

**A DYNAMO OF VIOLENT STORIES:
READING THE *FEMINICIDIOS* OF CIUDAD JUÁREZ AS NARRATIVES**

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Over the past twenty-three years, several hundreds of women have been kidnapped, tortured and murdered with absolute impunity in Ciudad Juárez, an urban Moloch on the Mexican-American border. Because of these crimes, the city has become a symbol for all of what is wrong with globalization, transnational exploitation and the Latin American form of masculine domination known as *machismo*. Terms like *femicidios* or *feminicidios* have been coined in order to express that women, far from being this crime wave's collateral damage, are rather their specific target, and that their sex is the factor that gives this vortex of violence its inner logic and coherence. For these crimes are, indeed, recurrently represented as a *single* crime wave that follows, moreover, an adamant logic. A myriad of different truths about and around that supposed logic has been elaborated by detectives, journalists, scholars, political activists, state officers, artists, social workers, etc. Both the crimes and the search for their logic have also appeared in prominent literary, musical, filmic and other cultural artifacts. My dissertation takes these multiple truths and these artifacts and analyzes them equally as narratives that are advanced to explain murderous violence against women and, in the process, acquire a life of their own by virtue of competing with each other, variously complementing each other, and being set in perpetual motion by a dynamo of violent stories that gyrates around the female corpses on the ground, clouding the access to said corpses and to the "facts" of their murders, ultimately constituting what I, throughout the text, will call the discourse on Ciudad Juárez. The goal of this dissertation is to map out this discourse, to

examine the ways in which different, often contradictory stories are mobilized within it and obtain the status of “truth,” and to propose a perspective from which to look at the *feminicidios* of Ciudad Juárez without succumbing to the temptation to look for easy answers and for single, individual culprits and causes, coming to terms with the enormity and chaotic nature of the social phenomenon being described and with its fundamentally ungraspable character instead.

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I. INTRODUCTION:

THE TWILIGHT ZONE

It is a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity.

It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition,
and it lies between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge.

This is the dimension of imagination. It is an area which we call the twilight zone.

Rod Serling (*The Twilight Zone*)¹

Over the past twenty-three years, several hundreds of women have been kidnapped, tortured and murdered with absolute impunity in Ciudad Juárez, an urban Moloch on the U.S.-Mexican border in which the industries of drug traffic, illegal migration and maquila production reign. Mainly because of these heinous crimes (albeit more recently also because

¹ This is the opening narration for every episode of season 1 (1959) of the legendary television series *The Twilight Zone*, created –and narrated– by screenwriter Rod Serling. Not to be confused, here, with two later versions of a lesser quality, which were broadcasted from 1985 to 1989 and from 2002 to 2003, nor with the movie from 1983 with the same title, Serling's *The Twilight Zone*, which lasted from 1959 to 1964, is generally considered a highly influential classic for the genres of film, television, and literary science fiction, mystery, and horror. We will come back to this series on page 5 of this introduction.

of the city's role as the most prominent arena of the ongoing Mexican "war on drugs," a phenomenon which is otherwise related to the killings of women we are dealing with here), Ciudad Juárez has become an international symbol for all that is wrong with globalization, transnational exploitation and the Latin American form of masculine domination known as *machismo*. Neologisms like *femicidio* and *feminicidio* have been coined, or at least appropriated, to express that these crimes are so obviously misogynistic that to keep calling them "female homicides" would amount to miss their point². The point of the crimes, so to speak, is that women are not a collateral damage, but rather their specific target, as well as that their sex is the factor that gives this vortex of violence its inner logic, its center, its coherence, for these murders have been recurrently portrayed as *a single* crime wave that seems to follow, moreover, an adamant logic, in a style reminiscent of classic paranoia narratives that attribute individual agency to collective conspiracies (Melley 10ff). Historically, this has been the favored interpretative model for the killings, regardless of their sheer abundance, which should instantly give reason to doubt a common origin, as well as regardless of the fact that both their patterns of victimization and their modus operandi differ significantly from case to case (Gutiérrez 65-66).

The thesis that suggests that there *is* a single phenomenon to talk about is, indeed, one of the reasons why "the crimes of Ciudad Juárez" carry their mysterious aura and, consequently, the reason why they have achieved such a worldwide celebrity, to the point that most educated persons in the Western world are more or less aware of what the signifier "las muertas de Juárez" ("the dead female of Juárez") is supposed to refer to. After all, if we were talking about random explosions of violence lacking any kind of common denominator and, thus, lacking any coherence, the question about the fundamental meaning of the *feminicidios*,

² These terms, coined in the Anglo-American scholarly debate on violence against women but transferred to the Latin American political discourse by feminist activists like Marcela Lagarde y los Ríos, among others, are used almost interchangeably to name the series of murders, but are not fully interchangeable; we will come back to this later in this introduction, starting on p. 10.

which is the question about their ultimate explanation and “truth,” would be off the table. Furthermore, and along with that question itself, the impetus for the resolution of the crimes would vanish, at least among the general public that consumes news, since the attempt to explain the murders would be perceived as an utterly futile enterprise from the outset. This is, however, not the case; on the contrary, the search for answers and for the solution to the enigma has been decisively fostered and led by a myriad of divergent narratives elaborated by detectives, journalists, scholars, political activists, State officers, social workers, relatives of the victims, writers, artists, producers of diverse cultural artifacts, etc. All these divergent and, in fact, very often mutually exclusive narratives compete, on a discursive level, for the status of the “truth.”

What has emerged from the coexistence of these narratives is a veritable dynamo of stories that circulates around the corpses, giving the so-called crime wave, in the process, an even more spectacular character. Paradoxically, the very proliferation of explanatory stories that constitute this dynamo has the result, in turn, that it has become increasingly difficult, if not even impossible, to establish *what* is happening in Ciudad Juárez at all, let alone who is guilty.

Thus, the booming international drug business and post-Communist imperialism, extreme Mexican *machismo* and the super-exploitation of workers, individual sexual “deviations” or psychopathologies and social problems related to youth gangs, State corruption and Satanism, pornography and racism, and licentiousness and organ trafficking, among other very big categories, are recurrently invoked as possible explanations for the fact that hundreds of women have been brutally killed and are being killed, even as we speak (Domínguez-Ruvalcaba and Ravelo Blancas 133). In fact, it is not too farfetched to say that this crime wave, as a spectacular event that elicits stories and is based on them, has acquired a life of its own, a life whose energies quite literally stem from the proliferation of female

corpses and, most importantly, from the proliferation of possible meanings these female corpses are given by the narratives that are produced to explain them and to integrate them in a more or less “senseful” world. Just like other famous unsolved historical mysteries that defy logical explanation and that even seem to, in the words of the U.S.-American author Don DeLillo, “[unravel] the sense of a coherent reality most of us shared” (“American Blood” 22), like the assassination of John F. Kennedy³, the Tate/LaBianca murders, and everything related to the “perverted” aspects of the German Nazi regime, the *feminicidios* have become an event whose “real” core is now indistinguishable from the stories about it, and which can only be approached, therefore, through a reading of those narratives and without any hope of getting to the core mentioned above.

To put it differently, the phenomenon based on the *huesos en el desierto*, to use the very popular title of Sergio González Rodríguez’ 2002 study on the subject, is neither simply a “case” in the criminal sense of the term (a “whodunit” in which it were even possible to fix guilt in a single person, or even in a single institution) nor a terrible political scandal or further proof of gender inequality and State negligence in Mexico or, by extension, in Latin America or the Global South. Although it is certainly both, to a certain extent, it is also much more than any one of those options – which, effectively, means that it is none of them, or at least that the phenomenon is by no means reducible to a single analytical category or to a single origin (or to a simple arithmetical combination of social and cultural factors that constitute an origin). Instead of being the spectacle of a certain – if still unknown – killer and a collective victim in murderous interaction, then, the crime wave against the women of Ciudad Juárez is a spectacle of stories produced around ostensibly –and, alas, *actually*– disposable female bodies (Schmidt Camacho; Bales; *Disposable Women*). It is, to put it otherwise, rather like a violent dynamo of narrative energies that emerge on several discursive

³ This concrete historical event from November 22, 1963, is, incidentally, what Don DeLillo is referring to in the aforementioned passage from his article “American Blood,” *Rolling Stone*, 8 December 1983, pp. 21-28.

fields (political, literary, [mass/pop] cultural, journalistic, etc.) as stories that almost seem to have been waiting to be bundled in order to create, in the words of the American investigator Robert K. Ressler, and in a revealing allusion to the title of a popular, thought-provoking television series of the science fiction, mystery, and horror genres, “a twilight zone” (González Rodríguez 14).

According to Lester H. Hunt⁴, the original *Twilight Zone* series, which was created and narrated by screenwriter and producer Rod Serling, and which lasted from 1959 to 1964, was “often quite consciously intended to provoke thought and argument about philosophical issues and ideas, and [was] very effective at doing so” (1). Moreover, it treated issues that included “those of skepticism in its various forms, the ethics of war and peace, the nature and value of privacy and personal dignity, the nature and value of knowledge (and ignorance), the nature of love, the objectivity of judgments of value, the nature of happiness, of freedom, and of justice” (1). When one considers that, still according to Hunt, many episodes of the series “committed spectacular violations of explanatory closure” and, “*as everyone knows*” (my emphasis), “include impossible events,” (1), as well as that the series as a whole “required a generation of viewers to revise the expectations that guided them in interpreting and appreciating narratives, and challenged them to think about fundamental issues” (2), one sees that Ressler, perhaps unknowingly, was using a more precise metaphor than is at first apparent when he defined the phenomenon of the *feminicidios* and their explanatory models as a “twilight zone.” This twilight zone is, in fact, what I will call the discourse on Ciudad Juárez.

⁴ See Hunt, Lester H., “Introduction to *Philosophy in The Twilight Zone*.” *Philosophy in The Twilight Zone*, edited by Lester H. Hunt and Noël Carroll, John Wiley & Sons, 2009, pp. 1-4.

1.1. A DYNAMO OF VIOLENT STORIES:

FEMINICIDIO AND THE DISCOURSE ON CIUDAD JUÁREZ

The goal of this dissertation is to analyze this discourse and read its different constitutive parts equally as stories, mapping out the way in which they are mobilized by different texts and cultural artifacts, as well as how they compete with each other, variously complement each other, and accumulate on a narrative level. I maintain, first, that none of the versions hitherto advanced to explain what is happening in Ciudad Juárez is by any means “truer” than others. Second, I wish to emphasize how, from their very outset, the killings were interpreted through the lens of mass/pop culture, culminating in their constitution as the single spectacular crime wave of the *feminicidios*. Furthermore, and finally, I argue that to even ask for the “actual” killers and their logic, while contributing to the creation of a sense of community (most especially among the victims’ relatives and their supporters, whose narratives and actions will also be taken into account *as narratives* here), ultimately helps to give the dynamo of stories proliferating around these abject murders, for all its mysteriousness and for all the legacy of human pain it refers to and leaves behind, the quality of a minor, yet fairly profitable niche in an international market of paranoia narratives and historic mysteries that will never be solved but, crucially, sell.

In other words, my dissertation aims to be a cultural studies-oriented analysis of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez that has arisen around the *feminicidios* (and, increasingly, around the war on drugs) and that has ended up converting even the city’s name into a signifier for atrocious violence, hopelessness and desolation. Indeed, my dissertation offers to place all classes of narratives on and around the *feminicidios* (official reports, journalistic articles, *testimonios*, movies, prose fiction, song lyrics, historical accounts, and scholarly work from

different disciplines) into dialogue without, however, establishing a priori hierarchies, as well as without a priori conceding a “truer” (or “untruer”) character to any one of them. In this way, I attempt to outline a critical map of these discursive formations in order not to solve the puzzle, as it were, but rather to highlight the changing, contradictory, uncertain, and necessarily incomplete nature of that puzzle. I suggest, in fact, that there is no puzzle for us to resolve at all, in a sense, and thus no possibility of a complete discursive map, and propose the New Historicist notion of historical and social phenomena instead, which imagines those phenomena less as events than as textual holograms that are visible and have actual influence on the world but virtually are not there (Veese xiii; Palmer 2-6). Thus, history (or reality) is not a concrete “thing” in the world that can be grasped by a viewer, but rather an ever-changing, always already irregular formation with multiple dimensions, layers, and subtexts, as well as with a multiplicity of levels of interpretation. Moreover, the hologram of history (or of reality) looks differently from different angles or viewing positions and can never be accurately described from a single one. A hypothetical sum of all possible viewing positions cannot accomplish this goal of describing the hologram in full, either, since the process of going from one position to the other, if it is at all possible, modifies the hologram in the first place. This means that, perhaps more crucially, the notion of the hologram emphasizes the fact that discursive formations are not stable but decisively change depending on their viewer’s situation, or on the situation of “the gendered reader, understood both as a historical figure and as a historied figure” (Dimock 622). To put it in Hayden White’s words⁵, “we require a history that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before; for discontinuity, disruption, and chaos is our lot ... [history] will be lived better if it has no single meaning but many different ones” (50).

⁵ See White, Hayden. *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

Furthermore, I plan to explore two critical implications that emerge from this conceptualization. On the one hand, I will first read the undeniably existing desire to explain the crime wave and make sense of it by reading that desire in the terms of a certain postmodern “sense of reality suspended” (Miller 14ff) which ultimately leads to the construction of numerous official and alternative truths (O’Donnell). The economic, political, and cultural changes of the last fifty years, together with concomitant discursive shifts and new subjectivities in the making, have led, all over the Western world, including Latin America, to a situation in which the premises of reality as a self-evident “fact” have been called into question, not only in academia (although clearly and most radically in that realm, too), but also in the general discourse. To put it simply, the world is too complex, and too uncertain, to comprehend, and historical experience seems to show that governments and intellectual elites cannot be trusted to rule it or to explain it disinterestedly, so that the impulse to create alternative narratives that offer manageable answers to ungraspable phenomena or problems and, thus, help to make sense of it all again is ever latent and perhaps progressively more so (Melley). On the other hand, and consequently, I will develop the idea that what has emerged around the *feminicidios* is nothing less than a niche product for an international market of horror and paranoia that deals with cultural artifacts, objects and affects for mass consumption.

Overall, my approach should be a step towards the goal of taking the case of Ciudad Juárez out of the reductionist sociological, criminological realm (the academic “whodunit”) it has heretofore almost exclusively been confined to, and putting it under the scrutiny of cultural studies in order to answer the following questions: How did this otherwise non-spectacular border town come to stand as a signifier for violence to people in Latin America and around the world, as shown by ominous references all over the discursive fields on which the narratives we are studying operate? What kind of narrative gravity, if any, holds the

dynamo of stories that constitute the discourse on Ciudad Juárez together, and why? How do these stories get constructed as “truths” or dismissed as not being “true”? And what is it with Ciudad Juárez that it is so often regarded as being a foreshadowing of our collective, and indeed global, future? After all, one of the foundational texts of the discourse, Charles Bowden’s very popular journalistic account of life in Ciudad Juárez from 1998 (which even includes a preface by Noam Chomsky and an afterword by Eduardo Galeano) is significantly titled *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future*. And, in her 2009 book, *Liberalism at Its Limits: Crime and Terror in the Latin American Cultural Text* (which will be discussed in chapter IV of this dissertation), Ileana Rodríguez writes:

The number of articles, books, films, pictures, paintings, and theatrical productions concerning the women assassinated in Ciudad Juárez grows steadily. This is due not only to the bemusing and menacing nature of this massive event that bewilders scholars but also to the intuition that it constitutes a symptom of overriding importance of events to come and constitutes one of the patterns of governmentality in the postmodern world. (175)

In order to tackle the aforementioned questions and be able to read the *feminicidios* as constitutive narratives of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez, I intend to proceed step-wise, dedicating each individual section of my dissertation to a different sub-set of stories and elaborating, in the process, a sort of typology of discursive fields on which competing versions of the truth interact and end up creating a kind of “sense.” This is, in my opinion, the best way to approach the phenomenon of the *feminicidios* as the holographic, narrative construction I maintain it is.

I will therefore divide the text in five separate chapters and a final conclusion, all of which will be announced and shortly explained at the end of this introduction. However, before setting into each chapter, I will briefly discuss two topics that are relevant for a contextualization of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez, namely the concept of *feminicidio* itself and the peculiar system of production imposed by a decades-long history of transnational capitalism called the maquiladora. Then, I will address more extensively what I mean by “discourse” when I speak of “the discourse on Ciudad Juárez” and, more importantly, I will explain why a discursive analysis like the one I offer in my dissertation does not amount to implying that violence against women, or any other violence for that matter, is nothing but a discursive effect. Finally, I will attempt to balance out the need to aim for a certain completeness, given the scholarly genre of the doctoral dissertation, and the impossibility of achieving anything remotely close to it, if only because I maintain that the discourse on Ciudad Juárez is an ever-changing, contradictory dynamo of innumerable narratives that can only be glimpsed at from certain positions but never be fully grasped.

1.2. SEARCHING FOR WORDS TO NAME THE UNSPEAKABLE: ON THE TERM *FEMINICIDIO*

Even though it is now associated mostly with Latin America, and most especially with Ciudad Juárez (“Feminist Keys for Understanding Femicide” xv), the term *femicidio* was not coined in Spanish but in English. Perhaps surprisingly, the first time that it was used, at all, albeit in a

jokingly way, was in an obscure book from 1801 titled *A Satirical View of London*, written by a John Corry (Mujica and Tuesta 172). As an analytic term trying to grasp with the specificities of murderous violence against women as the most destructive expression of patriarchal oppression, though, the term coalesced in the field of gender studies in 1992, only one year before the crime wave of Ciudad Juárez began, when feminist scholars Diana E.H. Russell and Jill Radford edited a book called *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*, but it had been making the rounds, in the feminist discourse of the United States, since the 1970s (“Preface to *Femicide*” xiv). To quote a very condensed, and very influential, definition of the term, we can turn to Russell herself, who, in her 2001 article, “Defining Femicide and Related Concepts” (itself part of a book edited by her and by Robert A. Harnes and called *Femicide in Global Perspective*), defined it as follows: “the murder of women and girls *because they are female*” (15).

Interestingly, then, the term is born in an Anglo Saxon context but, pretty quickly, it gets translated into Spanish and, in the process, it gets adapted and radicalized. From the 1980s on, indeed, the preferred translation of the term in Spanish has been *feminicidio*:

In the Latin American setting, the first documented use of the concept *feminicidio* is in the Dominican Republic, where during the 1980s feminist activists and women’s groups used the term in their campaigns to end violence against women in the region ... Marcela Lagarde first introduced the term into academe in 1987 ... Around the same time, the sociologist Julia Monárrez Fragoso used the term *feminicidio* to describe the sexual murders of women and girls first observed and documented in 1993 in the Mexico-U.S. border region of Ciudad Juárez by Esther Chávez Cano, the women’s rights activist and founder of the city’s first rape crisis center. Others, such as the scholars Ana Carcedo Cabañas and Montserrat Sagot

of Costa Rica and Hila Morales of Guatemala, prefer the concept *femicidio* to describe the misogynist murder of women. These feminist theoretical and political thinkers from Latin America used *feminicidio/femicidio* to represent murders in non-war settings ... (Fregoso and Bejarano 5-6)

But what is behind the difference between these two terms, what does that single syllable suggest? Already in their original usage, both the English *femicide* and the Spanish *femicidio* were meant to go beyond the simple designation of a crime and to point at the political implications of gender violence. Diana E.H. Russell and Jane Caputi, for instance, in their article, “Femicide: Sexist Terrorism against Women,” published in Russell and Radford’s seminal 1992 book, put it on a “continuum” of violent expressions of a “femicidal culture” that is, for all intents and purposes, patriarchy:

Femicide is on the extreme end of a continuum of antifemale terror that includes a wide variety of verbal and physical abuse, such as rape, torture, sexual slavery (particularly in prostitution), incestuous and extrafamilial child sexual abuse, physical and emotional battery, sexual harassment (on the phone, in the streets, at the office, and in the classroom), genital mutilation (clitoridectomies, excision, infibulations), unnecessary gynecological operations (gratuitous hysterectomies), forced heterosexuality, forced sterilization, forced motherhood (by criminalizing contraception and abortion), psychosurgery, denial of food to women in some cultures, cosmetic surgery, and other mutilations in the name of beautification. Whenever these forms of terrorism result in death, they become femicides. (15)

Nevertheless, Mexican activist and feminist scholar Marcela Lagarde y Los Ríos has pretty effectively argued that the term *femicidio* is simply the binary opposition of *homicidio* and thus a mainly criminological concept that lacks the political charge that *feminicidio* has, due to its supposed resonances with the more sociological and historical concept of *genocidio*. Therefore, she suggests (she has been suggesting for decades, indeed), the appropriate term to use is *feminicidio*:

I proposed to analyze the crimes against women and girls through a feminist lens and to define them as femicide. The category and theory of femicide emerge from feminist theory through the works of Diana Russell and Jill Radford. I based my own analysis on their theoretical and empirical work as elaborated in their volume *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing* (1992). The translation for femicide is *femicidio* ... In Spanish, *femicidio* is homologous to homicide and solely means the homicide of women. For this reason, I preferred *feminicidio* in order to differentiate from *femicidio* and to name the ensemble of violations of women's human rights, which contain the crimes against and the disappearances of women. I proposed that all these be considered as "crimes against humanity." *Feminicide* is genocide against women, and it occurs when the historical conditions generate social practices that allow for violent attempts against the integrity, health, liberties, and lives of girls and women. ("Feminist Keys for Understanding Feminicide" xv-xvi)

Thus, the use of *feminicidio* instead of *femicidio* is in itself a political choice that seeks to frame these crimes even more firmly in the social conditions allowed by a power structure in which violence is not distributed evenly and in which women, as a human population and

also almost universally as individuals, have historically been victimized in some form or the other (remember the “continuum” described by Russell and Caputi). To quote Fregoso and Bejarano:

We define *feminicide* as the murders of women and girls founded on a gender power structure. Second, feminicide is gender-based violence that is both public and private, implicating both the state (directly or indirectly) and individual perpetrators (private or state actors); it thus encompasses systematic, widespread, and everyday interpersonal violence. Third, feminicide is systemic violence rooted in social, political, economic, and cultural inequalities. In this sense, the focus of our analysis is not just on gender but also on the intersection of gender dynamics with the cruelties of racism and economic injustices in local as well as global contexts. (5)

Feminicidio is, then, and regardless of the fact that *femicide* had political implications *already*, a more precise term and, moreover, “an empowered term” (Bueno-Hansen 292). Since it also grasps subtle (or unsubtle) intersections between gender and other categories of separation or oppression (race, class, age, etc.), as well as both violence perpetrated by individuals and violence perpetrated by the State, it is a more useful term when discussing the discourse on Ciudad Juárez, which involves a dynamo of stories and a multiplicity of voices, actors, theories, and alleged culprits. It will be used accordingly throughout this dissertation. And it will be used in Spanish: first of all, because of the geographic region the study is about, and secondly, because it is precisely in Latin America –and, more particularly, in Mexico– where the concept took this special, more radical turn (Fregoso and Bejarano 9), so that the language in which this spin took place should be maintained, too.

There are two more reasons that justify the use of the term *feminicidio* in this dissertation instead of *femicidio*. On the one hand, the history of translation, modification and radicalization that was briefly outlined in the previous paragraphs makes the term, in all its instability and in all its internationality (it is, after all, “still under construction” and it is “adapted [differently] into each sociopolitical and historic context” [Bueno-Hansen 295]), a prototypical, hybrid Latin American one, as explained by Fregoso and Bejarano in the following passage:

[O]ur translation of *feminicidio* into *feminicide* rather than *femicide* is designed to reverse the hierarchies of knowledge and challenge claims about unidirectional (North-to-South) flows of traveling theory. Based on a decade of working on the issue, both of us have witnessed the back and forth of theory making and political practices that inform our current understanding of feminicide and the ways in which the concept has changed and evolved as its thinking traveled South, where other circumstances shape the experience of gender-based violence against women. Our cartography of feminicide proposes a reconfiguration of knowledge hierarchies that contests the notion of seamless translation – that is, the idea that Latin American feminists have merely appropriated theories from feminists of the global North without modifying or advancing new meanings in response to local contexts. Rather, in the process of borrowing the concept and adapting it to local circumstances, we have generated new understandings about feminicide. The concept of feminicide thus highlights the “local histories” of theoretical reflection on the part of Latin American, Latina, and U.S.-based researchers; human rights and gender-justice advocates; witness-survivors, and legal scholars as we came into contact with bodies of knowledge elaborated elsewhere. (5)

It is with the intention of honoring these local actors from Ciudad Juárez itself, from Mexico more generally, and from Latin America as a whole, that I prefer to use that term. Moreover, and perhaps even more importantly, it is not a matter of choice anymore: All over Latin America, and indeed in the whole Spanish-speaking world, the term *feminicidio* is now the preferred one both in the academic and in the legal contexts (with some notable exceptions; in Ecuador, for instance, the crime that was typified in the Código Orgánico Integral Penal of 2014 is called *femicidio*), to the point that the Real Academia Española de la Lengua officially incorporated *feminicidio*, and not *femicidio*, into its dictionary in 2014 (Panadés n.pag.). Even if there were no other reasons to use it, then (and there are, as I tried to show in the paragraphs above), that would be reason enough. *Feminicidio* is, simply put, now the accepted concept with which to name the crimes that make up the basis of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez.

1.3. THE MAQUILADORA MURDERS:

A SYSTEM OF PRODUCTION AND DESTRUCTION OF FEMALE LIVES

Another part of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez that seems to be almost universally accepted as a fundamental factor for the existence of the crime wave itself and for the proliferation of *feminicidios* is not so much a concept, although it is also that, but rather a system of production: the talk is of the maquiladora. It is hard to exaggerate how embedded this system

is in the stories of the dynamo and in the general narrative of a city transformed by transnational exploitation and by ruthless capitalism gone mad. Thus, the killings themselves were called “The Maquiladora Murders,” in the 1990s (“The Maquiladora Murders” 10-16; “Feminicidio: The ‘Black Legend’” 5; Arriola 25) and, sometimes, they still are (Pantaleo 349). For their part, their “victims are also called ‘*maqui-locas*,’ assumed to be maquiladora workers living *la vida loca*, or *una vida doble*, of a border metropolis, coded language for prostitution” (“Feminicidio: The ‘Black Legend’” 3), even though, as Elvia R. Arriola points out: “the reference to ‘maquiladora murders’ is a misnomer; not all victims have been workers for the vast number of American companies lining the two thousand-mile border that secures an interdependent economic bond between the United States and Mexico” (26)⁶. Regardless, the maquiladora system permeates every facet of life in Ciudad Juárez and, in that way, cannot but be linked to the phenomenon of the *feminicidios*; in the academic literature on it, as well as in the journalistic reports, they are in fact inextricable, to the point that Mercedes Olivera, for example, can define *feminicidio* as “a direct expression of the structural violence of the neoliberal social system” (50)⁷. According to the discourse, then, *feminicidio* in Ciudad Juárez is not just murderous violence against women that is framed in a power structure that is based on the oppression of women, but in a more specific one that is based on that oppression as mediated by “the neoliberal social system” which, at the U.S.-Mexico border, manifests itself in the system of the maquiladora.

But what is a maquiladora? In an article that has exactly that question as its title, Aureliano González Baz defines it as a Mexican corporation which operates under a special program approved by the State and which can therefore be financed by “foreign investment

⁶ See Arriola, Elvia R. “Accountability for Murder in the Maquiladoras: Linking Corporate Indifference to Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border.” *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*, edited by Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán, University of Texas Press, 2010, pp. 25-61.

⁷ See Olivera, Mercedes. “Violencia Feminicida: Violence Against Women and Mexico’s Structural Crisis.” *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Américas*, edited by Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano, Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 49-58.

participation in the capital –and in management– of up to 100% without need of any special authorization,” as well as which gives said corporation “special custom treatment, allowing duty free temporary import of machinery, equipment, parts and materials,” etc. (n.pag.)⁸

Deborah M. Weissman goes into the roots of this peculiar system of production and shows that it goes back to at least 1964, when the Programa Nacional Fronterizo was launched in order to stimulate the economy of the northern Mexican border (809)⁹. The opening of free trade zones for companies and financial actors from the United States (and, to a lesser degree, from other countries, like Canada, Germany, etc.) however, led to an imbalance that kept increasing to the benefit of foreign capital and to the detriment of local populations and social networks:

In the 1980s, the *maquilas* expanded dramatically as economic crisis prevented México from paying interest on its external debt. The debt also caused México to introduce classical structural adjustment programs: the public sector contracted, banks and state industries were privatized, wages were frozen, tariffs and investment restrictions were eliminated, and industries were deregulated in accordance with the dictates of international lending agencies. México’s communal land grants that once served as family farming structures were restructured, thereby setting the stage for privatization of family farms and

⁸ According to González Baz, the products of the maquiladora are usually exported through other maquiladoras, creating a web that dominates the region where the program is implemented. Besides, it is important to understand that, while many of the maquiladoras are dedicated to manufacture, others assemble parts imported from other countries, or take care of phases of manufacturing that are completed by other maquiladoras or in other parts of the world. The legislation that norms the operation of this program is the “Decree for Development and Operation of the Maquiladora Industry,” emitted in 1989, i.e. only four years before the start of the crime wave. See González Baz, Aureliano. “What is a Maquiladora? Manufacturing in Mexico: The Mexican in-bond (Maquila) program.” *Mexconnect*, 16 February 2007, www.mexconnect.com/articles/8-what-is-a-maquiladora-manufacturing-in-mexico-the-mexican-in-bond-maquila-program. Accessed 25 September 2016.

⁹ See Weissman, Deborah M. “The Political Economy of Violence: Toward an Understanding of the Gender-Based Murders of Ciudad Juárez.” *North Carolina Journal of International Law and Commercial Regulation*, vol. 30, no. 795, 2004-2005, pp. 795-867.

buyouts by private interests. As a result, *maquilas* assumed an increasingly strategic place in the Mexican economy. Mexicans migrated from the south, displaced by the changes in land tenure forms, and crowded along the U.S.-Mexican border areas in search of employment, thereby assuring the *maquilas* a reserve of workers. (810)

This process of pauperization and concentration of capital in ever fewer hands was not reversed with the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which entered into force less than one year after the beginning of the crime wave, on January 1, 1994, of course; if anything, the process was intensified and its main outlines were set in stone, so that foreign capital could hire (and consume) cheap labor with increasing freedom (and impunity) at the maquiladoras: “Establecidas sin reglas y obligaciones claras, las maquiladoras llegan ‘súbitamente’ y pueden irse sin siquiera decir adiós a sus desprotegidos trabajadores” (Gutiérrez Castañeda 78). Moreover, it is not “sus desprotegidos trabajadores” but “sus desprotegidas trabajadoras” who almost always get that “goodbye”: For reasons first examined by Norma Iglesias Prieto, the maquiladora system prefers women as employees: “De manera singular, en los países subdesarrollados se encuentra mano de obra femenina en abundancia, más barata que la masculina y con atributos sociales que permiten ejercer sobre ella mayor control” (16)¹⁰. Or, to quote Arriola on the subject, international –but mainly U.S.-American– firms relocating to Northern Mexico prefer women as workers because of models of femininity and of the working female that seem to belong to the 19th century but are prevalent as “a hybrid of stereotypes based on sex, race, and class” in Juárez today, where “women were seen as ideal workers because their smaller hands and fingers could better assemble the tiny parts of export goods” and because they were allegedly “not only more

¹⁰ See her seminal study of working conditions for women in Northern Mexico: Iglesias Prieto, Norma. *La flor más bella de la maquiladora: Historias de vida de la mujer obrera en Tijuana*, B.C.N. Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1985.

docile and passive than Mexican men, but submissive, easily trainable, and unlikely to pose problems with union organizing” (31).

Lest it is not clear that this liberalization meant, on the one hand, work for hundreds of thousands or millions of women, but also, on the other hand, horrible working conditions, I will borrow a passage from Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s in which she summarizes some of those conditions:

Not all of them are sixteen, the legal working age; the only documents needed to apply for a factory job are a grade school diploma and a birth certificate – both of which can and are falsified by girls as young as twelve who are desperate for work. Indeed, hundreds of young women arrive daily from remote areas in Mexico and Central America, not prepared for the dangers of border life or the tragic exploitation that awaits them at work: slave wages; ten-to-twelve-hour shifts on their feet; working conditions that include dangerous levels of noise pollution, toxic fumes, and sexual harassment by management; manic production schedules and the constant threat of dismissal for not meeting quotas, for being late, for getting pregnant; demeaning beauty pageants disguised as work incentives and morale boosters; pregnancy testing at the time of hiring; enforced birth control through pill or injection or Norplant implants; and the strict monitoring of their reproductive cycles through monthly menstruation checks. (64)¹¹

¹¹ See Gaspar de Alba, Alicia. “Poor Brown Female: The Miller’s Compensation for ‘Free’ Trade.” *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*, edited by Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán, University of Texas Press, 2010, pp. 63-93.

This was especially true in Ciudad Juárez, an urban Moloch with a population of over one million habitants (it is the fifth largest city of Mexico) and located at the border to the United States, which makes it a hub of transnational legal and illegal migration, drug trafficking, business-making under the maquiladora model, etc. Deborah M. Weissman explains:

As the city with the largest concentration of *maquilas*, Cd. Juárez has been described as the country's "economic powerhouse." In this instance, location *is* everything. Situated along the northern frontier, Cd. Juárez serves as a repository of cheap labor able to produce and transport goods on demand. (810-11)

It is in this location that the *feminicidios* take place and it is this location that builds the material basis for the discourse on Ciudad Juárez. Why Ciudad Juárez, though? Why not other Mexican cities or other places on Earth, for that matter? I will try to answer this question in the following chapters of the dissertation and point clues to an answer, even though it ultimately does not have one.

In her 2003 article, "*Baile de fantasmas* en Ciudad Juárez al final/principio del milenio," however, María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba argues that the reason for the alleged excessiveness of the phenomenon of the *feminicidios* in Ciudad Juárez is due to the contrast between the role women played in society before the maquiladora arrived to the region and the role they started playing afterward. According to her (and to other scholars of the *feminicidios*, like Julia Monárrez Fragoso or Rita Laura Segato), this contrast is more pronounced in Ciudad Juárez than in other towns at the U.S.-Mexican border because, in her account, female roles were solidly established before the advent of the maquiladoras, and the

urban spaces in which female subjects circulated were clearly delineated, too. Then, in 1965, according to Tabuenca Córdoba:

[L]a ciudad se empezó a poblar de otras subjetividades: mujeres que se incorporaban a la vida productiva de la ciudad y del país. Con su llegada masiva se dio un fenómeno singular en el discurso de la gente: a la maquila se la veía como “salvadora” pues sacaba a las mujeres del cabaret, pero a la vez, se creaba el estereotipo de la obrera de maquiladora como mujer de dudosa reputación sobre todo en el caso de las llamadas “madres solteras” ... Esta transgresión de los espacios y de las costumbres por parte de las mujeres obreras ha sido determinante para que el discurso hegemónico haya evadido y continúe evadiendo su reponsabilidad ante la ineficacia de resolver y detener los crímenes contra mujeres en Ciudad Juárez. (413)

Needless to say, this quote is well-intentioned, in the sense that Tabuenca Córdoba is a prominent actor of the feminist debate on the *feminicidios* and in fact is an activist at the local level, but it is also a highly biased quote that rather spectacularly reveals the regressive mentality from which a large part of the discourse on Juárez is constituted: it is as if the horrors of *feminicidio*, i.e. of patriarchy running amok, were to make us miss traditional patriarchy, which supposedly “at least” did not exterminate women! Alas, this way of framing the issue, which is seldom explicit (perhaps it is not even conscious), is more pervasive than one could think¹². In fact, many authors make the relationship between this new role of women in society and misogynistic violence even more explicit, like Rocío Galicia does when

¹² See chapter 3 of this dissertation for examples of how this particular, ultimately reactionary narrative finds a place even in the academic discourse on *feminicidio*, as well as chapter 4 for an extended discussion of “Las mujeres de Juárez,” a song by Los Tigres del Norte that is a clearcut example of this way of looking at and of representing the crime wave in popular culture.

she says that family relationships were substantially modified when women accessed the work market, which also led to access to spaces of public entertainment that were traditionally male-only, ending in the reprobation of a “cultura androcéntrica como la mexicana” (28)¹³. And this reprobation, in its ultimate expression, and still according to Galicia, leads to *feminicidio*, the backlash of a masculine order disjointed by the maquiladoras and determined to violently regain its position of power in a fundamentally changed context.

Is it not contradictory, then, that the maquiladora has also emerged, in the popular imagination, as the killer itself, either in the form of the alleged millionaire “juniors” who murder women “for sport”, in the form of the employers of dubious suspects like Abdul Latif Sharif or Los Choferes (see chapter II), or in the form of an industry that destroys female bodies and lives? Alicia Gaspar de Alba, for instance, reflects on the etymology of the word “maquiladora” and concludes that destroyed female lives are not merely the collateral damage of this particularly perfidious system of production, but a fundamental part of it:

If a *maquiladora* is the factory where the miller (the multinational corporations that own the twin-plant industry) grinds the wheat, and if the wheat represents the poor brown female labor force that is ground down, exploited, and discarded, are the murdered women and girls of Juárez the *maquila*, or miller’s compensation – the extra ounce of revenue in a system that already profits in the billions? Or are they simply the price that Mexico (the farmer) is paying for the privilege of free trade? (“Poor Brown Female” 91)

Therefore, she concludes that “no matter who the actual killers are, multinational corporations through the *maquiladora* industry are making a killing from the globalization of

¹³ See Galicia, Rocío. “Memorias de duelo.” *Hotel Juárez: Dramaturgia de feminicidios*, edited by Enrique Mijares, et al., Universidad Juárez del Estado de Durango, 2008, pp. 19-60.

poor brown female labor,” as well as that “the North American Free Trade Agreement has created an epidemic of sexual terrorism and misogynist violence on the border” (“Poor Brown Female” 85). This is, I argue, discourse in the making, regardless of the logical jumps that have to be made in order to pinpoint culprits: Because of their utmost importance in the social and economic life of Ciudad Juárez, there is a sense that the maquiladoras *have to be* somehow responsible for the *feminicidios*, either directly or indirectly, either as disrupters of an order and triggers of violence or as violent order-makers themselves, either as abstract structures and social forces or as corporations managed by actual serial killers and murderous perverts. Stories emerge and start spinning. One of the constitutive elements of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez, almost a *sine qua non*, generates: the maquiladora is involved. These are “The Maquiladora Murders” indeed.

1.4. CREATING WHAT WE STUDY: TRUTH AND ITS DISCOURSES

I contend that the stories that have proliferated about the *feminicidios* of Ciudad Juárez have acquired a life of their own and exist, now, on a discursive level that is quite separate from the corpses on the ground, i.e. from the facts of the crime wave. Furthermore, I argue that the different, often even contradictory or mutually exclusive stories compete for the status of “truth” but nevertheless can be grouped in a dynamo of stories that I call the discourse on Ciudad Juárez. In this, I am referring to Michel Foucault’s famous definition of discourse:

We shall call discourse a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation ... [Discourse] is made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined. Discourse in this sense is not an ideal, timeless form ... it is, from beginning to end, historical – a fragment of history ... posing its own limits, its divisions, its transformations, the specific modes of its temporality. (*The Archeology of Knowledge* 117)

Thus, neither am I interested in grasping, nor do I think it is possible to grasp anymore, the “truth” about the *feminicidios* of Ciudad Juárez. History is, as I have argued above, to be understood as a hologram, inevitably fragmented and ever-changing, a chaotic formation that only acquires contours and meaning through observation from a certain position and that, crucially, does never look the same from another one: it can never truly be grasped in its totality, since there is no such totality. Moreover, there is no transparent reflection of reality or knowledge devoid of power; in a word, truth is itself a social, discursive construction, and there is no place outside of discourse from which to gain access to some kind of transcendent truth, no matter how much modern thought insists on the possibility of revealing the truth through inquiry (“Truth and Juridical Forms” 40ff): to put it simply, the truth is *not* out there. Representation is inescapable and, for that matter, it is all there is, and it is all that matters. What we pretend to study is not actually there but something we are constituting by the very process of studying it: that is discourse at work, in my own definition, and its results are not truths but merely truth effects that have a huge influence on social life and practices but, fundamentally, are not truer than other possible truths. In the words of Lawrence Grossberg, synthesizing the notoriously non-synthetic Foucault in his 1997 book, *Bringing it All Back Home: Essays on Cultural Studies*:

In particular, Foucault's concern thus far is with the existence or nonexistence of the discursive event "within the true," that is, with the fact that some discursive events produce "truth effects." ... Truth effects are not a measure of epistemological validity; they rather describe the inclusion and exclusion of concrete discursive facts from exerting particular effects. It is, then, a question of power – of the power of some discourses that we describe as true, and of the power of contexts to determine which events have such power ... Foucault's project, then, is to explore the "political history of the production of truth" ... (93)

My own project is somehow similar, albeit, of course, more modest. In the following sections of this dissertation, I intend to read several of the most influential stories on the *feminicidios* of Ciudad Juárez and trace the ways in which they pretend to be true, in opposition to, or in intersection with, other stories that *also* pretend to be true. I will read the *feminicidios*, then, as narratives whose "truth effect" is determined in a constant competition with other narratives of the dynamo (the discourse on Ciudad Juárez) by instances of power that are not necessarily related to agencies of political or economic power but also, as in the case of the scholarly and literary stories (chapters IV and VI of this dissertation, respectively), sometimes to places assumed to be full of cultural or symbolic power, as well.

Is the approach I am undertaking, by studying different stories being set in motion by the dynamo, a detached academic representation of a heinous "reality" that, moreover, and because of my rather poststructuralist theoretical framework (they are part of "discursive formations" and do not represent the "truth"), ultimately renders violence against women, and even *feminicidio*, nothing but a discursive effect? This is a question I am still trying to answer and, in fact, it is a question that I do not think can be completely settled, but the attempts themselves can lead to productive reflections on the nature of discourses as related to reality,

as well as on the ethical role of the scholar in her (in this case in my) social and political context. Let me start trying to answer the question, then, by telling two different anecdotes.

I remember how, lots of years ago, I went to listen to a friend of mine who was presenting his thesis in progress at a relatively well attended conference at the University of Hamburg in Germany. His topic was, if not the most original, quite interesting nonetheless: he attempted to analyze the discourses on AIDS that emerged during the 1980s in the United States in order to show how models of perversion related to vampirism –going all the way back to the 18th and 19th centuries– profoundly shaped those discourses and, thus, the way the epidemic could even be thought about at the time and, at least partially, today. Had this been a student trying to get his degree in Literature, this would probably have been considered a slightly eccentric project (too Foucaultian), but it would not have been especially polemical. The problem was that this was a student of History, a field that in Germany, and to a certain extent also in the United States, is dominated by social historians for whom Foucault's methods are anathema and who really believe in the idea of representing the past as it was, revealing exactly how social divisions were created by the “dominant classes” and, crucially, how this recurrently led to both horrible suffering and explosions of resistance and revolution. Not unexpectedly, some of the attending professors were literally appalled by my friend's approach to History as discourse history, and massively attacked him during the discussion round for “ignoring all the human pain” and for “not taking into account the relevant *scientific* work on AIDS,” which demonstrated, in their opinion, that there *was* an epidemic called AIDS and that some people *belonged* to risk groups, so that any considerations of the discursive construction of those facts literally amounted to “mock the victims.” Needless to say, my friend tried to explain that he did not believe that AIDS did not “exist,” but it is difficult to even try to discuss anything after one has been accused of “ignoring pain.”

Some years later, while I was studying in the United States, I presented a paper on the *feminicidios* of Ciudad Juárez at a graduate student conference at Rutgers University (it was a very early version of this project, in a way). I probably emphasized too much the paranoid aspect of the narratives about violence against women without including a disclaimer of sorts, i.e. without explicitly saying that I, of course, know that people are being killed and that this is a terrible thing. I guess I thought that it went without saying: after all, who would seriously deny the existence of violence in this world and, more particularly, the fundamental inequality that makes living conditions for women worse than those for men not only in Mexico but perhaps almost everywhere else? I thought, somewhat naively, that my interest in this concrete topic was already a testament of that. One person from the public asked me to clarify my position and to explain why I chose to portray these crimes as narrative/media phenomena, as well as what I meant when I said that these narratives do not refer to “actual” events anymore but only to themselves. I tried to do it and had the impression that more or less succeeded (which was confirmed later by the person who asked the question, a graduate student from California who was working on Lourdes Portillo’s documentary *Señorita extraviada* [2002]). However, a fellow participant at my panel, who – regardless of the fact that his talk had been on a completely different issue – had been quite visibly shocked by what I had presented, allowed himself to intervene and said that, even though he knew the question was not directed at him, and even though he did not know a lot about Ciudad Juárez, it was his moral obligation (I paraphrase almost exactly) to say that “deconstruction” is great, “discourse” is great, but in the end those fancy intellectual words are too often used to deny reality and, thus, avoid engaging in social struggle. He even went on to explain that the “good” intellectual examples for everyone were not the poststructuralists but Edward Said and Jean-Paul Sartre. The latter, he said (he was a really eloquent man!), was on the streets of Paris on May 1968, distributing leaflets and fighting the power, while Jacques Derrida was

sitting somewhere, thinking about how there is no signified at all. Ultimately, he finished, this kind of fashionable intellectual exercise was not only egoistic, ignorant and useless, but it was tantamount to complicity with violence. Again, I tried to defend myself but it is difficult to talk with people who think that one is an accomplice of violence because of a certain theoretical approach.

The reason why I thought that these anecdotes were pertinent is that, to a certain degree, should my dissertation be susceptible of criticism for maybe rendering violence against women nothing but a discursive effect, it would be due to a version of these same critiques. And perhaps the best way of answering this is to ask back: What, if anything, is the problem with discussing violence as “a discursive effect”? To put it a little differently, I argue that it is not only not wrong but important to conceive the social practice of violence as part of shifting discourses that make it possible for it to be performed, as well as that condition the specific populations subject to violence, the way violence is either sanctioned or ignored or combated by the State and by civil society, and – in the context of this dissertation *crucially* – the meanings violence is given in order to undermine, or to stabilize, specific social relations and narrative models.

This is, however, an explosive topic, which is why the question inevitably arises and why no explanation can quite put it away. Women have been killed in Ciudad Juárez, and women are still being killed: their bodies are no mere elements of a discourse, and neither is the grief felt by their families or, for that matter, the trauma that impacts local society as such. I do not pretend to deny this most basic fact: women have been killed. My ethical stance on this that is in no way “impartial,” moreover: I personally maintain that violence against women has to be stopped, by any means necessary. I do, however, refer to the discourse on Juárez, here, the discursive formation in which divergent stories are grouped together through the concept of *feminicidio* and set to develop a life and an energy of their own in a narrative

dynamo that creates the impression that there is a single, discreet crime wave, and that there might be a single, discreet culprit, or at least single, discreet culprits who can be identified, prosecuted, and neutralized. But all there is, I argue, is the facts on the ground, i.e. the bodies, and the stories that gyrate around them, in the narrative dynamo, clouding the access to those facts and making it in fact impossible to look at the facts as themselves anymore, thus developing a life of their own as the stories on the crime wave and, in other words, as the discourse on Ciudad Juárez.

That is why I would like to refer to Naomi Mandel's excellent article, "Rethinking 'After Auschwitz:' Against a Rhetoric of the Unspeakable in Holocaust Writing," in order to think about the issue, advance some preliminary theses, and move on¹⁴. In said article, Mandel tries to tackle the most unspeakable of all crimes in order to show how its own "unspeakability" is not "real" (after all, as she points out, the Holocaust is "the most thoroughly documented atrocity in human history," and hence not "unspeakable" at all [205]) but "a cultural construct, replete with the interests and assumptions that govern any cultural construct, less a quality of the event itself than an expression of our own motivations and desires" (205). Then, after identifying some narratives that have been proposed to make sense of the Holocaust (the religious narrative, the traumatic narrative, the totalizing narrative, etc.), she concentrates on the fact that "Auschwitz" has become a term that is supposed to mean, metonymically, the whole complex sets of social relations, racial discourses and historical processes that took place in Europe over the course of many years. But this, she argues, is reductive, and, most importantly, it serves the project of actually forgetting the Holocaust, or of obscuring one's own historical relation to it:

¹⁴ See Mandel, Naomi. "Rethinking 'After Auschwitz:' Against a Rhetoric of the Unspeakable in Holocaust Writing." *boundary 2*, no. 28, Summer 2001, pp. 203-28.

[B]y giving the horror a specific location and a name, the horror is localized, abstracted, and isolated, as if the Holocaust is (merely) what occurred at the camps. But the fact remains that family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers, students, teachers, employers, employees, religious leaders, municipal and government officials, real and imagined allies were all potential betrayers or murderers, and it is this dissolution of an entire network of human relations, not just the killings, that constitutes the Holocaust. Calling it “Auschwitz,” especially in the context of a discussion of French complicity and collaboration, effaces this fact, makes it too easy to face. (219)

Indeed, while discussing Adorno’s famous statement that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” Mandel goes as far as to maintain that it is not the analysis of the different narratives of the Holocaust but the “rhetoric of unspeakability” which actually ends up “effacing” modernity’s “complicity” with the crimes committed:

[I]t is precisely this rhetoric of the unspeakable that facilitates the effacement of this complicity while maintaining contemporary culture in the presumably ethical position of refusing to further wrong the victims by misrepresenting their suffering through necessarily reductive conceptual and interpretive frameworks. This “ethical position” reflects a certain self-congratulatory morality by which, under the guise of not wronging the victims, contemporary culture maintains its position as safely distant, conceptually and ethically, from this “unspeakable” event. (223-24)

Therefore, she calls for speaking the unspeakable (“The unspeakable, I urge, must be spoken” [228]), regardless of the arguments – or because of the arguments, indeed – according to which “to speak the unspeakable is to somehow violate it, whether it desecrates the ‘sanctity’ of the victims’ suffering or (perhaps concurrently) whether it enables an illusion of conceptual mastery, the self-congratulatory assertion of which appears, in the context of such mass suffering, to be painfully inappropriate at best, downright pernicious at worst” (227). What we have to gain from this rhetorical operation, after all, is a lot: “Only by speaking the unspeakable, confronting the fact of complicity and assuming our own, can we effectively delineate the complexity of the victims’ experience, confront the presence of the Holocaust in our past, and, perhaps, reach a more responsible understanding of what ‘after Auschwitz’ really means” (228).

We can extrapolate this discussion to Ciudad Juárez, in my opinion, because the fact that we are talking about “Ciudad Juárez” as the site of evil is in itself a result of what I call the discourse on Ciudad Juárez in this dissertation. To imply that no rhetorical or narrative discussion of such an extensive social phenomenon is justified, moreover, as long as one does not actually go there and help the families and fight for justice or something like that is to “sanctify” the victims (to use Mandel’s terms) and to put ourselves in the position of spectators of a crazy crime wave that is outside discourse, outside normalcy and, in that sense, even outside “reality” (this in spite of the paradoxical accusation that the poststructuralist approach does not deal with “reality”). Finally, it is the search for allegedly “true” explanations, as opposed to the analysis of discourses and narratives *as such*, which ultimately banalizes violence and its impact on border societies. After all, and accepting the existence of such an explanation for the sake of the argument, what if we get to the truth (and no matter if the truth is provided by the State, by the activists, by feminism, by journalists,

etc.)? Are the killings going to stop? Will there be no more women murdered in Ciudad Juárez or, for that matter, anywhere else?

Of course, my own last questions (“Are the killings going to stop? Will there be no more women murdered in Ciudad Juárez or, for that matter, anywhere else?”) highlight the sex of the victims, which is what gives the crime wave a logic: the logic of *feminicidio*. But I share the fundamental notion that, just as there is no truth to the events of Ciudad Juárez, there is no truth to gender or, to go even further, to sex. As Judith Butler famously wrote in a passage of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) in which she deals with, and thoroughly deconstructs, the more traditional feminist “sex/gender” distinction:

It would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category. Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as “prediscursive,” prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts. [...] This production of sex as the prediscursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by gender. How, then, does gender need to be reformulated to encompass the power relations that produce the effect of a prediscursive sex and so conceal that very operation of discursive production?

(11)

In other words, there is no sexed body on which cultural discourses act, but models of sexual biology and anatomy – most especially the binary model – are themselves discursive. The sexed corpse is itself discursive, too. There are, initially, *huesos en el desierto* but, in the process of narrating and explaining their demise, the discourse on Juárez transforms those bones into “las muertas de Juárez”: In the context of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez, in other words, the sexed corpse is always already female. No matter how many men or male children are killed, no matter how many intersexed bodies fall victim to violence, the discourse on Ciudad Juárez is predicated on the notion that the city is a place where *women* are killed, and indeed that it *is* the city of the “dead women.”

One possible starting point for the analysis of the ways in which the discourse on Ciudad Juárez “reposition” gender, or at least rearticulate it and shift it, would be the visual representation of the dead women’s bodies. Charles Bowden’s photographic essay from 1998, *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future* offers, for instance, a whole section on the mummified face of a victim, which the author calls, somehow polemically, “a beautiful carved mask” (67)¹⁵. Interestingly, and just as Alice Driver—in her case dismissingly— put it in her article, “Ciudad Juárez as a Palimpsest: Searching for Traces of Memorable Lives” (as presented at the Latin American Studies Association annual conference of 2010) Bowden “believes that it is not useful to analyze the murder of women as a separate issue from other forms of violence in the city, a posture that is evident in his photo essay which discusses a myriad of forms of violence with no particular focus on femicide except for the author’s fleeting fascination with the burned out face of a victim of femicide” (5). This means that he, while contributing to the representation of the murders as a (visual) spectacle, actually rejects the concentration on gender (the “logic” that guides the stories I study in this dissertation) and tries to put violence against women in a larger canvas that includes other kinds of violence in Ciudad Juárez and,

¹⁵ See Bowden, Charles. *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future*. Aperture, 1998.

in fact, other kinds of violence that take place in other cities (I will address Bowden's position, as well as its implications, more extensively in the conclusion of this dissertation).

As for Driver, despite her accepting that violence in Juárez is not only (and not necessarily even mainly) directed towards women, she still feels it is a special sort of violence: "Although femicide is only one category of violence in a city that is crisscrossed by webs of violence related to drug trafficking, corruption, and police brutality, it is *essential* to analyze femicide in order to understand how and why women have been treated so brutally by citizens, politicians, and the press for the past 17 years" 6, my emphasis). But why, indeed, should this be so essential?

The sexed corpses of Ciudad Juárez are constructed as abjectly female, among other things, through the composition of the crime scenes or, more precisely, through the way the stories on Ciudad Juárez *describe* the crime scenes. Reading Roberto Bolaño's novel *2666* from 2004, for instance, or Luzrosario Araujo's novel from 2010, *Con licencia de ficción* (not that I am trying to by any means compare these novels in what respects to their quality, only to their iconography), we get the impression of ritualistic murders that are committed with a kind of perverted aesthetics in mind, which leads to the obligatory inclusion of genital mutilations, carefully damaged clothes that are revelatory *but not too much*, bodily positions that seem to *mean* something, etc. In her article, indeed, Driver addresses this and, once again criticizing Bowden, attributes the problem to a perverse game of "porno-misery":

Are the images necessary to provoke awareness, or is the content exploited in a perverted way that involves some small amount of pleasure. For example, Bowden describes the joy and rush of adrenaline the photographers experience as they race to the site of murders, beheadings, and mutilated bodies. There is a certain amount of exaltation and pleasure that both the author and the

photographers seem to extract from the glossy images of death included in [Bowden's] essay. (15)

But this all begs the question of representation, so to speak. Since there are no “facts” about the *feminicidios* (since it is not even sure that it makes sense, other than rhetorical sense on the level of the groups of stories of the dynamo that I analyze, to talk about a single crime wave at all), and since the fact that we concentrate on the murders of young, dark skinned, poor women *already depends* on a selection process from the vast amount of corpses offered by such a city as Ciudad Juárez, as well as on the existence of a discourse that precisely victimizes young, dark skinned, poor women, is it so farfetched to maintain that the iconography of the crime sites is a result of the stories, and in no case their basis?

I just mentioned in passing the existence of a discourse that already victimized a certain population within the female body of Ciudad Juárez. After all, the crime wave started in 1993 but, of course, women had been murdered before (see chapter II of this dissertation for more on the chronology of the crime wave). Moreover, not only is there no single *modus operandi* or victims' profile (as Alejandro Gutiérrez consistently shows in his 2004 article, “Un guión para adentrarse a la interpretación del ‘Fenómeno Juárez’”), but the search for one such “logic” actually obscures the fact that other women are also objects of violence, not to mention men and transgender subjects (Castillo et al.). Even the most sympathetic media campaigns that pretend to combat the *feminicidios* rely, as different authors have demonstrated, on models of gender relations that construct one particular female subject as the perfect victim, as it were, who is in need of protection both from the male and from the family structures as represented by the mother (Tabuenca Córdoba; Corona).

In other words, there is a shifting here, and it is one that reinforces the patriarchal matrix with a vengeance, all the while purporting to care about how horribly misogynistic this

evil place called Ciudad Juárez is. It is a shifting that is perhaps most clear in the development of international concern for the fate of the fighters against injustice in Latin America. To put it bluntly, there was a time when the classic case to study when speaking about gender and freedom in the subcontinent (say, while elaborating the syllabus for an introductory course on Latin American culture, for instance) would have been the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo of Argentina, who fought against the dictatorship and, at least morally, won. Now the case that comes to mind is the one of “las muertas de Juárez” (the dead women of Juárez). The notions of gender, then, have arguably shifted to the point of creating an utterly defenseless, abject, and unnamed female subject. It is my intention to show how this happened, to trace this shifting, and to highlight the particular ways in which the discourse on Ciudad Juárez was constituted, and constituted, this shifting¹⁶.

Finally, it is crucial to remember that the reader herself is gendered, as is made explicit by the concept of “gendered reader” developed by Wai-Chee Dimock on the basis of the contributions of a long line of feminist scholars including Laura Mulvey and Carolyn Dinshaw, among others. In the context in which Dimock discussed the term (the article “Feminism, New Historicism, and the Reader” from 1991), it was important for her to show that Foucaultian and New Historicist readings of texts tended to historicize everything, including the reader, without, however, questioning an universal subject that, by default, was male. Therefore, she called for a new approach to rethink history not as a unified phenomenon of synchronicity but as “a field of uneven development” (614) in which “[t]here are readers and readers, it would seem, and, when we meditate on their points of divergence as well as their points of coincidence, when we think about their uneven genesis, conflicting identities, and different modes of reception, ‘history’ itself will have to be reconceived as something less than homogeneous, something less than synchronized” (615). Thus the need of the “gendered

¹⁶ I have to thank Professor Joshua Lund for the comparison with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, even though the mention of them sometimes also appears –quite uncritically, though– in the literature [See Araujo, Luzrosario G. *Con licencia de ficción*. Creaciones Digitales, 2010].

reader,” insofar as we also understand gender not as a human constant (as something that has a truth) but “as a temporal (and temporary) construct, [as] constituted in time and constrained by time, propelled by temporal necessity and subject to temporal reconfiguration” (620). What she proposes, in other words, is to historicize gender and to engender history, at the same time showing the constructedness of gender, which leads to its changes over time, and the unevenness of any historical moment, its fundamental heterogeneity that is due to such unstable categories as gender: “History, thus engendered and thus decentered, is anything but a totalizing category. In fact, it is not even over and done with, but a realm of unexhausted and inexhaustible possibility” (622).

In a way, this debate is outdated, what with her needing to criticize both second wave feminism’s essentialism and a certain pre-Butler Foucaultian *machismo*. It is important, however, because the anecdotes that I told right at the beginning of this text (and there are lots of other possible anecdotes to tell about this) show that light poststructuralist and postfeminist ideas are far from sedimented in academia. Of course, “the gendered reader” is also “the raced reader,” “the classed reader,” “the ethnied reader,” “the aged reader,” “the weighted reader,” “the sexed reader” and so on. Moreover, and concretely in relation to my dissertation, in the case of the *feminicidios* the axes of production of readers have to be considered if we want to grasp how the hologram of history that I call the discourse on Ciudad Juárez is constructed, to whom the narratives speak and what kinds of subjectivities they help create or not, as well as what models of gender (and other categories) are mobilized, shifted, or (de)stabilized. If nothing else, the notion of the gendered reader as the spectator of the hologram is a good one to have in mind, while authoring this dissertation by reading the stories of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez, in order to not assume the point of view of the “universal subject” Dimock correctly criticizes in her article, constantly pointing out one’s own positioning and one’s own reading process, instead.

1.5. OVERALL IS BEYOND ME: ON THE WILL TO COMPLETENESS AND TO NOT COMPLETE

In this dissertation, I read multiple narratives of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez in order to create a map that is, by definition, changeable and incomplete. Thus, I do not propose a unifying model that somehow explains or makes sense of all the stories of the dynamo. Nor do I posit a model that offers all-out cooptation as a working narrative to somehow explain the discourse on Ciudad Juárez and the way some of its products turn into commodities on an international market of mystery stories fueled by popular culture but, perhaps more importantly, by privileged circuits of academic conferences and publications (see chapter IV for more on this).

Let us start with the latter aspect of the aforementioned problems, i.e. the one concerning cooptation and the international market of paranoia. My hypothesis is that there is something that can be metaphorically called a market for narratives and cultural artifacts that are consumed because of their promises to fulfill our desire for closure, for explanation, and for truth in relation to social phenomena that defy closure, explanation, and truth. Thus, the desire can never be fulfilled, which is of course what fosters the desire and, in turn, makes the market profitable in the first place.

There is, however, no master mind behind this market, and not even a Smithian “invisible hand” directing it to the benefit of everyone involved. Moreover, the narratives that are negotiated at the market are not the unified products of a single, monopolistic enterprise, but rather divergent stories that compete with each other, on a discursive level, for the status of truth. There is not a single truth, however. Even in the case of the *feminicidios* of Ciudad Juárez, there is more than one official truth (let alone the myriad of alternative truths I

examine more closely in chapter II): the police has captured several suspects, sometimes trying to link them together –as in the case of Abdul Latif Sharif and the gang of “Los Rebeldes”– and sometimes not (*Huesos en el desierto*; Newton), but representatives of the State also have denied the mere existence of the phenomenon (Rahmsdorff; “Ciudad Juárez as Palimpsest”), or have positively affirmed that it has already, and successfully, been dealt with (Ruiz).

This is all, of course, well documented and in fact vox populi. My point is, though, that not even the so-called official truth is a unified one, and that it is impossible to establish a final order in the concert of the multitude of narratives that constitute the discourse on Ciudad Juárez, for there is none (more on this later). My point is, too, that paranoia narratives are not to be regarded as delusional per se, but as competitors for truth. We are not talking about “clinical paranoia” here. Rather, and as Ray Pratt puts it in his seminal book from 2001, *Projecting Paranoia: Conspirational Visions in American Film*, the object of study is the massive phenomenon of the emergence, in the postmodern world, of a “cultural paranoia” that “reflects a public crisis in epistemology regarding truth claims, the status of knowledge, and the determination of truth” (246), that “is often symptomatic of more pervasive anxiety among individuals concerning their ability to control their lives” (1), and that “can also be a *method*, providing a way of seeing multiple, interconnected –though officially denied– stratifications of reality” (9). Stopping short of embracing the optimism and “privileging attitude” that Pratt shows concerning the subversive character of what he calls “visionary paranoia” throughout his study, I want to adopt this notion of a cultural phenomenon that happens to be associated with a pathology, which nevertheless should not lead readers to think that when I call narratives “paranoid” I am implying a priori that they are pathological or crazy. Hence, I do not think that there is a need to search for “anti-paranoid narratives” in such a crystalline example of a phenomenon of cultural paranoia as is the discourse on the

feminicidios of Ciudad Juárez, and in fact I would go as far as saying that, to the best of my knowledge, there are none.

The cooptation narrative, moreover, would imply that, among the dynamo of stories, there is something like a more authentic story, not as much “in terms of truth, or non-truth,” as in terms of its relationship to subaltern subjectivities and to possibilities of resistance to “larger structures and layers of oppression,” but also that this more authentic story, alas, has been assimilated by late, postindustrial capitalism and been turned into a commodity for mass consumption. While this narrative relies on an ultimately economicist theoretical framework that not only gives such a large category as the “late, postindustrial capitalism” an agency that the individual herself is supposed to have lost in postmodern times (getting strikingly near, in to process, to outright paranoia narratives fueled by “agency panic” [Melley 12ff]), it certainly contains some insights, not the least of which is that there are, indeed, stories of the dynamo produced by subaltern subjects (for instance, the ones told by activists who have fought heroically to make violence against women stop in Ciudad Juárez and elsewhere, as I develop in chapter III). Other than that, however, it is obviously akin to one particular narrative on the *feminicidios*, namely the one proposed by critics like Ileana Rodríguez (2009), in which the importance of the maquiladoras and of the economic and social structural inequality of border society is highlighted and constituted as the “basis” not only for the crimes themselves, but also for the cultural production on and around them.

If not for anything else, and given this dissertation’s explicit goals, I would have to reject this cooptation narrative as a comprehensive explanatory model. I do not think that the mechanisms of cooptation (if we can even call it that way) function this lineally at all, and this not only in the case of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez but in general. In this, I follow the excellent study by the U.S.-American historian Thomas Frank titled *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, and published in 1997.

There, he discusses in extenso the supposed “commercialization” of the so-called “counterculture,” a movement of mythical dimensions that, according to the same mythical template, was polluted by the mainstream and finally sold out and adapted, except for some of its “underground” ramifications: as he puts it while delineating the myth, it is about “[T]he revolt of the young against [mainstream] was a joyous and even glorious cultural flowering, though ... the story ends with the noble idealism of the New Left in ruins and the counterculture sold out to Hollywood and the television networks” (5). Later, however, he deconstructs the dichotomy counterculture/mainstream and rather impressively shows how both went hand in hand the whole time, how one could not exist without the other and how, far from one dominating the other, as it were, the mainstream was itself “countercultural” and the counterculture was itself pretty “mainstream.” There is, again, no master mind behind this, no media executives conspiring and changing the culture in radical ways for their own benefit, but a proliferation of stories and of points of cultural negotiation and competition for the status of cool. In the end, of course, the point of the book is that the “cooptation” didn’t happen chronologically, if at all, but that the counterculture was “coopted” from its very inception by a mainstream that, on the other hand, was itself different from the traditional one. Thus, the 1960s must be understood, for Frank, as the time where a new kind of consumer society emerges, and one more adequate to the development of transnational commerce, geopolitical relations, media technologies and demographical indexes, among other factors: hip consumerism.

We can apply this analysis, *mutatis mutandis*, to the phenomenon I am trying to tackle in my dissertation. It is not that there are authentic voices somewhere that have been silenced by their very insertion into the machinery of paranoia production that creates products for an international market and profits from the pain of the victims and their families. Rather, I argue that the discourse of Ciudad Juárez was always already inscribed into an international

“market” of paranoia that is totally decentered and that deals with notions of alternative truths, thus representing a subversive, destabilizing force with respect to the hegemonic narratives of power/knowledge but, and crucially, reinforcing the relation between power/knowledge, as well as a consumerist culture in which ideas are commodities, at the same time. There is no chronological order here, and certainly no cause and effect, but the emergence of a discursive field around a series of events that, as a whole (as a single crime wave), is constituted by this very emergence.

To go back to Dimock’s notion of the gendered reader, my model intends to be one in which history, and hence paranoia, has to be both engendered and decentered (and raced, ethnied, aged, etc.), in order for it not to be a “totalizing category” but a “fractured temporality, which is to say ... diachronic [temporality], the diachronicity here being generated not so much by the subject itself as by the analytic frame, which breaks up the seeming unity of time into its multiple sediments and infinite relays” (622). As a truly historical phenomenon (i.e. a temporally, geographically and socially situated, not transcendent phenomenon), and arguably one of the main sensibilities of our times and of our culture (Melley), paranoia needs to be viewed as such a diverse, diachronic field, too, in which there are more fractures than unifying forces (in the case of the *feminicidios*, again, the only unifying forces are the corpses) and in which there is neither a single, unilateral relation of economic production or epistemological dependence nor an all-encompassing corporation that coopts authentic subaltern expressions for profit. After all, to believe in the existence of such a corporation would be utterly paranoid.

This already addresses the second problem posed at the beginning of this subchapter, namely the necessity of a cultural studies project to deal with heterogeneity and symbolic tension and to avoid the temptation to offer a unifying (discursive) representation of evilness that ends up being as problematic, at least, as the most problematic stories of the dynamo.

This is a point that cannot be emphasized enough. When I call the dynamo of stories that constitutes the discourse on Ciudad Juárez a discursive formation, though, and a discursive formation whose particular order(s) I want to partially, incompletely map out in this dissertation¹⁷, I do not try to imply that the formation is a monolithic one. Perhaps it is indeed better to call it “discursive formations,” which is more accurate and better conveys the sense of heterogeneity that was present in the Foucaultian notion of linguistic systems as underlying structures that make certain ways of thinking and models of understanding reality possible, or thinkable, and which are both way outside from individual agency (or at least way outside individual intentions) and firmly grounded in history conceived as specific sets of possibilities (Foucault). Besides, attempting to map out a discursive order (or discursive orders) of the *feminicidios* should not immediately be interpreted as an exercise of “recentering” history or discourse, i.e. of looking for the unifying force behind the stories and, arguably, for its truth, but the opposite. Much like the archeological project of Michel Foucault, my aim is to cut a temporal section of a discursive formation on Ciudad Juárez and analyze its composing – divergent– fields, taking not only their multiplicity but also their heterogeneity into account, as well as the ruptures and moments of hiatus that open hermeneutic possibilities. Further, and rather like Foucault’s genealogical project, I expect to be able to historicize the present and look of course not for the origin (*Ursprung*) of the killings but for the descent (*Herkunft*) of their current meanings within the contexts of political, academic and cultural debate in current Mexico and elsewhere. This is, in fact, what has led me to put forward the hypothesis that there is no truth, and hence no origin, to the *feminicidios*, as well as that all that we have are the stories and the way they have been constructed and weaved into a textual fabric whose various descents can be traced, but whose center cannot be found because *it is not there*.

¹⁷ The reason why I state from the beginning that my map will be a partial, incomplete one, is that the discourse on Juárez is enormous and there is no way to grasp it in full. At best, it is possible to glimpse at aspects of it, to describe them and to interpret them or to establish patterns that, however, inevitably change, depending on the position from where one writes, as well as on the particular twists and spins that the dynamo of stories produces in its relentless production of narratives. Besides, and to quote Ammons’ poem again “Overall is beyond me.”

Indeed, one of the reasons why I –somewhat gimmicky– include the passage of H.R. Ammons poem “Corson’s Inlet” as an epigraph for the conclusion of this text, or, better, for the section of this dissertation titled “(No) conclusions,” is to point at the fundamental anti-totalizing stance I intend to develop in my dissertation: “Overall is beyond me.” But perhaps the concept of society as a “multivoiced body” proposed by Fred Evans in his 2008 book, *The Multivoiced Body: Society and Communication in the Age of Diversity*, will be helpful here in order to rethink the constant and inevitable tension between unity and diversity, or between homogeneity and heterogeneity:

[T]he notion of voices has the advantage of pointing simultaneously to our bodies as the producers of speech and to the discourses that provide these bodies with social and cultural significance ... Voices also make a necessary reference to each other; they exist as addresses or responses to other personalized social discourses and practices. Indeed, their dialogic interplay both separates and holds them together, constituting them as a body, a multivoiced body. (14)

If the “body” is the discourse on Ciudad Juárez and the “voices” are the competing narratives on and around the *feminicidios*, then the task of analyzing how the “dialogic interplay” takes place, as well as what kinds of “social and cultural significance” this process of interplay constitutes and configures, will be one that can be accomplished without creating the effect of totality or unity that obscures “heterogeneity and symbolic tension.” Furthermore, perhaps the inclusion of the word “body” in the concept of “the multivoiced body” can be of benefit to a dissertation that tackles questions of violence against women and of sex as a naturalized category.

Neither “sex” nor “gender” nor “paranoia” nor “discursive formation” are terms that will be ontologically privileged in any way here, just like the narratives themselves will not be privileged over others as for their status of, or at least their closeness to, “truth.” In their introduction to the volume *Rethinking Class: Literary Studies and Social Formations*, Wai Chee Dimock and Michael T. Gilmore write the following about the category of “class,” which I want to quote extensively because of its poignancy:

It is a concept with a genetic history of its own, we argue, a concept that came into being within a particular universe of discourse, under the exigencies of some particular circumstances, and carrying with it attendant premises and preoccupations, accents and ellipses. Class, in other words, is not (or at least not merely) a privileged analytic category here; it is itself an analyzable artifact, itself to be scrutinized, contextualized, critiqued for its commissions and omissions. In reminding ourselves of the historical provenance of the concept – in restoring to it a genealogy and a habitat – we hope, at the same time, to open up some space for ourselves, some critical distance from which we can take stock of a powerful idea without submitting completely to its inscribed epistemology. Our attempts at class analysis are therefore neither predicated on nor reducible to some universal determinant, neither predicated on nor reducible to the notion of a privileged historical subject. As we dispense with the security of a foundationalist epistemology, we look toward a hermeneutic that is not entirely arbitrary for being suspenseful, and not entirely pessimistic for being without guarantees, since the lack of certainty is not only the occasion for analysis but the occasion for hope. (2)

If we replace “class” with the other big categories employed or pointed at throughout my dissertation (“sex,” “gender,” “discourse on Ciudad Juárez,” or arguably even “narrative”), and maybe if we tone down a little the optimism of the last line of the quote, this could be a part of the dissertation that follows. I, admittedly, could not have articulated it better myself.

1.6. ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE:

ENTERING CIUDAD JUÁREZ

The following sections of this dissertation will require a step-wise articulation, though, since the layers of the discourse on Juárez are legion and the possible takes at them are virtually inexhaustible. Chapter II, titled “Through the Looking Glass: The Official and Alternative Stories on the *Feminicidios*,” will situate the reader amid the thick web of official stories about the *feminicidios* and the killers of Ciudad Juárez, as well as the alternative stories that civil society, and some very prominent journalistic authors, have come up with to counter those official stories. Chapter III, “On the Right to Mourn: Activism, Dissent, and the *Feminicidios*,” will focus on the stories and practices of organizations created by political activists and victims’ families, stressing the process by which they create a sense of community based on the sharing of a certain narrative ground, but also how they are the scenarios of new conflicts that arise among different interest groups within that community. Chapter IV, “Providing an Order: The Scholarly Interpretation of the *Feminicidios*,” will then

establish a dialogue between different instances of the relevant scholarship on the *feminicidios*, with an emphasis on the social sciences and feminist critique (the two fields on which the literature on the issue has concentrated). Chapter V, “Mainstreaming *Feminicidios*: The Discourse on Ciudad Juárez in Mass and Popular Culture,” will address the migration of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez from the terrain of politics and criminology and into popular and mass culture, taking selected examples from music and film as objects of analysis. Chapter VI, “The End of Violence: Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* and Roberto Bolaño’s *2666*,” will be on the literary articulation of the *feminicidios*, as found in two very different novels (*Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*, by Alicia Gaspar de Alba, and *2666*, by Roberto Bolaño) that posit different ways to search for the “truth” as well as very different results of that search. Finally, the ending section of the dissertation, titled “(No) Conclusions: Leaving Ciudad Juárez” (chapter VII), will come back to the crime wave itself, as an allegedly single, discreet phenomenon, and discuss whether or not it is possible to imagine a way of leaving the discourse on Ciudad Juárez.

II. DARK MIRRORS: THE OFFICIAL AND ALTERNATIVE STORIES ON THE *FEMINICIDIOS*

Aunque desconozco a fondo el caso mexicano, prevengo que los homicidios allá van a continuar. Se necesitaría una investigación científica al respecto.

Robert K. Ressler, investigador privado (qtd. in *Huesos en el desierto* 14)

The year was 1993. At the end of the previous year, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) had been signed by Mexico (Weissman 796). Almost simultaneously, on January 23, the beaten, raped and strangled corpse of Alma Chavira Farel was found in Ciudad Juárez. Although she most probably was not the first young woman killed that year in the area (there were at least more *desaparecidas*, a term that back then, however, still did not have the specific, and specifically Mexican, sinister resonance it now has), and even though her body had not been mutilated in the way later victims' bodies would be, her murder marks, rather arbitrarily, the beginning of the crime wave. It is at that point, in other words, at which the stories begin to spin around a corpse that functions, with hindsight, as a historical watershed. It is at this point as well that the spinning stories begin to constitute, just by their sheer gravity, a single dynamo of horror stories that we nowadays consider a whole distinctive phenomenon.

There is no official record of this murder and of this investigation in Ciudad Juárez anymore, though. Sometime during the 1990s, the file simply got lost. Thus, in a way that is so symbolic as to look concocted, the very first case of the *feminicidios* does not officially exist. Instead of that, we have a police report for the second case, which was the murder of Angélica Luna Villalobos, whose corpse was found 48 hours after the body of Alma Chavira Farel:

Averiguación previa número 1780/93-05, de fecha 25 de enero de 1993. Se localizó en la colonia Alta Vista el cadáver de una persona de sexo femenino de aproximadamente 16 años de edad, de complexión robusta, de tez blanca, cabello castaño claro, de aproximadamente un metro sesenta y cinco de estatura ... Como huellas de violencia se le apreciaron: doble equimosis en la región del cuello con marcas profundas en la parte lateral derecha del mismo, apreciando en esta región un cable de conexión eléctrica con dos vueltas y anudado ... Causa de la muerte: asfixia por estrangulación. Dicho cadáver fue identificado con el nombre de Angélica Luna Villalobos, quien contaba con seis meses de embarazo. (Fernández and Rampal 33)

From then on, the findings start to be counted and the stories start to proliferate. “Las muertas de Juárez” became a code word for the murdered women (Fernández and Rampal 35). In the popular imagination, as well as in most examples of academic and journalistic literature about the crime wave, the victims were young, migrant, female workers of the maquiladora system; initially, the crime wave used to be called “the maquiladora murders,” after all (see chapter IV of this dissertation for more on that term). They were “inditas del sur” (Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán 1), in other words, which was supposedly part of the reason

why the police did not show any interest in investigating their cases (the very first file got lost!): in this version of the events, they were all poor, brown, and disposable. The following passage, taken from “Ciudadana X: Gender Violence and the Denationalization of Women’s Rights in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico,” an otherwise excellent article on violence against women and contemporary citizenship written by Alicia Schmidt Camacho and published in 2005, is a typical description of the victims’ profile:

The feminization of the dispensable noncitizen is perhaps most visible in the ongoing brutalization and murder of subaltern Mexican girls and women in the state of Chihuahua. The evident refusal of the Mexican state and federal governments and much of civil society to provide even the most minimal protection to victims signifies a collapse of law or its replacement with new forms of social control that render racialized migrant women vulnerable to torture, sexual abuse, murder, and disappearance. The 11-year *feminicidio* in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua marks a campaign of gender terror that alternately mimics the repressive campaigns of Latin American "dirty wars" and the seemingly irrational codes of urban violence and serial killing (Fregoso 2003; Reguillo-Cruz 2002). Since 1993, some 370 women have been murdered in Chihuahua City and Ciudad Juárez, of which approximately 137 were sexually assaulted (Amnesty International 2003). Of these, 100 fit a pattern of serial killings. At least 75 of the bodies have not been identified or claimed. The mothers' organization Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa (Bring Our Daughters Home) estimates that in addition to the killings, 600 women have disappeared from the Juárez/Chihuahua metropolitan areas (Nuestras Hijas 2003). The victims of these crimes have been poor girls and women of color from the *colonias*, many of them recent migrants to

the border city from urban and rural communities in Mexico's interior. The peculiar features of the Juárez killings correspond to the physical and political geography of the northern city, its shared boundary with the United States, and its importance as a site of Mexican partnership with global capitalist institutions. (259)

But other commentators suggest that the truth is both more complicated and more terrifying than that. As Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos reminds us in her 2010 article, “Feminist Keys for Understanding Femicide: Theoretical, Political, and Legal Construction,” which is the preface to the book, *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Americas*:

The girls and women murdered in Mexico had different ages, and included girls, elderly women, young women, older women, and adolescents. They belonged to all social classes and socioeconomic strata; some were rich women, from the upper class and the elite, though the majority were poor or marginal. The full array included illiterate women, with little schooling (as was the case for most of the victims), though there were also students in vocational schools and universities, and graduate students with excellent academic records. To their assailants, these women, either single or married, were spouses, former spouses, coinhabitants, girlfriends, former girlfriends, daughters, step-daughters, daughters-in-law, mothers, mothers-in-law, cousins, close friends, neighbors, employees, bosses, subordinates, or unknown. Their occupations varied: the victims were service providers, dancers, peasants, teachers, vendors, waitresses, researchers, models, actresses, and bureaucrats. Most were hard-working girls and

women; some were on vacation, others were unemployed students and transients. Also killed were women associated with criminals, and upstanding citizens, activists, politicians, and women in government. Almost all were Mexican, and among them, some were Tzotzil (such as the Lunas of Acteal), Rarámuris, and Nahuatl. Others were foreigners, including those from Canada, the Netherlands, the United States, El Salvador, Korea, Brazil, and Guatemala. Most were killed in their homes, though some bodies were found in the street, in a vacant lot, along a roadside, in a ravine, in a store, at a construction site, in a car, in a cave, in an upland area, along a highway, in the desert, in a river, or in a house for holding kidnap victims, and it is not known where they were killed. Some had marks of sexual violence, though in most cases there is no trace of sexual violence. Some were pregnant, others were disabled; some were locked up, others kidnapped. All were tortured, mistreated, and intimidated, and they experienced fear and humiliation before being killed. Some were beaten to death, others were strangled, decapitated, hung, stabbed, and shot; some were mutilated and bound. For some, their remains were placed in a sack, a suitcase, or a box, put in concrete, dismembered, burnt, or stretched. All were held in captivity; all were isolated and unprotected. Terrified, they experienced the most extreme impotence in their defenselessness. All were assaulted and subjected to violence until death. Some of their bodies were mistreated even after they had been murdered.

Most of the crimes remain in impunity. (xviii-xix)

For Lagarde y de los Ríos, then, the “dead women of Juárez” are literally all female victims of murderous violence of Juárez, period. The victim of the crime wave is the female subject and it is her sex which gives the crime wave its logic and its coherence, in the first

place. To quote Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán's article, "Feminicidio: The 'Black Legend' of the Border," published as the introduction for her book, *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*, in 2010:

Just because I published a novel called *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005) does not mean the Juárez murders are fiction¹⁸. Since May [sic] 1993, over five hundred women and girls have been found brutally murdered on the El Paso/Juárez border, and thousands more have been reported missing and remain unaccounted for, making this the longest epidemic of femicidal violence in modern history. The victims are known colloquially as "*las inditas del sur*," the little Indian girls from the south of Mexico –poor, dark-skinned, and indigenous-looking– who have arrived alone and disenfranchised in Ciudad Juárez to work at a twin-plant *maquiladora* and earn dollars to send back home. Not all the victims are rural, not all of them are outsiders to the border metropolis, not all of them worked at a *maquiladora*, lived alone, or had indigenous features. But most of them are Mexican, impoverished, and young. And all of them are female, the victims of this particular crime wave. (1)

The logic of the *feminicidios* of Ciudad Juárez cannot be presented in a more circular, tautological fashion as in this example: The researcher looks for occurrences of heinous violence against women among the numerous cases of violence in general and then determines that there is a crime wave, and indeed a "particular" one, which is, moreover, defined by the fact that its victims are women... which is, however, precisely the selection of the researchable universe that was made by the researcher herself. This is as pristine an

¹⁸ See chapter 5 of this dissertation for an extended discussion of this novel.

example of discourse in action as I can think of: The thing that is being allegedly discussed and studied is actually constituted by the process of discussing and studying it as a thing. But the researchers' heart is undoubtedly in the right place, for the crime scenes were starting to multiply, the crosses that commemorated the victims were starting to be a part of the local landscape, and the "dead women of Juárez" were, sadly, starting to be a part of the local folklore, as the following description by Marcos Fernández and Jean-Christophe Rampal, taken from a chapter called "Las muertas forman parte de la decoración" from their 2005 book, the significantly titled *La ciudad de las muertas: La tragedia de Ciudad Juárez*, quite vividly shows:

Las "muertas de Juárez" se encuentran presentes por doquier. Además de las pinturas sobre los postes, numerosas cruces rosas se encuentran distribuidas por ciertos lugares de la ciudad. Delante del Puente de Santa Fe, por ejemplo, a doscientos metros de Estados Unidos, un Cristo apoyado en una gran placa rosa, sobre la que centenares de clavos han sido clavados en forma de un crucifijo, les rinde homenaje. Los nombres de todas las víctimas están inscritos, así como una exigencia: "¡Ni una más!" En las avenidas más concurridas, en los caminos que conducen a las colonias más pobres, hasta los parques industriales, también ahí los postes eléctricos llevan los estigmas de estos crímenes. A lo largo de decenas de kilómetros, una sucesión de inscripciones en rosa y negro clama justicia y recuerda que aquí dos mujeres han sido salvajemente asesinadas cada mes desde hace diez años. Hasta en los rincones más apartados de Ciudad Juárez, los habitantes, madres o padres, han erigido cruces en los lugares donde han sido descubiertos los cuerpos. En Anapra, en una colina que se levanta junto a este barrio situado a las puertas del desierto y a lo largo de la frontera, seis de ellas han

sido clavadas en la arena, muy cerca del depósito de agua. Como para recordar que los asesinos continúan golpeando, un aviso de búsqueda ha sido pegado a un poste de la electricidad. Un rostro más de mujer al que acompañan un texto sobre las circunstancias de su desaparición y unos números telefónicos. (41-42)

This process of visibilization of the crime wave, achieved by the activism of feminists and of the mothers and families of the victims alike, and which arguably constituted the crime wave by the act of starting to count the murdered women, began in 1993 and had rapid, albeit unsatisfactory, results. By the end of 1994, in fact, two years and approximately twenty-five young women's lives after the founding of the corpse arbitrarily appointed as the “original” one of this “particular crime wave,” the police was finally forced to acknowledge what had been *vox populi* since the very first murder in the row, namely that these were no isolated crimes but the work of “a serial killer.” The press, for instance, had been calling this still wanted serial killer “the Juárez Ripper” or “the Psychotic Predator” for months (Newton 7), and had created the figure of a disturbed man on the loose with a supposedly unified *modus operandi* that included, however, the seemingly aleatoric use of stabbing, burning, shooting, beating, and strangling, among other torture and killing techniques. Likewise, this human monster sometimes bit off the left nipple of his victims –but sometimes did not–, sometimes destroyed the right nipple of his victims without biting it off –but sometimes did not–, sometimes raped his victims –but sometimes, if admittedly very seldom, did not–, etc.

Whether the “serial killer” hypothesis was right or wrong is, of course, beside the point; the significant development, here, is the grudging acceptance by the State authority of the fact that there was a problem at all, and a unified, single problem at that, as well as that the stories told by the press and, most importantly, by the people of the city could lead to the actual “truth.” It was not exactly a move towards real citizens' participation in the

management of the crisis (until this day, the Mexican State has proven incompetent at best and accessory to the crimes at worst [Palomino n.pag.]), but it was undoubtedly the definitive insertion of the police machinery in the story-telling that could lead, then, if not to “the truth”, at least to an officially sanctioned version of it¹⁹.

Notwithstanding the bizarreness of this story so far, its actual preposterous turn only takes place in October 1995. For it is in that month that, as Michael Newton perceptively points out in his article, “Femicides in Ciudad Juárez,” “detectives claimed they had solved the case. They had detained a suspect who was charged with one of the city's brutal sex murders. Best of all, he was a foreigner” (8-9).

Enter Abdul Latif Sharif, a chemist from Egypt who had worked for years for big North American companies in the United States, until his somehow notorious tendency to sexually attack women became too much of an embarrassment and too much of a legal problem for, his employers. Facing deportation to Egypt, Sharif agreed (in 1994, i.e. when the crime wave was already well under way) to leave the US and to move to Ciudad Juárez, where one of the many maquiladoras owned by Benchmark was glad to offer him a job. But the escape strategy backfired when, one and a half years later, in October, he was charged with the murder of one seventeen-year-old girl that had happened in the summer of 1995, and Sharif was convicted and sentenced to thirty years in prison.

Whoever hoped this arrest would put an end to the explosion of misogynist violence in the city –after all, it was nothing less than the crowning of a month-long hunting of a “predator”– would be bitterly disappointed by further developments. Not only did the killings not stop, for instance, but as a matter of fact their rate increased. According to Newton,

¹⁹ For detailed chronological accounts of the many twists of this development, see Newton, Michael. “Femicides in Ciudad Juárez.” *Femicides of Ciudad Juárez & Chihuahua*, edited by Red de Solidaridad con Mexico/Mexico Solidarity Network, Red de Solidaridad con Mexico/Mexico Solidarity Network, 2004; and Fernández, Marcos, and Jean-Cristophe Rampil. *La ciudad de las muertas: La tragedia de Ciudad Juárez*. Translated by Manuel Arbolí Gascón, Debate, 2008.

“[b]etween Sharif’s arrest and the first week of April 1996 at least 14 more female victims were slain in Ciudad Juárez” (12), which made it quite obvious that the convicted suspect could not be the killer, or at least not the only one. In fact, Sharif himself grew fond of reminding everyone who wanted to listen about that (Fernández and Rampal 103ff) and, moreover, started doing his own accounting:

Desde que está entre rejas, el químico lleva una macabra contabilidad en un cuaderno negro cuyas páginas están cubiertas de cifras, fechas y nombres. “Cada muerte que aparece es una prueba suplementaria de mi inocencia. Es triste, pero es así”, afirmaba. Nada más en el transcurso de los seis primeros meses de cárcel, catorce jóvenes fueron asesinadas (violadas, luego estranguladas o apuñaladas). Sus cadáveres fueron descubiertos en cualquier parte de la ciudad o de sus alrededores. (Fernández and Rampal 106)

This sinister statistics made it also important and indeed necessary for the State machinery, in order to contain the rumors and the stories, to create a new one. However, the new story could not be just any story, since the existing story was already in place and had created, to all intents and purposes, a reality that could not be ignored anymore: “They [the local police] needed an explanation for the murders; but one that would not exonerate their prime suspect” (Newton 12).

Hence, the invention of the second official story became inevitable, a new story which was supposed, at first, to supplement the one that had Sharif at its center, but was enhanced *ad absurdum* soon and became, in the process, big in its own right. A street gang from Ciudad Juárez called “Los Rebeldes”, the story went, had been hired by the imprisoned Sharif to produce some copycat crimes –that is, to kill some young women in the Egyptian’s imputed

“style”–, with the goal of definitely proving that he was innocent. And many gang members, after being detained, confessed indeed to the murders, including Sergio Armendariz Díaz, the supposed gang leader who reportedly –and uncannily enough– was nicknamed “El Diablo” (Fernández and Rampal 106-09).

Needless to say, the confessions had been obtained under torture inflicted by police officers, or so at least the lawyers of “Los Rebeldes” claimed. In a country like Mexico, in which the mistreatment of prisoners is endemic or epidemic indeed (“Paper Promises, Daily Impunity: Mexico’s Torture Epidemic Continues”), and particularly in a situation like the one being recounted here, which –due to the desperate need of a “truth”– would probably have resulted in police brutality everywhere in the world, such a claim is completely credible, for if, granted, testimony given under duress may not convey the allegedly pristine “moral authority” a “voluntary” confession usually has, it surely is good enough to work with. In fact, according to Newton, Mexican courts are actually allowed by the law to *accept* such confessions (30).

Thus, the State acted upon its newly acquired story, one that had literally been extracted from and with the help of death, violence and pain, and condemned several of the gang members to –relatively short– prison sentences for rape and murder. Not to be outdone in lack of credibility, the police kept on maintaining that all those crimes had been committed in complicity with, or following orders from, the already incarcerated Sharif, who had not even been in Ciudad Juárez at the time of the first killing in the first place.

It goes without saying that the murders, “naturally”, and rather like a truly natural force, continued. The situation, “naturally”, worsened. Newton even asserts that, “[s]tatistically, 1998 was the city's worst year yet” (14). As a result of those horrible statistics, as well as of the transparent hypocrisy of the police's stories, which in the meantime had lost their value of truth or, better, their value *as* truth (which in the meantime had been debased, so

to speak) thanks to their sheer stupidity, the ordeal of the young women of Ciudad Juárez gained national and even international prominence, as documented, for instance, by Mexico's Human Rights Commission's 1998 report on the *feminicidios* or, on a very different discursive field, by the fact that a more or less mainstream pop-singer like Tori Amos joined the cause of the *desaparecidas'* families and published a song called “Juárez” in her 1999 platinum album *To Venus and Back* (see chapter V of this dissertation for an extended discussion of that song and other cultural artifacts). A fairly different example of this prominence, by the way, is the fact that the FBI had begun pressuring the Mexican government and had even already sent an own team to further pursue the investigations, although it had –“naturally”– not been able to gather any decisive, or at least slightly useful, information.

An ex-FBI agent, and indeed a legendary one, got involved in this story or, rather, in this dynamo of stories, at this point. The talk is of Robert K. Ressler, an expert in the science of profiling serial killers, developed over several decades by himself and his team at the Behavioral Science Unit of the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia; in a way, you can say that his and his team's work created, at least discursively, the character of the serial killer itself. In fact, Ressler stated that he had actually coined the term, according to Katherine Ramsland, whose research on the topic, however, suggests that that was merely an exaggeration, at best, and an outright lie at worst (n.pag.). No matter his self-aggrandizing, Ressler was enough of a reputed expert on serial killers as to be repeatedly hired by the film and television industry after his retirement in 1990 (even for such an Oscar-winning film like *The Silence of the Lambs*). It is perhaps fitting that the authorities of Ciudad Juárez, desperate to personify violence against women in a single culprit, as it were, and a serial killer at that, but without touching structural conditions, thought, in 1998, that he could also help them with the *feminicidios*, and decided to pay him between \$ 50,000 and \$ 75,000 in order for him to briefly visit Juárez and, hopefully, solve the crimes (Fernández and Rampal 61-62).

But Ressler did not. He praised the local police and especially the federal police in terms that caused consternation among activists and stated repeatedly that those institutions were absolutely competent to do the detective work themselves. As late as 2003, Ressler declared the following to a Mexican interviewer: “La policía judicial del estado de Chihuahua está perfectamente cualificada para indagar y resolver estos crímenes. Ya lo demostró en el pasado y continúa haciéndolo” (qtd. in Fernández and Rampal 62). As for his conclusions, according to Sergio González Rodríguez, he offered the following wisdom: “Aunque desconozco a fondo el caso mexicano, prevengo que los homicidios allá van a continuar. Se necesitaría una investigación científica al respecto” (*Huesos en el desierto* 14).

The leading serial killer expert of the world had failed to make sense of the crimes, and a number of other experts (from Canada, Spain, Brazil, etc.) would also try and fail (Fernández and Rampal 63-64). The *feminicidios* resisted explanation and, notwithstanding Sharif’s and Los Rebeldes’ imprisonment, the murders continued and intensified.

To put it somehow differently: by 1999, it was clear that the time was ripe for a new twist of the story. Soon enough, a new group of scapegoats would be invented both by street-wisdom and by a police institution always willing to “believe” in it and in its own ability to solve the mystery. This time around, it was the turn of a man who worked for the maquiladoras as a bus-driver, Jesús Guardado Márquez alias “El Drácula”, who was accused by a 14-year-old girl who had survived her encounter with him, in which he had –as stated by her– raped and nearly murdered her. Based on his confessions, once again allegedly obtained under physical duress, the State proceeded to arrest four other bus-drivers, all of whom supposedly integrated, along with “El Drácula”, a veritable criminal association baptized by the press as “Los Choferes”, which specialty was to capture their victims on their way home from work. As perfidious as this method may sound, it was nonetheless, and always following the police accounts, not a method applied by the bus-drivers out of their free-will, but –of

course— only as a means to emulate the still incarcerated Sharif and thus prove his innocence, because he still was, after all, the mastermind behind the crime wave (Fernández and Rampal 110-13).

Sadly, this account of the official story could go on and on. For the sake of brevity, it has even had left aside to leave aside bizarre, important turns of the stories, sub-stories, anecdotes, such as the romance between Sharif and his lawyer, the discovery of a mysterious document called “Richie’s diary” that was supposed to contain a testimony written by the serial killer, the way one of the first State reaction to the feminicidios —after grudgingly accepting that there was something like violence against women in Ciudad Juárez— was to create a prevention campaign that put the onus to stop the killings on the women who could be their victims, etc. In fact, only two intersecting and mutually influencing developments related to the *feminicidios*, if at all, can meet the outrageousness of the brutal murders themselves.

On the one hand, we have the increasingly absurd police stories, which —as the preceding paragraphs show, in spite of their concerning only the beginning of the Ciudad Juárez phenomenon— reach a degree of insulting nonsense that one almost starts feeling bad for Sharif, who is an otherwise despicable rapist (as his records from before his transfer to Mexico consistently demonstrate) and for the other tens of “suspects” who have been temporarily detained. As Diana Washington Valdrz, a reporter of *El Paso Times* and whose work we will discuss more extensively in the following pages, has said, “[a]t this exact moment, not even one of the prisoners has the least direct relation to the crimes” (Huffschnid n.pag., my translation). Or, as Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos put in the conclusion to an aforequoted passage, “[m]ost of the crimes remain in impunity” (xix).

On the other hand, however, we have the State's partial indifference in regard to the crimes, an indifference that sometimes turns precisely into the “actionism” that leaves the

police to invent unbelievable stories, but one that has also produced a whole euphemistic language that embellishes the violence, in the best case, and denies its mere existence, in the worst. It all depends, people are told, on how one interprets the numbers. Newton writes, for example, the following:

[B]y 1998 the long running investigation had become a numbers game. In May, media reports referred to 'more than 100 women raped and killed' in Ciudad Juárez. A month later, reports from the same source (Associated Press) raised the number to 117. In October 1998 another AP report placed the official body count at 95, while a women's advocacy group, Women for Juárez, placed the total at somewhere between 130 and 150. (15)

As for Fernández and Rampal, they put it this way, in a section of their book appropriately titled “Macabra batalla de cifras”:

Por un lado, las autoridades tratan de minimizar el número de muertas; por el otro, algunos no dudan en ampliar la realidad. “Les puedo asegurar que hoy, a la hora en que les estoy hablando, hemos contado trescientos treinta y dos homicidios,” declara, con voz calmada y comedida, seguro de sí, Manuel Esparza Navarrete, coordinador muy controvertido de la Fiscalía Especial para la Atención de Homicidios de Mujeres del estado de Chihuahua, encargada de los crímenes contra las mujeres entre 1998 y 2004, “Y de estos trescientos treinta y dos crímenes, sólo noventa son homicidios de carácter sexual”. Cifras confirmadas por Victoria Caraveo, directora del Instituto Chihuahuense de la Mujer (Ichimu), creado en febrero de 2003 por el gobernador del estado, que aporta apoyo

económico y psicológico a ciertas familias de las víctimas. Al unísono, ambos funcionarios regionales claman que sus cifras son las buenas, las únicas válidas, basadas en los expedientes de las investigaciones²⁰. Por su parte, Amnistía Internacional y la mayoría de las ONG locales estiman que el número de mujeres asesinadas en Ciudad Juárez desde 1993 es superior al cómputo de las autoridades. En agosto de 2003, en su informe, Amnistía Internacional hablaba de trescientos setenta casos. Cifra revisada al alza meses más tarde, en marzo de 2004, y fijada en cuatrocientos diez, de los cuales al menos ciento treinta y siete crímenes fueron de carácter sexual.

Sobre estos más de cuatrocientos asesinatos, un centenar presenta características comunes. Sin embargo, las macabras estadísticas de Ciudad Juárez no se detienen ahí. Con la mirada perdida a lo lejos, la cabeza inclinada a un lado, revolviendo nerviosamente con la cucharilla la taza de café, Óscar Máynez [a criminologist and former director State forensic director of Chihuahua] suspira: “No olvidemos las desaparecidas,” suelta de golpe levantando la voz. “Tenemos muchas desapariciones, muchas jóvenes de las que no se tienen noticias. ¿Están vivas? ¿Han sido asesinadas? Sin cuerpo, no hay asesinato; sin asesinato, no hay asesino. Es un problema sin fin.” Unas quinientas mujeres han sido clasificadas como desaparecidas, según varias fuentes locales. Pero, aun así, la polémica no cesa. (48-49)

We will come back to the “numbers game” in the conclusion of this dissertation, since it is, sadly, one of the main aspects of the discourse of Ciudad Juárez (I still get the question sometimes, when talking about this dissertation, and even from people who should know

²⁰ Although we know, by now, that the very first file got lost: see the beginning of this chapter.

better than asking, about how many dead women actually, exactly are there). Yet the numbers themselves, however “adulterated” or debatable they are, are not the only way in which this mechanism of denial manifests itself. The way the statistics are actually constructed is another one, and the denial goes up to the highest spheres of representative political power in Mexico. Take, for instance, the example of then President Vicente Fox, who around 2003, at the peak of national and international unrest about the murders, created several notoriously underfunded “commissions” and had appointed several “special prosecutors” without any special powers in the past, ostensibly in order to investigate the *feminicidios*, and whose wife once had, in 2002, dramatically appealed to the people of her country to stop the killings and all violence against women (Ruiz n.pag.). These were, for instance, his words, in June 2004:

A los padres, a los hermanos, a los hijos o a los esposos de estas mexicanas injustamente privadas de su vida, prometemos hacer cuanto podamos para que la expresión “Ni una muerta más” se convierta en realidad. Delante de ellos reitero mi voluntad de continuar haciendo todo lo que esté en el poder de mi gobierno para aclarar estos homicidios. (Qtd. in Fernández and Rampal 141)

Let us set aside the fact that, arguably because of the sexist quirks of the Spanish language, but very significantly in this context indeed, he addresses male subjects. Let us also set aside, as well, the fact that he does not use any variation of the terms *feminicidio* or *femicidio*. Let us just compare this talk, which was not unique but rather common for him, around that time, with what the same then President Fox declared on May 30, 2005, in the context of a welcoming ceremony for the then Austrian president: “that the majority of the cases of murders of women in Ciudad Juárez have been solved, and that the perpetrators have

been convicted and put in jail”. Furthermore, in the same speech he exhorted his compatriots to “look at it [the crime wave] in its proper dimension” (Ruiz n.pag.).

After all, Miguel Álvarez Ledesma, Fox' government's “special attorney”, concluded, in a report finished in February 2006, that there was never a *feminicidio* at all, since it was only possible to objectively prove the existence of forty-seven cases of *desaparecidas*. As for the corpses, which according to his sources added up to 379, he claimed that most of them had been the product of crimes that had already been solved and that had no connection with each other. Besides, it was his belief that at least eighty percent of these murders could be attributed to domestic violence, to begin with (Newton 34-35; Rahmsdorf n.pag.), as if domestic violence were not or could not be a part of the phenomenon of the *feminicidios*.

The official story, then, or rather the different threads of the official story, had come full circle, indeed, from denying the singularity of the crime wave, to using marginal, disposable human beings as scapegoats for these crimes on other marginal, disposable human beings, to announcing that the issue was under control –and that it had never been such a big deal at all–, to denying the singularity of the crime wave and, indeed, the crime wave itself.

Needless to say, in the face of these highly influential official stories, as well as of the obvious scapegoating performed during years by the State in order to convince public opinion that it was acting in defense of the women of Ciudad Juárez when it was either paralyzed, in the best case, or actually acting against them, in the worst, the civil society could not do anything but develop other, alternative stories, and try to position them as truths. Today, over 20 years after the crime wave started, these alternative stories are by far the more popular and the more widely believed ones. Sometimes, they are simply more believable than the absurd, convoluted stories concocted by the State, like the whole complex of the supposed criminal corporation Latif-Rebeldes-Choferes. Sometimes, they are just as absurd and convoluted, but, given the choice between believing what the notoriously corrupt State tells you and believing,

and at least giving the benefit of the doubt to what people ostensibly working against this State tell you, what would you choose?

In a way, calling the narratives composed and advanced by different sectors and actors of civil society to address and to explain the *feminicidios* “alternative stories,” as opposed to the “official stories” briefly recounted in the previous pages, is misleading. After all, somewhat paradoxically the alternative stories of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez *preceded* the official ones. Arguably, the very fact that we accept that there is a phenomenon here, that there has been and still is a crime wave at work in Juárez, is the result of the first alternative story on the issue, i.e. the story which, on the basis of undeniable, pervasive violence against women in a sexist society undergoing traumatic social changes, constituted the phenomenon while pretending to be describing it. It was Esther Chávez Cano’s decision to start counting, indeed, which created the *feminicidios*. Her story is then, probably, the single most influential alternative story on the *feminicidios*, and she was (she died on Christmas Day, 2009), unarguably, the single most influential individual in the discourse on Ciudad Juárez over the last three decades. But why did she start to count?

Interestingly, she started not in 1993 but in 1992. Born in 1933 and, significantly, an accountant by way of profession, Esther Chávez Cano had been active in Mexican and international feminist circles for decades when, in 1992, “when the bodies of women, often several at a time, were found in the deserts or cotton fields around Ciudad Juárez, [she] founded the Grupo 8 de Marzo” (Davison n.pag.). Formed as a coalition between 11 different organizations that worked toward the advancement of women and in defense of women in a violent patriarchal society, the group started its work months before the body of Alma Chavira Parel was found. In fact, it was in the context of this work and its frustrations that she decided to start minutely documenting instances of blatant violence against women and the *feminicidios* were born:

Esther tenía una mente matemática, su experiencia como contable le preparó para convertirse en la primera mexicana que llevó el registro y contabilizó, de forma empírica pero impecable y detallada, todos y cada uno de los asesinatos de niñas y mujeres en su estado. Fue ella quien nos señaló el camino, fue Esther quien intuyó que las cloacas simbólicas no eran subterráneos callejeros sino instituciones del Estado mexicano y colectivos de hombres capaces de asesinar por placer y por poder. Fue ella quien apuntó en su primera libreta los detalles de cómo aparecían las víctimas, de quiénes lo reportaban y qué autoridades hacían o dejaban de hacer. Muy pronto ya no era una libreta sino varias ... Como una contable decidida a no perder la cuenta de las ignominias y sus autores, Esther escribió los nombres de aquellos que, teniendo poder para proteger la vida de las mujeres y niñas, elegían ignorar sus asesinatos; aquellos que teniendo el poder económico, político y social para cambiar a México, elegían no hacerlo.

Esther los señaló con la mano firme y la palabra justa y verdadera. (Cacho n.pag.)

Almost single-handedly, then, Esther Chávez Cano shed light on violence against women in Juárez, gave this phenomenon a logic by counting and grouping the crimes in a single category, that of the *feminicidios* –even though, at that time, the term was by no means hegemonic and not even she used it yet–, and jumpstarted, as it were, “the protests that made this violence infamous around the world,” as Melissa W. Wright puts it in her 2010 article, “Femicide, Mother-Activism, and the Geography of Protest in Northern Mexico,” in which she also describes the following scene in which Chávez Cano talks about the context in which she started her accounting work on the crime wave:

“This silence terrifies me,” said Esther Chávez Cano, the director of Casa Amiga, a rape crisis center in Ciudad Juárez, the city that borders El Paso, Texas. The silence she refers to is the quiet surrounding the ongoing violence against women in northern Mexico. “No one is protesting,” she said. “There are no press conferences. No marches. It’s like we’re back in 1993.”

The year 1993 marks the beginning of what is widely recognized as northern Mexico’s era of femicide (feminicidio) – the killing of women by persons granted impunity. The year also marks the beginnings of the protests that made this violence infamous around the world. As I listened to Esther, a woman in her mid-seventies, while she lay on her sofa, preparing for another round of chemotherapy, I wondered if I should state the obvious. “You know, Esther,” I said, “no one, anywhere, protests violence against women on a regular basis”

“Well,” she said, “we used to.” (211)

As we will see in chapter III of this dissertation, Chávez Cano is not uncontroversial among activists in Ciudad Juárez, by any means. If anything, and is so often the case with prominent political figures from social movements and, more generally, from the left, she is more controversial in the city where her main work took place than elsewhere. At the international level, indeed, she is almost universally regarded as an inspiring, history-making person that changed Juárez for the better. To quote an obituary of Chávez Cano written by Eve Ensler, the famous activist and playwright who wrote *The Vagina Monologues* (see chapter III) and who is a legendary figure of the global feminist movement in her own right:

Esther Chávez Cano died early this morning, December 25, 2009. My heart hurts. I cannot imagine this world without her. She was a fierce activist and a huge part of our V-Day movement. She literally changed the world for women in Juárez, bringing the struggle of the raped, the disappeared, the discarded women and girls to global attention. She was tireless in her struggle, opening a transformational center, Casa Amiga, where women were healed and empowered, taking on the authorities, often endangering her own life. Even in these last years when she was fighting cancer she remained in the struggle. One of my greatest memories of Esther is when we marched together in Juárez, thousands coming from all over the country and the world to demand justice and freedom. She gave her life for the women and girls of Juárez. She taught me about service and humility and kindness. She was a force in our movement, a leader and a beacon and we will miss her terribly. (n.pag.)

She was a force, indeed: the force that, by an accounting act, contributed to the crystallization of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez as no other person other than perhaps the killers ever did, and also the woman who embodied the fight against the *feminicidios* more than any other activist related to the dynamo of (alternative) stories²¹.

Outside of activism as such and more clearly positioned in the realm of journalism – albeit of openly committed, ostensibly critical journalism– there are some other “forces” who have also acquired a certain degree of personal prominence within academic and literate circles by creating, compiling, positing and mobilizing alternative stories that have partially become the de facto leading hypotheses about the murders and their perpetrators. In the

²¹ In chapter 2 of this dissertation, I will discuss how she and her work is read in Ciudad Juárez, and I will show that she, somewhat surprisingly, is by no means regarded exclusively as a positive force in the fight against *feminicidio* and gender violence in general.

following pages, we will examine more closely parts of the work of two of these “forces,” namely Sergio González Rodríguez and Diana Washington Valdez.

A Mexican journalist who, after stints as rock musician and screenwriter found his life vocation as a researcher and as a chronicler of the *feminicidios*, Sergio González Rodríguez published the non-fiction book *Huesos en el desierto*, which still constitutes one of the most exhaustive studies on Ciudad Juárez' murders ever undertaken, in 2002. It is also, without a doubt, one of the most popular studies on the subject, if not the most popular in terms of influence and quotes, and one of the reasons of this popularity is, arguably, that the book manages to sum up, in its 335 pages, virtually all possible theories that have yet been advanced to answer the classical detective questions of “who”, “how”, and “why” related to the crime wave. Moreover, González Rodríguez even purports to “name names” in the book – no small feat in a country whose State, as was explained before, seems to either ignore the phenomenon, in the best case, or actively spare the ones who are responsible for it, in the worst. As we will now see, however, his reputation for “naming names” is more complicated than that.

Thus, the official story is told in the book –and it sounds as implausible in *Huesos en el desierto* as it did in the previous pages, a fact the author is very well aware of– but also the snuff movies theory, according to which the young women are tortured and killed in front of film cameras for the visual consumption of their deaths by rich gentlemen in Europe and the United States. The organ trade theory, which probably does not need further explanation, is also mentioned (130). Even obscure “narcosatanic” rituals, supposedly performed by very high positioned bosses of the drug trade who have been perverted through and through by their own way-of-life and by their own incredible amounts of money, are postulated as the proto-religious, and indeed thoroughly magical, context in which these murders take place (68ff).

Drug money seems to be, in fact, the big corrupter in the imaginary of Ciudad Juárez and, in fact, of Northern Mexico as a whole (*Huesos en el desierto* 242; Torrans 27), since it not only is presumed to be the means by which these drug traffickers pay for their total immunity, corrupting the police and the whole state in the process, but also the substance they are really addicted to, along with the complete border society. It is a substance that drives them crazy – according to one of the popular theories –albeit, granted, not one favored by *Huesos en el desierto*– it leads them downright to Satanism. Money is, additionally, and of course, the means used by the bosses, the people who pull the strings or, more precisely, the people who cut the *desaparecidas'* strings of life, to pay the murderers themselves, the “low rank” criminals who actually get their hands dirty with the young women's blood.

In short, *Huesos en el desierto* displays the alternative stories about the Ciudad Juárez murders as an already full-fledged conspiracy theory. In other words, it shows how –and reproduces how– civil society, in its otherwise perfectly understandable anti-establishment impetus, as well as in its open attempt to create an alternative version to the –clearly false– official story, gives the whole phenomenon an inner logic and a nearly individual intention, as if the crime wave itself was the work of an individual person or at least of an individual entity, of an entity that can be detected, identified, separated from the multiplicity of the hologram of history, and blamed on the violent events. If anything, however, this vision makes even the official version look, at once, plausible in comparison. For if the Sharif screenplay is certainly, at least at some level, a frame-up –a certainty later reinforced by the plots related to “Los Rebeldes” and “Los Choferes”–, the story about the organs does not hold better, since the corpses, quite simply, do not lack any organs. As for the snuff movies, no one has ever found an exemplar of such a film genre (Huffschnid n.pag.). Nonetheless, the legend about their existence has been haunting the cultural unconscious of the so-called Western world

since at least the 1970s (Williams 189ff; Bougie 90-95)²². After all, there is a reason why everybody knows what a snuff movie is supposed to be, even without having seen one or having read about the so-called genre. The latest stellar appearance of this haunting legend called the snuff movie genre has taken place, undoubtedly, in the discourse of Ciudad Juárez.

Finally, the claim that the spectacular murders may be performed during “narcosatanic” rituals is spectacular in its own right. As made clear by his declarations for the Spanish news agency EFE, González Rodríguez does not completely discard the possibility that this “folk-religion” (the existence of which he never seems to doubt), created by drug money and by sexual perversion, and rather well organized in “logias”, is the cause of the crimes: “Son homicidios orgiásticos, con ritos sexuales y una capacidad de perfeccionamiento sádico muy fuerte” (Pérez-Espino n.pag.). In fact, his unbreakable belief in this underground movement that touches and corrupts all spheres of society, but which obviously stems from “the highness” or from high political and economic powers, is nothing less than paranoid, as is the following statement by him, quoted in an article called “El Mal habita en México” and published in the Catalan newspaper *La Vanguardia*: “sólo con la información que contiene mi libro, este caso [the whole complex of the *feminicidios*, nothing less] podría resolverse en un plazo breve, si hubiera realmente voluntad” (qtd. in Pérez-Espino 87). González Rodríguez, then, seems to be convinced that the truth is already out there (it is in his book, after all), as well as that the individual culprit has been identified, but there is just no “will” to act on this information, for reasons that, like the thesis of the conscious collusion between the killers and the seemingly monolithic block of State authorities (of all levels), require paranoid explanations of their own, which lead to other questions that also have to be answered using this way of understanding and representing reality through the simplification of complex phenomena into easily grasped narratives, and so on and so forth.

²² That legend has also been promoted by academic articles like Beverley Labelle’s “Snuff: The Ultimate in Woman Hating,” published in 1992 in *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*, i.e. the very book in which the term *femicide* was coined.

It is not just a matter of his personally being convinced, however, but of this story being tremendously influential in the whole discursive landscape of the country, which is both the reason González Rodríguez believes in it *and* a result of his believing in it as well. David Rodríguez Torres, for example, federal representative of the right-wing Partido de Acción Nacional (then-President Fox' party), denounced that “[l]os asesinatos de cerca de 300 mujeres, más que un problema de seguridad pública en esa región se debe [sic] a la presencia de bandas de traficantes de órganos y grupos de narcosatánicos.” For its part, one of the capital's newspapers, *La Jornada*, reported the finding of a mass grave in Ciudad Juárez' vicinity, emphasizing the way in which the hair of eight female corpses had been identically cut, as well as the way a triangle of flesh had been taken off the genitals' area of several of those bodies. Mysteriously –or incongruently– enough, the note explained that these mutilations “hace[n] pensar en ritos satánicos (en oriente el triángulo es símbolo de la ultra derecha)” (Granados 100).

As an enormously influential figure in the discourse on Ciudad Juárez, then, González Rodríguez has made a career out of chronicling violence against women in the city and mobilizing alternative stories about them that openly contravene the clearly fraudulent official ones offered by the State. He has won prizes for his essays, he has been invited to multiple conferences and events in different countries and, perhaps more tellingly, he appears as a character in two of the most important novels written about the *feminicidios*, namely Roberto Bolaño's *2666* and Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*, both of which will be discussed at length in chapter VI of this dissertation. His books have been translated to several languages and he is, in sum, a minor celebrity in Mexican and international journalistic circles, as well as a major one in circles of people of any profession and culture who are interested in the crime wave. Surprisingly enough, however, neither *Huesos en el desierto* nor any of his other, less famous books on the subject was ever translated into

English, so that the very first essay of his that appeared in that language was *The Femicide Machine* (2002), a sort of synthesis of his previous analyses of the murders and of his previous investigations aimed at revealing the truth about Ciudad Juárez, finding the culprits, and making them accountable.

No stranger to hyperbole, González Rodríguez defines femicide machine, here, as “an apparatus that didn’t just create the conditions for the murders of dozens of women and little girls, but developed the institutions that guaranteed impunity for those crimes *and even legalized them*” (7, my emphasis), as if the killings had been, in fact, *legalized* and, at the risk of being too redundant, as if they were now *legal*. This is, of course, inaccurate: even if one is to grant, for the sake of the argument, that impunity constitutes some kind of tacit sanction of the crimes, and thus that those crimes are accepted and not considered properly *illegal*, the killing of women has not been formally legalized in Mexico, and neither does it look like it is going to be legalized in the near future (that it is not prosecuted or combatted the way it is supposed to be, according to the self-image of the Mexican State, is a different matter). It is also unnecessarily polemical, since the point about the institutional character of the crime wave and of the State’s response to it had already been made.

González Rodríguez correctly assesses, though, a series of factors that contribute to violence at the U.S.-Mexican border and, more particularly, to the *feminicidios*:

Ciudad Juárez’s femicide machine is composed of hatred and misogynistic violence, machismo, power and patriarchal reaffirmations that take place at the margins of the law or within a law of complicity between criminals, police, military, government officials, and citizens who constitute an a-legal old-boy network. Consequently, the machine enjoys discrete protection from individuals,

groups, and institutions that in turn offer judicial and political impunity, as well as supremacy over the State and the law.

The femicide machine applies its force upon institutions via direct action, intimidation, ideological sympathy, inertia, and indifference. This prolongs its own dominance, and guarantees its own unending reproducibility. (11)

This passage appears to be broadly adequate to the complexity of the social phenomenon being studied, and other passages are, to be fair, truly inspiring and original, such as the one where he writes that, “[i]n the past half-century, Ciudad Juárez gave birth to four cities in one: the city as a northern Mexican border town/United States’ backyard; the city inscribed in the global economy; the city as a theater of operations for the war on drugs; and the femicide city” (11-12). Regrettably, however, González Rodríguez soon proceeds to start searching for answers instead of just chronicling, which leads him to the sort of easy, spectacular answers that he already favored, embraced and posited as facts in *Huesos en el desierto*, although the ten years that have passed between both books seem to have moderated, at least at first, his temperament and his tone, somehow, so that the answers provided here, while offering culprits, are closer to systemic analyzes than to the mere, sometimes outrageous, conjectures that produced scandals for the sake of scandals in *Huesos en el desierto*. He begins, for example, with a general speculation that, while attributing a consciousness to the killers that is hard or impossible to proof, sounds reasonable nevertheless, like this:

Systematic actions against women bear the signs of a campaign: They smack of turf war, of the land’s rape and subjugation. These acts imply a strategic reterritorialization, as real as it is symbolic, that includes capital property

(contractors, shopping centers, industrial parks, basic services) and the possession of public space through ubiquitous occupation. Ultimately, what is expressed is the sovereign authority to determine urban life at the cost of the citizenry's slow and steady impoverishment. (12-13)

Then, suddenly, it turns into something like this: "It is possible that other femicide machines are now gestating in other Mexican cities and elsewhere on the planet" (14). Besides pointing out the implicit, extreme othering of Juárez as a unique place without ties of similarity to other places and, thus, without context, that is taking place in this short passage, I want to suggest that, in it, the achievement of an ominous, threatening tone seems to be more important than any factual accuracy or even clarity as of what it is that is being stated, as well. All of which, in turn, soon leads us to speculations like the following one, which, all its elegant language and baleful tone notwithstanding, merely rehashes one of the most widely theories about the *feminicidios* ever proposed, namely that they are toxic masculinity's reaction to women's new roles in society (see chapter IV of this dissertation for more on this thesis):

Women –above all, working women– moved into the role of the urban protagonist, a role as direct as it was subliminal. The presence of women in the home, on the street, in factories, and in spaces used for relaxation and leisure unleashed men's hatred.

Civil coexistence turned into gender harassment and aggression. A risk group –working women, girls, female students, and young women looking for work– emerged within the urban territory, inhabiting dangerous zones and corridors. In the absence of a framework of gender equality, relationships of power and

exploitation, asymmetry, and contradiction were imposed. The population incarnates a human terrarium for the maquiladoras that congregate in the city. Bio-political territory *par excellence*: the body as the objective of power. (28-29)

But how does González Rodríguez know that it was “the presence of women in the home,” for instance, that really “unleashed men’s hatred” in all cases? What would that even mean, given that this presence had always been there? And what to make of his assertion that “civil coexistence turned into gender harassment and aggression,” which seems to suggest that there used to be a time of peaceful, carefully balanced gender relations in Juárez which was ended by women’s irruption in all spheres (even “in the home”!) and only then elicited a violent backlash? Is this not an instance of idealizing the past in order to somehow make sense of a present that does not make sense? What is the logical conclusion of that train of thought? Make Mexico great again?

It gets worse. On the one hand, for González Rodríguez, Mexico is a police state, or in the verge of becoming one: “The use of gang members and former police officers to carry out acts of intimidation and extermination against civilians serves to support the government’s strategy of installing a police state, subject to military and paramilitary practices” (45). On the other hand, the Mexican State is, for him, almost as inefficient, and indeed incompetent, as the Keystone Cops: “Rule of law does not exist in Mexico, just as it is absent in Ciudad Juárez ... The international prestige enjoyed by Mexican drug traffickers is an emblem of the government’s failed war on organized crime. The government has reduced itself to making arrests and seizures ... Institutional inefficiency and corruption are decisive factors in Mexico’s failed war on drugs” (46-48). Moreover, the killings have, for the author, something to do with both the maquiladoras and... some sort of undefined, vaguely horrific ancient rites (it is not very clear): “Above all, manufacturing-assembly –*la maquila*– becomes a symbol,

and the conduct within it attains a productive ritual status, similar in many ways to ancient societies' rituals regarding the sacred" (29). Finally, González Rodríguez gives up on the effort of staying away from putting blame on single culprits and starts to simply present conjectures as facts, just as he prominently and often did in *Huesos en el desierto*. To make matters worse, and just as it was in that other book of his, the conjectures he bets on manage to be both incredibly specific and incredibly vague, so that he keeps up his reputation of naming names without actually naming any concrete ones:

The phenomenon of female homicides in Ciudad Juárez began to be denounced in 1993. There is evidence these crimes began years before. Why were they murdered? For the pleasure of killing women who were poor and defenseless.

How many victims have there been? Of the 400 women and girls killed for various reasons from 1993 to the present, at least 100 murders were committed in tandem with extreme sexual violence. The lack of reliable information from the authorities is part of the problem.

Who killed them? Drug traffickers, complicit with individuals who enjoy political and economic power.

Where and how did the events take place? The victims were abducted from the streets of Ciudad Juárez and taken by force into safe houses where they were raped, tortured, and murdered at stag parties and orgies ...

There is no mystery about these murders beyond the failure of Mexican authorities to undertake any in-depth investigation of these crimes. (71-72)

If only Mexican authorities would turn on those generic "drug traffickers [and] individuals who enjoy political and economic power" and storm their "stag parties," the crime

wave could be solved in days! Talk about easy answers for complex social phenomena! I am not trying to deny that there is the proverbial grain of truth in all these assertions and hypotheses. Rather, I am trying to point out that González Rodríguez is notorious for his tendency to treat imprecise, clichéd notions as obvious, albeit alternative, truths, as well as for his lack of sources and even conventional logic when proposing truly extraordinary theories which, to be believed, would require to be backed up by some kind of proof, but which he and his supporters expect readers to believe uncritically, at their word. This is a problematic methodology that, on the one hand, resembles the State method of fabricating truths and confessions in order to “solve” the problems purely for political gains. On the other hand, it is a methodology that, just as in the case of the State narratives, and no matter how well intentioned he personally and professionally might be (in contradistinction to said State), invalidates much of what González Rodríguez writes and makes. As our examination of both *Huesos en el desierto* and *The Femicide Machine* have shown, this methodology is also neither a freak occurrence in an otherwise sound theory nor a secondary feature that can be ignored for the sake of the argument, but it is the basis of the theory itself, it is the argument itself. As if that were not enough, it leads to such thoroughly unredeemable passages, in which the lack of clarity and González Rodríguez’ propensity to deal in paranoid visions and conspiracy theories is on full display:

Atop *Cerro Bola*, overlooking Ciudad Juárez on the border of El Paso, a triangle formed by stones nearly ten feet long on each side was discovered in the year 2000. Near there, not long before, the bodies of at least two murdered women bearing signs of strangulation, sexual abuse, and torture were discovered.

The triangle was formed, along with larger rocks at four points, by 46 stones on each side ($46 \times 3 = 138$; $1 + 3 + 8 = 12$; $1 + 2 = 3$). Its base featured a nearly foot-

wide opening. The apex faced south, and the opening at the base pointed north, to the United States. The rocks were an offering shaped like a heart, simultaneously parodying the Holy Trinity. The recurrence of threes and fours ($3 \times 4 = 12$) seems to be a temporal allusion of the number 12 – 12 months? 12 years? About 500 paces were measured between the stones and where the two victims were found. Inside the triangle, the land had been cleared of vegetation, and the remains of a bonfire were found to one side of the triangle. (89-90)

Another celebrity in the circles of international journalism, in general, and of the search for the truth about the *feminicidios*, in particular, is Diana Washington Valdez. Internationally, in fact, she is way better known than Sergio González Rodríguez, since she is a journalist from El Paso who writes mostly in English (although also in Spanish) and has, thus, immediate access to publishing circuits that were closed to González Rodríguez until recently (as was mentioned before, his first book translated into English appeared only in 2012). As a reporter for *El Paso Times*, she began writing articles on the crime wave in 2002, and her interest in the topic, as well as her commitment to try to publicize it and in that way help to stop the murders, grew into a whole new career dedicated exclusively to it. In 2005, she published an influential book titled *Cosecha de mujeres: Safari en el desierto mexicano*, which compiled her articles on Ciudad Juárez and expanded them to create a whole tapestry of violence against women, mysterious killers, and State-sanctioned impunity. In 2007, the book was edited, translated and also significantly expanded into a longer one titled *The Killing Fields: Harvest of Women*.

She is now most famous for this latter book. But this is not necessarily a good thing, for her. According to the promotional materials for the book, at least, Washington Valdez has been subjected to various death threats and other forms of intimidation as a result of the

publication of *The Killing Fields* (“‘The Killing Fields’ was my Signature Project” n.pag.). Regardless, the text continues, “instead of backing off, she decided to continue informing the rest of the world about what was taking place in Mexico.” And how could she not? After all, according to the same account, “Dr. Stanley Krippner, a psychologist in California with intimate knowledge of the Juarez crimes, attributed a decrease in some of the murders to her expose” (n.pag.).

It is perhaps worth mentioning that Stanley Krippner is a parapsychologist who has written extensively on “dream telepathy” and “psychic powers,” among other unorthodox techniques, as even the most cursory online search can show. Moreover, the threats that are mentioned in the materials were made, even according to said materials, by unnamed drug barons, Mexican officials and, more vaguely and more ominously, “a powerful citizen of Mexico.” The external source that this text provides to check for the veracity of this story is the testimony of equally unnamed “FBI agents” who “were present at one of her book signings in El Paso, Texas, and later revealed to [Washington Valdez] that the drug cartel planned to send people to the event to confront her.” Luckily, the materials continue, “[t]he FBI said the cartel people showed up, looked around but left the bookstore without approaching her.” Remember: these are the ruthless culprits of the largest and cruelest crime wave of contemporary history. These are the people whose murderous plots she “uncovered,” according to the promotional materials of her book, and should have every reason to at least “confront her,” indeed. It does not help that, judging from the fact that these promotional materials can literally only be found on her own blog (dianawashingtonvaldez.blogspot.com) and on her Amazon page, as well as that there is no other author attributed to them, everything seems to lead to the conclusion that the author is Washington Valdez herself. Which makes it all the more bizarre, by the way, that the text includes a passage that states that, even today, “people who read the series [of articles on Ciudad Juárez] and her books are amazed that one

reporter could carry out such a vast project single-handedly” (“‘The Killing Fields’ was my Signature Project” n.pag.).

This is the world of Diana Washington Valdez, a reporter who has been hyperbolically praised by scholars like Ileana Rodríguez and many others (see chapter IV of this dissertation), but who seems to be truly –and there is no way around it, once you actually read her books– a con artist, a person who is trying to persuade others (in this case, her readers and the attendants to her talks) to believe the things she wants them to believe in order to make a profit. In his own book, *This Love is Not for Cowards: Salvation and Soccer in Ciudad Juárez*, published in 2012 and partially based on his own essay from 2011, “The Dead Women of Juárez,” the Juárez-based American journalist, Robert Andrew Powell, demolishes Washington Valdez’ pretensions that what she does is serious research, let alone one that should elicit “amazement” from the people who read its results:

Washington Valdez got into the femicide business relatively late. Esther Chávez started tracking the murders of women in 1993, yet it wasn’t until 2002 that Washington Valdez published “Death Stalks the Border,” a series in her newspaper. That series led to her book, in which she claims to have solved the femicide crimes. I’ve read the book. Apparently, the killings of women were part of a circuit of orgies by prominent Juárez families. I say “apparently” because she does not name any of these families, nor any of her sources, nor any women specifically killed at an orgy. The book concludes in a Mexico City coffee shop. Washington Valdez meets with an unnamed source, a man talking in a shadowy way about a party he attended with unnamed powerful people. At the party, says the unnamed source, he learned that the state of Chihuahua had been sold to

“bloodthirsty” Colombian narcos, some of whom “were known to practice human-sacrifice” rituals.

But in televised interviews for NPR and other media that are available online, as well as in her frequent speeches at universities and NGOs worldwide (in the aforementioned promotional materials that appear on her own blog, it is said that she “has traveled to more than 30 cities and to others countries [sic] to speak about the murders”), she also mobilizes other theories and explanations that are, however, by no means less bizarre: sometimes, as in a 2003 interview, “The best information we have is that these men are committing crimes simply for the sport of it;” a couple years later, organ trafficking is the name of the game. “Important people” or “powerful persons” are usually the culprits, though, but they always remain nameless: “Eventually, I learned that several Mexican federal investigators [also nameless] had looked into the women’s murders, and their findings were conclusive. I also discovered that two Chihuahua State officials had tried without success to investigate a ‘junior,’ the scion of a wealthy Mexican family, in connection with the Juarez crimes” (Washington Valdez 220); “Two of the ‘juniors’ [both nameless] have appeared in photographs with the Mexican president. Federal sources said they were uncertain that Fox knows about the ‘juniors,’ but that several of his [nameless] subordinates were informed” (225); “Sergio Rueda, a Juarez psychologist who collaborates with [the aforementioned parapsychologist] Krippner [an ‘expert’ in telepathy], said, ‘We probably have two or three people who practice the sexual sacrifice of their victims. The modus operandi might vary, but the goal is always the same – to sacrifice the victim’” (229); “‘Our informants tell us that they are still killing women in Juarez,’ an FBI official said, ‘except that now they are disposing of them in different ways. They

are dismembering their bodies and are feeding the body parts to hogs at a ranch. Why hogs? Because hogs will eat anything” (230). These are just some random examples of instances in which it is obvious, for any critical reader at list, that this is tabloid-worthy journalism at best; the list of such vague but ominous statements can easily be expanded.

Similarly, in a list of possible explanations for the crime wave that Washington Valdez reads on camera in a YouTube video, and which she has, according to Powell, used at several conferences, she remains conveniently opaque:

- Drug dealers killed women with impunity, including to even celebrate successful crossings of drugs across the border.
- Violent gangs that have killed women to initiate new members.
- Two or more serial killers who are still loose, never been arrested.
- A group of powerful men who killed women at different times for different reasons.
- And then you have your copycats who have taken advantage of this situation to hide their own murders. (*This Love is Not for Cowards* 189)

With some noticeable degree of exasperation, Powell writes the following about this list:

Powerful men killing women at different times for different reasons? That sure is broad. Serial killers? An FBI investigation in 1999 concluded that the sex crimes were probably committed by many different men who did not know each other.

“It would be irresponsible to state that a serial killer is loose in Juárez,” the agency reported. Reading her book and her articles on femicide and watching all her videos on YouTube, I started to wonder if maybe Washington Valdez is being pranked. That perhaps one of her unnamed sources told her that a serial killer was murdering women for blood sport just to see if she’d run with it. Orgies involving los juniors, the offspring of the wealthy elite? Harvesting of organs? Her published theories lack any possible path to reinvestigation. They can’t be checked out in any way. (*This Love is Not for Cowards* 189)

As for the threats which Washington Valdez claims to have received, Powell’s comment on that is this anecdote:

Three times in our interview she said she couldn’t answer a specific question because “it would put [her] in too much danger.” She tells me she can’t go into Juárez anymore for her own safety. She’s grown too high profile, she later told a reporter at Fox news. For the life of me I can’t see why she’d be a target. In eight years of writing about femicide in Juárez, I don’t know that she’s ever named even a suspect in even one single murder. Has anyone ever been harmed by anything she’s written?

I’m of the opinion that it’s in her own interest to play up the danger. Spookiness is central to her appeal. She’s invited to travel the world on the femicide speaking circuit because she plays to the mystery. Since none of the murders have been solved, none of her theories can be proven wrong. (“The Dead Women of Juárez” location 390)

Thus, Washington Valdez has achieved a fascinating position within the discourse on Ciudad Juárez, given that she is one of the most prominent mobilizers of alternative stories about the crimes who has managed to convince large parts of the academic world (see chapter IV of this dissertation) and of the public opinion in general of exceedingly bizarre, implausible theories about the *feminicidios*, all the while presenting herself as a courageous investigative journalist who fights the power, risks her life and uncovers the truth about the murders without ever, not a single time, being specific or opening herself and her work to conventional fact-checking or accountability. It is my educated opinion that Powell is wrong: She is not being pranked, or at least that is not the most likely explanation for her career. Rather, and as I already said above, she should be regarded as a con artist.

But she is a very good con artist, indeed: her stories are influential and she has been able to put them in the center of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez, where they had been conferred the status of truth as a result of her efforts. The stories are fiction, just like all the other ones discussed here, but in this case they are so outrageous, in this case, and so outrageously mobilized, so transparently mobilized for the sake of achieving symbolic and material rewards and praise, that they highlight their own fictional character and, thus, should potentially serve as examples of the mechanisms in which truth is constructed out of obviously “untrue” accounts. For the time being, however, Washington Valdez is still considered an expert in the *feminicidios* and mostly lauded for her groundbreaking, revelatory work at that. We are still deep in the discourse on Ciudad Juárez, in other words, and this discourse is constituted mainly by alternative stories on the crimes.

As regards the stories told by the families of the *desaparecidas*, which are conspicuously let aside by both González Rodríguez’ and Washington Valdez’ account of the events (Pérez-Espino s/n), no single narrative can be found among them, but rather a plethora of different explanations that are perhaps best documented in www.mujeresdejuarez.org, the

website of the organization Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa. This association, created in 2001, is dedicated to promote “justice” in Ciudad Juárez, both in the juristic and in the social sense of the term.

The organization's main story, if there is one, is one that resembles Washington Valdez' and that differs from González Rodríguez' one only inasmuch as it gets rid of its Satanic elements and puts the whole weight of the guilt on the purely sexual perversion created by money, since this financial power make the criminals know that they can literally do whatever they want to do and still will “get away with it”. In this version, thus, the crime wave is, at least to a great part, the work of “blood-lusting gangs hunting [the young women] like prey”, in the words of Washington Valdez. Or, as the former deputy federal attorney general Jorge Campos Murillo formulated it in 2002, “the slayings were committed by 'juniors' – sons of wealthy Mexican families whose money and connections had spared them from prosecution” (Newton 21).

As if to underscore that the people responsible for the murders are untouchable, and in fact that the political class and the high finances of Mexico have a stake in protecting them, the organization's main enemy is the State, usually because of its inertia, which is so pronounced that it can also be called negligence. As a mother of a disappeared girl stated, “I am sure the state police of Chihuahua know what happened to these girls. *I want to know*” (Chute n.pag.).

The State negligence, however, often even turns into open hostility and into harassment of the active members of Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa and other human rights non-governmental organizations by the police. Marisela Ortiz, for instance, one of the founding members of Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa, has been repeatedly threatened with death and, worst, with the disappearance of her three daughters (who had to exile themselves from the city as a result) for trying to get at the core of the phenomenon. In 2006, she reported

that the chicanery had somehow decreased – which, it goes without saying, she then attributed, at least partially, to the self-defense mechanisms of the State machinery, worried about its image and under constant pressure both at home and abroad. “On the other hand”, she nuanced, “we are treated with total indifference, now” (Rahmsdorf n.pag., my translation).

Maybe the State is indifferent, now, because the peak of concern for the crime wave of Ciudad Juárez seems indeed to have already passed. One could argue that this peak occurred, roughly, around the year 2003 (see chapter III of this dissertation for more on this specific date), or in other words between the moment the phenomenon raided the national and international consciousness, which manifested itself in the first overtly political protests against impunity in Mexico, and the invention –or rather the canonization– of the alternative official truth(s) by both González Rodríguez, Washington Valdez, the political activists of the area, and others. It is, discursively, as if nothing special had happened since then, apart from the fact that more women have been killed and that there is no end in sight. Even the accounts of the killings in the Internet usually end around the year 2003 or 2004, as if the truth(s) had been established once and for all back then: capitalism, imperialism, machismo, drug traffic, corruption, gang violence, sexual perversion, and Satanism, not to say a transnational ring of snuff movie producers, among other evils, are guilty. It is all very clear and, at the same time, opaque.

All there has been, since then, is the constant repetition of these same truths, the constant spinning of the stories, as if to mimic the constant repetition of murders that are, or at least the story goes that way, basically identical. However, there has been, in fact, a timid but significant migration of these stories from the terrain of police work and investigation by the mourners to the realm of mass culture or pop culture, too. This migration, which has been exemplified with the mention of Tori Amos’ song “Juárez” and Bolaño’s “definitive novel”

above, includes also the books by González Rodríguez and Washington Valdez, as well as the 2004 corrido “Las mujeres de Juárez” by Mexican superstars Los Tigres del Norte, among many documentaries and reportages, somehow anticlimactically ended up in the production of *Bordertown*, a 2007 movie starring Jennifer López and Antonio Banderas. “Based on the true story”, this film was released in Europe with less than satisfactory results. In the US, it went directly to DVD, as it was –probably rightly– considered that it would flop in the cinema. For all their mysteriousness, for all their spectacular aspects, and for all the legacy of human pain they have left behind, then, the crimes of Ciudad Juárez are just a niche product in the market of historic mysteries that remain to be solved and, quite obviously, will never be, because their whole point is being unsolvable and being a dynamo that bundles stories and sets them in motion.

In the case of the Ciudad Juárez’ phenomenon, moreover, one can say that it is a dynamo that not only mobilizes stories about crimes that leave, then, real corpses as residues, as well as a dynamo that transports this stories into narratives that clearly belong to the pop cultural mainstream, but also one that, from the very beginning of the crime wave, prominently included stories in which the murders themselves were immediately interpreted through the lens of pop and mass culture. That life on the border between the US and Mexico has been called “a twilight zone”, for instance, was already mentioned. Furthermore, both the people’s and the authority’s initial certainty of having to deal with a serial killer can be related with the pervasive popularity of the psycho’s figure in the early 1990s, due to the success of *The Silence of the Lambs* and other films and books, as well as to the resolution of some spectacular criminal cases in different countries of the world (González Rodríguez14ff).

Perhaps one of the most densely concentrated examples thereof is the following one, taken from the article “Ciudad Juárez y el miedo,” written by Yéffim Gero Fong to denounce

feminicidio in the most drastic terms and published in 2007 on a webpage recommended by Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa:

Sí, podría ser el guión de una película de terror, la historia podría girar en torno a un grupo de muchachos y muchachas que sin padres o sin quien se ocupe de ellos, padres alcohólicos, enfermos, miserables, locos o trabajadores de noche, van cayendo en manos de "los guardianes del orden y la moral", los policías como monstruos depredadores de niños y atrás de todo una secta fanática religiosa, de esas que gustan de violar niños, con cardenales y todo, un casi imposible híbrido entre *Los olvidados* de Luis Buñuel, *Sin City* de Bob Rodríguez, *La ciudad de los niños perdidos* de Jean Pierre Jeunet y Marc Caro y *Hostal* de Eli Roth, usted saque sus propias conclusiones de cómo se pueden sintetizar estas cuatro películas en el contexto de Ciudad Juárez. No cabe duda que la realidad supera a la ficción.
(n.pag.)

In his book, *Chamanismo, colonialismo y el hombre salvaje: Un estudio sobre el terror y la curación*, which deals with the mediation of terror through narratives (stories) and with narratives (stories) as instruments to resist terror, Michael Taussig points out that "terror cultures" feed upon both silence and the mythical character of the voices that break that silence:

[E]stá claro que las culturas del terror se alimentan por la mezcla de silencio y mito donde el énfasis fanático en el costado misterioso de lo misterioso florece por medio de rumores entrettejidos finamente en la telaraña del realismo mágico.

Está también claro que el victimario necesita a la víctima para crear la verdad, objetivando la fantasía en el discurso del otro. (30)

In order to effectively combat terror cultures, then, it is not enough to speak up, or to make the unspeakable speakable, since such a process of speaking up, when framed in magical, mythical, or paranoid terms, can very well favor the ruling relations of power and reinforce the mysteries, myths, and rumours that give the governing groups and sectors of society an aura of untouchability and greatness, even if that greatness is based on fear and violence:

Claro está que el deseo del torturador es prosaico: adquirir información, actuar de concierto con estrategias económicas a gran escala elaboradas por los maestros de las finanzas y por las exigencias de la producción. Pero existe también la necesidad de controlar poblaciones masivas, clases sociales enteras, incluso naciones, mediante la elaboración cultural del miedo. (30)

Taussig does not, however, stand for a positivistic perspective that seeks to counterpose facts or truth to myth or magic. He is definitely no advocate of any kind of debunking project in the traditionally skeptical sense. Rather, he understands that myth is, depending on the context it is mobilized and on who mobilizes it and what for, both a power stabilizing force that can be used to strengthen terror cultures and also a potentially subversive tool against terror. It is not just that myth is inescapable, then, in his view, but further that the “mythical subversion of myth” can contribute to the fight against terror if it is practiced by engaging with myth in a serious, intimate way, and not from a skeptical distance. Embracing myth in order to subvert it, in other words, or going all the way toward Kurtz’ madness –to

borrow from Taussig's discussion of Joseph Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness*— so that one can actually experience it, offers alternative myths that question the ones upon terror cultures are based and break the silence mentioned above in a way that points toward emancipation:

Pero tal vez ahí está la clave: la subversión mítica del mito, en este caso del moderno mito imperialista, requiere que se dejen intactas las amigüedades —la grandeza del horror que es Kurtz, las brumas del terror, la estética de la violencia y el complejo de deseo y represión suscitado constantemente por el primitivismo—. Aquí el mito no está “explicado” como para que pueda “desecharse”, como en los melancólicos intentos de la ciencia social. En cambio se le muestra como algo que uno debe explorar por sí mismo, abriendo un camino cada vez más profundo por el corazón de las tinieblas hasta que uno sienta lo que está en juego, la locura de la pasión. Esto es muy distinto a moralizar desde la barrera o a plantear las contradicciones involucradas, como si el tipo de conocimiento que nos ocupa no fuera en cierta forma conocimiento y poder al tiempo, e inmune por lo tanto a tales procedimientos. (33-34)

Thus, what Taussig seems to be claiming is that terror, far from being only predicated on silence, also emerges from myths that instill fear and respect in subjects victimized by this terror; significantly, however, the mythical structures can and should be subverted and used for resistance against terror through the mobilization of other, emancipatory myths. I contend that this view, *mutatis mutandis*, can be applied to the discourse on Ciudad Juárez. That is, indeed, what I have been doing in this chapter so far, postulating that the alternative stories on the feminicidios mirror the official stories in their methodology and in their drive toward finding individual culprits for rather large, ungraspable phenomena, but still constitute

expressions of the will of the victims of gender violence and their allies to fight against said violence and create the actually livable living conditions for women, even if attaining that goal demands the mobilization of paranoid narratives with no relation to “facts.” Moreover, this process all but demolishes any conceptual wall that might still residually exist between real facts and their representation in stories, both in the case of the discourse on Juárez, in which, I have argued, the stories cloud the access to the corpses and, thus, are the only remaining facts, and in the cases studied by Taussig (terror cultures in the history of exploitation of natural resources in the Amazonia), as he himself articulates it: “Esta cadena de cuestionamientos supone un mundo divisible en hechos reales y en la mera representación de hechos reales, como si los medios de representación fueran un mero instrumento y no una fuente de experiencia” (59).

The concept of experience, used by Taussig in this passage, leads us to Walter Benjamin’s theorizing and, since our topic is the stories we tell in order to make sense of the world, to his influential essay, “The Storyteller,” originally published in 1936. There, Benjamin famously asserts that, in modern times (and, by extension, in postmodern ones, too), “the ability to tell a tale properly” is disappearing, which goes hand in hand with the waning of “the ability to exchange experiences” (362). However, it is not just the *expression* of experience that is failing, according to Benjamin; rather, experience itself has changed, falling “in value” and, indeed, “into bottomlessness” (362):

Every glance at a newspaper demonstrates that [experience] has reached a new low, that our picture, not only of the external world but of the moral world as well, overnight has undergone changes which were never thought possible. With the World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the

battlefield grown silent -- not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body. (362)

Thus, the development of new and increasingly complex technologies of death and terror, as well as of control and management of masses for destructive purposes, makes experience, which is based on the “tiny, fragile human body,” ultimately impossible. A violent phenomenon as large and as incomprehensible as World War I makes the things that individual subjects live through their participation in it, in the last analysis, incommunicable: “overall is beyond” the suffering subject, indeed. Further, the war demanded and brought along an intensification of bureaucratic efficiency, of productivity, and of the speed of life itself, as well as innovations in communicational technologies, so that stories started to die, according to Benjamin, in favor of a “new form of communication [which] is information” (365):

The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out ... [Now] Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us

without already being shot through with explanation. In other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information. (364-66)

Storytelling, in Benjamin's view, does not require explanation, because it is based on experience (366); information, however, "lays claim to prompt verifiability. The prime requirement is that it appear 'understandable in itself.' Often it is no more exact than the intelligence of earlier centuries was. But while the latter was inclined to borrow from the miraculous, it is indispensable for information to sound plausible" (365). Furthermore, information is ephemeral by definition, expendable:

The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time. (366)

Using these reflections to theoretically frame the discourse on Ciudad Juárez, we can see that the impulse toward plausibility is one of the main, characteristic features of the narratives about *feminicidio*²³. Hence the constant preoccupation with finding culprits and explaining motives and *modus operandi*, providing an order to violent events that do not

²³ I use the terms "stories" and "narratives" as synonyms, throughout this dissertation, and do not follow the distinction made by Benjamin between "information" and "story," because it works for his essay and for his purposes but not for mine, due to the fact that I do not counterpose a waning kind of narrative to a new, emerging kind of story. Rather, for me, and as I discussed in the introduction, all there is *is* the stories. Besides, arguably the best translation for the German term "Erzählung" is not "story" but "narration," which would make the title of Benjamin's essay "The Narrator" instead of "The Storyteller," with all its implications for said conceptual distinction. This is not the place –and I am certainly not the author– to address this issue of translation in full, but the mere glimpse at it and acknowledgment of it explains my dismissal of the idea of using Benjamin's terms consequently in the text as a whole.

necessarily have an order, and trying to make sense of complex phenomena that, just like the World War I, cannot possibly make sense to the “fragile body” of the subject, who then recurs to explanatory narratives that do not necessarily respond to the “facts” but at least offer some illusion of comprehension or of the ability to grasp reality as such. In that way, these explanatory narratives are expendable and do “not survive the moment,” since they are not related to any transcendental truth, even though they purport to be, but only to the constant, repetitive need to explain the latest explosion of violence, the latest *feminicidio*, the latest corpse found in the desert.

Needless to say, each and everyone of those findings deepens the trauma that lays as the ground for the discourse on Ciudad Juárez; as has been repeatedly stated in this dissertation so far, the dynamo of stories spins around the bodies, and though all we can see and look at is the stories, the bodies are there nevertheless. In her book, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century*, Shoshana Felman examines the links between juridical trials and trauma that, according to her, were articulated in the Nuremberg trials first and have since been a feature of legal processes everywhere, from the trials of Nazi criminals in Israel in the 1960s to the trial of O.J. Simpson for murder in the 1990s. Those are, in fact, her cases of study, and she uses them to show how, on the one hand, famous trials address trauma and also *are* traumas:

[W]hat distinguishes historic trials is, perhaps, in general, this tendency or this propensity to repetition or to legal duplication ... [G]reat trials ... make history, I would suggest, in being not merely about a trauma but in constituting traumas in their own right; as such, they ... are open to traumatic repetition; they ... are often structured by historical dualities, in which a trial (or a major courtroom drama) unexpectedly reveals itself to be the post-traumatic legal reenactment, or the

deliberate historical reopening, of a previous case or of a different, finished, previous trial. (62)

On the other hand, the cases she closely analyzes in her book allow her to claim that the division between personal and collective trauma, which appears to be commonsensical, cannot be maintained anymore, postulating instead “the indivisibility and the reversibility between private and collective trauma” (7). Thus, the trial of O.J. Simpson in 1995 was, in the beginning, a trial of a man who had allegedly killed his wife, which would make it private. Yet, soon after its beginning, a series of traumas that are latent in U.S.-American society, such as racism and misogyny, started to appear prominently in the process, aided by the enormous mediatic interest in the figure of the accused, and those collective traumas became the main framing concepts through which said trial could be viewed and interpreted. As for the trial of Adolf Eichmann, which took place in 1961 in Israel, it started as the trial of the most collective of all traumas (the Holocaust), but it recurred to private stories and to testimonies of personal trauma in order to make sense of the enormity of the crimes and to give them some sort of coherence that could allow for their juridical processing.

We can see the parallels to the discourse on Ciudad Juárez here, even though the crimes have not been brought to trial with any sort of consequence (other than the obvious examples of the trials of scapegoats such as Abdul Latif Sharif or Los Rebeldes [discussed previously in this chapter]). According to that discourse, the murders themselves are private affairs that, in the aggregate and once the individual crimes are counted and summed up, amount to *feminicidio*: crimes against humanity that target a whole group of people for their mere belonging to that group. In order for us to understand the social phenomenon itself, however, as well as to be able to act against it and to try to overcome the trauma provoked by violence and that tears the fabric of reality and indeed leads to a sense of “reality suspended”

(Miller 14ff), we must individualize the trauma and make it private, recurring to memories and testimonies whose plausibility does not depend on their references to transcendent truths or to facts but on their very existence as accounts of personal trauma. According to Felman, in a quote that refers to the Holocaust but could be as well about Juárez, the emphasis on the personal experiences of the victims (or of the members of their families) allows for a “legal process of translation of thousands of private, secret traumas into one collective, public and communally acknowledged one” (124).

The important point for my purposes, here, is that these traumas cannot be verified and, in any case, they do not need to be, since the narration of them, the stories about them, constitute a reenactment that proves their truth on their own terms, as it were, such as when “a witness faints on the stand during the Eichmann trial” after trying to testify about his experiences and his traumas using words and, through that combination of language and action (fainting), gives “a legal testimony in its own right” (131): as Haim Gouri, an Israeli poet who was present at the trial, later recalled, “*In a way he had said everything*. Whatever he was going to say later was, it turns out, superfluous detail” (qtd. in Felman 137). Likewise, the testimonies about the crime wave of Ciudad Juárez, as well as the silent (or loud) protest of mothers and activists on the streets, in a way say more about the case being symbolically on trial than any legal testimony could say: the trauma is both private and collective, and that tension is always there. Thus, that tension leads also researchers and scholars who seek to understand the social conditions in which these murders are committed and the larger phenomenon that they collectively constitute for the whole of Ciudad Juárez and, more generally, for Mexico and Latin America, to fall into the temptation to try to look for the individual culprit, making the collective trauma a personal, private one. We will see how this tension is always already there in the scholarly treatment of the *feminicidios* in chapter IV of this dissertation. Suffice it to say, at this point, that Felman’s analysis allows us to understand

how this tension arises, in the first place, as well as why, in this symbolic trial of the trauma of violence against women, the trial itself is traumatic and therefore does not require further “proof” or commitment to “facts” other than the story, i.e. the reenactment of trauma that is both private and collective and that is a tale that proves itself.

Somewhere in *Chamanismo, colonialismo y el hombre salvaje*, Michael Taussig’s book that was briefly discussed in the pages above, the author asks himself, though: “¿Y la verdad del asunto, el salvajismo de los indios?” (127) Of course, Taussig does not think that the Indians were savages, but neither does he think that we have a more “real” *reality* than the one which is produced by stories. In the case of Ciudad Juárez, “la verdad del asunto” is composed, sadly, by more than 700 corpses –and counting– by the time these lines are being written. That is the “truth”, the elusive “truth” that is now there and now is not, the “truth” that is literally written as a disappearing “truth” by the bodies of the *desaparecidas*. Other than that, we only have stories: stories of injustice, stories of political involvement, stories of the violence of economics, of the horrors at the borders, and of the State’s and patriarchy’s indolence. It is to these almost magical stories about this obviously almost magical force, this crime wave that has almost the character of being a natural catastrophe, to which we must turn. After all, and as the main character in Don DeLillo’s novel *Mao II* says, “what we have in front of us represents one thing. How we analyze it and describe and codify it is something else completely” (222).

III. ON THE RIGHT TO MOURN: ACTIVISM, DISSENT, AND THE *FEMINICIDIOS*

Estamos como hace dieciséis años. Peor.

Esther Chávez Cano (qtd. in *Juárez en la sombra* 45)

The year was 2003. Right there, at the beginning of the Bushian Middle Ages and in the same year that the invasion of Iraq took place and launched a conflict, or at least new dimensions of it, that still reverberates today, 13 years later, there were several important developments regarding the discourse on Juárez that we can say that ultimately helped to crystallize it. Most importantly, a couple of new developments helped to disseminate the main tenets of this discourse internationally and even to create consciousness about the need to improve the situation of the women working at the *maquiladoras* and of women living in Ciudad Juárez and experiencing gender violence, up to frequent occurrences of *feminicidio*, on an almost daily basis. In the words of Clara E. Rojas, a local activist and scholar, “in 2003, in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, ‘reality’ showed its face” (202).

In August 2003, for instance, Amnesty International published an official report called “Intolerable Killing: Ten Years of Abductions and Murders in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua”, in which it documented more than 370 *feminicidios* that had happened over the previous

decade in Juárez and in Chihuahua City, as well as showed “that at least 137 of the victims suffered some form of sexual violence and at least 70 of the total number of women remained unidentified” (“Mexico: Ending the Brutal Cycle” 1). In this report, which I will proceed to quote in extenso, Amnesty International concluded the following:

Over the past decade, the pattern of non-compliance with the minimum requirements of the "due diligence" standard has been so marked that it calls into question whether the authorities have the will and commitment to put an end to the murders and abductions in Chihuahua and the violence against women they exemplify. For ten years it has been the relatives of the missing and murdered young women who, together with women's organizations, have had to fight for their right to justice. So far, more than anything else, the initiatives taken by the authorities appear to be geared to curbing the intense national and international pressure they are under and avoiding any negative political repercussions. (“Intolerable Killings” 1)

Furthermore, at the end of this document, which had a great deal of international impact and was picked up by international NGOs, news organizations, scholars, etc. (just as any official document of Amnesty International usually has), there were some “recommendations to the federal, state and municipal authorities” which put the responsibility for solving the murders and for stopping further *feminicidios* from happening clearly in the hands of the Mexican State. All in all, Amnesty International had four full pages of recommendations to the State, but here I will quote just the first three recommendations, because they concisely point out everything that had been hitherto wrong with the State’s way

of dealing with the *feminicidios* and, thus, make the scandal public and open for the world to see, even through the obligatory bureaucratic language of a document of this kind:

- Condemn and investigate the murders and abductions of women
- Publicly acknowledge and condemn the abductions and murders of women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua, stressing the dignity of the victims and the legitimacy of the relatives' struggle for truth, justice and reparations.
- Carry out prompt, thorough, effective, coordinated and impartial investigations into all cases of abduction and murder of women in Chihuahua state and ensure that they are given the necessary resources. (77)

In a way, the straightforwardness of these recommendations (“acknowledge,” “condemn” and “investigate” crimes, “murders and abductions,” as if the State were not obligated to do that, by definition) shows that, on a discursive level, one of the main premises of all alternative stories of the *feminicidios*, namely that the State had either failed to act against or was involved in them, had prevailed. The State’s version(s) of the events, the official stories, were thoroughly discredited, and further legal landmarks, such as the 2004 inquiry by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women or, more substantially, the 2009 Inter-American Human Rights Court ruling in the case of *Campo Algodonero v. Mexico*²⁴ would make it increasingly clear that they were not going to

²⁴ This case, which turned out to be the single most publicized one of the crime wave, started when eight women were found in a place of Ciudad Juárez called Campo Algodonero (“cotton field”) in November, 2001. Faced with the inaction, and even with the hostility, of the Mexican State, three of the victims’ mothers presented a petition against said State to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2002, and this institution admitted those petitions some years later, filing a lawsuit against the State of Mexico in November, 2007. Two years later, in November 2009, the Inter-American Human Rights Court ruled in the case and declared the State responsible for the murders of three of the eight victims. As a consequence, their families became financial compensations and formal apologies from the government. In addition, and more importantly on a symbolic level, the State was ordered to erect a memorial to the victims of gender violence in Ciudad Juárez (Harrington 163; Iturralde 245ff, “Fronteras No Más” 133ff, Tabuenca Córdoba 431ff; Amnesty International 2011), which

be accepted as truths, even as real changes in practices and attitudes towards the victims and their families have not yet been achieved. Discursively, though, the 2003 report by Amnesty International was a game-changer; in her book, *Cosecha de mujeres*, Diana Washington Valdez calls it “devastating” (283), for instance, because it was such a thorough indictment of the inaction and/or complicity of the Mexican State that came, moreover, from a prominent, “pristine” source²⁵.

There were other discursive fields in which the discourse on Juárez was being crucially inscribed and propagated in 2003. Perhaps most consequentially in terms of international consciousness-raising, it was in this year that Eve Ensler, the celebrated playwright and performer best known for her episodic play *The Vagina Monologues* (which the New York Times deemed to be “probably the most important piece of political theater of the last decade [the 1990s]” [Isherwood n.pag.]), added an episode that specifically addressed *feminicidio* in Ciudad Juárez, “putting it on a par with with misogyny in other parts of the world,” to use a formulation by Kathleen Staudt and Howard Campbell (18)²⁶. According to another article by Staudt, written in cooperation with Irasema Coronado, this episode “has been performed at the border and in over thousand cities around the world. This monologue will be a permanent feature in future productions of the *Vagina Monologues*” (“Binational Civic Action for Accountability” 174). Moreover, and though the inclusion of an episode like that in a huge cultural vehicle like *The Vagina Monologues* might have the largest impact on the discourse on Ciudad Juárez in the long term, in the short term, Eve Ensler’s interest in the matter had some material ramifications that very much improved the visibility of the *feminicidios* and in that way changed the narrative of them towards one in which

was built and inaugurated by Mexican President, Felipe Calderón, in November, 2011, while Juárez was making news as the most violent site of his government’s so-called “War on Drugs.”

²⁵ A “pristine source” in the eyes of said State, which tended to disqualify other kinds of victims, activists and protesting subjects on the grounds of their alleged flaws and shortcomings of a moral and political order, as we discussed in chapter 1 and will see in the following pages of this chapter.

²⁶ See Staudt, Kathleen, and Howard Campbell. “The Other Side of the Ciudad Juárez Femicide Story: Activism Matters.” *ReVista – Harvard Review of Latin America*, vol. VII, no. 2, Winter 2008, pp. 17-19.

victimization is certainly a big part, but is always met with activism and empowerment. To borrow Staudt and Campbell's formulation, at least since the end of the 1990s, but most especially since the year 2003:

There are at least two, if not more, stories about femicide in Ciudad Juárez [by now, we know there are way more]. One is about the victims: the tragic deaths of hundreds of women. The other story is about civil society activism, an energy that is vital to deepening democracy and creating accountable governments. Beginning with the mothers of the victims and spreading to human rights and feminist NGOs, activists made valiant attempts to generate awareness, sometimes at risk of their own safety. They began locally and spread globally. While activists have succeeded in putting violence against women on the political agenda, or reasserting this issue on public agendas, the mothers of Juárez still await justice for the murdered daughters. (19)

Eve Ensler's commitment to the cause of the victims of the crime wave had indeed profound effects that, for the better or worse, still shape how we are able to think and approach the *feminicidios* today. We now think and approach this phenomenon, for example, as a local tragedy that has to be met and solved on an international level, and in fact whose solution can *only* be achieved through the pressure and the independent initiatives of both Mexican and international NGOs and academic / feminist networks, since the Mexican State itself has shown itself as being no viable candidate for that anymore. To quote Staudt and Coronado in their article, "Binational Civic Action for Accountability: Anti-Violence Organizing in Juarez-El Paso":

V-Day [the global activist movement to end violence against women that takes place every year since 1998 on February 14 and that was started by Ensler], organizing against violence, has offered a national and international link between the border region and the world. In 2003, Esther Chávez Cano, an antiviolence activist who runs Casa Amiga for violence victims in Ciudad Juárez, was named as one of ‘21 Leaders for the 21st Century – 2003’ in V-Day preparations. Eve Ensler visited Ciudad Juárez for a full day of cultural events, including guerrilla theater and marches, but also for meetings with state judicial officials. At the final event of the day, in front of the attorney general’s office for the State of Chihuahua, Ensler spoke in English and her words were then translated.” (170)

More spectacularly, and maybe even more consequentially for the establishment of a wave of bi-national activism and for the future of citizen protests against gender violence on the border, on V-Day, 2004, a march took place with an itinerary that went from El Paso to Ciudad Juárez. It drew approximately 8,000 people, mainly from Mexico and the US, and it was “the largest-ever solidarity march across the border in El Paso-Ciudad Juárez” (Staudt and Campbell n.pag.). Significantly, it was an event that prominently featured not only Eve Ensler but also Jane Fonda and Sally Field, two high-caliber Hollywood stars of the 1970s and 1980s who, albeit well past their professional peak, still had so much star-power that their participation was largely credited as having decisively helped to get the massive turnout the march had (Tuckman n.pag.).

And, lest the point is not clear, it *was* a massive event. Staudt and Campbell say that, “[i]n organizing terms, events like these are ‘tough acts to follow’” (19). Meanwhile, Jo Tuckman, reporting for the prestigious British newspaper *The Guardian* writes about hundreds, if not thousands, of students and feminists of different countries who joined

Mexican activists and members of the victims' families in chanting "¡Ni Una Más!" According to her summary of the event, The Vagina Monologues were performed for the general public, and the author of the play, addressing the "cheering crowd," talked about Juárez as a "pilot project" for "vagina warriors and vagina-friendly men," coming so far as to proclaim the city a "victory place":

"We are about making sure Juárez becomes the new capital of non-violence towards women around the world," she said. "Let's think about Juárez as the victory place." (n.pag.)

Leaving aside, for the time being, the statement made by Ensler about thinking of Ciudad Juárez as "the victory place," which instantly strikes the reader as being problematic, to say the least (Ciudad Juárez became the most violent city on Earth between 2008 and 2012, i.e. *after* this march ["Once the World's Most Dangerous City, Juárez Returns to Life" n.pag.], and the *feminicidios* have, sadly, not ended even yet [Palomino n.pag.]), it is quite significant that the article from which this quote is taken is actually titled "Jane Fonda *leads* march to force action against Mexican city's women-killers" (emphasis mine). What about local activists, local families, local women? To be sure, Fonda (and Ensler and Field, among others) has such a well-earned reputation for her involvement in different social causes over the decades that her participation can be regarded as sincere, and it has been presented as such, for instance in the article "¡Ni una más! ¿Traiciona al feminismo la lucha contra el feminicidio?," in which Mexican scholar José Manuel Valenzuela describes Fonda's way of highlighting the problem of gender violence and *feminicidio* in Ciudad Juárez in a thoroughly positive manner²⁷:

²⁷ The article is included in the 2015 book *Vida, muerte y resistencia en Ciudad Juárez: Una aproximación desde la violencia, el género y la cultura*, compiled by Salvador Cruz Sierra. Valenzuela's title is, of course,

Congruente con sus compromisos, la actriz Jane Fonda acudió a Ciudad Juárez para apoyar la lucha contra el feminicidio y colocó de manera clara el sesgo clasista que minimiza la lucha antifeminista, destacando su propia condición de mujer blanca, rica y famosa para asegurar que si su hija o su nieta fueran secuestradas o desaparecidas, las autoridades se empeñarían en encontrar a los responsables y luego preguntaba indignada: ¿por qué se ignora a las mujeres que luchan por encontrar a sus familiares o porque se castigue a los responsables de su muerte? ¿Por qué se les trata como si eso no fuera importante? (233)

But did she “lead” the march? Does she have a claim at leading the fight itself? What about the local activists who had emerged as organic leaders from the proliferation of desert bones itself? They were worthy enough to “lead” a march concerning their own tragedy, a tragedy of which they had not heard or read stories (nor, for that matter, which they had not come to know through Tori Amos’ songs, as in my case [see chapter V]) but that was inscribed in their bodies and in the fabric of their daily lives. They did not need to be saved by a Hollywood star with radical credentials but also (in)famously associated to a media empire like Time Warner that, during the 1980s and 1990s, through the coverage of the so-called “crack epidemic” of the US and most especially through the coverage of the First Gulf War, had decisively contributed to create a world in which violence had been banalized and had ultimately become a commodity marketed to privileged audiences but felt by marginalized bodies worldwide (Baudrillard).

Regardless of how much you like or dislike the person of Jane Fonda (or Sally Field, or Eve Ensler, or any other star/scholar/mainstream politician), the symbolic impact of

consciously –perhaps needlessly– polemical, and the answer he provides to the question of whether or not the fight against *feminicidio* “betrays” feminism is a resounding “no.”

someone coming from the outside, both geographically and culturally²⁸, as if briefly stopping on a personal trip, and then pretending to lead a movement found on the ground that has been years in the making, is enough to arise suspicions of colonial chutzpah. It does not matter if the person is likable or not, if her intentions are good or not, if she portrayed herself as a leader or allowed for her to be portrayed as such: on a purely symbolic level, all of these options amount to the same thing, and all of these options can be regarded as offensive by the people who have no choice but to actually live their lives in situations of extreme, pervasive violence and whose agency, once again, albeit this time benevolently, is usurped or taken away from them by good-natured gestures like this.

Furthermore, even Staudt and Campbell finish their portrayal of the event –which is a sympathetic portrayal, through and through– stressing that, despite the difficulties to follow such a “tough act,” “many border anti-violence activists remain committed to seeking justice, spreading awareness in order to eradicate interpersonal violence, and exercising oversight over public institutions” (n.pag.), which perhaps gives grounds to be optimistic. Immediately after stating this, however, and just a couple sentences below having praised this event for raising awareness about the *feminicidios* of Ciudad Juárez on a scale that, arguably, no other single event or discreet cultural artifact before or since has achieved, they mention, as if in passing, that “[m]eanwhile, international activists turned their attention to other parts of the world with higher femicide rates” (n.pag.).

In other words, while having been saluted by virtually all mainstream channels of public opinion, especially on the US and European side, Eve Ensler’s involvement in the process of highlighting the *feminicidios*, denouncing them, and organizing against them, let alone Jane Fonda’s, was in fact met with criticism from different actors on the ground. They resented her and, more to the point, what her commitment represented, for not taking into

²⁸ Let us remember, here, how it was mentioned above that, at the end of her “full day visit” to Juárez in 2003, Ensler gave a talk at the attorney general’s office for the State of Chihuahua, and the talk was *in English*.

account previous instances of struggle against gender violence in Ciudad Juárez, for not integrating all organizations and activists in the process that led to the march and its parallel events, for letting the process be “co-opted” by groups that either had no relation to feminist traditions in Ciudad Juárez or were directly counterposed to these traditions, and for having “appropriated” this fight for social justice in a sort of impressionistic, well-intentioned academic way, at best, or in some kind of configuration of an exploitative, touristic social activism, in the worst case. Staudt and Coronado’s quote from above, in which they casually mention that “international activists” were quick to abandon Juárez and go to other places “with higher femicide rates,” seems to imply that the latter interpretation has its merits, even though the international discourse on Ciudad Juárez has continued to proliferate, albeit maybe less intensely than during the first ten years of the crime wave, i.e. from 1993 to 2003.

At any rate, the criticism of Ensler’s involvement –as *pars pro toto* for a whole elite of privileged, mainly Western (North American or European) or metropolitan (DF) white feminists’ involvement– in the fight against *feminicidio* in Ciudad Juárez cannot be merely dismissed. It is not an automatic reflex of petty activists and scholars misguided by identity politics; just to make it clear, it is certainly not guided by misogyny or patriarchal backwardness, either. To the contrary: at least in its better, more thoughtful expressions, it is based on a knowledge of the ground, of the arena of the struggle, as it were, that is sorely lacking from even the best-intentioned interventions from the outside, from sympathetic academic research (such as the one I am writing now) to the allegiance of North American and European NGOs and feminist organizations, and up to and including Ensler’s and other allies’ solidarity statements and actions.

For instance, right from the beginning of her provocatively titled article, “The V-Day March in Mexico: Appropriation and Misuse of Local Women’s Activism,” Clara E. Rojas, a local activist and scholar who teaches discourse analysis and (Mexican) women’s history at

the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez, turns to quite strong terms (“appropriation” and “misuse”) to denounce the V-Day of 2004—one of the highlights of the history of struggle against *feminicidio* in Ciudad Juárez, according to the mainstream stories on the topic—as an event that, far from being worthy of celebration, transpired colonial arrogance on the part of its international organizers and, most crucially, opportunistic appetites and dubious practices on the part of sectors of Juárez itself: “The V-Day march, presumably a protest against the murder of over three hundred young women between 1993 and 2003, was not only a belated response to gender violence on the border, it was also, I shall argue, an appropriation and misuse of local women’s activism *by local hegemonic groups*” (201, my emphasis). First, then, Rojas deplores how “the national and international recognition and support came almost seven years after this struggle had begun; by then, political and social positions among local actors had been contested, rearticulated, and, in the process, many had been erased or in effect been dismissed” (203). Leaving aside the fact that, for her, 1994 marks the beginning of said struggle, so that her “almost seven years” do not really add up (she mentions neither 2000 or 2001 as significant, pivotal years), what is important here is how her article encapsulates a feeling of helplessness and of abandonment that might be pervasive among subaltern activists in the Global South or in marginalized populations of the Global North and that explains the doubts and outright mistrust with which some interventions from the outside, and from a discursive “above,” are sometimes met:

For example, when the call for the V-Day march was received, questions circulated in private conversations: What for? Isn’t it too late? Why not last year, when three more victims were found? Why not seven years ago, when we were struggling to prevent more murders? Why after hundreds of victims? Who’s benefiting from this march? Fair or unfair, this is how the majority of the local

activists felt and how they structured their feelings. The spirit has its reasons.
(203)

On the one hand, of course, it is possible to argue about the fundamental facts that underlie these feelings. Is a lapse of “almost seven years” really too long for international attention towards a specific “case” of gender violence in the Global South to build up? Is it really so strange or suspicious that a certain critical point in the development of the phenomenon (“hundreds of victims”) had to be achieved in order for that attention to build up, in the first place? Is it not just how the world and the global circuit of solidarity “work”? And how would it be “better” for the fight against *feminicidio* if international NGOs, activists, and concerned citizens decided *not* to get involved anymore after a hypothetical and only vaguely determined, but obviously very small, temporal window of opportunity to do so was – supposedly– closed and sealed shut?

However, and on the other hand, there is no arguing with feelings themselves. To put it in the words of Rojas herself, “fair or unfair,” they exist and they matter both because they influence how events, practices, and gestures are perceived and because they frame the attitudes that lead to the responses towards those events, practices and gestures. “This structure [of feelings] is important because it has affected, for better or worse, the way we, as local activists and scholars, participate now, or not, in the public or political sphere” (Rojas 203). Besides, feelings like the ones being described by Rojas do not come out of thin air: they are overdetermined by a history of asymmetrical power relations that leads to a healthy skepticism as to the “truths” invoked by deliberate or casual agents of the powers that be, for one; they also address explicit or implied slights that do not belong to the domain of history yet because they are iterated daily in the interactions between actors in different positions of the power scale.

Thus, “several weeks before the event [the V-Day of 2004] took place, the march had already been co-opted by local nongovernmental groups, at that time (re)positioning themselves vis-à-vis the state government. These groups, sadly, many of them represented by women, have never supported the local women’s struggles” (Rojas 203). This is not the snobbish criticism of a member of an intellectual elite deploring the expansion of access to a certain knowledge or practice based on a knowledge (as if there even was anything akin to an intellectual, let alone a feminist, elite in Ciudad Juárez that actually enjoys any of the privileges usually associated with the term “elite”). To the contrary, it has consequences that are far too real: According to Rojas, the call for the march erased the female subject and the specificity of the *feminicidio* and opted for an allegedly neutral language that could be only seen as a slap to the face by survivors and by feminist activists in Ciudad Juárez: “Día por la paz y contra la violencia” (203-04); perhaps even more ominously –albeit less instantly offensively, since for offense to be felt in this case there has to be some background knowledge of the actual context in which the struggle is taking place–, the march was sponsored by members of the highest socioeconomic layers of the city that, by virtue of their very privileged existence, collaborate with a system of inequality and superexploitation of workers that has been a fertile breeding grounds for superviolence against women (and other subjects):

[t]he V-Day march events were conducted on the premises of the Carta Blanca brewery, owned by the de la Vega family, one of the most powerful families not only in Juárez but in all of Mexico. Paradoxically, Mr. de la Vega is a local, state, national, and international distributor of beer and liquor. He was part of the hegemonic groups dismissing the femicide and one of the promoters of heavy drinking in Juárez. He is also known not only for his economic power, but also for

his political influence. His wife, Lupita de la Vega, a socialite and director of the Federación Mexicana de Asociaciones Privadas ... is also recognized internationally as a benefactor of the women of Juárez. The day after the march, local newspapers published stories about the event on the front page and in the society pages. The society pages contained a detailed story about an exclusive dinner held at the US Consulate in Ciudad Juárez for Jane Fonda and Sally Field the same night of the march. All the local socialites were invited, including Esther Chávez Cano. The victims' relatives and other activists were not invited. (Rojas 207)

The most striking part of the preceding quote, at least for anyone (including myself) who does not belong to the internal processes of configuration of a civil society in Ciudad Juárez that is against the *feminicidios* and is able to articulate this primal opposition in the form of a political organization with a political discourse and voice, is that Esther Chávez Cano is included in the group of the so-called “socialites.” The reader will recall her from chapter II, for Esther Chávez Cano is no other than the legendary local feminist activist who, in a way, “created” the crime wave by starting to count the victims before anyone else was looking, the one who started giving the *feminicidios* of Ciudad Juárez their shape and their logic by highlighting their common characteristics and the misogyny that lied beneath them, and the one who nowadays is mostly revered for having been the first person to mobilize the public opinion in Mexico and elsewhere in order to denounce impunity and to pressure the State into action against the murders. However, as Rojas puts it in her article:

[e]ven though we local activists have always recognized Chávez Cano as being *one* of the first local women to disrupt the government's silence surrounding the

murders during the initial confrontations (1994), she is not recognized locally as *the* representative of the women of Juárez, much less of the victims or their families, who began to distance themselves from her by the end of 1998. (206)

The reasons for this distancing seem to be multiple, including the fact that “Chávez Cano belongs to the local middle class” and, as such, as well as through her former employment as “an editorial writer for one of the local newspapers” and through her “participation in institutional politics in Juárez,” she has been “socially constructed, by local media, as the ‘star’ in this fight for social justice” (206), which apparently does not sit very well with activists, survivors, and relatives of the victims who remain anonymous and who are not in a position to play the media game as well as someone with the *habitus* of Chávez Cano (Bourdieu). There are more profound causes, though, and Rojas describes them in extenso even as she portrays herself as a late detractor who was convinced of the need to break with such a historical figure pretty late in the process of the struggle against *feminicidio* and only after paying attention to what the actual people of Ciudad Juárez, and more specifically to what the actual victims’ mothers, were saying, in a listening gesture that is perhaps not very often performed by members of the academia:

In the beginning, everything seemed all right, but, apparently, only to us, because by the end of 1998, almost all of the victims’ families had begun to publicly distance themselves from Chávez Cano, claiming, among many other things, that she was using their murdered daughters to advance her personal projects (that is, Casa Amiga [a social project in Ciudad Juárez that aims to help the victims’ families]). Again, this accusation was misinterpreted as a fight over resources, but it was not that simple; it was about an unethical process of (mis)representation on

the part of Chávez Cano. When some of us stopped and listened closely to the mothers' accusations, we realized that, in fact, the victims' bodies were being appropriated unethically by Chávez Cano in forums, conferences, and many other events, to obtain funds that never benefited the victims' families. When she was confronted, Chávez Cano denied it and argued that she spoke for 'the victims of violence'... in other words, she spoke basically for everybody in Ciudad Juárez ... Chávez Cano is currently distanced from local women scholars because of our critical position toward her protagonist behavior. Yet all this does not seem to be important, because Esther Chávez Cano is still being rewarded and recognized internationally as the representative of the women of Juárez. Apparently, all the issues surrounding the murders, besides the obvious social injustice perpetuated by the state, need a closer, critical and self-reflective look at how to advance social justice, and not just the easy, comfortable action of extending charity. (206-07)

My point, here, is not at all that Esther Chávez Cano is –or even might be– either opportunistic or a sophisticated academic con woman. As a subject situated in her own coordinates and attached to her own interests and trajectories, Rojas does not necessarily offer a more “authentic” and/or less mediated “truth” about the inevitable disagreements that arise in any larger social movement over issues of representation and of resource allocation (neither is Chávez Cano, for that matter). Rather, what I intend to do by discussing Rojas' version of events and arguments in depth is to show how the competition over the discursive high ground, which is to say, the permanent competition over who is allowed to portray a narrative as the truth and how, does not stop on the level of defining *feminicidios* themselves, of defining the role of the State in fueling or ignoring them, or of defining culprits and motives

that help us make sense of social phenomena, but irrepressibly reproduces itself overall and on every level of social interaction.

Thus, what appears to be a monolithic bloc from the outside (the bloc of activists against gender violence on the border) is, when observed with anything close to unidealizing eyes, the uncomfortable, always already unsatisfactory and ever-changing result of daily negotiations, compromises, and ruptures among different, highly complex actors who, inevitably, frame their own narratives according to their biases and experiences, perform those narratives, and push for them to reach a certain degree of centrality in the general discourse and to be accepted as truth. In the case of Ciudad Juárez, this process is to be expected even as, from the outside (from the well-intentioned, fully committed outside), the lines along which the confrontation takes place could seem to be clear-cut: On the one side, there is the *feminicidios* (and the legions of hypothetical culprits, accomplices, auxiliaries, enablers, indirect promoters, etc.) and, on the other side, there is the movement against them. But there is no unity and there is never a single story. The whole controversy about V-Day 2004 proves that, on an international level at least, and given the context of colonial difference in which the history of violence on the U.S.-Mexican border cannot help but take place, this unity is an utopia. In fact, it is not even that, because it is not desirable, lest we agree to erase the experiences of the whole “Mexican” part of the construct “U.S.-Mexican border”: It is an outright chimera. As for the local level, the level on which the actual people directly involved with the *feminicidios* and their consequences for the (destroyed) social fabric of the city have to live, Rojas’ article goes a long way to suggest that there is no unity either, even among supposed allies, and that, in a way, the question of whether the subaltern can speak or not (Spivak) is still current, and painfully so, in a place like Ciudad Juárez, where even the very definition of the parts of the population that share the common experience of subalternity (Mexican citizens in general? Migrants? Border subjects? All

women or just *maquiladora* workers, poor women from the South? Perhaps only the victims, the survivors and their families?) is contested. Hence, Rojas closes up her article with the following, rather pessimistic conclusion:

[i]n recognizing her [Spivak's] use of the concept 'subaltern' as a social position occupied by those who have been denied any social privilege, I asked who spoke and continues to speak not only for the juarense/fronteriza female subaltern, but for all the women in Juárez, and for what purpose. Granting that feminist poststructuralist discussions have rightly argued that female subalterns can, in fact, speak in the interstices, the margins, the third spaces, or the liminal, based on the experience of the juarenses/fronterizas, I argue that, in order to begin to understand the (im)possibilities of subaltern speech, we have to look into the symbolic and material constraints that exclude or limit the access or visibility of their demands in the public arena of political struggle and negotiation. If we do not do this, many issues will remain, conveniently for some, (in)articulated in the structure of feeling. Consequently, the scenario will continue to be one of despair. (208-09)

Having said all this, and even while there are enough reasons to argue that Eve Ensler was –consciously or unconsciously– acting in the context of a “white savior” narrative and thus mobilizing and feeding that narrative in turn, as well as depending on the support of a native informer like Chávez Cano is, according to Rojas' account, Ensler's commitment helped to change some fundamental things in Ciudad Juárez, both discursively and materially. Thus, Staudt and Coronado remind us of the fact that, in the wake of the intensification of bi-

national activism that took place in 2003 and that brought the discourse on Ciudad Juárez to new dimensions on the international level:

President Fox spoke out against the murders, appointed new federal officials, and coordinated intergovernmental investigations. New attention focused on Juárez in early 2004, when buried bodies were found in Juárez backyards, prompting the removal of complicit state police and binational attention (including Texas governor Perry's order to make canine patrol, heretofore unavailable, available for the investigation of the murders of girls and women). Investigative reports in the Dallas Morning News publicized victims "abducted, raped, and killed to 'celebrate' successful drug runs" and once again implicated the police. ("Binational Civic Action for Accountability" 173-74)

Of course, the President's involvement, while spectacularly breaking with the tradition of either ignorance or outright denial that had characterized the official response at both the state and the federal level, was lukewarm at best, and remained rhetorical in the sense that it did not lead to a continued effort from the State to solve the *feminicidios* that had already occurred or to prevent new ones from happening. The appointment of new federal officials ended up being a source of disappointment for many activists who, for a brief moment, truly believed that some kind of justice would be advanced by them: "Not much came of this, although there have been other highly acclaimed but ineffective steps taken by law enforcement authorities toward a more equitable solution" (Harrington 160). And, as Staudt and Coronado themselves admit:

[F]or all moves forward, there was backlash, and resistance continued. The business community has yet to respond visibly, save to blame organizers for fewer tourists in downtown Juárez and for the move of maquiladora jobs to China (a move caused by many factors, the most prominent being lower labor costs in China). Mainstream academic literature has been slim [I would dispute that, and I think this dissertation, which draws on many academic sources, is a testament to the contrary] ... And the murders continue. And the violence continues. (“Binational Civic Action for Accountability” 174)

Still, on a discursive level, the fact that it was officially acknowledged that the crime wave was taking place at all, and the fact that even some sort of simulacrum of decorum was undertaken by the State in order to solve that crime wave, was a huge validation for the alternative stories of the discourse on Juárez and, ultimately, for the activists on the ground and for the families of the women of Ciudad Juárez themselves. It meant, to begin with, that it was being formally accepted that the *feminicidios* had to be investigated and prosecuted:

Until 2003, Mexican federal authorities disclaimed jurisdiction over the murders and disappearances because they were not federal crimes. In 2003, however, the federal government changed course and announced it had a duty to clear up the cases in question and to promote dialogue with relatives, victims, and civil society, as well as to institute collaborative initiatives with NGOs (Harrington 160).

Furthermore, regardless of the inevitable limitations this process has met and the innumerable problems that have arisen in the difficult, and ever-changing, relation between civil society and the State with respect to the discourse on Ciudad Juárez, the new note being sounded by the main keepers of the official stories about the *feminicidios* implied, by necessity, that the victims did not “deserve” to be killed and were not to blame for their own

murders. As basic as that may sound, these fundamental notions were new to Mexico's official discourse on gender violence and specifically on *feminicidio* in Juárez, which is the reason why these developments mattered and changed the arena on which to fight for justice and for the establishment of truths.

On a long-term perspective, and on a more material level, it was arguably at least as important that, in 2003, Mexico issued new freedom of information laws, allowing limited access to public documents and opening up spaces of possibility for a process of legal struggle towards transparency and accountability that up to our days is far from complete—it operates solely on the federal level, to begin with (Staudt and Coronado, 176)—, but is nevertheless underway. Moreover, until 2004 there were no women's shelters in Juárez; this changed, too, as a result of activism and awareness raising on the local, national, and international levels (there are not nearly enough shelters, and they are not sufficiently funded by the government, though ["Binational Civic Action for Accountability" 176]).

In fact, even Clara E. Rojas herself, one of the most critical voices within the academic community of the border and elsewhere with respect to this march and the context in which it took place, offers a sort of disclaimer in her previously discussed article and, to her credit, visibly struggles to find the balance between her principled position against “(mis)representation and appropriation” (205) and the need for building alliances on a broad basis and without ideological entry fees:

Even though I have explained my reasons for believing the V-day march was manipulated by those less concerned with the victims, I recognize that, from a global perspective, a march of this magnitude was a very important international outlet for exposing one of the most violent and haunting instances of social injustice toward women and girls. It also represented the solidarity and effort of

many women –and men– who came from all over the world to support the women of Juárez. (204)

Still, she continues, appreciating this obvious dimension of solidarity and the possibilities the march offered as a platform for global awareness raising did not mean supporting it uncritically:

We –at least we local scholars and activists– recognized and appreciated this expression of solidarity, but to celebrate it uncritically was not easy. It was not easy because, in a benevolent process of supporting a plea for social justice, specifically for the victims and their families, the international activists were unaware that they were endorsing local dominant discourses, albeit represented by women’s faces. And although with the best of intentions, those who came legitimated the self-constructed “benefactor” status of a few local women who have for so long committed their activism to local hegemonic groups, erasing many other voices. The V-Day march was an urgent reminder of Linda Alcoff’s recommendation for feminists to be aware of the power of positionality. Who had the power to name? Who spoke? For whom? For what purpose? (204-05)

All considerations aside, which were political considerations of an external kind that transferred, through the personal commitment with the cause and the affective relations with the victims’ families, into an internal struggle for each and any activist opposed to the problematic character of the march and what it represented, Rojas opted for attending and thus providing, by her mere presence, a degree of critical support to the proceedings. It was,

after all, and as is often (always?) the case in social life, a messy reality in which, according to her, there were just no clear-cut, thoroughly good options for principled activists:

Many of us were torn by a paradox that in many ways has kept me and other local women activists symbolically immobilized for several years now. This paradox lies in being unappreciative of the efforts of so many international activists by not attending the march or by attending the march knowing that we were supporting those who intentionally or not have appropriated the victims' bodies and the families' suffering to forward their political personas. In the end, some of us decided to march in appreciation of the solidarity of so many people who came believing they were making a difference. (207-08)

These persons had succeeded, indeed, in making the march the single largest, most visible event held in protest against the *feminicidios* and the related system of impunity put in place and maintained by the Mexican State. What they had not succeeded in doing, however, was in actually ending the *feminicidios* or, for that matter, contributing to making more than incremental progress toward that goal. That was, after all, more than any discreet action could accomplish. Nevertheless, in the context of a dynamo of stories that had called, historically, for an explanation, a culprit, a cause, the failure to elicit quick, sudden change that could be quantified and presented as a spectacular triumph in the fight against spectacular injustice could not change the discourse on that ongoing injustice, either. Thus, and in spite of the wishes expressed by Eve Ensler before the march, which have been quoted above, this event did not, in any meaningful way, contribute to shift the discursive coordinates enough in order to position Juárez, as it were, “as the victory place.” Rather, it constituted a highlight of international activism against *feminicidio* and, as such, it actually highlighted *another* story

about Ciudad Juárez: the conventional narrative about women being killed, about dead women, and about victims, not agents and, much less, agents of any kind of “victory.”

The fact that the international interest in Juárez sharply decreased after the march is a testament to the permanence of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez as one in which dead bodies and victimhood dominate the narrative over other possible, more redemptive or emancipatory aspects of the stories being told. Of course, this decrease is not necessarily to be seen as a result of the march, even though the fact that it did not “change” things fast enough must surely have demotivated young, inexperienced activists –no matter how well-meaning they were– who had been attracted to the cause by Ensler’s and other celebrities’ (sincere) commitment to it. This, after all, is a frequent outcome of relatively bright spikes of hope in long, utterly confusing and frustrating political and social processes that cannot even begin to be properly addressed with a single march, as any person with experience in politics and social movements can tell. The decrease of interest in Ciudad Juárez, moreover, can also be marked, almost to the date, with a broader shift that took place around 2003-2004 and is reverberating still: simply put, in a world in which the Iraq war launched a new era of global terrorism and increasing rivalries among the major military and economic powers, as well as destructive social dynamics in most Western countries from which the international support for the fight against *feminicidio* had been coming, there was little time, and little place, for a story like Ciudad Juárez’ to gain much traction as a scandal worthy of continued, day-to-day denunciation in the discursive arena. Thus, for all its bi-national components, and for all its implications for the global economy and for the future of humankind itself, the crime wave stayed local and the narrative stayed firmly grounded on the notion of the dead women of Juárez who could not be saved.

The decrease in international activism and interest in Ciudad Juárez was remarkable, then. But local activism decreased as well. As a traditionally important industrial hub, the city

had played a leading role in activism and protests in the Mexican context of the 1990s; in their 2015 book *Courage, Resistance, and Women in Ciudad Juárez: Challenges to Militarization*, for instance, Kathleen Staudt and Zulma Y. Méndez briefly summarize this fact as follows:

Although there is a long history of mobilization in Ciudad Juárez, the gender-based violence ... that began in the 1990s instigated a vigorous activism that previewed and alerted people to the huge growth in violence that ultimately occurred when officials failed to cleanse law enforcement institutions, which operate with almost total impunity (2).

However, around 2003 and 2004, local activism started to decrease, even as the killings continued, as the “huge growth in violence” that Staudt and Méndez mention in the passage above took place, and as Ciudad Juárez started to become known, around the second half of the 2000s, for being *the* most violent city in the world for men, women, and human beings in general. In her article, “Femicide, Mother-Activism, and the Geography of Protest in Northern Mexico,” Melissa W. Wright explores this very issue. Writing in 2007 (although the article was published in 2010), Wright laments the situation:

In recent years ... the local antifemicide coalitions have dissolved as groups or have parted ways to work on separate projects or have coordinated around issues other than femicide. And with the disappearance of these local antifemicide coalitions, there has been a quieting of the protests across the region. Unlike in previous years, the discovery of a female body is not followed by press conferences or other public actions that keep the violence on the front pages of the

local dailies. Indeed, local press coverage of the femicides has waned despite evidence of enduring violence against women, an escalation of violence more generally, and impunity for criminals across the board. (212)

While explaining that this “dissolution of local coalitions and the quieting of public protest in Northern Mexico ... does not signify a lack of activism around femicide,” indicating instead “a shift in the geographic orientation of the movement as activists from Mexico form coalitions with organizations and individuals in other countries to raise public awareness of the problems in their country,” Wright admits that “it is hard to place an actual number on such efforts” (212). In fact, she only mentions the V-Day march of February 14, 2004, as a successful example of these efforts’ results: “While other protests have occurred since then, none have attempted to re-create the breadth of coalitions and events envisioned by the V-Day planners” (227). Still, she offers an interesting account of the ways in which conflicts arose among the different groups fighting against *feminicidio*, leading to the fragmentation of a movement that, perhaps, was never so homogeneous or unitary, to begin with; after all, since its inception, there was an underlying tension between the different subjects that were discursively “allowed” to search for the missing women and to seek justice:

The strategy of turning victims into daughters provided the governing elites with a powerful counterstrategy, again traceable along the contour line of the public woman. As they were losing the battle over the discursive production of the victims, the governing elites used the public-woman discourse against the activists when they asked: If the victims were innocent daughters rather than public women guilty of their own crimes, as the activists argued, then who was authorized to search for them? Motherhood thus became the standard for determining the

legitimacy of the women who were fighting for the daughters of northern Mexico, and any nonmother was fair game for being exposed as a dangerous public woman. (223-24)

Despite her slightly misleading use of the term “governing elites,” what Wright describes here is a fundamental division that, while certainly promoted and intensified by the official stories of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez itself, also finds expression in the language and the practices of activists and scholars who, like the aforementioned Rojas, whose article was discussed above, cannot be seriously suspected of colluding with the State (at least consciously). Thus, what this struggle over the definition of the “right” subject to grieve for the dead women of Juárez points to is, effectively, the question of representation (in the sense of *vertreten*²⁹) and the ways in which, even in this most basic of all human rights causes (the common fight for truth and justice for the victims of indescribable misogynistic violence), subaltern subjects tend to resent self-appointed speakers and “voices for the voiceless,” especially when there is good reason to doubt that their commitment can remain solid and selfless while the material conditions of the struggle lead them to profit from it and from its niche place in the international market of protests and academic activism (see also the introduction and chapter IV of this dissertation for more on this issue).

We have examined, above, how Rojas all but impeaches the actions of Esther Chávez Cano, who is not merely an activist but *the* leading activist who, in 1993, brought the *feminicidio* into public scrutiny by starting to count the victims, in the first place. Likewise, Wright quotes “one early leader in the anti-femicide campaign [who] announced in a

²⁹ Representation has two separate dimensions that can be perhaps best explained using two German terms that both can be translated as “to represent.” One of them, “*darstellen*,” means “to represent” in the sense of portraying an Other in the realm of arts, science, or philosophy, of presenting that Other “again” (re-presenting), whereas the other, “*vertreten*,” involves “speaking for” as a proxy in a more obviously political sense. Although both actions involve power and the effacement of the subject being represented, they do this through different means and with different kinds of immediate impact for actual bodies and. Gayatri Spivak discusses these “two senses of representation – within state formation and the law, on the one hand, and in subject-predication, on the other” and concludes that they “are related but irreducibly discontinuous” (276).

Chihuahua newspaper in 2003: ‘There are pseudo-organizations and pseudo-leaders who benefit not only politically, but also from the donations that they receive in bank accounts in the name of women assassinated in Ciudad Juárez. The time has come to identify a difference [between the public and private women] in order to clean up the image of the NGOs’” (226). To be clear, this is just an example from many:

In the weeks leading to the event [V-Day, 2004] ... the mothers associated with the Instituto Chihuahuense de la Mujer criticized some of the principal organizers for “profiting from the memory of their daughters.” Targeted in the attacks were the Mujeres de Negro [feminist activists from the first hour] and Esther Chávez, who were accused of “not being capable of understanding the pain that mothers feel from their losses.” But the recriminations were also directed at mothers associated with the Ciudad Juárez organization Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa, whose codirector had to defend the fiscal activities of her organization against the claims that it was also “profiting” from the deaths. In this context, to be guilty of such profiting was to be discredited as a public woman who was, essentially, prostituting the pain of the families in the public market. (“Femicide, Mother-Activism, and the Geography of Protest” 226-27)

What all this added up to, in the end, was a split on V-Day and around the issues relating to V-Day that, according to Wright, was even more prominently marked and more openly acknowledged than what could be inferred by Rojas’ previously discussed account of the event:

These claims [that they were “profiting” from the suffering of the victims] were disputed by the event organizers, but the impasse was never resolved. On the day of the event, the mother-activists parted ways.

The Ciudad Juárez mothers’ group held its activities in one part of the city, the Chihuahua City organization participated in the originally scheduled protest in another part of the city, and the mothers working with the Instituto Chihuahuense de la Mujer left town altogether and embarked on a weeklong government-sponsored trip to Mexico City. Participants from within and outside of Mexico who wanted to support the antifemicide cause had to choose between the simultaneous events. Some tried to support both efforts, and many talked of the confusion and despair caused by the public divide that exposed deep rifts within the movement. As one activist put it to me during the February 14 activities, “This is the beginning of *another* end” to the antifemicide movement in the region. (227)

The point, here, is not to provide a detailed protocol of the making of the march and of the tensions that emerged and were made visible by it. Needless to say, I do not intend to “pick sides” or anything like that, either. I do not even interrogate the previous testimonies about the divides within the local movement against the feminicidios of Ciudad Juárez as of their “truth” in some sort of fact-checking process I am neither interested in nor capable of performing. Rather, I have spent some time describing the general context in which V-Day, 2004, took place, as well as some of the events and discussions that led to this veritable highlight of the struggle for justice in the U.S.-Mexican border, because I think that it shows how, even at that level, and just as in the case of the crime wave itself, there is no single story and no single, discreet phenomenon for which we can find a single culprit.

Thus, the general consensus of outrage and eagerness to protest violence against women and State impunity notwithstanding, what V-Day, 2004, ultimately showed, and what the selfless but problematic participation of international stars and of well-intentioned activists from privileged backgrounds ultimately showed, was that the fissures within the diverse human groups involved were deeper than the intersections (at least were presented that way, in the heat of the action) and that activism against *feminicidios*, perhaps unsurprisingly, is *also* a place of negotiations and constant struggle for the discursive higher ground from where it is possible to establish narratives that are conceded the status of truth. Granted, subaltern social movements in general, and left-wing movements against huge economic interests and against the State that protects those interests in particular, have a history of being prone to internal fights and splits over programmatic points, tactical practices, and sometimes pieces of orthodoxy that, to the uninitiated at least, appear to be mere minutiae (the representatives of the worldwide Right, in capitalistic countries at least, are notorious for having often been more willing to momentarily set aside their internal disputes in order to create common fronts that defend their main goal, namely to keep up an unequal system of production and wealth distribution that usually benefits them). Still, in the case of the movement against *feminicidio*, it is somewhat dispiriting, albeit understandable, that no unity can be achieved among human groups that, for different reasons (different economies, different cultures, different countries, different notions of gender roles, etc.), are not equal and, in several ways, do not want to be perceived as such. Some mothers of the victims of the crime wave have turned to activism because they were forced to by the circumstances, not because they want to support everything their feminist helpers from the North fight for. Similarly, the activists that are connected to academic and journalistic circuits of knowledge making and of mobilization of stories have privileges that, consciously or unconsciously, put them at an inevitable distance from the direct victims (if the activists are

from outside of Juárez or Chihuahua State, that distance is multiplied). That mistrust and open hostility might arise in a constellation like the one being schematically described, here, especially during moments of intensification of the pressure put on the movement both from the State and from the international concern on the topic, which leads to more privileges for the activists that can canalize and “profit” from it (in form of interviews, invitations to events, ticket planes, speech fees, donations, etc.), is actually quite predictable; if anything, it could be worse, were the case at hand here, the crime wave of Ciudad Juárez and the impunity related to it, not such a scandal in itself.

To put it in Wright’s words:

As the antifemicide movement shows, mother-activism represents a powerful tool for women as they fight for social justice in a context in which women’s public participation is dismissed as socially perverse. Indeed, mother-activism offers a political identity for women who prefer to present themselves as mothers in the public sphere and who otherwise might not engage in political activism. It has proven to be an extremely effective identity for integrating women into political praxis. But when this identity is the *only* one recognized as legitimate within a social movement, other forms of women’s activism are silenced ... When presented as a response to the public-woman discourse, mother-activism actually reinforces many of the strategies used to silence women and exclude their participation in the public sector. So one of the challenges for mother-activism as a political strategy is to figure out how to recognize the relationships binding public to private women in their social justice work.

To highlight the limits of this strategy is simply to recognize it as a political strategy that, like any other, has advantages and disadvantages. As has been well

demonstrated regarding citizens'-rights movements ... such strategies also reproduce the exclusions on which citizenship always depends. ("Femicide, Mother-Activism, and the Geography of Protest" 236)

Of course, these divisions not only take a toll on the possibilities of common action and coalition building, but also on the reputations of the actors who, rightfully or wrongfully, are accused of profiting from the suffering of the victims. As mentioned before, this happened to Ensler and international activists as well as to Esther Chávez Cano herself. Another example is Diana Washington Valdez, a reporter at *El Paso Times*, author of the influential 2006 book *The Killing Fields: Harvest of Women*, and one of the best-known writers on the topic of the *feminicidios* outside the academic circles, although her work also circulates in those circles and she herself has attended multiple conferences and events on the crime wave at universities worldwide (see chapter II). That in itself is seen as suspicious, though, by people who think that there are certain persons profiting from the industry of marketing the discourse on Ciudad Juárez for mass consumption and in the form of a thriller, a mystery, a whodunit. As one of those suspecting people, the Juárez-based, American journalist, Robert Andrew Powell, writes in his book, *This Love is Not for Cowards*:

In publicity materials for her book, Washington Valdez is described as "*the expert on the ghastly border crimes.*" Drexel posted on its Web site a video of Washington Valdez's 2009 interview with Al Jazeera. The news network flew her to London, sat her in a studio, and described her on the air as "the woman who knows more about this story than anyone else."

On her own Web site, Washington Valdez documented her trip to England by posing in front of the Tower Bridge. She's spoken about the dead women of

Juárez in not only Philadelphia and London but also Barcelona, Madrid, Rome, Cartagena, Mexico City, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Dallas, Nashville, New York, Washington, D.C., Portland, Seattle, Boston, and more than a dozen other cities. When I met her for lunch, she told me she'd just accepted an invitation to speak at the University of Colorado in Boulder. Expenses paid, as always.

"I check my calendar, and if I have room on my schedule and I think I can do some good, I'll go," she said. "Someone like me and others like me out there, we're going to continue to keep very focused on what's going on with the women, simply because we've made it our business to do so."

Washington Valdez got into the femicide business relatively late. (187-88)

Admittedly, the tone Powell uses in this depiction is unsympathetic to the extreme, even polemical and very nearly slandering, up to its emphasis on the term "business," used by Washington Valdez, at least arguably, in a colloquial way, but which acquires ominous connotations when she is being subject of an accusation of profiting or benefiting from the scandal around the murders. But the point here is not to determine whether or not she—or any other activist, for that matter—is guilty as charged, or whether or not her work is being fairly assessed and balanced. Rather, the important thing is the existence of this tension itself, the fact that, in spite of the fundamental consensus—shared by everyone involved in that struggle in the first place—that violence against women is wrong and that the Mexican State is either incompetent or unwilling to do something about it, no kind of unity seems to be possible, at least from a certain point on, in the struggle against the *feminicidios*.

In the last analysis, this reflects that there is not a single "thing" called the *feminicidios* of Ciudad Juárez, either, but rather a myriad of violent practices and events that, sometimes for the sake of comprehension, sometimes for the sake of building communities based on

outrage and solidarity, and sometimes, too, for the sake of the money and the prestige involved in the fight against them, have been traditionally grouped as a discreet phenomenon with a beginning, a middle, and a possible end. As we have seen in the previous pages, and will continue to see in the following ones, this conceptualization, while useful and perhaps inevitable, breaks down once one starts to look at the different stories that conform this discourse and sees that they are convergent but also divergent, and that the limits we impose on those stories in order to create a bundle, as it were, depend on our own situation and on our own interests, which are also unstable and contingent. It is entirely consistent, then, that the human groups fighting against the violent practices and events themselves also perform their activities, either consciously or unconsciously, in the conditions imposed by divides and shifts in the discursive formation at hand, and following their own interests, biases, experiences, and positions in life.

One of the main contexts in which these stories have been posited, debated, and either dismissed or assigned the status of truth is academia. As was mentioned before, beginning around 2003-2004, the interest in the *feminicidios* grew immensely in international academic circles, while actual local (or international), political activism and lobbying explicitly related to the crime wave of Ciudad Juárez (as opposed to, say, violence against women in general) decreased remarkably in the same period. That is why, in the next chapter, we will turn to the academic narratives that also make an important part of the discourse on Juárez and see how they have helped to constitute the phenomenon whose atomized parts (the violent events and practices) they describe, stabilizing it as a drama in which, first of all, women are killed and in which, secondly, it should be possible to find a culprit. One of the very first international conferences on the topic, indeed, organized by Alicia Gaspar de Alba, among other scholars and activists, at University of California at Los Angeles, and which took place exactly in the fall of 2003, was called “The Maquiladora Murders, Or, Who Is Killing the Women of

Juárez.” We will come back to this conference in the next chapter, but suffice it to say, here, that the name of the conference itself frames the question not only as one in which women are agentless victims of a single crime wave (“the maquiladora murders”) but also as a whodunit: “who is killing them?” Interestingly, this conference also marks the moment where the international interest, which in February of 2004 would lead to a massive, bi-national march with the participation of A-list Hollywood stars and thousands of activists (the absolute highlight of the struggle against feminicidios in Ciudad Juárez, in terms of political activism), by Fall of 2003 had found a place in academia, which, on the one hand, offered possibilities for reflection and thorough thinking on the phenomena at hand but, on the other hand, limited the direct impact and the immediacy of this international expressions of concern and commitment for the actual struggle in Juárez. As if to make this transition even more obvious, at least in hindsight, one of the keynote speakers at said conference was none other than Eve Ensler (Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán 6).

**IV. PROVIDING AN ORDER:
THE SCHOLARLY INTERPRETATION OF THE *FEMINICIDIOS***

What we have in front of us represents one thing.
How we analyze it and describe and codify it is something else completely.

Don DeLillo (*Mao II* 222)

The year was 2003. Shortly after finishing a novel on the feminicidios that would be published two years later (and which will be discussed in chapter V of this dissertation), Alicia Gaspar de Alba, a young Chicana scholar interested in the topics of the border and gender studies, organized an international conference at UCLA called “The Maquiladora Murders, Or, Who Is Killing the Women of Juárez?” The conference was sponsored by Amnesty International and had the full support of the Chicano Studies Research Center. It was no small event: Over the course of three full days of activities –coincidentally, the Mexican Days of the Dead, from October 31 to November 2–, more than 1,500 people from different countries and continents attended the conference and listened to the panelists, the most famous of whom was arguably Eve Ensler, the writer of *The Vagina Monologues*, who gave a keynote speech. The program included literary and musical sessions, as well as performances, art exhibitions, and presentations of diverse activist and political group.

However, and in the words of Gaspar de Alba herself (together with Georgina Guzmán), the main “purpose of the conference was to facilitate more scholarly inquiry into the crimes and, in particular, to examine the social, political, economic, and cultural infrastructure in which the crimes were multiplying like another form of toxic waste on the border” (Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán 6).

Furthermore, the poster of the conference, designed by Chicana artist Alma López (who is Gaspar de Alba’s wife, incidentally), featured the Aztec Moon Goddess, Coyolxauhqui, who was dismembered by her brother, the War God, Huitzilopochtli, according to a foundational myth of the Mexican nation. In this way, it linked the murders of Ciudad Juárez to a patriarchal history that had her roots in long-term processes and cultural formations that transcended Juárez, which is to say that they transcended the mere “facts” of the *feminicidios*, too, and pointed toward the systemic character of the crime wave. To put it in Jane Caputi’s words in her article, “Goddess Murder and Gynocide in Ciudad Juárez”:

The cover of the program for the 2003 “Maquiladora Murders” Conference at the University of California, Los Angeles, focusing outrage on the ongoing rape, torture, and murders of hundreds of women in Ciudad Juárez, features original art by Alma López –a drawing titled Coyolxauhqui’s Tree of Life ... This artwork references key figures and symbols: the Aztec Moon Goddess, who was decapitated by her brother; the Cosmic Circle; and the Tree of Life. The last is a common theme in Mexican folk arts, originally in those used for ritual purposes.

The conference Web site explains López’s work in this way: “Coyolxauhqui is the Aztec Warrior Moon Goddess, who was brutally dismembered by her own brother Huitzilopochtli (the Sun God) for uprising against patriarchy.” In this way, López’s image re-members the Goddess whom Gloria Anzaldúa has

identified as the “first sacrificial victim.” She revives Coyolxauhqui and restores her to her rightful symbolic place of cosmic center. In so doing, López asks us to consider not only the political and socioeconomic, but also the spiritual meanings of this ongoing male sacrifice of the women and girls of Juárez. (279-80)

Setting aside the strange assertion that an Aztec Goddess could have been “uprising against patriarchy” at all (an assertion not made by Caputi but merely quoted by her from the official webpage of the conference), the point is that the poster for the conference emphasized its systemic approach, as well as its clear determination to address the *feminicidios* not as anomalies or random events but as social phenomena inscribed in a history and at a place (in this case, the U.S.-Mexican border). This was in accordance with the purposes of Gaspar de Alba and her organizing team, moreover, as stated by her in the following quote:

My intention as the organizer of the conference was not only to raise consciousness about the crimes and provide a forum for discussing, analyzing, and taking action against the binational silence that had protected the perpetrators for so long, but also to re-member the sacrificed daughters of Juárez. I wanted to focus not so much on “who is killing them” as on, as Alma López’s digital image suggests, how we could reassemble the pieces of the puzzle of their deaths to help us understand why they died and why they were killed with such viciousness directed at the brown female body. López’s image suggests two other key questions: What war gods are being served by their deaths? and What “mother” or “father” are the killers –these modern-day Huitzilopochtli who are wielding their own fiery serpents against their sisters– protecting? (Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán 8)

Nevertheless, the fact of the matter is that the conference *was* called “Who is killing them?” Thus, even in this event, which was one of the first major academic forums dedicated exclusively to the *feminicidios* of Ciudad Juárez (as opposed to a specific panel or paper presented in a more general setting like the annual Modern Language Association congress, for instance), we find this fundamental tension between the attempts to understand and sort out the underlying causes of the crime wave as exemplary of a more pervasive upsurge of misogynistic violence all over the world, and the easier path of looking for culprits—even if impersonal ones—and singling out Juárez as a special, spectacular case that stands out because of its uniqueness. Needless to say, these two different ways of approaching the phenomenon of the female murders are not mutually exclusive and, in fact, they get confused in practically the totality of the scholarly literature that deals with the topic. This is perhaps understandable and to be expected, since it has proven to be necessary to both show the *feminicidios* as scandalous, freak departures from the norm that have to be denounced and as extreme examples of the norm that show the oppressive character of the norm itself. Moreover, large, abstract categories like capitalism or sexism are useful for social analysis, but they sometimes remain too estranged from daily life to elicit protests and practical action, so that activists and analysts tend to simplify and personify them, as it were, even while maintaining the same names for them, in order to, ideally, have them serve as triggers for eventual social transformation. Finally, in a world progressively lacking coherence and in which subjects are not autonomous but arrested, through different mechanisms, in a given complex of discourses and practices that they cannot change, the temptation to provide individual agency to large entities that exist as abstractions only, as if they really existed as gigantic corporations or conspiracies of sorts, is an equally gigantic one (Melley). In this context, it is almost inevitable that, even while trying to theorize something that one *knows* is larger than any

individual action, and that one *knows* does not depend on any single personal interests but on huge social constellation and historical processes, many scholars –and other social commentators– end up personalizing and searching for culprits to whom one can impute the *feminicidios* in order to, ultimately, make sense of them. This is not a conscious process, and it is not a linear process, either: the tendency to generalize and search for structural causes coexists simultaneously with the tendency to particularize and to show how those causes make up a wholly unique situation that is, in the end, the discourse on Ciudad Juárez.

A case in point happened in the context of a different academic conference, one in which I had the privilege of attending –even if only as a member of the audience– and which was called “Narco Epics Unbound: New Narrative Territories, Affective Aesthetics, and Ethical Paradox.” Organized by the Department of Hispanic Languages and Literatures at the University of Pittsburgh under the coordination of Hermann Herlinghaus, this event took place in 2008 and was a forum in which, according to a press release, the participants discussed “the transnational narrative formations that have been focusing on violence and religiosity since the 1980s in Latin American literature, music, and film” (“Pitt Welcomes” n.pag.). In one of the panels, which had the title, “Violence, Gender, and the Political Substance of Life Itself,” Beatriz González-Stephan, professor at Rice University, and Julián Olivares of the University of Houston delivered a paper in which they talked about the *feminicidios* and presented several artistic initiatives that tried to come to terms with them and offer some possible forms of micro-resistance against them.

This is not the place to address this art or the content of the paper itself – which, to be honest, I have mostly forgotten anyway, after so many years (it has not been published, to the best of my knowledge). But something interesting happened when the round of questions and answers started. During her presentation, González-Stephan had mentioned, almost as an aside, that no one knew who the perpetrators were, and the very first comment that came from

the floor (by a female scholar) was that *of course* we knew who they were! Of course we knew that it was rampant super-exploitation of female workers at the maquiladoras required by globalization and sanctioned by NAFTA, aligned with traditions of sexism that turned to vicious, toxic masculinity as a reaction to the transformations in gender roles at the border! I remember vividly how many people in the room nodded in agreement, signaling their participation in a consensus that was deemed as obvious as to not needing to be discussed or thematized. I remember, as well, how González-Stephan herself thanked this person for her intervention and clarified that, *of course, everyone knew that*, but that she was merely referring to the specific persons committing concrete crimes as a result of these conditions that were, undoubtedly, the *real* killers.

The reason why I remember this anecdote is because that was one of the very first moments in which I started thinking about the *feminicidios* of Ciudad Juárez (a sinister topic that had interested me, as a feminist with a weakness for horror narratives, since the 1990s) in the terms that I am trying to articulate and sort out in this dissertation, years later. How could it be said that the murderers were not only pretty well-known but *universally* known, “*of course*,” only for them to turn out to be enormous, abstract categories like transnationalism, sexism, and capitalism, which are discursive by definition and –regardless of the real, physical consequences that their complex translation into social practices end up having for subjects– do not have agency or essence apart from the ones we confer to them while discussing and, in the process, constructing them? What kind of accountability could we expect, were we to consider transnationalism, sexism, and capitalism as the culprits? With other words: If transnationalism, sexism, and capitalism were responsible for the crime wave, was anyone responsible for the crime wave?

The impulse to put the blame of the *feminicidios* on such large entelechies, to be sure, is an understandable one. To a certain degree, it is even a justifiable one. All these social

formations and sets of relations, after all, collude and create the conditions in which life takes place and, in a city like Ciudad Juárez, in which violence is arguably a way of life (*Murder City*), this means that they are the conditions of possibility for both the murders and the impunity that follows them and that, as was explained in the previous chapter, makes them special beyond their mere violent character, in the first place. But to claim that larger social forces operate in a way that ends up favoring conditions that foster violence of specific kinds is different from claiming that the murders are *committed by* these larger forces. This is something they cannot, after all; even when we say that the system conspires against effective action to promote justice and transparency, we are using the verb “to conspire” in a metaphorical way, for transnationalism, sexism, and capitalism cannot actually conspire against anything unless translated into concrete practices.

The academic literature on the matter has tried to come to terms with these practices, as well as with the larger forces involved, and the balance has been somehow difficult to achieve. Furthermore, in the process of trying to achieve that balance and to make justice both to the conditions in which violence takes place and to the practices that constitute that violence in daily, individual life, the academic discourse on the *feminicidios* has repeatedly mobilized stories that are not just a part of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez but a fundamental part of it. To put it simply, there would be no discourse on Ciudad Juárez without the academic discourse on it, especially since circa 2003, the year of the aforementioned conference, “The Maquiladora Murders, Or, Who Is Killing the Women of Ciudad Juárez?,” which marks the moment when the topic is decisively integrated in academic circles that, from then on, start being the main scene on which the crime wave is discussed and on which stories about them are elaborated, developed, and mobilized. In the following pages, we will look into some of those stories, always putting an emphasis on the ways in which this

underlying tension between blaming social conditions and finding concrete culprits plays out, to different degrees and in different forms, in them.

Needless to say, there are many scholarly articles that could be the object of this analysis. As was mentioned in the previous chapter of this dissertation, the waning of local and international activism directly related to the *feminicidios* of Ciudad Juárez was concomitant with an increased interest in the issue, especially in the United States. This interest is ongoing and has been the context in which articles and panels on violence against women at the U.S.-Mexican border, and specifically in Juárez, have proliferated. For the purposes of this chapter, I will discuss some of these works that I consider especially relevant and that I consider, in one way or another, exemplary. I am well aware of the fact that my selection is debatable and that other, no less rich and no less interesting texts could have been brought up and dissected in order to paint a picture of some of the leading colors of the tapestry that is the academic discourse on Juárez. My selection, however, includes both Latin American and U.S.-American authors, as well as young scholars starting to make a name for themselves in academia and older, better known colleagues whose reputation precedes them and who have also attempted to make sense of a situation that involves abject violence and a multitude of influencing factors, so that, to a certain degree, it does not and cannot make any sense.

The two final chapters of Ileana Rodríguez' 2009 book *Liberalism at its Limits: Crime and Terror in the Latin American Cultural Text*, are a good example of a text in which a well-established scholar tries to come to terms with the *feminicidios* and never quite overcomes the fundamental tension between, on the one hand, analyzing underlying conditions and multiple causes, and then, on the other hand, succumbing to the logic of the whodunit and trying to find the culprits, as it were. At least on the surface, *Liberalism at its Limits* attempts to deal with the discourse on Ciudad Juárez (even if Rodríguez does not call it that way) while

standing as far outside of it as possible in times of postmodern self-awareness; she is, after all, writing a book about the “cultural text.” Moreover, she neither pretends to directly reveal the fundamental truth of the *feminicidios* nor to name single persons, institutions or entities that are guilty of them. In this sense, these chapters are, superficially at least, similar to my own project, analyzing how the discourse on Ciudad Juárez is textually constructed and showing a healthy skepticism of both the “facts” beyond the texts and of the narratives to explain those “facts.” Needless to say, this is different from other studies included in my bibliography, too, some of which zealously represent one specific narrative to the detriment of the others (Rita Laura Segato’s excellent feministic approach in her 2006 monograph, *La escritura en el cuerpo de las mujeres asesinadas en Ciudad Juárez: territorio, soberanía y crímenes de segundo estado*, is a case in point; it will be discussed below) and some of which, somewhat indiscriminately, collect some of the circulating narratives and try to synthesize a given truth from them (*Huesos en el desierto* is, again, the obvious example, but we can also mention Diana Washington Valdez’ 2005 book *Cosecha de mujeres: safari en el desierto mexicano*, both of which were discussed in the previous chapter).

Some aspects of Ileana Rodríguez’ approach are worth examining more closely, though, since she does tend to succumb to the temptation of finding culprits, in the end. In her sixth chapter, for instance –titled “*Feminicidio, or the Serial Killings of Women: Labor Shifts and Disempowered Subjects at the Border*”– she argues that “the important concepts to grapple with within this border scenario are gender and labor” (154). Moreover, the reconfiguration of these concepts in the form of the postmodern *maquila* system characteristic of the U.S.-Mexican border not only “obstructs the passage from civil to political society,” i.e. from a society organized around labor to a society of abundance and freedom (in Hegelian terms), but also ultimately produces a “collapse of political and criminal societies” (160). Indeed, in her effort to show that the dispositive of liberalism meets its limits in Latin

America, as well as in her effort to negatively answer her own rhetorical question of whether the Mexican State is “the actuality of the Idea” or not (158), Rodríguez develops a theory according to which Ciudad Juárez represents a “Mexican variation of Foucault’s governmentality” in which, instead of a system where the political permeates and saturates civil society through mechanisms of control, we have a complete “coalescence of well-organized crime, well-organized capital, and a well-organized state. ... *Maquilas* represent real governance” (168).

Compelling as it is, this analysis is motivated by a desire to prove that liberalism is “out of place” in Ciudad Juárez and elsewhere (173), which is, to quote Rodríguez writing about the fact that the Mexican State has not done anything to stop the crime wave, “so obvious – so much a *verité de La Palice* – that I wonder about the utility of this concept” (160). After all, one of her conclusions is “so obvious” that she even formulates it, again, in the form of a rhetorical question: “Thus, a serious reflection on *maquila* labor brings up all kinds of major and serious issues, such as government and governmentalities, development, bodies, and mentalities. The question has been raised as to whether or not this is a form of democracy or a transnational oligarchic system” (169).

Furthermore, while Rodríguez certainly raises some very insightful questions about governmentality and the *feminicidios*, she evidently subscribes to a narrative of masculinist backlash against women entering the labor force (169ff) and to an economic narrative of super-exploitation of female workers (161ff). Both narratives are crucial for the discourse on Ciudad Juárez, of course, which is a phenomenon that undoubtedly cannot be approached without a consideration of gender, labor and class. My project, however, consciously aims to avoid giving them the centrality Rodríguez ascribes to them, reflecting instead on how they might be stories that, at the same time, mask and reveal, instead. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, Rodríguez relies uncritically on accounts like González Rodríguez’ and

Washington Valdez', citing them as "evidence" or as "accurate" (162-68) even though, as was discussed in chapter II, those accounts are worthy of a more critical, distanced consideration, to say the least. This ultimately leads her to speculate about "psychopathologies of a sick society" (166) without as much as defining her terms, as well as to "factual" errors that should not be there (for instance, when she wrongly states that Abdel Latif Sharif was "a member of the 'Los Choferes' gang" [172]).

This last point summarizes the problems inherent to her seventh chapter, in which she once again tackles the *feminicidios*, and which is titled "The Perverse Heterosexual." There, she focuses on the community of women of Ciudad Juárez and on their testimonial production, explaining that "the authors of cultural texts have taken it upon themselves to narrate the different ways of perceiving mass crimes, and even illustrating labor as the performance of mass crime, spreading throughout the social body" (181). There is, of course, nothing intrinsically wrong with that, and in fact this approach might look strikingly similar to the one of this dissertation. However, she once again –and this time enthusiastically– embraces the narratives she is ostensibly commenting on, from the implication of bus drivers, shoe store clerks and *maquila* employees in the *feminicidios* (184) to the existence of an "industry of porno-violence of snuff films" (192): "My argument is that the young women and girls walk right into the twilight zone set up adroitly by industries of crime: drug traffic, the production of pornographic and snuff films, traffic of human flesh and organs inside or across the borders that rise in the shadows of *maquila* labor" (185).

It is important to remember, here, that most of these rather spectacular explanatory hypotheses are unconfirmed at best and nonsensical at worst: for instance, even alien abductions have been more and better documented than the existence of the snuff movie genre (Huffschnid n.pag.). In fact, "snuff" is a very recent Western urban legend whose genealogy has been fairly well outlined (Williams 189ff; Bougie 90-95) and which has found a place in

the cultural imaginary of our era without there ever having been any evidence of its existence³⁰. This does not hinder Rodríguez from presenting this genre as real; indeed, she goes as far as presenting herself as brave for speaking up against a sort of official/scholarly truth: “is the position of the voyeur/observer – or reader, cameraman, artist – ... the position of the torturer? ... I think the representations of the murdered women in Juárez raise the same questions ... *although scholars are reluctant to acknowledge it*” (191, my emphasis). In short, in its seventh chapter, at the latest, *Liberalism at its Limits* distinctly becomes a mobilizing part of narratives that, while representing alternatives to the official stories of the *feminicidios*, cannot but reproduce their paranoid logic and search for easy, spectacular answers to the spectacularly complex social phenomenon of gender violence and *feminicidio*.

While Rodríguez gives in to the temptation of blaming specific actors for the crime wave and, regrettably, even decides for one of the most “out there” theories to be the one she favors (namely, the snuff movie theory), Jean Franco stays mostly on the topic and addresses the discourse on Ciudad Juárez and, more importantly, some of its main constitutive texts in extenso, such as Roberto Bolaño’s novel *2666*, which will be discussed in a later chapter of this dissertation. Perhaps inevitably, in “Apocalypse Now” (the ninth chapter of her 2013 book, *Cruel Modernity*), Franco starts providing a general overview of the *feminicidios* and even gets into the complicated, and maybe even unsettable, question of the victims’ numbers. To her credit, she puts the murders of women in the context of general violence at the border and does not single them out from the murders of people, period, committed during the “war on drugs”: “The more than fifty thousand who have died during President Calderón’s ‘war on drugs’ are the casualties of a war in which neither women nor children are exempt and in which journalists have paid a heavy price” (215). She sees the problem, moreover, as one

³⁰ The myth is promoted in popular culture, through horror movies and episodes of series of the detective genre, but also by academic articles like Beverley Labelle’s “Snuff: The Ultimate in Woman Hating,” published in 1992 in *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing* (edited by Radford and Russell), i.e. the very book in which the term *femicide* was coined.

which involves a systemic crisis or collapse exacerbated by NAFTA and by neoliberalism, as well as by the drug trafficking business:

The fabric of Mexico, the ideologies and practices that had propelled the nation during the decades following its revolution, are in crisis. A showcase for neoliberal policies pasted onto a corrupt society in which institutions were already compromised and offered collusion rather than resistance to the drug trade, it is now the showcase for disaster. The army, sent in by President Calderón to wage war against the drug cartels, has not only failed to curb the traffic but has become yet another abusive power. Violence has increased since the army's intervention, and members of the armed forces commit rape and murder. Most commentators attribute the violence to a complex of factors, among which two stand out: first, the insertion of the drug trafficking into an already corrupt state, and second, the poverty caused by the collapse of the agrarian economy as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the flooding of the market with cheap US corn, which has in turn created a pool of unemployed who are ready and able to work for the cartels. (215)

Interestingly, she uses Charles Bowden's analysis of the Mexican situation and of the ways in which violence, there, has become a way of life (an analysis that is discussed in the conclusion of this dissertation), preconfiguring what is going to be the future and is, in fact, reflecting what is already *the present* in several other countries and regions of the Global South:

But why isolate Ciudad Juárez, or Mexico as a whole? In many countries of Central America and parts of Latin America, the positive aspects of globalization –the transnational alliances of social groups, the multiplication of cultural styles, the forging of new urban identities, the resources and technology, and unprecedented mobility– have erected a glossy façade on societies, but beneath this façade, cruelty formerly exercised by military governments is now exercised by powerful gangs responsible for a culture of fear and intimidation. (216)

Only then does she turn to the *feminicidios*, specifically, which make Juárez a “mirror of the future” or, in the famous formulation of Charles Bowden, “the laboratory of the future.” Franco correctly points out that, in a panorama dominated by general, unbelievable violence, the role of the women as a specially oppressed group in society is still distinct:

Women are the losers in the antistate. It was first of all the rape, murder, and mutilation of women in Ciudad Juárez that drew international attention to the U.S.-Mexican border, and although the atrocities committed by the drug cartels have eclipsed the murder of women in the news, these crimes have not stopped. On the contrary, impunity is blatant ... What is all the more extraordinary is that while Ciudad Juárez and the state of Chihuahua have all the scaffolding of government –state assembly, governor, judges, and police– it is a colossal *trompe l’oeil*. (217)

She then proceeds to recount the stories of the crime wave as we have seen them in this dissertation and as will continue to be addressed in the next chapters, briefly describing Sergio González Rodríguez’ work, films like *Bordertown* and *El traspatio*, and scholarly texts

like Ileana Rodríguez' *Liberalism at Its Limits*. These stories are extensive and they are almost exhaustive in describing an enormous social phenomenon that they contribute to constitute in the process of discussing it. According to Franco, however, there is something that these stories do not quite succeed in adequately grasping and accounting for:

What remains unexplained is the fury and sadism of the killers, who are not necessarily members of drug gangs but could be 'respectable' members of society. Like the civilians who, during the Colombian civil wars, murdered at night and during the day acted as normal citizens, the Juárez killers must mask their nocturnal savagery and a deep-rooted misogyny that requires the cruel extermination of working-class women ... The degree of cruelty recalls the massive genocides of the 1980s ... The dirty wars turned the degradation of women into a routine occurrence. The men who committed crimes under army orders were released into societies that did nothing to protect women and had a history of domestic violence and marital infidelity. Added to this is the erotic thrill experienced not only by the participants but also spectators, including distant spectators like ourselves. (224)

Here, we have the underlying tension between social analysis and whodunit that I am trying to flesh out from the narratives of some important academic texts on the *feminicidios* in a crystallized state. Even while consciously attempting to put Juárez in context –constantly reminding the readers, for instance, that the “feminicides in Juárez, although the most publicized, are not unique” (224)– and resisting to put the blame on individual actors, Franco elaborates on the relations between demilitarization of Central American societies and current violence, forgetting for a while that this process was of utmost importance in Guatemala, El

Salvador, and other such countries, but not so much in Mexico, and especially not so much in the Northern regions of Mexico. Moreover, she speculates, as in passing, on the psychology of the killers and how they “must” compartmentalize in order to be able to brutally kill and still function in society, as if we knew for a fact that they function in society. Finally, Franco also mentions “the erotic thrill experienced ... by the participants” (shortly before, she has discussed approvingly Rodríguez’ and others’ dubious theses on the sexual motivations of the individual killers, as if they were known), bordering on a diagnosis of their perversions that stops short of becoming that when she, rather surprisingly and refreshingly, reminds us that the *feminicidios* are a discourse that is being constituted by our discussion of it, so that we are involved in it and participate in whatever “erotic thrill” there is to it.

Thus, even in such an insightful analysis of the crime wave and its complex factors and implications, the author feels constrained, consciously or unconsciously, to search for the killers and to try to make sense of a situation that resists making sense. After all, and to quote from Franco’s own conclusions in the book’s afterword, titled “Hypocrite Modernity”:

Cruelty on the massive scale described in these pages is not a spontaneous and individual act, committed by deviants. It requires sanction from the state or from the rogue organization [and has] been instrumental in the cooptation of the nation-state by private interests and the softening up of civil society through a regime of fear. (247)

But, in the end, cruelty and violence, and the *feminicidios* by extension, are also more than that, or beyond that: “Violence is not only beyond politics, but also beyond representation” (247).

However, according to Rita Laura Segato, a feminist anthropologist who works at the University of Brasilia and visited Ciudad Juárez in 2004 for the first time, the lack of intelligibility of the crime wave is not a result of the complexity of its influencing factors and of its implications for social relations among a multitude of subjects in different places and cultures, but a part of the assumed conspiracy itself, a strategy used by the culprits in order to better remain in impunity. Thus, in her 2006 essay, *La escritura en el cuerpo de las mujeres asesinadas en Ciudad Juárez: territorio, soberanía y crímenes de segundo estado*, which has become a veritable classic of the feminist, academic debate about the murders and, in its own internal logic, is an absolutely brilliant essay (in her own book, Franco discusses it at some length, for instance, and it is very often quoted or at least mentioned in the literature), she posits the existence of a conspiracy as a given:

[E]n Ciudad Juárez no parece haber coincidencias y, tal como intentaré argumentar, todo parece formar parte de una gran máquina comunicativa cuyos mensajes se vuelven inteligibles solamente para quien, por una u otra razón, se adentró en el código. Es por eso que el primer problema que los horribles crímenes de Ciudad Juárez presentan al forastero, a las audiencias distantes, es un problema de inteligibilidad. Y es justamente en su ininteligibilidad que los asesinos se refugian, como en un tenebroso código de guerra, un argot compuesto enteramente de *acting outs*. (9)

What is this “code” of which she is talking about here, and in which she begun to be fluent already a mere couple of days after she arrived at Juárez? In a nutshell, the code is the crimes themselves:

Inspirada en [un] modelo que tiene en cuenta y enfatiza el papel de la coordenada horizontal de interlocución entre miembros de la fratría [who use and abuse female bodies to position themselves in the patriarchal hierarchy and among their male competitors and/or peers], tiendo a no concordar con la lectura de los feminicidios de Ciudad Juárez como crímenes en los que el odio hacia la víctima es el factor predominante. No discuto que la misoginia, en el sentido estricto de desprecio a la mujer, sea generalizada en el ambiente donde los crímenes tienen lugar. Pero estoy convencida de que la víctima es el desecho del proceso, una pieza descartable, y de que condicionamientos y exigencias extremas para atravesar el umbral de la pertenencia al grupo de pares se encuentran por detrás del enigma de Ciudad Juárez. (22)

In other words, and in a spectacular deviation from virtually all scholarly texts that imply that the murders happen either as a reaction to the pauperization and to the new gender roles brought about by globalization or as a sort of extreme displays of a toxic masculinity fueled by misogyny and hate, Segato basically proposes that the feminicidios are not even mainly about the murdered women but are a “system of communication” (30) used in a community of men –patriarchy, basically– competing for power among themselves. Interestingly enough, and perhaps worryingly enough for any researcher like me who happens to be male and is also (trying to be) “fluent” in all things related to the discourse on Ciudad Juárez, this community of men includes the men who attempt to defend the women or to solve the case:

Quienes dominan la escena son los hombres y no la víctima, cuyo papel es ser consumida para satisfacer la demanda del grupo de pares. Los interlocutores

privilegiados en esta escena son los iguales, sean éstos aliados o competidores: los miembros de la fratría mafiosa, para garantizar la pertenencia y celebrar su pacto; los antagonistas, para exhibir poder frente a los competidores en los negocios, las autoridades locales, las autoridades federales, los activistas, académicos y periodistas que osen inmiscuirse en el sagrado dominio, los parientes subalternos –padres, hermanos, amigos– de las víctimas. Estas exigencias y formas de exhibicionismo son características del régimen patriarcal en un orden Mafioso. (22-23)

Here, Segato is quite clearly, albeit tacitly, using notions of masculinity as a kind of subjectivity that requires constant performance and has to be proved, as it were, in every single practice, every single day, since not doing it and not being able to confirm masculinity makes a subject inherently suspect of femininity and, thus, threatening to heteronormativity and the clear-cut socially constructed distinctions between “man” and “woman” (Butler, Connell). This allows her to come to the conclusion that, as Jean Franco puts it while discussing Segato’s essay in her aforementioned book, “these crimes are committed to assert masculinity before an audience of peers. Assassinations are a group activity that inscribe a language of absolute power on the bodies of victims” (222). In a way, then, women do not matter at all, in Segato’s analysis, and they certainly do not matter to the killers of her theory, who regard their victims with “un sentimiento ... próximo al de los cazadores por su trofeo: se parece al desprecio por su vida o a la convicción de que el único valor de esa vida radica en su disponibilidad para la apropiación” (35-36).

Her very definition of the concept *feminicidio* itself, after all, is based on the idea that, for the men who operate within the coordinates of patriarchy, and especially for those who defend the status quo, the victims are not individual but generic:

¿Qué es, entonces, un feminicidio, en el sentido que Ciudad Juárez le confiere a esta palabra? Es el asesinato de una mujer genérica, de un tipo de mujer, sólo por ser mujer y por pertenecer a ese tipo, de la misma forma que el genocidio es una agresión genérica y letal a todos aquellos que pertenecen al mismo grupo étnico, racial, lingüístico, religioso o ideológico. Ambos crímenes se dirigen a una categoría, no a un sujeto específico. Precisamente, este sujeto es despersonalizado como sujeto porque se hace predominar en él la categoría a la cual pertenece sobre sus rasgos individuales biográficos o de personalidad. (35)

There are problems with Segato's reading of the crime wave, though, for, as fascinating and unique as it is, it betrays the same fundamental tension that I claim that all academic texts dedicated to the *feminicidios* have within them: On the one hand, it portrays the phenomenon as systemic (in this case, it is even called a "system of communication," as has already been quoted), but, on the other hand, it struggles trying to find individual culprits who are somehow in line with this system without even knowing how. In order to even exist, and regardless of how conventional and iterative its elements and messages are, a system of communication has to have an enunciator, after all! Thus, Segato goes there and starts looking for the "sujeto autor" of the "mensajes" (the murders themselves) embedded in "una escena donde los actos de violencia se comportan como una lengua capaz de funcionar eficazmente para los entendidos, los avisados, los que la hablan, aun cuando no participen directamente en la acción enunciativa" (30-31). And she cannot but speculate about those authors:

¿Quién habla aquí? ¿A quién? ¿Qué le dice? ¿Cuándo? ¿Cuál es la lengua del feminicidio? ¿Qué significante es la violación? Mi apuesta es que el autor de este

crimen es un sujeto que valoriza la ganancia y el control territorial por encima de todo, incluso por encima de su propia felicidad personal. Un sujeto con su entorno de vasallos que deja así absolutamente claro que Ciudad Juárez tiene dueños, y que estos dueños matan mujeres para mostrar lo que son. El poder soberano no se afirma si no es capaz de sembrar el terror. Se dirige con esto a los otros hombres de la comarca, a los tutores o responsables de la víctima en su círculo doméstico y a quienes son responsables de su protección como representantes del Estado; le habla a los hombres de las otras fratrías amigas y enemigas para demostrar los recursos de todo tipo con que cuenta y la vitalidad de su red de sustentación; le confirma a sus aliados y socios en los negocios que la comunión y la lealtad del grupo continúa incólume. Les dice que su control sobre el territorio es total, que su red de alianzas es cohesivo y confiable, y que sus recursos y contactos son ilimitados. (32-33)

These are plausible conjectures, to be sure. Nevertheless, that is what they are: conjectures. How does Segato know, for instance, that the author of the crimes performs them in order to send messages to State representatives instead of being a member of the State itself? How does she know that the killer wants to dialogue –to dialogue threateningly, but still to dialogue– with the men “responsible for the victim in her domestic circle” instead of, at least in some cases, precisely those men? How does she know that he, the murderer, has business partners and unlimited resources? Is it not strange that the profile of the assassin that emerges from her speculations, her “bet,” is the same old conventional profile of the drug baron or the corrupt entrepreneur, the suspect of numerous narratives that did not need the sophisticated feminist and discursive analysis that Segato undertakes in order to point at the same walking cliché as the culprit?

This is, in my opinion, the weakest point in Segato's essay, which is otherwise revealing and, dare I say, beautiful, as well as really original in the context of the dynamo of stories on Ciudad Juárez. Its strongest point, arguably, is the case it makes for our own participation, as readers, as scholars, as researchers, as "detectives" of sorts, in the dynamo of stories, trying to circumvent the commodification of the city as the place where evil is rampant, which makes all other places innocent by default:

[E]ntiendo que se trata de crímenes perpetrados contra nosotros, para nosotros – las mexicanas y los mexicanos, las mujeres de otros países y toda la humanidad en su conjunto. Y que lo que nos coloca en interlocución con sus perpetradores es deliberado e intencional. No lo digo de una manera general sino en el sentido estricto de que estoy convencida de que esos crímenes nos están dirigidos, lanzados, como enunciados de soberanía totalitarian sobre el territorio regional, de un control cerrado sobre ese confín de México y de este lado del mundo. Dicho de otra forma: no afirmo que estamos involucrados simplemente porque los crímenes nos agreden, nos hacen sufrir, nos ofenden. Sino en un riguroso sentido técnico que me permite afirmar que la exhibición de un dominio discrecional sobre la vida y la muerte de los habitantes de ese territorio límite, representada e inscrita en el cuerpo de sus mujeres como un documento, como un edicto, sanction inapelable de un decreto, es la puesta en escena de un diálogo establecido con la ley y con todos los que en ella buscamos refugio. Esos asesinatos, destinados a la exhibición ANTE NOSOTROS de intensa capacidad de muerte, pericia para la crueldad y dominio soberano sobre un territorio, nos dicen que se trata de una jurisdicción ajena, ocupada, sobre la que no podemos interferir. Y es justamente porque no estamos de acuerdo con esto, porque pensamos que Ciudad Juárez no se encuentra

fuera de México y fuera del mundo, que tenemos que hacernos cargo de la posición de interlocutores antagónicos, críticos, en desacuerdo, en que los asesinatos nos colocan. (46-47)

That we are part of the phenomenon and that there is no clear Other is another way of saying that the *feminicidios* of the U.S.-Mexican border are systemic and that, even if we could find the individual killers, sometimes, as well as their accomplices and their enablers, the underlying factors that motivated the violence or that erupted in the *feminicidios* would not magically end. In a way, in fact, we are all accomplices and we are all enablers, since we all consume the products manufactured in the maquiladoras and, most crucially, since we all consume and mobilize the stories that constitute the discourse on Ciudad Juárez. This is, to a certain extent, one of the points that Segato makes (a very strong point, in my opinion). In its purely economic version, and thus in a reductive fashion, it is also the point that Ana del Sarto makes in her 2012 essay, “Los afectos en los estudios culturales latinoamericanos. Cuerpos y subjetividades en Ciudad Juárez,” when she writes that “[l]a violencia de género es definitivamente parte de la violencia sistémica, es decir, es invisible (todos somos cómplices y todos somos víctimas) ... En el caso de Ciudad Juárez, esta violencia de género es una de las condiciones necesarias en cuanto condiciones de posibilidad, de la reestructuración del sistema capitalista en la época contemporánea” (60).

In spite of the promising title and of a long opening section in which she provides a good, useful introduction of the “affective turn” in the humanities and especially of its main moments within the tradition of Latin American cultural studies, del Sarto ends up delineating a hard, mainstream story of the *feminicidios* based on economic conditions and developments, as well as on the reactions of traditional social groups to those developments. In so doing, and somewhat surprisingly for an article published as recently as this one, she summarizes a

powerful, influential story on the crime wave that emphasizes economic factors related to working conditions to the detriment of other possible elements of importance to the explosion of misogynistic violence. Since this specific story appears, explicitly or implicitly, in lots of the academic accounts of the *feminicidios* (while I am reluctant to venture a number, I would dare to assert that this specific, economic story is in the background of nearly all scholarly texts on the crime wave), I will discuss del Sarto's article in the following pages, so that we can search for traces of the tension between systemic explanations and the logic of the whodunit in it.

First of all, del Sarto reminds us of something that, perhaps to better perform the "othering" of Ciudad Juárez, is sometimes omitted from the discussions about violence in the city: super-exploitation of workers and conflicts among different layers of the working classes exist everywhere where capitalism reigns, which is to say everywhere, period, and not only at the U.S.-Mexican border or in the maquiladoras themselves. "Buscando concentrar los mayores beneficios reduciendo los costos de mano de obra, el capital siempre crea ejércitos de reserva de mano de obra," she writes, but "en Juárez fueron las mujeres migrantes el caldo de cultivo a partir del cual se mantuvo la mano de obra barata" (60). The effect of this "feminización del mercado laboral" (Quintero Ramírez) on the subjectivities of the female workers and on their position in the matrix of working relations and gender relations, however, is twofold, and it is simultaneously positive and negative:

En el caso particular de mujeres jóvenes, de bajos recursos, escasa educación y trabajadoras de maquilas, me interesa destacar cómo se conjugan dos aspectos contradictorios en los procesos de configuración de sus subjetividades, a partir de la encarnación de un dispositivo paradójico, inconmensurable hoy en día pues funciona a nivel global: por un lado, un aspecto táctico de liberación a nivel

micropolítico y, por otro, un aspecto estratégico de subyugación a nivel macropolítico. (59)

In other words, the narrative according to which the female workers of the maquiladoras are exclusively suffering, super-exploited subjects presents only one side of the coin (or of the multifaceted hologram). Yes, the working conditions are horrible, if we compare them to the ones that were the standard in the industries of the Western world during the second half of the 20th century, and yes, in the big scheme of things, from the perspective of global capitalism, these women are being restlessly used and abused. Still, at the level of their own lives, work in the maquiladoras represents, in some –perhaps many– cases at least, an improvement, both in personal finances and in status, and a taste of some kind of limited “freedom” that sounds all the more pathetic to people –like scholars– who take their freedom for granted but is of vital importance to the persons who have to work in such conditions in the first place. Thus, to the women of Juárez, to the so-called “inditas del sur” for instance, life as maquiladora workers might offer things and sensations that no other realistically attainable life offers, no matter how hard the selfish managers and CEOs try to isolate, cheat and exploit them: among other things and sensations, this life offers a constant salary, a social network with other workers, a degree of independence from family and spouses, the freedom to go out to town and spend the fruits of one’s labor on consumer goods, etc.

According to del Sarto, however, herein lies precisely the problem. To put it simply, it is happening too fast and social inertia precludes large sectors of the population to keep up with the transformations:

En casos de modernización acelerada, desigual y despareja [sic] en zonas no alcanzadas por modernizaciones anteriores, este reajuste creó una disyunción:

mientras las prácticas de los papeles de género cambian súbita y rápidamente, los valores quedan atados a tradiciones patriarcales que todavía subyacen en la cultura. Es decir, las mujeres al conseguir trabajo, se independizan económicamente y deciden liberarse en distintas esferas y/o comportamientos. El problema surge cuando, en la relación entre hombres y mujeres, las prácticas no se corresponden con las imágenes y representaciones predominantes tanto del papel masculino de proveedor como del papel femenino de reproducción. (60)

Del Sarto does not necessarily explain why this process leads to specially violent results at the U.S.-Mexican border, but she does point out that this is the case and that this is not exclusive to Ciudad Juárez: “En el caso de Tijuana, Mexicali, Nogales, Ciudad Juárez y Matamoros, los efectos de esta modernización neoliberal fueron devastadores” (60). Not coincidentally, these are the cities in which the “feminización del mercado laboral” became more immediately visible with the establishment of the maquiladora system and in which the precarization of labor was intensified in such a way that it affected not just women but men also, adding up to their feelings of “humiliation” and inadequacy as traditional providers within clear-cut gender roles:

[L]a incorporación de esta fuente de trabajo al mercado laboral también resulta en efectos incompatibles, pues si bien se verifica una mayor integración de las mujeres a la estructura productiva, lo cual las libera de ciertas estructuras sociales tradicionales, la racionalidad hipermoderna imperante en esas redes globales hace que la naturaleza misma del trabajo se transforme en forma radical. A las características globales del trabajo como flexible, precario e inestable, se agrega aquí su carácter complementario y temporal. Y estas características no solo

afectan a las mujeres sino también a los hombres, redoblando así su humillación.

(61)

Having set the main elements of the problem of Ciudad Juárez, then, and having described what makes the economic system instituted in the city special, for better or for worse, for the women who come from all over Mexico but live there, in term of their relations to work, to private property, and to working men in general, as a category, del Sarto then proceeds to... jump to the *feminicidios*, as it were, as if they were the only logical consequence of the situation schematically depicted and their prevalence should not surprise us, given the context. Thus, directly after positing that men are doubly humiliated by the working conditions and by the feminization of labor in Ciudad Juárez, del Sarto turns her focus toward them and declares that *they* are the killers and the rapists, albeit ones that can and should also be seen as “victims” of the real culprit, capitalism. The passage in which she does this is a short tour de force of conflating psychological and economic categories to reach conclusions that have not been proved but sound inevitable, which is why I will quote it in extenso:

Este nuevo sistema seduce: convence de que el placer existe en el presente, buscando siempre la satisfacción tecnológica que complementa el cuerpo individual. En consecuencia, mientras el capital reproduce su más sólida estructura –protección de la propiedad privada y del intercambio mediado por el dinero–, se producen genocidios basados en prejuicios patológicos o péfidos de la otredad. Es decir, los victimarios son siempre representados como demonios diabólicos, enfermos mentales y depravados sexuales. Esto específicamente es lo que hay que resaltar: los asesinos violadores, también víctimas de la violencia

sistémica, son productos de este momento del capitalismo; son personas “normales” con ansiedad de capital fácil y rápido, aun cuando los crímenes sean el camino más fácil para conseguirlo. En otras palabras, los responsables son personas perversamente “sanas y normales” aunque poderosas, y solo parecerían encontrar satisfacción en este tipo de experiencia sexual límite. (61)

The question to ask here is, I think, quite obvious: How does del Sarto know this, or pretend to know this? How can she be so sure, for instance, that the killers are “normal,” or that they act out of “humiliation,” or that they are “victims” of the economic conditions instead of, say, profiteers from them? How does she know, and does it not contradict the previous statement, that the killers can only find “satisfaction” in extreme “sexual experiences” such as abject murder? And how do these murders “turn into easy, quick capital” when their very condition of possibility is silence and secrecy, i.e. when the perpetrators, by definition, (have to) remain unknown?

Moreover, if capitalism is the real culprit, is there a real culprit, at all? Del Sarto writes that “Todo comenzó a partir de las políticas de ajuste estructural que se impusieron para resolver el ‘tequilazo’ ... Desde ese momento , las distintas recetas neoliberales comenzaron a proliferar ... Sus resultados ... son ... [que en] México, a comienzos del siglo XXI, *la vida* (sobre todo de la vida de jóvenes-mujeres-indígenas-mexicanas-migrantes) *no vale nada*” (64-65). While this seems to be plausible, what does it mean for the *feminicidios* as a concrete phenomenon? Why do they happen in some places (Ciudad Juárez, for instance) and not in others? How does macro-economic policy transform and translate into violent, individual action? Who performs that violent, individual action and to what extent is he responsible for that, if capitalism is ultimately to blame?

Thus, in this article, del Sarto displays the tension that I claim to find in virtually all academic texts on the *feminicidios* when she, on the one hand, analyzes the economic conditions that generate violence against women but, on the other hand, singles out an individual perpetrator. It is just that, in her case, and more explicitly than in other theorizations that also reach this conclusion, the individual perpetrator turns out to be an entelechy (“capitalism”) that is given almost personal characteristics of autonomy while, conversely, the concrete individuals who perform the violent acts are deemed “victims” and, in this way, stripped away from all those personal characteristics of autonomy. What is somewhat amazing is that these conclusions, which can be deemed to amount to a loss of subjectivity, are reached in an essay that is titled “Cuerpos and subjetividades” and that purports to describe the processes of construction of subjectivity of the killers who, on the contrary, disappear.

Granted, del Sarto reaches a different conclusion in her essay, too:

Paradójicamente, una de las contradicciones más extrañas que se pueden rastrear en las páginas de varios textos que tratan el tema es que estos sacos de huesos, a partir de diversas escrituras y acciones sociales (como la movilización de movimientos sociales de familiares y la aparición de ONG relacionadas con los mismos, muy prolíficos hoy en Juárez), se transfiguran en subjetividades, precarias y vulnerables. (65)

And this constitution of subjectivities that build communities based on the grieving and on the common struggle for justice is the topic Patricia Ravelo Blancas, a professor of Anthropology at the University of Texas at El Paso, deals with in her article, “We Never Thought It Would Happen to Us: Approaches to the Study of the Subjectivities of the Mothers

of the Murdered Women of Ciudad Juárez,” published in 2010. Here, basing her research on interviews conducted between 2003 and 2004 among members of the families of some of the victims of the *feminicidios*, as well as among activists, Ravelo Blancas aims to explain how tragic events and the experience of loss and mourning can serve as a powerful motivator for the construction of communities that seek to change the conditions in which those tragic events took place, to begin with: “The discussion centers on how these women are constituted as historical subjects, understanding their subjectivities as a manifestation of conflicting emotions: on the one hand, suffering, fear, insecurity, anger, and discouragement, and on the other hand, strength, dignity, courage, and endurance” (37).

Ravelo Blancas points out that contexts of structural inequality like the one prevalent at the U.S.-Mexican border, in which many “residents have been forced to live in poverty and have suffered discrimination and abuses of their human rights” (38), can lead to social paralysis and frustration but also can breed resistance to these very conditions and, potentially, social change:

The violence these subjects experience in their daily life has paradoxically changed their worldview by stimulating feelings of strength and dignity as well as of resistance and willingness to fight for justice. Among them, many women have become able to think for themselves and have also begun to question authority in an attempt to transform their surroundings for the better. On a foundational level two main groups of feelings are present: on the one hand, melancholy, nostalgia, and existential crises; on the other, desperation, impotence, and the inability to explain the violence perpetrated against their daughters. Despite the diversity of individual interviewees’ responses, several women rejected the lethargy and

inaction that can be a product of melancholy and depression. On the contrary, these women feel mobilized and have become active. (38)

Of course, as Ravelo Blancas herself clarifies, this is but a possible response to the *feminicidios* and not a universal pattern among the members of the victims' families in Ciudad Juárez: "Not all the affected families and mothers have become activists, however. Not all have become independently operating subjects or members of groups that demand justice" (38). Nevertheless, it is clearly the possible response that she favors and that she considers worthy of analysis and, ultimately, of praise. For instance, all the subjects she interviews are somehow personally involved in the fight against the impunity that surrounds the crime wave; for some (unexplained) reason, she does not deem it important to examine more closely the subjectivity of subjects who, as a response to trauma, opt for inaction or for reclusion, rather than for activism or for commitment to the struggle for social change. Admittedly, such inactive subjects are harder to find, by the very nature of their choice to *not* act and, thus, *not* become visible. The lack of their narratives in this article is not only due to practical difficulties, however, but also to an unstated but obvious bias: Ravelo Blancas is interested in women who become activists, because that is the subjectivity that she herself prefers, or that is the narrative –from trauma to personal autonomy through struggle and commitment– that she privileges. Thus, in her language, the women who react to the explosion of violence in their daily lives and to trauma by turning into activists "become able to think for themselves." But this implies, in my opinion wrongly, that whatever they did before turning into activists was *not* "thinking for themselves" and, by implication, that whatever similarly positioned women who, for any reason, do not turn into activists do is not "thinking for themselves." Furthermore, and as was already quoted above, she reinforces this condescending (I hope unconsciously condescending) approach when she writes that not all

women who have lost dear ones to the crime wave of Ciudad Juárez “have become independently operating subjects or members of groups that demand justice,” as if the only way to become such a theoretically independent subject was social activism, or as if the affiliation in collectives or groups guaranteed the achievement of an “independently operating” subjectivity in the first place (I use the term “achievement” because she puts this in terms of a result, of “having become” something, and not of a process, of permanently “becoming”). Is there really no option to social activism, not even when abstention from struggle, for instance, or concentration on the daily, tedious work of surviving is motivated by personal trauma?

This overt privileging of the value of activism *per se* is in itself problematic; besides, it inevitably preconfigures her point of view on matters. It leads her, for example, to give a prominent spot to the testimony of Esther Chávez Cano, an activist whose work we have already discussed in the previous sections of this dissertation (the activist who started counting and whose work was crucial to the very first formulations of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez) and who has been accused, with or without firm foundations, of “profiting” from the suffering of the mothers (she is not a mother or a member of a victim’s family herself). In this article, she is quoted as saying: “The bravery of the women who come here has made me stronger. I can withstand many things, because if they come here after having been beaten, raped, their value diminished, they strengthen me to keep on fighting” (43). Needless to say, this is an oral testimony that uses some common tropes about inspiration and strength. But it is also important to add that it can be read, from a critical perspective, as the acknowledgment of the ultimately functional, utilitarian character of the suffering of the victims and victims’ families for the sake of the struggle for social transformation: The suffering is worth something not for the suffering alone but because it hardens the resolve to fight the power and, therefore, to make future suffering of the kind impossible or at least less

likely. This, in turn, can and does leave a slight aftertaste because one gets the uncomfortable sense that Chávez Cano –and the approving Ravelo Blancas (and other scholars) by extension– *is* profiting indeed from the suffering caused by the *feminicidios*, if not economically, then at least politically and in terms of her concrete, well-intentioned organizational goals.

Furthermore, the tension that I am tracing in all academic texts dedicated to dissecting and explaining the crime wave is also noticeable in this article, although its presence is perhaps less evident than in the previous essays discussed. To her credit, Ravelo Blancas never tries, in this text at least, to pinpoint the murders on individual or collective culprits, and she never speculates on the motives of killers who are unknown anyway and whose motives, as far as they exist, are probably either immensely diverse or at least more complicated than the pop psychological ones often attributed to them. In this, “Subjectivities of the Mothers” sharply differs from most other academic articles on the topic, constituting a modest but methodologically sound ethnographic work instead of a collection of more or less desperate conjectures in the business of making sense of something that does not. Indeed, Ravelo Blancas concludes:

These sentiments [confusion, grief, pain, etc.] are submerged in the incomprehensibility of such violence. Women do not understand why someone has murdered their daughter or relative, and there is no moral or rational explanation that can appease them. The only survival mechanism that they possess that can help cope with this violence is the repetition of their stories. (51)

Yet it is clear from everything that precedes this rather remarkable conclusion about the healing powers of story-telling, as well as from everything that follows it, that story-

telling is a coping mechanism, according to Ravelo Blancas, but it is not further interesting or productive as such. What she deems really worthy, because of its significance for a political struggle toward goals that she shares, is the way this story-telling leads to the building of communities that are able to establish their own truths and fight both the official stories of the *feminicidios* and, more generally, power itself:

By converting their individual stories into a collective discourse, these women can reshape suffering into political action. They also have to confront the misogynistic culture in which these deeds are to understand the patriarchal moral system that dominates their actions. This is a consciousness-raising process that will take time to develop given the border region's deeply rooted discriminatory and sexist social practice. (51)

It is almost as if Ravelo Blancas were celebrating the fact that the horrible murders of Ciudad Juárez, at least, led to “consciousness-raising” and to the possibility of social transformation. Given that she considers that the prevalent culture of the border is misogynistic and guilty of exacerbating gender conflicts and violence against women in the first place, it is only logical that she believes that the fight against it is, by necessity, a good fight, as well as that the fight against it is automatically a fight against the *feminicidios* themselves, indeed. Thus, even while she does not name capitalism or border culture as the proper culprit, the author conflates those large entelechies and the actual crimes against women perpetrated by individual subjects in a way that indicates that this conflation looks almost natural to her. In fact, this tendency of hers goes arguably very far, to the point that she portrays it as understood that the political awakening of the members of the victims' families, when it takes place, involves the struggle for a more just society, rather than, say, the

lobbying for violent revenge or the mobilizing of proto-fascistic ideas — both of which are theoretically “thinkable” responses to trauma, as well:

[T]his chapter considered objective reality by exploring the world of emotions, understood as mechanisms that work to transform predominant societal structures. This transformative process is evident in the mothers and representatives of nongovernmental organizations when they demand the nightmare of everyday life end, that their city be a safe place again, that basic necessities be satisfied, and that ingrained system of discrimination and impunity be terminated ... It is important to know how and why these movements are enacted by the waking of (or coming to) consciousness. Women can gain a sense of self-consciousness by sharing both lived experiences and emotional responses. When they reflect on their emotions, they can analyze how their experiences gain meaning. This meaning is grounded in historical, racial, and patriarchal identity categories and requires interpersonal connections. These connections, established through shared emotions and political actions, will eventually give way to a new ethics that can transform truth and justice from fleeting dreams to a concrete reality. (51-52)

In other words, and even while she is not in the business of finding the culprit proper, she *does* find the heroes of this tragic story. Moreover, the heroes are the ones who can “analyze how their experiences gain meaning,” and the more you are able to translate horrible experiences into meaning, the better you can transform society and make something good out of a tragedy. One way or another, making sense of an explosion of violence that does not make sense, as well as assigning blame or value to individuals involved in something way larger than themselves in order to make sense of it, is the crucial point for all scholars

previously discussed, and –admittedly in a much more tepid, indirect manner– for Ravelo Blancas, too.

The multiple stories that are advanced in order to make sense of the *feminicidios* are, incidentally, the object of study of Ravelo Blancas in yet another one of her articles, “La batalla de las cruces: los crímenes contra mujeres en la frontera y sus intérpretes,” co-authored with Héctor Domínguez Ruvalcaba and published in 2003. Basing their analysis on a famous formulation by Michel de Certeau according to which truth is produced independently from the facts (123), Ravelo Blancas and Domínguez Ruvalcaba attempt to identify, classify and tabulate all “hypotheses” about and “interpretations” of the crime wave proposed until the year in which the essay was published, calling these hypotheses and interpretations “stories” that are a result of “paranoid imagination” to explain the ways in which the profiles of the killers are constructed in accordance to what cinematic culture allows us to expect from serial killers, and despite the fact that virtually nothing is *actually* known about the killers (124). In other words, their project is remarkably similar to this dissertation, at least insofar as that it deals with the discourse on Ciudad Juárez and the ways in which some stories attain the status of truth but without that either Ravelo Blancas and Domínguez Ruvalcaba or me even pretend to try to solve the enigma of the crime wave or to offer “truths” about the “facts,” and much less to find the culprits and name the murderers once and for all:

Esta distinción [the one de Certeau makes between “truth” and “facts”] nos parece primordial como criterio de análisis discursivo de las hipótesis y líneas de investigación suscitadas en torno a dichos crímenes [the *feminicidios*]. Al aludir a las explicaciones de los hechos, incluso a su más numérica y concreta descripción, estamos enfocándonos en los factores ideológicos que intervienen en la construcción de lo real ... De esta manera, con la elaboración de hipótesis sobre

los hechos de secuestro, violación, tortura y asesinato de las mujeres juarenses, se ponen a funcionar marcos de representación determinados por modelos de racionalidad cuyo estatuto de “real” o “verdadero” depende de su capacidad de crear consenso en la esfera pública. (123)

All in all, the authors of “La batalla de las cruces” identify 32 different hypotheses and interpretations advanced to somehow explain the crimes and make sense of violence against women in Juárez in local newspapers, daily press from El Paso, the speeches of State representatives and activists, the testimonies of activists and members of the victims’ families, and other documents and texts published or compiled between 2001 and 2003 (123). In other words, Ravelo Blancas and Domínguez Ruvalcaba find 32 stories that pretend to be truths about the matter and that sometimes complement each other, but then sometimes also contradict each other or run on parallel lines, without apparent intersections. As they put it while explaining their methodology:

En nuestro recuento de las diversas hipótesis y líneas de investigación con que los actores de la sociedad civil y del Estado han tratado de explicar y resolver estos crímenes hemos llegado a localizar 32 interpretaciones, lo cual da cuenta de una numerosa participación y de una compleja red de relaciones de poder que rebasa, sin anularlas, la dimensión local y la misma preponderancia de lo policial como criterio de investigación. En la ardua elaboración discursiva sobre la incógnita se relacionan, desde el punto de vista especial, lo local con lo nacional, lo binacional y lo global. Desde un punto de vista académico, se han analizado los factores sociales, económicos, políticos y culturales a partir de diversas disciplinas como la sociología, la psicología social, la criminología, la antropología y posturas

teóricas como los estudios de género, la posmodernidad y los estudios culturales. Desde un punto de vista político, son distinguibles las visiones nacionalista, localista, religiosa, la política pro derechos humanos, la política pro diversidad, el feminismo, el racismo, la xenofobia y el clasismo. (123)

And the list of hypotheses and interpretations is really a sight to behold. Everything that can be possible imagined about the murders *has* been imagined, apparently, and has then been tabulated by Ravelo Blancas and Domínguez Ruvalcaba in order to be on said list, which goes from organ traffic to family disintegration, all the way through the following stories: sadistic snuff movie pornography; messages from the drug barons to the authorities; extrajudicial killings related to drug traffic; vendettas among rivaling gangs; police conscious complicity in the crimes; selection of the victims using a photographic catalogue with pictures of female maquiladora workers; the creation of a general climate of insecurity to produce a culture of terror and fear; murders that somehow financially benefit the bourgeois families that rule Ciudad Juárez; kidnappings of women for orgies organized by the sons of those families; Satanic rites in which women are sacrificed; copycat crimes; male nature (!); orgies organized not by the sons of the leading families of Juárez but by the elders themselves; crimes of passion; vendettas among rivaling oligarchic families; serial killers from the United States; fetishism (!); male anxiety as a reaction to the participation of women in the sphere of private jobs; male anxiety as a reaction to the participation of women in the public sphere; defense of patriarchy in front of the ascendance of women as influencing actors; misogyny; racism; extreme program to reduce migration from the South of Mexico to the North; lack of decent public services, poverty; impunity culture in general; lack of urban planning and of programs of prevention of violence and social ills; loss of moral values; revealing female clothing (!); insistence of the women of Juárez on trying to “invade” spaces that are not

appropriate for them; a certain “relaxation” of traditional female modesty; and family disintegration (133). And they have sources for each and every one of these stories! Whether it is the authorities, the local journalists, the police (and other State agencies) in official reports, the academic community, the representatives of the Church or of the trade and commerce guilds of the city, or it is the community leaders, the “citizenship” in general or the NGOs involved in social and political work in Ciudad Juárez, Ravelo Blancas and Domínguez Ruvalcaba have identified the “sources/transmitters of the hypotheses in every single case and documented, thus, the myriad of voices contributing to the discourse on *feminicidios* through the mobilization and postulation of more stories than is initially apparent, when the first reaction, even of scholars who should know better, often tends to be –as was discussed at the beginning of this chapter, for instance– “*of course* we know who kills the women of Ciudad Juárez, everyone does!” (133)

Given the scope of the essay, which is rather short even for an academic article, as opposed to a monograph or a book, Ravelo Blancas and Domínguez Ruvalcaba do not deepen their analysis of the hypotheses that have been advanced to explain the crime wave and, in the process, constitute the crime wave itself, but they practically limit themselves to the elaboration of the aforementioned list the identified stories. However, they do point out that there are at least three different “symbolic-political fields” (123) in which these stories operate: “la imaginación cinematográfica o la política de los monstruos, las interpretaciones estructurales de la victimización, y la impunidad y el mercado neoliberal como principios victimizantes” (124).

In the first one of these fields, titled “the cinematic imagination or the politics of the monstrous,” the authors include each and every story that has elements of evil subjects performing the crimes for reasons that defy the understanding of rational or conventional observers from the general, peaceful society: “Estamos, pues, reconociendo en las

elaboraciones hipotéticas de la policía [about the existence of serial killers] una reiteración de la moral mediática que reduce los problemas de violencia a la fórmula de oponer una mente temible y perversa a una masa media inocente e indefensa” (124-25). Here, in this field, all hypotheses related to snuff movies, religious (Satanic) rituals, organ traffic, and serial killers are to be located (126). In the second field, “the structural interpretations of victimization,” all stories in which the discussion is focused on the numbers of the victims –with wildly different numbers being provided by different, sometimes opposed social and political actors–and in which the main point is to clearly define what exactly constitutes a *feminicidio* and what does not (127). All the stories that mobilize notions of State crimes, masculine reaction to women advancement, and violent responses to the migration of female workers from the South of Mexico have to be situated in this field (128-29). Finally, the third field, delimited by “the impunity and the neoliberal market as victimizing principles,” includes all hypotheses that emphasize the generalized corruption of the Mexican State and the pervasiveness of drug trafficking, as well as the ones that directly blame the owners of the maquiladoras for the murders, either in a direct sense, as when they are supposedly organizing bloody orgies, or in a more indirect one, as when they are merely exploiting their female workers to death (129-31): “Si el control de la estructura socioeconómica depende de las formas de coerción [instituted by the State, the drug lords or the bourgeois class], esta economía invisible e ilegal apuesta al terror como garantía de su perpetuación” (131).

After distributing the 32 stories in the three symbolic-political fields described above in an analytic process that does not pretend to exhaust the potential implications of each one of those stories (most of them have elements that could make them belong to more than one field, after all), Ravelo Blancas and Domínguez Ruvalcaba conclude their article with a call for action that takes the demythologization of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez as its required starting point:

La revisión de las propuestas de líneas de investigación, las hipótesis producidas al calor de las luchas ideológicas y las consideraciones contextuales, nos permiten darnos cuenta de que estos hechos lamentables de exterminio de mujeres tienen un efecto detonador en la reflexión social y política. Aquí se han puesto en cuestión las relaciones entre la estructura sexogenérica con los mecanismos de dominación (pos) política que agrupamos bajo dos aspectos principales: el sostenimiento de un sistema económico supraestatal mediante un estado de impunidad y la exacerbación de formas fóbicas de exclusión y sometimiento tales como la misoginia, el racismo, el clasismo y la xenofobia, propiciados por dicho sistema. Más que de seguir construyendo monstruos o chivos expiatorios o entreteniéndose en los asuntos de jurisdicción e interpretaciones legalistas, la extinción de esta infame pesadilla dependerá de la capacidad de la sociedad civil (local, nacional e internacional) de confrontar el estado de terror y desarticular los mecanismos de la impunidad que imperan en esta frontera. (132)

Even in this work that attempts to offer an exit from the uncritical mobilization of stories about the murders, though, the tension I have been documenting in the different essays studied is manifest, albeit in a less evident form than in other texts in which one or the other hypothesis is usually privileged and provided, consciously or unconsciously, with the status of truth by the respective scholarly author. In this case, however, it is quite explicit that the whole point of the article is to study the discourse on Ciudad Juárez as discourse and to offer a map of different hypotheses and interpretations advanced to make sense of the crime wave without endorsing any single one of those hypotheses and explanations.

That is why it is so remarkable that, while discussing the first field of stories, i.e. the one that groups together all the explanations that depend on the existence of “monsters” who commit crimes for evil reasons that are unrelated to conventional financial and political rationality and, hence, are incomprehensible to regular citizens, Ravelo Blancas and Domínguez Ruvalcaba cannot help but include a disclaimer in which they use a specific case in order to assert that those stories do have a grain of truth, after all, taking the results of the police investigation on that specific case, as well as their sensationalizing reporting in the local press, at face value, in a strange, significant moment of performance of exactly the same process –the naïve, desperate acceptance of narratives by subjects eager to somehow make sense of the *feminicidios*– that they are describing and deconstructing, in the first place:

No puede hablarse, sin embargo, de la total ausencia de rituales mágicos, por lo menos en uno de los casos más afamados. En noviembre del 2002, un brujo fue detenido y encarcelado por habersele comprobado su participación en un ritual narcosatánico para descuartizar a una paseña y su primo y enterrar sus restos en el patio de su casa. Él fue contratado por un narcotraficante, el marido de Daissy Salcido, la mujer asesinada. El brujo Martín Guerrero detalló el ritual y ahora está preso en una celda de alta seguridad en el CERESO. Este hecho nos demuestra [!] que de ninguna manera puede negarse la existencia de estos rituales y su vinculación a la cultura narcotraficante y el crimen organizado. (126)

Perhaps less surprisingly, the authors confer even more credibility to the stories of the two other fields, which emphasize social, political, and economic factors that generate the conditions for the existence of the *feminicidios* and are, therefore, usually the preferred frames of reference for scholars trained in the humanities, the social sciences, and cultural studies.

Hence, they do believe that the State is clearly responsible, if not by commission, then certainly by omission:

Si contrastamos estas preocupaciones [about incompetence and negligence in the investigation of the murders] con la minimización expresada en los numerosos oficiales de la Fiscalía Especial de Homicidios de Mujeres y Desaparecidas, hemos de afirmar que son los voceros oficiales los que han contribuido más notoriamente a esta desvalorización de la vida de las mujeres. Tal afirmación nos llevaría a postular no solamente el debilitamiento del estado de derecho sino también la idea de un Estado que ha emprendido el exterminio de las mujeres inmigrantes con su indiferencia y evidente celo por ocultar las verdaderas evidencias de los crímenes. (128)

Likewise, they obviously consider that impunity “no sólo permite sino anima la realización de los crímenes” (129) and, furthermore, think of these impunity in economic terms related to power relations and to strategies used by the dominant classes to cement their position in the social hierarchy:

Es importante hacer hincapié en la despatologización del victimario a fin de enfocarnos en las condiciones estructurales y simbólicas en las que se produce la victimización. Al concebirse como grupo de poder se trata de penetrar en el espacio y la forma de la impunidad. Para el sostenimiento de dicha impunidad se pactan acuerdos, se teje una red de procedimientos, se ejercen estrategias de fingimiento, se amenaza, descalifica, difama y elimina a los que tienen información comprometedor. Es precisamente el tráfico y la posesión de

información un factor que determina muchos crímenes cometidos por este grupo de poder beneficiario de la impunidad. (130-31)

All of this, of course, makes sense. But the point of the article was that all of these are stories, too, and that they are advanced to make sense without necessarily being “true,” which makes it all the more remarkable that, almost as if without noticing, Ravelo Blancas and Domínguez Ruvalcaba end up supporting some of them to the detriment of the others. Needless to say, some stories deserve more support than others: the authors do not give any merit, say, to the hypothesis according to which the clothing of the victims explains the crimes (133). Still, the privileging of some interpretations over others in “La batalla de las cruces,” a text that sets out to be a discursive study and speculates about culprits and motives nevertheless, is perhaps the single most spectacular example of how the tension between analyzing innumerable factors that constitute structures and social phenomena, on the one hand, and putting the blame on individual or collective subjects that can be made directly responsible for the actual crimes, on the other hand, manifests itself, perhaps inevitably, in the whole corpus of the academic literature of the *feminicidios*. And this corpus is, without a doubt, and especially since the beginning of the century and the increasing academic interest on the matter that has been described in the previous pages, one of the main arenas of the negotiation and competition between different stories that are assigned the status of “truth” to varying degrees and by diverse actors –in this case, by reputed scholars who more or less “objectively” analyze the crime wave– in a process that constitutes the discourse on Ciudad Juárez, reproduces it, and gives it intellectual legitimacy and weight.

To summarize: there are numerous academic approaches to the *feminicidios*, and we have discussed some of the most relevant or most representative ones in order to show how, in all of them, the phenomenon being described is actually being constituted by the act of

describing it itself. But this phenomenon is described and constituted in other discursive fields, as well, such as pop culture, film, and music, as well as in literary fiction and narrative genres. We will turn to these fields in the next two chapters and will show how Ciudad Juárez is created in them.

V. MAINSTREAMING *FEMINICIDIO*:
THE DISCOURSE ON CIUDAD JUÁREZ IN MASS AND POPULAR CULTURE

Cualquier teoría puede ser. O todas al mismo tiempo.

Carlos Carrera (*Backyard*)

The year was 1999. In the most industrially developed areas of the Western world, and even in some parts of the not-so-industrially-developed, expanded “Western” world, the so-called Dotcom Economy (based on the Internet, which was a novelty) was booming and, despite the approaching turn-of-the-century with its obvious symbolic connotations, there was nothing about the collective imaginary of the times that could now be deemed as properly apocalyptic, the short-lived and rather naive fade of YK2 notwithstanding (Geier n.pag.). Much to the contrary, and especially when viewed in retrospect after 2008, the late nineties stand out as a period of generalized optimism and relative abundance in which the biggest political problem faced by the President of the United States, which back then was still considered the world’s sole superpower, was the ramifications that his infamous affair with an intern of the White House had for the country’s institutional stability.

This is, of course, the Western standard narrative, which very strictly follows a certain reading of the historical and economic events in the United States and parts of Western

Europe and tries to discursively impose it, with varying degrees of success, to the whole world. In reality, there were cracks in the Dot Com Economy that should have been evident to contemporary observers and that in many cases were pointed out from the margins as symptoms of a looming systemic crisis. There was the fact that the Dot Com Economy was based on the expansion of the Internet, to begin with, which to these days takes place in an extremely uneven pattern. There was also the Asian financial crisis of 1997, and there were the first signs of what would shortly amount to the implosion of Argentina's and other Latin American countries' economies, as well. Even in the United States, conflicts that announced new configurations of political, social and economic life were impending: the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, for one, or perhaps more poignantly the Battle of Seattle of December 1999. Both of these events can be chosen, indeed, as moments where the U.S.-American 20th century effectively ends.

From the point of view of a country like Mexico, moreover, in which 1994 had either been experienced as an *annus terribilis* or as a point of inflection that made hope —however frail— possible again (depending on the point of view of the subject experiencing the events of that year), and sometimes even as both, the nineties in general had meanings that differed from the Western standard narrative. Those meanings had been shaped by violence: popular insurgency, assassinations, intensified repression and aggressive subjection of the country's economy to the circuits of neoliberal, global capitalism had marked the decade.

By 1999, the *feminicidios* of Ciudad Juárez already were an integral part of this violent mix. Six full years had passed since the body of the first victim of the crime wave had been discovered and since the crime wave itself had thus begun to be constructed as a distinct discursive formation. Civil society, both in the border and in Mexico DF, had been on high alert for years; stories about the crimes had been advanced by the media, by popular testimonies and by academics, among other actors; the most activist parts of the country's

feminist and human rights movement had already undergone full cycles of protest and subsequent State repression. Even the State, in fact, had been forced to acknowledge, however reluctantly, contradictorily and hypocritically, that a problem existed, as well as to take action against it.

That the problem was defined differently depending on the subject defining it and her or his specific interests and perspectives, or that the actions taken by the State (the arrest of Latif Sharif and Los Rebeldes, for instance [see chapter II]) were nothing more than a transparent charade with classist, xenophobic, and deeply masculinist undertones, is beside the point. The point is that, by 1999, the discourse on Juárez had been basically established in Mexico and all its main lines had been drawn. When people talked about the *feminicidios*, in other words, everyone already understood what the issue was, even if this understanding was based on a denial of the existence of the phenomenon itself or on a system of thought that blamed the victims for the violence inflicted upon them. The crime wave was constituted and had developed into a spectacle. It was, to use a colloquial term, “a thing.” Therefore, it was ripe to spring into the cultural and pop cultural mainstream, even at an international level, and to become commodified in the international market of paranoia not only by journalistic approaches and contributions to political debates but also by music, art, film, and literature.

One of the first prominent apparitions of the crime wave of Ciudad Juárez on the level of international pop culture is a rather well-known song called “Juarez,” composed and performed by the U.S.-American singer-songwriter and virtuosic piano player Tori Amos and included in her 1999 album, *To Venus and Back*³¹. Full disclosure: I became aware of the phenomenon of the *feminicidios*, and in fact of the existence of Ciudad Juárez, as a young man who bought the album *immediately* after its release (September 20, 1999) and researched a bit on the motivations behind the lyrics — I was a fan. Cute as this little piece of anecdotal

³¹ “Juarez.” *To Venus and Back*, Atlantic, 1999, www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6SkXb7F0Ag.

information may be, it would not be of any relevance to this work, were it not for the fact that my own experience as a pop culture consumer, wanna-be activist (at that time) and soon-to-be scholar hardly seems to have been unique. In an appendix to her 2013 book *Sing us a Song, Piano Woman: Female Fans and the Music of Tori Amos*, which she aptly titles “My Position as a Tori Amos Fan,” sociologist Adrienne Trier-Bieniek explains how music, and specifically how Amos’s music, helped her to expand her horizons as a student: “As I began to add Tori’s albums to my collection of music, I found myself not only connecting to her music on an emotional and healing level but also finding that her songs represented new perspectives on the world that I had never been exposed to” (141). More specifically, she singles out “Juarez” and emphasizes the importance it had for both her research and her activism:

In the song, Tori detailed the rape and murder of women in Juarez, Mexico [more on the use of the verb ‘detailed’ later]. I had never heard of this happening and instantly felt like I needed to know as much about this area of the world as possible. Later in my life, after graduating from college, I had the opportunity to participate in *The Vagina Monologues* and perform a monologue about the women who were raped and murdered in Juarez. I credit Tori’s music for influencing this activism. (141-42).

Perhaps more importantly, in a section of her book that deals with the history of the Pandora Project, a non-governmental organization of survivors of sexual abuse whose foundation was explicitly inspired by several of Amos’s songs and statements, Trier-Bieniek points out how “Tori’s songwriting also consciously is based in feminist activism, such as in the song ‘Juarez’, which addressed the rape and murder of women in Juarez, Mexico,” and

quotes the testimony of a member of the Pandora's Project named Donna, who says: "Like the Juarez song, I didn't know about that until I realized what the song is about. I just feel like I've always learned something" (113).

All of this is part of the story because the story of the song "Juarez" and its configuration as a tentpole in the process of mainstreaming *feminicidios* and the discourse on Ciudad Juárez in the international pop cultural landscape of the late nineties and early naughts does not end with its lyrics — as we will see in the following pages. The lyrics of "Juarez" are just one element, and not really a main one, of this process. What plays a larger role than the lyrics is, then, the image of Tori Amos herself, the discourse on Tori Amos, the spectacle of Tori Amos as representative for a global sensibility and frame of mind. Although she was a veritable music star in the nineties, and although she never wholly left the public spot and is in fact experiencing a revival of sorts³², Amos has always seemed to belong to the margins of mainstream music, at the very best, or to an alternative, more diverse place populated by "disruptive divas," to quote the title of a 2002 book by Lori Burns and Melissa Lafrance³³.

And she was indeed disruptive, but a *mainstream* diva nonetheless: Among many other commercial successes, during her mid-nineties heyday she had an album, *Under the Pink*, peak at number one of the British charts in 1994, as well as another one, *Boys for Pele*, peak at number two of the charts both in the United States and the United Kingdom in 1996. *To Venus and Back*, the album of which "Juarez" is the second track, peaked at number twelve in the United States in 1999, in fact, according to the *Billboard* lists. She has appeared on the cover of prestigious, massively distributed and widely read magazines such as *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, and *NME*, and she has been the subjects of video documentaries and television specials, as well as of several books and numerous articles, both popular and academic. In her

³² See the article "A Space Odyssey: Tori Offers a Travel Planner for Select New Songs on *To Venus and Back*," written by Annie Zaleski and published on *Alternative Press* in its October 1999 edition.

³³ *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity & Popular Music*. Taylor & Francis, 2002. The other "divas" studied in the book are PJ Harvey, Courtney Love, and Me'Shell Ndegéocello.

2012 article, very seriously and scholarly titled “Reflections on Tori Amos and the Feminist Movement,” feminist blogger Morgan Baden offers what is perhaps the best measure of the extent to which, for a brief but influential moment in the nineties, Amos was not only inside the cultural mainstream but an integral part of it: “Suddenly, Tori was everywhere. (You don’t get any more mainstream than being named one of *People’s* 50 Most Beautiful People.)” (n.pag.)

Amos, however, brought her own preoccupations to this mainstream whose contours, by embracing her (and other acts like her), were itself shifted and changed while remaining, somewhat inevitably, mainstream. In that way, she embodied new sensibilities and frames of mind that had been shaped by second- and even by third-wave feminism and that were becoming widespread in the Western discourse, without ever becoming quite hegemonic but also without ever fully disappearing and being made unthinkable again (no matter how hard the masculinist backlash has tried to achieve that). In the words of feminist blogger Sady Doyle:

I’d argue that Amos’s popularity was connected to some of the key cultural moments of that decade. Her early mythos—burnt-out hair-metal escapee turns earnest singer-songwriter in attempt to regain her bruised integrity—was a perfect fit in the early ‘90s, as power-ballad fatigue set in and the MTV generation searched for “authenticity” in music. Her much-mocked New Age belief system tied into the pop-Jungian mysticism of the mid-‘90s—think *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, *The Celestine Prophecy*, Robert Bly, even *The Craft*—for which Amos, always willing to talk about faerie aid, could be seen as a high-profile representative. Her large, early-adopting online fandom was tied to the late ‘90s and the rise of the Internet. But in particular, the public persona of Tori Amos was

tied, whether by coincidence or intent, to the emergence of third-wave feminism, and the struggles around gender and sexuality that characterized the decade of its rise. (n.pag.)

Already in her first album, *Little Earthquakes*, Amos included the track “Me and a Gun,” a haunting a cappella song³⁴ with lyrics about the time when she was raped, at age 21, by a patron of a bar in which she had just performed (Jackson n.pag.). The fact that she was herself a survivor of sexual abuse, coupled with her openness to talk about it at a time when feminism was just beginning to be able to make the pervasiveness of rape culture and the inherent bias of the patriarchal justice system against the victims in cases of sexual violence, made Amos an instant feminist icon. Far from recoiling from this status, Amos fed on it, thematizing classic feminist issues in songs like “Silent All These Years,” about finding an own voice as a female subject³⁵; “Crucify,” about the struggle for female autonomy³⁶; “Cornflake Girl,” about genital mutilation³⁷; “Spark,” about miscarriages and abortion³⁸; and her ironic cover of the violently misogynistic Eminem’s song, “’97 Bonnie & Clyde,” about domestic abuse³⁹; to name but a few. Her writing has always been obscure, sometimes to the point of incomprehensibility (what in itself is inscribed in a certain tradition of female writing and could plausibly be attributed to trauma [Lewis Herman]), but whenever the meaning is too impenetrable for the fans, there are the interviews and media profiles, in which she talks about her experiences, about what we could call “the female condition”, and about her thoughts on the state feminism (Baden n.pag.).

³⁴ “Me and a Gun.” *Little Earthquakes*, Atlantic, 1991, www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xpyMvYYGjY.

³⁵ “Silent All These Years.” *Little Earthquakes*, Atlantic, 1991, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSYr0etDzRM.

³⁶ “Crucify.” *Little Earthquakes*, Atlantic, 1991, www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ipCKIxdHTs.

³⁷ “Cornflake Girl.” *Under the Pink*, Atlantic, 1994, www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_HA5Czhtx4.

³⁸ “Spark.” *From the Choirgirl Hotel*, Atlantic, 1998, www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVMwDd8V_kY.

³⁹ “’97 Bonnie & Clyde.” *Strange Little Girls*, Atlantic, 2001, www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKKs5J-goKU.

As if all this would not have already sufficed to place her as a major voice in the field of pop cultural feminism, she co-founded the largest anti-sexual violence organization in the United States, the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN), in 1994, as their institutional webpage attests, and has been a consistent presence, both personally and symbolically, for thousands of Amos's fans who are survivors of rape and sexual violence themselves and who use her music and the communities that surround it as a means of emotional support: to quote a sociological study on her influence, "Amos's unofficial role as personal confidant to the sexually abused was, and to a large extent still is, overwhelming" (Finding 45).

By the time Amos published "Juarez" in 1999, then, literally no one in the international pop cultural scene had better credentials or more moral authority to introduce the audiences of the world to the *feminicidios* of Ciudad Juárez and thus to help instill in the pop cultural discourse the awareness of a horrific crime wave against women taking place in the U.S.-Mexican border and of Ciudad Juárez being a place where women get killed in high numbers. Surprisingly, though, given how many people heard about this issue for the first time through their encounter with this song (myself included), its lyrics are oblique at best:

Dropped off the edge again down in Juarez

"Don't even bat an eye

If the eagle cries" the rasta man says

Just cause the desert likes your girls flesh

And no angel came.

I don't think you even know

What you think you just said

So go on
Spill your seed
Shake your gun to the rasta man's head
And the desert
She must be blessed
And no angel came.

There's a time to keep it up
A time to keep it in
The Indian is told
The cowboy is his friend
You know that I can breathe
Even when I cheat
Should've been over for me
No angel came.
No angel came.
No angel came.

What we have here is a highly sophisticated but hermetic poem that, rather than denouncing concrete gender violence in a concrete location, takes the *feminicidios* of Ciudad Juárez as an extreme example of the precariousness of female existence under patriarchy. If read as a text devoid of a larger text (its context) in which it is embedded, a reader could say that the song does not pretend to be a pamphlet and it does not pretend to actually educate anyone about what is happening in Ciudad Juárez or elsewhere. It includes, after all, references to characters such as the “rasta man,” “the cowboy,” and “the Indian,” who do not

seem to fit into modern “Mexican culture” or modern “border culture” (for lack of better terms) at all, let alone into the contemporary U.S.-American and international perception of those cultures. Further, it insistently mentions an obviously mythical figure, an “angel,” whose absence is the single most important piece of information that these lyrics give to us. Other than that, we have an implacable “desert” that likes the “flesh” of “girls” and something (we infer that it is the body of a dead girl, because of the title, but the lyrics alone do not really say) being dropped off onto it.

Guided by the title of this song, as well as by extra-textual information about Amos and her recurring concerns, we can safely interpret these lyrics as being about dead (female) bodies being discarded in a timeless, both metaphorical (patriarchy) and literal (the U.S.-Mexican border) “desert” that seems to be asking for this human sacrifice. In this violent ritual, though there is not a grain of hope of salvation (“No angel came”). We can argue that the “rasta man” is some kind of archaic, more benevolent and wiser figure, some sort of antithesis to the “desert,” who tries to warn us against the excesses of masculinist control of the world (“Spill your seed”) and masculinist violence (“Shake your gun”) but ultimately fails (“Shake your gun *to the rasta man’s head*” [my emphasis]). Finally, we can interpret the last stanza as one that establishes a connection between the “Indian” and the women being killed and thrown away, and we can even call that connection the common condition of subalternity. The “cowboy” is indeed no “friend,” as he says he is, but rather a subject that constantly “cheats”: He is the man of European descent who once took these lands away from the Native Americans, initially presenting himself as a “friend,” and who now uses the same methods against “the nigger of the world,” to borrow a term from John Lennon’s famous song about women⁴⁰. In both cases, again, and as long as the “cowboy” passes for a “friend,” there is no hope of salvation in sight. And again, and again, and again.

⁴⁰ John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band. “Woman is the Nigger of the World.” *Some Time in New York City*, Apple, 1972, www.youtube.com/watch?v=OA8N0xy3hjE.

But it is not my intention, at this stage, to provide a thorough literary interpretation of these lyrics. Rather, I want to, first, point at the eeriness of the song and, second, reflect on its character as an artifact that, in spite of its inherent, undeniable ambiguity and open-endedness, concludes occupying a more or less stable position in a much larger cultural formation and overdetermining a discourse in which it plays a fundamental part, namely the discourse on Ciudad Juárez.

On the one hand, inquiring into the first point, it is impossible to convey the eeriness of this song in writing. As uncanny as its lyrics are, one cannot really experience how strange the song really is unless one listens to it and notices how the pleasure of its sound (it is a great song, after all) is mixed with a sense of something being wrong, something being off. Accordingly, while promoting the album of which “Juarez” is the second track, Amos declared to *USA Today*: “The concept that there are are albums that make you happy and albums that make you suicidal — I don't live in that kind of segregated world” (qtd. in Brown 109). It is safe to assume that “Juarez” is one of the points of the album that would make one suicidal, regardless of how satisfying it might be as a piece of almost experimental contemporary pop music, too.

Not everyone was very happy with this, however. The song is very well-known among feminist groups and Amos’s fans because of its story, but it cannot be considered a hit (it was not released a single, either). It is not an easy song to which one can sing along, as so many of Amos’s other feminist hymns (“Silent All These Years,” say, or “The Waitress” [1992 and 1994, respectively]), and while the issues it touches upon are related to the ones present in the aforementioned “Me and a Gun,” it is too abstract and impersonal to count as a testimony of resistance to violence and of survival. To put it in the words of Jay S. Jacobs, Amos’s first biographer:

While some of her songs came from a personal place, others were inspired by the daily news. “Juarez” tells the violent story based on a series of women's rapes and murders that were going on in the town of Juarez, Mexico. This is of course a horrific subject for a pop song. However, as Amos has demonstrated going back to “Me and a Gun,” she is not afraid to prod raw nerves in her lyrics. But as touching as the story may be, the sterile modern techno beats sap the song of much of the passion that Amos has come to be known for and that the heartrending subject matter deserves. The song is a little too cluttered and the lyrics are buried a little too far down in the mix. Granted, it has a very disorienting, ghostly, eerie vibe — musically, however, it almost seems a bit cold, which is a description that could rarely, if ever, be used to describe Amos's work in the past. (89-90)

These musical features create a distance between the song and its listener that has unsuspected consequences for our topic: We care about what is being described. We just do not think it is *about* us. In fact, we would not even *know* what is being “described,” or rather hinted at, were it not for the help of the title and the specialized music press. So much for Trier-Bieniek, who writes that the song “detailed the rape and murder of women in Juarez,” which constitutes an instance of a rather liberal use of the verb “to detail.” In reality, few people would have ever been able to relate the lyrics to the U.S.-Mexican border, or would have had any reason to try to argue about the existence of that relation, were it not for the overdetermining title of the song and for Amos’s statements like the following, taken from an interview she gave to *A. P. Magazine* in October 1999 (only one month after the release of the album), and which was very adequately published in a sidebar titled “A Space Odyssey: Tori offers a travel planner for select new songs on *To Venus and Back*”:

I read an article about several hundred women in Juarez, Mexico, who had been taken out to the desert and brutally raped and murdered. When they didn't come home, their brothers would go and look for them, and many times they'd find nothing. Sometimes they'd find a hair barrette or a sock or something they knew was their sister's. The authorities haven't really done anything about it they get into this serial-killer theory. I mean, how much serial can one man indulge in? So as the song started to develop, I really began taking the voice of the desert, singing in that perspective. (Zaleski 66)

Thus, we can conclude that this mainstream pop song included in an album that made the charts in the United States and elsewhere, and which has been repeatedly acknowledged as one of the ways people outside of Mexico and the borderlands were introduced to information about a scandalous social phenomenon of extreme violence against women and were symbolically mobilized to protest in solidarity with the victims of such violence, did not have to be exclusively about Ciudad Juárez, and could easily have been interpreted as a poetic reflection on the immanence of violence against women worldwide, or in impoverished areas, or in desert areas, or in no specific place at all, or as a more abstract aspect of the human condition without an actual place, or more. It could be any place and it could also be a mythical place. Indeed, it is: By naming it "Juarez," as well as by repeatedly recounting the story of her authorial intentions and what the song meant, in her view and within her own position as a figure of the pop cultural mainstream of the mid-nineties, the (positive) feminist icon Tori Amos contributed decisively to the creation of a (negative) feminist icon. And this icon ended up being, by means of its constant iteration in the arena of discourses, a (negative) icon or, rather, an empty signifier of a doubtless existing irrational, atavistic, masculinist

violence that, however, and just like the meaning of the song before it, could be heretofore stabilized, reduced and confined to just a single one of its undeniable parts: “Juárez” itself.

While Amos’s song is by far the most popular and massively distributed cultural artifact constituting the discourse on Juárez and being given meaning by it on the international level, there are many other cultural products, including popular songs, that have dealt with the *feminicidios*, with its supposed causes, and with the contradictory, albeit always unsatisfying, State responses to them. Understandably —and also crucially— most of these songs originated in Mexico or in the U.S.-Mexican border and, while some of them can be said to be rather marginal or even underground, some others belong to what must be considered the mainstream of Mexican culture, as diverse as it might be: Lila Downs “La niña” (2001), for instance, tells the story of a young, female worker of the maquiladora, and promises that there will be justice for “la desaparecida”⁴¹; Ana Gabriel’s “Tiempo de hablar” (2004) obliquely mentions “blood” and equals the destroyed lives of the victims of misogynistic violence to “thrown-away flowers” but, most revealingly, deplores “lies and impunity”⁴²; and El Tri’s “Las mujeres de Juárez” (2004), which laments that the women Ciudad Juárez are killed “like animals” and “nobody cares,” nevertheless rejoices in the fact that “Biblical justice exists” and the “women killers” will be judged on time⁴³; to name a few.

In the following pages, however, I will focus on the lyrics and discursive meanings of the *corrido* “Las mujeres de Juárez” (2004) by the *norteño* band Los Tigres del Norte⁴⁴. The reasons to do so are threefold. First, the band’s role as representatives —both biographically and stylistically— of the border culture also prevalent in Ciudad Juárez; second, their

⁴¹ “La niña.” *Border/La Línea*, EMI, 2001, www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOgbbR0lcCc.

⁴² The song is not included on any official album by the artist and, due to copyright issues, has not been released for Youtube, either. The lyrics are widely available online, though, and the article “Fight Continues for the Women Killed in Juárez,” written by Laurence Iliff and Alfredo Corchado for the May 4, 2004, edition of *The Dallas Morning News* confirms its existence.

⁴³ “Las mujeres de Juárez.” *Alex Lora: 35 años y lo que falta todavía*, WEA, 2004, www.youtube.com/watch?v=vU1oVooAMgs.

⁴⁴ “Las mujeres de Juárez.” *Pacto de sangre*, Fonovisa, 2004, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ocVnr3sN2vU.

enormous popularity and reputation for “authenticity”; and third, the particular directness and crispness of the song’s lyrics themselves.

None of the Mexican artists mentioned above who have recorded songs that more or less explicitly address the fate of the women of Ciudad Juárez or even the killings themselves are actually *from* Juárez. As a band with a classic, orthodox sound instantly recognizable as rock and roll by even a casual listener, El Tri is a quintessentially *chilango* band, which means that it is from the capital of the country and does not have anything to do —nor does it intend to have anything to do— with the musical traditions of the different regions of Mexico. For her part, Lila Downs was born in Oaxaca, a Southern state of Mexico, but she is the offspring of a multi-ethnic family (her father was an artist from Minnesota) and has lived for most of her life in the United States. In that sense, she *does* represent a fundamental aspect of the border experience, namely the migrational and transnational aspect of it. (Downs’s most successful album to date is called *Border/La Línea* [2001], after all.) Her artistic interests, however, are oriented towards musical genres and styles from the center and from the South of the country, and most especially from indigenous communities that populate those regions and are discursively not linked to the U.S.-Mexican border culture. In any case, and despite having participated in concerts and events to promote peace in Ciudad Juárez (“Silvio Rodríguez, Willie Colón y Lila Downs” n.pag.), Downs operates at a place of pop cultural discourse (a place closely related to so-called “world music”) that sometimes intersects with Northern Mexican music but does not belong to this tradition. Finally, both Ana Gabriel and Los Tigres del Norte are originally from the state of Sinaloa, located in Northern Mexico and directly adjacent to the State of Chihuahua. Ana Gabriel, though, has focussed her career on genres like *balada romántica* and *ranchera*, the former of which is a relatively recent (from the 20th century) and hybrid, urban type of romantic pop music (Party 69-72), whereas the latter has been studied as one of the main symbolic “anchorages”

between “la nueva realidad urbana y los mundos bucólicos que migraron a las ciudades” that made the emergence of a strong, all-encompassing Mexican national Self on the cultural level possible in the first place (“[Re]Creación del melodrama” 158). Either because of their “Westernized,” international pop-like character or because of their immediate association with the whole of the Mexican nation, neither one of these genres can be considered an expression of specific Northern or border sensibilities and cultural traits.

The same cannot be said of the the music that Los Tigres del Norte play. Formed in the Sinaloan town of Rosa Morada in the late sixties, by 1968 the band, comprised of its accordionist and lead singer, Jorge Hernández, and other members of his family, migrated to the United States and settled in San Jose, California. From there, they started reaching ever increasing audiences that went to their concerts and bought their records of *corrido* music, another popular genre that José Manuel Valenzuela Arce (“[Re]Creación del melodrama” 163ff) deems as constitutive of Mexican national identity but which had been experiencing a decade-long decline and, by the beginning of the seventies, had virtually stagnated (Wald 3). The version of *corrido* that Los Tigres del Norte developed was not the traditional one, though. Musically, they did not make any significant changes to the specific Northwestern formula that had emerged during the 19th century as a result of the integration of Central European influences and instruments brought to Mexico by different waves of migration (“Tiger Tales” 23); if anything, one could say that Los Tigres del Norte, up until our days, deliberately keeps the genre pristine and, other than the use of amplification, tries to remain fully loyal to the *corrido*’s archaic roots (Ponce-Cordero 172). Both lyrically and in terms of their own artistic personae, however, the music of Los Tigres was literally a genre of its own, since it incorporated direct, explicit references to the drug traffic and to illegal migration that instantly connected their music to the border experience, and in fact helped shape the ways that border experience has been expressed and perceived for the last forty years.

Of course, this dissertation is based on an understanding that nothing really “belongs to” a certain place or culture, as well as an understanding that concepts like “original” or “authentic” cannot be used in any uncritical way. If anything, Los Tigres del Norte, who updated stories about *bandidos* and outlaws that were, at least in their general outlines, hardly new, and mixed them with their faithful adaptation of old musical elements in order to revitalize the regional version of a music genre that had once signified the emerging Mexican nation as a whole, would not even be make a shortlist in a hypothetical debate about authenticity and originality. Just like in the case of Tori Amos, though, in which her feminism is an integral part of her image and of herself as a spectacle, as was discussed earlier, the image of Los Tigres del Norte as a cultural spectacle very much depends on their association with border culture and more specifically with the drug traffic, to the point that their music (and the music of their numerous epigones) is called *narcocorrido*. The fact that their musical style does not diverge a iota from what is understood as being the “typical” *corrido*, moreover, cements their reputation of being “authentic.” To the people of the border, and to anyone who thinks to have a sense of what the border experience is like, the music of Los Tigres del Norte just *sounds like* the border, and it just seems to talk about its way of life with little to no mediation.

Indeed, even academia is convinced that their music, as well as *narcocorrido* more generally, is at the very least one of the fundamental expressions of the borderland. In his book *Violence Without Guilt*, for instance, Hermann Herlinghaus offers one of the most complete and best studies of the phenomenon of *narcocorrido* (and of the privileged position Los Tigres del Norte occupy in it). There, he comes to the conclusion that one of its astounding, most radically new features is the fact that it has achieved global popularity and has transcended borders as a peripheral cultural expression without having to either

geographically pass through the metropolis (neither Mexico DF nor, say, Los Angeles) or imaginarily pass through the cultural mainstream.

As useful as this theorization is, especially to grasp the peripheral character of the U.S.-Mexican border to both Mexico and the United States, it remains an open question how adequate it is to conceptualize the music of Los Tigres del Norte as belonging to anything other than the mainstream, given that they have sold more than thirty million records, that they have extensively toured at least two continents (Europe and the Americas), that they have performed both for the United States Army (!) and for the MTV Unplugged series, that they have repeatedly been the object of musical tributes by international artists that regularly make the charts, that they have won several Latin Grammys, and that their lyrics have even inspired a novel called *La Reina del Sur* (2002), an international best-seller written by a Spanish author, Arturo Pérez-Reverte, and which in turn inspired a popular telenovela in 2011 (Ponce-Cordero 178). Apparently, then, and just like we saw with Tori Amos before, Los Tigres del Norte operate in a section of the mainstream that is never quite hegemonic but is nevertheless in constant interaction with what gets to be considered as the mainstream proper, the perceived center of a pop cultural discourse that really has no center and both rejects and incorporate peripheral contributions such as feminist pop and *narcocorrido*. In the case of *narcocorrido*, though, it inevitably comes with concrete geographical associations and with an aura of authenticity that is not personal but social or regional, and that in itself signifies the way of life in the U.S.-Mexican border. That is another reason why their song on the women of Ciudad Juárez is of special significance.

The final reason for focussing the analysis on this particular Mexican song instead of the others mentioned above (or even on other, unmentioned songs) is that, unlike the ones by Lila Downs and Ana Gabriel, but similarly to the one by El Tri, it deals explicitly with the *feminicidios*. The title itself is straightforward: It does not try to be poetic or innovative. It

merely states what the song is about: “Las mujeres de Juárez.” Using the traditional form of the Spanish romance that was transferred to the corrido in the course of the 19th century, including “estrofas de seis versos generalmente octosílabos de los que sólo riman, en consonancias a menudo no muy cuidadas, las líneas pares” (Ponce-Cordero 189), the song is an example of what Herlinghaus calls “performative laconism,” meaning a text in which the narrator almost journalistically but in any case matter-of-factly tells a tale or exposes some facts keeping all kinds of adjectives, adverbs or verbal ornaments to the minimum (43-48). In fact, already the very first stanza presents us with what is, as I argued in the introduction, the core of the phenomenon of the *feminicidios*, the one factor that made them a scandal in a political sense and that bred a plethora of stories about them as a single crime wave: impunity.

Humillante y abusiva,
la intocable impunidad,
los huesos en el desierto,
cuentan la cruda verdad...
las muertas de Ciudad Juárez,
son vergüenza nacional.

From the very beginning, then, impunity is viewed, somehow tautologically, as “untouchable,” and also as the result of an “abuse” that in itself is a manifestation of a power imbalance. Moreover, the existence of this impunity is not only “abusive” but “humiliating,” due to the the fact that it brings “shame” to the “nation.” Indeed, according to these lyrics, the crime wave that results in the proliferation of “las muertas de Juárez” and the “raw truth” of which can only be revealed by the “desert bones” (a direct quote to the book by González Rodríguez that we studied in chapter II) is shameful more than anything else, and shameful to

the national pride at that. In this, Los Tigres del Norte paradoxically adopt one of the State narratives about the *feminicidios* (chapter II) in order to criticize the State and its inability or unwillingness to find the culprits. Needless to say, the implicit appeal to national pride is one that, while undoubtedly “popular” in any useful sense of the term, also frames the discussion about the murders and their consequences as one that is about a phenomenon that has to be quickly resolved and left behind in order to restore traditional Mexican values associated with the patriarchal order —and with the male role as the protector of both the female and this order, as we will see shortly— and not out of any particular concern for the fate of the women themselves. Still “women” in the title, the victims of the crimes are now just “dead women,” after all. More than anything else, their deaths constitute a blemish on the image of the nation, a blemish that has therefore to be erased.

In the next stanza of the song, however, Los Tigres address the life and working conditions of the living women:

Mujeres trabajadoras,
 pasto de maquiladoras,
 cumplidoras y eficientes,
 mano de obra sin igual,
 lo que exportan las empresas,
 no lo checa el aduanal.

The stanza is impressive in its economy. Within six short verses, the narrator has drawn a sociological and economic picture of Ciudad Juárez. As if going through a checklist of what are widely considered the fundamental elements of the setting where the *feminicidio* takes place, the lyrics mention both the *maquiladoras* and their workers, as well as the

ostensible reasons why women are so frequently hired in this system (they “deliver” and are “efficient,” indeed an “unmatched workforce”), not without ending the description with a sharp association between the workings of transnational capitalism (“what the companies export”) and their inevitable counterpart of Mexican corruption (“customs do not check” the exports, neither physically nor financially). Quite characteristically, then, and following the lead of texts belonging to the academic and to the journalistic discourses aplenty (chapters II and IV), these verses frame the problem as one that is circumscribed to a universe of young, poor dark-skinned women who work for peanuts in the maquiladoras, and who are so interchangeable, even to the poetic voice that tells the story, as to be explicitly portrayed as “fodder.” No wonder their lives, while arguably important (they *are* “efficient” and “unmatched”), are less important than their deaths, which are the events that ultimately bring shame to the (male) Mexican nation:

Vergonzosos comentarios,
se escuchan por todo el mundo,
la respuesta es muy sencilla,
Juárez sabe la verdad,
ya se nos quitó lo macho,
o nos falta dignidad.

This is the place where this song of Los Tigres del Norte adopts a prominent position in the dynamo of stories that is the discourse on Juárez, inasmuch as it mobilizes pervasive fears and perceptions about the *feminicidios* but also goes beyond that, to the point that it attempts to provide its own explanation for the phenomenon: Indeed, “the answer is quite simple,” and the city itself already knows “the truth,” the lyrics say. After all, and “to be

honest, we lost our manhood or lack dignity.” The appeal to traditional Mexican values and to a notion of the man as the protector of a passive, helpless female subject whose undisturbed life is not viewed as an end in and of itself but rather as a means to measure pride, manhood and honor, becomes explicit here. The whole crime wave, then, which only affects poor, helpless women who are “fodder,” and which brings so much shame to Mexico as a nation, is “simply” a result of a masculinity crisis. In this, the poetic voice of the song reminds one of, and seems to be a part of, a general, Mexican malaise that was pervasive at the turn of the century and that was famously detected by Matthew C. Gutmann in his influential ethnography of Colonia Santo Domingo, *The Meanings of Macho*⁴⁵. There, in a section adequately called “Machos are Not What They Used to Be,” Gutmann puts it this way: “It is common to hear women and men ... say that while there used to be a lot of macho men, they are not as prevalent today” (229). While he goes on to explain how the younger generations (the ones that were young in 1992, when the book was published) think this is a good development, regardless of what their elders say, he also points out that even those representatives of the younger generations insist on themselves being neither “machos” nor “mandilones,” i.e. neither male supremacists nor weaklings who are dominated by women (229). In “Las mujeres de Juárez,” however, the voice seems to belong to an older generation (Los Tigres del Norte themselves certainly do), as well as to think that men *have* become “mandilones,” at least in Juárez, and are therefore unable to protect “their” women. The solution, while still implicit, is already obvious: man up.

⁴⁵ See *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City*. University of California Press, 1996. As the book’s title makes clear, this ethnography is concerned with the capital of the country, and indeed with a specific neighborhood of that city, and not with Northern Mexico. However, its results about the so-called “masculinity crisis” seem to converge not only with studies that *do* refer to other regions of the country (*Masculinity and Sexuality in Modern Mexico*, edited by Anne Rubenstein [University of New Mexico Press, 2012], for instance, or Patricia Fernández-Kelly’s “Reforming Gender: The Effects of Economic Change on Masculinity and Femininity in Mexico and the U.S.,” which directly deals with the border and the transnational context of this “crisis” [*Women’s Studies Review*, Fall 2005, pp. 69-101]), but also with the international literature on the topic of said “crisis” (Connell; Kimmel; Kahn). Besides, and more importantly, it seems to coincide with the spirit shown by the voice of “Las mujeres de Juárez.”

This is urgent, by the way, because women *do* have a certain value, even apart from their role as “efficient” maquiladora workers:

La mujer es bendición,
y el milagro de la fe,
la fuente de la creación,
parió al zar y parió al rey,
y hasta al mismo Jesucristo,
lo dio a luz una mujer.

Lest we forget, then, the Mexican (male) nation quite literally needs women to reproduce itself. All men were born from women, after all (“the Czar,” “the King,” “Jesus Christ himself”). The link between women as the locus of tradition that has to be defended (from killers, from public life, from the maquiladoras, etc.) by men is made even more visible by the repetitive use of religious terms, of which this stanza is actually overdone: “blessing,” “miracle of faith,” “source of creation,” “Jesus Christ.”

This is no trivial matter, in other words. Indeed, according to Luis Hernández, bass player of Los Tigres del Norte, “the subject is serious ... so we tried to make that point by the way [Jorge Hernández] sings the song.” In fact, Hernández also explains that they wanted to “tell the [Mexican] government to do something, that we want a solution” (qtd. in Volk and Schlotterbeck 142). Yet Los Tigres do not wait for the government to reach a solution, or rather they are tired of waiting, so that they come up with their own solution. It does not involve government at all:

Es momento, ciudadanos,
 de cumplir nuestro deber,
 si la ley no lo resuelve,
 lo debemos resolver,
 castigando a los cobardes,
 que ultrajan a la mujer.

Justice is in the hands of the “citizens” now, who have to “punish the cowards who outrage woman [in singular]” because “the Law” does not “solve” the problem. Moreover, this is not just an option or a possible solution but a “duty” and, more specifically, “our duty,” “our citizen’s duty.” As Steven S. Volk and Marian E. Schlotterbeck point out, though, “[i]t is possible that by calling on the ‘the citizens’ to take the law into their own hands, Los Tigres are exhorting both men and women to act. Yet, in the light of the band’s representation of women primarily as mothers and victims, it seems hard to avoid the conclusion that both ‘citizens’ and ‘we’ refer only to the men of Juárez” (143). It is hard to avoid, indeed. In fact, given the song’s previous representation of women as helpless and of their deaths as problematic because of their consequences for the image of the Mexican nation, one has to read the first part of the above quote as an attempt at fairness that unnecessarily confounds the issue, and that is only corrected by the second sentence of the quote.

There is, however, a similar but different kind of woman in Juárez, apart from the maquiladora workers: the grieving mothers.

Llantos, lamentos y rezos,
 se escuchan en el lugar,

de las madres angustiadas,
 que al cielo imploran
 piedad, que les devuelvan los
 restos, y poderlos sepultar.

While undoubtedly “positive” in the most general sense of the word, or at least in the sense of not being overtly negative, this depiction of the female families of the victims goes hand in hand with the image of the female maquiladora workers that the song has already mobilized. Both the victims and the mothers are, in the end, utterly helpless and in need not only of help but of salvation delivered via male intervention. The “distressed mothers” have, in fact, only “tears, laments and prayers” left, as well as the remote hope that “heaven” will listen to their prayers and allow them to get the “remains” back in order for them to be able to “bury” them.

The question of whether or not the families of victims of crimes know what happened to their loved ones and have access to their mortal remains is a preeminent one. To begin with, it makes the whole distinction between cases of *desapariciones* and other horrible manifestations of violence even possible. There is an extensive literature, both on the Southern Cone (where *desapariciones* became common methods of repression during the age of military dictatorships) and beyond, that deals with the huge psychological, political and social effects of uncertainty about violent events, as well as of the inability to bury the victims of murder in a way that can help the bereaved, however weakly, to get some sort of closure and to start the healing process (Feilowitz; Osiel). But the mothers of “Las mujeres de Juárez” are, in every practical sense, passive and ultimately ineffectual. They are no Madres de la Plaza de Mayo going to police offices and military installations day after day, gathering information, creating a national network and bravely protesting in front of the seat of

government for their right to get, if not justice, at least some degree of certainty. The mothers of Ciudad Juárez, according to the song, just cry and pray instead, and even when they raise their voices and *demand* something from someone, their addressee is an authority far removed from the political sphere and even from earthly concerns: God. The fact that several organizations of families of the victims and of activists actually do exist in Juárez, as we saw in chapter III of this dissertation, seems to be of little interest to Los Tigres: Either because they do not want to see these other possible versions of “women” in action, or maybe because they cannot, the only role left for women in the universe of the lyrics is to be either crying or dead.

Notice, also, how the last stanza referred only to “mothers,” by the way, implicitly reinforcing the notion that the “citizens” who had failed to protect their women and had to now stand up to the challenge of regaining their manhood were, as it were, all male. We can even infer that some of them are the fathers of the victims, guilty of being weak, leaving their wives “distressed” and the nation “ashamed.” The solution is clear and “simple,” according to the song: Mexican manhood must be restored. If only there were no tough obstacles ahead:

El gran policía del mundo,
también nos quiso ayudar,
pero las leyes aztecas,
no quisieron aceptar,
tal vez no les convenía,
que esto se llegue a aclarar.

In a surprising turn of events, Los Tigres address here, in this stanza, the efforts made by U.S.-American institutions to contribute to the solving of the mystery of the crime wave

(one of those attempts, the one undertaken by the FBI and agent Robert Ressler, was mentioned in the introduction and studied in chapter II). Somehow paradoxically, given that the imperialist policies of the United States have been a source of anxiety and fears of emasculation throughout Mexican history (Behnken), and given that Los Tigres del Norte have a record of protesting U.S.-American cultural and political imperialism both in their songs and in their activism, the musicians salute the intervention of “the world’s big cop” here, as well as take it at face value as a selfless, well-intentioned attempt to “help.” Alas, and even besides the fact that the mere need for this “help” already denotes the need for a higher authority (in this case, the US) to restore Mexican masculinity and with it the honor of the Mexican nation, the problem ultimately lies in “Aztec law’s” apparently inherent corruption. Thus, the Mexican state disregards the efforts of the American-led investigations and refuses to “accept” them, which cannot but elicit suspicion within Mexican civil society and most particularly among people who, like Los Tigres themselves, always already were skeptical towards a state apparatus that seemed unconcerned at best and complicit at worst. Needless to say, its refusal to let the “big cop of the world” reestablish the much needed order and “help” to solve the mystery of the killings is immediately viewed as further proof of the latter theory, namely that the Mexican state has a real stake in the crime wave and in its lack of resolution. “Maybe,” Los Tigres say, “they did not want for this [the *feminicidios*] to be explained at all.” Consequently, the enigma remains unsolved and the only thing left are the facts:

Que hay varias miles de muertas,
 en panteones clandestinos,
 muchas desaparecidas,
 que me resisto a creer,
 es el reclamo del pueblo,

que lo averigüe la ley.

But the facts themselves are imprecise, on the one hand. Moreover, and on the other hand, any “neutral” account of the facts already leads to their interpretation and to their contextualization within an already fully fleshed out theory about the murders and their causes. That is why Los Tigres mention that “there are several thousand dead women” (casually inflating the body count of even the most ambitious narratives about the crime wave by 2004) and “lots of disappeared women,” just to postulate “clandestine pantheons” as the final resting places of said women and to doubt that they just “disappeared”: “I refuse to believe,” the song’s voice say.

This refusal is limited to the official narrative, to be clear, and not to any possible narrative about the murders (the facts): Los Tigres cannot believe that so many women simply ran away without even leaving a note for their families and think that many of them (thousands!), even more than the ones whose bodies have been found, must have been killed, and not just by random murderers and abusers but by a single, discreet crime wave that uses “clandestine pantheons” to dispose of its victims. The use of the word “pantheon,” indeed, already has ominous connotations, because in the original Ancient Greek it refers to a shrine of the gods and nowadays it refers to a temple —religious or secular— or to a public building commemorating the gods or the heroes and heroines of a community. Since the “pantheons” of the song are “clandestine,” however, it is safe to assume that whoever has built them and uses them to bury the dead women of Juárez in them does not consider these women to be “heroines” at all, but more likely performs some sort of cruel ritual involving dead women in them. Enter the “narcosatánicos,” a theory which has already been discussed in chapter II and which, as has been shown, is pervasive as an explanatory model for the *feminicidios*. So pervasive, in fact, that Los Tigres do not even need to explicitly mention it or at least name it

and *still* the dreadful notion that we are not dealing with mere crimes but with a whole liturgy of insanely logical and “meaningful” crimes is latently present in the lyrics. In a sense, then, “I refuse to believe” actually means “I want to believe”: The official story is a transparent lie that results from both incompetence and corruption, but there is a truth out there, just barely out of sight but not quite, that has to be revealed by the (male) citizens of Mexico themselves, if at all possible with the help of the (patriarchal) institutions of the US, in order to restore the (patriarchal) order of the Mexican nation and get rid of the (male) “shame” of having such an unresolved crime wave taking place in one’s own national territory. That the victims of this wave are women constructed as helpless subjects on whose bodies the honor of the nation depends only adds insult to injury and makes the resolution of the puzzle and the combat against perverted masculinities that engage in “narcorrituales” and endanger the hegemonic masculinity of the Mexican nation as a whole even more urgent.

For all its skeptical stance vis-à-vis the State, however, Los Tigres cannot help but to appeal to its institutions and to its conventional processes at the end of the song, embracing the kind of pressure politics that aims at forcing governments to do something, even if reluctantly or against its own self-interest, without necessarily shifting the discursive coordinates of the debates, let alone attacking the fundamental legitimation of said governments to even be governments in the first place. Thus, the song’s voice becomes a tribune of the people and asserts that it is this “people’s demand,” indeed, that the mystery be solved, but not by any social actor: According to the song, the responsibility lies wholly in the hands of the State, and it is “the Law” who has to “find out” what is happening and why. No matter how involved it is in the conspiracy, nor how patently ineffectual it has proved to be in the quest towards the restoration of the honor of the male Mexican nation, then, it is the State, in “Las mujeres de Juárez,” who ultimately has to deliver the certainties and the solutions that are so desired and forebode by the Mexican people. That is “the people’s demand,” after all.

In this way, what starts as a document of a suspicious and almost paranoid sensibility towards the State and its institutions ends up constituting a power-stabilizing text that reinforces the role of the Mexican State as the legitimate warrantor of the established order and of peace and quiet. Moreover, insofar as the lyrics of “Las mujeres de Juárez” deny any possible agency to the female victims of the crime wave and to the female members of their families and surroundings, such as their mothers, the song contributes to a framing of the *feminicidios* as a tragedy that mostly affects men and their honor, as well as the patriarchal, regressive social structures of the Mexican nation, in spite of the obvious fact that, by definition, the direct victims of these types of crimes are female. Thus, what we ultimately have in this cultural artifact is a vision of society as one that needs more, and not less, male intervention in the regulation of female bodies and lives, as well as one that needs more, and not less, conceptual and actual separation between the gendered roles of male subjects as protectors of women and female subjects as helpless victims waiting to be protected. Indeed, it is worth considering that Los Tigres del Norte themselves, precisely because of their reputation for being the voice of the people and for channeling the sounds and the feelings of the border, might feel entitled to be a significant part of that male intervention they deem necessary; they might even feel obligated to be, as the vehemence of this song actually attests.

At its core, this is a fundamentally reactionary and even archaic vision of society. Indeed, all good intentions of the authors of this “protest” song notwithstanding, it strikes one as especially perfidious that a concern about murderous violence against women is invoked as a pretext to mobilize this archaic vision and that criticism against the State and its practices is used as a way to put forward the notion that said State can —and in fact must— be the one and only institution in which to trust for the problem to be solved at all. Perhaps the move from the periphery to the cultural transnational mainstream without passing through the metropolis does not skip the metropolis, after all, or at least involves multilateral fluxes and

debts to powerful discursive sediments that complicate the narrative of Los Tigres del Norte as a social phenomenon, as an artistic force, and as exponents of some kind of “resistance.” Be that as it may, the conjunction of archaic models of resurgent manhood and of female victimhood with a modern trust in the potentialities of the State—even while deploring its momentary corruption and the impunity it entails—in “Las Mujeres de Juárez” crystallizes one of the main stories of the dynamo that is the discourse on Juárez, all while virtually eliminating women from the debate. For a song literally titled “The Women of Juárez,” then, this is a song with a contradictory message and rather impressively unconcerned with women, or at least with women who are not already dead.

Directed by Carlos Carrera (whose film *El crimen del padre Amaro* [2002] made him famous worldwide) and released in 2009, the movie *Backyard* (*El traspatio*) is, without a doubt, the most ambitious effort to tackle the *feminicidios* in mainstream film to date⁴⁶. It is also a text that consciously discusses some of the theories that have been advanced to explain the murders, including those tropes apparent in the lyrics of the song by Los Tigres del Norte. To its credit, though, the film ends without providing any easy resolution and without pointing at a single culprit or at a series of culprits. It is a police procedural and a whodunnit that never quite gets to the cathartic moment in which the whodunnit is actually and completely solved. I will comment on the particular version of the discourse on Juárez displayed by this movie and on its status within the field of pop cultural treatments of the *feminicidios* and of cultural paranoia in film. The reasons I chose *Backyard* to illustrate the mainstreaming of *feminicidios* instead of other possible films are related to its national origin, to its critical reception, and to its intrinsic, diegetic complexity, which is perhaps a function of its position in history, as a film released in 2009 and hence able to profit from hindsight.

⁴⁶ *Backyard* (*El traspatio*). Directed by Carlos Carrera. Performances by Ana de la Reguera, Asur Zagada, Marco Pérez, Alejandro Calva, Jimmy Smits. Tardan/Berman, 2009.

First, and rather simply, *Backyard* is a Mexican film that tries to tell its story from a distinctly Mexican point of view. Granted, the social phenomenon of the *feminicidios* is by definition a transnational, border one, but, as I discussed in the introduction, it has consistently been framed and portrayed, through the discourse on Juárez, as a Mexican one. Moreover, it has been consistently framed and portrayed as a Mexican problem that neither the Mexican State nor the Mexican citizens can resolve, so that international help is needed, either from different groups and individuals of the world's civil society (most prominently from feminist activists and scholars and from celebrities) or even from *other* State institutions. *Backyard* does not let the Mexican State off the hook by any means, but it most definitely presents the crime wave as a Mexican problem whose solution, if there is one, also has to include some sort of Mexican participation with an agency of its own and not just messianic help from without, no matter how intertwined the *feminicidios* are with transnational developments and regardless of the fact that, as the movie abundantly makes clear, violence against women in Ciudad Juárez is both homemade and a result of external forces and interventions. In this, the movie differs significantly from Gregory Nava's *Bordertown* (2006), a film that, after being released at the Berlin International Film Festival, went straight to DVD in the US and only had very limited and financially unsuccessful theatrical openings in Europe, in spite of its impressive cast featuring Jennifer Lopez, Antonio Banderas, Martin Sheen, Sonia Braga, and Juanes⁴⁷. Notably, none of the main stars of the movie is a Mexican citizen. Even the director, who is a product of border culture and has been a major actor in the shaping of said culture during the last thirty years, is a Mexican-American born in San Diego and not a Mexican citizen. Much more importantly, however, *Bordertown* tells the story of the crime wave through the eyes of a Latina journalist, performed by Lopez, who goes to Mexico to investigate the murders and fight both Mexican and U.S.-American corruption

⁴⁷ *Bordertown*. Directed by Gregory Nava. Performances by Jennifer Lopez, Antonio Banderas, Martin Sheen, Juanes.Möbius/El Norte, 2006.

while finding herself and her heritage in the process of also discovering who the real killers are (in this particular iteration of the discourse, it is the bus drivers). In contradistinction to that, *Backyard* is a Mexican production directed by a Mexican filmmaker and starring a largely Mexican cast that tells the story of a policewoman from the DF who is sent to Juárez to solve the mystery and ends up losing everything, including her job, her trust in the State institutions, and almost her sanity. Without wanting to fall into the essentialist trap, I argue that this film offers, partially because of its national perspective, a more interesting take on the *feminicidios* than *Bordertown*, which is so obviously an instance of the conventional Western discourse on Juárez that the only awards it ever won (again, this was a movie that went straight to DVD in the US) was one that Amnesty International gave to Jennifer Lopez for her role as producer and star of a film that shed light on ongoing human rights issues.

Speaking of awards, *Backyard* is a prestige film targeted to a formally educated audience and obviously intent on constituting a serious comment on the crime wave and their ramifications. As such, the movie won several Ariels (the Mexican Oscars), including Best Director, and also got some international recognition at the Havana Film Festival and Chicago Film Festival, among others. This makes the film different from a series of cinematic thrillers that have been produced and released in Mexico, and especially in the border area, during the last fifteen years, some of which are brilliantly analyzed by María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba in her article “Representations of Violence in Border Cinema” from 2010. While she differentiates between movies “presenting a biased view in favor of dominant social groups by glorifying the work of the police, presenting the criminals as monsters, the detectives as heroes, and stigmatizing the victims and other women” and movies that show “a patriarchal, classist, and deeply troubled society, while at the same time [giving] a voice to the victims and [privileging] the lives of women of Ciudad Juárez rather than their deaths” (99), she makes clear that all the films that she discusses are openly exploitative and do not pretend to

have artistic merits. Thus, in finishing her section on *Espejo retrovisor*⁴⁸, which she claims is the best and less stereotypical movie —and the less misogynistic one— of her corpus, she explicitly reminds us of the fact that, despite her own quite positive review, it “is not a cinematographic masterpiece” (97). Of course, *Backyard* is not a cinematographic masterpiece, either, but it clearly intends to be. And, while it can be argued that it is a film that, for all its intellectual pretensions, ultimately exploits the *feminicidios*, just like basically all other intellectual and scholar approaches to the phenomenon exploit the *feminicidios* to a certain degree and help constituting the discourse on Juárez, it is not an exploitation movie or an openly exploitative one. Not that there is anything wrong with exploitation in film; in fact, if anything the thrillers of border cinema that deal with the crime wave are even more interesting artifacts than *Backyard* for research on border cultures, artistic expressions, and sensibilities. This dissertation, however, is mainly concerned with the discourse on Juárez and not with border cultures per se, which is why *Backyard*, with its almost synthetic approach to theories and stories of gender violence in Ciudad Juárez, and with its own transparent habitus as a socially relevant reflection on that violence and on those stories, is a better match for my purposes at this point. Besides, it could be argued that the song “Las mujeres de Juárez” by Los Tigres del Norte, which was extensively discussed above, is already an expression of border cultures, so that, for the sake of balance and variety, we can now turn to a more traditionally mainstream depiction instead.

For such a traditionally mainstream depiction, *Backyard* offers little solace and very few clear-cut answers, if any at all. In fact, this is the aforementioned third reason for picking this particular film for study: its intrinsic complexity. As a detective narrative in which there is a clear mystery and no clear resolution but rather a series of interconnected circumstances that never quite amount to a cause, this film deals with different stories that have been

⁴⁸ *Espejo retrovisor*. Directed by Héctor Molinar. Performances by Manuel Ojeda, Azela Robinson, Géraldine Bazán. Cine Producciones Molinar, 2002.

advanced to explain the *feminicidios*, and sometimes mentions others in passing, as unlikely signs within a code that everybody knows but nobody truly understands; hence, my definition of it in the previous paragraph as a movie that has an “almost synthetic approach” to the crime wave. In a way, this is the cinematic version of the article “La batalla de las cruces” by Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba and Patricia Ravelo Blancas, which I have discussed in chapter IV, insofar as it offers a list of explanatory theories and narratives without being able to get to the “right” one or, perhaps more accurately, without even trying to.

In the movie, the policewoman Blanca (Ana de la Reguera) tries to find the culprits of the murders of women of Ciudad Juárez and confronts several obstacles while doing so. One of the main obstacles is the day-to-day, casual machismo of the surrounding culture: Her superior at work, for example, a corrupt police chief (Alejandro Calva) whose only dream is to leave the border and get a bureaucratic position in the distant capital of the country, is upfront from the beginning and tells her that women should not be allowed to be in the force because they follow their hearts instead of thinking with their brains. Besides, he is not terribly interested in following any leads that could prove controversial or that could put some powerful people in uncomfortable positions, and even provides her with a rationale for his inaction: “Tamos en Juárez, mujer. Acá las palabras básicas son ‘no hay,’ ‘no se puede’... y ‘no se pudo’” (“We are in Juárez, woman. Here, the basic terms are ‘there is none,’ ‘it cannot be done’... and ‘it couldn’t be done’”). He reluctantly agrees to persecute El Sultán, an Egyptian citizen suspected to be a serial killer (Sayed Badreya performing an obvious fictional version of Abdul Latif Sharif), but makes clear that he feels that the questions regarding the crime wave are better left unanswered during a conversation with Fierro (Marco Pérez), Blanca’s partner in the police. While not being directly and irredeemably complicit, he seems to know enough about what is happening to also know that he has to keep quiet if he wants to be promoted in his career. Moreover, he is involved in a corrupt ring of bribery and

extortion related, albeit tangentially, to the murders. Indeed, he takes money from criminals, including a rich sexual predator from El Paso (Jimmy Smits) who periodically rapes underage girls in Ciudad Juárez and buys impunity from the police.

Not everyone belonging to or representing the State is corrupted in the proper sense of the word, however; some people are simply too stupid or too ineffectual to know better or to do anything about what they know. The governor of Chihuahua, for instance (Enoc Leñaño), is both too weak to oppose the CEOs of the multinationals to which the *maquiladoras* belong and too blinded by his own Catholic conservatism to understand that the *feminicidios* are not just a result of loose morals and female depravity. True to the stereotype of the cunning politician, moreover, he has to consider the impact of the crime wave and of the way his police force handles it on the popular opinion and on his electoral chances. Thus, he is the first one to enthusiastically approve of the arrest of the Egyptian suspect, as well as later of the massive raid targeting members of a street gang called Los Cheros (the fictional version of Los Rebeldes), only to disavow both operations when he notices that they pose more questions than answers and, most importantly, make the police work, and therefore his work as the executive commander in Chihuahua, look very bad in the public eye.

Blanca is the leading force behind both the arrest of the Egyptian suspect and of the gang members, however, and even though the film makes completely clear that she is wrong in both cases and that her actions are palliative at best, she always comes across as someone who has the best intentions but fails due to her own increasing desperation and to the sheer vastness and complexity of the phenomenon she is trying to tackle. Just like Latif Sharif, the Egyptian suspect of *Backyard* really *is* a violent abuser, a psychopath who preys on women and who openly declares that Juárez is “paradise” because there, unlike in the US, he can rape women and “get away with it.” Likewise, and just like Los Rebeldes, the gang members in the film *are* dangerous criminals who horribly mistreat women and belong behind bars. But just

like in “reality,” neither one of these suspects is even remotely guilty of any of the actual killings that are being investigated, let alone of the whole crime wave. For Blanca, they are not exactly scapegoats, because she truly believes that they are involved in the *feminicidios*; for both the police commander and the governor, they are scapegoats. In fact, Blanca herself ends up being another scapegoat, as well, since she is stripped of her position and severely punished at the end of the film, when the public criticism of the police actions (of the scapegoating itself!) becomes too loud, when the State lies about corruption become untenable, and when her eagerness to search for the truth, whatever that might be, becomes dangerous for the stability of power and control.

Not that she is any closer to the truth than she was at the beginning of the film. To quote what she says during a crucial conversation in which she acknowledges that El Sultán and Los Cheros are not the culprits, “Cualquier teoría puede ser. O todas al mismo tiempo.” There are multiple theories. Any one of those theories might be true. Or all of them might be true at the same time. Thus, an inflationary process of narrative proliferation that closely resembles the one that constitutes the discourse on Juárez itself starts and acquires a logic of its own. Organ traffic is mentioned, as well as “narcosatánicos” and snuff movies, pornography and “regular” domestic violence. The serial killer theory is obviously given a big role, as well as the story according to which the real murderer actually lives in El Paso but prefers to operate in Ciudad Juárez because of the impunity for which that city is so infamous. A mysterious industrial freezer is found in the middle of the desert and seems to be connected to some murders and also to be the explanation for details that do not seem to match with what would be logical, such as incongruencies in the patterns of decomposition of the bodies. A feminist activist (Carolina Politi) who painstakingly documents and tabulates every single case of a missing woman in Juárez and who despises the police —she does their work better than they do, after all— is nevertheless able to initially open Blanca’s eyes as to the enormity

of the task at hand and as to the fact that there must be some larger truth behind the whole chaos. A radio talk show host and political commentator (Joaquín Cosío), who is good friends with Blanca and is generally portrayed as the objective voice of reason and as the only unbiased and unambiguous moral authority in the movie, paints a landscape of economic and social coordinates during his frequent monologues on life in the border area in a way the other characters cannot, and establishes connections between the crime wave, domestic violence, political corruption, sheer incompetence, and the exploitation of workers in the maquiladora. Just as importantly, the CEOs of the maquiladoras, who sit in Japan and in the United States, and the foreign politicians and lobbyists who back the interests of the transnational capital all get air time, as well. Not surprisingly, they seem to be willing to put up with violence against their female workers, if not to be at least morally complicit with that violence, as long as a public relations catastrophe can be contained and as long as they do not have to invest any money in programs directed to improve the living conditions of the poor people of Juárez; to quote a U.S.-American senator who visits the governor of Chihuahua in one scene of the film, “The American taxpayers won’t understand.”

The help, however, is desperately needed, as the story of Juana (Asur Zagada) makes clear. An immigrant from Chiapas, Juana is a young woman who comes to the border to live at her cousin’s place and to work at the maquiladora. From the beginning, her story is presented as the real thing, as a window on how life really is for women in Ciudad Juárez. She is presented as the real thing, too: she is a girl from the country whose mother tongue is a Mayan language—which she calls, in Spanish, “la lengua” (“*the* language”)—and who is used to live a life dedicated to hard work in the domestic sphere and to please her father and the men of her family. This conservative background, though, as well as the values and social mores that go with it, cannot be reproduced in the big city, and she is the last person who would want to reproduce it in any way. Emboldened by the relative freedom of living with her

cousin and with no men around (they live in a slum, but still), as well as of having an incredibly monotonous, thoroughly regimented job that nonetheless means a paycheck, some leisure time, and no one to tell her what to do or what not to do with her money and with her free time (no one other than the doctor from the maquiladora, that is, who tells her that she is not allowed to get pregnant), the initially shy and responsible Juana becomes, rather quickly, an assertive young woman who is quite explicit about her own sexual desires and about her own declared intentions to live her life however she thinks it is best for her.

We are entering dangerous territory here, of course, because this story borders on the narrative according to which the *feminicidios* are, fundamentally, an unfortunate and exaggerated but ultimately understandable backlash against the threat that women liberation, no matter how timid and incomplete, represent to patriarchy. From here to the conservative, misogynistic victim blaming that deplores the “excesses” of women’s autonomy and laments the dissolution of the old, archaic, and purportedly “safe” gender constellations, there is only one step. One of the pleasures of *Backyard*, if it can be called pleasure at all, is how the question of whether the filmmakers will take that step or not hovers during the whole viewing and creates true tension. On a certain level, in fact, this *is* the thrill of a thriller like *Backyard*: Will they go all the way within the discourse of victim blaming or will they bend it and break it somehow? Will Juana be punished for her quest for freedom or will she be able to assert herself and survive? And, if she is punished at all, how will that punishment be presented and with whom exactly will the sympathies of the film lie?

Spoiler alert: Juana dies. She is brutally raped and killed, indeed. This is all shown in horrible, graphic detail, in a scene that is very hard to watch indeed. Why this is happening, however, is never made clear. What connection do the killers have with the capital fluxes of the maquiladora industry? What is the relation, if there is any, between the sexual predator from El Paso, the industrial freezer in the dessert, the cowboy in the nightclub, the gangsters

and the scapegoats who are not quite scapegoats in prison? How much does the police chief know, how much do the CEOs care? How can the governor be so blind/how can the governor be so detached? Why are the killers doing what they are doing, other than the most basic sadism? How can everything be so confusingly, tragically, inevitably messed up?

What we have here, then, is a synthetic representation of some of the most common narratives about the *feminicidios* and their causes which is, if anything, a little bit too inclusive and all over the place. Framed as a whodunit and as a detective procedural, however, the film manages to create tension and thrill the viewer not so much by creating the illusion that there will be a culprit at the end but by touching on different tropes, almost as if going through a checklist, and playing with their limits and with their internal contradictions to finally show that there is no answer. Women do become freer in Juárez, even if they live in poverty, and there is a male backlash portrayed, at least in the case of Cutberto, as a result of the breakdown of traditional structures and of mere personal weakness and cowardice. Big money seems to be involved, somehow, as well as big fish in politics who either cannot see or look the other way. But there is also plain sadism and sexual depravity. There seems to be some kind of industry of death (the freezer) and also some kind of religious component that is even less visible (“narcosatánicos”). There is domestic violence and abuse and randomness, as well. It just does not really make sense, or it makes too much sense in a way that cannot be explained but just felt: it is life itself. Somehow there is nothing and everything to explain.

In the mainstreaming of *feminicidios* in popular culture, in other words, the motivation to find the truth might be the prevalent one, but the impossibility to do so fuels the whole process and gives it a life of its own: paranoia fuels paranoia and paranoia refers only to itself. To paraphrase Blanca, again: There are many theories, and maybe one of them is right, or all of them are, at the same time. Maybe none is. Tori Amos, Los Tigres del Norte and Carlos Carrera González all know that something is happening and all seem to have ideas as to what

it is and why, but all of them are ultimately left in uncertainty and it is precisely that uncertainty which provides them with an impulse to further search for answers. By the time we have reached 2009, the year of *Backyard's* release, the search continues even though it has basically been acknowledged that there is no truth after all, or that the truth is so all-encompassing and contradictory that it is not possible to grasp it anyway.

The truth, the journalist of the film asks Blanca during a crucial conversation? What is the truth? "That anyone can kill a woman in Ciudad Juárez and get away with it," she says. "That is the truth," nothing more.

VI. THE END OF VIOLENCE:
ALICIA GASPAR DE ALBA'S *DESERT BLOOD: THE JUÁREZ MURDERS*
AND ROBERTO BOLAÑO'S *2666*

El judicial le dijo que no intentara buscarles una explicación lógica a los crímenes.

Esto es una mierda, esa es la única explicación.

Roberto Bolaño (2666 701)

The year was 2005. Shortly after organizing the conference at UCLA that was mentioned in passing and then discussed in chapters III and IV of this dissertation, respectively, Alicia Gaspar de Alba published a novel, *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*, that, in conjunction with her work at the aforementioned conference, would position her at a prominent place within the spectrum of international, academic activism against the *feminicidios* of Ciudad Juárez. Winner of the Lambda Literary Foundation Award for Best Lesbian Mystery of 2005 and of a Latino Book Award for Best English-Language Mystery of 2005, *Desert Blood* is, first a foremost, a page-turner that captures the reader and confronts her head-on with the crime wave and its ramifications, as well as with the scandal of impunity and corruption that surrounds it, through a highly conventional –and highly effective– detective narrative (a real whodunit) that seeks to raise awareness about violence against women at the border and then provide a theory as of who the main culprits of this violence might be. This allows, in turn,

for the *feminicidios* to be, even if only symbolically, at least partially stopped and avenged, at the end, in a cathartic moment that is meant to offer some kind of hope to the victims of the crime wave and most especially to the potential activists of the world, who are, not quite secretly, the implied readers of the text.

In fact, in the “Acknowledgments” section at the end of the book, Gaspar de Alba makes who she is directing the novel to rather explicit when she ends the section (in which she has thanked a lot of people we have met in this dissertation, such as Esther Chávez Cano, Eve Ensler and Diana Washington Valdez, among other great activists of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez) with the following words:

To learn more about the crimes, or the author, or to sign the online petition to end the violence against women and girls in Juárez, please visit www.desertblood.info.

I hope this book inspires its readers to join friends and families of the dead and the disappeared women of Juárez. Only in solidarity can we help bring an end to this pandemic of femicides on the border. ¡Ni Una más! (346)

Similarly, in her blog on *Desert Blood*, Gaspar de Alba claims to have donated 50% of all honoraria from the novel and the book tour to Amigos de Ciudad Juárez, a non-profit organization that provides financial and emotional support to the families of the victims of the crime wave (Finnegan 105), which goes a long way toward showing how the novel is meant to be an artifact that can and should be *used* to serve a cause and that cannot, then, merely be read, despite its intrinsic literary value, as a work of art that is autonomous to reality. And, needless to say, this also the way it was received. In her review of the book, for instance, Helena María Viramontes writes: “Let me say something loud and clear: *Desert Blood: The*

Juárez Murders deserves the widest readership possible. In fact, copies of the novel should be delivered to the El Paso Police Department, La Migra, and the FBI with a post-it saying: ‘mandatory reading’” (qtd. in Finnegan 105). After all, even in the “Disclaimer” to this novel, Gaspar the Alba clearly states her goals:

It is not my intention in this story to sensationalize the crimes or capitalize on the losses of so many families, but to expose the horrors of this deadly crime wave as broadly as possible to the English-speaking public, and to offer some conjecture, based on research, based on what I know about that place on the map, some plausible explanation for the silence that has surrounded the murders.

I am from El Paso, a native of that border, I join the ranks of those who believe silence=death. (*Desert Blood* vi)

Desert Blood offers indeed “some conjecture.” Spoiler alert: in this particular instance of the dynamo of stories, the killers are the bus drivers, in collusion with the leaders of a snuff movie network. Other than that, we have the usual suspects in a tapestry tightly woven by cultural paranoia, to the point that not only everything that happens, within the book, is supposed to be interrelated, but also that a megacity like Ciudad Juárez/El Paso is depicted as a claustrophobic canvas in which four or five crucial characters who are related, in one way or another, to the *feminicidios*, keep on meeting –by chance– and interacting as if they were the only human beings overall. In fact, and setting aside chapter 1, which is a short description of the thoughts and the situation in which a kidnapped young woman suddenly finds herself in after waking up from a drug-induced sleep, thus confronting us in medias res with the horrors of violence against women, the characters start randomly meeting and interacting from the very beginning of *Desert Blood*.

Thus, in chapter 2, we are introduced to Ivon Villa, the main character of the novel, who is a Chicana academic from El Paso finishing her dissertation at UCLA and who is on a plane to the border in order to visit her family, from which she is partially estranged as a result of her open lesbianism, for the first time in years. Even while she is reading an article called “The Maquiladora Murders” in *Ms.* magazine (a clear-cut reference to the article of the same title authored by Sam Quiñones and published in that very magazine in 1998, which is also the article credited by Gaspar de Alba in another book as being the one where she first came across the murders [Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán 5]) and wondering how it is possible for her, as a native of the border, not to have known anything about the crimes up to that point, a man who is instantly described as a weird, or better, as an ominously weird person turns up and insists on sitting beside her; this man, it turns out some hundreds of pages later, this very man who asks to sit beside a woman who is just finding out about the *feminicidios* and who is not in any way (neither personally nor professionally) related to them yet, is no other than the main killer!

As if this were not enough, the man interrupts her in a rude way in her reading and makes a point of talking to her about the content of the article:

“Don’t mean to be skimming over your shoulder,” he interrupted again, “but are you reading about all those girls getting killed across the border?”

“Trying to,” she said.

“Sure is a damn shame they still haven’t caught the killers after all these years.” (5)

Then, after learning that she is a lesbian because she tells him so in order not to be the object of his aggressive, clumsy flirting advances, he gets seemingly confused and

embarrassed and lets a roll of pennies slip out of his hand when he takes it out of his pocket. Again, these pennies are going to play a major role in the plot, in which pennies are hints left by the killers in the bodies of their victims in order to mark them as their property and also, in a transparently symbolic way intended by the author to discuss the disposability of women bodies at the border, to establish different values among them (the whiter a victim is, the more pennies she has in her body). And they appear, by chance, even before the protagonist has arrived in Juárez and really found out about the crime wave!

Moreover, the reader is already on alert as to the importance of the pennies, since Gaspar de Alba herself has made sure it is that way by including, in the “Disclaimer” section that precedes the narrative, the following explanation:

Because this is a fictionalized account of true events, I have taken liberties with chronologies and facts. I have also added a metaphorical dimension to the story, using the image of American coins, particularly pennies, to signify the value of the victims in the corporate machine; the poor brown women who are the main target of these murders, are, in other words, as expendable as pennies in the border economy. Let me stress that, to my knowledge, none of the bodies of the actual victims was ever found to have had American pennies inside them. (v)

The symbol is a little too obvious, and its use as a narrative tool to inscribe the novel within the academic literature on the *feminicidios* that has, as was discussed in chapter IV, emphasized the economic causes and implications of the murders over other possible aspects to a sometimes extreme degree, is rather blunt. Still, one of the wonders of *Desert Blood* is that this little gimmick works and that the general tone of chapter 2 (and throughout the novel), which ends with the man saying “Catch ya later, alligator” to Ivon when they leave the

plane [7], using a conventional phrase that in this story has menacing undertones, remains ominous and threatening.

Likewise, other narrative shortcuts taken by Gaspar de Alba to put Ivon in the middle of the crime wave from the moment she sets her foot on the border (which, to Gaspar de Alba's credit, is presented as a system of relations in which one side does not exist without the other from the very start of the novel, also: "From the plane you can't see the boundary line, the cement riverbed that separates El Paso from Juárez. The borderland is just one big valley of lights" [7]) might look contrived and even ridiculous after the fact, but *Desert Blood* somehow works as a real page-turner. Thus, it strikes one as strange that Ivon has never heard of the crime wave given that her cousin, Ximena, with whom she keeps in touch in a relationship that evidently amounts to friendship and is not only conditioned by their being related (she even picks her up from the airport [10]), is a social worker for the young women of the maquiladoras and an activist against the *feminicidios* at that. As bad as it sounds, it is almost too convenient for the plot, as well, that the young woman of Ciudad Juárez who is going to give her not as yet born child in adoption to Ivon (the reason she is coming back to the border, in the first place) happens to be murdered before she can even meet her, so that the protagonist is directly involved with the killings less than 24 hours after her arrival. Immediately after that, she meets Rubí Reyna, a journalist who is hesitatingly trying to help and to uncover the truth behind the murders and whose own husband, as it turns out in the "Epilogue," seems to be an accomplice in the snuff movie ring that leads to them (he gets murdered himself in what is likely a settling of scores)... and knowing Reyna, incidentally, is the only thing that will save her life when she is kidnapped by corrupt *federales* for asking too many questions about the *feminicidios*. As if more were needed, Ivon's own young sister, Irene, becomes a casualty of the crime wave less than 24 hours after *that*, when she goes to a state fair in the company of Raquel, a former girlfriend of Ivon (the reason she *left* the border,

in the first place) who also happens to be a drug addict related to some of the killers, who are her dealers of choice...

This easy, exaggerated recurrence to chance as a driving force of the novel would make it literarily unredeemable were it not for the language the author uses and for the way she conceives and breathes life into her main character. The first aspect mentioned, the language, is perhaps the most remarkable: lacking all pretensions of virtuosity or even beauty for itself, it is straightforward, effective language meant to capture the reader's attention, as it were, briefly convey the meanings and senses that have to be conveyed, and generally serve the plot, which is in itself, as the quote from the "Disclaimer" makes clear, no more than an excuse to deal with the *feminicidios* and make the scandal as widely known as possible in the literary and academic communities of the United States and beyond. But you need a certain command of the powers of language, as well as a will to restrain from pomposity, in order to achieve that.

Moreover, Gaspar de Alba has a gift for encapsulating pieces of the border experience and the in-betweenness of the nomadic subject of the border, characterized by hybridity and flux (Braidotti; Kaplan), in short sentences that give the reader the sense of this way of life or of these living conditions without making too much of a fuzz about it, as when Ximena tells Ivon that she does not "look like no native to me, homegirl, wearing shorts and leaning against the car looking all sexy in your California tan. Te miras muy Hollywood" (22), or when the narrator says that, for "the locals on each side of the river, the border is nothing more than a way to get home" (7). She also has a knack for describing situations of abject terror in a way that makes them vivid without making too big of a point of it, as when the narrator says that the "air smelled of gunpowder and wet animal" at a crime scene (303) or when Ivon wakes up after fainting during a visit to the morgue and the "first thing she noticed

was smoke, and, for a moment, she was afraid they were still inside the morgue surrounded by the smoke of the burning clothes” (54).

Granted, Gaspar de Alba tends to rely too much on exposition, as in the whole initial chapters in which Ximena and her activist partners introduce Ivon, through dialogue, to the whole phenomenon of the crime wave. Sometimes, too, and to the detriment of the narrative, the scholar in the author takes charge of the language, as when she delves into Gloria Anzaldúa’s theorizations on border subjectivities in the closing chapters of the book, or when a boy looks at Ivon and her companions and uses an ugly, utterly derisive word used for the female victims of the murders, “maqui-locas,” out of nowhere (43), as if only for the sake of completeness in the ethnographic attempt of portraying Juárez.

Even these flashes of academic writing within the novel are consistent, however, both with the explicit intention of it (to denounce *feminicidios* and help to end them in real life) and, more importantly, with the main character as it is constructed in the narrative, which is the second aspect mentioned above that redeems *Desert Blood* and makes it a palatable literary work beyond its usefulness as an agitation tool. Ivon is sympathetic because she is, in many ways, a wreck: a young scholar of Chicano descent but no instantly visible physical features that can be connoted as “ethnically Mexican,” she is also a lesbian who has been practically ostracized by her mother for her sexual orientation and who, in turn, has exiled herself for the place that she comes from and which is presented, throughout the novel, as a hostile region trying –and failing– to find an identity for itself, as well. To borrow the words written by Nuala Finnegan in her article, “Moving Subjects: The Politics of Death in Narratives of the Juárez Murders”:

So, while the protagonists [of this and another border novel by another author] are seen as frequently hankering toward the United States as a topos of stability, it

nevertheless remains elusive. This double-edged alienation, then, cements their positions as outsiders and locates them as subjects in constant flux, suspended somewhere between “here” and “there” in a space that is marked by intense movements back and forth. (93)

Furthermore, and as was said before, Ivon is lesbian, which is hardly conventional for a detective narrative. In that respect, Finnegan points out the following:

It would seem therefore, that the integration of lesbian desire and sexual activity into the fabric of both plots draws attention to sexuality as a normative part of human experience and brings it into the mainstream in ways that are still very uncommon in conventional detective fiction, which from its inception was overwhelmingly dominated by central detective figures frequently characterized as aggressive and domineering. (95)

But there are traits in Ivon that are common in “conventional detective fiction.” She is an alcoholic, for instance, who spends the whole novel trying not to drink, as well as to avoid cigarettes, just to fail repeatedly when the impossibility of what she is confronting (nothing less than one of the most horrible crime waves in recent history) impacts her. Besides, she is *actively* unfaithful to her partner, taking the lead in the first of several sexual encounters with her ex girlfriend, Raquel: “She [Ivon] turned her face toward Raquel’s and kissed her, gently at first, then roughly, pulling her close, gnawing at her mouth with a hunger she didn’t even realize she felt. Raquel did not resist” (255). And, while she does feel remorse, later, it seems to be more for the feelings of confusion that Raquel (who is, as we said, familiar with the killers, by chance!) wakes up in her, rather than for the unfaithfulness itself. Ivon is no friend

of the bourgeois way of life, after all: in chapter 4, there is a long flashback in which the story of how she reluctantly came to accept and support her partner's wish to adopt a child, which is something which she clearly does not really want to do and which brings her to Ciudad Juárez, in the first place. Even her academic career is hesitant, unstable and, above anything else, a kind of vital compromise accepted by her in order to make her dead father (also an alcoholic, but one who killed himself) proud: "Her dad had always said you weren't anything in this country unless you owned your own house. Dissertation, tenure, real estate – that was the order of things" (18). But her dissertation topic and her grudging and somehow tongue-in-cheek approach to it shows how grudging she is about the mainstream in general and the academic mainstream in particular:

Last August, Ivon had landed her first job as a visiting professor in Women's Studies at Saint Ignatius College in Los Angeles. The dean, a Jesuit priest who as a rule did not like to hire ABDs, had given her twelve months to finish her dissertation, *Marx Meets the Women's Room: The Representation of Class and Gender in Bathroom Graffiti (Three Case Studies)*. (The dean hadn't thought much of the topic at Ivon's interview, finding it a little too frivolous for a Ph.D. candidate, until she explained that public bathrooms are a type of exhibition space in which the bodies of women and the graffiti they write and draw on the walls—a closed discursive system of words and images— can be read semiotically to analyze the social construction of class and gender identity in what Marx called the "community of women.") After defending the diss., she's be promoted to assistant professor step one, a tenure-track position with a higher salary and an office she didn't have to share, and she'd be on the way to job security, but only if she finished. Job security, or rather tenure, meant they [Ivon and her partner]

could buy the house they were leasing in Palms, a three-bedroom bungalow with wood floors and a little orchard of orange and lime trees in the backyard. (17-18)

All of these characteristics, among others, make Ivon a highly sympathetic protagonist. As readers, we want to know more about her and we root for her, which is a further reason –other than common humanity– why we want the plot of the novel to be adequately solved and the kidnapped girl, Ivon’s sister, to be saved. And she is saved, in the end: in a highly improbable chase scene that brings Ivon to the site where the snuff movies are being filmed by Mexican gang members directed by the American man from the second chapter, she is finally able to liberate the kidnapped girl and get the main villain and his accomplices killed, as well as to disassemble the criminal ring that is responsible for these concrete murders. There is, however, a sense of the crime wave as being bigger than this and as going on, with other faces and with slightly changed *modi operandi*, despite all of Ivon’s and, by extension, despite all of other detectives’, researchers’, journalists’ and activists’ possible efforts. Miguel López-Lozano describes the ending of the book as follows⁴⁹:

At the end of *Desert Blood*, Ivon recovers her sister and resumes her life as an academic north of the border, while Ciudad Juárez continues to be represented as irredeemable. As in most detective novels, there is a measure of poetic justice in that the villain, Jeremy Wilcox, is killed. However, there is little doubt that the patriarchal order has not been fundamentally altered. Despite Ivon’s statements about the snuff videos, the police conceal the truth about the involvement of corrupt officials: “Pornographers, gang members, serial killers, corrupt policemen,

⁴⁹ See “Women in the Global Machine, Patrick Bard’s *La frontera*, Carmen Galán Benítez’s *Tierra marchita*, and Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*.” *Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Media Representation and Public Response*, edited by Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba and Ignacio Corona, University of Arizona Press, 2010, pp. 128-51.

foreign nationals with a taste for hurting women, immigration officers protecting the homeland – what did it matter who killed them? This wasn't a case of 'whodunit,' but rather of who was allowing these crimes to happen? Whose interests were being served? Who was covering it up? Who was profiting from the deaths of all these women?" (Gaspar de Alba, 333). Thus ... *Desert Blood* is not focused exclusively on the pathological individuals directly responsible for the femicides, but rather on the broader social structures that allow such crimes to be committed and the perpetrators to remain unpunished. By emphasizing the exploitation of female workers both in life and death, *Desert Blood* elaborates on the systematic use of women in developing economies. (147)

This bleak conclusion is par for the course in detective novels, which are supposed to offer solutions to the main mysteries presented in their narratives without claiming to save the world, first because that would mean precluding further detective narratives, and secondly because, as the saying in the classic film⁵⁰ goes, "Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown." In the epilogue of *Desert Blood*, Gaspar de Alba allows Ivon to do that, precisely: to forget and to move on, with the help of the regenerative powers of family, food, and tradition:

Ivon had spent yesterday morning helping her uncle salt and season the special roasts he bought for his barbacoa. The aluminium-wrapped bundles of brisket would roast in a pit of mesquite wood for two days, beans cooking slowly, thick with ham hocks and garlic, in a cylinder-like pot in the middle of the smoky pit. She could almost taste it.

⁵⁰ *Chinatown*. Directed by Roman Polanski. Performances by Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway, John Huston, John Hillerman, Roman Polanski. Paramount, 1974.

Then she thought of the families of the murdered women. Were they going to celebrate Father's Day, she wondered, go boating on the lake, break piñatas, and eat barbecue brisket? Just be grateful you have a family, Ivon. Ximena kissed Jorgito [the newly adopted Mexican boy] on the cheek. He wriggled out of Ivon's arms and went to play with Curious George.

"¡Qué familia!" said Ivon. (343)

Interestingly, the way for Ivon to go back to "normal" life and to "forget" the murders for the time being is to pick up her dissertation and finish it, changing the subject in order for it to include some chapters on the *feminicidios* and hence showing a path towards social responsibility and activism that makes it possible for her, and for others like her, to be involved with the crime wave, trying to stop it, without being sucked up by it:

Once Ivon had allowed herself to fully focus on the work and stopped trying to play detective, the chapter had practically written itself in the five days that she and Brigit had been staying at Ma's place ... Ivon was brainstorming on a legal pad about how to integrate Anzaldúa's theory on border identity with Caputi's theory on femicide and the fetishization of serial killers in patriarchal culture. The stitches in her arm were throbbing today, and she'd just taken some more Tylenol ... Ivon looked at the calendar she had drawn on the legal pad. Today was Saturday, June 20th. She and Brigit were flying back to L.A. on Monday, the 22nd. That meant she had exactly eight days to finish the last chapter, write a conclusion, print up the whole manuscript, and submit it to her committee. How the hell she was going to do all that, she didn't know, but it wasn't going to

happen sitting here in the midst of all the family madness. Her computer was waiting for her in her old room. Back to the grindstone. (340)

But the distinction that Gaspar de Alba makes between “playing detective” and leading the life of a scholar is bogus, of course. Just to begin with, in the narrative of *Desert Blood*, Ivon has not merely been “playing detective”... she just solved the mystery, saved her kidnapped sister, and got some of the villains killed, for crying out loud! More importantly, and although she certainly is no detective like Robert Ressler, the aforementioned ex-FBI agent who went to Juárez to put his expertise on serial killer profiling to practice (and who appears in this novel as a secondary character called “Bob Russell”, “an ex-FBI dude they brought in to help the pigs in Juárez with profiling the victims. He’s written all these books on serial killers” [85]), or like the detectives of the Mexican police forces as depicted in the book, Ivon first researches and gets to know the context, then confronts the facts, then makes hypotheses about them, and then checks these hypotheses against reality in order to construct working theories that explain the meanings of what is happening and offer solutions to it, just like a detective would. In a way, then, she *is* a detective, the same as, say, Jennifer López’ character in *Bordertown* (loosely based on Diana Washington Valdez) was both a journalist and a detective.

Indeed, it is precisely her being an outsider to the detective game, but a researcher by training (“trained in cultural studies, Ivon always looked for the historical and cultural context of whatever she was researching” [118]), which allows her to seek for hints that no one else can find or even think of *as* hints, as well as to see the wood beyond the trees, to paraphrase a saying. The wood, in this case, is enormous, and Ivon’s comprehension of it is necessarily partial and incomplete. She is able, however, to at least save one tree, which is more than anyone else is able to accomplish in the universe of the novel. Moreover, she cannot grasp the

immensity of the *feminicidios*, for that is too big a goal for any single person, no matter how effective a researcher she is, but at least she is able to glimpse, tentatively and impotently, but also decisively, at the existence of the wood, at the systemic character of the crime wave, at the underlying causes that cannot be changed by detectives but require, in order for the murders to stop, a fundamental overthrow of historically unjust structures that depend on interests and mentalities of a myriad of actors on both sides of the border.

In fact, perhaps the best part of the novel is the moment when she suddenly becomes aware of the enormity of what she is confronting, something she is only able to do, as a humanities researcher in the 21st century, by using a computer and while procrastinating in the process of trying to come up with some kind of order to finish her dissertation:

Taking the plate and the coffeepot over to Ximena's office, where she's set up her laptop, she sat down to begin that new chapter. She ate the first quesadilla, waiting for inspiration to strike, but the screen remained blank. She connected the phone line to the computer so she could go online, and ate the second quesadilla. Still nothing. She pulled up a game of FreeCell. There was a trick she'd found to arranging the cards. It was almost an intuitive thing, knowing what cards to move to the free cells and what cards to arrange in a pattern, moving quickly, not thinking. She didn't always win, but that wasn't really the objective. The game helped her concentrate. Of course, she'd make more progress on her FreeCell skills than on her dissertation.

Poor Juárez, so close to Hell, so far from Jesus. That and *Ricky's Diary* were the only cards she had to go on, for the moment.

Violence against women, she typed on a blank page, and next to it, *Economic exploitation of the border*, and next to that, *Religion*. She formatted the page in

three columns. She needed to brainstorm now, let her mind doodle on some free associations, scratch the surface until she could see the pattern.

Violence–death–murder–young poor Mexican women–serial killers–Ted Bundy–Night Stalker–trematode

Exploitation–NAFTA–maquiladoras–workers–victims–Border Patrol?

Religion–church–Father Francis–“so close to Jesus” Could be a reference to a priest gone astray. He seems to know everything. Knows about Richard Ramírez–ministered to Night Stalker in prison–attended his trial–Richy’s Diary. Is Father Francis the perp? (114-15)

Here we have, in a nutshell, a depiction of the way in which the multiplicity of stories that forms the discourse on Ciudad Juárez starts to get organized by a researcher connecting the dots in a process of “consciousness raising” (López-Lozano 142) that does not refer to facts or events outside of the discourse but to itself, that is only possible by the process itself. In other words: there is no consciousness there, other than the consciousness that emerges from the effort to get to that consciousness. There is no pattern other than the pattern that emerges from the effort to get to that pattern, using the tools of academic research, cultural paranoia, healthy suspicion, and play – Ivon even uses her FreeCell skills in order to start to knack the meaning of it all!

It is not so much that there are no phenomena that have to be explained and put in context, since, both in the narrative universe of *Desert Blood* and in our universe, violent things happen, and they happen in a context. Rather, the point here is that, to be able to at least partially understand what is going on, and to be able to even start to act on it, Ivon has to first use a method and impose an order onto a plethora of stories that defies order and that could be ordered, if it was needed, in other ways. As a scholar living in the early 21st century

who has an extensive background in Cultural Studies, however, she logically privileges a system of explanations in which economic and cultural factors, such as the maquiladoras, religion, and patriarchy, play a larger role than, say, individual pathology, magical entities, or simply bad luck, or chance. Thus, as a scholar, and as a detective, she has to make sense of a state of things that, quite possibly, just does not make sense.

In *Desert Blood*, the *feminicidios* largely make sense, in the end, since, as extreme as they are, they are simply the extreme expressions of a *machismo* gone awry under the pressure of globalization and new gender roles. It is even possible, in this novel, to punish some of the culprits, although, as was already discussed, it is clear that the system that allows for these culprits to prosper has to change if the crime wave is to stop. In the end, then, the “familia,” after having suffered upheavals caused by Ivon’s gender orientation and by the addiction that seems to run in the family, is united by the intrusion of misogynistic violence through the kidnapping of her sister and most especially by Ivon’s ability to provide an order to the narrative and rescue her. Thus, no matter how excentric the protagonist’s family ends up being, in the “Epilogue” of *Desert Blood*, what with two lesbian couples and an adopted child in its middle, all of whom are accepted by Ivon’s mother in spite of her confessed homophobia, it is a family nevertheless: as was quoted above, the book ends (if we do not count the “Acknowledgments” section as a part of the narrative) with the words “¡*Qué familia!*,” after all. Similarly, the social fabric of Ciudad Juárez has suffered tremendously through violence against women and unlawfulness, in the novel, and it continues to suffer in the end, regardless of the partial victory against the one specific snuff movie ring that is achieved by Ivon and her use of research methods worthy of a detective and of a dissertation writer. But at least the crime wave has some kind of explanation, the causes can be accounted for, and the world still makes some sort of sense. In the book that we will be reading in the

next pages, Roberto Bolaño's instant classic, *2666*, no such comfort is offered, which is perhaps why it is the definitive literary statement on the discourse on Ciudad Juárez hitherto.

But let us start somewhere near the beginning. The year was 2004. Arriving pretty late to the game, I became acquainted with the work of Roberto Bolaño when a friend of mine introduced me to *Los detectives salvajes*, Bolaño's breakthrough novel from 1998, which he then gave me as a present and which I subsequently devoured in a state of incredulous fascination. There was life beyond the Boom, after all! A year later, in October 2005, I went to a blog I used to write and posted some idle reflection on fictitious biographies and metafiction with the declared intention to ramble and to "tirarme en plan al menos parcialmente auto-irónico a erudito sin saber nada. Escribir paja, pues. Ilustrar la cada vez menos existente diferencia entre el 'conocimiento' de otrora y la 'Información' de nuestra era" ("Nothing stays the same" n.pag.). Directly replying to this, the same friend who had given me the novel left a brief comment on the blog: "Acabé de leer *2666*, el mamotreto de novela de Roberto Bolaño que empecé hace tres meses, de 1200 páginas. 1200 páginas de pura paja, *brother*. ¡Increíble! ¿No estarás un poco bajo su influencia?" ("Nothing stays the same" n.pag.)

Let us leave the question aside about whether or not I was under Bolaño's influence, something that on the one hand is perhaps inevitable and on the other hand makes it sound as if there was possibly any equivalence between our talents, which of course there is not. Let us also look further from the admittedly colloquial and not at all academic language employed by my friend, who is an insatiable reader but not precisely a scholar. Still, his use of the term "paja" ("straw" or, in its figurative meaning, something light or lighthearted, lacking of any weight or entity, or even sperm as in the product of male masturbation) and of the term "increíble" ("incredible," meaning excellent) in the same breath is not only interesting in itself but also quite adequately captures my own affective reception of *2666*, that bona fide

narrative tour de force published in 2004 and which can arguably be placed somewhere between (or beyond) the categories of the “total novel” or the most total nothingness, or “paja.” The first relevant question to ask and to try to answer in the following pages, then, is this: What kind of “paja” are we talking about when we talk about *2666*?

In his review of Bret Easton Ellis’ novel *Glamorama* (1998) published in *The New Yorker*, the literary critic Alex Ross wrote that one of the main pleasures while reading it was to try to imagine “how scholars of postmodern fiction will explain it a century hence ... Ellis invents a fresh hell on every page [and] through all this mayhem the style remains mysteriously elegant” (87). This quote could be applied, without any changes other than substituting the name of one author for the other, to *2666*. If anything, the quote could be complemented with a disclaimer of sorts clarifying that all attempts to explain or to decipher Bolaño’s are doomed to fail, not so much due to the lack of historical hindsight (“a century hence”!) but rather because both interpretation and deciphering as critical enterprises are in crisis or downright impossible. In fact, the impossibility to apprehend fixed meanings and get down to the deep structure of things, or even to the sense of things and of the world itself, is arguably the main topic, as it were, or the whole point of *2666*.

This mega-novel is divided in five “parts,” each one of which can also be individually considered as a novel of its own, even though they all are interconnected and should be read in the order in which they have been published (I will not go into the discussion about the “incomplete” nature of the novel, since, for me, every text is somehow incomplete, and every text is also “complete enough” to merit interpretation). The first part, “La parte de los críticos,” is about a strange *ménage à trois* —or rather *à quatre*— consisting of three literary critics from different European countries. They all have a favorite author, the German Archimboldi, whose work they almost obsessively study; for all effects and purposes, they owe him their comfortable lives as scholars in the metropolises of scientific knowledge

(London, Paris, Madrid, and Turin). Archimboldi, however, is a famously reclusive writer who, in the vein of Thomas Pynchon, just cannot be found. And it is the search for his whereabouts, in fact, that triggers the action in this part, and in 2666, when it leads the critics to Santa Teresa, a fictitious border town in Northern Mexico which stands as an avatar for Juárez, and in which they suspect Archimboldi is hiding in what may or may not be related to a double life related to a crime wave against the women of the city.

Just like Ciudad Juárez, Santa Teresa is described as a chaotic and incomprehensible urban Moloch full of violence and general ugliness, at least in the eyes of the critics. The chaos and the violence of the city become even more important in the next part of the novel, “La parte de Amalfitano,” in which Santa Teresa is almost a character that plays a big role in the descent towards madness and schizophrenia of a Chilean intellectual, Amalfitano, whose different exiles and overall bad luck in life have ultimately brought to this horrible town. Serving as a kind of guide to the critics, whose intellectual language he understands and can talk, unlike almost everyone else in Santa Teresa, Amalfitano seems to also be somehow connected to the margins of society in which violent, mysterious crimes against women are taking place. His own daughter, Rosa, is in fact one of the potential victims, and this menace against her, no matter how vague and intangible it looks like, is a factor in the process of mind-decay documented in this part of the novel, as well.

“La parte de Fate,” the third part of the book, is really a detective story or a thriller. It is the more traditionally “narrative” section of the novel hitherto, meaning that, whereas in the first part the only “action” that was significant in terms of the plot was the quest for Archimboldi and the travel to Santa Teresa that that quest elicited, and whereas in the second part there was virtually nothing other than flows of consciousness and ominous forebodings, in this third part of the novel there seems to be a continuity and even a causality: something happens and then something else happens because of what happened first. There is no

causality, though: in “La parte de Fate,” the titular Fate is an African American reporter who gets increasingly involved in the messy universe of violence of Santa Teresa. He ends up being practically drown in that mess, but not because of some sort of perceptible causality, not really as a logical consequence of his acts, but rather due to the inexorable workings of randomness and chance.

This part is followed by “La parte de los crímenes,” where the novel finally starts dealing head-on with the *feminicidios* of Santa Teresa (or really of Ciudad Juárez) that have been hovering ominously and increasingly determining the general tone of the previous parts and the things that happen or seem to happen in them. Here, an excessively, obsessively detailed account of the crimes is served to the reader without authorial comment, without moral judgement, and even without proper contextualization. Just the “facts,” indeed, tabulated meticulously and piling upon each other, endlessly, creating the impression of a huge crime wave, both in the sense of its magnitude and in the sense of its apparent inevitability and matter-of-factness. The magnitude can only be compared to the novel itself. The matter-of-factness is in the language: for all we know, according to 2666, there is no way but what happens.

In a way, this part is the backbone of the novel, as it were, the “base” that supports all the other non-narrative narratives in this proliferation of narratives that constitutes 2666. It is also the part that, directly or indirectly, touches on the stories of every single one of the main characters of the novel. For, as we can see in the last part, “La parte de Archiboldi,” the fugitive author who tries to escape his own fame and even his own life is more than superficially interested in the murders of Santa Teresa, too, as well as in the revelation of their dark secrets and deep truths. In fact, he is on a quest of his own, trying to find out what is going on and why, which is the reason he has landed in such an unlikely place—even in the

context of a life full of bizarre turning points and random events as his own— as Santa Teresa to begin with.

Thus, even from this very short summary it is possible to establish the two main axes along of which the narratives of *2666* unfold in all of their complicated and chaotic glory and banality full of wrinkles, sediments, more or less dense and significant knots, and innumerable loose threads. First of all, there is the “plot” concerning the contexts surrounding the relentless but also “telos-less” development of the wave of horrific crimes against the working class women of Santa Teresa and its repercussions, a “plot” that is more atmospheric than anything else. This is, as I said before, arguably the backbone of the whole novel, the axis on which the whole narrative project rests and to which it always come back, the deepest surface of the book, the one with the “facts” and the bones to pass as the only place where certainties are available at all. The second axis, however, also shapes everything in *2666* and is, in a way, its more visible surface, the pretext, the alibi: I am talking about Archimboldi and his random life, and most especially about his disappearance and the consequent efforts of the critics to find him. If the crime wave constitutes the backbone of the novel, Archimboldi’s journey and its ramifications are the skin of the story, the largest organ of the body and the one that gives it not only a certain beauty but also a structure, the one that firmly establishes a division between that body and the rest of the world and, in that sense, make it a thing with its own entity, a body, in the first place. The skin gives the body its legibility. The inner world is just messy and chaotic, unreadable. That is the place where the crimes reside.

The story of Archimboldi is indeed the second axis of the novel, and it is divided into two different but interrelated quests: the quest of which he is the object and his own quest for the sense and the meaning of life, his quest for his own self as a subject. These quests frame the rest of the novel and as such are its “skin,” since they dominate the narrative of the first and the fifth part of *2666* and also have implications for the other three. On a more genera

level, further, these quests can be read as an allegory of the intellectual's journey (similar to Campbell's *The Hero's Journey*) and of the quest for sense in a world that seems to have lost it, or that seems to have lost the words to name it.

Words are indeed so lost that the author himself is lost. Arhcimboldi is, in fact, a fictional avatar of the mythic figure of the lost writer, the author of narrative universes who is gifted with the ability to perfectly use words and create realities but voluntarily refuses to use that ability and prefers to just disappear. Moreover, it is precisely this act of abstention from the world, it is the author's own condition as a disappeared, reclusive individual alone with his deep thoughts and sophisticated words to express them, that gives him a transcendence and provides his own persona with a mythical scope that would be almost impossible to achieve through the actual use of words. Voluntarily detached from the world and from its petty concerns, including actual books and stories, but simultaneously the perceived site of potential truths and deeper reflections on language and reality, the author becomes, through its disappearance, an even more transcendent figure that is progressively farther and farther away from the realms of meaning and of sense in the "real" world.

Significantly, if this term proceeds, it is the absence of the author, the absence of his words and of the sense that these words at least partially made —regardless of how fragile the sense being made was— is both cause of the critics' quest for him and effect of his own quest for existential truth and, more specifically in the diegetic context, for the truth about the murders of Santa Teresa and their fathomless secrets. In this way, the two main axes of the novel, its backbone (the crimes) and its skin (the quest), are constantly intersecting and separating again, leading to points of convergence that make it possible for new divergent lines to start, as well as for new universes to emerge and then almost instantly collapse, or not, or to get unceremoniously obturated by a narration that continues without progressing and that for all of its own verbiage does not really seem to care, or maybe to constitute elements

of new, interesting connections and hints, or not, or in any case to become even more and more profusely elaborated variations of the same monstrosity that is infinitely narrated, ad nauseam, in that other monstrosity that is *2666*.

I am using the terms “monstrosity” and “ad nauseam” in a conscious way, here. After all, the fact that this novel is a veritable boulder of more than 1,100 pages is neither casual nor irrelevant, and it should be indeed mentioned in every discussion of *2666*, for it is one of its most directly visible aspects. Besides, the physical enormity of the book itself goes hand in hand with and corresponds to the enormity of what is told in it, namely the crime wave of Santa Teresa (Ciudad Juárez) and its obscurity and incomprehensible scope. It also corresponds to the incommensurability of reality and of course falls short of that. If *2666* as a tangible artifact in the real world already looks terrifying from outside (it is, for all effects and purposes, a brick), then what can we even start to say about the countless demons that we can find ad nauseam in between its covers? What can we even start to say about the monstrosity taking place in between its covers and exceeding them?

The quote about *Glamorama* briefly discussed above, in which Alex Ross stated that one of the “pleasures” of reading that novel was to think of its future interpretation, would have to be modified in order to be adequately applied to *2666*, since there are lots of things that can be said about this book, but one that cannot be said is that reading it, regardless of how much futurist imagination the reader mobilizes while doing it, constitutes any kind of “pleasure” in the conventional sense of the term. In a way, indeed, Bolaño’s posthumous novel is an exercise in exasperation and its clearly exaggerated meticulousness can be considered, especially in “La parte de los crímenes,” as a deliberate provocation.

Yet the provoking character of *2666* does not only reside in the macabre story that it tells, even though that story is undoubtedly macabre. The provoking core of the novel, the core of its monstrosity and the horrors that monstrosity entails, lurks somewhere else, and it is

not even really a core but its opposite, an indeterminate narrative entropy that precisely lacks any resemblance of a core. What is a provocation to the reader, indeed, what exasperates and lacerates the reader in this novel is not the brutality of the crime wave per se but the forensic, repetitive minuteness with which the victims that result from that crime wave are described, tabulated, and forgotten. In *2666*, and especially in “La parte de los crímenes,” a routine is established in which progressively interchangeable, progressively dehumanized, and even progressively trivial female corpses are discovered and registered in an uncanny census of abject bodies that amounts to nothing at all and that does not mean anything in the end, that is insignificant in the end, at least to our anesthetized senses.

In other words, what truly causes exasperation in *2666*, and what distinguishes this novel from other accounts of monstrosity to the point that it makes it a monstrosity itself, is not merely the high doses of latent violence to which it subjects the reader and that is obviously behind the crime wave as such. The truly harrowing character of the novel comes from how boring and routine-like that violence is, from how trivial and insignificant it is, from how supinely *there* it is, without further qualities. It is just violence that is everywhere and nowhere, that seems to emerge from the things and from language itself. In fact, the immanence of violence in Northern Mexico prefigures, and maybe even determines to a certain degree, the senselessness or, better, the meaninglessness of violence in *2666*.

In fact, there are very few and very fleeting flashes of explicit violence in the 1,100 plus pages of the novel, and the reader is positively grateful for them. After all, thanks to those explosions of actual violence one has the impression that there is at least some kind of narrative grip in an immense, amorphous ocean of stories or rather in an enormous desert of digressions and proto-stories, of more or less delineated and fleshed out characters, and of a senseless and ridiculous proliferation of unconnected facts and events, or not. A desert in which the most abject violence lies within every atom and every story and is thus immanent,

ominous and real in its relative absence, pervasive and inescapable in its relative presence, but in which, at the end of the day, nothing happens and nothing will.

In fact, one of the reasons that one keeps on reading in a state of almost literal fascination, and at any rate bewildered, disturbed and somehow blinded (or anesthetized) but also irresistibly attracted to the enchantment of this literary desert, is the vain hope that something happens, sometime, even if the only means for something to ever happen in this desolate universe is some kind of properly violent denouement, some kind of horrific narrative catharsis that at least breaks with all the uniformity and all the entropy so that, by the end of the novel, the previous 1,100 plus pages make sense at all.

But there is no such thing as making sense in *2666*.

It is not a coincidence, after all, that the epigraph that opens the novel, taken from the poem “Le Voyage” (1859) by Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), is the following: “Un oasis de horror en un océano de aburrimiento.”

It is no coincidence either that in one of the many dreamlike moments of *2666*, and almost at the end, a scene takes place in which the sister of the famous, mysteriously disappeared writer, Archimboldi, dreams both of him and of that hellish, undifferentiated desert that is the Northern border of Mexico, in the context of the novel:

Esa noche Lotte soñó por primera vez después de mucho tiempo con su hermano. Veía a Archimboldi caminando por el desierto, vestido con pantalones cortos y un sombrero de paja, y alrededor todo era arena, dunas que se sucedían hasta la línea del horizonte. Ella le gritaba algo, le decía deja de moverte, por aquí no se va a ningún sitio, pero Archimboldi se alejaba cada vez más como si quisiera perderse para siempre en esa tierra incomprensible y hostil.

- Es incomprensible y *además* es hostil – le decía ella, y solo en ese momento se daba cuenta de que nuevamente era una niña, una niña que vivía en una aldea prusiana entre el bosque y el mar.

- No – le decía Archimboldi, pero se lo decía como al oído –, esta tierra es sobre todo aburrida, aburrida, aburrida... (1,100-01)

Needless to say, my insistence of the aspect of boredom, or rather tedium, which predominates as a tonal undercurrent at least as immanent as proper diegetic violence in *2666*, does not in any way aim at detracting this novel. Much to the contrary, and to borrow the words used by the U.S.-American critic and writer, Benjamin Kunkel, in his review of the English translation of *Los detectives salvajes*, the fact that “Bolaño can produce such an intense narrative interest in a book made up of centrifugal [narrations]” is in itself “something close to a miracle” (8).

My emphasis on boredom and/or tedium, however, does point at an effort to read the monstrosity of *2666* as a programmatic monstrosity, as it were, that is related to —or, in a more “utilitarian” interpretation, that is at the service of— the main topics or concerns of the novel as a whole, namely the immanent character of violence in today’s world and the essential intangibility of the so-called “reality” or the real intangibility of the so-called “essence.”

This programmatic momentum manifests itself, of course, not merely in the narrated events as they are told, as stories about the numerous unresolved murders and about the mysterious disappearance or symbolic death of both Archimboldi and the possibility of making sense of the world. Rather, the programmatic character of boredom and/or tedium in *2666* is inscribed, sometimes subtly and sometimes less subtly, in the both quantitatively and qualitatively excessive and immoderate language of the novel. Perhaps the crassest examples

of this are the descriptions of the crime scenes and of the more or less decomposed state of the bodies, descriptions which are clinically pointillist and frankly even picky. To begin with, the corpses are *everywhere*. Granted, they are not exactly innumerable, for they can be counted by whoever feels like it and their number is certainly finite (slightly over a hundred corpses in total, according to Ana María Moix in *El País* in 2004). However, the undaunted repetitiveness with which those descriptions are made, as well as their detached, criminological tone of the narrator, gives them such an inflationary quality that there could be, for all we know or care, thousands of dead women, or even millions. Furthermore, and despite constituting, as it were, the *body* of just “La parte de los crímenes” (a part which can in turn be considered, as was already discussed, the backbone of the whole novel), these forensic descriptions and crime scene reports also stand out within the general context of *2666*. After all, they are the most visible and somehow “realist,” most tangible, most bodily, and most legible effects of the immanent violence that hovers over the whole narrative but that only very rarely becomes something other than an abstract, ominously absent presence.

As transparently related to violence as these passages are, or as clearly referential to the “natural” order of things in the hellish desert of Santa Teresa (Ciudad Juárez), which prominently features the nameless and meaningless depredation against the bodies of mostly working class women, as these passages are, they are not the only ones in the novel in which the strongly violent charge of the language of *2666* itself can be detected. If anything, they are just further, repetitive instances of that violent charge, and indeed they are such repetitive instances that they are trivialized and end up being just words in the sand with nothing overtly dramatic or meaningful about them. At any rate, there are other numerous examples sprinkled throughout the 1,100 plus pages of the book in which violence impregnates narration and gets intimately intertwined with it. This happens, moreover, even in cases and in turns in which this intertwining does not seem to have any narrative justification at all but rather to be a

random product of *nothing*, a sudden apparition of something —something violent— out of nothing that neither has causes nor makes sense.

Significantly (again, if that term proceeds), this undercurrent of violence that is inherent to the language of the novel itself, to the discourse of the novel as a discourse and not as a sum of narrated events, is more or less perceptible throughout all the parts of *2666*, no matter the setting of the specific “action” — if we can talk about “action” in a novel in which, as I already pointed out, actually nothing happens. The violence is everywhere, then, just waiting to happen, but its manifestations begin to grow exponentially, both in intensity and in frequency, as well as in its excesses and its lack of narrative justification, from the moment in which the epicenter of the narration moves from Europe to Mexico. For instance, when the specialist in German studies of “La parte de los críticos” decide to actively search for Archimboldi and travel to Mexico DF in order to do just that, the first thing that they encounter is the existence of some kind of random, subterranean “war” that is going on between the cab drivers and the doormen of the hotels of the city (147). The causes of this “war,” its consequences, a clear account of its different bands and actors, of its main events and ramifications? There is no such thing as that in *2666*. The “war” just happens and is somehow noticed by the critics but barely. They are not directly involved in it and, indeed, there is nothing really in which to get involved at all. The whole “war” is a detail, and a fleeting one at that. It is utterly superfluous for the development of the diffuse plot, if we can even talk of a plot in view of the proliferation of details like this one that ultimately add up to nothing.

Yet, regardless of how subterranean and obscure it is, a “war” is almost by definition something that can be considered tangible, something with entity. Even more troubling than the discovery of the existence of this “war,” then, and even more representative of the overall way in which the immanent violence unfolds and makes itself visible in the language of the

novel itself, is the fact that, from the moment the critics set a foot in Mexican territory, the narration is increasingly sprinkled with violent elements and turns. As if this were not enough, these elements and turns are not merely unnecessary from a narrative point of view; they are completely rhetoric, just traces of disturbances or violent explosions within the desert landscape of the language of 2666. They literally explode out of nothing and become nothing. An oasis of boredom in an ocean of boredom indeed, violence without meaning, traces of nothing, straw.

Thus, when the literary critic, Norton, looks out of her hotel room's window after just arriving to Mexico DF, the narrator describes what she sees:

Por el cielo, presumiblemente lleno de nubes negras cargadas de contaminación, aparecieron las luces de un avión. Norton levantó la vista, sorprendida, pues entonces todo el aire empezó a zumbear, como si millones de abejas rodearan el hotel. Por un instante se le pasó por la cabeza la idea de un terrorista suicida o de un accidente aéreo. En la entrada del hotel los dos porteros le pegaban al taxista, que estaba en el suelo. (146-47)

While it is true that this reference to the doormen and the cab driver leads, a little later, to the ephemeral “explanation” that there is a “war” between them—an “explanation” that is never picked up again in over 1,000 pages—the passing mention of an imaginary “terrorist” attack or of an inexistent “plane crash” is as gratuitous as the one of “contamination” is banal, at least in the context of the infamously polluted Mexico DF. In this way, both passing mentions insinuate, already at this relatively early stage of the novel, the gratuitousness and banality of the crime wave against the women of Santa Teresa (Ciudad Juárez), in particular, as well as of the immanent violence that permeates the whole of 2666, in general.

Furthermore, both passing mentions point at the ultimately lack of sense of this violence, which is, just like the one taking place between the doormen and the cab drivers for unknown reasons, banal and gratuitous, as well. In the following 1,000 pages of the novel, these “insinuations” will proliferate exponentially.

Only a couple of pages after the aforementioned passage, for instance, and still with the same hotel in Mexico DF as the geographic setting, one of the critics discovers that the toilet in his room is faulty. This might seem innocuous enough and in fact is not related to anything else in the text at all, let alone to violence in general or to the *feminicidios* of Santa Teresa in particular. Still, the narrator uses such excessive words to describe this discovery, and thus creates an atmosphere so ominously violent that the reader cannot but relate this trivial, daily problem to the workings of evil on a broader, undetermined scope:

En la habitación de Pelletier faltaba un pedazo de la taza del baño. A simple vista no se veía, pero al levantar la tapa del wáter el pedazo que faltaba se hacía presente de forma repentina, casi como un ladrido. [...] El trozo que faltaba tenía forma de medialuna. Parecía como si lo hubieran arrancado con un martillo. O como si alguien hubiera levantado a otra persona que ya estaba en el suelo y hubiera estampado su cabeza contra la taza del baño. (149)

Later, already in Northern Mexico, the critics are invited to a traditional barbecue. This event is narrated with clear allusions to the murders that, as we can see in the following quote, already start to hover over the whole narrative like shapeless, immanent shadow — so much so, in fact, that the terms “mist” and “soil,” which refer to “natural” things that just happen and do not have a proper origin or an immediate cause, are used to describe the event:

Cuando apareció el rector Negrete [...] procedieron a desenterrar la barbacoa, y un olor a carne y a tierra caliente se extendió por el patio bajo la forma de una delgada cortina de humo que los envolvió a todos como la niebla que precede los asesinatos y que se esfumó de manera misteriosa, mientras las mujeres llevaban los platos a la mesa, dejando impregnadas las vestimentas y las pieles con su aroma. (173)

Much later in the book, in “La parte de Amalfitano,” there is another exemplary moment of the many silent and senseless explosions of an otherwise immanent and haunting violence that are sprinkled throughout the novel. In this passage, Amalfitano, the Chilean exile whose descent to madness we behold, suffers one of his mental breakdowns and, without any discernible reason or justification, the narration gets tinged again with an “unnecessary” violence that seems to emerge out of nothing and that creates a whole landscape or atmosphere of violence: “La voz dijo: cuidado, pero lo dijo como si se encontrara muy lejos, en el fondo de un barranco de donde se asomaban trozos de piedras volcánicas, riolitas, andesitas, vetas de plata y vetas de oro, charcos petrificados cubiertos de minúsculos huevecillos, mientras en el cielo morado como la piel de una india muerta a palos sobrevolaban ratoneros de cola roja” (269).

Around this point, at the latest, the general tone of the novel has turned so ominously dark, so hauntingly violent, the language itself has acquired such a strong charge of immanent violence, and the violence seems to be so intrinsically related to the mere existence or being of the hellish desert of Northern Mexico, that even the following statement by a minor character who supposedly is speaking in English sounds nothing short of abominable: “A esta hora [el campo] siempre es triste. Es un jodido paisaje para mujeres” (350). It is important to notice, here, the ambiguity of the second sentence of the statement. The character is speaking

in English and says that the landscape itself is “jodido,” which means either “fucked” or “fucking,” not just for everyone but specifically “para mujeres” (“for women”). Is this a “fucking landscape for women” in the sense that it is not worthy of a man? Is this rather a landscape that is “fucked” or where women are “fucked”? Is this a “fucked up” landscape or a landscape that “fucks” them? Even more sinisterly: is it everything at once? In a way that is consistent with the shapelessness of the violent shadow and with the general impossibility of ultimately making sense of what is happening in 2666, this is an ambiguity that is neither resolved nor even picked up again in the following 700 plus pages.

In “La parte de los crímenes,” of course, the violence that was immanent “materializes” itself, so to speak, but it still keeps its daily, trivial, and indistinct character. It is a truly unspectacular violence, in a way, and above all it is one that never acquires concrete contours or any real character other than the numerous, interchangeable corpses that proliferate just like signifiers of a lost signified or “something” that lacks, in the ultimate analysis, any meaning or significance. Even in this part of the novel, however, amid all the monotonous and meticulous descriptions of the crime scenes, we find single, discreet moments in which immanent violence is not just directly related to the crime wave or to its elusive causes, but rather emerges from and within the language of the narration itself. This is, then, ultimately a narrative without meaning and without entity that refers only to a reality that, in turn, also lacks meaning and entity beyond the mortal remains that it leaves in its unrelenting, senseless wake. It is a narrative full of signifiers (in fact, ostentatiously so) that does not try to signify anything because the horror at issue transcends signification and meaning, because violence at the border does not make sense, at all, and does not mean anything, either.

I want to quote in extenso one of those moments, here, because it is without a doubt one of the densest passages of the novel (in the good sense of the term “dense”), a moment in

which lots of thematic lines of 2666 somehow converge and intersect without, however, adding up to any more transcendent meaning: the immanence of violence, for sure, but also questions of patriarchy, national identity, Mexico as a myth and what Mexico represents within the book as the locus of horror, death's omnipresence, the Latin American experience as a whole, etc.:

Desconsolada, la vecina volvió a su casa, en donde la aguardaba la otra vecina y las niñas y durante un rato las cuatro experimentaron lo que era estar en el purgatorio, una larga espera inerte, una espera cuya columna vertebral era el desamparo, algo muy latinoamericano, por otra parte, una sensación familiar, algo que si uno lo pensaba bien experimentaba todos los días, pero sin angustia, sin la sombra de la muerte sobrevolando el barrio como una bandada de zopilotes y espesándolo todo, trastocando la rutina de todo, poniendo todas las cosas al revés. Así mientras esperaba a que llegara el padre de las niñas, la vecina pensó (para matar el tiempo y el miedo) que le gustaría tener un revolver y salir a la calle. ¿Y luego qué? Pues aventar unos cuantos tiros al aire para desencorajarse y gritar viva México para armarse de valor o para sentir un postrero calor y después cavar con las manos, a una velocidad desconsiderada, un agujero en la calle de tierra apisonada y enterrarse ella misma, mojada hasta el huesito, para siempre jamás. (659-60)

All these quiet explosions of violence within language itself enhance and even constitute, on the one hand, the gratuitousness and immanence of violence in 2666 and seem to contrast, thus, with the sober and forensic descriptions of the bodies in “La parte de los crímenes.” They also differ markedly from the few and widely scattered “loud” explosions of

explicit violence that can be found throughout the novel, the most impressive of which is arguably one that takes place almost right at the beginning of the book and involves a Pakistani cab driver who almost gets kicked to death by two of the literary critics of “La parte de los críticos” for no reason at all, or at least for no discernible reason other than an imprecise and never fully admitted xenophobia on the part of the aggressors, as well as the jealousy provoked by their own involvement in a bizarre love triangle that gets exponentially exacerbated by their feelings of inadequate, not quite manly enough manhood (100-01 — in the context of such a long monstrosity as *2666*, page 100 is “almost right at the beginning”).

Another one of those memorable explosions of explicit violence occurs when a male character called “la Venada” (which, strangely, means “doe”) starts to physically abuse his wife and, just like the critics before him, he suddenly lets himself go within the dynamics of violence itself. Having “tasted blood” in an almost literal sense, indeed, la Venada begins abusing his wife in a misguided, punitive gesture but gets excited by the act of violence itself and unburdens the tension, as it were, or cannot help spilling it all over the place, making the permanently latent violence visible and inscribing it in the most brutal way possible in the body of the female subject. Moreover, and maybe more importantly, this specific explosion of violence takes place in “La parte de los crímenes” and constitutes, thus, an even more poignant counterpoint to the tedious descriptions of female corpses that populate that part of the book and that desensitize the reader to the effects of misogynistic violence so much::

Probablemente, al principio, la Venada solo quiso hacer daño o atemorizar o advertir, de ahí el balazo al muslo derecho, luego, al ver el rostro de dolor o de sorpresa de Angélica, a la rabia se le añadió el sentido del humor, el abismo del humor, que se manifestó en un deseo de simetría, y entonces disparó sobre su

muslo izquierdo. A partir de ese momento ya no pudo contenerse. Las puertas estaban abiertas. (749)

Finally, it must be noticed that “La parte de Fate,” in an almost too obvious —and a bit too perfect— correspondence with the U.S.-American citizenship of its protagonist, is a very cinematic thriller of sorts and is, as such, also considerably more explicit than the rest of the novel, both in its logic of suspense and in its construction of an atmosphere rarefied by a barely contained, always hovering violence. It does not attain the level of explicitness of the two explosions of violence discussed above, however, even though it is certainly more violent than the majority of the narrative of 2666, in which death and mayhem is omnipresent but veiled, permanently latent but rather unspectacular and tedious. But “La parte de Fate” is still, most definitely, a thriller: like the best exponents of the genre, in fact, the narrative of this part gets progressively darker and darker, and also more and more entangled, in a subtle but perceptible way. It even gets to a point in which the reader almost, *almost* feels able to start making sense of the whole mystery and almost, *almost* starts hoping that, in the end, and against all odds, there will be light. For a brief moment, it seems as if this hope is not wholly vain, as if the rules of the game have been subverted but not fully and, therefore, one still can realistically expect at least some sort of narrative outcome and closure. Nothing like that happens, of course. Much to the contrary, after the momentary lapse of “hope” comes and passes, everything ends up abruptly, in medias res, and leaves behind a panting reader who is lost in a cliffhanger that, alas, never leads to any further development, let alone to a conclusion or resolution. It is a discontinued “to be continued,” in fact, as if the viewer of a movie like *Kill Bill Vol. 1* had to cope with its ending but knowing that there will never be a *Kill Bill Vol. 2*. It just stops right when it seems to start making sense. It is a thriller that is not.

For what comes directly after this brief moment of hope is not the revelation of the secret or some sort of trick that somehow allows the reader to make sense of the whole thing but narrative entropy, the never-ending desert of “La parte de los crímenes” and the inescapable certainty that there is no secret, it all makes no sense, and there is no certainty. An ascertainment that emerges not only from the excessively tedious tone, which belongs to a novel without entity that is about non-entity, a novel of and about “paja,” but also from the fact that every single line of possible explanation of the crime wave that has been advanced or approached in the text ends up obturated in an utterly undramatic way that does not have anything to do at all with its plausibility or lack thereof. These lines of possible explanation are simply left behind without that there is even discussion about their validity since, as explanations, they simply do not have a place in *2666*, other than that of being stories that proliferate.

Thus, all kinds of theories and possible causes that have been mentioned throughout the 1,100 plus pages of the novel (state corruption and drug traffic, the culture of impunity and police negligence, exacerbated machismo and neoliberal policies, irrational religious liturgy and perversions like “sacrophagy,” sexual “deviations” and the super exploitation in the maquiladora economy, personal psychopathies and the general brutality of a culture that has a baggage heavy with a history of war and violence, etc.) end up in a strange limbo reserved for pieces of a puzzle so enormous and so monstrous that one might as well not even trying to solve it. They all are, in any case, stories that try to explain a phenomenon but fall blatantly short of even starting to constitute something like a truth or approximation to the truth. So they just fly around in the general ominous atmosphere of Santa Teresa and get instrumentalized, sometimes consciously and sometimes not, for the sake of diverse interests that, while pressing, do not have anything in common with what one could call “the truth”

about the case. The truth is just not out there. We have this myriad of truths instead, each one of them compelling on its own but also interchangeable, invented, self referential, and fake.

Likewise, every single one of the characters who tries to decipher the enigma and get to the bottom of this violence without meaning and that makes no sense ends up being completely unable to even start to comprehend what is happening. Thus, even the interpretative inefficacy of literally all the characters (the critics and the police officers, the politicians and the “escritor detective” Sergio González, Fate and detective Loya, Lotte and the journalists), up to and including Archimboldi, ultimately confirms that there is no secret and there is no sense to be made, and that the immanent violence of the novel, the monstrosity of the novel, has no meaning, either. The fact that it is not only every single one of the characters who tries hard but does not even get close to an answer, but also the reader of *2666* herself, reinforces this conclusion and makes it even more inescapable.

In other words, every single interpretative or explanatory project of the narrated universe utterly fails. If we consider this in combination with the excessive verbiage with which this failure is narrated, as well as with the fact that the failure does not follow from mistakes made by the characters or from obvious obstacles put in their way but from the fact that the quest itself is doomed to fail, we must arrive to the conclusion that *2666* does not refer to a separate entity or to a deep, hidden reality that is just out of reach but there. Much to the contrary, the novel refers, in the end, only to itself and to its own gigantic nullity. In a way, then, it is a reflection on its own condition of being a palpable example of the impossibility of making sense of a world that has none, or of writing a “total novel” that truly captures the way we live and what the world is at a certain moment. The added twist here, of course, is that Roberto Bolaño manages to talk about this impossibility—that the novel *is* about this impossibility indeed—in the very act of writing a novel that, in its own excessive use of words and signifiers and “paja” that amounts to an equally excessive lack of meaning

and sense, cannot but be recognized and admired as the closest to a “total novel” that we can even have.

On page 701 of 2666, there is this quote: “El judicial le dijo que no intentara buscarles una explicación lógica a los crímenes. Esto es una mierda, esa es la única explicación.” To put it another way: twenty years after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the U.S.-American writer Don DeLillo had this to say in an article about that incident and its repercussions that he wrote for the magazine *Rolling Stone*:

What has become unraveled since that afternoon in Dallas [el 22 de noviembre de 1963] is not the plot, of course, not the dense mass of characters and events, but the sense of a coherent reality most of us shared. We seem from that moment to have entered a world of randomness and ambiguity, a world totally modern in the way it shades into the century's 'emptiest' literature, the study of what is uncertain and unresolved in our lives, the literature of estrangement and silence.

Perhaps the *feminicidios* of Ciudad Juárez, when viewed in the particular context of Latin American history and culture, and after these crimes have been literarily “filtered” and reflected upon, can be read, *mutatis mutandis*, as moments that are equally crucial to this process of “unraveling” of “coherent reality” —or, rather, of the sense of a “coherent reality”— that DeLillo discusses and that has marked the history of Western civilization and of Westernized peripheries in the last sixty, fifty, or forty or thirty years, as are Kennedy’s assassination, 1968, the Holocaust, the flowering of the counterculture of the Sixties, the End of Communism, the Birth of the Internet, globalization, September 11, etc. Perhaps the murders of women in Juárez are uncannily representative, then, of that which has been called, for lack of a better name, postmodernity. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Roberto

Bolaño selected this incomprehensible and bigger than life crime wave as the background against which to reflect on the impossibility of making sense of the world in his immense novelistic essay that is also bigger than life. Perhaps the discourse on Juárez is an appropriate narrative pretext to tell the story of an author who is lost or dead and who took the truth of the world and the possibility to make sense of it with him, as well as the meaning of that which, before postmodernity, used to be called “reality.” Perhaps that is why the *feminicidios*, once transformed, shifted and dislocated by means of the narrative entropy that deprives the reader of any hope in the existence or possibility of truth in the indistinct and hellish desert of Santa Teresa, serve here as the backbone of a total novel that insists on being a live plea (or a dead plea) for the search of just such a truth and just such a totality despite the obvious impossibility of having a total vision, of apprehending a coherent reality, of deciphering a meaning that is not only elusive but absent, and of writing, no matter how much verbosity, a novel that can be total. Perhaps all of this plays a part indeed in the reason why Bolaño so patently overdoes it and piles up absurd digressions upon barren association, words upon words that are like nothing, like straw, like “paja,” in order to dim, with so much excess, any misleading inkling of light, or in order to somehow capture, with this significant hyperbole of proliferating signifiers, how inexistent the signified has become, how much there is nothing behind the stories. Perhaps that is why Bolaño overdoes it in terms of mere length and number of pages and words and signifiers, too, with the same artistic motivation, or as another possible artistic or literary reaction to the same historical moment of estrangement, that makes a Beckett, for instance, progressively overdo it with his silence and go to the other extreme, in his work. Perhaps: after all, in page 896 of 2666 we read that, in a series of personal diaries written by an old Russian and that Archimboldi used to read and to *memorize* when he was young and still looking for his own authorial voice, the writer of the diaries notated how he

had written “un ensayo sobre el futuro de la literatura, cuya primera palabra era ‘nada’ y cuya última palabra era ‘nada.’”

“Nothing.” A term that is, probably, the best one to conceptualize the monstrosity that is 2666 and a term that says, in this context, more or less the same as the one with which I started this chapter, “paja.” It is the one with which I now end it.

VII. (NO) CONCLUSIONS:

LEAVING CIUDAD JUÁREZ

...but Overall is beyond me: is the sum of these events

I cannot draw, the ledger I cannot keep, the accounting

beyond the account:

in nature there are few sharp lines: there are areas of

primrose

more or less dispersed;

disorderly orders of bayberry; between the rows

of dunes

irregular swamps of reeds

though not reeds alone, but grass bayberry, yarrow, all . . .

predominantly reeds:

I have reached no conclusions, have erected no boundaries,

shutting out and shutting in, separating inside

from outside: I have

drawn no lines...

A.R. Ammons ("Corson's Inlet")

Everything is normal now. And we keep track of this with numbers that comfort us in the twirl of events and the dust of our abandoned dreams. Or we ignore this with numbers that fill our heads and our accounting books.

Charles Bowden (*Dreamland* 18)

In Roberto Bolaño's posthumous novel *2666*, discussed at length in the previous chapter, there is a short passage in which two literary critics and one exiled intellectual visit an unknown magician, whose name supposedly is Doktor Koenig, in order to establish his true identity, for they have reason to doubt the one he pretends to possess. The interrogation reveals nothing apart from the fact that he *really* is a magician:

- ¿En qué consiste su número de ilusionismo? – le preguntó Pelletier en inglés.
- Empiezo haciendo desaparecer pulgas – dijo el Doktor Koenig, y los cinco se rieron.
- Es la mera verdad – dijo el empresario [el jefe del mago].
- Luego hago desaparecer palomas, luego hago desaparecer un gato, luego un perro, y finalizo mi acto haciendo desaparecer a un niño. (176)

Neither the magician nor the “empresario” appear again after this dialogue, which can be considered to be fairly at the beginning of the novel, given that novel’s monumental scope. Nevertheless, it is tempting to read this scene as a narrative allusion to the crimes that have been committed with total impunity against the women of Ciudad Juárez over the last 16 years, and which have made this city internationally famous. To begin with, *2666* is, at least

on a certain level of its multiple layers, an account of this crime wave, as well as a reflection on its meanings. Indeed, it can be said that it is *the* novel on this topic, at least until now (and it seems difficult to imagine something that could alter this standing in the near future – see chapter VI of this dissertation for more on this).

Besides, the fact that there is actually a magician at work here, in this quote, and one whose specialty is to make living beings “disappear” at that, seems to correspond to the ominous nature of the immanent violence and of the ubiquity of death that is a fact of life on the Mexican-American border, and especially in Ciudad Juárez, according to a very popular reading of it.

Finally, the quote seems to reveal the existence, in the imaginary related to these murders, of an amoral continuum between “lower” animal forms (say, fleas), “higher” animal forms (dogs) and human beings who, given their position of fundamental weakness in an extremely hierarchic and unjust society (in this case, children), are suitable to be easily reduced to less than human beings, namely to the condition of “bare life” in the Agambian use of the term or, better, to the condition of “disposable people” in the sense proposed by Melissa Wright in her 2006 book, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism: Perspectives on Gender*, in which she tries “to understand how the laboring body, under capitalist conditions, emerges as an embodied site of exploitation and accumulation” (13).

Needless to say, and as the title of Wright’s book –which deals with the fate of female workers in Ciudad Juárez and in Southern China– already suggests, the wave of *feminicidios* for which Ciudad Juárez is pretty well-known, and which has become a symbol for everything that is wrong with the contemporary world, according to innumerable stories that we have examined in the previous chapters, has been not directed against boys, but against women. That is, after all, the point of the crime wave, as it were, the factor that gave it coherence and made it a discreet, “particular crime wave” (Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán 1). The victims were

female, or at least the victims that were being counted, first by Esther Chávez Cano and then by a progressively larger and more influential number of feminists, activists, scholars, artists, and journalists, were female. The victims that counted were female and they counted because they were victims: Ciudad Juárez became the city of the dead women, “the femicide city” (*The Femicide Machine* 12); *feminicidio* became, according to Rocío Galicia in her article, “Memorias de duelo,” “[l]o que podríamos llamar ‘el modelo juarense’ –respecto a la violencia contra la mujer–” (21). This “model” was then more or less successfully applied by feminists, politicians, and activists to other cities and countries, in the process of the international struggle for women’s rights and, more specifically, for the typification of *feminicidio* (or *femicidio*) in penal codes in Mexico (where it has only been legally recognized, since 2011, in the State of Mexico, one of the thirty-two states in the country), Latin America, and elsewhere, as Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos recounts in her memoir, *El feminismo en mi vida: Hitos, claves y topías*, published in 2012:

Hace más o menos quince años denominamos feminicidio a los homicidios de mujeres en Ciudad Juárez. Fue un hallazgo que permitió dar luz sobre las causas y las condiciones que generan ese tipo de homicidios. Dijimos entonces, en relación al conjunto de dichos crímenes que se trataba de feminicidio, es decir de crímenes de odio contra mujeres cometidos casi siempre por hombres desde una posición de supremacía y ventaja sobre las mujeres. Más aún, los consideramos parte de la violencia contra las mujeres por el sólo [sic] hecho de serlo.

Hace una década empezó a plantearse la necesidad de tipificar el delito de feminicidio por parte de grupos feministas y organizaciones de apoyo a familiares de víctimas.

Se buscaba visibilizar que los homicidios dolosos contra mujeres y niñas, en un principio en Ciudad Juárez y luego en otras partes del país, enfrentar el problema y resolverlo por la vía penal. (233)

It does not ultimately matter, then, that men, children, and other subjects suffer violence and even murder in Ciudad Juárez (and elsewhere), for the discourse on Ciudad Juárez is the discourse on *feminicidio* and, as we have seen in the previous sections of this dissertation, this discourse always has had, as a common denominator, the female victim of that particular city and of that particular time frame, i.e. from 1993 until nowadays. As Debra A. Castillo puts it in her article, “Violence and Transvestite/Transgender Sex Workers in Tijuana,” which specifically deals with other subjects that are victimized at the border, “[a]lthough the tragic murders of young women in Ciudad Juárez have become the most internationally recognized example of gender-related violence along the Mexico-U.S. border, and rightly are the main focus ... it would be a gross oversimplification to presume that gender-based violence is limited to this single city and to these specific women” (15).

Of course, it would also be a gross oversimplification to presume that, just because the discourse on Ciudad Juárez is made up by stories about *feminicidios*, violence in that city is limited to violence against women and that no stories about other violences are actually there. In fact, it is unquestionable that more men than women are killed in Ciudad Juárez –both in absolute and in relative terms– in any given year, as well as that this has been the case not only in the years of, say, President Calderón’s War on Drugs, but in the pivotal and crucial year of 1993, too. By any measure, *feminicidios* are marginal phenomena in Ciudad Juárez, regardless of their centrality in the discourse on the city and its ghosts. This is as hard a fact as any that has been provided in this dissertation or, for that matter, in the whole literature on the crime wave. But what does that mean?

This is where the discourse on Ciudad Juárez turns into a numbers game. First, the obvious: There is just no way of knowing how many were killed or disappeared as a part of the crime wave due to the fact that the crime wave is not a thing that exists, a fact, but a discourse that is constituted every time we talk about it in order to, for instance, try to establish how many women have been killed or disappeared by it. Alicia Gaspar de Alba circumvents this problem, predictably, by blaming the authorities:

Readers will note that the numbers do not match in any of the essays in in this book; the body count is always different. Indeed, that is one of the major issues with these crimes. There has been no systematic accounting of the victims or accountability by the authorities, which results in only more confusion, more impunity for the perpetrators, and less chance of resolution. Despite the discrepancy in the numbers, however, the contributors all agree with the activists and NGOs that have been working on these cases that the numbers given by “official” channels are much lower than the actual body count. (“Feminicidio: The ‘Black Legend’”¹⁰)

More elegantly, Kathleen Staudt suggests, in her 2008 book, *Violence and Activism at the Border: Gender, Fear, and Everyday Life in Ciudad Juárez*, that the difficulty to determine exact numbers also arises from the concept of feminicidio itself, which privileges, as its objects, the most spectacular, deadly cases, and obscures other violences against women, especially domestic violence:

Violence against women has been magnified as a border problem due to the widespread international attention to the murders of girls and women in Ciudad

Juárez. Consequently, attention to domestic violence and homicides resulting from it has been muted, although this terrifying but “normalized” part of everyday life is found not only in Juárez but around the world. Border social movements have framed and prioritized the hundreds of femicides, coupling numbers with grim and horrifying testimony from victims’ mothers about shockingly irresponsible police behavior. In so doing, activists initially missed the opportunity to stress the ordinariness of everyday violence against women and its victims and survivors. (29)

Others, like Julia Monárrez Fragoso in her important essay “Feminicidio sexual serial en Ciudad Juárez: 1993-2001,” published in *Debate Feminista* in 2002 and in which she summarizes the local, feminist discussion on the *feminicidios* hitherto, do attempt to use the available numbers, either the ones provided by the State or the ones gathered by activists and social workers, in order to tabulate the crimes. And that is what she does, indeed: she tabulates. Using different sources, including lists provided by Esther Chávez Cano, Monárrez Fragoso elaborates three different tables (the first one is about the status of the crimes as of their judicial processment; the second one, about the age of the victims; the third one, about the victims’ occupations) with which she not only comes to the conclusion that, “hasta el mes de diciembre de 2001, contabilicé 110 víctimas de feminicidio sexual y serial” (296), but with which she also reduces the complexity of the world to a set of variables (not a very complex set, either) in order to try and inevitably fail to make sense of the crime wave from the point of view of theories of economic inequality and structural causes for a violence that cannot be quantified, that transcends numbers and percentages, no matter how she tries to stabilize it using them:

Las mujeres jóvenes que presentan mayor riesgo y vulnerabilidad a ser atacadas, son las que trabajan en la industria maquiladora: 22,2%. Además de ser mujeres, son migrantes, caminan grandes tramos solas y a altas horas de la noche. La maquila es la actividad económica que concentra el más alto porcentaje de la población económicamente activa. Las mujeres, como objeto de violencia por parte de los hombres la sufren desde su causa inmediata, que es la diferencia de fuerza física entre ambos y la causa mediata, la cual se encuentra en la desigualdad social de las mujeres. (301)

Monárrez Fragoso's research is laudable, of course, and her intentions are good, but the general obsession with numbers that still permeates the discourse, even in the progressive, feminist expressions of it, represents, on a certain level, a sort of capitulation to the pressures of the official discourse of the State and the mainstream media –both columns of patriarchy at the border and elsewhere– to “prove” scientifically, as it were, that there is a feminicidio going on, and not just individual cases, and that the problem is statistically relevant and thus needs to be dealt with from the top on, as if a single crime against the life of a single woman or person were somehow not enough to guarantee official action. In that sense, the numbers game might be a trap and, perhaps paradoxically, a distraction from the main point, which is the defense of human dignity in every single case, no matter how many –no matter how many *exactly*– there are.

This is, in fact, one of the conclusions to which I have arrived, and part of my standard answer when I am asked about numbers even though my work is a study of discourses and thus regards even the debates on exact numbers as expressions of those very discourses: It does not ultimately matter whether it is a lot of murders of female subjects or only... a few? It matters, if anything, who determines what is a lot, and what is acceptable, and why, as well as

how those criteria are imposed in the culture and by culture and how stories are mobilized in order to strengthen the criteria or to challenge them. The negotiation, the struggle, the permanent shifting and reorienting matters; the numbers themselves are a part of it but have no more weight than other stories and other kinds of facts. Ultimately, what matters is that every single life that was lost to abject violence in Ciudad Juárez, from 1993 to the present, but also in the years before, was a lost life too many. As even Esther Chávez Cano, the accountant par excellence, the activist who arguably jumpstarted the discourse on Ciudad Juárez by minutely counting the victims (see chapter II of this dissertation for more on her role in the history of the *feminicidios*), has powerfully said –not without a noticeably high degree of exasperation– about the endless discussion on the exact numbers, the exact *modus operandi*, the exact indicators that guarantee the most objective approach and justify State intervention against the crimes: “¡Estoy harta! No me voy a pelear por una cifra. Lo único que importa es encontrar a quien mata a todas estas mujeres y poner fin definitivamente a esta masacre” (qtd. in Fernández and Rampal 51).

Or, as Alice Driver puts it in her excellent 2015 book, *More or Less Dead: Feminicide, Haunting, and the Ethics of Representation in Mexico*:

To talk about feminicide is to talk about violence against women in all its manifestations, and in Juárez one of the most visible of those is disappearance. When women are murdered, their bodies don't always appear. Often they disappear, and so the violence becomes unregistered, unrecorded, and seemingly invisible ... No exact numbers quantify the disappearances of women and girls in Juárez. There are estimates, and then there are the faces you see, the women marching through the streets of the city, the faces of their disappeared daughters on T-shirts or placards covering their bodies. (3)

Those representations based on horror and pain “the faces of [the] disappeared daughters on T-shirts and placards covering their bodies”: Those are the only facts, those are the ultimate truths about and within the crime wave. Numbers... well, numbers are representations, too, and not necessarily truer ones.

Still, numbers help to put things in perspective and to evaluate, for instance, whether or not there is some kind of justification, and whether or not it is actually beneficial for one's own goals, to present a complex set of problems that takes place in a context as a single problem that seems to stand out from that context and, in that way, be partially independent of it. Molly Molloy, a librarian at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, just an hour drive from Ciudad Juárez, has spent the last two decades tracking every single violent death in that border town, building a macabre repository that might well be the most complete data base of the dead women of Juárez and also, crucially, of the dead men of Juárez, of the dead children of Juárez, and, overall, of the dead humans of Juárez in times of all-out war and generalized violence. Her conclusions are bad news for people like Washington Valdez, who make a living off the business of making a spectacle out of *feminicidio*, but, in a way, they are bad news for the human species as such, since they paint a picture of the border that is, if anything, even more horrifying than the conventional one of the discourse on Ciudad Juárez:

Her biggest criticisms, the ones she marshals the most energy to launch, come when any journalist, academic, or filmmaker dares focus solely on Juárez's dead women. Her 2,600-word essay “A Perspective on the Murders of Human Beings (Women, Men & Children of Both Genders) in Ciudad Juárez” arrived in electronic mailboxes packed with stats and supporting a main point Molloy is

increasingly comfortable espousing: What is happening in Juárez is much more than a femicide. It's a human-rights disaster.

“Those in the press and academia who have written extensively about the murders of women, those who coined the term ‘femicide’ to define the killing of women as a product of their gender, seldom acknowledge the actual numbers of victims of violence in Juárez and the fact that the killings of women are a small percentage of the total,” she wrote. “And that this gender ratio in murder statistics is not uncommon, not in Mexico, not elsewhere.” (*This Love is Not for Cowards* 180)

As for impunity, which is the other aspect, apart from the proliferation of violence itself, that made the *feminicidios* of Ciudad Juárez stand out, to begin with, and that captured the attention of an international civil society eager to force the State to honor its ostensible mission, as it were, and to guarantee the rights to life and safety of its women regardless of their social class or race, Molloy points something out that is, on the one hand, indisputable, but on the other hand runs counter to both the official and the alternative stories of the *feminicidios* and therefore sounds more scandalous than it actually is, or should be, in any case:

It's a core contention among femicide proponents that machismo has kept Mexican authorities from prosecuting crimes against women. The Inter-American Court for Human Rights specifically ruled that “gender bias” undermined the government's investigation of the cotton-field murders. Molloy counters, with sources, that 99 percent of *all* reported crimes in Mexico go unpunished, male

victim or female victim. And only one in one hundred crimes are reported in the first place. (*This Love is Not for Cowards* 181)

All in all, her methods are the same that Chávez Cano used, which means, unromantically, counting and counting in order to grasp reality and expose a hidden, deeper truth that is lurking underneath discourse and has to be revealed if justice and social transformation is to be achieved at all. It is just that, in an ironic twist of the story, the discourse that she tries to unmask, the discourse that hides that supposed “truth,” is, in this case, the discourse on Ciudad Juárez, which is to say the discourse on the dead women and the *feminicidios*: “Femicide is like a religion ... I used to be a true believer. Then when I started looking at the real numbers, I changed my opinion. Now I’m a heretic. Now I’m like someone who has escaped from a cult and feels compelled to attack the cult” (qtd. in *This Love is Not for Cowards* 180).

The point is not, however –and this is a necessary clarification–, that there is no violence against women in Ciudad Juárez. To say that would be sexist, of course, but it would, moreover, also contradict the findings of her own studies and meticulous counting methods. The point is rather that violence against women is embedded in a violent, overall context in which gender is but a factor –albeit an important one– to be taken into account but that one cannot, or should not, artificially separate from others to highlight some murders, to define a single, discreet phenomenon (the crime wave), and to market academic, literary, and journalistic products to serve the outrage that the process itself has begotten:

“I don’t want to be misunderstood,” Molloy later insisted to me via e-mail.

“There’s nothing wrong with people mobilizing, organizing and challenging the government in Juárez and Chihuahua to solve these murders. There’s nothing

wrong with these women [from the cotton field] getting a judgment against the State for not solving these cases. These cases deserve attention. The wrong thing is not what the Mexican activists have done. It's what the idiotic American and international activist and feminist theorizers and these Hollywood people have done in turning it into this mysterious untrue thing, this myth." (qtd. in *This Love is Not for Cowards* 181)

Another way of putting the discourse on Ciudad Juárez in perspective using the methods that contributed to the emergence of that discourse in the first place, i.e. counting corpses and analyzing the numbers, is to compare said numbers on an international level and especially, given the geographic, economic, and cultural situation in play, to compare the numbers of violence in Juárez with those in cities of the United States. Robert Andrew Powell is very good at this. In his book, *This Love is Not for Cowards*, he describes how, in 2010, a large conference and art exposition was organized at Drexel University in Philadelphia, with the participation of artists, activists, scholars, and journalists, and with Washington Valdez as a keynote speaker, among others. The conference was sponsored by Amnesty International; Yoko Ono was one of the contributing artists. It was a big, well-funded affair: There were publications before and after the event, as well as TV ads promoting it and bringing the discourse on Ciudad Juárez to a large audience. This is how Powell recounts it (I will quote in full, because the passage is so poignant) and how he deplores the clichéd use of numbers and factoids to present Juárez as a dark, evil "Other" from the safety of a liberal American city in which well-intentioned subjects fight for a good cause without, however, reflecting on their own situation and on their own biases and blind spots first:

As part of the exposition, the university produced this television commercial, which aired on the Telemundo network:

“Over 700 girls and young women have been murdered in Ciudad Juárez, México since 1993,” says a female narrator. “Some as young as twelve years old. These killings are still unsolved. And they continue to this day. Because there is no penalty.” On-screen, a woman in a pink shirt places her hand on the shoulder of a girl, the girl kneeling with her hands clasped in prayer. The girl also wears a pink shirt. “Our lives are being taken just because we are women.” The commercial ends with information on the then-upcoming ArtMarch, aimed at ending “this femicide in México and violence against women everywhere. Help save the girls.”

The commercial did not say that girls are a very small minority of those killed in Juárez. It did not say that exponentially more men and boys are killed in Juárez every year, and that those male murders remain unsolved, too, and continue to this day. Most relevantly, Drexel did not say that, prior to the recent explosion of cartel violence, Philadelphia has historically been more lethal for women than Juárez, despite being about the same size.

In 2006 in Juárez, 253 people were murdered. Twenty of those killed were women, or 7.9 percent of the total. In Philadelphia that year, according to a database compiled by the *Inquirer*, 406 people were murdered; forty-seven of those were women, or 11.5 percent of the total. Furthermore, most of the women killed in Philadelphia were of childbearing age, a descriptor frequently used for the dead women of Juárez. The first woman murdered in Philadelphia that year was a twenty-one-year-old bludgeoned to death by a young man she’d broken up with over the holidays. That man also stabbed the victim, murdered her

grandmother, and burned down their house in an attempt to cover up his crime.

(This Love is Not for Cowards 186-87)

This is a striking passage because of several factors. First, it attacks liberalism and liberal commitment based on compassion directly, pointing out how ignorant it is, in the best of the cases, or how hypocritical, in the worst, to locate horror in Ciudad Juárez and pretend to speak from ethical higher ground when one lives in a country whose foreign and domestic policies not only can be partially blamed for any violence in Juárez –and in Mexico, by extension– but also in which, at least in certain areas like Philadelphia, Chicago, etc., there are higher rates of murder per capita and specifically of murders of women. Second, it implies that the discourse on a mythical, horrible place where women are killed –the discourse on Ciudad Juárez– is mobilized as a means to sell more tickets to an exhibition, or to gain cultural capital and status in the academic circuit, or to show the world, on TV, how committed one is to end violence at the border but, crucially, not at home. Finally, it contains a gory description of the rampage performed by the first reported killer of a woman (in fact, of more than one woman) in 2006 in Philadelphia, which is thrown in, I think, not for any salacious or exploitative purposes but in order to show that the proverbial brutality of the murders in Ciudad Juárez, while real, cannot fully be taken as a distinguishing factor. Violence is brutal everywhere, and misogynistic violence is especially brutal no matter if in Mexico or in the US. What the numbers game proves, however, according to Powell, is that there is “more” violence in the US.

Of course, the numbers game is ethically problematic, because it reduces people to numbers and it tries to somehow balance and compare horrors that are not quantifiable and are not comparable, in the first place. To put it simply, one single murder is one too many, let alone hundreds and hundreds of them. Moreover, when used to justify deeming the

feminicidios as a myth, it cannot but remind one a little bit too much –no matter what the intentions of their proponents are– of clearly reactionary discursive strategies like the slogan “All lives matter” thrown as a supposed rebuttal to “Black lives matter,” or even resemble accusations of “reverse racism” or “male oppression” that ignore the world and the discourses in which subjects interact and the fact that power is not evenly distributed among them.

But it is important to remember, at this point, that the numbers game is played by virtually everyone involved in the discourse on Juárez; in fact, the discourse itself can be traced to acts of counting, as we saw when we discussed the work of Esther Chávez Cano. Thus, while some, like Chávez Cano or Rosa-Linda Fregoso or Cynthia Bejarano, use the numbers game in order to highlight a situation of structural inequality and toxic masculinities gone mad (“Further research is needed to determine whether more women are being murdered as part of an overall increase in the homicide rates or whether the female-to-male ratio has remained constant over time ... As feminist researchers and activists argue, what makes femicide so distinctive is that it makes visible forms of violence that are rooted in a gender power structure” [Fregoso and Bejarano 7]), others, like Molly Molloy or Robert Andrew Powell, use the numbers game to advance the thesis that the *feminicidios* are but a part of a much larger and chaotic process of descent into violence at the border which affects all genders and affects indeed way more men than women for reasons that we, most likely, do not even really understand yet (“The longer I’ve lived in Juarez, the more I feel the city’s problems have little to do with gender. Girls are not being snatched off the street by serial killers or kidnapped and killed by U.S. Border Patrol officers making snuff films or whatever it was Gaspar de Alba conjured up for her mystery novel. The problem is that life itself in Juárez, across the board, has been devalued” [*This Love is Not for Cowards* 191]).

Still, an aspect that both Molloy and Powell mention *does* count as a distinguishing characteristic and is, in the end, the real reason why the *feminicidios* became a dynamo of

stories and why Ciudad Juárez became a discourse: impunity. No one would have cared, outside of Juárez at least, about the crime wave had it not been made quite clear by all authorities and even by the mainstream media that there was no interest in solving the crimes or, in any case, that there was no way of doing it, even if activism and visible protests provided the interest. To put it bluntly: it's been twenty-three years since Esther Chávez Cano started counting, and not a single one of the killers has been arrested (Abdul Latif Sharif, Los Rebeldes, Los Choferes et. al do not count as such). Arguably, and in spite of the problems with the justice system in the United States, which has huge racial and class-biases, which cannot find all culprits to all crimes that are prosecuted, and in which a sizeable percentage of sexual crimes are not prosecuted because of problems inherent to the sexist matrix, impunity is not as big of a problem in Philadelphia or in the rest of the country. After all, pervasive impunity is concomitant with what Powell defines as the real problem at the border: "The problem is that life itself in Juárez, across the board, has been devalued. Murder is effectively legal. You can kill almost anyone you want just about anytime you want" (*This Love is Not for Cowards* 191).

In his tour de force discussion of the concept of "narcoepics" and how the "pharmakon" relates to violence against women, Hermann Herlinghaus, however, convincingly argues that Roberto Bolaño, the novelist discussed in the previous chapter who, by virtue of *2666*, can also be deemed as one of the main commentators and even theoreticians of the crimes of Ciudad Juárez hitherto, does not emphasize impunity because the *feminicidios* are not "about" that:

Bolaño seems to imply that it is not about impunity. This is what Florita, the saint from Hermosillo, had once responded to Sergios questions about the terror in Santa Teresa: "It has nothing to do with impunity." How could this be? How

could the murders be explained through the failures in a system of order and punishment, if the mightiest players belonging to that system capitalize on them? In this light, “impunity” itself might seem to be a euphemism, suggesting that there would indeed be a concerted, profoundly ethical as well as integrally structural interest in punishing the perpetrators of the crimes. (231)⁵¹

But, whereas impunity does not seem to be the right concept to describe the scandal of the feminicidios, in Herlinghaus’ reading of Bolaño, the other possible terms that could be used as explanatory tools are even more sinister, indeed:

While in most of the cases of femicides registered from 1993 to 1997 police investigation was said to lack sufficient evidence, or was not carried out correctly, readers perceive that there is an underground sphere. The novel’s narrative embraces three areas in which violence against young women is a daily reality, with a tendency to suggest massive proportions. What are the constant threats that hover over women’s bodies and lives? The perhaps most pervasive realm can be labeled “family affairs” ... Then there is a second terrain, one in which misogynist [sic] excesses acquire forms of outright monstrosity ... Thirdly, a symptomatic trait, regularly mentioned in the accounts of the defaced corpses, usually in the cases in which the victims’ identity could be determined, points to the role that maquiladoras play in the game of femicides throughout the Juárez region. “The Crimes” insinuates that tying together these “loose ends” will not

⁵¹ See *Narcoepics: A Global Aesthetics of Sobriety*. Bloomsbury, 2013.

necessarily help readers conclude their search for truth. However, there is no way for the search to avoid traversing this territories, either. (215)

We have come full circle, then, from the criminological and sociological discourses to the scholarly treatments of *feminicidio* and to the literary reflection on them to end on “loose ends” that cannot be tied but, inevitably, one has to attempt to tie, in order to even start talking about the subject and, in the process, constituting the subject itself. That literature has been the medium through which the ways of tying loose ends have been best imagined, even though those ends cannot ever be tied, as it were, should not be surprising, given Herlinghaus’ challenging notion of literature as the “pharmakon” (“poison,” “cure,” “philter”) itself:

The perplexing issue is that literature cannot, perhaps, have the last word about the pharmakon, but it can certainly offer a unique agency of perception and understanding. Literature can have a role not as “literature,” but as a kind of “pharmakon” itself, due to which a novel, or a poem suddenly approximates “narcotic” imagination –implying a spiritual impact on the body through which affect resonates– rather than resembling an artistically codifiable text ... This literary strategy is certain to cunningly outplay, or expose, the destructiveness and exhaustion of the experience of the contemporary. (160)

The question still is, however, why this particular way of approaching literature and/or violence against women through stories emerging from a narrative dynamo that is based on female corpses *en el desierto* but acquires an energy and a life of its own applies so seamlessly to Ciudad Juárez. Why Ciudad Juárez and not anywhere else? Perhaps the author who has better grasped how Ciudad Juárez differs from other violent places not just because

of the *feminicidios* but because of the way violence has come to dominate life itself is Charles Bowden. A journalist from the United States, Bowden was one of the first American journalists and commentators who drew attention to the *feminicidios* internationally, with his article “While You Were Sleeping,” published in Harper’s Magazine in 1996. Furthermore, in 1998, he published a book that deserves to be considered a classic, *Juárez: The Laboratory of the Future*, in which he posits that overt super-exploitation and devaluation of life (including the murders of women) was going to be the new status quo under neoliberal rule worldwide. Bowden grew uncomfortable, in his later years (he died in 2014, aged 69), with the focusing on *feminicidio*. Although he still admired the activists and scholars who had begun counting and, thus, had created a movement seeking justice in Northern Mexico and elsewhere (he was friends with Esther Chávez Cano and first told her story and then eulogized her in his 2010 book, *Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy’s New Killing Fields*, which he finished with this words: “Esther Chávez Cano died on Christmas morning 2009. She lived to help heal the wounds of Ciudad Juárez, she insisted on justice from those in power. And demanded action from the rest of us” [*Murder City* 232]), he doubted that the crime wave and the *feminicidios* were discreet phenomena that could be separated from the engulfing violence that had come to dominate life in the city, most likely as a preamble of the expansion of this new, violent way of life to the whole world. As he declared in an interview on NPR in 2010, for instance:

People are interested in the dead women of Juárez because it’s a way not to look at Juárez ... If you say it’s young girls, sixteen to eighteen, being killed by a serial killer or rich guys for fun or whatever, then you have a finite problem and you don’t have to look at the city. And you can ignore the fact that while one to three hundred women have vanished, depending on who’s counting, 2,800 *people* have

died. You can ignore the fact that seven hundred men have disappeared in the same period. You can just pretend that really the only problem in Juárez is this bizarre slaughter of young girls, and then you're safe. (Qtd. in *This Love is Not for Cowards* 190)

As for what it is that causes this general wave of violence, this complete surrender of life to a state of immanent violence that is everywhere and does not even pretend to make sense, Bowden lists the usual suspects (the economy, globalization, the maquiladoras, sexism and machismo, etc.) but warns us of something that, after a whole dissertation dissecting texts that try to explain the crimes and find categories for us to normalize them, feels somehow refreshing even though it is so utterly despairing: "But this war I speak of cannot be understood with the normal political language of right and left or of capitalism and socialism. It is not postcolonial or precolonial or even colonial. It is life against death" (*Dreamland* 58). Thus, according to him, the question to ask is the following:

And the point is this: we are creating poverty that exceeds the ability of the State to alter it, we are creating violence that exceeds the violence of the State itself, we are creating lawlessness faster and over more territory than we are creating law. We must ask ourselves this simple question: Is the house of death the problem or the actual solution? Is this the freak show or the future? Are these men monsters or the coming human beings? (*Dreamland* 116)

Besides, Bowden has a way with words that makes him able to address this horrible process, which we cannot even yet quite understand, poetically, as well as to put it in a larger context that includes the United States:

One city is called El Paso, the other Juárez. One state is called Texas, the other Chihuahua. One nation is called the United States, the other Mexico. I find it harder and harder to use these names because they imply order and boundaries, and both are breaking down. So I stumble and try not to say these names even though they have meaning, at least some meaning, left, and they are right there on the maps and road signs. But they have the feel of the past, of dust and ruin and dead dreams. And so I say them at times, but often I struggle to find a way around these words because uttering them or writing them down contributes to a big lie and helps trap people in a dying world. (*Dreamland* 6)

Perhaps, Bowden says, even to impose an order on Juárez in the form of a clear delimitation of problems, of phenomena, and of crime waves, is a way to not look at Juárez and, thus, to keep discursively trapped there. It is not just the drug traffic, and it is not just migration, or NAFTA, or the maquiladoras, or the *narcocorridos*, or the inertia of misogynistic ideas and practices, that cause the violence in which women die and that has led some (including Bowden twenty years ago, when he published “While You Were Sleeping”) to posit the existence of the *feminicidios* as a discreet problem, in a –futile– attempt to make sense of something that, by definition, does not. It is life itself that has changed.

I am in a tiny minority on this matter. I see no new order emerging but rather a new way of life, one beyond our imagination and the code words we use to protect ourselves from life and violence. In this new way of life, no one is really in charge and we are all in play. The state still exists – there are police, a president,

congress, agencies with names studded across the buildings. Still, something has changed, and I feel this change in my bones.

The violence has crossed class lines. The violence is everywhere. The violence is greater. And the violence has no apparent and simple source. It is like the dust in the air, part of life itself. (*Murder City* 22)

In the previous sections of this dissertation, I have tried to come to terms with this new way of life and with how it manifests itself in myriad of stories that pretend to describe a crime wave, define it, examine its constitutive parts, and search for its possible culprits, all the while showing, by way of their very proliferation and diversity, that they are “just” that, stories, without fundamental claims to be closer to the “truth” of the murders than all the other stories. For practically all of them –with the exception of *2666*– try to make sense of the *feminicidios* and, inevitably, fail. There is nothing to make sense of, in a way. Violence like the one prevailing in Ciudad Juárez, which mutilates and kills women, men, and children day after day, defies all attempts to make sense. Maybe the best we can do, then, at least in our position as cultural commentators, is to read these stories as stories, as narratives that obey narrative patterns and rules, to show our own roles as producers and consumers of stories and, thus, as active parts of the discourse on the *feminicidios*, hopefully highlighting, in the process, our own potential agency to fight to stop them rhetorically.

And, while we are at it, maybe we can also help by donating to groups that help victims and families in situ, in Ciudad Juárez and elsewhere. After all, their pain matters, and it should hurt us, too, no matter how their stories are mobilized on the discursive level, or how the stories of the “dead women” of Juárez end up resulting in an “othering” of the border that makes it easy for everyone else, including me, to breathe deeply and say “pew, at least I am not in Ciudad Juárez.” In this view, we are all in Ciudad Juárez, now, and there is no way out

of Juárez, for it is the future, but we can at least try to make it better for the ones experiencing its worst sides first. Therefore, the fact that the feminicidios as a single crime wave are a discursive construction does not mean that we should not scream to the top of our lungs, and every single day, “¡Ni una más!”

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