

CHAPTER ONE

Toward a Planetary Civil Society

Cruelty has no unearthly punishment and often no earthly reason.

Jean Franco

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 femicide in this city across the border from El Paso, Texas, and more than four hundred disappeared women.¹ “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 “femicide” started in 1993, a year after the signing of NAFTA, and continued on through the tenure of three Mexican heads of state: Carlos Salinas, Ernesto Zedillo, and Vicente Fox.² As the numbers grew, the state continued to turn a blind eye to the violence afflicting women.

In spring 2001 a number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) involved in human rights work, including Grupo 8 de Marzo, Comité

Independiente de Chihuahua de Derechos Humanos, and Taller de Género de la Universidad Autónoma de Juárez, delivered a report, “Cases of Murdered Women in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua,” to the special rapporteur for human rights for the United Nations, Dato’ Param Cumaraswamy. The authors of the report had compiled files for 189 women murdered between January 1993 and April 2001.³

By early 2002, according to a report prepared by La Red Ciudadana contra la Violencia, the number of murdered women had increased to 269, with an additional 450 disappeared.⁴ Between 1985 and 1992, by contrast, thirty-seven women were murdered in Ciudad Juárez.

Records of the identities of the assassinated and disappeared women are kept by the nongovernmental organization Grupo 8 de Marzo of Ciudad Juárez.⁵ They were poor women, most were dark, and many of them had been mutilated, tortured, and sexually violated.⁶ 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.

Sensationalistic media accounts of these murders have exploited the stereotype of single or multiple serial killers violently and systematically exterminating young women. However, 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.⁷ 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. The women targeted in these unprecedented border feminicides represent the “stigmatized bodies,” those “marked for death in drug wars and urban violence.”⁸ Feminicide in Juárez makes evident the reality of overlapping power relations on gendered and racialized bodies as much as it clarifies the degree to which violence against women has been naturalized as a method of social control.

“Yet another massacre, another mass grave,” writes Jean Franco. “In our time, only too often we are given the image of the mass of bodies —

the massacres of Rwanda or Kosovo — out of which it is difficult for those of us watching the television screen or looking at news photographs to construct a meaningful narrative.⁹ In the course of my investigation for this book I found this difficulty often compounded by the competing discourses used to construct a narrative.

In September 1999 I attended the Burials on the Border conference, held at New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, where I witnessed a struggle over the meanings of these gender murders. There, before an audience of activists, researchers, and family members, representatives of the Mexican state publicly blamed the victims of femicide in Juárez. The heated exchange I witnessed between representatives of the state and civil society derived in large measure from competing interpretive frameworks. For the purpose of my own study, this public struggle over the social identities of the victims and the meaning of their deaths raises broader issues of cultural representation and its role in our effort to construct a meaningful narrative. In this chapter I intend to unpack the competing and often overlapping narratives that have been used to interpret the murders of women and, in the process, expose the subject that is constructed within each account.

From Negation to Disaggregation

One would expect the modern state to intervene on behalf of its citizens and limit extreme expressions of gender violence such as those unfolding in Ciudad Juárez, but the Mexican government has failed dismally. It has justified its failure through a rhetorical strategy of deflection that has taken two narrative forms: negation and disaggregation. Early on, state officials repeatedly framed their interpretation of the killings within a discourse of negation, refusing to acknowledge the reality of systemic and calculated acts of violence against women.

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ Indeed, the Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos

(National Human Rights Commission) found that police authorities had violated the victims' rights by making declarations such as these to members of the commission: "Many of the murdered women worked in factories during the week and as prostitutes during the weekend in order to make more money."¹²

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."¹³ 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."¹⁴ Nonnormative sexuality is central to the causal chain that goes from transgression of patriarchal norms to murder.

To establish legitimacy for this narrative of negation, the state enlisted the testimony of scientific "experts" whose testimony linked transgressive sexual behavior to newfound independence. A Spanish criminologist echoed the by now standard "moral panic" about the dangers of modernization: "As a result of the influence of the United States, women are joining the workforce at an earlier age and therefore discovering independence. This means young women could become more promiscuous. Some of these independent women have maintained sexual relations with more than one person. This behavior leads to danger."¹⁵

Again, nonnormativity became the lens through which the killings were interpreted, although the criminologist's comments also laid bare the patriarchal nostalgia for an earlier era of male authority in which women remain wedded to the private sphere of domesticity and motherhood. Like those who champion the conservative "family values" campaign in the United States in the 1990s, Mexican state officials blamed women's growing independence and mothers entering the workforce for the "disintegration" of the family and, first and foremost, the loss of male authority in the domestic sphere.¹⁶

It bears emphasizing that the subject constructed within the state's discourse is an "immoral" one. 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 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.

By the end of 2001, both the state's investigation of the murders and its dubious interpretive framework had been placed in question because of the convergence of a series of events that galvanized the public during that year: the assassination of human rights lawyer Digna Ochoa, the unearthing of the bodies of eight women in an empty lot adjacent to the headquarters of the Maquiladora Association, and the police assassination of a defense lawyer in Juárez. A broad-scale social force emerged within civil society. Hundreds of nongovernmental organizations — feminist, civil, and human rights groups from both sides of the border — joined the existing network of local grassroots activists and women's groups that had been denouncing the killings for several years. Media coverage of the killings zeroed in on state corruption and indifference.

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 adopted a less ideological strategy, this time enlisting the techniques of science to transform its narrative of interpretation from outright denial to disaggregation.

In December 2001 the office of the governor of the State of Chihuahua released the document "Homicidio de mujer en Ciudad Juárez, enero 1993–noviembre 2001" (Homicide of woman in Ciudad Juárez, January 1993–November 2001).¹⁷ Although a month earlier, special prosecutor for Juárez, Zulema Bolívar had acknowledged the murder of 259 poor women, this recent document in effect proceeded to disassociate the cases of the murdered women in Juárez as a phenomenon and reformulate most of the murders as discrete, unrelated cases.

The state authenticated its new narrative through technologies of statistics and forensic evidence, thus shifting the discussion away from broader social issues and 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, claiming that only 76 of the 261 murders exhibited traces of sexual violence or were related as "multiple homicides."¹⁸ As the months passed, the discourse of disaggregation served the state in several ways. First, it provided the state with a veneer of "scientific" authority and professionalism to counter its image as a corrupt "Third World" police

force, especially in meetings with representatives of international organizations and media. Second, disaggregation bolstered the “scientific” claims of the state, especially regarding the universal aspect of the crimes, as a “common” occurrence in any major city. Claiming the normality of the murders in Juárez, state officials cited the recent serial killing of fifty women in Canada. Finally, the state used disaggregation in a discursive war, a campaign to discredit women’s rights and human rights activists meeting with representatives from the United Nations and the Organization of American States by accusing activists of “politicizing” the murders.¹⁹ To some extent, the discourse of disaggregation has proven to be an effective strategy, providing the state certain legitimacy with U.S. state officials and international media, where the new narrative is reported uncritically.²⁰ Ironically, the state’s disaggregation of “the rest” of the murders as “crimes of passion, drug traffic, theft, sexual, intrafamilial violence, vengeance, [and] imprudence” does not preclude linking violence against women to gender hierarchies within a patriarchal state.²¹

Globalism on the Borderlands

Whereas the state’s narrative anchored the meanings of the murders of women at the microlevel of the individual, other accounts of femicide constructed a narrative out of macro processes, as is evident in the discourse of globalism.²² Unlike the state’s narrative, this discourse grew out of a progressive impulse, one critical of the expansion of transnational capitalism and global neoliberalism under the coordination of the IMF, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the World Bank. Established as a major interpretive framework during the mid-1990s, the discourse of globalism equated *exploitation* with the *extermination* of gendered bodies, tracing both conditions to a single process: economic globalization. And, on the Mexico-U.S. border, globalism was most visibly embodied in the maquiladora industry.²³

The murders of women in Juárez came to be seen as part of the “more insidious — and far more widespread — violence of work on the global assembly line.”²⁴ Given the geopolitics of the region, connecting femicide to the maquiladora industry proved to be a compelling narrative, especially since the murders of poor and dark women began in 1993, a year after NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement), the treaty that solidified the project of neoliberalism and economic globalization in this part of the world. One of the features of global capitalism today is the

creation of export-processing zones throughout the Third World. During the 1990s, Ciudad Juárez was the largest export-processing zone on the border, host to roughly 350 manufacturing plants owned primarily by U.S. transnational corporations. These plants employed roughly 180,000 workers who were paid around \$23 US per week in take-home pay, a little less than \$4 per day, or fifty cents per hour.²⁵

In many respects, the geopolitical and economic characteristics of the region lent legitimacy to arguments that the *exploitation* of bodies on the “global assembly line” and the *extermination* of bodies in the public sphere were part of a singular process. In studies of the worldwide grid of export-processing zones, researchers like Saskia Sassen have contributed important insights about the role of women as laboring bodies for global capitalism, documenting the “incorporation of Third World women into wage employment on a scale that can be seen as representing a new phase in the history of women.”²⁶ It is precisely this body of work on the “feminization of the proletariat” that is used to construct a narrative about the murders of women in Juárez, to make claims about how their “lives and deaths centered around the global assembly line.”²⁷ In other words, since both “exploited female bodies” and “exterminated female bodies” are expressions of the exercise of power and gender hierarchies, the cause of one condition (exploitation of gendered bodies) has served handily to explain the other (extermination of gendered bodies).

I do not mean to dismiss the value of critical theories of globalization, especially since they undoubtedly help to explain the structural transformations in export-processing zones like Ciudad Juárez. It is important to recognize how under current conditions of capitalist expansion, 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.”²⁸ 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 implode into the geography of Ciudad Juárez.

To be sure, the effects of this newly constituted global economic order impact the most vulnerable communities — the bodies of the poor and Third World women, who are its disposable targets of labor exploita-

tion.²⁹ 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. And, although there is no doubt that the process of economic globalization is “out of control,”³⁰ globalism is a monolithic, top-down analysis that neither captures nor explains the complexity of femicide. Nor does conflating the *exploitation* of gendered bodies with their *extermination* 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,” one in which the killers are allegedly targeting maquiladora workers — a cliché that continues to this day.³¹ For a Left drawn to critiques of global injustice, the maquila murders are certainly alluring victims.³² As convincing as this narrative may be, there is ample evidence disputing the myth of “maquiladora killings,” especially in the research of independent journalists and academics in Mexico. A study conducted by Benítez et al. of murders between 1993 and 1998 identifies only 15 maquiladora workers out of 137 victims.³³ Drawing from a larger sample — 162 murdered women between 1993 and 1999 — the research of Monárrez further corroborates the earlier figure of 15 maquiladora workers killed, citing additional occupations for the victims: students, housewives, sales clerks, sex workers, domestics, and drug traffickers.³⁴ Since the publication of these two studies, there have been several more maquiladora workers murdered, but they are still in the minority. 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.

The Subject of Globalism

In positioning the maquiladora industry as its unifying trope, the discourse of globalism elides the multiple structures of oppression in the lives of women as well as providing an insular explanation for the killings. In other ways, the discourse of globalism focuses a synoptic gaze primar-

ily on women outside domestic spaces — in work or leisure activities, as consequences of processes of globalization. Often its gaze is explicit; sometimes the focus proceeds by inference. But in each case, the subject of the discourse of globalism is an abject one: a subject in need of regulation; a subject as passive victim; or a subject as fetish of the masculinist gaze.

The documentary by Saul Landau and Sonia Angulo, *Maquila: A Tale of Two Mexicos* (2000), by linking feminicide to globalization, participates in this narrative. The film treats the issue of global justice, providing a critique of globalization as a “new world disorder.”³⁵ Filmmakers provide a generally persuasive account of unfair labor practices, gender and labor exploitation, health and safety violations, and environmental degradation through the dumping of toxic waste, chemical emissions, and toxic leaks. The film renders the “story of the struggle of a nation, deep in the midst of globalization” — as the rap lyrics by Manny Martinez and Greg Landau put it. The documentary is notable for its attention to the growing unionization movement among maquiladora workers, especially in light of the claims made by certain researchers on the Left regarding the impossibility of organizing workers from export-processing zones into a “coherent oppositional politics to capitalism.”³⁶ Even though the filmmakers emphasize the agency of transnational activists and labor organizers, in rendering feminicide intelligible to viewers, *Maquila: A Tale of Two Mexicos* adopts a masculinist point of view.

The maquila women are portrayed as alluring victims. The killings of women in Juárez are shown midway into the narrative, opening on the comments of local economist and member of the opposition party Victor Quintana, who characterizes “globalization” as a process that “tears apart the social fabric.” It is women’s visibility in public, nondomestic spaces — as laboring bodies and dead bodies — that provides the visual evidence for this “tear[ing] apart of the social fabric.” A visual collage of women in various public sites follows Quintana’s commentary: images of women in the maquila industry; images of women hanging out in discos and on the streets; images of women working in the sex industry. The accompanying sound track of “El Corrido de la Maquila,” by Greg Landau and Francisco Herrera, directs viewers to interpret the images, which point to the dangers inherent in women’s visibility and expression of nonnormativity, especially in spaces outside the private sphere of the home. “The dangers in the maquila,” as the song’s lyrics express it, demand parental (masculine) “protection” (regulation and surveillance) of young women outside the private sphere. And if viewers failed to grasp this message, the

next segment in the film drives the point home: a graphic scene of police examining the body of a recently found murdered woman in Juárez. The segment ends with the words of Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos, who led the popular uprising in Chiapas in the 1990s, describing globalization as a project designed to “eliminate a part of that population; erase them from the face of the earth,” — but this fails to undo the logic of association established in the film through the complementary visual images and song lyrics. Namely, women are killed for engaging in activities that exceed patriarchal gendered “norms”: hanging out in bars or on the streets, working in the sex industry. In establishing this montage, *Maquila: A Tale of Two Mexicos* characterizes women not simply as victims of globalization but as subjects in need of patriarchal regulation.

Early on, journalist Debbie Nathan also associated feminicide with forms of sexuality engendered under conditions of globalization. Drawing from ethnographic research on sexual practices in the maquiladora industry, Nathan wrote about instances of “a rigid version of femininity” and “the sexualization of factory life” in the maquilas. Evidence for the maquila industry’s promotion of hypersexualization includes heavy flirting on assembly lines; Mexican male supervisors soliciting dates from assembly workers; competition among women for the supervisors’ attention; the grooming of the youngest and prettiest girls for the “annual industrywide ‘Señorita Maquiladora’ beauty contest, complete with evening gown and swimsuit competition.” Nathan further described the hyperfemininity of “maquila girls” in this manner: “Unlike their North American sisters, who dress for assembly line in no nonsense T-shirts and sneakers, most maquila girls don miniskirts, heels, gobs of lipstick and eye shadow” — a hypersexuality that according to Nathan spills over into the weekend and after-hours.³⁷

Besides reporting on how maquila workers adopt the hyperfeminine forms of sexuality introduced into “traditional” societies like Mexico by global forces, Nathan uncritically embraces the state’s framing of the victims as leading “la doble vida — the double life of assembly work by day and casual prostitution by night.”³⁸ During the Burials on the Border conference, I was sitting in the audience with family members who were visibly distressed by Nathan’s public remarks, in which she drew the following analogy (later published in *NACLA*) about their rapes: “Oddly, the Spanish word for ‘double life,’ *la doble vida*, sounds a good deal like *las dos vías*, sex per the vagina and anus.”³⁹

Nathan’s discussion of the sexualization of maquila life is based on a selective and partial interpretation of the research of sociologist Leslie

Salzinger. Although Salzinger studies the “sexualization of factory life” in the maquiladora industry, this reference applies to only one of the three sites in her study; she concludes that representations of gender “vary between localized areas of domination, even those sharing elements of a common discursive framework.”⁴⁰

Specifically, Salzinger focuses on the “constitution of gendered meanings in a set of three work places” and on the ways in which gendered meanings and subjectivities conform or diverge from “public narratives” about the “archetypal nature of Mexican ‘sex roles.’”⁴¹ One of the factories, Panoptimex, exhibits an “objectifying modality of control” and reinforces “gendered meanings and subjectivities [that] appear to echo those crystallized in public discussions about maquilas . . .”⁴² (the factory animating Nathan’s argument). However, Nathan ignores Salzinger’s findings about the shop floors in the other two factories (Anarchomex and Androgymex): “The differences that emerge here are particularly striking,” Salzinger notes. Unlike in Panoptimex, gender in these two other examples is not a significant category, nor are women’s identities “defined around objectification.”⁴³ Salzinger’s work on the maquiladora industry in Ciudad Juárez calls attention to “the palpable heterogeneity and fluctuating significance” of gender representations on the borderlands, especially in terms of how these differences are lived out in women’s daily lives on the shop floors.

Ignoring this complex variability in gendered meanings and subjectivities, Nathan unwittingly echoes what is in fact the “managerial narrative” of the female Mexican employee, one that has served to describe the dress style of Mexican female workers through references to prostitution. In large measure, the stereotype of maquila workers as “prostitutes” is part of a much longer history of othering practices derived from colonialist fantasies about the border as a zone of “sexual excess” and border women as “culturally bound to sexual chaos.”⁴⁴ It is an old colonialist (and now neocolonialist) narrative indeed, this construction of Mexicanas on the border in terms of sexual excess and chaos.

Nathan’s reference to the “hyperfemininity” found on the Mexican shop floor and the differences in dress style between U.S. and Mexican factory workers is surely in part related to a narrative of objectification prevalent about workers in Mexican factories in general. But it is also symptomatic of a broader problem in public discourses on femininity that needs to be amended to include the role of national and global culture, for example, the role of Mexican cinema and television in circulating highly sexualized images of femininity, as well as the articulation of class

and culture in elements of fashion and dress style. In a study of managers in the maquiladora industry, Melissa Wright observes: "Throughout the maquilas, attention to women's dress style is continually articulated as an American or Mexican affect, and often in reference to cultural representation rather than to a national divide. The difference is generally discussed as one of length; fit, in terms of degree of snugness; color (bright or subdued); shoe style; make-up applications and hairstyle."⁴⁵

To a great extent, the links Nathan forges between dress style (what according to North American puritanical standards is highly sexualized) and "engaging in casual prostitution" echo managerial narratives about maquiladora workers on the border. As Wright notes, "When I asked one of the production managers, Roger, to describe the labor force, he said, 'Some of these girls have second jobs. You know, I've heard that some work the bars.' The message that you cannot tell the difference between a prostitute and a maquiladora worker was common in my interviews."⁴⁶

The devaluation of border female sexuality, as Nathan has noted, is part of a more generalized narrative about the border as a place of excess, violence, prostitution, drugs, and contraband that circulates in the Mexican popular imaginary. Nathan dates these images of the border to the early twentieth century. One can also trace regional identity differentiation back to the colonial era, especially with metropolitan locations like Mexico City stigmatizing the northern (frontier) regions as sites of vice and degeneracy. Expressed in popular cultural forms such as corridos, canciones rancheras, and much later in films and telenovelas, the earlier stigma of the frontier and of its inhabitants contributes to the ongoing othering of border femininity within Mexico, to what Nathan calls "this demonized yet casual throw-away view of border women" within the national imaginary.⁴⁷

The complexities of identity in Mexico have to do not only with the regional differences in constructions of border women as the other, according to Nathan, but also with patriarchal forms of domination, including "the fact that Juárez also registers the highest levels of reported domestic violence in México."⁴⁸ Nathan unfortunately lapses once again into uncritical acceptance of the narrative of nonnormative sexuality engendered by processes of globalization, positing a link "between maquila development, which has encouraged 'la doble vida,' and the sexualization of violence against women that appears to be a backlash against their changing economic and social roles on Mexico's northern border."⁴⁹

A more nuanced understanding of the regulation of women's bodies

under economic processes of globalization is offered by Ursula Biemann's 1999 documentary *Performing the Border*. The film focuses on women's bodies, rendered through experimental techniques — nonsynchronized sound and images, time-lapse filming uncoupling the image from real time, image enhancement, and a meditative voice-over. The effect of these nonrealist techniques is to distance and disturb the viewer's relation to reality and to force us to contemplate the links between the exploitation and alienation of laboring bodies in various sites within global capitalism, as workers in the maquiladora industry and in the sex industry. Informed as it is by a committed feminist politics, *Performing the Border* portrays women not as being in need of regulation and surveillance, but rather as the very *objects* of regulation and surveillance — an emphasis supported by the interviews of journalist Isabel Velásquez and writer/filmmaker Bertha Jotar.

Ultimately, though, *Performing the Border* is unable to escape the logic of associating the murders of women in Juárez with their nonnormative practices. Like *Maquila: A Tale of Two Mexicos*, Biemann's film equates exploited bodies with exterminated bodies visually through a linear sequence of narrative elements that creates a chain of associations: maquila workers—sex workers—victims of feminicide. The segment portraying female workers in the maquila industry is followed by the testimony of a Juárez sex worker and immediately afterward by a segment on the murdered women. In its metonymic association of globalization—nonnormative sexuality—feminicide, *Performing the Border* fails to disrupt the premise of the discourse of globalism, especially the notion that the extermination of women's bodies proceeds from the same logic as their exploitation: global capitalism. Like *Maquila: a Tale of Two Mexico*, *Performing the Border* is complicit with “Eurocentric victimology,”⁵⁰ a discourse that produces the murdered women of Ciudad Juárez solely as objects of global capitalism. In many ways, *Performing the Border* evidences an “imperial-charged agenda,” the power of “First World” feminists to define “Third World” women as “objects of capital” and as “traces of patriarchy,” failing to record the ways in which “women resist despite huge constraints and penalties.”⁵¹

The aforementioned film and journalistic representations, though limited, are much less egregious than the literary writings of Charles Bowden. Crossing the line from “titillation and information,” his essays warrant close examination for the discursive production of border woman as fetish.⁵²

Bowden adopts the narrative of globalism to explain the realities of

Mexico in colonialist terms, claiming that “the only cheap thing in Mexico is flesh, human bodies you can fornicate with or work to death.” His view of Ciudad Juárez as a “city woven out of violence” supports the emphasis on nonnormativity as the cause of femicide as well. Bowden similarly reiterates the myth of maquiladora killings, focusing on the sexual behaviors of maquila workers, whom he describes as “mostly young, often living free of family, with their own money and desires.”⁵³ For Bowden, femicide represents the “blood price” the nation pays for globalization, and he attributes violence to male backlash. “Killing girls,” Bowden argues, “has in effect become what men of Juárez do with the frustrations of living in a town with less than one percent unemployment but with abundant poverty. It is the local language of rage, a blood price exacted for what Juárez is: the world’s largest border community, with 300 maquila plants, and the highest concentration of maquila workers in the country.”⁵⁴

Although there is no doubt that femicide embodies the most deadly logic of masculinity, that its perpetrators are misogynist and racist killers, the focus on working-class men deflects attention away from the multiple structures of violence in the lives of women. However, Bowden’s own explanatory logic is also in many ways a form of male rage, or symbolic violence against women. In his most recent essay on the murders of women in Ciudad Juárez, for example, Bowden borrows the title of a popular banda tune (“Quiero bailar con la niña fresa”) allegorically, to stage his own desires and symbolic male rage, in his own “I Want to Dance with the Strawberry Girl.” This is how he ends his article:

The faces with the darkened lips and highlighted eyes, the cool young faces all say the same thing: Every man in this building wants me. . . . Her blouse is rich with red, her long white skirt erupts with roses. Her hair rises on her head in the crown of a contessa and then trails down her slender back. Worship me. The face is blank, no smile. A few hours ago she was a cog in a machine for 40 bucks a week. Tomorrow morning she will be scurrying round El Centro for a week’s supplies and then to the mercado publico, where cheap restaurants beckon and old men play the music of Chiapas. Outside, the city is spiked with painted poles and black crosses. El Paso glows across the river, as distant and cold as a star. But now, in here, hips smear against the bass line, the body heat rises.⁵⁵

The masculine gaze this passage enacts is perverse and disturbing. Here Bowden assumes to know the desires of a working-class woman in Juárez (“Every man in this building wants me”). Bowden conjures up images about the border familiar to U.S. audiences, images that portray

the border as a space of “excess.” The female body and the territorial body of Juárez are libidinal in a hot-tempered, close-up way. El Paso is the icy, distant North American counterpart (“El Paso glows across the river, as distant and cold as a star. But now, in here, hips smear against the bass line, the body heat rises”). With his focus on border/sexual excess, Bowden does not simply reproduce globalism’s emphasis on nonnormativity as an explanation for the murders; rather, he adopts a misogynist gaze, enacting the symbolic violence of male rage.

This is not the first instance of symbolic violence in the work of Charles Bowden. In *Juarez: The Laboratory of Our Future*, Bowden again crosses the line between titillation and information, recounting his fantasies about Adriana, a “whore” and former maquila worker with two children:

In my fantasy, Adriana and I do the right thing and follow the instructions of our time. We build a small casa by the sea. Actually, she has wrapped up her graduate studies at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM. She has an MA in romance languages and, of course an MBA, plus a doctorate in anthropology awarded for her groundbreaking study, “Sexual Surrogates: Free Trade, Multi-Culturalism and the Feminist Perspective.” She is now preparing a dictionary of industrial argot in her own work for the journal of linguistics and is contemplating study of dialogues with clients using the full French critical apparatus. . . . The children will play on the beach. I’ll keep an eye on them because the undertow here is terrific. Each morning she and I will jog up and down and the pounds will melt off and restore her girlish figure. We will live on locust, wild honey, young goat, fresh fruit, vitamin supplements, garlic tablets, and various hot salsas.⁵⁶

I imagine myself as the interlocutor of this passage. Is Bowden anticipating the feminist, antiracist critique of his writing, explicitly mocking after constructing a feminist poststructuralist reading of his literary fantasy? I take the bait, for this brutally senseless parody of yuppie lifestyle á la mexicana heralds the by now classic “rescue fantasy” of Western masculinity — one fixated on saving Third World women from the excesses of their own cultures. Written in the context of his account of femicide in Ciudad Juárez, Bowden’s ironic humor affronts common civility, revealing the perverse logic of his racist and colonialist gaze. The abjection of poor and working women in Juárez is nowhere more flagrant than in the “intimacy” he conjures up with the young women on the border, for example, the “fresa” who animates his voyeuristic gaze; the “whore” who serves as muse for his literary fantasies. Bowden’s perversity, his racist and colonialist gaze, constructs border women as abject. What’s more,

Bowden links these abject bodies to a third one he summons in his text, the mimetic image of one of the murdered border women.

The photograph published on page 66 of *Juarez: The Laboratory of Our Future* depicts the body of a kidnapped, raped, and murdered sixteen-year-old girl found in a park that is located literally on the border between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso and that is “dedicated to friendship between both nations.” The photographer, Jaime Bailleres, told Bowden that a newspaper refused to publish the image because, according to Bowden, “the lips of the girl pull back, revealing her white teeth. Sounds pour forth from her mouth. She is screaming and screaming and screaming.”⁵⁷

What logic would venture to further deface this image of a border woman’s horrified expression — this face of terror that Bowden initially mistook for a “carved wooden mask.” “Something,” as he tells us, “made by one of those quaint tribes far away in the Mexican south?”⁵⁸ The mask, Benjamin asserts, allows us to “get ahold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.”⁵⁹ Bowden continues: “I keep a copy of it in a folder right next to where I work and from time to time I open the clean manila folder and look into her face. And then I close it like the lid of a coffin. She haunts me, and I deal with this fact by avoiding it.”⁶⁰

Bowden did not avoid the face/mask. In his first article published in *Harper’s* and later in his book on Ciudad Juárez, Bowden published it.⁶¹ By so doing, he defaced it, thereby unleashing the magical power of defacement, which is, according to Michael Taussig, “the most common form of magical art.”⁶² What if in actuality the editors of the newspaper understood the logic of mimesis? Perhaps in Mexican political culture they are well aware of the enchanting qualities of defacement, and their refusal to publish (commodify) the image represents instead a refusal to practice a form of defacement, a disfiguration of the copy of her face because it would in all likelihood summon “a strange surplus of negative energy.”⁶³

In the hands of a literary writer/journalist from the United States, the face of horror belonging to the body of a woman on the border is aestheticized and transformed into a fetish, “a horror made beautiful and primitivism exoticized.”⁶⁴ Bowden’s urge to get “ahold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness” grows stronger every day. “The skin is smooth, Bowden writes, “almost carved and sanded, but much too dark. And the screams are simply too deafening.”⁶⁵ Perhaps in Mexico, ancient knowledges bespeak the mimetic magic of representation, its ability to animate what it is a copy of. In a “culture of masks,” as Subcomandante Marcos refers to Mexican political culture, this face/mask may well trigger “a strange surplus of negative energy.”

Rethinking State Terrorism

Cultural representations informed by the discourse of globalism have played a crucial role in deflecting attention away from the complicity of the state in creating a climate of violence. Although liberal and sympathetic to the murders of women in Juárez, often the discourse of globalism reifies the “global economy” as a “thing operating transhistorically and driven by its own laws and motion.”⁶⁶ In other ways, globalism posits an isomorphism between the local and the global that has led to grand generalizations about the demise of the state.⁶⁷ This failure to provide a more nuanced approximation about the interplay of “global and transnational” *as well as* “national and local dynamics implod[ing] simultaneously into the everyday experiences of members of urban households”⁶⁸ has worked to absolve the state of its complicity and perhaps even direct involvement in the murders of poor and dark women in Ciudad Juárez.⁶⁹ As the master narrative on the Left, globalism generates a problem of interpretation that is unable to account for the consolidation of a new form of state-sanctioned terrorism in Mexico. However, the state is in many ways directly implicated in the culture of feminicide in the region. In February 2002, state agents ambushed and assassinated Mario César Escobedo Anaya, a defense attorney for one of the suspects in the killings who was leading charges against police for their use of torture in extracting confessions. There have been numerous death threats against activists and journalists in Ciudad Juárez, including Esther Chávez Cano, the head of the NGO Casa Amiga; Samira Izaguirre, radio journalist and founder of the NGO Luz y Justicia. And at least a dozen activists, including Izaguirre, have filed petitions for asylum in the United States.⁷⁰

In order to broach the ways in which the problem of interpretation is complicit with state-sanctioned terrorism we need to first examine how “the state is implicated in the construction of gender regimes.”⁷¹ The *outdated* Roman and Napoleonic codes informing Mexico’s legal system have in fact ratified and promoted violence against women, especially in the private sphere, where male violence is normalized as “a mechanism of punishment and control.”⁷² Mexico’s regulatory and judicial system, strengthened by traditional cultural values, supports “the idea of masculine authority and ownership” over the lives of women and grants male impunity in the exercise of violence against women.⁷³ In fact few Latin American countries have legislation against violence in the private sphere. Under current Mexican law, if injuries inflicted during interfamilial violence heal before fifteen days, the woman cannot file charges against her

domestic partner; if the injuries heal after fifteen days but are not permanent, the aggressor is simply fined.⁷⁴

For years, feminist grassroots activists and NGOs have sought legal and judicial redress, aiming to extend full citizenship rights to women. Yet in the struggle to eliminate violence against women, activists are waging an uphill battle. Recently, members of the conservative party (PAN) in the Senate blocked ratification of the international human rights instrument CEDAW, the Convention to Eliminate all Forms of Discrimination against Women, a nonbinding document that would at least have signaled the state's support for the prevention of gender violence in Mexico.⁷⁵

The movement to extend rights to women in Mexico is of utmost importance because, as in many other Latin American nations, "Violence against women and sexual assault are typified in law as crimes against the honor of the family, rather than as crimes against the personal, physical integrity and human rights of the woman victim."⁷⁶ This interpretation of gender violence as "crimes against the honor of the family" has lethal consequences for women, since Mexican laws "still consider the honesty, honor, and good name of the woman to be relevant to the characterization of certain sexual crimes and to determine their punishment."⁷⁷ The state in effect tolerates violence against women, especially in the legal and juridical realm, depoliticizing and relegating violence to the domestic private sphere and narrowly portraying it as personal in nature, rather than as a "systemic historical and political event."⁷⁸ This same dynamic also depoliticizes other forms of family violence, such as incest and pedophilia, which often go unreported and/or ignored. Reinforcing these manifestations of family violence is a discourse that discourages women from leaving the private sphere, the purported site of patriarchal protection and authority: public space is imagined as inherently dangerous.⁷⁹

Given its failure to extend citizenship rights to women, Mexico's legal and judicial system is part of "the state machineries for the exercise of violence."⁸⁰ Recognizing state complicity, the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women "points to areas of state negligence, as opposed to direct responsibility. It notes that states are obliged to exercise 'due diligence' in preventing all acts of violence against women."⁸¹

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 from as much as they 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 and transnational. And this leads us to another way in which globalism is complicitous with the state.

The meanings surrounding the deaths are elusive. Are they committed by a single or multiple sex serial killers? By the police- and state-sponsored paramilitary groups? By the “Juniors” (sons of the elite)? By traffickers of illegal human organs? By an underground economy of pornography and snuff-films? By a satanic cult? By narco-traffickers? By unemployed men envious of women workers? By men expressing rage against poverty? By men threatened by changing sex roles? By abusive spouses or boyfriends? There are so many contrary interpretations and competing narratives that they have created a “problem of interpretation” that is “decisive for terror, not only making effective counterdiscourse so difficult but also making the terribleness of death squads, disappearances, and torture all the more effective in crippling of people’s capacity to resist.”⁸²

Fifty years ago, Walter Benjamin wrote: “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight.”⁸³ These insights permit understanding about the role of the Mexican state in creating the “state of emergency.” Mexico’s neoliberal policies — its disinvestment in the public sphere, instituted by the shift from a welfare state to a state that facilitated globalization — has produced the very culture of violence that it purports to police.⁸⁴ As Agamben so aptly reminds us, “Power no longer has today any form of legitimation other than emergency . . . power everywhere and continuously refers and appeals to emergency as well as laboring secretly to produce it.” In Mexico, the “state of exception . . . has now become the norm.”⁸⁵

It is thus 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 the poor, women, and indigenous communities. The state hides behind the mask of democracy, its appearance a subterfuge for the repressive, authoritar-

ian government which, until the 2000 presidential election of PAN candidate Vicente Fox, had been dominated by a single ruling party, the PRI. We should consider femicide in Ciudad Juárez a part of the scenario of state-sponsored terrorism because it is situated in 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.”⁸⁶ As Taussig so poignantly writes about the complicity of the state in generating a climate of terror: “There is also the need to control massive populations, entire social classes, and even nations through the cultural elaboration of fear.”⁸⁷

If the subject “woman” under the patriarchal state figures as the embodiment of the nation, the “space of death” occupied by these poor and dark women, embodiments of the nation, creates “meaning and consciousness” around the role of the state in creating the conditions of possibility for femicide. 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 Mexico “women’s relationship to the state is racialized and ethnicized as well as gendered.”⁸⁸ 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: “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.”⁸⁹

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. The consideration of gender violence as “social femicide” implicates “the role of an existing social order in practices that result in the death and devaluation of female lives.”⁹⁰

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



FIGURE 1. Black cross on pink background painted on telephone pole in Ciudad Juárez. Photo by Celeste Carrasco, courtesy of Lourdes Portillo.

murdered women (figure 1). 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.”⁹¹ The fusion of traditional secular and religious iconography — pink for woman; cross for mourning — contravenes against epistemic and real violence. Women are the protagonists of this grassroots movement.⁹² 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.

As in other places in Latin America, the women of Juárez used religiosity subversively to stage a confrontation with the historical and social trauma in the region. The use of religiosity — crosses, luminarias, vigils — is a form of indirection and nonliteralness for healing the trauma of the unrepresentable: death as the ultimate other. As a political and discursive strategy, religiosity gives voice to a new consciousness, one that recognizes the contradictions in the interface between woman’s visibility as abject subject (murder victim) and the invisibility of woman in the public sphere (citizen).

Woman’s visibility as abject is a subject-effect produced by the inter-

section of experiential violence and symbolic violence: the violence of racist misogynists, the violence of state-sanctioned terrorism, the violence of discursive frameworks of interpretation, but also the violence of representation. The hypervisibility of the feminine body in audiovisual media, as in the commodification of gruesome photographs depicting tortured and dismembered bodies, heightens the invisibility of the disposable body of the poor, dark woman on the border.⁹³ Faced with such literalness and explicitness, religiosity is a mode for reimagining the murdered, violated body otherwise: as a subject undeserving of annihilation.⁹⁴ In other ways, the discursive strategies of religiosity contemplate visibility for a new subject: the cross marks the intersectional identities of the targeted feminine subject, the feminine body of the poor and dark woman.

As in other parts of Mexico, in this northern region, certain bodies (white) are held in higher esteem than others are.⁹⁵ Although the women were indeed targeted for their gender, perhaps even more significant are the racial and class hierarchies that constitute their identities as women. As one of the mothers, Mrs. González, so aptly phrases 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.”⁹⁶

Three years after the crosses were first painted on telephone poles, the local coalition of grassroots groups and NGOs extended its reach beyond Juárez, growing into a broad-based, national and international movement to end violence against women in Mexico. 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. Staging demonstrations to publicize the murders, the transnational campaign *Ni Una Más* is working to extend citizenship rights to women in Mexico.

Horrible 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 new space of planetary civil society, of the movement for global justice, of the challenges to global capitalism, neoliberal state policies, and the rise of the global police state. Women’s activism on the borderlands constitutes an

identity formation that intersects with the transnational drive for women's human rights that gained momentum in the decade of the nineties after the United Nations World Conference of Human Rights in Vienna (1993).⁹⁷ However, this transnational 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, as Vasuki Nesiah reminds us: "A discourse about universally shared oppression can obfuscate global contradictions."⁹⁸ Although First World feminists have contributed significantly to "the theoretical and practical revision of international rights law," especially in their redefinition of women's rights as human rights, the challenge today involves framing women's international human rights within very complex and specific cultural contexts. For this reason, Celina Romany writes, "an integrated and more coherent use of international instruments," such as the coupling of the Women's Convention with the Race Convention in international law, as has been accomplished in South Africa, is an important step in the right direction. "The constitutional agenda had to recognize how a gender-essentialist critique fell short and did not adequately conceptualize a regime of rights and protections responsive to the realities of Black women."⁹⁹ In this manner, Romany's "intersectional methodology directs us to ask the woman/race question" and, in the case of Juárez, the class question as well.

Grassroots activists in Juárez are well aware of the limitations of basing a human rights framework on a singular transnational identity or "shared international subject class." 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.

In many ways, the murder and disappearance of women in Ciudad Juárez have strengthened the resolve of feminist and human rights in the campaign to eliminate multiple forms of violence in the lives of women and children. In the short term, women's rights groups are seeking legal and juridical redress, lobbying for reforms to the penal code, including a law covering violence in the private sphere.¹⁰⁰

The eloquent *El silencio que la voz de todas quiebra*, written by a group

of courageous journalists and creative writers, ends with these words: “What makes anyone (random or premeditated killer, individual or serial, alone or accompanied, Mexican or foreigner) think that in Ciudad Juárez one can rape or kill a woman without fear of retribution?”¹⁰¹ A rhetorical question, no doubt, but its spirit of denunciation challenges public and private patriarchies in Mexico.

At the national level, the state continues to produce the very “state of exception” it aims to police, combining rhetoric with inaction and non-intervention in eliminating violence against women.¹⁰² In November 2001, President Vicente Fox directed the attorney general of Mexico to assist in the investigation of femicide. However, 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. In this newly constituted planetary civil society, 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.”

Conclusion

This study of the cultural representations of femicide grew out of my ongoing collaboration with filmmaker Lourdes Portillo. In September 1999 I joined Lourdes at the Burials on the Border conference after she had spent two harrowing weeks in Ciudad Juárez filming for a documentary that was eventually released as *Señorita extraviada* (2001). My current analysis of cultural discourses is informed by the dialogic relationship we cultivated in the course of the production of her documentary. Just as her investigation has influenced my thinking, so too has my study influenced her framing of femicide in Juárez. In the course of our projects, both of us have constituted frameworks of intelligibility that are mutually influenced by our ongoing discussions about the continuing violence against women. I have listened to her theories about the murders and commented on several versions of the film; she has similarly impacted my study and clarified my understanding about the murders of women.

Lourdes maintained daily contact with the mothers and local women rights activists. I drew strength and inspiration from the generosity she exhibited toward family members and activists and from the passion and commitment that drove her documentation of the murder of their loved

ones. In the months that followed the release of *Señorita extraviada*, I accompanied Lourdes on several occasions during screenings of the film throughout the United States and abroad. Often we spoke in public forums to audiences who were generally unaware of the murder and disappearance of women in Juárez.

During these public presentations, my work has been to provide a framework for the film and to discuss its political and aesthetic merits. I situate this film within its activist tradition, as a film that refuses to withdraw from political action, a film expressing a moral outrage and seizing terror through confrontation. *Señorita extraviada* is an activist film in large measure because of its crucial role in the formation of what I have termed a planetary civil society. Lourdes has made video copies of the film available to grassroots groups throughout the Southwest, the Mexico-U.S. border, and Mexico City, for raising public awareness and participating in fund-raising campaigns for families of the murdered women. The film has served women rights activists in their appeals beyond the state to international forums. It has also served to publicize the murders of women in European, U.S., and Latin American contexts through its exhibition at major international film festivals, where it has won numerous awards, including the prestigious “Nestor Almendros” award from Human Rights Watch.

As an activist film in the tradition of radical cinema, *Señorita extraviada* is driven by a project of social transformation and *concientización*, aiming to move its viewers into political action. The film poignantly echoes the strategies of grassroots activists, mothers, sisters, and relatives of the disappeared in their ongoing struggle against state-sanctioned terrorism, reflecting the struggle of those who continue to demand justice despite threats against their lives and the use of disappearance as a mechanism of social control. *Señorita extraviada* is undoubtedly an issue-oriented film, yet its mode of delivery is eloquent and groundbreaking.

Making a film about an event that is ongoing and continues to unfold is an inherently challenging undertaking — even more so if the subject matter is as horrid and terrifying as widespread violence, murder, and disappearances. Given the absolute abjection of women through death, as well as the desecration of their bodies in public discourse, Lourdes confronted an enormous problem of representation. In the course of several trips to Ciudad Juárez, Lourdes faced quite a challenge. Not only did she experience firsthand the social trauma that these murders have produced throughout the region, but she bears witness to the psychic trauma that family members were living under and that they continually re-live with

each new report of a murder or disappearance. The film was thus motivated by these inextricably related conditions of the problem of representation and of social and psychic trauma. How does one represent the dead in a respectful manner, in a way that does not further sacralize their bodies, but honors the memory of their former existence? How does one represent the dead in a way that is respectful of the families and that honors their grief?

Drawing from the discursive strategies of grassroots groups like Voces sin Eco, Lourdes employs religious symbolism and iconography subversively. She enshrouds her film in the discourse of religiosity. The strategic placement of images of crosses, montages of crucifixes and home altars, along with the musical score of Gregorian chants, including the solemn chant for the dead (“Kyrie Eleison”), all work to establish a meditative, hieratic rhythm in the film. Lourdes describes *Señorita extraviada* as a “requiem.” She has in effect resignified the requiem into an artistic composition for the dead. To her credit, not a single dead body appears in the film; nonetheless the haunting presence of the victims is summoned both literally, through the placement of photographs, and figuratively, through her reworking of the requiem form.

Like her earlier film, *Las Madres*, *Señorita extraviada* emphasizes the process of radicalization rather than victimization. The narrative gives voice to women’s agency, to the mothers and sisters who have emerged as protagonists in grassroots movements. Through their agency and determination, poor women have shouldered the work of detection and forensic investigation, searching for missing daughters or sisters, combing the desert for bodies, and identifying remains.

The film portrays women on the border neither as passive victims nor as hapless dependents of the patriarchal state, the family, or international human rights groups. Instead, the film underscores the agency of mothers and women activists on the border, women who affirm the continuity of life, grieving and mourning, while acting as politically motivated citizens demanding the rights of women within the nation-state. It is the mothers and women activists, and not secondary sources or experts, who are the film’s ultimate guarantors of truth.

Informed as it is by a women’s rights framework, *Señorita extraviada* avoids positing a singular identity for women in Mexico. It emphasizes an intersectional methodology which in my estimation has generated a new understanding of femicide among Mexican intellectuals, not simply as class and gender motivated, but as *racially* motivated as well. Since the release of *Señorita extraviada* I have noticed references to the “racial”

nature of the killings on the editorial pages of *La Jornada*, a national daily based in Mexico City, where emphasis on the “misogyny,” “classism,” and “racism” of the killings has now become common.¹⁰³

Although Lourdes draws from experimental and realist techniques, unlike conventional documentaries, *Señorita extraviada* provides neither a singular cause for feminicide nor a contrived resolution. Lourdes draws attention to a confluence of intersecting and overlapping forces including but not limited to broader structural processes of economic globalization and the neoliberal policies of the patriarchal state, as well as more localized virulent forms of patriarchal domination. Ultimately, Lourdes turns her critical gaze onto the patriarchal state, a feature that some audience members have criticized for deemphasizing the role of global capitalism. But it is also clear from Lourdes’s investigation that, in the words of one women’s rights activist in the film, “The state is ultimately responsible.” The film draws attention to the role of state agents as actual perpetrators of the murders, as well as to the state’s role in creating the conditions of possibility (the state of exception) for the patriarchal expression of a sexual politics of extermination in the region. If Lourdes’s critical gaze on the state bothers some audiences, what is even more disturbing is how the filmmaker ultimately turns the critical gaze back onto its viewers.

In this respect, I am indebted to my students in a film course I taught during the spring of 2002 at UCSC for their insights about how the film’s powerfully unsettling and disturbing ending implicates the viewer in responsibility.¹⁰⁴ The film’s ending points to our complicity, not as a literal implication or responsibility for the murders, but as an ethical one. The film ends on the tone of moral outrage and in so doing calls for our ethical political engagement, summoning us to take action. I also like to think about the film’s ethics as summoning the “space of death,” a space, to quote Jean Franco, “of immortality, communal memory, of connections between generations,” a space “particularly important as a site of struggle in the colonized areas of the world, and this struggle is of necessity ethical.”¹⁰⁵

At the Burials on the Border conference I sat next to Guillermina González as she gazed intently at the postcard reproduction of the conference poster (figure 2). “These are my sister, Sagrario’s, eyes,” she said. “I took out the photo from my wallet and they are the same eyes.” They in fact happened not to be Sagrario’s eyes, according to conference organizers, but Guillermina’s fixation overwhelmed me. She stared at the image of those almond-shaped indigenous eyes, belonging to a partial

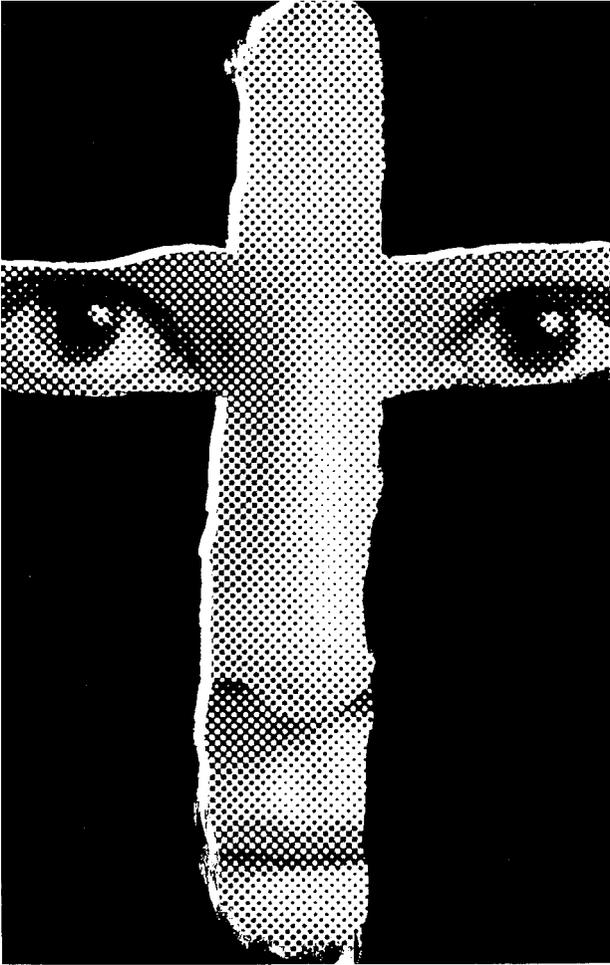


FIGURE 2. “Burials on the Border” conference poster.

face, so photographically enlarged that the pixel dots were visible; a partial face staring through the pink outline of a cross which partially hid this face—or did the cross deface the face? It wasn’t Sagrario, but to Guillermina it was. Was I witnessing what Taussig in another context calls “a type of ‘release’ of the fetish powers of the face in a proliferation of fantasy and of identities, no less so than the very notion of identity itself, a discharge of the powers of representation”?¹⁰⁶ And what charge did those almond-shaped eyes with the quality of magic emit? Almond-shaped indigenous eyes, both Sagrario’s and not Sagrario’s: eyes that

return the gaze, transform the object into the subject of the gaze, witnesses for her voice without an echo.

The ghostly barren black crosses on pink backgrounds, painstakingly emblazoned around Ciudad Juárez, as abrasions in public discourse, as embodiments less of Christ, the man made flesh, than of female flesh made human sacrifice. No literal images of the dead, no identifying names on tombstones, only the symbolism of a cross — the Christian cross, the cross of the Four Cardinal Points — superimposed on the traditional hue for femininity: representations of the unrepresentability of trauma. Hundreds of barren crosses in public spaces, crosses as rearticulations of discursive violence, as recodifications of femininity, as expressions of the inability to express terror and trauma: black-crosses-on-pink as figures for the “space of death,” so “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.” Crosses speaking for justice for eyes that cannot see, for women who can no longer speak, crosses marking the threshold of existence.