and lesbians gathered"; "she liked dating different men and was an avid patron of dance halls."⁷ Such expressions of nonnormative sexuality have been so relentless that the mother of murder victim Adriana Torres Márquez responded indignantly: "Don't they have anything else to invent? They have said the same in every case: that it's the way women dressed or their alleged double life."⁸ Nonnormative sexuality is central to the causal chain that goes from the transgression of patriarchal norms to murder.

The patriarchal state's initial preoccupation with women's morality and decency is a form of institutional violence that makes women primarily responsible for the violence directed against them. Thus, those women who do not conform to the mother/wife model of womanhood (lesbians, working women, women who express sexual desire, and so forth) are deemed "immoral" and suitably punished. In effect women are transformed into subjects of surveillance; their decency and morality become the object of social control. What's more, shifting the blame toward the victims' moral character in effect naturalizes violence against women.

Negating the reality of widespread violence against poor and dark women proved to be not just a transparent, but an obscene, interpretive strategy. To counter the growing national and international movement of outrage and denunciation, the state transformed its narrative of interpretation from outright denial to disaggregation.

The state shifted the discussion away from broader social issues by isolating each "case" from the more general and systemic phenomenon of violence against women. In other words, the state now conceded the fact of the murders, but it refused to accept their interconnection.

Globalism on the Borderlands

It is important to recognize how under current conditions of capitalist expansion, Chomsky observes that transnational corporations function as "the masters of a 'new imperial age' ... spreading an inhumane model of development ... with islands of enormous privilege in a sea of misery and despair." Antiglobalization perspectives provide valuable insight into how Juárez figures as the "local" embodiment of the wave of global neoliberalism (market-based development) under the coordination and direction of the G-8, the IMF, the WTO, and the

World Bank; of the concentration of economic power in transnational corporations; of the internationalization of social divisions; and of the subordination of national economies to global forces. There is no doubt that global and transnational dynamics impinge into the geography of Ciudad Juárez.

This newly constituted global economic order impacts the most vulnerable communities—the bodies of the poor and Third World women, who are its disposable targets of labor exploitation.⁸ And critical globalization theories have rightly noted the unevenness of development in Ciudad Juárez, the further exploitation of the poor, and the lack of infrastructural development—housing, sewage, electricity, health, and other basic services—to accommodate the many poor immigrants recruited from southern Mexico and Central America by the maquiladora industry. However, conflating the exploitation of gendered bodies with their extermination does not offer us the nuanced account of violence that femicide demands.

Attributing the murders of women to processes of globalization has created the enduring myth of “maquiladora killings,” where the killers allegedly target maquiladora workers.⁹ Rather than targeting “actual” maquiladora workers, it is much more accurate to say that the misogynist and racist killers are targeting members of the urban reserve of wage labor of the maquiladora industry, namely a pool of female workers migrating from southern Mexico and Central America and living in the poor surrounding *colonias* of Juárez.

Rethinking State Terrorism

Much of the problem with the discourse of globalism stems from its portrayal of sexual violence as primarily an effect of global capitalism without accounting for the ways in which global manifestations of power differ and also intensify earlier and more traditional forms of patriarchy within the nation-state. A more nuanced understanding of sexual violence in Juárez identifies the multiple sites where women experience violence, within domestic and public spaces that are local and national as well as global/transnational.

It is important to recognize how violence—not only in Ciudad Juárez, but also in Mexico City—is not simply a problem *for* the state but is in fact endemic to it, a “state of exception” produced by an authoritarian government that has cultivated extreme forms of violence, corruption, and yes, even death, in order to cripple people’s capacity to resist, to smother effective counterdiscourse and overpower the revitalized democratic opposition.

As the uprising of the Zapatistas in Chiapas has reminded us, the Mexican government has been waging a “dirty war” of terror, violence, and extermination against all forms of dissidence, including poor women and indigenous communities. We should consider femicide in Ciudad Juárez a part of the scenario of state-sponsored terrorism because it is situated in what Taussig calls the “space of death,” which “is important in the creation of meaning and consciousness nowhere more so than in societies where torture is endemic and where the culture of terror flourishes.”

The fact that all of the victims were members of the most vulnerable and oppressed group in Mexican society—dark-skinned women—underscores the extent to which in Mexican women’s relations to the state is racialized and eth-

nized. One way to politicize violence against women of intersecting identities is by highlighting the role of the patriarchal state in creating the conditions of possibility for the proliferation of gender violence.

Another way to politicize violence is to think about it in broader terms, not just as isolated or personal in nature, but as a form of state-sanctioned terrorism, a tool of political repression sanctioned by an undemocratic patriarchal state in its crusade against poor and racialized citizens. In the words of a 1995 Human Rights Watch report, “the choice of particular women as targets of rape is almost inevitably determined by their identities...[as] members of an ethnic group, race or class.”

The murders of poor and dark women in Ciudad Juárez, situated as they are in a nexus of violence that spans from the state to the home, are thus connected to broader questions of power and gender inequality within a patriarchal state.

Transnational Activism on the Border

In March 1999, the crosses started appearing. Black crosses on pink backgrounds, painted in protest on electrical poles throughout Juárez, by *Voces sin Eco* (Voices without Echo), a grassroots group of families of the murdered women. Eerily barren crosses, silent witnesses to symbolic and experiential instances of violence, suggestive of what local poet Micaela Solís calls “the language of the abyss: the cries for help we never heard/the screams of their voices.”¹⁰ The fusion of traditional secular and religious iconography—pink for women; cross for mourning—contravenes against epistemic and real violence. Women are the protagonists of this grassroots movement.¹¹ Crosses speaking for justice for eyes that cannot see, for women who can no longer speak, crosses marking the threshold of existence. In painting the crosses in public spaces, *Voces sin Eco* forged a new public identity for women, claiming public space for them as citizens of the nation.

Although the women have been targeted for their gender, perhaps even more significant are the racial and class hierarchies that constituted their identities as women. As one of the mothers, Mrs. González, so aptly phrased it: “For the poor there’s no justice. If they’d murder a rich person’s girl, they’d kill half the world to find the murderer. But since they’ve only murdered poor people, they treat us like dirt.”¹²

By early 2002, a new coalition of feminist activists from hundreds of organizations came together under the campaign *Ni Una Más*. In December 2001, thirty thousand protesters from both sides of the border gathered in Juárez. And in March 2002, hundreds of women dressed in black (elderly women, *campesinas*, housewives, factory workers, students, and professionals) marched for 370 kilometers, from Chihuahua City to the Juárez-El Paso border, in the Exodus for Life campaign.

Horrific forms of violence against women have had an unintended and spiraling effect. In the wake of femicide in Juárez, this emerging formation of feminist and cross-border activism is part of the movement for global justice, of the challenges to global capitalism, neoliberal state policies, and the rise of the global police state. This transnational borderlands movement for women’s rights poses unique challenges. For example, is it possible to locate women’s oppression within

the human rights framework developed by feminists in the First World? Is it possible to evoke a transnational subject identity within a planetary civil society? The writings of Third World feminists provide a cautionary tale.

Claiming a singular transnational identity for women ignores the profound differences among women across the globe, but especially within specific national localities. Grassroots activists in Juárez are well aware of the limitations of basing a human rights framework on a singular transnational identity. For as Mrs. González reminds us, it is their intersectional identities as specific class, race, and gender subjects which makes women in Mexico particularly vulnerable to femicide and state terrorism.

At the national level, the state continues to produce the very "state of exception" it aims to police, combining rhetoric with inaction and nonintervention in eliminating violence against women.¹³ As of this writing, the cultural elaboration of fear continues in Chihuahua. So too does the struggle to eradicate all forms of violence in the lives of excluded citizens, disenfranchised subjects of the patriarchal state, women, indigenous people, dark and poor women, gays, the urban and rural poor, and children. Human rights activists on the borderlands hold onto a vision of a future in which no person can "rape or kill a woman without fear of retribution."

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INS Raids and How Immigrant Women are Fighting Back

Renee Saucedo

I can't tell you how proud I feel to be at this conference put on by, and for, women of color. I think for many of us it is like coming home. It is very affirming, inspiring, it is that breath of fresh air we all need in our day-to-day work. What I've been asked to address today is how immigrant women are faced with INS enforcement. I'm not going to focus so much on the border, because I could go on and on about what happens at the Mexico-US border. Instead, I'm going to focus on what INS enforcement looks like inland, and how it impacts women.

I'd like to describe to you what INS raids look like because they're secret. And then most importantly I would like to talk about how immigrant women are organizing to resist the repression by the INS.

Generally, INS raids, arrests, and detentions are characterized by abuse, physical violence, and humiliation. These are all the things that immigrant women have to face and are terrorized by almost every day. Even if they are not personally victimized by INS raids, thousands and thousands of immigrant women wake up every day, wondering, is today the day when I will be caught by the INS, is today the day when I walk my children to school, or take my kids to the health center, or go talk to my social worker, is today the day when someone will betray me and I will be reported, and, ultimately, deported?

So let me tell you what happens to those women who unfortunately do see the claws of the INS. The first way the INS raids happen are at people's homes. INS enforcement officers, generally arrive at people's homes without warrants, without the necessary probable cause or suspicion that people living inside are undocumented. They usually arrive at four or five in the morning, pounding on the door. Typically it is an official who speaks perfect Spanish in plain clothes. And the families open the door; why shouldn't we? We're not committing anything illegal. But that's not how we're treated.

Take what happened at 305 Chestnut in Redwood City, California, in the fall of 1999. Redwood City police officers, collaborating with INS agents, stormed about six apartments where families were sleeping and paraded them in the hallway before they were sequestered in one family's apartment. They would not allow

Speech delivered at Color of Violence at UC Santa Cruz, April 17, 2000. Editor's note: Since this speech was delivered significant changes have taken place with regard to the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Services). The "War on Terrorism" has unleashed increased attacks, including raids, against immigrants and created the new Department of Homeland Security where the entity formerly known as the INS, now the US Citizenship and Immigration Services is housed. For additional analysis on the danger these changes pose for immigrants, please refer to the National Network for Immigrant Rights' report "Human Rights and Human Security at Risk: The Consequences of Placing Immigration Enforcement and Services in the Department of Homeland Security" at www.nnirr.org.